



# Lethal Illusion

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** A forced proximity, found family, bodyguard romance on the run from bestselling author Lori Sjoberg!

Practice, patience, and a boatload of discipline transformed Jacob Navarre into one of the deadliest snipers in the world. Now, as a member of Six Points Security, he channels those skills to protect others from danger. But the limits of his patience are put to the test when cyber security expert Sloane Welker is assigned to his team. She's got brains, beauty, a body built for sin, but zero experience in the field. That's a problem for him, because that lack of experience can get people killed when things inevitably go sideways.

Sloane's not exactly thrilled about this either. She'd much rather put her skills to use fighting bad guys in cyberspace. But her uncanny resemblance to one of Six Points Security's celebrity clients makes her uniquely qualified for the job. All she has to do is fool the paparazzi into believing she's an A-list actress for a few days while the actress sneaks off to enjoy a little privacy. In exchange, Sloane will spend a few days living the life of the rich and famous. What's the worst that could possibly happen?

She should have known better than to ask that question. Now armed mercenaries are hot on her tail, and it's up to Navarre to protect her. It doesn't help that their forced proximity is making the off-the-charts chemistry between them impossible to ignore.

Navarre will do what it takes to keep Sloane safe, but falling in love might be his most dangerous mission.

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## Chapter 1

Navarre stepped into the automated shuttle that ferried passengers from the gates to the terminals at Orlando International Airport. After four and a half hours in a flying tin can with nonexistent legroom, it felt pretty damn good to stretch his legs. He grabbed hold of one of the shiny metal poles that was anchored between the floor and the ceiling as a sea of travel-weary passengers brushed past and claimed their spots inside.

Beside him, Wade dumped his bag on the floor and reached for one of the straps hanging from the ceiling. Rosario trailed in the wake he created and gripped the strap beside his. Nobody talked; there wasn't much point. It had been a long weekend, they'd accomplished what they'd set out to do, and now they just wanted to go home.

Passengers continued to pile in until there was barely enough room to breathe. At last, the glass automatic doors closed with a whoosh, and as the shuttle began to move, the mayor's voice came over the speakers to welcome them to Orlando.

With the exception of one howling child, and that guy in the row ahead of him who reeked of Axe body spray, the flight had been uneventful. No delays, or turbulence, or any of that shit—just a straight shot from Salt Lake City to Orlando. And with Wade and Rosario seated in the same row, he hadn't had to worry about some random knucklehead trying to strike up a conversation.

Not that it happened often. He wasn't the type to stand out in a crowd. At five ten, he was slightly taller than average, with sandy-brown hair and plain brown eyes that never stopped scanning their surroundings. His jeans, T-shirt, and athletic shoes

wouldn't draw an ounce of attention. Regardless of where he was or who he was with, Navarre took great pains to blend in with his environment, to appear unassuming and bland, so nobody noticed or paid attention.

Such was the life of a sniper.

Wade, on the other hand, would never blend in, not with the jagged, cross-shaped scar that marred one side of his face. Being built like a bouncer didn't help.

A little boy no older than five stared up at him with eyes wider than saucers. "What happened to your face?"

"Michael, be quiet!" his mother hissed, and then added a quick "Sorry" to Wade.

"It's okay. I get that a lot." Wade stared down at the boy. "A very bad man did this to me, but I made sure he'll never do it to anyone again."

At the terminal, the doors slid open, and the woman dragged her child away as if the shuttle had burst into flames.

Navarre waited for the horde of passengers to exit before picking up his bag. He'd never been much for crowds—just one of the reasons he enjoyed his job—and after spending a good chunk of the day traveling, he was looking forward to some quiet time at home. First off, he wanted to take a long shower, and then he wanted a home-cooked meal, a cold beer, and a solid chunk of uninterrupted time to play *Demon Scourge 2*. He was coming up on the second boss battle, and he couldn't wait to dive in.

He and his teammates strode through the hall connecting to the terminal, and his gaze locked onto his buddy Jackson, standing near one of those shops that sold souvenirs to the tourists heading back home. Big, black, heavily tattooed, and roughly the size of

a Howitzer, he was kind of hard to miss. He stood motionless; his thumbs hooked in the belt loops of his jeans, while the crush of humanity moved around him like a river flowed around a rock.

At the sight of Navarre, a huge grin split his face, and he made a beeline toward them.

“Good to see you, man.” In true Jackson form, he pulled Navarre in for a big bear hug that probably cracked a few ribs, followed by a pair of thumps to the back that made his teeth rattle. “Not that I really need to ask, but how did y’all do?”

“The competition was stiff, but Rosario dragged us over the line.”

It was the third year that Navarre had represented Six Points Security in the Rocky Mountain Tactical Shooting Tournament, an event open to military, law enforcement, and private security organizations. This year, fifty-two teams had participated in the grueling two-day competition. In addition to marksmanship, it tested various skills such as navigation, reconnaissance, target identification, and, if necessary, though it wasn’t for them, combat field care. With so many elite teams from across the country competing, Navarre hadn’t been sure how well they’d fare, especially after Austin, the usual third person on the team, had been forced to bow out at the last minute. But in the end, Rosario had risen to the challenge, and they’d successfully defended their title.

“Oh, that’s bullshit and you know it.” Rosario hitched the strap of her carry-on bag higher on her shoulder. She was a statuesque woman, athletic and lean, with long, black hair that she tended to wear in a braid trailing halfway down her back. “No one could touch us, not even close, because we had two ringers on the team.”

Wade grunted. “You held your own, kid. Another year or two, you’ll be giving us a run for the money.”

The praise brought a smile to her face. Navarre had learned a few things about Rosario over the course of the weekend. One, she handled pressure like a pro; with experience, she'd get even better. She also had a competitive streak that was at least a mile wide. But she wasn't accustomed to receiving praise. If anything, it seemed to embarrass her. He'd mentioned it to Wade, who agreed with the assessment and said he'd work with Austin to bolster her confidence.

"Did anything exciting happen while we were gone?" Navarre asked Jackson as they skipped the crowded escalator in favor of the stairs to baggage claim.

It couldn't have been all that much. They were out of town for only a few days. Still, shit had a way of happening at the most unexpected and inopportune times, and he hated the thought of missing out on anything good.

"Nate taught Luther how to drive a stick," Jackson said as they reached the level for baggage claim.

Rosario huffed out a laugh. "Does his car still have a transmission?"

"He didn't use his car. He used one of the company trucks."

Wade swore—not surprising, considering how much work he put into those trucks to keep them in prime operating condition.

"I gotta give Nate credit, though," Jackson continued. "By the time he was finished, Luther was shifting like a pro."

They followed the signs to the area designated for their flight, where Wade's fiancée, Dr. Hope Chandler, and Jackson's wife, Essie, were camped out in front of the baggage carousel. At the sight of Wade, a smile lit Hope's face, and she quickly closed the distance between them and launched herself into his arms.

“Welcome home,” Essie said as Jackson slid one arm around her waist. She was also an expert at blending in, a skill she’d developed as a covert operative.

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Navarre mustered a smile that he hoped appeared genuine. “Thanks.”

It wasn't that he disliked Essie. After a rocky start, they'd made peace with each other, and things had gone fairly smoothly ever since. And any woman who made Jackson so happy was okay in his book.

But he and Jackson had been roommates for quite some time, had served together in the Army for much longer than that, and adding another person to the dynamic had left him with a case of Third Wheel Syndrome that was getting under his skin. Trouble was, he didn't know what to do about it, so for the time being he'd suck it up and keep his big mouth shut.

A harsh buzzing sound rent the air as the belt lurched into motion, and people crowded around the baggage conveyor like buzzards around day-old roadkill. Luckily, they didn't have too much to pick up, just the long, hard-sided cases they'd used to transport the weapons, ammunition, and tactical gear needed for the event. And now that they'd burned through most of the ammo, the cases would be a lot lighter. Navarre and Wade had brought their own supplies, while Rosario had used equipment from the Six Points armory for the event. Each case was secured with four separate locks and two GPS tracking devices, just in case anybody got ideas.

Like the pudgy, greasy-haired punk who was reaching for one of the cases.

“Touch it and I'll break your wrist,” Wade all but growled.

The guy's hand jerked back as if he'd touched a scalding-hot stove. Wade had that kind of effect on people, even when he wasn't threatening them with bodily harm. As

the guy scurried off, Wade grabbed two cases, handed them to Navarre and Jackson, and then lifted a third case off the belt.

It took a few more minutes to claim the final case that contained their tactical gear, as well as the trophy they'd won at the tournament. Then they exited the terminal and piled into a van that would bring them to one of the off-site parking lots.

"So what else did we miss?" Rosario asked as she fastened her seat belt.

"Not too much," Jackson said, his arm draped along the back of the seat where Essie sat. "Austin's still working on something big, but he's being tight-lipped about it. I tried to pry it out of him, but he said he didn't want to say anything until it was a done deal."

That something big was presumably what caused him to give up his spot on the team. Whatever it was, it had to be important, because Austin was one of the most competitive people he'd ever met. He lived for shit like this. It must have damn near killed him to let Rosario take his place.

"Oh yeah, that." Wade reached for Hope's hand and laced his fingers with hers.

The van continued to navigate through traffic, its turn signal making a strange clunking noise as the vehicle merged into the turn lane.

All eyes turned to Wade, but he ignored them. He bent his head to whisper in Hope's ear, and she let out a soft laugh in response.

"Well?" Navarre asked.

Wade's gaze cut to him. "What, you think I'd narc on my own brother?"



“Come on, at least give us a hint.”Navarre knew better than to press him any harder.It would only make him more intractable.

Wade stared at him for a few seconds, and then sighed.“Let me see what I can do.”

He pulled out his phone and typed a short message, most likely to his older brother.A minute or two passed, and as the van pulled into the off-site lot, his phone buzzed to announce an incoming text.

“Nope, can’t tell you shit yet.There’s one final detail that needs to be addressed.He said if things work out the way he wants, he’ll make an announcement tomorrow morning.”

SloaneWelkerwasalmostfinished writing up the final report of the day, her feet propped up on the corner of her desk while she typed away on her laptop, when she noticed movement from the corner of her eye and nearly jumped out of her seat.

Her gaze flicked up to the source of the movement, and her breath hitched at the sight of her boss standing in the doorway.

Technically, Larissa Falco was her direct supervisor, but her brother Austin Flint was the head honcho at Six Points Security.The oldest sibling of the Flint family, he was the founder and CEO, and she usually tried to fly under his radar.Not because he was mean to her or anything like that.To the contrary, during the few instances where they’d interacted, he treated her with courtesy and respect.But he always looked so stern and serious, like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and the last thing she wanted to do was get in his way...or on his bad side.

“I’m sorry.I didn’t mean to startle you.”His voice was a deep, heavy rumble.A Marine veteran, he still kept his black hair cut high and tight, while the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow darkened his strong jaw.He wore dark-blue slacks over brown

shoes and a white dress shirt that had been tailored to accommodate the deep V of his torso.

“It’s okay, I’m just...” She slid her feet off the desk in an attempt to salvage some semblance of professionalism. As it was, she felt way underdressed in her combat boots, faded jeans, and old T-shirt, but that kind of attire was fairly common among analysts in the cyber security division. “What can I do for you this afternoon?”

“Mind if I come in?” he asked, and nerves skittered down her spine. “If you’re in the middle of something, I can come back later.”

Like she’d ever tell her boss to come back at a more convenient time. “No, it’s fine. I was just finishing up. Make yourself at home.”

Sloane slid on her hoodie and zipped it all the way up in the hope that Austin hadn’t already read the front of her shirt: You Should See My Active Bitch Face. Larissa wore shirts like it all the time, and she never had a problem with other members of the team wearing whatever made them feel comfortable.

As he stepped into the room, Austin glanced back to the open doorway and called out, “Are you coming or what?”

“Be there in a minute,” Larissa called back.

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Worry knotted Sloane's stomach. For the life of her, she couldn't come up with a reason why both of them wanted to speak with her. Well, she could, but none of them were good. "Am I in trouble?"

"That depends." Austin arched one eyebrow. "Have you done anything that might get you into trouble?"

"Not that I'm aware of, Mr. Flint." And yet she couldn't help but worry. She liked this job, and the people she worked with. But more important, she needed this job to keep a roof over her head and the bill collectors at bay.

"Relax, Ms. Welker." Austin sat in one of the chairs on the opposite side of her desk. "You're not in trouble. I've heard nothing but good things about you and the quality of your work."

That loosened the knot in her stomach but didn't get rid of it entirely. "That's good to know."

The sound of footsteps came down the hall, and seconds later, Larissa walked in, wearing jeans and a plain black T-shirt with Boss Lady written across the front in glittery letters. She closed the door behind her and claimed the seat beside Austin.

"Sorry, I had to take a call. What did I miss?"

"Nothing yet. I was just getting started." Austin turned his gaze to Sloane. "I don't want to waste your time, Ms. Welker, so I'll cut straight to the point. I have a potential client with a unique situation, and I believe you can help us with it. Everything that I

say from this moment forward is highly confidential and cannot leave this room. Is that understood?"

"Yes, of course," she replied, curiosity gnawing at her insides. It wasn't often that people at Six Points came to her for help. She wasn't exactly action hero material. Most of her work came from behind a keyboard, protecting their clients' computer systems, networks, and data from threats and responding to them accordingly.

A muscle flexed along the line of Austin's jaw. "Are you familiar with the actress Sierra Page?"

"Yes, sir." You'd have to be living under a rock to not know about Sierra Page: actress, model, social media sensation, and unabashed devourer of men. Her leading role in the *Deathslayer* movie franchise had catapulted her to superstardom. Now her face was plastered on movie posters, perfume ads, action figures, and the covers of just about every magazine in the supermarket checkout line. "She's going to be a Six Points client?"

"Nothing is set in stone, but the odds are leaning in our favor. Ms. Page is unsatisfied with the company that currently provides her personal protection, and she's heard good things about Six Points."

She'd probably heard those good things from actress Vicky Hale, who'd recently worked with Sierra on some sort of spy thriller that was scheduled to release early next year, and who also happened to be married to Ryan Flint, one of Austin's four younger brothers.

"However, there is one sticking point." Austin leaned forward in his chair. "While Ms. Page enjoys the attention she receives from the paparazzi, there are times when she prefers privacy. To throw the press off her scent, so to speak, she occasionally

utilizes body doubles. Unfortunately, that's one tool we don't have in our arsenal, and it's the only thing holding back our ability to land the account."

"That's where you come in," Larissa added.

"What—me?" Sloane stared at them as though they'd lost their minds. It was the only possible explanation if they were thinking what she thought they were thinking. "You can't be serious."

"I never joke about my business," Austin replied. "You bear a remarkable resemblance to Ms. Page. You're the same height, same relative build, and your facial features are quite similar." He swiped at his phone and then angled the screen to show Sloane the picture she'd posted on one of her social media accounts from that time she dressed up as the Deathslayer at Dragon Con. "At first glance, I thought this was Sierra."

The comparison was flattering, but nothing close to reality. Sierra was bold, and glamorous, and larger than life, while Sloane was painfully plain. It wasn't a fun fact to acknowledge about yourself, but the truth was the truth. "Yeah, but that's only because I was wearing the costume and makeup. She doesn't look anything like that in real life. She's blonde, with those big blue eyes, and she's got that little mole above her left eyebrow, and she's...well, you know." She made a vague gesture to her chest, something she'd never imagined herself doing in front of her boss, and heat rose in her cheeks.

The corners of Austin's mouth twitched. "Those are cosmetic differences that can be easily remedied. You don't have to be an exact clone of Ms. Page, just close enough in appearance to fool the press from a distance." He paused as if giving time for the information to sink in. "You're a damn good analyst, Ms. Welker. Larissa and I would much rather have you doing the job we hired you to do. But Ms. Page needs a decoy next weekend, which puts us in a bind. Will you help us?"

This was so outside her comfort zone it wasn't even funny. There had to be another way. "Can't you just hire the body double she's already using?"

Larissa shook her head. "We contacted her, but she isn't available at that time."

"And Sierra can't reschedule to a time when her double is around?"

"People like Sierra Page don't reschedule. That word isn't in their vocabulary. We either provide the service she wants when she wants it, or we don't provide it at all." Austin rubbed a hand along the side of his neck. "I wouldn't be asking this of you if it wasn't important."

Sloane blew out an unsteady breath. It all seemed so exciting, but it also scared her to death. "I don't know. I've never done anything like that before."

There were so many ways for this to go wrong. What if somebody she knew recognized her and blew her cover? Or the press figured out she was a fake? The public humiliation would be monumental, not to mention the black eye on Six Points' sterling reputation. It could turn a lucrative contract into a devastating liability, and it would all be her fault.

As if sensing her indecision, Austin added, "I'll pay you double your normal hourly rate, plus a bonus at the end of the assignment if successful."

That got her attention. "How big of a bonus?"

Austin met her gaze. "Ten thousand dollars."

Sloane's breath caught in her throat. It wouldn't mean a lot to some people, but ten thousand dollars would be life-changing for her. She could pay off her credit cards, buy some badly needed tires for her car, and have a tiny bit left over for a rainy

day. For once in her adult life, she wouldn't have to live paycheck to paycheck. Still, she had a few more questions.

“Would I be in any danger?”

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“You’d have a full security detail assigned to protect you day and night, with the same number of staff we’d normally use for a person of Ms. Page’s stature.”

“That didn’t answer my question.” And it set off an alarm inside her head. “Is Sierra Page under some sort of threat?”

The muscle along Austin’s jaw flexed again. “Are you familiar with Sierra’s relationship with Dax Garvey?”

“Yes, but last I heard, they broke up.” Their whirlwind romance, which played out in public, had ended with a fiery flameout in the lobby of a Ritz-Carlton Hotel at two o’clock in the morning. A bystander had captured the incident on their phone and posted it online, where the footage had immediately gone viral.

For the life of her, Sloane couldn’t understand what Sierra had seen in the guy. The son of a billionaire hedge fund manager, he’d been born with a silver spoon up his butt and expected to be treated like royalty. He wasn’t smart, or funny, or even all that attractive. And the opinions he frequently spouted online made it clear that he had a problem with powerful women.

“Apparently, he refuses to accept that simple fact.” Scorn crept into Larissa’s voice. “Sierra blocked him from all means of contacting her, but that hasn’t stopped him from crashing a number of events where she was in attendance. And last month, he paid two million dollars for the property that’s three doors down from her home on Lake Nona.”

“Oh, that’s creepy.” But it wasn’t all that surprising. He struck Sloane as one of those



guys whose fragile ego couldn't handle being told no.

"Mr. Garvey hasn't made any direct threats to Ms. Page's safety," Austin continued. "But his actions are a cause for concern. If we win the account, we'll provide Ms. Page with a personal protection detail 24/7. And if you agree to act as her doppelganger, you have my word that you'll be afforded an equal level of security."

Knowing that she'd be protected day and night alleviated some of her concerns. This wouldn't be the first high-profile client for Six Points Security. They guarded corporate executives, politicians, A-list celebrities, and the family of a member of the Saudi royal family whenever they vacationed in Florida. Keeping her safe from a spoiled rich boy should be a walk in the park.

And what the hell, playing the role of a pampered rich girl might be fun for a few days. She could wear fancy clothes, stay in a fancy mansion, and pretend she was somebody special. If she turned it down, who knew if this sort of opportunity would ever present itself again?

Decision made, she blew out a breath. "All right, I'm in."

"Yes!" Larissa reached across the desk to give Sloane a high five.

"Thank you for agreeing to do this," Austin said. "You have no idea how much we appreciate it."

She hoped they remembered this when it came time for her annual review. "So what happens next?"

"Ms. Page's representative will be here Friday morning to ensure our body double meets their approval." Austin stood. "That means we have three days to turn you into Sierra Page's twin."

## Chapter 2

“I still can’t believe I let you do this to my hair.”

Eyes wide, Sloane stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror they’d set up in her office. Gone was her usual brown with red highlights, and in its place was a shimmery champagne blonde that brushed the tops of her shoulders. Also gone was about six or so inches of length. She couldn’t get over how light it felt compared to her usual cut.

To be fair, she’d agreed to change her hair to match Sierra’s current style. But knowing it was going to happen and seeing the actual result were two entirely different animals. This was so much more permanent than the wig she’d worn while cosplaying as the Deathslayer at Dragon Con. After everything was said and done, she could dye her hair back to its original color, but it would take months—maybe as long as a year—for it to grow back to its original length.

“You look fantastic,” Nina said for the seventh or eighth time since they’d returned from the salon. “Not that you didn’t look fantastic before, but the cut and color really bring out your eyes.”

“You’re just saying that so I won’t freak out.”

“No, I’m saying it because it’s true. Convincing you not to freak out is an added benefit. Now hold still while I put on your makeup.”

Sloane eyed the assortment of cosmetics on her desk. Foundations, concealers, eye and lip gunk. The sheer amount of it was daunting. Who had time to put that much stuff on their face every single day? “Is that part really necessary?”

“Of course it is. Clothes and hair alone won’t transform you into Sierra’s long-lost twin. Don’t worry; I won’t put on too much, just some light contouring around your

cheekbones and that blood-red lipstick she uses. Oh, and that thing she does with her eyes.”

It was probably for the best to let Nina apply her makeup. After lots and lots of practice, Sloane had gotten fairly adept at imitating Sierra’s funky, futuristic look in the Deathslayer movies, but every time she tried to give herself a simple smoky eye, she ended up more closely resembling a rabid raccoon on a bender.

At the office, Nina didn’t wear much in the way of cosmetics, just a few swipes of mascara and lip gloss, but she enjoyed glamming it up whenever she had a night out with the girls. Recently, she’d invited Sloane to join them. Actually, she’d invited Sloane on multiple occasions, but Sloane had politely declined, convinced her coworker was merely asking out of kindness, a pity invite for the new nerd on the block who didn’t even have a cat to go home to. Thankfully, Nina kept inviting, and eventually Sloane accepted, and then she’d kicked herself for not accepting sooner, because Nina and her friends were tons of fun to be around.

Still, this kind of transformation was a heavy lift for someone who wasn’t a professional makeup artist. They’d floated the idea of hiring one but shot it down just as quickly, because the fewer people outside of Six Points who knew about this, the better—and safer—for everyone involved. “Maybe I could wear big sunglasses and a floppy hat.”

“You know that won’t work.” Nina selected a tube from the tray. “Tilt your head up toward the light, will you? There, perfect.”

With Nina blocking her view of the mirror, she couldn’t watch what was happening, which was probably for the best. It felt weird to have somebody else apply her makeup, like she was one of those giant Barbie heads that little girls used to hone their skills, and it took a bit of effort not to squirm in her seat.

After what felt like an hour, Nina pulled back to scrutinize her handiwork. “You know, you’re kind of like Ally Sheedy’s character at the end of *The Breakfast Club*.”

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Sloane's jaw dropped open. "Oh, come on, why'd you have to go and say something like that? That princess makeover was my least favorite part of the movie. Poor Allison sacrificed everything that made her unique and conformed to conventional beauty norms, and for what? So some jock would think she was pretty?"

"I never thought of it that way." Nina set one brush on the tray and picked up another. "Okay, in that case, scratch the Breakfast Club reference. Think of it more along the lines of Sandra Bullock's character in Miss Congeniality. Her makeover was critical to going undercover at the beauty pageant. But unlike poor Sandra, you don't have to get your lady bits waxed."

Sloane snorted.

"Seriously, I appreciate you agreeing to go through all this. If we land this contract, it's going to open a lot of doors for Six Points."

"Well, you know me, always a team player. I only hope Larissa remembers this when it's time for my annual review."

After a few more rounds of goop and glop, Nina drew back once again. This time, approval curved the corners of her mouth. "Perfect. If I didn't know better, I'd say you and Sierra were separated at birth."

Nina stepped aside, giving Sloane an unobstructed view of the mirror.

Sloane blinked. Blinked again. Try as she might, she couldn't quite find the words to describe how it felt to look in the mirror and not recognize the person staring back at

her. It was her, of course, but much larger than life. Her eyes seemed brighter, her cheeks fuller and more defined, while the vibrant red on her lips added a punch of glamour and allure.

Reaching up, she tugged the band from her hair. She turned her head from side to side, noting the way the now-blonde strands swished against her brand-new face. Put it all together, she appeared softer, more feminine. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. "Let's hope Sierra's people agree with your assessment."

Nina opened her mouth, but whatever she intended to say was cut off by the sound of her phone. She scooped it off the desk and checked the screen. "Our timing's perfect. Sierra's representatives have entered the building. Are you ready?"

A fresh round of nerves sent her pulse racing, and she tried her best to ignore it. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Sloane zipped her feet into black ankle boots with three-inch heels and stood. They'd dressed her in an outfit similar to what Sierra had been photographed wearing last fall in Central Park: black skin-tight jeans and an electric-blue jacket over a white blouse that dipped low enough in the front to show a fair amount of cleavage. Thank God for pushup bras.

As they walked down the hall toward the conference room, Navarre emerged from the on-site fitness facility, drinking something out of a can. She knew who he was, had seen him around, but didn't know him on a personal level.

He had strong features, a little rough around the edges, and he carried himself with a steady confidence that few men ever achieved. Like the rest of the employees who worked in the personal protection division, he wore black from neck to toes, which made the pistol in his shoulder holster a little less noticeable. It also made it hard to tell what lurked underneath all that black. Considering the way his biceps stretched

the short sleeves of his shirt, she imagined it was something pretty good.

At the sight of Sloane, his eyes widened, and he choked on his drink. She wasn't sure whether she should be flattered or insulted by that reaction.

"Are you okay?" Nina crossed to where he stood and patted his back with the flat of her hand.

"Yeah, I just..." Bent at the waist, Navarre coughed a few more times to clear his throat. Face red, he slanted a glance at Sloane, and confusion furrowed his forehead. "Sloane?"

It was the first time she'd ever heard his voice, rougher than she'd expected, but that might have been from all the coughing.

Nina gave a smug smile. "See? I told you; you look just like her. You're not going to die on us, are you, Navarre?"

"What? No, I just thought for a second that..." After one last cough, he straightened. The poor guy looked like a dog that just heard a high-pitched noise. As the shock faded, his gaze sharpened, and unmistakable masculine interest turned his eyes to molten chocolate.

She would have felt flattered, if not for the fact he'd only given her the time of day because she resembled somebody else.

"Your hair's...different. And your clothes. Why are you dressed like that?"

It struck her as odd that he'd noticed the changes to her appearance. Most of the time, he acted as though she didn't even register on his radar. Not that his response was all that different from the rest of the guys in the building. They weren't rude or mean or

anything like that; they just didn't pay much attention to the geeks in the cyber security division, and that was fine by her. If given the choice, she preferred not to draw attention to herself, which was ironic, given her current situation.

"We'd tell you, but then we'd have to kill you," Nina said, a note of humor in her voice, before Sloane had a chance to reply. "If all goes well, you'll hear about it soon. In the meantime, could you do us a favor and not tell anyone about this?"

"Yeah...sure. No problem."

He still looked dazed as they walked on by, the click of Sloane's boot heels the only sound in the tiled hall.

At the conference room door, Sloane glanced over her shoulder and saw Navarre still watching her, his gaze intense as though he were trying to solve some great mystery of life.

Turning back, she faced the door and felt a fresh round of nerves twist her insides like a pretzel. There were so many ways for this to go wrong, for her to make an utter fool of herself. What on earth had she been thinking?

As if sensing her growing unease, Nina touched a hand on her shoulder. "Relax, Sloane. You're going to be great. Just remember, Sierra doesn't take crap from anybody. Neither should you."

Sloane drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly. It didn't help, but it was worth a shot. "Thanks. I just don't want to disappoint you guys."



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“You won’t. We all know you’re going way above and beyond the call of duty. Don’t think we’ll ever forget that.”

“Yeah, but if Sierra’s people don’t think I—”

“That’s on them. Their poor judgment is not your problem. Six Points won’t go out of business if Sierra Page decides not to grace us with her presence.” Nina gave a smile full of warmth and affection, and it took the edge off her nerves. “You got this. Now let’s go kick some ass.”

After one last deep, fortifying breath, Sloane tipped up her chin, squared her shoulders, and followed Nina inside. Austin stood by the conference table with a man and woman she assumed were Sierra’s representatives.

The guy was young, mid-twenties at the most, wearing tan slacks that were a little too short and a white dress shirt under a black blazer. His tie was purple, his glasses wire-rimmed, and his hair had so much gel in it that the tracks from his comb were still visible.

But it was the woman with short, spikey blonde hair who was clearly in charge. Tall and slender, with killer cheekbones and a flawless complexion, she resembled an older version of Sierra, perhaps a sister or a cousin. She exuded confidence and power in a scarlet dress that accentuated the curves of her body, while sky-high heels gave her an extra three or four inches of height. She tossed a glance in Sloane’s direction, her blue eyes colder than ice.

Always the professional, Austin met Sloane’s gaze and gave a subtle nod of

greeting. He wore a full suit, a rarity for him, one tailored to accommodate his muscular build, and it underscored just how much he wanted to land this contract. “Ms. Watson, Mr. Fields, you already know my wife, Nina. I’d like you to meet Sloane Welker.”

Here goes nothing. Sloane mentally cracked her knuckles as she crossed to where the pair stood and shook the hand Fields offered. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Watson made no effort to shake Sloane’s hand. Instead, she stared down her nose at Sloane as if she were something she’d scraped off the bottom of one of her expensive heels.

“Do you honestly think this...” she gestured toward Sloane, “is what Sierra Page looks like?”

The woman’s jaw barely moved when she spoke, as if it had been wired shut. Still, her voice was thick with disdain, and even though part of Sloane wanted to cringe, the comment sparked her temper. A smartass reply perched on the tip of her tongue, and it was all she could do to keep from saying something that would rear its ugly head on a future performance review. This was too important to let her emotions get the better of her.

“That’s exactly what she looked like on October twelfth of last year.” Austin picked up the remote on the conference table. He pressed a button, and an image of Sierra from that day appeared on the wall-mounted screen at the far end of the room.

The woman waved a hand in dismissal. “Her breasts are too small.”

“A little extra padding would take care of that,” Nina said with all the determination of a car salesman trying to convince a customer to pay extra for the undercoating. “Or she could wear a jacket that’s loose enough so the difference wouldn’t be noticeable.”

“It doesn’t matter.She walks too stiffly.”

“Jeez, you want to check my teeth while you’re at it?”She couldn’t help it; it just slipped out.

Nina ignored the comment.“She doesn’t normally walk in heels this high.An hour or two of practice, and she’ll be just fine.”

Watson seemed far from convinced.Lips pursed and eyes narrowed, she walked a predatory circle around Sloane as if cataloguing each and every perceived deficiency.Her gaze drifted up, meeting Sloane’s, and Sloane felt like she was in high school again, bracing for a mean girl’s insult.

The older woman’s head tilted a little to the right.“With a few fillers, she might be acceptable.”

Oh, hell no, she was not injecting shit into her face.She’d rather work at one of those stores that repaired cracked screens on cell phones.She opened her mouth to express that opinion, but closed it when she saw Nina give a slight shake of her head.

The vein on Austin’s forehead looked as if it might explode.He crossed his arms over his chest.“Ma’am, with all due respect, Ms.Welker bears a stronger resemblance to Ms.Page than your previous body double.I will not require, or even suggest, that my employee undergo any sort of cosmetic procedure to meet your approval.It’s insulting and unnecessary.If that doesn’t work for you, then I’m afraid we’ve wasted your time.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the conference room.

Austin stared at Watson; she glared at him in return, while Fields suddenly took an interest in something on the floor.

Sloane appreciated Austin's support, especially given the fact it might cost his company a lucrative contract. She also hated the thought of having gone through all this crap for nothing. If things didn't work out, she'd stop at the store on her way home from work for a box of hair color, because she didn't want to have to explain to her neighbors why she'd decided out of the blue to make such a drastic—

“Very well.” Watson sounded thoroughly put out. “Considering the time constraints, we'll move forward with Ms. Welker. However, I will insist that her hair, makeup, and wardrobe be provided by our stylists. No offense.”

“None taken,” Austin said, the edge gone from his voice.

Nina's expression suggested otherwise, which was totally understandable. She'd invested a lot of time and effort into transforming Sloane into Sierra.

Watson reached into her cavernous purse to retrieve her phone. “Shall we discuss the terms of the contract now, or would you prefer to schedule a time?”

“Now works.” It wasn't surprising that Austin wanted to seal the deal before she changed her mind. “As soon as the contract is finalized, we can iron out the particulars for Ms. Page's plans that require Ms. Welker.”

## Chapter 3

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

Navarre reached up and pulled the light closer to the elevated oak table that served as a repair station inside the Six Points armory. It gave him a better view of the unloaded pistol as he tried to determine the cause of its failure to feed bullets all the way into the chamber. There were a number of possible explanations, but so far, he'd found no signs of mechanical failure or a faulty magazine. No dirt or grease accumulation in or around the chamber either.

That left user error as the probable culprit, though he wasn't ready to make that determination until he gave the weapon a more thorough examination. If that ended up being the case, he'd have to drag Luther back to the range for some quality corrective training.

Overall, Luther was a competent agent with a good head on his shoulders, though it had taken some effort to break him of the habit of holding his gun sideways like they did in way too many big-budget action movies. That kind of shit might look slick on film, but it made it difficult to properly sight a target. It also required you to rotate your wrist, which resulted in a slight curve of your hand that totally screwed up your accuracy if you weren't shooting at point-blank range.

Navarre set the weapon back on the table and crossed to the rows of racks and drawers filled with various firearms, from pistols to shotguns and semiautomatic rifles, all meticulously organized and secured. To his left were the shelves stocked with ammunition and tactical gear. He punched in the combination for the handgun drawer and picked up one of the Glocks he'd personally tested on the range and knew worked perfectly fine.

After he relocked the drawer, he handed the Glock to Luther and placed a pair of

forms on the table. One was to acknowledge the receipt of the old gun, the other to check out the new one. “You know the drill. I need your signature at the bottom of each page.”

Six Points maintained strict controls over their firearms, which only made sense. Being fast and loose with deadly weapons was a surefire way to lose your business license and get sued into oblivion. As a result, nothing went in or out of the armory without being logged into the system. Employees were expected to secure their weapons at all times, and if any item was lost or stolen, they were required to report it immediately. Failure to do so would result in immediate termination.

For the most part, there hadn’t been any problems, at least not since Navarre had been hired. Most employees turned in their weapons at the end of their shift, so there weren’t any concerns about them being stolen from cars or homes. And in the event something managed to disappear, each weapon was fitted with at least one tracking device.

Luther scribbled his signature on both forms and pushed them back across the table, his biceps straining against the fabric of his solid black T-shirt. The kid had packed on a good thirty pounds of muscle since he started working out with Jackson. His size, coupled with his “bitch, don’t try me” attitude, made him extremely effective on personal protection details.

“How are you doing for ammo?” Navarre asked, and then stifled a yawn. He’d gotten shit for sleep last night. For the most part, living in a rural area was peaceful, but every so often, the woodland critters got rowdy. Like last night, when it sounded as if a band of raccoons were having a rave in the woods behind the house. They hadn’t mellowed out until sometime after three, and his alarm went off at six.

“I’m good for now.” Luther slid the replacement Glock into his shoulder holster. “But I’ll stop by Thursday for a box or two before I hit the range.”

The door closed behind Luther, and the distinctive clunking sound let Navarre know that the automatic locks had engaged and the Six Points armory was secure. The windowless room was in the bowels of the building, its walls fortified with steel and concrete, with a reinforced door similar to those used in panic rooms. It also had its own climate control system, so the weapons stayed at a constant temperature and humidity that was optimal for long-term storage.

Navarre placed the malfunctioning Glock in the drawer reserved for items in need of repair and jotted down a few notes so he'd remember what to look for when he had time.

He'd been given the additional responsibilities about six months ago, when the company had grown large enough for the Flint family to recognize the need to delegate a number of tasks to employees lower on the food chain. And though he enjoyed working in the field with the teams—he still performed those duties when the need arose—this kind of work suited him well. He kept track of the inventory, repaired firearms, and ordered supplies. Once a year, he provided a refresher course to all the employees who handled weapons, and he also served as the firearms instructor when Six Points hired a fresh batch of recruits.

He opened his laptop and returned to the email he'd been writing before Luther arrived. When he'd first been hired, he'd considered the job a means to an end, a steady paycheck, a way to apply some of the skills he'd learned in the military to civilian life.

But now it meant so much more to him. Sure, a lot of companies out there fed their employees bullshit about them being a part of the family, but the Flints actually meant it. Not only did they treat their employees with respect, they also paid well, offered generous benefits including paid time off, and rewarded loyalty with clear paths to promotion. It was the opportunity for a meaningful career, a place where he truly belonged, and he wasn't about to do or say anything to screw that up.

The sound of the door buzzer broke his train of thought. He glanced at the external camera feed, spotted Jackson standing in the hall, and pressed the button to disengage the lock.

The door swung open and Jackson's powerful frame filled the doorway, his freshly shaved head gleaming under the lights. "You about ready? Meeting starts in five."

"Shit, is it that late?" Navarre glanced at the clock on his laptop just as the meeting reminder appeared on his screen. He hit Send on the email he'd written to Ryan, requesting authorization to order ammunition, and powered down his laptop. As he left the armory, he keyed in the code to activate the alarm, because you could never be too careful with that much firepower.

Trust only went so far.

On the way to the meeting, they stopped at the break room for coffee. Navarre filled his travel mug, took a sip, and grimaced. More likely than not, Wade brewed this pot; he always made it strong enough to rouse the dead.

He followed Jackson into the conference room and—whoa, packed house. Extra chairs had been brought in so everyone could sit at the table. Normally, these meetings weren't nearly this crowded. Something big was going down, probably whatever Austin had been so damn secretive about.

Their entrance sparked a round of applause, the traditional greeting extended to whoever showed up late—or last—to a meeting. In response, Jackson gave an exaggerated bow, while Navarre raised his mug in salute.

Curious to see what the fuss was all about, he claimed the empty seat between Pinto and Garrett, while Jackson took the remaining open spot on the other side of the table. While he sipped his coffee, Navarre's gaze swept over the room, noticing



Sloane and Nina flanking Larissa, another indication of the significance of the meeting. Most of the time, there was only one member of the cyber security unit in attendance.

But it was Sloane's radical transformation that caught and held his attention. He'd damn near had a heart attack the other day when their paths crossed in the hall. Gone was her usual style that hovered somewhere between geek and Goth, replaced with a look that could only be described as glamorous. It was totally unlike her. The hair, the makeup, the girly clothes...she'd even removed the tiny diamond stud from the side of her nose. Put it all together, and she bore an uncanny resemblance to Sierra Page. And why did that bother him so much?

As if sensing his stare, her gaze cut to the right, meeting his, and his heart thumped hard against his sternum. He couldn't look away if he tried. And he should. It was the smart thing to do. Nothing good could possibly come from—

“Now that everyone's here, let's get started. We've got a lot of ground to cover, and I'd rather not waste any time.” Austin Flint sat at the head of the table, his expression nothing but business. No tie this morning, and the top two buttons of his gray dress shirt were undone. “Yesterday afternoon, we landed a contract to provide personal protection for Sierra Page, as well as security for her properties both in and out of the state.”

“Holy shit,” Pinto said. “That's huge.”

Austin's mouth curved up with a hint of amusement. “Yes, that's one way to put it. She isn't our first high-profile client, but her situation requires more than the usual security measures. For starters, Ms. Page is experiencing difficulties with an ex who refuses to accept the fact their relationship is over.”

“It's that Garvey guy, isn't it?” Hatch asked.

Pinto's dark eyebrows drew down. "Sierra Page was dating Dax Garvey?"

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“Dude, how could you not know that? It’s been all over the news.”

“Well, excuse the hell out of me.” An extra layer of New Jersey crept into Pinto’s voice. “I’ve got better things to do with my time than pay attention to what’s going on with the rich and shameless.”

Rosario snickered from her seat on the opposite side of the table. “I thought she had better taste than that. I mean seriously, have you seen Dax Garvey? He’s the epitome of sleazy.”

“Oh, come on, he’s not that bad.” Garrett sounded oddly defensive. He and Rosario had been partners for three or four months, and while they generally got along, there was an underlying current of tension simmering between them.

“Not that bad? Are you kidding?” Rosario stared at him as though he were one of those kids who kept trying to jam a fork into a light socket. “I’d bet good money that guy reeks of stale sweat and weed. He always looks like he needs to take a shower, and who on earth told him that a porn star mustache was a good idea?”

“As I was saying.” Austin’s voice cut through the chatter with a sharpness that reasserted his authority and put an end to the side conversations. He could have done it sooner but likely waited to give everyone a chance to blow it out of their systems. “In addition to the issue with her ex, and in spite of what you might have read in the tabloids, Ms. Page places a high value on her privacy.”

That didn’t come as a surprise. Navarre had learned a few celebrity clients ago that the carefully crafted façade they presented to the public often bore little resemblance to

their behavior behind closed doors. Some were homebodies pretending to be party animals; others projected a squeaky-clean image while their lives spiraled out of control. In his experience, it was rare for the two personas to actually match. The only one he'd encountered was A-list actress Vicky Hale, who was a genuinely decent person regardless of where she was, what she was doing, or who might be watching. No wonder Austin's brother, Ryan, had put a ring on her finger.

"Sometimes," Austin continued, "that entails the use of a lookalike to throw the press off her scent, so to speak. That's where Ms. Welker comes in."

All eyes focused on Sloane. She froze for a moment like a deer in the headlights, her drink a few inches from her mouth. Then she let out a soft, nervous laugh and gave a little finger wave.

That explained the sudden change to her appearance. He'd noticed the faint resemblance before, but it was easy to overlook with the longer, darker hair, and the grungy clothes, and the heavy dose of attitude typically present in her expression.

But now... Jesus. It was all but impossible to ignore.

"Ah, so that's what's up with the makeover," Pinto said in his trademark easygoing manner. "I did a double take the first time I saw you like that. Don't get me wrong, you look freaking fantastic, but I kind of like you better the other way."

"Thank you," Sloane said, the ghost of a smile warming her lips.

During most meetings, Navarre preferred to sit back and let others ask the questions. But this time he found himself raising his hand because he knew exactly where this was going and he didn't like it one bit. "Sir, with all due respect, is an impersonator really necessary? There are so many ways to avoid detection when moving an asset that doesn't involve this level of subterfuge. It feels like overkill."

“I understand your concern,” Austin said. “But this is Ms. Page’s preferred modus operandi. She’s been using it for quite some time. With the press focused on her doppelganger, she’s found that she has a greater ability to move about freely. And what the client wants—and is willing to pay for—the client gets.”

“What happened to her usual body double?” Rosario asked.

“She isn’t available at this time.” Austin didn’t provide any further details, and the tone of his voice made it clear it was best not to ask. “As you can see, Ms. Welker is more than capable of performing the task.”

“But Sloane doesn’t have any field experience. She’s cyber security,” Navarre pressed, and then added, “No offense,” when Sloane shot him a dirty look.

He hadn’t meant to denigrate her abilities. From what he’d heard, she was a master behind a keyboard. But that didn’t count for squat in the field, where things could go sideways so fast it would make your head spin. That lack of experience in a volatile setting could lead to somebody getting hurt—or worse.

“She won’t need it,” Austin replied. “Her sole responsibility is to look and act enough like Sierra Page to convince the press that Sierra’s in one place while she travels to another. Your jobs will be to ensure their safety and to prevent the press from getting close enough to notice the difference.”

That explained the packed room. When he’d worked on the protection detail for Vicky Hale, they’d never needed anywhere close to this many people, not even when she was being harassed by a creepy, obsessed fan. Protecting two people in two different locations would require significantly more manpower. It would also cost a small fortune, but he assumed a woman like Sierra could easily afford it.

“Based on our assessment,” Austin continued, “Ms. Page’s threat level stands at a

six.”That was on a ten scale.By way of comparison, Vicky was currently somewhere between a three and a four.“According to Sierra’s staff, she hasn’t received any troubling correspondence in the last ninety days, and the last incident with an overzealous fan happened during the promotional tour for her latest movie.The ex is our most pressing point of concern, but at this time, he’s mostly made a pest of himself and hasn’t made any direct threats to her safety.That said, we’ll still be monitoring his movements and will let you know if there are any updates.”

Navarre knew from experience that those kinds of situations could escalate in an instant.The amount of security assigned to a client depended on the credibility, corroboration, imminence, and gravity of threats to their personal safety.Prominent public figures were often at risk to harassment and attack.The higher their visibility, the more protection was needed to ensure they and their loved ones remained safe.

Some celebrities took it to the extreme, employing entourages of hulking bodyguards to keep fans and paparazzi at a respectful distance and maintain some semblance of privacy.Others preferred a more muted approach and utilized one or two bodyguards during their daily routines and a larger presence only for high-profile events like movie premieres or award ceremonies.

Austin’s gaze swept over the faces gathered around the table.Apparently satisfied there weren’t any further questions or concerns, he continued.“Ty and his team are currently at Ms.Page’s Orlando residence to inspect her home security procedures and make any necessary improvements.Pinto, Hatch, Vogel, and Calibuso, you’ll be providing protection for Ms.Page when she arrives in Orlando Friday afternoon.Jackson, Navarre, Garrett, and Rosario, you’ll be covering Ms.Welker.Each of you will receive an electronic dossier with all the relevant information for this assignment.I expect you to commit it to memory by tomorrow morning at the latest.Any questions?”

While Pinto asked about the logistics of collecting their charge at the airport,

Navarre's gaze slid back to Sloane, who looked just about as thrilled to be working together as he was. But it didn't really matter if they liked each other. They both had jobs to do. He only hoped her lack of experience didn't get her—or anybody else—killed.

## Chapter 4

Sloane paced the length of her tiny apartment, her nerves buzzing, neck knotted with tension, as a raging case of imposter syndrome chipped away at her self-confidence.

Now that the day had finally arrived, she couldn't remember what possessed her to believe she could pull off the body double act for a celebrity that had graced the covers of almost every major magazine on the planet. Had she lost her freaking mind? Sierra Page was poised, elegant, and sophisticated, a designer purse you could only buy at the most exclusive establishments, while Sloane was a cheap knockoff you could buy from a booth at the local flea market.

"Stop it," she muttered as she rubbed the knots in her neck. There wasn't enough time to call things off. Too many dominoes had already fallen, and backing out now would inflict irreparable damage to Six Points' reputation. She'd made a promise, and she'd be damned if she let anybody down.

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Besides, this weekend would be like a mini vacation. She'd never set foot in a mansion or flown in a private jet before. And once they touched down in North Carolina, she'd get to relax in a sprawling estate perched on a secluded hillside with every amenity known to man, wear ridiculously expensive clothes and eat ridiculously expensive food, all while getting paid double time with a big, juicy bonus at the end. And in return, all she had to do was look enough like Sierra Page to fool the paparazzi. Hell, they wouldn't even get all that close to her, so she really didn't have anything to worry about, right?

A sharp rap on the front door yanked her out of her mental pep talk. She took one last deep, fortifying breath and crossed to the foyer. A check of the peephole revealed Navarre in the hall, and her heart skipped in a way that she didn't want to even think about, because she had no intention of allowing that kind of complication into her life.

Dressed in all black, from the baseball cap on his head to his combat boots, with a bulge in the left side of his jacket that hinted at concealed firepower, he exuded an air of formidable authority that left zero room for doubt. He was a man on a mission, confidence personified, and Sloane couldn't help but feel a twinge of apprehension at the sight of him.

"You got this," she told herself as she unfastened the chain, flipped the bolt, and opened the door.

Navarre's gaze bored into her with an intensity that sent a shiver through her. "Where's your hat?"



Her stomach lurched. Damn it, she knew she'd forgotten something. She grabbed the cap from the hook by the door and jammed it onto her head. "Better?"

The plan was for her to enter Sierra's estate dressed as a member of the security team, because most people—especially press photographers—didn't pay attention to the help. Black pants, black shirt, black athletic shoes, and not an ounce of makeup on her face, because the last thing she wanted to do was stand out. But she'd forgotten the black baseball cap with the Six Points logo, which was meant to downplay her now platinum-blond hair in case anybody was actually watching.

Navarre's response was a disapproving shake of his head. "We should have sent you in with the cleaning crew."

Every last bit of her nerves dissipated, replaced with a flare of annoyance. "Why, because nobody would believe a woman could work security?"

He, of all people, should know that was a load of crap. Rosario and Vogel blew that outdated assumption straight out of the water. Too bad neither of them could pass for Sierra.

Navarre's silence spoke volumes as he turned from the door and headed down the stairs. With a frustrated sigh, she snatched her sunglasses and overnight bag, and locked the door behind her. She hurried to catch up with him in the stairwell and tried—well, she mostly failed—not to check out his ass.

Descending to the parking lot, her lips curved at the sight of Navarre's car gleaming under the mid-morning sun, a vintage royal-blue beauty amid a sea of drab modern sedans and SUVs. She'd never been much of a classic car enthusiast, but the Plymouth Barracuda was a work of art.

"Nice car," she said.

“Thanks.” Expression unchanged, he used his key to unlock the passenger door before rounding the front to the driver’s side.

Sloane got in, and it felt as though she’d stepped into a time capsule. Like the outside, the interior had been completely restored to its original glory. The dashboard contained an assortment of circular gauges, toggle switches, and horizontal levers. Not a digital readout in sight. The seats were covered with light-brown, butter-soft leather, while the doors had old school locks and window cranks. No console between the bucket seats, only the gear shift for the manual transmission that likely doubled for an anti-theft device.

She fastened the seat belt, surprised a car this old came equipped with shoulder harnesses. Perhaps they’d been added during the restoration process.

After sliding on a pair of yellow-tinted sunglasses, Navarre turned the key in the ignition, and the engine rumbled to life like a wild jungle cat.

“Did you fix all of this yourself?” she asked. She already knew the answer. People talked in the break room, and she couldn’t help but catch a few tidbits while she got her lunch from the fridge.

“Yeah.” He backed out of the parking spot and drove toward the exit.

“It must have taken a lot of work.” That was an understatement. Every aspect of the car’s restoration was a testament to Navarre’s craftsmanship and attention to detail. From what she’d heard, it barely ran when he bought it at an auto auction, and sounded even worse. But each week its condition had gradually improved, at times by just the tiniest of increments, until it looked better than it probably had when it rolled off the assembly line.

“Yeah,” said Mr. Monosyllabic.

So much for conversation.

Eyes still fixed on the road, he switched on the radio and turned it to a classic rock station, which kind of fit considering the car, but she interpreted the act as his way of telling her to shut the hell up. It raised her hackles, because she really hated that kind of passive-aggressive garbage.

“What did I do to offend you?” she demanded, her voice loud enough to carry over the music.

His gaze flicked to her and back to the road. “Nothing. Why?”

“You’re acting as if I gave your best friend an STD.”

He made a low noise as he changed lanes. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh, really?” She hated it when people tried to gaslight her. She knew damn well what he was doing, and she wasn’t in the mood to let him get away with it. “So what, this is your default setting? No wonder you’re single.”

A grimace tugged at his lips. At the next red light, he lowered the stereo’s volume and turned his head to face her.

“It’s nothing personal,” he began, his tone matter-of-fact. “But untrained operatives in the field are a recipe for disaster.”

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Sloane bristled at the implication. “I’m not an operative. I’m a decoy.”

“You’re an operative acting as a decoy.” An edge crept into his words. “Look, I’m sure you’re great in front of a computer, but you have absolutely no training for this kind of job. That makes you a liability to everyone working around you. You’ve never even fired a gun, have you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

The urge to lean over and smack him upside the head was growing stronger by the minute. Teeth clenched, she said, “I’m a celebrity impersonator, plain and simple. Bodyguard isn’t anywhere in my job description. I don’t understand why you’re holding me to a ridiculous standard that nobody else has established.”

Before Navarre could respond, the traffic light turned green. A car honked behind them. He hit the gas with more force than necessary, and the tires squealed as they shot through the intersection.

He shifted into fourth and kept his right hand on the gearshift. “Inexperienced civilians in a volatile environment have a way of getting good people killed.”

He said it as though he spoke from personal experience. Perhaps he did. His personnel file indicated he’d spent considerable time overseas while serving in the Army, including multiple deployments in active combat zones, though the details had been heavily redacted. He’d received more than two dozen awards and commendations,

including a Bronze Star and Purple Heart. It made her wonder about the secrets that lay beneath that stoic exterior, the experiences that had shaped him into the grouch he was today.

But their situation was entirely different from anything he'd faced in the military, and she simply refused to let him make her feel bad about herself. She'd put up with enough of that in her youth to last a lifetime.

"This isn't a volatile environment," she said. "We're spending the weekend at a celebrity's home, not airdropping into Fallujah."

"No, but it's impossible to predict how or when a situation will go from ho-hum to holy shit. When it does, your chances of survival are a lot higher if the person watching your six knows what the hell they're doing."

"Austin doesn't think it'll be a problem. Are you saying the boss is wrong?"

"Not at all. From a tactical standpoint, this job carries a low level of risk. The ex-boyfriend is a point of concern, but he's mostly being a pain in the ass and hasn't made any threats to Sierra's safety." He hooked a right into the office park where the Six Points building was located. "But you never know when things will go sideways. When it does, there's no time to prepare. You have to rely on every ounce of your training, which, I'll point out again, you lack."

The parking lot was almost full, with only a scattering of available spots to choose from. Navarre drove around to the back of the Six Points building, where he pulled into one of the open bays. He shut off the engine and got out of the car, effectively ending their conversation.

The bay to their right contained a huge black SUV with dark-tinted windows that looked like something you'd see in a presidential motorcade. It wouldn't surprise her

to learn it was armored to withstand a rocket attack. Jackson was there, as well as Pinto and Hatch, shooting the breeze near the front of the vehicle. One of them pressed a button on the wall, and the giant bay door rolled down behind the Barracuda.

Sloane unfastened the seat belt and got out of the car, noting the faint smell of diesel in the air. She'd never been back here before. She'd never really had a reason. Like the rest of Six Points, it was clean and well-lit, with a variety of tools neatly organized on workbenches and hanging on walls. To the right, floor-to-ceiling metal racks were stocked with parts and supplies, while large fans whirled overhead to keep the air circulating.

"Hey, Sierra—I mean Sloane." Pinto grinned. "Sorry, I almost didn't recognize you incognito."

He was one of those guys with an outgoing personality that could easily be confused with flirtatious, but it wasn't meant that way. She knew for a fact he was head-over-heels in love with his girlfriend, Fiona. She was practically all he ever talked about. They'd had a rough patch over the holidays, mainly because of her jerk of an ex, but now those troubles were in the past and they'd recently moved in together.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm not supposed to look like Sierra dressed like this."

"You don't," Hatch said, his vibrant red hair catching the light and framing his chiseled face. He was as tall as Jackson, but instead of big and burly, he had more of a basketball player's build. "Actually, you're kind of rocking a Linda Hamilton in Terminator 2 vibe. Very kick butt. I wouldn't mess with you."

"When are we leaving?" Navarre hung his keys on a hook near the door leading into the part of the building that housed the administrative offices and cyber security unit. Apparently, he intended to leave his car in the bay over the weekend. Not that she

blamed him.If she owned a car like that, she wouldn't want it sitting unprotected in a parking lot for an extended period.

"If everyone's ready, we can go now."Jackson pressed a button on his key ring, and the headlights of the monster SUV flashed.

"Shotgun," Navarre said as he crossed to the vehicle's passenger side.

"Fine by us."Hatch opened the rear driver's side door and gestured with a sweeping motion for Sloane to go in first."We get to sit with the hot chick."

She gave Hatch a look."Suck-up."

He grinned."I prefer to call it strategic flattery."

With the morning rush over, traffic wasn't too bad, though a fender-bender on the expressway created a bottleneck in the downtown area, made worse by drivers who slowed to gawk at the wreckage.At last, they entered the exclusive neighborhood along the Butler Chain of Lakes.Jackson flashed his credentials to the guard at the entrance, and the man waved him through.After a short drive through the winding streets of multi-million-dollar mansions, Jackson pulled up to a keypad at the end of a gated driveway.He punched in a code, the light blinked green, and the iron gate slowly rolled open.

Sierra's house, a sprawling two-story mansion, rose in front of them at the end of the driveway.Like many of the other mansions in the area, the Tuscan-inspired estate was a blend of timeless architecture and a touch of modern design, with custom stonework, a slate roof, and a six-car garage.The yard surrounding it was immaculately manicured, with lush St.Augustine turf, beautiful flowering bushes, and recently planted trees that would provide much-needed shade in a decade or two.

“Is she the only person who lives here?”Pinto asked as their vehicle stopped by the fountain.

“I think the housekeeper lives in the guesthouse by the pool.”



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“Sierra doesn’t live here full-time,” Navarre said as he unfastened his seat belt. “Where she stays largely depends on her filming schedule. She also has homes in North Carolina, California, and a penthouse in New York City.”

“Must be nice,” Sloane said.

If she remembered correctly, Ty Flint and his team were currently at the North Carolina location to inspect that home’s security features. Locks, cameras, motion detectors: if they didn’t meet Six Points’ quality standards, they’d get torn out and replaced with the best equipment available. From there, the crew would travel to the New York penthouse and repeat the entire process before flying to California. By the time they were finished, each home would be locked up tighter than the Louvre.

Pinto unfastened his seat belt. “Did Austin decide who’s going to be on her detail when she’s out of town?”

“I think he’s waiting to see how everybody interacts with Sierra before making a final decision,” Jackson replied as he reached for the door handle. “No point in assigning someone she doesn’t get along with.”

That made sense to Sloane. If they stuck Sierra with someone she didn’t like, they’d probably end up losing the contract, and they would have done all this work for nothing.

“Well, I hope it’s not us.” Pinto got out of the vehicle and offered Sloane his hand. “Nothing against Sierra, but I’d rather stay closer to home.”

“Maybe you’ll luck out, Navarre.” Hatch grinned at him over the roof of the SUV. “Now’s your big chance to land the lady of your dreams.”

Sloane’s gaze cut to Navarre. So the big, gruff security guy had a soft spot for the movie star. It shouldn’t surprise her. He’d be crazy not to want her. More likely than not, he was less than thrilled about being assigned to protect a decoy instead of the real deal. That explained his lousy attitude toward her, and it left her with an odd feeling in the pit of her stomach that she didn’t want to examine too closely.

Navarre slammed the passenger door. “It’s a job, not a dating opportunity.”

“Who says you have to date her?” Hatch wagged his eyebrows.

The look Navarre shot him was lethal. “Shut up, Hatch.”

“What, I’m just—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Eyes wide, Hatch raised his hands in a placating gesture. “Fine, whatever.”

An uneasy silence settled over the group as they climbed the steps leading up to the house. The front door opened before they reached the top, and Austin’s large frame filled the doorway.

He checked his watch and frowned. “You’re late.”

“Sorry, boss,” Jackson said. “We would have been here sooner, but an accident on the expressway shut down a lane.”

For a moment or two, Austin didn’t seem ready to accept the explanation, but then he

nodded and moved back a few steps to allow them room to enter.

Sloane followed the guys inside and...wow.The raised foyer opened to a huge living area with a warm color palette and comfortable-looking furniture.Freshly polished travertine marble gleamed under the pendant lights hanging from the vaulted ceiling, while modern art pieces decorated the walls on either side of the massive fireplace.Not that you really needed a fireplace in Florida, but it came in handy during those few days of the year when it actually got nippy outside.To the right was a formal dining area; to the left, a winding staircase that led up to the second floor.

As Navarre walked past, his shoulder brushed hers, and she did her best to ignore the way her pulse jumped at the contact.

Austin shut the door behind them and got right back to business.“Pinto, Hatch, you’ll be working with Nate.Jackson and Navarre, you’re with me.”His gaze cut to Sloane.“Sierra’s people are waiting for you so they can do the final fitting.Upstairs, down the hall, last door on the right.”

“Is Sierra here?”Navarre asked, and Sloane felt a pang of something that hovered between jealousy and annoyance.It was totally irrational; they didn’t even get along all that well, and she shoved the unwelcome feeling aside as quickly as it arose.

“Not yet,” Austin replied.“Weather delayed her flight.Her plane won’t touch down in Orlando until seven at the earliest.Ryan said he’d call as soon as they arrive.Any other questions?”

“Nope, we’re cool,” Jackson said, and the other men murmured their agreement.

“Good.”Austin’s gaze traveled from person to person.“Remember, Sierra chose Six Points because we’re the best in the business.She’s counting on us to keep her safe, and I have no doubt in my mind that we’ll exceed her expectations.You all know

what to do. Now let's get to work."

## Chapter 5

"You have to come over here and check this place out," Sloane told Nina over the phone that night. "It's like Disney World for adults."

She'd been tempted to snap a few pictures of the place, until she remembered the non-disclosure agreement she signed late last week. In addition to not being allowed to discuss her experience as Sierra's body double, the agreement also contained a clause that barred her from taking photographs of Ms. Page, her staff, or any of her property without prior written consent. Any violation of the agreement would get Six Points sued for breach of contract, and would also likely result in her immediate termination.

She understood Sierra's desire to protect her privacy, especially after her former assistant told a tabloid all about her affair with an actor she'd worked with on one of her films. And because the actor had filed for divorce from his wife a few weeks before, Sierra had been accused of causing the split. The media frenzy had lasted for weeks; the online comments had been brutal. Even now, there were some who still labeled her a home-wrecker and refused to watch any of her movies.

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“I wish I could.” Nina sounded genuinely disappointed. “But I’m not one of Sierra’s known friends or associates. It wouldn’t look right.”

“But you’re the boss’s wife,” Sloane pressed. She really wanted to share this with somebody, and she couldn’t think of anyone better than her close friend and coworker.

“And how would it look for me to use that excuse to enter a client’s home?”

Good point, but Sloane wasn’t ready to give up just yet. She stretched across the humongous bed in one of the home’s bazillion bedrooms, her feet dangling over the edge. How did they even find sheets for something this big? They sure as hell didn’t stock them at the local Walmart. Odds were, like the mattress, they were custom made. “In that case, how about you come over as one of the staff?”

Uncertainty tinged Nina’s voice. “I don’t know...”

“Oh, come on, I bet you have one of those little French maid outfits stashed away in your lingerie drawer.”

There was an awkward pause on the other end of the line, and Sloane barked out a laugh.

“Oh, my God. I was just kidding. You do have one of those outfits, don’t you? Wait, don’t answer. It’s probably better if I don’t know, but I’m really dying to know.”

A heavy sigh carried over the phone’s speaker. “You’re not going to let this go, are

you?”

“The odds are against it.” Yes, Nina was the boss’s wife, but they were also close friends, and friends wouldn’t let something like this go until they got a few juicy details. She propped herself up on one elbow and waited for Nina to crack.

After another long, awkward pause, Nina finally said, “If you really must know, then yes, I have one. I bought it for our wedding anniversary. I thought it would be fun to surprise Austin with it when he got home from work.”

“And did he like it?”

“Yes.”

“What did he do when he saw you wearing it?” She probably shouldn’t have asked that. Those sorts of mental images didn’t need to be bouncing around in her head. But she just couldn’t seem to help herself. It was almost as if filling in for Sierra Page had empowered her with a boldness that she’d never experienced before. It felt surprisingly good.

“What do you think?” Nina replied. “We missed our dinner reservation and ended up having a pizza delivered.”

Sloane laughed as she hopped off the bed. Her friend had certainly hit the jackpot when it came to Austin Flint. Handsome, well built, successful, and totally devoted to the woman he loved was a tough combination to find these days. Not that she was actively searching. At this point in her life, she’d rather remain single. Been there, done that, and in spite of Nina’s good fortune, she wasn’t in the mood to kiss more frogs in the hopes of finding a prince.

“Are you sure you can’t sneak over?” Sloane asked one final time as she stepped into

the hall. It was likely an exercise in futility, but she felt compelled to give it one last try. "You should see the room that doubles as Sierra's closet. I'm pretty sure it's bigger than my whole apartment."

Actually, it was Sierra's secondary closet. The primary closet was located in Sierra's bedroom, and nobody was allowed in there for obvious reasons. Sloane was, however, allowed to enter the secondary closet because that's where the clothes she'd be wearing this weekend as Sierra's body double were being stored until they left for North Carolina.

Sloane crossed to the room and opened the door. A flick of the switch and...good grief. It was like stepping inside Neiman Marcus. Try as she might, she couldn't get over one person owning all this. She took in the racks of designer clothing, from tailored suits and elegant dresses to casual jeans and T-shirts. Floor-to-ceiling shelves displayed bags and shoes, organized by style and color. Most of the items appeared brand-new; many still had the tags attached. How much of it would never get worn? She imagined it was a lot. It struck her as obscene, especially when there were so many people one paycheck away from financial devastation.

A small rolling rack in the corner contained the designer clothes chosen for Sloane by the people in charge of Sierra's wardrobe. Each piece had been tailored to fit her body while minimizing the differences in proportions between her and Sierra. Those differences weren't as much as she'd expected—except for the chest, but the mother of all pushup bras compensated for that. Perhaps, if she did a good enough job, they'd let her keep the clothes at the end of the assignment. After all, it wasn't as if Sierra was ever going to wear them.

"I'd love to, but it's probably best that I keep my distance. You can tell me all about it later," Nina said. "Listen, I gotta go. Austin just walked through the door and he brought Thai food for dinner."

“Sounds good.I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”Sloane turned off the light and closed the door behind her.Now that the clothes had been altered, her hair trimmed, nails manicured, and eyebrows tweezed to within an inch of their lives, there wasn’t anything on her official to-do list until tomorrow morning.

A few of the guys who were off duty tonight had invited her to join them in the screening room to watch a movie.Last she heard, they were still debating the evening’s film selection:Seconds to Midnight, which was one of Sierra’s first action films, orDeadpool and Wolverine.Either selection was fine with her, but they didn’t plan to start the movie until nine, so she had some time to burn.

She could always find things to do online, but she felt too restless for that.Normally, that meant she’d go for a nice, long walk while listening to an audiobook, but that was out of the question.Instead, she went downstairs, cutting through the main living room that stretched the width of the house, to the sliding glass doors that led to the lanai.The lights must have been equipped with motion sensors, because they flicked to life before she even had a chance to look for a switch.

She walked past the sleek, modern outdoor kitchen, with its high-end stainless-steel appliances and granite countertops, to a swimming pool so large it seemed to stretch into the horizon.The surrounding deck was lined with lounge chairs, perfect for sunbathing or relaxing with a good book, while a humongous hot tub was nestled off to the side, flanked by large, lush tropical plants to create a sense of seclusion.

It was peaceful out here, with only the sound of crickets chirping, a sharp contrast to the hustle and bustle of activity inside.Her offers of help had been repeatedly declined, so she might as well enjoy the amenities while they were at her disposal.She toed off her sandals, sat at the edge of the pool, and dipped her feet in water that was a bit chilly for a Florida girl but likely would have felt like heaven to anyone who lived up north.With her arms braced behind her, she let out a long, soft exhale, her head tilting back and eyes drifting shut as the stress of the day ebbed from her



system.

A girl could definitely get used to this. Maybe she'd get lucky and Sierra would need her again, and then she could really—

“What are you doing out here?” The terse tone of Navarre's voice made her muscles jerk.

So much for the stress draining away. Sloane's eyes popped open and found him staring down at her, hands planted on his hips, disapproval plain on his handsome face.

“Is there a problem?” She wasn't in the mood for a confrontation, but she also wasn't in the mood to put up with his crap. As a rule, she never started a fight, but she always made sure to finish it.

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“You shouldn’t be wandering around on your own.”

“I wasn’t wandering,” she bit out. On the heels of a sigh, she got up and slid her feet back into her sandals. “I was trying to enjoy a few minutes of peace and quiet, but I guess that’s not going to happen with you watching me like a hawk.”

His expression remained unchanged. “You’re not supposed to be outside.”

“Since when?” She jerked her chin up. She could understand his lousy attitude toward her if she’d insulted him or questioned his abilities, or if she’d royally screwed something up that painted Six Points in a bad light. But no, she’d just been minding her own business, and he still felt the need to invade her space and act like an ass. “Aside from Sierra’s bedroom, I was under the impression I was allowed to move freely about the property. Has that changed, or are you just being a control freak?”

A pair of lines formed in the space between Navarre’s eyebrows. “I’m not a control freak.”

She snorted. “Wow, talk about a lack of self-awareness.”

The muscle along his jaw flexed. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“Oh really?” Challenge accepted. She may not be an expert in the realm of personal protection, but she could practically run a background check in her sleep.

Shoulders squared, she met his steely gaze. “Jacob Sebastian Navarre the fourth, because inflicting three of you on the world apparently wasn’t bad enough. Age thirty-

four. Born in Lansing, Kansas. You were a unicorn in high school: a jock with good grades. You played soccer and baseball, lettering in both, and graduated magna cum laude. At Kansas State, you majored in finance but quit at the start of your junior year to join the US Army, where you became a designated marksman. From there, you served numerous tours overseas and received a handful of medals and commendations. Shall I continue? Because the military stuff was pretty interesting.” She hadn’t been able to access the really juicy stuff, but he didn’t need to know that.

Something sparked in the depths of his eyes. Surprise, perhaps, but there was also an element of raw intensity that cranked up her internal thermostat a good ten degrees. “You seem to have taken quite an interest in me.”

“I like to know who I’m working with, especially when my safety’s on the line.”

Navarre stared at her for a few long seconds, and then slowly shook his head. “Nice try, but I think there’s more to it than that.”

She made a derisive sound. “In your dreams.”

His lips curved into a sensual smile. “My dreams can get pretty filthy. If you ask me nicely, I’ll tell you all about them.”

Sloane rolled her eyes as she tried her best to ignore the buzz in her veins. “Not interested.”

“Are you sure about that?” He moved closer, deep into her personal space, and she could feel the heat radiating off his tanned skin. The faint scent of citrus and sandalwood infused the air around her. It was intoxicating.

Her heart thumped against her breastbone. Not out of fear or panic, but anticipation,

and she cursed her traitorous hormones. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“Like you’re about to get a shot to the groin.”

“I don’t think so.” Nevertheless, he angled his body to lessen the possibility. “I think you’re enjoying this little game, playing Famous Rich Girl and seeing how the other half lives. Maybe you want to see what it’s like to go slumming with the help.”

The smolder in his deep-brown eyes and the light stubble framing his jaw gave him a roughish, predatory appearance. And as much as she hated to admit it, that really turned her on. For the life of her, she couldn’t recall the last time her body responded this strongly to a guy. She really hoped he didn’t notice.

“Just say the word, princess.” His voice was an open invitation, seductive and alluring. “We can do it right here, up against this wall. Or would you prefer one of those big, comfortable beds upstairs, where I can play with you all night long?”

It was all she could do to keep her knees from buckling. “You’re being unprofessional.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I am.” And just like that, all trace of emotion dropped away from his face. With a flick of his chin, he motioned toward the rear wall of the property. “See the gap between the two boxwoods?”

She glanced over her shoulder to the area he referenced. It took her a moment or two, but she finally saw what he was talking about. It wasn’t much of a gap, maybe a foot or two at the most. “Yeah. What about it?”

“So far, the paparazzi haven’t found it, but it’s only a matter of time. With a good

zoom lens, they can see you back here.”

“What’s your point?”

“It’s not just your job that’s on the line. There are more than a dozen men and women working this op in some capacity. All it takes is one slip for your cover to be blown. Stay in character when you’re in a place where prying eyes might see you. Better yet, stay in character at all times. It’ll be easier that way.”

“Sierra’s not even here yet. Why would the press bother nosing around?”

“Flight plans are public record. Anyone with an interest can track the exact location of Sierra’s private jet. She also posted about flying to Orlando on her social media this morning. And even though we’re in a gated community, the press will find a way inside. They always do. When that happens, they’ll start searching for spots where they hope to snap a good picture of Sierra. Including. Back. Here. If they spot a hot blonde lounging by the pool, who just happens to bear a strong resemblance to Sierra, how long do you think it’ll take for them to put two and two together?”

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He was right, damn it. It ticked her off. She hadn't considered the possibility of being seen back here. The chances were low, but they were higher than zero, which made it a risk she shouldn't have taken. Hell, she hadn't even considered it a risk, but then again, why would she? This wasn't her area of expertise. She was a computer geek, plain and simple. Personal protection and assessing field risks weren't anywhere within her wheelhouse.

Then the "hot blonde" part skipped in her brain, and her breath caught in her throat. "Did you just call me—"

"Is everything all right?"

Her gaze darted to the sound of Pinto's voice. She'd been so focused on Navarre that she hadn't even noticed him come out of the house.

"Everything's fine." Navarre turned to face him. "We were just reviewing a few protocols."

Without another word, he walked away and went back inside, leaving her alone with Pinto and the sound of crickets.

Pinto watched her for a few long moments as though he were trying to solve a puzzle. "Did I miss something important? You seem a little flustered."

"No, I'm fine." That was a lie, but she was sticking to it. She forced a smile, even though her insides churned with an unsettling combination of relief and disappointment. "Navarre was just...being Navarre."

Something flashed over Pinto's face. Outrage or disbelief, she couldn't say for sure. He glanced over his shoulder to the sliding glass doors that Navarre had just used to enter the house and then back to her. "Was he bothering you?"

She was pretty sure bothering was his way of asking if Navarre was acting inappropriately. In a way, she appreciated his protective reaction. It was nice to have someone watching her back. "No, it was nothing like that. He doesn't think I'm qualified for this job. To be Sierra's double, I mean."

His shoulders visibly relaxed, confirming her suspicions. "Don't worry about it. You're doing fine."

"I'm not so sure about that. I mean, he's right; I came out here tonight totally oblivious to that little gap in the bushes back there where a photographer might see me. If my cover got blown, Six Points would lose their contract, and I don't even know what kind of trouble Sierra—"

"Stop overthinking it." Pinto cut her off. "Hatch and I just checked the perimeter, and there aren't any paparazzi lurking in the bushes. And considering how many surveillance cameras we installed around the property, if anyone so much as farts within ten feet of the property line, we'll know about it." The edge left his voice. "Seriously, you're doing fine. If there was a problem with your job performance, Austin would have told you. He never pulls his punches, especially when it comes to matters involving his business."

His assurances made her feel better, but they didn't absolve her completely. "I still should have checked before coming out here."

Pinto waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Eh, no harm, no foul. Everybody makes mistakes. Except Navarre, which is why he was being such a tight-ass. It's the way the Army built him."

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, built him?”

Pinto glanced back at the doors again, as if making sure they wouldn’t be overheard. Satisfied they were alone, he continued, though he spoke with a lowered voice. “Snipers aren’t born...they’re made. I mean, sure, you have to have certain basic characteristics, but the military takes those traits and molds them into exactly what they want. They’re trained to think and act a certain way; after a while, it becomes part of their nature. Their entire mindset revolves around focus and discipline. One shot, one kill. No room for error. To reach that level, you’ve got to be beyond meticulous, calculating every variable imaginable before you even think about pulling the trigger. Navarre was one of the deadliest snipers in the world—still is. But you, my friend...” He playfully tapped the tip of her nose with his index finger. “Are a variable he’s never encountered before.”

Her lips pursed. “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

Pinto chuckled. “Just remember that all of us have your back, Navarre included.”

## Chapter 6

Edgy and restless, Navarre walked the grounds of the estate in search of potential problems. Something was off; he could feel it in his bones, a stark sense of foreboding he knew better than to ignore. But he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was, and not knowing was making him buggy. Part of him wanted to pin it on Sloane, but he knew that was a load of bullshit.

He’d been out of line with her earlier—way out of line—and his behavior had nothing to do with concerns about her lack of training. Something about her pushed all his buttons in the proper sequential order. Sure, she was a beautiful woman, but there was more to it than that. Maybe it was the spark in her eyes when she got riled up, or the way she stood up for herself. He’d always been a sucker for smart, strong, sexy



women, and she checked off each of those boxes. Still, that wasn't a valid excuse for him to act like a jackass. He'd apologize to her later, and then he'd keep his distance, keep things professional, until this assignment was over.

After that, it depended on whether Six Points continued to employ her as Sierra's body double. He'd gotten the impression this was a temporary arrangement until they found another woman to fill the role on a permanent basis, which made perfect sense. Sloane was a valuable member of the cyber security division, and Larissa would want her back on the team as soon as humanly possible. That kind of work was a critical component of their business, and at the rate they were growing, they couldn't afford to have her away from her office for long.

If that was the case, their future interactions would be limited. The possibility didn't sit well in his gut, but he knew it was for the best. For the most part, his duties kept him in the field or at the shooting range, which, in this instance, would be a good thing. It would restrict their contact to the rare times they passed in the hall, or the occasional mandatory meeting, where there'd be plenty of people to stop him from saying or doing anything that would earn him a trip to HR.

But if she was going to act as Sierra's decoy on a regular basis... He wasn't sure how to deal with that scenario. There was chemistry between them. He'd be a fool to deny it. But as a general rule, he never mixed business with pleasure. He'd only seen a few instances where that scenario ended well, but knowing his luck—no, he wasn't going there. The last thing he needed was to screw things up on a job he loved by crossing hard lines in the proverbial sand. If push came to shove, he'd request to be reassigned to Vicky Hale's protection detail.

As he finished a check of the perimeter sensors, his phone chimed with an alert. He swiped at the screen and opened the incoming message that Austin had sent, informing him that Sierra's private jet had just landed at the executive airport. He'd send another notification once they were en route to the house with an estimated time

of arrival.

Navarre tucked his phone into the pocket of his cargo pants and headed for the house. On the way, he passed Garrett and Rosario at the front gate, gave them a nod of acknowledgment, and kept going. There was plenty of time before the client arrived—in good traffic, the airport was a half hour away—but he wanted to touch base with Jackson and make sure everything was buttoned up tight.

He paused at the base of the front steps and gave the grounds one final look. Things were quiet, almost too quiet, but that would change soon. The paparazzi were probably camped out at the airport and would follow Sierra home. And even though the community was gated, they'd find a way inside. From that point forward, they'd be crawling all over the damn place, jockeying for the best vantage point to see Sierra in the hopes of scoring a big money shot—

“There you are,” said a voice with a distinct New Jersey accent, interrupting Navarre's stream of consciousness.

He turned his head toward the sound of Pinto's voice and hoped there weren't any fires that needed to be extinguished. “Hey, what's up?”

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Pinto closed the front door behind him and came down the steps. The former naval medic looked pissed, a rarity for him. Usually, he was one of those guys who didn't let much get under his skin. "What's your problem with Sloane?"

The question caught him off guard. Of all the potential fires, that wasn't one he'd anticipated. "What are you talking about?"

Pinto made a sound to convey his annoyance. "Don't play stupid. You know I saw you two by the pool."

Okay, that narrowed it down. He'd wondered whether Pinto had overheard any of their conversation. If not, there was a good chance that Sloane had given him the rundown. "There's no problem. I just don't want her job performance to affect our continued employment."

Arms crossed, Pinto shook his head. "Nah, that ain't it. There's more to it than that."

True, but he wasn't about to admit it, and he wasn't in the mood to continue this conversation. "Believe what you want. That's your business. I've got shit to do."

Pinto blocked his path when he started for the steps. "She's a good person, Navarre. Don't bust her chops, or we're going to have more than words."

The veiled threat raised Navarre's hackles. He'd worked with Pinto for a couple of years, had been friends for nearly as long. Hell, he'd helped the guy restore his car after some assholes treated it like a piñata at a five-year-old's birthday party. But friend or not, he didn't put up with that shit. "Why the sudden interest, Pinto? Last I

heard, you and Fiona moved in together.”

“She’s a friend, you prick. I don’t want her getting hurt.” The anger in his voice seemed genuine. “This job has her stressed out enough as it is. The last thing she needs is you giving her a hard time.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Shit like this was exactly why he’d drawn that line in the sand. “If you really must know, I found her wandering around where photographers might spot her. When I told her to be careful about things like that, she copped an attitude with me. I returned the favor. If you have any other questions, save them for later, because I don’t have time for this shit.”

Pinto fixed him with a long, unblinking stare, his gaze sharp and assessing. Tension crackled in the air. Every second seemed to stretch. Finally, he gave a curt nod, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Just remember what I said, all right?” He didn’t wait for a reply. He strode past Navarre, bumping shoulders as he passed, and disappeared around the corner.

Shaking his head, Navarre climbed the steps. On some level, he appreciated the fact Sloane had people watching out for her. It spoke well of her character. It also drove the point home that he needed to apologize like a goddamn professional and then keep his distance. Hopefully, once he did, the rest of this assignment would go smoothly.

Sloane scrolled through the offerings on the television’s streaming app, searching for a show that piqued her interest, but all she kept thinking about was what Pinto said about Navarre.

It was hard to imagine he was one of the deadliest snipers in the world when he looked so...ordinary.

No, that wasn't true. Jacob Navarre was many things, but ordinary was not one of them. He was pretty damn hot, in a brooding, simmering-beneath-the-surface kind of way. Like a bomb primed to go off at any given moment.

Besides, she had no idea what a sniper was supposed to look like. In her mind, she pictured a guy dressed in camo, or maybe all black, nestled in a sniper's perch with one eye peering through the scope of his high-powered rifle. Beyond that, they could resemble anybody: short, tall, black, white, male, female, and everything in between. Kind of like her job, where the stereotypical computer expert was a pasty, geeky white guy with glasses, but the reality was often different.

All that really mattered was that he was good at his job. One of the best, according to Pinto. While she was...well, she was pretty good at her job as well. She'd worked her butt off to reach that level of achievement, taking courses and honing her skills until she'd become one of the best in her field.

But her job was back at the office behind a keyboard, fighting enemies of a different nature. This was uncharted territory for her, like driving on a black highway at night, and the lack of clarity wreaked havoc on her confidence.

The sound of the front door closing caught her attention. She glanced over the back of the couch and her body gave an enthusiastic leap of excitement as Navarre emerged from the foyer, his brows drawn down in concentration. He paused at the sight of her, his brows drawing even lower, a feat she hadn't considered possible.

In all likelihood, he'd come to give her more grief about some perceived inadequacy, and it put her on the defensive.

Bracing for the worst, she stood, cocked one hand on her hip, and shot him a glare. "What did I do wrong this time?"

“What?Nothing.I just—” For a second or two, he seemed genuinely perplexed, like he wasn’t sure what to say or do next.On the heels of an audible exhale, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other.“Look, I, uh...about what happened earlier.I wanted to—”

A chime on his phone cut off the rest of his sentence.

“Shit, I gotta take this.It’s Austin.”He swiped at the screen to read the incoming message.Then he unhooked the two-way radio from his belt and relayed the news to the rest of the team.“Riptide en route.Repeat, Riptide en route.ETA twenty-five minutes, over.”

A chorus of “Roger that” came over the radio’s speaker, an affirmation that the message was received and understood.

Sloane gave Navarre a questioning look.She had a feeling she already knew the answer but wanted confirmation.“What’s Riptide?”

“That’s the code name for Sierra.”

Yep, that’s what she’d thought.“Did she choose it?”

“No, the team assigned it.”

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“Any particular reason?”

“Because men who get too close end up getting sucked under. Hey, don’t blame me,” he added when she opened her mouth to call him a sexist pig. “Rosario’s the one who came up with Riptide. I suggested we use Gravity.”

Okay, she hadn’t seen that one coming. “Why Gravity?”

“Because it has no relation to Sierra. Nobody outside the team would guess it was her code name.”

Sierra’s staff must have received a similar message, because the house exploded into a flurry of activity. Pots clanged in the kitchen, and it sounded like somebody fired up a blender. A young man vacuumed like his life depended on it, while an older woman spritzed the air with the scents of lavender and vanilla.

Sloane picked up the remote control and turned off the television. She glanced toward the kitchen, winced at the sound of glass breaking, before turning her gaze back to Navarre. “Any idea what they’re doing in there?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He pressed a button on the radio. “How’s it looking out there, Jackson?”

“Situation normal, though I’m sure that’ll change pretty soon.” Jackson’s deep, velvety voice came over the speaker. “Me and Rosario are covering the gate; Garrett and Wade are out back.”

That surprised her at first; she'd assumed that one of the Flints would want to be at the gate when Sierra arrived. But then she remembered Wade's tendency to scare the crap out of most people, and the placement made total sense. Not to mention, he didn't strike her as the type who gave a damn about meeting a celebrity. From what she'd seen, he usually preferred to stay out of the public eye.

"What should I do?" Sloane asked. "Does Sierra want to see me when she gets here or is it better if I stay out of sight?"

Navarre shrugged. "Her associates didn't list any protocols for this particular situation, so you might as well stick around for the meet and greet. She might want to... I don't know... say hi to the person who's acting as her body double. If she doesn't, she'll probably just ignore you."

There it was again, that twinge of doubt that refused to completely go away. It slithered down the length of her spine and settled in the pit of her stomach. "What if she thinks I don't look enough like her?"

"It's a little late to worry about that, don't you think? At this point, it really doesn't matter. Her sister gave you the stamp of approval. That ought to be good enough for Sierra." The confidence in his voice soothed the worst of her nerves. "Relax, you look just like her."

His words caught her by surprise. "Was that a compliment?"

"It was the truth. Don't read too much into it."

They settled into the large living area, the soft hum of the air conditioning cutting through the thick Florida humidity. Conversations dwindled to murmurs as Sierra's staff kicked their final preparations into overdrive.



At last, the ping of a notification sliced through the quiet. The security detail escorting Sierra had arrived at the front gate. The flurry of activity ratcheted up to a frenzy, culminating with a pair of young men lining up at the door, one holding a tray of meticulously arranged finger foods, while the other cradled a glass of whatever concoction they'd whipped up in the blender.

Navarre's gaze flicked to the glass. "Is there alcohol in that?"

The taller of the two men stared at him as if he'd asked if one of the ingredients was strychnine. "Of course not," he replied, his tone clipped. "It's an energy smoothie. Ms. Page likes to refresh and recharge after a long flight. It has orange juice, vanilla yogurt, strawberries, flax seed, and a touch of honey. No alcohol."

The corners of Navarre's mouth twitched. "Good to know."

Less than a minute later, the double doors swung open, and Sierra Page breezed into the house, looking surprisingly fresh for someone who'd spent most of the day on an airplane. Not a hair out of place. Her makeup was flawless. She wore a cherry-red blouse over tight-fitting jeans and knee-high boots. An entourage trailed in her wake, dragging enough luggage to hold every piece of clothing in Sloane's closet. She carried a clutch that couldn't hold more than a cell phone and a pack of gum, which she handed to one of the waiting men in exchange for the smoothie.

She sipped the drink, and a look of pure bliss lit her face. "Thank you, Jordan. You always know how to take the edge off a long, hard day."

Her voice sounded softer than it usually did in interviews and carried a hint of a British accent even though she'd never lived there. Perhaps she was practicing for an upcoming role, or she'd picked it up from people she associated with. Whatever the reason, it wasn't Sloane's business.

Jordan beamed at the praise. "My pleasure, Ms. Page. If there's anything else you'd like from the kitchen, just say the word."

She picked up one of the pastry bites from the tray and popped it into her mouth. As she chewed, her gaze drifted to Sloane, and for a few long moments Sloane wished the floor would open and swallow her whole.

Something resembling amusement flittered over Sierra's face as she looked Sloane over. "So. You're me."

Sloane's heart pounded in her chest, so loud she wondered whether anyone else could hear it. She'd met celebrities at conventions before, where they got paid to be nice to attendees, to make idle chitchat while they posed for pictures or gave their autograph. But now the tables were turned, and she was the one who had to make nice, because the last thing she wanted was to say the wrong thing and jeopardize a lucrative contract.

Steeling her nerves, she lifted her chin and gave her best fake-it-till-you-make-it smile. "At least for the weekend. Any pointers?"

"Yes, don't screw it up." All trace of humor left Sierra's face. "If the press figures out you're not me, I'll never hear the end of it. Neither will your boss. Do you understand?"

Since the floor didn't seem inclined to swallow her whole anytime soon, Sloane nodded. "I'll do my best."

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“I’m sure you will.” Sierra gave a smile that didn’t come close to reaching her eyes. It was the one she used during interviews when a reporter asked her an uncomfortable question. Without another word, she climbed the stairs leading to the master suite, her entourage following closely behind with her mountain of luggage.

“Good job,” Navarre said low enough for only her to hear.

She gaped at him. “That was good?”

“It could have been a lot worse. You didn’t wet yourself, pass out, or run screaming from the building. Take the W.”

Her brows drew down. “I’ve never done any of those things.”

“Then you never had anything to worry about.” His gaze met hers, and she refused to acknowledge the flush of heat under her skin. “Don’t stay up too late. They expect you in wardrobe at 0800 sharp.”

### Chapter 7

Sloan didn’t sleep well that night. She’d always had trouble sleeping in a bed that wasn’t hers. It didn’t help that whenever she closed her eyes, the door to her closet of anxieties burst open and her insecurities came out to play. Or worse, her thoughts would drift to Navarre, and what he’d said about what they could do in the big, comfortable bed she was lying in right now. And although he hadn’t been explicit, her overactive imagination had been more than happy to make a few suggestions. No matter the reason, she woke in the darkened room with bleary eyes and a crick in her

neck.

As the fog of sleep drifted from her mind, she reached for her phone to check the time and groaned. Damn it, she still had almost thirty minutes before her alarm was set to go off. But by the time her body relaxed enough for her to fall back asleep, it would be time for her to get up anyway. She might as well start the day now.

On the heels of a jaw-popping yawn, she whipped back the covers and stretched. She had a busy day ahead of her, and it filled her with a strange combination of excitement and apprehension. If everything went according to plan, she didn't have a thing to worry about. Dressed as Sierra, she'd lure the press to the executive airport, where they'd watch her—from a safe distance, of course—board a private jet bound for Sierra's mountainside estate in North Carolina. Meanwhile, Sierra would sneak out with the remaining Six Points crew and drive to a totally different airport, this one closer to the coast, where she'd fly to a private island in the Caribbean with her current flavor of the week. Sloane didn't know who the guy was, and even though she was curious, she knew better than to ask.

On paper, it all sounded pretty straightforward, but she was also aware of Murphy's Law and that famous saying about the best-laid plans.

She padded barefoot to the bathroom and took a long hot shower, basking under the multiple jets until her fingers and toes were all pruned up and the crick in her neck only felt like a minor twinge. When she finished, she toweled her body dry and dressed in black sweatpants and a T-shirt with Fozzie Bear from the Muppets on the front. There wasn't much point in getting fancy. In less than an hour, she'd meet with Sierra's staff, who would take care of her hair and makeup, and dress her in the clothes they'd chosen for her to wear to the airport. Hopefully, her wardrobe would include a comfortable jacket. Last she'd heard, the high temperature in the Asheville area was forecast to reach the mid-50s today. Not bad, but chilly for a Florida girl who was accustomed to much warmer weather.

As she opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hall, the mouthwatering scents of chorizo and bacon washed over her, and her stomach rumbled in response. Not surprising, considering she hadn't eaten anything since dinner last night. Following her nose, she tracked the aromas downstairs to the kitchen, where she found Jackson and Navarre. Both men wore black from neck to toes, guns resting in their shoulder holsters, while they prepared what appeared to be enough food to feed a battalion. There were three or four cartons of eggs on the counter, in addition to an assortment of meats, cheeses, and vegetables.

Well, there was a sight you didn't see every day, though she honestly wouldn't mind it. For a moment or two, she simply stood there and watched them work side by side at the six-burner gas stove. Navarre wasn't what she'd describe as a small person, but his lean, muscular build appeared slight next to Jackson's hulking frame. Even so, they worked amazingly well together, their movements fast and fluid without ever banging into each other.

As if sensing her presence, Navarre glanced over his shoulder to her, and she felt a flutter low in her belly that she refused to admit was due to anything other than the smell of bacon. She offered a smile, refusing to feel embarrassed that he'd caught her gawking at them. Honestly, what did he expect? The two of them looked more out of place than the Kardashians at a truck stop.

"Good morning." She gave them a little finger wave. "Whatever you're cooking smells wonderful."

Jackson emptied the contents of a cast-iron skillet into a large casserole dish, one of several lined up on the kitchen island, each resting on a warming tray. Another dish was nearly overflowing with bacon, and she assumed the third was meant for the scrambled eggs Navarre was preparing in a huge frying pan. And if all that wasn't enough food for the crew, a round serving platter by the toaster was piled high with bagels and muffins. To the right, a stack of plates and a tray of silverware filled the

remaining space.

“Good morning.” Jackson’s smooth, deep voice filled the room. The dark skin of his freshly shaved skull glinted under the bright kitchen lights. “Help yourself. Milk and juice are in the fridge; cups and mugs are in the cabinet beside it. If you want coffee, you’ll have to brew it yourself. I was going to do it, but apparently mine is too strong for these lightweights.”

Navarre let out a low huff from where he stood in front of the stove, a spatula in his right hand. “Dude, I could use that shit to strip chrome off a bumper.”

Jackson flipped him off as he placed the skillet back on the stove to start the next batch of hash.

Sloane found it amusing, how guys socialized by insulting the crap out of each other. She’d heard a lot of exchanges in the Six Points building, especially in the fitness room. The closer the friend, the harsher the insult—some of them were downright vicious, but they never seemed to take offense. Maybe it was just a testosterone thing, or some weird form of male bonding.

Navarre’s eyes met hers for the briefest of moments, and the flutter in her belly returned with a vengeance. “Grab a plate and load up while you can. That might look like a lot of food, but the guys will plow through it faster than a room full of stoners with the munchies.”

She laughed at that. “Thanks.”

She picked up utensils and a plate. Unable to resist the lure of bacon—she couldn’t remember the last time she’d indulged—she used the tongs to place several slices onto her plate, and then added a scoop of scrambled eggs and breakfast hash. It was tempting to grab a muffin while she was at it. On any other day, she would have given

in to the urge. But she resisted, because she wanted to make sure she could fit into the clothes Sierra's people wanted her to wear.

Coffee wasn't her thing, so she crossed to the fridge for a can of Coke. Hands full, she took a seat at the humongous mahogany table in the adjacent formal dining room. From where she sat, she had a clear view of the kitchen, where the guys were busy preparing another batch of food.

While she watched them work, she scooped up a forkful of scrambled eggs and...oh, wow. This was a pleasant surprise. The eggs were amazing, light and fluffy, with a subtle hint of sea salt and cracked pepper that gave the flavor a boost.

"Is everything okay?" Navarre called out from his spot by the stove, his neck craned back to look at her.

She swallowed her food. "Yeah, why?"

"You made a noise."

A flush crept up her neck. That was probably the sound of her mouth-gasm. She didn't realize she'd made it out loud. In her defense, she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten eggs this flavorful. Ever since she moved out of her parents' house and into her first apartment, breakfast had become a hasty affair: cold cereal, yogurt with fruit, anything that could be eaten one-handed while reading emails or scrolling online. "I'm just enjoying my food. The eggs are delicious."

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The answer seemed to satisfy his curiosity, and he turned his attention back to the pan on the stove.

She was halfway finished with the food on her plate when Pinto appeared, his dark hair still damp from the shower. He made a beeline for the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with a mug of coffee and a plate piled high with more food than she ate in an entire day. He slid out a chair to sit beside her.

“Morning,” he said right before he shoveled a forkful of chorizo hash into his mouth.

For a few long moments, she watched him eat, amazed a person could put away that much food in one sitting. And he didn’t appear to have an ounce of fat on him. “I wish I had the kind of metabolism that allowed me to eat like that.”

“That’s what Fiona says.” He grinned as he picked up a strip of crispy bacon. “I suppose I’m lucky that way.”

“Damn straight you are,” Rosario said as she sat across from them. Her plate more closely resembled Sloane’s, though she had several more slices of bacon and a blueberry muffin. “It’s so not fair. My ass would be the size of a bus if I ate that much on a regular basis.”

“But it would still be a very nice ass,” Pinto said and then quickly added, “Not that I’d notice or anything like that.”

Rosario laughed.



Within minutes, the rest of the crew was seated and plowing through their food as though they hadn't eaten in a week or two. Most of them were former military, where service members learned to eat fast from the day they started basic training. At least that was what she'd heard. A few of them went back for seconds, and she was pretty sure Pinto went back for thirds.

"What are the movies for next weekend? It's Navarre's pick, right?" Hatch asked around a mouthful of food.

"You don't want to know." Jackson came from the kitchen and claimed a seat at the table. His mountain of food was even taller than Pinto's, which really wasn't all that surprising, considering his size. It had to take a lot of food to power that much muscle.

From what Sloane had heard, it was a standing tradition among the men and women who worked on the protection details to blow off steam at the end of the week by drinking a few beers while watching the worst movies they could find. It used to be a small group but had recently expanded to include a few of the new hires.

"It can't be any worse than last week's movies," Garrett said.

Pinto scoffed as if greatly offended. "Say what you want, but Meth Gator Versus Crackodile is a cinematic masterpiece."

"After how much alcohol?" Jackson asked.

Rosario laughed. "To be fair, it was better than the one with the puppets. That was just weird."

A few of the guys voiced their agreement.

"So what's the movie?" Hatch asked as he gathered the last of his eggs onto his fork.

“Ask him.” Jackson jerked his thumb to the left where Navarre had emerged from the kitchen, a plate in one hand and a coffee mug in the other.

Navarre set his mug on the table and leaned against the wall because there weren’t any open seats left. “Ask me what?”

Jackson speared a chunk of chorizo with his fork. “They want to know what movies you plan to subject us to next week.”

“Oh.” Clearly not in a hurry—a stark contrast to the rest of the group—he crunched down on a strip of bacon. “I thought we’d start with an old school classic. You know, one that most people have heard about but few have actually seen. A superhero movie that was way ahead of its time—”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, will you just spit it out?” Pinto said, and several people at the table laughed.

Navarre sipped his coffee and set the mug back on the table. His lips curved up, just a little, a rare crack in his gruff exterior, and damn, it made him look sexy as hell. He scooped up a forkful of chorizo hash, and right before he put it into his mouth, he said, “Howard the Duck.”

A collective groan filled the room. Somebody threw a sugar packet at Navarre that bounced off his chest and hit the floor. Undaunted, he picked it up and set it on the table.

“Keep that up and I’ll add Xanaduto to the lineup.”

Rosario shot him a pained look. “Now you’re just being mean.”

“You should come next time,” Jackson told Sloane as he set his fork on the plate he’d

emptied in near-record time. It wouldn't surprise her to see him go back for more, if there was anything left at this point. "Misery loves company."

She couldn't help but laugh. It was nice to be included in their group, if only for a little while. "How can I refuse when you make it sound so appealing?"

"It's actually a lot of fun. The movies are so awful, we spend most of our time making fun of them, kind of like MST3K but with good friends, good beer, good food, and no robots." Jackson glanced up at Navarre. "What other movies did you decide to inflict on us?"

The roguish grin returned. “Saturn 3 and Piranha II.”

Another round of groans erupted, but was quickly extinguished when Sierra Page walked through the entryway, wearing gray yoga pants and a teal tank top that hugged her toned torso and accentuated her cleavage. Her hair was gathered into a loose knot, and even though she didn’t wear a stitch of makeup, she looked poised to walk the red carpet. She was probably pretty used to that, to men stopping dead in their tracks whenever she graced them with her presence.

Sloane never had that problem. Most of the time, she considered it a good thing. There were benefits to moving through life unnoticed, like not having to hire private security to ward off creepy ex-boyfriends and crazed fans. But every so often, she kind of wished a man would look at her like that, like she was the only thing in the universe that mattered.

A note of amusement crossed Sierra’s face. Her fingers toyed with the neckline of her tank top, drawing even more attention to her cleavage, as if that was needed. “I’m sorry, did I interrupt something?”

“Nope, not at all,” Jackson said. “If you’re hungry, there’s eggs and chorizo hash in the kitchen. The bacon’s gone, but if you’d like, we can fry some more up for you.”

Her delicate eyebrows drew down. “I don’t think I’ve ever had chorizo hash.”

“Well, now’s your chance. Grab a plate and dive in.”

It struck her as funny, how Jackson spoke to an ultra-rich, mega-famous movie star as

though she were one of the guys. He'd worked a lot of protection details, including the one for actress Vicky Hale, which likely explained why he didn't act intimidated by Sierra. Still, her presence had stunned a number of the men into silence.

Garrett looked like he'd swallowed his tongue.

Curious about his reaction, Sloane's focus shifted to Navarre, and her breath caught in her throat when she met his gaze head-on. For a moment or two, he just looked at her, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath, his expression impossible to read. Then he blinked, raised his mug to his lips, and turned his gaze away.

Sierra went to the kitchen and returned minutes later with a modest portion of eggs and hash on a plate, along with a bowl of fruit salad and a small glass of what looked like some sort of smoothie. Pinto's partner, Hatch, scrambled to get up so she'd have a place to sit.

She glanced over her shoulder as Navarre pushed her chair in for her, flashed a brilliant smile, and said, "Thank you, sugar," and Sloane thought she was going to barf.

Sierra sampled the hash, chewed a few times, and her face lit up like Christmas morning. "Oh, this is delicious."

"Told you she'd like it," Hatch said, and Pinto rolled his eyes.

With the exception of Sierra, most of the plates, glasses, and mugs at the table were empty. Sloane checked the time, relieved to see she still had ten minutes before her scheduled session with the stylists. Showing up late would have been kind of awkward. Hopefully, the clothes they'd chosen for her wouldn't be too tight, because she hadn't planned to eat that much for breakfast.

Jackson clapped his hands to get everybody's attention. "All right, folks, pick a number from one to twenty. Closest to the pin does dishes. Not you," he added when Sierra tried to add her number.

Confusion colored her face in a way that showed she wasn't accustomed to being told no. "Why not?"

"Because she who signs our checks is excused from dish duty. You were kind enough to let us use your kitchen; the least we can do is clean up after ourselves. Garrett and Rosario, you're the lucky winners. Team One, we're leaving in two hours. Team Two leaves thirty minutes after that. Y'all know what to do."

Navarre stood at the edge of the steps, his hands buried deep in his pockets as he leaned against one of the carved stone pillars. All was quiet on the property. No perimeter breaches, or threatening messages, or anything else that might signal approaching danger. Hell, even the paparazzi were keeping their distance, a rarity in his experience. By all measures, things were going exactly as planned.

And yet, he still couldn't shake the feeling that shit was about to go sideways.

He hated this feeling, mostly because it didn't come with more detailed information, like what, where, when, why, or how many. Then he'd actually have something to work with. Instead, he only had a vague sense of impending doom that left him edgy, off-balance, and unsure how to proceed.

The front door opened, and he didn't need to look back to know it was Jackson.

"You okay, man?" The sound of boot steps got closer until Jackson stood beside him. "No offense, but you seem off this morning."

It wasn't surprising that Jackson had noticed. He'd always been perceptive. He was

more than a friend; he was family. During their time in the Army, they'd forged a bond that ran deeper than most could comprehend. At this point, they couldn't hide much of anything from each other. Most of the time, he considered that a good thing.

Navarre glanced up at his friend. "I've got a bad feeling about today."

Jackson's expression hardened, his eyes narrowing as he processed the words. "How bad are we talking? The Pit? Kundig?"

Jaw tightening, Navarre shook his head. "Wanesh."

"Aw, fuck." Jackson's hand instinctively reached for the grip of his sidearm. "Are you shitting me?"

"I never joke about Wanesh." Even though the scars had faded with time, the memories would always remain fresh. Some things were never meant to be forgotten. There were times when he woke in the dead of night to the smell of burnt flesh and diesel. They'd lost a lot of close friends in that shithole, a few whose bodies were never recovered in spite of their efforts. Their names were inked into Jackson's skin, just above his left pectoral muscle. They were seared into Navarre's soul.

Jackson went quiet for nearly a minute, his eyebrows drawn close together as he stared out at the grounds. "How long you had this feeling?"

“I woke up with it this morning.”

His friend sighed. “Think you should tell Austin?”

“If I did, what good would it do?” In Wanesh, it hadn’t done a damn bit of good. To the contrary, his CO had mocked him for being superstitious. Missions were never canceled or altered just because somebody got a bad vibe, especially this late in the game. You rolled with the punches, made adjustments, and powered through whatever got thrown your way. And maybe, just maybe, you made it through alive.

“Austin trusts your instincts,” Jackson said. “He knows you’re not the type to freak out over every little thing. More important, he wants this job to go smoothly. If you tell him, he’ll probably bulk up the protection details.”

Navarre took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. He’d feel foolish warning Austin about a gut feeling, but if he didn’t and somebody got hurt—or worse—he’d never forgive himself. Especially if that person was a civilian. In his experience, it was better to be over-prepared and feel a little foolish than to get caught with your pants around your ankles.

“You’re right; I’ll call him.” There wasn’t much time, but perhaps they could get some additional help to deal with any potential problems.

“Good boy.” Jackson’s mouth curved up on one side. “This wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with Sloane, would it?”

The question caught him off guard. “What—no. Why would it?”



“Just asking is all.” Jackson slid his hands into his pants pockets, his tone casual but his eyes razor-sharp. “I heard talk about you two by the pool last night.”

Navarre stiffened. Fucking Pinto needed to keep his damn mouth shut. “You know how I feel about untrained civilians on an op.”

“The only thing she’s got to do is look pretty,” Jackson countered. “We both know that ain’t a problem. She’s a damn fine-looking woman.”

Navarre inhaled sharply, irritation bubbling just beneath the surface. Friend or not, he wasn’t having this conversation. “Essie would kick your ass if she heard you saying that about another woman.”

“What? I’m just calling it like I see it.” His friend smirked. “I’m happily married, not blind. You, on the other hand, are very much single.”

Navarre didn’t respond right away. His mind flashed back to Sloane by the pool, and every cell in his body heated. It didn’t matter; he’d never act on the attraction. She’d made it clear that she wasn’t interested, and he wasn’t the kind of guy who disrespected boundaries. “Your point?”

Jackson chuckled as he turned toward the door. “You’ll figure it out eventually. If you need me, I’ll be inside.”

## Chapter 8

This was it. The big day. The make-or-break moment.

Sloane stood before the full-length mirror, not sure if she should smile or frown.

A half dozen makeup artists and hairstylists had left her room less than five minutes

ago after slathering on cosmetics and styling her hair to within an inch of its life. The results were stunning, though the clothes they'd chosen for her to wear were a little "too" for her liking: too bright, too tight, and the stretchy pink blouse showed way too much cleavage, especially with the padded pushup bra that felt more like armor than attire. But the point was to mimic Sierra's style, and her staff had definitely nailed it. The first time she looked at the finished product in the mirror, she almost didn't recognize herself.

She only hoped the dozen or so paparazzi camped out by the front gate would believe she was actually Sierra. The last thing she wanted was to embarrass the actress, tarnish her employer's reputation, or become internet famous in a way that would follow her for the rest of her natural-born life.

The plan was to keep the photographers far enough away that they wouldn't pose a safety concern, but also so they couldn't get close enough to notice the differences between the two women, such as eye color, Sloane's wider hips, and Sierra's much larger chest. Her cheekbones weren't as pronounced as Sierra's, though the miracle of makeup had made it nearly unnoticeable.

Lost in thought, Sloane lifted her finger to her mouth, but stopped herself at the very last moment before she bit the nail and ruined a perfectly good manicure.

"Stop it," she told her reflection. Now wasn't the time to worry about things she couldn't control. It wasn't productive, and she didn't have time for that nonsense. Pushing the negative thoughts from her mind, she straightened her spine, squared her shoulders, and stared straight at the mirror. For added effect, she sucked in her cheeks and pursed her lips the way she'd seen Sierra do at a number of red-carpet events.

There, much better.

She'd been asked to do this job for a reason, and she refused to let her doubts—or anybody else's—get in the way of performing her duties to the best of her ability. After hours upon hours of practice, she could imitate most of Sierra's movements as if they were her own. And when the job was finished, her bank account would be a whole lot healthier. If there was enough left over once her bills were paid, she might even treat herself to that new phone she'd been eyeing for months. Considering all the time and effort she'd invested, she deserved to splurge on something nice for herself.

A knock on the door put an end to her internal pep talk.

"Come in," she called out.

The door opened, and the sight of Jackson's smiling face took the edge off her nerves. He stepped inside, and then froze mid-stride. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ms. Page. I was told this was Sloane's room."

The glint of mischief in his eyes made it clear he was pulling her leg.

She raised an eyebrow, hands on her hips. "You know I'm not Sierra."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

“Yeah, but when you’re all gussied up like that, I swear you look just like her. It’s like you were separated at birth.”

It was nice of him to say that, but they both knew it wasn’t true. Despite her best efforts, insecurities crept back into her thoughts. “Well, I hope the photographers outside share your opinion.”

Concern creased Jackson’s brow. He closed the door behind him and moved farther into the room. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” No, she wasn’t. Every time she built up a scrap of confidence, her anxieties tore it back down. It was ridiculous, irrational, but she couldn’t help the way she felt. “Actually, no, I’m not fine. I’m scared I’m going to screw this up, I want to chew my nails but if I do it’ll mess up my manicure, and it doesn’t help that your buddy thinks I’m going to get us all killed.”

Jackson offered a comforting smile as he nodded with understanding. “I get where you’re coming from, I really do. This job has pushed you far outside your comfort zone. But trust me, you’re doing just fine. I mean it when I say you look like Sierra’s twin.”

Sloane let out a shaky breath. “Thanks.”

“Ain’t nothing to thank me for. It’s the truth. And don’t you worry about Navarre. He’s one of those guys who games out the worst-case scenarios for every situation. It can be a buzzkill at times, but he always busts his butt to make sure those scenarios don’t become reality. It’s what makes him one of the best in the business. He’ll keep you

safe no matter what.”

“Do you trust him with your life?” She already knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it from him.

As expected, he nodded again. “When things go south, there isn’t a person alive I’d rather have watching my back. I’ve never met anyone as calm under pressure. It’s like he’s got a kill switch for his adrenaline. No matter how bad things get—bullets flying, buildings exploding, people dying all over the damn place—he never loses his cool. He just shuts it all out and keeps going. Saved my life more times than I can count. He’ll say I saved his life as many times or more, but the scales ain’t close to equal.”

That gave her comfort from a security standpoint, but it didn’t do much to quell her concerns about the friction between them. They’d reached an unspoken truce last night, and she didn’t want to do anything that might trigger a return of hostilities.

“Any tips for how to handle him?” she asked.

“Just don’t let his grumpiness get to you. He’ll come around soon enough. In the meantime, come find me if you need anything. You got my number, right?”

She held up her phone. “Yep, sure do.”

“Good. I’ll see you downstairs in a few.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

Sloane gave the room one final inspection to confirm there wasn’t anything she’d forgotten to pack. Assured that everything was tucked in her bag, she sat on the edge of the bed and shoved her feet into black knee-high boots. They were pretty, but they

squished her toes. Thankfully, the heels were only two inches high, so she didn't have to worry too much about falling flat on her face and breaking her neck. If given the choice, she'd rather wear her own shoes, but Sierra wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of ratty Chucks or combat boots.

Bag in hand, she exited the room, closed the door behind her, and went down the hall that led to the staircase. Halfway down the stairs, she caught sight of Navarre and Jackson in the main living area, their heads bent close in murmured conversation. What they were talking about, she had no idea, but the looks on their faces gave her the impression it was something important.

Navarre glanced up at her approach, and something shifted in his expression that she couldn't quite identify. If she didn't know better, she'd say it was heat, but she knew that wasn't the case. Regardless of what he'd said by the pool, guys like him didn't go for women like her. That kind of thing only happened in books and movies.

He reached for her bag, and when his fingers brushed hers, a zing of electricity shot up her arm. "Sierra doesn't carry her own luggage. I'll put it in the back with the rest."

"Oh. Yeah. Thanks."

He pulled a set of keys from his pants pocket as they reached the front door. He paused, his hand on the door handle. "Remember, Jackson will walk with you to the car. Wait for him to open the door for you. Don't thank him, don't smile at him. Don't make eye contact. Just get in the car and let him close the door. If you hear anybody yelling Sierra's name or asking questions, ignore them."

"Got it." Sloane slid on a pair of blue-tinted designer glasses that were identical to the ones Sierra had been photographed wearing yesterday at the airport. But they were more than a fashion statement; they also made it difficult for anyone to notice her eye color didn't match Sierra's.

“You got this,” Jackson reminded her.

She let out a shaky laugh, even as her heart rate kicked up a notch. “Yeah, I got this.”

Navarre opened the door, and sure enough, Sloane spotted a small group of people clustered around the front gate, each carrying what appeared to be professional camera equipment.

At the sight of who they assumed was Sierra, they fired off a volley of questions that ranged from innocuous to downright insulting.

“Sierra, how are you feeling today?”

“I love your boots! Where did you get them?”

“Is that a baby bump, or are you putting on weight for a role?”

“Can you confirm you’re in talks to star in the next Galaxy Dominion movie?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

“Sierra, are you pregnant with Dax’s child? Will you confirm or deny reports you’re secretly married?”

Following instructions—and damn, that was a lot harder than expected—she refused to acknowledge the questions and waited for Jackson to open the back door of one of the two large black SUVs parked out front. She slid inside, and as soon as the door closed behind her, she pushed out a breath and slumped against the seat, relieved the vehicle’s dark-tinted glass shielded her from view.

Moments later, Navarre slid behind the wheel, while Jackson claimed the front passenger seat. They exchanged a brief glance—sharp, assessing—and then Navarre started the vehicle, the engine’s deep growl breaking the silence.

His gaze caught hers in the rearview mirror as he reached for his seat belt. When he spoke, his voice was all business. “How are you doing back there?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“Some of those questions were rude.”

She shrugged, though the motion felt stiff. “They’re easy to ignore when you know they’re not meant for you.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but he didn’t need to know that. The weight one ticked her off. She didn’t have a baby bump. Still, she’d rather eat a jar of Miracle Whip than admit it got under her skin.



As if reading her thoughts, Navarre said, “For the record, you don’t look pregnant. That asshole was trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Good job not taking the bait,” Jackson added.

“I’ve been called worse things than fat.” A few of the nastier ones sprang to mind, vivid and raw and hurtful as hell, and she ruthlessly brushed them aside. Now wasn’t a good time to revisit insecurities from what felt like a lifetime ago. Honestly, there never was a good time for that. She had better things to do than dwell on the taunts of schoolyard bullies.

At the end of the driveway, the gate rolled open, and they slowly drove past the photographers and onto the street. The second SUV, with Garrett and Rosario inside, trailed a few car lengths behind, while a few of the photographers scrambled to their cars so they could follow. Navarre turned up the volume on the radio, and the sound of Freddie Mercury’s voice drowned out a second barrage of questions from the remaining paparazzi.

“Last I checked, there weren’t any traffic concerns, so we should arrive at the airport in thirty minutes,” Jackson said. “You might as well make yourself comfortable.”

Once again, Navarre’s gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. “Do you have a music preference?”

“Not really. This is fine.” She’d grown up listening to a wide range of music, so she was familiar with everything from the Bee Gees to Billie Eilish. Queen had been part of her playlist at an early age.

Apparently, Jackson wasn’t a fan. He made a low sound in the back of his throat to convey his displeasure. “I was hoping you’d say you were a fan of R&B. Now we’re stuck listening to old people music.”

“Dude, you’re older than me,” Navarre said.

“Yeah, but I’m young at heart. I don’t listen to the kind of music you hear at the grocery store.”

A hint of humor teased Navarre’s lips. “I heard ‘Talking to the Moon’ at Publix the other day.”

Judging by the scowl on Jackson’s face, the comment struck a nerve. “You’re just making that up.”

The light ahead went from yellow to red, and Navarre slowed to a stop behind a silver minivan. “I think I might have also heard some Usher.”

“Okay, now I know you’re messing with me.”

“I don’t know,” Sloane said, unable to resist. “I’ve heard ‘Roar’ by Katy Perry at Publix, and that song came out years after Usher’s early albums.”

Jackson glanced over his shoulder at her. “You’re not helping.”

She laughed. Being part of the lighthearted banter took her mind off the photographers following them, and the fact she’d have to get back into character as soon as they reached the airport.

Construction added ten minutes to their drive, but they still arrived at their destination with plenty of time to spare. Navarre rolled down the window, spoke with the guard at the entrance, and waited for the security gate to open. Leaving the paparazzi behind, they drove straight onto the tarmac, where Sierra’s private jet was already fueled and ready to go. The flight crew stood at the base of the steps leading into the aircraft.

After the SUV came to a stop, Jackson got out and opened the door for her, while Navarre moved to the back of the vehicle and opened the trunk so the crew could load their luggage. Garrett and Rosario parked beside them and got out.

“The plane’s a lot bigger than I thought it would be,” she said. “I don’t even want to know how much it costs.”

“Imagine having enough money to buy one of these things,” Garrett replied.

“From what I heard, Sierra doesn’t own it,” Navarre said. “She charts the jet when she travels. It’s cheaper that way.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

Curiosity got the better of Sloane as she watched the last of their luggage being loaded onto the plane. “What happens with the cars?”

As if on cue, two men—she’d seen them around the office but didn’t know their names—emerged from the jet. They collected the keys for the SUVs and drove them off the tarmac.

Navarre turned his gaze to her. “All right, we better get going. Follow Jackson. I’ll be right behind. Don’t forget to put your left hand on the rail when you climb the stairs.”

“I won’t.” She almost gave a mock salute but resisted the urge, because Sierra would never do anything like that.

She stepped into the plane and—whoa. She’d seen pictures of what the inside of a private jet looked like, but experiencing it up close and personal elevated it to another level. Soft, ambient lighting bathed the cabin in a warm glow, complementing the wood paneling and accents of brushed metal. Plush leather seats, arranged in a spacious, ergonomic layout, offered ample room for relaxation. A state-of-the-art entertainment system boasted a huge high-definition screen that currently played nature footage of a coral reef, while the nearby bar was stocked with crystal glassware and a generous selection of top-shelf beverages.

“Sure beats flying economy, doesn’t it?” Jackson said. “Just wait until you try the seats. They have adjustable headrests and built-in massagers. You’ll never want to cram your body into an economy class seat again.”

She glanced up—and up at him. The man had to be at least six four and two hundred-

plus pounds of solid muscle. “I’m surprised you’d even fit into one of those.”

“It’s possible, but it sure isn’t pretty.” He grinned, a flash of white teeth against dark skin. “One star, would not recommend.”

She laughed. “Should I sit anywhere in particular? You know, just in case anybody’s watching with a mega-zoom lens.”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “Nah, you’re good. Sit wherever you like.”

She chose a window seat near the wing and—oh, yes, he was right. Soft yet supportive, it was amazingly comfortable. Every muscle in her body relaxed. No one, not even a certain grumpy guy who just walked by as if she didn’t exist, could make her body tense.

Once everyone was seated, the jet taxied onto the runway. From her spot by the window, Sloane watched as the engines roared to life, powerful yet smooth. Within seconds, the jet lifted off the tarmac, and the urban landscape gradually shrunk into a mosaic of streets and buildings. A little higher, and the city faded into the distance, replaced by white, fluffy clouds. Minutes later, the plane leveled off its ascent, and the Fasten Seat Belts sign switched off, allowing passengers to move about the cabin.

Sloane unfastened her seat belt but remained in her seat. “How long will it take for us to get there?”

“About an hour and a half,” Rosario said. “From there, it’s an hour or so drive to Ms. Page’s place.”

She’d seen pictures of Sierra’s home in one of those online celebrity sites. Nestled deep in the mountains of North Carolina, it reminded her of a ski resort: all that space, but for only one person, which seemed like a waste to her.

No matter. The house was hers for the weekend, and she planned to enjoy every last minute of it. The hardest part of the job was over.

Nothing but good times ahead.

## Chapter 9

Situated approximately twelve miles south of Asheville, North Carolina, Thundering Hills was a small private airport with a single paved runway suitable for light to medium-sized aircraft. Though not a commercial hub, it offered basic amenities such as fuel, restrooms, and a terminal. It served as a gateway to the Blue Ridge Mountains for private pilots, tourists, and businesspeople who wanted to avoid the congestion of a larger facility.

After a feather-soft landing, Sierra's jet taxied to its designated spot near the terminal. Once it came to a complete stop, a member of the flight crew unlocked and opened the cabin door. A gust of cool mountain air greeted Navarre from his spot by the door, taking the edge off the queasiness he'd felt the entire flight. After all these years, he still felt better jumping out of a plane than flying in one.

Last he checked, the high temperature was expected to reach the upper fifties, with the overnight low dropping close to freezing. Not bad, but chilly by Florida standards. And even though he'd worked in much colder climates, he was glad he'd brought his leather jacket.

He and Jackson descended the stairs and assessed the area for potential threats. Generally speaking, private airports maintained stricter access controls than their commercial counterparts, while the limited passenger volume made them safer from a security standpoint. There wasn't a whole lot going on at the moment, just a tanker truck parked alongside a small plane to the right, a hose from the truck pumping fuel into the aircraft's tanks. To his left, about twenty or so feet away, were

two black four-door Mercedes SUVs with dark-tinted windows.

The armored vehicles had been delivered by a specialty outfit based in Charlotte. At first glance, they looked like regular SUVs, but each was equipped with a heavy-duty frame, armor plating, bulletproof glass, reinforced bumpers, and special tires that allowed you to keep driving in the event of a flat or puncture. The added weight of the enhancements put a dent in the vehicle's maneuverability and laid waste to any sense of fuel efficiency, but it was a small price to pay for the extra layers of protection.

A tall Hispanic man in a midnight-blue three-piece suit stood in front of one of the vehicles, his arms crossed over his chest. Late thirties, early forties at the most. Smooth shaven. Curly dark hair, conservatively cropped. His appearance—neck tattoo and all—matched the picture sent by the rental agency. So far, so good.

No photographers in sight, which was always a good thing.

Seeing no threats, Navarre gave the all clear signal for the rest of the group to exit the plane. Rosario came out first, with Sloane following close behind. Garrett brought up the rear.

At the base of the steps, Sloane zipped up her shiny pink jacket, for which he gave a silent thanks because the pushup bra under her tight-fitting blouse was wreaking havoc on his concentration.

“Are those our rides?” she asked him.

“You got it.”

They watched as Jackson approached the guy in the suit. After a brief conversation, the guy handed over two sets of keys. They shook hands, and as the guy headed for the terminal, Jackson used one of the keys to unlock and open the rear passenger side

door to the vehicle closest to the jet.He looked their way and gave a curt nod.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

“Okay, we’re clear,” Navarre said. “Let’s go.”

She followed him to the SUV. Once she was inside, he closed the door with a soft thud and circled to the rear of the vehicle. Jackson tossed him a set of keys and then climbed into the other SUV with Rosario and Garrett.

Once the luggage was loaded into the vehicles, Navarre slid behind the wheel.

“Where’s Jackson going?” Sloane asked.

“He’ll be riding with Rosario and Garrett.” He sensed her incoming question and added, “According to Sierra’s staff, she prefers to ride with only her driver during this stretch of the trip.”

“Why?”

“How should I know? Rich people tend to have quirks.” He’d worked with a few wealthy clients who seemed fairly normal, but they were the exception to the rule. Some of the quirks were weird yet benign, like the insurance executive who paid a chef to prepare gourmet meals for his pet alpaca. Another guy, this one a Silicon Valley tech bro, would lose his shit if anyone outside of his immediate family made eye contact with him. In order to communicate, regardless of importance, you had to stare at a spot over his shoulder or at the floor while you spoke. He never asked why; that wasn’t part of his job description.

A turn of the key, and the SUV’s engine came to life. Though Navarre had already committed the route to memory, he switched on the vehicle’s GPS and entered the

address for Sierra's estate, where Austin and his crew had already secured the property. From their location, it was an hour's drive away, which meant they'd reach their destination well before sundown.

As he fastened his seat belt, his gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, and there it was again, that warm, fuzzy feeling that spread through his chest whenever he caught sight of Sloane. Only this time she didn't look like Sloane. She was staring out at the tarmac, watching a small prop plane as it taxied toward the runway. With all the makeup, she looked nearly identical to Sierra. Except for the eyes. Without the sunglasses, there was no way to disguise the sharp intelligence that made her unique.

As if sensing his stare, she turned her head and met his gaze in the mirror. "What?"

"Nothing. We've got a long drive ahead of us. You might as well make yourself comfortable."

With Jackson and the rest of the crew a few car lengths behind in the second SUV, Navarre followed the signs to the airport exit and hooked a left onto the two-lane road. Traffic was light—no surprise there. It was mid-afternoon in the middle of nowhere. The town a mile or so outside the airport wasn't even big enough to support a Walmart. And traffic would only get lighter as they moved farther away from humanity.

Two vehicles, a silver sedan and a black SUV, followed at what would have been a discreet distance in the city. Out here, with few other vehicles on the road, they were impossible to miss. In all likelihood, they were paparazzi, hoping to snap candid pictures of Sierra that they could sell to the tabloids. He'd spotted them shortly after leaving the airport. How they got their itinerary, he had no idea, but it didn't come as a surprise.

The lengths some of these jackals were willing to go for a juicy piece of gossip could

put the CIA to shame. He wasn't thrilled with their pursuit, but there wasn't much he could do about it. It was a public road; they weren't breaking any laws. They had as much right to be here as anyone.

He reached for his two-way radio and held it close to his mouth. "We got company."

It didn't take long for Rosario to respond. "Copy that. We're keeping an eye on them."

Sloane straightened in her seat. "Is there a problem?"

"No. We picked up a tail, but they're keeping a respectful distance." There was no point in worrying her over what appeared to be a nuisance. This kind of thing happened frequently with celebrities. He would have been more surprised if nobody had been waiting for them outside the airport.

"What if they stop being respectful?"

"Then we'll deal with them accordingly." Direct confrontation was a last resort, especially in a civilian environment, but sometimes it couldn't be avoided. Still, they were required to operate within the legal limits regarding the use of force.

For a second or two, Sloane looked as though she might ask what that entailed, but then she must have thought better of it, because she took her phone from her ridiculously small purse and swiped at the screen. To be fair, it wasn't her purse; it was given to her by Sierra's people. The purse she usually carried was almost as big as the rucksack he'd tossed in the back seat. She angled the screen toward the passenger window and snapped a picture of the passing scenery.

He should probably tell her not to take pictures. It wasn't something that Sierra would do. But the SUV's windows were tinted dark. Nobody should be able to make out what she was doing. Even if they could, they were driving on a two-lane road. It wasn't like

anybody could pull alongside to see what she was up to.

Besides, he didn't blame her for wanting to take pictures. It was beautiful out here. It wasn't flat like most of Florida, with sweeping views of the mountain ranges and their mist-covered peaks. As they ascended, rolling meadows and open vistas gave way to dense forests of oak, hickory, and pine. The road meandered through the hills, twisting and turning, inviting drivers to slow down and take in the breathtaking scenery.

"Have you ever been here before?" she asked once she finished taking pictures.

He checked the rearview mirror to confirm the two vehicles were still shadowing their movements but presented no immediate threat. "Here in particular or the area in general?"

"Let's start with here and branch out."

He shot her a glance. "This is my first time in the western part of the state, but I've been to North Carolina a number of times while I served in the Army. The base is a few hours east of here."

Sloane shifted in her seat. "What did you do on base?"

"Field training, sniper competition. Stuff like that. We didn't have a lot of downtime to do things off-base." When they did, they mostly went to nearby bars and nightclubs to blow off steam. Communing with nature had been low on the list of things to do, especially after spending so much time on base or out of the country on ops.

"What kind of training?" she asked.

“Does it matter?”

She shrugged. “Just making conversation. We’ve got what, forty-five minutes or so before we reach Sierra’s place?”

The GPS on the dash confirmed her estimate. “Give or take.”

“That’s a lot of time to fill.”

She unzipped her jacket, revealing that form-fitting shirt and pushup bra, and it was all he could do to keep both eyes on the hairpin turn in the road.

His grip tightened on the wheel. “You can fill it with quiet contemplation.”

“Or I could introduce you to the brilliance of Beyoncé. I have her entire catalog on my phone.”

Truth be told, he didn’t mind Beyoncé. In fact, her music appeared on several of his playlists. By and large, his musical tastes depended on his mood. Most of the time, he gravitated toward hard and grinding music like Mudvayne or Stone Sour. Those were his go-to picks at the gym, or while he was sharpening his skills at the range. Other times, he listened to classic rock, his choice for when he worked on his car. But there were days he wanted something lighter to boost his mood, like Bruno Mars, Maroon 5, and, yes, even Beyoncé.

“What makes you think I don’t like her?” he asked.

“I’ve been in the parking lot when you come to work in the morning. If you’re not blasting Aerosmith or Van Halen, it’s something that sounds like the orcs are preparing for battle at Helm’s Deep.”

Guilty as charged. He snorted at that. “Tell you what. You play twenty minutes of Beyoncé, and I’ll play twenty minutes of Mudvayne. Deal?”

She shot him a dubious glance. “Would you be open to swapping out Mudvayne for Metallica?”

That worked. Metallica was one of his favorite bands. “Consider it done.”

While Sloane got busy loading her playlist, Navarre’s gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. The two vehicles had moved closer, though still far enough away to avoid presenting as a threat. Even so, something about the situation made his senses tingle. He reached for the two-way radio again and paused a moment to choose his words carefully so he wouldn’t needlessly alarm Sloane.

“Our new friends are getting closer.”

“Copy that.” This time, Garrett’s voice came over the tiny speaker. “We’re monitoring the situation and will engage if necessary.”

Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. Movies and television shows made it seem as if danger lurked around every corner of a celebrity’s life. But in reality, most problems came from people with no respect for boundaries. The majority of them didn’t mean any harm; they were just rude. Some of them only needed a gentle yet firm reminder, but every so often you encountered a person who required a more forceful response.

They drove past an apple orchard, with its rows and rows of densely packed trees. In another month or two, they’d be in full bloom. If things worked out with this contract,

he might get to see them.

It was his understanding that Sierra had purchased the property specifically for its isolated location, then had the original home torn down and built a new one to her exact specifications. The result was a sprawling mountainside mansion, eight thousand square feet of living space with a game room, movie theatre, indoor swimming pool, and enough solar panels and battery capacity to keep the lights on in the event of a sustained power outage.

In addition, the home was equipped with the latest security technology, but it would also require a lot of manpower to ensure the property remained secure. Even though the real Sierra wouldn't be on site, they had to act as if she was. Thankfully, Austin had listened to his concerns and brought extra staff to the estate.

The punchy beat of "Single Ladies" came over the SUV's speakers. Sloane sang along, dancing in her seat, and the unabashed joy lighting her face hit him like a sucker punch.

Keep it professional, he reminded himself. It was a damn good thing he planned to spend most of the weekend on outdoor duty, far away from temptation. It didn't matter that he'd freeze his ass off. Keeping his job was more important. He forced his gaze back to the road, where it belonged, and refused to acknowledge the inappropriate thoughts filling his head.

Once again, farmland gave way to forest. Side streets were fewer and farther apart, many of them little more than dirt paths carved into the wilderness. The elevation climbed higher and higher, and the looming trees cast the road in shadows, even though it was mid-afternoon.

A flicker of movement caught Navarre's eye as they passed one of the rutted streets.

His gaze darted to the rearview mirror, just in time to see a full-sized pickup truck, with a massive steel wraparound grill guard, barrel out of the side road. It T-boned Jackson's SUV, and the sickening sound of metal against metal made Navarre's blood run cold. The SUV careened off the road, the tires on one side digging into the dirt along the shoulder, causing the vehicle to flip once, twice, before plunging down the ravine and out of sight.

"Fuck!" Navarre cut the wheel as he entered a turn, the back end sliding a little because he was going way too fast. That was the least of his troubles right now. He compensated for the slide. When they reached the straightaway, he punched the gas, and the vehicle shot forward.

"Oh my God, why aren't you stopping?" Sloane shouted, half turned in her seat, her voice a full octave higher than usual. "They need our help!"

Yes, they did, but years of training wouldn't allow it. "That's what they want us to do."

"They who?"

"Fuck if I know, but that wasn't an accident." His grip tightened, his knuckles white against the wheel.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:06 pm*

He wanted to stop, to make sure his friends and colleagues were okay, but he recognized an ambush when he saw one. He mentally kicked himself for not seeing it sooner, for not realizing the cars following them weren't actual photographers.

There wasn't anything he could do about that now. Pushing the grim thoughts aside, Navarre's gaze flicked to the mirror. The vehicles that had been trailing them were picking up speed and gaining ground, while the truck, its front metal bumper dragging on the ground, backed out of the ditch to join the pursuit.

"You mean they—" Shock widened Sloane's eyes. "That was on purpose?"

He bit back his sarcastic response, because picking a fight in the middle of a car chase wasn't going to do them any good.

"Is your phone working?" He flicked her a glance. "Can you call Jackson?"

She grabbed her phone, swiped at the screen, and frowned. "No signal."

He had a feeling she was going to say that. The GPS on the dash had gone offline moments after the truck rammed Jackson's vehicle. Either this neck of the woods had shit for reception, or their pursuers were jamming the signal. Either way, they were on their own.

"Hang on!" he barked. "And stay low. You're not getting killed on my watch."

In the city, he'd stand a decent chance of outmaneuvering the other vehicles, or losing them within the labyrinth of streets crisscrossing the landscape. He didn't have that

luxury out here, just a winding stretch of rural road with three hostiles in pursuit. His only chance was to stay out of reach until they got to Sierra's property.

That feat would be a lot easier to accomplish if their rental car wasn't such a pokey piece of shit. The winding roads made it damn near impossible to build up any kind of speed, and it wouldn't be long before the vehicles in his rearview mirror closed the remaining distance.

If the real Sierra was their intended target, they were in for one hell of a surprise. Unfortunately for them, once the hostiles figured out they were chasing an imposter, he and Sloane were as good as dead.

The SUV fishtailed as he rounded the next hairpin turn. Navarre turned the wheel in the direction of the skid and took his foot off the gas long enough for the tires to regain traction and hold the road. It worked, but it also gave the other vehicles ample opportunity to catch up with them. One of them swerved into the oncoming lane and pulled up alongside them. A dark-tinted window on the rear passenger side rolled down, revealing a white guy dressed in black with a big fucking gun that was pointed directly at them.

Teeth gritted, Navarre wrenched the wheel hard to the left and slammed the accelerator to the floor. The SUV veered into the oncoming lane, sideswiping the pursuing vehicle and forcing it off the road. Gunfire erupted from behind, each crack punctuating the chaos. One of their rear tires blew, and as the SUV lurched to the right, he fought to maintain control.

Sloane screamed at the top of her lungs.

His blood ran cold. "Are you hit?"

"No, I'm scared shitless." Her face was white, her eyes wild with fear. "I thought you

said the tires were bulletproof.”

“Nothing is completely bulletproof.”Technically, a run-flat tire could handle a bullet in the sense that it wouldn’t blow out upon impact like a regular tire.Instead, the reinforced sidewalls would allow the vehicle to be driven a limited distance at a reduced speed.

Unfortunately, they couldn’t afford to drive at a reduced speed, not if they wanted to stay alive.He had no choice but to keep his foot on the gas and use every last bit of his skill to keep the SUV on the road.

He glanced down at the dash and frowned.The gas tank must have also taken a round, because the gauge showed a lot less fuel than it did a few minutes ago.He muttered a curse.

“What is it?”she asked.“What’s wrong?”

“We’re running out of gas.”

Her eyes got even wider, a feat he hadn’t considered possible.She hunched down as bullets pinged off the vehicle’s armored plating.“We’re not going to make it, are we?”

“Shut up.We’re going to be fine.”That was a lie, and they both knew it.Bullets punctured the other back tire, and their vehicle was losing speed.At the rate they were going, they wouldn’t be mobile for much longer.Even if he managed to keep them on the road, the blown tires would make it impossible for them to stay ahead.

The black SUV pulled into the oncoming lane, the front of the vehicle pulling even with the back bumper of the rental.Navarre veered to the left, cutting them off, and he heard the sound of gunfire a split second before the driver’s side mirror shattered.

He wouldn't be able to hold them off for much longer. Eyes narrowed, he scanned the scenery ahead, searching for a suitable spot to ditch the vehicle. If possible, he'd rather be in control of where and when they came to a stop. It was their best chance of coming out of this alive.

"Listen up," he told Sloane. "I'm going to take us into that wooded area up ahead. When we come to a stop, I want you to get out and run like hell. I'll hang back and give you enough time to get away."

She gaped at him with a look of sheer horror. "Are you insane? You'll get killed!"

"I'll be fine." Maybe. There were no guarantees. "I've been in worse scrapes than this and made it out alive."

His words failed to allay her concerns. If anything, they seemed to make them worse. "You want me to run into the woods by myself? I won't know where I'm going!"

"Don't worry about it," he assured her. "I'll only be a few minutes behind. I'll find you, and then we'll find our way back to safety."

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She blew out a shaky breath. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

The fear in her eyes said she didn’t believe him, but she didn’t say it out loud. Lips pressed, she gave a curt nod and reached for the ceiling handle.

Navarre cut the wheel hard to the right and took them off the road. The SUV bounced like a bucking bronco, barreling through the dense vegetation. Branches slapped the vehicle from multiple angles, cracking the windshield and tearing off the remaining side-view mirror. He barely avoided hitting a tree, but momentum sent the back end slamming against another. The car spun several times, and by some miracle, they managed not to flip over.

Somewhere along the line, the airbags had deployed. Dazed and disoriented, Navarre unfastened his seat belt and stumbled from the vehicle. Fuck, his neck hurt—not surprising, considering what they just went through. He heard the sound of another door opening and caught a glimpse of Sloane streaking into the forest. From what he could tell, she appeared unharmed, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Now it was his responsibility to ensure she stayed that way.

The smell of gasoline fouled the air as the last of their fuel formed a puddle on the forest floor. Navarre shook his head to clear the fog as he pried the back door open, thankful he’d been paranoid enough to pack a bag of emergency provisions. It wasn’t standard procedure for these types of assignments, but then again, nothing about this assignment was standard.

Using the front of the SUV for cover, he drew his pistol, the cold steel a familiar weight in his hand. He aimed at the first of the vehicles that drove along the path he'd carved moments ago. Years of training clicked into place, his pulse slowing, senses sharpening to the point of hyperawareness. One by one, he blocked off his emotions, until the only thing left in his mind was ice-cold determination. His vision narrowed until he only saw his target. On the next exhale, he pressed the trigger, and the bullet pierced the SUV's windshield and tore into the driver.

Good thing their vehicles weren't armored.

The passenger door flew open and the remaining person dove for cover in the dense vegetation. With the driver dead, the SUV veered to the right, eventually coming to rest against the huge tree Navarre had narrowly missed. The vehicles behind it had stopped as well, but in a more controlled manner behind a thick stand of oaks.

Navarre fired three more rounds, and then took the opportunity to change position, moving back from the vehicle and taking a defensive stance behind a copse of pines.

"It doesn't have to end like this," a raspy masculine voice called out. "Just give us the woman, and you can walk out of here alive."

Yeah, right. Did they honestly think he'd buy that load of bullshit? As far as lies went, it ranked right up there with "the dog ate my homework," "I didn't know I was speeding, Officer," and "I swear, just the tip."

Stock-still, he scanned his surroundings, searching for the next target to kill. There, to his left, he spotted a man in dark clothes and a baseball cap creeping toward the armored vehicle, a pistol in his grip. Taking careful aim, he fired a shot and heard a pained grunt as the figure dropped out of sight.

The other side responded with an immediate barrage of gunfire that tore chunks out

of the pines that Navarre was using for cover. Head down, he dropped to a crouch and checked his gun to see how much ammo was left in the magazine. Not much. Not good. He had three more loaded magazines in his bag, but it wouldn't take long to burn through them.

He was outnumbered, outgunned, and he needed to find Sloane before any of these assholes got the chance. He laid out a spray of gunfire, emptying the magazine, and then quickly reloaded before escaping into the forest.

## Chapter 10

Sloane ran like a fox hunted by hounds, her lungs burning, legs aching, barely aware of the scrapes of branches against her face and neck. She skidded down a steep rocky slope, tearing one knee of her pants when she stumbled, too terrified to register the pain in her mind. She almost stopped a time or two, but the sound of gunfire had a way of pushing her beyond the limits of exhaustion.

She finally stopped in a small clearing when she couldn't breathe any longer. Bent at the waist, her whole body shaking, she sucked in huge gulps of chilled air and berated herself for not going to the gym more often.

So much for a nice relaxing weekend in Sierra's mountain retreat, eating good food, wearing stylish clothes, and enjoying a slice of the good life. Now she'd just be happy to make it to Monday morning in one piece.

Once she no longer felt as if she were going to throw up or pass out, she hugged her arms around her torso and tried to collect her bearings.

Was Navarre okay? Was he even alive? The questions haunted her thoughts. If he got hurt—or worse—because of her, she'd never forgive herself. She hadn't wanted to leave him behind, but what else could she have done? There wasn't a person on God's

green earth that would describe her as action hero material. Her preferred method of combat was with a keyboard and a mouse. Besides, it was what he'd told her to do. If she'd hung around, she would have been more of a liability than an asset.

Tilting her head back, she peered through the tops of the trees that surrounded her. Little by little, her breathing returned to normal, and when her heartbeat no longer pounded in her ears, other sounds crept in. The screech of a hawk. The yip of a coyote. Oh God, there might be bears out here. Or cougars. Maybe even wolves.

But the guys with guns were a whole lot scarier.

Needing to do something, she stepped cautiously through the woods. She had no idea where she was or where she was heading. For all she knew, she was walking right back into trouble, though it had been a few minutes since she'd last heard gunfire. Maybe it was better if she stayed in one spot until Navarre had a chance to find her.

A rustle of movement in the brush sent a fresh burst of adrenaline through her veins. She doubted it was Navarre. He struck her as the type who'd move through the forest with the grace of a tiger stalking prey, not lumber like a bull on Benadryl. Whatever it was, it sounded big, and that couldn't be good news for her. She picked up a long stick, for what good it might do, and wielded it like a club.

The rustling drew closer, and her heart leapt into her throat when a man wearing brown cargo pants and a camo jacket emerged from the dense brush. He was tall, at least six feet, with a rangy build, a gaunt face, and bleached-blond hair buzzed close to his scalp. Deep acne scars marked his cheeks. His nose looked as though it had been broken a few times and hadn't healed quite right.

His gaze swept over her body in a brazen appraisal that made her skin crawl. She'd been on the receiving end of that kind of stare before, and it never ended well. But



what worried Sloane even more was the pistol in his right hand, which made her stick pretty much worthless. For now, the barrel was pointed at the ground, but that could change in an instant.

He stepped toward her, his shoes crunching against the densely packed leaf litter, and she took a defensive step back.

“You’re even prettier than in the movies.” His gravelly voice carried a slight Southern accent. His mouth curved up on one side. “The boss said we have to bring you back alive. That doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun first.”

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Bile rose up in her throat. She shook her head. “No, no, you’re—you’re making a mistake. I’m not Sierra.”

“Of course you’re not.” His tone turned patronizing. “You’re just riding around in her car, and wearing her clothes, and just happen to look exactly like her.”

“Do I sound like Sierra?”

“Sweetheart, I got no idea how you talk in real life. All I know is what I hear in the movies. And what I see.” His gaze raked over her again. “Now how about we recreate the best part of Shock Factor?”

A shudder of revulsion swept over her. He was referring to Sierra’s first theatrical love scene that was also her first—and last—nude scene. All in all, it was tastefully done, but no way in hell was she acting it out with this creep.

For a moment or two, fear struck her speechless. When she finally regained the ability to form words, she said, “That’s not happening.”

The creep stepped closer, and she took another step back. “The way I see it, we can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Digging deep, Sloane tipped up her chin and channeled her best Sierra Page impression. “I’m not going anywhere or doing anything with you.”

His smirk broadened as his left hand drifted down to his belt. “I was kind of hoping you’d say that. It’s always more fun when they fight.”

Sloane's heart pounded so hard she feared she might pass out. She remembered a few basic self-defense moves from a class she took a year or so ago, but this guy was taller, heavier, and probably a lot meaner than her. No way was she going to simply give up, but she knew the odds were stacked against her.

A quiver of movement caught her attention, and she nearly wept with relief when Navarre emerged from the brush about twenty or so feet behind the guy, a pistol in one hand and a look of murder in his eyes. He pressed a finger to his lips to signal for her to not say or do anything that would alert the man to his presence.

Not a problem. She raised the stick higher. "Don't come near me. I mean it!"

The bastard had the nerve to laugh. "Sweetheart, perhaps you don't understand the gravity of your situation."

"Oh, I understand it just fine." She kept talking, because the more the guy focused on her, the less likely he'd notice Navarre. It was kind of impressive, how he moved without making a sound. "I've got some of the best security in the world. If you so much as lay one finger on me—"

"What, you mean those assholes we ran off the road?" The creep laughed, oblivious to the fact Navarre was less than a foot behind him. "Your driver should be dead by now. No one's going to—"

The rest of that sentence died in his throat when Navarre looped one arm around his neck and put him into a chokehold. His eyes popped wide as a strangled gasp slipped past his lips, but it was too late for him to fight. In a matter of seconds, the pressure of the hold cut off the flow of blood to his brain, rendering him unconscious. Navarre guided him to the ground and checked his pulse.

"Is he dead?" Sloane asked, her heart in her throat and her voice barely above a

whisper.

Navarre stripped the man of his weapons and restraints and tucked them into his pockets. “Not yet. Did he hurt you?”

“What do you mean, not yet? He can’t hurt us if he’s unconscious.”

Navarre grunted as he tugged the guy’s jacket off and tossed it aside. “What do you think he would have done to you if I hadn’t shown up? More important, what do you think he’s going to do when he comes around?”

A sickening feeling settled in her stomach as a host of possibilities flashed through her mind, each one worse than the last. “We’ll be long gone by then.”

“Are you willing to bet your life on that, or that he won’t hunt you down again?” Some of the edge had left his voice, but his body still radiated aggression like a heater radiated warmth. “We’ve got at least four hostiles after us, well trained and heavily armed, which means we can’t afford to assume anything but the worst. If you want to stay alive, we have to make sure this guy can’t come back to haunt us.”

“Can’t you do that in a way that doesn’t involve making him dead?”

Navarre stared down at the unconscious man, his jaw taut with tension. Shaking his head, he exhaled sharply and reached for the handcuffs. He rolled the man onto his stomach and secured his hands behind his back. Finished, he dug through his bag for a bandana and used it as a gag.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked. “It’s a bad move from a tactical standpoint.”

Sloane stared down at the creep. Already, he was starting to stir, his moan softened by

the gag. He'd wanted to do awful things to her. Just thinking about it made her skin crawl. Without a doubt, the guy was human garbage, but she couldn't bring herself to be okay with murdering him. "I don't want his blood on my hands."

"It wouldn't be on yours; it would be on mine."

"That's not true if I could have stopped it."

Navarre sighed. "As you wish."

He rolled the creep back over and slammed the heel of his boot against the guy's kneecap. The sickening crunch of bone filled the air, making Sloane cringe, though the noise was quickly drowned out by the guy's muffled scream, guttural and full of pain. Quick, relatively quiet, effective, and he did it without firing his weapon, which might have alerted the other men to their presence.

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“Problem solved. Now he can’t follow us.” Navarre bent to retrieve the man’s jacket and handed it to Sloane. “Put this on. Temperatures are going to plunge when the sun sets. Your jacket isn’t going to cut it.”

She hated the idea of wearing the creep’s clothes, but what Navarre said was true. Already, a chill had settled into her bones, and it wasn’t even all that cold yet. Not to mention, her bright-pink jacket made her easy to spot in the woods. Reluctantly, she slipped on the jacket and zipped it all the way up. It was huge on her, hanging halfway to her knees, the sleeves several inches too long. But even though it reeked of bad cologne, it did a much better job of warming her body than the one provided by Sierra’s staff, which was designed more for fashion than function.

It hit her then that Navarre had taken her comfort into consideration when he removed the creep’s jacket before handcuffing him. Not sure what else to say, she murmured a quick, “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me until we’re home. Now come on, let’s go. We only have a few hours of sunlight left.”

Jackson woke amid the wreckage, blinking a few times as his vision came into focus. The SUV had landed on its side at the bottom of a ravine. The windshield was a spider web of cracks, distorting the view outside.

A dull ache throbbed at the base of his skull, nearly drowning out the sound of birds chirping and the rattle of the car’s engine. As the haze of disorientation lifted, memories collided—the sudden impact, tumbling down the ravine.

Shit, was everyone all right?

The vehicle's engine made one final death rattle before it went silent.

He shifted in his seat and winced at a sharp stab of pain. Teeth clenched, he gently probed his torso and found warm, sticky wetness. Great, that meant he was bleeding, though he was unable to locate the source. There were no broken bones sticking out of his flesh or objects piercing the skin, just the seat belt digging into his side and holding him in place. Hopefully, it was only a superficial wound and nothing too serious. But he didn't have time to worry about that crap. There were more pressing matters to contend with.

He looked to his right and found Rosario slumped in her seat. Blood dripped like a leaky faucet from her broken nose, staining her shirt and the rumpled airbag wedged between her and the dashboard. But the steady rise and fall of her chest let him know that she was still alive. He could work with that.

He reached across the center console and nudged her shoulder. "Rosario, wake up."

A soft groan pushed past her lips, but her eyes remained closed.

To avoid aggravating the pain in his side, Jackson flipped down the visor so he could use the mirror to view the back seat. No sign of Garrett. That couldn't be good. He might have been ejected from the vehicle. Half of the back seat had been demolished by the force of the wreck, though he knew the damage would have been much worse if they hadn't been in a vehicle with armored plating.

Beside him, Rosario groaned again, louder this time. At last, her eyes cracked open. With the back of her hand, she wiped blood from her mouth and swore under her breath.

“Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty,” Jackson said. “How do you feel?”

“Like some asshole rammed us off the road.” The swelling around her broken nose made her sound like she had a bad cold. So far, the bruising was fairly light, but it would surely darken over time. She gently touched the bridge of her nose and sucked air through gritted teeth.

“First time broken?”

She nodded as she flipped down the visor and grimaced at her reflection.

“Congratulations,” he said in a bid for levity. “I was fourteen when I broke mine the first time. You’ve got some catching up to do.”

She laughed softly, and then sucked more air between her teeth.

Moving slowly, Jackson unfastened his seat belt, and the pain in his side went from a seven to a three. He searched for his phone and found it wedged between the seat and console. He swiped on the cracked screen. No reception. Fucking great. “Can you move?”

“Yeah.” To prove her point, she raised her hands, flexed her fingers, and turned her head from side to side. “I’m sore, but I don’t think anything besides my nose is broken.”

No amount of force could pry the door open, leaving them no choice but to climb out a window. Jackson stood a few feet from the wreckage, every cell in his body aching as a wave of disorientation washed over him. He braced one arm against a tree until the sensation passed. All things considered, it could have been so much worse. After what they’d just been through, they were lucky to be alive.



In spite of the blood and bruises, Rosario seemed steady on her feet. That was one less thing to worry about on a list a mile long.

He scanned the area, searching for Garrett, and frowned when he noticed a rumpled mass at the base of a tree twenty or so feet away. As he moved closer, the knot in his stomach tightened. Yep, it was Garrett, lying on his side in a patch of brush with his left leg bent at an unnatural angle. Fucking hell, that couldn't be good.

"Aw, shit," Rosario said from several feet behind him. "How bad is he?"

Jackson went down on one knee and pressed two fingers to the side of Garrett's neck. He found a pulse, weak but steady, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Carefully, he rolled Garrett onto his back and cataloged his injuries. Broken leg and wrist. A shitload of cuts and contusions. God only knew how many internal injuries. Probably a concussion as well. Long story short, the dude was a wreck.

Jackson glanced over his shoulder to Rosario. "He's alive, but he's pretty banged up. See if you can get into the trunk. There's an emergency kit and sat phone in there."

If they were lucky, the sat phone would be in one piece, and they could use it to call for help. Garrett was in no condition to move on his own, and they'd need special equipment to lift him out of the ravine.

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“The trunk’s smashed,” Rosario called out. “I’m going to try to get in through the back seat.”

While he waited, Jackson’s thoughts tracked back to the collision. It happened so fast, it was little more than a blur. But the fact Navarre was nowhere to be seen made it clear that this was no accident. His friend never would have left them down here without at least checking on them first. It went against everything he stood for.

It was safe to assume that Sierra Page was the intended target of the attack. Boy, were those assholes in for a surprise when they learned it was actually Sloane in the car with Navarre. How would they react? Probably not well. Possible scenarios raced through Jackson’s mind, not a damn one of them good. But he also reminded himself that Navarre was one of the best in the business. He’d been in far worse scrapes than this and made it out just fine.

Eyes still closed, Garrett groaned.

“Hey, buddy,” Jackson said. “Welcome back to the land of the living. Do you feel as bad as you look?”

One of Garrett’s eyes—the one that wasn’t swollen shut—cracked open. “That depends on how bad I look.”

“Well, it’s an improvement over how you normally look,” Rosario said as she approached. Her voice was light, but worry bracketed the corners of her mouth. She held a first-aid kit in one hand and a small metallic case containing the sat phone in the other.

Garrett let out a low chuckle and winced. “Jeez, don’t make me laugh. That fucking hurts.”

Add broken ribs to the list of probable injuries.

Rosario crouched beside them and handed the first-aid kit to Jackson. “The box is pretty beat up, but phone seems okay. Do you want to make the call, or should I?”

Finally, something to be thankful for. He unzipped the first-aid kit and took out a pack of antiseptic wipes. “Call it in while I work on Garrett. Let them know we need immediate medical assistance, a Cat One search and retrieval team, and a heavy-duty tow truck for the rental.”

Jackson’s thoughts tracked back to Navarre. They’d worked countless ops together, both in the military and at Six Points. He knew from firsthand experience just how lethal Navarre could be. But he was only one man against an unknown number of assailants. Plus, he had an unarmed civilian to protect.

Fifty bucks said Navarre mopped the floor with them.

## Chapter 11

Sloan struggled to match Navarre’s blistering pace through the rugged terrain. She wasn’t accustomed to this level of physical activity. They’d been climbing this hill for what seemed like forever, and all the muscles in her legs felt as though they were on fire. It didn’t help that her boots weren’t designed for this sort of activity, without any kind of support or protection for a hike over uneven ground.

She tripped over a tree root and almost fell flat on her face. “Will you please slow down? I can barely keep up.”

He did better than that; he stopped dead in his tracks and rounded on her, the lines of his face tight with tension. “In case you’ve forgotten, we’re being pursued by multiple armed hostiles who may have already killed three of our teammates. We’re outmanned, outgunned, and running out of daylight. Our prime objective at this moment is to put as much distance between us and them as humanly possible. Find a way to move faster.”

He turned back around and resumed his pace, leaving her no choice but to trail after him at a near-jog. All the while, she couldn’t stop thinking about Jackson, Rosario, and Garrett. Last she saw, their car had plunged down into what looked like a pretty steep ravine. How deep or what was at the bottom, she had no idea. The vehicle’s armored plating might have provided some measure of protection, but she doubted they’d walked away from the wreckage unscathed. They probably needed medical attention, and with no phone reception in the area—

She refused to entertain the possibility, though she was pretty sure it was living rent free in Navarre’s head. From what she’d heard, the personal protection division was a close-knit group. His connection to Jackson ran even deeper. They’d been friends for a long time and had served together in combat. If she remembered correctly, they were also roommates. It only made sense for him to worry. No wonder he was in such a foul mood.

When Navarre finally stopped at the edge of a clearing, she almost barreled right into him. He shrugged off his pack and reached inside for what appeared to be a satellite phone, but it looked like a chunk of it was missing. He frowned. “Shit, my phone caught a round.”

“You got shot?”

“No, my pack got shot.” To make his point, he poked his finger through a hole in the fabric near the top of the bag.

“Were you wearing it at the time?”

“Yeah, I think so.” He said it casually, as if that kind of thing happened to him on a regular basis. Who knew, maybe it did. “It must have happened when I left the car to find you. Can you see if your phone has a signal?”

Her pulse skipped, because she knew he wasn’t going to like her answer. “I can’t. It’s in the car.”

For a few long seconds, he just looked at her, disbelief clear on his face. “You left your phone in the car?”

“It flew out of my hand when we crashed. What was I supposed to do, stick around and paw through the wreckage until I found it? That would have been kind of hard with all the bullets flying around.”

He made a rude noise as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Please tell me it’s password protected.”

It was all she could do not to smack him upside the head. “Of course it’s locked. And no, the password isn’t something simple like 1-2-3-4-5. I’m an IT professional. What kind of idiot do you think I am? Don’t answer that,” she quickly added.

“For fuck’s sake,” Navarre muttered. He dragged a hand through his sandy brown hair as he stared straight down at his shoes. “If you’d been trained for this sort of situation—”

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“Oh, give me a break,” she snapped. She was sick of his judgmental attitude, and she wasn’t putting up with it anymore. “No amount of training would have mattered. I could have been Rambo with ovaries back there and it wouldn’t have made a damn bit of difference.”

“You could have provided cover fire.”

She made a sound to convey her disdain. “My job—my only job—was to play the role of Sierra Page, period, end of story. If she’d been there instead of me, would you have expected her to provide cover fire?”

The muscles along his jaw flexed, but he didn’t utter a word.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. Jackass.” It was official: she was out of fucks to give. She jabbed his chest with her index finger. “Stop holding me to impossible standards. It’s totally unfair and unrealistic, and I’m not going to put up with that bullshit anymore.”

She stomped off in the direction they’d been heading, too angry to care if she was leaving a trail or if Navarre was following her. Screw him. She’d find her own way home, even if it took two months and she had to subsist on a diet of tree bark and berries.

The sound of footsteps in the distance behind her indicated he’d chosen to follow. Then again, it might not be him. It could be a wolf or a mountain lion. Or a bear. Or maybe one of those knuckle-dragging goons who was after them. The thought sent a sliver of fear down her spine that settled in the pit of her stomach. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, venturing off on her own wasn’t one of her brightest ideas. In

general, she wasn't a fan of cutting off her own nose to spite her face.

Giving in to the urge, she tossed a glance over her shoulder and refused to acknowledge the rush of relief that came with the sight of Navarre. Like it or not, he made her feel safe, even out here in the middle of nowhere. There was power in the taut lines of his body, a strength that filled the air around him. He'd saved her from that creep. Looking back, he'd been pretty badass. That had to count for something, although she'd never admit it to him.

It didn't take long for him to catch up with her. He fell in line with the pace of her steps, not speaking a word, which was good, because she really didn't have anything nice to say to him. He finally broke the silence as they entered a stand of trees that grew along a bubbling stream, careful to avoid a patch of poison ivy.

"You're right," he said, and she stopped in her tracks. "I was out of line. I'm sorry."

Stunned, she turned her head toward him. Wow, a man who could actually admit he was wrong. How rare was that? "That had to hurt."

He huffed out a breath. "You have no idea."

They stood at the water's edge, a foot or so apart, neither seeming to know what to say next. Navarre rooted through his bag, took out a collapsible water bottle, and filled it with water from the stream. He dropped two tablets into the bottle, screwed on the lid, and put it back in his bag.

"By the way, thank you for saving me from that guy," Sloane said when she couldn't stand the awkward silence a minute longer.

"You're welcome." He still carried himself with an air of confidence, but now there was something else in the mix that she couldn't quite identify. He reached up to tuck a

strand of hair behind her ear, and the brush of his fingers against her skin sent sparks of awareness through her. “You should have let me kill him.”

“Maybe next time.” Though probably not. Call her naïve, but she wasn’t okay with killing a person who posed no immediate threat. Hopefully that act of mercy wouldn’t come back to bite them on the butt. She’d never hear the end of it.

Navarre’s mouth curved up a fraction. When his eyes met hers, warmth filled her chest, erasing the earlier tightness.

“So what do we do now?” she asked.

He turned his head, giving her his profile as he stared out at the water. “Stay alive, evade the enemy, and find our way to civilization, in that order.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds easy.”

“It’s not, but there’s no alternative, so we’ll find a way to make it happen.”

The calm conviction in his voice served as a balm on her frazzled nerves. This wasn’t his first rodeo. He’d served in Special Forces during his time with the military. In all likelihood, he’d survived worse scrapes than this. Knowing that gave her a glimmer of hope that they weren’t so screwed after all. She gestured to the rucksack slung over his right shoulder. “What else you got in the bag?”

“A few basic necessities, first-aid kit, ammo. Thankfully, the ammo didn’t catch a round. That could have ended badly.”

“How much ammo is in there?”

His mouth set into a grim line. “Not enough.”



She was kind of hoping for a more definitive answer, but it wasn't like she knew how much ammo was enough, so she'd take his word for it. "Did anything else in there get damaged?"

"Probably. I'll do a more thorough assessment before it gets dark." He glanced up at the sky, where the sun had already begun its descent. "We need to keep moving. There isn't much daylight left."

During his years in the Army, Navarre had visited a lot of foreign lands and eaten foods that most Americans would consider appalling. Like fried tarantula or roasted cuy. One time, on a dare, he'd even tried fugu—one star, would not recommend. But none of them could hold a candle to the sour taste of crow.

He moved a branch out of their path as they started up the next hill. There was no way around it: he'd acted like an ass. Worse, his actions had offended Sloane, and that meant it was his responsibility to make things right. It was one of the lessons his mother had drilled into him that he followed to this very day. Thankfully, Sloane had accepted his apology without making him grovel, which he very much appreciated, and now he could focus his attention on more important matters, like keeping them both alive and trying to figure out who'd put a price on Sierra's head.

Not many people had enough money lying around to hire a team of mercenaries to kidnap a celebrity, especially one as high-profile as Sierra Page. Her ex was the most obvious suspect. By all accounts, the man was unbalanced. But it could also be an obsessed fan, or someone who harbored a grudge for any number of reasons. In celebrity circles, those reasons could be anything from stealing a prized movie role to a perceived slight on a social media post.

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No matter the reason, the mercs seemed to want Sierra alive, which he could use to his advantage. Still, there was no way of knowing how far they were willing to go to accomplish their mission, and until he could get Sloane back to safety, it was better to stay far away and avoid engagement.

Inevitably, his thoughts drifted to Jackson, Garrett, and Rosario. Up until now, he hadn't allowed himself to even consider the possibility that they hadn't survived the crash. That Jackson's wife was now a widow, and two young agents would never have a future. Just thinking about it made his stomach churn.

Man, what a clusterfuck. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, at a serious tactical disadvantage, and saddled with a civilian with no survival training. It could be worse, but it could also be a hell of a lot better.

For now, his only course of action was to play the hand he'd been dealt and make the most of a bad situation. One way or another, he'd come out on top. His steadfast refusal to accept defeat was one of his best traits.

Everyone else just said he was stubborn. Potayto, potato.

The incline grew steeper as they neared the crest of a hill. With each step, Navarre could feel the growing burn in his quads and calves. It triggered a memory from years ago, on a very different mountain range halfway around the world. Back then, he'd frozen his ass off on a rocky crevice for nearly a week until he finally got a clean line on a warlord who'd spent the better part of a year attacking coalition troops. One shot, one kill. Same as it ever was. Then he'd evaded enemy forces for two long days and three longer nights until he finally reached a place where a Blackhawk helicopter

could extract him and the rest of his team.

He glanced at Sloane, who clearly wasn't accustomed to this type of exertion in these types of conditions. To be fair, not many people were. Her face was flushed, her brow damp with sweat. The hair that had once been expertly styled was now tucked behind her ears and plastered against her head.

All things considered, she'd done pretty well, and without much in the way of complaints, not even when she'd stumbled and made the hole in the knee of her pants bigger. That earned her points in his book.

"Let's take a quick break," he said as he came to a stop. It was a good location for it. They had the high ground, which allowed him to spot anybody approaching from a fair distance away, while the dense vegetation provided cover. If he were on his own and didn't have to worry about another person's welfare, he would have used this spot to lay in wait and pick off their pursuers one by one. When given the choice, he'd much rather be on the offense.

Relief bloomed on Sloane's face. She sat on the ground with her back against an oak, closed her tired eyes, and let out a soft sigh.

Navarre chose a spot a few feet away, and he had to admit that it felt pretty good to be off his feet for the first time in hours. He spared a moment to study her profile, noting the graceful curve of her jawline, the straight slope of her nose, the pout of her full, lush lips. The tiny hole along the side of her nose that a diamond stud usually adorned. Her makeup had worn off long ago, bringing back each subtle feature that made her unique into focus.

She really was quite beautiful, and he wasn't thinking that because of her resemblance to Sierra Page. To the contrary, he wished her hair was back to its normal brown with red highlights, because they suited her so much better than the garish

platinum blonde.

“What is it?”she asked when she caught him staring.

He averted his gaze.“Nothing.”

“It didn’t look like nothing.”Her eyes narrowed.“Is something wrong that you don’t want to tell me?Whatever it is, I can handle it, I promise.”

“I’m sure you can.Everything’s fine—well, fine considering the circumstances.”He reached into his pack for the bottle he’d filled at the stream an hour or so ago.By now the purification tablets had rendered the water safe for human consumption.The stream had looked clean and clear, but it never hurt to be careful.Another lesson he’d learned the hard way.“Here, you need to keep hydrated.”

She accepted the bottle with a simple “thanks” and took a long drink, and the way her throat muscles moved when she swallowed shouldn’t have had that kind of effect on him.But it did.And when she pulled the bottle back and licked her lips, he couldn’t help but wonder how they’d feel wrapped around—

He slammed the door on that line of thought.Nothing good could come of it.

Annoyed at himself for the lapse in discipline, he shifted his attention to the lower elevations, searching for potential threats, human, animal, or otherwise.He knew better than to think about Sloane that way, especially now that he needed to be at his absolute best in order to keep them both alive.He couldn’t afford to allow emotions to get in the way of cold, hard pragmatism.

“What’s wrong?”The sound of Sloane’s voice did a better job at cutting through the fog in his brain than his shitty internal pep talk.

Reluctantly, he returned his focus to her. “Nothing. Why?”

“It sounded like you were growling.”

That couldn’t possibly be true. “I don’t growl.”

“Could have fooled me.” She held out the bottle. “I only drank half. You should have the rest.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. You drink it.”

She made one of those soft huffing sounds to signal her disagreement. “You’re the one who keeps harping about how important it is to stay hydrated.”

“I can survive without water for three days. Don’t ask how I know.” It was a long story, not very pleasant, and one he didn’t like sharing.

She stared at him as though he were the kind of guy who needed to be told not to clean his ears with a power drill. “I have no idea if that’s true or not, but why would you want to do that to yourself when it’s not necessary?”

She had a point. It annoyed the shit out of him. Since when was she the one who made the most sense in the field? Maybe he was getting dehydrated, and it was making his brain fuzzy. He took the bottle, drank the last of its contents, collapsed the container, and stuffed it into his pack. He’d refill it the next time they came across a body of water.

According to his map, there was a small lake not far from their position. Of course, it meant going down one steep hill and up another, but forward movement also kept them beyond the reach of men with guns. He had no idea how much distance separated them, so their best bet was to keep moving as far and fast as possible for as

long as possible, until they either reached Sierra's estate or a Six Points team found them. By now, Austin had to know things went sideways and organized a search and rescue group.

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Navarre pushed to his feet and slung the pack over his shoulders.

“We better get moving.” He offered his hand to hoist her up, and when her slender fingers curled around his, the sparks of electricity that shot up his arm were difficult to ignore.

Her eyes flicked up, meeting his, and it felt like something shifted inside him that he couldn’t find the words to describe. Heat, yes, but it was more intense than that...dark and deep and bordering on primal. It shook him to the core.

Even if he was open to those kinds of feelings—and he certainly was not—this wasn’t the time or place for that kind of shit. More likely than not, they were simply a byproduct of the stress of the situation. Once things returned to normal, they’d probably dissipate so fast he’d doubt they ever existed.

At least that’s what he told himself.

Gently, he released his grip and jerked his chin toward the east. “Think you’ve got enough in the tank to make it to the top of that hill before sunset?”

Her expression said no, but she nodded. “Sure.”

More points. Much to his surprise, she was racking up the score. Not bad for a city girl.

“All right, let’s get to it.”

## Chapter 12

By the time they reached the hill's crest, the sun had begun its descent below the tree line, casting the land in a soft orange glow. Every muscle in Sloane's body ached with exhaustion, but standing atop the summit filled her with a profound sense of accomplishment.

She peered down at the valley below, nestled between two towering ridges, its floor dotted with clusters of trees and meandering streams. It was the first time since fleeing into the forest that she'd actually taken the time to appreciate the beauty all around her. Under different circumstances, it would have been relaxing, peaceful. But she couldn't look at it that way, not with a group of heavily armed mercenaries hot on their heels.

"This looks like a good place to stop for the night." Navarre slipped the rucksack off his shoulders and set it on the forest floor. "It's high, dry, relatively flat, and I can use that fallen tree over there to build us a shelter."

She followed his gaze to the massive pine, its trunk snapped a few feet above the soil. The tangled twist of limbs still bore a touch of green, and she assumed there was more than enough material for shelter construction. However, with night fast approaching, time was of the essence.

Already, the air had turned crisp, with the temperature expected to dip near freezing overnight. And while the creep's camo jacket had kept her warm during the day's long hike, she doubted its insulation would be enough to keep her comfortable until the sun's return the following morning.

"I assume a fire's out of the question."

As expected, he nodded, but at least he didn't look happy about it either. "I'm sorry,



but it could lead them straight to us.”

After hiking for hours that felt like days, Sloane wasn't in the mood to argue. Her legs were tired, her feet were killing her, and the persistent throb that lurked in her temples was getting harder to ignore. Besides, she knew he was right. Although a fire would be nice and cozy, she'd rather feel safe enough to close her eyes and get a few hours' rest. “How can I help?”

Hands on his hips, Navarre scanned the area, his gaze sharp and assessing. “We need materials to build a shelter: moss, leaves, branches, stuff like that. See what you can find and bring it here.”

She gave him a mock salute. “I'm on it.”

It didn't take long to gather enough supplies to create a makeshift shelter. Only it didn't look like a shelter by the time Navarre was finished. It didn't look like much of anything at all, which she assumed was the point.

Instead of building a structure resembling a tent or a lean-to, he'd used the materials to create a burrow of sorts, a hidey-hole carved along a stretch of the fallen tree that blended in with the twisted branches and surrounding vegetation. If she hadn't watched him build it, she wouldn't have even noticed it was there.

“Did they teach you how to do that in the Army?” she asked, and he nodded.

“Part of a sniper's job is to blend with his or her environment.” He cast her an assessing glance. “How are you holding up? I'm sorry; I should have asked earlier.”

“I'm okay.” That was a lie. She fully expected to wake up tomorrow morning feeling like the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*: stiff, creaky, and in desperate need of oil. But he didn't need to know that. “My feet are just a little sore. These boots aren't

built for hiking.”

That was the understatement of the day. Boots like these were made for a night at the club, not time in the great outdoors. It was a wonder she hadn’t lost a heel yet, though she was pretty sure they’d rubbed blisters on both feet.

Navarre’s gaze slid down to her feet. “Take your boots off.”

“What—why?” She stared at him as though he’d lost his mind. “They’re not great, but they’re better than nothing.”

His expression remained unchanged. “I don’t want you to get rid of them; just take them off for a few minutes.”

“Again, why?”

He raised one eyebrow. “Don’t you trust me?”

“That’s not the point,” she said. “My feet are swollen from walking all day. If I take them off, I might not be able to get them back on.”

“Sure you will.”

“And what happens if we need to get moving in a hurry?”

His voice softened, as though he were trying to reason with a child. “From this vantage point, I can see if anyone’s coming from a good distance away. You’ll have plenty of time to put your shoes back on.”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t know...”

“What’s the problem, Sloane?” His lips curved up on one side. “Do you have some sort of puritanical fear of an adult man seeing your bare ankles?”

“No, not at all.”

“Do your feet look like they should be attached to a creature that can swoop down over a lake and snatch a fish out of the water?”

Laughing, she swatted his shoulder. “My feet aren’t the most attractive part of my body, but they don’t look like they belong on a dragon.”

“Then there shouldn’t be any problem.” He sat on the forest floor and unzipped his

rucksack.

She lowered herself to the ground beside him, and she could have sworn her muscles gave a collective sigh of relief. “Do you have some sort of foot fetish that I don’t know about?”

“Quit stalling and take off your boots.”

Resigned to her fate, she blew out a breath. “Fine.”

She unzipped her boots, and the simple act of tugging them off felt as if she’d released a pressure valve. It was like her feet had been holding their breath all day and could finally exhale.

Navarre shifted position and propped her feet onto his lap. He picked up her right foot, used his thumbs to apply pressure to her arch, and she couldn’t stop from moaning out loud.

“Oh God, that feels good.”

He did it again, applying a little more pressure this time, and she clamped her jaw shut to keep from making more noise.

“Who taught you how to do that?” she finally managed to choke out.

His hands stilled a moment before he continued his ministrations. “Buddy of mine in the Army.”

Okay, she hadn’t expected that answer. It snapped her out of her massage-induced brain fog. “A buddy?”

“You learn a lot of weird shit when you’re stuck with each other in the middle of nowhere for an extended period of time.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.”

His hands moved from her arch to the ball of her foot, gentle strokes soothing tired muscles, and it felt so incredibly good, her eyes nearly rolled to the back of her skull. “There was this time. I don’t know, maybe six or seven years ago. We were sent to an outpost as part of an operation to neutralize insurgent forces in the area.”

“When you say neutralize, you mean kill, right?”

“Not always, but that was the general understanding for this op. Anyway, we cleared out a few cells that had been working in the area before winter set in. All in all, the locals were pretty happy about it. They invited us to the village for a celebratory feast of...well, I assumed it was goat, but who knows.”

He gave each toe individual attention, and she could feel the stress leaving her body. “Then things got quiet. And cold, really cold. But we still had to go out on patrols, because you have to make sure new insurgents don’t move in and take the place of the old ones. A day out in the rocky terrain is murder on your feet. One of the guys in my unit was dating a massage therapist. He showed us a thing or two.”

Finished with her right foot, he switched to the left and gave it the same glorious treatment. “He was a good guy, one of the best I ever served with, the type who always found a way to get along with anybody. He was planning to ask the therapist to marry him the next time he went home on leave.”

“Are you still in touch?”

“No.” A shadow crossed his features. “Our convoy got ambushed the following

spring. The armored vehicle Cory was driving got hit with a rocket. Poor bastard was still alive when we pulled him out of the wreckage. The damage to his body was so extensive the medic didn't know where to start." Navarre had a faraway look in his eyes, as though he were reliving the memory. "Long story short, he never got to marry the therapist."

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Sloane's heart ached for him. She couldn't imagine what the experience had cost him, and she doubted that was the only loss he'd endured during his time on active duty. "I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about. You're not the prick who killed him."

True, but she hadn't meant to dredge up painful memories. "Did you ever catch the guys who did it?"

Navarre nodded. "The village elders didn't want to get involved, but we finally convinced them to let us know where to search for the men responsible. We found them two days later, camped out in the mountains less than a kilometer from the border. We waited to strike until around two in the morning, when there was only one person guarding the encampment. I took out the guard, and my team took care of the rest. It didn't make Cory any less dead, but at least we made sure those assholes wouldn't send anyone else home in a body bag."

Finished massaging her feet, he reached into his rucksack for the first-aid kit.

"What's that for?"

"You have broken blisters on both heels. They need to be treated."

That didn't surprise her in the least. Her feet had been aching for hours. But she didn't feel right about using their limited resources for something that wasn't a dire emergency. "Is that really necessary? I mean, yeah, it hurts, but it's not life threatening. Wouldn't it be better to save that stuff in case we really need it, like if one

of us gets shot or falls off a cliff?”

A brief flicker of amusement crossed his face. “If one of us gets shot or falls off a cliff, we’ll be beyond the help of anything in this bag.” He tore open the package of antibacterial wipes. “If we don’t treat them, they could get infected, which is a lot more painful and will hinder your ability to move freely. That wouldn’t be helpful in our present situation.”

Deep down, she knew he was right, even if she didn’t want to admit it. “Fine, but I’ll do it.”

“No, I got it. Just hold still for a minute.”

He made quick work of sterilizing the wounds, which was good, because it stung like crazy, but then he applied some ointment and the sting quickly faded. Then he fashioned a bandage out of gauze and medical tape that shielded the blisters from further abrasion.

“How does that feel?” he asked.

She rotated her ankle and smiled when she didn’t feel any pain. “Better. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled, the first time she’d seen him smile all day, and it warmed her from the inside out. “Now let’s see if you can get your boots back on.”

It was a tight fit, but she managed to squeeze into them without disrupting the bandages. “All good; thanks again.”

He packed the supplies back into his bag and stood. “It’s going to be dark soon. Might as well settle in for the night.”



Sloane accepted the hand he offered, and a hum of awareness buzzed through her body. She ignored it, turning her gaze to the west, where the sun was barely a sliver over the tree line. He was right; it wouldn't be long before twilight turned to night. Already, shadows blanketed the valley below. A breeze blew from the north, and the chill penetrated her jacket and sent a shiver through her.

Navarre made a sweeping motion for her to enter the makeshift shelter. "There isn't much room, so make sure to go in feet-first. Take the spot by the tree trunk. It's better insulated; you'll be warmer."

The entrance wasn't more than a foot or so wide. She peered inside at the carpet of leaf litter, moss, and pine boughs. She understood the importance of having a thick layer of insulation against the cold, hard earth. But the city girl in her shuddered. "We're going to get ticks, aren't we?"

"It's a possibility," he said, not seeming bothered in the least. "But it beats the alternative."

"Which is?"

"Hypothermia. Capture. Or worse."

Well, he had a point there. Being uncomfortable was better than being dead, but she didn't have to be happy about it. Still, she wasn't about to complain. Like he said, it beat the alternative, and she appreciated his efforts to keep her safe and warm.

It's only for one night, she reminded herself as she crawled into the shelter. When this was all over, and they were back in civilization, she was going to take the longest, hottest shower in recorded history.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked when he didn't move to follow her.

“In a minute,” he said. “I need to cover our tracks.”

“Can I help?”

He shook his head. “No, I got it.”

Without much else to do, Sloane settled into the shelter. There wasn't a whole lot of room inside, though at least it was long enough for her to stretch out her legs. But the lack of light and the constant reminder of their precarious position made her feel like a bunny hiding in a burrow.

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Good thing she wasn't claustrophobic.

Still, it was a welcome refuge from the ever-looming threat of discovery. And it sure as hell beat sleeping out in the open, where they'd have no relief from the cold.

Navarre slid into the shelter ten or so minutes later and filled the remaining space beside her. He arranged a tapestry of branches and moss across the opening to conceal their presence. It also plunged them into near-total darkness, something she wasn't thrilled about, but she supposed the added warmth and security made the trade-off worthwhile.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, his voice low.

"Cold. Hungry. Every muscle in my body hurts." Exhaustion crept into her words, though she doubted the adrenaline lingering in her system would allow her to fall asleep anytime soon. "Other than that, I'm doing great."

He laughed softly. She heard the sound of rustling, followed by a sharp crack, and then a soft glow illuminated the shelter.

"You brought glow sticks?"

"Only a few. You never know when you'll be caught in a place where visibility is an issue." He handed it to her. "It'll only last a few hours, so enjoy it while you can."

"Isn't this going to make us easier to find?"

“Nah, we’re good.It’s not bright enough to be seen outside.”

“Are you sure?”

Navarre looked at her as if the answer was obvious.“Tell you what...if we hear any movement out there, we’ll cover it up to be safe.”

He rummaged around in his rucksack, and a minute or so later, he handed her a meal bar.“Here, eat this.It’s not much, but it’ll take the edge off your hunger.”

Her stomach grumbled just looking at it, and how pitiful was that?“How many of those do you have?”

“Not a lot.You can have another one in the morning.Just make sure to give me the wrappers.I don’t want to leave a trail.”

“Thank you.”She tore the wrapper and bit into the bar, surprised by the rich flavors of cinnamon and blueberries.She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, probably something that tasted as if it were packed with enough preservatives to survive the apocalypse.A little on the chewy side, but she could deal with that.She swallowed a bite and tore off another, and as she chewed, she noticed Navarre wasn’t eating.“Aren’t you going to have one?”

He shook his head.“I’ll be fine until morning.”

She knew for a fact he hadn’t eaten since breakfast.Considering what they’d gone through, how far they’d hiked, the man had to be starving.“Are you saying that because you’re not hungry, or because there isn’t enough for both of us?”

“I’ve gone days without eating.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” She shifted a little to see him better in the soft light. “You’re not going to do either of us any good if you’re running on fumes.”

His heavy exhale filled the small space, a sure sign she’d made a point he didn’t like but couldn’t refute. “Just eat the damn bar. You’ll need your strength. We’ve got a big day ahead of us tomorrow.”

She finished her food and handed Navarre the wrapper. He tucked it into his bag, and then took out a package no bigger than his hand. He removed the wrapper, unfolded the material, again and again and again, revealing a blanket with a camouflage pattern that he used to cover them both. The material was paper thin but surprisingly warm, and she couldn’t have been more thankful that he’d planned ahead for unexpected emergencies.

And just when she thought he couldn’t surprise her anymore, he extended his arm and tucked her against his side.

“I’m not making a move,” he said, his voice rough. “Shared heat will help us stay warm.”

That worked for her. The man radiated heat like a furnace. Tense muscles relaxed as she nestled into the crook of his arm, her hand resting on the front of his black leather jacket. Already, her eyelids were growing heavy; maybe she wouldn’t have such a hard time falling asleep after all.

“I’m sorry about the size of the shelter,” Navarre said. “But making it larger might attract unwanted attention. Odds are those mercs didn’t bring night vision goggles, so they shouldn’t be looking for us now that the sun’s gone down. But if they did, and they come across this clearing, they won’t notice us.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because they’ll be searching for tracks or a more obvious shelter.”His confidence was unwavering, and it gave her a sense of assurance.“They’ll assume a celebrity like Sierra Page wouldn’t agree to crawl into a shelter dug against the side of a tree.”He adjusted their position, drawing her closer, his breath warm against her hair.“This isn’t my first time being hunted.”

Thoughts of sleep gave way to curiosity.She tilted her head to look up at him.“When were you hunted?Was that during your time in the Army?”

“Some of it.”He didn’t elaborate, and it only made her more curious.

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She waited a full minute before giving in to the urge. “Care to share the details?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t say stuff like that and not expect me to want to know more. Besides, how else are we going to pass the time?” Okay, that probably wasn’t the best question to ask. A few suggestions immediately sprang to mind that she had no business entertaining.

But she did.

And her body heated a little more.

Navarre’s eyes focused on hers with an intensity that held her in place. His heart thudded, strong and steady, under the weight of her palm. This close, she could make out every line on his face, could see the tiny scar near the corner of his right eye that she’d never noticed before, and a part of her wished he’d make a move because she didn’t have the guts to do it.

Instead, he blinked, and it broke the spell. “I can’t give you details. Those missions were classified. But I can tell you that I was trained to stalk, to hunt, and to evade detection. I was very good at my job, and I’ll use every one of those skills to keep you safe from danger.”

There was such conviction in his voice; he wasn’t just saying it to make her feel better. He was saying it because he truly believed it. He considered it a foregone conclusion. And that confidence gave her hope that they’d make it out of this mess in

one piece.

She swallowed hard. “Good to know.”

He took the glow stick from her hand and placed it beneath the blanket, plunging the shelter into darkness. But this time she didn’t feel like a bunny in a burrow. She felt safe, because he was there.

“Try to get some sleep,” he said. “It’s been a long day; you must be exhausted. I’ll wake you before first light.”

That sounded an awful lot like he intended to stay up all night, which was ridiculous. He needed rest too. “You’re going to get some sleep, right?”

There was a pause before he answered. “One of us needs to stay awake in case there’s trouble. I’ll be fine. I’ve gone days without sleep.”

It was all she could do not to roll her eyes. Not that it mattered in the darkness.

“You keep saying these things like they’re a badge of honor. Why do that to yourself when it’s not necessary?” She continued before he could argue. “How about you let me sleep a few hours, and then you sleep for a few?”

“Sure, whatever.”

He’d agreed to that way too quickly. It made her suspicious. “If I go to sleep, will you really wake me up in a few hours, or are you just saying that to shut me up?”

He let out a sigh. “You don’t trust easily, do you?”

“Give me a reason to trust, and I will.”



“And what will that take?”

“Your word is enough. Break it, and I’ll never trust you again.”

Another sigh. “Done. You have my word that I’ll wake you in a few hours so you can take the next shift. Happy?”

“Delighted.”

## Chapter 13

Midnight in the emergency room was not where Jackson had expected the day to lead him.

He stared straight down at the sterile white tiles because the bright fluorescent lights hurt his eyes. After hours of being poked and prodded, the doctors had finally discharged him, though he’d yet to leave the hospital. Last he’d heard, Rosario was on the third floor getting her broken nose reset. Considering that was the worst of her injuries, she’d gotten off fairly lucky.

The waiting room door swung open, and Austin Flint strode inside, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in each hand. He looked pissed, which was to be expected, given their current situation.

“Don’t get up,” he said, and Jackson planted his ass back onto the cracked vinyl seat. He knew not to mess with the boss when he was in a mood.

Jackson uttered a simple “thanks” when Austin handed him one of the cups. He sampled the coffee—it tasted awful and was only lukewarm, but he needed the caffeine boost so he drank it anyway. “Any word on Garrett?”

“He’s still in surgery. Last I heard it’s going to be awhile before he gets out.” Austin drank a swig of his coffee and grimaced. “Christ, that’s awful. That’s what I get for buying coffee out of a vending machine.”

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He set the cup on one of the few spots on the waiting room table that wasn't littered with magazines. "How are you holding up?"

Jackson shrugged and fought not to wince. "I've been through worse."

"That's not what I'm asking."

Yeah, he knew that. He just hated acknowledging his own injuries. It reminded him of his own mortality, and that was a subject he'd rather not think about. "Possible concussion, cracked ribs. Six stitches to take care of whatever caught my right side. Other than that, I'm fresh as a daisy."

Austin chuffed out a breath. "Have you talked with Essie yet?"

"Yeah." It was the first thing he'd done when he reached a place with cell phone reception. He'd told the love of his life not to worry, that he'd be just fine, but that hadn't deterred her from booking the first flight to North Carolina. It was totally unnecessary, but he loved her all the more because she'd done it without hesitation. "She should be here in a few hours."

"Good. Text me her flight information, and I'll send one of the guys to the airport to pick her up."

"Thanks, boss." It was nice to work for a company that treated their employees with respect. "Any word on Navarre and Sloane?"

Austin shook his head, frustration evident on his face. "Nothing yet. We've got a team

on scene trying to piece together what happened.”

“It was well planned out.They knew we were coming.”

“Yeah.I know.Now we have to figure out how they got that information.”

The possibility of Six Points having a leak chilled Jackson’s blood.“How many people knew about the op?”

“Aside from the agents assigned to the job?Nobody.”

“Did Sierra’s team get tagged as well?”

“No, only you.”

The news alleviated some of Jackson’s concerns, because that meant the call hadn’t come from inside the house.If it had, those assholes wouldn’t have fucked up by attacking the wrong target.“Maybe Sierra has a disgruntled employee.”

“It’s always possible,” Austin said.“Or somebody within her inner circle was offered a boatload of money.Larissa and Nina are checking to see if any of them recently received an unusual deposit in their bank account or splurged on something expensive.If nothing hits, they’ll branch out to emails and text messages.It’s only a matter of time before they find the rat.”

NavarreandSloane didn’t sleep well that night, which really wasn’t surprising.

They’d used the alarm on Navarre’s watch to mark the shift changes; Sloane dozed until midnight, and then he’d napped until the distant rustle of raccoons woke him a few minutes before his alarm was set to chime at three.He’d been wide awake ever since, worrying about the rest of their team, wondering who’d hired those goons to

kidnap Sierra, while listening for signs of danger outside their shelter. Anything to keep his mind off the sexy woman sleeping beside him.

He couldn't see her—the glow stick died hours ago—but oh, he could feel her, lush and warm in his arms, her hand resting on his chest and one of her legs twined with his. Every so often, she breathed out a sigh that bordered on sexual, and it damn near drove him wild.

She moved in her sleep, her hand trailing down from his chest to his abs, and his body leapt to attention. A little lower, to the waistband of his pants, and half of the blood in his brain shot down to his groin.

Nothing good could come from this, he reminded himself again and again as he gripped her wrist and slid her hand back up to his chest. As soon as he let go, her hand started to drift down again, leaving him no choice but to keep hold of her wrist so she wouldn't do something they might regret.

The hoot of a nearby owl provided a much-needed distraction. The forest was alive with chatter, chirps, squeals, and grunts, which was good, because the first warning sign of an approaching predator—human or animal—was silence. So far, nothing had ventured near their shelter, probably because the critters put them in the predator category. That was fine by him. He appreciated nature, but he had no desire to interact with it.

Inevitably, his thoughts drifted to Jackson. They were friends, roommates, brothers-in-arms. He'd served as best man in Jackson's wedding. The possibility that Jackson was no longer alive made his chest ache, though he held out hope that wasn't the case. The rental vehicle was heavily armored, which should have provided additional protection for Jackson and the others when it plunged down the ravine. Combined with the other safety features, they stood a decent chance of walking away from the wreck on their own two feet. But until he knew for sure, he'd worry.

Outside, in the distance, an animal let out a god-awful shriek.

Sloane jerked awake. “What was that?”

“From the sound of it, some unfortunate critter became part of the circle of life.”

“Oh, God. What do you think it was?”

“I have no idea. It’s not important. Go back to sleep.”

“How am I supposed to sleep after that? What if whatever killed that poor animal comes sniffing around here?”

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“If anything gets close enough to pose a danger, I’ll fill it full of holes, okay?” He brushed his fingertips up and down her arm in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. “Now relax and get some sleep. It’ll be daylight before you know it.”

“I don’t know if I can. I’m wide awake now.”

“Try counting sheep.”

She snickered softly. “Sheep? Seriously? Who even does that?”

“I have no idea. It was just a suggestion. What do you normally do to get sleepy?”

A few more suggestions sprang to mind, most of them crude and highly inappropriate, but he had enough sense to keep them to himself.

“Most of the time, I read a book or watch TV, but those aren’t options out here.” She blew out an audible breath. “Maybe if you talk, it’ll help calm my nerves.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know.” She paused as if thinking it over. “How about a story from your time in the Army?”

“Those would give you nightmares.” Well, most of them would. The rest, like his suggestions, were highly inappropriate.

She shifted position, and even though he couldn’t see her in the darkness, he could

feel her eyes on him.

“In that case, why did you join the military?” she asked. “Was it born from a deep-seated desire to be all you can be?”

There were so many bullshit answers he could give her, ones she’d likely accept without question. That he’d felt a desire to serve his country, a need for purpose and belonging. That he’d yearned for adventure within a structured environment, while learning valuable skills he could use in the civilian world. And yeah, he supposed those were true to a certain degree, but they hadn’t been the deciding factor.

And because he couldn’t bring himself to lie to her, he offered the unvarnished truth. “I didn’t have much choice after my father disowned me.”

There were a few long moments of awkward silence before she finally spoke. “Okay, I wasn’t expecting that. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. It’s not like you had anything to do with it.”

“Yeah, but still... I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, not really.” But his mouth refused to shut the fuck up. Guess she was going to get a story after all. “My father was—still is—known as the Debt King of Kansas. He operates one of the largest debt collection services in the Midwest. It made him a millionaire many times over. He expected me to follow in his footsteps and take over the business when he retired.”

“I gather that wasn’t what you wanted.”

“Nope.” He stared at a tiny gap in the roof of their shelter, where a sliver of the moon



was visible. “When I was old enough, he gave me an entry-level job at the office. You know, scanning documents, running errands, stuff like that. He wanted me to work my way up the ladder like he did when he was my age. I didn’t have a problem with that... never had a problem with working my ass off. That part of the job I enjoyed.”

“What happened to change your mind?” she asked.

Navarre mentally cracked his knuckles. “The old man promoted me to account collections during the summer before I started my junior year of college. That opened my eyes to what the business was all about. Up to that point, I assumed they just went after deadbeats who didn’t want to pay their bills. And yeah, there were people who fell into that category, but there was more to it than that. A lot of them were just regular, decent, everyday people who’d fallen on hard times and were struggling to make ends meet. But with the sky-high interest and fees on top of fees, the hole they were in kept getting deeper and deeper until there was no way out.

“It didn’t take long for me to realize I didn’t want to earn a living by making other people’s lives miserable. I tried, I really did, because I knew it was expected of me. Hell, I was even a finance major my first two years of college. Made the dean’s list and everything. But I couldn’t imagine doing that kind of work for the rest of my life. I would have ended up hating myself. I wanted to forge my own path, pursue my own interests.”

She rested her chin on his chest. “Doing what?”

“Back then, I wanted to be an engineer. I’ve always enjoyed building things, or figuring out what makes them tick.” Nowadays, he scratched that itch by restoring classic cars. He enjoyed the work, and the finished product gave him a sense of accomplishment. He could probably earn a decent living that way, but he enjoyed private security even more. “About a week before the fall semester of my junior year, I finally mustered the courage to tell the old man that I didn’t want to work for him

anymore.”

“I take it that didn’t go over well.”

“That’s a diplomatic way to describe it.” He let out a humorless laugh as the grand finale unfolded in his mind. “My father isn’t the kind of man who takes ‘no’ lightly. Things turned ugly fast. Long story short, he kicked me out of the house and cut me off financially. He said if I was so determined to forge my own path, I’d be doing it without his help. So I left with my car, the clothes on my back, and a few hundred bucks—nowhere near enough to pay for tuition and books. I had to drop all my classes that semester. Eventually, I ran out of couches to crash on and ended up sleeping in my car. I was flat broke and I couldn’t get a good job because my only work experience was at my father’s company, and he refused to give me a reference. The way I saw it, the military was my best option.”

Looking back, he’d made the right decision. God only knew what would have happened to him if he hadn’t joined the Army. Probably stuck in some dead-end job, barely making ends meet, too exhausted from working nonstop to realize just how shitty his life had become. Now he had a career, stability. Friends. A life he’d built from the ground up; that he’d fight to the death to defend.

“Going from rich boy to Army grunt had to be a bit of a culture shock,” Sloane said.

“I was too pissed off to really notice. I was so damn determined to succeed at all costs, to prove I could do it on my own. I think it’s what got me through boot camp.” It was there that he’d discovered a natural ability with a rifle, which placed him on the path to eventually becoming a sniper.

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“How are things with your family now?” she asked. “Have you ever gone back for a Navarre family Christmas?”

His gut twisted. “No. I’ve never been invited.”

She gasped. “Are you kidding? After all this time? Not even by your mom?”

Navarre swallowed hard, the words thick in his throat. “My mother falls in line with whatever my father wants. She’s always been like that. The last time we spoke on the phone, she told me she didn’t have a son and hung up on me.”

Being cut off financially had sucked, but he’d found a way to make it on his own. But having his family refuse to acknowledge his existence had been a royal kick to the nuts. And even though he’d closed that chapter of his life, the wound still stung.

“Usually, I spend Christmas with Jackson and his family. It’s a packed house every year, with kids running around, parents fussing. There’s at least one argument over the proper ingredients of a casserole. After dinner, somebody breaks out the dominoes; there isn’t a member of the family who doesn’t take that game seriously. But no matter how crazy things get, they go out of their way to treat me like one of their own.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Sloane’s voice had softened, a little dreamy, as if sleep was preparing to reclaim her.

“It is. I’m lucky to have them in my life. At this point, I consider them more family than my actual blood relatives. I even know the secret ingredients in Momma

Jackson's award-winning peach pie."

He couldn't see her in the dark, but he could practically feel her smile. "Which is?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, now would it?" Navarre smoothed a hand up and down Sloane's back, and when she made a soft, contented sound, every muscle in his body tensed. For a fleeting moment, he wondered how she'd fit in with the Jackson family—they'd love her, no doubt about it—and then he gave himself a mental smack upside the head. Now was not the time to be pondering where she'd fit into his future. Actually, the time was never. She was a colleague, which made her off-limits for that kind of crap. Being friends was okay, but nothing more. It was a line he simply refused to cross, because it made things way too complicated. "When we get back, I'll ask her to make you one."

"I'd like that." She rested her cheek against his chest. "Thank you for trusting me enough to share that with me."

"You're welcome. Now go back to sleep. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

## Chapter 14

Sloane stirred as the first slivers of dawn filtered through the tiny gaps of their shelter, and winced at the kink in her neck. The earthy scent of Navarre's leather jacket enveloped her, mingling with the heat of his body and the layers of clothing they wore, cocooning them in a comforting embrace against the frigid morning air.

Surprisingly, she'd slept fairly well, but that may have been due to exhaustion. The human body could only withstand so much physical and mental strain before it simply shut down. Even so, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have gotten peaceful rest if Navarre hadn't made her feel safe.

She shifted slightly, tilting her head to peer up at him, and the seriousness in his expression set her nerves on edge.

So much for feeling safe.

Before she could ask what was wrong, Navarre silenced her with a press of his finger against her lips. She gave a quick nod to acknowledge the unspoken command, trying her best to ignore the tension coiling in her belly.

Navarre bent his head closer, the stubble along his jaw rough against her cheek as his lips brushed her ear.

“We’ve got company.” His voice was barely a whisper.

She could have sworn her heart stopped beating for a few agonizing seconds. Her gaze darted to the entrance of their shelter as the sound of crunching leaves reached her ears, confirming that they were no longer alone.

“I think it’s a bear,” he said.

Was that better or worse than it being the men who were after them? She honestly didn’t know the answer. An icy chill snaked down her spine, freezing her in place. Bears were huge, with sharp teeth, sharp claws, and really big appetites. And although they ate a variety of plants, they wouldn’t think twice about eating meat if the opportunity presented itself.

“Shouldn’t it be hibernating?” Sloane whispered.

“How should I know? I’m not a zoologist. Maybe this one got the munchies and decided to leave its den early.”

Her fears ratcheted up a notch as the bear sniffed around the entrance of their shelter. Clearly curious about their scent, it pawed at the fragile barrier. The massive paw broke through the thatch, sending debris cascading down upon them, its razor-sharp claws coming within inches of Navarre's head. He reached for his pistol, and the metallic click of the safety being disengaged echoed in the small space.

Sloane's eyes widened. "Are you going to kill it?"

Silly as it might sound, she hoped it wouldn't come to that. Maybe if he fired a warning shot, the noise would be enough to scare it away without actually hurting it.

Navarre slanted her a look. "That's entirely up to the bear."

Its paw broke through the barrier again, forcing Navarre to duck his head to avoid being clawed. He shifted position, took aim at the animal. But before he could fire, the paw retreated, and early morning light poured through the gaping hole.

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More debris rained down on Navarre's head, but he didn't seem to notice. His gaze was still laser-focused on the animal, his index finger resting on the gun's trigger.

She could see it now: black bear, brown snout. It was huge but seemed a little thin. It huffed out a breath, creating a cloud of white in the cold morning air. All the while, its dark eyes stared down at them as though it were trying to decide whether the potential meal was worth the hassle.

Please go away, please go away, she chanted in her head like a mantra.

Suddenly, its head swung up, its nose scenting the air. A deep, guttural sound reverberated in its throat. Then it looked to the east, let out a grunt, and took off into the brush.

Sloane's breath came out in a whoosh. "Oh, thank—"

Navarre shushed her as he worked like a fiend to repair the damage to their shelter from the inside. "It left for a reason."

Knowing their luck, he was probably right. Her stomach knotted at the thought. There weren't many things in the forest that could scare off a bear. A cougar perhaps, or a pack of wolves.

She heard it then, over the thundering of her heart: the sound of approaching footsteps. Man or animal? She couldn't say for sure. The footsteps drew closer as Navarre finished his repair job, and the addition of masculine voices kicked her adrenaline into overdrive.

“Christ, can we stop for a few minutes?My feet are fucking killing me,” a man with a New York accent grumbled.

“Yeah, man, I need a break.My blisters got blisters,” a nasally voice chimed in.

A third man made a derisive sound, his voice a thick Texas drawl.“Lazy assholes.All right, five minutes.”

They didn’t sound like hikers or nature enthusiasts.They sounded hard and mean, and it led her to believe they were the men who’d been hired to kidnap Sierra.

One of them sat on the trunk of the fallen tree, causing more debris to rain down on them, and it was all Sloane could do to contain her rising panic.They were trapped in their shelter with no means of escape, and the last thing she wanted to think about was what would happen if they were discovered.

Navarre lay silent, his eyes cold and unblinking, his pistol aimed at the entrance to their lair, ready to use lethal force if the men became aware of their presence.Without a doubt, he was willing to kill—willing to die—to protect her, and although that brought a measure of assurance, she prayed it didn’t come to that.Three against one weren’t very good odds, even for a man with his skill set.And if something happened to him, her odds of survival dropped considerably.

“How much longer are we going to look for that bitch?”the guy with the nasally voice asked.He sounded close, maybe a few feet away, leading Sloane to believe he was the one sitting on the fallen tree.

“As long as it takes.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” New York snapped.“We don’t have enough supplies for a prolonged search.As it is, we’re almost out of food.For all we know, she fell off a



cliff.Her type isn't known for roughing it."

"If that's the case, we drag her body back.Not as much money, but it's better than nothing."

"I bet she's still with that asshole who fucked up Porter," nasal guy said.

"All the more reason to find them."Texas's tone was matter-of-fact."Put some bullets in that prick, grab the girl, deliver her to Winslow, and get paid.Simple."

Sloane bristled with fear and indignation at the callousness of their conversation.They talked about murdering Navarre the same way normal people talked about a football game.And who the hell was Winslow?The name didn't ring a bell.Maybe he was one of Dax Garvey's minions.

"If it was that simple, we would have already found her."New York sounded pissed."You told us this was going to be an easy job.Hit hard, hit fast, get the girl, and get away clean.Now we got two men dead, Porter's leg is all fucked up, and no sign of the goddamn girl.At the rate we're going, it makes more sense to cut bait and limit our losses."

"You want to leave?"Texas's voice cracked like a whip."Then get the fuck out.The rendezvous point's that way.Nobody's making you stay, but if you leave, you don't get shit."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Sloane held her breath, her heart in her throat, terrified that even the tiniest noise might lead to their demise.The only thing keeping her sane was Navarre's unwavering strength beside her, the pistol a deadly extension of his hand, his whole body primed to explode into violence at the drop of a hat.

“Fine, one more day,” New York finally said. “After that, I’m done.”

“Me too,” the other guy agreed.

More debris rained down on them when the man sitting on the fallen tree stood. A section of Navarre’s repair work collapsed, but thankfully nobody noticed.

Some of the tension loosened in Sloane’s muscles as she listened to the men’s fading footsteps, but she refused to completely relax until she was certain they were gone.

They stayed in the shelter, not moving, not speaking, for what felt like forever, the only sound the wild pounding of her pulse in her ears.

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“Do you think they’re gone?” Sloane whispered when she didn’t think she could stand it a second longer.

Reaching up with one hand, Navarre widened the gap in the thatch that concealed their presence and peered outside. “I think so. Stay here while I check.”

It amazed her, how he managed to slide out of their shelter while barely disturbing any of the materials he’d used to construct it. Seconds passed, and she heard...nothing. No gunshots, or shouting, or sounds of a scuffle—nothing to give her an indication as to what was going on.

She waited. And waited. The minutes felt more like hours, and it took every last ounce of her willpower not to call out Navarre’s name. She needed to know whether he was okay, needed to know whether the danger had passed. If her nails weren’t so filthy, she would have already bitten them down to the quick.

At last, just as her patience had reached its end, she heard him say, “It’s clear, Sloane. You can come out.”

Navarre removed the remaining patch of their shelter, and she squinted at the sudden influx of light. Eager to get out, she gripped the hand he offered, and he hoisted her up as though she weighed nothing.

“Thanks.” Her leg muscles felt sore and stiff, no doubt the result of hiking all over creation yesterday. She brushed the dirt and debris off her body, knowing she wouldn’t truly feel clean until she took an hour-long shower, and maybe dipped her body in Purell. “Are you sure they’re gone?”

“Positive. The cocky bastards didn’t even bother to cover their tracks. I spotted them halfway down the ridge before I turned back.” Navarre stared down at her, concern in his eyes. “Are you okay? Your hands are shaking.”

“Am I?” She glanced down at her trembling hands, surprised she hadn’t noticed.

“Adrenaline rush.”

He said it as if that explained everything. She’d have to take his word for it. Life-or-death experiences weren’t a part of her daily routine.

Gently, he gathered her into his arms, and the strength of his body, the scent of his skin, felt so right it ached in her bones. She softened against him, grateful for the comfort he offered, and her breath left her in a sigh. He rubbed soft circles up and down her back, and little by little, the jumbled knots of tension in her body unraveled.

If given the choice, she would have stayed locked in his arms forever, but eventually his hold on her loosened.

“Better?” he asked, his voice a low murmur.

“Yes. Thank you.” She glanced up, meeting his gaze, and it felt as though time froze. There was so much fire in his chocolate-brown eyes, so much restrained passion. It made her a little light-headed. And at that moment, she would have given anything to feel his lips on hers.

He raised one hand to cup her face, the tips of his fingers sliding into her hair, while his thumb caressed her cheek. His lips parted. Damn, he was close. Only a few inches separated them. But he didn’t move closer, not even a bit. Instead, he blinked, blinked again, and drew his hand away.

Sloane made a sound to convey her frustration. She needed more, needed him, and she sensed he felt the same way. Throwing caution to the wind, she stood on her tiptoes, linked her hands around his neck, and kissed him with everything she had.

Every muscle in his body stiffened for a second or two, just long enough for her to question the wisdom of her actions. If she'd misread his feelings, things were going to get seriously awkward. But then a low, rough rumble rose from deep in his chest. He angled his head, his tongue sliding over the seam of her mouth, and she opened for him, sighing because it felt so right.

His scent surrounded her, so familiar after last night, but now it mingled with the taste of his kiss to create an intoxicating combination. His arm snaked around her, drawing her close, and she could feel the undeniable proof that he was into this as much as she was.

"This is wrong," he murmured against her mouth, but kept kissing her as though he needed her as much as he needed air. His mouth was firm, his tongue slick against hers, while his beard stubble grazed her skin in a way that made her wonder how it would feel against other parts of her body. The space around them crackled with energy, something new, and untamed, and so very powerful it energized every cell in her body.

"You don't want this?" she said on the heels of a gasp.

"That's not what I said. It's just..."

However he meant to finish that sentence dissolved into a series of long, slow, drugging kisses that wiped all rational thought from her mind.

Her hands drifted down from his neck to his chest, and the feel of hard muscle beneath her flattened palms drove her desire even higher. A curl of heat unfurled

inside her, starting low and spreading like wildfire, until it felt as though the only thing on earth that could possibly quench it—

Navarre tore his mouth away from hers as if he'd just been burned. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, his eyes wide and unfocused.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice frayed at the edges. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking. That shouldn't have happened."

It took a few seconds for the words to register in her mind. "What? Why not? I liked it. I'm pretty sure you did too."

His expression twisted, torn between anger and something far more dangerous. "What I like is irrelevant. I'm supposed to protect you, not maul you like a horny teenager."

"But I enjoyed the mauling."

"That's not the point." He raked a hand through his hair, leaving some strands sticking up at odd angles, and she barely contained the urge to smooth them down for him.

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He stepped back, as though he needed to create a buffer between them. “My focus—my only focus—has to be on keeping you safe. I can’t afford distractions. Out here, one mistake could get us both killed. Wanting you...it clouds everything.”

“Fair enough,” she said, trying hard to keep her voice light. “When we get back, we can—”

“No, we can’t. There is no ‘when we get back.’ We’re coworkers. That’s a recipe for disaster.” An edge crept into his voice. “If we stop right now, we can blame this on the heat of the moment. Pretend it never happened. And maybe things won’t be too weird at the office every time we pass in the hall. But if we let this go any further...” He dragged a hand through his hair again. “Can you imagine how uncomfortable things might get if this doesn’t work out between us?”

His reasoning struck a chord with her. Workplace romances were nothing new. She knew a few women—like Nina—who’d met their significant others on the job. But she’d also heard as many cautionary tales from women who’d hooked up with a colleague, only to have the relationship sour. Talk about a toxic work environment. One of them even had to find another job because the workplace had turned hostile. And although she didn’t think that would happen with Navarre, it was probably better not to risk it.

Still, it made her heart heavy, because she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d given up on something special. “So what do we do now?”

“Same as before: stay alive, evade the enemy, and find our way to civilization.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

His features softened, and the pair of lines between his eyebrows faded. “I’m not going to lie and say I don’t find you attractive. You’re smart, and funny, and sexy as hell, and you’ve handled all this much better than I expected. And yeah, that kiss came pretty damn close to short-circuiting my brain. If the circumstances were different, if we didn’t work under the same roof...”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence. She understood the point he was trying to convey. And on some level, she agreed with him, though she wasn’t happy about it.

“Just friends?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s the best I can offer.”

In the grand scheme of things, she supposed it could be worse. They’d worked past their differences, and maybe one day she’d stop wondering what he looked like naked. She had other guy friends; she just had to find a way to lump him into that category and move on with her life.

She shook the hand he offered, trying her best not to notice the way her pulse quickened with the simple contact.

Overhead, the forest had awakened with a symphony of birdsong. Sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees, casting intricate patterns of light and shadow on the ground below. Pretty soon it might even be warm enough for the air not to fog her breath.

Navarre reached into his bag and pulled out a meal bar. “Hungry?”

At the mention of food, her stomach rumbled. More than twelve hours had passed



since she'd eaten the last bar. But he'd only taken out one bar instead of two. "I'll eat one if you do."

He shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

That couldn't possibly be true. The man hadn't eaten a bite since yesterday. But rather than argue with him, she tried a different tactic. "Then I guess I'm not hungry either."

He arched one eyebrow. "Are you trying to guilt me into eating?"

"No, I'm emulating your pigheaded nature. How am I doing?"

"Surprisingly well."

She beamed. "I'm a quick study. Now are you going to eat, or do we both get to starve?"

Navarre made a noise that was somewhere between a growl and a grunt. He reached back into the bag for another bar and tossed it to her. "Happy?"

"Delighted." She tore the wrapper and bit off as much as she could fit into her mouth. This one was blueberry with little bits of walnut, and she was pretty sure it was even better than the one she had last night.

They ate in companionable silence, the only sound coming from the twitter of birds and the rustle of wind through the trees. She could have sworn she felt his eyes on her, but every time she glanced his way, he was looking in another direction.

"So which way are we going?" she asked before she took her last bite.

"Well, we were heading northeast toward Sierra's estate, but since the mercs took off

in that direction, we'll have to change course."Finished with his bar, he stuffed the wrapper in his rucksack and took out a map.He pointed out several locations."We're here, that's where we ditched our vehicle, and they're moving in that direction.If we cut through this valley and go around the lake, it should bring us close to the road.Then we can walk parallel to it until we reach this little town here.It doesn't look like much, but there should be a place where we can make a call."

If the map was correct, they'd be covering even more distance than they did yesterday."That's an awful lot of walking."

At least he didn't seem happy about it.He shot her a sympathetic look."Yeah, I know.How are your feet holding up?"

"Better than they'll be by the end of the day."

### Chapter 15

They traveled together in silence, determined to put as much distance between them and the mercenaries as possible. But the dense vegetation covering this stretch of forest slowed their progress. It had taken all morning to traverse the valley, and they'd only made it halfway around the lake before finally breaking for lunch. At the rate they were going, they'd have to spend at least one more night in the great outdoors.

That wasn't a problem for Navarre. He'd endured far worse conditions. Yeah, it was cold last night, but it hadn't been all that bad, not with Sloane cuddled up beside him, all lush and warm and—

Nope, not going there, he reminded himself for the hundred—or was it the thousandth?—time. With both of their lives on the line, he couldn't afford those kinds of distractions, and he sure as hell refused to let his hormones hijack his brain.

A breeze rustled the leaves, bringing with it the scents of earth and pine. His stomach rumbled, another reminder that it was past time to take another meal break. Now would be as good a time as any. He scanned the surrounding area to be sure there weren't any threats. Finding none, he stopped at one of the large rocks near the lake and shrugged off his rucksack.

“Is everything okay?” Sloane asked.

“Yeah, fine. Are you ready for lunch?” He unzipped the bag and dug out two meal bars. They were high in protein and packed with enough calories to keep them going until sundown.

“Sure.” She accepted the bar he offered. “How many of these do you have left?”

“Not enough.”

If they were out here much longer, he’d have to start foraging. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, he should have packed more bars, but space in his ruck was limited, and how was he supposed to know they’d have to rough it in the forest for this long? He wasn’t sure how Sloane would handle eating chickweed and dandelions, but that was a problem for later.

Sloane hesitated, her hand hovering over the wrapper. “Maybe we should save these for later.”

He met her gaze, his voice low and firm. “Eat the bar. You need to keep up your strength.”

“You’re eating one also, right?”

“Yes.” Navarre reached back into the bag for the water bottle and set it on the rock. “We’ll split the last one if we don’t reach town by nightfall.”

“I guess we can use that as motivation to move faster.” Sloane leaned against one of the rocks and propped a booted foot against another. The tear in the knee of her pants had widened, exposing more of her leg. She bit into the bar, chewed for a while—the bars were pretty dense—and washed it down with a swig of water. “What are you going to do when we get back to the real world?”

“Beats me,” he said between bites. Overhead, he heard the screech of a hawk, and glanced up in time to see it land on the branch of a pine. “I hadn’t really thought about it, but I take it you have.”

“Damn straight I have. It’s the only thing keeping me moving.”

“And here I thought it was my sparkling personality.”

“Smartass.” She picked up a pebble and tossed it at him.

He laughed, and it loosened some of the tension in his shoulders. “So let’s hear it. What are your grand plans?”

Sloane ate another bite of her bar. “Well, the first thing I want is a shower. I’m just going to stand there, under the spray, water as hot as I can possibly stand it, until my fingers and toes finally feel warm again. Then I want a pizza, and a whole pan of brownies, and one of those sweet, fruity, girly drinks that you probably hate.”

He almost missed that last part, because his brain had nearly melted at the mental image of her naked and wet in the shower. That self-imposed friends-only rule was going to be the death of him. At last, the words sank into his skull, and he shot her a questioning look. “What makes you think I would hate it?”

“Do you like those kinds of drinks?”

“Well, they wouldn’t be my first choice, but I don’t necessarily hate them.” Now that he thought about it, he’d never actually drunk one, but they didn’t sound like something he’d naturally gravitate toward. He enjoyed drinks with a bit of a kick, something that grabbed you by the taste buds and demanded your undivided attention.

“Then what’s your drink of choice?” she asked, and then added, “Don’t tell me, let me guess: beer, or maybe whiskey.”

He frowned. “What’s wrong with beer?”

“Absolutely nothing, but I nailed it, didn’t I? You’re a beer guy?”

“Yeah.” He reached for the water bottle and took a long drink. “I’ve never been a fan of whiskey. Anytime I drink it, I end up doing stupid shit.”

She let out a laugh that reached her eyes, and it did strange things to his insides. “Okay, I need details. What kind of stupid shit?”

“The kind I’m taking to the grave.” He bit into his bar to punctuate the end of that line of questioning.

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Of course, it didn't deter her. It was more like waving a big juicy pork chop in front of a ravenous rottweiler. "Ooh, that definitely sounds like something I want to hear more about. Would Jackson know? I bet I can get him to tell me if I ask really nicely."

"Jackson knows better than to rat me out. I know where his bodies are buried. The worst thing he'll share is the time I fell asleep on the couch during movie night, and the guys painted my nails pink and drew a dick on my forehead."

A pair of lines formed in the space between her eyebrows. "Why would they do that to you?"

"It's one of the rules of movie night. No fights, no crying, no bogarting the beer, no smoking inside the house, and whoever falls asleep first is fair game to the whims of the rest of the group."

The lines deepened. "Again, why? These are friends, right? People who supposedly like you?"

"Of course they like me." He and the guys had been doing movie nights for so long, he'd forgotten how the rules came about. "It's a guy thing. Blame it on testosterone."

Finished with her meal bar, she handed him the wrapper. "And when exactly did the toenail painting and dick drawing take place?"

"Uh...February, I think." He tucked the wrapper in his ruck. "No, wait, it was March."

"Of this year?"

“Yeah.” Usually, he was better at staying awake so that shit didn’t happen to him. But it had been a long, stressful week, he hadn’t slept well the night before, and three or four beers had been more than enough to put him out like a light.

Sloane shook her head. “So what are your plans, now that you’ve had time to think about it?”

“There hasn’t been time; we’ve been talking. No, you have it,” he said when she tried to hand him the bottle with the last of the water in it.

“Then what’s the first thing to pop into your head?”

He watched as she drank the last of the water, watched her throat muscles move when she swallowed, and a few ideas sprang to mind. Filthy, raunchy, sweaty ideas. If he told her about them, she’d have every right to slap the shit out of him. “Why is this so important to you?”

“It’s not. I’m just trying to make conversation that doesn’t have anything to do with the group of armed men who are hunting us for fun and profit in the middle of freaking nowhere. Or the fact we might freeze, or starve, or fall off a cliff, or get mauled by a bear.”

Shit, now he felt like an ass. He’d utilized similar tactics in the past, minor distractions to take the edge off of stressful situations. The least he could do was play along. “Well, the pizza sounds pretty good. So does the shower. Beyond that, I just want to sleep. Maybe I’ll play a little Demon Scourge 2 whenever I finally wake up.”

Her eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “I didn’t know you liked video games.”

“Contrary to what you might think, there’s a lot you don’t know about me.” He



walked to the water's edge and filled the water bottle. "It's my fourth favorite way to relax."

She raised an eyebrow. "Dare I ask about the top three?"

"If I told you, you'd call me a pig." He laughed when she chucked another pebble at him, and it bounced off his chest. "I take it you play?"

Her nod of acknowledgment came as no surprise. As a member of the Nerd Herd, he'd assumed she was a gamer, though he hadn't put any thought into what kinds of games she preferred.

He dropped purification tablets into the bottle, screwed the cap back on, and placed the bottle back in his ruck.

"How far into the game are you?" she asked.

"Not far. I'm working on the second boss." He'd been trying to kill that bastard for the better part of a week. He'd come close a few times, but he'd yet to discover the right combination of weapons and tactics to kill that particular demon.

"Oh yeah, he was a pain," Sloane said. "Once I ran out of ammo, I switched to the ax with the silver handle to finish him off. The next one isn't as bad."

Well, that explained things. He had an ax in his arsenal, but not the one with a silver handle. He'd have to go back and search for it in the areas he'd already covered. "How far along are you?"

"Oh, I finished that one a couple months ago. I'm playing Altershot now."

From what he'd heard, that one was damn near impossible to finish, which meant she

enjoyed a challenge. He appreciated that. “How do you like it?”

“It’s tough but fun. If you have an Xbox, you can borrow it when I’m done.”

“Thanks, I’d like that.” He slipped the straps of his rucksack over his shoulders. “It might be awhile before I can get it back to you, though.”

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“No worries. At some point, I’ll go back and play it again with a different character, but it won’t be anytime soon.” She fell in line with his steps as they turned away from the lake. Up ahead, a squirrel darted up a tree, its bushy tail flicking. “So what else do you do in your free time?”

“That depends on who’s around.” Lately, he’d been spending more time alone. Jackson was often busy with his wife Essie, while Pinto was practically joined at the hip with Fiona. That left Hatch, and even though they got along well, their ideas of a good time didn’t always mesh. “Now that the Barracuda is fully restored, I started work on another car.”

Her eyes sparked with interest. “What kind of car?”

“A 1985 Chevy Camaro IROC-Z.” He’d bought the car a few months ago at the auto auction for next to nothing, mainly because the poor thing was in sorry shape. It was going to take a fair amount of time, money, patience, and effort, but he was confident he could return the classic muscle car to her former glory.

“How long will it take to restore?” she asked.

“I can’t say for sure. Any estimate would be contingent on how hard it’ll be to score the right parts and how much free time I’ll have to work on it.”

At first glance, the car looked rough, with sun-damaged paint, rust creeping along the undercarriage, and a sizable dent on the driver’s side quarter panel. While the exterior damage was manageable, the interior presented different challenges. The headliner sagged, the front seats were trashed, and the cabin bore the unmistakable signs of

years of neglect. Clearly, the previous owner didn't understand the concept of routine maintenance.

Mechanically, it had serious issues—he'd paid to have it towed home—but there wasn't anything he couldn't fix. He'd already found a site online where he could order most of the parts, which would save him from having to take time-consuming trips to the junkyard. From there, it was mostly an investment of time that he'd fulfill on his days off work when he didn't have other plans.

They moved deeper into the forest but stayed parallel to shore. The vegetation was thick enough to provide cover in the event hostiles were in the area, as well as much-needed shade. Because even though storm clouds were moving in, there was still enough sun to get burned.

Navarre held out his hand to help Sloane climb over a rotted log that blocked their path, and there it was again, that little spark he felt every time they touched. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that.

"What are you going to do with it once it's all fixed up?" Sloane asked, providing a much-needed distraction.

"I haven't decided. I don't need two cars, so I guess I'll have to figure out which one to sell."

Surprise flickered over her face. "I'm shocked you'd even consider selling the Barracuda. That car's a work of art."

Navarre pushed up a low-hanging tree limb so she could walk past without ducking. "I never intended to keep her, but now that she's back to her former glory, it's not so easy to let her go. I guess it all depends on how the Camaro looks after I'm finished with her."

She gave him a funny look. “Why do guys always refer to their cars as she?”

Navarre shrugged, momentarily thrown by the question. “I don’t know. I never really thought about it. I suppose it’s a holdover from the old sailing days when ships were named after women or goddesses.”

“Did you name the Barracuda?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you never name something unless you’re planning to keep it.”

She gave him a look. “Like a dog?”

“Yeah, like that. If you name a dog, you just made a commitment to take care of it for the rest of its life.”

A rustle stirred the underbrush, a subtle reminder that they weren’t the only creatures in the forest. Moments later, a young doe stepped into view, its wide eyes locking with theirs. Time seemed to pause as it stood motionless, then, with a flick of its tail, it vanished into the shadows.

Navarre glanced at Sloane, and the wonder lighting the depths of her eyes stirred things inside him that he wasn’t mentally prepared to examine. He coughed to clear the sudden tightness in his throat.

“Enough about me.” He was tired of hearing his own voice. He’d much rather listen to hers. “What’s your story?”

Sloanethrewhimasidelong glance as she tugged the zipper of the camo jacket higher. “There’s not much to tell.”

“I find that hard to believe.” The tone of his voice made it clear he wasn’t prepared to let her off the hook. “Let’s start with the basics. How did you end up working at Six Points?”

That was easy. “I was recruited by Larissa.”

Apparently, her answer didn’t provide enough details to satisfy his curiosity. “And why did she recruit you? It couldn’t have been for your sparkling personality.”

She flipped him off, and he laughed. “At the time, I was working for Orlando Security Solutions. They were competing against Six Points for a contract out near the coast—some big engineering firm that does a bunch of work for NASA. Somewhere along the line, the friendly competition turned ugly. My boss in the cyber security unit offered a bounty to anyone who could hack the servers at Six Points as a way to prove our company was superior.”

“Did you succeed?”

“What do you think?”

He laughed because they both knew Larissa was one of the best in the business, if not the world. At first glance, she appeared unassuming: a doting mother with two young girls, a husband, an SUV, and a house with a white picket fence. But she was also an absolute demon with a keyboard, feared and respected in the digital world by those who knew her professionally or by her hacker alias. The things Larissa could do with a computer were kind of scary at times. It was a wonder the government hadn't drafted her into service. Then again, maybe they had, and they just weren't aware of it. It honestly wouldn't surprise her.

They hopped over a narrow creek that fed into the lake, and she did her best not to wince. The blisters on her feet still throbbed, though the pain had lessened since Navarre treated them the night before. For now, the best she could do was grit her teeth and keep moving forward.

“What did Larissa do to you?”

Navarre watched her with a singular focus, as if every word that came out of her mouth mattered to him. She wasn't used to that in a guy. It knocked her a little off-balance.

Warmth flooded her cheeks, and she hoped he didn't notice. Not because she was affected by the way he was looking at her—okay, maybe a little—but because the next part was just plain embarrassing. “She goated my laptop.”

As expected, he gave her a puzzled stare. “Okay, I need you to explain that one to me in simple English.”

She sighed. “Without getting too technical, Larissa is really good at designing Trojan horses within computer systems. It’s some serious next-level stuff. She toys with hackers and lets them believe they’ve breached her servers. But as soon as they try to access a file or insert any malware...” She clapped her hands together. “The trap is sprung and you’re totally screwed. By the time the hacker figures it out, it’s already too late. In my case, the trap was a virus that took over my computer within seconds and wallpapered every file with images of baby goats wearing pajamas.”

His sandy-brown eyebrows drew closer together, a common reaction for anyone not familiar with the world of cyber security. “Why goats?”

“You’d have to ask Larissa,” she said. Somewhere up above, a woodpecker drummed its brains out against a tree. She glanced up, but it was impossible to spot it among the tangle of branches. “My goats came with her contact information and a message that if I wanted to corral the goats, I’d have to call her within the next ten minutes. After that, the virus would permanently corrupt all the data on my hard drive. So I called, and she offered me a job.”

“That’s a creative recruiting technique,” he said, amusement clear on his face.

“It’s not uncommon in the field. Some people view hacking as an audition. Larissa said she would have offered me more money if I’d actually made it into the server.”

“That sounds like something she’d say.” He paused, consulted his map, and then altered their course slightly to the left. “How is she to work for?”

“When I started, she scared the crap out of me, but that was before I really got to know her. Her skills are at a level I don’t think I’ll ever achieve, even if I live to be a



hundred. I mean, there are times I can't wrap my brain around some of the stuff she does. But if you're willing to learn and put in the work, she'll pull up a chair and stay for however long it takes for you to understand things. She expects a lot, but she treats her people fairly and works with us when we have things going on outside the office." She shot him a glance, taking in his profile, noting the straight line of his nose, the strong set of his jaw. "Your turn. What brought you to Six Points?"

"One of Jackson's buddies is friends with Austin. He told us about this security company that was expanding in the Orlando area and was looking for people with our... talents. We were leaving the Army in a few months, so Jackson gave him a call, and Austin hired him on the spot. Then he handed the phone to me, and I got hired too."

"You've been here—oh, shit!" The smooth soles of her boots skidded across the loose leaf litter, and Navarre caught her just before she face-planted on the forest floor. Her heart skipped several beats, and she blamed it on the close call, not the feel of his hands on her waist. "Thanks. I take it you like working for the Flints?"

"Like you said, they expect a lot but they're fair. Good pay, time off, I like who I work with, and I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. I can't think of anywhere else I'd want to be." He waved a hand in front of his face, presumably to ward off an insect. "Your turn. How did you become a hacker?"

Her muscles tensed. "That's a longer story."

"It's not like we're short on time." When she didn't say anything right away, he added, "Like you said before, what else are we going to talk about?"

She let out another sigh, because she hated having her own words thrown back at her. That part of her life wasn't filled with shiny, happy memories, so she condensed them down to as few words as possible. "I was sick as a kid and spent a lot of time

indoors with my laptop.It sort of went from there.”

His gaze sharpened with a mixture of interest and empathy.“What kind of sick?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, not really.”He turned his focus forward where the canopy was starting to thin.“It’s your business.Forget I asked.”

Great, now she felt bad about snapping at him.In her defense, it was a part of her life that she rarely shared, not even with Nina or Larissa.Not because it was embarrassing or shameful, but because it dredged up unpleasant memories she’d rather keep in the past where they belonged.But for reasons she couldn’t begin to articulate, she felt comfortable sharing them with him.“I was diagnosed with epilepsy when I was six.”

His eyebrows nearly shot up to his hairline.“Oh shit, I had no idea.”

“Why would you?I haven’t had a seizure since I was seventeen.”She usually avoided telling people about her childhood, because even though it shaped who she’d become, she didn’t want it shaping people’s opinions about her.She hated it when people looked at her as if she were damaged or diminished.She’d fought hard to overcome that stigma.

Navarre didn’t look at her that way.Instead, he looked confused.“I didn’t realize that kind of thing went away.”

“It’s not always the case.I was lucky.Some people need lifelong treatment.But once I was diagnosed, my mother treated me like I was going to break at any given moment.She practically strapped a helmet on my head and cocooned me in bubble wrap.I wasn’t allowed to climb on the playground equipment, or ride a bike, or have a skateboard, or any of the fun stuff that normal kids did.Don’t get me wrong...I

understand why she did what she did and I appreciate her watching out for my safety, but it set me apart from the other kids.”

“That had to suck.”

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She shrugged. “It wasn’t a picnic. More often than not, I ate lunch alone, or with one or two other kids who’d also been shunned by the cliques. I also spent a lot of time with my laptop while the other kids played outside. By high school, I was known as that weird, pasty, geeky girl who sat in the front row but never spoke in class. The mean girls called me Twitchy because of the time I had a seizure in the lunchroom.” Her blood pressure spiked at the memory. The incident happened way back in sixth grade, but the nickname followed her all the way to her high school graduation ceremony.

Navarre frowned. “Mean girls suck.”

“Tell me about it.” She was touched by his indignation over something that happened so long ago. Overhead, the tree canopy thinned even further, allowing more light to reach the forest floor. “But it wasn’t all bad. It gave me the opportunity to get really good with computers. I was writing code in middle school, and now I get paid fairly well to do something I enjoy. Not everyone gets to say that.”

“That’s a healthy way to look at it,” he said. “A lot of people would have been scarred by the experience.”

“Oh, there’s baggage, trust me on that. I’ve come to terms with most of it. The rest, I try to leave behind.” This whole assignment had been an exercise in battling her inner demons. They’d gotten the best of her on more than one occasion, mostly because this was uncharted territory for her. But now she was feeling more confident. After all, she’d done so well that she’d become the target of a kidnapping attempt. That alone spoke volumes about her ability to imitate Sierra.

Navarre fell silent, his face unreadable. After a long pause, he asked, “My questioning your ability to do this job didn’t help, did it?”

She waved her hand dismissively. There wasn’t any point in holding grudges, especially when he seemed genuinely remorseful about his earlier behavior. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I shouldn’t have been such an asshole to you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s no need—”

Before she could finish, he hooked one arm around her waist, yanking her against him with startling force. The sudden movement stole her breath as he dragged her back under the cover of the trees.

Her pulse hammered in her throat. Oh God, had the mercenaries found them? Keeping her voice barely above a whisper, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

He pointed one finger toward the sky. “Drone.”

## Chapter 16

Navarre heard the high-pitched whir of the drone a few seconds before he spotted it hovering overhead. It sounded more like a swarm of bees than high-tech surveillance equipment. He had no idea what kind it was—that wasn’t his field of expertise. But it was safe to say that it wasn’t here to enjoy the scenery.

Sloane’s gaze flicked upward. Her mouth fell open. “Do you think it’s looking for us?”

“Why else would it be flying around in the middle of nowhere?”

Her eyes narrowed. “No need to get snippy.”

She was right, but he wasn’t in the mood to acknowledge it. “If it spotted us, we’re about to have company.”

Her face paled. “And if it didn’t?”

“It’s only a matter of time before it does.” He released his hold of her and took a step back, because he liked the feel of her pressed against him a little too much.

“What do we do?” she asked.

Navarre peered up through a gap in the branches. The drone hovered above the tree line, its cameras undoubtedly focused on the forest below. An easy shot with a rifle, but the effective range of his pistol was much shorter, which increased the level of difficulty.

There was no way of knowing how long it had been in the area before he’d spotted it. More likely than not, it was also equipped with thermal sensors that could track them through the cover of the canopy and had already broadcast their location to its operator.

That needed to end right now.

“Cover your ears,” he told Sloane.

He raised his pistol and lined the drone in his sights, making slight adjustments for distance, wind speed, and bullet trajectory. On the next exhale, he pressed the trigger, and the deafening crack of the bullet sent birds scattering. The drone jerked hard to the left. It lost altitude but remained aloft, the whir of its propellers louder than before. His second shot finished the job, and the drone dropped like a stone, snapping

branches as it hurtled toward the earth. It broke into pieces when it slammed to the ground not far from where they stood.

Navarre slid his pistol back into his shoulder holster. "Let's go. We don't know how long it'll be before company arrives."

If he had his rifle, he would have preferred to lay in wait and end things right then and there. But with only a pistol, limited ammunition, and a civilian he needed to protect at all costs, it made sense to err on the side of caution.

"Wait," Sloane said. "I want to check something first."

"We don't have time."

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“It’ll only take a minute.”Not waiting for his response, she crossed the short distance to the downed drone and crouched beside it.

On the heels of a curse, Navarre took off after her, his pistol back out of its holster and his eyes searching the area for any indications they were no longer alone.Nothing so far, but that could change in an instant, and he didn’t want to be caught flat-footed.

As he approached, he saw Sloane picking something out of the debris field.

“What is it?”he asked.

She held up a mangled piece of black plastic.“It’s the drone’s serial number.”

He was about to make a sarcastic comment about the usefulness of that bit of information, but then understanding dawned on him, and he appreciated the fact she’d thought to look.

“Good job.That’ll come in handy when we get back.”Drones above a certain size had to be registered with the Federal Aviation Administration.If it was registered, which this one should be, they could learn the owner’s identity.

“Take a look at this.”She handed him the piece of plastic.“Check out the logo that’s stamped above the numbers and barcode.Look familiar?”

Navarre held it up to the light to get a better view, and recognition hit him like a freight train.



“Aw, shit.” It was the logo for Six Points Security, which meant he’d tagged a friendly, the first time in his entire career. Now he felt like the world’s biggest idiot, but how was he supposed to know? It wasn’t like he could read a logo from that far away.

As if reading his thoughts, Sloane said, “You did what you thought was best. There was no way for you to identify who the drone belonged to.”

It didn’t make him feel better, but it was nice that she’d tried.

“Any idea what the range is for one of these things?” Sloane asked.

“It depends on the type. Commercial drones have a range that’s anywhere between a few miles to a hundred. Military-grade drones can go a lot farther.”

“Well, at least we know they’re looking for us. And now there’s a good chance they know we’re alive, as well as our location.” Her face brightened with cautious hope as she stood and wiped her hands on the front of her jacket. “That’s good, right?”

“Yes, it is.” He stuffed the piece of plastic into his pocket. “We better get moving. The sound of gunfire carries a long way. If any of those mercs are within earshot, they’ll come investigate.”

Together, they traveled deeper into the forest. They doubled back once, creating a false trail, just in case anyone happened upon the drone and tried to follow their tracks. All the while, the terrain grew more challenging, with steeper inclines, dense vegetation, and the occasional clearing that offered virtually no cover.

“You were right before,” Sloane said as they pushed through a thick patch of underbrush. She sounded breathless, and when he glanced over, he noticed her face was flushed. “I’ve never fired a gun.”

Navarre slowed their pace to give her a chance to catch her breath. “A lot of people haven’t.”

Though it wouldn’t be a bad idea for her to at least know the basics of handling a weapon, just in case something happened and he was no longer able to protect her. It was a grim thought, but you never knew what life might throw your way.

Satisfied they’d put enough distance between themselves and the drone, Navarre stopped to open his ruck and retrieved the gun he’d taken from the asshole who’d accosted Sloane. After giving it a quick inspection to ensure it was in good operating condition, he removed the magazine from the pistol and ejected the round from the chamber.

It had been awhile since he’d taught a beginner. Most people he trained at Six Points had prior military experience. For them, it was a refresher course, a sharpening of skills, or an exercise in breaking bad habits.

“This is a Glock 17,” he told Sloane. “They’re popular because they’re relatively cheap and easy to operate. It fires 9MM ammo, with the capacity to hold seventeen rounds in the magazine. It’s powerful, but it’s only as effective as the person wielding it.” He paused a moment to let her digest the knowledge before he continued. “Always assume a gun is loaded, even if you know it’s not, and treat it accordingly. That means pointing the barrel in a safe direction and keeping your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod.

He showed her the basics: how to load and unload the gun, how to advance a round into the chamber and clear a jam if it happened, and how to turn the safety on and off. When she seemed comfortable with all of that, he taught her about grip and shooting stance.

“Like this?” She mimicked his standard shooting position.

He nodded, a smile curving his lips. “Yes, very good. Now raise the gun to the target—in this case, we’ll use that tree over there. Make sure not to lock your elbows, because that bend will act as a shock absorber every time you fire a round.”

She overcompensated on the bending of elbows, holding the gun so close she’d never be able to properly sight a target. He lightly wrapped his hands around her wrists, extending her arms to the proper position, and there it was again, that hum in his blood that he felt whenever he touched her.

After showing her how to align the sights, he had her do a dry fire, which was pulling the trigger when the gun was unloaded. Then he asked her to load the weapon and advance a bullet into the chamber.

“Normally, this would be the part where I’d have you fire a few rounds, but that would risk giving away our position, so we’ll save it for another time.” He held out his hand, and she gave him the weapon.

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“Thank you,” she said as he verified the safety was on and put the gun back in his ruck.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I should have shown you earlier.”

He slid the straps over his shoulders, and they resumed their trek through the forest. According to his map, they had another couple of hours or so before they reached the road that led to town.

“When we get back, can we go to the range?” Sloane asked. “You know, so I’m better prepared if the situation ever arises.”

“Sure. Once we get you up to speed with a pistol, we’ll move on to rifles. By the time I’m finished with you, you’ll be able to field strip an AR blindfolded.”

She slanted him a dubious look. “I don’t think we need to take it that far.”

Navarre chuckled as he pushed a branch aside so she could walk past.

“Just remember, never point a gun unless you intend to shoot, and never shoot unless you intend to kill. Always aim for the center of mass.” For emphasis, he tapped the space between his pecs. “None of that going-for-the-leg crap you see on TV.” That shit drove him crazy.

They settled into a companionable silence for the next mile or so, until they reached a small stream at the base of a hill. Navarre took the opportunity to refill their water bottle. He added purification tablets and put the bottle back in his ruck.

“Can I ask you a question?” Sloane said as he stood.

“That depends on the question.”

The look on her face made it clear she was choosing her words carefully. “Those men you shot yesterday. I assume they weren’t your first.”

“No. They weren’t.” Not by a long shot, though he didn’t know the actual number. In his experience, it was better not to keep track.

“Do you regret any of them?”

“No, but there are times I’ve regretted the actions of others. That they put me in a position where the only choice was to take a life.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t know if I could make that kind of decision.”

Navarre gave her credit for being honest about it. Not everybody had that ability.

“Becoming a sniper isn’t easy. They don’t just hand you a rifle and tell you who to kill. The qualification course is seven weeks long; less than half of the candidates make it through. They teach you how to evaluate a situation, determine the threat, and weigh your options, all within a split second. They also show you how to process the emotions that come with taking a life.” Still, there were occasions when some of those emotions slipped through the cracks.

He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and stared out into the forest. “There was a kid one time. A boy. I never knew his name—it’s better that way—but he couldn’t have been older than twelve. He was wearing a vest packed with explosives. My spotter almost missed it because it was hidden under a big, bulky coat. He was

walking toward a market full of people, a huge smile on his face like he didn't have a care in the world.If I hadn't dropped him, a lot of innocent civilians would have died."

Empathy softened Sloane's voice."That had to be hard."

"It wasn't at the time.All that training kicked in, and I did what I had to do.But every now and then, I still think about that kid.About the lowlife who convinced him to strap on that vest and sent him off to die.Whoever it was, they were far more deserving of the bullet."

Reaching out, she touched his arm, and the simple contact grounded him in a way nothing else possibly could.A heavy silence settled between them, and for some stupid reason, he felt the inexorable need to fill it.

"I killed a man last year."Christ, why the fuck did he just tell her that?She was going to think he was some sort of monster.Perhaps that was the point."He took out a contract on somebody I care about."

Shock widened her eyes."A contract, as in he hired a hitman?"

Navarre nodded.

"Did he succeed?"

"No.We tricked the asshole who'd come to do the job into believing he succeeded.Unfortunately, that kind of deception is only a temporary fix.The person targeted can't play dead forever—not if they want any semblance of a normal life—and it's only a matter of time before the truth comes out.We could have killed the assassin—we had the shot lined up—but that wouldn't have solved the problem either.That's the thing about contracts; kill the killer, and another one takes their

place. Again and again and again.” He started to walk again, and she matched the pace of his strides. “The only way to make it stop is to eliminate the person who initiated the contract. If no one’s getting paid, no one’s getting killed.”

She looked as though she was weighing the situation from every angle in her mind. “I assume going to the police wasn’t an option.”

“Oh, it’s always an option, but it wouldn’t have done any good. This was one of those instances where the only viable option was a bullet.”

The creases lining her brow were a clear indication that didn’t settle well with her. “And you’re okay with assuming the role of judge, jury, and executioner?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:07 pm*

“I never lost sleep over it. It’s rare for the law to punish those types of people. They’re rich, and powerful, and well-connected, and they almost always get what they want without facing any kind of real-life consequences. In this case, there was only one way to stop him. Anything less would have resulted in the death of somebody I care about.”

He glanced at her, feeling oddly defensive. Most of the time, he didn’t care what others thought about him, but she was different. Her opinion mattered to him in a way he couldn’t quite put into words. “I suppose you think that makes me a bad person.”

“That’s not what I said. It’s just...I don’t know.” She made a vague gesture with her hands. “It’s not my place to judge you. I’ve never had to make that kind of decision. Hopefully, I’ll never have to.”

Jackson would have given his eyeteeth to be on one of the teams out in the woods searching for Navarre and Sloane, but Six Points had strict rules about injured employees working in the field. Until he received a clean bill of health, he’d have to settle for a spot in the control center. Technically, it was a step up in the chain of command, but right now it sure didn’t feel that way.

He paced the expansive living area of Sierra’s mountainside estate, which had been converted into a temporary base of operations. Two teams had ventured into the forest, one led by Austin, the other by Wade, searching for their missing colleagues. To his left, four agents sat at the rustic wooden table by the big bay window, remotely piloting aerial drones equipped with thermal and high-resolution cameras. But they’d yet to find so much as a trace, which wasn’t all that surprising, considering Navarre’s military training. They’d probably have an easier time finding



Bigfoot.

The sound of cursing caught Jackson's attention. It didn't sound like angry cursing, more like somebody caught by surprise. He crossed to where Rosario sat, staring at her laptop monitor.

"What's going on?" Jackson asked.

Rosario glanced up, an odd expression on her battered face. The bruising around her broken nose had deepened to a dark purple, making her look like she'd done ten rounds in a boxing ring without headgear. "Well, I've got good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?"

He'd always hated that question. "Let's start with the bad."

"The drone's toast."

"Aw, fuck." His stomach knotted. The boss was going to be pissed. "You crashed a nine-thousand-dollar drone?"

"No, it got shot out of the sky. The GPS is still functional though, so we should be able to retrieve it. Once we get it back, I can see if the damage is repairable."

"Who shot it?" he asked.

"Well, that's the good news." With a grin, Rosario angled the screen to give Jackson a better view. "Take a look."

Nerves on edge, he stared down at the screen as the aerial footage began to play. The drone skimmed above the tree canopy, its infrared camera showing a tapestry of blues and purples that indicated a lack of heat signatures. Occasionally, a small flicker of

orange appeared, most likely the body heat of a bird or squirrel—far too small to be human.

But then two orange figures came into view, one larger than the other, both walking upright. There for a second, and then gone. The drone reversed course, bringing them back into view. The camera feed switched from thermal to high resolution, but now the only things visible were tree branches. It shifted to the right, to a break in the canopy, and a man in dark clothing could be seen on the ground, aiming a pistol toward the sky.

Suddenly, the drone lurched to the right, lurched again, and then plummeted to earth. Upon impact, the feed turned to static.

Jackson's mouth went slack. "Is that who I think it is?"

Rosario rewound the footage and froze it at the exact moment the man's face came into view.

"Son of a bitch." Relief hit him so hard, his knees nearly buckled. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been this happy to see Navarre's face, though he'd still give his friend a load of crap for needing two shots to down the drone.

"Am I good or what?" Rosario said, her smile even wider than Jackson's.

"You're the best." He clapped Rosario's shoulder. "How far away is the drone?"

"Approximately four miles." Rosario opened a window on the laptop to reveal a map of the area. She tapped the upper right section of the screen. "We're here. The drone's there. It's rugged terrain, though. No roads, but we might be able to access it with ATVs. Even so, we won't be able to get there quickly."

She was right, damn it. But they were a hell of a lot closer to rescuing Navarre and Sloane than they were ten minutes ago.

Still smiling, Jackson swiped at the screen of his phone and called Austin.

“Give me good news,” Austin said when he answered, and Jackson was happy to oblige.

“We found them.”

## Chapter 17

Clouds moved in as the day wore on, turning the sky an ominous gray. It wouldn't be much longer before the gathering storm soaked them to the skin. Navarre had hoped they'd reach town before that happened, but it had taken them longer than anticipated to cross the last valley and maneuver around the lake.

“Too bad you don't have an umbrella in that bag,” Sloane said, and he couldn't agree with her more.

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But it wasn't the rain that concerned him. It was the cold the night would bring. The combination of the two could be deadly if they didn't find someplace warm and dry to shelter for the night.

After carefully avoiding a thorny patch of vine-like shrubs, they emerged from the dense thicket and stopped dead in their tracks.

"Please tell me I'm not imagining that," Sloane said.

"You're not."

Nestled between two massive trees, the building was little more than a shack. The green paint on the siding was chalky and faded, the peaked roof covered in rust. Two rocking chairs sat idle on the porch, while a hanging basket of ferns swayed with each gust of wind. Above the front door, a large wooden sign, bleached out by years of sun and rain, read LIVE BAIT, while a smaller sign in the window indicated the shop was open for business.

There were no vehicles in the gravel lot, but an old red pickup truck was parked along the side of the building, its bed loaded with scrap metal.

"Stay here," Navarre said. "I'll check it out."

"Are you crazy? The last time we split up, I almost got assaulted by one of those goons. We're doing this together."

She wore that unmistakable expression—eyes narrowed, jaw set—that made it clear

she wasn't backing down. He respected that fire, and he understood her perspective, but he also worried about what might happen if things suddenly went south.

He opened his ruck, took out the merc's gun, and handed it to her. "Just in case you need it."

Without hesitation, she tucked the gun into one of the pockets of the oversized camo jacket he'd taken from the asshole who'd tried to assault her. "All right, let's do this."

The weathered boards creaked under their feet when they stepped onto the porch. Navarre opened the door and followed Sloane inside, all the while noting things such as cover, possible weapons, and the placement of exits. So far, he'd seen nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew better than to take anything for granted.

He placed one hand at the small of Sloane's back as the door swung shut behind them. The air was heavy with the scent of aged wood and the distinct aroma of bait. Shelves, some sagging under the weight of merchandise, were filled with an assortment of fishing tackle, while glass tanks displayed a variety of fish, worms, and crickets. The walls were adorned with handwritten signs detailing bait prices, fishing tips, a few mounted fish, and faded photographs of prize catches that looked like they dated back to the 1980s.

An old, heavysset man sat behind the cash register, his nose buried in a book. He had to be in his mid to late seventies, with a puff of white hair and wire-rimmed glasses perched low on the bridge of his nose. Wearing a black T-shirt with a bass on the front, he glanced up at their approach and seemed surprised to see them there. He stood, set the book on the counter, and gave a smile that deepened the lines around his eyes and mouth.

"Good afternoon. How can I—" His smile slipped a notch or two as he stared at Sloane over the tops of his glasses. "You look really familiar. Do I know you?"

To her credit, Sloane kept her cool. “I don’t think so. I’ve never been around these parts before.”

“Are you sure? I could have sworn...” Recognition formed on the old man’s face as he snapped his fingers and pointed at her. “You’re Sierra Page, aren’t you? I heard you built a place up on Cooper’s Peak.”

For a split second, panic formed on Sloane’s face, but then she blinked and a sly smile wiped away all traces of anxiety. “All right, you got me. But please don’t tell anybody you saw me, okay? It’s nice to get away from the Hollywood scene and be with regular people, but it’s hard when folks find out who I am.”

The man nodded, as if that explained everything. “Your secret’s safe with me, ma’am. I swear I won’t tell a soul.”

“Thank you so much. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.” She extended her hand, and he shook it as though he were receiving royalty.

“Gus Stanton. Pleased to meet you. I’ve seen all your movies at least once. Well, except for that last one, ’cause it ain’t on video yet.” His Southern accent got thicker the longer he spoke. “If you don’t mind me asking, what are you doing out here? No offense, but it’s kind of late in the afternoon for fishing.”

Navarre settled back and kept watch of their surroundings, confident Sloane had the situation with Gus well under control. Hell, she practically had the guy wrapped around her pinky finger.

“I’m doing research for a new movie,” Sloane said. “If everything goes according to plan, we’ll start shooting early next year.”

“What kind of movie?” Gus asked.

“Action adventure. The bad guys try to kidnap my character, but I manage to escape into the mountains with nothing but the clothes on my back. From there, it’s a game of cat and mouse between me and them.” She glanced to Navarre. “My bodyguard has been teaching me things about roughing it in the forest.”

Damn, she was good. It was straight out of Lying 101: keep your story close to the truth so the lie was easier to remember.

And Gus fell for it hook, line, and sinker. “Oooh, that sounds exciting. Do you get to kick lots of butt like you do as the Deathslayer?”

“Not as much as I’d like, but that’ll change if I get my way.” She blasted him with a toothy smile, and the guy almost melted into a puddle. But then her expression turned serious. “All kidding aside, I was hoping you could help us. Our original plan was to hike all the way into town, but...” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “We hadn’t counted on that storm rolling in. You wouldn’t happen to know anybody who could give us a ride, do you? I’d call one of my assistants, but the last thing I want to do is admit to them that we didn’t make it—”

“I can do it,” the old man blurted. “I’d be honored to give you a ride into town. Just give me a minute to change the sign on the door and lock up.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly ask you to go through all that trouble.”

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“It’s no trouble at all,” he insisted with a wave of his hand. “I was about to close up anyway.” He glanced under the counter and then patted the pockets of his pants. “Now where did I put my keys?”

“They’re on the hook by the cigarette rack,” Navarre said.

Gus spun around and snatched the keys from the small metal hook. Then he grabbed a baseball cap with the North Carolina Tar Heels logo and popped it on his head.

They followed him out to the old red pickup truck.

“She don’t look like much, but she gets me where I need to go.” Gus opened the door on the passenger side and gestured for Sloane to get inside. “Think you can both squeeze up front? If not, I can take some stuff out of the bed.”

“I’m sure we’ll fit,” Navarre said.

Thankfully, the truck had a bench rather than bucket seats, which made squeezing two people into the passenger side easier. Still, it was a tight fit. Not that Navarre really minded. It gave him an excuse to stretch his arm over the top of the seat and tuck Sloane against his side.

Gus slid behind the wheel and tossed a pack of cigarettes onto the dash. He jammed the key into the ignition and, after a moment’s hesitation, the engine rumbled to life.

“How long will it take to reach town?” Sloane asked.



“From here? Oh, about twenty minutes or so.” He pulled onto the road and hit the gas, and the truck gradually picked up speed. “Who else is going to be in your new movie?”

“I’m not sure. They’re still casting. Last I heard, they were in talks with Nash Capwell to play an FBI agent.”

“Oh, he’d be good. I liked that movie he did with Vicky Hale.”

While Sloane chatted with Gus about movies, Navarre searched for signs of anything out of the ordinary, because the last thing he wanted to deal with was another ambush. The old truck wouldn’t fare nearly as well as the armor-plated rental car.

“Any place in particular you want me to stop?” Gus asked as they passed the City Limits sign for Fleet Creek. “I’m afraid there’s not much open this late in the day. Tourist season hasn’t started yet, so everyone’s keeping shorter hours.”

He wasn’t kidding. In a town this small, there weren’t many options to choose from, and most of them had Closed signs in their windows, even the little diner that was probably their best shot at getting food. He hadn’t seen any pay phones either, because that would have been too easy.

“You can drop us off in front of the post office,” Navarre said. “Ms. Page’s assistant will be here soon to pick us up.”

Gus pulled up to the curb and left the engine running. They climbed out of the truck, and Navarre already missed the feel of Sloane pressed against him.

“Thank you so much, Gus,” Sloane said through the open window. She flashed that thousand-watt smile at him again. “You’re a lifesaver.”

The old man blushed. "If you ever need help again, you know where to find me."

They watched the truck pull away from the curb. Gus honked the horn, and they waved at him as he headed back the way he came.

"I'm impressed," Navarre said, and now it was her turn to blush. "If you'd asked him nicely, he probably would have driven us all the way to Orlando."

"I didn't see the point in pushing our luck. Where do we go now?"

He gestured with his chin. "We passed a motel about a quarter mile back."

Sloane's mouth fell open. "Why didn't you say something? Gus would have dropped us off there."

"Because there's always a chance the wrong people might ask him about us. This way, if it happens, he won't be able to divulge our exact location." A bolt of lightning split the sky, followed by a clap of thunder that shook the ground. "Come on, let's go. If we're lucky, we'll get there before the rain starts."

Somuch for not getting wet.

The sky opened up and pelted them with rain as they darted across the courtyard of the Fleet Creek Cabin Motel, which consisted of eleven small cabins arranged in a U-shape, with rooms opening to the parking lot. They headed for the cabin in the middle with a sign marked Office and went inside.

Aside from a small reception desk, the place looked like somebody's home. A couch and overstuffed recliner faced the television that was mounted over the fireplace, with an old coffee table crammed in between. Nature pictures adorned the walls, while the hall to the right presumably led to the bedroom and bathroom.

A middle-aged woman wearing tan pants and a flannel shirt sat on the recliner watching a home improvement show on the television. She glanced up at their entrance and smiled, not seeming to notice that they were drenched to the skin. "Welcome to Fleet Creek. How can I help you today?"

The door swung shut behind Navarre. "We were hoping you had a cabin we could rent for the night."

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“Well, let me check.” She got off the recliner and crossed to the reservation desk, where a name plate indicated her name was Christina. A move of the mouse, and the computer screen came to life.

After a few clicks on the keyboard, she said, “You’re in luck. We have two cabins available: one’s at the end by the road and the other’s next to the office. Both come with a queen-sized bed. Which one would you like?”

“We’ll take the one by the office.” Navarre glanced to Sloane to make sure she was okay with the single bed, and she nodded. It wasn’t like they had much choice. They were adults; they could handle sharing a bed for one night. “Does the room come with a phone? I lost mine on the hike.”

“It does, but there’s a charge for each call. The rates are listed on the nightstand.”

“That’s fine.” Navarre dug out his wallet and handed her a credit card.

As Christina swiped the card, her attention shifted to Sloane. “You look really familiar. Have you been here before?”

Not missing a beat, Sloane shook her head, and droplets of water fell from her platinum hair to the floor. “No, I’m afraid not, but I get that a lot. I must have that kind of face.”

Navarre barely held back a smile.

Apparently satisfied with the answer, the woman opened a drawer beneath the

computer. She took out a metal key attached to a bottle opener shaped like a bear with its jaws open. "Okay, you're all set. You're in Cabin 5. Checkout is at ten. If you need anything, just pop on by or give me a call by dialing nine-nine on the phone."

"Thank you, ma'am." Navarre stuffed the key in his jacket pocket. "Are there any places within walking distance where we can grab a bite to eat?"

"I'm afraid not." Christina offered an apologetic smile. "The pizza place a few miles out used to deliver, but their driver went off to college and they still haven't hired a replacement. If you're really hungry, we have vending machines along the side of the building, but they only take dollars and quarters."

He could think of worse meals to eat. After getting change from Christina, Navarre held the door open for Sloane, and they bought enough vending machine food to send a small army into diabetic shock. While they were at it, they got drinks from the Coke machine, and then ran through the rain to their cabin.

Once inside, Navarre flipped a switch, and the interior flooded with light. The cabin was basically one big room with a bathroom tucked off to the side. It came with the basics: dresser, television, small table with two chairs, mini fridge, and a bed with nightstands on each side. Nothing fancy, but it suited their needs.

Sloane walked to the bed, unzipped her jacket, and their bounty of junk food tumbled onto the plaid comforter. "When we get back, the first thing I want to do is douse this coat in kerosene and light a match."

"I can make that happen." Navarre flipped the bolt on the door, checked the bathroom, and made sure the window was locked. Satisfied with the room's security, he set his ruck on the floor by the nightstand, picked up the handset of the old school push-button phone, and called the only number he had committed to memory.

As the phone rang, Sloane stripped the camo jacket off and draped it over the back of a chair. Then she removed the much-thinner pink jacket she'd been wearing underneath, the one Sierra's people had given her to wear, leaving her in the form-fitting blouse. And that pushup bra.

A host of wild thoughts filled his head, and he ripped his gaze away before he hung up the phone and did something stupid. Needing something—anything to do, he crossed his right foot over his left knee and began to unlace his boot.

At last, the call connected, and the sound of Jackson's deep, melodic voice was music to his ears. "Hello?"

Navarre closed his eyes as a wave of relief slammed into him with the force of a hurricane. "Damn, I'm glad to hear your voice. Essie would have kicked my ass if you died on my watch."

"What—Navarre, is that you? Holy shit, are you guys okay? Where are you?"

"I'm fine, Sloane's fine—we're just hungry and tired." He cradled the receiver between his ear and shoulder. "Is everybody okay?"

"Yeah, we're good. Me and Rosario got banged up a little. Garrett's still in the hospital, but they're supposed to let him out tomorrow. Where are you?"

"We rented a cabin in Fleet Creek, about twenty minutes from the bait shop."

In the background, he heard Austin say, "Is that Navarre?" and "Let me talk to him."

"Look, I've got to cut this short," Jackson said. "The boss wants to talk to you. We'll talk later, all right?"

“Count on it.” He couldn’t have stopped smiling if he tried. It was such a relief to know his friends—his family, as far as he was concerned—were alive and well.

Outside, the shower had turned into a storm, the rain coming down so hard he couldn’t see the cars in the parking lot.

“Navarre.” Austin’s steely voice came over the speaker a few seconds later. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear from you. Are either of you injured?”

“No, sir. Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, we’re good. By the way, I’m sorry about the drone. I didn’t know it was one of ours.”

“Don’t worry about it. You had no way of knowing. We’re still trying to figure out who hired those assholes.”

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“I killed two and incapacitated one. The guy I injured—they said his name is Porter, but I don’t know if that’s a first or last name. He’s going to need treatment for a shattered kneecap.”

“Good to know. We’ll check the local hospitals to see if anyone’s been recently admitted for a similar injury.”

“We also heard one of them mention somebody named Winslow. Does that ring a bell?”

“No, but I’ll pass it along to Larissa. The name might have come up in one of her searches.”

If anyone could find the proverbial needle in a haystack, it was her.

“What’s the name of the hotel you’re at?” Austin asked, and Navarre rattled off the name and address. “Do you think you’ll be safe there tonight? The storm’s pretty bad up here. Last I heard, there’s a flash flood watch in effect, and the forecast doesn’t show this storm easing up until early tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we’ll be fine here until things settle down.” He glanced to where Sloane sat at the table, and she nodded in agreement. “After roughing it in the woods, this place feels like the Ritz-Carlton.”

Austin laughed. “Good. If anything changes, give us a call, and we’ll find a way to reach you.”



“I assume they’re not coming tonight,” Sloane said when he hung up the phone.

Navarre shook his head. “The weather’s too rough for them to drive down the mountain. They’ll be here first thing in the morning.”

She glanced at the door. “Are you sure we’ll be safe?”

After everything they’d been through, he understood her concern. But more important, he wanted her to feel secure. “Yeah, we’re good. If any of those assholes are still out there, I doubt they’ll be searching for us until the storm breaks. That door’s pretty solid with a good deadbolt, but I’ll brace a chair under the knob just in case.”

A smile warmed her lips. “Thank you.”

Her gaze met his, and there was no mistaking the heat in her hazel eyes. Tension charged the air between them, and he felt the strain in his resolve. Digging deep, it took every last ounce of his willpower to keep from getting up and going to her.

She coughed to clear her throat. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel pretty gross. Should we shower before eating, or eat then shower?”

Just what he needed: the mental image of her soapy and naked. This was going to be a long night. “Are you close to passing out from hunger?”

She shook her head.

“Then shower first. You’ll feel better when you’re clean.” In need of a distraction, he pushed off the bed. “I’ll take care of the door while you’re in there.”

Chapter 18

Words could not begin to describe how good it felt to peel off her grungy clothes. The hot water in the shower felt even better.

Sloane scrubbed every square inch of her body and washed her hair twice. It was tempting to stay under the spray until the water turned cold, but that wouldn't be fair to Navarre. He'd kept her safe all this time; the least she could do was make sure he had a little hot water.

Reluctantly, she shut off the shower, dried her body with a midnight-blue towel, and put on one of the matching robes hanging from hooks on the back of the door. It was nice of the motel to provide them for guests, especially considering she'd hated the thought of putting filthy garments back on her clean body.

She cast a glance to the wall-mounted rack where her once-stylish outfit was hanging to dry. The torn-out knee in the black jeans would be all but impossible to fix, but the pink jacket and matching blouse were salvageable. Before stepping into the shower, she'd washed them all in the sink. Not the best way to clean them, but the cabin didn't have a washing machine. It also didn't have a dryer, which meant it would likely take all night for them to dry. For now, the robe would have to do.

She wiped the fog from the mirror above the sink and leaned forward to check her reflection. The hot shower had brought some color back to her face, making the dark circles under her eyes slightly less noticeable. A good night's rest would likely take care of that.

The blisters on her feet still hurt, but those would heal in a matter of days. Looking back at everything that happened, it could have been so much worse. She didn't have any bullet wounds, or broken bones, or deep psychological trauma that would require years of therapy. All in all, she considered herself lucky.

Straightening, she finger-combed her hair, tightened the sash on her robe, and left the

bathroom.

True to his word, Navarre had wedged one of the chairs under the doorknob, which would make it more difficult for anyone to force the door open. He'd also closed the curtains as an added measure of privacy. His boots were on the floor by the dresser, his leather jacket hanging from one of the bedposts. He sat on the other chair at the table, still wearing his shoulder rig over his black shirt, munching on a Clif Bar they'd bought from the vending machine while flipping channels on the television. At the sound of the door opening, he glanced her way and did a double take.

"Now that I'm clean, I didn't want to put my dirty clothes back on," she explained before he could ask. "I washed everything in the sink. Hopefully, they'll be dry by morning."

His gaze roamed the length of her body, from head to toes and back up again, and she felt it like a caress. "Where'd you get the robe?"

She pointed to the bathroom. "It was on a hook behind the door. There's another one in there if you want to wash your things as well."

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His lips twitched. “Good to know. How are your feet?”

It was nice of him to ask. “They’re still a little sore, but better.”

An awkward silence stretched between them. She tugged the sash a little tighter. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, because she couldn’t stop thinking about how naked she was under the robe. How much she wanted him to peel it off her body and satisfy every decadent fantasy that had taken up shop in her head. And there were a lot. She’d come up with some more while she was in the shower. One night wouldn’t be enough to burn through them all.

Too bad that wasn’t an option. The proverbial line had been drawn in the sand, and she wasn’t going to be the one who crossed it.

Navarre stood, crumpled the Clif Bar wrapper, and tossed it into the little trash can by the dresser. He closed the distance between them but stopped less than a foot away. He stared down at her, and it was hard to think straight when he looked at her like that. Like he knew exactly what she was thinking and was tempted to scratch a few of those fantasies off her list.

But instead, he said, “I’ll be out in a few. There are bandages and ointment in my ruck if you want to use them on your feet.” He gestured toward the camo jacket, where the pistol he’d given her was still tucked in one of the pockets. “Keep your gun within reach. We should be safe for the night, but it never hurts to be careful.”

Her feet stayed firmly rooted in place as she heard the bathroom door close behind her. It was only when she heard the sound of running water that she followed

Navarre's advice and retrieved the gun from her jacket pocket. She set it on the nightstand of what she'd decided was her side of the bed, and then dug through his ruck for the first-aid kit. Once the blisters were treated and wrapped, she made herself comfortable with a can of soda and a Kit Kat bar. She could have chosen something with a shred of nutritional value, like a granola bar or beef jerky, but screw it, she wanted candy.

She'd polished off the Kit Kat and moved on to a pack of Nutter Butters when she heard the water in the shower turn off. Minutes later, Navarre emerged from the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel around his trim hips, and her mouth went completely dry.

So that was what he'd been hiding underneath all that black. He had the sleek, powerful build of a gymnast, a tapestry of sharp lines and taut muscles, with a ripped eight-pack and a dusting of chest hair that tapered down into a V until it disappeared behind the towel. A motley assortment of scars, pale against his tanned skin, marred the perfection of his physique, but it only added to the rugged quality that she found so damn alluring. Even as a curl of heat unfurled within her, she couldn't help but wonder how he'd gotten them all.

"Sorry, I forgot—" He paused mid-stride, concern on his face. "What's wrong?"

Heat flushed her face. She hoped it wasn't noticeable. "Nothing. Why?"

"You made a weird noise."

That was probably her trying not to swallow her tongue. "I think some Nutter Butter went down the wrong way. I'm okay now."

Her answer seemed to satisfy his curiosity. He grabbed his ruck and went back into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Leaving her mind to wander.

Needing a distraction, she grabbed the remote and flipped through channels until she settled on a nature show about cuttlefish. When that didn't do the trick, she switched to one of those news programs where the guests yelled at each other.

Hair still damp from the shower, Navarre came out of the bathroom a short time later, this time wearing the robe identical to hers, which was good, because it covered a lot more skin. She was fairly confident she could resist the allure of his well-defined calves.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Yeah." He dropped the bag on the floor along his side of the bed. He sat next to her, back propped against the headboard, and reached for the pack of trail mix.

"I knew you were going to pick that." She grinned. "It's the most adult choice left in the pile."

He gave her a look. "Keep it up, and I'll eat the Skittles."

Her eyes narrowed, because she'd told him how much she liked them. She was saving them for last. "You wouldn't."

A devilish grin formed on his face as his fingers inched toward the bag. She smacked his hand, and he laughed.

To their credit, it took them the better part of an hour to consume their bounty of vending machine food. Outside, the storm raged on, with howling winds and torrential rain that pounded against the window. Claps of thunder shook the cabin, but thankfully the power stayed on. Strange as it sounded, the storm made her feel safer,

because no one in their right mind would be out there looking for them.

Navarre gathered the wrappers and dumped them into the trash. “I can’t remember the last time I ate that much junk food.”

“Lightweight.” Sloane drank the last of her Coke and set the empty can on the nightstand. “If it wasn’t for Mountain Dew and Peanut M&Ms, I wouldn’t have made it through my last semester of college.”

The mattress dipped under Navarre’s weight when he sat back down. He crossed his legs at the ankles. “It’s a shame those vending machines don’t sell beer.”

“That’s what the minibar’s for.” She gestured to the small refrigerator beside the dresser.

He shook his head. “I’m not paying eight bucks for a bottle of Budweiser.”

“Come on, live a little. After what we went through, you deserve an eight-dollar beer.”

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Sloane got up and went to the fridge. She opened the door and rooted through its contents. No snacks, which she supposed made sense, considering the overpriced vending machines outside, but there was a variety of spirits in tiny bottles, red and white wine, energy drinks, juice, and two bottles of beer.

“They don’t have Budweiser, but they do have something called Imperial Hop Drop.” She turned toward him and held up the bottle like one of those women on the game shows who showcased prizes. “I think this beer is meant for you to drink. It’s got an old muscle car on the label and everything.”

His eyes went to the bottle, and then back to her. “Temptress.”

She laughed. “You know you want it.”

“Technically, I’m still on duty.”

“Oh, give it a rest. One beer isn’t going to impair you. Besides, everything’s locked up tight, the curtains are closed, and I seriously doubt those guys are braving the storm looking for us. As far as anybody else is concerned, we’re just two hikers taking a break from nature.”

For a moment, he looked as if he was going to argue, but then he sighed and extended his hand. “Give me the damn bottle.”

Cracking Navarre’s iron-clad resolve felt like a victory of sorts, and she barely held back the grin as he popped the cap with the bear-shaped bottle opener and took a long drink.



“Damn, that’s good.”He held the bottle out toward her.“Want some?”

“No, thanks.Bitter beers aren’t my thing.”

“Well, there’s got to be something in there that you could use to make one of those girly drinks you like so much.What, you didn’t think I’d remember?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but it’s written all over your face.”

Okay, he had her there.She hadn’t expected him to remember something so trivial.She went back to the fridge, took out a can of pineapple juice and a tiny bottle of coconut rum.She poured the juice into a glass, added half the bottle of rum, stirred with her finger, sampled, and then added the rest of the rum.

“Yeah, that hits the spot,” she said after sampling the drink again.

Apparently tired of watching the news, Navarre reached for the remote control and scrolled through the programming guide.

“Looking for a bad movie to watch?”Sloane asked as she settled back against the headboard.

“No, just one I’ve seen a thousand times and don’t have to follow too closely.Ah, considering the last couple of days, this one’s fitting.”

He pressed a button and Sierra’s glamorous face filled the screen.It was the first movie in theDeathslayermovie franchise, the one that catapulted her from movie star to cultural icon.

On-screen, the Deathslayer raced toward Castle Dughardt on a mythical creature that looked like a cross between a bison and a hyena. When she reached the gate, she jumped off the beast and slashed her way into the castle.

Despite her best efforts, old insecurities crept into Sloane's thoughts. "It must suck to be stuck with me when you could have spent the weekend with her."

Navarre paused, the bottle halfway to his mouth, and then looked at her as if she were one of those kids who needed to be told not to eat a detergent pod. "Why would you say something like that?"

She shrugged. "I'm just being realistic. She's rich, and gorgeous, and leads an exciting life. Pretty much everything I'm not."

His brows drew down. "You really need to stop selling yourself short. The only thing she has that you don't is a shit-ton of money."

"I'm not gorgeous."

"The fuck you're not."

Her pulse skipped. "I don't lead an exciting life."

He huffed out a breath. "Excuse me, but did you hit your head in the bathroom and forget the last two days?"

"That was exciting in an unpleasant way, and it's not the way my life normally works."

"But that's what makes it so impressive." He drank another swig of beer. "Most people would have lost their shit if half of those things happened to them. You were shot at,

had your car run off the road, got chased by a team of trained mercenaries, had to sleep outdoors in freezing temperatures, and almost got eaten by a bear, and you never freaked out, not even once. Hell, you even put up with my shit and gave as good as you got. That's impressive all in itself. I'd bet my next paycheck that if half of that ever happened to Sierra, she'd curl up in a corner and cry."

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The compliment caught her off guard. “You really think I did okay out there?”

He nodded, not a shred of doubt on his face. “You did better than okay. You impressed the hell out of me. Not many women would have slept in a shelter built against the side of a fallen tree.”

“Well, if given the choice, I would have rather slept at the Marriott.”

He laughed. “You and me both. But when things got rough, you didn’t cry, or whine, or complain. You knuckled down and did what needed to be done to survive. As far as I’m concerned, that’s pretty badass.”

His gaze slid down from her eyes to her mouth. Everything in her went still. She would have given anything to kiss him again. But they were friends now, with clearly defined boundaries. If she wanted that friendship to last, she had to respect them.

He drank the last of his beer and set the empty bottle on the nightstand. On-screen, the Deathslayer was locked in a battle with Lord Ahkna, their swords throwing sparks with every clash of metal against metal.

She sipped her drink, enjoying the blend of sweet pineapple and the kick of rum. There wasn’t enough alcohol to give her a buzz, but it helped her relax and loosened her tongue. “I dressed as the Deathslayer at last year’s Dragon Con.”

Navarre grinned. “Seriously? With the blue hair and everything?”

A blush warmed her cheeks as she nodded. Maybe admitting this wasn’t such a bright

idea. “Nina showed Austin the pictures. That’s where he got the idea of me acting as Sierra’s double.”

Navarre’s gaze sharpened. “I need to see those pictures when we get back.”

She shook her head. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “It’s kind of silly for a grown woman to play dress-up.”

“No, it’s not. There’s nothing wrong with adults having harmless fun. Besides, if it wasn’t for your uncanny resemblance to the Deathslayer, you wouldn’t have landed this cushy job.”

She laughed, and he laughed along with her, and it felt so good after everything they’d gone through. She really liked this version of Navarre. She’d seen glimpses of it out in the forest, but now this playful, sexy side of him was on full display, and it really turned her on. “If I’d known what was going to happen, I would have asked for a lot more money.”

“Well, now you know for next time.”

Another crack of thunder rattled the cabin, causing the lights to momentarily flicker.

Sloane sipped her drink and set the glass on the nightstand. “I seriously doubt there’s going to be a next time.”

“There will be if Sierra enjoyed her weekend.”

“And you’d actually want to go through this again?”

“It wasn’t all bad.”

For a moment or two, she simply stared at him. “You’re kidding, right? Or did you forget those big, scary guys with guns who chased us—”

“They weren’t that scary.”

“Speak for yourself. They scared the crap out of me.”

All traces of humor left his face. “I never would have let them hurt you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” She had no doubt in her mind. “I just...thank you. For keeping me safe.”

She couldn’t remember if she’d thanked him before. Even if she had, it didn’t hurt to say it again.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I was just doing my job.” His lips curved into a smile that reached his eyes, and it transformed his face from ruggedly handsome to drop dead gorgeous. “Would you like to know why I don’t think the last couple of days were all bad?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Because I got to spend them with you.”

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She assumed he was yanking her chain and scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious, Sloane.”

Her pulse tripped when she met his gaze and...damn. The cool detachment in his eyes had melted away, replaced with a simmering intensity that bordered on desire.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, his voice low and deliberate. He set the remote on the nightstand. “About the friend zone thing.”

She swallowed hard against the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “What about it?”

“Well...” He dragged a hand through his close-cropped hair. “Tomorrow morning, Austin’s going to knock on that door, and this will all be over. You’ll go back to the cyber security team, and I’ll move on to my next assignment in personal protection.”

“Yeah.” When he put it that way, it made things seem so final. It turned their time together into just another assignment, which she supposed it was, but it didn’t sit well with her.

Navarre leaned toward her, and she caught a whiff of his scent, all clean, and fresh, and undeniably male. “We could...you know, just for tonight...suspend the parameters of the friend zone.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Like a temporary ceasefire?”

He nodded slowly, his gaze never leaving hers. “I was thinking more along the lines of satisfying a craving that’s been building for far too long.”

It was a wonder he couldn’t hear the sound of her heart slamming against her rib cage. All the reasons they shouldn’t do this flashed through her mind. If she had a lick of sense, she’d turn him down flat. But every cell in her body wanted this—wanted him, even if it was only for tonight.

Anticipation raced through her veins. She licked her lips, and his eyes tracked the movement. “This is a bad idea.”

“I know.” He leaned closer. “The worst.”

“Totally unprofessional.”

“Good thing we’re not at the office.”

And then his mouth claimed hers, hot and seductive, the kiss loaded with so much passion it set her soul on fire. His fingers tunneled into her hair, holding her head in a dominating grip while he plundered her mouth like there was no tomorrow, and a familiar ache ignited within her and spread faster than lightning.

Head spinning, she reached for his robe, shoving the fabric off his broad shoulders so she could touch bare skin. Her fingers trailed from his shoulders to his chest, and she reveled in the feel of him, so warm and strong and vibrant.

Navarre reached down, tugged the sash free, yanked the robe from his body, and tossed it to the floor.

“Better?” he murmured against her mouth.



She glanced down and her heart nearly gave out at the sight of him. Sure, she'd seen most of him when he came out of the bathroom wearing only a towel, but Jacob Navarre in all his glory was truly a sight to behold. He was hotter than hell. And all hers for the night. She wanted everything this man had to offer, consequences be damned.

"Can I touch you?" she asked.

"God, yes. Wherever you want." He kissed her again—longer, hotter, deeper—and her hands began to wander.

She reveled in the feel of hard muscles under warm, taut skin, all that power just waiting to be unleashed. Her hands drifted from his chest to his abs, tracing the ridges of each muscle as she went. Lower still, past his hips, and when her hand wrapped around his hard length, a groan rose from his throat. She marveled at the searing heat, at the feel of his pulse beneath her fingertips. With a stroke, he grew even harder, and she smiled at the knowledge that she did that to him.

Gently, he gripped her wrist and eased her hand away. "If you keep that up, it'll be over before we get started."

She laughed between kisses, while her hands resumed their explorations, mapping out each spot that made him hum, or growl, or groan—the man was vocal about what he liked.

He pulled his head back, breaking the kiss, his eyes heavy-lidded and glassy. "Your turn," he said. "I want to see you, Sloane. All of you."

Fingers clumsy, she unfastened the sash, and she sucked in a breath at the feel of cool air on her breasts. She slid her arms out of the sleeves, and Navarre tossed the robe to the floor with the other, leaving her completely exposed. And feeling a tiny bit

awkward. It had been...well, let's just say awhile, since she'd last gotten naked with a guy. Not to mention, she'd eaten a fair amount of junk food an hour or so ago, and—

“Christ, you're fucking perfect.” The sheer reverence in Navarre's voice melted a few of her insecurities, and when his hand palmed her breast, she forgot about them altogether.

He brushed his thumb over her hardened nipple, and she arched into his touch. Then he dipped his head, sucked the nipple into his mouth, and it felt so good she made a strangled sound.

Navarre's gaze flicked up to hers. “You like that, eh?”

“Oh yeah.Do it again.”

He did, and oh, how she loved a man who followed directions.

Her whole world narrowed and focused on the feel of his warm hands and hot mouth all over her aching skin.He felt so incredibly good, much better than she’d imagined possible.Liquid heat poured through her veins, and when his hand slipped between her thighs, she damn near lost her mind.

“Fuck, you’re so wet, Sloane.I can’t wait to taste you there.”He reached into her with one finger, then another, and with each stroke, the tension in her body built at an alarming rate.Higher.Tighter.Just a little bit more, and she’d find the release her body desperately demanded.

“I need you inside me,” she said between labored breaths.“Now.”

“You’re not ready yet.”

She made an impatient sound.“If I were any more ready, I’d spontaneously combust.”

But instead, he added his mouth to the mix, and her whole world blew apart.She gasped, her head thrown back against the pillow, unable to catch her breath.She was pretty sure he was going to have to peel her off the ceiling.Her fingers dug into his hair as the orgasm overloaded her senses, and when the echoes of ecstasy finally receded, she felt more alive than she had at any other point in her entire life.

Navarre looked so damn pleased with himself, like he just climbed Mt.Everest or

something. Hell, who could blame him? As far as she was concerned, any man who could bring that kind of pleasure to a woman deserved a freaking medal.

He kissed her inner thigh, his beard stubble raspy against her skin. "Now you're ready."

Stretching across the mattress, he reached for his wallet on the nightstand and took out a condom.

She somehow summoned the strength to snatch it from his hand and tore the wrapper. "Only one?"

"There's another in my ruck. After that, we'll have to get creative." He sucked air through his teeth as she rolled the latex over him.

After one more bone-melting kiss, he settled his hips in the valley of her thighs, and she moaned at the feel of his long, hard shaft gliding over her slick opening. Then her eyes nearly rolled to the back of her head with that first sweet slide into her.

He made a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a groan. The muscles along his jaw flexed, while the rest of his body went perfectly still, as though he were simply enjoying a feeling of bliss for a few glorious moments.

On the heels of a measured exhale, he said, "You have no idea how fucking good you feel."

"You're not so bad yourself." She wrapped her legs around his waist and ground her hips against him, pushing him even farther inside her, and the additional friction felt incredible.

A sound she could only describe as feral vibrated in his throat. "Christ, don't do

that.I'm holding on by a thread here.”

“Then I guess you better start moving.”

Navarre pulled almost all the way out of her and slid back in hard, and she gasped at the jolt of pure pleasure.

He grinned.“You like that, huh?”

“Maybe a little.”

He did it again, even harder this time, and a visceral ache spread to every erogenous zone in her body.

“Okay, I like that a lot.Do it again.Better yet, don't stop doing it.”

His grin turned wicked.“Yes ma'am.”

He moved with a raw intensity that drove every coherent thought from her mind.It didn't take long for him to pick up a rhythm, each grinding thrust of his hips driving the pleasure higher and higher.Already, she felt the pressure building within her—stronger, fiercer, wilder than before—and she dug her heels into the mattress and met him stroke for stroke.

Lungs pumping, he adjusted the angle of his hips, and the change in position hit just the right place at just the right angle, with just the right amount of friction she needed to completely lose control.She climaxed with a piercing cry, her inner muscles pulsing all around him.It was beyond pleasure, beyond euphoria, beyond anything she'd ever experienced.

But this time she wasn't the only one.A guttural groan rose up in his throat as

Navarre gave himself to the moment. His grip tightened, his fingers digging into her skin, and when his gaze locked with hers, the unfiltered emotions she saw in his eyes knocked her world completely off its axis.

As his breathing slowly returned to normal, she skimmed her hands up and down his sweat-slicked back. He rolled to his side, taking her with him, enveloping her in his embrace.

He pressed a kiss to her hair. "That was...damn."

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“Yeah.” She knew what he meant but her brain was too fried to put it into words.

Navarre ran a hand down the length of her back, and she arched against him like a cat. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to lay naked beside him. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember the last time her muscles were this relaxed. She rested a hand on his chest and let out a soft sigh of contentment, all the while refusing to acknowledge the deepening feelings that lurked beneath the surface.

“Get some sleep,” he said.

Oh, hell no. That so wasn’t happening. If they only had one night together, she didn’t want to waste a single second on trivial things like sleep. “We still have another condom.”

“I know. That’s why I want you to rest and recharge.” The smile he gave was pure sin, and her molten insides started to burn again. “The night’s young, and I have plans.”

### Chapter 19

Toriffona quote from one of his favorite movies: Navarre had fallen victim to a classic blunder, on par with getting involved in a land war in Asia, by assuming one night with Sloane could possibly be enough to get her out of his system.

Even though the sex was nothing short of earth-shattering, it hadn’t been what ultimately doomed him. It was all the other stuff that came in between: the talking, the laughing, the exchanging of stories. They dragged him in deeper, strengthened their connection, and, for the life of him, he had no idea how they could ever go back to

being nothing more than colleagues.

The first rays of morning light crept through a tiny gap in the curtains. The worst of the storm had finally passed. It was still raining, but it no longer sounded as though they might need to build an ark. But with each agonizing tick of the clock, Navarre became increasingly aware that his time with Sloane was coming to an end.

He'd been a fool to think one evening with her would leave him sated. To the contrary, it made things worse. She'd ignited something deep within him, stirring his heart as well as his blood, and he struggled for a way to contain it.

For now, he chose the coward's way out and forced the unpleasant reality from his mind, determined not to ruin their last precious moments together. He skimmed one hand along the curve of her hip, and she made one of those husky sounds that never failed to turn him on. "Funny, I always assumed you were inked."

She tilted her neck to peer up at him. "Why, because of the piercings?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess you seemed like the type."

She made a soft sound of amusement. "I've thought about it from time to time, but I never could decide what to get or where to put it. I mean, if it's going to be on my body for the rest of my life, I don't want to regret it in a year or two."

"Makes sense."

"What about you?" she asked. "I don't see any tats on you either."

"No, I figured Jackson had enough for both of us." He'd considered it on multiple occasions, especially when Jackson or one of the other guys in their unit got inked. Fear of missing out, and all that happy shit. But he'd ultimately decided against



it, because his job as a sniper had relied on his ability to blend in with his environment, to be able to fade into the background, and what was the point in getting a tat if it had to be in a place where nobody ever saw it?

She laughed softly as she nestled into the crook of his shoulder and rested a hand on his chest. “You guys have been friends for a long time, right?”

He nodded. “We met in the Army. Been friends ever since. He’s saved my life more times than I can count. As far as I’m concerned, he’s family.”

It had taken him years to work through the grief of losing his biological family. Jackson’s friendship and unwavering loyalty had been a huge first step. Then they’d left the Army and started working at Six Points, and his surrogate family had grown larger, filling the void left by his blood relatives. They’d given him camaraderie, a sense of purpose, and a framework of support that he hadn’t experienced since his father disowned him. To lose that for a second time would be catastrophic. He’d do everything in his power to ensure that never happened to him again.

Sloane let out a sigh of contentment, and the urge to take her again rose in his blood. Actually, the urge had been there for quite some time, but now it had grown too insistent for him to deny.

Her fingers traced the motley assortment of scars along his shoulder, pale against his tanned skin. “How’d you get these?”

Navarre glanced down at the scars, and a few choice images from the worst day in his life flashed through his mind. He still had nightmares about Wanesh, though their frequency had diminished over time. “Insurgents attacked an outpost I was stationed at. One of their mortars blew up the ammo depot. Killed eight guys in my unit. If I hadn’t been wearing Kevlar, it would have been nine. It took us eighteen hours of

nonstop fighting to beat them back.”

Her eyes widened. “God, that must have been terrifying.”

“It was at first, but you reach a point where you get too scared to be scared, and all of your training kicks into place and you do whatever needs to be done.”

She went quiet for nearly a minute as she processed what he’d said. Her fingers drifted lower, to the jagged line along his torso. “What happened with this one?”

“The Blackhawk helicopter I was riding in got hit by a rocket and crash-landed. I got knocked unconscious, so I don’t remember much after that, but somewhere along the line, I caught a piece of shrapnel.”

She moved to a series of puncture marks on his forearm. “And this one?”

He sighed, because those ones were kind of embarrassing. “Are you going to ask about the origins of every scar on my body? I can think of better things to do with our time.”

“They’re a tapestry of your life. I can’t help but be curious about them.”

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Okay, he couldn't get annoyed by that, but he was pretty sure she was going to be disappointed with the story behind them. "Dog bite."

As expected, she gave him a puzzled look. "Come again?"

"It was one of the first ops I worked for Six Points. This spoiled rich kid had gotten mixed up with some very bad people. His parents paid a lot of money for us to extract him from the situation. Getting him out was easy, but when we delivered him to his parents, their dog expressed its appreciation by biting me."

Her brows drew down with a hint of suspicion. Not that he blamed her. It was a big deviation from how he got the rest of his scars.

"Are you messing with me?"

He drew an X across his bare chest with his finger. "Cross my heart and hope to die. I swear that's the truth. It was a tiny, fluffy white ball of fur—couldn't have been more than ten pounds, with little blue bows in his hair. His name was Mr. Doodles. He trotted on over, tail wagging, tongue hanging out, looking friendly as can be. But when I bent down to pet him, that little bastard latched onto my forearm like a cheetah trying to take down a gazelle. Surprised the shit out of me. I didn't even think his jaws could open that wide."

Sloane laughed, and he joined her. It hadn't been funny at the time, but now he could look back and appreciate the absurdity of the situation.

"That dog held on for a good five minutes before his owners finally convinced him to

let go by offering him a piece of bacon. Which was good, because I really didn't want to drive to the hospital with Mr. Doodles still attached to my arm." He paused. "Every time I catch a whiff of bacon, I think of that little demon."

"Oh God, stop," Sloane said between fits of laughter. "You're killing me."

Navarre gave her a wry look. "I'm glad to see my near-death experience brings you such amusement."

She snorted. "I'm picturing Mr. Doodles as a canine version of that killer bunny in the Monty Python movie."

The reference caught him by surprise. He arched one eyebrow. "Aren't you a little young for Monty Python?"

"Oh, come on, Monty Python is classic." She idly toyed with the hairs on his chest, and arousal heated his blood. "My mother loved them. We used to watch reruns of their show every Saturday morning on one of the cable networks."

"Do your parents still live nearby?"

"No, they moved to Upstate New York about four years ago. My grandparents aren't doing well health-wise, and they wanted to be closer so they could help."

"It's good they're in a position where they can do that."

"Yeah, a lot of people aren't that fortunate. Dad was able to find a new job pretty quickly, and Mom works remotely so she can pretty much move anywhere." Her fingers drifted to a mark on his hip that was made by the graze of a bullet, low enough to send the blood from his brain straight down to his groin. "Enough about my parents. I want to know more about these scars."

“Later.” He shifted his weight, pinning her to the mattress, and kissed the daylights out of her. Their mouths joined in a tangle of tongues, and the more he tasted, the more he wanted to taste, until the need for her coursed through his blood as though it were a living thing.

Navarre couldn’t put a name to the way he was feeling. Okay, that was a lie. He knew exactly what it was, but he knew better than to acknowledge the soul-deep emotions that came with making love to Sloane.

He carved a path of kisses along her jaw and neck, relishing the throaty moan she made when he grazed his teeth along the tender muscle connecting her neck and shoulder. Lower still, and he’d almost reached the swell of her breast when her muscles tensed beneath him.

“Oh, my God.”

He froze. “What’s wrong?”

“Something just moved past the window.”

His senses snapped to full alert as he looked over his shoulder to the window. “Are you sure?”

“No, I’m making it up.” Sarcasm bled into her voice. “Of course I’m sure.”

“What did it look like?”

“I couldn’t tell through the curtain. All I know is that it was big.”

Navarre reached for his weapon on the nightstand and rolled off the bed. Quickly, he crossed to the bathroom and grabbed his clothes. They were still a bit damp, but if shit

was about to hit the fan, he'd rather not be naked when it happened. On the way back to the room, he snatched one of the robes off the floor and tossed it to Sloane.

“Go into the bathroom and lock the door. I'll let you know when it's safe to come out.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you crazy? I'm not leaving you to fend for yourself.”

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Now wasn't the time to argue. He dragged his shirt over his head and then reached for his pants. Where were his briefs? Fuck it, no time. For now, he'd have to go commando. "Go get dressed and use the bathroom door for cover. If things get bad, I want you to lock yourself in there. Don't argue with me," he said when she opened her mouth. "I can't do everything I need to do if I'm worried about your safety."

She stared at him for a few long seconds, and then must have changed her mind about arguing because she nodded, slid the bathrobe on, and headed for the bathroom.

Pistol in hand, Navarre crossed to the window. It was tempting to check the peephole, but there was always the risk of getting shot through the door. Instead, he peeked through the curtains and saw a huge figure in all black by the front door, but the view sucked and he couldn't get a good look at the guy. Masculine voices spoke in hushed tones, but he couldn't make out the words. They were probably discussing how best to breach the room without any of them getting killed.

Apparently, one of them thought the best strategy was to knock.

Sloane shot him a questioning look.

"Who is it?" Navarre called out.

"It's your fairy godmother. Now open the goddamn door."

The tension broke like a snapped wire, and a smile split Navarre's face. He'd know that voice anywhere.

He lowered his weapon and flipped the safety on. “Jackson, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Now are you going to open the door or what?”

He looked to Sloane, his gaze meeting hers, and the finality of the moment slammed into him with the grace of a bulldozer. This was it. Their time together had officially come to an end. After this, things would revert to normal, only that didn’t feel normal anymore, and he sure as hell didn’t feel happy about it.

He burned the image of her into his mind, looking soft, and tousled, and more beautiful than words could possibly describe, because he never wanted to forget a single detail from their time together.

Her lips twitched as she gave him a nod, and then she disappeared behind the closed bathroom door.

Straightening his spine, he drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly. It took every ounce of discipline to pull his shit together. Then he crossed the room, pulled the chair from the door, and disengaged the lock. He opened the door and saw Jackson, Austin, and Wade standing outside, dressed in all black and armed to the teeth. They grinned at the sight of him, and he opened the door wider for them to come inside.

Before he could utter a single word, Jackson pulled him in for a big bear hug that crushed the wind from his lungs.

“Damn, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Navarre said once he could breathe again, though he would have been happier if they’d called first and given them time to prepare. Then maybe this whole thing wouldn’t feel like such a kick to the nuts.



If any of them noticed the rumpled sheets, the bathrobe on the floor, or the lingering scent of sex in the air, they didn't let it show. Thank God. He didn't have the mental fortitude to deal with that shit at the moment.

Austin closed the door behind him. "Where's Sloane?"

"I'm right here."

Sloane emerged from the bathroom, fully dressed. Her hair was tucked behind her ears, which minimized the case of bed head. She smoothed a hand over the front of her fitted pink shirt in a futile attempt to flatten out the wrinkles.

Austin smiled at the sight of her. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you two. We've been worried sick."

She wore a smile like armor—bright, unyielding, and a little too perfect. "Well, Navarre took good care of me. I don't think I could have been safer."

"Damn straight," Jackson said. "But I still can't believe it took you two shots to take down that drone. You're slipping in your old age."

Navarre's hackles went up, even though he knew his friend was just giving him good-natured grief. "I only had a pistol, and I hit it both times."

"That's no excuse. You've got a reputation to uphold. I expect you to be able to shoot that shit down on the first shot with both eyes closed and a broken trigger finger."

"How about this finger instead?" He flipped Jackson off, and his friend laughed. If his chest hadn't felt so damn hollow, it would have seemed like any other day.

Austin clapped to get everybody's attention. "I hate to cut this reunion short, but we

need to get moving. We've got drones in the air to make sure there won't be any surprises waiting for us on the way to Sierra's estate. There should be enough time to grab some lunch before we leave for the airport."

They gathered their things—there wasn't a whole lot, just Navarre's ruck and his boxer briefs, which he hoped nobody had noticed. As he sat on a chair to put his boots on, Sloane went back into the bathroom and came out with the creep's gun.

"You might as well take this." She held it out to Austin.

“Where’d you get that?”he asked.

“I took it from one of the assholes who ambushed us.”Navarre stood, ignoring the pain in his feet because he’d tied the laces too tight.“It only made sense for Sloane to be armed, in the event something happened to me.”

Wade took the gun from Austin and gave it a quick inspection.“The serial number’s still on it.We might be able to use it to track down its owner.”

“I assume the guy hasn’t turned up in any of the local hospitals?”Navarre asked.

“Not that we know of.That kind of information is shielded under privacy laws.”Wade didn’t look happy about it, but then again, that was his default expression.“Larissa’s working her magic, but it’s slow going.”

He probably didn’t want to know what her magic entailed, but if anybody could find the asshole, it was her.

Austin and Wade left the room first to ensure there were no threats outside.Once they finished a scan of the area, they gave the all clear signal.

Navarre’s gaze cut to Sloane, and his throat felt tight with all the words he wanted to say but couldn’t.This was it.This was what they’d agreed upon.What they’d shared last night had rocked his world, but now it was time for them to move on with their lives.

Digging deep, he buried the emotions beneath layers of stoicism and gestured for her

to go first. Eyes wide, she opened her mouth as if to say something, but then pressed her lips firmly together. Then she stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets and walked out the door.

## Chapter 20

According to an FBI database, the creep's gun had been reported stolen more than six months ago, so that was a dead end. No luck with the area hospitals either, which meant he hadn't gone to one for treatment of his shattered knee. It was possible he'd sought help at a doctor's office or urgent care center, but finding him among the thousands of medical facilities across the country would be next to impossible.

Sloane sat at her desk, rubbing the tension that was building in her temples, as she redirected her efforts to digging into the lives of Sierra's known family, friends, business associates, former lovers, former friends, and anybody else who'd happened to get sucked into her orbit. The list was ridiculously long, and she put a number of the searches on autopilot while she worked on her daily tasks.

For once, the office wasn't cold enough to make penguins shiver, most likely because Nina fiddled with the thermostat when the guys weren't paying attention. Sloane leaned back in her chair and brushed a few strands of blonde hair away from her face, annoyed that she hadn't found time to change it back to its usual color. But her goal was to stay as busy as possible, because it kept her from thinking too much about Navarre.

In all her life, she'd never felt that intense of a connection with a man. Sure, the sex had been electric, but the emotions had added a level of intimacy she hadn't experienced before. Just thinking about it sent a blast of heat through her body. His taste, his touch, the way he said her name when he came were indelibly etched into her brain. She missed it, missed him...so much, it ached in her bones.

But their one-night love affair was over now, just as they'd agreed. Really, it was for the best. At least, that's what she kept telling herself. She refused to be one of those clingy women who chased after a guy who obviously didn't want her in return. It didn't matter that she missed him; she needed to move on with her life. In time, things would go back to the way they were, and she'd finally stop wondering about what might have been.

A chime from the computer alerted her that one of the searches had yielded results. Curious to see what it was, she minimized the task she'd been working on and opened the search window. The information looked promising, so she dug deeper, hacked through a firewall and into a treasure trove of databases. And when she finally hit pay dirt, her jaw just about hit the floor.

Buzzing with excitement, she picked up the phone and called Nina. "I found the creep. His name is Gerald Porter, age thirty-seven. Former Navy, no wife or kids. He's a quote-unquote security consultant for Adamantine Tactical Security Solutions out of Phoenix."

"Great job!" Nina said. "I knew you'd track that prick down."

"Oh, it gets even better." Sloane brushed a piece of lint off her plain black T-shirt. It felt good to wear her own clothes again, though she'd chosen to wear backless shoes until her blisters totally healed. "One of Adamantine's clients happens to be Chloe Aleo."

There was a pause. "Okay, I'll bite. Who's Chloe Aleo?"

Sloane had forgotten how little attention Nina paid to celebrity gossip. Kind of ironic, considering her sister-in-law was a hotshot Hollywood actress. "She's the ex-wife of Chad Aleo. Sierra allegedly had a fling with him while they were filming *All or Nothing*. According to the rumor mill, the affair broke up Chad's marriage."

“Okay, yeah, I remember hearing something about it. That was years ago, right? And she’s just now getting around to seeking revenge?”

Sloane shrugged, even though Nina couldn’t see her. “Who knows? Maybe she waited this long so no one would suspect her.”

“I can’t imagine holding a grudge that long, or taking it that far. I mean, seriously, it must have cost a small fortune to hire those guys.” Nina made a sound to convey her disgust. “Therapy would have been cheaper.”

After ending the call, Sloane sent a copy of her findings to the management team, and they could decide how to proceed. Those kinds of decisions were above her pay grade. The evidence was circumstantial at best, not enough to convict Chloe in a court of law. But there were other means of holding her—and the security company who’d agreed to kidnap Sierra—accountable for their actions. Knowing the Flints, those means would be swift, creative, and executed in a manner to make all parties involved deeply regret their recent life choices.

Finished, Sloane checked her phone and found a notification that her bank account had received a deposit, and she knew it could only be her bonus for acting as Sierra’s body double.

She tapped her foot against the floor as she opened the banking app. Sure, she knew how much the deposit was—she’d already calculated how much it would be after the government took its cut—but after everything she’d gone through, she wanted the satisfaction of seeing that big, fat, juicy bonus in her account.

She logged in her credentials. The screen loaded and—

“Holy crap.” Sloane’s heart stuttered. She leaned closer to the screen, as if it might make the numbers appear different. That couldn’t possibly be right. Somebody must

have made a mistake—a huge one—and if that were the case, she wanted it fixed immediately.

Normally, she would have gone straight to Larissa, but one of her daughters was sick with the flu and she'd gone home early to take care of her. With that option off the table, she left her office and hurried down the hall. She found Austin sitting at the desk in his office, dressed like he had an important meeting to attend, speaking on the phone. His gaze caught hers, and he held up one finger to signal for her to wait.

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She stood in the doorway, her gaze averted, trying her best not to eavesdrop on his end of the conversation. All the while, her anxiety grew with every tick of the clock on the wall behind him.

After what felt like forever but was probably only a minute or two, he ended his call.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he set the receiver back on its cradle. “What can I help you with?”

“Uh...yes. I think there was a mistake with my bonus.”

Concern plain on his face, he sat up straighter in his chair. “Not enough?”

“No, it’s exactly what I expected it to be. But there’s a second deposit, a bigger one.”

“Ah.” He smiled, as if that explained everything. “I’m sorry; I meant to tell you about it this morning but I got sidetracked. That second deposit is from Sierra. I sent her staff a full report detailing the events that took place in North Carolina. She felt terrible about what happened and wanted to compensate you for your trouble. A tip, so to speak.”

“A twenty-five-thousand-dollar tip?” She hated that her voice shot up a half octave, but this kind of thing didn’t happen to her on a regular basis. Or ever.

“Garrett’s was bigger, though I’m not at liberty to say how much,” Austin said.

Last she’d heard, Garrett was out of the hospital and recuperating at home. He’d be in



a cast for eight to twelve weeks, but a full recovery would take much longer. And if there were any complications, all bets were off.

Austin's phone rang again. He checked the caller ID and transferred the call to voicemail. "She also asked if you'd be open to working as her doppelganger in the future but said she'd understand if you declined."

She didn't blame Sierra for what had happened, but she was still surprised that Sierra wanted her to continue working as her body double. "Do I have a choice?"

"Absolutely. You were hired based on your computer expertise, not for who you resemble. I'd rather you not do anything that makes you uncomfortable. Considering what you went through last weekend, you have every right to say no, and I won't hold it against you. If you're not open to it, just let me know and we'll start searching for a replacement."

"Can I have some time to think about it?" She didn't want to make a snap decision that she'd later regret.

Truth be told, she had mixed feelings about the experience. On the one hand, it was kind of fun to dip her toe into the world of the rich and famous. It took cosplaying to a whole new level. And, of course, the pay was spectacular. It was hard to turn down that much money. But then there was the whole ambush thing, and getting chased through the wilderness by bad guys with big guns. That part definitely sucked.

And then there was Navarre. Agreeing to future jobs meant she'd probably be working with him again, and she wasn't sure she could handle the baggage that came along with it. She didn't regret their time together, but every time she saw him, she remembered the feel of his hands on her, his mouth on her, exploring every square inch of her body until—

She slammed the door on those memories before they ventured into more dangerous territory in front of her freaking boss. Talk about inappropriate.

Thankfully, Austin didn't notice. Or if he did, he didn't let on. "Of course. Why don't you think about it over the next day or two and let me know when you make a decision?"

Everything was back to normal. The scents of oil and metal tinged the air as Navarre worked on the pistol that had been sent to the armory for maintenance. After all, it was going to be a while before Garrett would be in any condition to use it again.

In the meantime, Rosario had been reassigned to work with Chung and Reyes. Last he heard, they were flying to New York with Ryan and Vicky, where Vicky was scheduled to appear as a guest on one of those late-night talk shows.

Navarre carefully lifted the slide from the frame and inspected each component, noting subtle signs of wear and a recoil spring in the early stage of fatigue. With meticulous precision, he cleaned each part, using special solvents to dissolve the grime and a soft brush to reach into crevices.

Three days had passed since they returned from North Carolina, and he couldn't stop thinking about Sloane. He'd crossed a line that should have never been crossed, and every second of that night kept playing in his head in a continuous feedback loop. The way she'd looked. Her scent, her touch. The soft, sensual sounds she made each time she came undone.

God, he was such an idiot. This was what happened when he let the little head do his thinking. Now everything was fucked to hell and he didn't know how to fix it, or whether it could be fixed. For the time being, he was keeping his distance to avoid making matters worse.

Maybe things would blow over in a week or two, and life would go back to normal.

Yeah, right. And maybe he'd win the Powerball next week.

Even if he did, he'd still be miserable.

A knock on the door provided a much-needed distraction. He glanced up at the security feed and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Jackson's muscular frame standing in front of the doorway.

He pressed the buzzer that disengaged the lock so Jackson could enter the room.

Jackson claimed he was feeling fine, but Navarre had seen him moving stiffly when he didn't think anyone was watching. Luckily, his wife Essie had taken a couple of days off work to help him through the worst of it.

"You ready for lunch?" his friend asked.

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“Yeah, hold on a sec.” Navarre jotted down the parts he’d replaced and adjustments he’d made to the pistol. He’d finish the rest of the work this afternoon, and test-fire the weapon the next time he went to the range. He glanced up to find Jackson giving him an odd look. “What?”

Jackson closed the armory door behind him, a sign that whatever he wanted to discuss was serious. “Talk to me, man. You ain’t been right ever since we left that motel.”

Leave it to Jackson to cut to the heart of the matter.

Of course, that didn’t necessarily mean he had to be honest about it. This wasn’t a subject he wanted to discuss, not even with his closest friend. “I’m fine, just a little tired.”

Jackson slowly shook his head. “Seriously, that’s how you want to play it? Come on, it’s me, man. Cut the shit.”

Navarre straightened. He didn’t want to have this conversation, but considering how stubborn Jackson could be, he didn’t see an easy way out of it. At least they were in a secure room where no one could overhear them. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“How about we start with the truth?” Jackson’s eyes bored into his. “What’s going on with you and Sloane?”

Navarre's whole body tensed. "Last time I checked, she was going to be fine—"

"That's not what I'm asking, and you know it." Jackson rubbed a hand along the side of his neck. "I'm not blind. You know better than that."

Struggling for normal, Navarre slapped on his best poker face, determined not to have this discussion at work. Or after work. Probably never. Yeah, never worked best for him. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" A low chuckle rumbled from Jackson's chest. "Dude, it's me, so let's be real. I saw how you looked at her in that motel room. I also saw those rumpled sheets, and your boxer briefs on the floor."

It was times like these when it really sucked to have observant friends.

"She's a beautiful woman, inside and out," his friend continued. "There's nothing wrong with being attracted to her. There's also nothing wrong with acting on that attraction."

He considered denying it, but what was the point? He and Jackson had been friends for so long, they could practically finish each other's sentences. He was best man at Jackson's wedding. They'd lived, fought, bled, and damn near died together more times than he could count. Most important, he was the closest thing Navarre had to family, and family didn't bullshit each other. "She's a coworker. That makes it all kinds of wrong."

Jackson scoffed. "You're consenting adults who work in separate units. Neither of you have authority over the other. I don't see how that could pose any kind of conflict. As long as you act like professionals and don't let your relationship interfere with your jobs, you'll be fine."

If only it were that easy. “That’s all well and good, but what happens if things fall apart and we still have to work under the same roof?”

Jackson simply stared at him for a good five seconds. “You’re worried about the potential fallout from the end of a hypothetical relationship?”

“You know me. I always plan for the worst so I’m never disappointed.” The practice had served him well for more than a decade, and he had no intention of stopping now.

“Sometimes you’ve just got to take a leap of faith and see where it leads you,” his friend insisted.

“I’ve tried that before. Didn’t like the results. Don’t plan on doing it again.” Granted, those leaps of faith hadn’t been romantic in nature, but a similar risk level applied.

Jackson’s shoulders rose and fell with his deep intake and release of breath. “You could be missing out on something spectacular.”

“Or I could be dodging a bullet.”

“So now it’s Schrodinger’s relationship?” Jackson chuckled.

“It’s not funny.” An edge crept into Navarre’s voice, and he caught himself before he lost his temper. Lips pressed into a grim line, he searched for a way to make it make sense to somebody looking in from the outside. “Look, I love you like a brother. I’d lay down my life for you without a moment’s hesitation. But this place...everyone I work with—you, Austin, hell, even Wade...it’s like I have a family again. I belong here. Six Points is my home. I can’t afford to fuck that up by getting involved with a colleague.”

All traces of humor left Jackson’s expression. He nodded. “I get it, man. I really

do. Your family hurt you something fierce, and now you're scared of losing the new family you found here. Let me finish," he said when Navarre opened his mouth to argue. "But here's the thing: family's not supposed to be conditional. It sure as hell ain't perfect. We haven't always seen eye to eye, now have we?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts. We're still family, even though we've pissed each other off more times than I can remember. Nobody in this building is going to judge you for following your heart. You owe it to yourself. If you don't even try, you're going to spend the rest of your life wondering about what you missed. It might not work out, but if it does..." He smiled. It was that goofy grin he always got whenever he thought about Essie. They'd gone through their own rough patch, but now that they'd worked through their problems, they were in a really good place. "Damn, it's something special. I can't even begin to describe how phenomenal it feels. I want you to experience it someday. After all the shit you've been through, you deserve to be happy."

"I am happy." He hated the fact that came out sounding defensive. Because it was the truth: he was happy with his life. He had a job that he loved, respect from his peers, money in the bank, a roof over his head, and friends he'd take a bullet for and who would do the same for him. So what if he wasn't in a romantic relationship? That wasn't a deal-breaker for him. Sure, he dated, but he'd yet to find a woman worth taking that kind of chance.

The look in Jackson's eyes made it clear that he saw straight through Navarre's bullshit. "Sometimes you've got to take that leap of faith. It's scary, I know. It hurts like hell when things don't work the way you want. But when they do..." The smile came back. "The reward is worth any risk. Just think about it, man. I'd hate to see you miss out on something amazing."

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A knock at the door put an end to their conversation, which was good, because Navarre couldn't come up with a single thing to refute what Jackson said. He checked the security feed and saw Pinto in the hall. That was odd. Sierra had flown back to Orlando two days ago, which meant Pinto should be at her estate. Curious, Navarre hit the buzzer to disengage the lock.

"Hey, man. I thought you were still working Sierra's detail."

"I am." Pinto stepped farther into the room, and the door clicked shut behind him. His tanned skin looked a shade or two darker than usual, the product of his weekend in the Caribbean. "She's meeting a few friends for dinner, but she insisted on stopping here along the way so she could talk to you."

"What—me?" He hadn't expected that. As far as he knew, the woman didn't know he existed. He traded a puzzled look with Jackson. "Why?"

"Fuck if I know," Pinto said. "It's not my place to ask. I'm guessing it's got something to do with Austin's report about what happened in North Carolina. Sounds like you guys had a wild weekend."

"That's one way to describe it." He thought of Sloane, soft and warm and naked in his arms, and his internal temperature jacked up a good ten degrees. He really needed to stop thinking about that, or at least not think about it until he was in the privacy of his own bedroom.

"Anyway, she's waiting in the conference room," Pinto continued. "When you get there, could you do me a favor and tell Hatch I'll be there in a few? I've got



something I need to take care of.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” Navarre secured the armory, parted ways with the guys, and walked the short distance to the conference room, where Hatch stood guard at the door. He must have forgotten to pack sunscreen, because his face was almost as red as his hair.

Navarre relayed Pinto’s message, and said, “I take it you don’t know what this is about either.”

Hatch shook his head. “I know better than to ask that shit.”

Yeah, but it was worth a try. Navarre paused at the door. After spending the day in the armory, he probably reeked of gun metal and grease, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now. He drew a deep breath, blew it out, and went inside.

Sierra Page sat at the head of the table in Austin’s plush office chair, her legs crossed at the knees. Her short red skirt allowed an unobstructed view of her toned, mile-long legs, while the scooped neckline of her form-fitting blouse showed just a hint of cleavage. Her makeup was flawless, not a hair out of place. The scent of her perfume tinged the air, floral but not overpowering. She glanced up from her phone as he entered the room, and her gaze sharpened like a raptor that just spotted its favorite prey.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Page.” The door swung shut behind him. “I was told you wanted to speak with me.”

“Please, call me Sierra.” She tucked the phone into her tiny purse and stood. “Ms. Page feels way too formal.”

He nodded, even though he disliked using first names when speaking with clients. It

stripped away a layer of professionalism that he preferred to keep in place. “If that’s what you prefer, Sierra.”

She smiled, a flash of white behind ruby lips. “I read your report, and I wanted to thank you for taking such good care of me.” She made a soft sound of amusement. “Well, the other me.”

“I was just doing my job, ma’am—Sierra,” he corrected himself.

She gave him a pointed look. “Did you really break a man’s kneecap?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. Serves him right.” She rounded the table and moved to where he stood. “What I read in your report sounded really exciting. I’d love to hear a more detailed account of how you evaded a team of mercenaries while keeping my body double safe. If we play our cards right, it could even be turned into a screenplay.”

Okay, he hadn’t seen that one coming, even though Sloane had pitched the idea to the old guy in the bait shop. “You want to turn what happened to us into a movie?”

She looked at him as if the answer were obvious. “It has all the makings of a summer blockbuster: action, suspense, mistaken identity, man—and woman—against the elements. The whole bodyguard/protector thing. Now that I think about it, that would make a fantastic romantic subplot. I know a few screenwriters who would kill for the chance to sink their teeth into all that.”

Something inside him went cold. No way would he allow what happened between him and Sloane to be twisted into a cheap plot device. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

A sensual smile curved her lush red lips as she closed the remaining distance between

them. Reaching out, she trailed one finger from his shoulder to his chest. “Oh, come on, I can make it worth your while. You’re cute, in a rough-around-the-edges kind of way. I normally don’t mix business with pleasure, but I’d be willing to make an exception for you.”

Navarre swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. There had been nights—more than he cared to admit—when he’d fantasized about moments like this. She was temptation personified. A body built for sin. And here she was, offering to turn those fantasies into reality.

And yet, God help him, he felt absolutely nothing, not even the slightest twinge below the belt, because he couldn’t stop thinking about the woman he really wanted.

The one he’d fallen in love with.

It hit him then, with a bit of a shock, that he’d used Sierra as a placeholder of sorts, an unattainable fantasy to fill the void created from wanting the woman he saw every day at work but couldn’t have.

Or could he?

Maybe Jackson was right. Getting involved with a coworker was a monumental risk, but not taking that risk could lead to a lifetime of loneliness and regret. He didn’t want to live the rest of his life wondering about what could have been.

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He gripped Sierra's wrist and gently pulled it away from his chest. "I'm sorry, but no."

Sierra blinked, blinked again, and a pair of faint lines appeared in the space between her eyebrows. "What do you mean, no?"

"Please don't take offense. I'm flattered by your offer, I really am, but... I can't do this. I don't want to do this."

Now she looked downright perplexed. "Nobody tells me no."

"Well, I suppose there's a first time for everything." He shifted to put space between them. From a professional standpoint, he didn't want to offend her. She was a client, after all, and a high-dollar one at that. If they lost the account after all this bullshit, Austin was going to be pissed. But he also didn't want to be an asshole and hurt the woman's feelings. "Trust me when I say it's not you. Any other man with a lick of sense would crawl on their hands and knees over broken glass for a chance with a woman like you. But there's a woman I care an awful lot about, and cheating on her is out of the question."

"Are you sure about that?" The seductive smile hit him full blast, but it didn't faze him one bit. "This is a one-time offer that expires the moment I walk out the door."

He nodded. "Positive."

Sierra's smile vanished. Her lips pursed into a pout, but she didn't really seem all that broken up about it. "Can't blame a woman for trying, right? She must be a special

woman.”

“She is.” Just thinking about Sloane made his body light up like a Roman candle.

“Will you still be part of my security detail?” Sierra asked. “I kind of like knowing there are people on my team who won’t think twice about shattering a kneecap.”

He nodded again, relieved to know this wasn’t going to cost Six Points its contract. “I’ll be part of your Florida team as long as that meets your approval.”

“It does.” She eyed him again. “If you change your mind about the screenplay, you know how to reach me.”

Navarre watched her leave, not moving a muscle until the door clicked shut behind her.

He’d just turned down the sexiest woman on the planet. Scratch that, the second sexiest. The woman holding the number one position was down the hall in the cyber security unit, probably cursing his existence because he was a dumbass.

That needed to change as soon as possible.

## Chapter 22

Sloane arrived at work the next morning with fifteen minutes to spare, and snagged one of the prized parking spots in front of the building. Now that she’d uncovered the identity of the person responsible for Sierra Page’s attempted kidnapping, she needed to start catching up on the mountain of work piled up in her queue. It wasn’t nearly as exciting as her time in the mountains, and that was fine by her.

She still hadn’t heard a peep from Navarre, which left her in a sour mood. No calls, no

emails, and no response to the “Hey, how are you doing?”text she’d sent him the other day. Not even a chance meeting in the hall. Going back to being “just friends” was hard enough. Him ghosting her was rude. Fine, whatever...that was his loss. One way or another, she’d move on with her life and eventually forget he existed.

Shoving the unpleasant thoughts from her mind, she pushed through the front door and was greeted with a blast of ice-cold air. The guys must have noticed that Nina messed with the thermostat and cranked the temperature back down to hypothermia. Good thing she had a space heater under her desk, so at least her toes wouldn’t freeze.

She continued down the hall to her office. With a flip of the switch, the room flooded with light, and the first thing she noticed was the plain white bakery box on her desk. An envelope rested on top of it.

That definitely hadn’t been there when she left the office yesterday.

Curious, she crossed to her desk, dropped her purse in a drawer, and slipped on the old purple cardigan she kept on the back of her chair. The cardigan clashed with her chartreuse shirt, but screw it, she’d rather be warm than fashionable.

She opened the box, and the delicious aroma of peaches and cinnamon made her mouth water and reminded her that she’d skipped breakfast. It was a pie, with a homemade crust and everything. Freshly baked, by the look of it.

The pie triggered the memory of a conversation she’d had in North Carolina. Heart racing, she picked up the envelope and took out the handwritten note.

I asked Momma Jackson to bake you a pie, but she told me to make it my own damn self. Don’t worry; she watched me like a hawk while I made it, so it should meet her high standards. I hope you enjoy it.

We need to talk.

The note wasn't signed, but she knew who wrote it.

He'd made her a pie. From scratch. After avoiding her for days. She wasn't sure how to interpret the mixed messages.

While she mulled it over, she walked to the break room and fished a dollar from her pocket. If she wanted to put a significant dent in her backload of work, she was going to need a caffeine boost. She fed the money into the soda machine, and it made her think of that little motel where they—

She slammed the door on that memory.

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A can of Coke dropped into the delivery receptacle, and she bent to pick it up. She moved to the small kitchen area, where she hoped to find a plate and utensils so she could eat a slice of pie—maybe two—for breakfast. The pie had peaches, and peaches were fruit, which meant it was practically health food. That was her story, and she was sticking to it.

Sloane found paper plates and plastic utensils in the cabinet over the sink. As she closed the cabinet door, she heard footsteps behind her, and her body's enthusiastic leap of excitement let her know exactly who it was.

“Have you tried the pie yet?”

The sound of Navarre's voice smoothed over her skin like a caress.

For a moment or two, she simply stood there as a flood of emotions washed over her. Giving in to the need, she turned to face him, and it felt as though a thousand butterflies had taken flight in her stomach. He still hadn't shaved, and his beard was in that rough, in-between stage—too long to qualify as stubble, but too short to be considered a full beard. Dark bristles shadowed his jawline and upper lip, giving him a rugged, slightly unkempt look. And God help her, she couldn't help but wonder how it would feel in her most sensitive places.

She dragged her mind out of the gutter and raked her gaze over his outfit. “Do you own any clothes that aren't black?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “I'm wearing red boxer briefs.”



She didn't need that mental image floating around in her brain all day, but she supposed it was better than the one where he was naked. She let out an exaggerated exhale. "We're not doing this. We're coworkers. That's a recipe for disaster, remember?"

His mouth pressed into a hard line. "Yeah, I do."

"Great, we're in agreement." Now she could leave the plate here, go back to her office, and eat the whole damn pie right out of the pan. She picked up her drink and utensils, but when she started to leave, he stood firm in the doorway, blocking her only means of escape.

Spine stiff, she gave her best glare. "I'm not having this conversation at work."

"Then how about we go outside?" He glanced down at his watch. "Technically, you're not on the clock for another five minutes."

She made a frustrated sound. "What is there to talk about? You set the parameters. I'm following them. End of story."

The muscles along his jaw flexed beneath the beard stubble. "We can't just pretend nothing happened between us."

"Why not? People do it every day. It's part of being an adult." Granted, being an adult largely sucked, but that was a whole other matter. She lifted her chin to meet his gaze. "You do your job, I'll do mine, and we can blame what happened between us on hormonally induced temporary insanity."

He shook his head. "I tried. I can't do that."

"Sure you can. You did just fine at the motel when the guys showed up."

“Damn it, that’s not what I—” He faltered, the words dying in his throat. Silence thickened the air between them like a heavy fog. Finally, he spoke again, his voice low and strained. “Sierra came to the office yesterday. She wanted to personally thank me for taking good care of her body double.”

“That was nice of her.” Sloane bit the words out.

“She offered to sleep with me.”

For a moment, the world seemed to tilt. She clenched her teeth so hard it was a wonder her molars didn’t crack. “If you’re telling me this to get some sort of rise out of me—”

“I told her no. Turned her down flat.” He stepped toward her, and she took a step back. “I used to believe she was my be-all, end-all fantasy woman. But now I know better. It’s not her I want...not now, not ever.”

When he moved closer, she stepped back again, her butt bumping into the refrigerator. His smoldering gaze locked onto hers as he took the soda and utensils from her and set them on the nearby counter. Then he braced one hand on the freezer door by her head, and the outer edges of her resolve began to fray.

Luther walked into the break room, took one look at the two of them, and walked right back out without saying a word.

Navarre leaned forward, his face inches from hers, and the masculine scent of his skin made her a little light-headed. “You’re the only woman I want. The only woman I need. I’ve never wanted anyone the way that I want you.”

A nervous laugh slipped past her lips. “Well, you know, that could be a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, you could—”

He cut her off with a soul-scorching kiss that fried every synapse in her body. Lost in the moment, she melted against him, one hand gripping a fistful of his shirt, while the other tunneled into his hair, and she thought, God, I missed you.

When they finally came up for air, he touched his forehead to hers. “You’re smart, and kind, and gorgeous, and funny, and a total badass in the field. You’re the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing I think about before I fall asleep at night. I want you in my life, by my side, in my bed. Does that make my feelings for you clear enough?”

It took a few seconds for the question to cut through the haze of lust fogging her brain, and then it took a few seconds longer for her to remember how to form words.

“What about work?” she asked. “You said you didn’t think it—”

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“I was wrong, okay? I realize that now. We’re adults; I know we can make this work. I’m willing to do whatever it takes and then some. Are you?”

She stared up into the molten depths of his eyes, and she couldn’t stop from smiling. A breathless laugh bubbled up in her throat as she nodded. “So what do we do now?”

“You can start by clearing out of the break room so I can get a bagel and coffee,” Wade’s deep voice ground out, and Sloane nearly jumped out of her skin.

She looked over Navarre’s shoulder to see Wade’s imposing figure a few feet away, an empty mug in his right hand. Mortified, she said, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s about time you two got your shit together.” What passed for a smile warmed his mouth and twisted the scar on the side of his face, and in that moment, he didn’t look quite so intimidating. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you both. Now move out of the way. You’re between me and breakfast.”

## Chapter 23

Sloane leaned close to the bathroom mirror as she applied the final touches to her makeup. She and Navarre were going out to dinner after work and she wanted to look her best. After months of posing as Sierra’s double, she could finally do the smoky eye thing without making herself resemble a raccoon on meth. She’d also amassed a killer wardrobe, because Sierra usually let her keep whatever outfits she wore for each job.

All in all, it was a great side gig. Sierra didn't use her all that often, just once every month or two when she wanted to shake the press off her trail. She'd yet to receive another twenty-five-thousand-dollar bonus, but she also hadn't been chased through the woods by assholes with guns, so she figured she couldn't complain. And with Navarre by her side, in addition to the enhanced security measures to ensure something like that never happened again, she felt no qualms about working as Sierra's double.

Satisfied her makeup was on point, Sloane finger-combed her hair. She'd invested a portion of her earnings in a pair of quality wigs that mimicked Sierra's cut and style, leaving her free to change her own hair back to its natural color.

She smoothed a hand over her burgundy silk blouse, one of the spoils from her assignments masquerading as Sierra. She left the bathroom, and her heart fluttered the way it always did at the sight of Navarre walking toward her. Dressed in his usual all black, his light-brown hair was damp from the shower, a sure sign he'd squeezed in a workout after his shift was over.

He greeted her with a kiss that might have appeared chaste to anybody watching. After all, they were still at work. But he managed to infuse it with so much emotion, it made her toes curl in her shoes.

"How was your day?" he asked as they headed for the exit. They passed Jackson in the hall, and the other man gave Navarre a shoulder clap and said, "Have fun tonight."

"It was pretty good. Thanks," she added when he held the front door open for her. Outside, fall had begun to make its presence known. The Florida air was a little less sticky, the sun set a tad earlier, and store shelves were loaded with all things pumpkin spice. "How about you?"

"We're starting a new training class next week, so I spent most of the day doing

weapons checks.”Navarre opened the car door for her, and closed it once she was inside.He slid behind the wheel, turned the key in the ignition, and the heavy rumble of the Barracuda’s engine filled the air.“Garrett and Rosario are assisting this time around.”

Last she’d heard, Garrett had completed physical therapy for his broken leg but was still on limited duty.Helping with the new batch of recruits would give his body more time to heal.And after months of working as a third wheel on another team, Rosario would undoubtedly be relieved to have her partner back.

Navarre pulled onto the main road and headed toward her favorite restaurant, a small family-owned business with the best Cuban food in the city.But instead of continuing north at the next intersection, he turned left into a subdivision.

“Where are we going?”she asked.

He spared her a glance as he shifted into third.“Well, I’ve been thinking.”

In her experience, that kind of beginning to a conversation didn’t bode well, but she held out hope.“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“We’ll find out in a few minutes.”He rounded a curve and continued straight through the four-way stop before he spoke again.“Jackson’s buying my share of the house.”

“What?”See, she knew it was something bad.“What happened?Is everything all right?”

“Oh, no.It’s nothing like that.We’re good.But now that he and Essie are back together, they need their privacy.I respect that.”

Okay, it wasn’t anything horrible, but it still didn’t seem like good news.The two men

had been roommates for years.They'd bought that house together and remodeled almost every square inch of it.

"So when are you moving, and where?"she asked.

"Nothing's set in stone yet.The house is getting appraised next week, and then we'll figure out how much is needed for him to buy my half.He said I can stay as long as I need after that part's taken care of, but I'd like to move into my own place as soon as possible."

Navarre pulled into the driveway in front of a one-story house with tan stucco walls and a two-car garage.It was an older home, which, in Florida standards, meant it was probably built in the 1980s.A For Sale sign from one of the local Realtors stood in front of a pair of crape myrtles in the front yard.He engaged the emergency brake and cut the engine.

Sloane reached for her seat belt."I take it this is the house you're considering?"

"It's the current frontrunner."Turning his head, he gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes."Come on, the Realtor gave me the code for the lockbox.I want to see what you think."

Hand in hand, they walked up the front path.He punched in the code, unlocked the door, and placed his palm at the small of her back as he followed her inside.

The foyer opened to a combined kitchen and large living area with cathedral ceilings, pale walls, and lots of natural light.A sliding glass door along the far wall offered a view of a large backyard surrounded by a six-foot fence and plenty of shade from several mature oak trees.No furniture, which gave the house a wide-open feel and provided a blank canvas for buyers to picture their own décor.

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“How many bedrooms and bathrooms does it have?” she asked as she walked across the wood flooring. From what she could tell, it was a split-level layout, with bedrooms on each side of the house.

“Three bedrooms, two full baths.”

That was a lot of house for one person. “Are you sure you need something this big?”

There was a pause before he responded. “It’s a good size for two people.”

She slanted a glance in his direction as her pulse kicked up a notch. “Is that your way of asking me to move in with you?”

“No.” He reached into his pocket and took out a small black box. Dropping to one knee, he looked up at her with eyes full of hope and promise. “I’m asking you to marry me first.”

Sloane’s breath caught in her throat. She honestly hadn’t seen this coming. Sure, things were going great. Really great. They spent nearly every free minute together. She could honestly say, without a shadow of a doubt, that she loved him with every fiber of her being. But for reasons unknown, Navarre proposing to her hadn’t been anywhere on her radar.

He opened the box, revealing a round sapphire held by four claws and set on a tapered platinum band with intricate engraving. “I love you, Sloane Welker. Each day I spend with you is better than the last. I want to build a life, a family, a future with you. But most of all, I want to make you smile every day for the rest of my life. Will



you make me the happiest man on earth by saying yes?”

How could she possibly say no? He was her friend, her lover, her confidant, her partner.

Her heart. She could see it in his eyes.

It took a few moments for her to push past the tide of emotions and find her voice. “Oh my God, yes. Yes! Of course I’ll marry you.”

Navarre’s smile widened as he stood. He slid the ring on her finger, and then kissed her with so much heat and passion, it left her weak at the knees. “I love you, Sloane.”

“I love you, Jacob.” She held the ring up to the light. She’d always loved sapphires. “It’s perfect. How did you pick this out?”

He grinned. “I got a little help from Nina.”

That really shouldn’t surprise her. Now that she thought about it, Nina had asked her opinion about some rings on Pinterest a month or so ago.

“I’m guessing Jackson knew about this as well?”

“Yeah. He helped me work on my pitch.”

She laughed softly.

“So what do you think about the house?” he asked. “I’m not buying anything without your stamp of approval.”

“Well, I haven’t seen the rest of it yet, but this part looks pretty nice.” Not to mention,

it was in a good neighborhood, close to work, with plenty of shopping and a public park within walking distance. “But I have one condition for whatever house we settle on.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Oh, what’s that?”

“I’m chipping in on the down payment. Now that my credit cards are paid off, I’ve been saving the money I make from Sierra.” She turned to face him, and the love she saw in the depths of his eyes made her wonder if he’d be open to ordering their food to go. “If we’re going to build a future, we might as well start with the house.”

“I’m fine with that.” He unlocked the sliding glass door at the far end of the great room.

They stepped out into the big backyard, and she envisioned the barbeques they’d have with family and friends. She’d already spotted a place in the living room where they could put a tree during the holidays. Unless the bedrooms were a complete nightmare, she was pretty sure they’d put in an offer.

Together.

## Epilogue

For a job of this nature, Essie Jackson typically charged a fee in the low six figures. But Chloe Aleo’s hired goons had damn near killed her husband, so this one was on the house.

The dinner rush had already ended, leaving the front of the restaurant less than half full. From her spot at the bar, she watched Chloe, who was showing visible signs of impatience because her dinner date had yet to arrive.

Spoiler alert: He wasn't coming. Essie's associates had made sure of that.

"Can I get you another gin and tonic?" the bartender asked Essie. He was a young guy—mid-twenties at the most—with boyish features and shaggy brown hair in dire need of a cut. He hadn't paid much attention to her, most likely because she'd worn the disguise that made her look like somebody's frumpy aunt.

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Essie glanced down at her half-empty glass. She'd been nursing the drink for so long that most of the ice had melted. "Yes, please. Heavy on the ice."

As the bartender reached for the bottle of gin, Essie turned her attention back to Chloe. Once upon a time, she was a beautiful woman, a former model who'd commanded runways around the world. But too many appointments with the plastic surgeon had turned her into a caricature of her former self. Now her nose was too thin, her lips comically large, with so much filler plumping her cheeks she resembled an angry chipmunk. It didn't help that she'd chopped her long, wavy black hair in favor of a short, blocky style that could only be described as unfortunate.

The bartender placed a fresh gin and tonic in front of her.

"Thank you. Can I go ahead and settle my tab?" Essie paid with cash, because only an amateur left an electronic footprint. Glass in hand, she left her seat and crossed to the booth where Chloe sat. The other woman was so engrossed with her phone that she didn't even notice Essie's approach.

"Hello, Chloe."

The woman's gaze flicked up to Essie. Annoyance flashed over her face, but it disappeared so quickly most people wouldn't have noticed it. She gave a small, practiced smile that came across as brittle. "I'm sorry. I appreciate your interest, but I need some personal time right now."

"That's a nice brushoff, but it's not going to work because we have business to discuss." Essie slid into Chloe's side of the booth and set her drink on the table.

The woman shot her a glare as she scooted to the other side of the bench seat that bumped against the wall. “You need to leave.”

“Not until we talk.”

Chloe held up her phone. “Do I need to call the police?”

Essie shrugged one shoulder. “That’s totally up to you. Do you want to tell them about those idiots you hired to kidnap Sierra Page?”

Her eyes widened slightly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The laugh Essie gave was genuine. “Wow, you’re a terrible liar. I expected better from someone who used to be married to Chad.”

Now there was a world-class liar. She’d watched the interviews where he denied any romantic involvement with Sierra. No rapid blinking or excessive throat clearing, or any of the other tell-tale signs of deception. With that level of skill, he could make a fortune playing poker. Or running for office.

Chloe scowled at the mention of her ex-husband. “Don’t mention that name in my presence.”

It was kind of cute, how she actually thought her commands carried any weight with Essie. That was what happened when you surrounded yourself with ass kissers.

“In that case, I’ll just talk about Adamantine Tactical Security Solutions. Remember them?”

Chloe shook her head. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Really? Because you used them for personal protection the last time you had a modeling gig in New York. You also paid them fifty thousand dollars to kidnap Sierra.” Before Chloe could deny the accusation, Essie added, “In all fairness, you didn’t pay them directly to do your dirty work. Your personal assistant, Graham Winslow, served as your liaison.”

That was an educated guess based on a series of cash deposits that the president of Adamantine received in his personal account, but the other woman’s reaction confirmed it.

Chloe downed the last of her drink and set the glass on the table. “Nice story. Good luck proving it.”

“Well, you’re right about that. I can’t prove it in a court of law, and the folks at Adamantine aren’t talking. But while I was digging, I learned some interesting things about them.” Essie sipped her gin and tonic. “Like the fact they submitted a series of fraudulent financial statements when they applied for a construction loan to build their fancy new headquarters. But those statements were totally different when they appealed the valuation of that property for tax purposes. Nobody noticed. Until now.”

Truth be told, her first impulse had been to wire their headquarters with enough explosives to trigger an earthquake. On a visceral level, it would have been more satisfying. But unleashing the law on them would be even more painful and last a whole lot longer.

“And why would I give a damn about that?” Chloe asked.

“Because they’re not going to answer your call the next time you want them to do your dirty work.” Essie opened a link on her phone, and then angled the screen so Chloe could read the headline about the arrests. The corresponding photo showed the CEO being led out of the building in handcuffs. “The state of Arizona takes tax fraud

seriously. The article doesn't mention it, but their assets have been frozen. If they get desperate enough, they might be willing to offer evidence to other crimes in exchange for a lighter penalty."

The pulse at the base of Chloe's throat was beating faster, but, to her credit, she gave a bored look. "Is there a point to all this?"

The waitress stopped by with Chloe's check, picked up her empty glass, and said, "I'll take that whenever you're ready."

Essie waited for the waitress to leave, even though she was one of her associates. Chloe didn't need to know that. "You blew fifty grand trying to get revenge on a woman you blamed for the failure of your marriage. I don't care where the actual fault lies. I'm just here to tell you to knock it off, or there will be consequences."

Chloe crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, and what are you going to do, give me another stern talking to?"

"No, but I did poison your drink. Don't worry," Essie added when Chloe's eyes nearly shot straight out of her head. "You only drank the first half of the poison. On its own, it'll only make you a little sick, like you ate some bad oysters or something. By now, it's already made itself at home in your bloodstream. It'll stay there for years, dormant, waiting. If you behave yourself, that's as far as it'll go. But if anything happens to Sierra, my associates will introduce you to the second half of the poison, and that's when things get interesting. It's not a pretty way to die. I'd give you the details, but why spoil the surprise?"

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Chloe stared down at her empty glass, unable to mask the horror in her eyes. “You’re bluffing.”

“Are you willing to bet your life on that?” Essie was fairly confident the answer was no. She picked up her drink and stood. “Move on with your life. In the long run, you’ll be much happier. Oh, by the way, you might want to stay close to a bathroom for the next few hours.”

She set her half-empty glass on the tray of a passing waitress on her way out of the restaurant. Halfway down the block, her partner in the op joined her, matching her stride for stride.

“Two-part poison?” Zara asked. “Why didn’t you just kill her?”

“Sierra didn’t want to take it that far, and Austin agreed.” They turned the corner and headed for the light rail station. “Besides, the placebo effect is a very real thing. People feel better after taking sugar pills because they think it’s real medicine. The same thing works for poisons. What I slipped into her drink will be out of her system by morning, but she’ll get sick enough tonight to believe there’s a part two.”

Zara shook her head, her lips stretched into a grin. “That’s so warped. I love it.”

“I’m happy it meets your approval.” They boarded the train and picked a spot near the back. “Are you ready for your next assignment?”

“Do you really need to ask?”



“Just trying to be considerate.”Essie laughed softly.To anyone watching, she appeared relaxed, but she kept constant watch for any signs of potential danger.At this time of day, things were usually pretty safe, but it never hurt to be careful.

“So what’s my next assignment?”Zara asked.“Please tell me it’s something I can sink my teeth into.That last surveillance job bored me out of my mind.”

Essie grinned, because she knew this mission was right up Zara’s alley.“Oh, you’re going to love this one.I’ll tell you all about it when we get back to base.”