



Love Me Knot

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Category: Romance, Adult, Action

Description: Someone wants to end the use of private military companies and will do anything to make it happen.

A platoon of soldiers is ambushed and killed during a secret mission. Their PMC security is suspiciously spared. Fearing the attack was a set-up to make the PMCs appear negligent, Knot's top people and the SEALs' Commander O'Reilly's Third Platoon team up to stage a mission to catch the traitor.

The mission raises more questions than answers, so it's time to target the movement's mouthpiece, a US congressman with insider information. For that, they'll need a deep cover.

She's a chameleon. No one knows the real her.

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Somewhere in Jordan

“This son of a bitch is gonna get us killed.”

Chief Benson, former infantry sergeant, turns toward his second in command, noting the man’s tight jaw. Keeping similar thoughts to himself, he places a hand on the former SEAL’s shoulder. “No, he won’t.”

The words were meant to calm the team of private military contractors, but Benson doubts they were successful. This deployment has been a four-star fuck up from the moment the task force landed in Jordan. Saying so won’t help anybody, especially since they know it already.

Benson and his men work for Iron Strike Security, a private military firm contracted to provide security for the US Army. Not an uncommon occurrence. What is unusual is the secretive nature of the mission. It seems someone from the Pentagon or higher up is doing their damndest to make an already dangerous job more difficult.

Iron Strike wasn’t told who or what the Army would be moving or retrieving, whether it was a pickup or drop off, or even where the target was located.

Normally, Iron Strike would hesitate to accept a contract with so little detail. Larger companies wouldn’t have done it at all. These days, with so much bad press about private military, government contracts are hard to come by. Small firms like Iron Strike can’t afford to turn down paying jobs—even shitty ones.

The contract directive sent Chief Benson and his men to Andrews Air Force Base to

travel with an Army unit to God knows where. GPS devices issued by Iron Strike allowed the PMCs to track the plane's movement toward the Middle East, specifically, Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan.

Before now, Benson would have bet a year's salary that he and his team would be part of a rescue operation for the three Americans kidnapped from a mall in Jerash. If that were the case, the plane would have landed in neighboring Israel. Stepping off the plane in Jordan blew away all his working theories.

Chief Benson has been on high alert since then. Equipment is offloaded, the team geared up, but still, no locations or objectives are communicated to the PMCs. Only when both units are ready to roll does anyone speak to the Iron Strike team.

The task force commander, who's already demonstrated a deep disdain for the private military, sends a captain to deliver orders for Benson and his men. This could explain why the captain looks uncomfortable with the information he's come to deliver. "We're moving out in five minutes. Have your vehicles follow ours."

That's it. The captain doesn't say anything about objectives, targets, or destinations. Benson is too much in shock and doesn't react at first. Those orders go against every standard practice that dictates that security contractors complete a risk assessment before anyone moves, especially when protection was their sole reason for being brought along.

Contractors organize only after analyzing infrared satellite images and any other available intel. Standard formation puts protection detail in front of and behind the convoy, with spotters assigned flanking positions. That's what should happen. Fucking idiots. What is happening is that Benson and his team are being benched without so much as a general direction of travel. They are not allowed to recon the route, either.

Everyone is loading up, but Chief Benson walks away from his transport to approach the officer who delivered their orders. So far, he's the only reasonable leader assigned to the mission, which includes more brass than the entire Iron Strike armory. "Captain."

The second-most senior officer sighs but pauses. "What is it, Benson?"

"I don't know what's going on here, but this setup is bullshit, and you know it. You wouldn't put your own security forces in the back, so why are we the tail?"

Captain Taft pulls Benson away from the Humvee and the listening ears inside. "I know what you're asking, and I don't have a problem with your team. I've only delivered orders handed down to me by the colonel," he says, gesturing to the front vehicle. "I know these orders aren't SOP and are borderline dangerous."

Benson nearly chokes. "Borderline? Marching into battle with your armor on backward isn't borderline anything. It's suicidal. Add to that, no one's told me what the fuck we're walking into."

Taft scrubs his day-old beard scruff. "You're in good company then because I don't know either."

Taft's confession leaves Benson speechless, so the captain fills in the silence. "I wouldn't worry about your men, Chief. With the way the colonel is running things, if anyone is in danger of not walking away, it'll be my unit. I don't like this any more than you do, but we both have our orders. Now, move out."

Chief Benson stares wide-eyed at the captain's back as he walks away. Does anyone know what the fuck we're doing here? Turning to glare at the colonel's transport, Benson shakes his head. "Stupid bastard colonels."

If the captain agrees, he's doing a good job keeping his mouth shut about it.

A loud whistle sounds from the group of armored Iron Strike trucks, calling Benson back to his men. Without explanation, he gestures for the group to load up and climbs into the first truck. The convoy rolls out in the dead of night, headed toward God knows what.

The Iron Strike team is silent on the radio, unsettled by the unorthodox procedure. Field security is inherently dangerous, which these guys knew when they signed up. Benson's men aren't cowards. Being in the rear is less risky for security, but not when you're denied basic information on objective, destination, or available intelligence.

Once the last truck clears the gate, Benson takes a haggard breath and keys up his mic. He relays his confrontation with Captain Taft and delegates recon assignments to those not driving. Four trucks carrying four men, with each group focusing on a different heading.

The pilot truck heads south, leading the fleet through the desert city of Azrak. Colonel Jackass keeps off the roads for the most part, giving the Iron Strike team no clue about his destination. After skirting the wetlands reserve along the southern shore, the convoy turns sharply northeast. "What the hell?" Benson murmurs under his breath.

"Where the hell are we going, Chief?" Rodeo asks from the back seat. "There's only fucking farmland and a mosque this way. Beyond that is nothing but a hundred and fifty miles of desert and the border with Syria and Iraq."

Benson looks up and through the windshield. He had thought the same thing as the former field artillery specialist, but a striking realization hits him suddenly. "Not true. Tower 22 is up there."

Tower 22. Small US military outpost half a mile from the Syrian border and six miles from Iraq. And we're currently thirty miles from Saudi Arabia.

Rodeo disagrees with Benson's line of thinking. "If that's the target, why the hell would we be driving there instead of taking helos?"

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Patch ponders out loud. “We could be headed toward the border.”

Rodeo rolls his eyes at the retired Marine. “Pfft. Which one?”

Benson shuts them both up. “We’re not crossing any border. It would attract too much attention. Besides, if we were looking at a target in any country within forty miles, the detachment could have landed at any installations there. This convoy is headed toward Tower 22. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

The chief keys up his radio to update the rest of his men, adjusting the recon assignments to focus on the course for the small outpost. Each group will study a forty-mile stretch between Azrak and the Tower.

The designated man from each truck reports within ten minutes. The news isn’t good. Hundreds of unmapped roads lead to unmapped towns. Numerous tree-lined creek beds create blind spots, and dry gulches with questionable soil conditions dot the landscape along the route.

In short, there are too damned many places a group of extremists could attack from. Our convoy is big and loud enough that, despite the late hour, all it would take is one person sighting and reporting us to their brethren. We could be in an all-out assault at any given moment during the four-hour trek to the tower.

Benson switches his radio frequency to that of the Army unit to share his concerns with whomever will listen. He keys in, but no one answers. Benson swears and tries again, hearing only silence. “What the fuck?!”

Rodeo drops all traces of sarcasm, answering in the quiet cabin. “They didn’t trust us. We’ve been shut out.”

Benson agrees and is ready to bug out on the mission, but his gut and a big-ass contract say he can’t. “Maybe they did, but I want one radio in each truck on the Army channel at all times. The rest of you, keep your eyes open.”

The fleet maintains a northeasterly course, traveling through the uncharted desert landscape. The night is thick as sludge, with no moon to cut through the darkness. Only the lights from the convoy trucks pierce through the veil of black.

Benson orders two men in his truck, Rodeo and Patch, to don vision optics and watch for invisible threats. One surveys the world through a haze of green, the other in shades of gray.

Fifty miles pass with no report of movement and no heat signatures, but the fleet is still ninety-five miles from the tower. They still have twenty-four miles of supposedly empty desert before they reach the closest mapped landmark.

The eerie trip continues, with Chief Benson finding it harder and harder to keep his men calm. Part of him wants to check in with Iron Strike HQ concerning the faulty arrangement, but doing so would give away just how nervous he is.

At least he has body cam footage of all his interactions with Army brass for his boss to evaluate later. That was a request straight from the CEO, and it wouldn’t be appreciated if any of the officers in this mission were aware of it. Given the current culture, the big boss felt a little CYA couldn’t hurt.

The former Ranger narrows his focus to the problem at hand, scanning the dark horizon for threats. Satellite maps indicate the existence of a nearby olive farm. A site shown to be a mosque twenty miles back was nothing but a circle of dirt. Beyond the

farm, the map shows another landmark labeled as an ancient burial ground. Neither of those seem like legitimate targets, which pretty much confirms Tower 22 as the convoy's destination. "Unless..." Benson mutters but stops when the Army trucks ahead in the line kill their lights.

The Colonel doesn't issue orders for the PMCs to do the same. "Shit. I don't like this, Chief," Brizzle, the driver, complains. "If someone is out here, we're now sitting ducks."

Benson keys his radio to reach everyone on his team. "Kill your lights. Focus all scopes forward. You watchers are now the drivers' eyes."

With his team now scanning the landscape ahead, Benson picks up his radio and tries to raise the Army team again. "Ghost Rider to Mephistopheles. What's the current situation? Over."

There's still no answer. "This is Ghost Rider. Sit Rep."

No one from the Army is answering, and there's no radio chatter. "Shit."

Benson scans through the radio channels, convinced this is another power play by the colonel to cut the PMCs out. He reconsiders when none of the channels produce a sound.

"What do we do, Chief?" Rodeo asks from the back seat.

Benson turns around, studying the man's face in the soft glow of the dash lights. "Switch optics with Patch. I want NV on the right as we pass this olive farm."

He pulls out his own NV optics and says, "Scratch that. Keep your eyes on the road. Here's what we're doing. Briz, speed up and pull left alongside the convoy. We'll

pass them and fan out, so they'll have to stop."

"You sure we ought to do that, Chief? The colonel may have sniffed out something he didn't like over there."

"Well, if he did, he ain't telling us shit," Patch points out.

Benson once again opens his team mic. "All teams, pull alongside the Army trucks. It's time we get some answers."

The other trucks acknowledge the order, and Brizzle floors the accelerator. Right as Benson's truck pulls level with the lead Army vehicle, the handheld unit Taft gave him crackles to life. "What the fuck are you doing, Benson?"

The PMC chief smiles at hearing the colonel's voice.

"Guess the radio's working after all," Brizzle says.

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Benson brings the unit to his mouth and hits the transmit button. “I’m doing my damned job, and part of that is to find out if you’re an idiot or if you’re trying to get my men killed.”

“Wha... Listen here, you son of a bitch! You_”

An explosion cuts off the colonel’s shrieking yell, and Chief Beau Benson closes his eyes. The blast is quickly followed by two more. Everyone is screaming now.

Time slows to a crawl, and an image of Benson’s wife and their nine-month-old daughter comes to mind. Thoughts of the tiny girl bring a small smile to his lips. He would have liked to see his daughter grow up.

Benson’s clenched eyes fly open at the panicked shouts of his team, and his spine stiffens. Not without a fight.

No more than a second has passed when two more blasts sound. Two corresponding fireballs light up the darkness. The cab lights up in orange, and Brizzle yells, “We’re not dead! How are we not dead?”

“I’m not waiting around to find out. Everybody out now!”

The PMCs spill out of the trucks, and all sixteen men huddle together. Benson yells above the flames. “The grenades had to have come from the east, or we would have been the ones blown. The fire will cover our approach. Get to the Humvees and look for survivors!”

The group disperses toward the rear Army rides. The flames mask the sounds of more incoming RPGs, but no one misses the ensuing blasts or streams of molten metal shooting from the grenade cores. Nothing of the Army trucks is left, and there's no way these guys see ours. So why are these bastards still firing?

Everyone on Benson's team hits the dirt, expecting to get taken out with the Iron Strike trucks. The echoes of the blasts end, leaving only the crackles of the flaming Humvees.

Benson calls the colonel through the radio, knowing there won't be any answer. The colonel is dead. His vehicle was the first hit. All five of the Army trucks were targeted and are now burning.

The shots came from the olive farm, meaning Benson's team is invisible. He doesn't waste time thinking about useless what-ifs, such as he'd be dead if the Iron Strike trucks had remained behind the others.

While the PMCs continue their fruitless search, Chief Benson fumbles for his satellite radio, dialing his boss and handler with shaking hands. Iron Strike's CEO, Roman Cargill, answers, and Benson yells into the speaker. "Roman, we've been ambushed."

Benson sees movement at the same time the man at his elbow does. A door on the leading Humvee opens, and Patch jumps up. To do what, God only knows. Benson reaches for Patch's foot, just getting a hand around the man's ankle before he's out of reach. "Stop! They're all dead."

"Oh, Jesus. What's happening?" Roman asks.

Benson doesn't hide the horror in his voice. "A massacre."

Two Weeks Later

Chelsea Danforth

“I am determined to lead Congress in the fight to stop the US from employing companies of mercenaries. War should not be a business model, and the US should not be bankrolling people who wish to profit from it. I have made it my personal mission to see that_”

A collective groan sounds from my table at the asshole congressman’s pompous mug filling the TV screen: Calvin Harding, the freshman representative from Arizona. The man is about as genuine as an Instagram filter and as pleasant as a fever blister.

Harding continues his self-righteous sermon until I’m dangerously close to throwing this bottle of cow piss at the TV. Thinking better of it, I yell across the barroom to the owner. “Hey, Arnie, change the channel, will you? Nobody wants to watch that shit.”

The crusty old bartender rolls his eyes at me. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Get up and change it yourself.”

Grumbling, I leave my group and trundle to the bar, reaching across the counter for the remote. “Dusty old fart. If I wanted to be treated like this, I’d have stayed in the Marines,” I grumble. “You’ll be sorry when I find someplace better to hang out and drink.”

Arnie laughs, nearly dropping the glass he’s drying. “You ain’t going nowhere. You’d miss watching my firm ass too much.”

I pause with remote in hand, cutting my eyes to the three-hundred-pound bar owner. “Arnie, your ass is about as firm as your schlong, and it hasn’t seen action in decades.”

With the bartender chuckling again, I turn back to the bank of TVs and start flipping

through the channels. My teammates cheer behind me as Capitol Hill's most pretentious windbag is silenced in favor of college basketball—which I hate. I stop surfing, figuring anything is better than the vitriol that loser has been spouting for the last seven months.

No one knows why Harding made it his mission to take down private military corporations, but he's dedicated his infant career to doing just that. Whatever Harding's motivation, he's making too much noise to be ignored. The guy is wrong about us. I can't deny we have our share of bad players, but what industry doesn't?

Maybe Harding is just a shameless opportunist capitalizing on the rash of recent military mishaps in the news, an alarming number of them. Most recently, the Iron Strike disaster. While more experienced members of Congress have refrained from addressing the fallout, this douchebag is eating it up.

A loud commotion draws my eyes toward our table at the Warriors Taphouse. My partner, Bastien "Bash" Laurent lifts his arm from around Birdie's shoulders and stands to greet someone strolling toward the group, someone I don't know. Or maybe I do? Why do I get the feeling I've met this guy?

I place the remote on the bar, pausing at Arnie's barked order to put it back where I found it. When I turn back around, Birdie is standing and tilting her face to receive the stranger's kiss on the cheek.

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“Stop kissing my woman, asshole,” Bash says with a grin.

My eyes begin an automatic scan of the man’s body, noting his confident bearing, fit arms, rock-solid middle, and finally, his playful smile and sharp eyes. Eyes that meet mine for a brief moment before I look away.

My cheeks heat as I replay my bottom-to-top scan of the stranger. The guy stood alert as if he was in the military or still is. Given his age, he’s probably a career man. Since Bash knows him, he’s most likely a SEAL. He’s definitely got the body of one.

My rusty libido takes notice and likes what it sees. Not sees. Senses. The man is an alpha, and given the way Bash greeted him, he earned it_bad news for me. I’ve been fooled by a pretty face before, so hot guys are easy to ignore. A man like this is appealing for a host of other reasons.

Attraction is a weakness I can’t afford, and the stronger the pull toward someone, the emptier my brainpan. I become this gullible, trusting idiot, which is how I ended up with someone like my ex. Never again.

Straightening my shoulders, I continue toward our table, still thinking I’ve seen this man before. It takes a minute, but I finally place the familiar face. This man was with Bash the day we rescued Birdie. He wanted to be part of the rescue team, but Knot made him watch from the ground as we raced away in a helicopter. I never did learn his name.

The two friends man hug, and then Bash turns to us. “Guys, this is Lieutenant Jackson “Clothespin” or “Pin,” for short, Bennett. We served together in the SEALs.

He's still active duty."

Bash gestures around the table for his friend's benefit. "Jackson, meet Kai and Cassanova." Gesturing toward me, he adds, "They're part of the team I lead with this badass, Chelsea."

Jackson nods at the first two names, but then his eyes lock onto mine and widen. "Chelsea. So, this is the famous Yeet."

I turn and glower at Bastien. "I'll kick your ass later." Then, to Jackson, I warn, "I don't know you, so I won't kill you this time. Next time you call me that, I'll stab you in the heart."

Unruffled, the man turns back to Bash. "I think I see what you mean."

Bash laughs at the inside joke at my expense. When Kai and Cassanova snicker with him, the familiar burn of humiliation fills my gut. I remind myself that these people_new guy notwithstanding_are my friends, and I choke out a laugh to hide my awkwardness.

Jackson smiles and meets my eyes, and another type of warmth threatens to melt me from the inside out until I catch myself. I pull my gaze away, refusing to get sucked into his...whatever spell he's trying to cast. Nope. No. Been there. Done that. I know all too well what it means when the hottest guy in the room starts buddying up to me. Someone either lost a bet or made one, or he just needs to scratch an itch, and no one else is available.

I hope Jackson's appearance is a coincidence, and he'll move on quickly. That would be great because I'm hormonal and off my game thanks to PMS. Unfortunately, today is not my lucky day because he pulls out a chair to sit at our table. Great. So much for my chance to just hang out and unwind.

Kai and Cassanova jump into grilling the SEAL about Bash's time in the Navy, but I tune the men out in favor of talking to Birdie, our brilliant intel specialist. I don't have the energy to deal with a new personality tonight.

The bar is busy for a Thursday. I haven't been coming here long, only since Bash found a personality and asked Birdie out. Since then, various members of our team have been making efforts to get together outside of work. I remind myself each time we meet that friends are a good thing, and that I am capable of being one.

The din of happy patrons means my lack of engagement isn't obvious. I'm generally not so aloof because I'm always with my teammates. Excluding myself from present company tonight is a defense mechanism. Thankfully, I've got Birdie to hide behind.

I realize I've gone too hard in ignoring the men when a rolled-up napkin gets tossed at me. Birdie, my one distraction from Jackson's gorgeous eyes, had left to visit the ladies' room, and I checked out altogether, pretending to people-watch.

"You still in there, Chels?" Kai asks.

"Yeah. What?" I say, pretending to be annoyed by the interruption.

Bash teases. "Where did you go? Planning another rafting trip in your head?"

I take my fork and stand it on end threateningly. Smirking, I answer, "Yep. I'm imagining how I could get away with drowning you while we're there."

The men at the table ooh at my fake warning. "I'd love to know how you plan to drown a SEAL," Jackson says, baiting me.

Though Bash is technically a former SEAL, I would never point that out. His exit from the Navy was not by choice, and there's no way I'd rub salt in that wound. And

given the way my stomach is flipping over Jackson's deep voice and strong jaw, any attempt at a sharp comeback would likely stumble out in some stuttered mess. Instead, I opt for my best defense, deflection. "What do you morons want?"

"Nothing," Cassanova says with his hands up. "We were just wondering where you went."

Four sets of eyes focus on me, waiting for an answer. Three don't bother me, but Jackson's stare has me fidgeting in my chair. What the hell, Chels? Get your shit together. Drumming up a quick excuse, I avoid looking at Jackson and answer with a grin. "Oh, nowhere. Just fantasizing Harding falling on his face during one of his interviews."

While the PMC guys nod in agreement, Jackson's brows rise in question. "Who's Harding?"

"Congressman Calvin Harding," Bash answers. "He's got a burr up his ass about private military contractors. He wants to rid the world of us."

Jackson laughs. "Good luck. You guys are like cockroaches. What'd you do to him?"

"Not us. None of our people have ever met him," Kai answers.

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“The bastard never even served,” Cassanova adds.

Jackson’s brow tightens. Instead of asking Bash, he turns to me. “What’s your theory?”

Beneath his piercing gaze, I’m stricken with a severe case of the stupids. “I...”

Birdie trots up to the table, drawing all eyes her way. Thank God. “What’d I miss?”

“Oh, nothing,” I answer. “We were just explaining to the lieutenant about Congressman Harding’s hard-on for PMCs.”

“Chelsea was just about to share her theory when you came back,” Jackson says, not letting me off the hook.

All eyes are on me again. If it were just Knot’s people, I wouldn’t care. I know who I am and how to act around them. Jackson’s throwing me off. I’m now second-guessing myself. “I don’t... have a theory.”

The men from my team stare at me as if I’ve forgotten my last name, and Jackson turns to Bash. “Didn’t you tell me she was a brilliant war strategist? Always knows what the enemy thinks before he does?”

Bash shrugs and tugs on a lock of Birdie’s hair. Jackson returns that laser focus to me, and the universe again shows me mercy. The waitress walks over with a beer for the SEAL and another round for everyone but me. When she walks away, Birdie asks Jackson about someone called Skin.

I listen to the report and ascertain that Jackson and his platoon are quite well known to some at Knot Corp. I'd heard about shared missions and even a rescue by a group of Navy SEALs, but I didn't know Jackson was involved.

I must have said that part out loud because he answers. "I wasn't. That was the other squad in my platoon."

"Your platoon?" As soon as I asked, I regretted the question because now I've got his full attention again.

"I'm the leader of Third Platoon in SEAL Team Two."

Platoon leader. That means he's not a fuck up or a complete asshole. The answer is still no. No matter how charming his smile is or how much his voice makes your insides quiver. I turn away, hopefully before appearing impressed.

My team has moved on from the conversation. Birdie and Bash are in their own little world. Kai and Cassanova discuss a flagrant foul call from the basketball game between the Tide and the Cavs. Unfortunately for me, Jackson doesn't suffer similar distractions. "Want another beer?" he asks.

When no one answers, I look up to see that he's asking me. "No. Thanks." I pick up my bottle and swing it back and forth. "Still full."

Jackson's voice drops low. "It's got to be warm by now."

I fight off a full-body shudder and imaginary tug to get closer. Fall back! Fall back! While facing off with Jackson is nothing like the life-or-death situations I've met in my career, being the sole receiver of his attention is unsettling. Not because he creeps me out but because he doesn't.

I push out of my chair and toss two tens on the table, surprising the man. Thank God I had cash tonight. “I’m out, guys. I’ve got some shit to do before tomorrow.”

No one tries to stop me when I walk away from the table. Knowing they’re watching, I plead with my body to not trip. Though I make it to the exit without embarrassing myself, I don’t take a relaxed breath until I’m on the other side of the barroom door.

Smooth, Chelsea. Real smooth.

Jackson “Clothespin” Bennett

Chelsea walks away, stirring my inner caveman. I want to give chase, wrap my hands around those juicy hips, and see what the woman tastes like.

Thankfully, I’m not ruled by my baser instincts and remain seated. That doesn’t mean I’m not watching, though. Turning my face to the TV over the bar, I pretend to watch the basketball game but keep my eyes trained on the woman who couldn’t get away from me fast enough.

Too bad. Chelsea’s a stunner, something Bash failed to mention when he described his teammates.

The woman wasn’t afraid of me. Our mutual attraction was palpable, evidenced by her sharp gasp when our eyes met. Why she shut down, I don’t know.

Based on Bash’s evaluation, Chelsea is fierce and fearless with a top-notch military intellect. Her fast mind and sharp tongue constantly keep her team on their toes.

Basically, he tells me she’s a hell of a leader, even if she’s a bit of a smartass. That doesn’t jive with what I saw tonight. The woman I just met didn’t have a confident bone in her body. Out of respect for Chelsea, I don’t ask publicly. I decide to wait

until the group breaks up.

Two beers later, the game ends, and the crowd begins to thin out. Kai and Cassanova pay their tabs and exit, leaving Birdie, Bash, and me at our table. My patience loses to my curiosity, and I let loose the question burrowing in my head. “Are you sure that was the Chelsea you told me about?”

Birdie rolls her eyes, and Bash lifts his ball cap to scrub his scalp. “I don’t get it. She’s always quiet at first when meeting new people like she’s taking time to figure them out. I’ve never seen her shut down completely. She must have hated you.”

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“Oh no,” Birdie says emphatically. “If she’d hated you, you would have gotten the saccharine sweet Chelsea and never seen the killing blow coming.”

Now, that, I believe. “So, where do I stand then?”

Bash’s teasing grin sobers up quickly. “What do you mean?”

I shrug, surprised by the protective position he seems to be taking. “You’re the one who said I should meet her.”

“Well, yeah. I’d like you to meet a bunch of people, but I wouldn’t expect to see you checking out Knot’s ass. I saw that, by the way.”

Waving him off, I respond, “Is it wrong that I’m interested in your partner? I mean, if she has a problem with it, the woman was Force Recon. I figure she can kick almost anybody’s ass.”

Bash goes quiet for a long breath, which sets off alarm bells in my head. My brows pinch, wondering what he’s thinking. I know he doesn’t have romantic feelings toward Chelsea. His fingers tangled in Birdie’s blond curls are a testament to that. He’s acting like an overprotective brother. “Hey, you know I’ve never mistreated a woman, and based on what we all just saw, I wouldn’t get a chance here anyway.”

My friend shakes his head. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just...we all know that Chelsea’s a badass and that she can handle herself.”

“You hesitated.”

Birdie glances between Bash and me. “We didn’t ask you to hang out to hook you up. But...if you’re interested, Chelsea would not be a mistake. She just has scars like the rest of us.”

Bash looks at Birdie like he has no clue what she’s talking about. I don’t know the woman at all, only what I’ve heard from my friend, the same friend who invited me here tonight, which makes the third-degree I’m receiving all the more confusing.

I nod at Birdie’s advice, figuring she has to be right. Everyone’s got some sort of emotional baggage.

I collapse onto the sand next to Fish, the leader of B Squad in my platoon. We’ve just completed the Body Armor challenge, more commonly known as the Murph. The morning sun is blinding, and I throw my arm across my eyes to block out the light. While I’m sucking wind and trembling, Leo “Skin” Ramsay, the youngest guy in Fish’s squad, laughs beside me. “It ain’t going to get any easier, Pin.”

Getting up to kick Skin’s ass would take more effort than I can manage right now, so I settle for the verbal threat. “And you’ll never make it to admiral if I kill you first.”

“Skin? An admiral? You’ve got to be joking,” Duck, my squad’s medic quips.

I don’t respond, needing to focus instead on getting more oxygen to my lungs. Fish also remains quiet. The truth is, I know Skin is special. Not just him but all the SEALs in Fish’s squad. Those men have bonded in a way my squad never has.

If I have the best platoon in Team Two, it’s because of those guys. My men aren’t losers, but of my original squad, only Brent “Duck” Mallard remains. Christopher “Fish” Hill has had no turnover since our commander gave him the post. If I were honest, I’d have to say I’m jealous. Of what, I don’t know. Lately, I want more from life, and all of Fish’s guys seem to have it.

I drop my arm and scrunch my eyes tight against the brightness overhead. A large form shades my face, and I look to see Gunner “Devil” Murphy standing over me with his hand outstretched. “Time to get back to work. We’ve got formation in twenty.”

I accept the sniper’s hand and let him pull me to my feet, thankful my legs hold me upright. Fish throws his arm across my shoulder, and we support each other’s first steps toward the gym. The rest of the platoon follows, though with our legs feeling like tree trunks, it takes nearly the whole time to get showered, changed, and make the short walk to the field behind base headquarters.

Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek–Fort Story is an amphibious launch base located in Virginia Beach and is home to SEAL Team Two. I’ve been stationed here my entire SEAL career. Eighteen years.

Commander Timothy “Stone” O’Reilly waits on the back platform of the three-story building as the men from SEAL Team Two line up in formation. The man is a legend who’s beat death more times than I’d care to think about. He’s a hell of a commander and leads like a man who has never forgotten what it is to be in the shit.

“Good morning. For the next four months, platoons from Team Two will rotate deployment to Vaziani Military Base in the Georgian country. Your purpose is two-fold. Number one is to reassure Tbilisi that the US sympathizes with its delicate position against its aggressive Russian neighbors. They don’t want to be the next Ukraine and don’t expect the border mountains to protect them. Your secondary purpose is to assist US military operations in surrounding countries. First and Third Platoons, you’re up first. You stay for instructions. The rest of you are dismissed.”

I lock eyes with Fish as the group breaks up. We’ve had questionable assignments before, but this babysitting job is a first for both of us.

My men march toward the platform with those from First Platoon, gathering close to hear the commander. “You men ship out tomorrow night at nineteen hundred. While your destination is to remain classified, this is not a mission-specific deployment, meaning you can tell your families when to expect you back. I’ll have your flight details after training tomorrow. Dismissed.”

We stand at attention and salute the commander. He returns the gesture and disappears inside. Duck claps me on the shoulder and shakes his head. “Never a dull day in Little Creek.”

He walks away with several others, but Fish and his squad hang around, noticing I’m not leaving. “What’s on your mind, Pin?” Fish asks.

“I’m just wondering. Us being on call. Who for?”

Nolan “Judge” Lockmore, a lawyer and the wisest of us, scratches the back of his head. “I think I can answer that, unofficially, of course. The word is that all branches are deploying extra people all over the place. Georgia is just a convenient excuse for us.”

Fish eyes the JAG lawyer-turned-SEAL. “An excuse for what?”

Extra hands. On call. Last night’s conversation with Bash and his people comes to mind. “The Pentagon is under pressure and has scaled back the use of military contractors. We’re replacing them.”

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Judge nods. “That’s what I hear.”

“Won’t a sudden surge in troop deployments look bad on the current administration?”
Wrench muses.

“Probably,” Fish answers the Italian mechanic. “Either the president gets to look bad, or the Pentagon will. How about we leave it to them to sort out? Until they do, we’re up.”

The group generally agrees and breaks up to prepare for an extended deployment.

One Month Later

Chelsea

The pounding music coming from on stage throbs in my ears despite the hideously expensive tech protecting my hearing. My chest will be vibrating for days. My clit is jealous.

“Do I see you dancing over there, Yeet?” Cassanova teases through the radio.

My expression doesn’t change with my threat. “How would you like a drumstick up your ass?”

“Oh, come on. Thrash metal not your beat?”

I ignore the taunting and keep focused on the stage steps across from the band’s

dressing room where I'm stationed. God, I miss gunfire. My team hasn't left the country in six weeks. We've had zero military support deployments in that time. All of our work lately is domestic_boring shit. I swear, if I ever have to guard another celebrity, I'll claw my eyes out.

It's nearly midnight when the last riff fades, and the crowd yells its final applause. I'm more than ready to go home and strip out of these beer-splashed clothes and wash the skunky smell of weed out of my hair. I'm not that lucky, though. We can't leave until the band is escorted safely to their tour bus. And that won't be until they've finished some light snacks, a few more cases of beer, oh, and the orgy.

The band eventually appears on the stage steps, where a few groupies wait to service them. Like before the concert, the band guys don't care if the girls are underage or not. Our contract says it's not my business, but thankfully the manager is on hand to keep things legal though still morally objectionable.

The first two metal heads to reach the dressing room door escort the horde inside. I do not know or care what place they hold in the band, only that they get on their bus safely at the end of the night. Hopefully, that'll be sooner than later, but I won't hold my breath.

When the last two hop off the stairs, one rushes inside the dressing room, following the giggles. The last one crosses the hall slowly, approaching the manager and me. Correction, the douchebag in leather pants is completely ignoring the manager.

"You're a tasty bit, aren't you?" the guy says in his smarmy British accent.

The tattoos, I don't mind, but the slick, black hair, pale skin, and ultra slim build do nothing for me. "Are you talking to me?" I ask.

Through my earpiece, I hear, "Oh shit."

The shirtless performer places a hand on the wall next to my head_his first mistake. I get a whiff of his sweat-soaked body and retreat two inches until my back meets the block wall. The manager steps forward to run interference, but I don't need his help. "Hey, Bon Jovi, I think you're confusing me with the night's entertainment, which I'm not. Now step back."

"Ooh. I like tough bitches," he breathes in my face.

Now, for his second mistake. The asshole reaches for my breast. Point two seconds later, he's on his knees with his wrist bent and pinned between his shoulder blades. "Don't you know not to touch without an invitation?"

"I'll have your job for this. You'll never work in entertainment again," the guy seethes.

I bend to his ear and whisper, "You can't threaten me with a good time, asshole."

Bash's slightly amused voice sounds on my right, not through the radio. "There a problem here?"

"Call your boyfriend, huh? Not so tough after all."

The rocker smirks until I pull upward on his arm, making the pig squeal. The manager cringes but doesn't intervene. He's more interested in trying to get the man he calls Rush to shut his mouth.

Bash stoops in front of him and sneers. "Not her boyfriend. I'm here to save you from her. She's a hell of a lot scarier than I am."

Bash stands and snickers at the murder he must see in my eyes. "Let him go."

I release Rush's hand and give him a little friendly shove, accidentally sending his face into the block wall. Oops. Rush jumps up from the floor, holding a bloody nose. For the briefest moment, he looks like he wants to say something about it, but a quick scan of all the nearby faces changes his mind.

With a huff, Rush skirts around me, enters the dressing room, and slams the door. Bash and I both turn toward the manager, expecting to catch hell for me putting my hands on one of his stars.

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He scrubs a hand over his face, looking resigned. “God, I hate this job sometimes. You’re not going to press charges, are you?”

I choke on the oxygen I just inhaled, not sure I heard him right. “Me press charges?”

“Yeah. I know Rush is a dick, and I wouldn’t blame you if you did. It would make my life even more hell than it is now, though.”

Another glance at Bash. “Ah, no. I think my point was made. Honestly, I expected you to be breathing fire at me.”

The manager scoffs. “God, no. I’m actually adding a big fat bonus to your fee. Seeing Rush on his knees for once... You made my week.”

The so-called manager’s comment is unexpected. “Um. As the manager, aren’t you supposed to be on their side?”

“I’m less of a manager and more of a fixer sent by the label to keep these idiots out of trouble. Thankfully, the tour ends next week. I’m looking forward to a good night’s sleep.”

“How about I help you out with that tonight? When will the venue kick these guys out?” Bash asks.

The middle-aged, accountant-looking man sighs. “Two. Three o’clock, maybe.”

I wink at Bash, catching what he’s thinking. “How does five minutes sound?”

The fixer grins. “It sounds like your bonus just got a lot bigger.”

The shortest route to bed last night was the Knot Corporation dorms. We’d ridden to the concert hall in two Knot SUVs, and when we arrived back on the compound around one-thirty, I picked walking to the hotel_what we call the dorm building_over driving home. Like most contractors, I keep a bag on site for such occasions. I showered, dressed, and fell into bed, all on autopilot.

The only downside to that plan was waking up with a god-awful rat’s nest on my head. My natural waves don’t do well when left to their own devices. My only option now is to rewet them and put them in a braid.

I’ve never liked that option. Growing up, I put a lot of effort into my hair, always taking the time to tame its wacky, wavy frizz with a flat iron. The long, sleek tresses looked better and helped to thin out my rounded cheeks. My cheeks aren’t so round now, but I still fret and fuss over having decent hair.

I hit the gym early, spending extra time on cardio like usual. This body is strong and capable, but it’ll never be perfect. That doesn’t stop me from working to get it as close as possible. My muscle lets people know I work out, but my hips and middle tell them I won’t pass up a cookie.

After the gym circuit, I enter the training room with the rest of the PMCs. It’s a full house today, with all of us assigned to random domestic security gigs. Despite the number of bodies in the room, the place is unusually quiet. Piper, our conditioning and combat coach’s dog, is even on hand to observe the group’s strange behavior.

Austin “Spatch” Madden takes us through Houthi training methods. It seems the Houthis are trying to take over where ISIS left off, and we’ll face off with them eventually. That is if we PMCs are ever given another military contract.

We pair up and work on attacks and counters, switching partners every few minutes until our chests heave and sweat covers our bodies. At least I'll get to shower again and deal with my crazy hair.

Our CEO and former SEAL, Dillan Knot, walks onto the training floor just as Spatch dismisses us. His mood is as dark as his skin, so we're all ears, waiting for the boom to be lowered.

"You'll hear about this in the news soon enough, but I didn't want this shit to get around the compound and freak you out. Heat from Congress after the disastrous Iron Strike mission has slowed military contracting jobs. As a result, many private military firms have had to shift their focus to stateside security jobs. Since many of those jobs do not require our level of expertise, they come with lighter pay. One US firm decided to advertise its skills internationally and took on a job securing an oil field...for the Saudis. The press got wind of it, and Congressman Harding is using the occasion to further smear our profession. Not only are we greedy, warmongering mercenaries, but if the pay is good enough, we're traitors to the very government that trained us."

Everyone in this room knows Dillan Knot would never stoop low enough to serve enemy governments or even questionable ones, but the public won't know that.

"I want all team leaders in the war room in an hour."

Great. This sounds like more thrash metal to me...or worse. I'm not the only one to think so, either. Someone in the group grumbles loud enough for Knot to hear. "Sounds like it's time to apply for the police academy."

This comment stops Knot in the doorway. He turns around and scans the group. If anyone expected him to lash out, they were wrong. Our boss sighs and rubs his bald head, but his bearing remains steadfast. "This isn't the first time some bureaucrat has

gotten a bug up his ass about military contractors, and it won't be the last. All of you have run across someone in uniform who didn't like the idea that you're better equipped than they are, or maybe their son or daughter. You also know these same bureaucrats are why the military sometimes works on the cheap. Knot Corporation is operating on a full budget. None of you are getting cut. If you want to quit, quit, but don't do it because you're worried about job security. This will blow over once the next social media trend makes its rounds through Congress, and we'll all get back to the work we've trained for."

The warrior in a suit leaves the room, taking some of the heaviness with him. I make eye-contact with Dani, the former secret service officer, and she nods, confirming what Knot said. I guess of all of us she would know, having spent much of her career at the US Capitol.

An hour later, the leaders of the Norfolk office field teams are clean, fed, and seated in the war room in the center of headquarters' main building. Knot walks in and leans against the briefing table at the front of the room. A long silence passes before he speaks.

"I didn't give you the whole story earlier. What I'm about to tell you is classified, and not everyone in your teams has proper clearance. There has been another incident involving a private military firm. A team deployed to Kandahar was wrapping up a mission when some local walked into the middle of camp and blew himself up. The bomber was reportedly the contracted team's interpreter."

The room erupts in swears, whispers, and grumbles of disbelief. Knot tosses up his hands, trying to quiet the room. Before he can speak again, his phone rings. He pulls it from an inner jacket pocket, and his eyes widen.

Knot gestures for us to be silent and answers the call. "Knot."

Our boss pushes off the table and stiffens at what he's hearing. "Shit. I'm all yours."

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Knot ends the call, only to make another. “Bev, clear my afternoon. Something’s come up.”

After speaking to his assistant, Knot calls our head of site security. “Frank, Roman Cargill is pulling up in the next two minutes. Let him in the gate and bring him to the war room.”

Cargill. Why do I know that name? I nudge Aaron “Grim” Hosfeld, who’s seated on my right. “Who?” I whisper.

Aaron shrugs, but Sadie, Knot’s second in command, leans forward, whispering around him. “Roman Cargill is the nation’s rebel. He’s from the second most wealthy family in the country and walked away to join the military. An IED resulted in a medical discharge, but he refused to go back to the family business. The family cut him off, and he bankrolled his own company. Cargill is, or was, the CEO of Iron Strike Security.”

That was the PMC group that went under after the ambush, the mission the congressman uses as his pulpit to preach from.

A short, tense wait later, a handsome man in a tailored suit storms through the war room door, led by our head of campus security. Everything about him, from how he’s dressed to how he carries himself, speaks of his top-one-percent upbringing_everything except for his tired yet sharp eyes.

Knot steps forward to shake his hand before introducing the group as a whole. “Roman, these are my team leaders. We were meeting when you called, but given

what you told me, I thought it best for them to hang around.”

Cargill nods to us. “I know what you’ve heard on the news, but my people did not fuck up. We’re not_well, were not as big as Knot Corp., so I was handling mission support on that run myself. Despite what you’ve heard, my team did not give up mission details. They were never given any.”

I lean back in my seat, deciding whether I believe this guy. The other team leaders seem to share the same skepticism. Cargill accurately reads the room and directs his comments to us contractors. “I get how this looks. We never should have accepted a contract without detailed parameters, backup plans, or escape routes. We’re a young company. Jobs are few and far between. I’m assuming that’s why we were chosen.”

“Chosen?” Knot asks with drawn brows. “What do you mean?”

Cargill’s blue eyes tighten in anger. “My men were set up.”

The room breaks out in murmurs. Knot holds up a hand to shut us down, but not before someone from another team questions Cargill accusingly. “What do you mean, set up? Your men got out without so much as a scratch.”

Cargill points to the man, not backing down. “Exactly. The Army took the beating, and we took the blame.”

Now, the whole room goes quiet and stays that way until Knot breaks the silence. “I assume you’ve got some evidence, or you wouldn’t be wasting my time?”

“Yes and no,” Cargill answers. “I’ve got an encrypted radio given to my team leader because the Army team refused to let us tie into their comms. I have audio recordings of every interaction between my men and theirs. I also have GPS tracking information, body cam footage, and eyewitness statements from all my men telling

me they didn't fuck this up."

"No, what you have is a lot of illegal information that would have you brought up on federal charges if it ever came to light," Aaron accuses.

Cargill stares down the former Marine. "Maybe, but I'm glad I have it all the same."

"So, what do you want from us?" Knot asks him.

"I want you to find out who set us up and why."

Knot studies the man for a long breath. "What you're asking is dangerous and will take a lot of manpower. And last time I checked, you're broke."

My ass clenches at my boss's response. I wouldn't have expected him to be so cold.

Knot's comment doesn't seem to bother Cargill. He only laughs. "You're not worried, and you'd do it anyway because you're afraid I'm telling the truth and of what that might mean. Still, you'll be paid. My father will tolerate many things, but having our name drug through the mud isn't one of them. As disappointed as he is in my career choice, he doesn't believe the bad press and will fund this effort to clear Iron Strike and the Cargill name."

Knot raises his fist to his chin in thought. "I see. I need time to meet with my legal team and intelligence staff. Give me until tomorrow at one. You can return then and share everything you've got with my team."

The battered CEO of Iron Strike sags in relief. "Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow."

Cargill starts to walk out, but Knot stops him. "Hey."

The man halts at the command, and Knot warns. “If you were set up, someone could be watching you. They’ll know you came here. Watch your six.”

Cargill tips his head and walks away, and Knot drops into a nearby chair and sighs.

Sadie “Fate” Phelps leans forward, her auburn ponytail falling over her shoulder. “What do you think?”

“Cargill knows what he’s doing,” Knot answers. “I don’t know what we can find outside his illegal evidence, but I know the man. There’s no way he would let this happen on his watch.”

Bash opens his mouth for the first time in the meeting. “Say Iron Strike was set up. What would that mean?”

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Knot reaches up and loosens his tie. “Well, in light of today’s news, I’d say someone appears to be working with Harding to take down our industry.”

“But you said the suicide bombing was classified. A freshman congressman wouldn’t have clearance,” I point out.

“Classified after the fact,” Knot responds. “It seems someone in the Pentagon is trying to stop the bleeding.”

Chelsea

The war room empties, with most scattering in different directions. I hang back with Bash, Sadie, and Aaron to discuss the coming chaos. “What do you think, ? You’re the resident expert in being falsely accused.”

Aaron cocks his head my way and glares. “Really, Chelsea?”

I shrug. “Sorry. It’s a personality flaw.”

Bash ignores us both. “Who benefits from Iron Strike going down?”

“That’s only relevant if Iron Strike is the only target. Knot seems to think it’s all of us,” I answer.

“Okay, so who benefits if we all go down?”

Tugging on my ear, I think about it for a second but come up empty. “I don’t know.

Harding must have a big stake in the movement since he's so vocal about it. Maybe if he's successful, he'll look like a Washington powerhouse and secure his place for the next thirty years."

"Maybe," Sadie ponders, "but there's no way he's doing this alone. I doubt a baby representative is sitting in on meetings with the joint chiefs. Who could be helping him?"

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the question," I declare.

The mystery lingers for a bit before Alpha and Beta's leaders split off to join their respective teams. Our guys should be at the range, so Bash and I head there. "What do you think our role will be in this?"

The man runs a hand over his dark hair and sighs. "God only knows. I plan on asking Birdie her thoughts after work."

"I would love to sit in on that conversation," I mumble. Birdie may be the mousy type, but she becomes a tiger when someone threatens her friends.

"Fine. Let's meet at our usual place tonight. Say about eight."

"See you there."

Over the next hour, our team of eight runs drills on the moving range and closes the session with target practice.

My workday ends at three, and I plan to go home to catch up on some laundry and cleaning. I slide into my Accord, swearing when my hand touches something sticky. "Ugh. But first, to clean out this damned car."

After going through a car wash and cleaning the inside, I figure I've accomplished enough to blow off the rest of the day. I shower, address my long hair, put on some makeup, and dress like a civilian. My legs shove into my favorite jeans, and I complete the fit with cute sandals and a flirty top. I'm not looking to impress anyone. I just needed a confidence boost after waking up looking like a train wreck.

Since I'm already dressed and made up, I figure I'll get to the bar early and eat instead of risking my clothes by cooking dinner for myself.

The parking lot of the Taphouse is full, which I find odd for a Wednesday night. Then again, for all I know, this place is always busy. As I approach the entrance, I spot a lot of US Navy stickers on the parked cars and trucks. Now, I understand why Bash comes here and why he avoided it for so long after joining our ranks.

I pull open the door and walk in, scanning the place for an empty table for Bash, Birdie, and me, even though they won't be here for another hour. The place is a portrait of American patriotism. The floor is concrete and cobblestone, and multicolored wood slats make up the walls with a band of blue at the top. Military-themed artwork hangs all around, and various military pins and challenge coins are fixed into the resin tabletops.

A busser cleans a table near the bar, so I head that way, freezing when someone calls my name. Cringing, I turn toward the wall and spot a familiar face sitting in a booth with three other men. His dirty-blond hair is mussed, and dark stubble lines his jaw. God, save me. You can even send Rush the Rocker to do it. I wouldn't care.

Jackson wears a surprised and amused expression when he stands from his seat. "Good to see you again, Chelsea."

The devilishly sexy man peers around me before focusing on my face once again. And, of course, he's standing way too close. "You here alone?"

“I...uh...no.”

Jackson smirks. “No, you’re not alone, or?”

Come on, brain, dammit. Work! “They...uh...Bash and Birdie are coming later. I got here early to get food.” Realizing how that sounded, I rush to explain so he doesn’t think I’m a closet eater. “Dinner. I came early to get some dinner. The others are only coming for drinks, not dinner.”

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“Okay. Would you like to join my group? We could pull up a chair.”

My eyes unwittingly shift to the table where the three strangers sit. All three are seriously fit and hot. I don’t stand a chance. “I think I left my phone in the car. I’d better run and get it.”

I turn on my heel and stride for the door, praying Jackson doesn’t notice the device in my back pocket. Of course, as I reach the door, I feel like slamming my face into it. After my earlier reaction to Jackson, there is no way I could sit at a table with him and his three friends. Not without appearing neurotic, which I am.

I fumble to open the door when I reach my car, flop into the seat, and lean my head against the steering wheel. What the hell are you doing, Chelsea? I thought you preferred to not look like a lunatic. “That guy fries my brain. I’m already weird around new people, but he activates a whole other level of dysfunction.”

More than enough time passes for someone to collect their phone, as long as they’ve parked in the same zip code. Still, I haven’t moved. I can’t go back in there. Doing so now would result in even more questions and awkward answers. Dinner will have to come from somewhere else.

I start the car and drive away, hoping those men will be gone by eight. If not, I’ll make up some excuse and leave. Yeah, because that will seem totally normal.

My favorite deli is only a few blocks away. In just a few minutes, I’m sitting at a table in the back, abusing the bag of chips I picked to go with my club sandwich. By the time my food arrives, they are only crumbs in the bag. I don’t need them anyway.

I take an angry bite of the sandwich, berating myself as I chew.

I don't get why I have to be such a mutant. Meeting new people at work, not a problem. Meeting new people in social settings, not my favorite. Meeting a hot man who melts my insides with just a look, complete cranial meltdown. I can't even fake it around Jackson like I can with others. It's annoying. He's annoying. And he's probably messing with me on purpose.

At ten 'til eight, I walk out the door after picking at my sandwich for half an hour. The bar's parking lot is no less full than before, but at least Bash's truck is here when I pull in.

I walk inside but only far enough to scan the room and rule out Jackson's presence. Finding my friends and no threats to my sanity, I head straight for their table and sit. "You look like somebody's after you," Birdie says, giggling.

Pasting on my best jester's face, I wave off her concern. "I'm fine. Weird day."

Bastien scoffs, turning his ball cap backward. "You ain't lying."

A waiter stops by to take our order. I don't have the energy to act for anyone tonight, so I order a Coke instead of the beer I'd pretend to drink. I'm mildly surprised when Bastien doesn't comment, but I let it lie since I don't want to talk about it. "So, Birdie..."

My unspoken question lingers, and Birdie sighs. "Yes, I know everything. No, I don't have any theories yet. I won't know anything until I get Iron_"

Bastien clears his throat loudly, and Birdie's cheeks redden. Continuing in a whisper, she says, "I won't know anything until I have a chance to look through all the files."

If what Roman Cargill says is true, there's something to find, and Birdie will uncover it. Keeping my voice low, I begin working out a theory. "Okay, so let's assume you find proof this was a setup. There's no way Harding is manipulating these military operations. And I doubt he has the connections to coordinate with the various enemy combatants."

Bash pulls his hat from his head, and his dark hazel eyes narrow. "Do you understand what you're suggesting? That someone in the US government is_on purpose_setting up members of our military for slaughter just to hurt private military companies?"

I lean across the table. "Look. I'm not suggesting anything. I'm asking who might benefit from the complete shutdown of military contracting and how they might accomplish it."

Bash takes a long pull of his beer, and Birdie spins her glass around. No one speaks for several seconds, absorbing the frightening possibility.

Eventually, Birdie sighs. "She's right. If we find evidence proving Cargill is telling the truth, Chelsea's theory is the only one that makes any sense. We have to focus on motive in order to find who's doing this."

My partner's hat goes back on, turned forward again. He still doesn't say anything, though.

An itch on my neck makes me worry we weren't quiet enough. I turn around to see who could be listening in on our postulating. Finding no one watching, I dismiss the sensation and turn back around, catching on a pair of dark blue eyes boring into mine from a few feet away.

Jackson. He never left.

Jackson

“Who was that? She’s gorgeous, man.”

Chelsea hurries toward the door just as frantic as last time. I watch until she’s gone and sit down again.

“Yoohoo,” Wrench teases, waving his hand in front of my face.

“What?” I ask, swatting his arm away.

“I asked who that was.”

I glance toward the door again, watching for her return. “That was Chelsea Danforth. She leads one of Knot’s teams with Bash.”

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Fish stares at me in shock. “That woman? The lady who just tore out of here like a spooked filly? What did you do to her?”

“She wasn’t spooked. She forgot her phone and ran out to get it.”

Devil shakes his head. “That woman isn’t coming back.”

“Yes, she is. She’s meeting Bastien Laurent and Birdie Crenshaw here at eight and came early for dinner.”

Now, they’re all shaking their heads and grinning. Wrench, the most obnoxiously. “You poor man.” Turning to the other two, he laughs. “He’s so out of practice he can’t read woman signals anymore.”

Wrench gets my best stink eye. “Would you shut the hell up?”

“Speaking of woman signals.” Fish teases. “How is Captain? I assumed with you being gone a month, you’d be spending the next three days making it up to her.”

“She’s at a Tides game with Caleb. It’s pup night at the park, and he wanted Captain to help him pick up girls. He’s supposed to bring her back in the morning.”

Wrench taps me with his beer. “How’s he doing? Junior year at Old Dominion has to be a big deal.”

“He’s doing great. His grades are fantastic. I can’t believe he graduates next year.”

“I can’t believe he picked a school close to his old man and that you guys go drinking together.”

Elbowing Wrench in the side, I say, “Hey, my kid happens to like his old man.”

Fish fights to hold in a laugh and fails. “I know someone who doesn’t.”

I swivel to glare at him and realize he’s staring at the door. Damn. Devil was right. Chelsea didn’t come back.

Slamming money on the table, I shove out of my seat.

Fish calls out, “Hey, I didn’t mean it. Where’re you going?”

“She’s alone at a bar. It’s dark outside. I’m going to make sure she’s alright.”

I’m only a few steps away from the table when Wrench snickers. “I don’t think I want to be here when he gets back.”

There’s not a soul in the parking lot of the Virginia Beach bar. I jog around to check the parking area on the right side of the building, but I don’t see Chelsea there either. A car door shutting out front has me running back toward the entrance, but it’s only Wrench leaving. I don’t get it. What the hell did I do?

Gravel crunches behind me, but I know who it is before he speaks.

“You alright, man?” Fish asks.

I shake my head but answer, “Yeah. I just don’t_yeah, I’m fine.” A dark chuckle rumbles through my chest. “I don’t even know what I’m doing out here.”

Devil claps me on the back. “Yes, you do, and I hope you find it.”

The two men walk on and leave to go to their families. I don’t even have my dog to go home to.

A glance at my watch shows it to be seven thirty-seven. If Chelsea is to be believed, she’s meeting Bash and Birdie here at eight. I’ve got nothing better to do, so I think I’ll hang around to see what I can learn about the skittish woman.

I jog to my truck and drive it to the farthest part of the side lot. I don’t want Bash to see it and look for me. Next, I strip off my shirt, replacing it with another from my go bag. The last thing I do is grab a ball cap from the back seat. I’m going back in, and I’m doing it incognito.

Back inside the bar, I pick a high-top along the side wall, which allows me to see most of the tables. With a fresh beer in hand, I settle in to wait and watch.

My old SEAL buddy and his girlfriend breeze through the doors about ten minutes later and take an empty table near the bar. A short time after that, Chelsea walks in, carefully scanning the room.

I duck so she won’t ID me, count to five, and lift my head again. Chelsea’s shoulders relax at whatever she’s not seeing_me, apparently_and traipses to join her colleagues. She’s not exactly all smiles, but she’s not the least bit timid, either.

With Birdie and Bash, she’s confident and authoritative. The three appear to be having a serious discussion about something.

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Several minutes pass, and my curiosity gets the better of me. This is not the woman who ran out of the bar an hour ago or stuttered through her exit several weeks ago. This is the Chelsea that Bastien described.

Stepping off the stool, I circle the room, purposefully walking up behind Bash so only Chelsea will notice me. And notice me, she does.

I don't take my eyes off her as I approach, activating her Spidey sense. Chelsea looks up, quickly finding me in the crowd. Her mouth drops open, and Bash reacts, turning around to assess the threat.

Seeing me behind him, Bash relaxes and gestures toward the empty seat at the table. "Where did you come from?"

"I was here with some of the team. You just missed them."

Chelsea doesn't flinch when I sit beside her, but she doesn't not react, either. "Chelsea, long time no see. Did you find your phone?"

"I..." A myriad of emotions filter through Chelsea's eyes before her walls come up and a Cheshire grin lights up her face. She's almost convincing, but the slight tremor in her fingers gives her away. "Yes, I did. Thank you."

Chelsea catches me staring at her fidgeting digits and lowers her arms from the table. Her sharp tongue draws my eyes upward again to see her taking in my change in attire. "Did someone throw a drink at you that you had to change clothes?" she asks sweetly.

Bash clears his throat, drawing my attention to him. He looks back and forth between Chelsea and me before asking, “Did I miss something?”

“Nope,” the beauty beside me answers. “Now, where were we?”

“We weren’t anywhere,” Birdie answers. “I’ll get started on whatever Mr. Cargill delivers tomorrow and see what shakes loose.”

Bash grins at his partner. “Until then, we’ll keep working shitty assignments where you get felt up by rock stars.”

“Whoa. What?!”

Chelsea ignores me and laughs off the comment, but I level a death glare at my friend. The rage is instant and irrational. “Back. The. Fuck. Up. You let some asshole put his hands on Chelsea?”

“It’s not like I gave him permission.” He shrugs. “Chelsea can handle herself, as the guy found out pretty quickly.”

I angle my head toward Chelsea, who is spending a lot of effort to ignore me. Her eyes slide to mine before quickly darting away. “That’s what I do when faced with unwanted attention.”

That was either a warning or an invitation, and damn, but I want it to be an invitation. “And what do you do when the attention is wanted?”

“Something which will remain a mystery to you.” Chelsea pushes her chair away from the table and addresses her colleagues. “See you at work tomorrow.”

For the second time in two hours, I watch Chelsea rush from the bar. I turn slowly

toward my friend once she's gone. Bash is smirking at me...until I punch him in the bicep. "What the hell did you tell her?"

Bash rubs the spot, still smirking. "What are you talking about?"

"Your partner acts like I'm the devil incarnate. When Chelsea got here at seven, she took one look at me and ran out again. Since the only things she knows about me were learned from you, I want to know what you told her."

Bash throws his hands up defensively. "Nothing, I swear. I described you to her the same way I described Chelsea to you."

"Then why the hell do I scare her like that?"

"I don't know, man. I've never seen Chelsea scared. Wait. Scratch that. I've been in scary-as-shit situations with Chelsea. I know she was scared because I was. In those situations, she didn't balk. Those are the only times I've ever seen her go still. When Chelsea is scared, she gets eerily still and quiet_generally, right before she kicks ass. So, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe she doesn't like your deodorant."

I flip my friend off and look over at Birdie. She puts her hand up to halt the questioning. "Sorry. We've only recently started hanging out. She jokes a lot, but I've always thought it was because she was unflappable. I guess there's a lot about Chelsea I don't know. You didn't do anything wrong, I'm sure. Maybe... I'm sorry, Jackson. I was secretly hoping the two of you would hit it off."

My night has just soured. I can't be angry at Birdie for trying to set me up or at Chelsea for not giving me a chance. She can't be repulsed by something I've done. I've barely met her. Maybe I remind her of someone she hates.

Despite my fascination with the woman, I'm not interested in psychological warfare.

I would never judge how someone deals with their issues, but I'm not in a position to fix anybody.

Bash doesn't offer any more pearls of wisdom about Chelsea. I think he and Birdie recognize that I'm losing interest. I push out of the chair and say my goodbyes.

My head hits the pillow thirty minutes later. I have the day off tomorrow, and my only plans are sleeping in and getting Captain back. I don't plan to waste any time thinking about the former Marine with a fine ass.

My phone wakes me up long before I'm ready to stir. Only one person on this planet would call this early on my day off. I love that boy, but I swear, I'm going to kill him.

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I reach for the device on my bedside table, swiping blindly at the screen until the call answers. “I want my dog back.”

A tinny voice responds though I can barely hear it since the call isn’t on speaker. Eyes still closed, I pull the phone to my ear. “Who is this?”

“Sir, this is Ensign Dorne. Your platoon is now on alert. You will be briefed at zero nine hundred.”

“Zero nine hundred,” I repeat to confirm.

Dorne hangs up after my acknowledgment, and I let my arm fall to the mattress. On alert? We just got back.

Chelsea

Friday morning, Knot interrupts close-quarters training to call out two teams, Sadie’s and ours. That’s a giant red flag. CQ training is vital to keeping our asses alive, and Spatch is considered god on this dance floor. In this room, everyone is of the same rank, and no one leaves until Spatch says so. Not even Knot himself enjoys CEO privileges during these hand-to-hand sessions.

The sixteen of us scurry off the mat to get cleaned up, wondering what the emergency could be. My first thought is of Iron Strike, but Cargill won’t be here until later today.

Alongside Sadie and Dani, I rush through dressing, pinning up damp hair, and soon cram into our boss’s office with the men. Birdie is already seated in one of Knot’s

guest chairs, and the rest of our two teams hover around Knot's huge office.

The boss nods to Aaron, who closes the office door. The room instantly begins to change when Knot initiates lockdown procedures. The door seals, audio and visual shades lower over the windows, and air stops flowing from the vents.

I assume this has to do with Cargill. I glance at my watch. Seven a.m. Birdie hasn't had a chance to review his files yet. This has to be about something else.

The first words out of Knot's mouth prove me wrong. "Iron Strike's PMCs were set up to take the fall for the massacre in Jordan."

We all look toward Birdie, but she shakes her head. Knot continues. "Roman left a copy of the audio recordings. I listened to all the tape last night, and what I heard contradicts the reports coming out of Washington that the PMCs were careless and leaked mission details. At the time of the ambush, the team from Iron Strike had no knowledge of their target, objective, or possible payload. Someone set up the mission for failure, but it wasn't Roman's men."

Questions about the circumstances overwhelm my brain, and I ask the most obvious one. "How did the contractors walk away unharmed?"

"I believe that to be intentional. Iron Strike's team getting out cleanly lends credence to the charge. It makes them appear derelict in their duty as security for the mission. In the eyes of the public, if something was to go down and these men were doing their jobs, they would have taken the heaviest losses."

Sadie, crosses her arms. "You didn't call us up here to tell us this, especially when you don't have admissible proof yet."

Knot glances at his phone and disarms the room's anti-espionage security. "No, I

didn't. Birdie will work on getting that proof, but I have no intention of waiting."

Bash leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "So, what do we do?"

"Now we cut these sons of bitches down."

Everyone in the room turns at the voice, and Bash jumps to his feet, standing at attention. His reaction is pure instinct upon seeing the white uniform. "As you were, son."

Knot emerges from behind his desk and greets the oldest of the two officers. "Admiral."

The white-haired gentleman pats Knot on the arm and shakes his hand. Knot then introduces the man to the rest of us. "Team, this is Admiral Jameson of the US Navy SEALs. Most of you know Commander O'Reilly."

The commander, dressed in a working uniform, steps up to Bastien and pulls him in for a hug. "Good to see you, Laurent."

"You too, sir."

Knot locks down the room again, and the admiral perches on the edge of the executive desk, studying the group. "Someone in my house is selling out our country because they want you gone. A lot of good people are dying because of it. The audio from Iron Strike is proof enough of the problem but not criminal evidence. I understand you have people investigating, but I'm not willing to wait around while more people die. Since you've all got a vested interest in ending this threat, I trust you'll get the job done."

The admiral nods toward O'Reilly and Knot, who disengages the room's security.

The admiral marches from the room as if he hadn't just rattled our cages. What job? Knot doesn't reengage the lockdown after Jameson leaves. He also doesn't clue us in as to what this mysterious job is.

Knot and Commander O'Reilly move toward the office door before finally addressing the contractors. "All of you to the war room. As of right now, you're deployed. You don't speak about your mission with anyone but the thirty-five people assigned to this op."

"What mission?" I whisper to no one, moving in unison with the rest of the group.

Knot leads us into our strategy room, which is half-full already. Well, that explains the other sixteen people. No big deal. This is just like any other deployment. Activate Work Chelsea, and... Oh, shit.

Jackson and the three men with him at the Taphouse are seated in the center of the room. Fuck fuckity fuck-licker. That's it. God hates me. There's no other explanation.

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I restart my frozen legs and walk stiffly toward an empty spot in the back, keeping my eyes ahead. Oh look. A screen with maps on it. And hey, another. Just look at all those cool desks with built-in adjustable touch screens.

Once seated, I look around at my team and give myself the peppiest pep talk. This is your team in your house, and you can work with anybody. You are Chelsea: badass Marine, ass-kicking PMC, and all-around mother...no, father fuc...no, that's even worse. You're the shit, and no one can say otherwise.

I've just about got myself talked from the ledge when Knot takes the floor. "This mission is designated the highest possible classification. You are not to discuss details with anyone outside this room. Not to other operatives, SEALs, Admiral Jameson, or even the damned president. Have we got that clear?"

The room agrees, and Commander O'Reilly takes over. "Knot and I watched the tapes and listened to the audio recordings last night. Iron Strike was set up. It's possible they were to die along with their Army clients. Dead contractors can't defend themselves. Whether they were or weren't marked for death, we may never know. The details are buried so deep, they'll never see the light of day."

"Roman Cargill told me this morning that no one has even asked to speak to his team leader." When the room responds in disbelief, Knot adds, "Our sentiments exactly. This kind of coverup shouldn't be possible."

"Unless this mission was never on the books," Jackson pipes up.

His boss nods. "That is something we've considered. Another possibility is that

someone is planning to manufacture evidence to color the outcome of a sham investigation. In either case, we're up against a juggernaut whose goal seems to be eradicating private military firms."

"A juggernaut who can conjure a slaughter mission and cover it up. And you're asking us to do what?" one of the younger SEALs asks.

Jackson rolls his eyes, but the commander ignores the man. "Since our guy hates PMCs so much, we'll offer them a target they can't resist. Knot Corporation."

O'Reilly nods to our boss to take over in the tag-team briefing. "We're setting up a fake mission, leaking the details, and planning an ambush of our own in the field. Our net won't catch those responsible, but catching anyone will be proof enough for the Pentagon to launch an investigation, vindicate Iron Strike, and put a muzzle on the asshole, Congressman Harding."

The plan is sound except for one small detail. "If Harding or whoever doesn't set up the mission, what makes you think they'll bite? I'm guessing our juggernaut likes to control the board if he's going to play."

O'Reilly takes this question. "Knot Corp. is the biggest and best in the business. If you guys can be taken down, there won't be any stopping the domino effect. Our guy won't pass on this opportunity."

No one else offers any objection, and Knot looks around the room before delivering what I expect to be our fake mission parameters. Instead, he says, "You know your theatres as well as we do. Let's get to planning."

No one expects the two powerhouses to share operational control, but the two sit with the rest of us to brainstorm. Bash is the first to speak up. "If our sleeper is in the Pentagon, we should stick to Team Two's normal territory."

Having been in SEAL Team Two, Knot is familiar and punches up a map of Europe. “We don’t want to involve Russia, Ukraine, or Crimea,” O’Reilly advises.

Yeah. No kidding. “Picking a country that shares a border with Turkey would be more believable,” I suggest.

Knot tips his head to me and zooms in to Bulgaria and Greece. Bash shakes his head beside me. “That’s nothing but empty farmland.”

“Not quite,” Knot responds. “Just off Bulgaria’s southernmost tip in Turkey is a large rail yard.”

O’Reilly perks up. “We could say the CIA reports that Turkish separatists are trying to smuggle bombs across the Bulgarian border for easy access to targets in Europe. That’s exactly the kind of situation my men would deploy for.”

Sadie, who’s worked with this platoon of SEALs before, shakes her head. “Yeah, but I don’t see that being a scenario where the Navy would want or could explain sixteen tagalongs.”

The room goes quiet, each operative deep in thought. “So there won’t be,” Knot announces. “Not exactly. Officially, sixteen of you will go. One SEAL squad and one PMC team.”

“And unofficially?” Aaron asks.

Knot regards the senior operative before turning briefly toward Commander O’Reilly. “Officially is all we have right now—that and motivation. We need to find out who is killing off troops and framing PMCs. The only way I know to do that is to set a trap. The problem is they only target warm bodies.”

“So, we give them warm bodies,” I say with a shrug.

“How do we do that without getting my men blown up?” Jackson asks me directly.

“You could always volunteer.”

SEALs and PMCs alike snicker, and Jackson cracks a smile. I ignore them all and continue my train of thought. “Or we could use human analogs.”

The same young SEAL sneers, dismissing my suggestion completely. “I don’t think scarecrows are going to help.”

I glare at the man and his ignorance. “Haven’t you ever heard of deception warfare?”

The guy doesn’t answer, but Knot does. “Yeah. I’ve seen inflatable rolling tanks and planes.”

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“And people,” I add. “And before I get any dirty looks, these analogs produce infrared signatures. We lay out a few fake people in real uniforms with real weapons, and no one looking will know the difference. All we have to do is set up an observation post in an accessible area and be ready to take down whoever comes to destroy our decoys.”

Jackson has apparently heard enough. He’s no longer moony-eyed when he argues against my idea. “We’re supposed to make it look like a team of SEALs would have the kind of lapse in judgment that we’d pick a vulnerable spot to launch an attack?”

“You’re missing the point,” I counter. “Considering the location and its historical lack of enemy activity, no spot would be considered vulnerable. That’s what makes the setup foolproof.”

Jackson turns contemplative, as does the rest of the group. The room is quiet for several beats, and O’Reilly asks, “You can get these decoys on short notice?”

Knot stands and pulls out his phone. “I’ll know in about five minutes. O’Reilly, come with me. The rest of you get to work on the details.”

With the bosses gone, I expect to catch hell from doubters in our blended team, but no one shits on my idea. We leave that room two hours later with good news from Knot about the analogs and a solid plan in place.

To set up the mission, a secret contact O’Reilly and Knot share will leak a fake intercepted communiqué concerning bombs being smuggled into Bulgaria via train through Kapitan Andreevo. The message says the exchange will happen between

eleven p.m. and three a.m. ten days from now.

The mission brief will outline how the SEALs are to disable and capture the train when it reaches the midpoint from Kapitan Andreevo and Generalovo, the next small village beyond the Bulgarian border town. The eight documented PMCs are to fan out along the rail line between Kapitan A and the border to act as spotters, meaning they wouldn't be within attack range.

A few in the group argued against this strategy, but I was emphatic. Knot and O'Reilly agreed. With Iron Strike's PMCs walking away without a scratch, it was much easier for them to be convicted in the court of public opinion. That's what'll make this opportunity too good to pass up.

The beauty of the setup is that there's only a mile separating the two villages and only a thousand feet from the track to the road. The rest of our people will be able to stage close enough to our decoy target without the proximity of extra warm bodies appearing suspicious.

To catch our killers, a SEAL called Bandid suggested we use benzilate gas. I'm shocked to find out the man is an actual medical doctor. Wrench, one of the guys at the bar with Jackson, outlined how we could remote activate BZ gas canisters around the area to knock them out. The bad guys go to sleep, we move in to restrain them, and Knot's CIA blackhat arranges to get them out of the country for questioning. Easy peasy.

Since Commander O'Reilly suspects military frequencies will be monitored, all radio chatter will support the faux train spotters and SEAL strike team. Our real communications will be via satellite phones. Inconvenient but necessary.

Ready with a solid plan of action, the only problem left to solve was logistics. We can't let it be known when we leave for Europe. To solve that part of the puzzle, we

decided to fly out commercially and enter the area by private car.

So, in one week, we'll leave, and Knot and Birdie will work some virtual voodoo, so it looks like we're still stateside for another three days. At that point, Knot and O'Reilly will dispatch empty planes to an airport fifty miles from the target zone.

The jets will meet a helicopter and fly empty to the staging point in the daytime. That will prevent infrared scans from revealing the empty bird. Meanwhile, we'll advance to the site undetected, set up the inflatable SEALs, and get into our watch positions. As if that weren't enough, we'll have to maintain radio contact following a script depicting a several-hour delay in action.

I swear. Real missions are never this hard to plan. Fortunately, battle planning is something I've always enjoyed. I was in my element today, working out such intricate details.

The distraction was enough that I could mostly ignore Jackson studying me the whole time.

Jackson

The transport chopper lands back in Little Creek around four, and my feet are on the tarmac two seconds later. I jog toward my truck, waving to my teammates and commander behind me. I've got somewhere to be.

A short time later, I'm knocking on Caleb's apartment door, still in uniform. He answers, wearing a grin and steps out of the way for the big, black boxer to intercept me at the door. Captain whimpers and yips happily, nearly knocking me down when I stoop to greet her. "Hey, girl. That's right. Who's your daddy?"

She dances and licks my face, continuing to "talk" to me. I talk back, carrying on the

pretend conversation. “I hear you’re building up quite the resume.”

Caleb laughs. “She’s a hell of a wingman.”

“And that’s on top of being an undercover agent,” I say, standing and patting the boxer’s head.

I study my son, who’s much more man than boy now and at eye level with me. He shares my dirty-blond hair and his mother’s smile. “Sorry about missing breakfast. I didn’t expect to be put on alert again so soon.”

“Don’t sweat it, Dad. How about burgers and a beer instead?”

My stomach growls, and I give it a pat. “Ooh. Now you’re talking.”

I walk out to my truck and grab clothes from the go-bag I keep ready. After a quick change in Caleb’s guest bathroom, we drive to 80/20 and sit at an outdoor table with Captain.

The air is warm as I sip on the cold brew. “Shit, this is good.”

Caleb tosses Captain a fry as I take a bite of my Alamo burger, groaning with pleasure.

“Damn, Dad. You two need a minute alone?”

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“Shut up,” I say with a mouth full of grilled goodness. Once I’ve swallowed, I add, “You try being without decent food for a month and hear how you sound.”

My son chuckles and looks down, mumbling to himself, “That ain’t all you’ve been without.”

“Excuse me. What was that?”

Caleb looks up, unable to hide his grin. As he studies me, his smile fades, giving me the idea that he was only half-kidding. He looks so grown that it startles me for just a second. “Dad, I’m glad you and Mom have always gotten along.”

He pauses, and so do I. My insides twist, but it’s not in hunger this time. “Okay,” I say, more in question than anything else. When Caleb doesn’t continue, I give him a little nudge with my elbow.

He finds his courage and asks, “Why didn’t you ever marry?”

The question surprises me. It’s not something I would have expected to come from my son. I know he’s serious, so I take the time to form a real answer.

“I don’t know. For a long time, all my focus went into making sure you and your mom were taken care of. Between that and the Navy, I didn’t have the time.”

Caleb’s shoulders stiffen, making me realize how that came out. “No, that’s not right, and I wouldn’t want you to feel like you’re the reason. Truthfully, I just never thought about it...until recently.”

Eyes like his mother's widen in shock. "You've been thinking about it? Who is she?"

I put my burger down and hold up my hands. "Whoa. Hold on. Just because I've been thinking about it doesn't mean... There is no she."

My son's grin is back and even more playful this time. "Okay. Who is he, then?"

I roll my eyes. "Okay, smartass. Yes, I've been thinking about it, but have no specific target in sight."

"Bullshit."

Leaning back, I scoff at what this light conversation has become. "What do you mean, bullshit? Have you become a mind reader, college boy?"

Caleb shrugs. "You tipped your shoulder when you answered. That's your tell."

Mentally rolling back the instant replay, I realize the mistake that has cost me many large poker pots. "You and your damned criminal justice classes," I grumble. "Fine. There is a she that I find interesting, but she seems to have an issue with me, though I don't know why. I've only met her a few times."

Caleb's brows rise to meet his longish hair. "If the first date was such a bust, how was there a second?"

"There was never a first. She was at the bar when I met up with Bash for beers. She leads a team with him."

A devilish look crosses my son's face. "So, she's a badass then. Sick. Since you struck out with her, can I get her number?"

“Sure, I’ll get Bash to write it on my shoe, and I’ll stick it up your ass.”

Caleb leans back and crosses his arms, sporting a victorious smile. “Hmm. Sounds to me like you haven’t given up yet.”

I move things around the table, lifting them and making a show of looking for but not finding something.

“What are you doing?” Caleb asks.

“I’m trying to find you some business, so you’ll stay out of mine.”

My son lifts his hands in surrender. “Alright. Alright. I’ll leave you alone. I just don’t want you to be alone forever.” Captain barks, and he adds, “Sorry, girl, but you don’t count.”

Ignoring his half-teasing plea, I say, “Speaking of Captain, I’ve got to ship out soon. Do you have anything coming up in the next two weeks that would keep you from watching her?”

“Nope. Our season’s over. I’ll still be training but on my own schedule. It seems kind of strange for you to be going out again so soon after being gone so long the last time.”

The temptation is there to tell him that I’ll be deploying with the she, but I wouldn’t, even if the mission weren’t so sensitive in nature. “It happens. I’ll give you as much notice as I can.”

“It’s okay, Dad. Don’t worry. Captain and I know the drill.”

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Exactly one week later, Fish and I sit in a bar in Svilengrad, waiting for the call to meet up with the rest of our team. We haven't seen any of our platoon since Virginia or the PMCs since the last meeting when the mission plan was created.

That doesn't mean I haven't thought about Chelsea every five minutes. Damn it. Despite my best efforts, I can't put her out of my head. The mysterious woman is as frustrating as she is alluring. Back to the mission, moron.

A couple of drafts sit on the table for appearance's sake, but we're not drinking them. I'll admit to being tempted. Just the thought of seeing Chelsea again has my leg bouncing and my blood pumping. I wish there was a cure for that. A complicated woman is the last thing I need on my mind right now. I check my watch for the fifth time in ten minutes, wondering where everyone else is hidden in this tiny hamlet.

SEALs and contractors are scattered throughout the city at various other restaurants, shops, and bars. We'd all flown into either Plovdiv International or Varna International airports, seventy and one-hundred-and-thirty miles away, respectively, then rented cars to reach the closest city to our target. The groups were limited to two or four people to avoid attracting attention.

This town is where Knot's outfitter, an Indian man named Sambi, is to meet us with some of the gear needed for our mission. While I'm not a fan of relying on civilians for equipment, Bash assures me I won't be disappointed.

Fish brings his beer to his mouth, pretending to take a sip. "So..."

My eyes roll at that mocking, inquisitive tone, and I reach up to knead the two-inch

scar on my neck. Memories of that mission still haunt me. I nearly lost my entire platoon to a suicide bomber. Not all of us made it out. I was critically wounded and lost one of my best men, a redneck named Tater.

Fish is still grinning at me, so I push the useless thoughts away. “Don’t start with me,” I warn.

“Hey, I’m just being a responsible squad leader here. Since we’ll be working with Danforth, I need to reconcile the woman you chased out of the bar with the woman who was invaluable in planning this mission.”

“There’s nothing to reconcile. Bash said she was solid. You’ve now seen the proof.”

“Well, then. That leads me to believe you did something to piss her off.”

Grabbing my glass, I take a small sip and swallow. “I didn’t do anything. Chelsea is just...viscerally uninterested.”

Because I refuse to meet Fish’s eyes, he drops his head to look up at me. “And?”

“What do you mean, and? There is no and. If she’s not interested, I’m not interested.”

“Oh. So that’s why you couldn’t keep your eyes off her anytime we were meeting with them. You’re no longer interested.”

My face pinches, and I give Fish the stink eye. “Has anybody ever told you how annoying you are?”

Fish lets out a deep belly laugh right as my sat phone begins to ring. “Thank god,” I mumble, picking up the device. “Go.”

O'Reilly says, "I'm texting you an address. Be there by nineteen hundred."

A glance at the phone screen says we've got two hours. "Nineteen hundred," I confirm.

I stand and pull a few Lev notes from my pocket and drop them on the bar. Yet another good thing about working with Dillan Knot. He had the foresight and connections to have the local currency for each of us before leaving the States.

Fish and I wait until we're in the rented car before opening the encrypted message from mission support, which consists of O'Reilly, Knot, and Birdie Crenshaw. Now that we know where we're going, we search for a restaurant nearby to get dinner and kill time.

At seven, we arrive at an auto shop near the Maritsa River. The two-bay shop is a little snug with all thirty-two of us, plus the mysterious Sambu, his assistant, and the shit ton of gear he's got ready and waiting.

In defiance of Fish's taunting, I resolve to keep from looking toward Chelsea. I only slip four, maybe five times while Sambu walks us through the equipment he brought. She's currently hiding between Sadie and Dani, a severe presence with a sleek, black ponytail. I hear she was former Secret Service. I'm a little afraid of her.

Once during my accidental glances, I notice Chelsea watching me and get a thrill when her cheeks redden at being caught.

Sambu passes out our gear bags, and afterward, Knot and O'Reilly join the meeting via tablet screen. "We've got eyes on the area. With less than two miles between towns and the border crossing, once we confirm the arrival of the assault team, you'll only have seconds to react."

“That’s all we’ll need,” Wrench declares. “The BZ gas canisters are rigged with remote on and off controls.”

The two men in Virginia nod. “You know the plan. Watch your radio transmissions and stick to the script. Call in when you’re in position. Bennett, bring them all back.”

The screen goes black after I tip my chin in promise. I scan all thirty-one faces of my expanded team. “You know what’s at stake here. These people want to kill us SEALs to destroy you PMCs. We’re not going to let them. Stay invisible and stay alive.”

The team begins to split into groups, half assigned to the border town as fake train spotters and the rest tasked with setting up the decoy and BZ gas. Fish clears his throat beside me, grabbing my attention. I glance his way just in time to watch him check a grin. “One more thing,” Fish begins. “In case someone had the same idea as us and has already set up nearby, a SEAL and PMC should be hip to hip at all times. If Chelsea’s right, hitting a contractor is counter to their narrative, so your proximity will keep the SEALs safe.”

Meddling bastard. He has a point, but I’m still going to kick his ass...later. “You heard the man. Pair up. Danforth, you’re with me.”

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Chelsea

The hush that falls over the room makes my insides clench. I can't believe this prick put me on the spot again. Even worse, the silence means everyone, SEAL and contractor alike, has heard about the times it's happened before.

Jackson stares at me, surprised, as if he can't quite believe what he demanded. Same here, asshole. Not liking the awkward attention, I shrug. "Just don't slow me down."

My sassy reply must amuse him. Jackson turns slightly toward me, and one corner of his lips turns upward. The rest of the group responds by scrambling to change and gear up. I make slow, measured movements to pick up my bag and slink toward the changing screen, refusing to show anything but lethal calm.

On the other side, I drop the bag and prop my forehead against a support column, not even caring if I get grease on my face. Sadie laughs beside me and whispers, "Whoa. What was that?"

"Just ignore him. He's butt-hurt because I wouldn't join him and some of his buddies for dinner."

Sadie's brows rise but then draw together. "That doesn't sound like the man I know, but then I don't know him as well as Fish. If Jackson bothers you, I can_"

"No," I say a little too quickly. "I can handle Bennett, but by tomorrow, he won't be able to say the same."

Dani shakes her head while tying her boots. “God help him.”

We finish dressing silently, packing all of our civilian wear to leave with Sambi. The three of us rejoin the others in time to watch the outfitter lay out one of the human decoys. With a rare smile, he explains, “Before you get any ideas, this isn’t a normal blow-up doll. These analogs are made by a Czech company that specializes in deception warfare. They manufacture accurate, life-size inflatables with radar and infrared signatures. If you do your jobs properly, these guys will be the only ones to suffer injury tonight.”

Sambi shows us how to set up the analogs and activate their systems. Afterward, he divvies up equipment for each group, including a two-man raft with an electric motor, two human analogs, and munitions. I prefer using my own gun, but since we all flew commercially, we’re stuck with Knot’s standard issue.

The scout group will be gone by the time we gear up, having only needed rafts to reach the border. That’s where I should be. I was Force Recon, for shit’s sake.

“How much weight do you carry?” Jackson asks, interrupting my inner monologue.

I whip my head around at near-breakneck speed. “Excuse me?”

The SEAL team leader points to our pile of gear. “How much weight can you carry?”

I strap my pack onto my back and reach for the heaviest piece of equipment, the raft. “Don’t worry about me.”

Jackson opens his mouth as if to argue but shakes his head. He straps on his own gear, the decoys, and the cache of fake weapons, then yanking down his balaclava, he mumbles, “Stubborn woman.”

I step forward to follow him outside, and unable to resist, I answer, “Thank you.”

My mission partner scoffs. “It wasn’t a compliment.”

“You sure about that?”

I don’t know why I’m goading him. Just last week, I was employing some impressive verbal acrobatics to avoid having to speak to the man. Now, I can’t seem to stop poking the bear.

Once we step outside the rear garage door, I’m all business. The time for petty bullshit is over. We trudge through the woods to the riverbank, moving silently as ghosts. The trip isn’t without its struggles. The uninflated two-man raft, with its electric motor, pump, and paddles, weighs over one hundred pounds. My pack adds another thirty.

Balancing a downhill hike at nearly double my weight isn’t easy, but I’m a Marine. And I’ll be damned if I let Jackson hear me complain.

Jackson

Danforth, you’re with me. Really? Shaking my head, I feel Fish’s smirk beneath his ski mask as I pass him to lead the group toward the riverbank. Chelsea slogs behind me, struggling with the raft’s weight but saying nothing. Yeah, she’s stubborn. Her choppy breathing is proof of that.

At the water’s edge, I drop what I’m carrying and lift the heavy strap from Chelsea’s shoulder. She doesn’t bark at my assistance, instead making me smile beneath my mask.

“You...get to...carry...it back up.”

I chuff out a laugh. “You got it, boss.”

If I’m not mistaken, I detect a hint of a smile on her face through the small opening in her mask. That has to be a fluke. I withdraw my sat phone from a chest pocket and call to update Knot and Commander O’Reilly on our readiness and timeline. They confirm the scout team is already in position. “I’ll check back in once we’re in the graveyard.”

“Good luck, Lieutenant,” O’Reilly says.

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I tuck the phone away and remind the team of our timeline. “Once we beach, you’ve got thirty minutes to set up. At twenty-one hundred, switch on your radios and stick to the script. O’Reilly advertised a range of twenty miles for our ambush, so once we give our coordinates, it won’t be long before any planned attack happens. Fish, you cover the rear. Let’s move out.”

Fish and Sadie’s partner, Aaron shuffle toward the back of the group. Chelsea already has the raft out of the bag and unrolled when I rejoin her at the water’s edge. I can’t help but tease the obvious. “You look like you’ve done this before.”

“I was captain of the inflatable polo team in high school,” she answers without looking up.

While I can’t deny she’s funny, hearing only silence or sarcasm is beginning to rub. Mainly because it’s shallow communication, and I’m eager to see more of what’s inside. “Are you always this much of a smartass?”

Chelsea shrugs and continues her work to inflate the raft. “It helps to pass the time.”

I give up. For now. As my temporary partner loads the raft with practiced ease, I don’t miss the graceful way she moves. Pair that with the fact that Chelsea has never tried to prove her worth to us SEALs, and I recognize how lethal she must be. Chelsea may be a fish out of water when not in uniform, but she’s money when it comes to her skills. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.

All eight boats are put into the water soon after, and we begin our seven-mile run down the Maritsa River. The IR shields serving as roofs over the rafts keep us from

being spotted by satellite just in case anyone else is watching from the sky. And thankfully, the night shields Chelsea's ass from my eyes.

The electric motors ensure a quiet and fast ride to our destination, and my team quickly sets up the fake observation post near the train track. Bandido, Wrench, and their PMC shadows join us at the cemetery after placing the BZ gas canisters. We disappear beneath our infrared shields, and after checking in with base and the scout team, I give the order to turn on the radios, ready to orchestrate our practiced play.

We volley back and forth as we would have done during the trip downriver and settling into our bogus positions. At the end of the script, I give our decoy's coordinates to mission operations and issue a command for radio silence until the train approaches.

That's the signal to turn the radio's auto-transmit feature off and recommence communicating by secure satellite phone. I call into base and get patched in with Bash, who's leading the scout team. Knot's voice comes through first. "I'm here with Birdie, O'Reilly, and our CIA contact. We've got your locations pegged and confirm your IR signatures have gone dark. The decoys are illuminated perfectly. Scout team, issue radio reports as we direct. Strike team will respond in kind. Remain online until this is over."

Now, we wait. About fifteen minutes later, Knot says, "The train is on the move. Scout team, radio it in."

Bash keys up his mike, the sound coming in as an echo over the radio and phone. "Fudd to Porky, the train is leaving the station. ETA seven minutes. Over."

"Copy, Fudd. We're in position. Over."

I turn my radio back down and hear Knot's satisfaction when he reports. "We have a

big rig coming to a stop on the road opposite the tracks. Stand by.”

A few tense moments pass before he adds, “Ten bodies headed toward the decoy. One remaining with the truck. The attack squad is holding at the road. My guess is they’re waiting to see if someone is watching and reacts. Nobody move. I don’t want them spooked.”

Knot counts off the distance to the BZ as our target advances. “Twenty feet, fifteen, ten. Get ready to trigger the gas in three, two, one. Now!”

None of us in the cemetery can see what’s happening, but Knot keeps us updated. “The targets are scattering. Slowing...” and then, “targets are down. Medical team, move.”

Bandaïd and Duck scramble, with the rest of us close behind. At fifty yards out, the medical guys don gas masks and hold us back until confirming the BZ has dissipated.

“We got all ten, sir,” I report to my commander and Knot once we reach the scene.

“It’ll take a while to relocate ten men. Myers, do you have something to keep them out until you can move them back upriver?”

“Sir,” Chelsea interrupts. “We could load them into the truck they brought. It’d be a hell of a lot safer, not to mention faster.”

“I like it. That’s your plan. Wrench can hotwire the thing if you can’t find keys fast enough.”

I wink at Chelsea, acknowledging her idea. It sure beats carrying these bastards three hundred yards back to the boats.

“Hill, you see the teams back upriver. Myers, I want you with the prisoners. Bennett, you’re with the truck. Keep in teams and on guard in case this isn’t over.”

Damn. For all the groundwork and setup, that went fast. Pulling my mask off my face, I grin at Chelsea. “Ready to ride shotgun?”

Chelsea cocks her head to the side in challenge. “Hell no. I’m driving.”

Chelsea

The road is a busy trade route, and if I’m guessing right, the attack squadron paid off a local to taxi them here. “I need to deal with the driver before trying to load these men.”

Jackson looks up from searching one of the sleeping bodies. “Local?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

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Jackson stands and nods, pulling his balaclava back on. "I'll do it. You keep behind me, but stay close."

I laugh at his suggestion. "Sure. If you want half the local police force looking for his truck, be my guest."

Jackson's hands go to his hips, unused to being questioned. "Alright, Napoleon, what's your brilliant plan?"

I unstrap my armor and drop it to the ground. Next, I remove my utility belt and hand it to Jackson. Lastly, I peel off my uniform top, revealing a white tank. I pull my pistol from the holster in Jackson's hands and tuck it into the waistband of my pants.

After a head-to-toe inspection, I release my hair from its bun and tug down the front of my top, exposing cleavage to just the other side of decent.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jackson asks with wide eyes.

I glare at the man, incredulous. "Um. We need to get to the driver without him freaking out. You showing up with your ski mask and gun won't accomplish that."

"So... What? You're going to use your body to ensure safe passage?"

"Not exactly, but I figured if the guy is busy looking at my tits, he won't notice you creeping up behind him."

Bandaïd jogs over to us, urgency evident in the tightness in his eyes. "We need to get

moving. I don't want to keep these guys sedated too long without backup supplies. Both our bosses will have my ass if we lose any of them."

I nod and turn back to Jackson. "Are you ready, or do you want to keep arguing about this?"

"Let's go," he grunts, gesturing toward the road.

He hands my stuff to Bandido, and we move in tandem toward the truck. I stay hidden behind Jackson as we near the pavement since he's still blacked out from head to toe. "I'm going up the driver's side. The plan is to get him out of the truck. You sneak around the other side and approach from the front."

Jackson grabs my arm, stopping me from leaving. "And if he decides to shoot instead of standing there drooling?"

I swallow hard and try my damndest to ignore the warm hand holding my arm. Jackson's touch has me sinking deeper. Stop it, Chels! Clearing my throat, I slide back into character. "Then you better move fast."

Jackson rolls his eyes, but I've already yanked my arm loose.

Satellite views show that truck parking along this road is common, but mainly during the day. In case someone comes along, I need to hurry, but be careful not to spook the driver. I stand up straight and fluff my hair after clearing the trailer. My steps are bouncy, and I hum as I sashay toward the cab. A red cherry flares, visible in the truck's mirrors. I know I've caught his attention when smoke rolls through the open window.

The man doesn't open the door, so as I near the step up, I speak to him in Russian. "Give a girl a ride?"

The face that leans through the window is grubby with a long beard. He speaks what I assume is Bulgarian, which I don't understand. No problem. I revert to the universal language between man and woman. I smile, wink, and puff out my chest while pointing to his cigarette.

Bingo. The door swings open, and the portly driver hops out of the cab. He offers me the pack of cancer sticks, and before I pull one from the sleeve, Jackson emerges from the shadows and puts the guy in a headlock. The pudgy man struggles uselessly, and I turn my unimpressed gaze toward my partner. "See how easy that was?"

Jackson grumbles, "Just go get Bandaid."

Twenty minutes later, the sleeping captives are loaded, and I climb into the truck's cab. Jackson joins me in the passenger seat, scanning all the buttons and twin sticks. The ski mask is gone, so I catch all of his comical reaction. "The hell? Do you even know how to turn this damned thing on?"

"You SEALs. You're accustomed to having clean exit strategies and waiting exfils. You know how they train Force Recon? We get dumped off in the middle of bum fuck Egypt with a mission directive and words of good luck. I can hotwire and drive almost anything with wheels and some without."

A voice from outside yells, "Don't tell my wife, but I think I'm in love."

Wrench closes the trailer doors and jogs off to join the others at the river. I roll the big rig to the highway intersection, careful of our human cargo, and turn back toward Svilengrad. We receive word to take the prisoners to a small airstrip twenty-five kilometers northeast of here. That means I have forty-plus minutes in this cab...alone...with Jackson.

The first five minutes are quiet. Granted, I'm driving a big-ass truck through a tiny-

ass village at midnight, but if any of my team were here, we'd be talking all kinds of shit.

The awkward silence must be eating at my assigned partner because it doesn't take him long to fill the void. "What have you got against me?"

I choke on my own spit, unprepared for the question. Recovering quickly, I answer with a nonchalance I don't feel. "Um. I don't even know you."

Now, Jackson is the one scoffing. I don't hold out any hope that the man will drop his line of questioning, and Jackson proves me right. "Then why do you short-circuit and run away whenever I come around?"

Checking my side mirrors, I avoid looking at Jackson. "You're just so hot that when you're near, my brain cells cease to function."

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The man nearly growls. “Cut the bullshit, Chelsea. I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” I say, smacking the steering wheel. “I’ve seen you exactly three times before this mission. What do you want from me?”

“I... Well, shit.” He scrubs a hand through his hair and sighs. “I’d like to get to know you.”

“No, you don’t,” I insist. “I never take anything seriously and don’t do relationships.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard or seen. Bash has had nothing but good things to say about you. And I watched you almost single-handedly point out the pitfalls and strategies for this mission.”

I dismiss his praise with a shrug, wanting to change the subject. “You seem so convinced of my worth and that I should fall at your feet. Tell me, what does a woman need to know about you? If I know what I’m missing out on, I might have a grand epiphany.”

Jackson’s frustration rolls off him in waves, but the man doesn’t bite back. He calmly says, “I have a son.”

“Ugh. God. I’d be a terrible mother,” I respond with a wry laugh.

“That’s fine because he’s twenty-one. Not much mothering left to do.”

That math ain’t mathing in my head. I glance his way with my nose scrunched up.

“Just how old are you?”

“Caleb was born when I was sixteen. I’m thirty-seven.”

Jackson isn’t that much older than me, but I refuse to give him any hope. “Nope. Too old. I’m looking to be a cougar when I grow up.”

Jackson turns in his seat and leans over the console. “You could pull it off for sure, but a boy won’t make those thighs quake like I can.”

Said thighs clench up, but Jackson isn’t finished. He leans closer and murmurs, “I’d make it so good, you’d call me daddy.”

The truck veers off the road just a few inches, and I gently steer the big machine back between the lines. “Are you fucking crazy?!”

Jackson flops back into his seat. “When I’m around you, I wonder.” With a voice laced with smug satisfaction, he adds, “That was the first honest emotion I’ve gotten from you.”

My automatic response is to lash out. “You are a certified psycho asshole.”

“And you are one hell of an actress.”

I bite my tongue to keep from responding, and Jackson chuckles. “Nothing to say?”

His careful study of my...well, me...feels about as comfortable as having strips of skin peeled from my bare arms. Jackson is too close to seeing me, and that’s the last thing I want. Stiffening my shoulders, I clamp my mouth shut, figuring I’ve exposed enough.

Jackson's satellite phone rings, saving me from more prodding. He answers the call, and I spot the last turn for the airfield coming up ahead.

Tuning Jackson's voice out, I park the rig next to a waiting jet and jump out of the cab as soon as I kill the engine. Bandaïd and Jackson's medic stand at the doors when I get them open. Thankfully, all eleven of our prisoners are still out.

"How was the ride," I ask them.

"We've endured worse," Bandaïd answers as he picks up a man's legs and drags him to the door.

I take over and hold the feet, and Duck jumps down to take the guy's upper body. Jackson jogs over, finished with his phone call, just in time to help Bandaïd with the second man.

A crew of paramilitary types spills out of the sleek jet and rushes toward the truck to help move the unconscious passengers. We don't ask who they're working for, and they don't volunteer the information.

Once the delivery is complete, the agents zip off in their jet, leaving the four of us watching. "We leave the truck," Jackson says, answering the unasked question. "Knot's sending a chopper."

The wait is short, and I refuse the headset offered to me when we load. I've said and heard enough for one night. And since the mission is over, there's no need for me to communicate with anyone.

I need some downtime to regroup and get back into character before dealing with Jackson or his team again. And oddly enough, I could use a beer.

Jackson

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“What’s her problem?” Duck asks through the headset.

Chelsea isn’t wired in and doesn’t hear the question, so there’s no danger in answering. “I guess I am. No, I didn’t do anything to her, and no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Because he can’t help himself, Duck stretches out his leg and kicks Chelsea’s foot. She turns from the window to look his way, and he opens his pack. Chelsea’s belt, shirt, and vest are packed neatly on top, and he hands them to her.

Chelsea accepts her things with a grateful smile and pulls the shirt over her head. The remainder of her gear rests across her lap, and she sits back again, content to stare out the window at the night sky.

With Chelsea’s gaze elsewhere again, Duck teases, “Guess you’re right. She only hates you.”

“Oh, thanks,” I sneer. “Asshole,” I add, grumbling.

The helo delivers us to Novo Selo Range, a military base operated by NATO Forces. The rest of the team is already there, waiting by a C-17 piloted by Commander Charli Myers, Bandid’s wife. “Looks like you guys had an interesting night,” she drawls in her lowcountry accent.

Bandid sidles up to his wife and snickers. “You have no idea.”

Charli winks at him and studies the PMCs. I realize she’s likely never met them

before, but she doesn't question them tagging along on the ride home. "Introductions later. Let's get you back stateside. Your boss can pick you up from Oceana."

The flight is about twelve hours long and should land at about five a.m. local time. I expect the team to sleep for the majority of the flight.

The thirty-two operatives board the plane, randomly picking out jump seats for the long trip. Chelsea dives for a seat between two of her teammates, elbowing each one when they groan playfully at her.

The move was likely so she could avoid further interaction with me. What rubs is that she seems so comfortable with her teammates and even mine. It pisses me off even more that I care. I told Fish that because Chelsea wasn't interested, I wasn't interested. Aaand that was a load of bullshit.

I pick a seat away from the others and wave off Duck when he approaches. The SEAL medic glances toward Chelsea and back before winking. Great. I'll never hear the end of this. SEALs gossip like little girls.

After takeoff, the chatter in the plane lessens as people settle in to get some sleep. I'm still wired from my body's reaction to teasing Chelsea and have no hopes of nodding off any time soon.

Knowing I shouldn't but doing it anyway, I subtly observe the PMCs. Correction. I study how Chelsea and the other contractors interact with one another. They resemble a family, supporting and teasing one another like my platoon. The men and women working for Knot obviously share a great respect for each other, even with the near-constant ribbing. Also like my team.

Chelsea's reaction to my men now looks very different from that night she ran into us at the bar. Come to think of it, she talks, jokes, and laughs with everyone but me.

Chelsea only seizes up and wields her wicked sarcasm when I'm near.

Damn. I guess she does hate...

Movement to my left catches my attention. Aaron, one of Knot's team leaders, sits next to Sadie. She elbows him, and he thumps her ear right before placing a rolled-up shirt against his shoulder. Sadie leans against the former Marine Raider, and he rests his chin on her head.

Well, I'll be damned. That's it. Chelsea only fights me. I almost laugh. Thirty-seven years old, and I'm reduced to flirting like a kindergartner. I know just how to handle that.

Smiling to myself, I huddle against my bag and close my eyes to sleep.

A kick to my boots jolts me out of my heavy slumber. Surprisingly, I've slept through the rest of the flight and landing, a testament to Charli's skill as a pilot. I look up into the face of my commander. "Welcome back, sailor."

I push out of the seat and come to attention. "Sir."

"Stand easy."

Knot stands next to O'Reilly, and after the mission crew gathers their packs and civilian bags, the two men lead us to an empty hangar to debrief. "Your mission was a success," Knot announces. "The CIA has already interviewed the failed ambush team and gotten the proof needed to prove conspiracy against private military organizations. While they don't have any information about who's behind the effort, the investigation is just beginning."

O'Reilly says, "You've done good work here. PMCs across the country owe you their

gratitude, though they can never offer it. As far as you're concerned, this mission is classified. Speak of it to no one for your protection and in case this team is needed again."

"Our identities, at least the SEALs, were included in the mission file," I point out.

The two warhorses grin at one another. "According to Admiral Jameson, the mission, set to be completed by DevGru, was scrubbed. Your involvement was never mentioned."

That sneaky son of a bitch. That the admiral went through so much trouble to keep mission details a secret is impressive. I won't deny it scares me to think his effort was necessary.

"So, since there was no mission and you weren't just in Bulgaria, no debrief is needed."

O'Reilly wraps up the informal meeting. "Let's get the hell out of here. I've got choppers waiting. We'll give you a lift back to Knot Corp."

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All of us migrate toward the helipads. Seeing Chelsea approach the first one, I jog in that direction, only to see several of my platoon do the same. By the time I reach the bird, Fish loads in, filling the last spot. Chelsea gives me a little wave, and with a wink, Fish shuts the door in my face, leaving me with no choice but to ride in one of the other helos.

So. Chelsea wants to make this battle public? Bring it on.

I end up riding to Norfolk with Bandid and Skin, along with several PMCs, including Sadie and Aaron. The rotor engine starts, and Skin smacks my arm. “So, how’s_”

Bandid slaps the younger man on the back of the head. “You never learn, do you? Do not bug a man about his woman.”

The second we touch down, I rip open the door and look for Chelsea. The rising sun is just beginning to color the sky, so I search the parking lot using the security lights. I spot Chelsea quickly and sling my bag straps over my shoulder. I’m hoofing it toward her in the next breath and don’t even care who notices. “Danforth!”

She’s nearly to a silver Honda when I catch up to her. Chelsea glances around, gauging our audience. Unfortunately for her, I don’t particularly care who witnesses this confrontation.

Chelsea reluctantly turns when I reach her, and her mask slips into place. “Yes, lieutenant?”

“What are your plans for today?”

“Oh, I have to practice my Oscar acceptance speech. I did give one hell of a performance yesterday.”

I shouldn't be surprised by her smart mouth. I respond, not hiding my disappointment. “Will we ever get past this?”

Chelsea rolls her eyes. “I'm sorry you don't approve of my personality.”

I reach for her hand, surprised when she doesn't recoil. This is only the second time I've touched her, and I'm already addicted. Ignoring the urge to stroke her cheek, I say, “There's nothing wrong with you being a comic. Or a smartass even. Just... Do you ever turn off the sarcasm and jokes?”

She doesn't answer, telling me I've hit a nerve. “Chelsea, I'm not attacking you. I just want to talk without the smokescreen. Be real. Please.”

Chelsea looks at her feet as every bit of her bravado drains from her body. “I...can't.”

“You can. You know I'm chasing you. I'll stop if you ask, but I need to hear it. Tell me straight. Don't play games with me, and don't be amusing.”

“I have to be amusing,” she whispers as if she hadn't meant to say the words.

Too bad. I heard them and can't let them go. The SEALs in the choppers are ready to go home, but they can wait. Chelsea turns to leave, but I refuse to release her hand. “Why?”

Her silence stretches for a long moment. I reach out to lift her chin with my free hand, but she jerks away. I break a dozen personal rules when I yank her against me

and forcibly tip her face upward. “Chelsea, why do you have to be amusing?”

The sun’s first light flickers in shame-filled eyes. Still, she won’t look at me. “When you grow up the fat kid, you learn real fast to be entertaining and accommodating or else you become the punchline.”

“No, you learn how to hide instead of making people accept you for who you are.”

Now, Chelsea looks at me. With eyes on fire, she cools her expression and taunts. “Thanks, Freud. I’m cured. Send me your bill.”

Chelsea breaks free and spins away, but I rush around her, meeting her face-to-face again. “You’re still doing it. Despite all that you’ve become and accomplished, you’re still hiding. I understand now.”

“You understand nothing. You don’t know me,” she snaps.

I crowd her, bending until we’re nose to nose. “I know plenty. You’re so used to hiding your feelings that real emotions scare you. The more you feel, the more you clown around. And baby, you joke the loudest when you’re around me.”

Her eyes widen, and I can practically hear the wheels of her mind turning, analyzing every encounter we’ve had. The horror on her face confirms her worst nightmare. Still, she brushes me off. “Nah. You justifying my actions just means you’re having trouble with rejection. That’s all.”

Laughter bubbles up from my gut, throwing Chelsea off balance. “That’s cute. You’re playing fast and loose with the whole rejection claim, considering how you reacted to me in that truck.”

Chelsea’s eyes narrow, but she’s all out of points to refute what I’m saying. That’s

proof enough for me. “Give me your phone,” I command.

“What? Why?”

Holding out my hand, I repeat the order. “Give me your phone, Chelsea.”

The woman clenches her jaw but shocks the hell out of me when she yanks the device from her bag, unlocks it, and drops it into my hand.

“Good girl,” I purr.

Her eyes narrow as if she’s thinking about taking the phone back. I pull away so she can’t and set things up, finishing by sending myself a text from her number. She can delete me from her contacts, but I have her number now. And she won’t block me.

Without a word, I return Chelsea’s phone, and she storms away, just as mute.

Chelsea

I can’t get out of here fast enough. Why did you tell him, Stupid?

Now, all Jackson is going to see are my flaws. Too much cushion around the middle. Thunder thighs. Uncertainty in my eyes. Pathetic people-pleaser.

Once people notice those traits about you, they respond in one of two ways: one, they take advantage of your giving tendencies, or two, constant ridicule because you don’t fight back. I’ve seen plenty of both. In high school, the it girls enjoyed making a servant of an ugly duckling starved for friendship. I don’t like reliving memories of the other kind.

After slamming my door shut, I grip the steering wheel and bite my tongue to keep from screaming. The years of groveling and humiliation come roaring back, pain and shame just as sharp as they ever were. A honking horn reminds me of the PMCs filtering through the parking lot, and I rush to crank the car and leave before someone sees me breaking down.

Here I am again. I thought high school was my rock bottom. My third year of college proved me wrong, but I thought I was finally past all the drama. It's not like life can ever get that bad again. That year changed me forever, and not for the good.

My boyfriend at the time was in law school, working in an internship his last summer. We met through a civics class team project. I did much of the work, and he was impressed by my dedication, or so he'd said. I was happy to be working toward a life with an exciting career and devoted boyfriend.

Looking back, I can easily see I was little more than a functional placeholder. All it took was a few flowery words, and I was happy to service Trace as he wanted.

The firm Trace interned for held a fancy banquet, and I was his date. Because of our work schedules, I planned to meet Trace at the venue instead of riding together. I found him quickly after arriving, and we'll say he was less than pleased with my appearance.

"You're not wearing the dress I bought."

"I forgot my shapewear and couldn't get the zipper closed. I think the sizing is labeled wrong. I found this in a boutique on campus. I think it looks good."

"If you had time to shop, why didn't you just go home to get your girdle?"

I tried to explain that I only had thirty minutes and we lived twenty minutes away, but Trace stormed off, walking into the party without me. To make matters worse, I mispronounced the name of something during dinner. I don't even remember what it was.

Halfway through the evening, Trace had enough. He pulled me from the ballroom and didn't stop until we were inside a janitor's-closet-slash-maintenance office. I

guess my usefulness outweighed his benevolence that night. Trace told me I was humiliating him. I wasn't charming and intelligent. I was frumpy and inept. He said that I should do him a favor and go home before I embarrassed him further.

Everything changed for me that night. I watched my first real boyfriend stalk away and slam the door, abandoning me to the janitor's closet. I remember dropping onto the beat-up chair in front of an ancient desk, wondering how I could be so careless and ruin Trace's chance to stand out.

For a long while after he left me there, I sat, eyeing a bottle of drain cleaner. I felt useless, ugly, and unlovable. I almost decided I would rather drink my death than face another day getting shit on.

The bottle was in my hand when a weathered old hag shoved open the door. She took one look at the bottle and then me. "Fuck 'em. Ain't a one of 'em worth it."

"Wh...what are you talking about?" I asked, clambering out of her seat.

"Psh. Whatever ass lickers got you moping in a closet."

The older woman motioned for me to sit back down and opened a small fridge above her desk. She pulled out two bottles of water and two candy bars. I accepted the water but waved off the chocolate after looking down at my waist. "Um, no thanks. I don't need the sugar."

She put the bar back, nodding her head. "Suit yourself. One day, you'll get tired of it."

"Tired of what?"

The weathered woman rolled her eyes in impatience. "I'm guessing you're tryin'

really hard to be somebody you ain't just to make somebody else happy. It don't matter if it's looks, brains, wants, or whatever. There's always gonna be some fucker out there that won't ever accept you because they ain't happy with themselves. I figure you have two choices. You can keep being miserable with 'em or give 'em the finger and go do something else. The truth is, honey, if they don't already, they ain't ever gonna like you for you."

She takes a big bite of her candy bar and talks through chewing. "So, like I said. Fuck 'em. Be the opposite of what they expect. Then, at least, you won't have to deal with 'em anymore." She swallows the bite and says, "Now, get the fuck out of my chair."

The next morning, I did the opposite of what everyone expected. I withdrew from engineering school and joined the Marines, psychosis and all.

The Marines didn't care about my personality, only that I could follow orders and not quit. That's where I excelled. I was so used to people-pleasing that following orders was as natural as breathing.

They also didn't care if I was a little soft as long as I met the physical requirements. I had to work up to them and bulked up in the muscle area. By the end of basic training, my new muscles evened out my shape, and my curves weren't so...much anymore.

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That doesn't mean I'm not still self-conscious. I've just chosen to focus on what I've made of myself instead of my hip size. I'm in a small fraternity of women to become Force Recon, a damned good strategist, and a hell of a marksman. I shouldn't be surprised that a man could be attracted to me.

Whether I should or shouldn't be, I am. And if I'm honest, I don't think I could trust someone enough to try a relationship. Not even a Navy SEAL who thinks he's got me figured out.

For argument's sake, say Jackson's right. Say I like him. In my experience, that only makes the man more dangerous. All those years ago, deep down, I knew Trace Newel was wrong for me. I never loved him. I only moved in with him because I didn't believe I would ever do any better.

Trace ripped me to shreds and walked away. If I were to fall for Jackson and he did the same, the end would be so much worse. Yes, the thought of someone wanting me for me is appealing, but I don't think it's worth the risk, not with my track record.

A small part of me wonders if Jackson could handle my chaos. That small part just isn't enough to convince the rest of me to gamble my heart on him.

Chelsea

“Danforth! Are you punching that bag or waltzing with it?”

Being called out by Spatch, the former Army Ranger trainer, snaps me out of my mental fog. I attack the bag with renewed focus, cheeks heating at being called out.

I was doing it again, replaying the truck scene with Jackson in my head. “I’d make it so good, you’d call me daddy.”

Annnd, my gloves just dropped again. “Ugh! Would someone please kick my ass?” I yell to the room.

Several hands raise, volunteering for the task. Sadie jogs over, but Bash heads her off. “I got this, Fate.”

Judging by the look on his face, I would prefer Sadie. My partner gestures to a far corner of the room, away from nosy ears. I follow without comment...reluctantly. Bash grabs a shield target off the wall, sets into a low stance, and barks, “Front thrust kick, jab, backhand.”

This isn’t exactly what I had in mind, but I don’t argue. I set my stance to launch the first kick, and my partner asks, “What did he do?”

I work through the combination and answer, “Nothing.”

My left arm drops, and Bash smashes the target into that shoulder. “Nothing? That’s it? No sarcasm? No jokes? No, mind your own damned business, Bash?”

Refusing to meet his eyes, I shrug and answer casually. “Nothing, as in nothing. I’m just a little off today.”

“I’m not buying it. Jab, cross, knee strike.”

I obey the command, and Bash continues. “You haven’t made a single smartass remark today. That means something’s wrong. Hell, you haven’t even smiled this morning.”

Shrugging again, I say, “We all have to grow up sometime.”

Bash slams the target to the mat. “That’s it. I’m going to kill him.”

“Oh, for cripe’s sake, Laurent. Knock it off. I’m having a little identity crisis. Your boyfriend had nothing to do with it. As a matter of fact, I think you should check on him. Jackson needs his head examined.”

“That’s nothing new,” he grumbles, scrubbing his jaw.

Spatch sounds his electronic whistle, and I sweep Bash’s legs from under him. Leaning over my friend, I sneer. “By the way, you suck at ass-kicking today.”

I leave Bastien on the floor and clear out of the gym with the rest of the contractors in search of a shower. After dressing and drying my wavy hair, the mass goes into a messy bun instead of running it through a flat iron. Rumor has it that Knot is calling a meeting for Alpha and Bravo teams at one, and there’s no time for silky hair, not when I still have firearms training to get through.

Precisely at one, Knot’s door closes, and the secret spy security measures activate. He must have big news.

“Don’t ask me how, but my contact in the CIA intercepted a message going to Congressman Harding describing an attack on a Navy SEAL team in Bulgaria. Just like with Iron Strike, this report blames Knot Corp. contractors for leaking the intelligence report, leading enemy forces to the location of the SEAL team. My contact saw the message before you put your rafts into the Maritsa River.”

“So, not only is someone selling out US forces, they’re orchestrating these attacks,” Dani affirms.

Our boss nods. “Orchestrating and reporting to Harding.”

Cassanova snarls. “That bastard is probably the one planning all this shit.”

There’s no way. “I agree that someone is purposefully reporting these occurrences to Harding, but something isn’t adding up here. How can a first-time congressman, a man who never served in the military, have the kinds of contacts necessary to pull off such complicated attacks? You’ve seen the prick’s interviews. He never changes his song and dance, always reciting the same lines of information. Someone’s only feeding him enough bits and pieces to make him sound informed.”

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“It doesn’t matter,” Cass states. “With what we found, the gig is up. Harding will shut his sanctimonious mouth, and that’ll be it. Right, boss?”

“Possibly. Private military firms have taken PR hits before. During those times, we signed on to more domestic contracts until the public forgot and things returned to normal.”

Knot’s regurgitated, white-washed answer isn’t sitting right with me. I’d bet a year’s salary he doesn’t believe it either. Why he’s not saying so is beyond me, so I do it for him. “Not this time. Sure, we’ve had bad apples get a lot of press before, but someone’s going through a lot of trouble to stain our profession permanently. In the eyes of Americans, killing innocent foreigners is very different from killing US servicemen. And somebody with military pull is making this happen. I think he’ll keep doing it with or without Harding.”

“So, what would you suggest?” Knot asks.

“Keep quiet what we found. Let whoever this is think we haven’t figured them out.”

Bash shakes his head. “Too late. They took the bait for our fake mission and would already know the ambush failed.”

“True,” I counter. “But they don’t know how successful we were. Let them think they’ve won for now. We have proof they exist. We just need time to find them.”

“And in the meantime, they keep killing soldiers?” Kai asks.

I turn in my seat to face my teammate. “No, because Knot is going to reach out to all PMC firms and quietly inform them of the situation. They’ll know what to look out for and can prepare accordingly. The status quo will remain unchanged, giving us a better chance of finding the person or people responsible.”

Everyone in the room stares at me, but I hold my ground. It’s a good plan. Knot must agree as he stands and releases the lockdown. “Birdie, you get started on everything from the CIA. The rest of you carry on like normal. Chelsea’s right. This isn’t over, and we might need you again. Be ready at a moment’s notice.”

I’m putting away laundry at home later that afternoon when I get a text from Bash. My house at eight. I toss the phone back on my bed with a mock salute. “Yes, sir.”

I arrive early, sporting sweats and a Bad Omens tee. Yeah, I’m still not feeling it today. Birdie is already here because she practically lives with Bash now. “Did you bring me here to grill me some more?”

Bash walks into the room carrying a chair from the kitchen. “Nope. We’ve got work to do.”

We? Bash leaves to get more chairs, and the doorbell rings. Birdie answers, ushering Sadie and Aaron inside. Over the next five minutes, Fish, Devil, and god help me_Jackson also show up.

I’m not thrilled about my appearance, considering our company, but I’m not hiding in the kitchen. That’s some improvement, at least. And after ten minutes, I haven’t cracked a single joke or hurled the first mock insult, either. Definitely making progress.

Bash offers beers to everyone, and all but me accept. Hey, look at me, not just trying to fit in. Since Bash called the meeting, everyone waits for him to begin. He doesn’t

make us wait, starting as soon as he's cracked the seal on his drink. "I don't know what kind of update O'Reilly gave you guys today, but I guarantee you didn't discuss what to do moving forward."

"I hate to say it, but you're right," Jackson confirms. "He told us about an intercepted report describing what someone hoped would happen, but that's it."

"Well, Chelsea has an idea of what to expect moving forward, and everyone from Knot down agrees with her theory. The problem is the timeline. We're stuck waiting for the intel to pan out, but I'm not a fan of sitting on my ass, while the enemy plans his next move."

All three SEAL gazes swing toward me. "What are you thinking?" Fish presses.

Though I'm in the spotlight again, I've now had time to work with these guys and have built a rapport with them. "Someone is using Harding, who readily accepted because of the publicity he gets out of the deal. His source is spearheading these attacks. Harding may or may not know that, but I bet Birdie's computer he knows something useful."

Devil's cold, steely voice shivers my chest. "That leaves us waiting on intel again."

"No, it doesn't."

Devil steeples his fingers together and holds my gaze. "No?"

That man is scary as hell. "No. We don't wait. That would be a mistake."

"Then what are you proposing?" Jackson asks.

"We get into Harding's head."

Jackson

Bash pulls upright suddenly. “How the hell are we supposed to do that?”

The whole room stares at Chelsea, cute in her lounge clothes and messy hair piled on her head. She sits on the sofa with her bare feet drawn up and tugs her shirt hem down, though nothing is exposed.

I get the idea she wasn't expecting a crowd and is self-conscious about her appearance. Why, I don't know. I could eat her up just like she is. Also off is that not a single wisecrack has passed her lips. Mine turn down, frowning at the realization. Something's wrong with her.

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“We, uh, set him up. Get him to say why he’s so against military contractors.”

Bash pushes out of his seat, dislodging Birdie’s hand from his thigh. Something’s wrong with him as well. He’s not generally like this. Could he and Chelsea have fought about something?

Bash glares at Chelsea, but his eyes show concern instead of ire. “I don’t understand why you think he’ll tell you shit.”

Chelsea isn’t bothered by his resistance. Maybe this is the norm when passing ideas back and forth with my former teammate. Chelsea rolls her eyes. “Ugh. Of course, he won’t if I introduce myself as Chelsea, the PMC.”

My friend begins pacing the floor in front of the fireplace. “Harding wouldn’t tell you anything anyway. Besides, how the hell would you even get close to him? You’re nobody to a US congressman. Even if you were a person of influence in his world, he’s only talking to people who can advance his agenda.”

I know Bash is being careful, but I’ve now seen how this woman’s mind works. Given half a chance, I’m convinced she’ll figure this out. And I’m going to help her. “So, we find someone who can advance his agenda. Or we become them.”

Bash’s expression is incredulous, but I ignore him, directing my question to the others. “What would draw this man in? Chelsea?”

The woman is even more surprised than Bash when I ask for her input. She rubs her arms and closes her eyes. “We need to get him away from Washington, so the draw

would have to be big, a fundraiser or campaign event. Since his biggest talking point is PMCs... No, it's how PMCs affect the armed forces...defense..."

Her eyes fly open. "Shit. A defense convention. With anti-private military speakers. Harding could be invited as some sort of dignitary. Maybe set up some bullshit after-party for deeper discussion."

Fish's nose wrinkles, and he raps his knuckles against his knee. "I get it that your boss is rich, but you're talking about a multi-million-dollar setup when there's no guarantee Harding will even show."

"No," Birdie spouts suddenly, yet softly and full of curiosity. "I'll bet..."

The intel specialist doesn't finish, instead opening a laptop on the coffee table and pounding the keyboard. "I'll bet there's already a convention scheduled with the private military as a keynote topic."

At Birdie's insistence, the rest of the room warms to the possibility. "God, there's several on the calendar with panels about the efficacy of private military and militia in modern warfare. We could just about take our pick."

Fish now leans forward, fully engaged. "Find one in Europe if there's one to be had. That way, we can be involved legally."

Birdie's furious typing continues for a second or two before, "Bingo. Southern Spain. End of this month."

Aaron speaks for the first time since arriving. "We still can't guarantee Harding will show."

"That's the easy part," I say. "Pompous and self-righteous as he is, I bet all it'll take

to get him is a private jet and an invitation touting him as an expert. Maybe make the after party a big fancy reception in his honor.”

Sadie pipes in with, “The jet is easy. We could rent some big-ass house to host a ball-style reception.”

“Your logistics are sound,” Devil says. “You still have one problem, though. You have to get this bastard to talk. Who are you getting to play host? Many of us would be out. Too recognizable because of recent press.”

“Chelsea and I volunteer,” I offer without hesitation.

“What?” she gasps.

“What do you mean, what? This was your idea,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but...” She stammers. “Do you know how many hoops a plan like this would have to jump through? First, we’ll have to buy our way into this convention. Second, we’ll have to scout mansions and convince some wrinkly old fart to let us use one. Not to mention, schedule a fake ball with fake guests. Oh, and provide adequate security so we’ll have a slim chance at an asshole congressman accepting our flowery invitation.”

“Thirty seconds ago, you were trying to sell us on the idea. Now you want to back out?” Bash asks.

Chelsea fails to come up with an intelligible answer. “I...um.”

I’m suddenly all about this plan. Clapping my hands, I stand to indicate we’re through brainstorming. “Everyone else good with the basic plan? Oh, and since some of you are well-known in political circles, I’d suggest making the party a masked

affair.”

Sadie pushes off the sofa. “I’ll get O’Reilly and Knot on a call or in a room together to sell the idea. Be ready to jump on this ASAP. The convention Birdie found is in four weeks.”

The rest of the room follows suit, and Sadie leaves with Aaron, followed by Fish and Devil. Chelsea, moving woodenly, carries empty bottles to the kitchen. I follow because I can’t help it.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

Chelsea places the bottles in the trash and turns. Blowing her cheeks out, she waits a second before answering, “I’m fine.”

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“You’re not fine. Did I do this? Did I_”

“Did you what? Break me? That’s some ego you must have, thinking you can alter my brain chemistry with a few words. What is it with you? I tell jokes. You think I’m flirting. I don’t tell jokes, and you think I’m pining. You. Don’t. Know. Me.” She slams the trash cabinet closed. “And trust me when I say you don’t want to.”

“Chelsea.” I place a hand on her cheek to stop this head of steam she’s building. “Stop pretending_”

The woman pulls away and rushes through the back door, slamming it behind her. Struck by her reaction, it takes me a second to give chase. I step forward, wrenching the door open, only to have a big hand clamp down on my shoulder.

Bastien yanks me back, slams the door shut, and spins me around, pinning me to the wall. “What did you do to her?”

Birdie shuffles into the kitchen, eyes wide at the pair of us.

Bastien’s eyes are feral as he repeats the question. “What did you do to Chelsea?”

“I didn’t do a damned thing.”

Bastien pulls me forward and slams me back again. “Bullshit. You must have done or said something for her to run out like that.”

“I swear, I didn’t do anything. I asked Chelsea to show me her true colors. That’s it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” my friend demands through clenched teeth.

“How about let go of me, and I’ll tell you.”

Bastien shoves off me and storms to the living room, Birdie hot on his tail. He flops onto the sofa and growls, “Start talking.”

I follow only because I know why Bash is pulling this asshat routine. He’s mentioned that Chelsea has no family besides a domineering mother who is no longer in the picture. Because of this, Bastien has taken on the role of overprotective brother since joining Knot’s outfit and being paired with her.

That’s the only reason I’m not kicking his ass right now. “I talked to Chelsea off and on during the Bulgaria mission. I asked why she’s always hiding behind jokes and sarcasm instead of showing people how brilliant she is.”

His mouth goes slack. “What are you talking about? Chelsea is a wiseass. What’s wrong with that? We both served with plenty of them. I don’t see you trying to change Wrench or Skin.”

“Yeah, well, Wrench and Skin don’t freeze up in social situations where strange men make surprise visits, or make fast exits when something other than work is being discussed. They certainly don’t pretend to like something to avoid being singled out.”

“Now, you’re just talking out of your ass,” Bash accuses.

“No, he isn’t.”

We both turn at Birdie’s statement. “I’ve seen it. Chelsea hates beer.”

Bash’s face contorts in either disgust or disbelief. “Then how come she always orders

one when the team goes out?"

Birdie shrugs. "She's always just ordered one, and I've never seen her finish. And now that I think about it, she always has other plans when we invite the team to do something more than have drinks after work. We don't do it often, but she always has an excuse."

Bastien is on his feet again, doubt beginning to cloud his eyes. "She went rafting with several PMCs before I came. It was an overnight trip. That's how she got her damned nickname."

"I remember the story about the snake in the raft," Birdie confirms. "That was mostly a girl's trip. Aaron was the only guy."

Birdie's explanation deflates Bastien completely. "You don't think some guy could've... She's never nervous around me."

"That's because she was never attracted to you," the intel genius states. "To answer your question, yes, I think someone hurt Chelsea, but not in the way you fear."

I nod, fully in agreement with Birdie's assessment. "Because of whatever happened, Chelsea wears a mask. I saw through it."

"How is that when you only just met her?" Bash presses.

"I was looking a hell of a lot closer because I want her."

My friend looks ready to take my head off. Birdie lays a gentle hand on his arm. "Bastien. You, me, all of us took Chelsea at face value because that's what she wanted. Jackson's attraction to Chelsea means he sees what she wants to keep hidden. That's why she's pushing back. You know as well as I do that if Chelsea had a

problem with Pin, she would have made it painfully clear that he should back off.”

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Bastien must see the truth in Birdie's words as he's stopped arguing. His shoulders sag, and in a hollow voice he asks, "What from her past could be so bad that she would...?"

His voice trails off, but I know what he's asking. "Who knows? Any number of things can make a kid grow into an insecure adult."

Bastien huffs. "You know what I don't like about this conversation? You make it sound like there's something wrong with Chelsea that needs to be fixed. Okay, she's hiding inner demons or some shit. Which of us aren't?"

Jackson

"You're right. I'm a fucking idiot."

Bastien scoffs but shows no mercy. "Couldn't have said it better myself. I may not have seen Chelsea's mask, but only because I chose to accept the person she presented to the world. And she's never given me a reason to doubt her. What's your excuse?"

Shit. "I messed this up. I've got to get out of here."

I shove past my friend, who hurls a warning for me to leave Chelsea alone as I race out the door. If Chelsea wants me to fuck off, I will, but not until I make things right. I jump in my truck and drive out of Bastien's reach, ending up in a nearby movie theatre parking lot. My place is fifteen minutes from here, but I don't want to wait that long.

My phone is out as soon as I stop. I open the message I'd sent from Chelsea's phone, and after a short deliberation, I peck out what I want to say.

I'm sorry. I never intended to suggest you need to be fixed. I failed to consider that you probably haven't felt safe enough with anyone to let your guard down. You need to be around people who will accept and appreciate who you are, good and bad. I hate that I made you believe I couldn't be someone like that.

Stopping short of asking for a second chance, I send the message before I can overthink what I said. Part of me wants to stay here and wait for a reply, but I don't expect one tonight, nor do I deserve one.

Captain waits in the foyer, tail wagging, when I open my front door. "Hey, girl."

I drop to a knee to pet the happy boxer. "I may need you to help me like you helped Caleb. I suck at women."

Her furry black face tilts sideways. "You're biased," I tell her, standing.

I take Captain out before bedding down for the night. The last thing I do before turning out the light is check my phone one last time. My message to Chelsea shows read. Sighing, I turn out the light. At least she saw it.

Duck emerges from the ocean ahead of me and the rest of our squad. This shit isn't getting any easier, but at least it's not getting any harder yet. We've just finished a four-mile swim in fifty-five-degree water, and I'm toast.

The newer guys on my squad come out of the water, laughing. I'm not sure why. I also don't care as long as we're working together and not slouching. I check my watch, satisfied with what I see. Our time is right at two hours and forty minutes. Better than average.

“Solid job, guys. We have no workups, so get cleaned up and hit the range. I’ll check in with O’Reilly and meet up with you later.”

I run into Fish and his squad after showering. “Hot orders to HQ,” Fish reports. “Don’t worry about the rest of your men. O’Reilly hasn’t summoned them.”

I don’t mind since that’s where I was heading anyway. The nine of us walk across the field toward Little Creek headquarters. Commander O’Reilly and Admiral Jameson are waiting for us on the front steps.

“Let’s take a field trip,” the admiral says.

No one questions the man, but we pass around a few odd looks. Our boss’s boss herds us to the helipad where a Sea Hawk waits. The ride to wherever is short, and when the doors open again, we’re on the Knot Corp. compound.

I glance toward Fish and Devil, and Fish nods. The pair seem to be thinking the same as me. Someone liked Chelsea’s plan.

Knot greets us in the lobby and leads the way to the same planning room as before. The admiral sits among the contractors instead of standing in the front. Knot attempts to give him reign, but Jameson says, “Your idea. Your meeting.”

Knot tips his chin to the man as the rest of us find seats. “Last night, a collection of PMCs and SEALs got together to brainstorm ways to flush out the traitor. They came up with a solid plan, which Sadie shared with me. I repeated it to Commander O’Reilly, who passed it along to the admiral. We all agree that this plan is our best next step.”

I can’t help but look toward Chelsea to see how she’s taking this vote of confidence. I expect to see pride in her good idea or at least satisfaction, but I find neither. Her

features are weighed down by guilt as she scans the faces of her teammates who weren't invited to last night's discussion.

"Our objective is Congressman Harding. We'll get him to give up how he learned of these attacks and if he's involved with planning them. To do that, we'll appeal to his vanity. We'll offer him a platform among the powerful and influential. All wealthy and all fake, of course. I'll hand things over to the author to walk you through the plan. Chelsea?" Knot beckons.

Chelsea's eyes widen in shock before her mask slips into place. She pushes out of her chair and strides up to her boss. Chelsea runs through the plan as we left it last night with all the confidence of a drunk on a dance floor. I wasn't wrong about her. She is quite the actress. I wonder how many in this room see through Chelsea's false bravado.

When she's done, Knot opens the floor for questions, much like we would do in a SEAL strategy meeting. One of the PMCs is the first to speak up. "Who do you have going undercover for this?"

Worried Chelsea will give the man the wrong answer, I speak up. "That would be me and Chelsea."

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“No offense,” the man teases, “but if you’re looking for someone to play debutant, you need to pick someone else.”

Knot dismisses the suggestion with a wave. “Actually, that’s what makes Chelsea the perfect choice. She’s a chameleon. I can throw her into any situation, and she’ll adapt faster than any of you.”

Well, I’ll be damned. Just as surprised as I am, Chelsea gapes at her boss. It looks like I’m not the only one who sees her, after all.

“Now that we’ve got that settled, this mission will go down in Spain in four weeks, which gives us ample time to prepare. Our legal team is working to set up a shell corporation through which this operation will be funded. Sambu is searching for possible hosting sites and will send plans and pictures by the end of the day. Our work begins tomorrow. With the Admiral’s permission, you SEALs are dismissed except for Bennett. You’ve got work to do. The rest of you be back here at eleven hundred tomorrow.”

The room clears of Navy men, and then Knot kicks out all his people but Chelsea and Birdie. “The three of you start today.”

Birdie stands and gathers her things. Chelsea looks a little sick. Besides the blow to my ego, I look forward to learning more about the woman. Or getting under her skin, anyway.

Chelsea and I follow Birdie, who seems to have a plan about where she wants to set up shop. We end up in her office in the executive area and settle in behind her closed

door. The room is perfectly posh for a company of this caliber. Sizeable executive desk with bookshelves behind and inviting guest chairs. To the right of her desk is a fancy sitting area with club chairs and a leather sofa. Little touches remind me of Birdie's house, which is warm and welcoming but missing the dick-shaped planters found in her home.

Birdie kicks off her shoes and drops into the farthest chair, tucking her feet beneath her. Chelsea and I sit on opposite sides of the sofa.

"Alright. Let's get started. We need to come up with bulletproof backstories and motives for working with this asshat. I'll oversee all support to corroborate your covers, but I'm not adept at making them up. That'll be on you."

Birdie readies a digital tablet for taking notes. It appears she expects us to spin this on the fly.

"The simplest cover would be for us to be married," I suggest.

Chelsea's neck nearly snaps with how fast she turns to glare at me. Ignoring her, I explain, "It makes the most sense for a couple hosting a dinner party to be husband and wife, right?"

At Chelsea's squeak, Birdie sets down her tablet. "Um..." She waggles her pointer finger between us. "With this chemistry, I couldn't pass you off as colleagues."

I shrug, unconcerned. "We did just meet. Maybe Chelsea and I should take an hour or two and get to know one another first. That would help, right?"

"I...I don't_" Chelsea stutters before being cut off.

"We'll go get some lunch and come back," I announce and stand.

Birdie tucks her equipment away in agreement. “Okay. I’ll grab a bite as well. See you in two hours.”

Chelsea

Jackson grins playfully and holds out his hand to me. Touching Jackson again would be a colossal mistake, so I push off the cushion and step around him toward the door. “Right. We’ll...um...we’ll be back.”

I scramble from Birdie’s office despite knowing there’s no escaping this. Jackson strolls along behind me, catching up at the door to the stairs.

“We’ll have to take your car since my chopper just left,” he quips.

The door is halfway open when I freeze. The last place I want to be is trapped in a car with Jackson. That means meeting up off campus isn’t an option. “We’ll go to the cafeteria. That way, we’re not wasting time driving.”

Jackson doesn’t argue, so I proceed down the stairs. The lunchtime rush is still going when we walk in. I’m relieved, but Jackson shakes his head. “This is no good. Too many distractions.”

“Well, one way to get to know me is to observe me around my peers.”

Unfortunately, Jackson’s rumbling laugh is so sexy. Right up to the point where he calls me out. “Nice try. Ours is a top-secret mission. We need privacy.”

A smart-ass reply stings my tongue, but I hold it in so Jackson won’t have reason to correct me again. “Fine. Get some food, and we’ll take it outside.”

Jackson sticks with me through the serving line, unbothered by the curious looks and

wagging eyebrows from the contractors. Trays loaded, we get drinks, and I lead him outside toward the trailhead picnic tables. You can do this, Chels. It's only two hours.

I chew every bite thoroughly to delay our collaboration as long as possible. If this were a normal conversation, I'd have no problem. I'm an expert at keeping the other person as the main topic. There's no way Jackson will let me get away with that. He proves it with his first question.

"Why do you hate me?"

I sputter into my drink. What was in my mouth splatters all over my shirt and dribbles down my chin. Needless to say, I'm shocked by the question. Jackson passes me a stack of napkins, trying hard not to laugh. I snatch the napkins from his hand, cleaning up while I cough. When I recover, I answer, "We've been down this road before. I don't even know you."

“All the more reason to ask why.”

At my eye roll, he rephrases. “Okay, so why do you avoid me?”

I toss the napkins on my tray and sigh. “What if I don’t want to answer that?”

“Since it’s our job to convince a congressman that we’re married, I figure it’s a good idea to discuss. I mean, how can I apologize or change a behavior if I don’t know what I’ve done.”

Jackson holds my gaze, daring me to look away. I hate to admit it, but he’s got a point. Kind of. If we weren’t stuck in this situation, he would never see me and thus wouldn’t know I’m avoiding him.

But we are working together, and I can see how anyone would judge me as acting like a total bitch. I drop my head in shame. This is why I keep relationships shallow_no navigating through messy emotions.

“Look. I’m sorry. I’m not normally a bitch. It’s just... Can we get back to work?”

Jackson cocks an eyebrow and keeps his mouth shut. His expression leaves no room for silence, so I let out a long sigh. “Fine. You haven’t done or said anything. I’m the problem here. I don’t know how to act around you.”

Jackson’s brows knit together, but his posture relaxes. “But I don’t want you to act around me. I want to get to know you.”

My chuckle is dark and humorless. “I don’t even know me.”

“Yes, you do. You’re a badass Marine who loves her job and hates beer. You’d give your life for those you care about, and you think I’m sexy as fuck.”

I look up, laughing with misty eyes. “Now, who’s using humor as a shield?”

Jackson only watches me instead of responding. I give up, knowing I’ve lost. “I grew up only being accepted if I became what people wanted. For as long as I can remember, I’ve molded my personality to fit whoever was around. This is why I don’t like meeting new people in social settings. There’s always a learning curve involved. Humor is my default setting because it’s the most widely accepted.”

A warm hand envelops mine, and Jackson says, “You’ve never tried to make me laugh. Why?”

I shrug and look toward the woods. “I don’t know. You’re just...extra. All my usual tactics short-circuit when you’re around. And you’re not even the hottest guy I’ve seen this week.”

Jackson relaxes on his bench and grins. “Looks have nothing to do with it. Well, maybe a little. I throw you off because you’re attracted to me on a deeper level.” He holds up a hand when I start to object. “Wait a minute. Before you lash out, I say so with confidence because you throw me off just as much. And I am definitely attracted to you.”

This isn’t happening. There’s no way. No one has ever pursued me, outside of guys looking for random hookups, not even Trace. I always had to make the first move with him, even after being together for months. And now, Jackson wants me to believe he desires me after only seeing my bad side?

My guarded heart is skeptical, as always. Real or fake, Chelsea? Real or fake? Since it's impossible to know, my paranoid mind refuses to yield. I pull my hand from beneath his. "Whether what you say is true or not, you said so yourself. I have self-esteem and trust issues, and nobody is that patient."

"Then let's take the pressure off. Let me be a friend."

Jackson's offer is so tempting, but I know me. I push around a crumb on my plate and look up again. "I don't think I can. I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear, and I swear I'm not trying to be difficult."

"I know you're not," he replies softly. "We'll just be respected colleagues, then. At this point, we kind of have to be since we'll be married in twenty-one days."

I scoff loudly and very unladylike. "Keep that shit up, and I'll be a widow in twenty-two."

Jackson grins and offers his hand. I reluctantly accept, we shake on it, and my newly minted partner drops his elbows to the table. "Now, tell me about the Marines."

Right at two hours later, we walk back to Birdie's office, this time side-by-side. Knot waits with her, leaning his large frame against the wall. "You guys figure your shit out?"

"Um... Which?" I ask him.

Knot shakes his head, chuckling to himself before walking out the door.

"Ok. Let's get started," Birdie says with a clap.

Jackson and I settle into her guest chairs and slide forward, ready to get to work. Our

knees are nearly touching, but I no longer have the urge to pull away.

“Alright. I’ve been thinking. We obviously need to hide everything about Chelsea’s past, but Jackson, it makes the most sense for you to go as yourself. Your real military background will make it easier for Harding to trust you.”

“That makes sense,” the SEAL says. “That means Chelsea will probably need to come from money. Otherwise, how else could we explain the mansion in Spain?”

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I nod in agreement. “Better make it devastatingly wealthy. Harding might be willing to speak to us in passing, but if we come across as supporters and a campaign finance well, he won’t only talk but fall all over himself to befriend us.”

“Good. That’s good,” Birdie says, scribbling furiously. “Now, Chelsea, give me a city you know well with diverse financial class representation. I’ll align you with some super-rich family there while making it so you don’t have to learn an entirely new town history.”

“Go with Redding, California. I haven’t lived there in ten years, but that could be easily explained. Because we’re keeping Jackson in the Navy, we’ll say college was in Norfolk, and I stuck around after that.”

“Great. Now, what do you want to be when you grow up? I mean, what should I present as your degree major?”

“Oh. God. I have no idea. I majored in engineering before the Marines, but I couldn’t fake my way through a conversation about that.”

Jackson pipes up. “How about psychology?”

“Now who’s being funny?” I ask.

“Not funny.” Jackson straightens in his seat and leans forward in thought. “I’m being serious. Psychology isn’t exactly a comfortable topic for discourse, and you can’t deny being an expert at reading people. Harding will likely be impressed but otherwise glaze over the subject of your profession.”

I nod, agreeing with Jackson's logic. "Well, I guess Dr. Danforth, it is."

"Don't you mean Dr. Bennett?" he teases.

"Okay," Birdie chirps. "I've got what I need to get started. The next thing is for the two of you to come up with stories about your personal lives, both separately and collectively. Don't worry about where you live. I'll come up with locations for past and present."

She turns away to start clacking at her keyboard, and Jackson stands up with me. Just as I turn for the door, Birdie speaks again. "I don't know what you guys did for lunch, but based on the change I've seen, you should do it again tomorrow."

I hold in a dirty comeback, keeping my eyes on the door. Barely. Jackson steps forward to grasp the handle. His shoulders are shaking, fighting the same battle.

Jackson

Chelsea and I part ways in the main lobby with simple expressions of, "See you tomorrow," and Chelsea's, "Later."

One of Knot's security taxis me back to Little Creek to pick up my truck, and on the drive home, my mind is on Chelsea. I wouldn't call today a breakthrough, but at least she's speaking to me on purpose and without attitude. Still, I can't let go of this nagging sense that her wounds will keep us from moving past where we are.

Captain is in the backyard when I get home. I'm less than enthusiastic about life right now, so I sprawl out on one of the Adirondack chairs to watch her for a while.

Captain brings me her floppy frisbee, dropping it at my feet. I throw it on autopilot, not even watching her race across the grass. The fresh scent of spring carries on the

cool breeze but also goes ignored. I should feel some hope after today, but instead, I seem to be talking myself out of trying.

I keep launching the frisbee for Captain, who gives out after seven or eight more throws. She eventually collapses to her bed beside my chair, and neither of us moves until the back door opens an hour later.

“There you are.” Caleb drops into the chair beside mine, stretching out his long legs. When I don’t acknowledge him, he leans forward, waving his hand in front of my face. “Dad? You okay?”

I suck in and blow out a deep breath before answering. “I spent the day with Chelsea for work. I can’t explain why.”

Caleb’s voice reaches an unnatural high when he asks, “What? And?”

“She feels about me the way I do about her,” I answer, monotone.

“And instead of celebrating, you look like someone just died.”

Captain gets up and drops the slobbery frisbee in my hand. I let it roll off my fingers to the deck. “She’s attracted to me but doesn’t want to date. She doesn’t even want to be my friend.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“In a way. Chelsea dealt with bullies as a kid and in college. Apparently, they were the subversive type. She’s got some residual trust and esteem issues. She won’t give me a chance because of what someone else did.”

“Ah. I get it,” Caleb says.

I tilt my head to stare at him. “What do you mean, you get it?”

Caleb shrugs. “Well, I don’t get it, but I understand what’s going on. I’m guessing by subversive you mean something like a Carrie situation.”

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Noticing my confusion, he clarifies, “Like the movie Carrie but without all the blood and death. Someone hurt like that will lock people out to protect themselves.”

What he says sounds plausible, but this kid is twenty-one years old. What does he know? “Where the hell are you getting all this?”

Caleb answers with a grin. “I did ace my Psych Two final.”

I roll my eyes and spin the chair to face him. “Okay, Dr. Phil, how can I get through to her?”

Now, my son flounders. “Well, I...”

When his voice fades, I urge, “No. No. Don’t wuss out on me now.”

“I’m not wussing out. I just don’t know how you’re going to take this advice.” He picks up and launches Captain’s frisbee and wipes his slobbery hand on his jeans. “For a class project, we were made to read certain romance novels. They ranged from avoidable, nonstop drama to dark themes, all equally popular. Our assignment was to reconcile the popularity of these books, which counter today’s acceptable male behavior.”

“You read what? Wait, why are you smiling?”

Caleb laughs. “I learned a lot reading those books. You match up just about any woman’s personality to one of those characters and treat her like the man in the story does. You can’t lose.”

I lean back, unsure if I'm appalled or proud. "Please tell me you're not manipulating women...and using my dog to help you."

"What? Dad, no! Just listen for a minute. Take someone like Carrie or Chelsea. They bleed for acceptance, desperate for whatever crumbs are offered to them. And what happens? They get shit on. Women like that eventually reach a point, where they won't accept anything anyone is offering."

"Then, what is the point of this conversation?"

"This is where it gets controversial. You're offering Chelsea romance and friendship. Chelsea likely sees it as a trap. Instead of trying to entice her, you should make her have to beat you off with a stick. She'll eventually let down her guard. That's when you strike."

"Strike?" I choke.

Caleb rolls his eyes. "For the love of god, Dad. You dominate her. If she's had to play at being strong her whole life, I guarantee her biggest wish is to hand over the reins and let someone else lead for a while."

I'm now shaking my head. "Sorry, kid, but that sounds like a bad conduct discharge and sexual harassment suit."

"Oh, come on, Dad. I know you're not stupid. Does the woman object to your company?"

"No, we've actually come to a truce. Well, more that Chelsea put me in a box, so I'm no longer a threat."

"That's good, or less bad, at least. Okay, here's what you do. Bullies torture people

for two reasons: entertainment or to feel better about themselves. You're going to pursue her relentlessly, but you'll have to be embarrassingly over the top about it. I mean, make yourself look pitifully desperate. Kill whatever pride you have."

"No. Number one, I'll lose her respect and that of everyone I know. Two, because no means no. We're back to sexual harassment."

"We're not. I'm telling you. This woman is begging somebody to give up something for her. She wants to be worth that to someone."

Pushing out of the seat, I lean against one of the big timber posts. "I just don't know. Chelsea isn't some simpering female. She's a warrior. There's no way she'll accept a wilting flower of a man."

"Dad, no. That's not what I'm saying. Let me slow this down for you. If you want Chelsea, go get her. Be yourself but fucking go get her. Let Chelsea and others see you trying and failing to earn a shot with her. Show the woman she means more to you than your pride. She'll begin to feel safe around you. That's when you make your move. You'll know if she's accepting or not."

I sit stunned, staring at the man next to me. "You learned all this in two psychology classes?"

Caleb's boyish grin reminds me he's still just a kid. "That and a little practical application."

"Captain's going to need therapy for watching all the shit you've pulled, isn't she?"

Caleb stands and props a hand on my shoulder. "You can do this, Dad."

"You forget this woman carries a gun," I grumble.

The hand on my shoulder becomes a friendly shove. “Hey, I’m ready for a stepmom. You know, two Christmases and all that.”

I wristlock my son, bending him over. “You’re a pain in the ass, and you already get two Christmases. Now, is there something you wanted, or did you just come to shrink my head?”

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“Actually,” he grunts. I let him up, and Caleb lowers his head, looking through his eyelashes. “I came to borrow Captain.”

Throwing my hands up, I complain, “Oh my god, lady-killer. You’re going to put me in the ground or jail. Get out of here. Have her home by ten, or your ass is toast.”

Caleb pulls a leash from his pocket and calls Captain. He clips onto her collar and starts for the back gate. “See you later, Dad. If you want any good book recommendations, let me know.”

The half-kid half-man walks away with my dog, leaving me to process the strangest conversation I’ve ever had. Either the kid’s crazy, or I am because after thinking about it for a while, I go inside to get my phone.

I usually text my friend instead of calling, but I don’t feel like waiting for a response.

The call rings twice before Bastien answers. “Why do I get the feeling I won’t like what you have to say.”

“Don’t be such a princess,” I grouch. “I need a favor.”

Bastien grumbles. “If it were anyone else, I would have already hung up. I still might. What do you want?”

“If you and the missus don’t have plans tonight, I want you to have Chelsea meet you for beers.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

And here’s where it could all go south. “I need an in.”

“You need an... What the hell is this? High school?” Bastien roars.

I’m basing this whole strategy on my kid’s hypothesis, so I answer, “Something like that.”

Bash doesn’t say anything for a bit. I’m this close to begging when he finally responds. “Look, man. You’re my best friend, my brother, but I don’t have the patience to play matchmaker between you and Chelsea. Especially since she despises you.”

“She doesn’t. Even Birdie says so, remember.”

At the feminine murmuring in the background, I presume she’s confirming my claim. “Fuck,” Bash mutters. “You should know I’m only doing this because Birdie’s making me. I’m going to laugh my ass off when Chelsea doesn’t show. You’re buying the beers either way.”

“Deal. Oh, and don’t tell Chelsea I’m coming. I’m not asking you to lie to her. Just leave me out of the conversation. And don’t invite anyone else. Wait. Invite whoever you want.”

“God. I’m beginning to get a headache. I’ll text you after I get my head examined.”

Bastien hangs up before I can thank him. Honestly, I feel bad for the guy. I would have told me no.

I spend the next half-hour pacing the floor, waiting to hear back about tonight. My

phone pings with a new message, and I nearly rip my uniform, trying to get the damned thing out of my pocket.

Shit! It's a political spam message. Either I or the phone is about to crack when it vibrates again. Finally, it's from Bash. Seven thirty. Same place.

I shower, change, and drive to the Taphouse over an hour early to eat and do some homework. The waitress removes my dinner dishes when I finish and blanches when I ask for a drink menu. My team and I are here so much that Margo and the others know our drink orders by heart. "What the hell's gotten into you?"

"I'm allowed to try something different," I answer.

Margo has just returned with the requested menu when Bash and Birdie walk in fifteen minutes early as requested. "Um. What are you doing?"

I look up from the menu to Bastien's side-eye glare. "I'm trying to decide what drink I want."

Bastien lifts Birdie's hand to his forehead. "Con enculé," he barks. "If you're trying to punk me..."

Bastien Laurent's French cursing is usually entertaining, but not when it's aimed at me. "I swear, I'm not. Just sit down, shut up, and act normal."

"Yeah. Like you're doing?" he tosses back.

Birdie lifts onto her tiptoes and kisses Bastien's jaw. "Hey, big guy, let's sit down, and you can buy me a drink."

The badass former SEAL melts looking into her eyes. Bastien kisses Birdie's nose

and smiles. “I’ll do anything you want, Petit Oiseau.” Gesturing to me, he says, “But that asshole’s buying the drinks.”

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Margo walks up again, carrying an ultra and a cider, the lovebirds' usual. She sets the bottles down, pointing my way with her elbow. "What's wrong with him tonight? He's acting weird."

"Who's acting weird?"

I look up as Chelsea drops into the seat next to mine. I'm stunned that she hasn't shied away, so Bash chimes in, all too pleased to answer. "This idiot. He must have swallowed too much water during his morning swim."

I flip him off and look at the waitress without reacting to Chelsea. "Margo, I think I'll try a mojito, a cosmopolitan, mai tai, amaretto sour, and an espresso martini."

Her jaw drops, and I helpfully place the drink menu on her tray. The woman is so stunned that she walks off without taking Chelsea's order. I'm met with bizarre expressions when I return my attention to my friends.

"I think you broke Margo," Birdie says, chuckling.

Bash taps Jackson on the side of the head. "Forget Margo. What the hell is wrong with Pin?"

I shrug and finally direct my attention to Chelsea. "I didn't feel like a beer, and since you don't like beer, I thought we could both try something new."

Chelsea

I...don't know what to say. I half expected to see Jackson here and was proud of myself for not bailing. God knows his apology message_the one I haven't acknowledged yet_put me in a tailspin.

If that weren't bad enough, hearing Jackson's drink order and explanation, my heart sinks to my feet. My reaction is to peek toward Bash since Jackson just outed me about my distaste for beer.

Bastien's face is a mix of anger, pain, and suspicion, but I don't see surprise. When my gaze slides to Birdie, I don't see a reaction at all.

I drop my eyes and clear my throat nervously. "How long have you known?"

Birdie sips on her cider, wholly unaffected. "I've always known. Being uncomfortably observant is an occupational hazard, I'm afraid."

Bash pulls his hat off, shamefaced. "I somehow missed it until Jackson said something. I guess I didn't believe it until now."

The shame becomes mine at the hurt in Bastien's eyes. "Why would you fake that? Did you think we_I would reject you for being different? I don't understand. I mean, it's just beer, but is it?"

Bash looks down at his lap, and I feel like shit. I never thought my self-preservation would hurt someone else. "I'm sorry, Bash. I_"

My partner's head whips up suddenly; all the color drained from his face. "Did I do something, say something to hurt you?"

Bash's reaction makes sense only because I know how his mother died. That makes me feel even worse. "God, Bash. No. I came to Knot Corp. broken. Hell, I went into

the Marines broken.”

My eyes flick toward Jackson, knowing all this is coming out because of him. I can’t lay this at his feet or yell at him because he’s even more pale and traumatized than Bastien.

Jackson stammers, “Wait, this wasn’t supposed to... I didn’t mean... Shit.”

Great, Chelsea. Thanks to you, everyone is having a meltdown. Do you leave them to suffer or do you stop hiding? I heave a long sigh. “Knot was right.”

The bar noise fades, and my table goes deathly silent. “I am a chameleon. I’ve been a fake for so long, I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

Birdie stretches her arm across the table to squeeze my hand. “I understand. Believe me. I’ve learned that past traumas may shape who we become, but they don’t define us.”

“What happened to you?” Bastien nearly growls.

That’s the protector in him talking. Birdie places a restraining hand on his arm. “Wait.” Then, to me, she says, “Chelsea. You don’t have to say anything.”

Jackson has been quiet since his outburst, but I look at him now. His face is blank. I get the idea he doesn’t want to push me either way. It’s ironic. I’m here because of him or thanks to him, depending on how you look at it.

Though nervous, my rational brain believes coming clean will release some of this weight off my chest. Jackson dips his chin in encouragement. With a shaky nod, I begin the story. “I’ll spare you the schoolyard bully bullshit. Suffice it to say I allowed a lot of it because of low self-esteem.”

I recite for them about Trace and our brutal end, each word cutting like a razor blade. Doing so leaves me hollowed out, raw. I can't meet anyone's eyes despite knowing these people only want to support me, Bash and Birdie at least. However, I suspect the same about Jackson.

Sensing there's more to be said, the three remain quiet. I begin again reluctantly, giving them the rest of the ugly truth. "As hard as I tried, I was never enough for anyone until the Marines. By then, I'd grown used to pretending. I made myself whatever I needed to be to fit in: tomboy, one of the guys." I train my gaze on Jackson. "And a comedian, just so no one would see the real me. I figured I might finally be accepted if I became someone else."

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Jackson surprises me by speaking for the first time since all this started. “You may have gone through hell to get here, but I’ve seen how much your people respect you. You don’t have to hide anymore.”

I find the strength to meet his gaze. “What if I’m not hiding? What if I’m just lost?”

“Then we’ll help find you,” Bastien rasps.

Birdie echoes him. “Yes, we will.”

“Damn right,” Jackson adds, smacking the tabletop.

Margo returns then, carrying a tray loaded down with girly drinks. She sets them on the table, shakes her head, and returns to the bar. The four of us study the artistic display, and Jackson randomly selects a glass, lifting it in the air. “To those who found their way back and those still looking.”

Bash and Birdie lift their drinks, and I study the remaining cocktails, selecting a yellowish-green one with crystals on the rim. We clink our glasses, and I take a small sip. “Oh shit. That’s nasty.”

Jackson and I lock eyes and laugh. He reaches for my glass and offers me his, the frilliest one of the bunch. We sample all the cocktails, with me favoring the espresso martini and Jackson, the amaretto sour.

We call it a night around nine-thirty. Birdie and Bash surprise me with hugs before they head toward home. I end up alone with Jackson, walking to my car. The air is

pleasantly warm and fragrant with all the spring blooms out.

“I don’t know whether to shank you or thank you,” I say honestly.

Jackson’s laughter is unrestrained. “I promise this was unintentional. I was not expecting the night to turn out like it did. I hoped to get comfortable with each other in a social setting since that’s where we’ll need our acting skills.”

I’m not sure I believe him. “And the drink buffet you refused to let me pitch in for?”

He waves me off innocently. “If someone doesn’t like beer, they shouldn’t feel they have to drink it. I was only trying to give you options without putting you on the spot.”

“That’s...ah...that’s decent of you.”

Jackson tilts his head, regarding me intently. “It’s what friends do, right?”

My laugh is resigned and comes out as nothing more than a huff of breath. “Goodnight, Jackson.”

Ball gowns and espresso martinis are all I think about on the way home. The drink is on my mind because of the man who bought it for me. I suppose I’m thinking about the dress for the same reason.

When I wake up in the morning, my mind is still on dresses, but I’m no longer smiling. The more I think about having to find a dress, the more my mood sours.

By the time I leave for work, I’m not in a good place. I keep picturing that last night with Trace. No, I’m not the same shape or size I was then, but I’ll never be centerfold thin, either.

If I'm to pull off this undercover role, I'll need to find a dress that'll show off my toned upper half and hide my pear-shaped bottom that no amount of leg presses has diminished. This mission requires me to be the wealthy, show-stopping hostess, and it won't happen if I don't manage my undesirable parts.

Thoughts of my physique threaten to derail the entire day, so I crank up my radio and blast Eminem all the way to work.

I complete my morning gym cycle in near record time, even throwing in an extra set of lunges. Those not working this sting were sent to meet up with a team organized by Knot and Commander O'Reilly for some water maneuvers exercise. The two special assignment teams are summoned to Spatch's lair.

We figure out the water maneuvers thing was a clever cover when Jackson's platoon of seals marches into the room.

Spatch shouts over the murmuring crowd to get our attention. "You guys will be working in unfamiliar teams, in an unfamiliar place, while some of you are wearing masks. Because of this, verbal communication won't always be an option. And being practically strangers, you won't have the advantage of recognizing each other's body language. To help with that, you'll train together for the next week, study how each other moves, and learn a series of signals and signs unique to this mission. Today will be a good, old-fashioned dust-up. Now partner up! PMC to SEAL."

Bash marches right up to Jackson and cracks his knuckles. "I'm looking forward to kicking your ass."

The tattooed Aussie, Ink, approaches Sadie, offering a wink to Aaron. Fish, Jackson's second squad leader, walks up to me. His blue-jean eyes sparkle in amusement. "This is a hell of a mission you cooked up. Impressive."

“Thanks.”

With a wry smile, he says, “Most SEALs would be afraid to fight women.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not a woman then. I’m a Marine.”

Lungs beg for air, and sweat drips off our bodies an hour later. We switched partners every fifteen minutes to work through the teams. By the end, I’d rumbled with Fish, Bandido, Devil, and Wrench. I’d won some and lost some but managed to hold my own. That I owe to our former Ranger trainer.

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Spatch sounds his electronic whistle. “That’s it for today. Get out of here and get cleaned up. You’ve got work to do upstairs.”

I shuffle to the showers with Sadie and Dani, hiding how sore my body is. “Am I still moving?” I ask the other two.

“I don’t know. Am I?” Dani parrots.

Sadie plants a hand on my shoulder. Ow.

“You did better than me,” she says. “You’re the only one to put Devil on the ground.”

I shiver at the memory of the man with the dark eyes and even darker scowl. “He pulled his punches. He was afraid he’d kill me.”

“Ha!” Sadie scoffs, pointing to a red mark on her arm. “Gunner Murphy didn’t pull shit. You surprised him.”

Shaking my head, I duck beneath the hot spray for a short nap. Afterward, we three dress, pin up our dry, unstyled hair, and walk to the cafeteria for a bite to eat. The men are already seated, having beaten us there. As we pass the group, I glance toward Devil, who tips his chin respectfully. I guess Sadie wasn’t kidding.

After lunch, we join the two big bosses for more details about our Spanish mission. Knot starts the briefing by popping an image on the view screen. “This is a satellite view of our op location.” He points out specific features. “The main house has twenty rooms. We’ll use the salon off the front entry for fake security screenings. We’ll say

we're checking IDs in private so the congressman gets the illusion of privacy.

"To the west is a guest house we'll use as the operational base. Most of you will mix in with the party guests, and the rest will pose as security."

"If we need someone for relays between the hosts and security, we can make Skin a server," Wrench from the SEALs offers.

His team laughs at the man with a model's face, and Bash says, "You can have Cassanova join him."

Yeah, those two look like they're cut from the same cloth.

"Alright. Knock it off," O'Reilly says, reining the group back in. "Sambi will provide some of his people to fill out the ballroom as well as the caterers, wait staff, and valets. We'll iron out your specific assignments in the days to come. We do have one job that needs to get started now. I want the congressman's ride bugged. Since Sambi will provide the car, access won't be a problem."

"Delano, that's where you come in," the commander announces, speaking to Wrench. "I want you to fix up a recording device that can be remotely controlled. We don't expect Harding's team to scan for bugs, but I want to be ready just in case."

Wrench answers, "I'm on it."

The commander scours the room until finding his next subject. "Bennett, how are the IDs and personas coming?"

Knot answers the first half of the question. "Birdie has finished the IDs and records. We don't have physical copies of anything yet, but those will be here within the week."

“We’ve got our general backgrounds covered,” Jackson tells his boss. “We’ll work our way forward starting today.”

Knot pushes off the table he’d perched on. “Harding’s invitation was hand-delivered yesterday afternoon. Until we hear from him, all this prep work is just academic. That doesn’t mean we can do a half-assed job. You’ve already seen how this has become a life-or-death situation. Plan as if it’ll be your life on the line next time. We’ll get Harding.”

Wrapping up the meeting is Commander O’Reilly. “Fish and Sadie, pick out the security detail and study the plans. Bennett, you and Chelsea get back to work on your covers. The rest of you are dismissed.”

The room clears of everyone except Jackson and me. Not even Birdie stayed behind this time. Jackson stands and lumbers to the spot across from me. His smile is disarming, which sets my teeth on edge. We’ve... Well, I’ve finally settled into this friendship, and a stupid crush is the last thing I need right now.

I don’t want to notice Jackson’s broad shoulders and chest that taper to trim hips. I wish I could ignore his crooked smile, hazel eyes, and dark-blond hair that give him a sexy cowboy surfer look.

“Ready to get started?” he drawls.

He pulls out the chair and sits, and I rise quickly. I can’t be alone with him so close. “Let’s go outside. I could use some exercise.”

Jackson lifts a single brow. “Exercise after the meat grinder your trainer just put us through?”

“Air,” I correct myself. “I could use some air.”

“Then let’s go get some air.”

We’re both quiet as I lead Jackson to the running trail in the woods behind the main building. The day is clear and comfortable, but I hardly notice. I set a leisurely pace on the wooded trail, hoping the movement will mask my nerves.

Jackson doesn’t attempt to command the situation by forcing conversation. After several yards, I’m feeling pretty awkward in the silence. Not to mention, I’ve brought us to the woods, where we’re alone. “How did you get that scar on your neck?”

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Jackson reaches up, seemingly without thought. Pain flashes in his eyes, and I regret asking. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“No. Fair is fair,” he insists. “I got it during the only mission that I lost a man. I almost died and would have if Bandido hadn’t been there. He had to shove his bare hand inside my neck and sew my carotid shut to keep me from bleeding out.”

What follows is proof of how much Jackson cares about his men and how he almost quit over losing one. I wish I could provide him comfort or support, but words fail me, and I’m too close to the edge to offer a reassuring touch.

The only other thing I can think of is to change the subject. “Tell me about your son.”

Jackson snickers, causing me to glance his way. The pride on the man’s face makes me smile. “Caleb, a live wire for sure. He’s a junior at Old Dominion studying criminal justice.”

“Wow. He’s close. Was that intentional?”

“Yeah. He and his...” Jackson sighs. “Caleb wasn’t planned, obviously, but that kid is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I was sixteen when he was born. Shelby, his mother, and I were young and dumb but wanted to do right by our son. We weren’t stupid enough to get married, thank God. I gave up baseball and got a job to help out as much as I could. When I graduated, I had to make a choice. Getting a shitty job wasn’t going to do much, and the college where I had a scholarship_I could have done it, but it would mean never seeing my son.

“I did the only thing I could think of. Caleb was two when I joined the Navy. I didn’t have long-term plans for serving, but I had a job, and Caleb had insurance. Being in the Navy was the calling I never knew I had. I hated missing those months of his life during training, but we made it. Shelby and Caleb moved with me to Virginia when I was stationed here permanently.”

Past insecurities bubble to the surface, making me wonder how I measure up to Caleb’s mother. I don’t mean to ask, but the words tumble out of my mouth. “What happened to Shelby?”

“She got a job and took some online business classes. We made a good team with Caleb but, over time, recognized that we’d gotten over the teenage infatuation. We settled into a comfortable friendship, co-parenting as well as a couple of twenty-year-olds can. When Caleb was six, I realized we were holding each other back. Shelby deserved to find someone who could be more than a teammate, someone who would complete her. She moved out, and we split time with Caleb. She had him when I deployed. If Shelby needed time to study or had a date, Caleb was with me.”

We near the half-mile mark and turn off for the short track, but I find that I want to keep going on the longer track and hear more. “What about you? Did you ever find someone to complete you?”

Jackson is quiet and contemplative for a while. “No. I had my team and my son. The Navy demanded a big chunk of my days. I wasn’t willing to give up any of my time with Caleb.”

We pass the half-mile marker with me digesting what I’ve learned. “You sound like a dedicated father. What’s Caleb like?”

“He’s almost as good-looking as I am.” Jackson continues through my laughter. “He’s currently using my dog in a campaign to pick up women.”

“If he’s as persistent as his father, girls better watch out.”

I catch Jackson smiling from the corner of my eye.

Jackson

Chelsea’s laughter is a balm to my soul. After last night’s surprise turn, I was sure I’d lost footing with her. I didn’t even know what to expect in today’s meeting. Watching Chelsea take on my teammates this morning set my mind at ease. She was her typical comical self but more natural. Nothing about her seemed forced.

Step one complete. Chelsea is out of hiding, and it’s not of my doing. Now, to help her find the woman she’s been suppressing all these years.

We finish a two-mile walk with Chelsea leading the conversation the whole way. I never pressed her for information, content to answer all her questions. She had plenty, which makes sense. I already know a lot about her, including that she’s crazy about me.

The hard part will come next, convincing Chelsea she doesn’t have to protect herself from me. I can’t push, but I will prove I can be a safe place for her. I just don’t know how to do it yet. I mean, sure. I’ve got Caleb’s suggestion, but I don’t know how confident I am with trying to strongarm Chelsea or any woman.

Chelsea and I part in the parking lot, and I drive home to take care of some household chores. I grill a steak and bake a potato between folding loads of laundry and watching the Nats play the Braves. Afterward, I head to bed.

Friday morning, my platoon completes a five-mile run on the beach at Little Creek. We finish at the lighthouse and walk back. Most of us do, anyway. There isn’t a monster mash planned for today, and we’re not meeting at Knot Corp.

Five men of my squad have hot plans and are in a hurry to leave. They take off toward showers and clean clothes, while Duck and I stick with Fish's squad.

"How's the cover building going with Danforth?" Judge asks without an ounce of humor.

"It's going well." Given our unsuccessful dinner with Chelsea last week, I scan the group for Fish, Devil, and Wrench's reaction. "It's going surprisingly well. Chelsea just takes a while to warm up to new people. She and I make a good team."

Our group has just rounded the south corner at HQ when Commander O'Reily strides through the side door. He's headed straight for us. "Bennett, get cleaned up ASAP. You're with me."

I cut my eyes to Fish, who seems just as clueless as I am. "Yes, sir."

Fish pats me on the back, and I jog toward the gym, speeding through a shower. Instead of returning to HQ afterward, I find the commander waiting for me outside the gym in his Tahoe. He drives to Naval Air Station Oceana, circling the grounds to an open, empty hangar.

Or, not so empty. Dillan Knot, Chelsea, Birdie, Bastien, and Admiral Jameson wait inside the cavernous space. The admiral gestures us forward, in a hurry for whatever purpose he's brought us here. Commander O'Reilly and I hoof it toward the group, acknowledging those present with simple nods.

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“Harding has had the invitation for three days, and we haven’t heard a thing. It’s time to try something new. I’ll be attending a charity gala this evening, and Harding is expected to attend as well.” He points to Chelsea and me. “I want you two there. I want this bastard to see you together, interacting with government power players and military higher-ups. You two are to ignore Harding.”

“Wait. You don’t want us to meet Harding?” Chelsea questions.

“No,” Jameson confirms. “I’ll make sure he knows you’re there, and unless he’s an absolute dipshit, he’ll connect your names with the invitation. I’ll have a friend mention your reception and how disappointed they are that their schedule won’t allow them to go. Harding will be salivating to meet you by the time I’m finished. I’ll signal you to leave at that point. The man won’t be able to resist your offer then.”

“So, we’re playing hard to get.”

Admiral Jameson nods at me. “The man is an attention whore. It’ll drive him nuts that you aren’t begging to suck his dick. Anyway, I hope you two have your back stories ready because they’re gonna get tested tonight.”

Knot clears his throat, indicating he may not be entirely comfortable with this plan. I’m not happy with the short notice either, but if this doesn’t work and Harding doesn’t show, all the prep work we’ve done is for nothing.

“I’m sending the two of you with Birdie to pick out clothes for the evening. I wouldn’t make you do this together, except we’re on a short leash where time is concerned. You need every possible second to get in character. Once you have

something suitable to wear, Birdie will bring you to my house, where my wife Trish will have stylists on hand to get you ready for the event.”

The briefing volleys back to the admiral. “My goal is to approach Harding while he’s in relative quiet, but not directly. I only want to be within hearing distance. I’ll mention seeing you and talk about your role in the family’s business Birdie detailed.” The admiral waves the sheet of paper he’s holding. “We won’t be wearing radios, so you’ll have to watch me for cues.”

Chelsea nods. “We want him sucking up to us, not the other way around.”

“Exactly. Now, get out of here,” Jameson orders before glancing at his watch. “You’ve got six hours.”

Bash turns and walks toward one of Knot’s fleet vehicles. With a salute for the admiral and my commander, I turn to follow a few steps behind Chelsea and Birdie. Birdie takes the front passenger seat, leaving Chelsea and me to take the back.

“Where to first?” Bash asks.

Birdie pecks away at her phone for a few seconds, and driving directions appear on the SUV’s navigation screen. “Trish says to go here first.”

Bastien turns out of the private hangar entrance, and Birdie turns around in her seat. “Dr. Bennett, your father owns a successful practice in your hometown in Redding. As soon as Jackson retires at the end of the year, you’ll relocate there to take over ahead of your father’s retirement. You don’t have kids. You only have work and your new cause, which is ending the scourge of warmongering PMCs.”

Chelsea gives the intel specialist a clap. “Wow, Birdie. That was good. Maybe you should be the one acting this part.”

Bash jeers. “Hell no. Especially since there’s the chance she’d have to kiss that jackass back there.”

The atmosphere inside the SUV shifts instantly. Chelsea’s eyes widen. While I’m not opposed to the possibility of tasting her lips, Chelsea looks absolutely horrified at the prospect. I don’t want her to worry about it, so I consider the possibility out loud, directing my thoughts to Chelsea. “A fancy event like this would be all about appearances. I don’t see PDA being on the list of acceptable behavior. At the most, we’re talking a peck on the cheek, and that’s likely something you’ll see a lot of between the socialite wives. You have nothing to worry about. Although, I will be expected to hold your hand or put mine on you in other small ways. We should probably work on that today.”

I hold out my hand, palm up, in silent invitation. Chelsea stares at my wriggling fingers before her eyes shoot up to Birdie, who’s discreetly turned forward in her seat again. No longer having an audience, Chelsea frowns at my hand before swiveling her neck to peer out the window. A few seconds pass, and then her hand slides across the seat to rest on mine.

I hold on, gently caressing her skin for the rest of the drive, though Chelsea doesn’t look at me again.

God, I wish she didn’t hate this.

Chelsea

God, I wish I hated this.

Why is his hand so warm? Why do my fingers fit in his so well? Why does it have to feel so good to be touched like this?

I can't let Jackson see how much he affects me. If he sees, he'll have sway over my emotions, and I won't let anyone manipulate me again. So, what if you enjoy it? You still have a part to play. Be convincing. No one has to know how you really feel.

I turn slowly toward my temporary partner. Jackson's gaze is transparent and captivating. No mocking smirk exists to make me feel needy. No mask hides a scheming mind. Even if he was being coy, Jackson can't hurt me. I won't let him.

I'm again secure behind my protective wall and allow my fingers to entwine with his. Jackson's answering smile is luminous, and I almost jerk my hand away at his delighted response.

The vehicle stopping draws my eyes forward, and I'm glad to have a legitimate reason to let go of Jackson's hand. We're at a dress boutique, so I reach for my door handle. "So, this is Birdie and me. Where will you guys be?"

Bash puts the SUV in park and turns around. "You two need to work on being together in public and don't need an audience," he directs toward his best friend. To me, he mumbles, "Or a crutch."

"What he means is that Bash and I will be waiting in the car." Birdie hands me a black credit card bearing Knot's name. "The attendants know you're coming. We use them all the time. They know what we need to present and won't steer you wrong. Just go with what you like and feel good in."

My jaw drops. "You mean I have to shop for a dress with him?" I yelp, pointing to Jackson.

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Bash grins. “Well, you’re practicing shopping with your husband, right?”

“Oh shit,” I whisper.

Trying on dresses by myself is brutal. Having an extra set of eyes_male eyes_critiquing my body will be downright torture. Time’s wasting, and you’ve got a job to do, Marine. I jump out of the SUV to keep from saying so, and Jackson quickly follows me toward the store.

The gentlemanly SEAL rushes to catch up, placing his hand on my back while reaching for the door handle. He coos in my ear when I stiffen up. “Easy now. This is what I was talking about. I’ll be expected to behave this way tonight. If you cringe like that, you’ll blow our cover. I won’t touch you outside what’s socially acceptable. I promise.”

I suck in a shallow breath and force my body to relax. My mouth opens to make some sarcastic reply, but my brain blanks completely. I take one step and then another, driving my legs forward until met by a gaggle of attendants.

A tall, dark-skinned woman with sharp cheekbones and the bearing of royalty steps up to greet us. “You must be Chelsea and Jackson. My name is Amina. If you’ll follow me, I’ll get some measurements and get you into a robe so we can get started.”

Ten minutes later, I tug on the robe, making sure it’s closed up top and loose around my hips. The light color doesn’t hide the parts I would prefer, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I clench my jaw and step from the changing room to find Jackson and the beautiful attendant waiting. Next to her, I feel like an absolute dumpster fire. I

can't look at either of them right now.

Amina leads us around the store, talking of skin tones, lines, and ideas to best accentuate my athletic frame. She marks several dresses with a blue tag without me giving much input. Jackson surprises me by pointing one out, but I keep my thoughts to myself.

Amina tilts her head to study the dress, and Jackson says, "The color matches the lighter flecks in Chelsea's eyes."

Amina smiles at Jackson in approval and tags the dress. In no time, an ungodly number are tagged, and I march back to the changing rooms as happily as someone headed to the gallows.

Jackson settles on a plush chair facing a round dais while Amina guides me to a dressing cubicle. Amina and her team set out to collect the numerous dresses, and I change into the strapless bra and thong laid out for me.

With the lingerie in place, I accept the first experiment, a navy corset dress with a flowing A-line skirt. The top is sheer with strategically placed appliques and ribbon at the boning. Pretty, but not my style.

Amina zips me up, and I walk out to look at myself in the full-length mirrors. Jackson had been joking with the other attendants but went eerily silent when I emerged.

My steps falter at the longing in his eyes, but Amina ushers me forward, gesturing to the dais. Jackson stands, his expression unguarded as he walks a circle around me. I fidget under his intense scrutiny, wishing to be anywhere else.

When Jackson makes another lap around the platform, I brace myself to hear what's wrong with the dress or how it looks on me, but instead, I hear, "That... You..."

Jackson clears his throat and tries again. “Wow.”

My cheeks redden, and I look away to see Amina studying my reflection. “It does look good, but I think we can do better.”

I try on dress after dress, with Jackson growing increasingly entranced with each one. I expected the exact opposite. He’s not just a spectator, either. Jackson offers input on each selection. Some dresses he likes better than others and says so, but not once has he made a negative comment about my body or the way a dress looks on me.

When I get to the one Jackson picked out, I find myself hoping it fits and feels as good, if not better, than the others. The dress is light blue, asymmetric, and has a gemstone flower on the shoulder. It cinches in the waist and flares at the hip, the heavier fabric flaring softly at my feet.

Amina zips me up and exits the small room. I turn toward the narrow mirror and swish my hips. The thick fabric isn’t as heavy as expected, and I love the color. I feel damn good in the dress.

For that reason alone, I don’t want to walk out that door. What if the look isn’t what Jackson imagined? What if I don’t wear it well?

When I’ve kept the audience waiting too long, Amina interrupts my paranoid musing. “Chelsea, is everything alright?”

“It’s fine. I’m coming out.”

I open the door to hear Amina say, “Oh yes. That is the one.”

“It’s perfect,” Jackson declares. “We’ll take that one and the red one.”

The man presumes to choose for me? My glare darts to his, finding his eyes trained on my face. Jackson's grin grows in response to my annoyance. He knows what I'm thinking and shrugs. "Those were the only two you wore a smile with."

I will my face not to react, even though my heart is on the verge of melting. "Yes," I croak. "I think these will work fine."

The gowns are packaged while I put my uniform back on over the new lingerie. The bra and panties I wore earlier go into a separate bag, and we're soon on our way. "That was faster than I expected," Bash says when we return to the car.

Birdie looks back and asks, "Find something you like?"

Though I don't know why, I fear admitting Jackson picked out my dresses. I give Birdie the safest answer by simply nodding. I also use both hands to hold onto the bag containing my underwear so Jackson won't reach for me.

Bash starts the engine, and Jackson takes the bag from my hand. He slides closer, picks up my hand, and places it on his thigh. I keep still to avoid feeling the firm muscles beneath my fingertips.

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Jackson reads me too easily. He stretches his hand over mine, gently kneading until I relax my fingers. God, touching him feels good. Dammit.

I pull away quickly when we arrive at the men's store. Jackson leads me inside with his arm around my waist this time. That simple, innocent contact overwhelms my brain, exactly what I feared would happen. His grip is solid, possessive. Even the light drumming of his fingers on my hip dares me to try and escape. The problem is that I don't want to, but he can't know that.

A dapper gentleman welcomes us with a measuring tape draped around his neck. He invites us in, and I'm deposited on a comfortable bench while Jackson gets the Amina-style treatment from the tailor.

Jackson's measurements are taken, with him grinning when asked to flex his arms. The SEAL winks at me when he catches me watching. When satisfied, the tailor drapes the tape around his neck and scampers off, picking this and that. Jackson hops down and sits next to me on the fancy settee. He doesn't tease or make conversation, and there's no awkward silence to fill.

When the tailor returns, Jackson pats my thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze before disappearing into the changing room. My breath escapes my lungs in a heated rush, and my eyes drift closed. I'm picturing that same hand wrapped around my throat.

A flurry of goosebumps spread across my body at the visual. My imagination itches to imagine what would happen next, but a voice dashes my fantasy. "What do you think, miss?"

My eyes fly open, and I hope what I was envisioning isn't plastered all over my face. Jackson stands in a sleek suit, adjusting his cuffs while the tailor kneels to pin the slacks. I have to say, the man looks just as good in a suit as he does in his uniform.

Jackson watches me closely, his hopeful grin telling me he's anxiously awaiting my appraisal. "That works. It's fine. You look...good."

He winks, which I should find corny and annoying. Instead, it's playful and cute.

The tailor finishes with Jackson and rushes him back into the dressing room. He has Jackson try on a few different styles of tuxedos. The sight proves to be almost too much for my self-control. Jackson looked good in a suit, but Jackson in a tux is utterly fucking devastating. My willpower will definitely be tested on this mission.

We finish here faster than at the boutique, though we take nothing with us. The made-to-measure tux will be a rush job for Spain, and the suit is receiving what alterations can be completed in time for tonight. Jackson had asked about wearing his dress uniform, but Knot shot him down. While maintaining Jackson's true vocation, we don't want to flaunt it.

Bash suggests getting some lunch when we're back in the car again. When Jackson reaches out for my hand this time, I don't hesitate. His touch just feels too damned good. Even if just for a little while, I refuse to think about the consequences...until I catch Bash watching through the rearview mirror.

Chelsea

The afternoon goes by in a blur. Jackson and I are pulled in different directions as soon as we walk into Dillan Knot's enormous house. Knot takes Jackson to brief him on the venue and discuss further plans with the admiral. I'm left out simply because hair, nails, and makeup take forever, and the techs are waiting to transform me into

the socialite of the century.

Four hours later, I'm waxed, smoothed, painted, pampered, and styled to within an inch of my life. Apart from feeling like an overworked lab rat, I look amazing. I'm genuinely stunned by the reflection staring back at me when the technicians finish.

A knock sounds on the door of my borrowed suite, but I can't look away from the mirror to see who it is. A gasp and mumbled curse have me turning around to see Jackson in a similar state of polish, minus the makeup and nails.

He's openly gawking until I prop a hand on my hip. "If you keep making that face, it'll freeze like that."

Jackson shakes his head and smiles sadly. "I'm jealous of myself. Here I am, staring at the most beautiful woman in Virginia, and I can only pretend she's mine."

His words paralyze me. I don't know how to respond. Luckily, Knot and his wife save me from doing so when they push past Jackson to enter the room.

"Oh my God," Trish squeals. "You look perfect."

For the first time in my adult life, I agree.

Knot clears his throat and nudges Jackson with an elbow before addressing me. "Let's get you up to speed and on the road."

The four of us walk to the living room, where Knot details the evening's plan. Except for his reaction upstairs, Jackson hasn't spoken a word.

"I set up an account with twenty-five thousand dollars for the fundraiser. Don't be assholes but make a splash. Remember, we want this guy sniffing after you for

campaign donations. It's casino night, so play what you like and act natural. The limo will drop you back off at Knot Corp. later. Jackson, Wrench took the liberty of hotwiring your truck. It's parked next to Chelsea's ride."

Knot ushers Jackson and me out the door, where a black stretch limo waits. The CEO of Knot Corp. regards us carefully but doesn't voice what's in his eyes. He doesn't think we look believable.

I cozy up to Jackson, bringing a hand to his chest and leaning against his shoulder. Jackson picks up on what I'm doing, wrapping an arm around me and kissing the top of my head. I let my eyes drift closed momentarily and then check my boss again. "That better?"

He grunts. "Make sure you stay in character the whole time."

Knot walks off, and Jackson releases me to open the door. "Like I said. Hell of an actress."

I elbow him playfully and step inside the lavish interior. The driver closes the door behind my fake husband, and I take a moment to admire my loaner wedding ring. The engagement ring is not one I would ever pick. It's way too big and flashy for my practical style. I suppose it will serve its purpose, which is to attract attention. Jackson wears a much simpler platinum band.

"Is there anything else I need to know about you before stepping out of this car again?" Jackson asks. "Like maybe an allergy I should watch out for?"

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“Nope. I’m only allergic to social gatherings. What about you?”

Jackson laughs at my self-deprecating comment. “None for me, though, like Bastien Laurent, I have an awful reaction to bullshit.”

“Great. We should turn around now, then. You do realize all the ass-kissing and posturing you’ll have to do tonight, right?”

“Not me. You,” he says with a tap on my nose. “I get to go as myself. You’re the heiress who saddled herself with a roughneck.”

Assuming my best hostess face and voice, I cup Jackson’s cheek. “Aww, honey. I’m sure you have some worthwhile qualities buried somewhere deep down.”

Jackson’s eyes turn feral. He leans into my hand and whispers, “Yeah, I know a good woman when I see one.”

Jackson

Chelsea drops her head and turns to look out the window. Maybe I said too much. At that point, I couldn’t help it. Spending the day with her, talking and touching, pushed me to my breaking point.

We’re both quiet for the rest of the ride. I reach out and touch Chelsea’s shoulder near the venue’s entrance. “Ready?”

The stunning woman turns, and I come face-to-face with the chameleon. “Of course,

darling.”

The limo stops, and the driver opens the back door. Second nature has me scanning our surroundings before I climb out and offer Chelsea my hand. Once she’s out and upright, I place a hand on her lower back and steer us toward the door.

Chelsea’s pale dress glows in the moonlight. I glance down at her face, mesmerized by the stars sparkling in her dark-blue eyes.

My phone rings, so I stop to check, answering immediately when I see Admiral Jameson’s name on the screen. I show Chelsea and step away from the river of finely dressed people to take the call in private. As I walk away, someone calls out for my partner.

“Chelsea?”

I freeze mid-step but answer the Admiral. “Bennett, here.”

The old salt gruffs, “I’ll be late. We’re caught behind a wreck. I don’t want you loitering outside, but I don’t want you mingling yet, either.”

A suavely dressed man approaches Chelsea. I answer the admiral curtly, wanting to get back to her. “We’ll lurk at the edges until you arrive.”

“Carry on, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir.”

The man who called out to Chelsea reaches her and stands close despite her stiff posture. Chelsea’s behavior triggers alarm bells in my head, and I rush back to where she’s waiting. I come up behind her in time for the man to say, “Chelsea, I thought

that was you.”

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be kissing ass in California?” she asks sweetly.

This guy seems to be bothering Chelsea, which means our cover is at risk. More than just protecting our objective, I bristle, ready to defend my friend.

“No, actually. I’m vice president of legal for the Denton Corporation. Our company supports this organization, and our CEO couldn’t attend the gala, so I’m here.” The prick shamelessly looks Chelsea up and down. “You look fantastic. You know, we would be married if you had put in this kind of work in college.”

The fuck? Chelsea tenses, shame keeping her frozen. That’s it_time for this jackass to go. I slither up to Chelsea’s back, ignoring the asshole. After pressing against her, I glide my ringed hand across Chelsea’s middle while leaning in to kiss her neck. “Sorry, my love. That was the admiral.” Standing upright and pretending to notice the man for the first time, I ask, “Who’s your friend?”

Chelsea takes a deep breath and answers with one tightly spoken word. “Trace.”

I experience a rush of thoughts at hearing the name, mostly torture, murder, and vengeance. My instinct is to attack. I’ve never wanted to more.

Despite his expensive suit and flashy watch, the man before me is less than impressive. Trace Newel ignores me completely and leers at the woman he once destroyed. The longer he stares, the more Chelsea shrinks.

“Oh. The limp dick from college.”

Newel fights to remain poised, and seethes. “And you are?”

“I’m Chelsea’s husband, and you’re leaving.”

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Newel opens his mouth to argue, and Chelsea lurches forward to defend me. I stop them both. “Nah-ah-ah. We don’t need to resort to threats, sweetheart. Not when this man’s a coward.”

Newel’s face turns an ugly, mottled red, and I lean forward hostilely when he opens his mouth again. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to leave for your own protection. I get a little crazy when I drink, especially if someone bothers my wife. And you bother my wife.”

The man pulls an envelope from his breast pocket. “I’m an invited guest with a sizeable donation. It’s you who should leave.”

I snatch the envelope from his hand and rip it open. “Five thousand dollars from such an illustrious corporation? Please. We’re giving five times that.” The check goes into my pocket, and I lean toward Chelsea’s ex again. “Run along now.”

“Or what? You’ll rough me up?”

“Hell no, but I’ll stand guard while Chelsea deals with you. As Marine Force Recon herself, she’s probably killed more men than I have.”

Newel turns to the beautiful woman with one brow notched high.

“That sounds like a great idea, Pin,” she says, using my shortened call sign.

Newel’s eyes widen, and he steps back.

“Sorry I’m late, Lieutenant,” is spoken behind us.

Admiral Jameson approaches dressed in his class-A whites. “Traffic was a bitch. Is this a friend of yours?” he asks, gesturing to the man frozen in horror.

“This is an old acquaintance of Chelsea. He was just leaving to avoid a scene with me that my admiral wouldn’t approve of.”

Jameson nods thoughtfully. “If he’s bothering you or the lady, be my guest. As your admiral, I promise I won’t notice. Just wait until I’m inside to provide me with plausible deniability.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a sneer.

The admiral disappears inside, and I step toward Newel. “Get the hell out of here with your pride intact. If you walk through those doors, I guarantee you’ll be emasculated publicly and dragged out by security. I can do this many ways.”

Newel sniffs and swings his glare toward Chelsea again. “You may have trimmed down, but you’re still trashy, evidenced by the company you keep.”

My fist clenches, ready to fly, but Chelsea steps between us and grabs my hand. “He’s not worth it, Jackson.”

I laugh in the man’s face, making a show of finding him lacking. “You’re right, Major.”

The military ranks seem to be the nudge needed to get the prick moving. Newel scurries toward the parking lot while Chelsea and I watch. “By the way, what was your rank when you retired?” I ask her.

“Captain.”

I laugh and turn Chelsea toward the door. “Of course, it was.”

Chelsea

The ballroom is wall-to-wall filled with Norfolk’s wealthiest, most powerful, and influential. I don’t fit into any of those categories, but I can fake it with the best of them. Curious glances are cast our way as Jackson escorts me toward the bar with a hand at my back.

The focal point of the high-class venue is the antique bar spanning half the right side. A stage takes up the left side and is done up to resemble an old Gaslamp theatre. A dance floor is set up in front of the stage. Dining tables fill the center of the room, and the casino area is on the far end.

Just inside the entrance are table displays showcasing the organization’s charitable endeavors. And to add a little competition and showmanship to the evening, a projector displays a real-time top-ten list of tonight’s donors. Top billing right now sits at nine thousand dollars. That’d be a surefire way to attract attention.

Jackson catches me looking and whispers, “Good idea, but we’ll wait until Harding is confirmed to be here to see it. Until then, let’s do a lap and then decide where to stake out.”

I don’t argue because Jackson’s plan is precisely what I would suggest. It seems the man is a fair match regarding battlefield strategy. Well, Chels, he is a SEAL platoon leader. They didn’t promote him for his tight ass.

Jackson and I mix and mingle our way past the bar to the back, noting the various politicians and gods of business playing roulette, craps, and blackjack. As we leave

the casino area, Jackson bends to whisper in my ear, nuzzling his nose against my cheek to hide his motive. “You’re being eye-fucked by at least four men right now. We could use that to our advantage.”

Reaching up to grab Jackson’s lapel, I tug him down to me. “I watched a dozen women try to picture you beneath that suit. How do you want to play this?”

A rumble sounds in his throat, and then he says, “Dance with me.”

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I release my fake husband, who takes my hand, leading me to the dance floor. “My dancing skills will test your acting mettle,” Jackson warns as he drapes my hand over his shoulder and takes my waist.

I lift onto my toes long enough to say, “If you slip up, I’ll pretend I stepped on your foot.”

The music is soft and romantic, and I try to focus on anything except the feel of Jackson’s hard body. He’s warm and sure, and I fit perfectly in his arms. Jackson’s rich smoke scent only adds to his allure. If I weren’t careful, I could get lost here. The man is more than intoxicating.

We’re barely a minute into the dance when Jackson murmurs against my temple, “I’ve just spotted Harding.”

His voice snaps me out of my reverie and reminds me not to get caught up in the moment. I clear my throat and glance toward the top donor display. “Let’s make our donation and put eyes on the admiral.”

Minutes later, we’re heading toward the bar as applause erupts around the room. The leaderboard just changed and now displays Jackson and Chelsea Bennett on top by fifteen thousand dollars.

We pass Admiral Jameson on our way, who grins and nods. He seems to recognize the impromptu signal and begins stage two of our plan.

Jackson orders the drinks we favored at our usual bar, and we chat up a couple we

saw talking to Harding. The admiral joins us a few minutes later. “Lieutenant, good to see you again. Is this your lovely bride I’ve been waiting to meet?”

Jackson introduces me and even includes the couple we’d been speaking to. When Jameson looks my way, he winks. He was successful in laying out the trap. Now, we set the bait.

Dinner is announced at seven-thirty, and Jackson and I follow directions to our assigned table. The place is packed. How the admiral managed to secure a spot for us, I have no idea. We don’t know a soul here, but my people-pleasing persona will hopefully serve me well in my role.

Jackson looks completely at home as himself. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t jealous. How nice it must be to be comfortable in one’s skin.

While I make small talk with the women at the table, Jackson endeavors to make them jealous—a late addition to our plan. It’s the women who will remember and be talking about us in their social circles. Jackson chats up the men but never without his hand on me somewhere.

His arm, at times, is draped across my chair with his fingers caressing my bare arm. Occasionally, he’ll walk his hand up and circle my neck with his thumb over my pulse point or play with escaped tendrils of hair.

After the main course, Jackson slips his hand from the table to rest it on my thigh. My legs are crossed, meaning his arm stretches across my body. The possessive gesture is incredibly intimate. The men don’t notice, but the women drool over the flex of Jackson’s muscular arm as he massages my leg.

My face reddens for all the attention we’re getting. If Jackson asks about it later, that’s the story I’m sticking to. The fact that my heart rate has kicked up and my

breaths are coming faster has nothing to do with thinking about the things this man could do to my body.

What Jackson's doing right now is for show, but only my brain seems to understand that. My skin only knows an intense craving for more. I fight my body's response, but my fragile control shatters when Jackson shifts to the other leg. He finds the slit in my dress, taking advantage of the access to tuck his fingers between my thighs.

At my sharp inhale, Jackson turns, and his jaw clenches. His eyes drop to my lips, which are suddenly parched. My tongue darts out to wet them, and Jackson's eyes go savage.

The clanking silverware and murmuring voices fade until the rest of the room disappears. I become lost in the man's gaze. The blatant desire I see there weakens my resolve. I ache to taste his lips, but the emcee saves me from myself by announcing the official start of casino night. Our tablemates rise from their chairs, and Jackson lifts his hand from my leg with a smirk.

That bastard knows exactly what he's doing to me. I glare at my prick of a partner through narrowed eyes. All I get for my tantrum is another wink. Bastard.

I plaster on my fakest smile and let Jackson pull me from my seat. To get a needed point across, as well as a bit of revenge, I lean close to whisper in his ear. "We want them to notice us, yes, and maybe even be jealous but not enough to research us." And then I lick his ear.

Jackson freezes and swallows audibly. He answers quietly like he's straining to get the words out. "You're right. I'll take it down a notch."

My mind may be relieved, but the rest of me is not. "Let's finish this show and get out of here."

Jackson

The warmth of Chelsea's skin sears my fingers as I guide her to the casino area. Her dress dips low in the back where my hand rests, and self-control is a struggle when my fingers burn to dip inside.

Shouts and groans fill the air from the night's winners and losers. Chelsea and I walk a lap around the room and stop a table away from where Harding watches a spinning roulette wheel.

We've landed at a craps table, and I trade in some of our play money for five thousand in chips. I bet, and Chelsea watches, though she doesn't follow the game too closely. A few minutes in, a tap on my shoulder has me turning around. Admiral Jameson stands behind me, wearing the smile of a casual acquaintance. Right behind him, staring at us, is Congressman Harding.

The Admiral bows slightly. "Lieutenant, if you don't mind, I'd like to dance with your lovely wife. I promise not to make any moves on her."

Jameson's back is to Harding, and his expression clearly communicates the move is calculated. I play along, grinning widely. "Of course, sir." With a wink for Chelsea, I add, "And I'm not worried. She knows who she belongs to."

I may be pressing my luck with my pretend wife, but the risk proves worth it when Chelsea fails to mask the fleeting appearance of desire in her wide eyes at the comment, much more than the light touches I've employed all night. Well, I'll be damned. Maybe Caleb was right.

"Sir? Sir, it's your turn to shoot."

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I turn back around to the table, accepting the offered dice. I launch them, not caring what I shoot. I've already won the night.

My first roll sets the point at eight, which I make on my third roll. I've made the betters happy, but I'm done. Eyes trained on Chelsea, I walk away from the table and my winnings in search of a more interesting game.

Chelsea may think herself a pawn, but she's the queen on this board. And the king is about to stake his claim.

I leave the gaming area, headed straight for the dance floor. Admiral Jameson dances respectfully with Chelsea, but I don't like seeing another man's hands on my...on her. "May I cut in?" I ask when I reach the pair.

"Your timing is impeccable," the senior officer answers. "I believe my work here is done." To Chelsea, he says, "Your idea was the right call. I'll leave you to update the lieutenant."

Admiral Jameson walks away toward the exit, and I turn and take Chelsea into my arms. The band ends one song and begins a softer number, but I'm dancing to Chelsea's melody. She molds herself to me, no longer nervous in her role as my wife.

I dip my head and breathe her in, whispering in her ear. To those around us, we're simply sharing an intimate moment. "What was all that about?"

"We reaffirmed that approaching Harding tonight would be a mistake. I've seen him watching us. He's intrigued and impressed. We can't accomplish anything more if we

talk to him, but there's a chance I_one of us could turn him off if we do. Now that we've got his attention, we should get out of here before he tries speaking to us."

"You make good sense, but we don't want to arouse suspicion. If we're planning to split now, we need to give these people a good reason."

"Like what?"

I rest my forehead against Chelsea's. "Trust me?"

She laughs nervously. "Um, do I have a choice?"

"That's a no."

I stop on the edge of the dance floor and tip her chin up. Then, staring straight into Chelsea's eyes, I kiss her plump lips. The reluctant, standoffish woman stiffens at first but then melts into me.

My fingers work upward to knot in Chelsea's hair, and I pull her head to the side to deepen the kiss. One taste of her is all it takes, and I'm fucking gone. I'm bordering on obscene here and need all of my self-discipline to pull away from Chelsea's mouth.

Her eyes are closed, and her hands are fisted in my jacket when I brush my lips over the shell of her ear. "Based on the looks we're getting, the plan worked."

"Huh?" she mumbles.

I chuckle and take Chelsea's hand, guiding her toward the exit. She takes a deep breath of the cool night air when we clear the door, and I do the same. As much as I want to comment on Chelsea's condition, I think better of it. She would kick me in

the nuts, which would be excruciating, considering I have a raging hard-on after that kiss.

For my own safety, I keep my mouth shut and use my phone to text the limo driver. We settle in the private cabin after the successful mission, and the driver takes us away. Chelsea has not spoken since that kiss, but at least she's not shifting away from me. I take her hand in mine, noting the contrast between her smooth skin and the hard-earned callouses.

"We're not on the clock anymore. You can stop acting," she says, pulling her hand back.

My heart hammers in my chest because I'm done tiptoeing around this insane attraction we share. "I'm not acting, but you know that already."

"I don't. I mean. I know you're not. Uh, shit."

I lean in, brushing my lips across her cheek. "So which is it? You don't think I'm acting, or you don't think I'm serious."

Chelsea shivers but then pushes me back with a hand on my sternum. "It doesn't matter. I'm not here for either. We work together temporarily. We're not married, not dating, not even friends. Hell, I don't even know you."

My temper flares, but I force myself to project calm. Even so, I'm not totally successful in keeping the hurt from my voice. "You know me well enough to distinguish me from the assholes in your past." I lean back into my seat, dislodging her hand. "And like it or not, we are friends."

Chelsea ignores me, so I change the subject. "What do you think will happen next?"

She still won't look at me. "I could give you hell for the rest of the ride, or you could behave and keep all your parts to yourself."

"Point made, but I was talking about the congressman."

Even with the low cabin lights, I notice Chelsea's face glowing red. I think the pink of her cheeks is my new favorite color. "Oh. My gut tells me Harding took the bait. He approached both of us during the night but got cut off each time. That we were such big donors and so popular in the room would have interested him. That he couldn't speak to us and that we weren't fawning over him gives us the illusion of power and prestige. I wouldn't be surprised to hear he's accepted the invitation by morning."

"That means we'll need to practice our hosting routine," I tease.

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Chelsea rolls her eyes. “I think you’ve practiced enough.

You’re right. I’m ready to put my hands on you for real.

Chelsea

Anticipation is high the following day. Word got around about the gala, and instead of our usual Friday antics, the expanded team is packed in the war room waiting for news. However, neither Knot nor O’Reilly are here yet.

My ass is planted in a chair across the room from Bash and the rest of my team because Jackson is seated with them. My distance likely paints me as a chicken, but I prefer to think of it as self-discipline. I don’t trust myself around that man after last night. Jackson is a force of nature, and the more I’m around him, the harder it is to fight his charm.

Jackson hasn’t given me any reason to equate him to Trace, at least not yet. He might not be out to use me, but he’ll walk once he sees the mess inside. I’ve seen this script play out too many times to believe otherwise.

Even Bastien looks at me differently these days. Once he learned my foundation had a crack, things have been different at work. We used to have an easy camaraderie. I would kid around, and he would snicker or tell me to knock it off. Now, Bash seems to put great effort into navigating our partnership. Awkwardness fogs our interactions.

I can confidently say that being handled with kid gloves is even worse than being

ridiculed. I miss my friend. I could have seen myself becoming close with Birdie, but loyalty was never an expectation of mine. I assume she'll follow Bastien's lead and drift away like he has. Like everyone in my life has.

I tuck into the corner behind some of Sadie's teammates when the war room door opens with Knot, Commander O'Reilly, and Admiral Jameson on the other side. The room quietens, and the admiral sets the tone right out of the gate. "You leave for Spain in one week."

Zach from Sadie's team pats me on the shoulder, I suppose in recognition for my idea. I disregard the gesture and concentrate on Jameson's briefing.

"I'll dispatch the SEAL team to a nearby embassy for a fake security bulletin courtesy of the CIA. The rest is up to you to figure out. And with that, I take my leave. I don't want anyone outside this team to be privy to mission details." Admiral Jameson scans the room, pausing when his gaze finds mine. The officer tips his head in silent recognition and exits the room.

"You heard the man," Commander O'Reilly says. "We've got seven days to button this up. Let's start from the top."

Lieutenant Chris Hill, or Fish as I've come to know him, stands and takes us through the security plan. Wrench demonstrates his limo surveillance equipment in his New York accent. Sadie outlines individual assignments. Some will pose as guests, some as servers, and others as security guards.

When she's finished, O'Reilly gestures to Jackson and me. "You two are all set?"

Birdie speaks before I have the chance to stammer out a response. "I've worked with our friend from the CIA on scripting a few scenarios and questions. I'll work Chelsea and Jackson through those each day until deployment."

“Good.” The naval commander turns to his friend and former teammate. “Warden, where are we on location setup?”

My boss answers, “We’re covered. I’ve got a call scheduled with Sambi in an hour. I want you and the team leaders to be there. Bennett and Danforth, you’re with Birdie. Everyone else is dismissed. Tomorrow, we begin rehearsing.”

Once more, the room clears of everyone except Birdie, Jackson, and me. Birdie’s eyes bounce back and forth between us when I’m slow to move. With a sigh of resignation, I rise and cross the floor to join them.

“Okay,” Birdie says, handing out folders to Jackson and me. “We’ve covered a bunch of likely scenarios and ways to steer them toward the information we want. Of course, we can’t anticipate everything. You’ll have to be prepared to improv. Hopefully, there’s enough here for you to latch onto something to steer conversations back to where we want them.”

Birdie opens her own folder. “Admiral Jameson reported that Harding was checking you out, Chelsea. If he’s into you, we can play up that angle.”

I roll my eyes. “Doubt it. I’m sure he was more interested in campaign contributions than copping a feel.”

“Either one works in our favor,” she says, not missing a beat.

Placing the folder on my lap, I open it and read the first few lines on page one. Chelsea is soft and pliant toward the congressman. Openly flirt when Jackson isn’t around.

Jackson’s fists clench around the folder he’s holding, his playful grin nowhere to be seen. He’s reading the same thing.

“I...I don’t think this will work,” I say.

Birdie shrugs. “It’s only one of many suggestions. You’ll have to practice them all and pick one on the fly once you feel this guy out. Skip to the next one.”

Page two has me coming off as an activist, passionate about eliminating war contractors. I flip to the next and the next, growing more nauseous with each new persona.

“Alright,” Birdie chirps. “I’m Harding, and I’ve just walked in. You’re standing to the side greeting guests, and security introduces me to you.”

Jackson runs through a basic introduction as his usual self. He gestures to me and gives my name, but I freeze with my eyes glued to the paper.

“Chelsea?” Birdie prods.

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Instead of seeing words on a page, I hear an argument in my head. “You’re a certified asshole.”

“And you’re one hell of an actress.”

That confrontation with Jackson derails any possibility of getting through this, especially after last night. Jackson must read my mind as he says, “I think it might be a good idea if Chelsea and I get a chance to read through these before trying to act them out.”

Birdie tilts her head in thought. “Good point. I’ve worked on them so much that I’ve probably memorized everything. The precise scripting isn’t as important as the overall leading. You guys read through and work on these. Change whatever you want to be more natural.”

Birdie stands to leave, but not before I catch the concerned look she aims my way.

Jackson closes and locks the door behind her and kneels in front of my chair. “Talk to me, Chelsea.”

I shake my head, embarrassed about falling apart over a simple assignment.

Jackson shifts and then, “Eyes up, Marine!”

On their own, my face and eyes lift in response to the command.

“You were given an order. What’s keeping you from carrying it out?”

I've never heard Jackson use that tone, though I'm sure his men have plenty. I drop my eyes to the papers in my lap, refusing to look at him.

Jackson barks, "I asked you a question, Captain Danforth."

My eyes squeeze shut briefly before I pick up the papers and hold them between my fingers in disgust. "I've been every one of these people in my life, but I don't know who the hell I am now."

Jackson grabs my face with both hands and slams his mouth against mine.

Jackson

Chelsea's kiss is a spiritual experience. Every touch of her lips is a divine encounter, an altar I'd gladly sacrifice myself on every day for the rest of my life.

I don't know how I got here, how I fell so fast, and I no longer care. This woman belongs to me, and I'll wait as long as it takes for her to accept it.

Chelsea pulls away and brings a hand up to cover her mouth. "What are you doing?"

"Tell me what you're thinking. Right now."

"I..."

"No. Don't stop to think. Give it to me."

Chelsea sighs, and the sound couldn't be more erotic. "Warm."

Her eyes are closed, but she's not hiding. Her face screams her emotions.

“That’s good. What else?” I nearly beg.

“Why?”

“That’s not a thought. That’s a question. I don’t want questions. I want a reaction.”

Chelsea’s eyes spring open. “You want my reaction? Okay. How’s this? Suspicion. Curiosity. Longing. Wariness. Insecurity.”

Her voice grew quieter with each word until she looked away and whispered the last. And now, we get to the heart of the matter. I’m confused, though. I thought we’d turned a corner.

My gut reaction is to swear that I would never hurt her, but I don’t. Words mean nothing to someone who was manipulated and hurt by them. And as much as I want to unpack each part of Chelsea’s whispered confession, now isn’t the time to do it. Chelsea needs an out.

“While I’m intrigued by the longing part, I figure it’s time to get back to work. You say you’ve been all these women over the years. Show me what you’ve got. And you can stop claiming we’re not friends because you know we are.”

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Chelsea disagrees but doesn't argue or run away. That has to be a good sign, so I begin running through the opening lines for the first persona in the stack. This was the one that set her off earlier.

"Let's skip this one," she insists.

"Why?"

"Because once I assume one of these personalities, there's no changing. Me flirting with this guy won't do anything but turn him off, and then where the hell will we be?"

"I know why you think so, but you're wrong. There isn't a man alive who wouldn't turn his head to watch you walk by. And with an ego like Harding's, he would not only want women to fawn over him, he'd expect it. Now stop stalling. We've got work to do."

Chelsea picks up the folder and pulls out the first script, reading through the lines. Some out loud, some in her head. She ad-libs a bit, and I do my best to keep up, scribbling down notes for Birdie. By the end, I'm amazed at Chelsea's ability to build a character and assume that role.

Chelsea views her acting skills as a survival technique, but I recognize the raw talent. Not only does her voice's tone change, but her posture, body language, and even her accent to a degree.

We wrap up with the character she's the least comfortable with, the lonely wife

starved for affection. This one takes the longest. “Ugh. I hate this bitch, and she only exists on paper.”

I put my notes down and relax my shoulders to avoid appearing critical. “This one is a real sticking point for you. In all your time with Newel, did you never crave a deeper connection, a genuine loving touch from someone who couldn’t live without you?”

“No,” she answers, her tone flat and matter-of-fact.

“No? Really?”

Chelsea rolls her eyes. “Really, no. Is that so hard to believe?”

I cross my arms and answer, “Kind of.”

I do my best to ignore Chelsea’s chin wobble. Otherwise, I’ll fold and stop her from responding.

After a long breath, she finally says, “I didn’t wish for more because I believed I wouldn’t get it. I was conditioned to think I didn’t deserve it.”

Again, I’m fighting violent urges to find and hurt people from Chelsea’s past, but that won’t help her. I focus all my energy on the Here and Now. “What do you wish for today, right this moment?”

Chelsea looks straight into my eyes for the first time without being made to. “I want to be enough.”

Taking a risk and her hand, I open my mouth to reply, but Chelsea stops me. “I want to be enough for me.” Then, before I’m allowed to respond, her eyes become

inquisitive, and she tilts her head to study me. “What is it you want?”

You. I want you.

Since I can't give that response, I say, “To be wanted by someone instead of just needed. I want love, and I want to find it with a woman who's real and not obsessed with society's bullshit idea of perfection. I want someone to laugh with. I want a woman to critique bad movies with and, at the end, nibble popcorn crumbs off one another. And after all that, I want fire. Give me a woman who makes me want to work for it. I want sweat dripping down my quivering muscles. I want her to leave me crawling.”

“That's...ah,” Chelsea squeaks, clearly not expecting my answer. “That's awfully specific.”

“It's a good thing I know where to find it,” I rasp, my desire unmistakable.

Chelsea's mouth goes slack. “Jackson...” She shakes her head. “I don't know how to get through to you, but you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm a social mutant, a defunct pariah. I don't get to keep people. Ever. Not even...” Chelsea exhales heavily and looks away. “Not even Bastien.”

For a brief moment, I'm in danger of my head exploding. There's no way she's saying... Though my heart is pounding, I keep my mouth shut, hoping Chelsea's not about to tell me she's in love with my best friend.

She winces at an unpleasant memory and continues without encouragement. “Bash hasn't had much to say since the beer conversation. Like everyone else, he sees how damaged I am and how much baggage I carry and doesn't want to deal with the drama. It's fine. I'm used to it, but that doesn't mean I enjoy the experience.”

Fear becomes rage, and I breathe slowly and stand before I say something we both might regret. Chelsea doesn't try to stop me or even ask where I'm going when I turn and unlock the door to leave. The woman is indeed used to being abandoned. That and only that gives me pause. "Would you excuse me for a minute?" I growl through clenched teeth. I need to have a word with Bastien.

I don't know where to find him in this big, damned building, so I check the parking lot to see if his truck is even still here. It is, so I call him. "Where the hell are you?" I demand as soon as the call connects.

Curious and apprehensive, he answers, "In the cafeteria, having lunch."

I don't remember how to get there from here. "Where the fuck is that? Forget it. Don't you have somewhere in this building where I can legally kick your ass?"

The dining hall sounds quieten. I assume because Bastien covered his mouth and the phone. "Whoa! Hold up. What the hell did I do?"

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“Where, Laurent?” I roar.

“Shit,” he grumbles. “The training room, but I’m not volunteering for a beat-down unless you give me a damned good reason.”

Calm but determined, I say, “Okay. I’ll come kick your ass in the cafeteria.”

I end the call and approach the first person I run into. “How do I get to the cafeteria?”

The timid corporate-type woman points to the stair door and stutters through directions. “Down one floor. You’ll see a sign.”

The door bounces off the wall when I shove through, likely scaring the woman in the hall. On the way down, I run into Bash on the mid-floor landing. This works just fine. I slam him against the wall and snarl. “What is your problem? You won’t talk to your partner after learning what she went through. Doesn’t that lump you in with the rest of the assholes from her past?”

Bash rolls his eyes, making me want to imprint his face on the block wall. “Oh yeah. I forgot you’re so perfect that you don’t understand the shame I might feel because Chelsea felt the need to hide her real self from me for two years. If His Highness would permit me...” Bash reaches into his pocket and produces a folded stack of papers. “I was working out what to say to her in a letter, so I didn’t fuck things up any worse than I already have.”

I look down at the papers in his hand and instantly let the man go. I clear my throat and add, “You should go handle that. Chelsea thinks you’ve written her off. You’ve

been added to an already long list of people who walked because she didn't measure up."

Bash's eyes widen. "Aww fuck! Where is she?"

"Still in the conference room."

My friend races up the stairs, no longer concerned with me. I watch for a second and then continue downstairs to give him time to make amends with his partner.

Twenty minutes later, I've eaten Bash's lunch and found my way to the training room. The trainer's dog, Piper, keeps me entertained through the big windows. She's working through an elaborate course of challenges for treats and making good time doing it.

"You!"

I whirl around at the angry yell and see a furious Chelsea barreling toward me. Before I know it, I'm on my back with the wind knocked out of me. I gape like a fish until my lungs work again and splutter, "What did I do?"

With all the rage of a cocaine bear, she screams, "You wanted me to trust you, and you go spilling my shit to Bastien!"

It's just now that I notice her eyes. She's been crying. Chelsea is hurting, which means she really had begun to trust me. And in her eyes, you just fucked all that up. "I put my best friend into a block wall just now, and for some reason, he demanded to know why. Since that was fair, I called him out for turning his back on you."

Chelsea lifts me an inch, slamming me back to the mat. "He didn't turn_"

I grip Chelsea around the middle and flip us. I'm now hovering above her, my nose touching hers. "Do not defend anyone who makes you feel less than enough," I practically growl at her. "Bastien fucked up, and he did it because you let him."

"I... What?!"

"You. Heard. Me. You've been shit on your whole life because you let people do it. You've more than earned your place at the table. Stand up for yourself. If someone has a problem with you, fuck them. They're not needed."

I soften my voice and relax my body. "The people around here have great respect for you. You don't have to buy it. Accept it and the good people in your life. Hold each other accountable when someone screws up. That's how friends help each other grow. They don't shy away and let things fester."

Chelsea lies motionless with fire in her eyes. A slow clap sounds nearby. "Couldn't have said it better myself, and I've been trying for years."

We look up to see Austin "Spatch" Madden standing over us. The hard-ass trainer walks away, leaving Chelsea with her mouth hanging open. She shoves me off her and clambers up, appearing more embarrassed than angry.

Chelsea

The sting of humiliation chases me from the room. The skin-tightening sensation is all too familiar, taunting me with lingering wounds and scars that aren't easily forgotten. Once again, I come face-to-face with vulnerability, cruel and merciless. Will I ever not hate who I was? Still am?

Face hot with shame, I rush through the hallways, avoiding eye contact with anyone I see. She's a chameleon...I've been trying for years... Bastien's awkward apology.

I don't know where I'm going, but I stop cold when I spot my boss in the lobby. That's the last human I need to deal with right now. Turning a complete one-eighty, I head toward the locker room but duck into a maintenance closet when I hear Bastien's and Birdie's voices around the corner.

All at once, I'm back at that party, hiding in disgrace after being thrown away by Trace. That night, I hid because I wasn't good enough. Now, I'm hiding because Jackson tells me I am.

Why does that feel worse? I used to do anything to get people to accept me. Now that people do, I'm running. What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I like this? The only person who treats me like shit is me.

Bastien's sorrowful face crosses my mind, and my heart sinks. I've become what I hate. I'm hurting the people I care about.

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I give myself an emotional ass kick and yank open the closet door. The sight in the hallway surprises me, though it shouldn't. I point a finger at Jackson, who's leaning casually against the wall with his arms crossed. "You. Round up the team leads. We're going out for beers."

At his raised brow, I correct myself. "Beers and an espresso martini."

Jackson pushes off the wall and offers me a small salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Three hours later, I sit around the large table in the back of the Taphouse, waiting for bodies to trickle in. Fortunately_or unfortunately, I'm not sure which_they all seem to show up at the same time.

Jackson, Duck, Fish, and Devil make up the SEALs. The PMCs in attendance are Kai, Bash, Birdie, Aaron, and Sadie. They fill the empty seats, all sharing a similar curious expression. I've already ordered a round, thanks to my excellent memory. It arrives as the team is getting settled.

"What the hell is that?" Kai asks of my froufrou cocktail.

"It's a drink, you Neanderthal."

Though I try not to, I glance toward Jackson to see him smiling. Then, I purposefully seek out Bastien. Birdie's hand rests on his arm as her man studies the group. He's pensive at best. I don't feel much like practicing my comedian routine, but for my friend, I'll do it. "Bash, you look like Spatch shoved his foot up your ass and left the shoe."

His eyes widen comically just before they roll. Bastien cracks a smile, but it's relief I see in his eyes. "You're such a pain, Yeet."

The group stills at him using the name I've always hated. Instead of being incensed by its embarrassing origin, I see how it could be part of what endears me to these people. With this in mind, I stand and take a little bow. Yeet, it is.

The crew gets a good laugh, and I rap my knuckles on the table to shut them up. "Alright. Knock it off. We deploy in one hundred and fifty hours. Jackson and I have worked out the scripting. I've got some thoughts I'd like to get feedback on without dealing with a room full of opinions."

Over the next two hours, we walk through all likely scenarios until the group feels prepared for anything. Confident in our plans, the group heads out until the only ones left are Birdie, Bash, Jackson, and me.

Bastien wears a hangdog expression and opens his mouth, probably to apologize again. I cut him off. "Bash, don't. You and me, we're fine. Even if we weren't, it would be my fault. Not yours. Now, take Birdie and get out of here. You look like you could use a blow job."

Birdie's face turns red, but she grins. Bastien groans, trying to hide his own smile. "For the love of Christ."

He hugs Jackson and finally pulls Birdie toward the door. I'm now alone with Jackson. Well, as alone as two people can be in a bar. I'm still less than poised around the SEAL leader and don't know how to exit gracefully. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow?"

When Jackson's only answer is a cocked brow, I shuffle my feet. "Right. See you later."

I turn tail and skitter away, but Jackson has no intention of letting me run. He shadows me outside, following me all the way to my car. Twitchy nerves trigger my standard defense mechanism. “You lose your truck or something?”

Jackson doesn’t ruffle at my mocking tone. He takes it in stride with a grin on his face. Bracing a hand on my trunk, he steps toward me. “You’re a brave, amazing woman, Chelsea Danforth. You did yourself proud tonight.”

He leans in like he means to kiss me again. The last time was sooo good that I’m tempted to let him. A big part of my brain still worries that he’ll kiss me one time, and I’ll finally turn into the frog I know myself to be. I duck out from beneath Jackson’s arm and escape to the driver’s side door.

Again, Jackson doesn’t get heated. His response is a wicked chuckle. “Running will do you no good. This thing between you and I, it’s happening.”

Jackson advances on me with the grace of a deadly predator. “Don’t try to deny you want it. We both know it would be a lie.”

The streetlight filters through the trees, painting his face in sinister slashes. The effect lessens when he backs up a step. “I’m a patient man, Chelsea. You’re only scared of yourself, and I’m gonna help you kick that fear.”

Jackson turns to leave but then tosses over his shoulder, “And then I’m making you mine.”

Jackson walks away, leaving me reeling. The wind kicks up as if to put a fine point on his dark promise, and my answering shiver has me diving into my car.

For the rest of the week, I remain suspended in the same state of shock. The SEALs don’t come back to the compound for training. I’m torn between being relieved and

disappointed because of it. I'd gotten used to Fish and the guys. Even Jackson is absent, given Knot's and O'Reilly's approval of our revised scripts. He doesn't have a reason to be here, which means I don't have an excuse to talk to him.

The night before we deploy, I'm in my equipment locker, checking the bag with my dress and ensuring my shoes are pristine. These things, not to mention the borrowed jewelry, are the most expensive things I've ever worn. A delicate Venetian mask matching the dress lies on the garment bag. I lift it to my face and study my reflection in the mirror. Time to be someone else again.

Jackson

Keep moving, asshole.

Every step away from Chelsea is a battle. She took my words to heart. Even though the woman was terrified, she gathered her courage, assembled the group, and even stood up for herself when she went off script with the martini.

Chelsea is trying. And dammit, if that doesn't make me want her even more. I clench my fists, fighting off the desire to turn around and wrap them around her luscious thighs. Soon. I'll have her soon. It's only a matter of time.

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Six a.m. rolls around, and I stoop to say goodbye to Captain after loading all my stuff in the truck. “I’ll be back in a few days, girl. Caleb will be here later to pick you up. Do me a favor and scare off any unsavory bitches that try to talk to him, will you?”

Captain barks and licks my jaw. “That’s right. You do a good job keeping the Bennett boys out of trouble.”

My platoon takes off from Oceana an hour later. When we land at Naval Station Rota, a convoy will be dispatched toward our official destination, the embassy, but my platoon won’t be on it. We’ll be on a helo headed toward the southern coast.

The PMCs will fly direct to Malaga in a charter jet. We’ll meet up with their outfitter at the borrowed coastal mansion and begin our undercover roles.

“Hey! Watch the suit!”

Fish and I look up at the commotion to see Wrench waving off my newest squad guy. Wrench picks up the garment bag, dusting it off and straightening it. “This is going to be a long few days,” Fish groans.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to it,” I reply.

Fish laughs and drops into the seat next to mine. “She’s burrowed deep in there, isn’t she?”

I wink at my second and lean back, closing my eyes.

Our flight is just over eight hours. We transfer to a Sea Hawk after landing and get dropped off in the backyard of our staging property. It's almost nine p.m. local time when my boots touch the ground.

The pool and house are lit up inside and out, and several bodies filter out the back doors at the sound of our helo arriving. We meet the PMCs on the pool deck, eyeing one another as if we hadn't worked together on staging this mission for the last several weeks.

A stiff ocean breeze carries up the cliffside after the helo leaves, rustling the numerous decorative trees dotting the landscape and filling the air with the scent of jasmine. I step forward to greet Sadie, Knot's top operative. "Glad you made it," she says. Gesturing to the Indian man on her right, she continues. "You remember our outfitter and field magician, Sambhi."

It's a good thing she reintroduced him because I didn't recognize the man in his expensive suit. His clothes were a few classes lower in Bulgaria.

"Happy to see you again, Lieutenant," Sambhi says. "I have all the equipment you requested and a few extras I thought would be helpful. Let's get your team settled, and I'll show you everything."

I nod and turn to the rest of my guys. "You guys set up in the guest house. I'll stow my gear and meet you there."

They take off and I turn back to the contractors, who I assume are housed in the primary residence. Sambhi tours me through the main level and outside, pointing out security features and controls.

When I don't see signs of any other people staying here, I mention it to Sadie. "That was a game-time decision," she says. "In case Harding is the paranoid type and brings

security to snoop around, we didn't want them to find a reason to be suspicious. The rest of us are staying in a neighboring house. Only those posing as security will remain on the property."

She dismisses Sambi and gestures toward Chelsea. "You show him around upstairs while the rest of us review the security setup in the guest house."

The cavernous entry clears quickly, leaving Chelsea and me alone in the big house. I step toward my fake wife, and Chelsea spins away toward the great hall. "This way," she squeaks. I lick my lips and follow close behind.

The four-level home has three living rooms, one opening to a grand covered lanai adjacent to the gigantic pool. The three accompanying dining rooms mean you can host multiple parties at one time, I guess.

The bedrooms are upstairs, one complete with an enclosed deck featuring spiral staircase access to a roof-top terrace. Twin-sized cushions pad wooden platforms with plants everywhere. Plants in pots, on stands, in baskets on the walls, and even plants growing up the walls themselves.

I follow Chelsea up the stairs and take in the view in silence. Trees surround the whole place except for the cliffside, which looks out over the Bay of Marbella. I survey the area from beneath a vined arbor, providing added privacy from the neighbors to the right.

The place is impressive and screams high class. The walls and ceilings are all white, but color abounds with the terra cotta floors, accented bathrooms, bright pillows, books, and other expensive touches on display. It's not my taste, but I can appreciate the look, especially with this view.

Chelsea stops the tour when we reach the bottom of the spiral stairs. "Well, that's

about it. Which of these bedrooms do you want?"

I keep my tone and expression as serious as possible. "Hmm. If Sadie's right and Harding has guys snooping, what will he say if his security questions our separate sleeping arrangements?"

To her credit, the former Marine doesn't rile. "Since you get to be your charming self, you could always flip him off and insist he mind his own business. Or I could cozy up to him and let the man think what he wants."

I toss my shit in the closest empty room and grumble, "I vote neither."

Chelsea and I walk downstairs to join the rest of our blended team in the guest house. A plethora of surveillance equipment is already set up, courtesy of Sambu and his minions. The outfitter is currently briefing the group on all the security upgrades.

"We've placed cameras and microphones in all public places of the residence. All of your team will be wearing cameras except for Mr. and Mrs. Bennett. We don't want to risk exposure in case the congressman looks too closely."

"What if Harding wants to talk somewhere privately?" Chelsea asks.

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Something about the way she framed the question puts me on edge. “Just how private are you thinking?” I demand.

Sambi clears his throat. “I’ll put a camera in a red rose in the hall. If he leads you away, pluck the flower from the arrangement and carry it with you.”

I flex my neck and bite my tongue. Yes, the Harding-slimeball routine was one we rehearsed, but I don’t like the thought of Chelsea cozying up to someone who was willing to have my whole team killed.

Because she’s so good at reading people, Chelsea nudges me with her elbow. “Whatever’s wrong with you, figure it out. We’ve got less than twenty-four hours before Harding shows up.”

Damn it. She’s right. “What else have we got?” I ask the outfitter, changing the subject.

Sambi lays out the property features and vulnerabilities with the familiarity of someone who’s lived here his whole life. My suspicion is confirmed when I interrupt his spiel about neighborhood activity. “Hey, just who owns this place?”

The man shrugs and says, “I do,” and then continues his briefing.

We soon wrap up the meeting, and Sadie directs Chelsea and another woman back to the main house. She said something about staging some pictures for our cover on social media. Several of my platoon guys mix with the PMCs for some poker, but I’m too keyed up to play.

Leaving them with a half-salute, I trudge back toward the main house. Lights are on at the pool deck, and laughter filters through the open glass doors. Despite being tempted, I don't feel I should crash whatever they're doing out there. Likewise, I don't think I should stand here eavesdropping.

I'd like to see Chelsea carefree and happy, but I force my feet toward my room. I keep walking until a glance at the spiral stairs pulls me from my original destination. After the climb, I stare out over the hillside and bay. It is beautiful here. And peaceful.

Who am I kidding? The only thing I notice is Chelsea lounging in the pool while Dani holds a light and Sadie takes pictures. The staged scene below seems so out of character for the badass Marine, but I suppose it's precisely what a wealthy socialite would be doing.

The women finish after several more shots, and I have to bite my tongue when Chelsea rises from the water. I feel partly like a bastard for lusting over the woman, but I was hooked long before I ever saw a hint of her body. That means I'm not a total creep.

For all that sexy Chelsea hides, she's even more brilliant, caring, and, yes, funny. Her beauty is just icing on the cake. And, oh my lord, that cake. I'd love to take a bite right now. And with that, it's time to go to bed. Or better yet, a cold shower.

Chelsea

I think I've decided good angles, not diamonds, are a girl's best friend. Sadie is talented as a cell phone photographer. These pictures of me actually look good. I expected tragic shots that would require tons of touch-ups.

Sadie posts the best images to Mrs. Bennett's social media accounts, and then she and

Dani leave for the night. I pick up my towel and dry off. Much fiery internal debate is had about covering up or not before I desert the towel on a lounge chair.

I've been at work on this pool deck. Those pictures were maintenance on my cover. That means I'm technically still in uniform. So what if I'm low-key hoping to run into Jackson inside? Either his soul will leave his body or his dinner will. It'll be a risky but fun little experiment.

I close and lock the lanai doors but don't find Jackson on the first floor. Since I don't want to seem like I'm looking for him, I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and head upstairs to my room.

I reach my door and open it with a sigh. Figures. Feel good about how you look, and the bastard's nowhere around. I strip out of the suit and slide into bed, rehearsing possible conversations with Harding for the next two hours. I nod off eventually, as prepared as I can be for whatever may come.

Unlike our usual missions, I don't make my body fight the time difference. I sleep until noon, knowing there isn't much prep work needed for tonight. Sambu will have his event crew here by three to set up, and his actors will begin arriving at seven. That's also when our people will start filtering in. Harding should also arrive around that time, making the scene seem genuinely organic.

Thinking I've lazed enough, I force myself out of bed and don a robe to get some coffee. The long, boho satin fabric drapes over my frame, sitting cool against my skin. I tie the robe securely and walk downstairs. I haven't seen Jackson and don't hear him moving around, so I assume he's with his team.

Midday sun filters through the gauzy drapes. The doors are open from the kitchen to the pool deck, and a soft breeze fills the house with the rich fragrance of local flora. I approach the opening and step out onto the lanai. Found him.

Jackson is in the pool, doing laps, gliding beneath the water's surface. I get lost watching and lean a shoulder against the stone column. A voice from the kitchen startles me a bit later. "Ah. Coffee. Thank God!"

As I scamper back inside to greet Sadie, I catch Jackson staring at me with a knowing smirk. Damn. Caught looking.

Sadie unscrews the lid from her travel cup, grumbling, oblivious to my embarrassment. Her auburn hair is in a messy bun, and she's dressed for a run. "I put on coffee, and those pricks drank it all while I was on a call with Knot."

She decks out her morning caffeine and sighs after taking her first sip. I nudge her out of the way, needing my own pick-me-up.

"You ready for today?" she asks.

I shrug but don't meet her gaze. "Nothing to it. I put on a dress, act my part, and we walk."

Sadie scoffs. "Are you sure about that? Tonight's success hinges on your ability to read a man's mind. Oh, and then you become a passionate nut job, potential mistress, or simpering wife while our whole team watches. That's a tough ask for anyone."

"I can sell it." The only part I'm worried about is turning it off.

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Jackson enters the kitchen, fresh from the pool with damp hair and a bare, glistening chest. He takes in my robed body and steps in close. “Morning, Mrs. Bennett. Sleep well?”

I roll my eyes but lift my cup to my lips with both hands to hide my blush.

Sadie refills her mug and rushes for the door. “I’ll be back at three.”

I don’t answer or even look her way. Jackson stalks over and leans into my personal space. My breath catches in my throat until he stands upright again, holding a coffee cup. Dirty tease. Biting back a rude comment, I stare straight ahead, attempting to ignore the hard chest next to me.

“Something wrong, Chelsea?” Jackson purrs before his voice drops low. “Does my wife need a good morning kiss?”

Oh, he’ll pay for that. My expression softens to something sensual and dreamy. I drag one of my hands down my neck and over the swell of a breast. Jackson’s eyes follow the movement, widening when my nipples pebble beneath the thin robe. He sucks in a sharp breath as his pupils dilate.

I think that makes us even. “No. I’m fine, dear. I think I’ll take my coffee upstairs.”

Jackson grabs my bicep as I push off the counter. “So we’ve graduated to teasing now?”

I smile innocently. “Nope. Just a little payback.”

A puff of air to my ear accompanies Jackson's growled chuckle. "Keep it up. I like what it tells me."

The blatant desire in Jackson's voice sends a rush of heat to my face and a shiver down my spine. I cover the response with a laugh. "In your dreams, sailor."

I shake off Jackson's grasp and slink to my room with clenched thighs. I need a cold shower.

Sambi shows up at one with food to feed a small army. We stuff our faces, and all thirty-two of us, plus his team, perform a walkthrough of tonight's event, beginning with Wrench's demonstration of his voyeur skills.

Everyone is clear on their assignments, operational signals, and the timeline. Cameras and mics have all been rechecked and confirmed to be in good working order, and the jet carrying Harding has already landed in Spain. The only detail still up in the air is what script we'll follow. And I won't know which to pick until I get a read on Harding up close and in person. No pressure.

With nothing left to do, I let Sadie herd me toward my room and Sambi's procured team of beauty technicians. The process from Knot's house repeats much the same. By six, my hair is pinned in a romantic updo, my makeup is silver-screen perfect, and my crimson gown is on. After slipping into my heels, the last touch is for the stylist to position the delicate filigree mask shaped like a dragon with spread wings. It's black and mysterious, and I've never felt so sexy.

The technicians pack up, and Sadie escorts them out after nodding her approval. At the door, she pauses to say, "Unless that fucker's secretly gay, you should have him eating from the palm of your hand."

Sadie closes the door, and I look long and hard at myself in the mirror. The face

looking back at me is that of a stranger. Maybe it's the mask, but I feel more prepared to face Harding than any other mission before. Who will I be tonight?

I practice expressions for each of the personalities we prepared. Depending on what Harding presents, I'm locked and loaded for demure, battle axe, passionate activist, and desperate for attention. I'm a master of them all, sadly, and ready to be whatever is necessary to get under Harding's skin.

With a last wink to my reflection, I swish around and walk out. I take the stairs slowly and enter the great room. Caterers are busy with food staging, and florists tinker with flower arrangements brought in for tonight.

As I take in all the prep work, I have to smile. Sambu always looks a dollar away from being homeless when we meet in the field, but he owns all this. He's even more of a chameleon than I am.

I don't see any of my people until I reach the lanai. Fish is in deep discussion with Jackson, whose back is to me. When Fish notices my approach, his eyes widen. Jackson whirls around, only to freeze when he spots me.

Jackson is in the tux we picked, now tailored to fit his frame. He carries his mask in hand, a knight's armor style. The left is solid black, and the right is silver filigree.

The platoon leader scans me from head to toe and back, all without a word. He seems to be malfunctioning.

"Fish, he may need a reboot," I joke to hide my nervousness.

"Maybe," he says with a laugh, "but there's no way I'm touching his power button."

That bit of mockery worked because Jackson smacks Fish on the chest. Lieutenant

Hill shakes his head at his friend and commanding officer, ignoring him. I take Fish's outstretched hand, smiling when he gently squeezes mine. "You look beautiful, Chelsea. I'll be around."

Fish walks away, leaving me alone with Jackson. My fake husband pulls me into his arms, and I flinch. "That right there can't happen tonight," he drawls. "I should be able to do this"_the man bends me backward and feathers his lips across my neck_"and you not bat an eye."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be ready when the time comes."

Jackson grins and, keeping me bent over, whispers, "Is that a promise?"

A throat clears behind him, and Jackson pulls me upright again. "Practicing for Harding?" Aaron teases.

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“Yes,” I answer, straightening out nonexistent wrinkles in my dress.

“Sambi has everything set up. The rest of his and our people will begin filtering in in another ten minutes or so. Ready to get this show on the road?”

I nod toward the senior operative, and Jackson pulls on his mask. “You ready to be your normal, annoying self?” I ask sweetly.

“Always,” he rumbles.

Jackson and I enter the great room to greet Sambi and thus begin the careful dance. We’re to be nothing more than gracious hosts all night as if this were a real party. We’ll mingle, sample the delicious fare prepared by local chefs, sip champagne, and dance to the live ensemble playing outside by the pool.

With each new guest that arrives, security checks them in, and eventually, a buzz in the room indicates our target is here. Harding breezes in, sporting the plain white Guy Fawkes mask provided to him. Harding didn’t bring his wife. Interesting.

I discreetly watch his interaction with our door security and make a game time decision. “Jackson, take a hike,” I whisper quickly.

“What?” he whisper yells.

“Come back in three minutes. Please.”

I expect to plead my case, but Jackson doesn’t fight me. He shows his confidence in

me by walking away. “Three minutes,” he whispers as he turns to leave.

Fish escorts Congressman Harding to me and introduces him. “Ma’am. May I introduce Congressman Calvin Harding and his aide, Bernard Pollack.”

Harding doesn’t acknowledge Fish, so I mirror his behavior toward the staff and ignore his aide as well. “Congressman, so pleased you could make it,” I purr.

The fake smile and too-long handshake make me want to gag, but I keep perfect composure. “Thank you for the invitation. I was surprised at the effort you spent in getting me here.”

I’m in heels, and Harding stands eye-to-eye with me. That puts him at six feet. His compact frame hints at a disciplined fitness regimen. Impeccably styled dark hair peaks over the white mask, and his rehearsed smile reveals perfect, white teeth.

Harding skims the grand home, dollar signs flashing in his cunning blue eyes. He then carefully includes my body in his perusal before commenting, “The masks are a curious if enthralling choice.”

Harding’s wandering eye settles me into my least favorite role. Dammit. I give him a sultry laugh, draping my fingers over my throat. “Yes, well, some of our potential benefactors in attendance aren’t sure how well their viewpoint would be received back home. I’m sure you understand, as you’re the sole voice in Washington leading this effort.”

Harding dismisses my praise with calculating charm and studies my face through the mask. Feigning ignorance, he asks, “We haven’t met before, have we?”

“Not directly, no. I’m told we recently attended an event together, but our paths never crossed.” Because I was saved by a savvy admiral.

“Had I known you were there, I would have sought you out. Like many, we’ve begun following your career. I’m pleased to see someone with values that align with my own bravely speaking out. Sadly, our government’s use of private military is a touchy subject.”

The self-important man preens with the praise. “Yes, and what is your position on the matter?”

“I believe the entirety of our defense budget should be spent on our service men and women.”

I let myself become animated, and Jackson arrives seconds later, placing a restraining hand on my shoulder. “Sorry about that. My wife gets a little passionate where my safety is concerned.” He extends a hand to the congressman. “Lieutenant Jackson Bennett.”

Harding’s brows rise. “Oh, you serve?”

Jackson nods. “US Navy. SEAL Team Two.”

Harding takes note of Jackson’s hand still on me, and I step out from under my fake husband’s hold. To his credit, Jackson doesn’t react. Harding, however, does.

The man relaxes, and the corner of his lips raises ever so slightly. Got him. I paste my smile back on, shift toward the prick, and narrow my act to two possible roles. Both of which I hate. “This reception is a meeting of minds per se. A means to garner support for this movement, monetarily and in voice and strategy. And, if I may be so bold, to devise a way to make the idea more palatable for the mainstream voter.” Intentionally, as if it were an afterthought, I add, “My husband could touch on how redirecting contracting budgets would benefit active service members.”

I let my eyes light up again and continue. “I could address the flawed psychological motivations for someone to go private, and a few benefactors would propose lobbying opportunities.” Adding a smile for effect, I propose, “That’s where you come in. We want to approach and provide backing for the right candidates to advance this cause.”

Harding bristles at the possibility of sharing the spotlight but recovers quickly. “I am just one man, after all.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. Without you taking this stand, there would be no movement. These mongrels_”

“Now, honey,” Jackson chides. “Sure, I’ve had some bad experiences with contractors, but some of them are just like us, working men and women who wish to support this country.”

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I issue a tolerant smile toward Jackson and redirect my attention to Harding. “My husband may not be willing to condemn these mercenary animals outright, but I will.”

Skin, posing as a server, approaches with a slight bow. “Dinner is served, ma’am.” He gestures toward the patio and guides us to the head table.

“Congressman, please,” I say, pointing to the center setting. “You are the guest of honor.”

I signal Jackson to sit to Harding’s left and move to the congressman’s opposite side. When Harding pulls out my chair, I catch Sadie watching from the adjacent table. She winks, telling me the night couldn’t be going any better.

Jackson and Harding have to remove their masks to eat, a calculated move. They’re the only ones in attendance wearing full face masks. Jackson’s face and true, verifiable identity will put Harding at ease. The choice for Harding means we will have photographic evidence to go with our voice recordings.

The servers bring out the first course, and Jackson shifts his chair back to deliver his rehearsed welcome speech. Considering Harding’s behavior thus far, I stand before Jackson can and do it myself.

“Friends, esteemed guests, welcome. I am honored that you would commit time from your busy schedules to confront a dangerous practice affecting our military’s courageous men and women.”

Jackson

“Good men and women like my husband struggle to stay alive while these greedy mercenaries play dirty with better pay and equipment. The government should devote the defense budget_our tax dollars_to our troops and only our troops.”

Chelsea’s voice softens, showing off her skill as an actress. “Each of you, or someone you love, was directly harmed by the war-for-profit machine. It’s time for this practice to stop. Let the better pay and equipment go to our fighting men and women. You’re here tonight to help bring about this change. Winning this battle is too much for one man, even a powerful congressman.”

She pauses and looks at Harding, beaming a megawatt smile for him. The man preens, feeding off the attention. Chelsea continues her speech, eyes still on Harding. “There is more to be done.” Chelsea turns to look over the staged crowd again. “I trust we can count on you to help turn this tide. Thank you.”

The collective actors applaud, and some yell out for Harding to speak. Never one to miss an opportunity, he stands and rests a hand on Chelsea’s bare shoulder. The man addresses the crowd, but I don’t notice anything except how his fingers caress Chelsea’s skin. “This is a big job and an important one. There are those in the Pentagon who agree, and with their backing and support from you and others like you, we will see change.”

My eyes jolt forward at his incriminating statement. No way he just said that. I seek out the PMC leader to confirm what I heard, and Sadie winks at me through her mask. One step closer.

The rest of the meal goes forward without any fanfare. Chelsea carries the conversation with Harding, leaving me out of it for the most part. Harding doesn’t seem to miss me, which I take to be part of the plan. By now, I understand which

character role Chelsea has settled into. And I hate it just as much as her.

Chelsea's accomplished subversion continues after dinner, pointing out people in the crowd and sharing their fake stories, wealth, and willingness to throw money at the problem. Harding is enraptured, at times touching Chelsea's hand or leaning too close to whisper to another man's wife—who he thinks is another man's wife, anyway.

Chelsea is perfectly charming, as I knew she would be. She's a master at becoming that which a person most identifies with, except with me. I don't mind because I want the real Chelsea, and right now, another man is touching her.

Dessert and drinks are announced in the garden and pool area. Chelsea slips her arm around Harding's and leads him around to meet specific people with rehearsed backgrounds. I follow them like a puppy wanting to be played with, the role I was to assume if all Harding's attention went to Chelsea.

My mask is in my hand as I had no interest in putting it back on. The damned thing irritated the shit out of me. Harding's mask sits on the table, likely because he preferred his face to be on full display.

Fish walks to the edge of the lanai and signals for me. Since no one notices I'm here, I walk away to follow him inside. "O'Reilly and Knot are watching, and O'Reilly thinks Chelsea will get more from Harding if you're not there. Find someone else to talk to. Oh, and Pin, try to look like you're not about to rip the man's arm off."

I flip off my B squad leader and walk back outside. All the SEALs have the benefit of wearing radios, so they're all aware of my state and new orders. Skin intercepts me on the lanai, wearing a server uniform and carrying a tray of champagne.

"Here, you look like you could use this." He hands me a tumbler of whiskey from behind his back. "Make it last. It'll be the only one you get."

I walk past Chelsea and Harding, who now has a hand resting against Chelsea's back. My blood boils, and I turn toward them. I only make it one step before my name is called from poolside. Bandid waves me over, and I grudgingly approach him.

The doctor claps me on the shoulder and pulls me close. "I've got a syringe loaded with sedatives in my pocket. Don't make me use it."

I try to pull from his grip, but his fingers squeeze, holding me in place. "Stand down, Lieutenant. You're under orders to hang out with me for a while."

Planting my feet, I shake off the doctor's grip and turn to look over my shoulder. Chelsea and Harding are heavily engaged in conversation and ignoring everyone else here. Turning to face Bandid again, I demand, "Give me your radio."

"Pardon?"

"I want your radio, Myers. Give it to me."

He listens to the powers that be for a moment before handing it over. As soon as I position the device in my ear, Chelsea's sultry voice comes through loud and clear. "I hope you'll contact me if I can help. Jackson has a hard job and can't tell me anything about it. I wouldn't know anything about this problem at all if it weren't for hearing about these awful occurrences on the news."

"Your support would mean the world to me. Thank you."

My back remains to the pair, though it's difficult to hold still. Harding's honeyed words drip with filthy intention.

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“Great,” Chelsea cheers. “Why don’t we exchange contact information.”

“Chelsea is leading Harding inside,” Devil updates over the radio.

Commander O’Reilly takes over the play-by-play from there, monitoring the cameras. “She’s stopping by the planted camera flower and picking it up. Shit. Harding just took it from Chelsea’s hand. Wait a minute. The bastard only tucked it above Chelsea’s ear.”

That means she’s leading him somewhere private. I must look poised to run as Devil breaks in again. “Stand down, Pin.”

“I’ve still got that needle,” Bandid teases.

“Alright. Shut up. All of you,” I growl.

“Hey, calm down. We’re still acting, remember? The man’s security or his aide could walk through here at any second.”

Dammit, he’s right. I relax my stance but focus only on the radio in my ear.

“Have you enjoyed the convention?” Chelsea asks.

“Sadly, I didn’t arrive early enough to attend today, and I’ll need to leave early in the morning.”

“That’s too bad, but then most of the people I would hope for you to meet are here

tonight,” she soothes.

“You know, Mrs. Bennett. You’re a remarkable woman to fight for your husband this way.”

Leather creaks, telling me Chelsea now sits on the stiff tuxedo sofa in the office. I can picture her shrugging shoulders based on the sound of her voice. “Jackson is a good man, but I’m doing this for a friend. He was killed when a military contractor fucked up a mission for personal gain. Sorry. Please excuse my language.”

Harding laughs. “Please. I hear worse during congressional hearings.”

Leather creaks again, and Harding’s voice is much closer to the mic now. “Being a SEAL, your husband is probably away a lot.”

“It’s true. It’s lonely being a hero’s wife. On the plus side, I have loads of time to devote to worthy causes.”

“And what about you?” Harding murmurs. “What do you do for you?”

Hell fucking damn. The woman is an artist. Chelsea has Harding eating out of the palm of her hand. I’ve never witnessed more expert manipulation. I can practically see the man inching his way closer.

“Well, I have met some wonderful, fascinating people over the years,” she answers.

“Am I included in that count?”

Chelsea purrs, her voice fawning and breathy. “Most certainly.”

Her fan-girl act is way too effective. Harding is totally sucked in and ready to make a

move of his own. Leather creaks, fabric rustles, and my imagination runs wild. I can just see the bastard taking advantage of Chelsea's admiration and sliding his hand up her leg.

Before I realize it, I'm on the move, but no one dares break character to call me back, at least in person. I pull the radio from my ear and toss it to the nearest SEAL as I storm through the house.

I pause at the office door, needing a calming breath. Harding is sitting too close with his hand on Chelsea's bare knee. The slit in her dress has opened up to her hip, and that asshole's fingers begin crawling northward. I see red, and I'm not talking about the damned dress.

I'm tempted to kill the man, so I force several calming breaths in. My rational brain kicks in, and I back up a few silent steps, calling out, "Chelsea? Some of our guests are ready to head out. Where are you?"

I step loudly toward the office, noting the sounds of two people springing apart. "There you are," I say with a smile.

"Jackson, yes," Chelsea stammers, mimicking a woman caught cheating and is trying to appear innocent. "My phone is upstairs, but I'm sure..." Chelsea turns and searches the desk, bending over the surface toward the opposite side for the notepad and pen. The move is on purpose but only for Harding's sake. That doesn't mean I'm not fantasizing about having her bent over like this later.

She scribbles down a phone number and email address, handing the note to the congressman. "Please reach out to me_us_if there's anything we can do to help in addition to financial support."

Harding accepts the note with a slight bow. "Very much looking forward to it."

I'm on the verge again, so I bite my tongue and shepherd the pair back to the main party area. One fake couple approaches to say their goodbyes and several others follow. Harding takes the hint and says, "I guess I should head out as well. We have an early flight tomorrow."

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Chelsea faces the man, grasping his offered hand in both of hers. “Thank you so much for coming, Calvin.”

I simply nod at the man, glad I don’t have to pretend to be anything other than my grouchy self.

The instant Harding leaves, the act is over, and all the crew begins to clear out. The caterers have already cleaned up and left, and Sadie and Aaron only remain long enough to help take down the extra cameras. As Chelsea and I walk the pair out, Aaron says, “You both did great work tonight.”

Chelsea hangs her head. “I’m not so sure.”

“Trust me,” Sadie commends her colleague. “You did.”

I close the door behind them and pause to brace a hand against the frame.

Chelsea stands behind me, holding the metal mask she wore over her real one. I close my eyes, still picturing that bastard doing his best to seduce her and Chelsea playing along. The sounds and images drive me batshit until I’m in danger of losing it for real.

Unbidden, Caleb’s advice comes to mind. Dominate her. I guarantee it’s her biggest wish. A few moments with Chelsea over the weeks seem to back up his theory, further weakening my resolve.

Before long, jealousy and desire fuel a hunger that gnaws at my insides, bordering on

obsessive. I'm unraveling, dangerously close to following through with my son's suggestion, consequences be damned.

Chelsea steps forward and lightly touches my shoulder. "Jackson?"

That timid whisper snaps the tenuous control I was holding onto. I slip the mask back onto my face and speak to the door, voice strained and slightly unhinged. "Run."

Chelsea freezes as if she doesn't understand my growled command. "What?" she repeats cautiously, but I'm too far gone.

"I. Said. Run."

I spin around, and Chelsea's eyes widen at the mask and my eyes behind it. "What...what's wrong with you?"

My laughter is chilling, even to my own ears. "Wrong with me? I've spent the last two hours watching that dipshit steal your attention and little touches that should be for me alone. Whatever patience I had is wiped out. You're mine, and I'm through waiting."

"Jackson, you_"

With a death grip on the door handle, I cut Chelsea off. "You've got one minute before I move from this spot. Then I'm coming for you."

The woman stands paralyzed, her mind blown. Fine by me. It'll make her easier to catch. Still, I need her to make a conscious decision. "Chelsea, time's ticking."

My warning spurs her to action, and Chelsea finally moves. I stop her with one last word of caution. "If I catch you, I won't stop. We both know how good you are at

hiding. That means if I find you, you wanted me to.”

Chelsea

Jackson’s vow and face behind that mask have crashed my whole system. When I fail to move, the man looks down at his watch and threatens, “Fifty seconds.”

The growled warning jumpstarts my fight-or-flight instinct. I drop my mask and take off toward the lanai. One problem. I don’t know where the hell I’m going. There’s only one place on this property I could hide that Jackson wouldn’t make good on his threat, and that’s the guest house filled with his teammates.

My shoe catches on the hem of my dress during my escape, nearly taking me out. I pause long enough to remove the heels and bolt through the open glass wall. With the pool and cliffside before me, my only choices are to go left, right, or back inside.

A tall fence blocks the left side of the house. On the right is a gate that opens to the driveway. I dart around to that side, hoping it isn’t locked.

The gate swings free when I thumb the latch, and I nearly tumble to the pavement on the other side. I’m home free now but don’t know where to go next. The guest house is only a hundred yards away, Chelsea. Why the hell aren’t you already halfway there?

“Good question,” I whisper before crouching behind a rose bush.

Thinking my time has to be running out, I summon the will to begin working through a plan. I’m a Marine, after all. Hiding in shrubbery goes against my training. I rise from the shadows, lifting my dress to avoid another tripping incident.

At the front corner, I look to the right at the guest house and safety. I take one step

toward shelter, swearing under my breath before changing course and tiptoeing toward the front door.

A peek through the sidelights shows the foyer to be empty. Fortunately, the door is unlocked. I ease it open and slip inside, pausing to listen for Jackson. He's turned all the lights off, so I'm stuck feeling my way around.

Just enough moonlight reflects off the terra cotta tile to keep me from breaking my neck as I ascend the stairs. Jackson knew I wouldn't run for protection, so he'll come this way as soon as he clears the back of the house.

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My room would be too obvious, as would his. I take the chance anyway and slip through his door to reach the terrace stairs. If I'm going to hide out, I may as well have a decent view.

I push through the glass doors but don't even get a toe on the first step. The lights blink on as I'm grabbed from behind and swung around to face the monster in the black-and-silver mask. "Found you."

His hand lifts to wrap around my throat but doesn't squeeze.

"Excuse me, but I think I found_" My words are cut off when Jackson shoves me against the wall.

Jackson attacks, removing his mask and tossing it away before brutally claiming my lips. I'm here for it, giving as good as I'm getting, though Jackson makes it clear I'm not in control. I'm a butterfly caught in a hurricane.

I reach for the sexy man holding me captive, and he releases my throat to trap my hands above my head. Jackson leans back, breathing heavily. Violent possession burns in his stare. My sudden urge to submit scares me a little, and I begin to struggle.

Jackson tightens his grip in response. "Oh, no you don't. You had your chance to run. Now you're going to take everything I give you like a good girl."

Jackson spins me around, pressing my face against the fragrant vines creeping up the bricks. He slowly unzips my dress and slides it from my shoulders. The gown puddles

at my feet, and I'm left in a strapless bra and thong.

A firm hand grips my ass, pulling my hips backward while the other continues to hold me in place. When he's positioned me just so, Jackson releases my bra clasp, and the fancy lingerie falls to the floor beneath me. Jackson's hands leave me then, and I wait several seconds before turning to see where he's gone.

"Face the wall, Chelsea. You've tortured me all night. I feel like returning the favor."

I don't bother defending myself because Jackson's right. Yes, I was only doing my job, but I knew he was suffering. And I enjoyed every second of it. I'm not the type to play with people like that, but it felt good to be desired.

A rustle of fabric precedes Jackson's jacket and shirt landing next to my dress. His hot breath feathers over my spine soon after, but I don't feel his touch. Only when Jackson hits the floor behind me do I feel his hands again.

Jackson slowly glides his fingers up my thighs to grip the waistband of my thong. He drags it down my legs just as slowly, tapping my feet for me to step out of the fabric.

My heart is pounding now. Jackson is eye-level and intimately close to all my worst parts. If anything, the man should be staring at my tits. At least those are decent. I shift as if to turn around, but Jackson stops me cold with one word. "Don't."

"Jackson, can_"

"There are only two words I want to hear from your pretty mouth: yes and sir."

He can't see it, but I roll my eyes. "Whatever you say, Daddy."

The laughter that comes from Jackson is only slightly less threatening than his

following whisper. “Keep pushing me. I dare you.”

I button my lip and then feel a wet kiss on my right ass cheek. “Mmm. That’s a good girl.”

That good girl shit does things to me I don’t understand. I don’t get the chance to analyze too deeply before Jackson nudges my legs apart, and his tongue is on my clit. I grasp a fistful of vines, not caring if I damage the plant.

Jackson tortures me thoroughly, switching between fast flicks and languid strokes. Pretty soon, I’m pushing against the wall, riding his face.

My legs weaken the closer I get to climax. I come with a shout and collapse to my knees, exhausted. “You’re not done yet. Not by a long shot.”

The SEAL stands, forcing me to my feet. His tie is draped around his neck, which he uses to bind my hands to the spiral stair banister. Jackson steps back, his sinful gaze roving over my naked body.

There’s nowhere to hide. Jackson is seeing every extra pound and dimple, but the blistering heat in his eyes doesn’t lessen. My breasts feel heavy, and the fire he ignited in my core is scorching to the point that I forget about my flaws. Meanwhile, I’m lusting over him just as hard, wishing his undone belt and pants would hit the floor as my dress did.

Instead of stripping as I wish, Jackson stalks forward and lifts me by my thighs, wrapping them around his waist. The decorative handrail digs into my back, but just like with the ivy, I don’t care.

Jackson’s full lips latch onto a nipple, teasing and biting until I’m a whimpering mess. “Jackson, please.”

His graveled chuckle vibrates the sensitive peak in his mouth. “Not until I’m good and ready.”

The other nipple is subjected to the same torment until I can take no more. I clasp my ankles together and squeeze, twisting to regain control. Jackson laughs and pinches my calves until I let go. “Hmm. It seems you have too much of an advantage here. Time to move.”

He lowers me to the floor, and Jackson releases the tie from the metal handrail. He doesn’t, however, release my wrists from the binds. He marches me up the stairs and forces me to lie back on the double lounger, resecuring my hands on the decorative finial at the top. Though bound, I can move and no longer have to fight gravity over exhaustion.

Jackson towers over me, finally pulling his belt from his slacks. He hits his knees between my legs, dragging the thick leather strap over my drenched slit. I clench my eyes shut and arch my back to escape the contact with my clit, still sensitive from the orgasm Jackson wrung out of me.

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The belt stretches across my middle, forcing me back down. All I can move now are my legs. I've never been more turned on in my life, but I'll bite off my tongue before admitting it.

I've also never been more scared, not of what the man is taking, but of what I'm giving away.

Jackson

I know the moment Chelsea surrenders to me. Her body uncoils, no longer struggling against the restraints. I've never seen her relax before. Not once.

Her trust in me is humbling, but now isn't the time to get all sentimental. I've been granted dominion over this exquisite creature, and I will make sure she doesn't regret the decision. I shuck off the rest of my clothes, roll on a condom, and settle between her luscious thighs. "Eyes open, Chelsea. You're doing this with me."

Chelsea's eyes fly open, narrowing to angry slits at the command. I can't help but leer. They're mesmerizing, sparkling in the moonlight. "You know, you're beautiful when you submit."

I don't give any more warning before I plunge balls deep in one hard thrust. Despite my threat to be ruthless, I start slow, wanting to savor the moment. Chelsea watches me warily as if waiting for me to change my mind.

This makes me want to shock her, and I roll my hips, going as deep as I can with each stroke. I'm not in a hurry. I've got all night. The only thing that could make this

better is if Chelsea was truly with me for the experience.

Hoping to get her there, I give Chelsea in words what my body is already saying. “No one has ever moved me like you do. You’ve sent me spiraling, but I love every second of it. I want to drive you just as mad.”

“Then do it,” she whispers.

And the last bastion falls. Chelsea’s ultimate surrender is the sweetest victory. I’m in seventh fucking heaven. Feeling like a god, I rise to my knees, holding her legs up, and slam back home.

Chelsea yelps at the explosive change of pace, but I don’t lighten up. What can I say? I’m feeling a little extra motivated. Her shocked gasps soon become frenzied whimpers. I’ll never get enough of her.

I drop to my elbows and taste her lips again. Chelsea pushes against every thrust, meeting me halfway. She bites my lip when I lift again, setting me off. I explode within her, my whole body going rigid. I groan into her neck, riding out the explosive rush.

My heart eventually restarts, and I layer kisses on Chelsea’s neck and collar. “We’re a done deal, you and I,” I whisper in her ear.

“Think so?”

Pushing up on trembling arms, I hover above her face and grin. “You bet your ass.”

I touch my lips tenderly to hers and hold still, waiting for her to prove she wants this just as much. Chelsea holds out for a long time but eventually grunts and swipes her tongue across my bottom lip.

Though I'm softening, I piston my hips slowly, wringing every last bit of pleasure I can from the encounter. Chelsea hisses, her whole body over-sensitized from what I know to be the roughest sex of my life.

I reach up and release Chelsea's hands from the binds, bringing her arms to rest around my neck, then grab her hips and stand us up. Chelsea wobbles when I set her on her feet, but my arms go quickly around her. "I've got you."

Chelsea drops her forehead to my chest, and her whole body slumps. I kiss the top of her head and savor the way she leans against me. We remain that way until steady on our feet, and then I take Chelsea's hand to lead her downstairs.

After gathering our clothes, we slip inside the private terrace entrance which lands us in my bedroom, the best room in the house. I'm not surprised that Chelsea chose to take a smaller room and leave this one for me.

She skates past me toward the hallway, holding her dress.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Chelsea halts her steps and turns around, using the shimmering red fabric to cover up. Her hair is a beautiful chaos on top of her head, and her cheeks are flushed from our lovemaking. "Um. We're done, so I'm going to my room."

I drop my things, not caring that I'm still naked. "No, you're running, and I want to know why."

"Jackson, I'm tired. I'd_"

"I don't want to hear bullshit, Chelsea."

She closes her eyes and grits her teeth. “Fine. I was leaving before you could dismiss me.”

Chelsea reaches for the door handle, but I stop her. “If you walk out that door, I’m coming with you.”

She must not have expected to hear that. Her eyes show it when she whirls around. “You’ll...ah...what?”

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“I’m nowhere near finished with you, Jarhead. If you’re leaving, so am I.”

Chelsea stares blankly for a bit. “Okay...um...I’ll be right back?”

I cross my arms and step closer. Chelsea, surprised and hopeful, rushes to explain. “I have to handle a few things. Could you give me five minutes? I’ll be right back. I swear it.”

I nod but say, “If you don’t return, I will come get you. I won’t even care if you bolt for the security house.”

Chelsea ducks out of the room without another word. I pick up my expensive tux, drape it over a chair, and brush my teeth before sliding into bed. The clock on my phone says Chelsea has about two more minutes before I go after her.

My door swings open barely a minute later, and Chelsea tiptoes across the floor, timid as a mouse. The moonlight spilling through the windows reveals that she didn’t put on any clothes. Her hair is down, and the dramatic makeup is gone from her face.

I open the covers in invitation, and Chelsea hesitates. “Jackson...just... I need to know something first.”

The woman fidgets with her hands, noticeably nervous. This is one time I sense pushing her would be a bad idea, so I let her speak her mind. Chelsea takes one step closer to the bed and asks, “Why me?”

Her question doesn’t surprise me. I’ve actually thought about this a lot. What I could

reveal might scare her away, but offering a simple reply of why not you wouldn't be enough. Chelsea needs raw and genuine, or she'll never relinquish the innate need to protect her heart.

"Why you?" I ask, rising from the bed. Chelsea holds her ground as I close the few feet between us. I reach up to finger her soft waves and lock eyes with her. "Because when I think about my life fifty years from now, I hear you whispering my name."

The risk I took in revealing that truth must have been the vulnerability Chelsea needed to see. She steps into me, leaning her head against my chest. I'm tempted to hold my breath, afraid I'll do or say something to break the spell.

I shouldn't have worried. Chelsea lifts her head, slides her hands up my body, and pulls my mouth down to hers.

Chelsea

Though it's midnight to my body, sunrise is almost here. Jackson has only been asleep for about ten minutes. He's lying behind me, tucked against my back, with his arm wrapped around my waist and a hand cupping my breast. His hot breath caresses my neck as I relive the night.

Jackson's confession said something to me I'd never heard before. The man wants a future with me in it, flaws and all. With Trace, a life with him was something I had to earn. He dangled our relationship in front of me like a carrot on a string. I was always one misstep away from losing it.

I hear you whispering my name, Jackson had said. After that, I didn't want anything but him, and once more wouldn't be enough. Moonlight spilled through the windows as I brought Jackson to his knees while on mine.

That was the first time I put my mouth on a man without it being an expectation_a far cry from the times I did it to prove my worth. When Jackson's legs began to quake, I pushed him onto the bed and climbed on top, riding hard until we both were out of breath and shaking. Thank God for birth control.

My eyes finally drift closed to sleep, though I'm afraid of how things might be when we wake up. Things might be exactly the same, or I could wake up from this dream and be cast aside again. I guess I'll find out.

The sun is high in the sky when I wake, but in my head, it's six a.m., like in Virginia. Jackson's heat is missing, leaving me with nothing to chase away the doubts flooding my mind.

I'm about to slink off to my room when Jackson's door opens. He's freshly showered and carrying two cups of coffee. At his smile, the butterflies that survived the hurricane take flight in my middle. "I worked you over pretty hard, so I didn't want to wake you too early."

Jackson sits on the side of the bed, placing one of the cups on the nightstand for me. I sit up, bringing the sheet with me. "Thanks."

I take a few sips and moan at the much-needed caffeine infusion. "How long before we fly out?"

"My men and I will catch a transport to Rota in about an hour. You guys leave a few minutes after us. Knot and O'Reilly want to meet when we've all landed."

Nodding, I study the coffee in my mug. "No doubt they'll be busy all day looking for this Pentagon player."

Jackson doesn't say anything else, so I look up to see him staring, smiling serenely.

“What?”

“It’s nice to meet you, Chelsea.”

I get what he’s saying. Jackson is witnessing the true, authentic Chelsea without the uniform or pretense I like to hide behind. I may not know what I am, but Jackson is convinced he does and still likes what he sees.

The man stands and gestures toward the bench at the foot of the bed. “Alright, Jarhead. It’s time to get moving. I brought your stuff in here. You get cleaned up, and I’ll keep the wolves at bay downstairs.”

Jackson bends down to kiss my forehead and leaves. I sip on my coffee, hiding my grin from the empty room.

I join the crew in the kitchen half an hour later. Most of the SEALs are outside packing their gear into the three vehicles set to deliver them to the airport. My stuff is packed and waiting in the entry hall. I took a few extra minutes to make sure Jackson and I didn’t leave anything embarrassing on the terrace or the private atrium below.

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Jackson is in the kitchen, and I'm struggling to know how to act toward him around our teammates. He's his usual self, and no one seems aware of the change between us. Bash hands me a plate and shoves me toward the simple buffet at the stove.

Food is easy. Food makes for a good distraction. I pick out some fruit, eggs, and bacon, and then park at an empty seat at the bar. Conversation carries on around me in the large kitchen. I tune it out for the most part, only acknowledging what's directed toward me.

Jackson's gaze is palpable, electrifying my skin, each glance a physical weight I can't ignore. When I finish the meal, Jackson puts down his cup and shoves away from the counter. "Chelsea, could I talk to you for a minute?"

My instinctive reaction is to brace for the it was nice fucking you, but... I follow meekly toward the office, where Jackson closes the door, shutting out the chatter from the others. I stand facing the desk with my eyes squeezed shut, but Jackson doesn't offer regrets or excuses.

Soft lips brush against mine, and I nearly sob in relief. Jackson's kiss becomes demanding, making me lightheaded. Just before I get carried away, Jackson withdraws to rest his forehead against mine, leaving me wanting more.

He lifts my chin with a single finger, his stare penetrating deep into my soul. "I'm not walking away, so stop expecting me to."

With one last brush against my lips, Jackson is gone.

My crew catches a ride to the airport shortly after the SEALs leave. I'm acutely aware that every one of my teammates heard the entire staged scene last night. They've now seen a side of me that I successfully kept hidden for a long time.

Since then, there's been no razzing between us or even lighthearted jokes. I don't know if that means they're impressed or repulsed by the role I so easily played. I'm afraid to face anyone directly in case I see the latter.

We're two hours into the flight before anyone speaks at all. Bash rises from his seat and kicks Dani out of the spot beside me. I tense my muscles, unsure of what my partner is thinking.

"I don't know how I never saw it before, but you're a natural at undercover work."

"A professional liar, you mean."

"No, that's not what I mean. You made that covert shit look easy. If I hadn't known you for the last two years, I'd be sold on you as the debutante."

Shaking my head, I start to brush off the praise. "Bash_"

"Geez, Chelsea, could you please just accept the compliment? I've felt like shit ever since the Beergate incident. I'm only trying to make things right with you."

I gape at my friend like he's grown a third head. He doesn't usually talk this much, and certainly not with this much emotion. Seeing him like this is unsettling. To ease his mind, I ask, "Beergate? You christened the situation?"

Several voices answer throughout the cabin. "Yes." Followed by laughter.

My head pops up. "Hey! Don't you losers have anything better to do than listen in on

private groveling?”

Bastien’s shoulders deflate as the weight slides off them. I bat my eyes at him and smile. “You were saying?”

The man scoffs, incredulous. He scrubs a hand over his chin and stands. “No thanks. I’ve given you enough ammunition.”

Bash walks away, making Dani switch seats back. She doesn’t seem to mind, and neither do I. The tension is broken, and each of us settles into the comfortable silence.

Shortly after we land, a fleet of Knot vehicles carts us back to base, where we meet to debrief. Having private jets at our disposal, we beat the SEALs and fill up one side of the room, knowing they’ll arrive soon.

Commander O’Reilly leads his men into the war room a few minutes later and joins my boss at the front. The man shocks me by seeking me out amongst the crowd. “Nice undercover work, Chelsea. You’ve got good instincts.”

Instead of relishing the praise like I might have done in my younger years, I recoil. “Thank you, sir, but I got nothing useful.”

O’Reilly smiles. “You didn’t have to, but you did set him up beautifully.”

I look around the room, not understanding. Since none of my temporary team sports a ta-da expression, I look toward Knot. “Set him up for what? What does that mean?”

My stony-faced boss remains quiet. He’s not happy about something. I worry it’s my failure to get the name of the leak inside the Pentagon. When Knot doesn’t respond, the SEAL commander does. “Harding is on the hook enough that we could get what we need in one follow-up.”

Now, I'm reeling. Normally, I'd fake like I understand to keep from standing out, but since I'd be volunteering, that would be stupid. "I'm sorry. I'm not following. How do I follow up?"

My gaze swings to Jackson, who looks even worse than Knot. "The sleazy asshole thinks you're a lonely wife ripe for the picking or that you married a hero just for the prestige and like to take rides on the side. Either way, he'll make a move if you meet him alone." Jackson angles his gaze away to glare at the two men in charge of planning. "Maybe before he tells her anything. When she shuts him down, we won't get shit."

My eyes slam shut beneath the weight of responsibility. We have to expose these bastards, or good men will keep dying. Hating it but knowing it's necessary, I say, "So I don't shut him down."

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The room goes silent briefly before erupting, the loudest voice being Knot. “No. Absolutely not. Your job is not worth putting yourself in such a questionable position.”

I hold Knot’s stare, sensing that even though he’s protective, the man is torn. He knows what’s at stake as well as I do, so I give him an out. “We all know it’s not just my job in jeopardy, but an entire industry. And you know more troops will die in their pursuit to shut us down. We have to stop them.”

“You’re not doing it, Chelsea!” Jackson roars, shoving out of his chair.

“Look around you, Jackson. Remember that planned ambush in Bulgaria? Harding and his rat set up your team to die. Had that been a real mission, your team would be dead. You or someone else will be sent out with PMCs again, only they won’t know where to look. If we can prevent another massacre, I think we should do whatever it takes.”

Jackson shakes his head. “I know what you’re doing. You’d give Harding your body to prove your commitment to him,” he accuses, pointing to Knot, “but no one here needs that kind of proof. You’re not doing this. I won’t let you.”

Embarrassed that the deepest, darkest part of me is now exposed, I lash out in anger. “It’s. Not. Up. To. You. Just because we fucked, you think you can run my life.”

Jackson rushes me, and no one attempts to stop him. “Just because I made you feel something, you think you have to destroy us.”

“Knock it off!” Knot thunders. “The answer is no, Chelsea. This company is not worth what it would cost you, and I don’t want that on my conscience. And since we’re still officially under contract for this mission, you’ll obey orders. Now, we’ve got to work on a plan for our next steps. You two, take your shit outside.”

“No, sir,” I say through gritted teeth. “We’re fine.”

Jackson growls, “Like hell we are.”

He bends to throw me over his shoulder and storms from the room.

Jackson

Wide-eyed onlookers gawk as Chelsea beats her fists against my back, demanding I put her down. I ignore them all and crash through the door, going to the only place in this unfamiliar building where we can have some privacy.

I tighten my grip, and Chelsea doesn’t let up, stopping short of hurting me for real, just like I knew she would. Chelsea doesn’t hurt people. Well, didn’t until offering herself up to become Harding’s whore.

I shove through the stairwell door, eyeing the spot where I introduced Bash to the block wall. After lowering Chelsea to her feet, I cage her against the wall in the same place. “You can’t do this.”

Chelsea rolls her eyes. “The point is moot, but I’m confused. What part of this would be your decision?”

Never in my life have I felt such rage. It’s turning me inside out. “First of all, stop trying to piss me off. It won’t work the way you expect. Second, those people do not need you to throw yourself on a grenade to prove your value. In case you’ve missed

it, they already respect you. When will you accept that?"

Chelsea's eyes well up, and she slams her hands against my chest. "Stop it! You think you know me, but you don't."

"You're wrong. I see you. I know you better than anyone, which scares the shit out of you."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Chelsea snarls.

I roar right back. "You're afraid of being abandoned, but you're not alone. Those people upstairs would die for you." Jabbing myself in the chest, I yell, "I'm falling in love with you. And I'll protect you from yourself until you believe it."

Chelsea goes still until I drop my head to take my frustration out on her mouth. She shoves to the side to evade me, and I grip her shoulders, bringing her back. "Stop it, Chelsea. Stop pretending it doesn't feel good to have someone looking out for you. Stop acting like you haven't wished for someone like me to see you. And for fuck's sake, stop wasting time fighting this. You wouldn't only be hurting yourself. You'd be hurting me, too."

Chelsea's expression shows a great miscalculation on my part. She is afraid of being alone but even more scared of finding something real just to lose it. "So this is about you now?"

Stop, man, she's backed into a corner. I should listen to the voice, but I don't. "No, this is about you thinking so little of yourself that you would deny yourself a shot at love. That you would rather shred your soul than risk your heart again."

Those beautiful eyes turn feral. "Maybe you don't understand because you can't comprehend that level of commitment."

Chelsea's face slackens in instant regret, but the arrows have already been fired. I drop my defenses and let them hit home. You should have listened to the voices, dumbass. "You know what, Chelsea? You're exactly right."

I shove off the wall and leave before I open my mouth and burn the whole place down.

Every step I take toward the exit screams that I'm a hypocrite. I told Chelsea I wouldn't be walking away. I wanted to reassure her that we all have faults and that hers weren't a dealbreaker.

I never expected her to torpedo our tenuous connection. Maybe I should have. Maybe Chelsea's more damaged than I thought. Maybe she's not capable of trust. As much as I wish I did, maybe I don't care. My heart is hers now, and I can't take it back.

My escape from the building spits me out near the helipads. The two Romeos that brought us here sit waiting for the trip home. I'd love nothing more than to get away from this place, but I couldn't, even if my truck was parked in the lot. Technically, we're still deployed, and jetting now would risk being listed as AWOL.

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Too edgy to sit still, I head toward the trailhead Chelsea showed me just a few weeks ago. Ironically, that trail is where I made my first breakthrough with her. I set off in a jog and get lost in my head for a while.

I don't understand how Chelsea can keep throwing up wall after wall. All her life, she's bent over backward for others to notice her, but the closer I get, the harder she pushes me away.

She sounds a lot like you.

The foreign thought halts my steps. Nothing about that makes sense. Chelsea and I are not anything alike. I'm an open book. What you see is what you get. By her own admission, Chelsea doesn't even know who the hell she is. "If I've avoided relationships, it was to protect my son."

Chelsea did it to protect herself. You were using Caleb as an excuse.

"Talking to yourself again, Lieutenant?"

Fish jogs up to me and matches my stride when I take off again. "What is it, Hill?"

"Nothing. We're finished and ready to fly back."

I reverse course and slow to a walk. Fish keeps pace, acting like something's on his mind. I can only guess after the very public eruption between Chelsea and me. "Go ahead and spit it out," I tell my second.

Fish chuckles. “I wouldn’t know what to say. I’m not surprised you guys hooked up. I wouldn’t have expected it to be a problem, though. Can’t say Knot or the commander’s too happy about it.”

“Let me guess. I’m off the assignment.”

“You were anyway, I think. The husband is no longer needed.”

“Pfft.” Like I didn’t already know that.

“Are you alright, Pin?” he asks carefully.

Lying would be preferable, but Fish knows me too well. After a beat, I finally answer, “I don’t know.”

“Need to talk it out?” he offers.

“I don’t think it would help.”

Fish nudges me with his elbow. “It couldn’t hurt.”

We take several more steps before I make up my mind to speak. “I’m chasing a woman who wants to be chased. The problem is that she’s afraid to get caught.”

“And you’re in too deep to walk away.”

“I thought so, but I just did.”

“Nah,” Fish says, smacking my shoulder. “You’re just blowing off steam. It wasn’t walking away unless you refuse to go back.”

I stop walking and kick a rock out of the path.

When I'm silent, Fish encourages me to continue. "Spit it out."

"I want..." I hesitate to share my thoughts because of how selfish they sound. At Fish's raised brow, I open up and let it all out. "I want to know the struggle will be worth it. I haven't been in a relationship since high school. My time with Caleb as a kid was not going to last, and I didn't want to waste any of it."

"And there's nothing wrong with that, but that boy doesn't need you anymore. He's old enough that you get to be his best friend if you've done your job right. If anything, he'll start worrying about you."

I chuckle without humor. "He already does. Caleb wants me to find someone to build a life with. I just don't want to invest time and energy into someone if they don't want the same thing."

"Is Chelsea that person?"

I lift my eyes from the ground and look straight at my friend. "I wish I knew the answer to that."

Chelsea

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I take a deep breath before walking back into the war room, not that it helps. All eyes swing my way and then immediately past. They're looking for Jackson, but he isn't behind me. For him to duck out of work, I must have damaged things between us for good. Idiot. I somehow manage to wreck relationships whether I'm trying to or not.

When it's evident that Jackson isn't returning, the meeting resumes, though the atmosphere is a lot thicker.

Knot clears his throat as I take my seat. "Though I'm against allowing this thread to continue, we're all convinced Harding will seek you out. The best we can do is frame the situation to maintain complete control. I won't let you be put at risk."

"Okay, so let's get started."

Knot gestures to Birdie, who's keeping tabs on the congressman. "We know he spends most of his time in DC. The current session ends on the seventh of next month. After that, he'll return to Arizona for summer fundraising and ass-kissing."

"He'll want to get to you before he leaves, but DC is four hours from here," O'Reilly speculates.

I shrug, unsure why they haven't already figured this out. "So we set something up for me to be in Washington at some point."

Bash pipes in, looking a little heated about learning his best friends went at it while watching them go at it. "It'll need to be publicized. Like a fundraiser where you're listed as an organizer or sponsor or something."

“Right.” I nod.

“Birdie?” Knot says.

She’s already clacking furiously on her keyboard. “I’m on it. Looking for events already on the calendar.”

We all watch her work and respond physically when her shoulders sag. She’s coming up short. “Does the congressman need to be involved?”

“No,” Knot answers. “Anything to get Chelsea’s fake name in the paper.”

“Okay. I think I’ve got something then. There’s a deployed spouse event going on this weekend. It’s a carnival theme. We could step up and give the event a boost. There’s no way they’d turn us down. Well, they wouldn’t turn down a private citizen whose husband is deployed.”

“That’s it. Make it happen,” my boss orders his intel chief. To Sadie and me, he says, “You two, work on staging a meetup. I want it to happen in a public place. A hotel bar. I want people in that room to run interference if necessary.”

“Okay. We’ve got a plan but not a lot of time. Let’s move, people,” O’Reilly says as he stands.

I walk out with the others, torn between following Sadie and searching for Jackson. The choice is taken from my hands when one of the SEALs attaches himself to my hip. “Got a minute?” the guttural voice asks.

Devil points me to an empty office, and I enter without question. I know what’s on his mind anyway. “Look. I didn’t mean to air all that laundry. I’m just not used to being told what to do.”

The feral SEAL raises a brow, challenging my explanation. Military. Duh. “Fine. I’m not used to someone having a say in my personal life.”

“That’s not fair. You offered yourself up in front of your team. You can’t expect them not to react. And for someone who cares about you as Jackson does... The man is only human. Of course, he’ll be jealous, but I think it’s more than that. And I believe you do, too. Selling yourself even for a good reason would shatter him...and you.”

“I get what you’re saying, okay, but Jackson and I aren’t a thing. I piss him off too much.”

Laughter rumbles from Devil’s chest. “If that were the case, you’d never have gotten a reaction from him to begin with. Jackson has always kept his emotions in check. Until you, the only person that could reach him was his son. And if it’s loyalty you’re worried about, you can stop. Jackson gave up an Ivy League scholarship to be a father. He joined the Navy to provide for his son.”

“You don’t have to sell me on Jackson being a good man. I know he is. That’s why I’ve tried to convince him he deserves better than the neurotic bitch with trust issues.”

“Whatever issues you have might help Bennett deal with his.”

Jackson has no issues except me. “Devil, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but what’s happened has already happened. It’s all moot now.”

Before he says anything else, I walk from the room and set off to look for Sadie. I find her waiting for me in the executive conference room. “So...?”

“Nope,” I cut her off. “Not going there. What hotel do we use?”

Our plan is simple and wrapped up in less than an hour. Sadie and I take our plans and stroll toward Birdie's office. She's leaning back in her chair, smiling smugly when we walk in. "I take it things are going well?" I ask as I claim one of her guest chairs.

"Well? I've already booked a shit-ton of inflatables, secured and paid for food trucks to set up and feed the crowd, and even hired some street performers. Even better is that I got Dallas Allred, famous investigative reporter and wife to one Hagan "Ink" Fischer, to write an article highlighting the event. She promised to include that your husband is currently deployed. I should be receiving it anytime now. Once I have it, I'll forward a fake newsletter to Harding's personal email. Dallas tells me she'll even be able to get TV mention of the event, so we have a better chance of catching Harding's attention."

I applaud the woman, astounded by how she works so fast. Birdie blushes and asks, "What about you guys? You get the trap set?"

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“I’d say yes. We picked the Willard for its proximity to the capitol.”

Sadie nabs a chocolate from Birdie’s candy bowl and pops it in her mouth. Speaking around the chocolate truffle ball, she says, “It has a private bar with even more private dining options.”

Birdie cuts her eyes back to me, and mine roll. “Not that private.”

“Just enough for Harding to feel comfortable giving up the name of his Pentagon informant,” Sadie clarifies.

I shake my head, still thinking this is insane. Yes, just an hour ago, I was willing to go to shady lengths to get the name of Harding’s informant. My proposal got shot down by virtually everyone. What concerns me is that I don’t know how I’ll get Harding to spill his guts with just a bit of light conversation. Instead of saying so, I suggest, “How about we just work on what I should say in case the man makes contact?”

The call from Harding comes two days later. I haven’t seen Jackson in all that time. In fact, none of the SEALs have visited the compound since the day we returned from Spain. I guess they haven’t had a reason to.

I’m currently at home, sitting on my sofa when the mission phone rings. “Hello.”

“Chelsea. I’m glad I caught you. This is Calvin.

“Calvin, what a surprise. I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon. Hoped, but didn’t

expect.”

“I didn’t want you to forget me.”

“Impossible. How are you? How was your flight back to Washington? I trust my flight staff treated you well.”

“The flight was perfect. Speaking of Washington, I heard you’ll be in town this weekend. If your schedule allows, I thought we could meet and discuss ways to integrate you into our cause.”

“As luck would have it, I do have some spare time. I’ll be flying in Friday afternoon in case there are any last-minute details to clear up. I’m afraid Jackson won’t be with me, though. He’s currently deployed. Is that alright?”

“More than alright. Where will you be staying?”

“I’ll be at the Willard. We could meet at the Round Robin.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Great. I’ll reach out on Friday with details.”

“See you then.”

I end the call using my sultry, in-heat voice and lean back on the sofa, not liking the bad taste in my mouth. I let the undercover phone drop to my lap and reach for mine to inform Birdie.

We got him.

Chelsea

Fifty times now, I've picked up my phone to message Jackson_fifty times over the last two days.

I'm sorry.

The words are needed but are not enough. Jackson was right. I've taken this whole need for acceptance to a dangerous level if the thought of sleeping with Harding for answers didn't give me pause.

Time ticks by as I stare out the window. The driver brings the SUV to a stop, and I file out with the rest of my crew to board the jet taking us to DC.

Sadie, Aaron, Bash, and Kai stow their gear and buckle into the lavish seats for the short flight. They're the only ones going with me. While Kai isn't a team leader, the half Samoan-half Caucasian man is the most attentive operative on our team. He'll aid Bash on video surveillance while Aaron and Sadie pose as a couple in the bar. The SEALs aren't allowed to operate on US soil, so their participation was an automatic no. Given the nature of this particular exercise, they're not needed anyway.

I fidget with the hem of the ivory-and-green floral Giambattista Valli dress Amina picked out specifically for tonight. The wide V-neck cuts down to the empire waist, ensuring I could wear no bra with the pretty spring dress. My hair is done to perfection, and so is my makeup.

On the outside, I look as ready as I can be for my last undercover mission. Inside, all I can think about are the regrets I have.

Upon arrival, vehicles from our DC branch whisk my team to the hotel. After checking into adjoining rooms, the men set up surveillance equipment while Sadie

fits the crew with hidden cameras and microphones. No one recites security measures or coaches me up. The team hardly speaks at all. No one wants to be here, least of all me.

Just before go time, Bash orders everyone out of the room, sealing me inside with him. He turns off his radio and grips my shoulders, dipping his head to stare into my eyes. “We need a code word.”

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“We don’t need a code word,” I counter, exasperated.

I look away so Bash won’t see my reluctance to face off with Harding. Bash reads me anyway. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m_”

“Chelsea, stop. I may be missing a lot of details, but I’ve worked with you long enough to see that something’s not right. Before you walk out that door, I need to know if this is personal or if you’re afraid of Harding.”

My shoulders stiffen. “I am not afraid of some candy-ass politician.”

“Good. Then do I need to kick Jackson’s ass? Don’t think I haven’t noticed his absence or his silence.”

“You leave him alone,” I fire back, poking Bash in the chest. “Jackson has suffered enough because of me.”

I shove away from Bash, suddenly energized for my mission. As I yank open the door, he whispers, “Maybe, but he needs you.”

My feet keep moving, though my heart craves the validation of Bash’s belief. A second after the door closes, it opens again, and his voice carries down the hall after me. “The code word is trust.”

I ignore my partner and keep moving until I’m seated in the bar. Not long after, the

bartender serves me a fruity, sparkling mocktail. Bash and Kai are holed up watching the camera feeds, and Sadie and Aaron are seated in a booth across the classy room.

My nerves are shot, and the longer I wait for Harding to show up, the closer I get to cracking. Since talking to Bastien, all I can think about is Jackson. I still believe the man deserves better, but I'm going batshit thinking, despite my crazy, that I could possibly be something he needs.

That's something worth fighting for, fighting myself, my demons. I'll even fight Jackson for another chance. I reach for my purse and phone, but there's a touch on my bare shoulder before I can put the call through. I slide my phone back into my bag and turn to greet my target. "Congressman Harding. So good to see you again."

The tall man towers over me in my seat. I direct him to the chair across from me so he'll be in direct view of the flower cam planted by Sadie. With a predator's smile, he slowly unbuttons his jacket and holds his tie to sit. "Please. Call me Calvin. Or Cal if you wish to be more friendly."

I test out the name, speaking to the ceiling to expose my neck. "Hmm. Cal. I like that."

Harding winks. "Thanks for carving out time to meet me. I hear you have a busy weekend planned."

I brush off the comment. "When you have no children, your family is a continent away, and your husband is always deployed, you find things to fill your weekend. I get to the point sometimes where I'd do just about anything to feel a connection with another human."

A waiter approaches to take Harding's drink order, and I scan the room, briefly locking eyes with Sadie. When the barman leaves, Harding leans forward. "I

understand how you feel. And to be worried about your husband's safety doesn't help. How often is he forced to work with mercenaries?"

My blood boils at the derogatory term, but I don't let it show. "Pretty often," I answer with a sigh. "And with the number of tragedies you've reported, my nerves aren't catching a break, I'm afraid."

Harding reaches across the table to take my hand. "That is an unfortunate consequence of what I do. I regret any loss of sleep I cause you."

"No. I understand. You have to do this. No one else is. Besides, no battle was ever won from a place of comfort. I also know you need help and support, not whining from spouses like me. Speaking of, did you have something in mind for me to do?"

The waiter returns with Harding's drink, and I clench my napkin in my fist at the interruption. "Sir, your table is ready."

Shocked at the announcement, I sit up straight. "Table?"

Harding brags, "I'm friends with the manager and requested a private dining room. I hope you don't mind."

Schooling my features, I toss back my shoulders and stand. "Hmm. Preferential treatment. You're setting a dangerous precedent, Cal."

Harding collects his old-fashioned and my mocktail with a laugh, and we follow the host down a long hall past a collection of doors. Sadie's concerned gaze follows me from the room, but there's nothing either of us can do.

We follow the host down a hall to a set of heavy French doors open to a candlelit room. Fragrant floral arrangements adorn the table, and polished silverware gleams in

the flickering candlelight. The scene is far too romantic and intimate to pretend to be even remotely professional.

The host pulls out one of the two chairs for me and places a napkin across my lap. Harding sets my drink down and declines a pour of chilled champagne.

A waiter returns the bottle to its ice bucket and removes the covers from the plates. All three courses are on the table, which I find odd. The host and waiter exit gracefully, if quickly, and, suddenly nervous, I reach for my drink. After a fortifying sip, I place the glass back on the table. “This is beautiful.”

Harding follows my gaze around the room. “I felt privacy was needed.”

I snap back to his face at his tone, but he only grins. “In case we discuss your colleagues.”

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“Of course. Right.” I shake my head, feigning disappointment to not be the reason and embarrassed to have shown it.

Mine proves to be the correct reaction because Harding sits up just a little straighter. “Well. Shall we?” he asks as he picks up his fork.

We mainly make small talk during the meal. Strangely, no waitstaff returns. I sip my drink faster than I would a real one just to see what happens, but no offer is made to secure me another. When my glass is empty, Calvin reaches for the champagne, pouring me a glass.

I alternate between it and the water, wanting to remain sober. Halfway through dessert, I attempt to get the conversation back on track. “We got interrupted earlier. Though I was glad to hear from a new friend, I didn’t get to find out why you wanted to meet. Have you found a use for me? I don’t imagine I can be as helpful as your contact at the Pentagon, but I’m good at working with people’s emotions. Maybe I could help with speech writing.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Harding croons. “You are far more valuable than that. You’re just feeling a little lost right now. I get it. Believe me. I get it. You’d think being in Congress, a man would never be alone, but regardless of the number of people I deal with daily, I get lonely. People only see me as another rung on the ladder.”

“Oh, I’m not... Please, don’t think I’m_”

Harding rushes to pull his chair closer to mine and grabs both my hands. “I would

never think that of you. Remember, it was me that called you, right? And instead of asking for something, you're offering to help. I find that, and you, refreshing."

I almost throw up in my mouth at the man's insincerity. He's a media whore who prefers the company of expensive escorts over that of his wife. The latter information is courtesy of Birdie, of course.

Harding begins drawing circles on the insides of my wrists, and I let out a little moan. As soon as I do, my eyes spring open at the phony slip. I clear my throat to cover the intended faux pas. "Um. I've been thinking about your contact at the Pentagon. In my head, I like to think it's Admiral Jameson. He's a good man and one I'd like to imagine spearheading the effort to rid the ranks of mercenaries."

"My contact isn't part of the Navy, but if the admiral is sympathetic, I'd love to make his acquaintance."

It wasn't much, but I've eliminated one branch so far. "Oh, I couldn't say. I'd just like to think so. I don't think the Navy has as much experience with the private military as the Army does. Is that the branch our hero works for?"

Harding stiffens at some of the praise shifting to another. "Yes, while it helps to have such a high-ranking connection, I'm afraid my friend doesn't have the guts to fight this battle in the public arena."

I let disgust color my voice when I say, "Another man more concerned about his career than doing what's right. I'm glad you don't suffer the same affliction."

The congressman's ego is restored, but unfortunately, he's ready to move on. "I think it helps to let the world know what we're fighting for. I believe it encourages our troops."

“Absolutely. I’ve seen a difference in Jackson since Spain. When he was last home...”

My face falls, and Harding reaches over to lift my chin. I don’t recoil at his touch, though my skin is crawling. “It’s been difficult for you. Being alone all these years. It’s why you agreed to meet with me, isn’t it?”

I look away, close my eyes, and nod. “I feel so guilty, but having someone’s attention feels nice. I’m sorry. I’ll leave.”

Harding pulls my hands when I try to stand. “I’d rather you stay. Everyone deserves to feel cherished. I imagine you don’t get much of that with your husband being away so much.”

While I’m not surprised by his refusal to let me leave, I also fear I’ve lost control of the narrative. Harding’s not going to give me a name easily. I could keep trying, but there’s no guarantee he’ll give it up. And I don’t know how far I’d have to go to find out.

Promising myself not to go too far, I relax in my chair. Harding places a hand on my thigh, and I allow him to see me flinch. Maybe I can use this. His fingers massage lightly as they creep forward, and I pretend to ramble nervously to keep him distracted and talking. “H_how did you first decide to wade into this fight?”

Lifting his hand to my collarbone, Harding answers, “During a budget meeting. The two sides were arguing over how much was being paid to private military corporations.”

The hand at my collar wraps around my neck, and Harding brushes his lips across my cheek.

I let my fake nervous chatter continue, hoping he'll let something slip while distracted with what he's doing. "I'll bet that was eye-opening. I assume CEOs were arguing pro, and military brass against?"

Fingers slip beneath the hem of my dress and nudge my thighs apart. Shit. I need to slow this down. "Wait. What about the waitstaff?"

Instead of backing down, Harding smirks. "I paid them extra to not disturb us for an hour. And no, plenty of uniforms argued for continued use of contractors."

Harding allows my conversation, assuming I'm exorcising my reservations. I'm just glad it keeps him away from my mouth. "That's unbelievable."

"I took in the scene, noting those who were the staunchest opposers of the government's use of private military. I sought out those men and formed an alliance."

Harding shoves one of my straps off my shoulder, nearly exposing my left breast. About the same time, his fingers brush against my panties. My shudder is involuntary and not part of the act. I can't do this.

I close my eyes in disgust as his mouth latches onto my neck. A tear leaks from my eye, and I whisper, "I'm glad you found someone you could trust."

Jackson

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PT is too damned quiet. This group of assholes is normally loud enough to disturb the ghosts on this island, but today, everyone is too afraid to speak. I know why. It's because of my very public display with Chelsea yesterday. I'm sure there was a better way to handle it, at least without the audience.

My platoon finishes our run, and I linger on the beach, hoping for a few minutes of solitude before facing the firing squad. O'Reilly left me alone yesterday after returning to base, but I don't for a second believe that he won't bust my ass eventually. I wouldn't even be surprised if he demoted me. It's no less than I deserve.

Most of my squad heads toward HQ, but Duck sticks around, as do Fish and his men. "Guys, isn't it bad enough that I'll get reamed by O'Reilly? Can't you cut me a break?"

"We're not looking to bust your balls, man," Fish says. "Hell, if Willa were offering to do what Chelsea is, I would have already killed Harding."

"What are you gonna do?" Duck asks. "She won't go against Knot, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about."

Placing a hand on Duck's shoulder, I shake my head. "I know she won't, but that's not the problem."

Being the coolest head in the bunch, Judge asks, "Then, what is the problem?"

I'm off the hook for an answer when a loud command booms from farther inland. "Bennett, report in!"

Looking back at my team, I shake my head again. “Later, guys... If I’m still breathing.”

I jog toward HQ, wondering how low the commander will bust me. The man isn’t in the lobby, so my imagination runs wild a little longer on my way to his office.

“Shut the door,” he barks as soon as I step inside.

I do, and then I’m commanded to take a seat. “Knot’s people are planning to take another run at Harding.”

I snicker and self-correct quickly. “Yes, sir. I’m well aware.”

Cocking an eyebrow, he says, “It’s a good move.”

“If you say so.”

“You don’t agree?” he asks to provoke me.

“You know damn well what I think... Sir.”

O’Reilly steeple his fingers and leans back in his chair. “Pretend I don’t, Lieutenant.”

His tone left no room for disobedience, so I answer the man despite how stupid it seems. “Harding won’t tell her shit. He wants to fuck her and use her as an ATM. He’ll string her along, and Chelsea will let him.”

“You have that little faith in Danforth?”

“No. I believe it because I have too much. The woman would die to save a stranger.

Giving up her dignity to save the livelihoods of thousands of people is a no-brainer.”

O'Reilly drops his hands and leans forward. “I agree. And so does Knot. He wants assurances Danforth won't go through with it.”

I look past my commander to the pictures on his wall. “Knot's got a whole company of assurances.”

“We want you.”

I don't hold in my bitter laugh. “Well, that's too bad because Chelsea doesn't.”

“Well, Chelsea's not in charge here.”

“Sir, with all due respect, you know that's not what this is about. Why don't you cut the bullshit and tell me why I'm here.”

The commander turns to stare out the window overlooking the ocean. “Knot says something's happening with Danforth. She's not herself.”

“I happened to her,” I mumble.

“What was that?”

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“Nothing happened to Chelsea. She’s acting like herself. That’s the problem. She’s always been someone else. Now that she’s trying to be herself, she’s suddenly not good enough.”

“No one is saying that,” O’Reilly asserts.

“Aren’t they?”

My boss shrugs. “Maybe they are. I don’t know the woman, but I think you do.”

“What’s your point, Commander?”

“There is no point. I just want the best man on the job, and right now, that seems to be you.”

“You need someone Chelsea listens to. That isn’t me. Now, unless you’re ordering me to return to Knot Corp., I’ll ask to be dismissed to my men.”

“Your team’s status is still listed as deployed and will remain that way until this meeting happens. I suggest you remain ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

I stand and come to attention, but I don’t know what I need to be ready for. “Yes, sir.”

The commander dismisses me, but when I exit HQ, all my men are gone. No surprise there. With our status being what it is, we don’t have any workup or support assignments. They’ve all gone to be with their families, those who have them. I go

home to my dog.

Captain is happy to see me as she is each time I walk through the door. I've neglected the poor boxer lately, so I change and pack us up for the beach. Captain loves catching frisbees in the surf, and I could use the time away from everything.

Captain runs and plays like a pup until my arm screams from throwing the disk. I plop onto the sand, pull a beer from the small cooler, and set up a bowl for Captain. She slurps and splashes the cold water until flopping onto the sand beside me. "You're my best girl, Captain. Why can't all women be uncomplicated like you?"

I pat her head and take a long pull of the beer. "I mean, what the hell am I supposed to do? There's no winning here. Everything I try works for a while, then blows up in my face."

She ignores the question and me, content to watch a group of gulls nearby. "Figures."

Since I get no help from my dog or the sea, I pack up to go home. Dinner is an underwhelming roast beef sandwich eaten in front of the TV. I take a long, hot shower and go to bed early instead of moping around the house.

Lying in the dark later, I give up on going to sleep. I've tortured myself by replaying that night in Spain. Chelsea could have run to Fish, and I wouldn't have touched her. She ran to me instead, knowing what would happen.

I get lost remembering the way she submitted to me, her passion. My reaction to even her memory is too strong to resist. I pull my dick out of my shorts and squeeze. Chelsea's whimpers and moans as I feasted on her still vibrate my chest. Her nails still rasp over my scalp as they did when I claimed her body and soul. As her memory demands more space in my head, I squeeze harder and pump faster until cum spurts all over my stomach.

The manufactured orgasm hollows me out, and I'm left wrecked, just like I was this morning.

The next day passes much the same except that instead of the beach, I spend the evening prowling the SEAL bar, hoping Bastien might show up. Of course, I could have called him, but I didn't want it to look like I was desperate for company.

He hasn't shown up by eight, so I call my new best friend.

"What's up, Dad?"

"I was just... Are you busy?"

"Not particularly. Want me to come over?"

"I've got a better idea."

Twenty minutes later, Caleb walks into the bar and slides into the booth opposite me.
"You look like shit."

"Please. Don't hold back on my account."

Caleb laughs. "What's going on?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I need your help."

The playfulness on Caleb's face dries up instantly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just need... These women you read about."

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“Yeah,” he presses when I don’t continue.

“What happens when they start to feel things? I mean, do women freak out when they catch feelings for the male character?”

Caleb’s brow pinches. “Look, Dad, I don’t think_”

Ready to beg at this point, I do just that. “Tell me. Please.”

After a quick sigh, Caleb says, “I assume you’re looking for negative behaviors. Since you’re the one chasing, I’ll eliminate some on the list. What’s left are the worst. Women like yours might succumb to their anxiety and second-guess their feelings, dismissing the relationship. Worse still, a woman might be so afraid of being rejected that they avoid their potential partner or even sabotages the relationship.”

“A self-fulfilling prophecy,” I comment.

“Basically.”

“I left her,” I confess ruefully. “Chelsea lashed out because she was scared, and I left her. After I told her I wouldn’t, I walked away.”

“Dad. You can’t fix somebody.”

“Chelsea does not need to be fixed.” Caleb pales at how softly I’d spoken, but I’m not done yet. “Too many people in Chelsea’s life have told her that she’s broken. It’s time Chelsea learns she’s perfect the way she is.”

“Dad.” My son’s placating tone has me grinding my teeth. “You’ve been tied up in knots for weeks because of this woman. I don’t think you should_”

“I’m in love with her.”

“But, Dad_”

“Chelsea is mine. I just needed a kick in the ass to remind me. Thank you for your help and insight, but from here on out, I’ve got this.” He starts to speak again, but I stop him once more. “And when you meet her, she gets a clean slate. Got it?”

Caleb nods, and a smirk tilts his lips for the first time since the start of this conversation. “Got it.”

I hug Caleb as usual when we call it a night, and afterward, I shake his hand.

Sack time comes after doing a load of laundry. I go to bed feeling a lot better. Hopeful even. Yeah, I let my pride put me in a tailspin, and yes, I have some groveling to do with Chelsea. I can honestly say I’m looking forward to it. So much so that when I take my dick in hand, it’s to thoughts of what I’m going to do to Chelsea the next time I get my hands on her.

My Chelsea craving has me up and on base early the next morning. I don’t know why. It does me no good to be here before my platoon. I kill time cleaning my service weapon, ready to start as soon as my men arrive. The sooner we get going, the sooner it’s over, and I can find my woman.

I don’t want her to see me coming, so I’ve messaged Bash_several times_to get a rundown on where they’ll be today. He hasn’t answered a single text. I’m worried that means things are moving fast in their mission to bag Harding. Until I hear something, all I can do is focus on my job here and not getting my ass kicked. Today

is close quarters combat tactics, and the commander surprises us by coming out to observe.

Halfway through the session, Commander O'Reilly takes the field, causing a curious pause in activity. Somehow, I know he's headed straight for me. "I'll take over here, Fischer," he says, dismissing my current sparring partner.

"He's all yours, Commander," Ink drawls in his Aussie accent.

Walking to the nearest man, Ink puts Hawk, one of Fish's snipers, in a headlock, which the smaller man quickly breaks out of. O'Reilly shakes his head and faces me, quickly settling into a fighting stance. I mirror him and wait for my boss to make the first move.

The leader of SEAL Team Two produces a rubber dagger and strikes for my middle. I dodge, grab his wrist, and spin, disarming him and delivering a strike of my own. I'm at an advantage, having fifteen years on the guy. Maybe I should take it easy.

When I send a strike of my own, Stone reminds me why he's the base commander. I'm on my knees a second later with the rubber blade at my throat.

"Feeling any better, Pin?" O'Reilly lifts the blade to allow me to answer.

"I may have experienced a shift in conviction."

I'm released from the hold, and O'Reilly stands. "Good because a meeting with the target is set for eight hours from now, and I think you should be there."

That explains Bastien's silence. "I think so, too."

"Finish up here and head to Knot Corp. Birdie will catch you up, and Knot will get

you to DC.”

“Who else is going with me?”

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O'Reilly rests his hands on his hips and shakes his head. "Nobody. Knot only needs you."

Commander O'Reilly withdraws to his office, and I return to the day's training with a little more enthusiasm. Eight hours to Chelsea.

Four hours later, I'm on a Knot Corp. chopper flying toward the capitol, still in uniform. I never heard back from Bash, but he'll hear plenty from me when I see him. The bastard has had plenty of time to send a simple message. I'm convinced he's just messing with me.

I arrive at the Willard thirty minutes before showtime. I text Bash to let him know I'm here, figuring he's too busy to answer a call. He answers within seconds this time. You're on surveillance. Room 320.

Hoisting my bag over my shoulder, I trot up the stairs and knock on the door. Kai answers, holding a headphone speaker to his ear. He motions me toward a mobile command station and passes a spare headset toward me. "The show hasn't started yet. Chelsea's at a back table within sight of Sadie and Aaron."

"Is she mic'd up?" I ask the men.

Bash answers, "Camera at the table, and she's wearing a mic in her necklace."

"Earpiece?"

"No. Just like Spain, we didn't want to chance Harding seeing it."

I hesitate to ask the next question. “Does Chelsea know I’m here?”

The answer is pretty much what I expect. “No.”

I don’t dwell on what that might mean. I take the empty chair between the two PMCs and focus on the four screens. Kai gestures to each one, walking me through the setup. “Sadie’s view is here. The empty view is the flower cam at Yeet’s table. Aaron’s camera will show us when Harding arrives. This one”_he points to the last screen_“is the camera Chelsea’s wearing.”

“Why is it so close to the tabletop?”

“It’s ah...” the man stammers. “We couldn’t place it any higher because of her dress. It’s kind of low-cut to catch Harding’s attention.”

I shake off the visual of her naked breasts and thoughts of someone else seeing them. Clearing my throat, I settle in to watch.

Harding eventually passes through the rich, dark-wood entrance, pausing to leer when he spots Chelsea. Beyond that, he behaves as a proper government official until a host arrives to escort them to their table.

My surveillance partners do not react well to this. That, paired with Aaron and Sadie’s worried updates, tells me this wasn’t part of the plan. As Chelsea and Harding leave the opulent bar, we lose all reliable views.

Sadie and Aaron abandon their post to join us since they can no longer observe the pair in person. Over the next-half hour, we listen to and watch Chelsea’s valiant effort to coax information from the sleazy politician.

Harding keeps looking almost directly at the camera low on Chelsea’s chest, perving

at her boobs. After the tenth time, Bash clamps a hand on my shoulder. “Stand down, Lieutenant.”

I’m through listening when the bastard puts his hands on Chelsea. I get halfway upright when Aaron steps in to help Bastien restrain me. “Stop,” Bash whispers. “She won’t do it. Listen to her. Chelsea’s playing him beautifully. I think he’s close to letting the name slip. He’s already shared more than I thought he would.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Harding. I only care that Chelsea can look at herself in the mirror tomorrow.”

“I told you she won’t go through with it. You’re going to have to trust me.”

Though my whole body wants to tear this room apart, I sit back down and pull my headset back on. One of Harding’s hands disappears beneath the table, and my jaw clenches so tight I’m in danger of shattering my teeth.

After a few more seconds of not seeing Harding’s hands, I’m ready to have a stroke. Chelsea whispers, and I latch onto her voice. “I’m glad you found someone you could trust.”

Jackson

“Oh fuck.” Bash looks up at me, eyes wide. “Chelsea just used the code word. She wants out.”

I don’t need any further encouragement. I’m out of my seat and out the door in two seconds. Aaron slaps my chest on the way out, but I don’t acknowledge him.

Thankfully, I studied the layout of the hotel’s public areas with Birdie. I only get slightly turned around but quickly find the hallway and the right door from Chelsea’s

camera feed.

I bust through into the private room to find one of Harding's hands up Chelsea's skirt and the other on her bare breast. "Get your filthy fucking hands off my wife!" I thunder.

"Jackson," Chelsea gasps, yanking up the strap of her dress.

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Harding springs out of his chair and scrambles away from Chelsea. His pants tent with a boner, but I zero in on the fingers of his right hand. They're not glistening. That means he hadn't touched Chelsea yet or was bringing her no pleasure.

My glare swings to Chelsea, and it takes massive effort not to let my face soften toward her. A husband would be furious, so that's what I have to project. Her face falls as very real shame rolls off her in waves.

I look away and rush over to Harding. Though I want to pound him, I keep enough distance so my uniform doesn't even brush against his expensive suit. "I don't care who the fuck you are. You better get the hell out of here before I break you in half."

Harding scrambles from the room, knocking over his chair as he does. I watch the man leave and then pause to take a few deep breaths. My anger is not for Chelsea, but I still need a moment to let the rage fade from my face.

When my fury subsides, I turn and kneel before Chelsea. She won't look at me. "Are you alright?" I ask, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Chelsea lets out a sob but still won't lift her eyes to mine. "I couldn't do it. He was close to giving up his contact, but I couldn't stand the feel of his hands on me. I failed my team."

I lift her hand to my lips, lightly brushing her knuckles. "I'm glad."

Now, Chelsea looks up. "You're happy I failed?"

Shaking my head, I answer, “I’m happy you protected yourself.”

Chelsea’s eyes widen, and she takes my face in trembling hands. The soothing warmth of her touch is at odds with the urgency in her eyes. “Jackson, I didn’t mean what I said. I was_”

I grasp her face like she’s holding mine. “Chelsea, stop. You don’t have to apologize. I shouldn’t have walked away. From here on, I swear. I’m never walking away again. I’m in love with you. I’m yours to tame. Yours to love. Yours to destroy.”

Chelsea sobs quietly, and I lean in to pull her to me. A voice at the door barks for me to stop. “Jackson, don’t move.”

Knot’s people spill into the room, and Aaron pulls me to my feet. The man touches my chest and blocks me when I try to swat his hand away. “Hold on a minute, dammit. Let me get the camera first.”

I freeze and look down at the small black disk stuck to my lieutenant patch. That’s why he smacked me as I was leaving the surveillance room. “Is that all you need?”

Aaron glances toward Chelsea and nods.

“Then I’m getting her out of here.”

I brush past Aaron to take Chelsea’s hand. She rises in obedience but doesn’t look at anyone as I lead her from the room. No one tries to speak to her, either.

Bash stops me in the hallway but only to hand me mine and Chelsea’s bags. “Call me in the morning, will ya?”

“I will. Thanks.”

Chelsea offers no resistance as we exit the Willard and walk to the hotel across the street. She's silent throughout the trek, worrying me. I'm a little curt with the receptionist in my rush to get Chelsea somewhere private. I get the sense that her breakthrough is leading to a breakdown, and I want her to feel safe enough to do it.

The instant we're behind the closed door of our room, I drop our bags and whirl around, pulling her tightly against me. That's when the dam finally breaks.

"I'm so sorry, Jackson," she sobs, burying her face into my chest. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm_"

She's killing me. I tilt her chin up and stop her by crushing my lips to hers. Chelsea lets my innocent kiss linger for a moment before pulling away.

Unshed tears fill her sad eyes, and pain laces her voice. "I let him touch me."

Damn it. This is what I was afraid of. Wanting to make things abundantly clear, I back up to the bed and pull Chelsea onto my lap. With her straddling me, we're now eye to eye. "No, you didn't. You used the code word. We just didn't get to you fast enough because we were all piled in the room watching the feeds. We failed you, Chelsea. I failed you. I should have been there the whole time. I should have been right outside that fucking door."

Chelsea's eyes squeeze shut, sending a torrent of tears racing down her cheeks. "I hurt you."

"Not as much as I hurt you. I'm sorry I left. I should have_"

Chelsea takes a turn at shutting me up.

Her surrender is sweet. Making it even sweeter is that I haven't asked for it. I'm so

instantly drunk on her kiss that I don't fight when she pushes me to lie back.

I grieve the loss of her lips when she lifts off my chest. Chelsea undresses me with the speed of someone used to wearing a similar uniform and boots. I watch, entranced, knowing she doesn't want me to move.

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After her dress and panties hit the floor, Chelsea releases her hair, which cascades down her shoulders in sexy chaos. My breathing increases, and the siren steps close again, gliding her palm up my aching dick.

She kneels and takes me into her mouth. I reach out to move her hair, not wanting to miss watching this. Chelsea bobs and swallows until I'm begging incoherently. I tug her hair firmly to get her to stop. The only place I want to finish is inside her.

"Sit on my face," I demand, my voice choked. Chelsea doesn't move, so I tug her hair again. "Get your ass up here and sit on my face."

"Jackson, I can't. I'd suff_"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, little girl. You've got three seconds."

Chelsea finally obeys and settles her hot body over my hungry mouth. I lick my lips and dive in. She jerks at the first touch of my tongue but soon moans my name.

The sound goes straight to my cock, but it's the only one I get. I look up to see why and notice Chelsea biting her lip to hold in her cries.

"Let me hear you."

I reach up and take her hands, encouraging her to move against me. In no time, Chelsea shudders and calls out through her climax. I maintain my grip but slow the pace of my tongue while she soars.

Chelsea's body slumps as she returns to earth but then quickly shimmies downward to impale herself on my cock. Before she does, I grunt the word condom. Chelsea answers with similar desperation, "Birth control."

My eyes roll back as she takes me inside and then rocks and rolls her hips. Her tight channel contracts around me because of her climax, heightening the senses of my every nerve ending.

My hands find her full breasts, wanting to erase the memory of Harding's touch. When Chelsea doesn't flinch, I know she's not thinking about that ass hat at all. She's here with me and not lost in her head.

Chelsea begins to tighten around me again, so I move my hands to her hips to help her come a second time. As she careens over the edge, her body tenses, so I hold her hips still and piston into her from below. My release soon explodes from someplace deep, and I finally give out, letting Chelsea collapse to my chest.

I lock my arms around her, content to keep her with me forever in this bed.

Chelsea

Jackson's heart beats a comforting, steady rhythm as I lie with my ear to his chest. I draw nonsensical shapes on his skin while our breathing returns to normal. Out of the blue, Jackson grabs my wrist and rolls us over, dislodging himself from inside me.

My cowardly self wants to look away, but I force my eyes to remain locked on his. That doesn't mean I'm not shrinking beneath his intense stare.

"I want you to stop running," he says.

"I have," I promise. "I was about to call you when Harding showed up. I didn't

expect you to be here. How did you get here? How did you even know to come? I know Bash didn't tell you because I asked him not to."

"Knot," he answers in explanation.

My forehead creases. "He sent you because he didn't trust me?"

Jackson shakes his head. "He sent me because he does. Knot knew you wouldn't sleep with Harding and needed a reason besides your conscience to stop. I could provide the interruption while maintaining your cover. And I think my intervening gives your boss leverage in dealing with Harding."

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. "Knot intends to blackmail Harding?"

Jackson chuckles and drops a kiss on my nose. "He's too smart for that, but I don't doubt he and O'Reilly are cooking up something with the footage they took from my camera."

My eyes drift closed, and I cover my face. How many will see? "Shit."

"Hey. Hey," Jackson soothes, pulling my hand away. "There's no way those men would let you be caught in the crossfire. Even if they thought to try, you know me, Sadie, Bash, and certainly, Birdie wouldn't allow it to happen. Stop worrying, and let's get back to you not running."

I unclench my eyes and relax beneath Jackson's smiling face. The words get caught at first, but I'm determined to get them out. "I meant what I said. I'm through running. I'm yours to love, yours to chase around the house, and you're mine. I can't promise not to slip up and flip out on occasion. You were right about me being afraid."

“We’re both afraid. And we will hurt each other. When you love deeply, you hurt just as much. Because we’re imperfect, it’s inevitable.”

“If It Doesn’t Hurt, it was never real,” I whisper. “I’m glad you agree because I’ll probably piss you off at least weekly. I’ve got a lot of shit I’m working through, but I’m pretty sure I’m well on my way to being in love with you.”

“That’s all I could ask for, Yeet.”

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I have no motivation to coax my body out of bed the next morning. Jackson and I spent half the night tangled up, and I'm deliciously sore from head to toe. It isn't until Jackson snakes a hand beneath the covers to squeeze my bare ass that I even open my eyes. The man is freshly showered, covered in just a towel. Droplets of water still decorate his fantastic abs and chest, tempting me to lick them off. I am terribly thirsty.

"That's a dangerous look," Jackson teases.

"You have no idea. What time is it?"

"Almost seven. I give Bash an hour at most before he's calling one or both of us."

"Or less."

I push back the covers and sit up. Jackson ogles me, and I fight the urge to pull the sheet to my chest. The man shakes his head, bringing him out of his stupor. "I can order some breakfast while you shower."

"Sounds good. I'll eat anything and a lot of it. You completely drained me last night."

I stand and start for the bathroom, and Jackson smacks me on the ass. "I wanted to be sure you were too tired to move."

"Mission accomplished."

I shower quickly, and we eat breakfast before I lose the coin toss to call Bastien.

Jackson settles in the side chair to watch, wearing a wry grin. I stick my tongue out at him, press the call button, and brace myself.

“I was about to come looking for you. Dammit, Chelsea. Are you alright?”

I feel horrible at the panic in Bash’s voice. “I’m fine, and not the bullshit fake fine, either.”

Bash’s sigh is a long one. “I’m sorry it took so long to get you out. We weren’t prepared for Harding’s curveball and left you hanging.”

“No. It may look that way, but I made the perfect clean break. Harding will never contact me again, and I have a good reason to stay away. I just hate that I couldn’t get the traitor’s name. Now that Harding is out of the picture, we’ll have to start over somewhere else. Meanwhile, Harding and his buddy get to keep killing troops and setting up PMCs to take the fall.”

“Not according to our favorite CEO,” Bash announces proudly. “He’s already viewed the footage from last night and had Birdie permanently alter the video file. If you check the news this morning, you’ll see a juicy exposé about a certain congressman’s extramarital affair. Harding will be out of play, which means our mole in the Pentagon will have to spend his energy finding another mouthpiece.”

That means my nightmare wasn’t a waste, at least. “That’s better than nothing, I guess. So, when do we take off for Norfolk?”

“We’re ready to go when you are.”

I glance over at Jackson, who winks playfully. “Okay. Meet us outside in ten minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I shove the phone in my pocket and cast a sultry glance toward Jackson. “You wanna get out of here, sailor?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you, Mrs. Bennett.”

Rolling my eyes, I pick up my bag and walk toward the door.

The ride to the airport and flight back to Norfolk are uneventful. During the short trip, I check out the news reports of the now-disgraced congressman. I ignore most of the articles’ content, searching instead for any clues that I may be compromised.

The only mentions I find are those of a mystery woman whose identity is unknown. My whisper of Jackson’s name isn’t audible, either. His voice, however, is. That worries me a little_more like a lot. I don’t know what that could mean for him. Hopefully nothing.

Speaking of Jackson, he takes my bag and my hand when we arrive at the front entrance of the Knot Corporation. Dillan Knot and Commander O’Reilly wait at the door for us and offer no acknowledgment of Jackson’s very public display of affection. After carrying me from a room over his shoulder, I suppose a little handholding is nothing.

I let go of Jackson and approach my boss. “I’m sorry, sir. I’d hoped I could get a name and end all this.”

“You did just fine, Chelsea,” he insists.

O’Reilly adds, “Between your recordings and our ambush mission, we have enough evidence to take to the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Army. They’ll

launch an investigation to find the leak. They find the leak, and they find the traitor. It's all but over now."

"You guys take a few days," Knot orders my colleagues and me. "I think you've earned it. Bennett, I'm afraid I can't do anything for you."

The SEAL commander chuckles. "Oh, I think the lieutenant is due for a few days' leave."

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“Great,” Jackson says before turning to me. “Chelsea, would you have dinner with me tonight?”

Bastien clears his throat, so Jackson adds, “Without this bozo?”

“Hey,” my friend whines.

We ignore him and the rest of the group and turn to leave.

Jackson walks with me through the half-empty lot. “This is me,” I announce when we get to my car.

Jackson places my bag in the open trunk. “Will you text me your address, or should I get it before I let you leave?”

Rolling my eyes, I reach for my phone and send him my address right then. “There. Happy now?”

He leans in to kiss my neck and says, “Deliriously so. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Jackson walks away and tosses over his shoulder, “Dress comfortable.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The man reacts instantly, freezing in place. “You have no idea what you just unleashed, little girl.”

The threat in his voice causes an all-over quiver. I can't wait.

Jackson

The Boozy Bark is busy this early Saturday afternoon. I shudder walking through the gate, knowing this is the same bar slash dog park slash concert venue where Birdie was attacked.

Shaking off those memories, I search for Caleb, finding him among his friends. My son grins when he notices me, standing and hugging me. "Guys, this is my dad."

Caleb's male friends offer chin lifts or a handshake. The female companions in the group take in my track pants and snug tee with blatant appreciation. They preen and pose but otherwise keep their distance. Thank God. I'm most likely twenty years younger than their fathers[CH1].

"You want to hang out for a while or just take my one good excuse for being here?" Caleb asks.

"I'd love to stay, but Captain and I have a date tonight."

Caleb grins and nods. "Sounds like you've made it to the final act."

"I won't even ask what that means."

With a nod to Caleb and his boys and not even a passing glance at the girls, I whistle for Captain and head out.

The two of us are clean and shiny when we arrive at Chelsea's townhouse. I'm carrying a bouquet of roses, minus one stem in Captain's mouth.

I ring the doorbell, and Chelsea answers a moment later. My mouth dries up when the door opens. Chelsea wears blue linen shorts and a pink halter top. Her light-brown waves are loose around her shoulders.

Chelsea smiles brightly but forgets all about me when she realizes I'm not alone. "Oh my God!" She drops to a knee and gushes over my dog. "Aren't you a beauty?"

Captain lifts to all fours, and that butt starts wagging. Chelsea scratches Captain between the ears and takes the rose from her mouth. "She's gorgeous, Jackson. What's her name?"

"It's Captain."

Chelsea laughs. "Of course, it is."

"I'm glad to see you like dogs."

"I love them. I've had dogs all my life until I joined the Marines. Since then, I'm not home enough to have one."

Captain is now talking to and loving on my woman as if I needed any more confirmation that this was right.

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“How do you have one?” Chelsea asks. “Your schedule has to be just as screwy as mine.”

“My son keeps her when I’m gone.”

Chelsea stands and smiles. This carefree side of her knocks the breath out of me. I stare long enough that she asks, “Are you okay?”

“Never better.”

I get my ladies loaded into the truck and drive to my favorite place on base at Little Creek. Chelsea kicks her shoes off when we reach our destination and tosses them into the truck bed. I hand her Captain’s leash and unload the cooler and blanket.

A short walk lands us at the beach beneath the Cape Henry Lighthouse. The sun is setting, but it’s not dark yet. Anyone using the beach has gone home, leaving the place quiet and private.

Chelsea unclips Captain’s leash, correctly gauging that the boxer is well-behaved and won’t run off. I spread out the blanket and set the cooler on the edge. “I hope this is okay. I didn’t much feel like being in a crowd tonight.”

“It’s perfect,” she answers without an air of pretense.

Captain takes her ragdoll to the water’s edge and tosses it in the air repeatedly, keeping herself entertained. While Chelsea watches her, I serve up the Greek feast I picked up from my favorite Mediterranean place.

We eat and chat in the waning light, and Captain flops onto the sand nearby after wearing herself out. The sun has fully set now, taking all the sky's colors with it. Beneath the stars and full moon, I take Chelsea's hand and guide her to rest her head in my lap.

She stares at the sky, and I run my fingers through her long hair. Chelsea sighs contentedly. "How is it that a man who's got it all together is drawn to a trainwreck like me."

"You're not a trainwreck."

"Okay. Someone with as much emotional baggage as me."

I tear my eyes away from her face to stare out over the black ocean. "We all have emotional baggage, and I'm not as well put together as you think."

"Oh, you are very well put-together, sir," Chelsea teases.

I roll my eyes and pinch Chelsea on the hip. "You know what I mean, brat. The issues I had, I blamed on someone else. Or, I used my son as an excuse, anyway. I'd wrecked the future I was supposed to have when I got Shelby pregnant. Don't get me wrong, I loved my son and being a dad, but when it came to my life outside of Caleb, I only saw what might have been.

"I felt second-rate. I'd obviously screwed up in my responsibility as a man and couldn't have the career I'd planned. The only thing I was any good at was being a dad until I joined the Navy. When Shelby and I realized we couldn't love each other, she moved out to move on. That's when I decided I'd put all my effort into the only two people that I could actually make happy: my son and my commander. Cowardly, I know, but it was easier than trying and failing at something else."

“That doesn’t explain why me.”

“You won’t believe it,” I begin, “but I saw in you a bravery I wish I had.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Chelsea jeers.

“Nope. Between the two of us, you were the only one still fighting to become something. I was content to quit and just be.”

Chelsea sits up and faces me, wide-eyed in shock, whispering, “No one has ever thought of me as brave.”

“Maybe because no one ever truly understood you before.”

Chelsea leans close and touches her lips to mine briefly. “Take me home, Jackson.”

As soon as my truck rolls to a stop in Chelsea’s driveway, she hops out, leading my dog into her home. I follow them inside to see Chelsea setting a bowl of water on the floor next to a folded blanket she set out for Captain. The woman then takes my hand and leads me upstairs to her room.

I undress her slowly and spend the next hour making love to the only woman to make me want forever.

Early the following morning, Captain wakes me with a bark. I roll over, place a kiss on a sleeping Chelsea’s naked shoulder, and pull on my board shorts. I slip into my shoes and go downstairs to walk Captain.

On our way back in, I grab what’s left of her food from last night and set it out next to the water bowl in the kitchen. I’ve just stood back up when Chelsea yells upstairs. I’m instantly rocketed into SEAL mode and take the stairs three at a time to get to

her. “What is it?”

She’s white as a ghost as she fumbles for the TV remote, not even caring that her top half is exposed. I sit on the bed beside her, watching the channel flip to a national news network. The blood drains from my face when I read the breaking news bulletin. Popular Congressman from Arizona found dead this morning.

Chelsea

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

I can barely breathe as Jackson and I watch the report about Harding.

Congressman Calvin Harding of Arizona has been found dead in his DC apartment. A concerned neighbor prompted a welfare check by the police after hearing shouting through the walls. Upon finding the congressman unresponsive, paramedics were called. Medics declared Calvin Harding dead at the scene.

The congressman's death has been ruled a homicide. While police have yet to name a suspect, the murder happened the same day evidence emerged of Congressman Harding's alleged affair with an unknown woman. Also reported yesterday was that the congressman's wife filed for divorce. We'll bring you more details as we uncover them.

My hand shakes as I turn off the TV. Harding's dead. His wife is in Arizona filing for divorce. That has to mean Jackson and I would be first_or only_on any list of suspects, at least for a short time.

We were out of DC before noon yesterday and were on base at Fort Story last night until about nine. It would be a stretch to think we went back just for a murder, but not impossible.

"What do you think happened?" I ask Jackson.

"Hell, if I know." He picks up his phone and makes a call. "Sorry to call on a Sunday. Have you seen the news?"

O'Reilly's voice is silent for a moment, and then I hear him yelling through the

speaker. Jackson ends the call seconds later, and he's on his feet. "We need to move."

I'm already up and pulling on clean clothes. "Yeah, I got that."

Jackson races out the door, shirt in hand and phone to his ear. When I get downstairs, he says, "I have to get Captain to Caleb. I'll meet you at Knot Corp."

I step toward the kitchen to get my keys, but Jackson grabs my bicep, whirling me around. His lips crash against mine for just a second, and then he's out the door. I follow when my knees are no longer wobbling.

Knot is pacing in the lobby of his building when I make it inside. Bash, Sadie, Aaron, and Birdie are already here waiting. Commander O'Reilly arrives seconds after I do, followed by Fish and Judge.

"Where's Bennett?" the commander barks.

"On his way," I answer.

We wait nervously in the lobby for a grim-faced Jackson. He rushes to my side but remains silent as we follow and then cram into Knot's office. Aaron reads his boss's face and slams the door shut a split second before Knot initiates lockdown procedures.

"We did not anticipate this, but we fucking should have. How did we not see this coming, Stone?"

The two leaders are angry at themselves. O'Reilly shakes his head. "We couldn't have known. Nameless troops are one thing to this guy. We would have been crazy to expect him to take out a US congressman."

“Well, he fucking did.”

Knot finally shares his focus, his dark eyes scanning the room for Jackson and me. “We submitted cropped footage to the press. No one who saw it could ID you or your location. With Harding dead, there will be an investigation. The Willard will produce security footage of the two of you.”

“Let’s work on your alibis,” O’Reilly orders. “We have proof you left DC and arrived here. What can we present for the time after that?”

“We checked onto Little Creek just after seven and left at nine-thirty,” Jackson says.

“After that, my security cameras will show us at my house until this morning.”

Commander O’Reilly nods and snaps, “Lockmore, what should we be doing?”

The former prosecutor for Judge Advocate General grasps his chin. “Given the high-profile nature of the case, the FBI, local police, and the district attorney will hold a press conference tomorrow at the latest. I would gather proof of their alibis and written statements from you two and Admiral Jameson about their connection to Harding before then. I’ll call my cousin Jasper, a JAG defender. He and the admiral can lay it all out for the investigators.”

“And that will work?” Knot asks him.

“I believe so.”

“Good. I’ll have one of my lawyers go with them as well. O’Reilly, you get the base security logs. Birdie, get the passenger manifests from the pilot. Chelsea, send me your security footage.”

I waste no time, pulling out my phone to send the logs and time-stamped video to Knot and Birdie. The message won't go through until Knot ends the lockdown, but at least the information is queued up. "Done."

Jackson's brow hasn't relaxed, though we have airtight alibis. "What do we do until Judge's cousin meets with the investigators?"

Everyone turns to stare at Judge, who would be the only one with any clue. "Do what you normally do, but make sure it's on camera. Guilty people hide. Make sure you're seen acting like your normal selves."

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Great. I'm fucked. But that doesn't mean Jackson has to be. "Sirs, would it be better if Jackson and I aren't seen together?"

The man in question whips his head around to glare at me. I stubbornly ignore him, waiting for one of the big bosses to answer. Unfortunately, O'Reilly defers to Judge, who is hardly an unbiased party. "I don't think it's necessary to avoid one another. I only advise spending as much time in the public arena as possible until Jasper can meet with the investigators. Speaking of which, I better excuse myself to call him."

Judge asks permission from Knot, who nods and ends the lockdown. "Okay, here's what I want. Chelsea, you stay here or go somewhere with your team. Bennett, you either return to Little Creek or go somewhere with yours."

"Sir, can a combination of our groups meet up later?" Jackson asks through clenched teeth.

O'Reilly purses his lips, then, "I don't have a problem with it. Warden?"

Knot shakes his head and dismisses all of us while he and O'Reilly stick around to call Admiral Jameson.

I scurry from the room but not to hide. I wait in the hallway near the elevator and grab Jackson as he clears the corner.

"What the_!"

I trap him against the wall with my hand over his mouth. "Before you say anything,

I'm not offering myself up for the good of the team. I'm being logical. My face is the one on all the cameras with Harding. Birdie checked and found no cameras in the private dining rooms, but anyone who looks deep enough will see us leaving the Willard together. If we flaunt our relationship, it'll cast doubt on our account of the situation."

Jackson didn't struggle while I spoke and isn't demanding to be released. Sensing we have an audience, I remove my hand and back away slowly. "Okay?"

My lover clears his throat and glances at his chuckling teammates. "I was just going to say your idea makes sense."

My cheeks heat for overreacting. "Oh. Um. Well then."

The gathered group is full-on laughing now. Cheeks still blazing, I turn toward them in time for Fish to elbow Bash. "What do you think, Laurent? Should we meet up later so these two don't go through withdrawals?"

Bash covers his mouth to hide his smile. "I think we'd better. The usual place?"

"Sounds good."

The current and former SEALs bump fists and head for the door. Fish grabs Jackson's shirt on the way out, forcing him to leave, though it's clear Jackson isn't finished with me.

Birdie tucks her arm in mine and does the same. "Since our boss doesn't want you going home, we're going out."

I groan at the thought of going shopping, so Birdie teases, "Unless you would rather stay here."

The three of us kill the entire day, walking around and visiting the little shops near Bastien's house, having lunch at his local deli, and shopping at the closest mall. By three, I'm ready to tap out and go back to Knot Corp.

My life is in the twilight zone right now. I mean, how else could I go from having mind-blowing sex to a national crisis to slurping a smoothie in just a matter of hours? The dichotomy is melting my brain.

Bash picks up on my glitch and suggests a change. "How about a movie?"

I laugh at the idea but ultimately agree. "Why not?"

At least in a theatre, I don't have to be nice to anyone. I can sit and stew quietly in the dark. By the end of the action thriller, it's almost time to meet at the SEAL bar. Birdie suggests running by her house to freshen up and put on our new outfits.

Mine is a flowy romper with a plunging halter neckline. It's a dusty slate blue with gathered ankles and has pockets.

"Ooh, that's pretty," Birdie gushes when I enter the living room.

"Hmm. I like that it shows off my fit top half while hiding my hips, but I'm a little nervous at how much it emphasizes my ass."

"Girl, that's the best part."

Bash keeps his opinion to himself, thankfully.

I take my car to the Taphouse, planning to spend the night in the staff dorm at Knot Corp. tonight. As I drive toward Virginia Beach, I realize for the first time I have zero anxiety about going to a social event. It's a stunning revelation, and I have Jackson to

thank. I wonder if we can find a private place where I can thank him improperly.

Chelsea

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Jackson and his teammates are easy to spot among the buzzing crowd. The same ones from earlier, plus a couple more, take up half of a long table in the center of the room.

The men are happy and laughing, but Jackson stops when he notices us approaching. His eyes track my every move. Surprisingly, I don't feel the least bit self-conscious. I feel...beautiful. Beautiful and wanted.

The men shuffle the lineup, shifting the seating arrangement to open up three spots in the middle. It's no accident that my seat is next to Jackson. With a nod to the SEALs, I sit and join the conversation.

We keep things light, steering clear of Harding or the battle in Congress over the PMCs. Wrench amuses us with stories about some of his teammates. I have similar tales from my time in the Marines, but tonight, I'm content to listen instead of feeling the need to entertain the group.

I learn about the men in Fish's squad and the wild things they've lived through. I can't help but wonder that if I hadn't held myself back, maybe I could have developed a similar bond with my teammates.

The men with children begin packing it in at nine. I don't blame them. I'm grateful they volunteered their time on a Sunday night to keep up appearances, but in another first, I'm sad to see the night end.

Apparently, so is Jackson. Fish taps on his shoulder and gestures toward the door. The longing on Jackson's face would be my undoing if we weren't trying so hard to keep up appearances. Though I itch to cup his cheek, I keep my hands on the table.

Fish drops a hand onto his platoon leader's shoulder. "Come on, Pin. You'll hold until tomorrow."

Jackson's longing turns to determination. "I'll see you tomorrow, Chelsea. Remember what I told you."

I am in love with you.

"I remember."

As the remaining SEALs clear the door, Bash tugs at my elbow. "Let's get out of here."

I don't argue. Grabbing my small purse, I push out of the chair and walk beside Birdie to the door. "You're headed back to the compound, right?" she asks.

"I was going to, but I think I'll just head home."

Bash, who's in front of us, stops and turns around with narrowed eyes. "Jackson won't be there, will he?"

"No, Jackson won't be there." But I'll be able to smell him on my sheets.

"Well, go straight home. Don't stop anywhere."

I come to attention and give him a one-finger salute. "Yes, sir."

"Ugh. For a minute there, I thought you'd finally grown up," Bash groans, but he can't hide his grin.

"You're not that lucky."

I turn onto my street a short time later and crack up laughing. Every one of the small trees along the row of townhouses is draped with toilet paper. It reminds me of senior week in high school, only the kids in our school didn't stop with rolling. We'd plant a garden of plastic forks, stabbing hundreds into the ground. Sometimes through foam plates. Of course, I was only included if I brought all the prank materials.

The streetlight near my townhouse is out again, so I check all my mirrors before unlocking the car. My neighborhood is pretty safe, but it's close to a main highway. Safety isn't something I'll ever take for granted. For that reason, I pull up my home security app, turn on the lights inside, and disarm the system. My keys are also in hand when I step out of the car.

A shiver crawls down my spine, and I stop to scan my immediate area. Seeing nothing out of place besides a ton of butt napkins, I chuckle, wondering how the neighborhood Karen will take this insult.

I pause at the top step of my stoop to listen, hearing no noise. The pranksters must be long gone. Too bad. I had a few suggestions to improve their technique. After unlocking the deadbolt, I reach out to open the door. My fist closes around the knob...and the glob of jelly coating it. "What the hell?"

I pull my hand away, thinking those teenagers deserve a round of applause. My group of delinquents never thought of putting petroleum jelly on doors. I'm impressed and pissed off at the same time. Here I am, still outside with jizz all over my hand. I don't want to get my other hand greased up, and I don't want to use my new outfit as a cleaning rag. My purse doesn't contain anything useful, either. Shit.

Thinking I have some napkins tucked away in my car, I jog back down the steps. I use my clean hand to unlock the car and open the passenger door. Thankfully, I still have those napkins in the glove box.

I tuck them beneath my right arm and return to the door to clean up the mess. Unfortunately, I'm getting just as much goop on my left hand in trying to clear the doorknob. I eventually give up on neatness and use all the napkins and both hands to get enough grip to turn the knob. Next house, I get a thumb latch.

The door finally opens. My purse is on the welcome mat, so I kick the bag into the house. I hadn't wanted to get any goop on it. It would have ruined the outside. Next, I bend down to pick up the spent napkins. On the way back up, I sway with a sudden rush of dizziness. Whoa.

I lean against the door frame for a second or two and start for the kitchen. The dizziness worsens with each slowing step, and I'm having trouble remembering what I was about to do. Suddenly hot, I reach up to wipe my forehead, spreading a little of the gel there. Oh yeah. Wash hands.

I stumble toward the kitchen, stopping halfway there. I'm in trouble. I spin around to get the phone from my bag, nearly falling as I do. My vision doubles, so I don't know which bag to go for.

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After a few unsteady steps, I freeze when my front door swings in, and a man I don't know waltzes into my home. I try to focus on the two images of him I see, but he's blurry.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. The doubled man rushes toward me, grabbing my hands and shoving them into a bag. I can't fight him off. I can't do anything. My wrists are bound together, and the man half walks and half carries me outside, all without a word.

Despite the rough ride, my eyes drift open and closed as I fight to stay awake. I lose the battle shortly after being stuffed into a trunk.

Jackson

Since it's not too late, I call Caleb when I get in my truck. "Dad. Thank God," he answers, sounding relieved.

"Sorry I was in such a rush earlier."

"Yeah. What was up with that? You were pretty freaked out. I didn't even get to hear how your date went."

Thinking of Chelsea brings a smile to my face, however brief. "The date went great. As for the rest of it, I can't say anything. You know how my job is."

"I guess I do. But you're not in Hell-hole-a-bad, so I assume things aren't too serious."

“Um...they are but will hopefully be fine tomorrow. Since you’ve got class in the morning, I’ll come get Captain tonight.”

“Don’t worry about it. My morning class isn’t meeting tomorrow. We’re doing an online assignment because the professor is out of the country. I’ll take Captain home before my one o’clock.”

“That sounds good. I’ll go home and crash.”

An hour later, I’m sitting on the sofa in the quiet living room with my phone in my hand. I can’t stop thinking about Chelsea. I’m tempted to call or at least message. The only thing stopping me is wondering if that would be breaking Knot’s rule.

I unlock the device, but before I get to Chelsea’s contact page, my living room fills with light from the car that just pulled into my drive. I draw my Sig and rush to the door. My scowl morphs into a grin when the lights turn off, and I see Chelsea’s car in my driveway.

My gun gets tucked away, and I fling the door open. I’m halfway down the walkway when I question why Chelsea hasn’t gotten out. I realize my mistake too late.

A gun barrel peeks out from behind the driver-side mirror. Fuck. Knowing I don’t have a prayer, I still dive as the gun fires.

Chelsea

My shoulder aches from bouncing around on the hard trunk floor. I’m conscious enough to know I’m trapped in my own car. Unfortunately, my hands are of no use. I’m wrapped like a mummy from shoulder to wrist with my arms secured at my sides.

The method is overkill in keeping me from using my hands. It also keeps me from

injuring myself with the binds. That's the scariest part. Someone doesn't want it to look like I was kidnapped.

When the car comes to a stop, I'm utterly clueless as to how far or the direction we traveled. I wouldn't have to guess if I were wearing my Knot Corp. watch. I could check the built in GPS. Stupid me took it off and put it in my purse, wearing a dainty new bracelet to dinner instead. Shit.

I don't have my phone, either. My best hope is for Birdie to start searching for me when I don't check in tomorrow. Hopefully, I won't be dead.

The trunk lid opens, and the dark-haired stranger from my house reaches into the compartment. I feel a sting at my hip, and the darkness swallows me again.

When I wake up, I don't know where I am. I'm tied to a chair in an unfamiliar house, the binds just as careful as in the car. As the effects of the drugs wear off, my mind clears, and my dizziness lessens enough that I swivel my head to study the house. A loud thud sounds from the next room just before the bastard kidnapper enters the dining room where I'm being held.

He doesn't speak as he approaches, walking around the back of my chair. Grabbing the top, he turns me around and drags the chair across the floor. When he spins me around in the next room, my heart plummets. "Jackson!"

He's unconscious, lying in a heap on the tile floor. "Jackson, wake up! What did you do to him, you bastard?!"

The man doesn't answer, pissing me off. My next words come out screeching. "What have you done to Jackson?"

"Jesus. I should have dosed you higher."

I focus on that angry voice, racking my brain for any prior memory of it. Coming up short, I demand, “Who the fuck are you, and what do you want?”

“I’m someone who doesn’t like parasites. You, Knot, and all the others are leeches.”

Oh God. This has to be Harding’s Pentagon contact. “If you don’t like us, you should take your complaints to the people who hire us.”

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The traitor is silent, meaning he has no interest in bragging to me that I'm beaten. Instead of lashing out like I want, I settle into a different role. "Where are we?" I ask softly, glancing around the simple, clean kitchen.

"You don't recognize your husband's home?" he taunts. "I would act surprised, but we both know you're not his wife. Any idiot could have looked up Bennett's record and seen that he never married."

"Harding didn't, and I'm pretty sure he was an idiot. Isn't that why you picked him to do your dirty work? I bet the dumbass only thought you were sharing stories of tragedy and negligence. He had no idea you were the one responsible for the death of those men."

My theory is met with more silence, but I've only just begun to piss him off. "Oh, come on. This is bad-guy one-oh-one. The damsel is in distress. The hero is down. This is the part where you brag about your brilliant scheme and leave me in a precarious situation."

The traitor dips his hand into a bag, coming out with two medicine bottles and syringes. "No, this is the part where you commit suicide after killing a decorated SEAL. The same way you killed the congressman."

My heart stutters in my chest, but I refuse to show fear. "That'll be kind of difficult with my hands tied."

Now, the man snickers. "I'll help, but don't worry. I'll make sure you get all the credit."

“So...how did I kill the congressman?”

The man ignores the question, but then all hell breaks loose when a knock sounds at the door. The unexpected visitor fills me with hope until keys rattle in the lock and a voice like a younger Jackson calls out. “Dad. Captain was going apeshit. I had to bring her home. Please don’t be naked.”

My first instinct is to call for help, but this is Jackson’s son. I would never forgive myself if I let something happen to him. I have to try warning him away. Sensing I’m about to yell, Harding’s mole shoves a forty-five-caliber barrel pistol to my temple. I have maybe seconds before Caleb finds us. I expect it’ll take Captain even less.

As I feared, Captain’s growl precedes her nose around the corner. “Captain, what’s wrong?”

Caleb walks into the kitchen behind Jackson’s boxer. Captain’s head is lowered, and she’s still growling. “What the_oh shit.”

“Well, Chelsea. Looks like you’ll get to take credit for three murders.”

I throw my head back, hoping to give the younger Bennett a shot. “Caleb, run!”

The traitor fires behind me, but it’s not the big blast from the forty-five. Caleb takes off, and a second shot is fired. The younger Bennett rounds the corner, so I know he’s not dying yet. Captain charges the bastard planning to kill for her family, but the boxer’s back legs fail when she tries to jump.

Whatever she was hit with is working fast on her much smaller body. I can only hope it’s not a lethal dose, whatever it is. Regardless, if I don’t get us out of this, it’s only a matter of time before we’re all dead. The traitor takes off after Caleb. I begin frantically searching the room, but even if there was an M16 on the table next to me, I

couldn't get it, trussed up like I am.

I shift my upper body, testing the binds. They're too tight to move my arms any which way but further behind my back. As I check my range of movement, I notice the other chairs. These are straight ladderback chairs. If I can lift straight up, I might be able to slide off. I'll still be bound, but the straps should be loose enough to work my arms out.

The rest of the chairs have leg stabilizers across the front, so I lift one foot, planting a heel on the bar. It takes a bit of shimmying and muscles burning to inch my way upward. My heartbeat thunders in my ears like a countdown. I don't know how far Caleb ran before passing out. I'm hoping the bastard is taking the time to tie him up and will then carry him inside. That would give me more time. Of course, he could have just killed him and is on his way back right now.

I keep pushing, shifting my foot on the floor to the seat. A few more inches, and I should be off.

My legs scream from the prolonged power squat and balancing my unsteady heels on the chair cushion. The first band clears the top, making each subsequent one more manageable. When the last one slides off the chair back, I nearly topple onto the floor. I manage to correct my balance and immediately work to free my arms from the straps.

My priority now is finding a weapon. I check the mole's bag, striking out for a gun. Spotting a magnetic knife strip on the wall, I grab the biggest blade and set it on the counter near Jackson.

I drop to my knees beside him, checking for a pulse. He's alive. I shake him, smacking his cheek and whispering, "Jackson! Jackson, wake up!"

His eyelids flutter, but that's all I get. There's nowhere to move him that would be protected. All I can do is eliminate the threat and see about signaling for help.

Grabbing the asshole's bag of chemicals, I peek around the dining room wall down a hallway to the back door. I don't see Caleb or the mole, so I race through the room, looking for a phone. There's one on the floor in the hallway. It's probably Caleb's.

I activate the screen, knowing I can at least make an emergency call if I can't unlock it. The call goes through, and I cut off the dispatcher. "A man is trying to kill me and two other people. Trace my location. Please hurry!"

I shove the phone beneath the couch cushion and keep moving. The first door in the hallway is to a half bath. The second opens to a large bedroom. This has to be Jackson's.

A door closes somewhere in the house, telling me the mole is finished with Caleb. I carefully close and lock Jackson's door and tear through the room, searching for his service pistol or any other weapon I can find.

Hurried footsteps tell me the assassin has noticed my absence. I've got precious few seconds before he finds me, and there are no weapons to be had. Jackson appears to be a responsible gun owner, keeping everything locked up. Damn.

The bedroom door jiggles, indicating my time is up. The only thing I could do now is escape through a window, but leaving Jackson and Caleb won't save me. The mole plans to kill them and pin it on me. He'll do that whether I'm here or not, and I have no intention of letting the Bennett boys die.

I open the bag in my hand, reading the labels on the glass bottles.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

“Chelsea, open the door.”

The cold voice outside the bedroom makes me shiver, but I won't crumble. I have a bit of time here. This bastard doesn't want a busted door frame to call into question the murders. Doing the only thing I can think of, I rush into Jackson's bathroom and open the shower door. I fastball the bottles against the tile wall one by one, shattering them. It'll leave a mess, but the killer will have to pause and reset.

Only when every last one is broken do I open the window. The drop to the ground is short, but running on these wedges isn't easy, especially on the spongy earth.

The sound of the bathroom door frame shattering echoes through the open window. Guess he's given up keeping things neat. My feet hit another gear and I'm soon around the front of the house again. I rip my shoes off and enter the front door, locking the deadbolt behind me. Rushing past the kitchen, where Jackson is still out, I slam the back door closed and secure it as well. The bathroom window I left open is next.

After a brief search for Caleb, I find him unconscious and tied up in a guest room. I don't stay long, knowing a locked door won't keep the mole out for long. He could cut and run, but he won't. I've seen his face. Plot or no, he can't leave me here alive.

I tiptoe back toward the kitchen, turning off lights as I go. Wood slivers from the shattered door frame stab into my feet, but I can't stop. The emergency call is still active when I retrieve the phone, so I put the device to my ear. “Are police on the way?”

“Yes, but the phone’s location is turned off. I can only pinpoint your location to a certain range.”

Damn it all to hell! “I’m at the home of Jackson Bennett of the US Navy.”

A window shatters, and the glass lamp beside me explodes. Shit, that was close. I drop the phone and crawl to the kitchen, shredding my clothes and belly on the broken glass. The lights are still on in here, and Jackson is a sitting duck, lying beneath a window.

I jump up to hit the light switch and dive over Jackson a split second before a bullet pierces that window. Fire erupts across my shoulder blade, and fear pierces my chest. It’s all over now.

More glass shatters, but it’s just the gun knocking the rest of the broken pane from the frame. The low sill gives the traitor a perfect bench height from his stance on the ground outside. “A valiant effort, Chelsea, but your time is up.”

I bury my head in Jackson’s chest and whisper, “I’m sorry, Jackson. I love you.”

Then I close my eyes and wait for the kill shot.

Jackson

Air rushes from my lungs when something slams into me, pinning me to the floor. The scent teasing my nose is familiar and pleasant. I must be dreaming. The dream becomes a nightmare when the sound of a gunshot rings in my ears. Memories of the night come rushing back: Chelsea’s car and the gun. I turned and ran before the first shot but stopped when I realized it wasn’t a bullet that hit me. I reached around and felt a gloopy mixture seeping through my shirt.

Convinced it was a bad joke, I was ready to put Chelsea over my knee for her prank. I turned back toward her car to do just that when that big bastard poured out of the driver's seat.

I had no idea who he was or why I was still alive. All I knew was that I had no interest in hanging around to find out. I ran for the house, only making it to the porch before the dizziness hit.

Whatever was in that paintball shouldn't be working that fast. My first attempt to get the door open was a failure. With my second, the door yielded, but so did I. The floor rushed up to meet me, but I never felt the contact.

I feel everything now. The tile beneath me, Chelsea above me, and death coming for both of us.

The smell of blood teases my nose and taints Chelsea's delicate fragrance. The gunshot! Chelsea must have been hit. I can't make my body or mouth work to check her for signs of life. Please don't be dead. Unable to do anything else, I focus all my concentration on detecting breathing movement.

Her chest moves against mine, meaning she's still alive. I've got to get us out of here, wherever here is. My eyes open to see we're in my kitchen. Noting the breeze, I look to the window on my right and the gun barrel just beginning to peer over the sill from outside.

This is no air rifle. It's the real thing.

"A valiant effort, Chelsea, but your time is up."

The man's voice is unfamiliar, but his threat isn't. I test my fingers, finding that I can move my hand. The rest of my body refuses to obey my order to roll over to protect

Chelsea, still too hampered by whatever drugs were in that paintball.

“I’m sorry, Jackson. I love you.”

Chelsea’s whisper triggers a surge of adrenaline. Like hell will I let her die. I focus all my energy on my right hand and that weapon. My arm lifts off the floor, and I snatch the gun right out of the asshole’s hands.

The gun and my hand fall to the floor, me having used up all my strength in that small maneuver. A face appears in the broken window, one I don’t recognize. The window is chest high for him, and his arms lift to rest on the sill. He can easily reach inside and retrieve his gun. I can do nothing to stop him.

“Nice try, Lieutenant.”

As much as I don’t want to see this coming, I won’t let this bastard see me afraid. I stare him down, watching him reach for the gun. A flash of movement from Chelsea catches my notice just before her hand shoots out and reaches the pistol first. She quickly aims and fires three rounds through the opening.

The man outside hits the ground a second later, and Chelsea drops the gun to the floor.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

My ears ring from the percussive blast, but I don't care. Neither does Chelsea. She sits up, and her hands go straight to my face. "Jackson, are you okay?"

I let my head fall back, and my eyes close. Chelsea was shot, and she's asking if I'm ok. "I love you, Chelsea."

"Jackson! I asked if you were alright."

Eyes still closed, I say, "I can't wait for my son to meet you."

"Shit! Caleb!"

At her yell, my eyes fly open. Caleb? My son's here? Chelsea jumps up and runs from the kitchen. Fear like I've never known obliterates rational thought. My son! I can't get up to follow Chelsea, so I work to roll over, determined to crawl. That's when I notice black fur, unmoving. "Captain!"

What the hell are they doing here?! I pull my body forward a few inches and give out. Her back legs are within reach, so I grab a paw and pull her toward me, gently laying my head on her chest. A faint beat resonates in my ear. She's alive but unresponsive.

I try again to crawl from the kitchen and hear the faint wail of approaching sirens. "Caleb! Chelsea!"

A shout from the front door shuts me up. "VBPD! Nobody move!"

"The shooter is down. Outside. Northwest corner," I yell back.

“Identify yourself!”

“Lieutenant Jackson Bennett. I’m down. In the kitchen. My girlfriend went to check on my son. I don’t know where.”

“Back here,” Chelsea yells. “Caleb’s alive but unconscious.”

An army of stomping boots spread out, with three S.W.A.T guys rushing into the kitchen.

“The shooter is down there,” I announce, gesturing through the window.

“Where are you hit?” one asks, pointing to the blood on the floor and my chest.

“Not mine. Chelsea was shot. I was drugged. I don’t know what’s wrong with my dog.”

One of the team steps out to call for paramedics. The other stands guard over the pistol. The lead guy gestures toward the weapon. “Whose gun is this?”

I point toward the corpse outside. “His. I relieved him of it when he stuck it through the window.”

“Ballsy,” the cop responds.

No. “Desperate.”

Another guy escorts Chelsea back to the kitchen. She sobs when she notices Captain on the floor and drops to her knees beside me. “How is he? How’s my son?”

Chelsea’s hands are shaking. “I think he was drugged. He’s like you were.”

“What about you? You were hit.”

“Just a graze,” she answers, slightly less rattled.

Chelsea turns her head to peer out the window. “Is he dead?”

“He’s dead,” someone outside answers.

More sirens approach, these sounding like they’re driving into the house. Another swarm of first responders flood the house, one pulling Chelsea away to treat her.

At seeing the last two faces that walk through the kitchen opening, I finally relax, knowing this shit show is over. Knot and O’Reilly.

Jackson

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

My ass is planted in a wheelchair in Caleb's room, with Chelsea perched on my lap and her head on my shoulder. She's wearing one of my t-shirts and sweats since her clothes were ruined. Her graze is stitched up, and bandages cover the scratches on her middle from the glass.

Our bosses are here, leaning against one wall, while Fish, Hawk, Devil, and Bandid take up another. Caleb is still out and hooked up to half a dozen monitors.

Fentanyl. Those paintballs were dosed with liquid fentanyl. That shit absorbs through the skin fast. Chelsea was dosed through her hands when Colonel Bart Ames coated her doorknob with the stuff suspended in petroleum jelly. Caleb, Captain, and I were shot with the dosed rounds. Caleb will be fine. I'm still waiting on news about Captain.

"What have you guys learned about Ames?" I ask the crew, whispering to keep from waking Chelsea.

"The guy had a kid brother in the service," Commander O'Reilly answers. "Brent Ames was killed in Iraq in 2009. A private military firm was contracted to provide security for several US bases. The firm subcontracted another company for guard work which used Ugandans and South Africans. These subs were paid pennies on the dollar and not trained for the work. There was an attack on a group of soldiers returning to one of the bases. The cheap substitutes bailed, and several men were killed. Ames has had it in for the PMCs ever since."

"I can't say I blame him, but the guy should have known there are assholes everywhere. By his reasoning of a few bad apples, every industry in the world should

be taken out.”

Caleb’s door shoves open, and a blur of blond hair rushes into the room. “Caleb!”

Shelby bends and weeps over our son, and the men in the room quietly duck out. Knot raises his brows and points to Chelsea. I shake my head, wanting him to let her remain where she is.

I roll my chair forward, careful not to wake my woman.

“How is he? What happened?” Shelby asks, not looking up.

“Everything points to him being alright. He’s just sleeping off the effects of the drug.”

Caleb’s mother finally looks toward me, her eyes widening at the sleeping woman in my lap. I worry for a moment what her reaction will be, but then she surprises me. “About time.”

Chelsea stirs and lifts her head. Noticing the strange woman in the room isn’t hospital staff, she clambers off my lap, rubbing her eyes. “Um. Sorry.”

I grab her hand to keep her from fleeing. “Chelsea, this is Caleb’s mother, Shelby.”

“Chelsea’s a badass,” we hear spoken from the bed.

Three faces swing toward my son, whose eyes are open half-lidded. Shelby grasps one of Caleb’s hands in both of hers, bringing it to her cheek.

Caleb’s voice is heavy with sleep when he speaks again. “That was fucked up. I was afraid to walk in and find you two doing naked shit in the living room. I knew

something was wrong when Captain was acting freaked out but seeing a gun to Chelsea's head? That was fucked up. The guy said he was going to kill me and pin it on her. She told me to run, so I did. Then the asshole shoots me, and I wake up here, decidedly not dead."

Shelby shakes her head, dislodging the tears filling her eyes. "What happened tonight? Why was this man after you all?"

"The why doesn't matter. What does is that Chelsea saved all of us. The man is dead, and our bosses will make sure he doesn't have any trigger-happy friends waiting in the wings."

Shelby walks toward us, prompting Chelsea to take a step back. Caleb's mother throws her arms around my woman, squeezing her tightly. "Thank you for saving my son."

Chelsea remains still and speechless until Shelby releases her to return to Caleb's side. Overwhelmed by the gesture, Chelsea says, "I think I'll give you guys a minute."

I don't want Chelsea to go, but I have to let her. Just not before I say, "Please don't go far. I need you here with me."

Chelsea's face relaxes, and she nods. When she opens the door to step out, I notice the quiet Tyler "Hawk" Morgan standing guard in the hallway.

I watch Shelby with our son, no longer seeing the man in the bed but the ten-year-old boy recovering from appendicitis surgery. Caleb has drifted to sleep again, and Shelby turns puffy eyes toward me. "He'll be alright, won't he?"

"Yes. The concentration was high enough to incapacitate but not harm. The man

wanted all traces of the drug to metabolize before killing us.”

Caleb’s mother shudders, and more tears run free. “Shit. I’m sorry, Shell. We’re fine. We’ll be fine.”

Shelby sniffles and lets go of Caleb’s hand to sit on the sole chair in the room. “Who is she?”

Knowing to whom Shelby is referring, I say, “Her name is Chelsea. She’s a former Marine who works for the Knot Corporation.”

Shelby’s eyes widen, reminding me about the shit Harding has been spreading on the news about PMCs. “They’re not what you’ve been led to believe. The man Chelsea killed tonight was killing troops and framing private military. Everything you’ve heard was part of his effort to bring down these companies.”

“Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

“A personal vendetta. These are good people. Bash works with them. He’s Chelsea’s partner.”

Shelby remembers my best friend from all the years we served together and closes her eyes in relief. “This Chelsea. She means something to you.”

“I’m in love with her.”

Now, Shelby smiles, fingering her wedding band. “I’m glad, Jackson.”

Caleb’s door opens again, this time for a nurse. She’s pushing a care cart and stops next to my wheelchair. “Since you refuse to stay in your room, I just came here.”

She checks my vitals and switches out the empty IV bags for two more before vacating the room again. With Shelby watching Caleb, I decide to step out to check on Chelsea. “You’ll be here for a while?” I ask.

“I’m not leaving until he does,” she confirms.

“Okay. I’ll be back.”

Instead of fighting the wheelchair and IV stand, I grip the pole and push onto my feet. My legs are a little unsteady, but I’m vertical. I keep a hand on the pole, glad for the broad rolling base.

Hawk leans against the wall opposite my son’s door. “Where did everyone go?”

“Home. They’ll be back in the morning.”

“Chelsea?”

“She’s in your room.”

The clock over the nurse’s station reads half past midnight. “You should go home, too. The man’s dead.”

Hawk tilts his head, unconvinced. “Are you certain Ames was working alone?”

When I don’t answer, he says, “Get some rest, Lieutenant.”

I shuffle three doors down to my assigned room, finding Chelsea stretched out on the bed and Birdie balanced on Bastien’s lap. “How’s Caleb?” my friend asks.

“He woke up briefly. The doc says he’ll be fine. Just needs to sleep it off.”

Bash points to my IV bags. “He getting the same cocktail you are?”

“Yep.” I reach the bed and tap Chelsea’s hip to make room for me.

Bash points between us as I climb up. “By the way, whose room is this?”

Chelsea

I answer with a yawn. “It’s his. I didn’t need one. Everyone knows Marines are tougher than SEALs.”

Jackson snickers and lies back on the inclined mattress. I lift my head to rest on his shoulder and drape an arm across his middle. Jackson wraps an arm around my back,

making sure to miss the bandage covering the gunshot wound. “At least this one is.”

Knowing Caleb will recover fully, Jackson’s thoughts turn elsewhere. “No one’s given me an update on Captain. She’s dead, isn’t she?”

Bash shakes his head. “Last I heard, she was defying the odds. Spatch and Piper are watching over her at the pet hospital. From Spatch’s reports, the Malinois laid beside Captain and hasn’t left her side.”

Jackson yawns, and Birdie nudges Bash in the ribs. “Let’s go so they can rest.”

The room is soon quiet. Jackson hits the button on the rails to turn off the lights and rests his cheek on my head. His heart beats strong beneath my ear, reassuring me we’re both alive. Still, I shudder, thinking about what almost happened.

“You didn’t,” he whispers.

“What?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

“Lose me. You didn’t.”

I snuggle closer and let myself drift off to sleep.

I’m jolted awake by a forceful knock. Jackson starts when I nudge him, and the door swings open to quite the crowd: Admiral Jameson, O’Reilly, Knot, Judge, Birdie, Bash, Sadie, and a stranger in uniform. “We could probably fit a few more in here,” I mutter when the door closes.

Knot snickers. “Believe me. They wanted to come in. I ran them off.”

Jackson rubs his eyes, becoming temporarily tied up in his IV lines. “Speaking of running someone off, will one of you make Hawk go home?”

“Already done,” O’Reilly announces. “Fish took his place guarding the hall.”

The stranger shoulders his way to the front of the group with Judge on his heels. “This is my cousin. Jasper Lockmore, Judge Advocate General. Jasper, this is my platoon leader, Jackson Bennett, and former Marine, current private military contractor, Chelsea Danforth.”

The man looks a lot like Judge, just with less muscle. “Nice to meet you,” he says. “Let’s get to work.”

Chelsea and I share our accounts of the night before for the fifth time. The police needed to hear it four times from each of us, but Jasper was satisfied with just once. “The police are out of this investigation. Every military investigative service is

involved, given the nature of the case. Based on what I've learned before and from you now, you two have nothing to worry about. I'll keep my eyes and ears open, anyway."

Jasper turns and offers his hand to the admiral. "Sir."

Jackson swings his feet to the floor to get up. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm feeling my liquids," he says, pointing to the empty IV bags. "If you'll excuse me, I have some things to take care of, and I'd like to check on my son."

Jasper perks up. "I'll go with you...after you hit the head."

Jackson pauses after he's vertical. "Captain?" he addresses to his commander.

"The staff at the animal hospital shaved the fur at the site instead of washing it to avoid any more of the fentanyl absorbing into her skin. After sleeping for several hours, Knot's trainer reports that Captain is sluggish but on her feet and talking to Piper."

Jackson drops his head, masking a wave of emotion at the good news. Once he's gone, an awkward silence settles over the room, but I refuse to be a wallflower. "We'll probably be sent home shortly."

"How are you doing, young lady?"

I smile at the admiral and flex my shoulder blade. "Just a few stitches, sir. I'm fine."

"Good. I'll see myself out then." Admiral Jameson turns to the two leaders with him. "Stone, Warden, I trust you can take care of your people from here. I'm headed back to Washington. I'll keep you posted."

The admiral walks out, and Bash speaks for the first time since arriving. “Sirs, I’ll get these two home. You can head out.”

O’Reilly grins at his friend and former teammate. “I guess we’ve been dismissed, Warden. You know, Laurent was never this pushy as a SEAL.”

Knot laughs. “You may have trained him, but I toughened him up.”

He inclines his head toward the door. “Let’s get out of here.”

Sadie steps up and squeezes my hand. “I’m glad you’re alright, Yeet. We still haven’t rafted the Big Pigeon.”

I roll my eyes and laugh.

Jackson returns a bit later, bringing a nurse with him. “I’m being sent home. Caleb’s already been sprung, and Shelby is taking him back to campus. I wanted you two to meet, but he said he’d be by later.”

Birdie pipes up, then. “I’ve already contacted a company to replace your window and repair any other damage to your house. They promised to check in throughout the day and get to work as soon as the police allow. It may be tomorrow or later, though.”

“You can crash at my place,” Bash offers as he stands. “We’ll get you some breakfast while you work it out.”

The door closes behind the couple, and I conjure Jackson’s deranged meanie face from Spain. “If you think you’re going anywhere but my place, you’ve lost your mind.”

Chelsea

I rip off the dangling police tape, remove my purse from the evidence bag, and unlock my townhouse front door. I trudge past the signs of my struggle with Ames, not caring about anything but my bed right now.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

The lock snicks behind me, and Jackson growls. “You’ve put me in a difficult spot, Chelsea.”

“Um. Excuse me?” I squeak.

Jackson flexes his neck and stalks toward me. “You took a bullet for me. I want to redden your ass for that. Conversely, you likely saved my son’s life. I want to kiss you for that.”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. “How about I help you with your decision?”

Placing my hands on my hips, I lean forward and with as much attitude as I can muster, whisper, “You_can kiss_my ass... Daddy.”

Jackson is on me in half a second with his hand around my throat. “Be careful, Chelsea. You’re in fuck around and find out territory.”

“Cute threat. Now watch me ignore it.”

I turn for the stairs, and Jackson rushes me, pinning my arms behind my back. “You’re going to be so much fun to tame. Now be a good little girl and get naked.”

“Make me.”

Jackson rips his shirt from my body. “Yes and sir, Chelsea. Yes and sir.”

My arms tremble before outright giving up. I’m done. My face smashes into the

pillow when I collapse, and I wait until near suffocation before turning to suck in a breath.

Jackson doesn't stop.

I'm spent from the two orgasms he wrung from me on the stairs and the one that came after he carried me to my room and threw me on the bed. By now, I'm content to be used as he pleases. A few ragged breaths later, Jackson loses his rhythm as the ripple of another climax devastates me. "That's it, baby girl. Choke me."

I squeeze hard, and Jackson lets out a long groan before collapsing onto my back. Jackson's labored breaths fan over my skin, hot and cold with each inhale and exhale.

"You're such a good girl. My goddess."

Jackson gently rolls me to my side, pulls the blanket over us, and cuddles up behind me. His big hands work over my body, caressing and massaging as he murmurs words of praise in my ear about how good I felt and how well my body takes him.

Later, we lay in the quiet with the late morning sun streaming through the windows. I'm stretched out on top of Jackson with his hand resting on my ass. Without warning, he lifts his hand and swings it down hard.

The loud smack echoes throughout the room. "Hey! What was that for?"

"That was for coming between me and that bullet."

"Psh. You would have done the same thing," I throw back.

Jackson has me on my back before I can blink, nestled between my legs. "You won't ever do anything like that again. Understand?"

I pick up my head and challenge, “Oh yeah? Just how do you plan to stop me?”

Jackson shoves inside with one hard thrust.

“Uh,” I pant.

“Just. Like. This.”

Jackson

It’s Wednesday before my house is released and the window replaced. The bullet that grazed Chelsea passed through the drywall and lodged itself into a wall stud. That repair was a simple touchup after police retrieved the slug.

I’m finally back in my own house, cleaning up what was disturbed in the struggle. Chelsea is also here, experiencing my home the right way. I cook dinner for her, a baked salmon served over jasmine rice with garlic, lemon, and caper butter sauce.

We take care of cleanup duty together and relocate to the sofa in the living room to watch MASH reruns. “Hey, I forgot to tell you. O’Reilly relayed a bit of good news from the admiral today. Iron Strike is back in business. Fearing a lawsuit, the US Army offered a settlement to the CEO and issued a formal and public apology to the contractors that were caught up in the massacre.”

Chelsea shakes her head. “I hope every dime goes to Benson and his men. God knows they’ve earned it.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:30 am

A knock sounds at my door, and Captain lowers her head and growls. After what we just lived through, I don't blame her.

"It's me, Dad," Caleb announces from outside.

Captain stops growling and hops up, prancing over to the door.

"Come in," I call.

My son uses his key and waltzes in, flopping onto a side chair. Chelsea tried to pull away when the door opened, but I yanked her back against me and held her there.

Caleb watches us with a satisfied smile. "You guys doing okay?"

"We're alright," I answer. "Are you having any side effects from the fentanyl?"

My son shrugs as though he's invincible. "Nah. I'm fine. I'm milking it with Mom, though. This is the first time since starting school that all my laundry is clean at the same time."

I shake my head, and Caleb drops his smile and stares at Chelsea. He doesn't speak for a long time. "You got shot protecting my dad. And you told me to run while that asshole held a gun to your head."

Chelsea doesn't say anything, so I figure it's time I made formal introductions. "Chelsea, this is my son Caleb. Caleb, this is Chelsea."

Caleb grins and leans forward to shake Chelsea's hand. It strikes me at that moment: the sharp structure of his jaw, shrewd eyes, and muscular frame. My little boy has been replaced by a man.

"Glad to meet you...officially, anyways," he tells her.

"You look so much like your father."

"Even better," he brags. "Dad tells me you were a Marine?"

I settle back onto the sofa, enjoying seeing my son and woman getting along. It's a very good thing they do. I'm going to make Chelsea marry me one day, so she may as well get used to the idea.

Hell, I'm even tempted to retire just to get more time with her. I want to wake up beside her every morning that we're both stateside. Thoughts of falling asleep with my hand between her legs every night stir up a fierce hunger in me.

With each passing minute, my desire grows. The two most important people in my life continue talking while I fight off the urge to take Chelsea to bed. I stroke my hands up and down her spine, but feeling the heat of her skin only makes things worse.

After another minute, my control shatters. I rudely interrupt their conversation. "Caleb, say goodnight."

"What?" he yelps, shock reddening his cheeks.

"It's time for you to go home."

He laughs nervously. "Um... Are you kidding?"

“Son, we’re about to do naked shit in the living room. Unless you want to be here for that, I suggest you split.”

Caleb covers his eyes and shoves out of the chair. “Oh God. I’m out of here. Come on, Captain. You can go home with me, and I’ll take you to a baseball game tomorrow.”

My hand is up Chelsea’s shirt before the door closes. “Did you just kick your son out so you could get laid?”

“Mmhmm.” I nip at her neck and whisper, “Run, little girl. You’ve got sixty seconds.”

“Uh... Jackson, you live in a crowded subdivision. I could be to the edge of your yard in ten.”

“Fifty seconds,” I growl.

“Your room in three.”

“Forty-five seconds.”

“Oh shit.”

Excitement flashes in Chelsea’s eyes, and she shoots up from the couch. I don’t let her get far. I grab a fistful of her shirt and yank her back, flipping her under me. Hovering over the fascinating woman, I shove her top and bra out of the way and latch onto a pert nipple. “You aren’t going anywhere.”