



Lawless Hero

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Category: Romance, Adult, War

Description: I saved her life.

I thought that being deployed would be the worst thing to ever happen to me.

I was wrong.

When Rose walks into our camp, everything changes.

She needs a protector, and I'll break all the rules to keep her safe.

Those lips, that body, her sassy attitude?

She's everything I've ever dreamed of.

But when we return to the States, rumors and lies from the base come home with us too.

Savages are supposed to stick with their brothers.

But I'm choosing her.

Forever.

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CHAPTER 1

Rose

Someone is following me.

As the thought hit, I stopped and glanced over my shoulder. At the far end of the market, I spotted four men carrying weapons.

Leaving the Savage Soldier base on my own suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea.

Panicked, I took a deep breath and contemplated my options. I took a few steps forward and tried to blend.

Shortly thereafter, I noticed a strange old man in traditional garb staring at me from the shade of his booth.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Some men are following me," I said, surprised that he spoke English.

He beckoned me with his hand. "Step inside out of the sun and have a seat."

His shop – if you could call it that – seemed innocent enough. Shelves full of candles filled the walls. He sat cross-legged on a mat near the entrance.

Not all locals are bad guys, I reminded myself. “Thank you. It’s so hot out today.”

“Scorching.”

I stepped into his booth and sat on a wooden box across from him.

“What’s a woman like you doing here by yourself?” he asked, studying my face.

“I’m a journalist working on a story about the Savage Soldiers base nearby.”

“I know it well,” he said, nodding his head. “Still, it’s not safe for a woman like you to be alone here.”

“I know. I snuck out today to talk to locals without the military around. I thought I might get a better story.”

“My name is Arjun-Manju,” he said. “And you?”

“Rose Bennett.”

He smiled, showing a mouth with a few missing teeth. “What a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s good for people to hear the truth about Afghanistan. Are you an honest reporter?” His ancient eyes stared into mine.

I shifted in my makeshift seat. “I would say so.”

He nodded solemnly. “Would you like some water?”

“Sure.” I watched as he leaned over and dipped a metal cup into a bucket next to him. “Uhm...do you have a bottle?” I asked.

He tilted his head. “This water is clean. Look.” After taking a sip, he offered me the cup.

“I believe you, but I have a sensitive stomach,” I lied. “I need bottled water.”

Outside, I heard an angry male yelling in Pashto.

“They’re looking for you!” the old man said, standing up. “Come with me. I’ll hide you.”

I stared farther into his booth as he held out his hand to me.

“Come, come. We must go,” he urged.

I swallowed. “I don’t know...”

“Everything in Afghanistan is not as it seems. I can help you.”

My panic skyrocketed. “No thanks,” I said, stepping out of the booth and ignoring the hurt expression on the man’s face. I scanned the market for any signs of the Taliban faithful.

Where had they gone?

“Come, come,” the man said urgently, pleading me. “Trust me.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, but I trust no one.”

I stepped away from his booth, trying to blend in with the locals once again. If I made it to the edge of the market, I could find a taxi driver to take me back to the Savage Soldier base, where I belonged in the first place.

Being originally from Savage, CO, I had jumped on the opportunity to travel with the Savage Soldiers in order to advance my budding journalism career. It had seemed so perfect in the beginning. I could travel with the military as a journalist, seeing different parts of the world and writing about my experiences.

However, things had started so slow in the beginning that I wound up moving to New York with my father, hoping that the Big Apple would give me break. But then the break I needed unexpectedly came forward when the Savage Soldiers offered me the chance to travel with a select group who were being stationed in Afghanistan. A few of the Savage Soldiers who had been relocated to New York were a part of the mission, so I had been able to travel with them. The very moment the opportunity had been presented, I had started dreaming of my name under huge headlines...

But now that I had potentially put myself in danger, I felt nothing but stupid.

A man's voice yelled out and I walked faster, hoping to get away before they caught up with me. When I reached the only exit from the market, I saw two other men with long beards and guns looking at the crowds.

Act calm. You've got this, I told myself while taking measured deep breaths.

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Suddenly, the rest of the people around me scattered, leaving me exposed. One of the two men with guns pointed in my direction.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I ran toward a battered taxicab a few hundred feet away. From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the men rush forward. Before I reached my means of escape, a rough hand grabbed my shoulder.

I whirled around and kneed the man in the nuts. He cried out, bending over in pain.

I tried to escape again, but the other man grabbed me around the waist from behind and lifted me into the air.

“Let me go!” I screamed. “I’m American!”

Foul smells hit my nose as the man laughed. While I struggled to free myself from his grasp, the other man walked over with a serious scowl etched on his face. I tensed, thinking he was going to hit me.

Before I knew it, a bag had been thrown over my head. I kicked and screamed at the top of my lungs. Meanwhile, all the men were yelling, but I had no idea what they were saying. I didn’t even know if they were from the Taliban or the henchman of some local warlord.

It didn’t take me long to deduce that fighting and struggling wasn’t getting me anywhere.

One of the men pulled my hands behind my back and tied them. And then someone pushed me from behind.

“I’m going,” I yelled, taking a step forward and wondering what the hell was going on.

My pulse quickened as I was forced to walk blindly. With my vision cut off, the market sounds were clearer.

The men who had grabbed me continued talking, but I didn’t understand them.

This is it. My life is over. I’ll never see my family or friends again. I never even had the chance to say goodbye...

After hearing stories about how kidnapped women were treated in Afghanistan, I told myself

I had to keep fighting until there were no other options.

“Allah Akbar!”

At the familiar cry of martyrdom, I heard gunfire and men screaming in English. This was my chance.

I turned and ran to the left, hoping for a clear getaway and avoiding the fire. The hood over my head made the struggle significantly more difficult, but time was of the essence and I had mere seconds in the midst of the chaos.

Gunfire continued ringing out as I ran face first into a wall. Dropping to the ground, I curled into a fetal position, hoping for the best.

As the shots died down, I heard American soldiers barking orders. I struggled to my feet and screamed at the top of my lungs, “Help! I’m American!”

“Rose? Is that you?” Warren, one of them Savage Soldiers, asked.

“Yes!” I said, shaking. My knees buckled beneath me. I nearly fell to the ground, but was saved by his strong arms. The hood was removed from over my head, and with my newly restored vision, he looked like the most amazing man in the world. Our eyes locked and all the chaos around the market faded into the background for a split second that felt like eternity.

He smiled, his white teeth standing out on his dirt-covered face. “You okay?”

“I am now. How did you know I was here?”

“I didn’t. This was supposed to be a routine check-up on activity at the market.”

“Well, I’m glad you came.”

“You’re lucky to be alive.” He lifted me by my shoulders, making sure I was balanced before releasing his grip. “Let’s get you back,” he said, untying my hands.

I rubbed my wrists and looked around the market. “Is anyone...dead?”

He nodded somberly. “Let’s get out of here before something else hits.”

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I grabbed his arm and followed as he led us back to the Humvee convoy on the edge of the market.

CHAPTER 2

Rose

I sat in back of the Humvee as it roared down the dirt road toward the Savage Soldier base. Warren sat in the passenger's seat up front.

"You snuck out without your escort," he said, bending his torso to look back at me. "You're damn lucky. Those guys were about to take you to the desert and turn you into a sex slave."

I took a deep breath and stared out the side window, my stomach churning. It was almost enough to make me forget why I'd come to Afghanistan in the first place.

"Are you even listening?" Warren asked, agitated.

"I am, but—"

"No damn buts about it. You made a bad situation worse. If Ryan and I hadn't arrived at just the right time, I don't know what would've happened."

"Thanks, Ryan," I said to the driver. Like Warren, Ryan was also a Savage Soldier. They both were among the soldiers relocated to New York that I had traveled with to Afghanistan.

“No problem,” Ryan said, calm as ever.

“Whatever,” Warren muttered. “It was foolish for you to even be here.”

“It’s not foolishness,” I retorted, offended. I’d always been bothered by the distorted view so many people had about war. It wasn’t foolish to want to shed light on such a dark situation.

“Whatever,” Warren said coolly, still wearing his helmet. His assault rifle was nestled in his arms as he scanned the horizon.

God, he was so infuriating.

“Thanks for saving me. I appreciate it,” I said blandly.

“Just doing my job,” he replied.

I sat back, wishing my head would stop hurting. “Were they Taliban?” I asked, although I already knew the answer.

“Damn straight they were,” Ryan answered.

The Humvee bounced and jostled as he sped down a dirt road toward our Savage Soldier base. After only being embedded with the forward operating base for two days, I wondered if they would send me back.

By embedding with the U.S. military through the Savage Soldiers, I had cut the costs for my Afghanistan trip down considerably. In exchange, I had agreed to let the army approve any articles I wrote before publishing them online.

They couldn’t stop me from reporting the truth though.

Nevertheless, the regulations and restrictions had turned out to be harsher than I ever imagined, which was why I'd snuck into Samangan on my own. Several sources had given me information about a huge smuggling operation out of Afghanistan that involved members of the U.S. Army. Personally, I suspected everyone at the Savage Soldiers base, including Warren and Ryan. The two were best buddies from what I'd been able to gather, although I knew all the military types were usually close-knit.

"Why do you have to be so damn secretive, anyway?" Warren asked, catching me off guard.

I blinked. "I'm a journalist. It's part of my job."

Outside, I noticed a tall metal fence surrounding the small military base, one of the few still in operation a decade after the war in Afghanistan had started.

"The CO will want to see you," Warren said.

"I can handle him."

"We'll see." He snorted. "You've got balls, though, Ms. Bennett."

"Huge!" Ryan added, laughing along with him.

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The laughter died down as we approached the entrance of the camp, the entry control point, or ECP, as they called it. I'd been getting myself up to speed on military lingo and jargon for two weeks prior to arriving, but I still had a long way to go.

As we stopped at the outer gate, a fully armed soldier whose name I didn't remember walked up and glanced into the back. "What happened?" he asked.

"The Taliban were about to forcibly take her from the city. We had a firefight and saved her."

I frowned but said nothing to correct his version of the events.

"Damn," the soldier said and then stepped back, waving us on.

When we reached one of the long metal buildings with a rounded roof, Ryan stopped. "This is you," he said.

I opened the door and climbed out.

"Hey," Warren shouted out.

I shielded the sun from my eyes with my hand and looked back at him. "Yeah?"

"Don't let him give you too much shit, okay? I'm glad you're safe."

Despite my best efforts to mask my emotions, I smiled. "Thanks. I'll catch up with you later."

“You better,” he said. “And get that head checked out.”

“I will.”

After Ryan drove away, sending up a cloud of smoke, I walked to the entrance of the building that reminded me of a huge metal shipping container.

Captain Jacoby, the Commanding Officer of the Savage Soldiers, would not be happy with me sneaking out. But if I was investigating claims against the military, I wasn't able to work too openly with them.

I opened the door and walked inside. While cooler than outside, without air conditioning, it wasn't very comfortable. Negan Rusell, his aide-de-camp, sat at a tiny desk.

“Hey,” he said. “You made it back. Are you okay?”

“I'm not sure yet, but I think so. I came here first. Jacoby wants to speak with me?”

He nodded, his frail facial features so out of place in Afghanistan. “Yes, but you should go see the medic first.”

“No, I want to get this over with,” I said, walking past his desk.

“Hold on.”

Negan stood up, but I kept going, opening a door that divided the two halves of the metal container. Captain Jacoby looked up from his desk, frowning the moment he saw me.

“You wanted to talk?” I asked.

“Do you know how much trouble you caused today?” he said.

“I’m simply trying to do my job.”

“And so am I. Sit down.” He pointed to the armless chair in front of his desk.

“I need to go see the medic,” I said, changing my mind.

“If you were fine enough to come straight here, then you can sit down and talk for a minute.”

I sighed and sat down, crossing my arms over my chest.

/> “What the hell were you thinking?” he asked, shaking his head.

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“I needed to see Samangan without the soldiers around. You guys frighten people.”

“We save their asses—that’s what we do.”

As he scowled at me, I lifted a hand to my head and gingerly inspected the bandage.

“Go see the damn medic,” he spat. “But just know that if you sneak out again, you’ll be shipped back to the States. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” I said, standing up and turning toward the door.

“One more thing.”

I halted.

“How did you sneak out? We’re secure here, so someone must have helped you.”

I swallowed, not daring to turn around. “Nobody helped me.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “Believe me, I’ll sort this out.”

When he said nothing else, I headed out the door. My headache had gotten worse and I hoped the medic would give me something to numb the pain.

CHAPTER 3

Warren

When I finished my reports about the interactions with the Taliban in Samangan earlier that morning, I left the CO's office and headed to check on Rose in the metal building that served as our medical center. We hadn't been getting along well, but I had to admire her fighting spirit.

I also couldn't ignore the fact that I hadn't seen a sexy American woman in over a year, at least not in person. With no females stationed at our Afghanistan base, I spent long stretches of time forgetting what it was like to be around a woman, let alone one I'd be interested in.

As I approached her Containerized Housing Unit, or the CHU for short, I cleared my mind of all negative thoughts. Normally I would have nothing to do with a woman like her—a liberal media elitist. But in this case, I figured spending time with her wouldn't be all bad.

The door to her CHU opened and she walked out. The setting sun lit up her face, making her skin glow. She nodded when she noticed me.

I smiled and walked faster. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Melvin making a beeline for her too.

Fuck.

"Hey," I said. "Your bandage is off. How are you feeling?" I stopped in front of her, hoping it would deter Melvin.

"Better, thanks. The CO yelled at me. How pissed is he?"

"I've been avoiding him all day," I said with a sheepish grin.

"I don't blame you. That guy has issues."

“He’s kept us safe though.”

“Hello, beautiful.” Melvin Stevenson had strolled over.

Rose turned her head to the huge, burly man that everyone hated. “Hey yourself,” she said.

“I heard you got in some trouble today,” Melvin continued, ignoring me.

“Yeah, and I took care of it,” I said. “We were on our way to eat.”

“We were?” Rose asked.

“Yeah, we were.” I held my hand out to her. “You ready?”

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“I’ll come with you,” Melvin said.

“No, that’s okay.” I stared into his eyes and he stared back unflinchingly.

“Now, boys,” Rose said, “no fighting over me.” She stepped between us and walked toward the chow building.

“Hold on a minute,” Melvin mumbled, grabbing my arm.

I looked down at his hand and then up to his face. “What?”

“About the secret operation.”

“Yeah? What about it? I said I’m getting out.”

He laughed, his bulky body shaking. “There’s no getting out once you’re in, stupid.”

“We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

“You gonna hit that?” He nodded at Rose as she walked off.

I clenched my jaw. “A gentleman never tells.”

“You ain’t no fucking gentleman, Warren. We both know that.”

“Whatever, man. I’ll catch up with you later.”

I jogged toward Rose before Melvin could go on about our illicit activities in Afghanistan. “Hey!” I called out. “Wait up!”

She glanced back at me. “You can’t keep up with a wounded woman? How the hell are we going to win this war?”

“Funny,” I said, as I slowed down beside her. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Did your CO send you to babysit me?”

“No, of course not. Although if he did, I would never tell.”

She kept up her pace. Outside the mess hall, she stopped and turned to face me.

“What?” I asked.

“Exactly. What do you want?”

“I just thought we could dine together. If you’re wanting to go into the villages without soldiers, I can see about going with you undercover in local garb.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You would do that for me?”

“I might,” I said, not ready to fully commit yet.

“Fine. We can eat and talk if you’ll help me get what I need for my story.”

“What paper do you work for again?”

“I don’t work for a newspaper. They’re all dying. I write online for an audience around the world.”

“Uh huh,” I said, uninterested. I couldn’t think clearly with her sizable breasts pressing against an army-issued green tee-shirt that looked two sizes too small. Her hard nipples were clearly visible through the cloth.

“Come on,” she said. “I’m starving.”

Behind us, Melvin called out, “Warren, come here!”

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I sighed. "I have to go."

"Wow. He's got that kind of control over you?"

"You don't understand..."

"You'll have to tell me sometime then."

"Maybe I will," I said, not breaking eye contact.

"Come on, Warren! Now!" Melvin bellowed.

"I'll take you on a date tomorrow or later this week," I said.

Rose tilted her head to the left and peered at me. "A date?"

I grinned. "A working date. I'll get you into a nearby village that's friendly to our side. They might answer your questions and help with your story."

She nodded. "That would be wonderful. Thanks. Thanks for everything."

"No problem. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yeah," she said. "Tomorrow."

"Come on, Warren, you shithead!"

I rolled my eyes.

Rose laughed and then turned to go inside the mess hall.

What the fuck does he want now? I wondered as I walked back toward Melvin, regretting getting involved with him.

CHAPTER 4

Warren

The next day, I convinced Jacoby to let me take Rose to a nearby village so small that it wasn't even on the maps. I told him it would keep her under control and happy. To my surprise, he agreed.

I went to tell Rose the good news.

Part of my attraction to her was the fact she was the only American woman for miles around, but more than that, I found her interesting. For one, she had traveled thousands of miles from her home to one of the most dangerous places in the world. That took guts.

As I walked toward her sleeping quarters, I wondered where she stayed in New York and whether she'd left a boyfriend behind. The closer I got, the more questions floated through my brain. Getting answers would not be a bad way to spend the day with her.

I stopped in front of her CHU and knocked on the door. It opened right away. She stood in the doorway, dressed in camouflage pants with another ill-fitting t-shirt.

"Yeah?" she asked. "I'm busy right now."

“You don’t want to go to the village?”

“Oh! You were being serious?”

“Yeah. I got permission from the CO. He doesn’t want me in civilian garb, but I know the village elders here. They’ll talk to you.”

She stared into my eyes. I swore I could see the gears turning in her head.

“Okay,” she said after a few tense and silent moments.

“Great. You ready now or you got something else to do?”

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“Melvin wanted me to come see him about something. I was on my way there.”

“Screw Melvin,” I said. “You should be careful around him.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t want to go into specifics. You know we’re on a tight deadline. If we’re doing this, we need to go now.”

“Sure.” She patted her black messenger bag. “I have everything I need in here.”

“You’re lucky. I wish my equipment was that light.” I smiled. “Let’s get out of here. Ryan is driving us.”

“You two friends?” she asked as we walked toward where the Humvees and trucks were parked.

“You could say army buddies, I guess. We met back at the Savage Soldiers home base in Colorado, and sent out to New York together. Why?”

“Just curious. I want my piece on the Savage Soldiers to be human.”

“You been at this journalism thing long?”

“Ever since high school.”

“And how many years is that?”

“Are you asking my age, Warren?”

I grinned. “Not at all. Just curious.”

When we reached the parking area, Ryan raised a hand into the air. “Let’s go, people!” he said.

“You’re in the back,” I said to Rose, opening the door for her.

“As long as you don’t expect me to shoot the gun or anything.”

“Only in the case of an emergency.”

She smiled and climbed into the back. I got into the passenger’s seat, the butt of my M16A4 on the floorboard between my legs.

“Let’s rock-and-roll,” Ryan said.

“Is he always this full of energy?” Rose asked, leaning forward with one hand on each of the two front seats.

I chuckled. “You don’t know the half of it.”

The Humvee slipped into gear and lurched forward, pushing her back.

“Careful,” Ryan yelled over the roar of the engine.

I glanced back at her, impressed by her determination. “We’ll hand out medical supplies and water while we’re there,” I shouted.

She stayed silent, looking out at the barren landscape. I turned forward and stared out

the windshield, looking for anything out of the ordinary. In Afghanistan, anything could happen at any moment; the only ones who survived were the ones who always stayed on their toes.

Ryan stepp

ed on the gas pedal and the giant vehicle rushed forward.

It was going to be one hell of a day.

* * *

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Ten minutes later, we rolled up to the entrance of the village. An old man sat on a huge tire on the side of the road. I kept my eyes on him as we passed, not sure if I recognized him or not.

“We’re here,” I said. “Be sure not to wander off.”

“Trust me. I learned my lesson yesterday.”

I turned to Ryan. “Park by Jahmir's house,” I instructed.

“Already on it,” he replied.

“He’s the village elder,” I explained, glancing back at Rose.

“Have you known him long?” she asked.

“Always full of questions, huh?”

She shrugged. “It’s my job.”

The Humvee came to a stop and Ryan killed the engine. I opened the door, hopped out, and waited for Rose to climb down. At least a dozen village children swarmed around the vehicle, excitedly raising their hands and yelling at the same time.

“Enough!” Jahmir said as he emerged from the house, stroking his long, white beard.

At the sound of his voice, the children scattered.

“Welcome, my friend Warren,” he said, ignoring Rose’s presence.

“Thank you, Jahmir. I brought someone to talk with you. This is Rose.”

She offered her hand, but the old man stared at it as if she was offering him a pile of dung.

“How are things?” I asked him, trying to ease the tension and awkwardness.

Rose dropped her arm, but didn’t appear upset.

“They are peaceful now,” Jahmir said. “Have you come for the samples?”

I glanced at Rose and then back to him. “We’ll talk about that later,” I said. “We brought gifts. Maybe Rose can speak to your wife and daughters?”

“Fine,” he said then raised his hand into the air.

A half-dozen men all dressed in similar attire stepped out from behind two of the mud-brick houses and made their way over to us.

“Help with the gifts,” Jahmir told them.

They walked to the back of the Humvee as Ryan opened it and began setting cases of water onto the dry, dusty ground.

I could already tell it was going to be a long day.

“I’ll take you to the other families who want to talk,” I said to Rose.

“I’d like to talk to Jahmir too.” She looked at him. “Is that okay?”

“Maybe later.” I took her hand. “Let’s go.”

She pulled her hand from mine as we walked away.

“I’m trying to keep the friends I have here,” I said. “You have to understand—the culture is different.”

“I don’t care about the way they treat women. There’s something he’s hiding. What did he mean by samples?”

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“Don’t worry about it. Look, there’s Yamna. She’s a terrific person to interview,” I said, pointing her out.

“I’ll sort this out,” Rose said as we continued walking toward the Afghan woman.

“I don’t doubt it. You stay here with Yamna. I need to talk to Jahmir alone.”

“Is it safe?”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I haven’t lost a reporter in my charge yet.”

“How many reporters have you helped before?”

“Well, since you ask, you’re my first.” I winked.

Rose rolled her eyes and quickened her pace. I stared at her a moment, loving the way her body moved.

I knew the women of the village would treat her well and keep her safe, which was a good thing because my conversation with Jahmir couldn’t wait.

* * *

“You can’t let anyone know what we’re doing,” I said to Jahmir as we sat on floor cushions in his living room. “Do you understand? It’s important.”

He waved my concerns away with his hand. “Are you ready to see the samples?”

“Yes,” I said nervously. Melvin had certainly gotten me involved in some crazy shit.

Jahmir pulled out a wooden box and opened the lid. Inside, I saw what appeared to be a metallic rock of some sort. “This is one of the smaller pieces we have mined.”

“How much can you get?” I asked, reaching for it.

He pulled the box away. “We can get as much as you want for the right price. I do not want to sell poppies like the others. You must give us a fair price. Two men have died so far getting this material.”

I nodded. “I’ll need to bring the sample to Melvin.”

He stared at me with his ancient eyes, wrinkles running like rivers from them. “I will trust you, but do not cross me.”

“You have nothing to worry about,” I said. “We need to keep this quiet, though. As I told you before, we’re not supposed to be transporting this stuff.”

“I will sell to the Chinese if you do not want. Rare earth minerals are booming business.”

Ryan stepped into the room, holding his rifle at the ready. “You ready to leave?”

I glanced up at him. “Give me a minute, okay?”

“I’ll be outside,” he said.

I turned back to Jahmir. “Thank you again,” I said, holding out a hand. He gave me the box and I got to my feet. “I’ll return soon with money and an order.”

“Fine. Safe travels,” he said.

As I walked out the room of his simple house, I thought about my apartment back in New York City and how much I missed it. It may have been small, but a year in Afghanistan had made me realize how much I had loved the space.

Outside, I saw Rose standing nearby. She walked over. “How’d your meeting with Jahmir go?”

“Fine,” I said, hating that she was so damn curious. “You get to talk to the villagers?”

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“Yeah. Some of them.”

“Great. We should get back.”

“This wasn’t very romantic,” she said.

I tilted my head as I stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“You called this a date yesterday, but it wasn’t very romantic.”

“I guess not,” I said, grinning. “I’ll have to make it up to you.”

“No worries. It was just an observation.”

I motioned toward the Humvee with my hand. “After you.”

She walked ahead of me and I watched her ass sway back and forth.

Why does this damn woman captivate me so much? I thought, somewhat exasperated. I tried to think of a logical answer on the ride back to the base but came up empty-handed.

CHAPTER 5

Rose

Once we arrived back at the base, I went directly to my sleeping quarters. They had

given me an entire double-room dwelling because they didn't want me bunking with the men.

I sat at a plain wooden desk in the room and stared at the blank page on the laptop screen, memories of the villagers running through my head.

What had Jahmir meant about showing Warren samples? Were the rumors about soldiers running a drug smuggling operation true?

They had to be, but I needed proof.

As I waited for inspiration to strike, I heard two men laughing outside. Reminded of the seriousness of my situation, I banged out a few words.

The questions on the page laughed at my ignorance, but I wasn't ready to give up on solving the mystery. With only two weeks, I needed to make progress.

I sighed and dug my expensive satellite phone out of my messenger bag. The debate over whether to call my dad or my best friend Kim lasted about two seconds.

"Hello?" Kim answered.

I smiled, loving the sound of her voice. "Hey, you. It's not too late, is it?"

"It's early," she said with a yawn.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, it's like eight-thirty in the morning or some crazy shit."

"That's not early," I said. "You need to get up and talk. Grab a coffee."

“Nag, nag, nag. Even from halfway around the world, you’re nagging me.”

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“You love it.”

She sighed. “I do. Hold on.”

“I don’t have much time on this phone,” I said.

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“I’m back. What did you say?”

“Just that I don’t have much time on this phone over here. Afghanistan is crazy.”

“You doing okay?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“So, traveling to some godforsaken country halfway around the world wasn’t a smart idea after all, huh? I think I remember telling you that.”

“It’s not bad. It’s just strange and different. Oh!” I sat up in my chair. “You’ll never guess what happened. I almost got kidnapped by the Taliban!”

“Get out of here. You’re not funny.”

“I’m serious. When I went into the city on my own without a military escort to do some intel, they saw me and grabbed me.”

“How did you get away?”

A suspicious sound hit my ears. “You are not going to the bathroom while talking to me, are you?”

“I’m sorry. Your phone is dying and I couldn’t wait. I’m done now.”

“You’re something else.” I rolled my eyes just as I would have if she had been in

front of me.

“Tell me what happened, crazy woman,” she said.

“Well, this guy rescued me. I don’t remember any of it. They knocked me out.”

“Was the guy cute?”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

“Does anything else matter?”

“I think so. Why else would I have traveled to some godforsaken country halfway around the world?”

“He’s a dog. Okay, I get it.”

“No, he’s not. I think he’s hot. He’s got the buff body of a soldier.”

“My, oh my. Look at Rose’s new interests in Afghanistan.”

“Shut up,” I shot back.

She sighed again. “I miss you so much. When are you coming back?”

“In two weeks. And I miss you too.”

“Are you there...” The phone crackled. “...Rose?”

“Hello?” I said into the static. I lowered the phone and thought about trying to call her back. But instead, I set the phone down and typed up a description of Warren to

maybe use later for my story. I reasoned that if he was involved in something bad, he would make it into my final story.

Reviewing the observations as I wrote, I noticed they were mostly bad traits, but some good slipped in here and there.

Before I finished the writing session, someone knocked on the door. I closed the laptop and stood, wondering who it could be and knowing I had to be ready for anything Afghanistan threw at me.

“Hold on,” I said out loud.

I turned the doorknob and saw Warren standing outside. His bulging muscles were about ready to rip his olive-green t-shirt in half. He grinned that cocksure grin of his.

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“Hey, Warren. What’s up?”

“The CO wants to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He glanced to the left, then to the right. “Do you have a sat-phone with you?”

“No. It’s against the rules.”

“We intercepted the signal going out. You’re dealing with the U.S. army, not a bunch of idiots.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I insisted.

“Can I give you a tip?”

“Sure.”

“Tell the truth, okay? If you do, he won’t restrict you in your quarters.”

“He can’t do that to me. I’m a private U.S. citizen.”

“Look, Rose—I’m just trying to help you out. He has a lot of power out here.”

“Yeah? What kind of power? Anything going on I should know about? Like those samples?”

Warren’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said.

I pursed my lips together. “Yeah—just like I have no idea what you’re talking about with the sat-phone you said you saw me using. Right?”

“Come on,” he said, turning. “I have to bring you to him.”

I took a deep breath and stepped outside into the cool evening air. With dinner in an hour, Captain Jacoby wouldn’t yell at me long. Besides, making him upset might work to my advantage if he got heated enough to let something slip...

As I followed Warren across the central plaza in middle of the base, I planned out answers to the questions Jacoby would likely ask. No matter the situation, I liked to be prepared; it’s what had gotten me through college and made it possible for me to find freelance assignments around the world.

Warren slowed down as we approached the Captain Jacoby’s office. “Just be honest, okay? It’s for the best,” he advised.

“Like you’re being honest with me about the samples?”

He frowned. “Like I said—”

“Forget it,” I interrupted. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.”

We stopped and turned to face each other. I stared into his blue eyes, betting many women had fallen prey to them over the years.

“Suit yourself.” He pointed to the door. “I’m off to enjoy my downtime.”

“Good for you,” I said, tired of the back-and-forth with him.

I walked up to the door and opened it without knocking. Negan looked up from his desk, terrified. He was an easy man to manipulate.

“The CO wanted to see me?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Hold on.”

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“I’ll go back.”

He looked at me like a frightened mouse as I walked past his desk and went into Captain Jacoby’s office. By the time he stood to stop me, I’d closed the door of the CO’s office.

“Sit down,” the grizzled commander growled.

“Is this about my phone call? I know it’s against the rules, but I had to call my father. He’s dying.”

Captain Jacoby leveled his icy stare at me. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s liars.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“You didn’t call your father.” He glanced down at a paper on his desk. “You called someone named Kimberly Tallis. Who is she? Your contact? Were you speaking in code?”

I crossed my arms over my chest as I stood in front of his desk. “You were listening to my call?”

“I said sit down.”

With a sigh like a miffed teenager, I sat down and crossed one leg over the other.

“You’re in a warzone, Ms. Bennett. I know modern journalist blogger types like you

don't respect the unspoken agreements between the media and the military, but you're not going to endanger the lives of me and my men while you're here. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"I can't hear you, Ms. Bennett."

"Yes," I repeated louder.

"That's better. If I could get you the hell out of here tonight, I would. But it's not possible. The Taliban is making a move because of the firefight you caused yesterday."

"That I caused?"

"Shut-up and listen," he said. "You would be out of here tonight, but I can't risk bringing a transport copter in to take you to the Kandahar airport. That said, you're out of here in a few days. A week at most."

"No!" I moved to the edge of my seat. "That's not fair! The agreement said two weeks!"

"And you broke the agreement, Ms. Bennett," he said smugly.

"Fine. I'll just have to finish earlier. You can't stop me from doing my story."

"Your story on the villagers here in the province?" he asked, staring into my eyes.

I used my many years of practice to lie. "Yes. Why else would I be here?"

“Get out of here before I change my mind and fly you out over the enemy for the fuck of it.”

I stood and saluted, just because I knew he would hate it.

Outside, Warren stood a few feet away. “How did it go?”

“He’s making me leave a week early.”

He stared at me like he wanted to say something.

“Spit it out,” I said. “I’m running out of time.”

“There’re things going on here that you don’t know about.”

“Yeah? Tell me more.”

“I can’t right now.”

“Fine. I’ll ask Melvin and some of the others.”

“You need to stay away from Melvin.”

“I do?”

He nodded. “Trust me. He’s not a good guy.”

“I’ll have to decide that on my own,” I said stepping away.

He put a hand on my shoulder. “Rose, wait...”

I spun around. “What?”

“Just be careful, okay? Afghanistan is a rough country.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said and then turned to walk away.

Fucking men always trying to control me, I thought.

I had to admit though, he was hot.

CHAPTER 6

Rose

After Warren warned me about Melvin, I was even more eager to talk with him. I went to where I usually saw him—the makeshift outdoor gym on the south wall of the camp. He was on the weight bench, lifting some ridiculous amount into the air while a slightly smaller man stood behind him. Neither of them had shirts on and their bodies glistened with sweat.

“Hey, boys,” I said, strolling over.

Melvin grunted before placing the barbell back on the hooks. He sat up and stared at me, not bothering to disguise his lustful expression. While not afraid to apply my female charms when necessary, I never took it too far and only used it to acquire the information I needed. And looking at Melvin—I knew he could possibly help me break the story wide open.

“What’s going on, foxy reporter?” he said, standing up.

The other man wandered away, leaving me and Melvin alone.

“Your CO is making me go home early,” I said, pouting.

“Get out of here. We were just getting to know each other.”

“Do you want to be in the story I’m writing? It would be a profile piece online. You’d get a lot of fan mail from women all over the world.”

He stepped toward me. “Who says I don’t get that already?”

“Well, it would be even more with a nice story online. Maybe some photos...”

“You want to take

photos of me?”

“Maybe later. I just need information first.”

“Information?”

“Yeah. About what goes on here at the base.”

“What have you heard?”

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Does he actually know something? I wondered. “Nothing specific,” I said. “It’s just—you’re the real big man on base.”

He smiled as he lifted an arm and flexed his muscles.

“Impressive,” I cooed, fighting back my revulsion. “So—do you have time to talk?”

“Not now,” he said. “Give me an hour.”

“Um, sure. How about we meet at the mess hall?”

“No, I’ll come to your quarters.”

“I don’t think...” But before I finished, he was walking away. “Dammit,” I muttered.

I wasn’t too concerned though. I figured I could handle him.

* * *

Well over an hour later, someone knocked on my door.

“Hold on,” I said, standing up. I crossed the room and stopped.

Be strong, I told myself as I took a deep breath.

I opened the door to find Melvin dressed in camo pants and a tight green tee-shirt, all standard issue. He grinned and stepped forward, giving me no choice but to step back

and let him in.

“You made it,” I said.

“I keep my word.”

As he shut the door behind him, a sense of dread rushed came over me. I tried to ignore it and walked over to my desk. “Have a seat, and I’ll pull up my list of questions,” I said.

He stepped over and closed my laptop.

My eyes snapped up toward him. “What are you doing?”

“We can do the interview after.” He smirked.

“After what?” I asked, right as he lurched forward. I narrowly avoided his kiss. “Whoa. Hold on a minute...”

“The hard-to-get act is getting old,” he said, his voice thick.

“Are you drunk?”

He laughed. “Alcohol isn’t allowed on the base. How would I get some?”

“Smuggling,” I said, staring into his eyes and wishing I could read his thoughts.

“What do you know about smuggling?” he asked, moving in on me.

“It’s happened during wars all throughout history,” I said.

“Yeah? Well, Afghanistan ain’t no war. It’s a hell-hole all the time.”

As he spoke, I attempted to subtly move toward the door.

“Where are you going?” he asked. “You afraid of me or something?”

Or something, I thought. What have I gotten myself into now?

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“Come on,” he begged. “You know you want this hot body.” He lifted his shirt, showing off his ridiculously huge muscles.

“Sorry, but you’re not my type,” I said, two steps away from the door. “No hard feelings, though.”

“Oh, I’ve got hard feelings,” he said with a nasty grin.

I reached for the doorknob, ready to make a run for it. But he lunged forward and pressed his palm against the door, holding it shut.

“Where you running off to, beautiful?”

“You need to leave,” I said firmly, determined to not show the fear I felt.

“Look, you fucking cock-tease,” he said, “you’ve been playing Warren and me both, and it’s not right. If you want information for your damn story, it’ll cost you. He’s not the man you think he is.”

“What do you mean?” I said, attempting to put on a brave face and ignore his threat. Instead, I latched on to his comment about Warren. “Is he involved in the smuggling?”

He sighed. “There you go with the damn smuggling again. All you do is ask questions. Time for you to give some up.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.”

The moment he reached out to grab my arm with his hand, I screamed, hoping someone would hear.

CHAPTER 7

Warren

When I heard Rose scream, I immediately began rushing to her CHU. The lights were on, but I had no idea what was happening inside.

Had she seen a rat or something?

Seconds later, the door burst open and she ran outside with Melvin lumbering after her, a sick and demented smile on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked once within earshot of her.

“You need to teach your boy some manners!” she said angrily, glaring at Melvin.

I turned toward him and the sickening smirk on his face. “What did you do?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“Nothing you don’t want to do with her,” he said, puffing out his chest.

I stepped forward, pressing mine against his. He stood a few inches taller than me, but I wasn’t afraid of him in the least; brain won over brawn every time. “What...the fuck...did you do?” I said.

“Nothing happened,” Rose said, grabbing my arm and pulling. But I didn’t budge.

“You like me, don’t you babe?” Melvin said, patting her ass.

“Hey!” she snapped.

“That’s it, you son of a bitch.” I swung and punched him dead on the temple. He bellowed and bent into a defensive stance, his fists up.

“Knock it off you two!” Rose cried.

“Too late for that,” Melvin said and then lunged for me, landing an uppercut to my jaw.

“Why are we fighting?” I asked, dodging his next hit.

“Because you need to know who’s the alpha around here,” he growled.

I ducked out of the way as he swung again, and then landed a punch on his forearm.

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“What the fuck, guys!” Ryan yelled as he ran toward us.

“Tell him to get the fuck out of here,” I yelled, keeping my hands up as I bobbed up and down, blocking his additional hits.

Ryan stepped between us, while Rose stood off to the side, watching and looking dumbfounded.

“All of you need to leave,” she said.

I stared at Melvin, daring him to make a move.

He put his hands down, grinning like an idiot. “I’m out of here.”

As he approached the door, I stepped aside.

“That’s better,” Ryan said, following after him.

I hung back, looking across the sand at Rose. “Are you okay?”

As the other two men walked away from the quarters, she took a deep breath and shook her head.

“Well, I came because I heard you screaming. I guess I’ll go now,” I said.

“No, wait.” She put her hand on my arm.

“Yeah?”

“I’m leaving soon, and you seem to have little time for that romantic date you promised me. I need something to remember Afghanistan by.”

I smiled, my heart still racing. “Fine. I’ll stop by tomorrow. If you need anything, just yell and I’ll come running.”

“Clearly.”

“He won’t bother you again. I can promise that,” I said, seeing the anxiety in her eyes.

She removed her hand from my arm.

“Have a good night, Rose,” I said, already missing her touch.

“You too, Warren.”

I left her CHU, closing the door behind me. The half-full moon had risen in the sky as I walked to the sleeping quarters I shared with Ryan.

Melvin stood outside the door, punching his fist into the palm of his other hand and shrugging his shoulders a few times.

Do you want more? I thought. I’ll give it to you.

He tilted his head back and puffed out his chest.

I stopped in front of him.

“We can’t be fighting over pussy, bro,” he said.

“I’m not fighting over anything.”

He laughed. “Oh, so you didn’t sucker punch me?”

I sighed. “What do you want, Melvin?”

“I want to make sure you don’t open your stupid mouth to that reporter chick about what we got going on.”

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“I’ve told you I want nothing to do with it anymore.”

His chest bumped against mine as he stepped forward. “And I’ve

said you don’t have a choice in the matter.” “Hey, Warren,” Ryan called from behind Melvin, “you coming in?”

“I’ll be there in a second,” I said. “Melvin and I have some stuff to work out.”

“All right, man. No more of that fighting bullshit.” The door closed behind Ryan.

I concentrated on my breathing. “Melvin, I mean it. I’m done. My tour is over soon, and I’ll be going home.”

“Then you’ll sign up again,” Melvin said, his eyes never leaving mine.

“No, Melvin, I’m won’t.”

His lip twitched.

“Look, I won’t say anything to Rose or anyone else. I’m implicated in this mess myself,” I said.

“Damn right you are,” he said. “Don’t forget that shit.”

“Go get some sleep. And cut down on the steroids. That shit is making you crazy.”

“Maybe, but I’m buffer than any motherfucker in Afghanistan.”

“Whatever, man. I’m going to bed. Lay off the reporter, okay? We don’t want any extra eyes on either of us right now. She’ll be leaving in a few days.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Captain is sending her home.”

Melvin grinned. “You had nothing to do with that, did you?” He patted me on the shoulder. “Later, man.”

I watched as he walked away to his CHU.

I briefly wondered if I needed to stay up to make sure he didn’t go back to bother Rose, but ultimately decided against it. I climbed into bed, trying to come up with something somewhat romantic for my date with the reporter.

With luck, I hoped to fuck her under the open sky on the foothills of the mountains. If nothing else, I would distract her until she left our camp and lives for good.

Then I would get out of the smuggling operation for good.

One step at a time, I told myself as I fell asleep. One step at a time.

CHAPTER 8

Warren

When I saw the smile and look of amazement on her face, all the effort and trouble I’d gone through felt worthwhile. I had even called in favors from three different

people at the Savage Soldier base.

“This is so beautiful,” she said, looking at the valley below and the mountain range in the distance.

“Right? It’s a shame this country is besieged by so much war.” I sat down on the blanket. “Here, have a glass of wine and some cheese.”

She sat next to me, her knees bent and her feet farther down the hill. I poured her a glass of red wine as she stared out at the landscape.

“What’s that over there?” she asked, pointing.

I glanced up. Shit.

“The Chinese, I think.”

“The Chinese? I didn’t know they had troops here.”

“They don’t,” I said. “Here you go.” I handed her a glass of wine.

“Thanks,” she said and then took a drink. “I wonder what they’re doing over there.”

“Probably mining.”

“Mining? What, like gold?”

“You sure do ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s my job. I’m sorry. I get curious. Maybe I’ll try my luck and ask Melvin about it later.”

“No, don’t,” I said.

She tilted her head. “Why not?”

“They’re just miners,” I said. “It’s no big deal.”

“But I wonder what they’re mining.”

“Rare earth minerals.”

“What are those?”

“The shit they use to make cell phones and electronics.”

“Oh, like platinum and what-not?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

We both stared out at the majestic landscape.

“It’s so beautiful. I’m at a loss for words,” she said.

“That’s certainly something for you,” I teased.

“Hey.” She leaned over and lightly punched me on the arm.

I laughed and took another drink, wishing we had more wine. “Refill?” I asked, picking up the bottle.

“I shouldn’t...” she said hesitantly.

“Come on. One more glass won’t hurt.”

“I’m not a big drinker. This one already has me a bit dizzy.”

“Well, more for me then,” I said.

“Okay, okay,” she relented, holding out her half-empty glass. “One more. A small one.”

I filled the glass to the brim and she pulled it away, giggling.

“So, how’s this for romantic?” I asked.

She stared straight ahead, nodding ever so slightly. “Yeah. It’s nice.”

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I smiled, putting my hand on her back and rubbing it.

“That feels good,” she said.

“Yeah? Hold on. I’m actually pretty good at this.”

Unable to set my glass down on the hill without it spilling, I emptied the contents in one massive gulp. She smiled as I crawled behind her and placed my hands on her shoulders, kneading her flesh.

“Oh, wow...” she said.

“You’re so tense.”

“You don’t even know the half of it.”

“What’s a beautiful woman like you have to be worried about?”

She leaned forward. “Come on, you don’t want to be like Melvin, do you?”

“I’m nothing like him,” I said, working her muscles with my thumbs.

“Good.”

Now that I had gotten her mind off the mining operation across the way, I prepared to make my move. The fact that the Chinese operation would be in view had slipped my mind, but I would make up for it.

As I massaged her, I leaned in to kiss her neck.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” she said, pulling away.

“Come on, you can’t say you don’t feel something between us.”

“You are just like him,” she said, annoyed. She stood up. “What? You two got some sick bet on who can bed me first or something?”

“It’s not like that. Don’t get all crazy on me.”

“I am not crazy!”

I glanced over at the Humvee. “Stop yelling,” I hissed. “This area isn’t completely safe.”

“Are you kidding me right now? You brought me out here and it’s not even safe?” Her eyes widened. “You didn’t drug the wine, did you? Oh my God, I’m feeling faint. You fucking drugged me, didn’t you?”

“No!” I said, standing up. “I would never drug a woman. You think someone like me needs to be a Cosby?”

“Then why am I so lightheaded?”

“It’s the mountain air. You probably haven’t adjusted all the way.” I stepped forward and put a hand on her waist to steady her.

“Get away from me!” She stepped back and flung the rest of the wine in her glass to the ground. The parched earth soaked it up greedily.

I sighed. Why don't things ever go the way I planned?

"We should get back," I said, bending to pick up the blanket.

"Yes, we should," she said as if it had been her idea.

I shook my head and proceeded to gather up the food, putting it back into the basket. She had already made it to the Humvee by the time I finished.

After throwing the stuff into the back, I climbed in.

"I freaked out," she said as I shut the door. "I'm sorry. I've got nothing on this story I'm supposed to be doing, and now I'm being sent back even sooner than my short stay was originally going to be."

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“Why don’t you have anything? Wasn’t that the whole point of me taking you to the village?”

“That’s not the story I’m really working on...”

We stared at each other from across the front cab of the Humvee. I shook my head and turned the key in the ignition. The engine fired to life. “You are really something else.”

“Don’t you want to know what story I’m working on?” she asked after a moment.

“I can only imagine. Something about the military being corrupt, or...”

“The smuggling. I know about it.”

I turned the vehicle off and looked over at her.

“Are you involved?” she pressed.

“Is this off the record?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t want to be digging in this, okay?” I said, not sure I could trust her. “It goes high up the food chain. There are billions of dollars at stake. You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Billions of dollars? That’s a lot of drugs.”

I shook my head. “Don’t you get it? It’s not drugs. They’re smuggling rare earth minerals back to America and China. Both countries are making a bundle. Why do you think the Afghanistan war has dragged on for so long? Do you see an army anywhere near capable of defeating us if we put our mind to it?”

“There are a lot of caves in the mountains,” she said.

“Fuck those caves. The only reason we’re still here is to protect the Chinese and American civilians who are pillaging the mountains like there’s no tomorrow.”

“You need to tell me more,” she said, her hungry eyes staring into mine.

“I’ve said too much already.”

“Are you involved?”

I fired up the engine and put the Humvee in gear. “Not anymore.”

We rode back to the base in silence.

CHAPTER 9

Rose

When we arrived back to the Savage Soldiers base, everything looked a bit different somehow. The knowledge of a huge conspiracy just out of my reach drove me crazy.

“You’re going to cut it out with the investigating, right?” Warren asked after parking.

“Yeah, yeah,” I lied. “It’s too dangerous for me.”

“Good. I’d hate to see someone like you get wrapped up in this. It’s been hell for me trying to get out.”

“Why is that?”

He smirked and shook his head. “There you go again. Nice try. You almost got me.”

Out the window, Negan Russell rushed toward us.

“Fuck,” I said.

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Warren twisted around in his seat and opened the door. “What’s up, Negan?” he asked.

“Captain wants to see her right away.”

“What about?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, climbing down from the massive vehicle.

Warren stared at me. “Be careful,” he said in a quiet voice.

“I’m always careful,” I s

aid as I walked past him.

Negan dashed back to the CO’s office building, reaching it before me.

Warren walked back to his CHU. I smiled at how familiar I’d become with the terminology in such a short time period.

Inside the long, metal building, my smile faded as soon as I saw Captain Jacoby behind his desk.

“What in the hell were you doing off base with Warren?” he asked, skipping any form of greeting.

“Hello to you, too, Captain,” I said as I walked over and sat down in front of his desk.

“You better answer my question.”

I quickly flipped through a few options in my mind. “Warren and I have been getting along, and...”

“Don’t say anymore,” he interrupted, raising his hand into the air. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“It was my idea, not his.”

“I don’t care whose idea it was, Ms. Bennett. He should know better than to go out in that area unaccompanied with a civilian.”

“We were fine. I didn’t see anyone around for miles.”

“You didn’t see anyone?”

I shook my head and lied again. “No.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary?”

I laughed nervously. “Now you’ve got me thinking I missed something. Do you have something to tell me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re leaving on the next chopper out of here.”

I blinked. “I thought you had to wait because of the Taliban or something?”

“The situation in Afghanistan is still fluid, Ms. Bennett. I want you to be packed and ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Do you understand?”

“But I’m not done with my story!”

“That ain’t my problem,” he said, damn near smiling.

I stood, furious at him and the rest of the male-dominated world. After leaving his office, I headed to my quarters to pack my belongings.

I thought about going to talk with Warren, or maybe even Melvin, wondering if one of them would give me the information I needed before I was forced off the base.

It didn’t take long to get it all packed up; all I had brought with me was a week’s worth of clothes, my laptop, my phone, and various cords and chargers for the electronic equipment.

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Would the CO really kick me out? I wondered.

Returning without a story would not go over well with the website that had hired me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I thought, images of Warren and Melvin running through my brain.

The two men were similar in some ways—both alpha males teetering on the edge of being alpha-holes or straight up psychos. But they had their differences too.

Warren was definitely the smarter of the two. Beyond his semi-romantic picnic on top of a hill in the Afghanistan boonies, something about him made me want to smile.

On the other hand, Melvin always got straight to the point. He was dumb, but I'd never had much luck with smart men anyhow.

What type of woman am I? I asked myself, particularly at the unnerving realization that I was even considering someone like Melvin—a man who had essentially tried to assault me. It was a question I worried I would never be able to answer completely, and it made me feel like something was wrong with me.

It didn't matter though. I would be leaving without a story and wouldn't get the opportunity to talk to either of them ever again. And I only had myself to blame. It was my fault for failing to get the story at their feet. But then again, if they hadn't been such assholes, I might have been able to dig around enough to come up with something to save my ass.

Did the criminal conspiracy really go all the way to the top? Was I sitting on another

scandal like the Iran-Contra Affair? The thought excited me. Had I been able to follow up on it, people would have finally seen me as a real journalist.

I closed my eyes, drifting through the land between waking and dreaming. As I approached sleep, someone knocked at the door.

CHAPTER 10

Rose

“What are you doing here?” I asked, finding Warren standing in front of me. I glanced around. “I’m supposed to be leaving soon.”

“It won’t be until the morning,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” I stepped back and he brushed against me on his way in. A tingle ran through my body.

Why did he have such an effect on me?

“You’re all packed?” he said, looking at the suitcases piled near the door.

“Yep.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “You ready to talk more about the smuggling?”

“No,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Then why are you here?”

“Earlier.”

I tilted my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“This...” He stepped forward and put his hands on my waist. At the same time, his head came toward mine, tilting slightly.

I froze, closing my eyes, anticipating the moment our lips would touch. When they did, I felt as if Heaven had opened shop deep within my body. My heart sped.

Is this really happening? I thought.

I pulled back. “Pinch me.”

Warren raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I need to know if I’m dreaming.”

He smiled then kissed me again, sliding his tongue into my mouth. I swirled mine against his. As we kissed, his hands moved along my body, squeezing my breast through my shirt. I moaned, wanting more.

“Do you have a condom?” I asked between kisses.

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“Yeah,” he grunted and lifted my shirt.

I raised my hands into the air, allowing him to take it all the way off. Standing in front of him with bare breasts, I wondered if I was making a bad decision. But then lust took over and I didn’t care anymore.

While I didn’t get my story in Afghanistan, at least I’d have something to remember...

He bent his head to lick one nipple before moving to the other. As he explored my naked flesh with his tongue, I undid his pants.

What a marvelous sight awaited me there...

I fondled him while we kissed, amazed at his size. He stepped back and lifted his shirt, exposing his rock-hard chest and abs. I leaned forward and kissed his skin.

He took his pants off the rest of the way, and I did the same with mine. We were soon standing in front of each other, naked. My eyes lowered, scanning his body and enjoying what I saw before we resumed our passionate kiss.

I loved the way he made my body feel as his tongue moved against mine.

Time became irrelevant. All that existed in that moment was him and me, our bodies preparing to blissfully lock together.

He moved forward as we kissed, guiding me toward the bed. I sat on the edge of the

mattress, looking up at him, enamored by his magical blue eyes. He grinned and lowered himself to his knees in front of me.

As he went down on me, I closed my eyes and threw my head back, not believing how good it felt to have him kissing, licking, sucking, and fingering my sensitive flesh. Blood rushed between my legs as a familiar tingle spread through my body.

I hadn't been with a man in so long that I forgot for a moment or two that I was in Afghanistan with a war going on outside.

"Do it," I begged. "Hard."

He looked up from between my legs and stood, his huge length swinging back and forth in front of him. I watched, enthralled, as he put on a condom.

I wasn't sure if it was the fact we weren't supposed to be doing this or the fact I was in a strange country that turned me on so much. Either way, I felt like nothing I had ever experienced before compared to this, and we hadn't even officially started yet.

Warren stepped forward and lifted my legs. Our eyes met as he rubbed his tip over my wetness before sliding in. I squeezed my eyes shut and moaned.

When I reopened my eyes, I saw that his hungry expression had turned to one of surprise at the sound of an explosion outside.

"What the hell?" I gasped.

&

nbsp; He dropped my legs and spun around. "Fuck."

I jumped up. “Are we under attack?”

“I don’t know,” Warren said, slipping his underwear back on.

As we dressed, a second explosion sounded from the same direction.

“That sounds like it’s inside the camp,” Warren said. “Stay here.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, my heart racing and adrenaline pumping.

He flung the door open and bolted outside.

I ran to the window and peeked out. Flames had risen into the air about five hundred feet away, near the wall surrounding the Savage base.

Hurriedly, I shut the door and locked it. Eyeing my suitcase and bags beside the door, I wondered if I would ever get back to New York.

Leaving early no longer sounded like a bad idea. Story be damned.

But then the thought of not making it hit me hard. I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself.

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As a journalist, I wanted to find out what the hell had happened.

Cautiously, I opened the door and I stepped outside. No other explosions had occurred since the second one.

I pondered whether it had been a car bomb, an RPG, or something else?

Suddenly, I saw men running toward the blaze. Before I made the conscious decision to follow them, Negan Rusell ran over to me.

“We need to go,” he said. “Are you packed? Captain Jacoby wants you out of here right now.”

“This is bullshit,” I said, nodding to the flames. “What the hell just happened?”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis, and you don’t need to know. Can I help with your bags?”

“I’m not leaving,” I said, defiantly crossing my arms over my chest.

“If you don’t, Warren will be in even more trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis too, and—”

“Let me guess—you don’t think I need to know.”

“It’s not my call. Are you coming, or do I need to call the MPs?”

“I’m coming,” I said then stepped back inside to grab my suitcase and messenger bag.

“Hurry. The chopper is waiting,” Negan said as I followed him to the large, open space in middle of the camp.

“Will you please just tell me what happened?” I begged over the loud chopper blades and engine. “Was it the Taliban?”

“No,” he shouted. “It wasn’t an attack. You need to get on the chopper. Now.”

I glanced around, wondering about Warren. Would he look me up and call to let me know what had happened?

“You need to go,” Negan shouted, pointing at the helicopter.

“Fine,” I shouted back, ducking my head and jogging over. A soldier helped me inside and as soon as I sat down, the chopper lifted into the air. I peered over the side, looking down.

Warren!

He looked up at me in the chopper as it flew away.

The entire trip to the Kandahar airport, I thought about what had happened at Savage base.

While I hadn’t gotten the story I sought or the man I desired, all I wanted to do was get back to New York and resume my normal life.

CHAPTER 11

Warren

Two Years Later

As I got out of the yellow cab and saw the New York City skyline, I suddenly realized how much I had missed the city. As the car drove away, I walked up on the sidewalk and pulled out my phone.

Everything had fallen apart after Rose left the Savage base in Afghanistan. Captain Jacoby, involved heavily with the smuggling operation, had ordered her to the chopper after Melvin blew himself up; the damn fool had constructed a bomb from mining dynamite. It had gone off before he had a chance to take it off the base. He had said it was to shut-up a local Afghanis who wanted to report us.

I glanced up at her building from across the street, wondering which apartment was hers.

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Was she looking out a window at me? I checked her address on my phone.

After more than two years of not hearing from her, I looked up her information online. It had cost me two hundred dollars, but I found it.

Crossing the street, I wondered why she hadn't contacted me over the years. Our last night together in Afghanistan had turned hot and heavy, but she had been sent away before we could finish what we'd started.

I made it to the front door of her building, not seeing a doorman. After finding her name, I pressed the button to ring her apartment.

She's not home, I thought immediately, stepping away. I'll come back some other day.

"Hello? Who is it?" came the sound of her voice.

My heart soared from the thrill of hearing her again. "Me," I answered.

"And who is 'me'?" she said after a brief pause.

"Warren."

"Warren?"

"From Afghanistan."

“Oh, Warren! Come in.”

The door buzzed and clicked, unlocking. I walked through, entering the lobby. On the way to the elevator, I thought about the two years since I’d last seen her.

Was I insane for showing up out of the blue? Questions went through my mind as I rode the elevator to her apartment on the eleventh floor.

The moment I reached her door and knocked, it swung open.

When I saw her beautiful face, memories of that fateful night in Afghanistan rushed to my mind.

“Warren,” she said, her long dark hair as curly as ever. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s been two years. I thought I’d look you up.” To my dismay though, she didn’t seem too excited to see me.

“Come inside a minute. I need to leave for work,” she said

I stepped into her apartment. Feeling awkward, I began to ramble. “Anyway, like I said, we were separated a bit abruptly, and—”

“Yeah,” she interrupted and then took a step toward the floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side of the living room. Her shoes tapped on the polished wooden floor as she walked over.

I followed her, captivated. She hadn’t changed a bit. “That’s quite a view,” I said without thinking.

“Yeah, it’s why I moved here. The rent is crazy expensive, but I think it’s worth it.”

“You must be some big-name journalist by now, huh?”

She frowned. “No. I’m an editor now.”

“Oh, working on the other side of the equation? Still a journalist though.”

“I’m not actually a journalist anymore. I edit...other stuff.”

The tone of her voice piqued my interest. “I’d love to hear more about it then, if you’re up to it.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but like I said, I’m on my way to work. It’s weird that you caught me. I’m usually not here this late in the morning. How did you find me, anyway?”

“Oh, some stuff I did online.”

She chuckled. “Okay. Fair enough.”

“How about dinner tonight?”

She took a deep breath.

Meanwhile, no matter how hard I tried not to, I couldn’t stop thinking about that last night we’d shared in Afghanistan and what had almost happened between us.

Nor could I stop thinking about how beautiful she looked...

“Okay,” she finally said. “But I need to go now.” She put her hand on my arm and guided me to the door.

“How about I pick you up around six?”

“Yeah, that should work. Give me your number.”

“Here...” I dug my phone out and handed it to her. “Call yourself.”

As her fingers manipulated the screen, my eyes stole glances of her cleavage.

She handed my phone back as we exited her apartment. “If I don’t call you, meet me here at six,” she said as she locked the door.

“Here’s hoping you don’t call me.” I grinned.

She smiled. "My life's a little chaotic right now, but it's good to see you again, Warren."

"I understand. We can take it slow."

As we walked down the hall, I pushed all the questions I had aside. The elevator doors closed and my body tensed as I fought the urge to touch her.

She turned and grinned at me as we rode down.

Did she feel the sexual tension in the air too?

The doors slid open and we walked toward the front door.

"It really is good to see you again," she repeated.

"I'll see you later tonight. Have a good day," I said before turning to walk away.

"Are you headed uptown? If so, we could share a cab," she called after me.

"No, I'm the other way."

"Oh well. We have a lot of catching up to do. I guess it'll have to wait until tonight."

"Yes, tonight," I replied, smiling.

She waved and then spun around, taking off down the street and stretching her arm out for a cab. I watched for a moment or two before heading to find a place to kill some time.

After leaving the military, I had been living on the small nest-egg I'd acquired

helping Melvin and the others extract a ton of minerals from Afghanistan. On rare days I missed working and having a reason to get out of bed in the morning. But most of the time, I enjoyed having nothing tying me down.

Melvin still called me occasionally, wanting to go into business together, but I'd never taken him up on the offer. We'd gotten away with our operation in Afghanistan, and I didn't want to push my luck any further.

I just wanted to concentrate on the future.

After two years, I would finally be having uninterrupted time with Rose Bennett, the woman I'd never been able to forget.

CHAPTER 12

Warren

I approached the apartment building without receiving a single phone call all day. She'd been on my mind since the day I saw her being lifted into the air and away from the base. My luck in love had been far from satisfactory since getting out of the army, but it hadn't exactly been my first priority either.

I hit the buzzer at the door and waited to hear her voice. After years of not seeing her, I could still hear her laughter ringing in my memory. There was something special about Rose; she had been the first woman to leave a real impression on me.

"I'm on my way down," she answered, interrupting my thoughts.

I hailed a cab for us as I waited. When she walked through the doors and made her way to me, she demanded every eye on the street. I eyed her as the cab took off toward the restaurant I had instructed the driver to take us to. The red, low cut dress she had on played off her dark hair and enticing eyes.

"You look incredible," I said.

"Thanks. You never told me where we're going."

"A picnic in the Afghanistan mountains."

She laughed.

“No, it’s a place called Maggiano’s,” I said. “Do you know it?”

“Yes! They have the best pasta.”

“You have good taste then.”

Tall buildings passed outside on either side of us, so different than Afghanistan buildings that were rarely more than two-stories high.

“Whatever happened with that story you were working on?” I asked, curiosity suddenly coming over me.

Rose frowned. “Well, after Captain Jacoby kicked me out before I’d had a chance to put the story together, my readers and the website that had paid me to go to Afghanistan weren’t happy, to say the least. I had a hard time finding work as a freelance journalist after that.”

“That sucks.”

“You’re telling me.”

“But you’ve got a better job now?”

“I don’t know if I would go that far, but it pays the bills. What about you? What happened after...that night?”

At the mentioning of that night, the mood shifted. Rose looked away, peering out the window on her side.

“Things didn’t go too well for me either. I left the Savage Soldiers about a year later.”

“What have you been doing since then?” she asked, turning back to face me.

“Oh, a little of this and a little of that. Let’s forget about work and the past for now though. Let’s just be two people about to have a great dinner together.”

Rose’s smile returned, putting me at ease. “I don’t think it will be as romantic as a picnic in the foothills of a mountain range, but I’m game,” she said.

The driver pulled over to the side of the road in front of Maggiano’s. I paid the driver and then got out, glancing around.

“I haven’t eaten here in a while,” Rose said. “It’s so expensive.”

“My treat.”

We walked to the front of the restaurant and I opened the door for her. Once inside, the hostess smiled, recognizing me.

“Mr. Lewis, your table is ready.”

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“Wow. You come here a lot?” Rose asked.

“Yes, usually alone though.” I nodded at the hostess and then gestured toward Rose.

“After you.”

She followed the hostess and I followed behind her, loving the way her dress clung to her body. After we were seated at my usual table in the corner, she glanced around. The sound of other diners filled the room with their chatter.

“Looks busy tonight,” Rose observed.

“The food’s good.” I picked up a menu. “I’m not sure what to get yet though.”

We studied our menus for a moment until a waitress arrived to take our orders.

“Sucks that the story didn’t pan out for you,” I said once we were alone again, feeling a little guilty about not giving her all the information I had about what was going on in Afghanistan.

She shrugged. “It was probably for the best. At least I’m not traipsing across the planet to war-torn countries anymore.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“So what are you doing now?” she asked, taking a sip of water from her glass.

“Not too much. I saved a bit of money, and I’ve been thinking about starting my own

business. But lately, I've just been relaxing and enjoying life after all the craziness in Afghanistan."

"What kind of business?"

"I forgot how much you like asking questions," I said with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry. When I'm nervous, I tend to ask questions to keep the conversation going."

"You're fine. It's cute." I unrolled my cloth napkin and put it on my lap. "I guess I'm not sure what type of business I want to run yet. With my background, maybe a security firm or something."

"It must be nice to have enough money saved up to not need to work for a while."

"Yeah, I guess. My expenses were super low the two years I was over there, so I saved a lot."

"Maybe I should join the navy or something then!"

I smiled. "Well, what about you? Boyfriend?"

She glanced away, avoiding my eyes. "Not really," she said in a noncommittal voice. "You?"

"Still single. I've been thinking about that night though..." My voice trailed off as the waitress returned with our bottle of wine and poured us each a glass before leaving.

Rose lifted hers into the air. "To finding friends years later."

“And to moving relationships to the next level,” I said.

She stared into my eyes as we clinked our glasses together. I took a sip of the expensive wine, enjoying the bittersweet taste in my mouth.

“This is good,” she said after taking a sip of her own.

I smirked. “Maybe I’ll open a vineyard.”

“Then you’d have to move out the city.”

“True. And there’s too much here I’m interested in right now.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, Maggiano’s, for one.” I joked. “Then there’s you...”

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She looked down at the white tablecloth.

“You’ve thought about that night, haven’t you?” I asked in a low voice.

“Yeah,” she said. “I mean, once or twice. Not excessively...”

The waitress returned with our salads.

I stared at Rose, wanting to press her for more, but felt it best to back off for a while.

We ate quietly for a minute.

“We can’t just pick up where we left off,” she said suddenly.

“No, I guess not. Let’s forget about it then and just have fun tonight, okay? We have more options here than in Afghanistan.”

“That’s for sure,” she said, smiling.

By the end of our dinner, we had fallen into a comfortable conversation that had her laughing lightheartedly.

As we were leaving the restaurant, I didn’t want the night to end. “You up for a comedy club or something?” I asked, trying to figure out where we could go next.

Rose took a deep breath. “Normally I would, but I need to get up early in the morning, so I should get home.”

“Maybe some other time then. Let me get a cab for us.”

“I’d rather go home alone, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” I said, hiding my disappointment. From what I could tell though, she would be worth the wait.

“I’ll call you later this week, okay?”

“All right.” I stepped forward and hugged her around waist. A few seconds later, I debated with myself and then went for it, giving her a quick peck on the lips. “Good night, Rose. So great to see you again.”

“Yeah,” she said, a little flustered. “You too.”

“Hold on.” I stepped to the street and hailed a cab for her.

“Thanks again,” she said before climbing into the back.

“No problem. Talk to you soon.” After I closed the door, I watched the driver pull away, merging with the traffic. I thought briefly about heading to a nearby strip joint to blow off some steam, but with her on my mind, I decided against it.

She’ll come around, I told myself as I made my way home. And we’ll finish what we started...

CHAPTER 13

Rose

Back at the apartment after my dinner with Warren, I debated whether I should have

invited him over.

My phone rang. I glanced at the screen and saw Melvin's name.

Ugh.

"Hey, Melvin," I answered. "What's up?"

"You never called me back about our second date. You're not backing out on me, are you?"

"No, I've been busy with work and stuff," I said, although

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a voice in my brain yelled at me to tell him about Warren and get it over with.

“How about tonight then? We could grab a bite to eat.”

I walked into my kitchen. “It’s late. I’ll call you later in the week, all right?”

“What’s wrong? You didn’t like our first date?”

“It was fine, but I’ve got a lot going on right now.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said.”

“Well, I’m going to go. I need some sleep. I’ve got an early day tomorrow.”

“All right. But just know I’m not going to stop trying to get that second date.”

“You can keep trying, but I’m not making any promises.”

“Later on, Rose.” He ended the call before I had a chance to say anything else.

Melvin had looked me up a week earlier. Against my better judgment, I went out with him, mainly out of curiosity. A part of me was still bitter about not getting my story two years ago, and another part of me was still curious about Warren. Hence, Melvin had struck me as an opportunity to dig for information.

But now, regrettably, both men were interested in me and I didn’t know what to do. In Afghanistan, I had leaned toward Warren, but was ultimately left wondering if that

had been a mistake. Melvin was much easier to read, but there was something predatory about him that was an immediate turn off; it wasn't like I could forget how forceful he had tried to be with me in Afghanistan.

After pouring myself a glass of water, I retired to my bedroom. It was early, but I actually need to be up early for work the next day; my skills as an editor were in high demand.

I worked for a publisher of trashy romance novels, which was as far away from journalism as one could get. While I told myself I didn't care what other people thought, none of my friends or family knew about the job.

As I laid under the covers, memories of that night in Afghanistan flooded my mind. Warren and I had been so close to taking our relationship to the next level.

The look on his face after the explosion was permanently etched in my memory.

Why had both he and Melvin come back into my life so suddenly? Was it some kind of sign?

I had been sleeping with one man on and off for the past year. He'd been one of few male romance novel writers, but I had broken things off with him some months earlier. He'd been okay in bed, but I couldn't stand him the rest of the time, so continuing things with him had been hardly worth the trouble.

And now Warren had returned to stoke my fire completely out of the blue. While I suppose it wasn't too surprising that he had returned to New York—Melvin too, for that matter—I just hadn't really given much thought to the possibility that they would. Even though they both had been living in New York before leaving for Afghanistan, and both were originally from Colorado just like me, our paths had never crossed before heading to Afghanistan, so I'd had no reason to assume they

would afterwards. We hadn't made arrangements to keep in touch before I was sent away from the Savage Soldiers base.

Yet, I'd now been out with both of them within a week of each other. Destiny certainly could be strange.

Warren was the one who regularly occupied my mind though. I suddenly felt compelled to call him.

I reached over to grab my phone from the nightstand. I turned on the screen, tapping and swiping until reaching his name on my contact list.

Then I remembered how awfully late it was.

But unable to resist, I tapped the screen. I held the phone to my ear, my heart pounding as it rang.

"Hello?" he answered a few seconds later.

"Hey, it's Rose."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine, but I thought it could be better..."

"Huh?"

"You know, the night I left Afghanistan? What we were about to do..."

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“Ohhh,” he said. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Are you really going to make me say it?”

“I’m on my way,” he said and quickly ended the call.

I sat up and threw the covers back, shocked by what I’d just done. I rushed to the bathroom.

Am I making a mistake? I asked my reflection in the mirror.

I barely knew the man, but that night in Afghanistan had been special, despite the interruption.

As I continued looking at my reflection, I swished mouthwash back and forth and decided I would just have fun for a night. After that, we would simply see where things went.

I’m still young. It’s no big deal, I tried to convince myself.

I spit into the sink, washed my hands, and then started wondering what I should wear before deciding to stick with the two-piece pajamas set I already had on. They were soft and comfortable, but still a bit sexy. Nevertheless, I undid the top few buttons, figuring that would help.

I then went around the house, making sure everything was in place. Just as I was contemplating whether I should light some candles, put on some music, or get some

wine, the buzzer sounded.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself calm before pressing the button to open the security door downstairs.

Right that instant, at the most inopportune time, I thought of Melvin.

What if he called or decided to come over?

For someone who used to be a reporter, I really didn't think things through sometimes...

I walked over to my front door and opened it an inch, praying it would really be Warren on the other side.

CHAPTER 14

Rose

Warren stood in the hallway.

Relieved, I smiled and stepped back. "Come inside."

He moved forward quickly, shutting the door behind him. I stood in my living room with pajamas and no socks on my feet, my heart fluttering.

Our eyes met as he stepped forward. He put his hands on my waist and pulled me toward him, my soft body pressing against his hard one.

I stood on my toes and kissed him, wanting my memories to turn into reality. His reaction immediately told me he wanted the same.

Hardly wasting any time, he unbuttoned my top. I began fumbling with his pants, wanting to touch him again and feel him inside of me.

As our clothes came off, we held our kiss until I took his hand and led him to my bedroom.

Looks like we didn't need candles or soft music after all.

Once we reached my bed, I sat down on the edge of the mattress, just as I had in Afghanistan.

A lustful look fell over Warren's face as he dropped to his knees in front of me. Once again, his strong thick hands ran over my skin, getting my blood flowing.

He trailed a path up my thigh with his tongue, sending my heart racing. Once his tongue made contact with its destination, I ran my fingers through his hair as he explored every inch of my tender pink flesh. As my whole body tingled, I remembered the explosion in Afghanistan and laughed.

Warren stopped and looked up at me. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I'm just hoping there won't be any explosions before we get to it this time."

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He rubbed my thighs with his and then stood, his massive appendage bouncing in front of him. I watched intently as he slid on a condom and crawled on the bed. I scooted back, spreading my legs in anticipation.

He balanced on one huge arm and positioned himself for penetration as I stared up into his eyes.

He worked his way into me and everything else faded away. As the hard thickness slid in and out of me, it felt like we were made for each other.

I ran my hands down his firm and strong back. He leaned down to kiss my lips.

Letting my hesitation fade away, I enjoyed the moment. He thrust in and out of me, faster and harder, sending chills through my entire body.

“Don’t stop,” I begged, so close to coming.

The desperation on his face pushed me over the edge. I felt myself tighten around him as my whole body began to shake. All the while, he continued pounding me.

“Fuck, yes...” I moaned.

His face scrunched up and he grunted, thrusting into me one final time. “Yes...” he hissed, breathing heavy.

Slowly, he stopped. Staying inside of me, he stared into my eyes.

Suddenly, fear washed over me.

What the hell am I doing? I thought. This guy is practically a stranger...

Without warning, images of war-torn Afghanistan came to mind, along with memories of Melvin's forced kiss, and the way things had gone wrong with Warren during our picnic.

My chest suddenly felt too tight. My breathing too shallow.

"Get off!" I said, propping myself up with my elbows.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he pulled out.

I looked to the wall, wanting to see anything but his face and blue eyes. "This was a mistake," I choked out between my labored breathing.

"Mistake? What do you mean? You wanted—"

"I know," I snapped, cutting him off. "Will you please just leave?"

Guilt and shame mixed, forming an emotional cocktail I wasn't ready to deal with, especially not with him still naked in my bed.

"What the hell?" he muttered, crawling out of bed.

"Just go. Please."

"You're the one who called me over," he reminded, intensifying my guilt.

I pulled a cover over my naked body, not even fully understanding why I felt so

ashamed. Tears welled in my eyes. “Will you please just leave?” I said again. “I’ll call you later.”

“Whatever. Where’s your bathroom?”

“There.” I pointed.

“This is so messed up, Rose,” he muttered, grabbing his clothes and crossing the room. “You’re making me feel used.”

I said nothing. Tears flowed completely outside of my control, effectively making me feel even worse.

When I heard Warren leave a few minutes later, practically slamming my front door, I laid back and cried, letting everything out.

It wasn’t him, but he had opened a floodgate that would not be closed easily. All my problems had started after I got back from Afghanistan—after I’d seen brutality, the mistreatment of women, and so much more. None of my life had made sense after returning from that country.

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Gradually, my tears dried, but I still felt terrible.

Plus, I knew Warren would never speak to me again—not after that outburst. My sadness quickly turned into self-loathing.

I thought about calling and begging h

im to come back, trying to explain how crazy my life had become after meeting him over there, but I couldn't.

Why would someone as perfect as him want a problem-woman like me?

CHAPTER 15

Warren

The next morning, I woke up as confused as the night before.

What the hell was Rose's problem? She had called me, invited me over, let me fuck her, and then gone nuts crying?

What the hell?

I picked up my phone from the nightstand and turned on the screen.

No messages.

Maybe it was a one-off? She didn't seem like that type of woman, but what the hell did I know?

After throwing the covers back, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stretched my arms.

Craziness aside, I couldn't deny she'd been a good lay. The look on her face when she came stuck with me as I went through my morning routine, gradually waking up and getting ready for the day.

With no job, I had nothing but time.

Around lunch, my phone rang. I grabbed it, expecting to see her phone number on the screen. But instead, it was one I didn't recognize.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey, man. What's up? Long time, no hear."

"Who is this?" I asked, unable to catch the voice.

"Damn, bro. We lose touch for a year, and you've already forgotten me?"

"Oh. Hey, Melvin. I didn't expect to hear from you again."

"Yeah, you made that quite evident last time we met."

"What's up?" I asked, getting straight to the point. "If this is about the past..."

"No, no," he interrupted. "I want to talk to you about a new opportunity. What are you doing these days?"

“Nothing much,” I admitted.

“You did all that complaining back in A-stan, but you’re enjoying that money, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Look, let’s meet up, okay? This is a solid idea, and you’re the perfect partner.”

“I don’t know, Melvin...”

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“You fucking afraid?”

“Man, don’t do that to me.”

“Do what?”

“Try to manipulate me. It doesn’t work.”

He laughed. “Not anymore, huh? Anyway, what do you say? At least hear me out.”

“Fine. When do you want to do it?”

“You got time now? I have a hot date tonight.”

“Sure, now is fine. Where you at?”

“Let’s meet at Lucy’s Diner on Fifty-Third Street.”

“I’ll see you there in half-an-hour,” I said then ended the call.

Whatever he had in mind, I wasn’t interested. But I knew he wouldn’t stop bugging me until I told him in person and made it abundantly clear we weren’t going to go into business together ever again.

* * *

On the walk to Lucy’s Diner, I wondered what Melvin might want.

I also marveled at how ironic it was that two people with connections to Afghanistan had re-entered my life at roughly the same time. I had sought out Rose, but Melvin had shown up on his own.

Was it really just a coincidence?

None of the world made much sense, and ever since I returned, my view of the world had changed.

All I thought about was coming up with a way to get over the guilt attached to the money I had made illegally while serving my country. It didn't matter how many times I told myself we hadn't hurt anyone; the guilt remained.

When it came down to it, I'd participated in a scheme that had made many people wealthy. The money I had received was enough for me to not have to do anything for a while, but I had to come up with my next step.

Rose didn't seem to be the type of person who would date someone without a job or any prospects for the future, and I wasn't going to let her go so easily next time around.

When I made it to the diner, I spotted Melvin sitting in a booth next to the front window. He nodded and smiled as I walked through the door.

"What's up, bro?" he said as I took a seat at his booth. He sounded far more jovial than I remembered him.

"Same old, same old," I said. "And you?"

A waitress walked over with a pad of paper at the ready to take our order. Melvin ordered coffee with no sugar or milk, as did I.

When she left, he looked across the table at me. "I'm looking for a partner," he said.

"I don't want to be part of any of your schemes," I said firmly.

He laughed. "Damn. Jump to conclusions often? This is totally legit."

"Yeah? And what is it?"

"I'm starting a security company. I've already got three big name clients lined up, and I need to find people like you who I can trust."

"You want to hire me?" I shook my head. "Not interested."

"No, I need a financial partner."

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“Oh. So you want my money?”

“Well, yeah, but I want you too. I like how you think things through all the time. We made a good team back in Afghanistan.”

I took a deep breath and shook my head. “It’s not for me. Not now.”

He stared into my eyes, his brow furrowed. “Will you at least think about it?” he said. “I’ll write up an official proposal with all the terms and details.”

“You can do that, but I’m still not interested.”

“Before you even know the details? That doesn’t sound like the Warren I remember.”

“Well, we all change. At least some of us do.”

“Harsh, but fair.”

The waitress returned with our coffee. I took a sip while glancing out the window. Several people passed by, wrapped up in their own worlds, oblivious to anything else.

I finished my coffee as quickly as possible, ready to leave. If Rose called, I didn’t want to be anywhere near Melvin or his crazy plans, legit or not. The mystery of the night before replayed in my mind, and I tuned Melvin out as he rambled on.

After I drank the last of the bitter brew, I slid the cup to the center of the table and stood. “I’m leaving. You can email me the information, but I’m probably not going to

change my mind.”

“At least read the shit, bro. You can do that for me, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll read it. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Still a cheap bastard, huh?” He laughed.

I turned and walked out the door, already lost in my own thoughts. The image of Rose’s face when I first slid into her flashed through my mind as I walked home, trying to decide what to do next.

CHAPTER 16

Warren

When I got back to my apartment, I called Ryan, my old Afghanistan bunkmate. He had moved back to New York too, but we hadn’t talked in almost a year. With everyone else from Afghanistan coming back into my life, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to search him out too. Maybe he had the answers I sought.

“Hey, Warren. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, I’ve been laying low since I got out.”

“I hear you. What’s up?”

“Want to grab a beer? I’ve got some stuff I want to talk out.”

“Oh no,” he said, chuckling. “More of your crazy theories on the origin of the universe or why oranges are the perfect fruit?”

I smiled. “You remember all that shit?”

“Dude, we spent so many hours together. Your stories and monologues kept me going.”

“Glad I accomplished something over there. Let’s grab a beer tonight.”

“I had some plans, but I’ll change them. Where do you want to meet?”

“Let’s go to that joint down Seventy-Fifth Street. What’s it called?”

“The Irish Paddler?”

“Yeah, that’s it. We met there before we shipped out, remember?”

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“How could I forget? One of the craziest nights of my life.”

“I don’t think we’ll get that crazy tonight.”

??

He laughed. “That’s what you always say. I’ll meet you there around seven. That work for you?”

“Sounds great. Good to hear your voice.”

“Yeah, you too man. Later.”

I ended the call. Afghanistan, even at the late stages of a war that had lasted longer than a decade, had been a place where lifelong bonds were formed for better or worse.

Was that why Rose wouldn’t vacate my thoughts? Maybe a night of drinking with Ryan would help so that I could finally move on. I didn’t need a crazy woman in my life, no matter how much I enjoyed her in bed.

After talking to Ryan, my spirits lifted enough to make the afternoon tolerable.

While reading an autobiography from a man who had served in Vietnam, I kept glancing over at my phone, thinking Rose might call. But she never did.

Fucking women.

* * *

Later that evening, I walked in the bar like I owned the place. It was pretty much empty, which wasn't surprising for a Tuesday night. Most normal people who frequented bars had to work hard for their drinking money.

I found Ryan sitting at the bar and walked over. Taking a seat on a stool to his right, I patted his back as he looked in the other direction. He turned around and smiled the moment he saw me. We had been through so much together.

"How you been?" he asked and then turned to the bartender. "Two glasses of your top-shelf single malt."

"Not bad. Yourself?" I said.

"Things went to hell after I got back."

I nodded. "Yeah. Same for me."

"Really? You seem to be doing okay for yourself. I mean, you're drinking on a Tuesday night!"

"Oh, I'm doing okay. I'm glad you came."

"No problem."

When the bartender returned with our drinks, I pulled out a twenty and slid it to him. "Keep it," I said.

He nodded before wandering down to the other end of the bar.

I lifted the glass. “To the family the government gives you,” I said.

Ryan grinned as he clinked his glass against mine. We both took healthy swigs.

Ryan set his glass down on the weathered wooden bar-top, while I kept mine in my hand, staring at the floating ice cubes.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked. “I can see it on your face.”

“Remember that reporter chick who showed up and got kicked out by Captain Jacoby?”

“Yeah. What about her?”

“I looked her up.”

His face scrunched up in confusion.

“What?” I asked and then finished the last of the alcohol.

“Melvin called me all excited about a week ago. He said he found her and that they were dating.”

“That’s not possible. I just saw her yesterday.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“No, she didn’t say anything. He didn’t either. I talked to him earlier today.”

Ryan shook his head. “That man is bad news.”

“Tell me about it. He wants me to go into business with him.”

“Of course. You have the money.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I can trust him. And now I find this out.” I shook my head.

“Maybe I can’t trust either of them.”

“Some days it seems like everything was so much simpler in Afghanistan. I mean, it was more dangerous, but we knew what to expect, you know?”

I nodded. “Definitely. Melvin showed up after I found her.”

“And you figured why not add good ol’ Ryan to the mix, huh?” He laughed then finished the rest of his drink.

I raised my hand to fetch the bartender for another round. And then I turned off my phone.

Fuck Rose if she tries to call, I thought, still unsure of what to think after she had flipped out on me the other night. I didn’t need that kind of confusion in my life. I had enough of my own crazy to deal with.

Ryan and I spent the rest of the night catching up, drinking and forgetting our problems. Then we parted ways after he picked up a brunette with big tits.

On the way back to my apartment, I turned my phone back on, thinking about giving Rose a call and seeing if she was okay. When I saw no messages come in, I put it in my pocket and kept walking.

Maybe it’s for the best, I told myself. If this business opportunity with Melvin turns out to be legit, maybe I’ll be able to have something in my life with actual meaning...

As I climbed the stairs to my third-floor apartment—part of my daily routine for keeping in shape—my phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket and saw Rose’s name. After half-a-second of consideration, I ignored it.

With liquid courage running through my veins, I didn’t see any need for her in my life anymore. I had done fine enough without her, and I would keep doing fine without her.

She appeared in my dreams that night though, chasing and teasing me in a thousand different ways. I woke up the next morning with the hardest boner I’d had since my teenage years.

What was that woman doing to me?

CHAPTER 17

Rose

When he didn't answer my call, I figured it was late and he was probably asleep. The next day, with each hour that passed, I became more obsessed with talking to him.

I still wasn't able to explain my craziness after we'd made love, but I was ready to try. He kept appearing in my thoughts and I wanted to give him a chance if he would have me.

After controlling my urge all day, I broke down after dinner and sent him a simple text message saying, "U around?"

He answered with a simple, "Yes."

"Can I come over? Talk?"

A minute passed. Then another. No answer.

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I fucked it up. He's done with me, I lamented.

Right before turning my phone off so that I wouldn't stare at the screen all night waiting for him, it buzzed.

The text message contained an address across town, nothing more.

My heart raced.

A million questions went through my mind as I rushed to my bedroom to pick out something to wear. I wanted to look sensual, not slutty. I told myself I was only going over to his apartment to talk and explain my actions the other night, but I wore my special red panties just in case things got heated.

As I got dressed and freshened up, I thought about what to tell him and decided the truth was best, even if he wanted nothing to do with me afterwards.

But what was the truth?

In the cab on the way over, I sat with my legs pressed firmly together, wondering if the skirt I'd chosen was too short since he probably already thought I was just using him for sex.

Did he think that was why I wanted to come over?

Was it?

Or was part of it because I was still seeking the answers I had never been able to obtain in Afghanistan?

When the cab arrived at his apartment, I paid the driver and got out, the wind whipping my hair in every direction.

I rushed to his front door where a man in a nice blue uniform opened it, holding a tablet in his left hand.

“Welcome to Rosary Tower,” he said. “Are you here to see someone?”

“Yes. I’m here to see Mr. Lewis. He’s expecting me.”

“Hold on a minute,” the man said, scanning the tablet screen. “I don’t see your name...”

“Can you call him? I just talked to him half-an-hour ago.”

“Sure. Hold on.”

I watched nervously as he walked over to a desk and picked up a phone, debating whether I should just leave. Like that night in Afghanistan and the other night, this suddenly felt like a bad idea.

He walked back over and smiled. “Sorry about that, ma’am. I’ll walk you to the elevators.”

“Thank you,” I said. “What room is he in?”

“He’s got the entire top floor. Mr. Lewis is the king of the tenants here.” He smiled politely, stopping as we reached the elevator doors. “Here you go, ma’am. Have a

wonderful evening.”

“Thanks again,” I said, and then walked into the elevator. I took a deep breath once the door closed, knowing it was too late to turn back.

Or was it?

Mixed emotions made me dizzy as the elevator rose toward the top of the three-story building. When the door reopened, I stepped into a small foyer.

A door opened and Warren walked out, a smile on his face and a robe covering his body. “I stayed in the hot tub too long,” he said. “Come on in.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Hot tub, huh?”

He nodded, leading me inside his opulent apartment.

“Nice place,” I said, glancing around.

“Thanks. After I came back from Afghanistan, I treated myself.”

“Mission accomplished.”

“Let’s go to the balcony and talk. You want to get in the hot tub?”

“I don’t have a bathing suit.”

“Suddenly so modest?” He grinned. “Well, we can just enjoy the fresh air.”

I followed him across a grand living room toward a balcony bigger than my entire bedroom. “Wow, that’s quite a view.”

“I love waking up to this scene every morning,” he said.

“I bet. It’s incredible.”

As I scanned the skyline in the distance, I wondered how much he was paying for such a nice place. Thoughts of the smuggling operation—the story that had ruined my career—came rushing back.

We stood next to each other near the marble railing surrounding the balcony. He had his hand on the small of my back, making me feel at ease despite my nervousness.

“I’m sorry about kicking you out,” I said, looking at the street below.

“It’s okay.” His hand slid farther down my back before moving back up.

I shot him an agitated glance. “Is that the only reason you want me? My body?” I

stared into his eyes, demanding the truth.

He didn't look away, meeting my gaze with the same intensity. "It's one reason," he admitted before kissing me.

I pulled back, not wa

nting to rush things and end up having a repeat of last time. "Wait." I put a defensive hand on my chest. "We should talk."

Warren walked over to a metal table in middle of the balcony. "Talk about what?"

I followed and sat down across from him. "Everything. I'm just so confused. After I got back from Afghanistan, everything in my life fell apart."

"And you weren't even a soldier or there for long."

"Right. I mean, I like you a lot, but I don't want to bring you down." I glanced away. "It seems you're doing so well for yourself. I don't want to mess that up for you."

"But all of this means nothing without someone to share it with," he said. "Besides..."

His voice trailed off and I wondered if he was hiding something. "Go on," I urged. "I can be a good listener."

"You're working on another story, aren't you?" He shook his head and chuckled.

"No, I'm not. I honestly care, Warren."

He took a deep breath, looking out at the night sky, his brow furrowed.

What had him so tensed? My old journalistic curiosity threatened to take over for a moment.

“It’s in my past,” he said. “We all have checkered pasts, right? They make us who we are.”

“And who are you?”

“A man looking for a woman like you.”

“Just for fun? Physical only?”

“No, not only—but it’s a good place to start...”

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Under the table, I felt his hand slide onto my knee, tentatively at first. I tensed, but didn't stop him. Taking it as a sign of consent, he moved his hand higher, up to my thigh.

I sighed, unable to fight my body's desires.

We could talk after. Right now, it was just time for a little fun.

I pushed my chair back, the metal legs scraping against the cement. As I stood, I kept my eyes on his, mentally ripping his robe open. He got to his feet and instantly closed the gap between us.

With his strong arms around me, holding me close, he kissed me on the lips. Willingly giving in to him, I told myself that this was going to be the last time.

Warren backed up and took my hand, leading me inside the massive and modernly-decorated white living room. It was so clean, it almost looked unused. Opulent beyond words.

For the first time in a while, I felt safe.

We passed through the living room and along the way, I stared at his marvelous ass through his white robe.

We stopped in his bedroom, where he turned around and threw his arms around me again. I reached into his robe, feeling that he wasn't wearing underwear as I wrapped my fingers around his thick appendage.

The intensity of our kiss increasing, he moved his fingers to my blouse, unbuttoning it as fast as he could manage, while I stroked and tugged at him, feeling him hardening in my hand.

After taking off my blouse, he stepped back and threw his robe open. I glanced down at his halfway formed erection, watching it twitch a few times as I undid my bra strap.

When the fabric fell away, he stepped forward and bent slightly, sucking on one nipple while holding the breast with his hand. I ran my fingers through his hair, pressing him closer.

He moved to my other breast, leaving nothing unexplored. I undid my skirt and let it fall to the floor. A moment later, he rubbed his hand against the outside of my panties.

I moaned, loving the way he made me feel both inside and out. My body responded to his every touch, but my heart also fell for him beyond what was physical.

His kisses moved lower on my body. I felt his hands moving to my hips, pulling me closer to his face as he got on his knees in front of me.

“Yes,” I hissed as he leaned back and pulled my panties down.

I stepped out of them and spread my legs. He licked my outer lips as his hand squeezed my ass, pulling me even closer.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation.

He teased me another minute or two. The more he licked, the wetter I became and the more I wanted him.

I put both hands on his shoulders and pulled. Understanding immediately, he stood in front of me. Before he made another move, I got to my knees, wanting to make love to that masterpiece with my mouth. While I rarely enjoyed going down on guys, it was different this time. I willingly wrapped my lips around his thick shaft, taking as much of him in as possible.

I looked up at his face. He stared down at me with a look of ecstasy and appreciation that I'd never seen on a man before. With his hands on his hips, he looked like a Roman Gladiator. Or perhaps a Greek god of perfection.

While sucking him, I stroked his shaft with my right hand, really getting him worked up. I loved the expression on his face as I ran my tongue over the sensitive spot under his head.

"Come here," he said in a gruff voice, lifting me up and leading me to his bed. "Bend over the edge."

I did as he told me, feeling dirty and horny at the same time. He slapped my left ass cheek, causing it to sting with a perfect blend of pain and pleasure.

"You like that, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," I groaned.

He slapped the other cheek as I stood with my breasts pressed against his mattress. He ran his hands up to my back and then back down. I moaned, spreading my legs a few more inches, wanting him to have all the access necessary.

"You're so fucking hot," he said, rubbing himself against me without penetrating.

"Come on..." I begged.

“You want this?”

“Yes.”

When the first inch or so slid in, I knew I wouldn’t last long. My body already tingled everywhere as he slowly pushed the rest of all nine wonderful inches inside. I pushed back against him, wishing he could go even deeper.

He pulled out just as slowly, enjoying every moment. Once out almost all the way, he would start again. Gradually, he found a rhythm, working up the pace, pounding me harder and faster. Waves of pleasure washed over my body and I never wanted him to stop.

All my doubts and worries floated away. The world itself faded around me when he reached under and rubbed my clitoris while continuing to pump me. All that mattered in that moment was the bliss being created between us.

He fucked me like it was our last time together. As if he was heading off to war again.

I concentrated on the feeling of him sliding in and out, never having felt such intense pleasure before in my life.

He pushed me to the edge and my mind went blank when my orgasm hit. All the while, he kept going as my body shook.

“Turn around,” he said. “I want to see your face.”

He pulled out and I flipped over, spreading my legs apart as wide as was comfortable.

Then he slipped himself back inside me.

My only thought was to make him feel at least as good as he had made me feel moments before. The look on his face told me I wasn't far from my goal. His forehead wrinkled as he stared at me, thrusting faster. I ran my hands down his strong back, digging my fingers into his flesh and pulling him closer. A pleasurable sensation ran through me, letting me know we were connecting on some deeper level.

He grunted, his thrusts finally slowing. When he came, I saw it in his eyes. His face relaxed and his body stopped.

Still inside of me, he stared into my eyes while he worked on catching his breath. I looked back, soaking in every visual detail of the moment.

"Fuck," he muttered, pulling out.

"Fuck indeed."

He laid on his back beside me, still breathing heavily. I rolled over and threw my arm over his rock-hard stomach, cuddling against his quivering body.

"Fuck," he repeated.

I giggled.

He smiled. "You're something else, Rose."

"And I can't kick you out this time. You're not going to make me leave instead, are you?"

"I don't want you to leave, ever." He brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes with his

fingers.

“Do

you mean it? We don’t know each other well, but I feel so connected to you.”

“Still?” he said with a grin.

I squeezed him briefly, laughing. “I’m serious.”

“I know what you mean. I’ve been wandering aimlessly since Afghanistan.”

Will he ever tell me what really happened over there? I briefly thought, but kept the question to myself, not wanting to ruin the afterglow.

We cleaned up a few minutes later. We then shared a bowl of ice cream before calling it a night and crawling into bed together.

CHAPTER 18

Rose

I woke up before him the next morning. As I laid next to him, his bare back rose and fell as he breathed. I smiled to myself.

It hadn't all been a dream.

Had I finally found a man worthy of my time, two years after meeting him in Afghanistan, no less? Our story would be fun to tell around the dinner table, that was for sure.

Carefully, I slipped from under the covers and got out of bed, trying not to wake him. He groaned and rolled over, but appeared to be a heavy sleeper.

I wondered if he was a morning person, or the type who was super grumpy before coffee and breakfast. As I grabbed his white robe from the top of his dresser, I realized how little I knew about him.

At the same time, none of the mystery seemed to matter; it just made our blossoming relationship better.

In the spotless kitchen, I started a pot of coffee with his fancy machine. While it brewed, I returned to the bedroom, where he was still asleep. I gathered my clothes and dressed quickly, needing to get home to shower and change before work.

I didn't want to go to work, but needed the money. Plus, a little time and space from Warren wouldn't hurt anything because I needed to think things through. We were moving so fast.

Before I left, I wrote a quick note telling him I'd gone to work and would call him later that evening, and left it hanging on his refrigerator with one of his banana magnets.

Outside his door, in the small foyer with the elevator, I saw a door leading to a set of stairs.

A quick three flights should help me wake up, I reasoned and started my way down.

By the time I reached the lobby on the first floor, I realized I needed to get in shape.

The doorman, the same as the night before, smiled and nodded his head as I passed in a hurry.

I hailed a cab when I got outside Warren's apartment building. The driver yammered on about some festival happening in Brooklyn later that night. I nodded politely but said nothing.

When the cab driver made it to my building about ten minutes later, I paid him before getting out.

Then I saw Melvin leaning against the brick wall next to the front door.

Ugh. I don't need this now, I thought, seriously debating whether I should just walk away and go to work in old clothes. It wasn't like my co-workers would mind.

Melvin spotted me before I could decide though. Smiling, he walked over.

Everything about him was broad—his shoulders, his gait, and even his thinking. The latter was the main reason I wasn't interested in dating him anymore...

"Hey, girl," he said, stopping in front of me.

"Hey, Melvin. I'm in a hurry."

“You weren’t home last night.”

I tilted my head to the side and studied his face. “How do you know that?”

“Oh, let’s just say I’m the protective type.”

“No, that’s just creepy,” I said, walking around him. “Anyway, I need to go.”

“Hold on,” he said, grabbing me.

Agitated, I looked at his grip on my arm, and then up at him.

He let go. “You still haven’t confirmed our second date.”

“I’ve been busy. And, to be honest, I’m not interested.”

“You got someone else?”

“No,” I lied. “But even if I did, it wouldn’t be any of your business.”

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Warren and Melvin had known each other in Afghanistan, but I was sure they didn't talk anymore. So I knew as long as I didn't tell either of them about the other, I should be fine.

"Damn. When did you grow so cold?"

"That's not helping your case. Like I said, I've got to go."

"Fine, I'll call you later," he said as I walked away.

"Please don't," I called over my shoulder.

My hands trembled as I fumbled with my key to unlock the front door of the building.

When would I be able to afford to live in a place with a doorman?

Inside my building, I slammed the door shut and turned to look outside. Melvin had left. I breathed a sigh of relief and then headed upstairs to get ready for work.

* * *

Melvin was still nowhere to be seen when I left the building again. On the entire walk to my nondescript office building about a mile from my apartment, my thoughts bounced back and forth from Melvin to Warren.

Warren. I had slept with him again. Did I finally have him out of my system? He had satisfied my physical needs, but I felt like he could offer me so much more...

At work, I ran into Kim in the break room while getting another cup of coffee to keep me going.

She smiled when she saw me. “You weren’t answering your phone last night,” she said.

“Oh, I might have hooked up with someone,” I said teasingly as I headed to the coffee machine on the counter.

“You? Hookup with someone? I need the details!”

Kim and I had been friends for years. We shared practically everything with each other.

“Maybe later,” I said, pouring coffee into my mug. “How are you and that new guy working out?”

“Which one?”

“The tall one with the beard. I can’t remember his name.”

“Drew? He was like two men ago. You need to keep up!”

“Are you ever going to find a decent man?” I asked before taking a sip of coffee.

She sighed. “I don’t know. There aren’t any good guys left who aren’t already in a relationship.”

“Right?”

“Was it the guy from Afghanistan that you hooked up with last night? Melvin?”

I frowned, staring down at my coffee.

Kim raised her eyebrows. “No?”

I looked up, noting the excitement on her face. “No, it wasn’t Melvin. I met another guy in Afghanistan too...”

“Warren? Yeah, you told me about that crazy night right before you left.”

“He caught up with me a few days ago.”

“And Melvin found you like a week ago? That’s so weird.”

“I guess.”

“You should hook me up with Melvin if you’re not interested in him,” Kim said after a brief pause.

“Really?”

She shrugged. “Why not?”

“He’s really not my type at all, but I won’t judge you.”

“You better not.”

I smiled. “All right. I’ll send him your number. Is that cool?”

“Yeah. Who couldn’t use a little more muscle in their life?” She wiggled her eyebrows.

Whether she and Melvin hooked up or not, hopefully it would distract him enough so that he would quit stalking me.

“Well, I should go,” she said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yeah, me too. I’m on chapter thirty-two of editing this novel and I need to get it finished today.”

“Good luck.”

“Only four more chapters to go, but this author can go on and on, dragging scenes out way too long. I never know what to expect.”

“Can’t be any worse than the one I’m editing right now. You doing anything for lunch?”

I shook my head. “No. We can get something together.”

“Sounds good. Don’t send Melvin my number yet though. I want to think about it some more.”

“Okay,” I said, and then headed toward my desk for another day of work, helping other people with their written words but writing none of my own.

It didn’t bring me joy, but at least it paid the bills.

CHAPTER 19

Warren

When I woke up and saw her gone, I wondered in the back of my mind why she hadn’t told me the truth about her and Melvin the night before. Granted, I hadn’t mentioned it either, and so we had both been rather preoccupied. But still...

As I drank a cup of coffee in the kitchen and attempted to wake up, my phone rang. Thinking it might be Rose, I quickly grabbed it. But I didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Is this Warren Lewis?” a man asked in a heavily accented voice.

“Maybe. Who is this?”

“It’s Jahmir. Do you not remember me?”

“Jahmir, old friend! How have you been?”

“Not good, Warren. Not good at all.”

Another man’s voice suddenly piped up. “You will come back here, Mr. Lewis, and finish what you started.”

I froze. “Who is this?”

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“My name is not important. Jahmir’s life will be spared because he got me in touch with you. But if you do not comply, I will burn this whole village to the ground.”

“What do I care?” I asked as nonchalantly as possible. If he knew I cared about the people, he would be able to use them as leverage—and I didn’t want that.

“You care, Mr. Lewis. Did you forget what you have done in our country?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You are stealing our resources.”

“I’m not stealing anything,” I said. “By the way, this conversation is probably being recorded.”

“Do I sound like I care?”

“Who am I speaking with?”

“You will know my name soon enough. For now, understand you need to come back to Afghanistan and finish what you started.”

“Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Put Jahmir back on the phone.”

“Beware, Mr. Lewis, we have eyes all around the world.”

The call ended. I stared at my phone’s screen, still unable to believe what had just

happened.

Did Melvin have something to do with it? If he did, it would explain why he had suddenly reached out to me nearly a year after w

e'd left the Savage Soldiers.

I pushed Afghanistan out of my mind, hoping this was just a dirty joke because Melvin was still bitter that I refused to go into business with him again.

To take my mind off it, I thought about Rose and our night before.

After finishing my coffee, I left my apartment and walked a few blocks to the nearest Central Park entrance. All the while though, I couldn't stop wondering why Rose hadn't told me the truth. Determined to confront her about it, I sent her a text saying, 'Your place or mine tonight?'

She replied quickly with: Start at my place ;)

The winking smiley set off something within me. The more I thought about her not telling me about Melvin, the angrier I became.

Just how much would she lie about and did lies of omission count?

My thoughts went back and forth the rest of the afternoon while I ran errands before returning to my apartment for a nap.

CHAPTER 20

Warren

By the time evening rolled around, I had myself worked up, ready to go off on Rose for keeping secrets from me. The closer I got to her apartment, the more upset I felt.

Sure, she was a good lay, but it wasn't worth this game she was playing. What the hell had I been thinking? I hit the buzzer for her apartment around six o'clock.

I already had it set in my mind that after confronting her, we would either fuck our brains out or I would leave and get drunk alone.

She buzzed the door open right away, and I went inside.

On the elevator ride up, an apparent housewife, her hair still in curlers, turned to smile at me. I smiled back and nodded, hoping she got off before me.

We stopped. The door slid open and she got out, glancing over her shoulder. I hit the button to close the door, fully prepared to give Rose a piece of my mind. I had given her too much of my time already. If she didn't come clean about everything, I would kick her out of my life. It was that fucking simple.

The elevator door slid open on her floor. I stepped out and headed toward her apartment. With each step, I mentally prepared myself for the confrontation.

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She wasn't expecting me to ask her about Melvin, which gave me an advantage.

I rapped on the door three times. She opened it a few seconds later, a smile on her face. Her curly hair was wet and she wore a half-open robe that exposed her soft cleavage.

"Hey, you're early. Come in. I just got out of the shower."

"We need to talk," I said, walking in and shutting the door behind me.

"Can you talk in the shower?" she teased, pressing her body against me.

I stepped away.

"Uh oh." She frowned. "What did I do?"

"I don't know, Rose. Did you do something?" I crossed my arms over my chest. "Or fail to mention something, rather?"

"What's this about?"

"Something you're not telling me."

"Oh, like those samples in Afghanistan Jahmir asked you about? Or that whole smuggling thing that you were involved in? Not getting that story ruined my career, you know that, right?"

“You seem to be doing pretty good for yourself,” I said, glancing around her living room.

“Not as well as you,” she shot back.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re living large for someone who recently got out of the military and isn’t working.”

“I saved up money,” I said, dropping my arms.

“That’s what you told me.”

I stepped forward and put my hand on her arm.

She pulled away. “You’ve got a lot of nerve coming in here and lecturing me about honesty.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s take that shower. We can talk about it later.”

“I’m already clean. You ruined my mood.”

I took a deep breath, not taking my eyes off her beautiful face. She looked even sexier when angry. “Come on, Rose.”

“You’re not coming on, or in, anything tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Well you’re not the only woman in the world.”

Her lips pressed together tightly as she stared at me. “Are you saying you’re fucking

me and other women at the same time?”

“That’s not what I said at all, but you’re one to talk about sleeping with other people.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she asked, her voice growing louder.

“Why don’t you tell me.”

“Get the hell out of here, Warren. You’re an asshole.” She stormed over to the door and flung it open.

“Whatever. Like I said...”

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“I heard what you said,” she yelled. “Now get the hell out!”

As soon as I made it into the hallway, she slammed the door behind me.

I walked back to the elevator, wondering what the hell had just happened and debating whether I should go back and ask her about Melvin.

No, she would have told me if she wanted to, I reasoned. The thought resonated with me as I took the elevator down to the first floor.

Fuck you, Rose, I thought as I went outside.

I needed a drink.

Sitting at a bar a few blocks away from my apartment, nursing a drink, my phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket, seeing the strange number Jahmir had called me from again.

What now?

I ignored the call, hoping the problem would go away on its own.

CHAPTER 21

Rose

After Warren left, I grabbed my phone and sent Kim a text message, telling her to

come over for drinks. She agreed immediately.

I went to my bedroom and got dressed while waiting for her, all the while wondering what the hell was Warren's problem. I had gone out with Melvin only once, and we hadn't done anything. And even if we had, it was none of Warren's damn business.

It wasn't like I was playing both men.

I grew angrier about the situation the more I thought about it. By the time Kim arrived half-an-hour later, I was fuming.

She came in and closed the door behind her. "Where's the wine?"

"In here," I said, walking toward the kitchen.

She followed me as I retrieved a bottle of wine and opened it on the counter.

"Grab some glasses," I said.

"You're not with Warren tonight?"

"Ugh. Don't even get me started."

"What did he do?" she asked, opening the cupboard to get glasses.

"He came over demanding to know the truth, but didn't come out and accuse me of anything. I don't get it."

"Did he find out about that Melvin guy?"

"I don't know how he would. Unless Melvin is talking to him again..."

“If that was the case, Warren probably would have said something.”

“Right.” I poured us each a full glass of the mid-range quality red wine.

Kim lifted her glass. “Here’s to a girls’ night out then.”

“A girls’ night in, rather.” We clinked the glasses together.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I asked.

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“Staying in drinking? Not at all. You have more wine, right?”

“I always have more wine.”

“Good. They should let us drink more wine at work like the French, don’t you think?”

“Um, I don’t think the French go to work drunk.” I laughed.

“But I read about it online.”

“Speaking of online—you want to check out Melvin?”

“Yes, please!”

I headed into the living room with her following behind me. After grabbing my laptop, I joined her on the couch as she poured herself another glass.

“Okay,” I said, sitting down next to her. “Let’s do some Facebook stalking.”

After a few minutes, I had signed in and located his profile page.

“Wow. He’s buff! Are you sure you want to pass him to me?”

“He’s definitely not bad to

look at, but he’s not for me,” I said.

“Really? Why not?”

I shrugged somewhat uncomfortably. “I don’t know.”

“It has something to do with Warren, doesn’t it?”

I took a drink of wine, ignoring her question.

“Anyway, I’m sure he’s fine,” she said, scrolling through his photos. “Aw, he has one of you and him in Afghanistan.”

“What?” I leaned forward, peering at the screen. “I don’t even remember that being taken.”

“Well, you had a lot on your mind at that time, right?”

“Yeah, I guess...” I sat back as she browsed through his other photos. “Well?” I asked.

“I’d go on a date with him,” she said, nodding approvingly.

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah!”

“I’ll give you his number then,” I said. “Maybe it’ll get him off my back.”

“As long as he gets me on my back,” she said, grinning.

I laughed, pushing her gently before sitting up and grabbing my phone. “Here you go.” As I read off the digits, she put them in her phone. “Put it on speakerphone,” I

said as she dialed.

“Okay. Hold on...”

As the phone rang, I felt like a middle school girl making a prank call for the first time.

“Hello, is Melvin there?” Kim asked.

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“Me. Who is this?”

“Kim.”

“Well, hello, Kim...”

“I got your number from Rose.”

“Oh, did you now?”

“Yeah. I told her you were hot.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” she said, turning to look at me.

“Well, what can I do you for?” he asked.

“I thought we could go out or something.”

“Sure,” he said. “You doing anything tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, tonight.”

“Well...”

“Let’s go grab a drink and see where it goes from there.”

She looked at me for affirmation. I shrugged and then nodded my head. The sooner he moved on, the better.

“Sounds good to me,” she said.

“Great. You want me to pick you up, Kim?”

I shook my head violently.

“No, we can meet somewhere,” she said.

“All right. I’ll text you an address.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll be the one with all the muscles.”

Kim giggled. “Yeah, I’ve seen your photos online.”

“Oh, you have, have you?”

“Yeah. They were pretty nice.”

“Just nice, huh? You’ll change your tone when you see them in person.”

“I bet I will.”

“Talk to you soon, Kim.”

“Yeah...” She ended the call then twisted to face me. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

“Why would I give you the number if I minded?”

“I don’t know. You can be too nice sometimes.”

“That’s my problem, is it?”

“I need to go get ready,” she said, standing up. “It’s okay if I leave?”

“It’s okay, I promise,” I said, nodding toward the bottle. “More wine for me.” I smiled.

“Thank you for this. I need to find a good man.”

I swallowed, not sure Melvin was really someone to consider a good man. A uncomfortable feeling squirmed inside of me as I remembered my not-so-pleasant experience with him in Afghanistan. I’d told Kim about it, but she had insisted that I’d been ‘too-nice’ to him earlier, and he likely just misread the situation.

With Kim though, he would meet his match.

Feeling better, I smiled again. “I hope he works out for you,” I said.

She waved and walked toward the door.

“Call and let me know how it goes,” I called after her.

“You know I will!”

After she left, closing the front door behind her, I sat back and took another drink of wine. My eyes moved to the laptop screen, which had been left on a shirtless photo of Melvin.

I began to think about both Warren and Melvin.

Did I even really like either of them?

No, I told myself. I’m perfectly fine being alone for now, concentrating on my career.

Yet, as the night wore on, I found myself becoming more than a bit bitter about Kim going on a date with Melvin.

Why had I set up my best friend with him?

The thought left me feeling more upset with Warren and the games he was playing. As if I should tell him everything when he wasn’t telling me everything.

The night stretched on forever with no call from him, and I eventually went to bed, feeling more alone than ever before.

CHAPTER 22

Rose

Waking the next morning alone, I missed Warren.

Why did he have such an effect on me?

Had I made a mistake giving Kim Melvin's number, or was I just upset about getting rid of an easy rebound from Warren? I couldn't have both and at this rate, I would just end up having no one.

As I dragged myself out of bed and through my morning routine, I contemplated whether I should call Warren or not, ultimately deciding against it in favor of visiting my father instead.

He had moved to New York shortly after I did, wanting to be close to me. I usually visited him at least one Saturday a month, but hadn't done it this month of June yet. He lived in Staten Island, which would take me a while to get to by train. The time I spent with him was worth it though. Growing up, my father had also played the role of mother after she died. Whenever I felt stuck in life, he was who I needed to see.

Lately, I'd been bogged down quite a bit. Did I really need either man? Sure, Warren could make me feel good in bed, but he kept secrets from me. And Melvin—if I was being honest with myself, I knew he wasn't my Prince Charming by any stretch.

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In the kitchen, eating toast and jam for breakfast, I wondered how he and Kim had gotten along. I knew I would be hearing from her before the weekend was over though.

In the meantime, I mentally prepared for visiting with my father; there was no telling what mood he would be in. Over the years, he had sacrificed so much to give me a chance to attend a decent university.

My school loans were still not paid off, but I'd been sidetracked after losing my job as a freelance journalist. Granted, the editing gig paid reasonably well—about double the national poverty rate—but it wasn't much. It simply paid the bills and kept me in my general field of writing.

Yet there I sat, eating toast and jam every morning instead of going out to brunch with someone I loved.

Fuck my life.

* * *

I found myself sitting across from my father at his round kitchen table. The leaf for the middle hadn't been used in years. He stared at me with disapproving eyes, never satisfied with me.

“Go on,” he said.

“That's it. I can't decide between two men even though it's an obvious choice.” I

sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know why I’m even telling you.”

“Well, I have my mother hat on, but let me take that off a moment.”

“Please don’t, Dad. How’s work going?”

“Fine. I’ll be traveling again soon.”

“I still don’t see how being a traveling salesman is your dream job.”

“You’ve got a lot to learn about life then, young lady.”

“I’ve been places in the world, Dad. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“Thank God for that.”

I smiled.

“Now, let’s talk about these men,” he said. “They are men, right? Not boys?”

“Yes, Dad. I told you about Warren and Melvin. Remember when I got back from Afghanistan?”

“Yeah. That’s when your career went to shit and you started working for those smut publishers.”

“They publish romance novels, Dad. It’s not like that.”

He shook his head. “If your mother was around...”

Both of us fell silent a few moments. I took another drink of his fresh squeezed

lemonade. The bittersweet taste reminded me of childhood, back when my dreams seemed possible and nothing was capable of standing in my way.

“I don’t know why I even concern myself with Melvin. I think Warren is the one for me,” I said.

“But it sounds like Melvin is the one who would keep you safe.”

Safe from other people, maybe. But not safe from himself, I thought with a grimace.

“But love is about more than that, isn’t it?” I said, looking up at my father.

“If your mother were here, she would tell you that’s not true.”

A wave of sadness washed over me as pain washed over my father’s face. I put my hand on his arm, but he pulled away.

“You can’t keep using her death to beat yourself up, Dad. It’s not healthy.”

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“She died because of me. I’m going to carry that the rest of my life.”

“It’s not like you were trained to be able to save her,” I reasoned.

* * *

Later that evening, my phone rang. I grabbed it, thinking it might be Warren, but I saw Melvin’s name on my screen.

What the hell? Is Kim okay?

“Hello?” I answered, worried.

“Hey, Rose. What’s going on?”

“Um, not much. Why are you calling me? Is Kim okay?”

“She was fine when she left this morning, although it probably hurt her a bit to walk, if you know what I mean.” He guffawed while I groaned internally.

“Good for you, I guess. Now again, why are you calling?”

“I just wanted to thank you for hooking me up with her. Damn, she’s fine.”

“No problem. Just be nice to her. Don’t fuck her over.”

“Too late for that. I fucked her over, under, and around...” His laugh screeched

through the phone and I scrunched up my face, thankful he couldn't see me.

"Well, I'm going to go now," I said.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Will you do a story on me?"

"What kind of story?" I asked suspiciously. "I don't do journalism anymore."

"But you know people, right? You could submit it some

where?"

"Maybe..."

"I'm opening a new security company and I need a big launch, you know? Big like me."

"Whatever you say."

He chuckled. "Come on, now. Your friend must have told you."

"I haven't talked to her yet."

"Well, she might not tell you, but it's fucking huge."

"What's huge?"

“What do you think?”

“I don’t have time for this, Melvin,” I said, annoyed.

“I’m just talking about the story, you dirty woman.”

“Whatever. Seriously, I need to go.”

“Fine, but consider it, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Bye.” I ended the call, not wanting to deal with him any longer. My instincts about Warren being the better man had been spot-on, although I had to accept that it didn’t necessarily mean we were meant for each other. After all, he still hadn’t called me.

Had he found someone else already?

Self-doubt and worry tried to show their ugly faces in my thoughts, so I went outside for a walk to soak up the last rays of the day’s sunlight.

Life would either work itself out or it wouldn’t. In the meantime, I would just have to keep working hard and stop sweating the small details of my love life, or lack thereof. Nevertheless, as I walked around the neighborhood, Warren kept popping into my head.

Why couldn’t I get him out of my mind?

CHAPTER 23

Warren

I looked across the bare office to Melvin, still not sure what to think about his proposal.

“Huh? What did I tell you? It’s fucking perfect, right?” he said, grinning ear-to-ear.

“It’s nice,” I said, surprised. “And the location is good, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m not looking for a business partner right now.”

“Bullshit, man. That money we made isn’t going to last forever.”

“Have you heard from anyone in Afghanistan recently, by any chance?”

“No. Why?”

“No reason,” I lied, wondering why Jahmir had only called me. Was it all a setup? Whatever the reason, something told me I shouldn’t trust Melvin.

“I’m telling you man, the time to strike is now. I got a few high-end clients lined up already,” he said smugly.

“Like who?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“See, what kind of partnership can we have when you don’t tell me shit?”

He took a deep breath, staring into my eyes for a moment. “You know what, man? You’re right. I have to tell you something.”

Uh oh. Here we go, I thought, feeling less than thrilled.

“You remember that chick from Afghanistan I liked?” he asked.

“Which one?”

“Ha. Fair enough. The journalist chick.”

I swallowed and carefully arranged my expression. “Rose?”

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“Yeah, that’s her. I hooked up with her recently.”

“Oh yeah? How recently?”

“A few nights ago. Banged the fuck out of her, but she’s not for me. I don’t like the lip on her.” He laughed. “Anyway,” he continued, “I moved on to this friend of hers who fucks even better. I’m on a roll, I tell you! The next chick is going to be the best.”

I shook my head. Had she actually slept with him? Ryan hadn’t told me anything, but I wouldn’t put it past him. Rose didn’t seem like the type of woman who would sleep with Melvin, but it’s not like I knew her well.

“She’s an uptight bitch,” Melvin said. “I don’t know what you saw in her over there in the Stan. On a positive note, this friend of hers is fucking intense in the sack. She sucked my dick about ten minutes after we met.”

“Good for you,” I said, unimpressed.

After he came clean about going on a date with Rose, I was able to see myself doing business with him.

Rose, on the other hand, I still had my doubts about. After keeping her hookup with Melvin a secret, I couldn’t help wondering what else she could be keeping from me.

“Let’s do this,” I said. “We’re going to own high-end security in New York.”

“Hell yeah,” Melvin said, punching his fist into his palm. “And the world.”

I never understood how he allowed his emotions to rule him. Weak bastard. Maybe him and Rose actually did deserve each other.

“But yeah, that Rose chick is fucking nuts, man. I think we’re both better off without her,” he said.

I nodded. “For sure.”

“I’m not going to mess with her anymore, bro—if it makes you feel better.” He stepped forward and offered me his hand. “We’re business partners now. We have to be there for each other.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, shaking his hand.

Time would tell if I should actually trust him, but for the time being, a new business venture would help me move on from Rose and her madness.

CHAPTER 24

Warren

After my meeting with Melvin at the building where we would forge new lives for ourselves, I walked toward Rose’s apartment with a bounce in my step.

Time had allowed me to realize that I had been too hard on her and had overreacted. She needed someone like me in her life and she was just the type of woman I needed in mine. Together, we would be able to take over the world.

Yet, on the way to her building, I suddenly got the strangest feeling that I wasn’t

alone.

Am I being followed? I thought, fighting the urge to turn around. I forced myself to stay calm. If someone was following me, I didn't want them to know I was aware of them. However, I needed to change paths, just to be on the safe side. I didn't want to lead whoever it was to Rose's apartment; whoever was possibly following me didn't need to know she was affiliated with me.

Some people had been angry with how the Afghan mineral operation had gone toward the end when it all fell apart as things tend to do. Were they the ones calling me, and were they following me now?

I picked up my pace, ready to take some evasive measures as I approached Times Square. When I reached the next intersection, I stopped and spun around.

Peeking past the corner of the building, I saw a man wearing a turban walking down the street.

Mother fucker.

My heart beat faster as I switched into self-defense mode. All my thousands of hours of practice were about to be put to the test. I took a deep breath and stepped forward, running into the suspicious man.

"Watch it," he yelled in broken English.

"You watch it," I said as I walked away. A few steps later, I stopped and turned around. "What are you doing following me? You're obviously in a costume."

"What are you meaning?"

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“Your fake accent isn’t very convincing either.”

The man frowned and then yanked his fake facial hair down. “It’s the fucking beard, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Something like that. What’s up?”

“People want to talk to you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Too bad,” I said and then bolted down the block.

“Hey, wait!” he called out.

My military training took over as I dodged traffic and crossed the street, disappearing into an alley. Five minutes later, I had climbed the fire escape to the top of the building.

I took a moment to catch my breath, occasionally peering over the edge of the building to the street below. Fifteen minutes later, I was convinced that I’d lost them.

Fuck the bad guys, I thought with a smile as I climbed back down to the alley. Proud of myself, I resumed my path to Rose’s apartment building.

My mood, however, plummeted instantly when I got close enough and spotted Melvin outside talking to her. She was laughing.

I kept walking, my blood boiling.

How dare she accuse me of

hiding something when she was obviously the one sneaking around?

And Melvin...

Fuck them both, I thought savagely.

CHAPTER 25

Rose

As I reached my building, I felt someone approaching me. The moment I turned around, a frown fell over my face.

Melvin walked toward me, smiling cockily.

“Are you stalking me?”

“Nah, not really,” he said, his bulky body shaking as he laughed. “I was in the neighborhood and I thought we could talk about that story on me.”

“I’m busy right now.”

“Come on. It will only take a little while. The story’s gonna be a hit.”

“We’ll see. But you have to promise me no stories with lurid details of you and Kim, okay?”

He smiled. “She got a bit too drunk last night and sang something she called Karachi.”

I laughed and put my hand on his arm for a quick second without realizing it. “Yeah, that’s her word for karaoke when she’s too drunk.” My laughter died down and my thoughts sobered. I knew all too well how friendly Kim could get when she got drunk, just like I knew all too well how demanding Melvin could be when he was riled up. “Kim is a good friend of mine though. So just tell me—you didn’t take advantage of her, did you?”

“Me? Hell no. I didn’t need to. Not that I would have to begin with,” he said. “Emotions were running high over in Afghanistan. There was a lot going on back there. I think you got the wrong impression of me that day when...you know.”

I nodded, remembering that day all too well. It was the source of all my conflicted feelings towards him to begin with. He hadn’t tried anything like that on me since though, so maybe military-life stress really had been to blame.

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“Anyway,” he said, “give me half-an-hour to blow your mind with my story.”

I surveyed him for a second. “Okay, fine,” I said. “But I’ve got company coming over later, so we have to hurry.”

“I’ll be quick.”

The look on his face made me uneasy, but I unlocked the door. We walked across the lobby to the elevators in middle of the building and I punched the button.

He looked around, shaking his head. “I hope you’re not paying too much to live here.”

“That’s none of your business,” I quipped. Quite suddenly, I got an overwhelming feeling that I was making a mistake.

Why am I bringing him upstairs? I thought.

The elevator door slid open. He stepped in before me. Right then and there, I considered asking him to leave.

“Come on,” he said. “What floor?”

“The eleventh,” I said hesitantly, a bad feeling in my gut.

“Ooh, nice views. You got a balcony?”

“No, not really. There’s some railing and about half-an-inch of space that they advertise as a balcony, but it’s not functional.”

“Damn, that’s messed up. We’re gonna have to get you out of here, aren’t we?”

I smiled nervously as the elevator door closed and we ascended.

I vowed to just ask him a few questions and then send him on his way. Easy as cake.

But cake really wasn’t that easy at all, as far as I was concerned. The last two I’d made had come out flat and tasteless.

“You okay?” he asked, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding my head a little too vigorously.

“Thanks again for this story. It’ll give the business some legitimacy, you know?”

Legitimacy? That’s an odd thing to want for a new business...

The elevator dinged right before the door slid open. He stepped out in front of me once again. Staring at him, all I could think about was how I should have been with Warren instead right now.

“Where you at?” he asked. “I never made it up to your apartment when we were dating.”

“This way. And we went on one date,” I reminded him as I walked toward my door.

“That’s still dating in my book.”

When we reached my apartment, I unlocked the door and slipped inside before him. He followed closely behind, looking around and whistling.

“Not as shabby as I thought.”

“Glad you approve,” I said sarcastically.

“Not really, but it’s okay for you, I guess.”

I shook my head and walked across the living room. At the couch, I sat down and opened the lid of my laptop. He wandered over and sat beside me, a little too close for comfort.

When I moved over, he did the same. I turned, ready to yell at him. But before I had the chance, he leaned over and kissed me on the lips, roughly sticking his tongue in my mouth.

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“Stop!” I said, pulling back, disgusted.

“Really?”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I thought you and Kim were down to share me? That’s why you introduced me to her, right? I fuck her, then you. Then we three get together.”

“What? No!” I stood up and pointed to the door. “You need to go.”

“You know what? I don’t need this shit from you.” He got to his feet, towering over me. “You’re fucking nuts.”

“Get the fuck out of my apartment before I call the cops!”

“Whoa, hold on.” He raised his arms in the air. “Calm down. No need to get them involved.”

I glared at him, shaking because I knew how easy it would be for him to overpower me.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he said over his shoulder as he headed to the door.

Still shaking, I stared after him, positively revolted.

What the hell was wrong with me for thinking a guy like Melvin was even worth any

of my time?

And even worse, knowing what a creep he could be, why had I tried to push him off on my best friend?

I felt like scum. I needed to call Kim because under no circumstances could she go out with him again. She needed to know the truth about him, and I didn't care how great their first date had allegedly been. I felt bile in the back of my throat, knowing that any other time, Kim would have called me by now.

I hoped she was okay...

"You can forget your story," I spat, just as he was about to leave out the door.

He stopped and turned around. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He shook his head. "Warren was right about you."

I blinked. "What did Warren say about me?" I asked, instantly regretting letting the words come out of my mouth.

Melvin smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know." He then turned and walked out of my apartment, slamming the door behind him.

I grabbed my phone and called Kim. She answered on the third ring.

"What the hell?" I screamed.

"Rose? What's going on?"

“Melvin just made a move on me, that’s what’s going on!”

“Melvin? Are you at his apartment?”

“No, he came to mine, asking me to do a story on him.”

“You don’t do those kinds of stories anymore.”

“I know.”

“So why did you invite him over?”

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“I didn’t invite him!” I said, fuming. “He just showed up, talking about how he fucked you and wanted to fuck us both at the same time.” Silence filled the air between us. “Kim? You still there?”

“I’m here,” she said quietly.

My heart dropped to my stomach. I knew that tone. “Tell me...” I said, my voice suddenly strained.

“I was drunk last night and I didn’t think he would remember...”

“Remember what?”

“It’s funny, really. You’ll laugh about it someday.”

“I’m not laughing right now,” I said. “Tell me.”

“I might have suggested we try a threesome sometime...”

“Kim...”

“I was drunk. I swear I didn’t think he would remember.”

My anger mounted for a moment. I’d been completely prepared to hear the worst. Out of everything Kim could have told me, that hadn’t been what I was expecting.

But then I remembered it was all my fault for pairing her with him in the first place. I

sighed, and my anger began to subside.

“Rose?” she said on the other end.

“I’m here,” I said. “We should get him back.”

“What do you mean?”

“For thinking we would do something like that with him.”

“I meant get him back how?”

“Oh. I’m not sure. Maybe make him think I’m going to do a story on him, and then write up something awful and tell him it’s posted online when really we just have it on a private website where no one but him can see it...”

“I have no idea what the hell you just said, but I’m in.”

A smile spread across my face. “Great. Let’s go get a drink and come up with a strategy.”

“You’re not busy? I thought you would be with Warren tonight.”

I sighed again. “Yeah, me too. He hasn’t called me though.”

“Well, you should call him.”

“No. I don’t want to mess this one up by pushing too hard.”

“If you say so. Anyway, I’m on my way over.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

I ended the call and sat back on the couch, wondering why Warren hadn't called me or even texted. None of it made any sense, but a prank on Melvin would help keep me occupied.

CHAPTER 26

Rose

By the next morning, Warren still hadn't called me, and there was no way I would break down and call him first. I didn't even remember why we had gotten into an argument, but that didn't matter anymore. Besides, he'd been the one to come over with the vendetta, so he would have to call me first, or we would never talk again. End of story.

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My mind resolute on how to handle Warren, I went back to thinking about the prank I wanted to do on Melvin. Kim and I had our plan all worked out. Last night after she came over, I called Melvin and pretended to apologize for my rash behavior. I continued with a small phone interview and promised to meet him to finish up in person. Kim would follow behind me as I finished interviewing him. Then, I would

finalize the piece and turn the screen for him to give it a read.

And then, right on cue, he would lose it.

During all of this, Kim would film his reaction. Near the end, she would pop out and surprise him from behind. Then we would both laugh our asses off.

We planned to use the recording against him—he would have to either leave us alone, or we would share it with the world. It would be his call, really. And at the end of the day, we'd have some fun teaching him a valuable lesson—don't fuck with women.

I arrived at the address he had given me. The neighborhood was so nice that I wondered how the hell was he going to afford an office in this part of the city.

Did he have secret money or something?

Out of breath, Kim walked up and put her hand on my shoulder.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I had to run the last few blocks because I left late,” she panted.

“Well, I’m going inside so I won’t be late. You can follow me in a few minutes after you catch your breath. Remember, stay back until the end. I’ll give you the sign.”

“Yeah, yeah. You call him a small-penis-mother-fucker and I jump out, hoping he shits himself. Then I’ll show him the video.”

“This is the best plan ever,” I said, giggling.

“I feel like we’re in college again.”

“Right?” I smiled. “I’ll see you in a few.”

As she waited outside, still breathing heavily, I went into the ten-story building. The top floor was supposedly where he was opening his security company.

None of his story made sense to me though. That was one of the reasons I didn’t feel too bad about pranking him. He needed to be taught a lesson.

When I reached the top floor, I stepped out of the elevator and glanced to the left and then to the right, looking for him.

He was straight ahead, standing near the floor to ceiling windows at the other end of a big, open area.

I took a deep breath and walked over, plastering a smile onto my face.

Kim is coming soon, I reminded myself, so just keep cool.

But another voice in my head asked the ominous question: What if he gets angry and hits me?

I swallowed nervously, realizing too late that this was all potentially a very bad idea.

What the hell is your problem, Rose? When will you learn to stop being such a short-sighted idiot? I chastised myself.

My short-sightedness was a fatal flaw that would surely be the death of me one day.

He spun around and smiled, stretching out his arms as if he wanted a hug. I stopped a good twenty-feet away from him, careful to keep the smile on my face.

“Damn, you look good,” he said. The little black dress I was wearing had always been a favorite with men.

“You’re looking pretty fit yourself,” I said.

“Look, about yesterday...” he prefaced.

“Don’t worry about it,” I interrupted, waving my hand dismissively. “Water under the bridge. You ready to do this?” I walked over to the only desk and set up my laptop.

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“Yeah,” he said. “Sorry I don’t have it furnished yet, but I thought it would help you finish the story.”

“Okay,” I said, pulling up the already prepped Word file. “Just a few final questions.”

“Hold on. Can I say something first?”

I glanced over at the elevators and then back at him. “Sure. Yeah. Go ahead.”

“Why are you doing this story? Is this some type of trick? You seemed pretty certain you would have nothing to do with me after yesterday.”

Damn, is he smarter than I thought? I worried.

“Trick? No, not at all. A story on a former Savage Soldier doing good in the big city will get my journalism career back in gear. Colorado is my hometown too, you know that. I want to do this story. Trust me.”

“All right. I’ll trust you,” he said, although he stared at me warily.

“Okay,” I said, my fingers positioned on the keyboard. “I still need the name of your business.”

“We haven’t decided yet, right Melvin?” Warren asked from behind me.

What the hell?

I spun around and saw him staring at me with his massive arms crossed over his chest. “Warren? What are you doing here?”

“I’d like to ask you the same question.”

“Now, now,” Melvin said.

Warren and I both turned to him. “Shut up!” we said at the same time before looking back at each other.

“Why don’t you tell him the truth, Rose?” Melvin said. “We’re here to fuck.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, whipping my head around toward him.

“You know, baby. My cock.” He grabbed his nuts and lifted them.

Warren rushed forward, ready to punch him, but I stepped in between the two of them.

“Hold on,” I said.

“She wanted to put her hands all over me, bro, but I said no.”

“What the hell are you smoking, Melvin?” I said angrily. I turned to Warren. “You don’t believe this asshole, do you?”

“Who served with you in the Stan, man?” Melvin puffed up his chest. “Me.”

Warren turned his attention from Melvin, back to me.

I pleaded to him with my eyes, silently begging him to believe me.

“I’m leaving,” he said, taking a step back.

“Wait.” Melvin stepped forward. “Fuck her. Let’s do this business deal. Once you’re in, you can’t get out. Remember?”

“I’m leaving,” Warren said, spinning around and walking toward the elevator.

At that precise moment, Kim popped out, pointing at Melvin. “She show you the article, mother fucker?”

Warren walked around her and into the elevator. I rushed behind him, but the door closed just as I arrived.

“What’s wrong?” Kim asked, as clueless as ever.

“Ugh,” I sighed, stomping my foot as if that would help.

“You two crazy bitches need to get out of here,” Melvin said, walking toward us.

“Come on.” I grabbed Kim’s hand and hurried for the stairwell.

“You bitches!” Melvin yelled after us.

We went down two flights before getting out and hopping on another elevator.

“What the hell was that all about?” Kim asked. “What happened?”

“Warren showed up!”

“The other guy from Afghanistan?”

“Yeah,” I said, staring straight ahead.

“Oh, shit.”

“Exactly.”

“Why did he—?”

“I don’t know. And it doesn’t matter. We don’t need either of them.”

“But Warren didn’t seem so bad.”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah, but we keep getting caught up in these stupid games. I’m not sure he actually cares about me.”

“Well, he doesn’t know you as well as I do.” Kim put her arm around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder for a moment. “You’re worth the chase.”

“Let’s just forget about them both for a while,” I said. “Go back to my apartment and enjoy the rest of the weekend before we have to go back to work.”

Kim released me from the hug. “Now that sounds like a good fool-proof plan.”

CHAPTER 27

Warren

I left the office building with my mind racing. When I got to the corner and turned, I noticed the man who had followed me earlier. He wasn’t wearing the beard this time, but I knew it was him.

What the fuck does he want? I wondered as I increased my pace, ready to evade him again. I figured that if I slipped into a bar for a few drinks, he would never find me.

I sped up even more, my heart still pounding. At the next alley, I turned sharply and took off running. When I reached the end, an unmarked four-door sedan pulled out and slammed on the brakes, almost hitting me.

Two men jumped out.

I craned my neck to peer behind me. Th

e man who had been following was at the opposite end of the alley, heading toward me.

Fuck.

I looked back at the other two who had guns drawn. “What the fuck do you guys want?” I shouted. “Didn’t Melvin tell you I was out for good?”

The two men looked at each other briefly then back to me.

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“Talk to me, mother fuckers,” I said.

“You better watch your mouth,” the man walking up behind me said.

I turned to face him, ready to bolt the first chance I got.

“Take it easy. We just want to ask some questions,” he said.

“About what?” I asked, flexing my muscles.

“Afghanistan.” He turned to the other two men. “You two, back in the car,” he commanded.

They obeyed immediately without saying a word.

“What about Afghanistan?” I said. “That was a long time ago.”

“Relax. We don’t have enough proof to take you down in a court of law, at least not here in the States. But we know you were involved with the smuggling. Do you realize how much help you gave the Chinese?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard that all before. Believe me. We’re after Melvin. He’s working with someone posing as a journalist.”

“A woman?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“She’s not involved.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do, okay?”

“Are you connected to her?”

“I said she’s not involved. Keep her out of this.”

“Relax, big guy. I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

We locked eyes, neither of us backing down or looking away.

“We want you to help us take down Melvin. Your name will be cleared of any wrongdoing. Hell, we might even throw in an extra incentive for your cooperation.”

I stared at him for a moment longer. “I’ll consider it.”

“You better do it fast. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Can I go now?”

He stepped aside and waved with his arms. I walked by him and back to the main street. After walking around for half-an-hour to make sure they weren’t following me, I headed back to Rose’s apartment.

We needed to talk.

CHAPTER 28

Warren

I stood outside her door and took a deep breath. She answered after the first knock.

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We simply stared at each other a moment.

“Why did you walk out like that?” she asked, breaking the silence.

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” she said, stepping aside.

I walked in and closed the door behind me.

She gestured to the couch. “Have a seat.”

I followed her across the living room to her brown suede couch, where we settled on opposite ends.

Looking across at me, she put her hands in her lap. “Well?”

I sighed. “Seeing you with Melvin upset me,” I admitted.

“Okay, that’s a good start.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not. Geez. Give a girl a break, would you?”

“I got jealous, okay? Are you interested in him?”

“No, not at all. He asked me to do a story on his security company.”

“You mean our security company.”

She tilted her head sideways. “What do you mean?”

“I’m investing in the company with him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Something isn’t right. I talked to the real estate agent, and no one is supposed to be in that office. It’s been rented already.”

“What? When? And what make you think to do that in the first place?”

“Does it matter? I multitask. I’m a journalist. Well, used to be, anyway.”

“A damn good one.”

She smiled. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Good to know,” I said, moving closer toward her.

“I think it seems like he’s trying to start up that smuggling operation again. He might be starting the security firm as a front operation.”

I clenched my jaw. “So that mother fucker lied again.”

“Calm down,” Rose said. “We should go talk to the FBI. I’ll tell them everything I

know.”

“No. I don’t want you involved in this any more than you are already.”

Rose’s expression turned defiant. She folded her arms. “That’s bullshit.”

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I smirked, loving the way she stood up for herself. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We’re a team now. Don’t you forget it.” She poked me on the chest with her finger.

“There are a lot of things that make you unforgettable,” I said in a low voice.

“Really? Like what?”

“Like this.” I slid over, placing one hand on her thigh and one on her neck. I then drew her closer until our lips met. She kissed me back, her hands moving up and down my biceps, squeezing and rubbing.

All the nonsense from earlier faded away.

She moaned as I moved a hand to her left breast, squeezing it through her white blouse.

“You look so damn hot in that outfit,” I said. “All powerful and business-like.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I kissed her again, slower this time so that we could enjoy the pleasure.

“Take me,” she pleaded, breathlessly.

I ran my hand up her arm, her skin so soft and silky. She smiled seductively as I bent

to kiss her shoulder.

Her shirt and bra came off quickly.

She ran her hands through my hair, pressing my head against her chest before I stood and stripped off my shirt.

She got to her feet and we kissed again while stripping the remaining clothes off each other.

“Sit,” she said, pushing me on the couch.

As I sat back down, she lowered onto her knees and positioned herself between my legs. I stared into her eyes and found myself getting lost in her beauty. She grabbed my cock with one hand and kissed the tip.

I took in a deep breath.

A smile spread over her face as she tugged and stroked, teasing me before eventually taking me into her mouth. Her tongue swirled twice before she swallowed more of me in. I hardened while she sucked, licked, and kissed every inch of my rapidly swelling flesh.

She pulled her head off, still stroking while looking up at me. I watched as she stood, her long curly hair perfectly framing her face. She then rolled a condom onto me and climbed on my lap.

With my hands on her hips and her hands on my chest, she lowered her body, permitting me to penetrate her.

Her face tensed in ecstasy. “That’s so good,” she said, leaning forward. Her breasts

pressed against my chest and I swore time stopped as she rode me, moving up and down in all the right ways.

She moaned, enjoying the pleasure just as much as I was. I moved my hands to her breasts, pushing her up so that I could see some more of her beautiful face. As she continued grinding me, I squeezed those perfect breasts, loving the size, shape, and feel of them in my hands.

“Don’t stop,” she cried, increasing her momentum.

Each time she came down, I thrustured upward, savoring the friction. She moved my hands and leaned forward again, kissing me.

We were connected as one, pleasure growing and spreading between us. My toes curled, fighting back the urge for release.

“I’m so close,” she moaned. “Harder.”

I thrustured upward as she came down, the sounds of our labored breaths and my own pounding heart filling my ears.

Rose’s face scrunched up, signaling the beginning of her ending. “Yes!” she cried as her body shook and shivered against mine. Her muscles contracted around me, pushing me over the edge. I plunged into her one last time and came into the condom at full force.

She kissed me on the lips, her tongue sliding into my mouth as we came down from the heights of bliss. Reality and normalcy would return, but for that one fraction of a second, we were two souls with one body.

I had never felt anything like it before.

Still breathing heavily, Rose pulled back and smiled.

“You’re fucking amazing,” I said.

“And you are an amazing fuck,” she retorted.

I laughed, hugging her and loving the way her skin felt against mine.

Reluctantly, she crawled off of me and stood.

We both cleaned up before retiring to her bedroom, where we laid together and talked for a half-an-hour about nothing and everything. It was amazing how her mind captured me even more than her body, which was something I had never experienced with anyone else.

As I fell asleep with her body curled against mine, I thought about my future and what I needed to do. I wanted nothing but the best for Rose. For us. So if we were going to be in a real relationship, I had to do better.

She deserved the best, and I intended on giving it to her.

CHAPTER 29

Rose

I woke with his magnificent body next to mine, which instantly put a smile on my face. He moaned and stirred but didn't wake as I carefully climbed out of my bed.

We should have gone to his place, I thought, remembering his comfortable bed on my way to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. What does all of this mean for us?

The only way it would work was if we continued communicating like we had the night before. He had appeared ready to work with me, but with men, I honestly could never tell, at least not completely. They were such a mystery.

After taking a shower and brushing my teeth, I returned to the kitchen for a cup of fresh coffee. A third of the way through, Warren walked in, his hair perfectly messy and his eyes nearly closed.

"Morning," I said.

He grunted as he shuffled toward the coffee pot.

I took another drink, wondering if I should ask him about breakfast. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah," he said.

When he finished fixing himself a cup of coffee, he sat next to me and gave me a peck on the cheek.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Best sleep since the last time we were together. Your bed is better though."

He s

miled then took a sip.

I cleared my throat. "We should go talk to the FBI today."

"Yeah." He sighed. "It'll be a hassle though."

"But it's better to tell them you have nothing to do with it sooner than later. I'll go with you to back up your story and make sure you have a witness."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded.

He frowned, seeming to remember something. "They told me you might be involved," he said after a slight pause.

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“What? That’s crazy.”

“That’s what the agent said yesterday.”

“We both need to talk to them then.”

“I just wanted to make sure you knew what he said about you first...”

“You don’t believe I’m involved, do you?” I asked, feeling myself getting mildly upset.

“No...I mean, I don’t think so. Can I finish my coffee before we get into an argument?”

“I don’t want to argue.”

“Good. Neither do I.”

As we both sipped at our coffee, I stole glances at him, wondering what it was about him that had made me fall so hard and so fast.

* * *

I sat next to him in a plain unassuming waiting room in the FBI building downtown. After dropping the man’s name who had talked to him in the alley, the security guard downstairs had shown us to the right floor.

Warren turned his head to look at me. “If something happens, I’ve got your back.”

“I can’t wait to talk to this guy and see what he thinks he knows about me.”

“They might have been lying. We shouldn’t be talking. The waiting room might be bugged.”

I nodded and then turned to face the only door in the tiny room. A few minutes later, the door opened and a man in a black suit walked in. Warren and I both got to our feet as he stared at me curiously.

“This is the female journalist who has nothing to do with it,” Warren said.

“Come with me,” the man said.

“Can we get your name?” I asked.

“Mr. Sully. This way, please.”

He held the door open for us, and then the three of us walked down two different hallways. By the time we stopped at a door, I wasn’t sure what part of the building we were in.

“Take a seat,” Mr. Sully said while adjusting the oval wire-frame glasses on his face.

Something was off about him, but I couldn’t put my finger on what. As I sat next to Warren, I watched the man’s face for any signs of lying.

“Thanks for coming in,” he said, opening a folder on his desk. “As I said, if you give us information on what happened before, we’ll make sure you’re not charged with anything.”

“Hold on a minute,” I said.

“I thought you were a journalist, not a lawyer,” Mr. Sully said with a chuckle. “Although they’re both kind of hated the same these days.”

“People hate the media more. Trust me, I’m—”

“We know who you are,” he interrupted. “And we’re glad you came in too. When we saw you asking questions about Melvin Stevenson renting office space, we thought you might not be involved after all.”

“You know she’s not, right?” Warren said, sitting on the edge of his seat.

I rubbed his back with my hand, more to support me than him.

“We’ve been listening to phone calls and reading emails, so yes, we know she’s not involved.”

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“Wait. You’ve been listening to my calls and reading my emails?”

“It’s all standard stuff,” he said. “The Patriot Act has given us a lot of power.”

“Too bad America doesn’t seem any safer,” Warren said, angrily.

“Let’s not get into a political debate,” Mr. Sully said. “As both of you have had contact with Mr. Stevenson before, we want to wire you and get something we can use in court.”

“Absolutely not,” Warren said.

I raised my hand. “Hold on a minute. Don’t I have a say in this too?”

Warren looked at me.

“If I can finish the story that I started in Afghanistan and clear your name at the same time, I’m all about helping,” I said, looking back at him.

“You don’t understand the risks,” he objected.

I turned my attention back to Mr. Sully. I wasn’t ready to commit but was definitely interested. “What do you need me to do?”

“Easy. We’ll give you a recording device, and you get Melvin to admit what he’s doing.”

“He hasn’t even told me anything yet,” Warren said, shaking his head.

The fact he was so worried about me made me glow on the inside. Most of the joy, however, was extinguished by the reality of what the FBI was asking us to do.

Warren shook his head. “There has to be another way.”

“Believe me, we’ve tried. These guys are slick.” Sully eyed Warren. “You’re not involved in any of this, right? If so, the time to tell me is now.”

“No,” Warren said firmly.

“Fine,” Mr. Sully replied. “I have to fill out all the paperwork to get this started, but if you two stop in tomorrow afternoon, we’ll have the equipment ready for you. All you need to do at that point is get Melvin to slip up and say something incriminating.”

“Oh, is that all?” Warren scoffed sarcastically. He stood and shook his head again. “Come on, Rose. Let’s get out of here.”

“You two be safe,” Mr. Sully said.

We walked out of the office and back downstairs.

“Those guys are fucking nuts,” Warren said once we’d made it outside. “We’re not going through with this.”

“We have to,” I said.

“We don’t have to do anything.” He placed his hands on my cheeks, staring into my eyes. “I care about you so damn much, you know that?”

“And I love you.” Once the words had slipped out, there was no taking them back.

Warren kissed me, his lips saying everything without him having to say anything at all.

And then we rushed back to his apartment, to the better bed.

CHAPTER 30

Rose

Once through his apartment door, we were all over each. In that moment, it looked like things might finally get better between us. And if everything worked out, I might be able to become a journalist again, and his name would be cleared once and for all.

I couldn't help smiling as we made our way to his bedroom.

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Clothes came off as if we were in a race. I touched my lips against the skin on his chest, moving lower. Suddenly, he bent and lifted my naked body into the air. My eyes widened in surprise. He grinned, kissing my lips as he carried me to his bed.

He lied me down on the comforter and kissed my neck. I moaned, loving his lips against my skin.

His kisses began to lower. He suckled one nipple and then the other while his hands roamed the rest of my body. When his mouth reached my stomach, I sat up on my elbows and slid back. He crawled onto the mattress between my legs, kneeling and looking down at me. He then pressed his body against mine, kissing my lips once again. His tongue slid against mine, making my whole body sing.

I pushed his shoulders down and a wicked grin slipped onto his face as he held himself up with his arms and stared into my eyes. Ever so sensually, he kissed my skin, moving lower down my body as I pushed him, trying to speed him along.

Nestled between my spread legs, his tongue barely touched me. I ran my fingers through his hair, loving the soft, fullness of it. He started licking me more insistently, running his tongue from bottom to top, and then back again. Heat rushed between my legs, sensitizing my clitoris as he nibbled and teased at the tiny nub, sending me waves of pleasure.

He thrust a finger inside me, wiggling it and almost pushing me over the edge. I groaned, arching my back and lifting my hips into the air.

“You taste so good,” he murmured, breathing heavily.

My own breaths were fast and furious, and my heart pounded

. The rest of the world faded away as he slid another finger in to join the first, making them danced together inside of me.

“Warren,” I squealed.

“Yes, baby. Come for me.”

The sound of his voice took me to that special place. My mind exploded as my body convulsed, ecstasy running through me. I looked down to find him staring up at me.

“Fuck me like it’s our last,” I said.

I would never forget the look that came over his face—a combination of lust, love, hunger, and trust.

He entered me quickly, his condom-covered cock sliding in easily. All the feelings of pleasure built up once again as he pushed in and out, faster and harder with each stroke.

I ran my hands over his strong arms as they held him up. The look of determination on his face almost did me in, and for a moment, I saw myself spending the rest of my life with him.

Our bodies moved together as one. He lifted my legs into the air, pounding with more ferocity.

My second orgasm hit quickly and unexpectedly. I felt him throbbing deeply inside of me as I came, my muscles clenching around him as he kept going.

“Yes, baby,” I cried, delirious with pleasure.

His face contorted and his eyes narrowed. “Fuck!” he cried out as he came.

I had never seen him lose his composure before. The physical side of our relationship had somehow merged with the emotional, making the sex that much better.

His stroke slowed before finally stopping. He pulled out of me and I kissed him before he moved to lie beside me. We both stared up at the ceiling, enjoying the afterglow.

“Now that was a good afternoon,” I said.

He laughed, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. “Yes. That was unreal.”

“It keeps getting better,” I said, my hand on his thigh.

“You can say that again.” He placed his hand on top of mine.

“I’m not ready to go back to work tomorrow,” I said with a sigh.

“Thanks for calling off today and going with me.”

“I want to help with this. I mean, if I can get the story...I want to make sure you’re safe.”

He rolled over on his side and stared into my eyes. “You mean a lot to me, Rose. More than any woman before.”

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“Hopefully there weren’t too many,” I teased.

“None in your league, trust me.”

I kissed him on the lips, never able to get enough of their sweetness. As we enjoyed the moment, I let my mind wander willingly.

Until all hell broke loose.

Someone abruptly pounded on his apartment door.

“Stay here,” he said, jumping out of bed. He grabbed a robe, threw it on, and hurried out.

“Hands up!” someone shouted.

I crawled out of bed, gathering my underclothes. But before I even had them all the way on, the bedroom door burst open and two men in black suits with guns drawn rushed in.

“Freeze!” one shouted.

I screamed, dropping my bra.

“Let her get dressed,” Mr. Sully said, walking in. “She’s not coming with us.”

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, my arms crossed over my bare chest.

“Melvin testified against Warren. We’re bringing him in.”

“That’s bullshit! We had a deal.”

“That was before we knew your boyfriend was still involved.”

“But he’s not!”

“Do you know that for a fact?” The agent stared into my eyes a moment before his gaze dropped to my chest.

“Get out of here!” I yelled, furious.

“I’ll be out here waiting to talk with you,” he said with a grin.

As soon as he left, I rushed to get dressed, wondering if Warren was still in the living room.

What the hell was going on? Why did my life always have to fall apart when things were going well?

When I left the bedroom, Mr. Sully would give me no information other than that I was not to contact either Warren or Melvin. And then ignoring my complaints, he left.

They had already taken Warren away, and I had no idea what condition he was in.

My eyes teared up as I was left in his apartment alone.

CHAPTER 31

Warren

Mr. Sully stared at me from the other side of a wooden table. A mirror took up one wall of the otherwise barren room. I hadn't said a word since they brought me in.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he said.

I stayed silent.

"Okay. We'll bring the woman in too."

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“No,” I said, slamming my cuffed hands into the table.

“Ah, so you can talk...”

“Look, I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but I’m not involved with Melvin, Jacoby, or any of them.”

“Jacoby?”

Fuck.

“Would that be Captain Jacoby, your Savage Soldier CO?”

“You guys said you know everything, right? Have you seen me involved in any way since we got back?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything. You could be really good at what you do.”

I laughed at the insanity. “Don’t I get a lawyer? Let me talk to an attorney. I have the money to hire one.”

“You’re a national security threat, and you don’t get access to a lawyer.”

“That’s bullshit.” I moved my hands, the chains connecting my cuffs to the table clanging against the wood. “I’m a U.S. citizen, and I have rights!”

“Not until you help us, you don’t. Patriot Act, my friend.”

“Fuck this. That should have expired years ago. Let me go.”

“Or what? You’re not in a position to make demands.”

I bit my tongue to keep from saying something I would regret. The more I acted out, the more they could learn about me.

If they wanted a game, I would play it.

The military had taught me how to get through torture well because they knew it would likely be used against soldiers who found themselves captured during the new 21st century wars.

“Have you settled down?” Sully asked in a cocky tone.

I felt like reaching across the table and punching him in the throat just to wipe the smirk off his face.

“Here’s the deal,” he continued. “We need someone unknown and not in the military to take the fall. If you’re willing to give up the journalist, we’ll let you go free and clear.”

“Give up the journalist? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. As a soldier, you follow orders and get things done no matter what it takes.”

“But she’s not involved,” I said sternly.

“You must not know her family very well, do you?”

“Her father is a traveling salesman, and her mother is dead. I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“You are a dumb grunt, aren’t you? No wonder the marines and the air force didn’t want you.”

“Hey, I chose the army on purpose.”

“Then you’re even more of an idiot than I thought.”

I lunged toward him and then pulled myself back, causing him to flinch.

“You better fucking watch it,” he warned.

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“I’m not saying anything else until I get an attorney.”

He shook his head. “Okay. If that’s the way you want to play...”

He left the room and I stared over at the mirror, making sure they knew I was mad as hell.

* * *

Someone eventually came back into the room. Seeing my new visitor, I stared him in the eyes, my gaze full of rage. When he undid my handcuffs, I slid the chair back and stood, causing him to take a step back and put his hand on the gun at his hip.

“I’m not doing anything,” I said, raising my hands. “Where are you taking me now?”

“We’re setting you free.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

The man shook his head nervously.

“Well, I’ll be talking to my attorney about this,” I said.

“You can do whatever you want,” Mr. Sully’s voice said through a speaker.

I glanced up at it, and then over to the mirror. “You’re fucking with the wrong man.”

“Yeah? Get used to it. We’ll have our eyes on you.”

I bet you will, I thought, glaring at my reflection.

“Let’s go,” the man in the room said. “I’ll escort you out.”

I stepped toward the door.

“Oh, Warren—one more thing,” Sully said.

“What?”

“Stay away from Rose. If you go near her, we’ll bring you in and throw the book at both of you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I muttered.

“Good. It’s just until we get all of this resolved. Thanks for understanding. Have a nice day.”

I walked out of the room and down a nondescript hallway void of life.

How can they treat me like this after I served my country in Afghanistan? I thought in disbelief.

Memories of everything that had gone on in connection with the smuggling filtered through my mind, images and sounds rushing past my consciousness as I walked.

One foot in front of another carried me to the elevator. After a ride down to the lobby, I went outside, where I stopped to soak in some fresh air.

Determination took hold of me and I knew that no matter what happened, I had to contact Rose.

She was all that really mattered to me.

If one person could help me see her without getting caught, it was Ryan. Even though I knew they were likely listening to my phone, I didn't want to destroy it. So instead, I bought a roll of aluminum foil from a corner store and wrapped the phone in it, cutting off the signal.

Rose might not be able to get through if she tried to call, but at least the feds wouldn't be able to track my movements while I went to find Ryan—the man whose friendship had made my time served in Afghanistan tolerable. I hated to drag him into the mess, but I had to have someone trustworthy on my side. Ryan fit the bill to a T; I respected no other man more.

As I headed toward his apartment by way of back alleys, I thought more about my next move.

What to do, what to

do...?

CHAPTER 32

Warren

Ryan sat next to me at the bar of a dark and seedy dive in the Bronx. He stared into his beer, not saying a word as he digested everything I'd told him.

"None of it makes sense," he said.

"You're telling me. But the only thing I'm worried about is getting to Rose."

"I knew you two would get together," he said, a familiar smile sliding over his face.

"She's my life now, man. Help me get to her."

"It won't be easy."

"No, but that's why I called in the best."

"I have an idea, but you won't like it."

"What is it?"

“Remember what we did in that hotel in Kabul?”

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “Not that.”

“It’s easy and safe. No one will get hurt, or at least they shouldn’t. We’ll pull the fire alarm, everyone will evacuate the building, and then I’ll bring her to you.”

“But you might scare her. Plus, they’re probably watching her.”

“That’s why we’ll get everyone out the building.”

“She’ll be pissed.”

“It’s the only way. And it’s safe. I’m done with killing people, man.”

“All right. Let’s do it. Tonight?”

“I’ve got your back. You know that.”

I lifted my mug into the air and he raised his too. We clinked them together and drank.

* * *

Traffic passed by cluelessly as I waited on the opposite side of the street from Rose’s building, far enough away that the spooks keeping watch wouldn’t be able to see me.

Come on, Ryan. You got this.

I shifted from one leg to the other, ready to jump into action when people started exiting the building. Two blocks away, we had designated a place to talk.

Suddenly, I heard the fire alarm. Dozens of people stormed out of the front door a few minutes later.

This is it, I thought as I slipped into the alley.

I broke into the neighboring abandoned building, the spot we had determined was safest to talk. Anxiously, I stopped and leaned against a wall in a dark corner.

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I hated waiting, but it was necessary. My only thoughts were of making sure Rose was safe. She was my priority, plain and simple. Our relationship had sparked quickly, and I didn't want it to extinguish so soon. Hence, helping the feds had become the least of my worries.

Hearing noises outside, I braced myself.

Rose walked into the graffiti-covered lobby, rushing over when she saw me. I stepped forward, my arms out-stretched. She ran into them.

"Are you okay?" I asked, pulling back and placing my palms on her cheeks.

She nodded. "Yeah. A little surprised, but okay."

"I can't believe they dragged you into this mess."

"I'm involved because I'm part of your life now, and I wouldn't change that for anything."

I kissed her.

"Hurry, you two," Ryan said from the doorway as he peered at the street outside. "I have to get her back before the spooks get spooked."

"I've been researching more," she said quickly.

"No, you shouldn't be—"

“Anyway,” she interrupted, “I kept following the money, and it’s scaring me.”

I moved my hands to her waist. “What do you mean?”

“This smuggling operation made billions—it goes all the way to the top.”

“What do you mean all the way to the top? The President?”

“Okay, maybe not that far, but at least a general or too. Quite a few people got rich off Afghanistan.”

“Be careful.”

“We need to get going,” Ryan urged. “The clock is ticking.”

“You should just run. Get out of the city,” I said, grabbing her hands tightly.

“And go where? This is the FBI we’re talking about here. I can’t run from them.”

“They probably let us both out to watch us. We need to be careful.”

“We’re innocent, Warren. It’ll be okay.”

I sighed. “If only the world really worked that way.”

She stepped back. “I’ll follow this last lead.”

“Let me come with you. We can do it together,” I suggested.

“No, that would be less safe. Think about it.”

“You’re right,” I said, begrudgingly.

“I’ve been adding to an article as I find more information. This will be the story of my career, Warren.”

“I believe in you,” I said and then kissed her again.

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

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“Wait about ten minutes, man,” Ryan said from the door.

“Thanks,” I said, turning towards him. “I’ll get with you in a few days after things calm down. They have to know something was up tonight.”

“They’re not dumb,” he said.

After Ryan and Rose left, I paced the dusty lobby of the condemned hotel that was too shitty for even the poor bastards running amok in the city.

I have to save her.

CHAPTER 33

Rose

Ryan left before we reached my apartment building. I went inside alone, sending Kim a text message on my way up to the eleventh floor.

Come over. Need to talk, I typed.

The feds were likely listening, but I didn’t care. I had been using the neighbor’s WiFi, so hopefully they didn’t know about my research.

As I found out more about the players involved in the smuggling operation, everything made more sense. Following the money trail had paid off—that was, if they let me get the story out.

A story this big wouldn't be accepted by many traditional news outlets or blogs like the Huffington Post.

By the time Kim arrived, I had myself worked up, ready to take on the world.

She walked in my apartment, glanced at the printed sheets of paper strewn everywhere, and whistled. "You got some serious Erin Brockovich activity going on in here."

"Close the door. You haven't been with Melvin, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"You can't see him again."

"I wasn't planning on it," she said, stopping by me as I stared down at the stacks of paper neatly arranged on my glass coffee table.

"Good. He's a bad man."

"He's bad in bed too." She laughed, still clueless.

"You don't understand. He's a criminal. There's no telling what he's capable of doing."

"This is Melvin you're talking about, right? The guy you set me up with?"

I furrowed my brow. "I am so sorry. If I had known, I never would have recommended it. Can you forgive me?"

"I guess," she said. "Honestly, I'm still confused."

“It’s easy. Melvin—and maybe Warren—were involved in a smuggling operation out of Afghanistan.”

Kim’s jaw dropped. “Warren was involved too?”

“Seems like it. From what the FBI said, they’re ready to pardon him.”

“The FBI?” She tilted her head back and stared at me. “You’re putting me on, right?”

“No, I’m serious. I’ve been freaking out. They told me not to get in contact with Warren, but...”

“Let me guess,” she interrupted. “You talked to him anyway?”

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“He came to check on me. He loves me.”

Her eyes widened. “Already?”

“I know, right? This is the real thing though. I’ve never felt this way about someone before. We connect.”

“But now the FBI is saying you can’t see him.”

“Exactly. Unless I can unravel the mystery of who’s behind this smuggling operation and where all the money is going.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

“You have an idea to help?”

“No! I almost forgot to tell you though—I’ve met a new guy.”

I

stared at her, dumbfounded. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Was she really serious right now? I took a deep breath. “That’s nice, but—”

“No, really. He’s great, a rock star.”

At this, my eyes rolled on their own.

“I’m serious, Rose. We’ve been getting along well so far, and we haven’t even slept together.”

“That’s great. I’m glad for you, but I’m kind of in middle of an emergency right now.”

“Have you called your dad?”

“No...Why?”

Kim stared at me as if I was the stupid one. “Because he’s a spy.”

“I’ve told you,” I said in exasperation, “he is not a spy.”

“And I’m telling you—he definitely is some sort of spy. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples for a second. “Kim, are you back on drugs?”

“No,” she said indignantly. “I can’t believe you don’t believe me after all of this time. There’s something off there, and it’s because he’s a secret-keeping spy! Anyway, all this talk of the FBI and spies has me spooked.” She giggled. “Spooked. Get it?”

I clenched my teeth. When Kim got like this, there was no reason to have her around, especially during a crisis. I couldn’t deal with her because I had a hell of a lot of work to do if I was going to bring down the people smuggling precious minerals out of Afghanistan on such a massive scale.

Clearing Warren’s name, as well as my own, was my first priority. I saw Kim out of the apartment and then returned to my laptop. Running the Tor browser made it more difficult for them to watch where I went on the Dark Web, a real source of

information that flew fast and free.

As I worked on the story of my career, I realized that if Warren was going to be a part of it, he would have to go on record. My first instinct was to protect his identity, but having his name attached would give the story even more credibility when it broke online.

If I ever finished it.

CHAPTER 34

Rose

As much as I hated to admit it, Kim had given me some decent advice in the midst of her gibberish. Even though my father wasn't a spy, he was my own personal superhero and might have had an answer to my dilemma.

He appeared surprised yet happy when I appeared at his doorstep. I threw my arms around him and hugged tightly. No matter the situation, he always made me feel better.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Come inside."

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I stepped in the apartment. “How do you always know when something’s wrong?”

“How long have I been your father?”

“Don’t remind me,” I said. “I’ve got a problem, and I thought you might be able to help me solve it.”

“What’s that, dear?”

“I need to sneak into a building unrecognized.”

He tilted his head to the side as he studied me. “You sure everything is okay? You can talk to me.”

“I know, Dad. Everything’s fine. It’s just... for my job.”

I hated lying to him, but he didn’t need to know the FBI was after me. Some things were better left unsaid.

“Well, you need a good disguise,” he said.

“Like a mask or something? Maybe a wig?”

He laughed. “If you want to look conspicuous, that will work. But if you want to blend in, you’ll need to do better than that. Lucky for you, I can help.”

Now I tilted my head. “When did you become such an expert at disguise?”

“It’s been helpful in my career.”

“As a traveling salesman?”

“Yes, dear, as a traveling salesman.”

We made eye contact for a few seconds. I looked away first, not ready to push him about his past. Right now, I just needed to get to Warren and convince him to agree to being in my story on the smuggling operation.

A few minutes later, Dad had me sitting on the toilet seat as he straightened a blond wig on my head. “Let’s accentuate your eyebrows and make you look foreign,” he said.

“No!” I objected.

He stepped back and peered down at me. “No?”

“I mean, it’s fine. As long as I look different.”

“That’s better,” he said, going back to work.

“How did you learn this?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, don’t worry about that right now, dear. Let’s just finish your make-up.”

Forty-two minutes later, I looked like an entirely different person. When I saw my reflection in the mirror, I didn’t recognize the woman staring back at me.

“Well?” Dad asked.

I smiled. “This will work.”

“Go get your story,” he said. “Don’t be like me. I failed your mother, and—”

“Stop it, Dad! Seriously. You’re the best man I know. The only one I know who could pull off both roles for me growing up.” When he frowned, I put my hand on his arm and rubbed it gently. “Dad, I’m serious. I love you.”

“I love you too. Now go before you get emotional and smear your mascara.”

“Makeup tips from my salesman father. Gotta love it.”

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He smiled meekly before walking away. Shortly thereafter, I heard the garage door slam and knew he'd snuck off to have a cigarette.

I stood there for a minute, thinking about how Kim was overreacting in thinking he was a spy.

Not my dad.

* * *

Lucky me, I thought as I nodded my head at the doorman. He winked but said nothing.

Did he know? Would he let me go upstairs and then rat me out to the feds?

Calm down, I told myself. How could he even know they're looking into me?

When I made it to the elevator, I hit the button, pacing back and forth impatiently while waiting.

The second it arrived, I dashed inside and pressed the button for Warren's penthouse suite. I remembered the federal agents busting in on us, but I didn't care. With his help, I would be able to run my story and make what we'd gone through public. If I pulled it off, it would receive immeasurable attention and we would finally get some protection.

At the top floor, I got out and knocked on the door in the private foyer.

He answered, his eyes widening as soon as he saw me. “What are you doing here? Come inside.”

“I couldn’t wait to talk to you. I’ve found out some stuff on Jacoby that you need to hear. My story’s almost done.”

“Are you crazy?” he asked, killing my mood.

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t run this story! It’s too dangerous!”

“Think about it,” I said, putting my hand on his thick arm. “If we go public, they can’t disappear us. At least not as easily.”

He shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t really need your information or to even source you in the story,” I fought back, not believing how quickly he was shutting down my idea.

“Other journalists will look into it and see I was at the Savage Soldier base in Afghanistan during the same time period. Are you willing to ruin my life like that?”

“Ruin your life? What about me?! Are you not interested in a life for both of us?”

He took a deep breath, taking a few steps away before stopping and turning. “No.”

“No, what?” I asked, following him.

“I’m not helping you with this. I’ll go to the feds and tell them it was all me.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Name-calling? Really? Are you twelve or something?”

“You can be such an asshole sometimes, you know that?”

“And you can be a...” He grimaced, not finishing the thought.

“Fuck you, Warren. I came all the way over here to share the good news with you, and you’re not interested in anything other than controlling what I do.”

“Come on, Rose. I’m trying to protect us the best way I know how. Don’t be like that.”

“Like what? Someone who stands up for herself? Maybe I should hook you up with Kim instead.”

“I love you,” he said, putting a strong hand on my waist.

We made eye contact.

“Prove it,” I said.

He sighed, removed his hand, and looked away. “You should go. We don’t want them to catch you here. They probably followed you.”

“I don’t have my phone on me, and I took some evasive measures.”

“Yeah, I noticed the wig.”

I frowned. “Why do we have to do this to ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” he said and then repeated, “You should go.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to you when I talk to you, I guess.”

As I rode the elevator downstairs, anger boiled inside me, ready to burst. The poor doorman must have thought I was a bitch as I left the building in a rage.

Fuck men, and especially fuck Warren, I thought bitterly.

CHAPTER 35

Warren

I went to see an attorney the next day. The prick had the nerve to ask what I'd been smoking before I came in. His eyebrows came together in confusion once he realized I wasn't kidding.

"If you're being investigated under the Patriot Act, I'm not sure I want anything to do with you. Why didn't you work with the feds?"

"We were. They came after us a few hours later. I imagine someone higher up told them to go after us and is trying to cover for the ones still doing the shit."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid my hourly rates—"

"Fuck your hourly rates," I said, cutting him off. "Can you help me or not?"

"If you have the money, I can help you."

"I have the fucking money."

"Good, good," he said, actually rubbing his hands together.

Could I trust this guy to keep me and Rose safe?

After I told him the rest of the details concerning Rose, his expression filled with fear and loathing.

"Do not, under any circumstances, go anywhere near that story, on the record or off."

"That's what I told her, but now I'm not so sure..."

"Don't think with your dick."

“Excuse me?”

“Calm down. I’m not going to sugarcoat things just because you’re paying so much.”

“What are your rates again?”

“Four...”

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He studied my reaction. “Fifty per hour.”

“Fine. You’re the only one who didn’t kick me out of their office today.”

“I bet. For now, I recommend you go home and lie low. If you’re not working, that shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Right.” I stood and looked down at him as he sat behind his expensive mahogany desk. “I’ll call you when I learn something new.”

“See my receptionist out front to put down a retainer.”

“Ten grand work?”

His eyes widened. “I thought you said you weren’t involved in this smuggling operation?”

“I was in the past, but I’m not anymore. Don’t you listen? This is my life we’re talking about here.”

He shrugged. “You unloaded a lot of information for a first meeting,” he said, rubbing his moustache.

I headed to the door of his office, ready to pay and prepare for whatever awaited me next. Between the feds, Melvin, Rose, and everyone else, there was no telling what would happen, but I wanted to be ready.

After swiping my Visa Black Card in the lobby of his office in a rubdown strip mall, I headed to catch the Staten Island Ferry back to the city.

CHAPTER 36

Warren

I headed straight to her apartment, still hoping I could talk her out of doing the story. If the feds tried to stop me, they could talk to my attorney.

During my trip to her place, I replayed things in my head. I had thought it best for her to trash the story, but maybe I was wrong now that I finally understood her point-of-view.

Once I admitted to myself she was right, it all made sense. The story going public would direct a lot of attention toward us and consequently provide some level of protection. At most, it would keep us from disappearing into a holding cell in some bunker unnoticed.

By the time I reached her building, I had my mind made up. The feds could fuck themselves for all I cared. I had served my country and I deserved my freedom of speech.

I knew I would likely end up prosecuted or losing my military pension, but as long as I had Rose by my side, nothing else mattered.

I walked straight up to the front door of her building and pressed the buzzer for her apartment.

“Yes?”

“It’s me,” I said.

“What are you doing here?”

The door buzzed and clicked. I opened it and went inside. On the way up to her floor in the elevator, I thought again about my decision to be honest with her about what I’d been a part of during my time serving in Afghanistan.

My mind and my heart battled the whole way up. When I stepped out of the elevator, doubts hit me hard.

Was I making yet another mistake?

I pushed the self-doubt aside and made my way to her apartment. A concerned look on her face, she stood in the doorway, waiting as I approached.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed, stepping back into her apartment.

“We’ve got to talk. I don’t like the way our last conversation ended.” I walked in and closed the door behind me.

“Me either,” she said.

“Wow. You’ve really been working.” I glanced at all the papers scattered around her living room.

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“You don’t know the half of it. It’s been crazy, but it’s all coming together.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ve given it a lot of thought...I’ll allow you to use me as a named source.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I put a hand on her waist. “If we’re serious about our relationship moving forward, we need to work together.”

“Are you sure you’re sure?”

“Yes. What do you need me to do?”

“Answer some questions and let me connect the dots. You need to read what I’ve written so far.” She pointed to her laptop on coffee table in her living room.

I walked over and sat down. After scrolling up to the top of the long article, I read what she had compiled so far. The words on the screen moved me emotionally—something I wasn’t accustomed to. As I read, she sat down on the couch next to me, our legs touching.

“Damn,” I muttered.

“It gets worse. I told you it went high up,” she said.

“They made tens of billions of dollars...”

“You can kind of see why they’ve kept the war going for over ten years now, huh?”

I shook my head, furious at myself. “How could I have been involved in this? The money was good, but we’re talking a couple hundred thousand dollars in return for risking my life over there! And these guys walk away with billions?”

Rose rubbed my back, instantly calming me.

I inhaled deeply. “That day I saved you in Afghanistan...”

She moved her hand away. “Yeah?”

I frowned as the truth got ready to surface. “It wasn’t just me who saved you,” I said with some difficulty.

“What do you mean?”

I swallowed. “There was this old Afghan guy who helped me.”

Rose’s eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“He hid me and you while the Taliban searched for us. If it wasn’t for him, neither of us would have walked out that day. I didn’t tell you because I really wanted to impress you.”

I stared into her eyes, searching for forgiveness.

Rose nodded. “Yeah, I could tell you had one thing on your mind, but I’m an adult. I made a decision. The right one. I think I know the old man you’re talking about. Before they dragged me away, he offered to help, but I didn’t trust him.”

I grimaced. “I should have gotten his name.”

“You and me both.” She sighed. “Let’s get back to work. Who knows how much time we have.”

Over the next two hours, she questioned me about the smuggling operation, including all the people I knew were involved. When she got into the zone afterwards, typing away on her laptop, I went to her bedroom to lie down and rest my eyes.

Minutes later, I was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 37

Rose

With the story posted online at DC News Heroes—the only website that was willing to work with me—I crawled into bed, exhausted. I fell asleep the moment I closed my eyes.

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Suddenly my phone rang, waking me up. Confused, I reached to answer it. “Hello?”

“Hello,” a heavily accented male voice said.

“Who is this?”

I sat up, rubbing my eyes with the back of my left hand while I held my phone in the other.

“This is Argun Manju,” he said cheerily.

“Who? How did you get this number?”

“Please go slower. One question at a time.”

“Who are you?” I stood up and walked over to my laptop on the small desk in my bedroom. Warren continued snoring from the bed, oblivious.

“You refused my water and did not trust me in Samangan.”

“How did you get my number?” I reiterated.

“My nephew is on the internet site called Facebook, and he found your name. The rest, he said, was easy-peasy.”

“Why are you calling me?” I asked, growing scared.

“I saw your article and I have information you might want.”

“Yeah?”

“The hesitation again!”

“Look, this is awfully strange. I’m being careful.”

“You didn’t trust me before and look what happened. Will you trust me now?”

“Okay...” I replied, hesitantly, not sure what else to say.

“Good. Your friend, Warren, gave you wrong information.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of the names he gave were wrong, and I can prove it.”

“Prove it how?”

“It’s not safe to discuss on the phone, as you know. You must come to Afghanistan.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Trust me,” he interrupted. “You can find me in Samangan. You know where.”

The call ended. I stared at the phon

e a moment, stunned. After waking up the laptop, I checked my email and saw thirty-two new messages, all about my story.

It had only been up for two hours, but thanks to the internet, it had spread far and wide.

I turned to look at Warren again, debating whether to wake him.

CHAPTER 38

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Rose

As I watched him sleep, Warren opened his eyes, perhaps sensing me watching him.

He smiled and patted the mattress. "Come rest," he said.

I laid down beside him in my pajamas.

"You're a bit overdressed," he teased, putting his hand on my stomach.

"We need to talk," I said seriously.

He rolled over, propping himself up with his elbow. "What's wrong?"

"That man you were talking about earlier?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"He just called me."

Warren blinked. "What? How?"

"He saw my article online after I posted it an hour or so ago. It didn't take him long to find me."

"Yeah, I guess it would be afternoon over there right now. Early evening, maybe."

“He said you got some of the names wrong and that he can get the feds off your back by proving our innocence.”

“But I’m not innocent. I already told you I was involved.”

“Yeah, but he said he could help us. We have to go see him.”

“Whoa, hold on a minute. That’s crazy. We don’t know this guy or even what information he supposedly has for us. Sounds like a trap to me.”

“I didn’t trust him before, and it blew up in my face. I don’t want to make the same mistake again, Warren.”

He sat up. I placed my hand on his back, wanting to make love to him in that moment and make all of our worries fade away.

“Let’s do this then,” he said. “I can pay for us to fly there in the next few days. It’s not going to be easy.”

I sat up, my arm draped around his back. “Believe me, I remember my last trip to Afghanistan. This might be our only chance to clear your name.”

“If your story keeps spreading, I’ll have to do something. All eyes will be on me. We’ll have to make sure they’re seeing the full story.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

He stood up and walked over to my laptop. “Buying tickets to Afghanistan while naked. This is new for me,” he said.

I laughed and got out of bed. Exhaustion still racked my body, but something felt

unfinished. My story would tarnish his reputation, but knowing that he still agreed to let me use his name—to me, that said love more than words alone ever could.

“There,” he said, spinning around. “We have two coach tickets leaving tonight at six p.m.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Exactly.”

“Should I stay up and sleep on the long flight or crash now?”

He shrugged. “It’s your call.”

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He walked over, putting his hands on my shoulders before moving them to my waist, holding tight as his lips pressed against mine.

I pulled back. “You need to brush your teeth. And a shower wouldn’t hurt.”

“Join me?” he said, running his hands along my hips.

“On second thought, I’m pretty tired. Plus, we will need something to occupy our time on the long flight over.” I smirked.

“Oh, and what’s that?”

“Mile high club.” I took his hand in mine and led him back to the bed.

We were soon laying side by side, still holding hands as sleep overtook us both.

My dreams were filled with mountain ranges and strange people speaking an unknown Afghan dialect.

No matter what happened on our crazy, last minute adventure, I would stay by his side. We had each other, and at the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 39

Warren

Rose and I landed at the Kandahar airport in one piece. I had sent word to a few

contacts I still had in the country, so a Land Rover waited outside, ready to take us to Samangan.

The man riding shotgun smelled of goats and sour cheese, but looked tough enough to protect us. I had spent a lot of money setting up this trip to be sure nothing would happen to us.

I glanced over at Rose, sitting beside me in the back of the vehicle. She was looking out the window at the landscape as the sun rose in the distance.

Arabic music flowed from the speakers as the driver and his security guard yapped back and forth about the best way to dig a well.

“We have to be ready for anything,” I said and then paused. “You...You shouldn’t have come.”

Rose turned to face me, her eyes red with bags under them. “The man contacted me, not you. Plus, I want to be here. You couldn’t have stopped me.”

I sighed. “Well, this will all be over soon and we’ll be able to put it all behind us and get on with our lives.”

As I watched her smile weakly, I realized how much I loved her. It was as if we were made for each other.

“I can’t think of a better plan,” she said.

“We should arrive early enough to scope the place out before it gets too packed. Are you sure you remember where his booth was in the market?”

“It’s been so long. My memories are a little hazy, but I think so.”

“Good.” I turned to the passenger up front. “I need the gun.”

He twisted around, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Do it. He’s been vetted,” the driver said in English.

The other man reached into the glove box and pulled out a revolver old enough to be in a museum.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “This isn’t what we agreed I would be getting. I’ll need more firepower than this if this turns out to be a trap.”

“That what you pay, that what you get,” the driver said.

Meanwhile, the passenger stared at me menacingly.

“It’s okay,” Rose said. “We’ll be fine.”

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I wanted to call her out for being so naïve, but held my tongue in front of the strangers.

Our escorts resumed arguing amongst themselves as we bounced around in the backseat. Outside, the unforgiving Afghanistan landscape stretched into the horizon.

Coming back to the war-torn country was stupid in so many ways, but if we wanted any chance of a future together, it was necessary.

* * *

At the outskirts of Samangan, the so-called escort specialists dropped us off and zoomed away, leaving a cloud of dust rising in their wake.

“Fucking assholes,” Rose said, wiping off her baggy white blouse and jeans.

“I’m sorry. It’s the best I could get on such short notice. We’re here now. Let’s find out what this old man claims to know.”

“Thanks for supporting me with this,” she said.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s you and me. We’re in this for the long haul.”

“I’d kiss you, but my lips are full of sand and dirt.”

I smiled, squeezing her arm briefly. “Let’s do this.”

We walked side-by-side into the city which had only begun to awaken. Everyone who saw us stared. I gripped Rose's hand tightly, increasing our pace.

At the center of the city, we arrived at the market, already bustling with vendors setting up shop and locals arriving for early bird specials and the freshest produce.

"It's this way," she said, leading me toward the left side of the plaza. She stopped a few stalls down.

We both peered inside, seeing nothing.

"Where is he?" she muttered.

I had already turned to glance around the plaza.

"What the hell?" she said.

"I told you it was a trap." I scanned the crowd, which was steadily increasing in size. "There..."

Rose's gaze followed my finger as I pointed across the market. "Isn't that Melvin?"

"Yeah. I should've known he was behind this," I said through clenched teeth.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, holding onto my arm.

"Don't worry. I'll get us out here."

"I'm sorry, Warren..."

"It's not your fault," I reassured her. "But you need to keep it together now, okay?"

She nodded.

“Let’s go this way,” I said, taking her hand.

We only made it a few steps before two Afghan men with AK-47’s stepped out from an alley and pointed their weapons at us. I pushed Rose to the side, sliding in front of her in case they shot.

I stared into their eyes, knowing they were hardened mercenaries and didn’t give a fuck about anything, let alone me or Rose.

Think fast, I told myself, weighing all our options.

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The only way out would be to overpower them, but if I tried, they would likely shoot Rose. She had no training and would be a liability if we tried to run.

Our only other choice was to cooperate and hope for the best.

“You come with us,” one man barked, moving his assault weapon erratically.

“Do what he says,” I whispered to Rose. “Stay calm. We’ll get through this.”

She said nothing as the men led us to a waiting van around the corner and put hoods over our heads.

Why the hell had I agree to come back and put both of us in danger?

I had no answers to my simple questions, let alone the more difficult ones.

* * *

As soon as the hood came off, I realized they had taken Rose somewhere else.

“Where is she?” I yelled.

Unseen hands pushed me, sending me almost falling to the dirt floor.

Were we in a fucking cave?

“Settle down, Warren,” Melvin said as he emerged from the darkness.

A half-dozen other men, all heavily armed, formed a circle around me. Yet, regardless of the strong and intimidating men surrounding me, my thoughts were solely on Rose and her safety.

Where was she?

Melvin laughed. “What? You’ve got nothing to say?”

“Where’s Rose?” I asked, glaring at him.

“That bitch is fine.”

I lunged toward him. He pulled out a stun-gun and hit me with at least fifty-thousand volt

s, sending me to the ground. He laughed again as I writhed in pain.

“Where is she?” I yelled furiously, slowly climbing back to my feet.

“You don’t need to worry about that bitch,” Melvin said, staring at me with his lifeless eyes.

I shook my head. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why not?” he said with a chuckle. “You could have been on the winning side of this, but you had to be a punk-ass and drop out. We were going to let you go until that bitch published her story.”

“You were behind the Afghani calling her?”

“Wow. You really are dense, aren’t you?” He shoved the stun-gun forward and

pressed the button, causing me to flinch. A round of laughter filled the cavern.

Think, Warren, a voice in my head urged. It's sink or swim time. You have to save her...

"You should have either stuck with us, or kept your mouth shut. Now you'll pay." Melvin paused before barking an order. "Bring the woman in here."

I watched in horror as Rose was dragged kicking and screaming into the cavern.

"Leave her alone!" I said, rushing over. They shoved her to the floor. I went down on my knees next to her. "Are you okay?"

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“They drugged me,” she said, her speech slurred.

I stood and faced Melvin. “What the fuck did you do?”

He grinned.

I bolted forward, hoping I could at least knock him over before he stunned me again. But as I approached, gunshots rang out somewhere deeper in the cave, followed by an explosion. Unable to stop myself, I changed directions, running into one of the surprised men wearing long white robes. I punched him in the face and grabbed his AK-47.

The rest of the cavern erupted in chaos. I didn’t see Melvin, but most of the other men were running toward the sound of the explosion.

When I saw Rose curled up in a fetal position, I rushed forward, intent on protecting her. The others had all left by the time I reached her. I crouched down with the AK slung over my shoulder. “Are you okay?” I asked, holding her head.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, but I’m getting you out of here. Can you walk?”

She shook her head.

“What the hell did they give you?” I muttered. “Never mind. I’m going to carry you.”

I picked her up and surveyed my options.

More gunshots rang out in the distance, and then there was silence. Hoping I didn't have to drop her to get my gun, I headed in the opposite direction. A few hundred feet later, I saw sunlight from the entrance of the cave.

"Just a little longer. Hang on," I said, more to myself than her.

She looked up at me, oblivious to the severity of the situation.

"I'll leave you here," I said. "I need to see where we are and if anyone's outside the cave."

"You're leaving me?" she said, her speech slurred.

I set her down on the floor and grabbed the AK-47, pointing it toward the sunlight.

"Hold on, I'm a friend," someone yelled behind me.

I spun around, ready to shoot, but I held off as I saw a man with his hands raised in the air.

"I'm here to help," he said, taking a step forward.

"Watch it," I said, raising the gun.

"Dad?" Rose said, sitting up.

"Are you okay, dear?" the man asked, walking toward her.

"I said hold it," I shouted. "She's been drugged. How do I know I can trust you?"

“You don’t, son. But if I were you, I’d lower the weapon.”

He nodded toward the entrance of the cave. I turned and saw a half-dozen U.S. Marines with their weapons pointed at me. I lowered the assault weapon immediately.

“It’s okay,” the man said.

I turned and saw he had reached Rose.

“I’m in the CIA,” he explained while bending to check on Rose. “Come and help, will you?”

“Dad?” she said, giggling. “Kim was right for once!”

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I walked over and picked Rose back up. Outside, a helicopter waited to take us away.

As soon as we were in the air, I turned to her father. “How did you know?”

“I told you, I’m in the CIA. We know everything.”

Rose sat next to him with her head resting on his shoulder.

We were so lucky to have made it out of the obvious trap I had led us into. Hate for myself increased as we flew over the mountains.

I didn’t care where we were headed, as long as it was outside of Afghanistan.

* * *

In a private room at the Kandahar airport, Rose slept curled up on a string of chairs as we waited for our flight back to the United States.

Frank, her father, sat next to me. I adjusted my seat, partly because the chair was extremely uncomfortable and partly because this was the way I had met Rose’s father for the first time.

And because he was in the CIA.

“You did good in the market,” he said.

“Huh?”

“We were watching, but we didn’t have time to move in before they took you. I liked the way you handled things. You could have run for it, but you stayed behind and tried to keep her safe. That’s someone I can respect and stand behind.”

“Thank you, sir. I love her.”

Both of us glanced over at her while she slept.

“She never told me you were in the CIA.”

“Because she didn’t know. I’ve never told her. Maybe I should have, but I wanted to protect her.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like to ask your daughter to marry me. Can I have your blessing?”

“When she came to me about you and Melvin, I did some digging on both of you. That’s when I realized just how dirty Melvin was and how hard you were trying to protect her. If that’s not worthy of my blessing, I don’t know what is.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Quit calling me ‘sir’. Makes me feel old. But don’t you call me ‘dad’ yet either. We’ll see what she says first.”

“She’ll say yes. We’re in love. It’s what brought us back to Afghanistan. We’re in this together for the long haul.”

“She told me about you saving her. I never thanked you for that. Thank you.”

“Just doing my duty. You know how it is.”

He nodded.

We both turned our attention back to Rose, still sleeping soundly.

“She snores,” her father said out of nowhere.

“You don’t need to tell me.”

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He glanced at me from the corner of his eye, but I stared straight ahead, unashamed. In that moment, sitting with her father, I vowed to spend the rest of my life with Rose, building our love on a foundation of honesty and trust. She had done so much for me, and she deserved nothing short of the best.

CHAPTER 40

Warren

I stood next to Ryan in the luxurious room of St. Cathy's Cathedral downtown. Organ music floated through the air, bouncing off the ornate walls of the historic place of worship.

"This is it, man. You ready?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think I am."

He laughed.

"It's not a time to be thinking."

"No, no, I'm sure. We've been through so much."

"You found a good woman, Warren. She's as strong as you. You guys are going to be fine."

"She's stronger than me," I admitted, knowing full well just how special Rose was

and how lucky I was that she chose to spend her life with me.

Ryan pat me on the back. “That very well could be.”

We both laughed, mine sounding full of nervousness and excitement.

The rest of my life was about to begin. As I stared at one of the stained-glass windows in the room, I took a deep breath and relaxed.

What life was worth living without someone to share it with? I had found my true love. My soulmate. For the rest of my

life, I would have someone by my side, no matter what happened. Rose had taught me so much in the short time we’d known each other. She knew my past, she knew my shortcomings, and she loved me all the same. She made me want to be a better person.

* * *

An hour later, I found myself seated next to her at the reception. Everything had moved so quickly, but it was official now. We were married, ‘til death did us part.

“Forever,” I said when she nudged me with her elbow.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. Just thinking.”

“We’ve been here long enough, right?”

I grinned. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

She nodded.

We pushed our chairs back and stood. None of the revelers noticed as we made our way out the back of the reception hall. In the parking lot, I saw her father leaning against his car, smoking a cigarette.

“You two be safe,” he said. “And congratulations.”

Rose waved and I nodded. A moment later, we were in the limousine we’d rented and on our way to our hotel in Upstate New York.

On the ride, we kissed like two kids on prom night. I pulled back after a few minutes, staring into her eyes.

“I told you it would all work out,” I said.

“Don’t think I ever doubted you.” She smirked. “Well, maybe a little in Afghanistan.”

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I grinned. “You’re incredible, Rose.”

Her smirk grew into a full-blown smile that lit up her entire face. “We’re married! I still can’t believe it.”

“Me either,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too. So much.” She pressed her lips against mine.

The countryside passed outside as time sped by. At the bed-and-breakfast I had rented for the weekend, we made love multiple times a day.

While nice, none of the physical connection compared to hearing her thoughts out loud. Never growing bored, I found myself becoming more and more captivated with her as time went on.

Our lives had been thrown together in a country ravaged by war halfway around the world and our first meeting had been interrupted, but sometimes second chances were possible.

CHAPTER 41

Rose

Five Years Later

Warren and I arrived at our home in Savage, Colorado after the awards ceremony

exhausted. Not long after we married, we both decided we wanted to return to our hometown. We had so much history there. Plus, the Savage Soldiers of Savage, CO were the reason he ultimately ended up meeting in the first place. Hence, it only seemed right to return to where it had all begun.

We had spent the whole day preparing to receive the honor for Best Independent News source in the country. Fittingly, the ceremony was in our hometown.

Now that everything was all over, I wanted to get back to work. The company Warren and I had created, enabling people around the world to get their story about corruption in front of audience, had taken off.

He unlocked our beautiful front door to our new home, still not saying anything. After five years, I learned his moods and eccentricities quite well. Boredom lurked behind his sullen face, I was sure of it.

“Whatcha thinking about?” I asked as I walked in first.

“Oh, you know.”

After closing the door and locking it, he turned around. His eyes opened wide as he saw me unbuttoning my blouse. I smiled seductively, ready to start the next phase of our life.

“Let’s make a baby,” I said, watching as he stripped out of his clothes.

“I was thinking earlier today, after this award, our business will take off. We’ll need to hire more people, delegate some responsibilities...”

“Delegate,” I said, down to only panties.

“There will be more man power, so some of our time will finally be freed up. This is the perfect time...”

“To start our family,” I said, finishing his sentence.

He stepped forward and pressed his body against mine. After so many years of condoms and contraceptives, we were finally going to make love without any barriers between us. The thought made my heart beat faster as I slipped off my panties, kicking them across our spotless living room. They landed on the expensive leather couch we had picked out together.

I saw that familiar look in his eyes. Even after five years, his lust and love for me knew no bounds.

“Let’s begin our next adventure,” he said.

His voice made me shiver. Or maybe it was the central air left on too high. We had enough money to live the rest of our lives without working if we wanted, more than enough to be comfortable.

Our next step though—a child—made perfect sense.

I stared at him, wondering if he would want more than one.

How many did I want? I’d been an only child and always had missed not having a sibling.

We would have to discuss that later though, for my mind went blissfully blank when he kissed me. He ran his hands up and down my body, touching and teasing every spot that drove me wild.

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I stroked his magnificent body, unable to believe it had been over seven years since he had first come into my life. His hand moved between my legs, his fingers brushing against my mound.

My moans filled the air as he took me right there on the stairs. Absent of the usual condom, I felt all of him for the first time—long, hard, and slick-- sliding in and out. Thrusting harder and faster as I lost myself in the moment.

Through it all, I momentarily thought of having his son or daughter, and growing old with him. But then I forgot how to think at all as he made love to me with more passion than I'd ever felt before. Just when I could hardly stand it anymore, he slowed his pace.

“Sore?” I asked, smirking.

“I’m getting old,” he laughed.

“We are not getting old. Let’s go upstairs.”

I swayed my hips back and forth, giggling gleefully as he squeezed my left butt-cheek and slapped the other.

“We want to make this a happy baby, not some fifty shades of gray baby,” I said, glancing over my shoulder as I reached the top of the stairs.

He grinned. “We’re gonna make the happiest, cutest, smartest, and funniest baby ever.”

“Here’s to hoping he or she gets the best from both of us.”

I stopped and kissed him, stroking his baby-maker to keep it hard.

Our master bedroom was a welcomed sight. We made our way to the bed, stealing kisses as if it were our first night together.

I couldn’t help thinking how as we grew closer each passing day, our love for each other continued to blossom. I simply couldn’t imagine a world without him in it.

He slid himself into me as I laid on my back with my legs held up by his broad shoulders. The friction sent tingles of pleasure through my body. The break to come upstairs had somehow heightened my senses.

We gazed into each other’s eyes, both of us breathing heavily. My hardened nipples rubbed against his body as he moved up and down.

“Warren...”

His eyes closed as he came, and I did the same half-a-second later. Our bodies, connected, writhed in pleasure as the orgasms washed over us.

He slowed his strokes, then stopped. Still inside of me, he kissed me on the lips.

While I would never know for certain if that was the night we conceived, I had a hunch.

He pulled out and then collapsed next to me.

“You’re thinking too much again, aren’t you?” he said, studying my expression.

“Probably,” I said. “It’s just that...that was so...I mean, we almost never...”

“I know. It was like the first time.”

We cuddled for a while before I reached down to touch between his legs. He kissed me, and before we knew it, the process started all over again.

By the end of the year, we had our first child. A girl named Jasmine Anne Lewis. We both loved her more than anything else in the world, and we proved it daily for the rest of our lives.

Things didn't always work out our way, but we stood by each other until the end.

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