



Operation: Sharp Angel

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Description: A horrific crime left Becca Elliot in the middle of a nightmare. And even worse, the police got it wrong. She turned to Shepherd Security to get it right.

United States Marine Raider and Shepherd Security Operator Carter 'Moe' Tessman was well-respected in the SpecOps community and was considered a Marine's Marine. He was a no-nonsense, experienced combat veteran. His baby-face didn't match his reputation and resume though. At thirty-five years old, he still got carded when buying alcohol more often than not.

He worked hard and played even harder, knowing every mission could be his last. Commitment, family, settling down were not words that ever ran through his thoughts.

He had been personally recruited by Colonel Sam Shepherd, a man he'd worked alongside of and respected immensely, and he was proud of all he'd accomplished both as a Marine and as a Shepherd Security Operator.

But things are changing at Shepherd Security with the types of cases he's assigned to, and amongst his teammates, many of whom have women in their lives. Tessman doesn't know it when he meets the client, Becca Elliot, and is assigned to her case, but things are about to change for him too.

Warning, this story is realistic, with adult language and content on the way to the HEA. This is book 17 in the Shepherd Security series.

Even though the story does continue from book to book, each is a stand-alone story and can be read without reading the prior book(s), but they are best enjoyed in order.

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Alpha

Driver David Bloom had the side door open on his truck. He loved working for UPS on days this beautiful. It had been a warm spring, for which he was grateful. He had his normal customers on his route, including dogs for whom he carried Milk-Bone treats. The DeSoto family received few packages from him, though as he drove through the neighborhood, he often saw Amazon deliveries on the front porch, which was recessed from the walkway, giving it a private feel, as many of the homes in this subdivision had.

He took hold of the flat envelope and exited his truck. He rang the bell and waited a moment as the package required a signature. After a good thirty seconds, he peered in through the narrow pane of glass that ran the length of the door to the right of it. His gaze landed on the still figure that lay just past the entry. Beyond that downed figure, the wall had a large splatter of what he was sure was blood. He knew the man was dead. He backed away and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He dialed 9-1-1.

Shepherd Security Operator, Marine Raider Carter 'Moe' Tessman, focused through his EOTech holographic sights, which were mounted to his M4 carbine, at the target just under two-hundred yards away. The target was a group of four men who were gathered in front of an open hangar door at a little, rarely used airfield in the middle of bumble-fuck nowhere Texas way off of TX-163. Just behind them lay the Cessna 172 Skyhawk that had landed within the last fifteen minutes and the black Ford Pickup truck that was inside the hangar, its tailgate down. Two men had arrived in each vehicle.

The terrain was flat with low scrub and dry field grass trying to live in the parched sandy soil. It was just past zero-seven hundred. Tessman and his team had been in position since just before zero five hundred. He lay prone, concealed by the branches of shrubs he'd propped up around his rifle and the desert-colored camouflage clothing he wore.

"Is anyone else seeing this?" Danny 'Mother' Trio, one of the two other Marine Raiders on the Shepherd Security Team, asked through comms.

"Roger that," Tommy 'Louisa' Flores replied. "There are enough rifles in those crates to kill a lot of people."

"I meant that those are pristine, brand-spanking-new M4s by the look of them," Mother clarified. "And those look like original military shipping crates."

"The two that arrived in the pick-up look like military," Tessman chimed in. "But those two yahoos that flew in on the Cessna I'd peg as cartel." Although his position would not allow him to see within the hangar, he saw the four men clearly.

"Roger that, Moe," Landon 'Lambchop' Johnson, the team lead for this Op, replied. "I was just thinking the same thing."

There were six team members on site. An urgent call had come in to Colonel Sam Shepherd, United States Army, retired on paper only, less than twenty-four hours before from his contact with the CIA. Chatter had been picked up by the CIA while surveilling a person of interest, and they'd passed the urgent need for a team to be at this aircraft hangar on this date and time to Shepherd.

The team had no idea what it was regarding, or who the CIA had been surveilling when the tidbit was heard that drove the CIA to contact Shepherd. For all they knew, the Shepherd Security Team could have been walking into an ambush. That was why

the six members were spread out well enough to keep watch for any approaching threat, cover each other, and the hangar. And a satellite had been dedicated to the area to help keep watch. They were in body armor and were authorized to use lethal force.

Also on comms was Yvette 'Control' Donaldson. A former CIA Analyst, she was now a lead analyst in the Operations Center at their headquarters, an unassuming ten-story building on the ring road around the large Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, Illinois. She notified them when the satellite picked up both the incoming pick-up truck and aircraft, which arrived within twenty minutes of each other. Then she got Shepherd on comms, as he'd requested. "The surrounding area and airspace remain clear," Yvette transmitted.

"Take them down, team," Shepherd ordered. "Confiscate the weapons and vehicles. If they are military weapons or if those two Tangos are active duty, I can have an MP team there in under an hour from JBSA. I've also just notified Whiting to send a team."

The men all knew that JBSA was the acronym for Joint Base San Antonio and Whiting was Deputy Director Leonard Whiting, Shepherd's contact at the FBI.

"Powder and Kegger, move in to the rear of the hangar," Lambchop ordered. Both men were hidden in the scrub and tall prairie grass a hundred and nearly two hundred yards, respectively, behind the hangar. "Report once you have your backs against the structure."

They both acknowledged the order.

"Mother and Moe, you should both be able to advance at least fifty yards without being seen. Close in," Lambchop then transmitted. "I'll watch the targets and advise. Move slowly."

Again, both men acknowledged his order.

Tessman carefully and slowly pushed the branches that covered his position away from his rifle. He kept his head down and kept hold of his M4 while he crawled forward, being careful he didn't disturb too much of the prairie grass and scrub as he advanced. Thankfully, there was an intermittent breeze blowing from the southwest at five to ten mph, so the movement of the grass wouldn't be noticed by the Tangos. All the while he listened, hoping he would not hear anything through comms indicating he'd been detected.

Tessman heard through comms when both Mike 'Powder' Rogers, the team medic, and Elijah 'Kegger' Robinson arrived at the back of the hangar. Then he heard Mother's acknowledgement that he'd closed the fifty yards as requested.

"Move in another twenty yards, Mother," Lambchop broadcast. Mother was off to the east of the hangar and there was sufficient cover for him to move in a bit closer.

Mother again acknowledged the order.

"In position," Tessman transmitted. Through his scope, he had a clear view of the men in front of the open hangar door. Just then, he saw one of the men move to the aircraft, which was directly in front of him, parked kitty-corner to the hangar. The man grabbed something inside. The men were all armed, so it wasn't a weapon. "Hello brick of what I'll assume is cocaine or heroin," he added when the man brought a loaf-pan sized white brick into view.

"That plane is loaded with the shit," Tommy 'Louisa' Flores reported. From his position, he had a clear view of the plane through the open door.

"Drugs for arms," Lambchop remarked. "Deadly on both sides of the border."

“Try to take them alive, team,” Shepherd ordered. “But don’t let any of those weapons or drugs leave that area. I’m bringing the DEA in as well.”

“Roger that, Big Bear,” Lambchop acknowledged. “Moe, circle around to the north and see how close you can get to the aircraft. Preventing its departure is on you.”

“A grenade in the cockpit will do the trick,” Louisa broadcast with a laugh. Everyone knew he was joking. They needed to recover the drugs without them being damaged.

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Then Lambchop assigned numbers to each of the four men in front of the hangar. “Ratty cowboy hat-boy with the AR-15 is Tango number one,” Lambchop said. “Green jacket, also carrying an AR is two, and Dirty Harry wearing the plaid shirt with the .44 Magnum is three, and that leaves the man in black with the nice Winchester as Tango number four.”

“Once I’m behind the bird and moved in, I won’t see jack-shit,” Tessman broadcast.

“I’ve got your six,” Mother replied. He’d been positioned furthest out in front of the hangar, so he technically was on overwatch.

“It’s more my three o’clock position I’m worried about,” Tessman said.

“I’ve got that too, honey,” Mother said in a sugary sweet voice.

Several quiet chuckles were picked up on comms.

“Mother, temporarily take over command. I’m going to circle to the back of the hangar and will be blind,” Lambchop broadcast. “Powder and Kegger, hold at the back door. Mother, if anyone’s detected, give the go order.”

“Roger that, Lambchop,” Mother acknowledged.

After several long minutes, Lambchop finally broadcast. “At the back door of the hangar. The three of us are going silent, going to penetrate the inside of the hangar. I’ll tap comms three times when we’re in position. At that point, Mother and Louisa lay down cover fire in front of the Tangos to distract them when Mother gives the go-

order.”

Both Mother and Louisa acknowledged.

Tessman didn't answer as he'd moved in so close, he would be heard even if he whispered. He was just a few feet from the plane. From his location, still lying prone on the ground with his weapon trained on the space between the plane and the ground, Tessman could no longer clearly see the four men, could mostly see their feet and legs. Nor could he see within the hangar.

Several minutes elapsed as the three men in the hangar moved to take up position. As they waited, Tango number one returned to the Cessna to retrieve another brick of white. Tessman trained his weapon on the man's feet, but angled his head to view the window on the aircraft to verify the man wouldn't be likely to see him. He was assured he was invisible.

Then they heard the three taps. Lambchop and the others were in position.

“Go-go-go,” Mother called. His words were immediately followed by automatic weapons fire as he and Louisa peppered the ground a few feet in front of the four men.

Tessman saw the Tangos feet turn towards the hangar. And then there were bullet impacts in front of them as well as behind them.

“Drop them!” Lambchop yelled.

Tessman sprang to his feet and aimed the barrel of his weapon over the tail section of the plane, which gave him a view of the four men while the plane provided him some cover.

Tango number one raised his AR, pointing it into the interior of the hangar. A shot hit his upper right shoulder, knocking him back. Tessman watched him fumble with his weapon so that his left hand grasped the trigger. Tessman squeezed off one shot, striking the Tango in the left thigh, which dropped him to the ground.

“Tango number one down. He’s still armed,” Tessman reported.

Tango number three instantly surrendered, raising his hands above his head, his .44 Magnum dropped to the ground, but his hands held a brick of the white drug.

Tango number four, the man in black with the Winchester, dove to his right and rolled across the ground in an attempt to get out of the active firing zone. He was stopped by Kegger, who stepped from the right side of the hangar and kicked his weapon away from him while pointing his M4 at the man in black’s head. “Stay down,” Kegger warned. “Tango number four, subdued.”

The gunfire stopped as Louisa moved in, but Mother remained in his overwatch position.

Tango number two must not have seen Tessman. He sprinted to the Cessna and jumped inside the open door. He closed the door and settled into the pilot’s seat in the cockpit, firing the engines up immediately. At the same time, Lambchop ran from inside of the hangar and disarmed Tango number one.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Tessman muttered under his breath. He ducked under the wing and came up along the side of the aircraft. He fired a round through the side window glass. It exited through the front cockpit window, narrowly missing the Tango’s head on purpose. Then he opened the cockpit door. “Shut it down or the next one goes in your head!” he shouted to the man in the plane. His weapon was trained on the guy’s head.

The Tango pushed the throttle forward, moving the aircraft forward, while pressing the rudder peddle to initiate a turn.

“No! No! No!” Tessman shouted. “Stop or I shoot!”

The plane was already moving and turning. The Tango’s AK lay across his lap. He fumbled to pick it up as he pushed Tessman’s weapon away. Tessman squeezed the trigger, hitting the Tango in the shoulder. Shepherd wanted them taken alive. Then Tessman climbed inside the bird, disarmed the man, and threw his AR out of the plane before he shut the engine down.

“Tango secure,” Tessman transmitted. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that two of the three remaining Tangos were all secure, face down, and his teammates were securing their hands behind their backs in zip ties. The third, who’d been shot in the shoulder and thigh, was lying on his back, his hands in zip ties in front of him. The team medic, Powder, was tending his wounds with Louisa’s help.

Tessman pulled the hands of the Tango in the plane in front of his body and secured them in zip ties. Then he pulled him from the plane and drew him over and sat him on the ground beside the others. He pushed his green jacket down his arm and then cut his shirt to expose the shoulder wound. There was significant bleeding. He visually examined the shoulder from the front and the back. No exit wound. He then felt around the area, to which the man moaned and cursed in Spanish. It looked like the bullet had hit bone.

“Powder, can I get a pack of QuikClot and some dressing? Doesn’t look like an artery was hit, but I’ve got significant bleeding. The bone’s been hit. This is going to need surgery.” He wasn’t a medic, but he’d seen enough bullet wounds to know. And he knew basic battlefield treatment for bullet wounds to keep this guy from bleeding out.

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Powder broke away from the Tango he was treating just long enough to provide Tessman with the requested supplies as well as a syrette of morphine for pain relief. “You nicked the femoral artery on this guy,” Powder said to him as he handed off the supplies. “I’ve got him stabilized.”

“He flinched,” Tessman said. “Otherwise, that artery wouldn’t have been hit.”

Powder barked out a laugh. He then went back to the downed Tango with the two bullet wounds.

Lambchop already had the wallets out of the pockets of the two men who’d driven the pick-up truck with the rifles to the party. “Big Bear, I’ve got confirmation. We’ve got two enlisted active-duty soldiers here,” he reported.

“I’ll notify the base,” Shepherd replied. “Sit tight. I have the DEA and the military, MPs and medical services heading your way. Complete a turnover to both before you leave the area.”

“Roger that, Big Bear,” Lambchop acknowledged.

It was nearly nine-thirty before a Black Hawk helicopter with military markings approached from the east. The team on the ground had just heard the approaching chopper when Yvette’s voice came through comms, “Medical personnel and MPs from JBSA are nearly to your location. DEA is about thirty minutes out.”

“Roger that, Control. We’ve got a visual on them,” Lambchop advised.

As the temperature had already risen to a seasonable eighty degrees and there was not a cloud in the sky, the team had moved the Tangos into the shade just within the hangar. Tessman and Lambchop stood by the Cessna. They'd conducted a thorough search of it. Likewise, inside the hangar, Mother and Louisa had thoroughly searched the pick-up truck.

The backseat area of the Cessna was stacked with twenty-four, one-pound bricks of the white drug. The DEA's testing when they arrived on site would confirm it was cocaine. The back of the pick-up truck held, as they thought, brand new M4 rifles in original military shipping containers, eight rifles to a crate.

The team performed turnover to both the military and the four-man DEA team that arrived. The two injured Tangos were flown out in the Black Hawk. They'd receive treatment at the base while in DEA custody. The two soldiers were in the custody of the MPs and in shackles on the flight to the base. Both the vehicles were seized by the DEA.

The team only had to wait an hour for the Shepherd Security Lear to land on the dirt landing strip to fly them out. It had flown them in that morning and waited at a nearby regional airport. Once in the air, the men settled back in their seats and most closed their eyes. Tessman sat by a window. He gazed out and his thoughts drifted to the two soldiers who were trading new military hardware for drugs. Why the hell would anyone get messed up with the cartels? What a waste! And it never ended well. They'd worked enough cases that involved drugs to know that.

After landing at Chicago Executive Airport, the local regional airfield where the Shepherd Security hangar was, the team returned to their headquarters for a short mission debrief with Shepherd.

"Gentlemen, I just wanted to meet to pass along the DEA's thanks," Shepherd began. "The estimated street value of the drugs we intercepted is four hundred thousand

dollars. The twenty-four pounds once cut equals approximately seventy thousand doses that would have been sold on American streets. And if laced with fentanyl, it could have killed a lot of people. No matter what other cases this agency takes on, the mission of helping to keep dangerous drugs off the streets will remain something we're involved in."

"It would have been nice to know, going in, that this was drug related," Flores complained.

"I'm not sure the CIA had a complete understanding of what was going to go down at that tiny airstrip in Texas. And if they did, I'm sure we got the case because we could move fast enough to get assets on the ground. I don't think the DEA, ATF, or the Army's Criminal Investigation Division could have moved that fast, especially if there was to be any coordination between the agencies," Shepherd said. "And to your original point of knowing what we were walking into, Mason has a long history of not sharing what will make our job easier. That's the one constant."

"That's an understatement," Lambchop said.

Several of the men chuckled. The corner of Shepherd's lips pulled into a small grin.

"The other constant is the drugs," Mother added.

"True. As long as there is a demand for drugs, there will be a supply," Lambchop said. "We kept this shipment off the street. There'll be more that do make it through."

"It's a losing proposition," Flores said gruffly.

Tessman viewed Flores with a sideways glance. He knew Flores and the rest of Bravo Team had voiced their opposition to working the DEA Partner Missions, which one could argue this case technically turned out to be with the added twist of the military

rifles and two soldiers included in the bust. He respected his colleague, but had to wonder how his private conversations with Shepherd went regarding Bravo Team's stance on mission selection. And while Shepherd was old-school Army, accomplish the mission even if it's impossible by any means necessary, he had also made adjustments in staffing due to nearly half the team members having families, and their desire to cut their travel for jobs by half. He'd made adjustments to keep his assets. Period. But with Bravo Team making it known that they all saw retirement on the horizon, Tessman couldn't help but wonder how long Shepherd's patience would hold out before he advised them to retire.

"Unfortunately, it's part of the mission. We can take that discussion off line if you'd like to discuss it further, Flores," Shepherd said. "Thank you for your flexibility, gentlemen. You are all off the rest of the day. Watch your emails for your next assignments that may begin tomorrow."

All six men came to their feet. They knew they'd just been dismissed. Tessman held back and watched, interested to see if Tommy Flores would remain in Shepherd's office for further discussion. He was surprised to see Flores and Kegger, both assigned to Bravo Team, exit the conference room in front of him.

Bravo

Becca Elliot sat on the hood of her car; her gaze fixed on the gray vinyl sided two story home. She'd sat here staring at the pale gray house for hours each day for over a week. Her conscious mind could not comprehend the horror that had taken place inside. She tried to block from her thinking what her sister's last thoughts had been. Thankfully, the police believed her nieces had been asleep when they were fatally shot. A single .9mm round to each of their little heads in what should have been the safety of their bedrooms. Dealing with this thought was more than Becca could bear, so she pushed that reality far from her thoughts and focused on her sister.

Her sister wasn't as lucky. Her body was found on the kitchen floor, a bullet in her back a second in the back of her head. Becca conjured an image of Nicole running for her life, but not from Nick, as the police believed. Nicole's husband had not killed the family before taking his own life.

There was no way he had. Becca hoped the forensics would prove that out. They had to.

Before Tessman left the office, he sent his friend and teammate Jimmy 'Taco' Wilson a text message asking if he could swing by Wilson's place. In the past, he would have just dropped by. But things were different now because Wilson had acquired a live-in girlfriend and a four-year-old daughter six weeks before. It happened very quickly, so he wasn't used to it yet. But it did mean that his days of just dropping in were over.

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Besides being his best friend, Wilson was also his team leader on Charlie Team, which he was officially assigned to, though recently, all five of the Shepherd Security teams had been pulled at what seemed as randomly and staffed together on missions. The mission earlier that morning had Mike 'Powder' Rogers, also from Charlie Team staffed as well as Lambchop and Mother from Delta Team in addition to the two members of Bravo Team. Shepherd had said the mixing of teams was temporary with the growing pains the agency was currently going through, and because several of their ongoing contracts required six team members.

Wilson replied to his text immediately, inviting him over. Tessman and several others had helped move Wilson and his new family into the townhouse just a week earlier. Wilson had deployed on one of their new Domestic Violence Intervention Cases on Monday, and the small three-person team had wrapped it up and returned to HQ very late the night before. Now that was a mission type that Tessman would be interested in being staffed on.

When Tessman knocked on the door to Wilson's new home, Wilson's new girlfriend, Rae, answered the door. "Hi, come in," she invited with a smile. "Jimmy will be down in a minute." She was pleasant, had been at each of the four occasions Tessman had spent any time with her, though he couldn't say he really knew her well.

Tessman stepped into the living room. His eyes glanced at the staircase that led up to the second floor. Then his gaze swept over the living room and the kitchen at the far end of the house. There wasn't a box in sight. It looked like they'd lived there for years. "House looks good. You got a lot done."

She laughed. "The garage is still full of unpacked boxes, but we're getting settled

little by little.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Wilson said from halfway down the staircase. “She did all this and unpacked everything upstairs, too.” Wilson descended the rest of the stairs and stepped up to the two of them. “But she is right. The garage is still loaded with boxes. I won’t be parking in there anytime soon.”

“I’m off the rest of the day if you want help to knock some of it out,” Tessman offered.

“Thanks, but it’s stuff that has to be gone through and either put away, thrown away, or donated,” Wilson said.

“He’s saying it’s mine or Lilly’s stuff, or her mom’s, so I’ll have to tackle it,” Rae said.

“I didn’t say that, but sorry, yeah, most of it will be on you to go through, Rae,” Wilson said with a chuckle.

Lilly was the four-year-old who was now Jimmy and Rae’s daughter. Her mother was facing life in prison. Rae was her pre-school teacher and was quite attached to her when she and her mother disappeared, prompting Rae to look for them. She contacted Wilson and when Lilly’s mom, Stella, who was involved in an identity theft ring, discovered that Rae had found her, Rae was kidnapped by Stella and one of her co-conspirators. Rae nearly died. Wilson and the team found her and Lilly, and the Shepherd Security Team working with the U.S. Marshals apprehended Lilly’s mom and the criminal network she was a part of.

“Thanks, babe,” she said sarcastically. “I have to go pick Lilly up from school. You didn’t block Jimmy’s truck in the driveway, did you?” Rae asked Tessman.

“No, ma’am,” Tessman replied.

Rae reached for the keys, which were on the end table near the door. When she did, Tessman saw the diamond solitaire on her left hand.

“I’ll be back. Don’t feel you need to rush off because of me or Lilly. As a matter of fact, if you’ll still be around, you can plan on staying for dinner if you like spaghetti and meatballs.” She smiled and then disappeared out the door.

Tessman’s eyes fixed on Wilson. “Was that a ring on her finger?”

Wilson smiled and nodded.

“You proposed? You fucking proposed already?” Tessman asked, his voice expressing his shock.

Wilson chuckled. “We’re not getting married tomorrow. But when we do, you’ll be my best man, won’t you?”

Tessman stared at him, dumbfounded. “Well, yeah, of course.”

Wilson slapped him on the back and then stepped further into the house. “You want a beer?”

“Sure,” Tessman said. Yeah, he fucking needed one, seeing that Wilson had proposed.

Tessman took a seat at the breakfast bar that faced into the kitchen. Wilson handed the bottle over the sink and bar to him. “I know you don’t get it, but Rae and me, it feels right. Besides, Rae and Lilly both have my last name, thanks to the Marshals, so I figured we should make it official.”

“Lambchop didn’t mention anything.” Lambchop was an ordained minister and the team pastor. Tessman assumed Wilson would have him marry them.

“I haven’t had the chance to mention it to him yet. You’re the first on the team to know,” Wilson said, and then took a long pull from his bottle. “I should probably tell a few others.”

“Married? I figured it would come at some point, but I didn’t expect it this soon.”

Wilson chuckled. “As I said, it just feels right, them living here, the three of us a family.” He smiled.

Tessman had to admit he’d never seen his friend happier. “Well, then I’m happy for you.”

“Stay for dinner. I’d like you to get to know Rae better,” Wilson invited. “She’s right. I don’t want you to feel you need to rush off or stay away, either. I know you think things have changed because she and I are together now, but as far as our friendship is concerned, nothing’s changed, dude.”

Tessman nodded and took another drink of beer. He knew Wilson believed that, but he knew a lot had changed. How that would all play out was yet to be seen.

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When Rae and Lilly got home, Lilly ran to Wilson and gave him a hug. Tessman saw a different side of his friend as he asked how her day had been and what she'd learned. Wilson spent at least five minutes completely focused on the little girl. Tessman realized that Wilson was already Lilly's dad. When did that happen?

"So, are you staying for dinner?" Rae asked him. She was in the kitchen getting dinner started.

"Please stay," Lilly begged. "Mommy said she wants you to."

"She did?" Tessman asked her with a smile. "When did she say that?"

"In the car after school," Lilly said.

Tessman's gaze went to Rae. "Thank you for the invitation. I'd love to stay."

Later that night, after he was at his condo, Tessman received the text from Shepherd with his next assignment. He was assigned to the next CIA Referral Mission that would deploy two days later with Wilson and four of the members of Alpha Team. There was quite a bit of mission prep he'd begin to do at HQ the following day. He had to be in by zero seven hundred.

When he got to the office, he and the five other members assigned to the Op met with Shepherd and Digital Team member Caleb 'Hound dog' Smith. He'd be assigned as the primary Digital Team contact while they were on site. The focus of the case was a

business, not an individual, like was normally the case. But as usual, the CIA would not disclose who they'd been surveilling or why when this company name came up. Or what was learned that could possibly be illegal, necessitating the surveillance of this company.

“The principal ownership in SLTD Inc. is Chinese, which is a big hint as to why we were passed this one,” Shepherd said. “They have three main interests in Boise, which will be divided between the six of you to look into. That’s why we’re holding a few days before you deploy, so you can have a good look at those interests from here.”

“Forward requests that you don’t have the tools to look into, to me,” Anthony ‘Razor’ Garcia, the team lead for the Digital Team and a member of Alpha Team, said. “Smith and other members of the Digital Team can help, but I want to route the inquiries.”

“Of particular interest are large swaths of farmland south of Boise, too close to the Mountain Home Air Force Base for my liking,” Shepherd said. “The second division of SLTD of concern for me is the food processing plants it controls. And lastly, SLTD runs a freight and cargo line out of Boise International Airport.”

“They’ve got their hands in a lot,” Tessman remarked.

“Into too much that we don’t want the Chinese anywhere near,” Alpha Team member John ‘Coop’ Cooper agreed.

“Even if the owners are American citizens, unlikely,” Garcia said, “they very well could have ties to communist China. That’s one of the things Smith will be looking into.”

“I’m not sure what concerns me more,” Alpha Team member Madison ‘Xena’ Miller,

who was also Cooper's wife, said. "The proximity to the Air Force base or the control of our food supply."

"Both aspects concern me greatly," Shepherd said.

The meeting ended, and the team filed out. Tessman went to his office to begin to do the research on what he'd been assigned, the freight and cargo line out of the Boise International Airport. Three hours in, he was nodding off at his desk. And he thought turning a wrench on the Power Grid Protection Project was boring! This was far more boring work for him. Plant his ass out in the middle of the desert, the mountains, the forest, anywhere with a scope trained on a target and he was in his element. Desk work and research were not his element.

He got up and went for a walk to revive himself and ended up in the kitchen on floor five where he knew Angel, the Office Manager, and Alpha Team member, Ethan 'Jax' Jackson's wife, always kept left overs from the lunch meals she had catered in, almost daily. He grabbed several sandwich spirals and a bag of chips. He was looking through the cookies when Angel entered behind him.

"Don't finish all those cookies," she said with a smile.

"No ma'am," he replied.

"Madison was just down here raiding the cookies. Shepherd has pulled her from the next CIA Mission and replaced her with Mother. Did you know that?"

"He did?"

"Yeah, and she was pissed. Said she'd already done hours of prep. Mother's in her office with her now and she's doing a turnover," Angel said.

“Yeah, I’d be pissed too. I’ve spent the last three hours doing my homework. This is a big case. It’s no wonder Shepherd is having us do a couple days of prep before we ship out,” Tessman said.

“I heard.” Angel stared at him expectantly.

“What?”

“I understand you were over at Wilson and Rae’s place yesterday,” Angel said with a grin.

Tessman flashed her an amused grin. “You know, don’t you?”

“Yeah, they do live just down the block from me. I was dropping Johanna off at Elizabeth’s this morning and Rae was there too.” Johanna was Angel and Jackson’s nearly one-year-old daughter. Elizabeth was married to Doc, also on Alpha Team, and she babysat the majority of the children of agency members. “She said you were there for dinner last night. I know Rae and Lilly moving in with Wilson was a shock to you and I also know that the two of you are close. You’re not losing a friend, you know. I know Garcia felt that way when Jackson and I got together.”

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“Yeah, we’ll see how much things change. I know he won’t be going diving with me whenever we have a few days off,” Tessman lamented.

“You never know.”

“Thanks, Angel. I better get back to it.”

He brought the food with him and returned to his office to continue the desk work, which for this case was a necessary evil.

Charlie

Becca Elliot once again sat on the hood of her car; her gaze fixed on her sister’s two-story home. She still couldn't comprehend what had taken place inside the walls. Her thoughts were dominated with pain and death, her sister running for her life only to be gunned down in her kitchen. The police detective assigned to the case had contacted her that morning, asking that she meet him here.

“Miss Elliot,” his familiar voice startled her out of her dark thoughts.

“Detective Davis,” she greeted him, having found him standing beside her. She’d been so trapped by her own thoughts that she hadn’t heard him drive up. She glanced behind her car. Sure enough, his silver sedan was parked there.

“I know you don’t agree with the findings, but the coroner is standing behind his ruling. The investigation has officially been closed. I’ll be taking the crime scene tape down. You may enter the house now.”

Her gaze flickered to the yellow police tape that surrounded the house and swayed in the unseasonably warm seventy-two-degree breeze.

“I have to warn you, though, you know, the condition it is in.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I will contact that crime scene clean-up company you suggested.”

She didn’t expect that anyone had cleaned the mess up. And since it had sat this long, she could only guess how hard it would be to clean up all the blood. The girls’ mattresses would have to be hauled away. And their rooms would have to be painted. So would the kitchen. The hardwood floors would have to be stripped and sanded. What she really wanted to do was just take a match to it and burn the house to the ground.

“Again, I’m sorry for your loss,” the detective said. He paused for a moment. “You should take some time. Go away somewhere. You know, take care of yourself.”

She didn’t look at him. She stared straight ahead at her sister and brother-in-law’s house, where so many happy memories were made. “Nick didn’t do this,” she told him for at least the fortieth time.

“I know you believe that, but you just never know what some people will do.” He’d told her that before. He doubted she’d believe him now. He watched her for a few seconds. “Are you still planning to pursue a private investigator to look into it?”

For the first time, she faced him. “Wouldn’t you? I know Nick didn’t do this,” she said, her confidence unwavering. “Whoever did it has to be caught.”

“Look, I’m not agreeing with you, but if you’re going to do this, I know of this group who may be able to help. They’re good. I don’t know for sure if they take this kind of case or what they charge, but I know they’re legit and won’t rip you off.” He brought

up a contact app on his phone and searched for the group he was thinking of. “If there’s anything to your, if it wasn’t your brother-in-law, this group can figure it out and will refer actionable items back to the Schaumburg Police Department. They’re mostly ex-military and are thorough.”

Reading between the lines, she surmised that this group he was referring her to was respected enough that they’d be believed. She was encouraged by the detective’s offer. Could he believe the coroner was wrong? “Yes, thank you. I’ll take the name and phone number.” She plugged the contact info into her phone as he read it off to her. “Thank you, Detective,” she said.

“Miss Elliot, Becca,” he said more gently, “take care of yourself.” Then he crossed the street and took down the crime scene tape.

After he drove away, Becca dialed the phone number he’d given her.

Angel was at her desk at the Shepherd Security Building, working on budget spreadsheets. She saw the incoming call on the public agency line. They received very few legitimate agency calls on that line. It was normally solicitation cold calls. “Shepherd Security, how may I help you?” she answered, expecting the normal sales call.

Becca was put at ease by the pleasant female voice that answered the phone. She’d had wagered it would have been a gruff male voice. “Hello. I was given this number by Detective Davis with the Schaumburg Police Department. He thought you might be able to help me,” she said.

“May I have your name please?” Angel asked, more than a little surprised.

“Becca, Rebecca Elliot.”

“Hello, Miss Elliot, may I call you Becca?”

“Yes, please do.”

“My name is Angel. Is the number you’re calling from the best number to reach you at?”

“Yes, it’s my cell.”

“May I inquire about the nature of the work you have for our agency?”

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“The police have wrongly determined a crime, and I need someone to re-investigate it.”

“And what is the nature of the crime?” Angel asked.

“My sister and her entire family were killed. The police believe my brother-in-law did it, murder-suicide. But they’re wrong. I know he didn’t.”

“Is the police case still open?” Angel asked.

“No, they closed it this morning.”

Angel knew it had to be that horrific local crime that had happened just over a week ago. It had hit close to home for her, two little kids killed while they slept in their beds. It had been all over the news. “Okay, here’s what will happen next. I’ll refer this to the head of the agency, and he’ll determine if we’ll discuss it further with you. Either way, I’ll be back in touch with you within twenty-four hours.”

Becca was left feeling disappointed when the call was terminated. She wasn’t sure what she expected, but that hadn’t been it.

At the Shepherd Security Building, Angel walked down the hall to Shepherd’s office. She knew he was in between calls and meetings. She rapped once loudly on the door and then opened it and went in. “Morning, boss,” she greeted.

Shepherd stood at his desk. “Good morning, Angel. What do you have for me?”

“I got the end of the month spreadsheets done and opened April’s. Did you get outside this morning? It’s beautiful out.”

Shepherd’s lips pulled into a grin. “Yes, Diana made me go for a walk outside with her this morning.”

Angel smiled and nodded. She adored Shepherd’s wife. “We just received a call on the public agency line from a Rebecca Elliot, referred to us by Detective Davis from the Schaumburg Police Department.” She knew that Shepherd would remember the name. She didn’t have to remind him that he’d been the detective who investigated Shereese’s murder in their building a few years earlier.

“Really?” Shepherd asked. It was very rare they’d get a case referred to them by local law enforcement.

“The triple murder-suicide last week. Our caller said the police closed the case this morning, but she believes they got it wrong. She’s related to the family.”

“Can you get her info to the Digital Team and have them check her and the dead family out? Then I’ll decide if we’re going to talk to her.”

“Will do,” Angel said.

“Anything else?”

Angel went over the last few items she had for him and then left him to his next call.

When Shepherd received the report from the Digital Team on the Rebecca Elliot case later that day, he discussed it with Cooper, his number two in charge at the agency, and with Jackson and Garcia, who shared the number three role.

“I would like to at least bring the Elliot woman in and talk to her about the case,” Shepherd said. “I’m not saying we’re taking the case. That will be for you to decide, Jackson.”

“I’d like to talk to the detective before that meeting takes place,” Jackson said.

Shepherd nodded. “Garcia, I see on the report that Brielle was lead. Can she handle this case?” He knew this one would be rough, two dead kids. Brielle was not only a member of the Digital Team, but she was the wife of one of the Operators. The couple had a nine-month-old son.

“Yes, she can handle it. I think she’d be pretty pissed if you took her off it at this point,” Garcia answered.

“Okay. I want her in the meeting with the client. And pull in Tessman. He needs a case such as this. He’s a good Operator, but needs to develop his soft skills,” Shepherd said. “If we accept this case, we’ll staff the three of you, for starters. Let me know if you need more assets.”

Jackson nodded.

“The PGP Install Team gets back into town tonight. Let’s pull Burke from the install team. He can take Tessman’s place on the CIA Referral Case,” Cooper said.

Shepherd nodded his approval. They wrapped up the remainder of the agenda items and the meeting ended.

Becca Elliot had programmed the phone number to Shepherd Security into her phone, so the name displayed when the incoming call came just twenty hours after her initial

call to them. She said a short prayer that the call was to say they would accept her case before she answered the call. “Hello, this is Rebecca Elliot.”

“Hi, Becca, this is Angel from Shepherd Security.”

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“Hi, Angel.” She waited, hoping, but also mentally preparing herself for the possible decline.

“We’d like to schedule a time for you to come in and speak to our investigators for us to determine if this is a case we’d take on,” Angel said.

That disappointed her. She thought if they wanted her to come in, that would mean they were taking her case. She expressed this thought to Angel.

“I’d say the chances are good,” Angel said. “Your case made it past the initial screening.”

“Okay, I hope you’re right. I,” she started but then paused. She knew it wasn’t right to plead her case to who she assumed was a receptionist. “I’m sorry. I’m sure there is a process. And I’m sure your agency doesn’t take every case that knocks on your door.”

Angel heard the desperation in her voice. “Can you come in this afternoon?”

“Yes, I can. Thank you.”

The appointment was set for two-thirty. Becca arrived at the ten-story building located on the ring road around the large Woodfield Mall at just past two. She had spent many hours shopping and eating at the many restaurants over the years and never knew a private detective agency was here.

She perused the building directory and was surprised how few businesses were in the

building. There was a veterinarian, jeweler, coffee shop, and dentist on the ground floor. That seemed an odd mix. There were quite a few medical-type practitioners throughout the building, including a large chiropractic office that took up most of the second floor, by the looks of it. There was a beauty shop and several nondescript LLCs. Several floors appeared vacant, or at least no tenant was listed on the directory.

After several minutes of killing time, she rode the elevator to the fifth floor, where Shepherd Security was listed as the sole occupant of the floor. She found herself standing in front of a heavy black door with gold lettering. The door was on the wall to the left of the elevator.

Tessman still had no clue why he'd been slotted for this case. He'd never been staffed on a private security case before. That was normally Alpha or Bravo Team's gig. But here he sat at Shepherd's conference table with Shepherd, Cooper, Jackson, and Brielle, discussing a triple murder-suicide case.

Brielle had done the initial research into the deceased and the potential client. If they accepted the case, she'd be dedicated to it. She'd even meet with the potential client immediately after this meeting, as would he. He and Jackson would be primary on it. Cooper would just be sitting in on this meeting to help vet the case to make the decision if the agency was accepting it or not. Cooper and the rest of the team he'd just been pulled from were deploying later that afternoon on the CIA Referral Case. Had this case not popped up, he'd be deploying on it. He would admit he was pissed he'd been pulled from it after nearly two days of prep work.

"Jackson and I spoke with the detective from the Schaumburg Police Department," Shepherd said. "It's not that he disagrees with the findings of the coroner. He just wishes he'd been able to investigate further to satisfy Miss Elliot's concerns, which he admits are valid."

“I don’t get why he couldn’t,” Tessman said.

“Department staffing constraints,” Jackson said. “Right after this horrendous case hit, that politician’s murder happened that still is not solved. He was higher profile.”

“And rigid policies. The coroner determines COD and once the verdict is in, the case is closed,” Shepherd added.

“But Jackson’s right. Senator Henshaw’s murder commanded a higher priority than some suburban family, where all signs pointed to a soccer dad going off the rails,” Cooper chimed in.

“And this case appeared cut and dried on the surface,” Shepherd said. “Detective Davis has five more open cases, including Senator Henshaw’s murder, and no time to dig deeper just to cross his T’s and dot his I’s on this one.”

“Either the husband did it or he didn’t,” Tessman said.

“And that’s what we’re going to take a look at with fresh eyes if we take this case,” Jackson said.

Tessman scanned the electronic file on his tablet, flipping through the content. “The deceased lived in a normal-looking neighborhood. Did any of the neighbors report the gunshots?”

“No,” Jackson answered. “It happened the night of that thunderstorm. There was a lot of thunder and lightning. I’m sure the neighbors just assumed the shots were thunder.”

“Convenient timing,” Tessman remarked. “If the husband did it, it was planned just like we planned Ops to get cover from clouds, rain, or thunder. Was this guy prior

military?”

“No,” Brielle answered. “And the husband had no history of mental illness. There’s been no past police activity at the residence. I combed through their medical insurance claims for the past five years. There are no visits to counselors or therapists to indicate marital problems or depression, and there were no meds taken by either Nicole or Nick DeSoto,” Brielle recapped her findings. “And there were no financial issues either. They have credit scores over eight hundred.”

“So that begs the question as to why this guy would suddenly decide to kill his entire family and then himself,” Jackson said.

“If it’s a case, you’ll try to figure that out,” Shepherd said.

“The police didn’t find a motive, so even if we determine this guy really did it, maybe we can at least determine the why to give our client some closure,” Jackson said.

“Continue with what you found on the deceased, Brielle,” Shepherd said after he’d nodded his approval at Jackson’s comment.

“Both were employed at Well-Life Pharmaceuticals, Mrs. in the marketing department, and Mr. in the scientific division.”

“Does that mean he was a scientist developing drugs?” Tessman asked.

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“His title and division were all I could get, but I believe so as Mr. Nick DeSoto does hold a PHD in chemistry,” Brielle said.

“Do you think their employment has any bearing on what happened?” Jackson asked.

“Right now, everything has bearing,” Shepherd said.

“If we accept this case, you need to look at every aspect of their lives,” Cooper said.

“You meet with the Elliot woman at fourteen-thirty,” Shepherd said. “I’ll expect your decision on whether we should take this case by fifteen-thirty. Cooper and the rest of the team are due to leave for the airfield by sixteen hundred.”

“One note on the potential client, Rebecca Elliot,” Brielle said. “She’s an attorney.”

“Is she also employed at Well-Life Pharmaceuticals?” Tessman asked with a groan.

“No, she works for a firm in Chicago that specializes in trusts, wills, and other estate issues,” Brielle said.

“I would think she set up her sister and brother-in-law’s wills and should know the contents,” Cooper said.

Brielle shrugged. She didn’t have any information about that.

“Find that out too,” Shepherd said. “Also, for this case, no one discloses their federal creds to Miss Elliot. We don’t want questions from her. As far as she knows, we are a

private security firm. That's all Detective Davis disclosed to her."

"I'm thinking we should just decline this case outright," Cooper said.

"We've already set up the initial meeting. We decide after talking with her. If you decide we should decline this case, I'll want justification for that as well as if you decide to accept it," Shepherd said.

They all came to their feet, knowing they'd just been dismissed. Having a good fifteen minutes to kill before the client meeting, Tessman jogged up the stairs to his office. Wilson and Burke, his two Charlie Team members who were deploying on the next CIA Referral Case, were in Burke's office on the seventh floor. He wanted to catch them before the client meeting.

"Hey," he greeted them, coming into Burke's office. Burke had been staffed in his place when he'd been pulled for the Elliot Case. "Did you get enough time to review that case file, Burke?"

"I'll review it while we're en route," Burke said. "I'm sorry you were pulled from this one. I know you had put in a lot of time on it already."

Tessman's eyes shifted to Wilson. "It all pays the same," he said, borrowing Wilson's favorite phrase.

"I'd say Tessman caught a good one to be staffed on," Wilson said. "I wish I'd been slotted for it."

"That's just because it's local and you'd rather be on it so you could be home with Rae and Lilly instead of flying out to Boise today."

Wilson snickered and both Tessman and Burke laughed, but Wilson didn't actually

respond.

“At least he isn’t saying it isn’t like that,” Tessman added, his teasing gaze now fixed on Burke.

Now Wilson laughed. Rich Burke had yet to come clean about his relationship with a woman who had three children Burke was playing daddy to. They were in Virginia, which was where Burke had been spending all his time off the past few months. Whenever Burke was asked or teased about his relationship with the woman, his reply was always ‘it isn’t like that’.

Burke laughed out loud. “Fuck you, Tessman. Wilson gets it. And believe it or not, he was just saying how he would have liked to be assigned to the Elliot case to increase the type of cases he’s considered for.”

“Charlie Team’s time turning screwdrivers on the PGP Project is coming to an end,” Wilson said. “I want a variety of cases I’m assigned to going forward.”

“I thought they all paid the same?” Tessman teased.

“They do, but the private security cases have the potential to keep me closer to home, closer to Rae and Lilly. They also are more likely to not come with drug-dealing scumbags shooting at me,” Wilson said.

“Yeah, I hear you on that one. I think we’ve all had more than our fair share of the DEA Partner Missions, but they’re not going away anytime soon,” Tessman admitted.

“I agree with Taco,” Burke said. “I want a wide range of different types of cases. I heard Shepherd is considering a security contract out at O’Hare investigating and securing international shipments of cargo. I’d like to know what kind of cargo requires armed guards.”

“Who’d you hear that from?” Wilson asked.

“Eddie Winston,” Burke said. Winston was on Bravo Team.

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“Where the fuck would Winston have heard that?” Tessman asked.

“Probably from Shepherd himself, or Flores,” Wilson said.

“With Bravo Team just looking to ride out their time until retirement, for the most part, I don’t doubt that Shepherd is looking for profitable ways to keep them working on reasonably safe missions as well as assignments that are close to home as they have said they want some time in one place for the most part,” Burke said. “I get it. We were doing the same thing they were doing for the last few years; in that we traveled nonstop. I’d say we had it better with the PGP Installs we were doing. At least we didn’t have to put up with entitled assholes like they did, protecting ungrateful and often uncooperative clients.”

“Yeah, and a contract at O’Hare will allow them to rotate in those with families too,” Tessman said. “Like you, Wilson.” His gaze shifted to Burke. “And maybe you, if you ever classify your relationship and move Donna and her kids here.”

“Really, it’s not like that,” Burke said. “And she has no intention of moving here.”

Tessman just shook his head. Burke’s relationship was none of his business, which was good because he didn’t understand it. “Anyway, we meet with the potential client soon and get this. She’s an attorney. Cooper thinks we should decline the case outright.”

“Because she’s an attorney?” Wilson asked.

Tessman shrugged. “He didn’t voice his thoughts until Brielle said she was an

attorney.”

Wilson whistled. “I take back that I wish that case was mine. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Tessman said with sarcasm. “Anyway, good luck with the Op. I have a feeling this case will be a no go and I’ll be heading to up-state New York to join the PGP Team later today.”

“It all pays the same,” Wilson said.

Tessman snickered and then left.

Delta

Tessman met Cooper, Jackson, and Brielle in the conference room on the fifth floor. Cooper directed him to sit beside Jackson on the far side of the table. Brielle was on Jackson’s other side.

Then Cooper sat beside Tessman. “I want you two in the center, as you are running primary on the case,” Cooper said. “Angel will bring her in when she arrives.”

They didn’t have to wait long. Just a few minutes later, Angel appeared at the door and then, stepping back, she ushered the client in. “Miss Becca Elliot,” Angel said.

Tessman watched her enter. Becca Elliot appeared to be in her mid-thirties. She was a beautiful woman with chestnut brown shoulder-length hair, vibrant green eyes, a flawless complexion, and a confident manner. She wore blue jeans and a dark green V-neck girly T-shirt over her slim but strong-looking frame. He could just as easily envision her wearing a business suit and he believed she would look as comfortable in it as she did in blue jeans.

The four of them stood, and they each introduced themselves.

“Please, have a seat,” Jackson invited.

They sat after she did.

“Miss Elliot,” Jackson began.

“Please, it’s just Becca,” she said.

“To recap a few items, and please let me know if I have any of it incorrect,” Brielle said, “your sister and her entire family were found by a UPS driver making a delivery.”

“Yes, he looked through the side window on the front door and saw my brother-in-law lying in the hallway when no one answered the door when he rang. He called the police.”

“Neither your brother-in-law nor your sister had a FOID card or were known to you to own any weapons,” Brielle continued.

“Correct,” Becca said.

“I guess the best place to start is why you don’t think the police’s determination is correct,” Jackson said.

“There are several reasons. I know you’re not going to accept this at face value, but the fact is, my brother-in-law, Nick, was not a gun guy. He’d never fired one in his life. He was a science nerd. If he was going to kill his family and himself, it would have been with some chemical agent, a drug, or something else nonviolent. And I was very close to my sister. She told me everything. They had no problems beyond just

the normal married life stuff like he left the toilet seat up or didn't take the trash out when she asked him. Nick was sane, he wasn't some crazy lunatic with bi-polar or depression. No one was a powder keg just waiting to explode in that house. They were a normal, happy family. I'm telling you; he didn't do this."

"If he didn't, then who did?" Cooper asked.

"I don't know. That's what I'm hiring your agency to find out."

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Tessman was impressed by how calm she was. He could tell she wanted to scream that answer at them, but she didn't. She was presenting a calm and rational case, the lawyer in her, no doubt.

"If that's true, someone made it look like murder-suicide," Jackson said.

"Yes," Becca agreed. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Recapping the police report, we obtained it from Detective Davis," Jackson began, "it was noted that all the doors were locked. There was no forced entry. Nothing was disturbed in the house indicating a struggle, and nothing was stolen."

"That we know of," she interrupted.

"You haven't been inside the house yet?" Tessman asked, knowing from the police report that she hadn't.

"No," she said, glancing away and for the first time not looking so collected. "The police just released the scene yesterday, but I'm not ready to see it yet. Detective Davis described the condition of the house to me, the blood, and the cleaning that will be needed. I've contacted a crime scene clean-up company he recommended. They can't come out until the day after tomorrow."

"But Detective Davis went over the contents with you, and it appeared nothing was taken," Tessman said.

"Yes. My sister had some jewelry that wasn't cheap. It's still in her jewelry box on

her dresser. They always kept several hundred dollars in one of the kitchen cabinets. It was still there. All the electronics in the house, including their phones and laptops, were there too.”

“Is that all?” Jackson asked. “Are those your reasons why you don’t believe your brother-in-law did it?”

Becca tried to hide her reaction to that question. She was undecided how far she could trust them. But this was her only opportunity to hire them. “Is there some sort of client privilege relationship you extend that would keep anything I tell you between us?”

“Between us?” Jackson repeated. “Yes, anything you share would be kept between us. Who would you not want to know what you’re about to tell us?”

Becca knew these people were her only hope. “The police. I have some information that was leaked to me from a member of the forensic crew at the state police lab that I wouldn’t want to get back to the police. My source would get in trouble for telling me.”

Tessman waited for Cooper or Jackson to comment on that statement. He focused on Becca Elliot and still saw no hint of insecurity coming from her.

“What were you told?” Jackson finally asked.

“It’s the GSR pattern that was present on Nick,” she said. “It isn’t right. There was GSR on his right hand and shoulder, and down his right arm that is consistent with holding a gun to your head when you fire.” She held her hand up, her index finger to her own temple in the position one would expect in a suicide. “But there was very little present on the front of his shirt, and none on his left hand or arm, as you’d expect when a person holds a gun out in front of themselves and shoots someone

else.” She moved her arms out in front of herself as though she were holding a gun out to shoot. “And certainly not the quantity that should be present if he’d shot three people.”

Tessman stared at her while he processed this information. She still looked confident.

“And there’s more. They only lifted a couple of sets of Nick’s prints from the outside of the gun. His prints were not on the magazine or any of the remaining bullets in the magazine. So, how’d he load it? Why would he wear gloves? And there were no other prints on the gun but Nick’s. Unless he or someone else wiped the gun to eliminate the prints, there’d be others. It was clean. Too clean.”

“And you said this information came to you from a member of the State Police Forensic Services Department?” Jackson said.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“We’ll need to verify this information,” Jackson said.

“I won’t give you the name unless I get in writing that you won’t divulge it to anyone else, especially the police.”

“Duly noted,” Cooper said. He passed a pad of paper and a pen across the table to her. “The name, please. And you have my word we won’t divulge your source.”

Becca wrote the name down and provided the phone number. “I want your assurance in writing, please.”

Cooper scribbled out a note guaranteeing the source would remain confidential, and he handed it to her.

“Any other reasons you don’t believe the determination was correct?” Jackson asked.

Tessman was sure what she’d said was enough to justify them taking the case. The GSR and fingerprint information were more than enough, as far as he was concerned.

“Motive,” she said. “As I said, there were no marital problems, no money problems, no mental illness. There was no reason at all he would have done this. And I also restate the fact that it wasn’t in his comfort to handle a gun, and my God, a nine-millimeter? Pardon me stating it so bluntly, but isn’t that overkill? A nine-millimeter is powerful. The thought of handling that gun would have scared the crap out of Nick.”

“But you know of no reason anyone else would want to kill anyone in that house?” Cooper asked.

Becca’s gaze swept over all four of them. She’d been sizing each of them up since she’d entered the room. The young woman with the southern accent, Brielle, believed her. She could tell by how Brielle empathetically nodded whenever she said anything. Jackson was at least ten years Brielle’s senior, the man who sat in a middle power position, but wasn’t the determining voice as attentive, and she could see how he processed each answer she gave. Tessman, the younger man beside him, also in a middle power position who she judged to be a junior member of the team not only due to his age but also because he didn’t speak as much, believed her. And Cooper, the man on the end. He was the decision maker on the team. His manner broadcast his position.

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“No, I know of no other motive anyone would have for wanting to kill any of them,” Becca answered firmly. “They were just a normal suburban family.”

“Do you know the contents of their wills? And who is the executor?” Jackson asked.

“Yes, I prepared their trust, and I am the executor of that trust,” Becca replied. “In the event of either Nick or Nicole’s death’s the other inherited everything. If both of them were to die together, everything would go to their girls, with me given full custody of them.” Becca paused and took a deep breath, closing her eyes. With them still closed, she continued. “In the event all four went together, their entire estate goes to me.”

“Were there no other family members?” Jackson asked.

Becca opened her eyes. “Nick was estranged from his entire family. He didn’t even want me to try to find them should something happen to them. He doesn’t even know if any are alive. His parents divorced when he was young, and he had little contact with his father. His mother never remarried but had multiple boyfriends who lived with them over the years. He had a brother and a sister, both of which are drug addicts who stole from them the last time he allowed them into his life after he and Nicole got married. And on our side of the family, it was just Nicole and me. Our parents died in a small plane crash last year.”

“I’m sorry,” Tessman said.

“We’re going to need the names and any information on your brother-in-law’s estranged relatives,” Jackson said.

“Sure. But I don’t know much more than their names and approximate ages,” she said.

“Last known locations will help too,” Brielle added.

Becca nodded.

“Last topic,” Jackson said. “They were both employed at Well-Life Pharmaceuticals.”

“Yes. Nicole was in the marketing department, and Nick was a chemist.”

“What was he working on?” Tessman asked.

Becca shrugged and shook her head. “It was all hush-hush, proprietary stuff. He wasn’t allowed to talk about the latest cure he was working on. He developed drugs. He was one of their top chemists. I doubt there’s much in his home office about his work because I don’t think he was supposed to remove anything from work of consequence, but you’re free to look.”

Jackson nodded. “If we accept the case, we will want access to the house.”

She took the key ring with the key to her sister’s house from her purse and placed it in the middle of the table.

Cooper stood and stepped to the door. “Can we ask you to please wait in the lobby while we discuss your case?”

Becca stood. At the door, she turned back to the three members who still sat at the table. Cooper had already stepped into the hallway, anticipating that she’d follow. “Thank you for hearing me out. Please know that if you decline this case, I will keep

asking private investigators to take it on until someone does.” Then she stepped through the door and followed Cooper to the door into the waiting room. Angel, the black-haired receptionist, was not at her desk. She sat down and waited.

Cooper re-entered the conference room a few moments after he’d shown Becca Elliot out. “If she’s right about the GSR and fingerprints, I’m not sure how the coroner would have made the ruling.”

“Toxicology isn’t even back yet,” Jackson added. “I’d sure like to know if there were any drugs in anyone’s system.”

“I believe her,” Brielle said. “And I think the cops are dropping the ball on this.”

Cooper’s gaze went to Tessman.

“This isn’t cut and dried, as Detective Davis stated. And as Jackson said during our meeting with Shepherd, if the brother-in-law did do it, which I don’t think he did, I’d like to be able to find the reason to give that woman closure.”

“Why don’t you think he did it?” Cooper asked.

“Most people who buy a gun are going to at least test fire it before they use it to commit a triple homicide and use it for their suicide. If he did, he would have been scared off by the kick and loud bang if he wasn’t a gun guy, as she stated,” Tessman said. “And there would have been fingerprints all over that gun and its magazine.”

“Agreed,” Cooper said. “I’ll tell Shepherd we have a case. I’ll show her back in and you three can take it from here.”

“Good luck on your Op,” Jackson said.

“Becca, we’re ready for you,” Cooper said after he’d opened the door to the waiting room.

Becca wasn’t sure what it meant that they’d already decided, or at least she assumed they’d decided if they were going to accept her case. She followed Cooper back into the suite. As the two of them stepped back towards the conference room, Angel approached from down the hall. She smiled as they passed in the hallway, putting Becca somewhat at ease.

She entered the conference room and retook her seat. She heard the door close and then, glancing around the room, realized Cooper had not rejoined them.

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“Becca, we all agree there is more to look into. We accept your case,” Jackson said.

Then he laid out the fee structure the agency charged. It honestly didn’t matter to her. Finding the truth was what mattered, not what it cost. She didn’t care if Nicole and Nick’s entire estate went to finding out who killed them.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“We’ll do a deep dive into them, bank accounts, social media presence from their own devices once you get them back from the police, which should be soon. Tessman and I will go to their house this afternoon. We’ll talk to other people who knew them, neighbors, coworkers, friends. Give us a couple of days and we’ll be back in touch,” Jackson said.

“I didn’t ask when I’d get their phones and computers back,” Becca admitted.

“We’ll contact Detective Davis and let him know we accepted the case and see if we can get them,” Jackson said.

“There are a lot of papers they took from the office and the safe in the office that I need to settle their estate,” Becca said.

“We can ask Detective Davis about those, too,” Tessman said.

“Did Davis say when the bodies would be released and what are your plans for them?” Jackson asked.

This question caused Becca's breath to catch in her chest. "Yes, I have to contact the funeral home back about that. They told me to notify them when the coroner has released them."

"Trust me, I'm not making any judgements of you, but you seem to be handling this very well. I'd be a blubbering mess if my sister and her family were murdered," Brielle said.

"I'm past tears," Becca said. "I cried my eyes out; not sure I have any tears left. I think I've already gone through the stages of grief a couple of times, and I'm stuck on anger. I'm mad at the police for closing this case and ruling as they did. I'm angry, no make that pissed off that this happened to them. I have nightmares about what happened in that house."

Brielle reached across the table and laid her hand on top of Becca's. "I hope we can help make those nightmares go away. I get it. I have a sister I am very close to."

Becca appreciated her empathy. "Thank you." Then her gaze swept across the faces of the two men.

"Have you spoken to anyone since they were killed? A mental health professional?" Brielle asked.

"A shrink? No," Becca said.

"There's a good one in this building. Dr. Joe Lassiter. If you decide to reach out to him, you can tell him that we're handling your case," Brielle said.

"Thank you, I'll think about it."

Jackson and Tessman drove over to the DeSoto residence. They let themselves in with the key Becca had given them. Even though the bodies had been removed, the unmistakable smell of death lingered in the air. They both took a cursory glance at the front door locking mechanism, doorjamb, and door knob. As indicated in the police report, there was no damage or marks to any of them. No one forced their way in through the front.

The footfalls of their boots on the ceramic tiled entry were the only sound in the house. It was eerily silent. Tessman gazed in the direction of the hallway, where he knew from the report that Nick DeSoto's body was found, still within view of the front door side window. To the right of the entry was the open space of the formal living room. Its windows had light filtering honeycomb blinds. Even though they were lowered, the room was very bright.

They quickly came across the bloodstained section of hardwood flooring where Nick DeSoto had reportedly killed himself. The living room wall behind that area held a large splatter of blood. Tessman took a step around the dried blood on the floor and peered in all directions. From that spot, not only could the front door be seen but also the short hallway to the left that led to the laundry room, which he clearly saw, the garage past it, he assumed, and in front of him the hallway spilled into the kitchen. He saw the island with the remainder of the kitchen behind it, and he knew between the two is where Nicole DeSoto's body was found.

Tessman turned back around to face Jackson. "Why here? Why kill himself in this spot? If the police are right, he went upstairs and killed his kids first." He pointed at the staircase, which was on the left side, behind the front door upon entering. "Then he went into the kitchen and killed his wife. Why did he walk back out here and kill himself here? Why not in the kitchen with his wife? Or seated in a chair someplace?"

"Or his office, his own bedroom, or in the bedroom of one of his kids?" Jackson added, nodding his head in agreement.

“Hell, why not in his car in the garage?” Tessman posed. “Why this spot? The only reason I can see is that it is visible from the window beside the front door, so he’d be seen. Had the UPS driver not seen him, it could have been days before they were discovered.”

“That’s a little too thought out for a man who, out of the blue, killed his entire family and then himself,” Jackson said.

The two men proceeded into the kitchen. The blinds on the back of the house were all open and the entire space was bathed in sunlight. Tessman gave the bloodstained ceramic tile, grout, and blood-splattered white cabinets a glance that lay between the island and the kitchen counters where he knew Nicole Desoto died. He bypassed the area and stepped over to the large sliding glass door at the far end of the room. Jackson stopped and was examining the dried bloody mess.

“Nice backyard,” Tessman said, viewing the jungle gym and swings. “I looked at an aerial view and noticed there were no neighbors behind them. This property backs up to a nature preserve. Anyone could have approached from back there and no one would have seen them.” Then he examined the lock and handle on the sliding door. He unlocked it and stepped outside. There, he examined the entire frame. No scratches or dents. Nothing to indicate the door had been jimmied. “This door hasn’t been forced open.”

“There’s blood splatter on the counter. The police forensic unit reported it to support their supposition that Nicole DeSoto ran through the space between the island and the counter and was shot in the back as she fled. Once she was on the ground, she was shot in the head.” His gaze went to the open arched doorway that let into the formal dining room on the far kitchen wall. “She was heading towards the dining room to get away from the gunman. She’d seen him coming,” deduced Jackson.

“That’s some good shooting for someone who’s never fired a gun before, hit a

moving target and then have the aim and balls to take the kill shot to the head.”

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“Steady hand, not nervous, that’s for sure,” Jackson surmised. “I don’t recall the police report stating how many rounds were left in the magazine.”

“We’ll have to look into that. It didn’t say,” Tessman answered. “If there weren’t at least five rounds missing from the magazine, I’m sure that would have been noted. I’d hope so at least.”

Tessman walked into the family room area adjacent to the kitchen and eating area. He looked around. Nothing seemed out of place or out of the ordinary. Becca would be the one to determine that, though. While he glanced over family pictures of happy times for the family that were hung on the walls, Jackson wandered into the dining room.

Tessman studied the kids’ toys against the wall and was reminded that was what Wilson’s living room now looked like; a child’s play area set up in the main TV room. There were no papers or mail lying around, no clutter on the tables beyond coasters and a couple of candles.

He stepped back to the kitchen. On the edge of the counter, he found a stack of mail. It was all open and appeared to have been gone through. He wondered if the police had done that or the adults who lived here. He flipped through the stack. It was all normal, routine stuff, utility bills, junk mail flyers, a doctor’s bill from Schaumburg Pediatric with a co-pay of twenty-five dollars due from a visit for Riley DeSoto the month before.

“Let’s find Nick’s office and take a look,” Jackson said, reentering the room. “Nothing in the dining room or living room look disturbed.”

“Family room and kitchen eating areas as well are undisturbed.”

“One thing is bothering me,” Jackson said. “This whole house is too clean and uncluttered. Did people with two kids really live here?” He pointed to the family room area. “Angel is amazing, but our house is never that picked up. It’s impossible with two kids to have every toy put in its place. I even walked into the powder room. There wasn’t a water splash mark anywhere on the counter or mirror.”

“Maybe it had just been cleaned,” Tessman said. “We’ll have to ask Becca if they had a weekly cleaner come in.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Jackson said. “Let’s check the basement next. The down staircase is off the entry.”

Jackson led the way. Tucked around the corner near the laundry room was a staircase leading down. They turned the wall switch on, illuminating lights on the stairs, and they could see beyond where the last stair ended on the basement floor. The basement was unfinished. On one half of the large open space, shelves lined the wall and boxes and totes lined the shelves. On the other side, there were ride-on toys and other play equipment that looked like they were meant for outside but had been brought inside to play with during the winter. Past them was a kitchen table and chairs with paint brushes and large sheets of paper with a shelf full of craft supplies beyond it.

The two men checked the two escape windows for any hint that either had been forced open. Neither found anything.

They returned to the main level and then climbed the stairs to the second floor. Tessman didn’t even have a kid, and he was dreading seeing the two bedrooms the kids were killed in. The first room they came to at the top of the stairs was the parent’s bedroom. They took a look around it and the attached bathroom. Besides being very clean and uncluttered, they found nothing concerning.

Tessman rifled through the closet that held male clothing. He remembered that on the police report of items removed from the home, there was no mention of anything gun related. No gun box, no ammo, no cleaning supplies, no hearing protection. Even as he searched, he knew it was probably foolish. The police would have looked everywhere.

“What are you looking for?” Jackson asked.

“I know the police searched thoroughly and there was no mention, but I’m just looking for anything gun-related. Unless he bought the gun on the street, it would have come in a storage box.”

“The police searched everywhere, inside and out,” Jackson said. “I’m surprised they didn’t find a box of ammo anywhere. Where’d he load the weapon and where’s the rest of the ammo from the box?”

The room next to the parent’s bedroom was the office. There was a large safe in the closet with the door open. Detective Davis said they’d obtained the combination from Becca. All contents had been removed by the police. It was empty. There was a monitor on the desktop with the docking station, keyboard, and mouse in place, waiting for the laptop to tap into. It was gone, had been confiscated by the police.

Hanging above the desk was a large collage frame with many family pictures of what looked like a Disney vacation. Becca was in many of the pictures. Tessman couldn’t help but look at her beautiful, happy smile while she interacted with her sister and the kids. He became angry on her behalf that she’d been robbed of her family and would never enjoy more of those times.

A thorough search of the office revealed no clues to them. They moved on to the last two bedrooms, which they both dreaded. They didn’t spend much time in either room knowing the police had thoroughly searched them. They just viewed the beds with the

bloodstains and blood-splatter on the walls and bedding, and then they did a quick look at the hall bathroom, which was also clean.

“There’s not even a glob of toothpaste in the sink,” Jackson said. “Those kids didn’t brush their teeth before bed, or the sink was cleaned after. Either that or Sammy is just a hell of a lot messier than any other kid. He can’t brush his teeth without leaving a trace of the toothpaste in the bowl of the sink.”

“Are you saying you think someone cleaned this place up after the murders?” Tessman asked.

“We’ll have to ask Becca if Nick was OCD. Maybe he was some kind of neat freak who wouldn’t want the police or anyone else in here with it less than immaculate,” Jackson said.

“So, he had the presence of mind to kill his two kids and then his wife, and then cleanup the entire place, except for the blood, before he shot himself in the foyer? I’m not buying it,” Tessman said.

“Let’s go back downstairs. I want to take a look at the backyard and at the edge of the forest preserve,” Jackson said.

At the top of the stairs, Tessman hit the light switch. The light over the stairs didn’t come on. “Burned out?” he questioned. “We’ll have to ask Becca if it was out the last time she was here.”

Once in the backyard, they both noted it was not as immaculate as the house. Of course, spring was only just upon them and most people had just begun the winter cleanup around their yards. There was a jungle gym climbing fort with swings that looked like it had been used recently.

At what they assumed to be the property line between the house and the forest preserve, there were several depressions in the ground that looked like footprints. Both men acknowledged the indentations could have been made by the police, as it was assumed they too would have checked this area out. Tessman wandered into the taller grass and shrubs at the boundary, which stretched for about ten feet before the tree line. He found nothing notable. Just within the tree line, there was trampled tall grass behind a thick tree trunk. There, he also found several cigarette butts. They looked fresh, well, smoked and left there within the last few weeks. They hadn't been buried under snow. They collected the butts in a baggie. They would talk to Detective Davis about them.

Echo

Tessman hit a Starbucks drive-thru for coffee on his way to meet Jackson and the client at the crime scene. After being inside the day before and seeing the remnants of the death that took place, he didn't blame the client for not wanting to enter yet. Tessman had seen a lot of death, and had helped facilitate it. In combat, it was one thing. In a family home while children slept in their beds, it was another thing altogether. One of the victims had been the same age as Wilson's new daughter, Lilly. That thought had gnawed at him since he'd left the crime scene house the day before. His sleep hadn't been restful.

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Becca arrived in front of her sister's home fifteen minutes early for her meeting with the two private investigators. She sat on the hood of her car, waiting for them to arrive. It was another unseasonably warm, sunny day. The sun beating down on her felt good, especially on her bare arms. She wore blue jeans and a short-sleeved girly T-shirt, what had become her favorite outfit. She may never go back to wearing suits.

For the first time since she was notified of their deaths, she felt hopeful, hopeful that what really happened in that house may be discovered. When the police were investigating, it hadn't occurred to her that they'd close the case declaring that Nick had done it, so she just felt devastated. But knowing in her heart that he did not, she had to set the record straight as well as find who really did it and make sure they were punished. Her sister and her family deserved some kind of justice.

A car pulled up and parked in front of hers, leaving a six-foot gap between them. The younger of the two investigators got out of the car. He walked up to her. She noticed he held a Starbucks cup.

"Good morning," Tessman said to her.

"Morning," she replied. She hadn't said good since the murders. "Tessman, right?"

"Yes," he said.

"You got a first name?"

"Carter," he said. "But not many people call me by my first name."

“Is that a military thing?” she asked. “You and Jackson, as well as most of the men in your organization are ex-military, aren’t you?”

Tessman was more than a little surprised by her question. He was aware of his lips tipping into a smirk-half smile, which he knew was his tell. That was why he didn’t play poker. “Why would you say that?”

She saw a little smile curve his lips. It was cute. “Detective Davis mentioned it.”

“Yes, to answer your question. It’s a military thing.” He took a sip from his coffee cup.

“Which branch were you in?” she asked.

“Oorah! Marine Corps, ma’am,” he said with a grin.

She couldn’t picture this baby-faced man as a Marine. She couldn’t stop the smile that formed, either. It was the first time she’d smiled in weeks. “How long were you in?”

He couldn’t tell her that technically, he was still in. “All of my adult life and I’m thirty-five.” He saw Jackson pull up and park across the street. “And here’s Jackson now.” He was glad. His arrival stopped any further conversation.

Becca couldn’t believe he was thirty-five years old. He didn’t look old enough to buy a beer in a bar.

“Thank you for meeting us here,” Jackson said to Becca as he approached her car. She still sat on the hood.

“You’re welcome, but I’m still not sure I’m ready to go inside.”

“We get it,” Tessman said. “The blood stains are emotionally hard to see.”

“But it’s important we ask a few questions, and you have to see exactly what we mean,” Jackson added.

She eased off her car and stood in front of them. “One request. I don’t want to go into the girls’ rooms.”

Jackson laid his hand on her shoulder and nodded. He understood.

They crossed the street and walked up the sidewalk to the front door. Her heart pounded in her chest. For the first time, standing in the alcove under the front porch, Becca realized how secluded the front door was from the street. She watched Jackson unlock the door with her set of keys. He went in first. Tessman motioned her in and then followed.

Right in front of her was the first blood stain, which she knew would be there. It was where Nick died. And there was an odd smell in the house. She couldn’t place it. She assumed it was due to the blood.

“Everything is very orderly,” Jackson’s voice invaded her thoughts. “Was this normal for this room to be so immaculate?”

Becca’s eyes scanned the living room and portion of the dining room she could see from the entry. “Yes. Nicole was never one for clutter. She had no collections, no chachkas sitting around collecting dust.”

“And there were never the kids’ toys in this room?” Jackson asked.

“No, this was the one room they didn’t play in.”

“Let’s go through to the kitchen,” Jackson said.

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“Look to the left as we enter and walk all the way through,” Tessman said. “That way you won’t,” he began.

“I know,” she interrupted him. The police had told her the exact locations of each body in the house. She knew she sounded harsh. “And thank you,” she added with a softer tone.

“It’s okay,” Tessman said with a nod. “We’ve got you.”

She blew out a breath and then stepped around the blood in the middle of the walkway. She strode quickly into the kitchen, making sure her eyes focused on the wall to the left. Once she stood by the sliding glass door, gazing out at the backyard, did she breathe.

“The mess is below counter level,” Tessman said quietly. He stood beside her.

“Thank you,” she said, turning her head to view him. She appreciated that he understood.

“Was this room usually so immaculate?” Jackson asked. He stood in the middle of the family room.

“On a school night? Unlikely. It would be partially picked up, but it wouldn’t be this clean,” Becca said.

“Did your sister make sure the kids brushed their teeth before bed every night?”

Becca couldn't understand why that would be important. "Yes, she was a stickler about their bedtime routine. Why?"

"No one brushed their teeth in the sinks after they were cleaned," Jackson said. "Either that or my son is the only slob out there. He can't brush his without leaving a trace of toothpaste and splattered water." He flashed her a grin.

"So, what does that all mean?" Becca asked.

"I wish I knew," Jackson said.

"To me, it means someone cleaned this place up after the kids were in bed," Tessman said. "Did either your sister or brother-in-law clean when they were stressed or angry?"

"For that matter, was anyone OCD about messes?" Jackson added.

"No to both questions. Of the two of them, Nicole did most of the cleaning, but on a weeknight after the kids were in bed she'd be looking to have a glass of wine and wind down, not clean. It was a family joke that Nick didn't even see the messes in the house or yard."

"Did either secretly smoke cigarettes?" Tessman then asked.

"No," Becca insisted. "It feels like you're asking me questions about another family."

"The office upstairs was just as tidy as the rest of the house," Tessman said.

Becca shook her head. "No, the desktop was always littered with papers. Nick mostly used the office, and he was not a tidy person." She thought for a moment. "Could the police have tidied up after they searched?"

“Unlikely,” both Tessman and Jackson said together.

“But we can double check that with Detective Davis,” Tessman added.

“When were you over last?” Jackson asked.

“The Sunday before they died. We had dinner, and I stayed long enough to help tuck the girls in bed.” A sudden wave of sadness hit her. She never would have guessed that night would have been the last time she saw them. Her eyes filled with tears. She took a moment to push the sadness down, to tuck it away. She didn’t want to cry. She’d rather be angry. Anger was productive. Sadness, she just wallowed in. She swept a few tears from her cheeks. “Sorry.”

“It’s completely understandable. Please don’t apologize,” Tessman said.

“You have the crime scene cleanup crew coming tomorrow, right?” Jackson asked.

“Yes, is that okay? You don’t need it in its current state longer, do you?”

“No. The police were all over this place. We knew it was unlikely we’d find anything they missed, but we wanted to see it for ourselves,” Jackson said. “Here, we’ll return your keys.” He handed her set of keys to the house back to her. He nodded towards the front of the house. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“I’ll go ahead of you and close the kids’ bedroom doors,” Tessman offered.

“Thank you,” Becca said, truly appreciative that she wouldn’t get even an accidental glance within either room.

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She again averted her gaze as they passed through the kitchen. She gave the spot where Nick died a wide berth and then forced herself to climb the stairs. They went first to the office. Jackson and Tessman were correct. The room was clean and tidy, too much so. Though she did think that it was possible the police took every paper that was on the desk to go through. That would account for Nick's stacks of papers no longer being there.

"There were a dozen stacks of paper on this desk," Becca said after looking the desk over. She opened and closed all the desk drawers. They were all empty. "Do you think the police took everything from the desk?"

"It's possible," Tessman said. "We'll add that to our list of questions for Detective Davis. Now that they've closed their case, they should be returning anything taken from the home to you. We'll find out when and if it's okay with you, we'll see if we can take a look at it first."

"That's fine." Becca knew settling their estate was going to be a lot of work. She needed everything back that was in this office to make that easier for her. But she had hired these men, and she knew they had to see everything. "But I would ask you go through it as fast as you can, please."

"Of course," Tessman said.

Becca took a look at the rest of the office. The safe in the closet stood open and emptied of its contents. She'd provided the combination for it to Detective Davis. He'd given her a list of the items removed from it. It looked accurate to her.

Next, they went to the master bedroom. There were many footprints in the high-pile carpet that had otherwise been freshly vacuumed, Becca noticed. She pointed it out to the two men.

“We noticed that when we were in here yesterday,” Tessman said.

Becca shook her head. “This is all wrong. It wasn’t like this that last night I was in the house. This carpet should not have been vacuumed recently. Nicole rarely vacuumed up here. And their housecleaner only came once a month, on the first Tuesday, which was two weeks before they died.”

“Did the housekeeper have a key?” Tessman asked, knowing the police had already talked to the housekeeper.

“No, she let herself in with the garage code while they were at work. Nick and Nicole had an app on their phones that alerted them when the garage door opened and closed. Do you need to speak with her?”

“Maybe. We know that the police already did,” Tessman said.

They all stepped back into the hallway, intending to return to the first floor.

“Was this light over the stairs burned out when you were here last?” Jackson asked her, his hand flicking the switch on and off with no results.

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “The police didn’t mention anything about it.”

Tessman knew it was because the police rarely ran operations where they’d knock out all the lighting in the area to help conceal their movements, which was standard for SpecOps teams. He now understood that the experience they had given them a different perspective, which could help in cases like this.

His gaze caught Jackson's, and the two men had a silent moment of acknowledging the same thought with a slight head nod to each other. Neither man would voice the possible meaning of the malfunctioning light to Becca Elliot.

"Just checking," Tessman finally said.

Becca doubted anything they asked was superfluous. She sensed they were highly competent, which made her wonder exactly what they thought had happened to her sister's family.

"What are your plans for the house?" Tessman asked her, breaking in on her thoughts.

She thought it was an odd question. "After I've removed anything valuable and all family pictures and mementos, I plan to donate it to a woman's crisis shelter to be used as emergency housing. I'll leave all the furniture and furnishings in it, even the clothing and toys. Someone can use them."

"That's admirable," Tessman said.

"This is already known as the murder house. I don't think many will be flocking to buy the place."

"You never know. People can be attracted to the macabre," Tessman said.

"Yeah, I guess they can," she agreed.

Jackson motioned her to go down the stairs. They remained in the entry. Becca Elliot's gaze swept between the two men. "What do you think happened here?"

Tessman and Jackson exchanged glances.

“We prefer not to speculate until we’ve reviewed everything,” Jackson said.

“I won’t hold you to any opinion you’ve formed,” she said.

“There are things here that are just off,” Tessman said.

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“Like how clean the house is?” she asked.

Tessman nodded.

“Now what?” she asked.

“We have several more things to check out,” Jackson said. “We’ll be in touch in the next few days.”

Tessman and Jackson walked Becca Elliot out. After she’d driven away, Tessman got into Jackson’s car for the drive to the Illinois State Police Forensic Service Center on West Roosevelt Road in Chicago. They had an appointment with Kai Nguyen, a civilian technician, who was also Becca Elliot’s source. Brielle had already checked her out to confirm her identity. She was who Becca Elliot said she was. She’d been with the State Police Crime Lab for eight years.

Tessman went over Brielle’s report as Jackson drove. “Kai Nguyen and Becca Elliot graduated the same year from Illinois State University in Normal. Becca Elliot graduated with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice before she was accepted to law school. Huh? Makes you wonder why she went into a firm doing estate planning when it looks like criminal law was her original intention.”

Jackson chuckled. “It shows how smart she is. There has to be a lot fewer headaches where she is than if she was with the DA or defending criminals.”

As previously planned, Tessman called Kai Nguyen when they arrived onsite. She exited the building and met them at their car, sliding into the backseat. Kai Nguyen

was a confident young Vietnamese-American woman who had demanded confidentiality from them before she agreed to the meeting. “I could get into a lot of trouble by talking to you,” she said after she was in the car. “Becca will file a lawsuit against you personally if the police find out I talked to you.”

“They won’t,” Jackson assured her.

“We appreciate you being willing to talk to us,” Tessman added.

“Like I told Becca, the GSR pattern on Nick DeSoto does not support the conclusion that he shot three people. It supports the suicide, but not the murders.”

“She also mentioned lack of fingerprints on the weapon,” Tessman said.

“It was wiped clean,” Kai said. “We only lifted prints in two areas. On the grip and trigger and along the top, where you’d grasp it to rack the slide.”

“And there were no prints on the magazine or the rounds?” Jackson asked.

“No, none.”

“And the police did not send to you a box with ammo in it to test for prints either?” Tessman asked.

“No. If they were recovered, they would have been sent to the lab for testing. They always are,” Kai said. “I think the coroner screwed up on this one and the detectives assigned let it pass, and not just because Becca and I are friends.” She handed a flashdrive over the seats. “Everything you need is on that. I copied the entire forensic file to it. It’s for your eyes only. I’m only doing this because I believe the real killer is out there.” She opened the door, intending to exit the vehicle.

“One last thing,” Tessman said, stopping her. “Was there any injury to the webbing on Nick DeSoto’s hand between his thumb and index finger?”

“No, there was no slide bite.” She got out of the car and walked quickly back to the building.

Tessman retrieved his tablet from his backpack and plugged the flashdrive in. He reviewed the files and gave Jackson a running narrative of what he saw in the files as Jackson drove back to the northwest suburbs and their headquarters. He also read off the list of what was sent to the lab regarding this case. There was no box of ammo, no gun case, no cleaning kit.

Due to what they found on the flashdrive, Tessman and Jackson made the request for an update meeting with Shepherd. He set the meeting time for thirty minutes after they were due back at HQ. They also contacted Brielle, hoping she had dug into the DeSoto’s accounts. Earlier that morning, Detective Davis had dropped off the phones and laptop computers belonging to Nick and Nicole Desoto. He’d also had a brief conversation with Shepherd, which both Tessman and Jackson were eager to hear about.

They settled around the conference table in Shepherd’s office. Tessman handed the flashdrive to Brielle, who had her laptop plugged into the docking station that would project its contents onto the large television that served as a monitor on the wall.

“Kai Nguyen provided copies of the forensic files and reports. The tox screens aren’t back yet, but everything else is here,” Tessman said.

Brielle inserted the flashdrive and brought up its contents for all to see.

“The key points are there was no spare ammo, no storage box for the gun, or cleaning kit taken from the residence and we didn’t find one either when we searched,” Jackson said.

“And there are no finger prints on the magazine or rounds in the gun. Just two sets of Nick DeSoto’s prints on the grip, trigger and the racking slide. There were exactly five rounds fired,” Tessman added. “The casings were found where you’d expect them to be in the house. No surprises there.”

“I’m finding no trace of the purchase of the weapon or ammo in any of their accounts. And there are no unaccounted-for large cash withdrawals from their bank accounts. I also checked every range in Wisconsin and Illinois. Nick DeSoto did not visit one at any point in the last six months,” Brielle reported.

“What else?” Shepherd asked.

“As Becca Elliot said, the forensic report confirms the GSR patterns and counts don’t support the theory that Nick DeSoto killed anyone besides himself,” Tessman said. “And even that, after reviewing the lack of blood splatter at height where Nick DeSoto supposedly killed himself, the technician even concluded he had to be sitting on the floor when he pulled the trigger.”

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“Maybe he realized what he’d done and was so distraught he collapsed to the floor before killing himself,” Brielle said.

“Shep, there’s a lot at that house that doesn’t make sense, including that location to kill himself, unless Brielle is right that he was so distraught that he just collapsed there. If not, Tessman and I can’t figure out why he killed himself there. And the place was cleaned, like vacuumed and sinks wiped,” Jackson said. “Our client said her sister had a solid bedtime routine for her kids. They would have brushed their teeth before bed, but the bathroom showed no indication they had. The sink bowls were wiped clean.”

“There was no slide bite on the webbing between Nick DeSoto’s thumb and index finger. If he was an inexperienced shooter, I’d anticipate in the heat of the moment he would have gripped the weapon incorrectly at least once,” Tessman said.

“Another item that is noteworthy is that our client stated that her sister had a glass of wine after the kids were in bed every night. Not only was there no used wine glass anywhere in the house, not even in the sink, but there was no wine in her stomach contents. So, whatever happened in that house, happened right after the kids were put to bed, before she had the chance to pour her wine,” Jackson said.

“What else?” Shepherd pressed.

“None of the neighbors heard anything that night besides the thunderstorm,” Tessman said. They’d interviewed all the neighbors the previous day. “That’s bothering me. I don’t care how bad a thunderstorm is, the sound of a gunshot is distinctive and loud, louder than thunder. The neighbors may have dismissed one loud sound as intense

thunder, but five?”

“Brielle, get a hold of the recorded lightning strikes and the decibel level of the thunder in the area that night from the weather service,” Shepherd said.

“I’ll get that data right after this meeting,” Brielle acknowledged.

“If Nick DeSoto wasn’t the shooter, a suppressor could have helped to hide the murders from the neighbors amid the thunder, but that’s a hell of a stretch that the murder was planned and held off until a thunderstorm was raging,” Shepherd said.

“Shows a great deal of patience by the murderer,” Jackson agreed. “Even if it was Nick DeSoto.”

“And what about inside the house?” Tessman asked. “If the police’s timeline is accurate and the two kids were killed in their beds first, Nicole DeSoto would not have thought the shots that killed the children were thunder. Even with a suppressor, the gunshots still would have been too loud inside the house.”

“We have more questions than answers,” Shepherd said.

“You spoke with Detective Davis when he dropped off the laptops and phones,” Jackson said to Shepherd.

“Yes, they didn’t find anything noteworthy, but Brielle is still looking at them. I asked if he could provide us with the forensic report from the crime lab,” Shepherd said. “That way we can ask questions about what we already know without them suspecting the info was leaked to us. Davis is a good cop. He did admit there were a few inconsistencies that bothered him about this case, but he wouldn’t elaborate on what they were. He’s plowed under with the six other cases on his plate, including the politician’s murder, which he admitted has the brass all the way up to the mayor

putting a lot of pressure on him to solve. The one thing he did say was that they couldn't come up with a motive for anyone outside of the family."

"Speaking of family, Brielle, did you track down either of Nick DeSoto's siblings?" Tessman asked.

"No. I lost his brother, David DeSoto, six years ago when he was released from a prison in Florida after serving two years out of the five he was sentenced to for drug charges."

"And the sister?" Tessman asked.

"Nothing. She's been completely off the grid for nearly ten years."

"So, she's not in jail someplace?" Jackson asked.

"No, neither of his siblings are currently the guests of any state or federal jail or prison," Brielle answered. "And there are no reports of their deaths, either."

"Okay, keep asking questions. You haven't visited Well-Life Pharmaceuticals yet. Make that your next stop," Shepherd said. "Keep me informed of your progress."

Everyone came to their feet, knowing this meeting was over.

Foxtrot

Becca had put off the inevitable long enough. The crime scene cleanup crew had removed all traces of the violence that took place in her sister's house. It now waited for her to clean it out of all the important documents, the family pictures, and the priceless keepsakes of their lives, before she donated the home to the crisis center. She purchased ten large totes to start with. Though she knew she'd need many more.

She would start by just boxing the important things up. She knew she wouldn't be able to go through the items yet. Not only would that be time-consuming, but it would also be very taxing, emotionally, and she knew she was not up for it yet.

Becca also knew that she'd have to go back to work full time soon. That was another inevitable she'd been putting off. The thing was, she wasn't emotionally ready for that either. She'd put in a few hours a day from home, answering emails from clients and communicating with the partners regarding issues she was handling from home. So far, the law firm she worked for wasn't demanding she return to the office. The partners had been very supportive of her need to take time off both after her sister's family was discovered dead and to settle her sister and brother-in-law's affairs. They seemed fine with the part-time, at-home approach she brought to the job. The partners had also been supportive when her parents had died the year before. But she didn't want to take advantage of their kindness.

She drove to her sister's home, arriving just after noon. She'd arranged with the dealership that they would meet her there to pick up her car as she'd received a recall notice and the anticipated time to correct the issue was over five hours. They were supposed to drop a loaner off to her, but when they arrived, somehow, the promised car was not delivered.

"No problem," Becca told them as she handed her car keys over. "I'll be busy here all day and into the evening. Just give me a call and drop it back off when you've completed the work." This would force her into putting in a full day packing things up at her sister's house. She'd already unloaded the two stacks of five large bins and lids, placing them in the house.

She'd eaten lunch before coming over, after putting in a few hours of working on a client's will at home. And if she remained at the house past dinnertime, she knew there was ample food and beverages in her sister's house. That would be her next task before turning the house over to the crisis center. Once she'd cleared out the

important personal and family items, she'd have to go through the refrigerator and throw away the expired food. She'd leave the rest.

She started in the family room, boxing up pictures and other personal items. That didn't take long. She moved to the kitchen. Even though the mess on the floor and cabinets had been cleaned up, she knew the space between the cabinets and the island was where Nicole was killed. She struggled to keep the images of her sister running for her life from her thoughts.

She pulled the items from the junk drawer, glancing to be sure there was nothing important in the contents. She piled them into the box. Then she moved all the papers from the counter's edge to the far side of the island to go through them. This was the spot Nicole would drop the daily mail until she could go through it later. Becca knew the most recent bills were probably here, bills she'd pay to settle their estate.

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On the top of the pile was a bill from the girls' pediatrician. Becca recalled that Nicole had taken Riley to the doctor because of the headaches she was having. She smiled, recalling how ridiculous Nicole had felt to discover Riley just needed glasses. She hadn't even thought that a possibility. Becca chastised herself for allowing her thoughts to wander. This wasn't the time or place for her to relive the memories. It was a simple sort she needed to do. Bills to be paid in one pile, mail to investigate in another, and junk mail or irrelevant mail in a third pile to be recycled or trashed.

She plowed through the pile of mail and other papers on the counter and slipped the bills that needed to be paid into her purse. It only took her three hours to clear the entire first floor of personal items, and she only used one of the bins. She carried the remainder of the bins upstairs. She knew that was where the majority of the things that she'd want to remove from the home were located.

The office was the first room she started in. It didn't take long, as most of the contents had been removed by the police. She'd finally got back everything the police had removed from the house, including all the papers from the office. The last of it was dropped off by Detective Davis at her house earlier that day, as she was leaving to come here. She'd placed the box in the trunk of her car as she'd already locked her place up. Besides, she planned to pass most of it to Jackson and Tessman from Shepherd Security to review first. They'd promised her they would go through it in a matter of days and have it returned to her promptly.

She spent less than an hour in the office and then moved onto the master bedroom where she spent three hours. She'd filled two bins, which she left in the hallway. She'd hire someone to come move all the bins when she was done, as she was packing them full, and they were heavy.

It was more difficult to not take trips down memory lane with each keepsake she touched, as this was the one room with Nicole's cherished mementos from childhood through present day. Becca found several thick photo albums in a box on the floor of the master closet. There were pictures from their childhood, including the few family vacations they'd taken. She sat on the bed and looked through the albums. They contained a lot of pictures she did not have copies of. She believed Nicole had gotten these photo albums from her parent's house after their deaths. Becca vaguely recalled seeing them when they went through her parents' things.

The room was getting dark as it was nearly sunset.

She checked her phone for a missed call from the dealership, assuming the work on her car had to have been completed by now. There were no missed calls. She could always take an Uber home if needed. Her house keys were not on the keyring she'd given the dealership with the car's fob.

She knew she should get back to work, but she couldn't tear herself away from the photo albums or the happy memories that were contained within. She turned the bedside light on, got comfortable, and continued to look through the pages. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but she'd looked through all four photo albums, and it was completely dark outside by the time she put the last photo album on the bed beside her.

She glanced around the room and decided to call it a night. She should be able to finish if she put in a full day tomorrow. Several of her girlfriends offered to help go through her sister's things. She'd take them up on that to do one more check to go through every drawer to ensure she missed nothing. And she'd have someone else go through Riley and Zoe's rooms. She couldn't do it. She hadn't gone into either one even though the crime scene cleanup company assured her all traces of their deaths in those rooms had been taken care of.

She got up and went to the closet to turn the light off. She picked up her purse and stepped into the hallway. She'd leave the bedside light on to give her some light as she went down the otherwise dark staircase as she remembered the light over the stairs was burned out. She'd turned no lights on downstairs.

As she reached the top of the staircase, she saw a beam of light, which she assumed was from a flashlight, sweep across the bottom few stairs. It danced along the wall for a few moments before it withdrew. She froze where she was.

Someone was in the house!

Then she heard voices, male voices. "Looks like that law-yr has been packing things up," one of the male voices said.

"The police didn't find it. I doubt she did," a second, deeper voice said.

"And if she did, she wouldn't know what it was," the first voice said.

She tiptoed back into the bedroom and went into the large walk-in closet, quietly closing the door. She leaned against the door and let out a shaky breath. Her heart raced, and she felt light-headed. She took a deep breath and pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans with her right hand, which shook. She brought up the text message string with Carter Tessman from Shepherd Security and tapped out a message.

Help in my sister's house master bedroom hiding in closet 2 men in the house

Tessman had just driven his car out of the parking garage attached to the Shepherd Security building when the text hit his phone. He was heading to his condo, a rarity that he stayed there.

On my way, also calling police. Do they know you're there?

He, of course, called Ops for them to notify the police and any other agency personnel in the vicinity to help back him up. And Ops would notify the local LEOs that armed federal agents were on site as well.

I don't think so

Stay hidden

Oh, she intended to. She tapped out what she'd heard the men say, just so someone would have the info in case something happened to her.

Tessman thought about what she heard the intruders say as he drove, way above the posted speed limit. Ops had also reached Jackson. He was on his way, ETA fifteen minutes. Bravo Team members Flores and Robinson were also en route. Their ETA was twenty-five minutes. Tessman would reach the house way before anyone else. He wouldn't wait for Jackson to enter. He had to decide how he'd play it. Would he ring the bell and knock, hoping to send the intruders fleeing out the back door? Or should he enter quietly and try to catch them?

Hiding in the closet, Becca watched the minutes tick by on the face of her iWatch. She took purposeful deep breaths to calm her racing heart. Her adrenaline was spiking high, she was sure. She prayed Carter Tessman, or the police, would get there before the men exhausted their search on the first floor and came upstairs.

The intruder, at the top of the stairs, stepped cautiously towards the room with the light on. He also noticed the two doors that led into the kids' bedrooms further down the hall were closed, which they hadn't been when he was last in the house.

In the closet, Becca stayed perfectly still, willing her heartbeat to settle down. She

strained, trying to hear any sound. For the first ten minutes, she heard nothing. But then she heard the sound of the closet doorknob turning. She also felt the door press against her back. She flattened her back more firmly against the door and braced herself, her feet pushed hard into the carpet. The door hit her back harder as the person on the other side tried to open it.

She dug her feet in more firmly and pressed harder with her back. Would the intruder think the door was jammed by something? Did he have any idea she was in the house? And in the closet?

“What the hell?” the man muttered.

She heard him clearly. He pushed harder, now throwing his body against the door.

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She thought about what was in the closet to defend herself with. She doubted she could keep the door closed. His last body slam against the door moved her nearly a foot. There was a large golf umbrella in the corner behind the door, within reach, she remembered. Her hand reached out and grabbed it. On the shelf a foot or two down from where she was, were several pairs of Nicole's shoes with narrow heels, what many would call stilettos. There was one pair in particular she believed could do some real damage if she could get it in her hand and hit this man just right with it.

The door hit her harder as the man threw all his weight against it. An arm poked in, the hand grabbing the wire shelf unit on the other side of the door. His foot also invaded the room, both she saw by the light from the bedroom now penetrating into the closet. It reflected from the large, full-length mirror leaning against the far corner of the closet.

The door pressed in on her as the man pushed the door farther open and stepped into the closet. Becca met his gaze in their reflections in the mirror. She also saw the pistol he held in his hand that didn't grip the wire shelf. She swung the umbrella with all her strength, striking him in the neck. Then she hit the lever, opening it wide and she dove for the shoe box with the heels she wanted.

He deflected the umbrella, wrestling with it for a costly moment to get it out of his way. While he did this, she grabbed the silver sequenced stilettos, one in each hand. She dropped to her bottom and as he rushed towards her, she lifted her right leg and kicked him in the groin with every ounce of strength she had. He collapsed in on himself, shrieking in pain. She was grunting in a strangled scream, the only sound she could currently force out.

That was when she sprang up and hit him in the temple with one of the shoes. It didn't go in as far as she anticipated, and the heel broke from the bottom of the shoe when it made contact with his head. She knew that the weakest part of the skull was the pterion, which was where the frontal, parietal, temporal, and sphenoid bones met. It was located on the side of the skull, just behind the temple. She'd hit too far forward. His head was turned, so that she didn't have a clear shot at that weak place. So, instead, she followed up with a second blow to the head as close as she could get with the now heelless shoe, and her other hand swung the second stiletto at his neck.

He deflected her blows, both of them, and pushed her back, farther into the closet. She landed on the floor beside the large mirror and let out a scream. She noticed he bled from the head and the neck. He lumbered towards her like an unsteady drunk man. She tried to stand, but he grabbed her by the front of her shirt and pushed her more violently against the wall. She hit it hard. A second startled scream came out of her.

Beside her on the ground were hand weights. She picked each of them up and lobbed them at the man's face. He backed up as he tried to deflect each of them. Once they were expended, and he was several feet back, she turned her attention to the large, heavy mirror. She pulled on it as he recovered from the blows of the weights and took a step towards her. She held onto the mirror and let herself drop, using her body weight to pull it from the wall and set it careening towards her assailant. He ducked, but it hit him in the head beside the head wound she'd caused with the stiletto. He went down, the mirror crashing on top of him.

That's when she heard the gunshots.

Tessman arrived at the DeSoto house, noticing no lights were on, on the first floor. He saw the glow of a light coming through the master bedroom windows on the

second floor. He turned the door knob and gave the door the smallest amount of pressure. The seal on the door broke. The front door wasn't locked. He drew his weapon and turned his comms to transmit. He'd inserted the earpiece as he drove. "At the DeSoto residence, Control. The front door is unlocked," he broadcast in a whisper.

"I'm still three minutes out," Jackson transmitted. "Can you wait for me?"

Tessman heard a very faint scream coming from inside. "Negative. I hear screams from inside. Entering."

"Remain on transmit. And Moe, keep your head on the swivel," Yvette said, not expecting a reply. She knew he'd already have crossed the threshold. Then, per protocol, she notified Shepherd that Tessman was about to engage an unknown number of Tangos solo and that the local LEOs were en route.

Tessman opened the front door just enough to step onto the entry tile. As seen from outside, the first floor was dark. As he did, his eyes swept the interior of the living room, which he could see well enough due to the outside streetlights casting some light into the room.

He was not able to see the staircase behind the door, but the door itself gave him some protection. He peered around the edge of the front door to catch a glimpse of legs on the staircase near the top. He dropped to one knee and pivoted near the edge of the door; his weapon trained on the legs.

A single shot hit the front door, about a foot higher than his head. The sound of the gunshot was deafening in the otherwise quiet house. He returned fire, striking the figure on his thigh. The man crumpled onto the stair and raised his weapon to fire again. Tessman squeezed off another round. It hit him in the chest. He fell to the side and slid down the stairs, crashing into the pie shaped landing near the foot of the

staircase.

Tessman rushed around the door and made sure the man was disarmed, taking his Glock from his hand, which still clutched it. He shoved the man's weapon into his own holster. Then he checked the man's chest. It bled, and the man was either unconscious or dead. He didn't check to see which. He glanced back towards the kitchen, thinking he had heard something. He saw nothing all the way through to the closed sliding glass door. Becca said she was upstairs in the master closet. He hoped she was still there.

"One Tango down on the stairs up," he whispered, broadcasting the status to Yvette, Jackson, and whoever else may be on comms.

Then Tessman mounted the steps, not knowing how many Tangos there might be in the house. She'd heard two men, so he had at least one more man to find. But there could be more. He crept up the stairs. He could see the light spilling out from the bedroom as he neared the top of the stairs.

He soundlessly stepped into the bedroom, noting that all the other doors on the second floor were closed. He'd still check the master bedroom and closet first. The closet door was open about a foot. He didn't like the placement of the rooms. The master bathroom door, which was open, was adjacent to the door to the closet. He couldn't search them both at the same time. And they were set up that if someone was within either of the spaces, they could get the drop on him as he checked out the other. He listened intently, but heard nothing.

Becca had grabbed the pistol belonging to her assailant from the closet floor. She sat with her back against the back of the closet, the weapon clasped in both of her hands in the correct position to fire, her index finger resting on the outside of the trigger guard as she was taught. The man lay motionless beneath the downed mirror.

She knew that with all the noise, someone would eventually come through the door. There was another man in the house that she knew of, and she'd already heard several gunshots. Was Carter Tessman or the police already there too? And who fired at who? She prayed it wouldn't be the other intruder who would find her in the closet. And for a split second, she envisioned Carter Tessman getting shot as he entered the house. She shook that thought from her mind. No, he hadn't been shot.

Tessman passed by the door to the closet and quickly checked out the master bathroom space while keeping an eye behind him. No one was going to sneak up on him. The bathroom was empty.

"On scene, entering the house through the front now," Jackson's voice came through comms.

Tessman positioned himself outside of the closet, so the door blocked his detection from within. He was able to see into the front corner of the closet through the cracked open door. Nothing in that corner looked amiss. Then, all at once, he lifted his right leg and kicked the door open. It exploded in and wedged open against the bottom half of a man's torso, which lay on the floor beneath a large frame with a solid wood backing. Behind it, along the back wall of the closet, was Becca, pointing a pistol at him.

"Easy, lower the weapon," he said. He turned to view the bedroom. "Jax, I've got Becca and a second downed Tango, master bedroom."

Becca saw the earbud in his ear and knew he was talking to someone other than her. She assumed Jax was Jackson.

"Roger that," Jackson whispered. "First floor is clear, besides the wounded Tango on the stairs. Back slider is open."

“It was shut when I got here,” Tessman said. “This second level needs to be checked, as well as the basement.”

“And garage,” Jackson added. “If you can clear the second floor, we’ll let Louisa and Kegger handle the rest when they arrive.”

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“ETA five minutes,” Tommy ‘Louisa’ Flores’s voice came through comms.

Tessman looked back into the closet. Becca had stood and was maneuvering around the downed man and what he now identified as the mirror on top of him. “You any good with a gun?”

“Good enough,” she said, holding the weapon lower but with both hands in the proper position, prepared to raise it and fire if needed.

“Cover me while I check him out.” He pointed to the man under the mirror in the closet. “Jackson is in the house. Don’t shoot him.”

She stepped all the way out of the closet and pressed her back against the nearby wall, her eyes fixed on the open bedroom door and the hallway outside of it. She still felt light-headed and her chest felt constricted.

Tessman stepped into the closet and found one of the Tango’s hands. He pulled it out from under the mirror and checked for a pulse on his wrist. Nothing. He lifted the mirror and leaned it against the wall. It was heavy. The man was still. He checked for a pulse at his neck, finding blood, but no pulse. He turned his head and saw a large wound at his temple and just behind it, which was the source of most of the blood. Then he quickly patted the guy down, looking for a wallet or some ID. Nothing.

“He’s dead,” he told Becca as he emerged from the closet.

She didn’t tear her gaze or her aim from the bedroom door. She merely nodded, not sure how she felt about that. The only emotion she could identify was relief that she

wasn't the one dead in the closet.

He didn't know how to read her silence. He came in close to her. "It was self-defense."

"I know it was," she said. "Now what?"

"Stay a few steps behind me. We need to clear the rest of this floor. Cover me while I check each room."

She stepped into the hallway behind him. At the top of the stairs, she glanced down and saw Jackson. He was pulling a man who lay crumpled near the bottom of the steps off of them and into the entry. She wondered if he was alive or dead. She assumed he'd been shot by Tessman or Jackson.

She watched Tessman methodically check each room, moving slowly, deliberately, soundlessly, and checking under every bed, in every closet, in every corner. Watching him as he did this, she no longer saw him as the young guy she'd originally thought of him as, regardless of his actual age. He moved with confidence, training, and precision with what she would guess was lethal accuracy. He was a Marine, just as he'd said.

"Second floor, clear," Tessman transmitted to Jackson and Yvette.

She followed him down the stairs. The entry light was on now. A large splatter of blood was on the wall halfway down. And then at the landing, there were several smudges of blood. The carpet in both spots had large bloodstains as well. She was sure there was blood in the closet. She stifled a nervous laugh. It looked like she'd be calling that crime scene clean-up company back and paying to replace the carpet.

Tessman gazed at her with confusion and concern when he heard her small chuckle.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That wasn’t really a laugh. It was an I don’t fucking believe I have to call the crime scene cleanup company back to this house.”

Tessman nodded. He understood. It had been a nervous emotional release. “Careful, don’t step in the blood. We don’t want to track any through the house.”

She nodded and carefully stepped around it as she descended the stairs.

“Control, going off transmit now,” Tessman broadcast. He then switched his comms to listen only.

“Roger that, Moe,” she acknowledged.

“Arrived on scene,” Flores transmitted. “Coming in the front.”

Tessman took Becca by the upper arm and pulled her towards the kitchen. They stepped past Jackson and the bleeding man. “Step away from the door. Two of our team members are entering.” Then he noticed she still held the Tango’s gun. “Let me have that.” He took the weapon from her.

Jackson had moved the body far enough in so that its position didn’t interfere with the front door opening. He knelt over the unconscious man, with his back to the wall the stairs were on. He had pressure on the chest wound with one hand, his weapon still in the other as the entire house hadn’t been searched.

“Becca, can you get us a few kitchen towels?” Tessman prompted.

“Sure,” she said, and then hurried into the kitchen.

Flores and Robinson came through the front door, weapons held at the ready. “Status?” Flores asked.

“Dead Tango in the master bedroom closet. This one has a GSW to the thigh and the chest. He’ll live,” Tessman said. “Second floor and this floor clear. Stairs to the basement are around this corner, as is the door to the garage. They need to be checked out.”

“The back door was open when I got here. Check out the back after you clear the house. The first time we checked this place out, we found cigarette butts and flattened grass out back just within the tree line.”

Becca had just re-entered the room and heard what Jackson had just said. She dropped the stack of towels on the floor beside Jackson and the wounded man. “You think someone could have been watching the house from back there? The person or persons who actually killed them, don’t you?”

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“It’s possible,” Tessman said. “Becca Elliot, our team members Flores and Robinson.”

Becca nodded a greeting and forced a small smile at the two older men.

“Ma’am,” Flores greeted with a nod. And then the two men stepped around them, splitting up. Flores went down the stairs to the basement and Robinson made his way through the small laundry room and went out into the garage. A few minutes later, they both returned and reported the basement and garage clear. Then they exited the house through the back door to check out the back yard.

“Team,” Yvette’s voice came through comms, “be advised the local LEOs are arriving on site. I’ve advised them you’re onsite and have control of the scene.”

“Roger that, Control,” Jackson broadcast.

Two uniformed officers came through the door, weapons drawn. Tessman held up his FBI badge. “Tessman and Jackson, federal agents,” he said.

Becca stared at Tessman, her eyes bouncing between the badge he held and his face.

Assured the scene was secure, the police radioed the ambulance, which waited for the all-clear down the street. Once the paramedics entered, Jackson stepped back and let them get to work on the wounded man.

“He’s under arrest,” Jackson advised the paramedics and the local LEOs. “As soon as he’s conscious, we need to question him. And there’s a DOA in the master bedroom

closet.”

One of the two police officers jogged up the stairs.

“The crime scene techs have been called, and a detective is en route as well,” the other cop said. “One of us will accompany the perp. You all need to remain here to give your statements to the detective.”

Tessman bent down and without getting in the paramedics’ way, he searched the wounded man for an ID. He found none. He took out his phone and snapped a few pictures of the man which he then sent to Yvette in Ops at HQ. He’d have to get a couple pics of the face of the vic in the closet once his body had been turned over. They’d be passed to the Digital Team in an attempt to get an ID on the men. Then he noticed how awkwardly Becca stood, her eyes riveted on the wounded man and the paramedics.

“Let’s wait in the kitchen,” he said to her.

She defiantly shook her head and then crossed the living room, taking a seat on the couch. From where she sat, she watched the paramedics.

Jackson and Tessman stepped over and stood beside her. The cop that had gone up to check on the dead man in the closet came back down the stairs, being careful to stay out of the blood splatter on the stairs.

Within a few minutes, the paramedics transferred the man onto their stretcher and then wheeled him out of the house. Becca let out a breath she’d been holding. She then stared at the badges both the men from Shepherd Security displayed on their belts. FBI and DEA. She was more than confused.

Tessman noticed that her eyes were riveted on their badges. Either that or she was

checking out their packages, though he doubted the latter was the case. He made eye contact with her and saw the questions she would ask soon. He wondered how she'd ask. Would she be outraged? Demanding? Baffled? Certainly, she'd feel lied to. She'd been through a lot of shit since her sister's family was murdered. He didn't want to add to her angst.

Robinson and Flores re-entered the house through the back. They flashed their badges at the lone uniform cop who stood in the entry.

Detective Davis arrived at the house a few moments later. He quietly conferred with the uniformed police officer for a moment at the entry. He crossed the room and then greeted the five of them, shaking Jackson and Tessman's hands and addressing them by name and then trading introductions with Flores and Robinson while shaking their hands as well. Then he turned his attention to her. "Becca, are you okay?" The concern in his voice was genuine.

She didn't even know how to answer that question. She was now. "They were searching for something specific. I heard them talking. And they knew that I'd been here packing, referred to me as that lawyer. So, they knew who I am." That was what bothered her the most.

Davis's eyes flickered to Jackson and Tessman. "Can you keep her protected until we figure this out?"

"We can," Jackson volunteered.

"I thought so," Davis replied. "Stay here. I'll get your statements in a minute. First, I need to take a look at the vic in the closet upstairs. Who killed him?"

"I did," Becca said in a strong voice.

“The mirror did,” Tessman said. “He put himself in the path of the mirror when he assaulted you.”

“Okay, the vic can wait,” Davis groaned. “Becca, step into the kitchen with me. I’ll take your statement there.” He turned his attention to the four men from Shepherd Security. “Stay here. I’ll get to your statements after hers.”

Tessman grinned at Jackson as Davis retreated, following Becca Elliot into the kitchen. “He admits she needs protection. Do you know if Shepherd got the crime scene report in yet? Might be a good time to confront him with everything that’s in it that doesn’t add up.”

Jackson shook his head. “Yes, it would have been a good time for that if we’d gotten the report, which we haven’t.”

“Damn,” Tessman remarked.

Becca took a seat at the kitchen table.

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“Tell me all of it,” Detective Davis prompted as he sat across from her.

“I worked here packing things up all day,” she began. She proceeded to tell him all of what happened up until the police officers arrived.

“They could have just been looking to burglarize a vacant place,” Davis said.

“Didn’t you hear me?” she demanded. “They were looking for something specific. Said the police hadn’t found it and even if I did, I wouldn’t know what it was. This was not random, and Nick did not kill his family. This is all connected, the murders, these intruders in the house. They didn’t know I was here, or they probably wouldn’t have come in. They would have waited until I left.”

“I’ll agree with you on the last part. As far as the rest, we’ll see.”

Becca looked away, disgusted. “Have you seen the full crime scene report yet?”

Davis looked embarrassed. “It hit my desk a few days ago. I’m sorry, I’ve been busy, too busy to look at a report on a closed case.”

Becca raised her chin a little further into the air. “Look at it and then give me a call.”

Detective Davis eyed her suspiciously. What did she know? “I will. You can step out into the living room. Can you please send one of the Shepherd Security men in?”

Tessman came in first. He placed both the guns from the two Tangos on the table. “This one is from the dead Tango in the closet. You’ll find both Becca’s and my

prints on it. And this one is from the guy I shot on the stairs.” Then he pulled his own weapon from the back of the waistband of his jeans where he’d shoved it, right beside his holster that had the first Tango’s gun in it. “This is my weapon that I used to shoot the Tango on the stairs. First round went into his thigh as he was standing on the stairs when he fired at me. The second round went into his chest. Then he took the seat across from Detective Davis.

Davis stared at the three weapons lined up on the table. “You’ve been busy.”

“Hey, I didn’t start this. The guy on the stairs shot at me first. And the guy in the closet assaulted Becca.”

“Why didn’t you wait for backup when you arrived?” Davis asked.

“Your DOA was assaulting Becca in the closet when I arrived. I heard her screaming when I got to the front door.”

Davis took Tessman’s badge and wrote down the information before handing it back to him. “So, the shooter on the stairs, was he heading up or down when you arrived?”

“I assumed up as Becca was screaming and pushing the mirror onto your vic in the closet when I arrived. But I can’t say for sure. I opened the door and two seconds later his first shot hit the door. I returned fire, hit him in the thigh and he collapsed into a sitting position. He raised his gun at me again and I got the shot off faster than he did, hitting him in the chest.”

“I’m sure it was a good shoot,” Davis said.

“Damn right it was,” Tessman said. “If you have any questions regarding it, contact Shepherd.” Tessman knew he had immunity, and Shepherd would handle any issues.

Davis shook his head. He knew this group was connected to Washington D.C. He knew they were a special multi-agency task force; however, he thought they had an NGO arm of the agency, and he was surprised badge carrying agents had been working Rebecca Elliot's case. It made him wonder why they'd taken it.

"Okay, send Jackson in next," Davis said. "And after I've interviewed each of you, you're free to go. You'll see Becca Elliot home and make sure she's protected?"

"We can stash her in a safe location for a few days. You've already had your shot at the items in this house to see what they could have been looking for. Do you mind if we comb through the contents?" Tessman asked. He and Jackson had already discussed both before Davis arrived.

"That's fine," Davis said. "You'll keep me in the loop if you find anything?"

"Yes. And will you re-review all you have in on the murders of the DeSoto family?"

Davis nodded. "Yeah, I'll try to go over it with fresh eyes. Becca Elliot is convinced that once I see the final lab reports I'll change my mind on it." He stared at Tessman for a long moment, seeing confidence in Tessman's return stare. "And something tells me you think so too. Makes me wonder if you both have already seen it."

"Our office hasn't received it from Shepherd's request yet," Tessman said. His lips pulled into a half-smile, half-smirk.

"Yeah," Davis said, even more convinced that somehow, they'd already seen it.

Golf

Becca was exhausted by the time she fastened her seatbelt in the front passenger seat of Carter Tessman's four-door silver Jeep Wrangler hardtop. Jackson stood beside her

door as Tessman retrieved his spare handgun from the locked storage box under the floormat of the backseat on the driver's side. The police had kept his weapon and gave him a receipt.

She sat back as Tessman drove. Her house was the destination to grab a few essentials, with what he'd described as a safe location: the final destination. Jackson followed in a black SUV of some sort. She appreciated the protection, but truly wished they would protect her at her own house. She wanted nothing more than to put on her pajamas and crawl into her own bed.

"You were comfortable handling a weapon," Tessman said.

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His voice broke in on her thoughts. “Yes,” she said, knowing his statement held an unasked question. She glanced at him. He returned her gaze when he stopped at a red light. “An ex-boyfriend taught me how to shoot.”

“Was he a cop?”

“No, just a gun enthusiast. They say everyone comes into your life for a reason. I guess teaching me to handle a gun was the purpose why he was briefly in my life.” She flashed a small smile at him.

He picked up on her subtle message that she hadn’t previously found a reason the ex-boyfriend had been in her life, which he deduced to mean it hadn’t been a great relationship and it hadn’t lasted long. “Not that you need a gun to defend yourself. You’re pretty good with a heavy mirror.” He gave her a side glance and returned her smile.

Her lips turned up in a broader smile. “Death by mirror. That has to be a first.”

“Are you okay? I’m going to assume you don’t go around killing intruders with heavy mirrors on a regular basis. It wasn’t your fault, you know. His death is solely on him for being there and attacking you.”

“If I’m supposed to feel shockwaves to my morality for defending myself, I don’t. I mostly just feel relieved he’s the one dead in the closet and not me. Is that wrong?”

“Not at all,” he said. “As I said, his death is completely on him and maybe also on whoever sent him if he was working for someone.”

She hadn't considered that. "Do you think he was working for someone?"

"I don't know. It would depend on what they were looking for and exactly who they were. Was it something they wanted or did someone hire them to get it?" Tessman posed.

"I can't even guess what it could be," Becca thought out loud. "And why the hell did they have to kill everyone in the house? The kids..." Her voice cracked and then trailed off and she gazed out the window, tears filling her eyes.

She felt his hand atop hers, his fingers gently gripping her hand, which she had resting on the armrest between them. He didn't speak, which she appreciated. After a few moments, she unconsciously flipped her hand over and she folded her fingers around his hand. His thumb softly stroked over her thumb from the base of it up to its tip. It was comforting.

With this realization, she pulled her hand away. "Um, how long do you think I'll need to stay wherever you're going to put me?" she asked, turning in her seat as if to justify why she'd taken her hand from his.

"Until you're safe, Becca," he said plainly. "Until we know these guys aren't going to come after you again."

"Well, they weren't really coming after me, just whatever was in the house," she said.

"Okay, until we identify what that is. There was a third person or more in the house tonight who got away out the back door," he said. "So, there's still at least one person, if not more than one, out there who wants whatever it is they were looking for and I doubt he or they are going to give up."

His blunt statement sent a chill down her spine. He was right, and she knew it. She

blew out a breath and nodded. He saw her head nod in his side glance.

“I’ll still need to help go through the stuff in that house and papers the police returned to me. Detective Davis gave me a box this morning before I left the house. It’s in the trunk of my car.”

“Where is your car?” he asked, realizing it hadn’t been at the house.

“At the dealership. There was a recall notice they were doing the work on. They picked it up at my sister’s house earlier and were supposed to return it to me. I don’t know why they didn’t. I’ll have to call tomorrow.”

They were quiet as Tessman parked the car in her driveway. Jackson pulled in behind him.

“Stay in the car until Jackson is by your door,” Tessman said as she released her seat belt and took hold of the handle, prepared to open the car door.

“Do you think we were followed?” she asked, turning in her seat to gaze out the back.

“Just being careful, that’s all.”

When Jackson stepped up beside her door, only then did she get out. The temperature felt like it had dropped ten degrees on the way over, which she knew it hadn’t. Why was she cold all of a sudden? They walked up the sidewalk to the front door together. She handed her keys to Tessman at his prompting, and he unlocked and opened the door. “The light switch is on the wall immediately to the right.”

Tessman hit the switch and light tumbled out onto the front porch. Viewing his profile, she instantly saw the focus come to his features. And he drew his weapon. “Stay behind me, Becca. Jax, the room’s been tossed.”

Becca's eyes went to Jackson, who stood behind her. He too drew his gun. "What do you mean, tossed?" she asked, even though she knew what that meant.

Tessman stepped into the house. "I'm going to assume it didn't look like this when you left earlier today?"

Becca stepped onto the tiled entry beside him. Her home had an open concept. From the entry, one could see the great room in the forefront, with her home office up against the front window, and the kitchen to the rear of the room. The wind was sucked from her lungs. Literally everything in her line of sight had been knocked over, dumped, or disturbed in some way.

Jackson crowded in behind her. "Fuck," he muttered. "I'll call Davis. He needs to see this."

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“We’ll all wait outside for him,” Tessman said. “We know these motherfuckers won’t hesitate to take lethal action and I’d just assume not to have to shoot anyone else tonight.”

The three of them stepped back outside. They all got into Jackson’s SUV, and he backed out of the driveway while he called Davis, who was still at the DeSoto residence.

“Where are we going?” Becca asked after the call to Davis was ended.

“We’re just going to circle the block until the police get here and make sure no intruders are still at your place,” Jackson said. “I’m sure the police will want you to take a look to see if anything is missing.”

“This is crazy. What the fuck could they be looking for?” she exclaimed with venom. “I cannot tell you how utterly pissed off I am.”

Tessman turned in his seat to gaze into her eyes. “We’ll get to the bottom of this and find out who they are and what they want. And we’ll keep you safe until then.”

“Well, they either got what they were looking for or it wasn’t there. They said I wouldn’t know what it was if I saw it. I’m not a threat. I probably don’t need protection. I mean, seriously, what more can they do?”

“Don’t ever ask that,” Tessman said. Then he turned back around in his seat.

And she thought she’d been cold before. A new chill invaded her.

Hotel

They didn't have to wait long for Detective Davis. He arrived with a fresh set of uniformed officers. Jackson and Tessman let the police clear her townhouse before they went in. Becca just shook her head in denial and disgust as she surveyed the disarray close up. They'd even dumped every single kitchen drawer. They found both of the bedrooms upstairs to be in the same state as the first floor. Even her closet had been destroyed.

She gathered clothes for a few days and scooped up the bottles of the toiletries and makeup she'd want with her from the bathroom floor and shoved it all into a backpack. Back on the first floor, she grabbed her laptop bag, which was in the corner behind the curtain and untouched. They must not have seen it.

She gave Detective Davis a spare set of her housekeys. He'd lock up when the crime scene crew was done.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Detective Davis told her.

She'd noticed nothing missing, so robbery wasn't the motive, not that anyone expected it had been.

"At least they didn't slash furniture or break shit just to destroy it," Tessman said as they drove.

She watched the side streets pass by her window. "Where are we going?"

"We have an apartment on the ninth floor of our building on the secure side that can't be accessed from the public side of our building. It's Fort Knox. Our boss, Shepherd, authorized you be allowed to stay in it for as long as needed."

“Who the hell are you guys? You carry federal badges.”

“We do,” Tessman said. His eyes flickered to his rearview mirror and Jackson’s headlights. “Shepherd will talk to you tomorrow. I have to ask you not to make any calls tonight, not to tell anyone where you are or about us.”

She forced out an indignant laugh. “Who the hell would I call? And why?”

“I don’t know. Don’t know if you have a boyfriend or if you’d call one of the attorneys you work with,” he suggested.

“No to both,” she said.

“A best friend you’d want to commiserate with,” he then said. “But I have to ask you not to do that tonight.”

“Okay,” she said. “The truth is, I just want to take a hot shower and put my pajamas on and go to bed.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “It’s way past dinner time. I could eat.”

“Are you kidding me? Eat dinner? One man is dead, another shot, and my house was broken into.”

“We still need to eat,” he said. “Angel keeps food in the refrigerator, mostly leftovers from the lunches she orders in for everyone every day. Or we can stop and get anything you want. I’d prefer to bring it back to our HQ to eat it, though.”

“No, thank you. Whatever she has there will be fine. You’re right. I am a little hungry.”

The two cars pulled into the parking garage beside the ten-story Shepherd Security building. They were not followed. Becca was attentive as they drove deep into the second sub-basement level, through the security gate and the two garage doors that required codes and a palmprint scan to enter. He parked in the private below-ground parking lot in front of the elevator door. Jackson parked beside them.

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Tessman insisted on carrying her overstuffed backpack and her laptop bag for her. Neither man pulled his weapon as they walked to the elevator, which also required a code and palmprint to call the car. She assumed this was a secure area. With all the security to enter, it certainly wasn't a public facing space. She relaxed and followed them to the elevator.

"We're going to stop on five and get something to eat," Tessman told Jackson, pressing the five button within the elevator car.

Jackson nodded. He pressed ten. "I'm going up to Shepherd's penthouse to make an in-person report before I head home. Angel has already put the kids to bed, but she's waiting to have dinner with me. She's kept it warm." He smiled appreciatively.

Becca heard him and it took a second to process that Angel was his wife. She'd noticed that they both wore wedding bands, as did Cooper and Brielle, but hadn't suspected that Angel and Jackson were married. And they had children, which surprised her because of the job he did. She knew she'd never be able to be married to a man who was in law enforcement. She'd be too worried every time he went to work that he wouldn't make it home. Families that could do it impressed her.

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor. Tessman motioned her out. "I'll get her settled in the apartment after we eat. I'll notify Ops when she's there and I plan on staying in my office tonight," Tessman told Jackson. He also stepped into the hallway.

Jackson nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow, Becca. This building is a fortress. You're completely safe here."

“Thank you,” she said before the elevator door slid closed.

“Come on,” Tessman said, nodding to the hallway.

She followed him to the kitchen. He set her bags on one side of the large table. Then he opened the refrigerator. “We have Chinese. Looks like wonton soup, fried rice, Mongolian beef, and some cashew chicken. And there are sandwich spirals and a garden salad, and of course chips.” He flashed her a grin. “Can’t have sandwich spirals without chips.”

She peeked over his shoulder and saw large containers with each on the shelves in the full-size refrigerator. “You said Angel orders lunch in every day. Does this food belong to someone in particular? I wouldn’t want to eat someone’s food.”

“She orders large quantities for everyone in the office and to have enough left-overs for anyone working nights or getting back to HQ at an odd hour. It’s one of the many perks of our job. I’m going to have some Chinese. This place she orders from is the best one in the area.” He began taking those containers from the fridge.

“That sounds good. I could go for some soup and fried rice. Thank you.”

He took two bowls and two plates down from the cabinet. After they portioned out what food they wanted, he put hers in the microwave to cook first. He grabbed two bottles of water from the door, holding one up in offer to her.

“Yes, thank you. About this agency, Carter, I know you said your boss will talk to me tomorrow, but can’t you explain why you carry an FBI badge?”

The microwave dinged. He placed her dishes on the table. Steam rose, sending the incredible scent of the food throughout the room. Becca had felt just a little hungry, but now, sniffing the aroma, she was famished.

“Go ahead and start,” Tessman said, nodding to her food. “Don’t let it get cold waiting for mine to heat.”

She dug in. It tasted as good as it smelled. It was only after he joined her at the table that she gazed at him with a questioning look, waiting for him to explain how he was an FBI agent.

“Our status is complicated,” he began. “We are officially a multi-agency task force, but that’s not the entirety of it. Our boss, Shepherd, will explain it fully to you tomorrow.”

“When Detective Davis told me about him and this agency, he mentioned that your boss is a retired colonel from the army and that the majority of you who work for this agency are former military. He didn’t say anything about anyone being federal agents or how you can work cases like mine. He said your agency was some sort of private investigators.”

“We are that too,” Tessman said. “As I said, it’s complicated. And I am not at liberty to tell you all of it. But Shepherd will tomorrow morning.”

“Why can’t you tell me what he’s going to?” she pressed.

“Because I signed an NDA and could be prosecuted for divulging the information to you because you haven’t been read in yet by Shepherd.”

Becca was taken aback by this pronouncement. “Will he ask me to sign an NDA?”

“Probably,” Tessman admitted. “Look, what I can tell you is our agency does a lot of good. We help people other forces, agencies, and police departments don’t or can’t. People like you.”

She nodded, knowing they'd helped her not only by taking on this case, but this evening with the two armed men at her sister's house. Had she not had them to call, she may be dead, or if not, she would probably have been forced to shoot that second man, and maybe the third. She took several more bites of food.

"I can't argue that fact," she said after she'd chewed and swallowed. "And I'll reserve judgement until I talk with your boss tomorrow morning."

"Thank you for respecting that I can't tell you anything more," Tessman said.

"If this last month has taught me anything, it's patience. All things have a process that I can't rush, no matter how much I would like to."

"The one positive outcome from tonight is that I think Davis will look at your sister's family's murders again. If he takes from the crime scene report what we did, he'll know your brother-in-law killed no one."

"If he reopens the case, does that mean that you and Jackson won't continue to look into it?"

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“I’m not sure. We rarely work open police cases, but we do in some situations. Shepherd will make the decision.”

“Will you get any input into that decision? Or, for that matter, will I?”

“Yes, to both, I’m sure,” Tessman answered.

She felt better knowing that there would be a discussion. She would certainly ask his boss to keep them on the case, as well as the police, if the case was reopened. She was anxious to meet him and talk with him in the morning.

“Did you get into Well-Life to talk with anyone there yet?”

“No, we tried as private investigators, but they turned us down cold. If Shepherd approves it, we could go in as federal agents, but I suspect they’ll hide behind their lawyers and insist we have a subpoena or court order of some sort to even talk to anyone there. Then we’ll have to guess if who they give us access to is really anyone Nick or Nicole worked with directly, which is what we want. And as far as what Nick was working on, I’m sure they’ll cry trade secrets to deny us the inquiry.”

“That’s frustrating,” she said.

“Detective Davis didn’t have much more success, even with his badge.”

“I’m sorry I had no names of their coworkers to share with you or the police. Nick, of course, was very tight-lipped about anything work-related, and Nicole worked quite independently. She didn’t come out and say it, but I got the impression the marketing

department had become a competitive environment, so she had no real friends in her department. They weren't a team. Well, they weren't since my mom died, anyway," she said.

"What do you mean? What did your mom have to do with it?"

"My mom was one of the founders of the company."

Tessman was shocked to hear this. Why didn't they know before now? "I don't recall seeing her name in any of the company documents we looked at."

"She went by her maiden name at work, Fuller, Dr. Madeline Fuller," Becca said.

Tessman had recalled seeing her name. It just hadn't dawned on any of them that her date of death lined up with Becca and Nicole's parent's deaths. "Does Davis know your mother had worked there?"

Becca shrugged. "I don't know if it ever came up. Does it matter?"

"I don't know," Tessman said. He pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped out a text to both Brielle and Jackson, informing them of this revelation and asking Brielle to look into her mother. "What exactly did she do there? Was she an MD or a PHD?"

"Actually both. She was an MD specializing in cancer treatment, which led her to cancer research. She lamented that the treatments were killing as many patients as the disease. She believed there had to be a better treatment, and she was also interested in preventive measures and was looking for more natural, healthier alternatives to the harsh chemicals. Well-Life Pharmaceuticals was founded with grants and private investments with both aspects in mind, better, less caustic treatments and a mission to discover preventive formulas for those most at risk of developing terminal diseases, not limited to cancers."

Tessman's thoughts were wildly all over the place with this conversation. "And what exactly was her role?"

"Head of research," Becca said. "She had oversight over all the chemists in the entire company. If she was still alive, she'd know exactly what Nick had been working on."

"When your mom died last year in that plane crash, who took her place at work?"

"I don't know," Becca said. "It wasn't Nick, I know that. He went for the position but didn't get it. And he was not happy about that. From what Nicole said, he should have gotten it. He would have been Mom's pick to succeed her and not just because he was her son-in-law. Mom always said that Nick shared her moral compass regarding research. She said he had the same low tolerance for risk that she did."

"Becca, this could be important. Can you write down all of this information and anything else you can think of that is related to Well-Life? Anything and everything about your mom and Nick, past things they worked on that you may know of. I mean, after a drug is out on the market, certainly they'd be able to talk about it."

"Yes, though the number of drugs my mom worked on over the years is in the hundreds."

"Concentrate on the last few years for them both," he said.

"Sure. I can type something up after I take a shower. I still want to just stand under hot water for at least a half hour," she said with a small grin. "But I am a bit revived, so sleep can wait until I get you some notes."

"Have them ready for our meeting with Shepherd in the morning," he said. "Did you want more?" He pointed to her empty plate and bowl. He'd eaten all the food he'd had on his plate as well.

“No, thank you. I’m full,” she said. “You were right. I was hungry, no matter what happened tonight.” She paused and gazed at him with appreciation and admiration. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” he asked.

“Do the job you do and not be jaded, disgusted by people’s actions, or suspicious of everyone and everything.”

“Who says I’m not?” he posed with a grin.

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She shook her head. “No, you’re not. You’re compassionate, kind, and you’re even keeled. Doesn’t anything get to you? You were fired at tonight. That man tried to kill you.”

“Tried being the operative word. Which of us is lying in the hospital under arrest right now?”

“Even as a Marine, you had to see the bad in life. How do you deal with it?”

He shrugged. “It might sound corny, but I believe good triumphs over evil in the end.”

“Well, I’m having a hard time believing that right now.”

“Do you believe whoever killed your sister’s family will be found and punished?”

“I hope they will be, but I have to admit that as each day passes, the odds of them being caught seem smaller. When the police closed the case, ruling that Nick had done it, I think my faith in justice died.”

“We’re going to get to the bottom of this. And I’m sure that once Davis looks at that full report that we did, he’ll come to the same conclusion and the case will be re-opened.”

“I hope you’re right, Carter,” she said.

“Come on, I’ll walk you up to the apartment. Shoot me a text when you wake up in

the morning. It's late and you deserve to not have to set an alarm." He stood and took hold of her backpack and laptop bag. They walked back to the elevator. He pressed nine. "My office is on seven. I'll be there all night."

"I'm sorry if you can't go home because I'm staying here."

"I sleep on the couch in my office more often than not when I'm in town. It's quite comfortable," he said. "We all have one in our offices, as many of us end up sleeping here for a variety of reasons." He wouldn't tell her some of the God-awful places he'd slept during his time in the Corps. Nor would he tell her that the guy shooting at him this evening was nothing compared to some of the intense firefights he'd been in where he'd swear all hell was raining down on him and his Marine brothers. No, she didn't need to hear about any of that after her horrible night.

Indigo

Seated on the bed, alone in the room, Becca breathed deeply and realized how exhausted she was. The digits on her phone told her it was nearly midnight. How had it gotten so late? It was the first time she'd looked at her phone since she'd text messaged Carter while hiding in the closet.

She glanced around the comfortable room. There was a microwave and Keurig coffee maker with a counter, cabinets, and shelves that were fully stocked with snacks, plus a dorm-sized refrigerator that Carter had told her had bottles of water, juice, and soda. No liquor, though, he'd joked. And in front of it was a small table and three comfortable chairs. The bathroom was on the other side of the table and chairs. Behind her on the far wall was a large window with the drapes closed, and a television was atop a chest of drawers across from the bed. They called it the apartment, but it resembled a hotel room more.

She grabbed her toiletries and pajamas from her backpack and went into the

bathroom. There was no tub, just an okay sized shower stall. She turned the water hot and then disrobed. As she'd planned, she stood beneath the downpour for a long time.

The bed was comfortable, the sheets crisp, expensive. They held a hint of lavender. She drifted to sleep immediately.

She was surprised when she woke up to find it was nearly ten a.m. And she was starving. She made a cup of coffee and unwrapped a large chocolate chip muffin that was on the shelf. There were even individual creamers in a variety of flavors in a basket in the cabinet. Carter had said Angel kept the room stocked with comforts for guests. She'd have to thank Angel if she saw her today.

She'd charged her phone overnight. She grabbed it and reviewed emails, both personal and work, while she enjoyed her coffee and muffin. It surprised her, but she did feel very relaxed. After her second cup of coffee, she messaged Carter to let him know she was awake.

His reply came right away. He was obviously awake already, too.

I hope you slept well. Can I get you something for breakfast?

Thank you, not necessary. There are packages of muffins here and coffee. I already ate. What time is the meeting with your boss?

When can I come up? I really hate texting.

She smiled seeing his message. She preferred talking on the phone or in person as well.

Give me ten minutes to get dressed.

In his office, Tessman called Angel. “Hey, Becca Elliot just messaged me that she’s awake. When can we get in to see Shepherd?”

“He can see you in twenty minutes, if that’s not too soon,” Angel offered.

“That should work, thank you. I’ll let Jackson and Brielle know,” Tessman said.

“Bring her by my desk after the meeting,” Angel said.

“Will do, thanks, Angel.”

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He sent Jackson and Brielle invitations to the meeting. He'd already spoken to them both that morning and given them a heads up that he was working on scheduling it and why. The revelation that her mother had been one of the founders and the chief research chemist at Well-Life still floored him. Jackson agreed with him that it was more than coincidence that both her mother and brother-in-law had what was described as the same moral compass and were risk adverse. And they were both dead. Moreover, the bit about her brother-in-law, that he should have gotten her mother's position but didn't, sent up red flags for Jackson.

Tessman trotted up the stairs to the ninth floor and was outside the door ten minutes later. He knocked once.

"Hi," she said after she'd swung the door open. She stepped back, inviting him in.

"Hi, how'd you sleep last night?"

"Good, soundly all night. I think I slept the best I have since it happened," she said.

He noticed that with this statement, her mood instantly changed, and she suddenly looked incredibly sad. She obviously tried to push it away. She clutched her hands together in front of herself. She always seemed so normal that he had to remind himself of the horrible loss she'd just suffered. He reached out and took hold of her hands. "Hey, I get it and it's okay that you slept well. You were exhausted."

"Thanks," she said, taking a step far enough away to break the contact. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked, motioning to the Keurig.

“No thank you. I’ve had a few cups already.” He noticed she had a half cup on the kitchen table with two muffin wrappers. “But don’t let me stop you from finishing yours.”

She retook her seat at the table. “Join me?” She motioned to one of the other chairs.

Tessman sat across from her, watching her school her sadness. She forced a pleasant expression. “We have a meeting with Shepherd in ten minutes. Will that work for you?” He noticed that not only was she dressed in a dark purple girly T-shirt and jeans, but her hair was brushed smooth, and she had a trace of makeup on. Besides the momentary sadness she’d allowed to escape, she looked rested, put together, and beautiful. He had to admit to himself that she impressed him. She was intelligent and was dealing with the murders of her family with courage and determination that the guilty would be found.

She took a big drink of her coffee. “Yes. Let me just finish this and brush my teeth.”

“His office is down on five. No rush.”

“So, I Googled him, Colonel Samuel Shepherd, United States Army. It was hard to find information on him.”

“Yes, I’m sure he’s had most of it scrubbed,” Tessman said.

“What does that mean?”

“That most if not all of his career was classified top secret, so there should be no record of him or the work he’s done. And anything that managed to get out there about him, he would have made it disappear.”

“What should I expect during this meeting?”

“I’m sure he’ll ask you to sign the nondisclosure agreement. And we’ll recap everything that happened yesterday and where we are on the investigation.”

She nodded her head. “Okay.”

“Were you able to make notes of everything we talked about last night?”

“Yes, I have them here on my phone.” She tapped her iPhone, which sat on the table beside her. “I was also able to recall a few names of people at Well-Life that my mom had mentioned over the years. And I remembered that my brother-in-law went through my mom’s home office after the plane crash. He brought all her files into the office. So, I didn’t even see any work-related documents then. But seriously, Carter, do you really think my sister and her family’s murders were committed by someone at Well-Life or was related to anything at work?”

“Becca, it’s the only possible motive we have on our radar. And I want to warn you, Jackson and I are going to ask our boss that we look at the plane crash that killed your parents to be sure it was an accident and nothing suspicious.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Her parents’ accident had been just that, an accident. No one had ever thought that it was anything but a tragic accident. “The NTSB did an investigation and found nothing suspicious.” Becca finished her coffee in one gulp and then stood. “I have to brush my teeth. I’ll be right out.”

He watched her enter the bathroom and close the door.

Becca would admit that she felt intimidated by Colonel Sam Shepherd. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, who wore a dress shirt better than anyone she knew. He looked solid and strong, and he threw off an air of authority that would make a judge

cower. She could easily envision him in a military dress uniform with many ribbons and medals.

She already sat at the conference table in his office with Carter, Jackson, and Brielle. She watched Shepherd finish what he was doing at his stand-up desk before he crossed the room and joined them at the conference table. He had a manilla folder in his hand. He'd introduced himself with a handshake when they'd entered his office, but had retreated back behind his desk for the last four minutes, typing on his computer keyboard. Becca assumed he was completing an email that he'd started before they'd entered.

"Thank you for your patience while I finished that," he said. "Miss Elliot, Becca, I'm sure you understand confidentiality and promise it with your clients."

Becca nodded. She eyed the folder. She'd bet anything a nondisclosure agreement was in it. "I do." Her gaze flickered to Carter and then back to Colonel Shepherd. "Is that an NDA?"

The corner of Shepherd's lips ticked up. "It is. Unless you have no questions regarding what you saw last night?"

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“You mean their federal badges and the security you have in place to enter this building through the private parking garage?”

Shepherd nodded. “I am prepared to fully read you in, provided you sign our NDA.” He passed it across the table to her.

She took her time and read every word, unconcerned that the others sat, waiting. It was more strongly worded than any NDA she’d ever read or written. Federal prosecution would be the penalty for disclosing any information covered by the NDA, which was basically everything about Shepherd Security and the people associated with the organization.

When she gazed up from the paper and made eye contact with Shepherd, she nodded. “Obviously, I already know things about your organization that would be covered under this document.”

Shepherd nodded as well. “In order to properly protect you last night, you were exposed to classified information regarding this organization.”

Becca picked up the pen that had been provided and she signed the document. She fully understood the document and the ramifications of signing it. She slid it back across the table to Shepherd. “I thank you and your organization for accepting my case and for the assistance last night. And yes, I have many questions.”

“This agency is a hybrid. We have staff that carry federal credentials and badges and those who do not. We work federal, military, and civilian cases with all our assets. There is no segmentation of our cases or our staff,” Shepherd began.

Becca processed his words, wondering how that could be.

“We have a multi-tiered reporting structure to the military and federal authorities whose cases we work and who sanction our missions,” Shepherd continued. “What this means is that we take on jobs that other entities can’t or won’t. And we have a greater latitude in working those cases, which makes this agency more effective.”

The words military and federal were not lost on Becca. “Detective Davis told me the majority of your personnel are former military,” she said, suddenly wondering if former was the correct term.

“Yes, the majority of our staff came from military units, predominantly from the Special Forces. The training and skills possessed by Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, Green Berets, Delta Force, and Marine Raiders make them ideal operatives of this agency.”

Operatives? Marine Raider? Her gaze went to Carter. He wasn’t just a Marine. He was a member of the elite Marine Raider unit. Jackson sat beside him. She wondered what unit he’d been in. Then her stare went back to Shepherd. “I have to wonder why you even bother with civilian cases.”

Again, Shepherd’s lips ticked up. “We evaluate the cases presented to decide if our special skills are required or if any run-of-the-mill detective or security agency can handle and resolve them. And of course, we reject any that are unfounded or would duplicate the efforts of local law enforcement. We are quite particular in regard to the cases we accept from civilians.”

“Then I am truly honored you took my case. After last night, I’m even more convinced that I’m right and my sister’s family was murdered by someone other than my brother-in-law. If the police reopen the case, will you please keep working it, too?”

“I already spoke with Detective Davis this morning. He has referred it back to the coroner with the new information from the crime scene report regarding the lack of GSR on Nick DeSoto. And he had some additional information for us. The tox screen had just come back. All four members of your sister’s family had lorazepam in their systems. With this news, he’s sure the case will be reopened.”

“Lorazepam?” Becca asked. “That’s a sedative?”

Brielle spoke up. “Yes. One could argue that Nick DeSoto sedated his family to make it easier to kill them, and that he took it himself as it is commonly prescribed for anxiety. But no one in that house had a prescription for it.”

“So that begs the question of who obtained it and fed it to that family,” Jackson said. “And how was it given to them?”

“Nicole fought. She ran. Whoever drugged her didn’t give her enough to put her to sleep,” Becca lamented.

“How fast does it work?” Tessman asked.

“Twenty to thirty minutes,” Brielle answered. “And it comes in tablets and liquid.”

“So, it could have been slipped into their food, and they may never have known,” Jackson said.

“Their dessert,” Becca said. “They usually had dessert right before the girls got ready for bed. That would explain why they were in their beds. They were sedated from it when they were shot.” This scenario would make her feel a little bit better. The girls could have been sound asleep and heard and saw nothing, hopefully felt nothing.

“There were no signs of torture on Nick or Nicole DeSoto,” Jackson reminded

everyone. “If the intruders were looking for something, they surely would have left marks on them, trying to get it. This isn’t adding up.”

“No, it isn’t,” Shepherd agreed. “There’s something else going on. Becca, Tessman says you have information on Well-Life Pharmaceuticals related to your mother that hasn’t been disclosed to us or the police yet.”

“I didn’t think it was relevant,” she said. And she still didn’t. “But yes, my mother was one of three people who founded the company. You have no record of it, as she practiced under her maiden name. She was an MD and did cancer research before Well-Life was born.” She proceeded to go over the information and relationships at Well-Life Pharmaceuticals that she’d told Carter about the night before, plus the additional notes she’d made. “When she died, my brother-in-law should have gotten her position as head of research, but he didn’t.”

“Brielle, have the Digital Team take another run at Well-Life’s department structure and staff. We need the names of anyone Nick or Nicole DeSoto worked with directly. And see what you can dig up on the plane crash that killed Becca’s parents.” Then Shepherd’s glance shifted to Tessman and Jackson. “After she has something, badge your way in for a second visit. It’s unlikely you’ll get access to specific individuals but if you can get into talk with their head of HR and make a case for seeing the personnel files for both of them. I’ll work on getting you a court order.”

“I can help draft the probable cause justifications as well as the legal precedence for it, if you’d like,” Becca offered. “If your own in-house counsel doesn’t have time.”

Shepherd didn’t react or respond. He didn’t require such things. One phone call to one of his federal contacts and warrants magically appeared.

“Aren’t search warrants usually done on the prosecution or police side of the law?” Tessman asked.

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“While I was in college, I interned several summers with the Chicago Police Department, helping them complete their affidavits to obtain search warrants, amongst other things. I was considering a career in the District Attorney’s office while I was in law school,” she answered.

“Really?” Tessman said.

“Yes. Do you think I dreamed of writing wills and setting up trusts when I decided to be a lawyer?”

Everyone at the table chuckled with her.

“I’ll let you know if assistance is needed,” Shepherd said. “What we will need is for you to go through everything you packed up at the residence with fresh eyes in search of whatever they may have been looking for. We’ll have it all moved to this building.” His gaze shifted to Tessman and Jackson. “You can set her up in the rec room.”

Both men nodded.

“Sure,” Becca said. “I honestly don’t think anything is there. I didn’t see anything work-related in what I packed up.”

“They were looking for something, something important enough to get killed over,” Jackson said.

“The man you shot lawyered up,” Shepherd said. “He’s not talking.”

Everyone at the table either cursed or muttered similar sentiments.

“Where are the boxes the police returned?” Jackson asked.

“My car, which is at the dealership for a recall. I almost forgot. They never got back to me yesterday regarding it being completed. I’ll have to call them and arrange to get my car back.”

“You’ll need to go through everything the police returned to you. Our Digital Team is already combing through the laptops and cell phones,” Shepherd said.

“Yeah, I didn’t have the chance to look at the boxes. I was leaving the house to go to my sister’s place when Detective Davis stopped at my house, so I just sat the boxes in the back of my car.”

“When you call the dealership, see if you can have someone else pick it up,” Shepherd said. He nodded at Tessman and Jackson.

“One last thing,” Brielle said. “I’ve still not found any trace of Nick DeSoto’s siblings. There’s no place else I can search.”

“I don’t think those men last night were sent by them, and neither was Nick’s brother. They were way out of his league,” Becca said.

“We’ll cross them off the list and focus on Well-Life for now,” Shepherd said. “Keep me informed of your progress, team.”

Becca watched Carter, Jackson, and Brielle all stand. Evidently, the meeting was over. She stood as well. “Thank you, Colonel Shepherd.”

He nodded and then also rose.

Juliette

Becca waited in the room she's slept in at the Shepherd Security building while Carter and Jackson took a few other men to her sister's house to retrieve all the bins she'd packed up. Sitting at the table, she opened her laptop to get some legal work done. Brielle shared the password for one of the secure internet connections within the building with her.

As she reviewed the will she was working on for one of her clients, her mind wandered to her youthful desire to work for the District Attorney's office. She hadn't thought about that in years. Her decision to forgo that route was sound at the time, but she wondered if it may be a better choice for her now. The thought of helping to put criminals away was appealing. And honestly, she found writing wills and creating trusts to be boring work.

She called the dealership, and her car wouldn't be ready until later that afternoon. They'd call.

Her office used Teams and now that she was logged into the firm's portal, a message popped up from Sue, who was the front desk receptionist and her friend.

Heads up, the partners are asking when you plan to be back in the office.

Becca groaned. They'd been very patient and accepted her need for time off. And it wasn't like she wasn't working at all. She was. She hadn't missed any deadlines. She stayed in communication with them and clients. Most of what she did could be done from home. They were just old-school in that they wanted everyone at their desks in the office.

Thanks, I'll get in touch with them. There is still so much to do at my sister's house and with her estate. It's overwhelming.

I honestly can't even imagine.

Anything else I should know?

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If I were you, I'd commit to being in the office at least 2 days a week from now on.

Becca groaned again. She couldn't tell Sue, the partners, or anyone that she was basically in hiding, being protected, because someone tried to kill her the night before. She laughed aloud at the absurdity of it.

Thanks

She closed the window and ended the conversation there. She finished the work she had and emailed the client her will for review. Then she drafted an email to the partners.

Carl and Brad,

I have just emailed the revised will to the client, Janet Neal. I anticipate this version will meet with her approval. Once that is confirmed, I will email her the invoice and copy Sue in for payment.

I appreciate the flexibility you have given me with the extraordinary events surrounding my sister and her family's deaths and the need for me to settle their estate. Unfortunately, new events that occurred last evening will most likely result in the police re-opening the investigation in search of the real killer(s). I am involved in the investigation in an advisory role and will have to dedicate a percentage of my time to help the authorities. I will need to continue to have a reduction in my workload and work from home for the foreseeable future. If this is not acceptable, please place me on an extended leave of absence, and if that is not possible, please accept my resignation.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Elliot

She read it over several times to see how it felt. Did she really want to resign? She knew she couldn't go into the office, and actually, even if she wasn't being protected, she didn't want to. Her days of commuting downtown and working for the firm were over. There were other jobs out there where she could practice law her way, from home, or with a reduced in-office presence. And even the type of law she wanted to practice had changed. She was sure she no longer wanted to focus solely on Wills and Trusts.

Satisfied she was doing what she truly wanted, she hit send. Then she logged off and closed the lid to her laptop.

Shortly after, there was a knock at the door. "Come in. It's unlocked," she called.

The door opened and Angel took a step in. "Hi. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Becca stood. "Hello. Not at all. Angel, I'm told you keep this room stocked for guests and I wanted to tell you thank you. It has all the comforts of home, and I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. It's nothing," she said dismissively. "It's hard to be away from home, especially when you're not expecting it, and when it's under dire circumstances. If you need anything that isn't here, just let me know and I will make sure you have it."

"Thank you, but there's nothing. You've literally thought of everything right down to coffee creamers and toiletries in the bathroom. You even have a basket of packaged items, including toothbrushes."

“Often people end up in this room with nothing but the clothes on their backs. There are even phone chargers for most phones in the top drawer of the nightstand.”

Becca wasn't sure what to say about that. “Well, again, thank you. The room is quite comfortable.”

“The team will be back shortly with your bins. I've come to escort you to the room you'll set up in. It's just down the hallway from my desk. And I wanted to be sure you had everything you need in here.”

Becca grabbed her phone and followed Angel out of the room. They rode the elevator down to the fifth floor. Becca recognized the office directly in front of the elevator door, tucked in the corner as Colonel Shepherd's office. They walked down the hallway, passing the kitchen.

“By the way, I've ordered Italian for lunch. It'll be here around noon. And we still have some left over sandwich spirals, salad, and Chinese I'll put out,” Angel said. “I'll make sure to get you when it arrives, but if you're hungry earlier, please feel free to help yourself to whatever is there. Some people eat in the kitchen, others make plates and bring them back to their offices. It depends on their workload for the day.”

“Yes, Carter said you order in most days. That's quite a benefit for any job! We had some of the Chinese last night. It was good. Yu's is one of my favorite Chinese places in the area.”

Angel smiled. “Mine too. Jackson and I ate when he got home last night. When he's in town, I tend to cook in the crockpot so that it can be kept warm as his schedule is so volatile.”

“That's right, he's your husband. I am so sorry he had to come help me last night and interfere with your dinner and night,” Becca said.

They had stepped into the rec room. “Becca, it’s okay. It was important. Jackson told me all that happened to you last night. My God,” she exclaimed, clutching her chest. “You were attacked. I’m so glad the team got to you in time. Trust me when I tell you none of us ever has an issue when our guys are pulled away when someone’s life is in danger. We all know it comes with the territory.”

Becca was impressed by her attitude. “Jackson said you have kids.”

“Yes, our son is three and our daughter is nearly one.” She smiled a big, loving grin. “Well, here is the rec room. We’ll have the guys stack the bins beside the ping-pong table and you can unpack and sort items on it if you want.” She grabbed a high stool and pulled it over beside the table. “This is the right height for you to sit on while you do that if you don’t want to stand. And if you decide to stand, let me know and I’ll grab you an anti-fatigue mat to stand on.”

“That’s great, thanks.”

“And you saw the bathroom near the kitchen, didn’t you? Feel free to move around this floor.” Her phone chimed. She looked at the screen. “Ah, good. They’re back. They’ll be up in a few minutes. I need to go back to my desk. I’ll let you know when lunch gets here.”

Becca waited and five minutes later, Carter and Jackson entered the room. Each of them pushed a flat cart stacked with the bins she’d packed at her sister’s house. “Okay, looks like I have a lot of work to do.” She helped them unstack them beside the ping-pong table. “I was wondering if Detective Davis had the place locked down with it being a new crime scene.” Even as she said it, she shook her head in disbelief that it was.

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“He wasn’t thrilled with the idea of us taking them, but we didn’t give him much of a choice,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, we kind of reminded him they dropped the ball on this investigation,” Tessman added.

“Well, it’s true,” she said. “So, are the police officially investigating my sister’s family’s murders?” It was odd to her how normal it felt to say the words. Saying the horrific and impossible out loud shouldn’t be as easy as it was now. It had to be because she’d said it so many times.

“Yes, the coroner has reopened the investigation,” Tessman said. “We did promise Davis he’d be our first call if we found anything in these bins. He was there when we were and the place was crawling with cops who were searching every inch of the house for anything the intruders could have been looking for.”

“For the life of me, I don’t know what it could be. The one man said even if I found it, I probably wouldn’t know what it was.”

“I’d say go over everything and scrutinize it to be sure it isn’t anything other than what it appears,” Jackson said.

“We’ll be back in a few hours,” Tessman said. “We’re going to pay another visit to Well-Life.”

“Good luck,” Becca said.

“You too,” Tessman said.

Becca watched them both leave the room. Then she got to work, going back through what she’d just packed the day before.

In the car, Jackson and Tessman drove in silence until they pulled into the large parking lot of Well-Life Pharmaceuticals. After Jackson put the vehicle in park, he spoke. “You know, there is one possible motive we haven’t discussed yet, and I didn’t want to bring it up in front of Becca.”

“Her brother-in-law was a chemist,” Tessman said, believing he knew where Jackson was going. “The cartels are notorious for killing the entire family of an enemy.”

“Yeah,” Jackson agreed. “But there were no unaccounted-for funds in their accounts. If he was cooking up drugs, where are the proceeds?”

“Offshore accounts? That’s where I’d put it,” Tessman said.

Jackson raised an eyebrow behind his sunglasses. “Given it that much thought, have you?”

Tessman chuckled. “Just saying. Knowing how easily U.S. bank accounts can be checked, I’d either stash it off shore or in a shell company account.”

“That could have been what they were looking for, any documentation on that account,” Jackson said.

“I’ll send Becca a text and have her look for something of that nature without telling her what we’re thinking.”

“I’ll loop Brielle in on this line of inquiry as well,” Jackson volunteered.

Once both men were done sending their text messages, they exited the vehicle and walked to the main entrance. Once they stood in front of the receptionist, Tessman held up his badge. “Agent Tessman, FBI. We don’t have an appointment, but we’d like to speak with either someone in your Human Resources Department or the head of your Research and Development Department.”

“And eventually, the head of your Marketing Department too,” Jackson added.

The young woman behind the elevated counter looked flustered. “Um, I’m sorry, as I’m sure you understand they are all extremely busy and see no one without an appointment.”

Jackson pointed at the waiting area where a half-dozen people were seated. “We’ll just wait and talk with the others to pass the time.”

The woman looked horrified. “Do you have a warrant?” she asked a beat later.

“It’s in process, but we’d prefer to have a friendly chat and not need to serve you with a warrant because that’s a lot of paperwork and we’ll be taking files and all sorts of things then, which we really don’t need to. We just need five minutes of someone’s time to ask a few questions,” Jackson said.

“But we can have a warrant in about fifteen minutes if we need one,” Tessman added.

She rose from her seat. “Follow me. I’ll have you wait in the conference room, and I’ll get someone from Human Resources right away.” She led them to a hallway through a set of double doors on the left. Within, the first door opened into a small conference room. “Please, have a seat and someone will be right with you.” She closed the door on her way out.

Jackson flipped his wrist up and gazed at the face of his watch. “I’ll give them seven minutes.”

Tessman chuckled. “And then what? We take a walk and find the people we want to talk to ourselves?”

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“Or wait in the lobby and make it known to all their visitors the FBI is here,” Jackson said with a laugh. “She was horrified by the thought of us talking to anyone.”

Five minutes later, a woman in her sixties dressed in a black pant suit came into the room. Her face had a lot of work done to it, and her lips looked like a recent Botox session had gone a bit wrong. “Hello, I’m Shirley Craig, V.P. of Human Resources.”

Neither man had sat. Tessman again displayed his badge. “Hello Ms. Craig. Agents Jackson and Tessman, FBI. Thank you for taking the time to see us. We’ll be brief.”

“I’d appreciate that.” She motioned to the table. “Please sit.”

They all sat, Shirley Craig on one side of the table, the two men on the other.

“We’re investigating the deaths of Nick and Nicole DeSoto and their children,” Jackson said.

Shirley Craig looked confused. “I thought that was ruled a murder-suicide?”

“New information has come to light, and the investigation has been reopened. Nick DeSoto did not kill his family,” Tessman stated as fact.

This news visibly upset Shirley Craig. “And why is the FBI investigating it and not the Schaumburg Police Department like the first time?”

“I’m sorry, we’re not at liberty to say,” Jackson said. “We’d like to see their personnel files and speak with their immediate supervisors and coworkers or be

provided their names to follow up with them outside of work.”

Shirley Craig appeared shocked. “I, I can’t provide that information. Do you have a warrant?”

“We can have one in about ten minutes,” Jackson said. “We’d prefer you cooperate with any part of our request. Let’s start with their personnel files. Is there a reason you wouldn’t allow us to see them?”

“I’d have to take the time to redact our confidential information. Nick was a lead researcher and worked on the development of proprietary drugs.”

“Then Nicole’s file. Surely there isn’t confidential information in a marketing associate’s file,” Tessman said.

“I’d have to review the file to ensure that is the case.”

Jackson and Tessman exchanged side glances.

“You do realize that if we get that warrant, we see all the info in those files and any other info we deem relevant,” Jackson said. “We will take a lot more than we actually need.”

Shirley Craig’s face hardened with a stare that told them she dared them to do that.

“How long have you been employed at Well-Life?” Tessman asked.

She looked disturbed that she was being asked about herself. “Ten years.”

“Then you knew Nicole DeSoto’s mother, Dr. Madeline Fuller.”

“Yes, her death was a great loss to the organization,” Shirley said.

“Why didn’t Nick DeSoto get promoted to her position after her death? We were told he would have been her choice and was in line for it.”

“You were told wrong,” Shirley said, looking flustered. “He was never considered for the management position.”

“So, a lead researcher wasn’t considered for a management position,” Tessman said, reminding her that she’d just said that Nick was a lead researcher.

“Not Nick DeSoto,” she said with no explanation.

“Why not?” Tessman pressed after a pause when she did not continue.

She blew out a huff. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but Nick was excellent at what he did, but he wasn’t a people person. He was actually very abrasive with his coworkers, no one we’d want in management.”

Tessman knew they’d ask Becca about that, about all of Nick’s personality traits. “Were there any specific incidents noted in his personnel file?”

“No, nothing noted. Madeline would never have allowed that to happen,” she answered.

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“Would his immediate supervisor or coworkers have any examples of his abrasive personality to share?” Tessman asked.

“We’re interested in speaking with them to also see if they noticed anything different about him in the days leading up to the murders,” Jackson added.

“The police already talked with them,” Shirley moaned. “If it wasn’t Nick, who did it? Couldn’t it have just been random violence? Someone broke in and killed them.”

“And made it look like Nick killed them and then killed himself?” Tessman questioned.

“Some psychopathic serial killer who did it just to see if he could get away with it,” Shirley suggested.

“Unlikely,” Tessman countered with no explanation.

“This next question is merely an inquiry. We have absolutely nothing to even suggest this but we’re looking at all possibilities,” Jackson began. “Is there any chance Nick DeSoto was doing side work for any other organization or for his own personal gain?”

“Moonlighting?” she said with a gasp. “I suppose it’s possible, but I don’t know why he would. He and Nicole made more than enough money here at Well-Life and I know Nicole inherited quite a bit from her parent’s estate.”

“What happened with Madeline Fuller’s interest or ownership in the company after

her death? Did her children inherit it?" Tessman asked.

"No, per the agreement the partners made at the organization's inception, her share of ownership was divided equally between the two remaining partners."

"That would be James Standish and Marvin Ackman," Tessman said.

"Yes," she agreed.

"So, if one of the other partners dies, their full share goes to the last remaining partner, correct?" Tessman asked.

"Yes," Shirley confirmed.

"And if they were both to die together, what would happen then?" Jackson asked.

"Per the terms of the agreement made by the owners at the organization's inception, ownership would then be an employee-owned company."

"How does that work?" Tessman asked. He'd never heard of such a thing.

Shirley's face scrunched up in an exasperated scowl. "I'm not going to explain the principle to you. Google it when you get the chance. Now, if there are no other questions, we're finished here until you have a warrant."

Jackson checked his phone and smiled. He held his phone up. "I actually have it right here. We'll take those two personnel files now, please."

Shirley Craig's face turned pale. "I require a printed copy."

Jackson swiped on his screen. "I see several printers in the building in the print menu.

Which shall I send it to?"

Shirley abruptly stood. "Come with me to my office. We'll do it there."

Tessman shot Jackson a satisfied smile as they followed Shirley Craig from the conference room.

Indigo

"Lunch is here," Angel announced from the doorway, bringing Becca's attention to her.

"Thank you," Becca said, looking up from the stack of papers she was going through. "I'll probably come grab something in about a half hour. I want to finish this bin. It'll still be out, won't it?"

"Yes, I usually leave it out for an hour. Feel free to come to the kitchen whenever you'd like," Angel said.

"Thank you, I will," Becca answered. Then she got back to work.

About an hour later her stomach growled and she figured a break from scrutinizing every piece of paper in the bins would do her good. She was sure by now that no one would be left in the kitchen, not that she knew how many people worked in the building who would be getting lunch. She just preferred to stay out of their way.

She made her way through the hallway. Passing Angel's desk, which she was not at, she continued to the kitchen. There, she found Angel, two other women, and a little girl who was probably around four or five. The little girl sat far back on the kitchen table and one of the other women, a stunning woman who was very pregnant, adjusted an ankle bracelet on the little girl.

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“Sweetie, it hasn’t been on long. It hasn’t gotten tighter. You’re just not used to it yet,” she said.

“That’s what I told her. She needs to give it more time to get used to it,” the other woman said.

“It has to be tight to keep you safe,” the first woman said. Becca watched her insert two fingers beneath the metal chain. Then she looked up and saw Becca standing in the doorway. “Hello,” she said with a smile, which made her look even more beautiful. “You must be Becca.”

“I am,” she answered, her gaze darting to Angel.

“I’m Michaela. I work here,” the pregnant woman said, taking a step towards Becca with her hand reaching towards her.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you,” Becca said, shaking her hand.

“And this is Rae and her daughter, Lilly,” Angel introduced.

“Hello,” Becca said, glancing their way.

“Hi, how are you?” Rae greeted.

“Good, thank you,” Becca said, a pleasantry. No, she wasn’t good, but she wouldn’t go into any detail. Her gaze landed on Michaela’s belly. “When are you due?”

Michaela caressed over her large baby bump. “Not for three more weeks,” she moaned.

“I doubt you’ll go that long,” Angel said. “I have the earliest date in the baby pool. I have you going next week.”

“That’d be great by me,” Michaela said.

“Will Lambchop be back in town by then?” Rae asked.

“Yes, he’s on his last mission until after she comes. He’ll be assigned to the office beginning Saturday when his team gets back,” Michaela answered.

Becca surmised Lambchop was the baby’s father, Michaela’s husband based on the rock nestled beside the diamond crusted band on the ring finger of her left hand. Becca would be afraid to wear something that cost as much as that set had to have. She watched Rae replace the sock and shoe on the little girl’s foot noticing the diamond solitaire on the ring finger of her left hand.

“Are you coming to get something to eat?” Angel asked. “I was just going to put it away.”

“Yes, if that’s okay,” Becca said.

“Of course, it is,” Angel answered.

“I need to get a plate also,” Michaela said. “Rae, will you and Lilly be joining us?”

“Thanks, but we already ate, and I need to get Miss Lilly home for an afternoon rest time. We don’t officially nap any longer, but we take an afternoon rest. Right sweetie?”

“I don’t nap anymore,” Lilly said. “But Mommy says it’s good for me to lay down and close my eyes for a few minutes.”

“I love to nap,” Michaela said, beaming a grin at Lilly. “I’m going to go back up to my office and lie down after lunch.”

“You are?” Lilly asked with wide eyes, making all the women chuckle.

“Yes, I am,” Michaela confirmed.

“Come on, sweetie, we should go and let these ladies get back to work. Thank you for checking on that, Michaela,” Rae said.

“No problem. Better today than after Stephanie comes and I’m on maternity leave for a few weeks.”

“Months,” Angel corrected her.

“We’ll see,” Michaela said.

“Nice to meet you,” Rae said again to Becca. “See you later, Angel.” Then she ushered Lilly from the room after both Michaela and Angel gave Lilly a hug and said goodbye to them both.

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Michaela fixed her gaze on Becca. “I’m planning to eat here. Would you like to join me?”

“That would be nice, thank you,” Becca replied.

“I’ll be back in to put everything away in about fifteen minutes,” Angel said.

Becca watched her leave.

“Angel gave me the cliff notes version of your case and I know that you signed the NDA and Shepherd read you in on the agency,” Michaela said, surprising Becca. “And she also said you’re an attorney.”

“Yes, to all three,” Becca said. She followed Michaela to the counter where the food was lined up in a buffet.

Michaela handed her a paper plate. “What do you do here at the agency? If I may ask.”

“I play with new technologies, try to improve them, and implement them with the teams,” she answered as she served herself a plate-full of food.

“I’m not even sure what that means,” Becca confessed.

“For one, I invented that ankle bracelet you saw on Lilly’s ankle. It’s basically a compact version of an AirTag. That heart charm has the tech in it and the chain is made from tungsten, which is one of the strongest metals out there. We put them on

all children of agency personnel. I have to add links when it gets tight. There's no clasp to prevent them being taken off by anyone but me or someone with the tool to do so here at the agency." She smiled. "I could see you had questions about it."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be nosy, but yes, I was curious when I saw you examining the ankle bracelet. And that's really incredible that you invent those kinds of things."

"I also get to mess with weapon modifications and explosives." She grinned a big smile when she saw Becca's reaction to that. "Which is very cool. My most recent project has been working on fortifying our drones, so they withstand inclement weather better."

"Wow, that is pretty cool," Becca agreed.

Michaela laughed. "I crashed about a half-dozen in the process. That wasn't so cool."

"I bet not." They set their plates onto the table and took seats. "Colonel Shepherd told me the majority of his personnel came from the military. Did you serve?" She couldn't envision this beautiful woman in uniform.

"Me, no. I've been a lab rat my whole life, literally. Both my parents were engineers who worked for the Department of Defense and other U.S. intelligence agencies. That was how I made it here."

Becca nodded, digesting that. "Do you like working here?"

"Yes, there's no place I'd rather be. Shepherd's the best to work for. I'll be able to bring my baby with me to work as often as I like as long as she doesn't interfere with what I'm working on, and I'll be able to work from home if what I'm working on allows for it. There is always a documentation portion that goes along with my job, which I've done from home in the past and will still be able to. Angel has brought

both her kids to the office and Brielle brings her son at least once a week. She generally works from home a few days a week too, so she only has to have a babysitter a few days a month. I'm planning the same. I like that Shepherd is so flexible."

"That's great." She was surprised to hear that Colonel Shepherd was so accommodating. She would have thought that he'd have been a strict military man. "So, you're having a little girl. Are you telling what her name will be?"

Michaela finished chewing her bite. "Oh, yeah, this baby's name was decided long before I even got pregnant and everyone here at the agency knows. Her name is Stephanie and had she been a boy, it would have been Stephan. She's named to honor my husband's best friend, Stephan Arnott. They were in bootcamp together, both volunteered to be SEALs, and went through their training together. They were assigned to the same SEAL Team and served together in the Middle East, where Stephan died. Landon told me about their special friendship and told me if he ever had a child, it would be named after his friend. But I get to name the next one," she added with a smile.

"That's a very special name for your child."

"It is," she agreed. "Angel told me you'll probably be around the building for a few days while the team resolves the threat against you. Will you be able to work from here?"

"I have been working from home since my sister and her family were killed. I emailed the partners this morning to tell them I need a few more weeks to work from home."

"You must have a pretty flexible work situation then too," Michaela said.

“I’m not sure how much longer they’ll be flexible. I may have resigned from my job this morning.”

“May have?” Angel asked from the doorway. “Sorry, I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I couldn’t help but hear you.”

“It’s fine,” Becca waved her off. “Yeah, I think their flexibility has been stretched as far as it will go. I heard from our office manager that the partners were wanting me back in the office, which obviously right now can’t happen. And in all honesty, I don’t think I want to go back.”

Another woman entered the room. “Hi,” she greeted everyone. “Angel, can I have a word. I need to vent and need you to talk me down.”

Angel glanced at the food, which still lined the counter.

“We’ll get it put away,” Michaela said. “If you need anything I can help you with, Briana, just let me know.”

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“Thanks,” she said before she left the kitchen, followed out by Angel.

Becca had finished her meal. She rose from the table and began putting the food back into the refrigerator. Michaela finished eating and tossed her plate by the time Becca had it all put away.

“I’m going to go to my office and take that nap,” Michaela said. “I wasn’t joking about that.”

“Yeah, I better get back to work,” Becca said. “It was nice talking with you. Best wishes for the baby.”

“Thanks,” Michaela said. She headed left when she exited the conference room, Becca turned right.

Angel and the other woman were not near Angel’s desk. Becca passed by it and returned to the rec room where she’d been working. This time, the door within that room that had been closed all morning, and had the name placard J. Cooper, was open. As Becca approached, she heard Angel and the other woman’s voices. She stopped before she reached the doorway, not intending to listen but after hearing the first few exchanges, she couldn’t pull herself away.

“I mean, I know Shepherd is right. I’m just frustrated,” Briana said.

“Hon, you haven’t been with us that long. It’s only natural you’d feel frustrated not working your missions your way.”

“I knew when I agreed to come under the Shepherd Security umbrella that I’d have to change how I operated, especially when it came to women with children, and this is the first referralsince then that involves children. I just can’t sit back and wait, knowing that my client could be killed by her husband at any time. It was easier to just pull new identities for them and make them disappear.”

“How long does he want you to wait?” Angel asked.

“Until we can plant cameras and mics in the house and get proof that will stand up in court that this guy is an abusive assbat. I want this guy more than arrested. I want him convicted and sent away for a long time, certainly until those kids are over eighteen. I’ve seen the legal system screw over the abused and let these monsters out and even order visitation with their minor children. Just divorcing someone who is this abusive isn’t enough.”

“And what are your concerns with doing it Shepherd’s way?” Angel asked.

“That he’ll kill her before we have other evidence. And if he finds out about the cameras in the house, he’ll kill her someplace else. I even asked Shepherd to let me be there with our client as a houseguest who she’s given permission to stay at the house, so I can protect her.”

“That sounds like it could put you in danger,” Angel said.

“I can protect myself. If this guy or anyone else ever laid a hand on me, it would be the last thing they ever did.”

“You could ask Shepherd to assign one of the guys to go with you,” Angel suggested.

“One with a badge, given that you haven’t earned your FBI creds yet.”

“Ugh!” Briana moaned. “I know it’s going to take maybe six more months to get

them. And I'm really okay with whoever Shepherd assigns to work my cases with me. Everyone's been great. I'm just frustrated I can't move fast enough to help this woman legally."

Becca took a step past the open door. She gave them a small, guilty grin. "I guess it was my turn to eavesdrop. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. There are a lot of legal avenues available to help women in abusive relationships. And Colonel Shepherd is right, cameras and mics, that one of the residents of the house agrees to have installed, that capture the abuse is one of the best ways to prosecute the abuser. But that has to be combined with an order of protection filed immediately at the time of their arrest in conjunction with divorce papers being served. It's a highly coordinated effort. And then the obvious continuation of the campaign is to have protection in place to catch the accused in the act of violating the protection order. That is the ideal situation that most abused women can't do because they can't find someone to provide that protection, and the cost involved."

"Straight from a lawyer's mouth!" Angel said.

"I've done a little family law. I'm not an expert by any means," Becca said.

"I bet you could be with a little more experience," Angel said. "By the way, Becca, this is Briana Woods, one of our new Operatives."

"Hi, Becca. Nice to meet you and thank you for that legal advice. You and I should talk with Shepherd together. With your help, we could revamp our protection program for our domestic violence cases," Briana said.

"I like it!" Angel said. "You have a little time for the foreseeable future, don't you Becca?"

"I'm flattered, and yes, I do have some time, maybe permanently if the partners

accept my resignation, but I'm not really sure family law is something I want to dive deeper into. It' so messy."

"Maybe you could work with me on a limited basis, to research legal ways to get past the obstacles I'm facing so we can get down a process that we'll use moving forward," Briana suggested.

Becca nodded. "Yes, I could probably do that."

"I'll see what time I can get you two into a meeting today with Shepherd," Angel said.

Kilo

"That was a waste of time," Tessman grouched after he'd closed the car door.

Jackson turned the engine over. "They were lying."

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Their meetings with Nick and Nicole's immediate supervisors were not enlightening. And they had been denied meeting with any of the other employees the couple worked directly with daily. Instead, their direct supervisors promised to pass their phone numbers on to those employees who may want to reach out to them individually. Both Tessman and Jackson believed it was done on Shirley's direction and they doubted the supervisors would mention it to the people who worked directly with Nick and Nicole DeSoto.

"Neil Eddy is a horrible liar," Tessman agreed.

Neil Eddy had been Nick DeSoto's immediate supervisor, the head of the Research Department, the person who replaced Becca and Nicole's mother after she died, the position that Becca said Nick should have gotten. While pleasant, he clearly chose each word carefully before speaking, which was only one of the reasons the two men believed he'd been lying.

"Either he or Shirley had been lying about Nick DeSoto's supposed abrasive nature. According to Eddy, Nick was the nicest guy around and got along just great with all his coworkers," Jackson agreed.

"He struck me as a yes man, which is probably why he got the job over Nick DeSoto. If Becca is correct and Nick had the same moral compass as her mom, he would have had backbone. I didn't see that trait in Neil Eddy, no backbone whatsoever."

"And what about Phil Green?" Jackson asked with a small chuckle. Phil Green was the V.P. of Marketing, Nicole DeSoto's immediate supervisor. "Nicole was the best team player he had, misses her contributions greatly. If I was a diabetic, I'd be in a

sugar-coma with how thick he laid it on.”

“And that directly disputes what Becca said her sister said about the work environment in the Marketing Department since their mom died. What is going on in that company?” Tessman asked, more as a rhetorical question.

Jackson shook his head. “I don’t know, but it makes me a hell of a lot more suspicious that their deaths are linked to Well-Life Pharmaceuticals.”

“And I have to believe their personnel files had been whitewashed by Shirley or someone else in HR,” Tessman added.

Their personnel files held little information of value. There was not even any info on any of the drugs Nick had developed over the years, redacted or not. Both held performance reviews with exemplary ratings and no information about any performance issues.

“Maybe Becca would know what doors Nick and Nicole’s coworkers exit the building through at the end of their workday. We could hang out by the doors and see if we get anyone to talk,” Jackson said.

Tessman laughed. “Sounds very stalker-ish. I’d love to do it though and watch Shirley’s head explode.”

“Okay, so one more theory. What is the chance that a drug cartel was threatening Nick into working for them? Make this synthetic opioid drug, or we kill your family?”

“That would explain why there were no unaccounted-for funds in their accounts,” Tessman answered. “But if that was the case, what were they looking for at the house last night?”

“Proof of it?” Jackson theorized.

“Or it could go back to money,” Tessman said. “Yes, they both made good money and Becca’s parents left both their daughters their large estate, but what if Nick was just greedy?”

“He got a taste of more money and liked it,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, or he was manufacturing drugs all along, even before the inheritance hit their accounts. The killing of the entire family is what’s making me think the cartels are involved. Or maybe we just work too many drug cases,” Tessman said. “Damn, I really want a cigarette.”

“How long’s it been since you quit?”

“Over a month,” Tessman replied. “But after this frustrating-ass day, I want one bad.”

“Come on, you’ve gone a month. Don’t fuck it up now. When we get back, go down to the gym. Work your stress and aggravation off there.”

“I wanted to help Becca go through those bins.”

Jackson grinned an insinuating smile at him. “Do you now?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s attractive and you two seem to be getting close,” Jackson said with that grin in place.

“Seriously? No. You’re barking up the wrong tree. Not this dude. I’m not like the rest of you.”

“I didn’t think Wilson was either and was shocked as shit he’d been having a secret relationship with Rae.”

“They were just friends. It’s not like what you’re implying,” Tessman corrected him.

“Yeah, and now they’re living together, engaged, and raising a little girl together. I’m just saying,” Jackson began, but Tessman interrupted him.

“Don’t wish that on me!”

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Jackson chuckled. “Look, she seems to be a nice woman who is going through something really shitty right now. Don’t go there with her if you don’t plan on staying there.”

“I haven’t gone anywhere,” Tessman argued.

“Yeah, well, I know you,” Jackson countered, his smile broadening.

“Pot, kettle, black. And by the way, fuck you.”

Jackson laughed again. “The difference is when I let things with Angel go where they did, I knew fully well I was staying there. I envisioned the life we have right now.”

Tessman shook his head. This was not a conversation he was interested in having. “Back to the drug angle. We’re focusing on Nick. What could Nicole have been into?”

“It’s Nick that was into something,” Jackson said as fact. “He was the one set up to look like he’d killed his family, not Nicole.”

“I’m still shocked that no neighbors heard the shots. I saw the report that Brielle got on the lightning strikes in the area that night. One shot could have been discounted as thunder. I don’t see five of them being timed right for that.”

“I believe a silencer was used on all five shots. That could explain it. The shots would have been quieter and more apt to be believed it was just thunder.”

“Yeah,” Tessman agreed. “That is plausible, but it points to a professional hitter.”

“Yes, it does,” Jackson agreed. “Now we just need to figure out what the hell Nick was into that cost him and his entire family their lives.”

For the second time in one day, Becca found herself in Colonel Shepherd’s office, seated at his conference table. This time it was just Briana and her sitting opposite of the man who still intimidated her. Briana and Becca laid out what they’d discussed with Angel regarding the cameras and mics, the arrest, and the application for the restraining order in conjunction with the serving of divorce papers in front of the police, hoping for the worst possible reaction from the client’s abusive husband.

The corners of Shepherd’s lips tipped up. He was impressed that Briana accepted his silent challenge to come up with a different way of attacking this case. “We can have the cameras and mics installed in thirty minutes with a team of two going in who knows what they’re doing. With the current case, your abusive husband works from his home office and reportedly rarely leaves the house. What do you suggest we do to get him out of the house?”

“A car hitting his in his driveway hard enough to set off the car alarm should do it,” Briana said. “His wife says he loves his car. And if he wants to file a police report, certainly the officers can help us out by keeping him outside long enough.”

Shepherd rubbed his forehead as though he had a headache. “We need to come up with something that doesn’t involve us disclosing ourselves to the local LEOs.”

“It takes at least a half hour for the police to respond and for a report to be taken,” Briana said. “And if the person who hit his car, one of us, keeps interrupting the police and maybe provoking our client’s husband, we can drag it out that long.”

Shepherd nodded. "So now we have two of our assets besides you assigned to this."

"For a half hour," Briana said with a shrug.

"It should be a woman who hits his car," Becca said. "He's abusive to his wife, so he's already shown he has no respect for women, unless he has a short fuse with everyone. Is he a coward who only hits women, or is he just a bully with anger management issues waiting to explode?" Becca asked.

"I think a bully based on what she's said," Briana answered. "But I agree, it should be a woman, me, who hits his car."

"Then that woman needs to provoke him in front of the cops. Wouldn't it be awesome if he's so pissed off that he loses it in front of the police? That's one more report on his abusive behavior," Becca said. She really wanted this guy to cause a scene with the police. "The more instances of his behavior noted, the better the chance the wife would get the restraining order and, hopefully, sole custody of the two minor children."

Shepherd gazed at Becca first. Then his gaze shifted to Briana. "I'll want another Operator nearby to assist you if he comes out swinging. I know you've passed your advanced self-defense modules since coming on board, but I don't want you injured. This guy isn't known to carry a gun, correct?"

"Correct," Briana answered.

"Consult with Joe on tactics to push this guy's buttons and get him to lose his cool in front of the cops," Shepherd ordered.

Briana smiled. "I'll do that right after this meeting."

“Okay. When is the wife due to check in with you again?”

“This evening at eight p.m. when he’s in his basement gym working out.”

“Find out what time tomorrow will work for us to set the plan in motion. She’ll have to let our two installers in the back while you and the police keep the husband busy out front.”

“I’ll draw up the divorce papers,” Becca volunteered.

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Becca watched as Shepherd lifted his phone from the table and dialed someone.

“Smith, I need an agency email set up ASAP for Rebecca Elliot. Enable the following people only as contacts, Angel, Woods, Tessman, Jackson, and myself.”

When Tessman and Jackson returned to the office, Angel informed them that Becca was in Shepherd’s office with Briana Woods regarding one of her domestic violence cases.

“She’s assisting with the case?” Tessman asked.

“In the capacity of an attorney,” Angel said. “It’s not like she’s going to go out onsite with Briana and meet with the client.”

Tessman laughed. “I’d hope not. She’s still under our protection and we’re no closer to solving who killed her family.”

“I hope you can solve it quickly,” Angel said to both men. “That woman needs closure. I can’t even imagine how she feels, to lose them all at one time like this to violence.”

“She’s trying to be strong, to keep it tamped down, but it’s raw, just below the surface,” Tessman said.

“If anyone can figure it out, I know it’s this agency,” Angel said. “And I think her

helping with this case is good for her. It'll give her something else to focus on besides her own grief."

"Yeah," Tessman agreed. He hadn't considered that.

"One more thing," Angel said. "I'm going to bring up talking with Joe Lassiter to her. If you were also to push for it, she may agree. I think it would help her tremendously."

"I have mentioned it," Tessman said. "So far, she's declined."

"I think we don't give her the chance to decline," Angel said. "I'm thinking about suggesting to Shepherd that he asks her to sign a limited employment form since she'll be helping Briana on this case and make the appointment with Joe mandatory. But you know her better than I do. How do you think she'll react to that?" Her gaze was on Tessman as she said it.

"I'm not sure I know her better than you or Jackson," Tessman said defensively, recalling his conversation with Jackson in the car. "But I think it's a fifty percent probability she'd sign the form. She's only working part-time right now for her law firm, so she has time to work on Briana's case."

"She may have resigned from her firm today," Angel said. "And she told me she's pretty sure she doesn't want to return to it when this is over."

Tessman was shocked to hear this. "Well, she doesn't need the money from her job, not with her sister and brother-in-law's estate going completely to her. She became quite wealthy with their deaths."

"You're not saying you suspect her of killing them, are you?" Angel gasped.

Tessman tsked and shook his head. “No, not at all.”

“Okay, good,” Angel said.

Just then, the three of them saw Briana and Becca heading down the hall towards them.

“Ah, their meeting with Shepherd is done. Good timing,” Angel said.

Tessman couldn’t help but like the sight; Becca and Briana walking together and talking, collaborating like a couple of coworkers. That wouldn’t be a bad thing, Becca working at the agency, he thought. Okay, so maybe Jackson wasn’t so far from the truth regarding how he thought about Miss Becca Elliot. He just hated that someone had noticed.

When Becca and Briana reached the three of them, they all exchanged greetings.

“Just a heads up,” Briana said. “Shepherd will let you know, but you two,” she pointed at Tessman and Jackson, “plus Smith are going to be helping me with my domestic abuse case for about an hour sometime tomorrow. I won’t know what time until after eight p.m. tonight, so try to leave your day open for me if you can.”

“Sure,” Jackson said.

“No problem,” Tessman seconded. Then his gaze landed on Becca. “I hear you’re helping out with this case, too.”

“Just a little. I’m happy to,” Becca said.

“How’s the bin search going?” Tessman asked her.

Becca shrugged. “I haven’t found anything, but the dealership called, and my car’s ready. Maybe it’s in one of the boxes Detective Davis returned.”

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“Jackson and I can go get it right now,” Tessman said. “Give the dealership a call back and let them know I’ll be picking it up.”

“So, am I basically confined to this building?” Becca asked.

“More or less, yes,” Tessman replied.

“It’s easier for us to protect you this way,” Jackson interjected. “Why risk it if you absolutely don’t need to go anywhere? And the dealership to pick up your car? That’s something we can easily do for you.”

“I get it,” Becca said. “I’m just used to handling my affairs myself.”

“We know you are,” Tessman said. “This is temporary.”

“Okay,” Becca relented. “Hey, did you get any information from your field-trip to Well-Life?”

“Not really,” Tessman said. “We have a few things to run by you, which we’ll do when we get back with your car.”

“Okay. I’ll call the dealership now.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Tessman said. And then he and Jackson retreated back down the hallway towards the elevator and stairwell.

“I’ve added you to my phone,” Briana told Becca. “I’ll be in touch after eight and let

you know how my conversation goes with the client.”

“Will you actually be talking with her?”

“No, texting. She doesn’t risk talking on the phone with her husband in the house. She has a burner she keeps hidden. I’ve emailed with her and text messaged, and actually spoken with her once,” Briana volunteered.

“Please ask her if there are any other terms she wants in the divorce papers. I’m assuming sole custody with supervised visitation and the standard financial terms she’s entitled to after twelve years of marriage. But if there’s anything else, I’d like to include it in the first draft that he will be served with.”

“And you’ll remain as her divorce attorney throughout?” Briana again asked. It had been discussed in Shepherd’s office.

“Yes.” She paused and then smiled at Angel. “I guess I’m going to be this client’s divorce attorney. I’ll trust Colonel Shepherd with the payment for my services as he asked me to.”

Angel smiled. “You can trust Shepherd,” she guaranteed. “And these clients really need someone like you who cares and will represent them well.”

“I have to study case law more in depth, not sure this is really the best time for me to take this on.”

“I’ve always believed that where our lives lead us, when unplanned, is divine intervention,” Angel said with a smile.

“Ah, you’re an eternal optimist,” Becca teased her.

“I am,” Angel confirmed. “I’ll tell you why sometime, over a glass of wine.”

“I’ll hold you to that!” Becca said.

Lima

Becca turned the speed on the machine up a couple of notches and settled into a comfortable yet challenging rhythm, running on the treadmill. Beside her, Briana ran at full speed on the one she used. After Carter and Jackson returned from the dealership, Carter helped her go through the contents of the boxes, most of it taken from the office at her sister’s house.

The time she spent with him was always easy. She appreciated how laid back he was. Unfortunately, the attraction she felt for him only increased as she spent more time with him. She knew that the last thing that should be on her mind right now was a man, a man who does a dangerous job.

They scrutinized every item, every document, every scrap of paper, and nothing. Nothing that looked suspicious, certainly nothing that anyone would kill an entire family over. Becca was starting to think that Nick and/or Nicole left no clues behind. Whoever searched for it had to be under the mistaken belief that they had.

Tessman told her about the visit to Well-Life. She couldn’t believe that the woman from HR had said Nick didn’t get her mother’s vacated position because he was abrasive. No, that was categorically a lie! The supervisor was the one telling the truth between the two of them. Then Carter was called into a meeting in Colonel Shepherd’s office, and she was left with nothing more to go through. That was when Briana came into the rec room, asking Becca if she wanted to go to the gym to work out with her. The gym was in the basement of the building.

Becca immediately took her up on it. Becca had some clothes that would work to

exercise in. Briana went to the apartment on the ninth floor with her and waited while she changed. Then they took the elevator to the second sub-basement level and Briana showed her the well-appointed private gym for agency personnel and the amazing woman's locker room, complete with all the toiletries she'd need. When Becca saw the hot tub, she wished she would have brought a bathing suit.

"Shepherd provides only the best for his people," Briana had said.

That was when Becca learned how Briana had been offered a position at the agency only four months earlier. While they warmed up on the treadmills, Briana had also told her about her boyfriend, Sebastian, who worked for the agency, and how he'd been part of a team who was investigating Briana's brother when they met. Her brother was cleared of any wrongdoing and he too worked for the agency now as a member of the Digital Team.

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Becca was happy she'd signed the NDA. Otherwise, she'd not be privy to any of this information, and would probably not have had any contact with any other members of the agency. She was happy she'd met both Michaela and Briana and got to know them. And Angel, even though she'd met her when she came in for her appointment, she was glad she'd gotten to get to know Angel better. She was a total sweetheart who had to be one of the most genuine people Becca had ever met. An evening of wine and conversation with her sounded delightful.

Running felt great. Becca hadn't exercised at all since this horrible nightmare began. She hadn't done anything she normally would. And for just a little while as she ran, she didn't think about it, which felt wonderful, until she realized that she had momentarily forgotten, or more accurately, she had just focused on running. Her feet pounding beneath her and the deep draws of breath she pulled into her lungs relaxed her. But with this realization that she hadn't thought about it, she felt terrible. Her sister and her family deserved to dominate her thoughts until whoever did this was found and paid for it.

"You'll have those divorce papers ready by tomorrow morning, won't you?" Briana asked.

"As long as you've obtained any other terms the client wants added to them from her tonight. I have the framework built, but plan on working on them after I have dinner," Becca answered. She guessed she'd hit up the leftovers in the kitchen refrigerator for dinner.

"That's good. Shepherd has hired a licensed private process server to serve them when and where we tell him to. He's on standby for tomorrow. Normally, the county

sheriff would serve them for a nominal fee, a lot less than it's going to cost us, but we can't control the timing of it if we go that route."

"Is all this being charged to the client? Did you already go over these costs with her?" Becca asked, beginning to get winded from her workout.

"Yes and no," Briana answered. She wasn't winded in the least. "This client has funds that she can access once she no longer fears her husband, which may be after he's been served with divorce papers and an order of protection. There are household accounts she is on with some money she has access to. I've already advised her to open an account in her name alone to be ready to transfer all the funds from the joint household account into, preferably at the same bank, so she can do it online through the banking portal. Getting access to the majority of the money will have to wait until the divorce decree orders it, and-or alimony and child support payments kick in if he's not in jail. So yes, she is prepared to pay for our services and an attorney's services, though it may be awhile before she can pay her bill in full. I've always accepted payments from my clients over time and those who couldn't afford to pay, I asked them to promise to provide me favors in the future for the services I provide them today."

"What kind of favors?"

"Usually, to give other women fleeing their abusive husbands a place to stay and to possibly hide them until they're safe."

"It sounds like you have a whole network set up," Becca said.

"You could say that," Briana admitted. "The bottom line is that my clients expect to have to pay the going rate for services, but I'm flexible in the payment of that debt. The important thing is getting them out of the really bad situation they're living in first."

“I can afford to provide the service as a divorce attorney and get paid in installments, if need be,” Becca said.

“I’m sure Shepherd will pay you by knocking the amount off your bill with us,” Briana said. “It makes no sense for you to pay us and then for Shepherd to turn around and pay you.”

“Yes, that does seem stupid.”

“What do you think? Would you like this gig long-term? I could talk with Shepherd about it. I’d love to have you on full-time representing my clients as their attorney,” Briana suggested.

“I’m flattered you ask,” Becca said. “Let’s see how this first one goes.” She was panting from her run, breathless and winded. But she wouldn’t slow down. It felt so good.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Carter and another younger man enter the gym, both dressed in workout clothing. Carter came up to her treadmill. “Oh, so this is where you went. I checked the rec room and the apartment on nine and didn’t find you. Angel told me you were with Briana, but didn’t say you were here. I assumed you were in her office working on the domestic abuse case.”

Becca slowed her machine to a fast walk. “No, nothing more to do on it until after she talks to her client tonight.”

“Shepherd filled us in on the plan.” He pointed to the man Becca had not seen before who had entered the gym with him and was now by the free weights. “That’s Smith. He and Jackson will go in and install the cameras and mics. I’ll be out front to provide backup to Briana in case this guy gets physical.”

“Great, thanks, Tessman,” Briana said, only now beginning to get winded.

“I’m going to go,” Tessman pointed over his shoulder, towards the free weight area. “After we’re both cleaned up, let’s talk about dinner, if you have no plans.”

“Yeah, no plans,” Becca confirmed with a grin. She hadn’t realized her lips were still upturned after he walked away.

“A dinner date, huh?” Briana whispered.

Becca was shaken out of her own thoughts on the subject. “No, not a date, just dinner, probably to discuss my case,” she whispered back.

Briana let it go.

They finished their cardio and then moved over to the weighted machines. From there, Becca got a front seat view to the free weight workouts that the two men engaged in, though her gaze was magnetically drawn to Carter. He held large hand-weights. She had no clue how many pounds each was. She’d never used weights that large. He wore a tight-fitting tank style shirt that clung to his chest and abs, displaying each muscle that she hadn’t known was as spectacularly developed as the shirt showed.

“You may want to close your mouth and stop yourself from drooling over those men,” Briana whispered with a laugh as she crossed in front of Becca. Briana had finished her reps on the machine, unlike Becca, who’d gone still as she watched the men work out. Briana adjusted the seat and weights on the next machine she’d use on the other side of Becca.

“Just taking a break for a moment,” Becca argued.

“Yeah, that’s what we’ll call it,” Briana teased with a smile. “Don’t worry. They’re so focused on their own workouts, I’m sure neither noticed you were staring and drooling.”

“I wasn’t drooling,” Becca argued.

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Briana laughed. Becca didn't argued that she was staring. "You have it bad for that boy," she said in a barely audible whisper.

Becca chose to pretend she didn't hear her, and she got back to her reps, forcing herself to pull her eyes from Carter. Yeah, she kind of did have a crush on Carter, but she wouldn't admit that to Briana or anyone else. And watching him lift weights was quite a sight. The more she saw him and learned about him, the more attracted to him she became. That, she would admit to herself.

After the two women finished their workouts, they showered and cleaned up in the lady's locker room. When they exited back into the gym area, Tessman waited nearby for Becca. He, too, had cleaned up. He was freshly showered and re-dressed.

"Becca, let's head back up to the rec room. There was one more thing I wanted to look at in your bins," he said to the two ladies.

Briana murmured something suggestive in Becca's ear and flashed her a grin. "I'm heading home. I'll be in touch with you both after the client contacts me after eight. See you both tomorrow."

They both bid her goodbye. Becca trying not to blush at Briana's interpretation of Carter's statement. She hoped Carter didn't hear Briana.

They rode the elevator back to the fifth floor.

"That's a great gym," Becca said.

“Did you enjoy the show?” he asked with a coy grin.

Becca detected flirting in his tone. She thought for a second about how to respond to that. She could play dumb and ask what he meant. Or she could deny it and insist that she wasn’t watching him. Instead, she decided to encourage him. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I did.” She chuckled. “I guess I’m busted. But you’re probably used to it.”

He didn’t like her calling him out on that. Yes, he was used to female interest, and he rarely struck out when trying to get female companionship. But he didn’t want her to think badly of him, which he was sure she would. He shrugged. “Naw, not used to it. Not that I’ve noticed, unlike your staring,” he teased.

Becca immediately picked up on his joking tone as well as his dodging of her statement. Carter Tessman was attractive and there was no doubt in Becca’s mind that women always paid attention to him, and he noticed it alright. “As I said, busted.”

The elevator door slid open, and they exited. Angel was just leaving Shepherd’s office. “Good timing,” she said. “Shepherd needed to see you for a second, Becca. He’s free, go on in.”

Her nervous gaze went momentarily to Carter before she stepped to Shepherd’s open door.

Shepherd stood at his desk. He glanced up. “Come,” he said, waving her in.

She walked up to his desk. “Angel said you needed to see me?”

“Yes, since you’ll be working for the agency, even in a limited capacity, I have a shortened employment contract for you to sign.” He lifted a folder from his desk and handed it to her. “Could you please read it and sign it now? You can use my conference table. That way, if you have any questions, we can get them out of the

way now. You'll be provided with a copy for your records. I'll have Angel email it to you."

Becca flipped open the file folder. It was a short, one-page document. She almost asked if it was necessary, but she'd already learned that Colonel Sam Shepherd was a stickler for details and order, a military man to his core. She nodded and took a seat at the table. She read every word of the agreement, just as she had the NDA.

There was only one section that she found odd. And that was their medical and psychological oversight regulations. Apparently, there was a team mental health professional and regular visits with him were mandatory, beginning with the inception of the employment relationship. This man, Dr. Joe Lassiter, could bar her from working if he didn't find her mentally fit just as one of their team medics could deem a team member medically unfit for duty.

Her work for the agency would be limited, this one client, so she decided to just go ahead and sign it. Then she replaced it in the folder and handed it back to Colonel Shepherd. "There you go," she said.

Shepherd flipped the folder open and viewed the signature. "Thank you. Joe is actually free right now to see you. Have Tessman escort you to his office. I understand you will confer with Woods this evening after she talks with the client so that you can draw up the divorce papers with any special terms she wants."

Becca was taken aback. She'd go see this psychologist right now? "Um, yes. I have the framework already created. It won't take too long to add what she may need to it."

Shepherd took hold of one of his business cards from the holder on his desk. "When it's done, please email it to me."

She took the card and saw his email address on the card with what she recognized as the main phone number to the agency. “I will, thank you, Colonel Shepherd.”

“Becca, just Shepherd is fine,” he said. “And please close the door on your way out.”

She smiled a forced grin, nodded, and then left the office. Carter waited nearby. She was happy she wouldn’t have to go looking for him. “Colonel Shepherd just had me sign a shortened version of an employment contract,” she said quietly, pointing back over her shoulder.

“I’m not surprised,” he said.

“And I’m supposed to have you escort me to see Dr. Joe. I don’t recall his last name.”

“Lassiter. I was wondering if he was going to enforce that protocol. Yeah, we all see Joe on occasion, sooner if a mission goes sideways.”

“Sideways, like last night?” she asked.

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Tessman snickered. “We’ll go through the public access.” He led her back down the hall. “No, that was business as usual. Sideways would be if one of the team got injured or killed, or if anything horrendous happened. I’m sure when this case is over, Joe will talk with both Jackson and me. The emotional toll of investigating the senseless murders of two innocent kids gets to everyone, even if you don’t realize it. Joe’s a good guy and anything we tell him stays in confidence. He doesn’t even tell Shepherd the details.”

They exited through the public entrance to the Shepherd Security suite of offices. There they took the public stairs down one flight. Becca was still processing what Carter had just said when they stepped into the hallway. He ushered her up to the black door with the gold lettering that said J. Lassiter. Before she could protest or say another word, he opened the door and motioned her in.

“Just a heads up so you’re not surprised. Joe has some severe scars on his face and neck. He was in the army, served in the Middle East, where he was injured.”

Her gaze swept the office. It looked normal enough. Then the door to the interior office opened and a man with severe scars on his face and neck, just as Carter had said, greeted them with a smile. “Hello, you must be Becca Elliot. I’m Joe Lassiter.” He outstretched his right hand to her.

“Hello, nice to meet you,” she said politely.

“I’ll have her for about an hour, Tessman. Come back then unless I reach out to you,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll be back.” Without waiting for a reply from her, Tessman left the office. A smile formed on his face as he jogged back up the stairs.

Mike

Becca had never seen a psychologist or therapist before. She wasn’t sure what to expect. But as Joe Lassiter brewed her a cup of coffee in his kitchen, while she sat at the table gazing out of the windows which overlooked the large Woodfield Mall, she was sure this wouldn’t have been it. He’d greeted her, wearing blue jeans and a long-sleeved dress shirt, the arms casually rolled up to his elbows. He’d told her to call him Joe. Then he’d invited her into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. And Carter had been correct. He had some bad scars on his face and neck.

“Thank you,” she said as he set the cup of coffee in the floral mug she’d chosen from the double-wide cabinet with hundreds of coffee cups.

He sat opposite her. “Do you regularly shop at the mall?”

“Often enough,” she replied.

“Bet you never would have thought we were here in this building,” he said with a grin.

She returned his smile. “You are correct. But I guess that’s the point. The agency needs to remain anonymous.”

Lassiter nodded. “Yes, it does. People’s lives depend on it. Just as people’s lives depend on the job we do, which we can only do if we remain anonymous.”

She nodded.

“These domestic violence cases are important to help get people, mostly women and children, out of abusive and dangerous situations. Briana finds the work rewarding, but the cases also take their toll on her and on the rest of the team who work on them.”

“I can understand that,” Becca agreed.

“You’re wading in,” Lassiter said with a chuckle. “I’ll assume there is a reason you don’t specialize in divorce cases.”

“When I was in college, I was interested in working for the DA’s office. But what I saw while I interned with the Chicago Police Department over two summers cured me of that. I guess I was naïve, not knowing that people can really be that evil and inhumane to each other with the crimes they commit. I knew I didn’t want a steady diet of that sort of work. And honestly, divorce cases can be just as vile.”

“How’d you get into estate law?”

“By accident,” she said and then chuckled. “It’s not exciting, but it’s steady work and I build relationships with my clients. I like that part, the people part. I haven’t checked my email since this morning, so I’m not sure I have a job left. I may have resigned from the firm I work for this morning.”

Now Joe chuckled. “You don’t sound too broken up if you did resign. What happened?”

She told Joe about the morning messages with the receptionist and the email she’d sent the partners. She also told him she didn’t want to go back to the office. “But maybe that’s just me resisting that I have to get back to my normal life.”

“Your normal life had your sister and her family in it. You’ll need to settle into a new

normal now that they're gone," he said.

She teared up.

Joe handed her a box of tissues. "I'm sorry, sorry for your loss, and sorry bringing it up has upset you. I'm told you haven't spoken to anyone about it yet. It'll be good for you too, you know. Everyone grieves differently and for different amounts of time. You won't ever get over it, but you'll learn coping techniques to adjust to life now and to live with what has happened."

He paused and watched her reaction. She dabbed the tears which had spilled onto her cheeks. He took a drink of his water bottle and waited her out for several long minutes.

"I'm not ready to deal with any of that yet, not until after the person who did it has been found and brought to justice," she finally said.

"What does justice look like?"

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“If Illinois had the death penalty, it would be that. But since we don’t, life in prison. And I want to know why, why he had to kill all of them.” She broke down and cried like she hadn’t in weeks. “The kids, why the kids?”

Joe reached across the table and took her hand. “Becca, you need to start to deal with it now. You may not ever get answers to those questions, and this will tear you apart if you let it. You can’t change what’s happened. All you can do is deal with it so it doesn’t destroy you, find a new normal, and live your life the best you can. You can heal from this and, in time, find happiness in your new normal.” He again watched her and waited her out. She didn’t pull her hand away.

“It feels wrong to. I’ve had moments I feel normal, or I should say I’m not thinking about it and am not feeling devastated and then I realize it and feel so guilty.” She kept her gaze fixed on her coffee mug as she spoke.

Joe squeezed her hand. “Hear me. You should not feel guilty for letting moments of normality sneak in and lift your spirits. It’s not a disservice to their memories. It doesn’t mean you’re not devastated by this, not grieving. All it means is that you’re healing and letting a little bit of light back in.”

Becca kept her gaze on the coffee mug. “Will I ever feel like myself again? Will I ever have a day that their murders aren’t the first thing I think about when I wake or the last thing I think about before I go to sleep?”

“Yes,” Joe answered gently. “And you won’t feel guilty for it either. That’s called healing.” He paused. “Has the intruders and the danger you faced last night dominated your thoughts today, too?”

“You know, I’m angrier about my house being trashed than the intruder attacking me and making me kill him in my sister’s house last night. His death is on him. Is that wrong?”

“No feelings are wrong. The only feelings that are wrong are the ones you don’t acknowledge. Those are the ones that will cause you trouble in the long run. Let’s break this down. You’re angry about your house being trashed. That is a normal, healthy reaction. If you weren’t, there’d be something wrong with you.” He smiled at her.

She couldn’t help but return the small grin.

“And you are absolutely correct that the man who attacked you, the intruder who broke into your sister’s house, where he did not belong, is to blame for his own death. You protected yourself, something everyone has the right to do, and I’d argue, a moral obligation to do.”

Becca nodded emphatically.

“It had to be scary. Recount what happened and name the emotions you felt. This is how you deal with trauma, talking about it and naming the emotions you felt then and now,” Lassiter said.

Becca told him about the events the night before. Fear was a predominant emotion. She also named hope that Carter and Jackson would get there before the men in the house found her. But when the doorknob jiggled, and she knew one or more of the men were on the other side of the door, a momentary paralyzing terror gripped her. When the door hit her back, she was shaken out of that immobilization, and she told herself she’d fight until she could no longer.

Oddly, when the mirror fell on the man and he went down, she felt relief. While

sitting in the closet, clutching the gun, she felt determined to survive. She knew she would shoot anyone who entered the closet. At the sound of the gunshots downstairs, a new level of panic hit her. And when Carter appeared in the closet doorway, the feelings that washed over her were profound and overwhelming. She was safe.

“How did you sleep last night?” Lassiter asked.

“Better than I have in a really long time,” she admitted. “Not only was I exhausted, but I knew I was safe in this building.”

“It’s not surprising you haven’t slept well since the murders. That too is perfectly normal. For what it’s worth, besides, as you said, you were not dealing with it yet, I think you’re coping well. I can help you through a few other parts of it if you’ll let me.”

She moved her head in a noncommittal mix between a nod and a shake. “I’ll think about it.”

“Will you commit to one more appointment with me?” he pressed.

“Yes, I can do that.”

He grinned. “Our time is nearly up. If you need anything, reach out to me.” He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “Your brother-in-law didn’t kill your sister or her family. I’m glad you’re coming on board for this domestic violence case to help ensure our client isn’t killed by her husband.”

Becca finished her last sip of coffee and then stood. “Thank you for the conversation, Joe.”

Lassiter also stood. “Thank you for being so open. It’s a process, healing. You’ll get

there.”

He walked her out. As expected, Carter sat in one of the chairs in the outer office, which brought Becca a feeling of security. He came to his feet as she stepped into the room. She gave him a mild grin, more as recognition, so she wouldn't have to speak. She was feeling emotionally exhausted after the meeting with Joe Lassiter and the last thing she wanted to do was recap any of it with Carter.

“Hey,” Tessman greeted. He noticed her eyes were red. She'd probably been crying, which meant Lassiter got her to talk about the murders. Good, she needed that. The urge to hold her and comfort her hit him hard. “You ready to go back upstairs?”

“Yes,” she said. She turned back to Joe. “Thank you. I'll talk to you later.”

Joe nodded. “Have a good evening, both of you.”

They took the public stairs back up to the fifth floor. Tessman led her into the kitchen.

“I thought you wanted to look for something in the bins from my sister's house?”

“I looked while you were in with Lassiter,” he said. She looked bothered that he had looked through them without her. “I hope that's okay. It was in the interest of time.”

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She shook it off. “It’s fine. Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No. I was hoping Nick had a copy of his performance reviews at work. I wanted to see how altered the file was that the HR lady gave us. I also wanted to see if he had anything that listed projects he’d worked on or any names of his coworkers.”

“I’m surprised there was none of that in his home office.”

“Unless whoever murdered them found it and took it,” Tessman suggested.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Becca said. “If he had it all on a flashdrive that could have been what they were looking for last night. I didn’t pack up everything in their drawers yet. It could be hidden in his underwear drawer,” she said. “A few friends said they’d come help me do that when the time comes.”

“Or he could have some cloud storage account that we didn’t find where his important documents are kept.”

“That would be more like Nick. He wasn’t a paper person. He even read his books electronically.”

Tessman opened the refrigerator. “What would you like?”

She came up beside him. “I purposefully didn’t have any of the lasagna for lunch. I’d like some of that and salad.” She reached in and pulled out the salad container.

Tessman got two plates down from the cabinet. “Sounds good. I’ll have the same.”

He pulled the tray of lasagna out as well. “When this is over, I’d like to take you out for a good steak dinner. I feel bad you’re stuck eating leftovers.”

Becca flashed him a nervous smile. Had he just asked her out? Like on a date? No, that couldn’t have been his intention. “Don’t feel bad. The food has been very good. The vegetable pasta I had for lunch was incredible.” She tapped the restaurant’s name on the package. “This has just become my favorite Italian restaurant in the area.”

“I think Greek day is tomorrow. You’ll have a new favorite Greek restaurant after you try whichever meals Angel orders. She rotates what she orders, but their chicken lemon orzo soup is incredible.

“Avgolemono?”

“Yes,” he grinned shyly and dropped his gaze. “I can never pronounce it properly.”

She returned his smile. “Chicken lemon orzo soup works. I knew what you meant.”

They heated their meals and then sat and ate, mostly in silence. Tessman wanted to ask her about her appointment with Lassiter, but didn’t want to pry and he certainly didn’t want to upset her. She still looked exhausted. He wasn’t sure where that dinner offer for after this was over came from. He certainly hadn’t planned on asking her out, though the thought of an actual night out that was strictly personal was an appealing thought.

Tessman checked his watch. It was eighteen thirty hours. It would be at least an hour and a half before Briana Woods would hear from the client and get back to Becca on possible terms to include in the divorce papers. He’d like to spend the time with her, but didn’t want to be pushy or assume she wanted to spend the time with him. There was really no legitimate work reason for it. But what else would he do in his office for a few hours before he hit the rack?

“What are your plans for the rest of the night?” she asked after taking her last bite of lasagna.

“I don’t have any,” he said.

“Are you staying here or heading home tonight?”

“I’m staying.”

“Do you have to because I’m here?” She hoped that wasn’t the case. She didn’t need a babysitter.

Tessman smiled and shook his head. and looked kind of boyish as he replied. “No, but I want to, in case you need anything. You know me and I won’t mind if you call or text. Those working in Ops overnight wouldn’t mind either. That’s why they’re here, but I’d like to be here for you.”

Becca felt a warmth spread through her. She watched him stand and grab both their plates. “That’s really nice. Thank you. But really, if you’d rather go home,” she began, but he interrupted her.

“I spend most nights here when I’m in town. It’s just easier. I have this shoebox-size apartment with no food in it. I basically store my clothes and stuff there,” he said. “Here there’s food, the gym, a great locker room with shower facilities and if I get scrambled in the middle of the night, I’m here ready to go. If not, and I’m just reporting for duty, the commute is no problem.” He flashed her another grin and then he stepped over to the trashcan and threw away the used and now empty paper plates. They’d both eaten every bite. “What are your plans until you hear from Briana?”

“I was thinking a movie, a funny movie. I’d love a glass of wine,” she said, also coming to her feet.

“I happen to have a couple of bottles of wine in my car,” he said.

“You do?”

“Yes, I remembered you wanted a glass last night, so while Jackson and I were out, I stopped and got a couple of bottles. Not knowing what you like, I got both a red blend and a white blend.”

“Oh my God! Thank you! That’s unbelievable!” She was so surprised; she flung herself into him and wrapped her arms around him.

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Tessman tentatively returned her embrace. “You’re welcome.”

She pulled away. “That was so inappropriate of me. I’m so sorry.”

He couldn’t help but grin, seeing her embarrassment. “Wow, if that’s what happens when I get you a bottle of wine, maybe I should try a margarita, or a Long Island Iced Tea.” He already missed her in his arms.

She laughed, looking more relaxed than she had all day. “If you really want to get a reaction, try a chocolate martini.”

“I will remember that,” he pledged.

She laughed again. “Or a mudslide, especially on a Caribbean cruise.”

“Chocolate martini, check, mudslide, check,” he said. “I’ve never taken a cruise, well not one on a cruise ship that is. While active duty we got plenty of transports on ships, but trust me, it was nothing like a cruise you’ve been on. I go diving in the Caribbean as often as possible though.”

“Scuba diving?”

“Yes,” he said. “I love being beneath the waves. It’s so peaceful.”

“I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“You should. It’s a great time,” he said.

She nodded. “Yes, hopefully sometime, maybe on my next vacation.”

“Most island resorts do a quick scuba certification, but I’d never advise doing that if you’re not going out with someone very experienced. If you’re serious about it, there are a few local places that do real dive training and certification.”

“Do you have a favorite place you go diving?”

“St. Thomas,” he replied remembering the last time he was there, just a few months ago with Wilson. That was before Wilson got together with Rae. He wondered if his buddy would go diving with him again or if all his leave time would now be dedicated to his new family. He figured the latter.

“I love St. Thomas,” she said, breaking in on his thoughts.

“How about we go down to the garage and get that wine from my car? I’d like a glass with you, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds good,” she said. “I was kind of hoping you’d want to watch a movie with me.”

Tessman loved that she asked. “Yes, that sounds good.”

November

The movie she chose was, *This is 40*, which he’d never heard of before. He didn’t watch many movies, though. Tessman began to sit in one of the chairs by the table after he’d poured them both a glass of white wine, per her request.

Becca went to the bed and propped up two pillows against the headboard beside each other. “I’m going to sit here where it’s more comfortable. You can join me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, quickly getting up from the chair.

She placed her hand on his chest as he came up beside her. “This is just watching a movie. I’m not inviting you for anything else. I just wanted to be clear about that.”

“I’m not thinking anything else,” he said.

She looked deeply into his eyes, looking for any hint of deceit on his part. She didn’t see any. “Okay, sorry if I’m blunt, I just find it leads to less confusion.”

“I respect it,” he said. “It’s always good to get expectations and boundaries out there.”

She handed him her glass and then she crawled over to the middle of the bed and sat with her back against one of the pillows. She took the two glasses from him as he settled in beside her. After she handed his glass to him, she turned the television on and signed into her Netflix account.

“You look tired. If you fall asleep, I won’t wake you until Briana gets in touch with us.”

She took a big sip of her wine. “This tastes so good. Thank you again for getting it.” She paused and then turned her head to view him. “I’m exhausted. To be honest, if we weren’t waiting for Briana to get back to us with the information, I’d probably go to sleep after this one glass. That’s why I picked the movie we’re going to watch. I’ve seen it a dozen times. It’s so funny it keeps me awake. It’s my go-to when I need my spirits lifted or I have to stay awake.”

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The movie was just starting. “I’m looking forward to it,” Tessman said.

“Carter, it really was thoughtful of you to pick up the wine for me. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. She’d already turned her head back to view the television. She didn’t see the grin on his face.

The movie didn’t disappoint. Becca found it as funny as always and it kept her awake when otherwise she surely would have fallen asleep. Tessman found it humorous as well. He didn’t kick back and do nothing often, but he did find the evening relaxing.

Becca held her empty glass up as the credits rolled. “Can you refill please?” The bottle was placed in the refrigerator after he’d poured their first glasses.

“Sure,” he said, getting up from the very comfortable position he’d been sitting in. He retrieved the bottle, filled her glass, and then put it back in the fridge.

“You’re not having another glass?”

“No, it’s all for you.”

“Suit yourself,” she said. She began scrolling through movie choices on the menu.

“Let’s find something else to watch until Briana calls.”

Tessman had just sat back down on the bed beside her when an alert came from his

phone that he knew well. He jumped up and pulled the phone from his pocket and silenced the alert and hit the 'Will Respond' button. "I'll be back later. Just stay here and call Ops if you need anything," he said as he viewed the screen for the location of the panic alert. He stepped to the door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'll explain when I get back. One of our team members is in trouble." Without further explanation, he left the room and hurried down the flights of stairs to the second sub-basement level where his car was parked.

Madison exited the elevator around the same time he burst through the stairwell door. "Ops hasn't gotten Dahlia on the phone yet," she said. "Bubbles is deployed with the PGP Team. Looks like Jackson, Flores, and Robinson are responding as well. That's it for assets in town."

"Roger that," Tessman said as he opened his car door.

"See you there," Madison said as she climbed into her own SUV.

On the drive to the condo where Michael 'Bubbles' Cooper and his fiancé, Dahlia, lived, Tessman mentally prepared himself for what he may encounter. As he pulled up in front of the unit just behind Madison's vehicle, he saw a large man on the front porch pounding on the door and screaming obscenities.

Tessman and Madison hurried up the sidewalk towards the door. "Hey, stop!" he yelled as he ran.

The man turned and viewed the two of them. They both had their handguns out, pointed at him.

“FBI! Hands up!” Madison said.

“Mind your own fucking business!” he screamed, his words slurred into one long word. He went back to beating on the door. “Open the door, bitch! I’ll knock the fucking thing down!”

They both realized right away he was either drunk or high. “Shit, this isn’t going to be good,” Tessman murmured to Madison.

Through comms, Yvette’s voice came. “I’ve got Dahlia on the phone. She said she sees you through the window.”

Tessman’s eyes shifted to the window. He saw the curtain was slightly parted. “Yeah, Xena and I are onsite. Any ETA on Jax?” He really didn’t want to try to take this guy down without Jackson on site as well.

“Less than five minutes,” Yvette replied.

“Tell Dahlia to stay in the house with the doors locked for now. It looks like just a drunk, but we’ll verify there is no real threat,” Madison replied.

“Roger,” Yvette acknowledged.

“I wish I had a taser on me,” Madison said to Tessman.

“Yeah, that’s probably about the only thing that will bring him down,” Tessman agreed. “What do you think? Meth? Crack?”

The man continued to batter the door. He wasn’t tiring out. Something had him super-charged.

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“Dahlia’s safe. I say we wait him out until Jackson and the others get here.”

“I say we let him tire himself out completely. He’s gotta crash sometime. I don’t want to tangle with gargantuan if I don’t have to,” Tessman replied. “He’s gotta be near seven feet.”

Madison chuckled as Elijah ‘Kegger’ Robinson pulled up in his black BMW. He hurried over to the two of them, his weapon also drawn. “Whoa, that’s one angry mountain. What’s the plan?”

“We wait for Jackson to arrive,” Madison said. “Control, any word on Louisa?”

“Yes, Louisa is en route, still fifteen minutes out.”

Tessman checked his watch. “Another fifteen minutes to see if he winds down isn’t bad.”

The big man at the door suddenly turned around and focused his attention on the three of them. Without warning, he bolted right towards them.

Tessman sprinted to intercept him. Tessman went low and plowed into him, bringing his feet out from underneath him. He crashed to the sidewalk. Tessman jumped on his back, his knee into the guy’s shoulder. The man shook him off as though he was a tiny kitten and he stood back up, his gaze fixed on Madison and Kegger.

“Try not to kill him,” Madison said. “Freeze! Hands in the air!” she yelled to him, not expecting a reaction.

He didn't slow down, didn't comply with Madison's orders. Robinson pulled a taser from his jacket pocket and discharged it a split second before he plowed into them. Both Madison and Robinson stepped aside and let his convulsing body faceplant where they'd been standing. Pain-filled screams, that sounded like they were coming from an animal and not a human being, came from his downed body.

"So glad you answered the alert," Tessman said to Robinson as he pulled himself to his feet. Thankfully, he'd landed on the lawn and not the concrete when gargantuan had shaken him off.

Robinson stepped in and disconnected the taser barbs as Tessman straddled the man and pulled his hands behind his back to secure them in zip ties. In the distance, approaching quickly, sirens could be heard. The local LEOs would join them within a few minutes. They all holstered their weapons.

"Okay boys, let's have our badges ready for the LEOs," Madison said, pulling hers from her back pocket.

"Control, let Dahlia know we have the situation handled and the local LEOs will arrive shortly. Dahlia can join us outside of the front door. And you can have both Jax and Louisa stand down."

"Roger that, Xena," Yvette replied.

"We'll check the back out too before we leave," Tessman said. "Just to be thorough." He stepped towards the front door, ready to greet Dahlia.

Madison nodded as the police cruiser pulled up, its red and blue lights casting a neon glow on her face.

Tessman reached the front door as Dahlia cracked it open. She was dressed in a tank

top and boy shorts, which he assumed were her pajamas. Her appearance reminded him that he always thought Michael was a lucky man to have her in his bed. She was a beautiful woman with a toned body and all the right curves in the right places, which were clearly displayed by what little she wore, making her incredibly sexy. And she had been a bona fide Indian princess, which added to the allure. As he thought this, his thoughts suddenly went to Becca. She wasn't sexy in the same way, but there was something about Becca that held his interest and made him want her. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I am. Thank you for coming," Dahlia said, her voice sounding tense.

Her fiancé, Michael, was a friend of Tessman's. He'd spent time inside the condo, mostly watching sports on television and having a few brews with the couple, so he knew Dahlia well enough. He wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay. Looks like a random dude, higher than a kite. But we'll check it all out before we go. You did the right thing hitting the panic code. Where's your gun?"

"I stashed it in the bedroom since the local cops are here. I had it on me while he was banging on the door. I would have pulled the trigger," she vowed.

"Good girl," Tessman said. "Michael will be proud of you." He released his embrace. "Why don't you go throw a hoodie on or something? The police will need to interview you."

"Yes," she agreed. She went back inside, leaving him standing at the open door into the home. She returned moments later, pulling an LSU hooded sweatshirt over her head.

The local LEOs took statements and transported the still rambling, screaming, and cursing man away. He was so high he couldn't even give his name or answer any questions coherently. There were very few cars parked in the area, as most residents

of the building parked in their garages. The police would run the tags on the few cars on the street to see if one belonged to him, but that wasn't the concern of the Shepherd Security personnel.

Tessman and Robinson checked out the immediate area, including the alleyway that ran behind the rear-facing windows to be sure all was secure and no one else lingered. It was clear as expected.

"You two can go. I'm going to go back in with Dahlia until we reach Michael," Madison said. "You can come to my place for a sleepover with Hahna and me if you'd like," she said to Dahlia. "She'd love it if her Aunt Dahlia spent the night at our house."

"Aw, thanks. I love that little girl, but I'm fine," Dahlia said. "And the police have him now. You guys can all go. I'll get a hold of Michael soon, I'm sure. They're probably just wrapping up for the day at the install. It is two hours earlier there."

"Have a good night," Tessman said, giving her a brief squeeze. "Hit the panic code again or call Ops if anything else happens. I'll be at HQ doing nothing all night."

"Thank you, Carter," she said.

As he drove back to the Shepherd Security building, Tessman thought about this attraction he felt to Becca Elliot. She was unlike any other woman he'd ever been attracted to. Maybe because he had a different relationship with her, a professional relationship. He wondered if he'd find her as appealing if he'd met her in a bar. Given that she'd probably smack down any advances he'd make, probably not. He chuckled at this thought. No, Miss Rebecca Elliot was not a pick up in a bar, one-night stand kind of woman. She was probably a no sex on the first date type, too. Yes, she was a relationship type of woman, something his life wouldn't support, not that he wanted one.

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Oscar

At exactly eight twenty-five, Becca received a text from Briana.

Check your agency email. I just sent the particulars for the divorce papers.

Great, thanks. I'll get the paperwork completed and email it to both you and Colonel Shepherd.

She thanks you. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

She's welcome. Good night.

Becca woke her laptop and brought the Summons Petition for Dissolution of Marriage/Civil Union document up. Then she accessed her new Shepherd Security agency email account to view the one new email there. As expected, it was from Briana. Becca worked on it for about twenty minutes, filling in the new information Briana had obtained from the client. Then she sent it attached to an email to Briana and Shepherd as she had been asked to.

After knowing she had to face her current employment situation, she logged into her work email, which she had been avoiding all day. There was an email from one of the partners, replying to her earlier message. Not knowing what she really wanted the reply to be, she opened the message. It was one sentence.

Bradley and I will discuss this email and get back to you soon.

That was it, which left her feeling unsettled. Did she want them to say no problem, take as long as you need? Or did she want them to accept her resignation? She already knew she didn't want to return to the office every day. And deep inside, she knew she didn't want to practice estate law any longer. She could afford to take some time away from working. Maybe that would be the best thing right now; resign and spend a month or so figuring out what she really wanted to do.

She didn't reply to Carl's email. After she scanned the remainder of new emails in the account, she closed it down, done with work for the evening. Not knowing if Carter would be back, or when, she washed her face, brushed her teeth and put her pajamas on. She had already shut off the television. Then she settled into bed and turned the bedside light off, doubting sleep would come easily.

She hadn't been in bed long and was not asleep yet when her text message chime sounded through the otherwise quiet room. Grabbing her phone from the nightstand, she saw the message from Carter.

Are you still awake and if so, may I come by?

She sat up in bed and tapped out a quick reply.

Sure.

She turned the bedside light back on at the same time there was a knock on the door. She figured he must have been standing on the other side of the door when he sent the text. She jumped up and went to the door, opening it, uncaring that she was wearing her mid-thigh-length night shirt. She embraced him, relieved that he was back. "Carter, is everything okay?" she asked. Then she stepped back, releasing him, and she looked him over for any sign of injury.

He grinned, pleased by her concern and her brief hug. "Yeah, can I come in?"

“Sure,” she said, stepping back so he could enter. “Can you tell me what happened?”

He closed the door behind himself. “Yeah, it’s fine. It really wasn’t a big deal. The fiancé of one of my teammates hit the panic code on the alarm system, which notifies our Operations Center to send help. That was the alert I got to go assist. It was the same type of code I had Ops send out after I got your text last night that you were in danger. It turned out to be some unknown dude, high as shit, pounding on her door.”

“Did you take him on alone?” she asked.

“No, Madison, not sure you’ve met her yet, and Robinson also responded. He was the older black guy that came to your sister’s place the other night. Jackson was en route when we got it resolved, so we had Ops send him home. Robinson tased him to stop him as he wasn’t listening to reason. He was so high. We cuffed him for the local cops to arrest. Dahlia, Michael’s fiancé, was fine, just a bit shaken up. Michael is out of town for work.”

Becca stared at him, dumbfounded that for him it had not been a big deal. “Did she overreact?”

“No, not at all. She did the right thing, hitting the panic code. This guy was huge, nearly seven feet tall. He was screaming and swearing, pounding on her door violently. He wouldn’t listen to reason, not sure what he was on, but he came after us and had Robinson not tased him, I’m sure we would have had to either pummel him into unconsciousness or shoot him to stop him.”

“Shit, that’s scary,” Becca said. “That woman in the house had to be scared.”

“Yeah, she was shaken. Madison stayed with her while they tried to get a hold of Michael and will probably convince her to go home with her tonight. Michael is Madison’s brother-in-law, and I know she already considers Dahlia her sister-in-law

even though they aren't married yet. But Madison would do it for any of the wives or girlfriends of the team. You met Madison's husband, Cooper, when you came in for your first appointment with us to consider if we'd take the case."

"Yes, the blond guy? I remember him," Becca said.

"Yeah. I'm glad Madison was home. She's on the same team with Cooper and normally deploys with the team, but is assigned to HQ for the next month as a training officer."

"She was in the military?" Becca asked.

"Yeah, a captain in the army."

"Wow. That's something. Briana told me she'd been an MP in the army, too. She told me how she came to be on this team recently."

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“Madison is her supervisory and training officer. That’s why she’s at HQ right now.”

“This is such a foreign world to me, what you guys do. But I am so thankful you do it.”

He noticed that her mood became more emotional with that statement. He reached out and caressed her shoulders, taking in the feeling of her soft cotton nightshirt. “I’m glad we’ve been there for you. I’m glad I personally have been there for you.”

Becca gazed into his eyes. His presence was comforting. He was easy to talk to and proved himself to be both caring and intelligent. His touch was soothing as well as something more exciting, something that created a yearning inside of her for more contact. She pushed aside the thoughts in her head that told her to keep her distance from him. Raising on her tiptoes, she pulled herself into him and laid her hands to his cheeks as she pressed her lips to his.

Although surprised by her actions, Tessman immediately returned her soft kiss, matching the gentle nature of it as he wrapped his arms around her. He let his lips linger and didn’t escalate the kiss, didn’t turn it into the fierce response his body urged him to. It lasted far too short for him, and he was left wanting a lot more when she pulled away. He didn’t release her from his hold, though. Still gazing deeply into her eyes, he ran one of his hands slowly and lightly up her arm, over her shoulder, and up her neck until he gently cupped her jaw. Her skin was so soft he yearned to feel over other parts of her body, more intimate parts.

“That was nice,” he said.

She saw the small, boyish smile curve his lips, but it was the desire she saw burning in his eyes that was anything but boyish that made her breath hitch. If offered, Carter Tessman would take her to bed, wanting it with a man-sized appetite that would probably stun her. She appreciated that he hadn't tried to escalate the kiss, hadn't let his hands wander, and didn't look disappointed that she ended the kiss where she had. He was a gentleman, and this was just another way he treated her with respect.

"It was very nice," she said in a whisper.

His thumb gently caressing her cheek was a distraction. She wanted to tell him so many things. She wanted to explain what that kiss meant and what it didn't mean. But no words came. Instead, she leaned back in and kissed him again, this time wrapping her arms around his neck and holding on for dear life.

As the kiss deepened and his tongue pressed past her lips, she knew that this was the last thing she should be doing. But it also felt right. She felt like the world was spinning out of control, and this was the only way to stabilize it. Being held in his arms not only felt safe, but she felt energized, and empowered as she'd initiated the physical contact, and she felt wanted, something she needed to be right now. She felt sexy and daring, like a woman who went after what she desired. She'd always been reserved when it came to initiating physical, sexual contact with a man before a relationship was established. She'd never had a one-night stand, not that she planned to tonight. No, she wouldn't have sex with him tonight.

As his hands kneaded her butt cheeks, pulling her fully against him, she felt his arousal and she wished she were the type of woman who could engage in meaningless sex, but she wasn't. She pulled away, slowly. His eyes opened, revealing dilated pupils. She felt flushed with excitement.

"I'd like to lie with you tonight and enjoy the feeling of our bodies holding each other, but I'm not inviting you to have sex. Just to be clear," she said, watching him

for a reaction. He looked confused. “I like you, Carter, but I don’t,” she began, stumbling over her words, trying to pick how she wanted to describe who she was and how she felt about sex, how it had to mean something.

He silenced her with his index finger, gently pressing against her lips. “I’d like that, and I promise, I won’t push for more.” He knew she’d been through a lot, and she was emotionally vulnerable. He didn’t want to sleep with her as she later could regret it. It would feel like taking advantage of the situation. Then he removed his finger and pressed another closed mouth kiss to her lips.

His body was buzzing after the kiss, which he cut short, knowing he really wanted her. He drew her by the hand to the bed. She crawled to the middle of it. He sat on the edge and took his boots off. Then, watching her carefully, he removed his wallet, which contained his FBI badge, and his phone and gun, and he sat all three onto the nightstand. Then he pulled the covers over himself and reached up to turn off the light. He rolled into her and wrapped her in an embrace.

A tidal wave of emotions washed over Becca as she lay enveloped by Carter’s body and surrounded by his warmth. For the first time since the murders, she felt at peace, and felt like it was okay not to focus on her grief, to allow herself to feel something else, something good. And it did feel good. She shifted her position and pulled herself more firmly into him, her head resting on his shoulder. His erection pressed into her hip and she let herself imagine what it would feel like to be intimate with him.

“Sleep well, Becca,” he whispered.

“You too, Carter.”

She felt a kiss press to the top of her head. She closed her eyes, knowing she’d get the best night’s sleep she’d had in a very long time.

Papa

Waking up beside Carter was just as nice as going to sleep in his arms. When she opened her eyes, he was seated with his back against the headboard, reading something on his phone, the glow from the screen illuminating his handsome face and a small portion of the room.

“Good morning,” she said, still lying so close to him that their bodies touched.

“Good morning. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, not at all. What time is it?” she asked as she stretched.

“Just past seven hundred.” He laid the phone on the nightstand, face-up and still illuminated, and he shuffled his position to lie beside her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in as close as possible to his solid form. Then he brushed his lips across hers and he pressed light, wet kisses over her cheek. When his lips reached her ear, he spoke in whispers, his hot breath blowing over her ear. “I really liked holding you all night.”

A rush of warmth filled Becca, especially her southern region. “Umm,” she cooed from the pleasurable sensations his words, kisses, and warm breath brought. “I liked waking to you here. Thank you for staying.”

“I’d never have snuck out while you were sleeping.” The light from his phone faded out, casting the entire room back into darkness. He pulled away just a bit, reached and turned on the bedside light. Then he wrapped his arms around her again, holding her tightly. “I really like you, Becca. This is personal for me. This, holding you, kissing you, it’s not the job.”

His gaze held hers with a magnetic grip. She couldn’t tear her eyes away. She was

glad he'd turned the light on so she could see him when he said that. She reached her hand to his face and caressed his cheek. "I'm not in the right place, emotionally, for a relationship, but I want to be," she confessed. "And I don't want to miss out on something that could be great because of it."

Was that what he was offering her, a relationship? Yeah, he guessed he was. He'd already surmised that she wasn't a one-night stand kind of girl, so a relationship was the only option. And same as her, he didn't want to miss out on something that could be great, in his case because he stupidly wouldn't try a relationship. "I'm patient, Becca. I know you're in a really bad place right now. I want to hold you, both of us, naked. I want to make love to you, but I won't do that until you can be all in. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't know how much I appreciate that," she said, so many emotions bubbling up inside of her.

He pressed his lips to hers again. Taking in the amazing sensation of lying with her, holding her, kissing her. This would have to suffice until she was in a better emotional place and ready for more. He understood PTSD, had seen it in so many of his brothers. He recognized it in her. She may have acted as though the incident the other night hadn't bothered her, but he saw the difference in her since it happened. That, on top of the murder of her sister's family, was more than enough to cause a bad case of PTSD.

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They lay in silence, just holding each other for five wonderful minutes. Then his phone buzzed. He pulled it from the nightstand. It was a meeting invitation from Shepherd. He acknowledged the meeting. “I’m sorry. I have to get up. I have a meeting with Shepherd in fifteen minutes to go over the Op to get the cameras and mics in Briana’s client’s house.”

“What time will you be out doing that?” she asked.

“Not until around ten hundred this morning. You’ll be fine here, right?”

“Yes, I know I’m safe here. What else can I do to help try to figure out what those men were looking for? Jesus Christ! They tore my house apart. It has to be something important.”

“I’m sorry that we are no closer to figuring it out than when you hired us. We have theories, but that’s it.”

“Is there anything else I can do to help?” she asked as he got out of bed.

“I wish there was,” he said. He went over to the Keurig. “I’ll make you a cup of coffee before I go.”

She pulled herself up from the bed. “You don’t have to do that. I can make my own.”

“I’m making myself a quick cup too,” he said. “I’ll take it with me to Shepherd’s office and bring the mug back after.”

“Okay, in that case, thank you.” She crossed over to and sealed herself in the bathroom.

He used it after her, grabbing a new toothbrush from the cabinet where a supply was housed. When he emerged, he shot her a grin. “My toothbrush is the blue one. I left it in the cup next to yours. Hope you don’t mind.”

At zero nine forty, the three vehicles the Shepherd Security Team were using were parked in the convenience store parking lot of the tiny strip mall one block from the home of Briana’s client, Simone Hoch. Tessman drove a borrowed cable television company work truck, as did Jackson and Smith. Tessman had no idea how Shepherd always secured anything the team needed. All three of them even had valid ID identifying them as employees.

Briana drove a late model sedan with many dents and scratches. It was registered in the name Chris Mack and Briana carried a valid Illinois driver’s license and insurance card in that name. Shepherd guaranteed it would hold up to the local LEOs scrutiny after she crashed into Simone’s husband’s car.

“Now don’t forget to cut the wheel and hit his car with the tail end of your car so you don’t get hurt,” Jackson reminded her.

“Roger that,” she said. “I’ll only be going thirty or so, so I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, Tessman, you go first as planned and make sure you’re in the street enough that her swerving to miss your vehicle is plausible.”

“Okay, I’m on comms,” Tessman said as he stepped towards the borrowed truck. “Stay vigilant Briana. This guy might come out swinging.”

“I almost hope he does. I’d love to flatten his ass to the ground.”

Tessman chuckled as he opened the driver’s side door of the truck.

“Okay, we’re heading to the street behind theirs, so we’re ready to move in through the back,” Jackson said. Then he and Smith moved towards the cable television work truck they’d be driving. “Time your move, so you come up their street at exactly one minute after ten.”

Briana nodded. Then she got behind the wheel of the sedan.

Tessman parked the work truck as planned, kitty-corner from Simone and Jacob Hoch’s home. He glanced at the car parked in the driveway, a candy apple red nineteen seventies Camaro. Holy shit. Briana was going to crash into that beauty! Then his gaze went to the window over the garage, which Briana had advised was his home office. He could make out a male figure sitting in front of it. It was five minutes to ten. Jacob’s regular weekly call always lasted until ten hundred hours. And his wife said he then spent fifteen minutes going through the emails he missed while on the call. He would be at his desk until at least ten-fifteen.

Tessman got out and put cones near his vehicle and approached the green utility box for cable television service. He kneeled beside it and accessed the panel like a workman would. “In position,” he broadcast through comms. He listened through comms and heard Jackson’s confirmation that he and Smith were in position at the rear of the house as well.

“Slowly making my way into the neighborhood,” Briana transmitted at ten hundred hours on the dot.

Tessman’s eyes flickered to the window over the garage again. Jacob Hoch still sat in front of the window. Tessman activated the video function on his phone and videoed

the inside of the panel, his finger tracing a wire through the panel. Then he shifted his gaze on the road, in the direction Briana would approach from. At exactly 10:01, the sedan turned the corner. She accelerated as she neared the work truck he'd parked. She swerved, heading straight for the Camaro. At the last second, she turned sharply. The back end fishtailed, crashing right into the front bumper of the vintage car. Its car alarm immediately screamed through the neighborhood.

Even with the upstairs window closed, Tessman heard Hoch scream, "What the fuck! No! My car!"

Tessman smiled, a small chuckle escaping from his mouth. He sat his phone on the utility box and left the record function going. He'd capture it all.

"Calling the police now," Jackson transmitted.

A moment later, an irate Jacob Hoch burst through the front door. "What the fuck?" His gaze fixed on Briana, who now stood near her car, which had bounced off the Camaro and stopped a few feet away. "You stupid bitch! Look what you did to my car!"

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“I’m so sorry. I over-corrected,” she said.

“Shut the fuck up! I don’t want to hear your whiney voice.” He examined the damage to his car, reacting with groans and expressions on his face, bouncing between outrage, anger, and disbelief. He was very animated in his gesturing.

“I’m sorry. I have insurance. Insurance will pay to fix it,” Briana said.

“Fix it? Are you fucking serious? How fucking stupid does someone have to be to come into my driveway and hit my car? You’ll do more than fix it, sweetheart,” he threatened. He raised his right arm, his hand in a fist.

“He’s getting physical,” Tessman transmitted. He bolted upright and ran at full speed across the street.

Briana was ready for it. As the fist was thrust through the air, she sidestepped it, grabbed his arm in flight, and propelled him towards the ground. She braced herself, using her legs to block his, causing him to trip, his upper body following his fist to the blacktopped driveway.

Tessman hit the property just as Hoch, dazed but still mad as hell, pulled himself to his feet. More curses flew from his mouth.

“Hey, man,” Tessman said as he came to a stop beside Hoch. “Are you okay?”

“You saw that,” Hoch yelled. “You saw that crazy bitch assault me!”

“No, I saw you throw a punch at her and I saw her deflect it. That was on you, man,” Tessman said.

Hoch’s hands were fisted by his side. “Look what she did to my car!”

“Damn, that was a beautiful car,” Tessman said, wincing at the damage. “I was working across the street and saw the whole thing.” He pointed to the work truck. “I called the police and reported the accident. They should be here soon.”

“Jacob,” Simone Hoch called as she came out of the house. “Is everything okay?”

“Okay? No it’s not okay!” He muttered, “another stupid bitch,” under his breath. “Get me my wallet. This fucking whore came into our driveway and crashed into my car! My car!”

Simone hurried back into the house and reappeared seconds later, carrying a black wallet. She rushed up to him and handed it over. Then she craned her neck to view the damage to the car. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“It can be fixed,” Briana said.

“Yes, yes it can,” Simone agreed.

“Shut the fuck up, both of you. Simone go back into the house. This is none of your fucking business.”

Tessman wanted to give this guy a good beat-down. Someone needed to teach him some manners. Hopefully, justice, in the form of jail, would be coming for him very soon. “You’re pissed. That’s understandable. Take it easy, dude.”

Jacob Hoch was about to answer, no doubt with an angry comment, but the

approaching police car stopped him. The police cruiser, with no lights or sirens, pulled up to the curb. The lone male police officer got out of the vehicle as Simone rushed back to the house. She'd already let Jackson and Smith in before she'd brought the wallet out. Tessman had heard that through comms. She'd remain at the front door, watching for her husband's approach as they completed their task.

Tessman eyed his watch, marking the time. They needed thirty minutes to adequately plant the cameras and mics. He jogged across the street and grabbed his phone from the top of the utility box. Then he jogged back with it in time to hear Jacob Hoch's rant on how the stupid bitch hit his car and then assaulted him.

Tessman was glad to see the older cop was a no-nonsense guy who shut Hoch down pretty quickly, demanding IDs from both Hoch and Briana. He also radioed for a second officer to come to the scene.

"I have it all on video," Tessman said, holding his phone up. "I was taking a video of an incorrectly wired switch when it kicked off over here. He handed his phone to the cop and hit play. As the cop watched it, Jacob Hoch radiated rage towards Tessman. Tessman found it odd he didn't listen to himself on the recording and come to the same conclusion everyone else did regarding his temper.

"You were going to punch her in the face," the cop said, dumbfounded after seeing it. He turned to Briana. "Do you want to press charges, miss?"

"Um, I don't know. I mean, I did swerve because I lost control, and I hit his car. So, I know I'll get a ticket. It was my fault, I admit that. He'll get my name and address on the police report for the accident, won't he?" she asked, acting fearful. "So, no. I don't want to press charges."

The cop turned back to Jacob Hoch. "Be glad you didn't strike her, or the decision would be out of her hands with what I just saw."

“I was wrong, I’m sorry. I was just so pissed. It’s a seventy-two Camaro! I just spent the last two years restoring her.”

“May I suggest you keep it in the garage where no harm can come to it?” the cop replied. “Okay, so Miss Mack will get a ticket for the accident. And I’m warning you, Mister Hoch, if you threaten or harass her in any way, you will be arrested. You’re on my radar now.”

Just then, the second police cruiser pulled up. The two cops worked on taking statements from all three of them and they wrote the ID info down.

“You have my information. Am I free to go back to work?” Tessman asked the cop.

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“Yeah, go ahead,” the cop answered.

Tessman crossed the street and occupied himself at the utility box for fifteen more minutes while the cops finished up. Finally, he heard that Jackson and Smith were done and had vacated the premises. He stayed where he was until Briana drove away, followed by the officers. Hoch still stood by his car, assessing the damage and winding himself up.

“All assets are clear of the scene, Control,” Tessman reported.

“Roger that, Moe. Control, dropping off.”

“Jax, are you still nearby?” he broadcast.

“Affirmative, just leaving the neighborhood. Why?”

“I have a really bad feeling. Can you watch the feed as he goes back inside? He’s still pissed. I think he may take it out on his wife.”

“What? You think he’s going to go in and beat her up?” Briana broke in.

“Yeah, I do,” Tessman said. “He’s standing in the driveway winding himself up.”

Quebec

Becca kept herself busy going through the bins from her sister’s house and the boxes returned by Detective Davis again while Carter and the others who were setting up

Briana's client's husband were away. She would admit that she felt anxious about the safety of Simone Hoch, who technically was now her client as well. And she was worried about Briana, purposefully provoking a violent man. She knew she wasn't cut out for this sort of work because she didn't want to see anyone get hurt.

She'd also decided that she needed to go home. She couldn't hide in this building indefinitely. She'd talk with Carter about that when he returned. They had no idea who those men were that had been in her sister's house. According to Angel, the man who'd been shot still refused to talk to the police. And there was no ID on him or the man she'd killed in the closet. Without knowing who they were, they wouldn't be able to figure out what they were looking for.

The other decision she made that morning was that she was going to resign from the firm. She didn't want to practice estate law any longer, and she didn't need the money with the inheritance she'd be getting. She could take her time to figure out what the next chapter of her life looked like. That decision did bring her a degree of peace.

After finishing going through the last of the bins and boxes, she wandered through the hallway and ended up at Angel's desk. "You look lost," Angel said with a grin. "Getting bored?"

"Yes," Becca said. "I looked through the bins and boxes a third time and I still don't see anything that anyone would have been looking for."

"It might not be there to find," Angel said with a shrug. "You knew your sister and her husband the best. If they wanted to hide something or put it someplace for safekeeping, what would they do with it?"

"Ordinarily, I'd say in their safe, but Detective Davis went through all that stuff too and found nothing."

“What did your sister do to hide things when you were kids?” Angel asked.

Becca chuckled to herself. “She used to hide her treasures in her socks.”

“Did you go through all the sock drawers in the house?” Angel asked.

Becca grimaced. “No, I didn’t touch any of the drawers the clothes are in and neither did the intruders,” she pointed out.

“Well, from what Jackson said, they were stopped before they went upstairs to where the bedrooms are.”

Becca nodded. “True. And they did rummage through all the clothes at my house.”

“Becca,” Angel said gently. “What could your brother-in-law or sister have been into that would have caused this? I know you don’t want to believe either or both were into something they shouldn’t have been, but the fact is, this kind of thing doesn’t happen to people who aren’t doing something sketchy or aren’t involved with the wrong people.”

“I don’t know,” Becca admitted. “I keep thinking it was a mistake. Someone mistook them for someone else.”

“I hope that wasn’t the case. If it is, this may never be solved,” Angel said.

“Has your husband told you the theories they have? Carter mentioned they have a few theories, but he got called to a meeting this morning with Colonel Shepherd after he brought it up, before I could ask.”

Angel bit her lip. “It’s not my place to say anything, Becca. It’s not my investigation. Ask Carter and Jackson when they get back. They should be back soon.”

Becca felt a wave of disappointment wash over her. She nodded. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Yes, lunch should be coming soon. Would you get the leftovers out of the refrigerator and put them on the one side of the counter like I do? That would help me a lot. I want to finish the updates I’m making on this spreadsheet before lunch.” She tapped her monitor.

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“Sure, no problem. I’m sorry if I was keeping you from your work.”

“Not at all,” Angel assured her.

Tessman and Briana got back to HQ just after the lunch order arrived. Jackson and Smith were still near the Hoch house, watching the feed. They’d described how things had gotten tense when Jacob re-entered his house. Simone made herself scarce, obviously staying out of his way as much as she could, and she was nearly a mute when she was near him. He was looking for a fight and trying to provoke her into doing or saying something that was deserving of a beating, in his mind anyway. While they watched, Simone admitted to being stupid about things, not caring enough, and being a lousy wife, promising to do better.

Hearing what was going on in that house made Tessman sick. No one should have to live like Simone Hoch was. And knowing they needed proof of Jacob Hoch’s abuse, as in footage of him actually hitting her, Tessman couldn’t help but want to camp out right outside of the Hoch’s front door. He wanted to bust in and defend Simone when Jacob would eventually strike out at his wife.

Tessman and Briana caught up with Becca in the kitchen on the fifth floor. She sat at the table with Michaela and Angel. Their plates held the remnants of their lunches.

“Mexican, yay!” Briana squealed when she saw the offering. “Thank you, Angel.” She went to the counter and grabbed a plate.

“I thought today was Greek day?” Tessman said, his gaze on Angel. He was disappointed.

“Tomorrow,” Angel answered. “How’d it go?”

“Show her your video, Moe,” Briana said. “The piece of shit took a swing at me.”

Becca was shocked to hear her say it, and she said it so calmly, almost jokingly.

“He didn’t actually hit you, did he?” Michaela asked as Tessman handed his phone to Angel, who sat beside Michaela.

Briana flashed her an ‘oh come on’ grin. “Hello, your Lambchop taught me hand-to-hand. Of course, he taught me how to evade a punch.”

“I thought I taught you that,” Madison said, coming into the room as Angel and Michaela viewed the video.

“You did too,” Briana said. “STO extraordinaire.” She giggled.

Becca listened to the exchange and picked up on the friendly teasing. She saw the pistol worn openly on this woman’s belt. And she was also beautiful. Was that some sort of requirement for working at this agency? She wondered if this was Madison.

“You must be Becca. I’m Madison. I’ve heard a lot about you. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” Becca greeted. “I’ve heard a little about you as well. It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Let me see how she did,” Madison said, reaching for the phone. She replayed the swing, deflection, and faceplanting that followed. “Oh, nicely done!”

Briana beamed proudly. “Thank you. I would have liked a reason for a throat punch, but that didn’t present itself.”

Everyone in the room laughed. Becca couldn’t help but smile and chuckle along.

“She handled herself like a pro,” Tessman said.

“Aw, thank you, Moe,” Briana said, wrapping her arms around him. “We made a good team.”

The people in the room continued to laugh and conversations broke out. When Tessman pulled himself from Briana’s embrace, he went over close to Becca. “I’m going to get a plate. Will you stay with me while I eat?”

“Sure, I have nowhere else to be. I went through everything one more time while you were gone. I still can’t find anything worth killing over.”

“You’ve checked the contents on all thumb drives or other external storage?” Madison asked.

“Yes,” Becca answered.

“Brielle is convinced they have to have an account someplace that we don’t know about where they stored things. She is shocked by the lack of stuff in their cloud storage accounts,” Tessman said. “She and Smith have gone over their laptops and browsing histories but can’t find a trace of it.”

“What if they used their work computers?” Madison asked. “When I was in the private sector, people stored all kinds of personal shit on their work computers or the cloud storage attached to their work accounts that they shouldn’t have.”

“Then we’ll never see it. Well-Life has already wiped it, I’m sure. If they aren’t guilty of something, they’re sure acting like it,” Tessman said.

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An idea suddenly came to Becca. Her mom's cloud storage. Her sister and Nick, as they worked at Well-Life, took all the information on her parents' accounts. She knew her mom had a personal Dropbox, One Drive, and Google Drive. And she stored a lot on them. That would be the most secure place to put anything; on a dead woman's cloud storage. So where was her mom's laptop? It had been found in their home after the plane crash and it hadn't been at Nick and Nicole's house that she saw, or the police took.

"There's another laptop we need to find," Becca stated. "Nick and Nicole took my mom's after her death. It should have been at their house. My mom's cloud storage is where I'd bet they put things, especially if it was for safekeeping."

"We need to go back to your sister's house and search for that computer. If they were using it to store important documents or data, they have it hidden someplace in that house," Tessman said.

"Do you remember your mom's account names and passwords?" Madison asked. "We can have Brielle search for it and try to hack in."

"I'm not sure. I can make a list of possibles. But if Nick and Nicole were using it, they may have changed the password," Becca said.

"If we can at least find the accounts, the Digital Team can see about getting into them," Madison said. "When are Jackson and Smith due back?"

"Not sure. Shepherd approved them to remain on site, close to the Hoch house in case the husband hits her. He's wound tight, looking for a fight. And if he strikes out, he's

going to deliver a hell of a beating, I'm sure," Tessman said. "They'll be there to stop it before he does too much damage to her."

"I hate having to wait for it to happen. When I was solo, I would get the woman out before the guy snapped," Briana said.

"Yes, and you made her disappear, which isn't optimal in most cases," Madison reminded her. "You're following the law now and hopefully giving these women a better solution. They shouldn't have to give their lives up to get away from their domestic abusers."

"I know. We want to put these guys away in prison," Briana said. "But the system is broken."

"You need to have faith in Shepherd," Angel said to Briana.

"I do or I wouldn't be here," Briana said.

"I'll talk to Shepherd and ask if Briana and I can come to Becca's sister's house with you, as Jackson isn't available," Madison said. "Another couple sets of hands to look for this laptop can't hurt and we're free for a few hours, or until something goes down with Briana's client."

"That would be great, Madison, thanks," Tessman said.

Standing outside the front door and watching Carter insert the keys into the lock, Becca mentally prepared herself to re-enter her sister's home. Detective Davis wasn't thrilled that the Shepherd Security crew was going in to conduct a new search. But he cleared the crime scene none-the-less because, as Carter had said, the police had no

leads on the two men who'd broken in or of who killed her family. He was hoping for some help to solve it.

Madison and Briana got out of the black SUV that Madison drove after she parked it behind Carter's Jeep. Madison pulled her pistol from the holster, which was tucked into her jeans at the small of her back as she reached them at the front door.

"I'm assuming nothing," Madison said. "We conduct a thorough search of the place by the numbers first to be sure no one is here."

Tessman nodded. "Becca, stay behind me."

All three of them had their weapons drawn when Tessman opened the front door. The air was tinged with the metallic smell of blood. As soon as he entered, he stepped farther into the living room, Becca following right behind. He led her to the front corner of the living room and stood in front of her, his aim in the room.

Madison rushed forward through the hallway and into the kitchen. Becca watched as Briana closed the front door and kept her aim up the stairs. In the corner of the stairwell, and on the tiled floor of the entry, Becca saw the bloodstains from the man Carter had shot.

"Clear," Madison called from the kitchen area. Then she reappeared through the open doorway that led from the kitchen to the dining room. "Where are the stairs to the basement?"

"Around the corner from the stairs leading up," Tessman replied.

"Bree, you're with me," Madison ordered.

Becca remained in the corner behind Carter for what seemed an eternity before

Madison and Briana came back into view.

“Basement is clear,” Madison said. Then she checked out the powder room and laundry room. “Door to the garage is locked. We’ll leave it that way and search the garage last.” She then stepped over the dried blood on the tile in the entry and started up the stairs. “Bree, you’re with me again. Tessman, stay down here and cover our six.”

Becca watched the two ladies aggressively mount the stairs. Seeing how capable they were, Becca respected them even more than she already did. “They’re both really something,” she said quietly.

“Yes. I hadn’t really worked with Briana before today, but I’ve worked with Madison on many occasions. She’s fearless.”

“What really impresses me is that you all just know what to do.”

“We all receive the same training and the teams train together often. And of course, we deploy on missions together frequently too, so there is a comfort we all have with each other,” Tessman said.

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“It shows,” she remarked. “Your team is impressive, Carter.”

He smiled. “Yeah, Shepherd Security is impressive.”

Before long, the two ladies came back down the stairs. Their pistols were reholstered.

“Okay, it’s clear. Becca, if your sister or her husband were going to hide a laptop, where would you think that would be?” Madison asked.

“I’m not sure,” Becca answered. “I have about four places that are the most possible. In the boxes in the basement labeled Christmas decorations is my first guess because when Nicole purchased things for the girls she wanted to hide, that’s where she’d stash the stuff. Second would be in the garage. Nick hid things out there sometimes. I think we should check the tops of all the cabinets in the kitchen because of a joke Nicole made one time about where she’d hide drugs.” She stopped talking when all three of the others gave her a questioning look. “We were watching a movie, and the cops raided a house, looking for drugs. On top of the cabinets were the one place they never searched. It was Nicole’s sense of humor in pointing that out, that’s all,” she said, clearly defending her sister.

“And the fourth?” Tessman pressed.

“In the sock drawers.” Becca shrugged. “She always hid things in her socks when we were kids.”

“We save the garage for last,” Madison said. “Briana, you go back downstairs and

search through all the Christmas boxes and bins. Look for anything that doesn't fit, laptop or not."

"Got it," Briana said. She turned and walked towards the stairs to the basement.

"I'm going upstairs and will start with the sock drawers, but will search all the drawers in every room," Madison said.

"I haven't gone through any of the drawers yet," Becca said.

"We'll look on top of the kitchen cabinets," Tessman volunteered.

Becca watched Carter hop on top of the counter and stand so he could see over the top of the cabinets in the kitchen. After checking over all of them, he hopped down, disappointed. No laptop computer, nothing that shouldn't be there.

"I was hoping for at least a thumb drive or something," he said. "Let's go upstairs and help Madison search."

Becca ignored the blood stains as much as she could, but knew she had to call the crime scene clean-up crew back to paint the hall stairs and maybe even replace carpeting. She might be better off just having the house torn down. Who'd ever want to sleep in a house where five people died?

Madison was in one of the girls' bedrooms, looking through drawers. She hadn't searched Nick and Nicole's room yet. That was where Becca and Tessman started. Not only did they search the drawers, but they went through the closets with a renewed focus. Nothing.

Becca stepped into the master bathroom and gazed at the white cabinet that ran down the left side of the vanity area. "Carter, check on top of that cabinet."

He hopped up on the counter and stood. Raising up on his tiptoes, he peered over the top of the cabinet. “Oh, hello.” He reached his hand up and retrieved the silver laptop computer, which sat nestled perfectly in the top quarter round that framed the top of the cabinet. He handed it to Becca and then hopped down.

“Found something,” he called

Becca ran her hand over the smooth silver lid. She opened it, recognizing it. “It’s my mom’s.” It didn’t power up upon opening it as it should have. “Was there a power cord up there? It’s not powering up.”

“The battery could be dead,” Tessman said. “And no, there wasn’t a cord.”

Madison and Briana entered the room. “Where was it?” Madison asked.

“On top of the cabinet,” Becca said, her eyes looking at the top of the bathroom vanity cabinet.

“Nice job,” Madison said. “You knew your sister well.”

“We’ll have to take it back to HQ and find a compatible power cord. Looks like the battery is dead,” Tessman said. “We’ll grab a bag from the closet to bring it out in. Just in case this place is being watched, we don’t want anyone to see us bring it out.”

Becca was nervous as the laptop powered up, once a compatible cord was plugged into it. The four of them, plus Brielle, were in Brielle’s office on the seventh floor. They all huddled around the desk where Becca sat in Brielle’s desk chair. Once it powered all the way up, a family picture of her mom and dad, and she and her sister from Nicole’s wedding, appeared. A smile curved Becca’s lips. She had forgotten her

mother had set this photo as her screen background. It was one of her mom's all-time favorite pictures.

The box popped up to enter the passcode.

"This is easy, unless Nicole or Nick changed it. Mom always used Dad's birthday as her passcode."

"Not very secure," Brielle said.

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Becca typed it in. All the icons and files her mom had created populated the screen. “Yes!” she exclaimed.

“Okay, let me in to search the files,” Brielle said.

Becca rose from the chair, but stayed beside her, leaning in to watch the screen in anticipation. It didn’t take long for Brielle to find the last few files that had been saved on the laptop. There were seven of them, saved after the date of her parents’ deaths. The very last was a video, saved just three days before Nicole’s family had been murdered.

Tessman laid his hand on Becca’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Becca gave him an emotional grin. “No, but I have to see it.”

Brielle hit play on the video. Becca’s sister Nicole displayed. She was clearly in the master bathroom at her house. “I hope it’s you watching this Becca, and if you are, that means Nick and I are no longer alive.”

Nicole became upset as she spoke. Becca clutched her hand to her chest as tears filled her eyes. So many emotions swept over her.

“I am so sorry I couldn’t tell you what was happening. It was too dangerous, and I didn’t want to put you in danger.” She nervously glanced behind herself. Then she turned back, facing the camera. “Nick doesn’t even know I’m leaving you this message. Please know I didn’t know the world was going to crash in on us this soon the last night you were at our house for dinner. I don’t want you to feel I lied to you

or deceived you. It wasn't like that."

Tessman watched Nicole swipe at her eyes to brush away the tears the same way Becca did. He tightened his grasp on Becca's shoulder.

"We are all sick. Nick accidentally poisoned himself in the lab and somehow, it was transmitted to me and the girls. The first symptom was the headaches," she said. "We had dull headaches on and off for weeks."

Becca gasped. She reached down to the laptop and hit pause on the recording. "I remember the week before I went over for dinner, the whole family had what they thought was a case of the flu. They all had horrible headaches. Nicole said they'd all been plagued with headaches for weeks. She even took Riley to the eye doctor, who said her headaches were due to eye strain." Then she un-paused the recording.

"But when he reported it to Neil, his boss at Well-Life, something really suspicious happened. The matter was referred to the partners, and they insisted it be handled in-house with their new in-house medical staff. Even the girls, they insisted we bring them to see their doctors and implied we'd both be fired if we didn't comply. I went to see James Standish myself and he insisted it was nothing sinister, just trying to keep a lid on it so no one from the FDA or OSHA came in to investigate. We saw their doctors, and they insisted a vitamin cocktail would nullify the poison in our bodies. And we felt better. But Nick ran his own tests, and they lied to us. I have a bunch of documents as proof loaded up in Mom's Dropbox. The password is the name of our favorite vacation as kids. I hope you remember."

The recording abruptly stopped.

"That's it," Brielle said.

"This is bigger than we thought," Tessman said. "I'm sending Shepherd a message to

let him know what we've found. I'm sure he'll loop in his federal contacts." He tapped out a text message.

Brielle brought up the Dropbox account. "What do you think the password is, Becca?"

Becca shook her head. "I'm not sure what Nicole was going for with this. We went on a combination Disney Cruise and Walt Disney World park vacation one summer. That was my favorite, but Nicole got seasick and then the heat got to her in the park. It wasn't her favorite by far and we never went again as a family until a few years ago to bring her kids. And one winter we went skiing in Vale. That was her favorite. The altitude gave me headaches and I really don't like winter. I hated skiing, and we never went again."

"Anything else?" Tessman pressed. His phone buzzed with a new message. He viewed it. A text from Jackson.

"No, just several long weekend trips to the Dells. Mom called them mini-vacations. We always had a good time."

"The Wisconsin Dells?" Brielle clarified.

Becca nodded.

Brielle typed in several variations of the words. Nothing unlocked the account.

"Try WiscDells, all one word," Becca suggested.

The second attempt, capitalizing the W and the D, did it and the drive opened up. Everyone leaned in close to examine the many files that displayed.

“It’s going to take me some time to go through these files and find the proof your sister uploaded and anything else that may be of value,” Brielle said. “I’d really prefer to go through them alone, without all of you leaning over my shoulder.”

“That’s fine. Jackson just messaged. Briana, Becca, and I need to go have a conference call with him and Smith,” Tessman said.

They went down the hall to Tessman’s office. He dialed Jackson and hit the speaker. “Hey, you’re on speaker. It’s me, Briana, and Becca on the line,” he said after Jackson answered.

“Mister Wonderful is still primed to blow. I talked to Shepherd. He’s sending Flores and Robinson to take over so Smith and I can get back to HQ.”

“I should be on scene,” Briana argued.

“Negative. Hoch has already seen you. If anything goes down and they go in to intervene, they’ll call you to come in after the local LEOs have carted him away. It’s going to happen today; there’s no doubt in my mind. So stay available, Woods,” Jackson said. “You’ll need to help your client obtain the order of protection as soon as her husband is arrested.

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“Okay,” Briana replied, understanding, but still disappointed.

“Did Brielle find anything on the laptop?” Jackson asked.

Tessman had kept him apprised of their find at the house. “Yes, Nicole DeSoto left a video telling her sister that Nick accidentally poisoned himself in the lab and somehow it infected the entire family. They knew they were sick. The in-house doctor at Well-Life treated them and said they were fine, but Nicole knew they weren’t. She also directed us to a cloud drive with proof, not sure what kind. Brielle’s pouring over it now.”

“Makes you wonder if the toxic chemical he was working with came with an MDS or SDS,” Smith interjected. “If the company purposefully hid that from the guy working with it, that’s a big OSHA no-no.”

Tessman fixed his stare on Becca. “Would you know anything about that at Well-Life?”

“Here’s about all I know. Material Data Sheets, or Safety Data Sheets are included in all chemicals and compounds that are in any lab, even organic compounds. The last time I was at Well-Life was well over a year ago, before my parents died. The sheets were prominently displayed in the labs at that time.”

“So, this is looking more and more like it’s linked to Well-Life,” Jackson said.

“Yes,” Tessman agreed. “Once we have whatever proof Brielle finds, we need to go back with a new search warrant and go after their in-house medical charts and MDS

sheets.”

“Is there any way to see if anyone else who works at Well-Life has died in the last year?” Becca asked.

Tessman nodded his head. “You’re thinking if Nick accidentally poisoned himself and his family, did anyone else?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m thinking,” Becca said. “Nick was experienced. I don’t believe for a second that he accidentally poisoned himself or didn’t know how concentrated and potent a compound was that he was working with.”

“We’ll have Brielle look into that after she’s done with the cloud storage,” Tessman said.

“Okay, we’re signing off now,” Jackson said. “I’ll catch up with you after we get back to HQ.”

Romeo

After the call was disconnected, Briana excused herself, leaving Becca and Tessman standing alone in his office with the door closed. Becca glanced around, checking out the place Tessman spent more time at than his own apartment. She walked up to a large poster that hung over the couch, where he’d said he slept often. It was a stunning photo of the silhouette of a scuba diver in beautiful blue water with a vibrantly colored coral reef to one side and thousands of brilliantly colored fish swimming all around him, but mostly above him where the water was a lighter blue that transitioned to nearly white at the waterline, the bright sun shining into the top layers of the water.

“Don’t fear death, fear the un-lived life,” she said aloud, reading from the poster. Her

gaze then settled on him. “Said Angus Tuck in the book *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt.”

“Was it? I wouldn’t know,” he said, impressed she knew that off the top of her head.

“Does that pretty much sum up your approach to life?”

Tessman grinned that half-smile, half-smirk at her. He wasn’t sure how to interpret that statement, nor could he read her attitude towards it. “You’ve figured me out.”

Her lips spread into a grin. “I doubt that.” She stepped into him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “But I’d like to see more inside of Carter Tessman’s world, so just maybe, I could figure you out.”

Tessman glanced at the door to be sure it was closed before he wrapped his arms around her lower back and pulled her all the way into himself. “I’m a pretty simple guy. What you see is what you get, unlike you, who continually surprises me.”

She shook her head, disputing it. Their eyes locked, and they both felt the magnetic draw. Their lips neared, and they shared a kiss that was lengthy and passionate. After a few pleasurable moments of enjoying the kiss, she pulled away, just far enough to break the contact with his lips.

Gazing deeply into her eyes, he saw unasked questions and maybe even a statement by her that was bubbling there, wanting to get out. “I don’t think I’d ever get tired of doing that.” He tightened his arms just enough so that she’d feel it. “But you have something else on your mind than how incredible that kiss was.”

Becca nodded. “It was incredible. This closeness is incredible.” She paused.

“But?” he prompted.

“I wouldn’t ever pick someone who does a dangerous job to be involved with, but I can’t deny the attraction I feel to you or how amazing it feels when we kiss. Or how much more I want when we touch. I haven’t felt this way in a very long time. I wish I’d met you at a different time in my life.”

He wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but he was sure it didn’t bode well for him or any continuation of this relationship. “We can’t pick the timing. And I don’t think we should let what we think is supposed to be the right timing or the wrong dictate anything. And as far as what I do, my job, it’s who I am. If you don’t think you can deal with it, I’d first ask you if you’d give it a try before deciding. And if you won’t do that, then I’d ask you to give me one incredible night before you walk away. Memories are better than nothing, and I’d rather have the memories to go along with the heartbreak of never seeing where this could have gone, than have nothing at all.”

She sighed an emotional release and dropped her head against his shoulder. “And if I completely fall for you and something happens to you?”

Tessman gently lifted her chin until she looked him in the eyes. “You’ll live through it just as you’ve lived through the horrible loss of your sister and her family. I can’t promise nothing will ever happen to me at work, and I can’t promise nothing will ever happen to me anywhere else, either. I’m not an adrenaline junkie. I don’t put myself in dangerous situations for the thrill of it. I do what I’m trained to do, training that few others have, to protect people from the very bad people who are out there. I’ve served my country all of my adult life and I’m not going to stop doing it anytime soon. I’ve seen a lot of death, Becca, caused my fair share of it, too. But since meeting you, I’ve realized my life is lacking one special person in it, who I can say is mine and that I’m hers, someone I can be all in with. I never thought I wanted that until you were in my life.”

Becca saw nothing but honesty in his return stare. She felt vulnerable and raw. Her heart pounded in her chest. She’d professed her feelings, but she wasn’t ready to be

what he wanted and needed. “I want that with you, but I don’t feel I’m in a place to be all in. And if you were, and I wasn’t, that wouldn’t be fair to you, and it wouldn’t work. Can you give me some time?” If he couldn’t, she knew it would crush her.

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“Whatever you need,” he said, his hand which had been holding her chin, now gently caressing her cheek. “I want to be here for you, to help you through this any way I can.”

She nodded. “And you are helping me a lot. But I feel so conflicted. I feel this overwhelming sadness along with this anger that I can’t direct anywhere. While we kissed, I didn’t think about anything but how good it felt and then when I realized that was the case, I felt guilty for feeling good.”

Tessman tapped his lips against hers. “I think you need to do a whole lot more of it if you think of nothing but feel good when we kiss. You deserve that after the shit-show you’ve lived through these last few weeks. No pressure, Becca.”

He pressed his lips to hers again, determined to keep any sad thoughts from her mind. The one thing he couldn’t do was keep his hands from roaming. God, how he wanted to strip her clothes from her and feel the skin on her ass rather than the blue jeans beneath his touch.

The kiss lasted much longer, and his hands greedily explored any place on her body they could reach. He ran his hand up her bare back, beneath her T-shirt, enjoying the sensation of her soft flesh. When his fingers began to work the fastener on her bra, she pulled away.

“Carter,” she said in a breathless whisper, her palms firmly pressing against his shoulders.

“Sorry, I was lost in that kiss, forgot where we are.” He held her bare back with both

his hands, didn't withdraw them like someone caught with their hand in the cookie jar. He pressed another kiss to her lips and softly ran his hands up and down her back.

The heat from his hands on her back seared her, flesh against flesh, making her want more. Those kisses were intense. Maybe he was right. She needed to just go with it and let herself feel what his kisses and his touch brought her. It was satisfying as well as igniting. It was exciting and indulgent to give into the desire she felt for him.

Within a few short moments, they were back at the heightened state they'd been in when she'd put the brakes on his advances. His pants were uncomfortably tight, his cock throbbing to be let out. He slipped one hand out of the back of her shirt and pulled her right leg up and partially wrapped it around his leg so he could more snugly nestle his cock up against her clit. He wanted her to feel him, even if it was just through their jeans. He thrust himself against her and circled his hips.

Becca broke her mouth free and gasped at the immense pleasure his body brought hers, and they were still both fully clothed. With her head thrown back a bit and turned to one side, Carter pressed hot, wet kisses to her neck.

His kisses on her neck caused ripples of need flowing right to her intimate places. She knew she should stop this before it went further. The problem was, she didn't want to. She wanted this. She wanted more.

Tessman watched her chest heave with each breath she drew in. Her nipples were erect beneath her T-shirt, which he clearly saw as her bra was not padded. His lips made their way down her neck, across her chest. The curve of her round breasts peeked out from beneath the low neckline of her T-shirt. He ran his tongue under the fabric, rewarded by a gasping moan escaping her parted lips and a shiver that ran through her body. He pressed on. He kissed over the fabric until his mouth was poised over a nipple. He blew a hot breath over it and gently bit down. Becca moaned the most erotic sound he'd never tire of hearing, squirmed, causing more pressure

against his cock, and she pushed her breast farther up into his face. He nearly came in his pants. If only they were naked.

“Carter,” she moaned, “Is it safe here in your office?”

And he thought when she’d said his name that the word no would follow. “Yes, but the apartment would be safer.” He gazed into her eyes. “I want to make you feel really good. Imagine how a couple of orgasms will make you feel.”

The look in his eyes was pure passion. She didn’t doubt for a second that he could easily give her a couple of orgasms. And she’d bet they’d be intense. She nodded.

He opened his office door and led her from the room, encountering no one as they hurried to the stairwell without a word spoken. They mounted the steps and were up on the ninth floor and in front of the door to the apartment moments later. Once inside, with the door closed and locked, he again gazed into her eyes, looking for any signs she was having a second thought.

Seeing none, he took her into his arms and picked up where he’d left off with deep kisses and roving hands. He only broke the contact long enough to push her shirt up and over her head. Then his hands reveled in her soft, hot flesh.

Becca tingled where his fingers traced over her bare skin. With her shirt off, the heat from his hands warmed where they touched. This time, when his fingers worked the clasp at the back of her bra, she didn’t pull back, didn’t stop him. And when his hands felt over her breasts, followed by his lips lathing kisses and suckles, she focused on the pleasure she felt and nothing else.

“The window,” she said, motioning to the open curtains over the window, which showed the brilliant sky ablaze from the setting sun.

“All the windows have privacy film. No one can see in,” he said.

Tessman tore his own shirt off, overheated and needing to shed all his clothing. Then he undid the button and lowered the zipper of her blue jeans. Instead of peeling them off her, he ran his hands down the back of her jeans, under her panties. He cupped her bare ass with both his hands as he kissed her, making love to her mouth with his. She panted and moaned, spurring him on.

A hand thrust down the front of her pants followed as one of his knees parted hers to give his hand room to feel over her, which garnered him an even louder moan when his hand came in contact with her drenched folds. After he took a few minutes to run his fingers in all the right places, he dropped to his knees in front of her and worked the fabric from her. She now stood in front of him, completely naked, the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. He leaned in and gave her open-mouthed kisses, his tongue making love to her.

When his tongue penetrated her intimate lips, the sensation was intense. Becca shuddered and gasped. She tried to back up, but Carter wrapped an arm around her hips and increased the licking and sucking. “Oh my God!” she gasped.

Tessman pulled away just far enough to be heard when he spoke. “I’m not stopping until you come.” Then he thrust two fingers inside her and resumed flicking his tongue over her clit until her knees slightly buckled and she did just that.

Becca was in a post-climax daze when Carter laid her on the bed. She heard him in the bathroom, the water running. He returned with a towel, patting his face, which had an erotic smile on it. She watched as he kicked his boots off and shed his pants and underwear. His erect cock sprang free, and he stepped to her with no shyness, only a fire burning in his eyes that promised this was just the start.

He straddled her, his legs fully separating hers. He held a condom in his hand. But

instead of sliding it on, he circled his cock at her entrance, teasing her very sensitive clit with it. Becca knew it wouldn't take much to make her explode again. Then he kissed her, deeply, slowly, slower than their kisses earlier had been. There was an honesty exchanged in their kisses, a deep wanting, trust, and a promise of more.

He slid his mouth to her ear and kissed it, blowing a hot breath over it as he whispered, "I'll wear the condom this time, but I'd like to ditch it very soon. I want to feel every part of you." Even as he said it, he knew it was a discussion for another time.

His thoughts were electrified with the sudden sensation of her hand gripping his bare length. Now it was his turn to moan and gasp. She milked his cock until he was about to come. He pulled her hand free and slipped on the condom. Then he settled between her legs, pressed them open wide, and pressed in, slowly, inch by incredible inch.

After a few minutes, and intense sensations, he moved her into one of his favorite positions. He pulled her so her ass hung slightly over the edge of the bed. Cupping her ass cheeks he thrust into her and then laid atop her, her legs in the air and out to the sides. This was a favorite position as it gave deep penetration and increased his chances of hitting her G-spot, and he could look at her face and still kiss her, which he loved to do. He loved to kiss her lips, to trail kisses down the neck, to breathe over her ear. He'd already discovered she got off on hot breath blowing over her ear.

It didn't take long for him to reach his peak. As he tumbled over it, he was aware of her insides gripping him tightly, her breath matching his in short draws laced with moans.

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Becca lay back; Carter's face nestled in her neck. She felt his cock throbbing deep inside her. Her heart still raced. It felt perfect. Her thoughts were quiet, and she focused on nothing but the incredible pleasure he brought her. Even now, she allowed her mind to focus on her rapid breathing. She felt high, she felt content. She felt good. Then she felt Carter's lips on hers and his tongue entered her mouth for a slow, passionate kiss. She lazily rubbed her tongue against his, envisioning his tongue on her clit. It felt erotic, stimulating beyond words, perfect. Heknew how to hold her, how to touch her, how to kiss her. His touch and kisses were perfect in every way.

Fighting his waning erection, Tessman circled his hips, his cock still in her. Energy bristled through his body. He pulled his lips a breath away from hers and gazed into her beautiful green, half-hooded eyes. "Wow. That was magic."

Her lips cracked into a smile. "Wow is right."

"Let's make you more comfortable." He reluctantly pulled out and shifted about until he was able to pull her so that her butt was nearly on the bed. He sank to his knees in front of her open legs. "You are absolutely beautiful," he said, his gaze still on her eyes. His hand ran up her thigh. His fingers gently descended into her drenched crack. He grinned when she shuddered. He drew a finger up to her clit and slowly circled it. She gasped out and threw her head back, still aroused. He didn't stop until she came.

Carter lay beside her, holding her when she came back down from the last orgasm, which was mind-blowing. She wrapped her arms around him and held on as the peace she felt from her mind turning off, was replaced with the sadness and anger that had been constant companions for weeks.

“I wish we could stay here, just like this forever,” she said when she opened her eyes, gazing into his.

“We could, but the world will invade our refuge. It always does.”

“Ugh! I know,” she said. “I’m surprised your phone has stayed quiet this long.”

“If anyone had called or text messaged, I would have ignored it,” he said.

“We both know you can’t.”

“So, are you willing to give it a try with me and my job? Or was that our one incredible night?” As he said it, he prayed it wouldn’t be the latter.

A smile curved her lips. “That was a fool’s choice. Even if one incredible night had been my choice, after that I’d be changing my mind. There’s no way I’d want to walk away from what you just did to my body.”

“So that was you’re willing to try,” he said.

“I still need some time to get my head on straight, Carter, or I won’t be any good in a relationship.”

“And I still vow to give you the time you need.”

Sierra

Becca woke from the post-sex nap snuggled up against Carter, the same way she’d fallen asleep. She still felt at peace even though her first thought was of her sister’s family, as it had been every morning since they’d been killed. But maybe for the first time, she wasn’t focused on what she could do to make sure it got solved. In her

heart, she knew that Carter and the Shepherd Security Team would figure out who had committed the murders and they'd be brought to justice. She wasn't sure where the confidence in this suddenly came from.

It was dark out except for the light that reflected up from the nearby buildings and street lights. She lazily stroked her hand over his chest and abdomen, his muscles tight, even as he slept.

"If you keep doing that, we're going to have to go for a round two," he said.

She smiled as she ran her hand further south, coming in contact with his erect cock.

He moaned his approval of her actions and wrapped his arms around her as he turned into her and pressed his cock up against her abdomen. Their lips met, and the kisses were passionate, fueling a fire that would not be put out no matter how many times they coupled.

His phone, which was on the nightstand beside him, rang. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," he moaned as he rolled over to grab it. He viewed the display. It was Shepherd. "Sorry, have to take this," he told her. Then he accepted the call, sitting up as he did. "Tessman."

"Fifteen minutes, my office, you and Becca both," he said. Then he disconnected.

Tessman turned the bedside light on. "That was Shepherd. We have a meeting in his office in fifteen minutes." He wondered if Shepherd knew they'd been together and Shepherd was going to address it. But he was sure if that was the case, Shepherd would address it with him alone as Becca wasn't agency personnel, or was she? Had her limited employment contract included the nonfraternization clause? But why would it matter to Shepherd when so many others had violated that protocol? No, he told himself. That wasn't it.

“Did he say what it was about?”

“I assume either your case or Briana’s domestic violence case,” he said. He kissed her one last time before getting up and grabbing their clothes. He tossed hers to her. “Raincheck?”

A smile spread over her lips. “Definitely.”

“I’m just going to rinse off real quick,” he said, pointing to the bathroom. “I’d invite you to join me, but we’d never make our meeting with Shepherd if you do, and then I’d be fired. I promise, I’ll only be a minute, so you can grab a quick shower if you’d like.” He left his clothes on the bed and stepped into the bathroom.

He emerged exactly four minutes later, wrapped in a towel. His hair was still dry, a purposeful move on his part not to advertise he’d just showered, post-sex. Becca rushed past him and sealed herself inside next. Seven minutes later, she emerged fully clothed. Her hair was in a ponytail and also dry.

They rushed down the stairs to floor five and entered his office at exactly the fifteen minute mark. Shepherd sat at the conference table with Jackson and Brielle. Shepherd glanced at his watch and then at Tessman. In his world, being on time was considered late. Tessman closed the door, and they took a seat at the table with the others.

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Brielle had Becca's mother's laptop hooked up to the large wall monitor. Shepherd glanced at Brielle and nodded. "Walk us through what you found," he said.

"There was a lot to go through in the cloud storage, both from your mother and the documents that were uploaded after her death, presumably by your sister and or her husband," Brielle began. She clicked a few keys and two documents displayed on the wall monitor. "These are the two MDSs on chemicals or compounds that I believe contributed to the poisoning of their family. I couldn't find much on either of them when I Google them. I can't even pronounce either of them. One appears organic, maybe even developed in-house at Well-Life. The other appears petroleum based, which has me confused because of the vision statement Well-Life has out that says they ban all petroleum and other caustic chemicals from all their products."

Becca and Tessman both stared at the chemical names and then read further down the MDSs. The one that appeared to be petroleum based, held all sorts of warnings regarding inflammation to skin and eyes if contact was made as well as being highly flammable. The other, a more organic compound, although appearing to be plant based, also included the psychotropic drug diazepam.

"Diazepam," Becca pointed out. "Is that in the same family as lorazepam? That's what was in their systems per the tox screen, wasn't it?"

Brielle nodded. "Yes. Diazepam is known as the brand name Valium. Lorazepam is stronger than diazepam. Ten mg of diazepam is equivalent to two mg of lorazepam. The other notable item I found is that lorazepam has the ability to cause short-term amnesia."

“That’s another argument that Nick DeSoto did not kill his family and then himself, not that we need one. He had access to diazepam in the lab. Why go to the trouble of getting his hands on lorazepam when the diazepam would do the job and he had access to it?”

“Does the use of that drug mean that maybe they didn’t intend to kill everyone, but rather cause short-term amnesia?” Becca posed. “Maybe something went wrong while they were in the house, which caused them to kill everyone.”

“It could be,” Shepherd said. “Until we get a statement from whoever did it or ordered it, we won’t know.”

Tessman knew she desperately wanted to believe that, believe that all of them, including the children, hadn’t been murdered in cold blood. Somehow, that would make it easier for her to accept.

“There was one more thing I found that was odd. It was a sheet on ethyl alcohol, as in grain alcohol used in beer, wine, and other spirits. It’s primarily used in alcoholic beverages, but also as a solvent, antiseptic, and fuel additive,” Brielle said.

“What the hell kind of drug was he developing with those ingredients?” Tessman asked. “I’m no chemist, but combining alcohol and sedatives with something toxic doesn’t sound like a recipe for a cure to anything to me.”

“The last thing I found related to the lab and what was being used in it that had been uploaded was a packing slip for the preservative Thimerosal, which is a bacteriostatic and fungistatic mercurial compound that is approximately fiftypercent mercury by weight. It has been used as a preservative in vaccines since the 1930s,” Brielle said.

“Vaccines?” Becca said. “Well-Life doesn’t hold any patents for vaccines nor were they ever on the trajectory to create them.”

“I did a little research into Thimerosal and discovered it has been banned in vaccines for children because of the heavy mercury content. The other notable thing about it is that Thimerosal is metabolized to ethyl mercury, which can easily cross the blood-brain barrier. I read a lot about neurotoxicity with the accumulation of Thimerosal in the brain.”

“I’m going to send all this to a contact of mine at the FDA, without divulging Well-Life as the source, and see what they make of it,” Shepherd said.

“There was something else I found,” Brielle said. “Kind of unrelated to this.” She instantly appeared a bit nervous.

Becca picked up on it immediately. “What is it, Brielle?”

“Your sister kept a journal of sorts in that cloud file. She made weekly journal entries, a conversation of sorts with your mother.”

“After she was dead?” Becca asked.

“Yes,” Brielle confirmed. “You can read it yourself. Most of it was your sister’s thoughts, working through her grief. But about two months ago is when it got interesting to the case. She wrote about Nick’s disillusionment with his job at Well-Life and he was considering leaving.”

Becca shook her head. “She said nothing about that, not about writing a journal to our mom, nor about Nick thinking of leaving his job.”

“About a week later was the first entry mentioning Nick feeling ill and what she described as him catching hell from his manager, Neil, who she described as that ass-kissing sonofabitch,” Brielle said.

“So he felt ill and caught hell for it?” Jackson recapped.

“This makes no sense,” Becca said.

“Yes, it does,” Brielle said. “Here is your sister’s last entry to the journal.” Brielle typed on the keyboard, and the last journal entry displayed.

I think that Mom and Dad’s accident was no accident. From what I’ve dug up, it looks like Mom was in a power struggle with one of the partners to stop a potentially dangerous drug from being developed, from Nick developing it. She knew the side effects and possible risk of poisoning with one of the ingredients and they pushed it through anyway after Mom was gone. I’m going to talk to the one person who I think is honest and didn’t know. This has to be stopped.

Panic rose inside of Becca as she read it, the full impact of the meaning hitting her. “Nicole would have deemed James Standish as honest over Marvin Ackman if she was going to talk to one of the partners. John was more friendly, the public relations face of the original three partners. Marvin was the money man, the comptroller, the CFO. There’s nothing warm or fuzzy about him.”

“So Nicole confided in James Standish, who was either the one responsible for the dangerous direction the drug development took or Standish told someone else, the person who was responsible,” Tessman posed. “What did the person responsible hope to accomplish by drugging the family and sending people with guns to their house if it wasn’t to kill them?”

“And let’s not forget they’d all been poisoned by something in the lab,” Jackson added. “We haven’t seen anything yet to know if it was fatal or not.”

Shepherd shuffled a few papers in the folder on the desktop in front of himself and glanced through the content of one of the papers. “They were all shot in the head. The

coroner reports that the shot to Nicole's back would have been life ending if the shot to her head didn't accomplish that quicker." He paused and glanced at Becca. "Sorry. But I think it's germane. Were they destroying evidence in their brains?"

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Tessman glanced at Becca. She sat rigid, and her breathing appeared to be very shallow. He reached over and laid his hand on her forearm. “Are you okay?”

She nodded stiffly. Her gaze went to Shepherd. “How do we prove it so it sticks?”

“A confession may be the only way,” Shepherd said. “I’d like to send you in to confront James Standish. Let’s confront him and see what shakes loose. We’ll have the room bugged.”

“No,” Tessman argued. “That puts a target on her back.”

“Yes,” Becca said, her gaze darting to Carter. Then she returned her eyes to Shepherd. “I’ll do it.”

Shepherd glanced at Tessman briefly before his gaze shifted back to Becca. “We’ll keep you protected before, during, and after. And we’ll script your entire meeting with Standish.”

Tango

It was later that same night that Briana finally got the call from Flores she’d been waiting for. Jacob Hoch had hit the vodka hard, and by twenty-two hundred he was not only angry and looking for a fight, but he was drunk and belligerent too. Simone no longer had to do or say anything to provoke him. After going outside to view his dented baby yet again, he came in and decided he didn’t need a specific reason to beat the hell out of her.

Seeing ahead, how sideways it was about to go, Flores and Robinson had called for backup before the first punch was thrown. Bravo Team medic, Eddie ‘Needles’ Winston and Mother responded. Three of the four men drew in close to the house and waited while Eddie hung back watching the camera feed advising them of what took place in the residence.

As soon as Eddie saw Jacob start to beat his wife, he gave the go order to the other men. Then he called the police to report the domestic abuse and then called Briana.

At the back sliding glass door, Mother used a crowbar to pry the door off its track and pop it off. He, Robinson, and Flores rushed in and ran up the stairs. They went right to the master bedroom where Jacob Hoch repeatedly struck his wife with closed fists and kicks while she cowered in the fetal position in a corner, one of the three corners that was clearly in view of the camera. From the first punch to them busting in, less than three minutes had elapsed.

Hoch never knew what hit him. The three men were on him fast, pulling him off his wife. They secured him face down on the carpeted floor, his hands zip tied behind his back. He thrashed on the floor like a fish out of water and swore, the only thing he accomplished was waking both his children from the dead sleep they’d been in. They wandered into the bedroom, bleary-eyed and confused.

Mother knelt in front of them. “We’re the police. Your father was hitting your mom, but she’s okay.” That was yet to be determined. Winston was on his way to the house, running through the backyards. Simone Hoch lay in the corner, crying, bloodied, and bruised. “We stopped him. A uniformed police officer is on his way to arrest your dad.”

The little girl started to cry. “Daddy hits her a lot. He hits us too.”

“Your daddy is never going to hit any of you ever again,” Mother said. He looked the

older boy in the eyes. “I need you to be the man of the house and take your sister back to bed and stay with her. Your mom will be in soon, okay?” He knew the two children didn’t need to see any more of what was going on in this room. He doubted they’d go back to sleep, but the safety of her bedroom was where this little girl needed to be.

“Yes, sir,” the boy murmured. He glanced at his mom, who was still lying on the floor. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen her like that.

Briana arrived before the police. Robinson stood outside the front door. “How bad is she?”

“Winston is with her now, not sure. Hoch got in some good hits before we stopped him. They’re all still upstairs in the master bedroom.”

Briana shuddered. She walked past him and into the house. She jogged up the steps and went right into the master bedroom. Jacob Hoch was face down though he craned his head, trying to see what was going on in the corner his wife was in. He still yelled and swore at those in the room including his wife.

“You shouldn’t be in here yet,” Flores whispered, taking hold of her upper arm and leading her back into the hallway. “He can identify you and that will majorly fuck up this Op.”

Briana leaned against the wall and let out a breath. She’d only gotten a glimpse of Simone Hoch but it didn’t look good. She saw open cuts, blood, and bruises. Her heart ached that they couldn’t stop it faster before she’d been hurt so badly.

“The kids are awake,” Flores said, pointing at one of the doors down the hallway. “Why don’t you stay with them until the cops take him away? Needles also called for an ambulance. You’ll need to see who your client wants to stay with the kids.”

Briana nodded. “Let me know as soon as the police take that piece of shit away.”

“You know I will,” Flores said. He watched her proceed down the hallway and then disappear behind one of the doors, closing it behind herself.

The police arrived first. Robinson, still outside of the front door, advised them of the situation, showed his DSS badge and creds, and then sent them up to the master bedroom. The two officers didn’t ask him why the Diplomatic Security Service were on-site. Those questions would come later.

One look at Simone Hoch, still lying in the corner of the room, and they were ready to arrest the husband. The video the team had recorded of the attack cinched it. And the information to look for the police report from the morning’s call had them vowing that they’d talk with the attending officers from that call.

Flores pulled the senior officer of the two that responded to the hallway. “Just a heads up that the vic plans to get an order of protection and a process server is on standby to serve divorce papers on him while he’s in jail.”

“Good to know. Thank you. Don’t worry, he’ll be there for some time, I’m sure. Judge Kinian is on tomorrow morning and she always denies bail or sets it astronomically high on these kinds of cases if the wife is hospitalized or shows up with the D.A. willing to press charges. Two questions. First, why are agents of the Diplomatic Security Service here? What’s the connection?”

Flores couldn’t tell him that they were in the process of their creds being switched over to FBI and DEA for the four team members of Bravo. Now that they no longer protected visiting dignitaries, who technically didn’t qualify for official protection, carrying the ID of a special agent of the Diplomatic Security Service, no longer served them. Shepherd had canceled that contract with the State Department, much to Bravo Team’s relief. They’d been dedicated to that contract for several years.

“No connection. We’re officially on leave. Helping Simone Hoch was a favor for a friend,” Flores said.

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“Uh-huh,” the officer said. “Who else is here? You said the minor children.”

“Yes, and a friend of Simone’s is in with them. She wasn’t here during the assault but came after to be with the children.”

Becca woke up tucked in tightly against Carter. They’d waited up to hear from Briana for the resolution of things over at the Hochhouse. She’d notified them both when she’d gotten word from Flores that Jacob Hoch had snapped and beaten Simone.

Briana had finally gotten back to them at midnight. Simone Hoch was transported to the hospital via ambulance for x-rays for suspected broken ribs. Bravo Team member, medic Eddie Winston had accompanied her to the hospital while Briana stayed with her children. Winston brought Simone home around zero three hundred. The x-rays confirmed two broken ribs. Several cuts required stitches, and photographs were taken by the police as proof of her beating. She originally didn’t want to go to the hospital, but the team convinced her it would look worse for her husband if she did, so she agreed.

Becca wasn’t surprised to find Carter awake. “What time is it?” she asked, when she realized that even though he lay motionless beside her, his eyes were wide open.

“Just past six,” he answered. “How’d you sleep?” He kissed her temple, where his lips easily reached without moving.

“I had a hard time falling asleep. All I could think of was that poor woman,” she said.

“Briana texted last night while you were asleep, after Winston brought Simone home from the hospital. Two broken ribs, they’ll heal. It could have been worse.”

“At least we got it all on tape. That bastard won’t ever hit her again.”

“We’ll make sure of it,” Tessman said.

“She’s also my client now. I’ll stay in touch with her and make sure of it too,” Becca said. “Carter, will you think I’m nuts if I tell you I think I want to help more women like her who are in a bad situation?”

“No, it wouldn’t surprise me at all. You said at the beginning you were going to sign your sister’s house over to a battered woman’s shelter, so I know this is a cause you are passionate about.”

“I’d like to help Briana with more of her cases,” Becca said. “Do you think Shepherd would extend my limited contract and hire me on for more of a regular gig?”

Tessman’s lips pulled into a grin. “I’d like that.” He rolled into her and wrapped his body around hers. “You’ll never know until you ask.”

“I guess not. But I don’t think I’d want to start right away. When this is over, I need a few weeks away.”

“Away where?” Tessman asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe a few days in Vail, a few in Disney, and a few days in the Dells to revisit the memories.”

“St. Thomas. Add St. Thomas to your vacation plans and I’ll meet you there and teach you to scuba dive.”

Becca laughed. “That would be nice. I wish.”

“I’m serious,” Tessman said.

“Will you be able to get off work?”

“I have several weeks leave on the books. I’ll get off, don’t worry.”

“Then we will definitely talk more about this when it’s over and those responsible for killing my sister’s family are behind bars where they belong.”

Tessman hoped that would be the case.

Becca gazed out of the window as Jackson pulled the SUV from the parking garage. The sun shone brightly. She wanted to lower the window and feel the sun on her skin, the breeze on her face. But Carter had told her to leave it up. The windows were tinted for a reason and although it was unlikely someone watched the parking garage, hoping to get a glimpse of her, it was just safer this way.

As they drove, heading for the court house, a feeling of freedom settled over Becca. This was the first time in several days that she’d left the Shepherd Security building. She remembered that she’d never had that conversation with Carter, that she needed to go home. Her home still needed to be righted since it was ransacked. The thought of all of her belongings lying scattered all over the floor bothered her.

When they arrived at the courthouse, Jackson dropped them off at the entrance on the side of the building for law enforcement. Tessman walked her inside while Jackson parked the car. Becca watched Carter show his badge and declare his gun. They both proceeded through the metal detector, Carter retrieving the items on the other side. It

amazed her how comfortable he was with all of it. For some reason, she saw him as a Marine, not an FBI agent, which seeing him interact with the county law enforcement officers who guarded the entrances into the building, reminded her that he was.

Tessman then guided her to a conference room that was near the courtrooms. Briana had messaged that she and Simone Hoch waited there. Tessman opened the door without knocking. Two other women were inside with Briana and Simone.

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“It’s okay, they’re with us,” Briana said when one of the women protested the door opening. “This is Meg Fitzgerald with the D.A.’s office.” Briana pointed to the older woman in the black pantsuit. “And this is Denise Bradley, the advocate who’s been assigned to the case.” She was younger with long, dark red hair.

“Hello, I’m Rebecca Elliot, Missus Hoch’s attorney,” Becca introduced herself to the two women. Then her attention turned to the only one in the room with facial injuries, her client, Simone Hoch. “Hello Simone,” she said, reaching her left hand out to her. “It’s nice to meet you in person.”

“Thank you for everything,” Simone said.

“And I’m Carter Tessman, one of Miss Elliot’s outside investigators,” he introduced himself, the role that had been thought up by Shepherd. Briana had already informed Simone he and Jackson would be there and what their roles would be.

“We were just telling Missus Hoch that Jacob Hoch is number three on the docket. Judge Kinean is known to be tough with domestic violence perps,” Meg Fitzgerald said. “We’ll inform the judge of the divorce papers having been served this morning, the order of protection request, and we’ll ask for remand, which I’m sure she will grant. There are two police reports now to back up our insistence that the defendant is a danger and should not be granted bail or if it is granted that it is so high he won’t be able to raise it, not to mention the fact that his wife will not put up the bail for him.”

“Are you sure the divorce papers were served this morning?” Simone asked.

“Yes, we have confirmation they were,” Tessman answered.

“Okay, good,” Simone said, obviously relieved.

“Any other questions?” Meg Fitzgerald asked.

“No, so, we just wait here until Jacob’s case is called?” Simone asked.

“I’ll be in the courtroom across the hall and will come get you when the second case is finishing up. I’ll bring you right up to the seats behind the D.A. You and your attorney will sit there until your husband is brought back to the prisoner area after the arraignment. Then we return to this room to go over the orders the judge gives,” Denise Bradley said.

Simone Hoch blew out a loud breath and nodded.

Briana took hold of her hand. “We’ve got you, Simone. One step at a time.”

Simone nodded.

Just as the A.D.A. and the victim’s advocate were leaving, Jackson entered the room. Briana filled him in on what transpired. As Jacob Hoch could identify both Tessman and Briana, they would not go into the courtroom. They’d wait in the room.

When Denise Bradley came to get them, Becca and Jackson accompanied Simone into the courtroom. They sat in the back row until the proceedings on case number two ended. Then, Denise led them up to the front of the courtroom as Jacob Hoch was led into the room by a bailiff. Becca stared at Simone’s husband, noticing that he was wearing handcuffs. The bailiff removed the cuffs as he reached the defense table where a court appointed lawyer stood.

Jacob Hoch stared at his wife throughout the entire arraignment. Becca judged his facial expression as pleading. He was silently pleading with her to end this, to retract

the charges she wanted to press, retract the divorce papers. Becca bet that it would take little to throw him into a rage. He was smart enough to know he had to keep it locked down though. His defense attorney surely would have told him to exhibit no anger. He'd probably told him to avoid looking at his wife too, advice he wasn't heeding.

The arraignment didn't last long. Becca was very happy that when it was over, the judge ordered all motions they wanted granted, except for bail. But even that, she set the bail so high that Jacob Hoch would not be getting out. They returned to Briana and Carter in the room across the hallway. Only then did Simone Hoch noticeably relax. Denise Bradley went over all of the motions and what they meant, and gave Simone a card with her information and the case information on it plus a pamphlet on her rights as a victim. Then Denise excused herself, but advised they could use the room for another fifteen minutes if needed.

Becca gave Simone her card as well. "I'll be in touch, but call me if you have any questions," she told her client before they all left the room. Briana would escort Simone home.

Jackson went out ahead of Tessman and Becca to retrieve the car. Standing alone just within the law enforcement entrance Tessman could see something was on Becca's mind. "That went about as well as it could have," he said.

"Yes, I'm very glad the judge set bail so high. She couldn't deny it, but Simone is sure there is no one who will come up with that amount to get him out. Unfortunately, he may get time served as his sentence when it does go to trial," Becca said.

"We deal with that when it happens," Tessman said.

"Carter, I need to go home," she said.

“Sure, you want to pick up a few more things? We can swing by on our way back to HQ.”

“No, I mean home to stay.”

“Oh,” he said, visibly disappointed. “I don’t think that’s a good idea yet.”

“My place is a mess. I need to put it back together. And I can’t hide at your office indefinitely.”

“How about a few more days? Just until after you confront Standish?” he whispered.

“Becca, we can protect you so much easier at the office.”

“Do you know how soon I can do that?”

“A day or two, I’m sure,” he answered as Jackson pulled up with the agency SUV.

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They exited the building and got in.

“In that case, then yes, I’d like to go to my house and get a few more things,” she said.

Uniform

Becca stood in her entry, her gaze taking in the sight. “How?” she asked.

“Surprise,” Tessman said. “Shepherd hired someone.”

Her entire house had been picked up, cleaned, righted.

“You may not be able to find anything as I’m sure they didn’t put things away where you had them, but it’s all off the ground,” Tessman said.

Tears pricked her eyes, happy, thankful tears. “I can’t believe he did this. I’ll never be able to thank him enough.”

“Well, Angel may have had a hand in it too,” Jackson said, stepping in behind them.

“Your wife is a total sweetheart,” Becca said. “Red or white?”

“Excuse me?” Jackson asked.

“Wine, red or white? I want to get her a bottle or two as a thank you for everything she’s done to help me,” Becca said.

“Red. She’ll only accept it if you come to our house and enjoy it with her,” Jackson said.

“I’d like that very much,” Becca replied.

“What did you want to get?” Tessman asked attempting to prompt her into moving past the entry.

“Clothes, upstairs,” she said. “Is it okay to go up?” She nodded to the stairs.

Tessman drew his weapon. “Let me check it out first,” he said. “Stay here with Jackson.”

She watched him mount the stairs. Waiting at the foot of the stairs, she kept her eyes trained on the hallway upstairs until he came back into view.

“It’s clear. Come on up.”

The upstairs was similarly righted. Becca grabbed a tote bag from the closet, taking in all the clothes that were now neatly hung. “A woman must have been involved in cleaning the mess up,” Becca said after she’d opened and closed several drawers, pulling clothes out and putting them into the tote bag.

“Why do you say that?” Tessman asked.

“Just the thought put into what is in each drawer and the fact that everything is folded or hung so neatly,” she said.

“I’ll have you know I fold and hang clothes very neatly, too,” Tessman said jokingly. “It’s not just a female trait.”

Becca smiled at that. “I’ll reserve judgement on that one until I see your place and the condition the closet and dresser drawers are in.”

Tessman glanced back at the door. Jackson was downstairs. She still faced the dresser, searching the drawers and pulling more items of clothing out. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “So, you would like to see inside my drawers, huh?”

She chuckled. “Oh, I’ve seen what’s in your drawers.” Her tone was as light and flirty as his.

“And you’d like to see more?”

Becca folded the T-shirt in her hands and slipped it into the bag before she turned to face him. She set the bag onto the floor and then wrapped both of her arms around his neck. “Yes, I’d like to see more. I’d really like to get to know you better during normal life.”

“Normal life?” he repeated.

“Well, during my normal life when I’m not being protected, when I won’t need to be.” And that was when it occurred to her. “But this is your normal life, isn’t it?”

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Tessman felt her go rigid in his arms. “If you’re talking about missions, yes. Protecting people, occasionally. That’s the job I do, who I am. I’m also someone who finds you incredibly intelligent, beautiful, and sexy. I love that you care so deeply about people, and that you have a strong sense of right and wrong. One of the core values of a Marine is Spiritus Invictus, which means unconquerable spirit. You have that. It’s one of the many reasons I’m so attracted to you. And I do want to get to know you better no matter what my job is. But you have to understand, my job is who I am, Becca. There’s always going to be missions and deployments. That’s part of the deal but I hope you’ll find me interesting enough to deal with it.”

“I never would have set out to get involved with someone who does the job you do. But now that I’ve gotten to know you, I can’t imagine you not being in my life. When we’re holding each other, I feel like me again, not the person I’ve been since Nicole and her family were killed.” She paused for a moment and reflected on what she’d just said. She sounded selfish to herself. “I like the person you are, your attitude towards things. You have this calm way about you, even during really intense or scary moments. It’s like nothing fazes you and I find that a very attractive quality. So, yes, I find you interesting enough to accept the job you do to have you in my life.”

“How much longer you going to be?” Jackson yelled up the stairs. He still stood in the entry.

“Just a minute or two,” Tessman replied, yelling towards the open door. Then he pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “We will finish this conversation later.”

Later that evening, Becca was alone in the apartment on the ninth floor. Carter had gone to pick up dinner for the two of them at a restaurant, insisting on treating her to a meal that wasn't leftovers. She checked her work email. There was a message from Brad, one of the partners. Carl, the other partner was copied in. The subject was Employment Termination.

A part of her didn't even want to open it and read it. She wasn't even sure how she felt about it. A very odd, unnerving feeling settled over her. She didn't feel sad, but she didn't feel excited either. She would be free to pursue the next professional chapter of her life. Wasn't that what she wanted? Was it going to be as a divorce attorney specializing in domestic violence cases? She wasn't sure. She reminded herself that she didn't need to plan the rest of her career out now. That should have brought her peace. It didn't.

Reluctantly, she opened the email.

Rebecca,

Carl and I have discussed your situation at length. And while we both sympathize with how difficult this must be for you, and we applaud your attempt to strike a balance between the personal circumstances you are in that demand your attention and the work you do for the firm, we cannot continue to extend the part-time, remote work arrangement you've been granted that has gone on longer than any of us would have foreseen. Although I know of no specific incidents that you failed to meet a deadline, our clients deserve better representation and service. It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that we require you return to a normal schedule in the office or we will regretfully accept your resignation. Carl and I will continue to pay you your full salary and extend your health benefits for six weeks as a severance package. You will of course have the option to extend your health benefits with COBRA coverage after that time period if you would like to.

Best wishes,

Brad

Well, that was that. She had no intention of going back into the office full-time for any reason, not that she could right now, anyway.

When Carter returned fifteen minutes later with a takeout bag that smelled incredibly good, that unsettled feeling she'd had, had shifted to a sense of autonomy. For the first time in her adult life, she owed nothing to anyone. This made her feel light, almost carefree.

Tessman noticed something different in her mood as he unpacked the two containers and popped the lids from them. He set them on the table and then placed a fork and steak knife he'd borrowed from the kitchen on the fifth floor beside each container.

Becca poured each of them a glass of wine. "That smells divine," she said, handing him one of the wine glasses. She raised her glass between them. "Join me in a toast?"

"Sure, what are we toasting?"

"My free market status. I heard back from the partners. I no longer have a job." She tapped his glass and then took a healthy drink, savoring the flavor in the red blend.

"Is this a moment where I'm supposed to say I'm sorry or congratulations?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I think congratulations. I had no intention of ever returning to the office full-time. I feel strangely okay with this."

Tessman grinned. "Well then, congratulations."

“I’ve never had a steak dinner to go,” she said, changing the subject. In the container in front of her was a perfectly grilled fillet, a loaded baked potato, and a side of asparagus also grilled and seasoned.

“I eat a lot of my meals to go,” he said. “Of course, I don’t keep the most regular hours.” He paused and chuckled at himself. The truth was, like many single guys, he didn’t eat regular meals most of the time either. “Angel caters from them occasionally. That’s how I found out about them. I think they catered Angel and Jackson’s wedding.”

“Really?” she asked. “Did you go to it? Their wedding?”

“Yeah, the whole team did. It was here at the office. They were married in the rec room,” Tessman said. “Shepherd walked her down the aisle and Lambchop, our team pastor, performed the ceremony.”

“Lambchop, I’ve heard that name. He’s Michaela’s husband, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s been deployed on a mission. You haven’t met him yet. He’s a force, a hell of a SEAL and a hell of a good guy. We were all happy for him and Michaela when they finally got together. It had been a long time coming.”

“I don’t understand,” Becca admitted.

“There is an anti-fraternization clause in all our contracts. Jackson was the first to break it with Angel. About a half-dozen others did too before Lambchop and Michaela broke it. I know neither of them wanted to let Shepherd down by disobeying any of the rules. And any of them that did, could have gotten fired for it.”

“Why do you think no one did?”

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“Because they’ve all kept their relationships separate and haven’t let it interfere with work. I’ve operated with Cooper and his wife, Madison, before, and you’d never guess they weremarried when you’re in the field. Even when the shooting starts, they keep it professional. I heard that on an Op once, they both took rounds to their vests and that was the only time they held hands and anyone saw a glimmer of the personal relationship they have.”

Becca was shocked to hear his statement. Shooting? Shot in their vests? She’d met Madison. And although she’d been impressed with how competent Madison had seemed, she couldn’t imagine her rescuing her in the closet as Carter had. “So Madison is a full member of the team, just like you and Jackson, I mean, she does the same dangerous job?”

Tessman chuckled. “Women are just as capable as men, you know, at least the women at Shepherd Security. Briana’s just completed her Operator training. She’s only been with us a few months.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me that Madison is Briana’s Supervisory and Training Officer, that she used to be a captain in the Army. I guess I didn’t put two and two together that she does exactly what you do.”

“She does,” he confirmed. “I’d trust her with my life.”

Becca let that sink in. She nodded. Then she took a bite of her potato, followed by one of her steak. The food was still hot and cooked to perfection. “Oh, my God, this is so good.”

Tessman smiled a satisfied grin. He'd wanted to treat her to something good. She'd eaten the leftovers and hadn't complained about anything. "Yeah, it's my go-to place when I want a good steak."

They ate their meals and exchanged small talk mostly about food likes and dislikes. Tessman's thoughts were on bedtime and what the sleeping arrangements would be, as well as if there'd be any extra-curricular activities. He didn't want to assume that just because they'd had sex, that they would continue to have it every time they had the opportunity.

Tessman refilled their wine glasses and cleared his throat. "So, back to the conversation we were having at your place, earlier. Becca, I've never really been what anyone would call relationship material. This job is hard on relationships, but I want to try, when you're ready, that is. I know you've been through a lot and probably need some time to figure out your own life and where your head is."

Becca was impressed with him and his directness, a quality she admired and always tried to conduct herself with. "Yes, you're right about that, but as I said earlier, I can't imagine my life without you in it. Would you say it's the job that makes you say you're not relationship material or is it something else?"

Tessman took a drink of the wine, to stall. "Good question. I think the job has made it easy for me to not have to explore it at all. It's a hard job that makes a person disconnect from their emotions. It's been easy for me to keep that detachment. But I feel very attached to you, and I want to see where this can go. I want to be there to support you as you figure out your new normal and as you heal from the emotional toll this has had to have taken on you. But I'll be doing that while deployed on missions. I've never had a long-distance relationship before. I've watched my teammates do it, some making it look effortless, some struggling. My best friend recently got into a relationship. She's living with him now and they got engaged really quickly. I didn't understand it until now. They know they want each other in

their lives and when he's home, want to spend every second together because time is precious and limited. And there's a kid involved, not his, but he feels responsible for her. I guess what I'm saying is, it can be done. Honestly, I think one thing that has stopped me in the past, besides the fact that I didn't meet anyone who I spent enough time with to feel attached to them, is that I haven't wanted to get into a relationship that would fail because of my job."

"If we're being honest with each other, I've kind of sucked at relationships. I've spent a great deal of time in school to become a lawyer and that had to come first. Not many guys understood that and were okay with taking a back seat to my education and then career. And since I've passed the bar, my billable hours have been higher than any of the other associates at the firm. Add in the commute downtown and it hasn't left much time for a relationship."

"Sounds like the guys you've been involved with are the ones who suck at relationships. I'm sure you were honest about your commitments."

She nodded, again impressed with him. "Yes, very honest. But I plan to have a much different approach to my career now, whatever career that turns out to be."

"And you don't have to figure that out yet. Get through this first then see what interests you," he said. "I'm sure you can do a lot as a lawyer."

"Yes, there are a lot of different types of law to practice. In the short term, I'm happy to help Briana's client. Who knows, maybe I'll help a few more before I decide on what my future should be. It could be this. I don't know."

"I think that's a good approach. Keep the pressure off yourself. You don't need any pressure right now."

Tessman cut the last two bites of his steak apart and then ate them. He noticed she'd

polished her entire meal off as well. He liked a woman who ate a full meal. A lot of the women he'd been with ate salads or left half their plate untouched. A woman starving herself or denying herself good food was not attractive to him. But in the past, with sex partners anyway, it hadn't mattered to him. He'd known none of those trysts would form into relationships and any traits she had besides her sexual openness were irrelevant. He'd never voiced that thought to anyone, not even Wilson as he'd sound very shallow, which maybe he had been.

"And now that I know I have no job, honestly, I don't feel any pressure. It's strangely freeing. I will have to go into the office soon though and get my things that are in my office. I haven't replied to the partners yet to confirm that I won't be back. They left it open so that if I could return to a regular full-time, in-person presence in the office that I could keep my job. But even if this was resolved, I wouldn't do that, no longer interested."

"It's good you know that."

"Yeah, that job was a good fit for me once but I've outgrown it. Spending sixty plus hours a week in that office no longer suits me. Not when I know I can work from home and accomplish the same tasks, probably more in the allotted time. I may still do some estate planning, but I don't want to coast doing easy, boring work any longer."

"Again, good you know that. And even better that you have the means to take some time off and decide what you want to do after all this is over, in your own time."

"Yes," she agreed, taking the last drink of her wine.

"Would you like another glass?" he offered.

"No, I think I'd just like to take a hot shower and then put my pajamas on and lie in

bed watching a funny movie for a few hours before I fall asleep. I'd like it if you'd join me."

"I'd like that too," he said, knowing she'd pretty much set the expectations of behavior for the evening in that statement.

Victor

Becca didn't have to wait long for Shepherd to have everything arranged for her to meet with John Standish. She woke snuggled tightly against Carter when both of their phones chimed invitations to the meeting in Shepherd's office that would take place at eleven hundred hours, eleven a.m. The subject line was 'Prep for Standish Meeting'.

Becca rolled back into Carter, resting her head on his chest after they'd both viewed their screens. "Really, he had to send this invitation at six a.m."

Tessman chuckled. "He's probably been up working for hours. The man's a machine."

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Becca chuckled with him. She let herself relax against him, taking in the sensation of being held by him. “I like waking up like this.”

“Me too,” he said, though truthfully, had it been waking naked after a night of incredible sex, he would have liked it far better. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s comfortable.”

“I appreciate you didn’t try to have sex last night,” she said. “I mentally just wasn’t up for it. I felt mentally, maybe emotionally exhausted last night.”

Tessman chuckled again. “You were asleep minutes into the movie. I’d say you were exhausted all the way around. Do you feel more rested this morning?”

“Yes, thank you, I do. Do you think the meeting with James Standish will be today?”

“Most likely today or tomorrow,” he replied.

“What if I don’t get him to admit anything?”

He detected nervousness in her question. “Sometimes it’s what they do after they’re confronted, and the meeting is over, that yields the results we need. Even if he admits nothing, he may make a phone call after you leave that is damning. Or go meet someone, which is good because then we know who the co-conspirators are. We’ve even had perps try to bolt after they’re confronted. A few even committed suicide. If that isn’t a declaration of guilt, I don’t know what is.”

“Suicide? Yeah, I’d say that’s a huge declaration. But that isn’t what I want. I want to

know who all was involved in it. I want to hear the full scope of who and why come from his mouth.”

“I hope you get what you need, but Becca, you have to be prepared for it to not go that way. It’s a crap shoot, how much info we’ll get out of him, even if he does admit his part in it.”

“I know,” she said. “He does, after all, have the right to remain silent and not incriminate himself. I just don’t know how we’re going to get to the truth if he doesn’t admit it.”

“Have a little faith in the agency. We’re pretty good at what we do.”

She didn’t doubt that at all.

In the office at eleven a.m. there were familiar faces. Carter, of course, Jackson and Brielle, and the two men who had helped at her sister’s house the other night, Flores and Robinson. There was a fifth man she’d never seen, who introduced himself as Winston. Carter told her he was a team medic. A team medic was always assigned to a mission.

“We’ve made an appointment for you with Standish at Well-Life for sixteen hundred today,” Shepherd said.

Becca did the math in her head. Four p.m. That didn’t give her much time to get ready for it.

“We’ll have all five team members on site during the meeting. Jackson and Tessman will go in with warrants again and keep Shirley Craig from HR busy. Robinson and

Flores have appointments with the other partner, Marvin Ackman, so they'll be in the building, just down the hall from Standish's office. And Winston will be stationed in the car in the parking lot with the recording equipment. Becca, we're going for anything incriminating, if not an outright confession," Shepherd said. He passed a packet of papers across the table to her. "Lassiter has several scenarios scripted out for you. Familiarize yourself with the content before you go in."

Becca lifted the papers and scanned the front page.

Then Shepherd passed a case with earbuds across to her. "You'll be on our comms. Because you are unfamiliar with using them, we'll only transmit to you if prompts are needed while you're in with Standish. But they'll be on transmit from you, so we will hear and record all that transpires while you're in the room with him."

"You'll need a word that will be your panic code to us," Tessman said.

"A panic code?" she asked. "Surely, you don't think he'll do anything to me in his office, do you?"

"Becca, if we're right, he hired someone to kill four people. He may not have gotten his hands dirty with the deed, but he won't hesitate to hurt you to keep you quiet to cover it up," Jackson said.

That was a sobering thought. "What if it was Marvin Ackman?" she asked. "What if Nicole got it wrong?"

"My money's on Standish," Tessman said. "Your sister went to him. If it wasn't him and he told Ackman, who then sent the killers to her house, Standish would have at least suspected. He's not innocent in this."

"And don't forget, the chances are good that he was responsible for your parent's

deaths too,” Jackson added.

“My contact at the NTSB has come up with nothing conclusive on the crash,” Shepherd said. “He can’t confirm, nor can he rule out something was tampered with.”

Becca scanned a few more of the scripted prompts. “So basically, I’m going to try to bullshit him that I have more proof than I actually do, and convince him I want to be paid off to stay quiet. I’m not sure he’s going to believe I’m capable of blackmail. He’s known me for a really long time.”

“And you’ve known him for the same amount of time,” Shepherd said. “Would you have believed he was capable of murder?”

“Point,” she conceded.

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“Here’s the thing,” Brielle began. “You never really know what a person is capable of. Money and greed corrupt. Some people can justify selling off little pieces of their souls until there’s not much left. And then when they’re backed into corners of their own making and see no way out of, other than to commit horrible acts they would never have considered themselves capable of.”

Becca nodded, though she really didn’t want to believe that James Standish, a man her mother trusted, had become greedy and corrupt, and was capable of murder. “So what if he admits nothing to me and throws me out of his office?”

“We planted a bug and a camera in his office last night,” Shepherd said. “And we’ve tapped into their phone system. If he throws you out, we wait and see what he does.”

Becca was shocked to hear they had. “Do you have a warrant? Will anything we get be admissible in court?”

“Yes and no,” Shepherd answered without explaining further. Then his gaze shifted to Jackson and Tessman. “Give her instruction on how to use our comms and run her through practice scenarios so she’s ready.” He paused for a moment, and he scanned those at the table. “Anything else?”

Becca shook her head as the others, except for Shepherd, came to their feet. Evidently, the meeting was over. She also stood, as did Shepherd. And while Shepherd still intimidated the hell out of her, she felt a strange level of comfort with the entire routine.

“How’d they get into Well-Life to plant cameras and mics?” she whispered to Carter

after they were in the hall.

“We walked through the front door with the overnight cleaning crew from the temp agency,” Flores answered. “Well, I personally didn’t, but two of our team members did.”

She was surprised he’d heard her. She thought she’d whispered quietly enough. She watched the other men and Brielle turn left and mount the stairs. Carter pointed her down the hallway, towards the kitchen and Angel’s desk.

“We’ll use Coop’s office to prep her,” Jackson said.

“I wish we had more time,” Becca said.

“Nope, three hours is perfect,” Jackson said. “Too much prep is worse than not enough. And don’t forget, Winston will be on comms feeding you prompts if you need them.”

“James will see you now,” Jill, Standish’s administrative assistant, said, breaking in on Becca’s thoughts. She was re-reviewing in her mind the points she needed to cover from the different scenarios they’d practiced earlier that day.

Jill stood in front of Becca and was motioning towards the door to his inner office. Becca hadn’t seen her get up from her own desk or walk over. “Thank you,” Becca said, shooting to her feet. She followed Jill to the door. Once there, Jill swung it open and then stepped back for Becca to enter.

“Becca, I was so surprised to see you on my appointment schedule for today,” James Standish said, rising from his desk. He crossed the office and extended his hand.

Becca reluctantly shook his offered hand as Jill closed the door.

“Come, sit,” he said, motioning to the small conference table to the right of his desk.

“I won’t be here long enough to get comfortable, James. I found it. I know. And for me to keep quiet, it’s going to cost you.”

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

“Nicole knew it. She left me the proof and made a recording in which she said that she was going to come talk to you. And then they were dead,” Becca said accusingly.

“Now wait just a minute,” Standish blurted. “Their deaths had nothing,” he began, but Becca cut him off.

“Their deaths had everything to do with it, and you know it. What I need to know is, was it deliberate? Did you know what the combination of those chemicals would do before they got sick? Or was your first instinct afterwards to cover it up rather than to get them help?” Her voice was demanding and unwavering. She was channeling her best trial attorney cross-examining a hostile witness like she’d seen in countless legal thrillers.

“Nick was careless. Nick poisoned himself,” James Standish insisted.

“No,” Becca argued. “We both know that Nick was just like my mother. He was methodical, careful, and risk adverse.” At the mention of her mother, she saw James flinch. “And let’s talk about my mother, too. She would never have allowed these chemicals to be used in the lab. If she was here, the development of this drug would never have taken place. Is that why you did it to her?”

“Careful Becca, you need to walk a fine line on this topic,” Winston’s voice came

into her ear through the comms.

“I didn’t do anything to your mother and father’s plane,” Standish said, a bit too aggressively to be believed. “Nicole came in here with those same accusations. She was as wrong as you are.”

“Ah, so you confirm that Nicole came in here and confronted you about this before they were killed? That’s not a coincidence, James. How could you have had them all killed, my nieces, little girls, for God’s sake! Shot in their heads in their beds. Jesus Christ, James! You’re a father.”

“No, I didn’t do that. I have no idea who,” he said.

She interrupted him. “Bull shit! Don’t lie to me. You know exactly who ordered it if it wasn’t you, probably even know who actually did it. And had I not been at Nicole’s house packing their things up when those men came back to look for it, I would never even have known there was something I should be looking for.” Something then occurred to her that she hadn’t thought of before or mentioned to the people at Shepherd Security. “Something they were willing to die to get, willing to kill me for. And I would never have found it. But you couldn’t be patient and wait, could you? Why not? What was time sensitive in it? That’s what I can’t figure out.”

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Standish's lips tipped into a grin that told her she'd overplayed it. She had just said something that told him she didn't know it all, certainly didn't know enough. "Get out," he said.

"If I leave, your one chance to stop me from going public and ruining you and Well-Life walks out the door with me," she bluffed. "Oh, and right now, the proof is with a friend that will release it if anything happens to me."

She returned James Standish's determined stare.

"This isn't who you are, Becca. You're not going to try to ruin Well-Life. Your mother gave her soul to this company."

"My mother died because of this company, and it's being hijacked and perverted into something she'd never support. Caustic, dangerous chemicals had no place in her company." She watched his face as she said it. Yes, he knew how dangerous the chemicals were. "And when someone got sick because of it, she would have blown her own company up by going public with what happened rather than covering it up."

"Nick knew the stakes," Standish said. "He made his own choices, and his skill wasn't up to the task. What happened is on him. And then he snapped, and he killed his family and then himself. That's what the police ruled, and they were right."

"No, they weren't. They've already reversed that ruling and are looking for the real killers who staged the scene to look like a murder-suicide. They were sloppy and didn't do the job right. Even I saw the inconsistencies to know Nick didn't do it. This is closing in on you and Well-Life, James. I can help you or I can bury you. Which is

it going to be?”

“You don’t know shit,” he said. “Get out.”

She ignored him. “It crossed the blood-brain barrier, didn’t it? That’s what Nick was trying to do, but what crossed was not what he intended. Was it fatal? Is that why they were killed? Or were they going to go public? I’ll admit I don’t know that part, the why, and that’s what keeps me awake at night.”

“You better get used to sleepless nights, sweetheart, because I have no answers for you. I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about, ravings of a mad woman. Go get some mental health help. You need it.”

“Fuck you, James! We both know what was going on in that lab, the dangerous chemicals and compounds that should never have been combined. Has the research at least been halted?” By the look in his eyes, she knew it was still ongoing. “Shit, it hasn’t, has it? You still have someone working on it. You’re still trying to bring it to market. Sonofabitch! That’s it, isn’t it?”

“This meeting is over. You take whatever it is you think you have and go to anyone you want with it. You don’t have shit,” he said. He charged across the room and flung open his door. “Good day, Miss Elliot.”

“Go, Becca. You’re done there for now,” Winston’s voice came into her ear.

The last thing she wanted was to leave. She felt close to getting James to say something, anything, that would make it all make sense. As she walked past him, she whispered, “this is not over.”

Her heart pounded in her chest as she trotted down the stairs. Her mind was reeling. They were still working on it. Someone else was conducting the research that had

poisoned Nick and the whole family. And something else was going on, she was sure of it. Something that made those men go back to Nick and Nicole's home while she was there, something they were willing to kill for and die for. Something time sensitive. But what?

Whiskey

Becca's hands were still shaking when she reached her car. She fumbled with her fob to hit unlock, forgetting that she didn't need to. Just hitting the button on the exterior door handle would unlock it. She hadn't driven in several days and her brain was in overdrive, thinking about all that had been said in James' office and the ramifications of it all.

And as soon as she'd left his office, Winston broadcast to everyone, including her, that James Standish placed a phone call on his cell phone. Brielle was running it down to find out to whom the call had been placed. He didn't broadcast to her what was said, though. She suspected he told Carter and Jackson.

"Are you okay?" Eddie Winston's voice again came into her ear. She glanced at the van, parked beside her car, where she knew Winston sat in the back with the equipment.

Knowing there were surveillance cameras in the parking lot, Carter had driven her in her car from the office, stopping at a convenience store a half mile from Well-Life. Jackson followed, and Eddie Winston followed them. Flores and Robinson were already at Well-Life, their meeting with Marvin Ackman starting fifteen minutes before hers with James Standish. Then Carter joined Jackson in the other vehicle, and she drove her own. The three vehicles continued to the Well-Life parking lot, where they all parked beside each other.

"I'm fine, thank you, Eddie," she insisted, knowing she wasn't. Her heart still beat

wildly against her ribcage, in addition to her shaking hands. “What did he say on the phone call?”

“We’ll go over that during our briefing when everyone is clear. Just follow the plan,” Winston said. “We meet back at that convenience store.” Flores and Robinson had just left the building as well. It would be another fifteen minutes until Tessman and Jackson were due to leave.

“Sure,” she said.

Then she opened the driver’s side door of her car and slid in. Before she closed the door, two men suddenly appeared, one beside her, one in the center of her windshield. Her adrenaline spiked higher. She knew their presence put her in danger. With no fumbling this time, she grabbed the handle and tried to pull the door shut. He crowded into the space, preventing her.

“Let go of my door! Help! Eddie!” she yelled.

The side door of the van slid open, right beside her car, purposefully parked next to the driver’s side door for her protection. Eddie Winston emerged and was quickly on the man. He pushed the door hard, repeatedly, forcefully, into the man. The man in the windshield drew a gun from under his open light blue button-down dress shirt worn over a dark blue T-shirt.

“Gun!” Becca yelled.

“Drop it,” Winston warned the second assailant. He held the man beside the car by the hair, his own pistol at the man’s neck.

Becca watched what looked like a moment of indecision wash over the man’s face, who stood in front of her car, before he bolted to his right. He didn’t even get three

steps before another man tackled him, bringing him to the ground. It was Flores who tackled him. Within seconds, Robinson ran in and helped to subdue him.

The man standing beside her door with Winston said, "Lawyer. I want a lawyer." His cocky grin was focused on Becca. She read that to mean this man knew who she was.

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“Maybe the police would care, scumbag. I don’t,” Winston said. “Big Bear, permission to transport these two to one of our facilities.”

“Roger that, Needles,” Shepherd’s voice came through everyone’s comms, including Becca’s. She didn’t know he’d be listening to all of this. “We’re done fucking around with these guys. The one in custody from the DeSoto house is still hiding behind his attorney. You have permission to proceed with extreme prejudice at the warehouse with these two. And someone scoop up that Standish asshole. Do that one by the numbers and transport him separately to the warehouse but bag him too. And don’t let him see the two you have there.”

Becca wasn’t exactly sure what all that meant as she listened to the many voices that acknowledged Shepherd’s order. And there was no mistake that it was an order by the tone of Shepherd’s voice. The one voice she heard clearly was Carter’s.

“Needles confirm she’s okay,” Tessman said.

“Roger that, Moe.”

Becca gazed into Eddie Winston’s eyes after he’d replied to Carter. She felt incredible appreciation for his actions, stopping the two men from whatever they had planned for her.

“Big Bear, Jax and I are proceeding to Standish’s office,” Tessman said. Standish’s office was down the hall from the HR conference room they’d been working in. “I’ll make the arrest, but I’m sure his secretary and other execs on this floor are going to make this messy and way too traceable if done by the numbers,” Tessman said. He

made eye contact with Jackson as they reached the outer office for Standish. “Permission to just bag and transport him.”

“Make your case, gentlemen,” Shepherd said.

“I agree with Moe,” Jackson chimed in. The outer office was empty. “Not sure where his admin is, but she’s not at her desk. I say Moe and I quietly sneak him out a less than public exit.”

“You don’t have enough assets on site for this,” Shepherd said.

Becca watched the three men from Shepherd Security quickly secure both of her would-be assailants face down in the van, with their hands and feet zip tied. They carried them and placed them on the floor of the van and then they slid black hoods over their heads, tightening them at the neck to completely blindfold both men. Yes, that was exactly what she’d thought ‘bag them’ meant from the wild espionage movies she’d watched.

“We have these two secure,” Flores transmitted. “Kegger and Needles can transport them and our girl. Let us know what door you’ll be coming out and I’ll meet you there for a pick up,” Flores said.

“Approved,” Shepherd said.

Flores pointed to the passenger seat. “Sit up front.” He exchanged glances with Winston and Robinson and then hurried away, towards the car he’d driven there.

Becca immediately got out of her vehicle and locked it before climbing into the van. She thought about the layout of the third floor of the building, where HR and the partners’ offices were, where her mother’s office had been. “There’s a stairwell in the north corner of the building just down from James Standish’s office,” she spoke. “My

mom used to use it. It terminates at outer door number six.” Her gaze flickered to that corner of the building.

“Roger that,” she heard Carter’s voice reply. “And thanks.”

She smiled to herself; glad she could help in even a small way.

Eddie Winston slid into the driver’s seat. Behind her, in the bed of the van, she watched Elijah Robinson close the side door of the van. He sat in the seat, his gun holstered, but a taser in his hand, pointed towards the two men lying on the floor. Knowing the two men had meant her harm, she didn’t really care that their rights were being violated, even though she fully understood that they were. No, as Shepherd said, they were done fucking around with these guys. She wanted answers, not criminals hiding behind their lawyers.

Tessman and Jackson strode through the outer office and opened the door to Standish’s inner office. He stood in the center of his office, coming to a stop from the nervous pacing he’d been doing. His cell phone was pressed to his ear. “I have to call you back.” After he disconnected the call, while the two men who had rudely come into his office without knocking moved closer to him, he spoke to them. “Get out. Who do you think you are just walking into my office?”

Tessman had closed the door behind himself, something Standish hadn’t noticed. He held his badge up but didn’t identify himself or the agency that had issued it.

“I’ll take this,” Jackson said, ripping Standish’s cell phone from his hand. “Hands on the wall,” he ordered Standish. “Get them up.”

James Standish looked completely confused, with eyes that wildly darted between the

two men and the badge. He complied, raising his hands into the air.

“On the wall,” Jackson repeated. He pulled Standish over to the wall and helped him assume the position. As Jackson zip tied his hands behind his back, Tessman checked the outer office. Still clear.

“Are you going to tell me why I’m being arrested? And I want my attorney to meet us wherever you’re taking me. I have the right to a phone call,” Standish insisted.

“We’ll deal with that later,” Jackson said.

He led him back through the door, following Tessman, who led. Exiting the office into the empty hallway, Tessman turned right, spying the stairwell door in the north corner of the building. When they reached it, Tessman pulled the door open.

“Why are we using this stairwell?” Standish questioned.

“You really want to be perp-walked out of here through the front, public door?” Tessman asked, as if what Standish had asked was the craziest statement ever.

“No, this is fine,” Standish said, changing his tune.

“Thought so,” Tessman said.

They led him down the stairs, Jackson holding on to Standish’s arm so he wouldn’t trip even though Tessman would love to push this guy down the stairs. But you didn’t get intel out of dead men. And after that phone call, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Standish had intel to spill. He couldn’t wait to sit this guy on the metal bench in the warehouse and interrogate him. James Standish didn’t have what it would take to hold up against intense questioning. Tessman would bet anyone who’d take the bet that Standish would piss his pants before the day was over.

X-Ray

Shepherd Security had acquired a warehouse in a manufacturing area near O’Hare International Airport several years earlier, realizing a need for a location to sequester perps at that didn’t need to be transported to their isolation facility, the Silo. While the warehouse was less secure than the Silo, it was closer and was a good choice for certain situations, such as this one.

Becca knew what kind of facility they were at when they rolled through the large garage door and it closed again before Eddie had put the van in park. The problem was, given that she was an attorney, she was considered an officer of the court. She had a duty to promote justice and uphold the law. And accompanying a group of quasi-military, quasi-law enforcement officers to what amounted to a black site, where God knows what was about to take place, did not jibe with her duty. No justice or the upholding of the law was going to take place in this building, she was sure.

But hopefully, the truth would be learned here, which wouldn’t happen in a police

station. These two men were going to lawyer up and not divulge who had sent them, why, or what they'd had in store for her, just as the man Carter had been forced to shoot at her sister's house had. The bad guys didn't follow the law as the good guys were expected to. That left a hell of a disparity between doing the right thing and stopping the bad guys, or in this case, even figuring out what the hell the bad guys were doing and why. That was her mental justification for not speaking up about this.

Eddie exited the van and held her door open for her. She stepped out and viewed the rough warehouse they were parked in. There were metal walls, a cement floor, and rows of industrial lighting overhead that were suspended from metal beams. A chill invaded her, and it wasn't because the temperature in there had to be at least twenty degrees cooler than the outside.

Eddie escorted her to the third metal door of four that were on the wall straight ahead. Just like at their headquarters building, it required a code and palmprint scan to unlock the door. He activated lights in the room and stepped in first, ushering her in. There were three large windows with dark rooms beyond the glass, one on each wall. He flipped switches on the control panel and lights activated in each of the three rooms, illuminating what could only be described as interrogation rooms.

"You're a smart lady," Winston said. "You know exactly what's going to go down here. If that's a problem for you, speak up now and we'll escort you back to HQ."

Her gut tightened. "I have to know what they're going to say," she said.

"We can get you the cliff notes later," Winston said.

She shook her head. "No, I have to hear it all for myself."

Winston nodded. "You were warned." He pointed to the windows. "Two-way mirrors, and this room is soundproof. They won't know who's in here. No one will

ever know who was in here watching the interrogations.”

“I won’t lie if I’m ever called to testify about it,” she said.

“That’s not ever going to happen,” Flores said, coming into the room behind her.

At the same time, there was movement in the room to her far left. Carter and Jackson led in a man with a black hood over his head. She recognized the clothing he wore. It was James Standish. They made him sit on a metal bench that was beside a metal table and chairs. They snipped the zip tie binding his wrists, but attached him to the bench with the metal handcuffs that were secured to the bench. He didn’t struggle at all.

Then they left the room, leaving him sitting alone, the hood still on his head. Not that she felt empathy for James Standish, but she’d not be human if she didn’t put herself in anyone’s place who found themselves there. It had to be terrifying.

“Have a seat,” Flores said to her, pointing to one of the three chairs in the room. Then he left.

Moments later, Carter and Jackson brought another man into the room on the far right. The one who’d been standing in front of her car. They secured him the same as they had Standish. He, too, was eerily compliant. A few moments after, Flores and Robinson led in the man who’d stood in her doorway into the last room. He was the only one of the three who violently struggled against them, cursing and yelling.

All the Shepherd Security men then entered the room Becca sat in; her elbows pulled in tight to her sides, her hands clasped in front of herself to ward off the chill.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Tessman said, seeing Becca in the room.

“I have to be, Carter,” she insisted.

He stepped in front of her and took hold of her hands. They were cold. His eyes searched hers. He saw determination in her return stare. “If it’s too much, step back out into the warehouse.”

She nodded.

Then he removed the suit jacket he wore and draped it over her shoulders. When he turned back around, he caught the knowing stares coming from the other men. They’d figured out the relationship. Jackson openly wore a smile. Oh well. It was only a matter of time before everyone knew.

“Are you still on comms, Big Bear?” Flores asked.

“Roger that,” Shepherd confirmed. “Becca, last chance,” he said. “We both know what your duty is, and that this violates it.”

Becca’s heart thudded in her chest. “My duty is to get justice, and there can be no justice without the truth. This is the only way to get the truth. I have no conflict,” she declared.

“Very well. And just a reminder of the NDA you signed. This falls under it.”

“I understand,” Becca said.

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“Team, continue. Needles, play the recording of Standish.”

A small monitor on the desktop came to life after Winston typed on the keyboard.

The interior of James Standish’s office displayed. The tail end of Becca’s meeting with him was on the monitor. It ran for a minute prior to her leaving the room. The mic was so sensitive, it picked up her whispered warning to him that “this is not over.”

Watching it and hearing it, Becca was impressed with her own performance, as well as the depth of her confidence as she played it out. She didn’t recognize herself.

Then, with her out of the room and the door closed, Standish grabbed his cell phone from his desk and hit dial what had to be a programmed-in contact. “Yeah, we need to move on the lawyer. She was just in here and she knows too much.” He waited a beat and listened. “No, she hasn’t put it all together yet.” He listened again. “Do it! I don’t care! She’s living on borrowed time as it is. If your men had done their job,” he began, pacing and appearing agitated. He stopped speaking, listening again. “Tell them not to fail this time. We’re too close. She can’t fuck it up for us.”

Then Carter and Jackson entered the room, surprising James Standish with their unexpected presence.

Becca felt dizzy and knew she wasn’t breathing. She sucked in a deep draw of the cold air in the room and became even more chilled. No wonder Shepherd had ordered them to pick up Standish, too. That conversation was damning. Too bad it wasn’t admissible in court.

“Has Brielle figured out who he called?” Jackson asked.

“Negative, but his phone will tell us,” Shepherd said.

Tessman held it up. “Our first order of business will be to get it unlocked so we can see the call log and messages.”

“Do it,” Shepherd said. “Moe, you and Jax take point with Standish.”

Becca watched the two men leave the room. Carter barely made eye contact with her before he left. She glanced over the control panel. All the rooms showed the volume muted until Eddie flipped the switch on one of the rooms and she heard the unmistakable sound of a metal door opening and then closing in conjunction with both Carter and Jackson walking into the room James Standish was confined to. The monitor that had displayed the footage from Standish’s office now showed the same scene she was viewing live through the window. They were recording the interrogation.

Jackson pulled the bag off his head. He was wild-eyed and confused. First, they played for him the recording of his last exchange with her through his phone call being interrupted by Jackson and Carter entering his office. Becca watched his face while he listened. He went from being confused to scared.

“What happens in the next half hour in this room is up to you,” Tessman warned Standish. “You tell the truth, and you leave here in protective custody. You lie and you may not leave alive.” During the four second walk into this room, he had hardened himself and tucked away the fact that Becca watched. She’d chosen to stay. He had a job to do and if she couldn’t handle seeing what they sometimes had to do, she didn’t belong working in their world. It was better to know now, he told himself.

“You’re cops; you can’t do this?” Standish quivered.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Jackson said. “Let’s start with something easy. Who did you call when Becca Elliot left your office?”

“I want to see a warrant. You bugged my office.”

Tessman fisted his right hand and slammed it into Standish’s abdomen. Standish grunted loudly; the air being expelled from his lungs in response to the punch. Standish slumped forward.

“Wrong answer number one,” Tessman said in a quiet growl. He held Standish’s phone up in front of his face. He watched it. No facial recognition lock on it. It required a password. “We’ll get it unlocked and see who you called. This is an opportunity to provide us with good faith.”

By the look on James Standish’s face, Becca could see he now recognized the trouble he was in. She also saw the distinct expression that showed he’d never been punched before. He was shocked it had happened. Violence wasn’t his normal world. How the hell had he crossed a line that put him into this world?

“Who did you call?” Tessman repeated.

“Please, they’ll kill me,” Standish pled.

Now they were getting somewhere. “Like they killed Nick and Nicole DeSoto and their two children?” Tessman replied.

“Nick fucked up. He wasn’t careful enough. He killed them.”

Tessman wasn’t sure what that meant. He knew that if it was confirmed that Nick had been involved with any of this, it would crush Becca. “Explain.”

“I can’t. They will kill me,” Standish repeated.

“And we can save you. You tell us everything you know, and the Marshals will come through that door and take you into protective custody,” Jackson said.

“Oh no, they can’t. This is bigger than them,” Standish said.

“What’s the password for your phone? We’ll get it open, eventually. Why not save yourself a lot of pain?” Tessman said threateningly.

Watching from the control room, Becca no longer saw the baby-faced guy she’d met that first day. Carter was intense. He was frightening.

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“If you’re already a dead man, what does your help matter?” Jackson asked him.

“I want a deal in writing. That protection and no prosecution, full immunity. That’s the only way I cooperate,” Standish insisted.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Jackson said. Then they both left the room, leaving Standish sitting alone. His gaze darted all around the room.

“Now what?” Becca asked the other men.

“We let him sit and stew for a few hours while we go at the other two,” Flores said. “Robinson, you’re with me.” The two men left the room as Jackson and Tessman re-entered.

Tessman let his gaze flick momentarily to Becca. She avoided making eye contact with him. He figured that she was still processing what took place in the room with Standish. It hadn’t been too bad, not as bad as it could have gone. His guess was that the interrogation of the two men who’d confronted her in the parking lot would be a hell of a lot more violent. If he was right, they were paid muscle with no conscience.

Becca watched as Flores and Robinson entered the room of the man who’d been standing in front of her windshield, still sitting with the hood over his head. The monitor on the desktop now displayed that room. Flores ripped the hood from his face. Unlike Standish, this man didn’t look afraid in the slightest, Becca noticed.

“Only one of you is going to get the deal with Standish,” Flores said. “The question is, will it be you or your parking lot partner?”

The man didn't reply, barely looked at either of the two men.

"Play it," Flores said.

It only took Winston a few moments to isolate the exact parts of Standish's recording. Then he played the audio into the room. First Standish's phone call boomed through the room. Then Standish demanding a deal in writing.

"Did he call you or your partner? Or your boss?" Flores asked.

"You've searched me. Did you find a phone?" he taunted, knowing they had not.

They'd searched both men and found no phones, no IDs, just guns, Heckler and Koch .9mm on them both. They'd also ran both men's prints. So far, nothing had come back from the quick search. Brielle was working on it from HQ. But no one thought IDs would be found, just like they had not gotten IDs on the two from the DeSoto house.

"Keep him talking. I recognize his voice!" Becca said.

"From where?" Tessman asked, his focus now on Becca.

She shook her head.

"Your partner asked for a lawyer. Do you want one as well?" Robinson asked.

The man chuckled. "Yeah, I'll take a law-yer. Rebecca Elliot will do. I'm sure she's behind the mirror."

"He was in my sister's house the night I was attacked in the closet. I recognize his voice and the way he said lawyer," Becca said. "I'm sure of it."

Everyone was still on comms. “Interesting request, given that you were there when your partner tried to kill her in the closet at her sister’s house a few nights ago. But you went out the back door when things got dicey,” Flores said. “Left the two others to die or be arrested.”

“You have an active imagination and no proof,” the man said. “I have rights. Now charge me or release me.”

“You’re assuming we’re the police,” Flores said with a laugh. “Or we give a shit about your rights.”

“Who called you and ordered you to go after Rebecca Elliot in the parking lot?” Robinson asked.

The man shrugged but didn’t speak.

“Let’s start with your name and who you work for, then?” Robinson then asked.

Still no answers from the man.

“Who’s in charge of this clusterfuck?” Flores asked. “Obviously something went sideways during this Op of yours.”

“What’s the big picture, or don’t you know? Foot soldier, I’d bet, not high enough on the food chain to have all the deets shared with you,” Robinson taunted.

Becca watched and listened. They weren’t getting anywhere. She wondered when they’d start beating on him.

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“Last question, last chance,” Flores said. “We know Nick DeSoto accidentally poisoned himself and his family. Was it a fatal exposure?”

Becca watched the man’s face as Flores asked that last question. Either he didn’t know, or he was giving nothing away.

With no answer from the man, Robinson pulled his taser from his pocket and fired it at him, point blank. The man convulsed, screamed, sounding more like an animal than a human. His body lunged forward, the handcuffs all that kept him from crumpling all the way to the ground.

Becca was shocked to see it. Her sharp intake of air and her body going rigid told everyone in the room how she felt about it. Tessman wanted to go to her and wrap his arms around her, whisper that the man would be okay, but his feet were rooted in place. Her eyes did dart to him as one of her hands raised to cover her mouth.

Tessman nodded, an attempt to silently convey his thoughts to her.

Leaving the man slumped forward, dangling from the bench, Flores and Robinson left the room and went to the room the other man from the parking lot was detained in. Meanwhile, Winston marked different places in the audio at Shepherd’s prompting to do so, as heard through comms.

Leaving the hood over the man’s head, several sections of audio from both Standish and the other man from the parking lot that took snippets to make it sound more damning that it was were played. The sound of that man screaming when he’d been tased was played last.

“Only one out of the three of you gets the full deal,” Flores said. “Do you have anything to add to what they’ve said that would make you the contender?”

“Go fuck yourself!” the man yelled.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” Flores replied. “You do realize you’re a dead man if they think you told us anything. We’ll drop you off someplace very public, like back in the parking lot at Well-Life right in front of one of the security cameras as everyone is getting off work, shake your hand and thank you profusely for the info on who really killed the DeSoto family and why.”

“You don’t know jack-shit,” the man yelled.

“Move on from him. It’ll take a lot to get anything out of him,” Shepherd said. “Go back to Standish with the offer and get more on tape from him to go at these two with. We need it all from both sides. Standish is scared, but not of these two.”

“Standish is getting an offer of immunity? No!” Becca argued.

“He’ll think he is,” Jackson said. He winked and then he and Tessman left the room again, and they re-entered the room James Standish was held in. Jackson immediately uncuffed Standish. He pulled him over to the table and sat him in one of the chairs. Jackson took the seat across from him, while Tessman stood behind Standish. “I need two actionable items of intel for the offer to be solidified.”

Tessman held up Standish’s phone within Standish’s peripheral vision. “The passcode into your phone would be the first.”

“I want the offer in writing,” Standish pressed.

“Good will gets it for you. We have one offer of immunity, you or one of those two

assholes from the parking lot. But given that we have proof that at least one of them was at Nick and Nicole DeSoto's house the night another one of them tried to kill Rebecca Elliot, we're not inclined to want that immunity and protection to go to either of them if we can help it," Tessman said.

"You know we're going to get into the phone soon on our own. Buy yourself good will and provide your passcode," Jackson pressed.

Standish provided it.

Tessman plugged it in and then took a seat at the table with them. "Last call was to a contact named Chester. Who might that really be?"

Standish glared at him, knowing he had no other way out but to try to get immunity.

Tessman scrolled through the call log and the text log. "You and Chester are tight. Fifteen calls back and forth in the last two weeks plus multiple text messages. Oh, Jimmy, this one is pretty damning," Tessman said, shaking his head. "It's from the night Becca Elliot was attacked in the closet at her sister's house. Chester told you she was there and not only did they not get what they were sent in for, but someone else crashed the party, and they lost two. Oops, that was us. And I'll assume losing two meant two men. And your reply Jimmy, was not very nice. You said you didn't give a rat's ass how many he lost to get someone back in there ASAP, and stop that lawyer bitch from finding it."

"So, Chester isn't really a partner, per se. That sounds more like you are the one giving the orders." Jackson concluded. "Hum, and here we thought you were doing what you were under duress, caught up in something over your head that took on a life of its own by accident. That text paints a different picture for us."

"Maybe we need to contact Chester with the offer of immunity to testify against you,

Jimmy boy,” Tessman said. “We have his number,” he said, holding up the phone. “And soon we’ll know who he is.”

“You don’t want to do that. Chester is psycho, a real sociopath,” Standish said.

“And you weren’t too careful, Jimmy, leaving this on your phone,” Tessman said.

“Proof, you left it all there as proof to protect you from Chester, didn’t you?” Jackson asked.

“As I said, he’s no one anyone wants to mess with. I regret the day I accepted his call,” Standish said.

Then it all spilled out of his mouth.

The call from Chester came roughly six weeks before the plane crash that took out the only one of the three partners opposed to Well-Life Pharmaceuticals entering into the deal to research and develop the next generation of antipsychotic drugs, a new type of mood stabilizer to treat schizophrenia and bipolar. Standish kept it from the other partners, though, that the drug had national security implications and that Chester was with a clandestine government agency.

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Standish went on to explain that the ability of antipsychotics to cross the blood-brain barrier is crucial for their therapeutic effect, as they need to reach the central nervous system to block dopamine receptors and alleviate psychotic symptoms. Or in the case of the partner drug Chester needed Well-Life to develop, create the opposite effect, too. They wanted to induce psychotic symptoms that would be used in conjunction with enhanced interrogation techniques. The targeted drug and its anti-drug partner would be developed together.

Caustic chemicals were used, and unfortunately for Nick DeSoto, false data sheets were provided to him, labels were swapped in some situations, which minimized how dangerous the chemicals were. The combinations he made created reactions never seen, and he accidentally poisoned himself merely by inhaling the fumes of the chemical reactions. The toxic compound now in his body crossed the blood-brain barrier and attacked the central nervous system, resulting in headaches, the first symptom of the poisoning.

It was transmitted to the rest of his family through saliva. Kissing his wife infected her. Sharing drinks and food infected the two children. It took weeks for the symptoms to present in all four of them. By this time, Nick had figured out what happened, and he'd done enough digging to know he'd been lied to regarding the true toxic nature of the chemicals he'd been working with. It had been no accident, as he was originally told by his manager. At that point, the focus of his work became the development of an antidote for the poison.

And then Nicole confronted James Standish. That was when they knew the DeSoto family wasn't going to play ball and quietly allow the cover up. Somehow, she'd even figured out that her parent's plane crash was no accident. Chester sent his men

in the following evening and things went sideways. The murder of everyone in the family was not premeditated, said Standish.

“Why was the entire house sanitized?” Tessman asked. “They cleaned up everything but the bodies.”

“Yeah, we didn’t know how long the poison would remain active in the saliva. Chester’s team cleaned it up.”

“But the blood?” Jackson said.

“Police and crime scene procedure would keep everyone masked up and wearing gloves near the bodies. Potential for spread was minimal. Same for the coroner.”

“Chester’s people sanitized the scene?” Jackson asked.

“Of course they did. I don’t have those kinds of resources and none that would do that kind of job,” Standish said.

“Okay, so the million-dollar question. Who is Chester?” Tessman asked. He was sure by now Shepherd would be running that name down and would be in communication with all of his intelligence agency contacts looking for him and trying to discover if the development of this drug was sanctioned or off the books. Tessman knew one more thing. Given that things had gone horribly wrong, resulting in the killing of a scientist and his entire family, heads would roll.

“I don’t know,” Standish said. “I swear I don’t. When things went bad, I tried to track him down so I could go above his head to his boss. Do you think I wanted Nick, Nicole, and their kids to be poisoned and then killed?”

“You were sure willing to allow Becca Elliot to be killed,” Tessman reminded him.

“Everything was spinning out of control by then,” Standish said.

“So, you figured what’s one more person killed, huh? Anything to protect your secret,” Tessman spat.

“You’re not going to believe me, but I was against anyone being killed. I only found out about Madeline after Chester had already had her killed. Same with Nick and Nicole,” Standish said.

“You’re right, we don’t believe you,” Tessman said.

“What about the other partner, Marvin Ackman?” Jackson asked.

“He knew about and supported the partnership to develop the drug because it had the potential to make Well-Life a boatload of money, but he didn’t know about any of the rest of it,” Standish said.

Even though they had his entire confession recorded, Jackson handed him a pad of paper and told him to write it out. Then they left the room.

“It’s time to get answers from the two parking lot goons,” Shepherd said. “I’m running down Chester with my contacts, but so far nothing. Do what you have to do to get intel, team.”

“We’ll need you in with us, Needles,” Flores said to Winston. “Door number two is the lucky winner.”

The three men entered the interrogation room with the man who’d been in Becca’s door, the man who struggled the most. He was still combative.

“You should step outside,” Tessman told Becca in a whisper. “You’ve got your

answers. You don't need to see this."

Becca shook her head. She would later regret that she hadn't left the room.

She watched Flores and Robinson grab the man, who still had the black hood over his head. They forced him into a reclined position on the bench and then the bench itself was adjusted so his head was lower than his body. He tried to struggle. Flores punched him twice in the stomach. Winston had opened a cabinet near the door and pulled out two jugs that looked to be about a gallon each. He poured some of the fluid onto the black hood over the man's face. He sputtered and coughed. A drain was on the floor beneath his head. The water drained away.

"Chester, and what agency he and you work for?" Flores demanded.

Through coughs, the man yelled obscenities at them.

Becca watched it go on for some time. It was one of the most horrific things she'd ever witnessed. Water was poured over the hood. The man coughed and sputtered. Every few seconds, the hood was partially removed, just lifted over his mouth and nose and he was allowed to breathe for a few seconds before it was repeated. All throughout, he strained against the restraints which held him to the bench.

When he'd gone still and quiet, he was checked to be sure he was breathing. Twice, he was rolled to his side, and they helped him to cough up or vomit the water he'd either swallowed or aspirated into his lungs. Becca believed he'd stopped breathing several times. He had drowned. And Eddie Winston brought him back each time, only for the torture to be repeated.

But he did talk in the end.

The man's name was Sergio Lopez. His parking lot partner was Gustavo Chavez. Both were in the country illegally from Mexico. Chester's real name was Jude Ross. He was, by the man's definition, a sleazy CIA Agent who operated over the line. They and many others were paid well by Ross, a private army. They were both present at the DeSoto house with Chester the night the family was killed. Both of the men were at the DeSoto house the night Becca was attacked. They had already ransacked Becca's house before going to the DeSoto house that night.

The other shocking piece of information they learned from him was that not only had the drugs been developed to induce psychotic symptoms to use with enhanced interrogation methods, Ross also planned to taint standard drugs with it and then sell it and the counteragent to reverse the effects, which would be a gold mine. Imagine a high so good it lasted until a counteragent stopped it. Addicts would sell their souls to acquire a drug like that. The potential to influence and control someone had limitless possibilities, and Jude Ross was going to tap into it and exploit anyone he could.

Shepherd only spoke when it was done. "Good work team. Keep your detainees secure. I've already contacted Mason. He'll send agents to take custody of the three you have. Moe, it's time to transport Miss Elliot back to HQ before they arrive. We'll debrief tomorrow at zero nine hundred."

Yankee

It was long past sunset when Tessman drove out of the warehouse with Becca in the passenger seat beside him. They were getting her out before the federal authorities

arrived that they'd hand the three men off to. She was quiet and looked exhausted. He knew what happened in the warehouse had disturbed her. How couldn't it?

"Are you hungry?" he asked her. It was way past dinnertime.

"No, I couldn't eat a thing."

"Yeah, I know. Me neither. I wish you hadn't seen all that."

"I'm glad I did," she said.

"What are you thinking?" he asked. "Talk to me, Becca."

She shook her head and didn't answer. Her head was turned, so she gazed out the window. He couldn't see the expression on her face.

They drove in silence. He pulled into the parking garage and passed through the gate and two garage doors. "Becca, you need to talk to me," Tessman said after he'd put the car in park.

"I can't," she said.

She hadn't moved to get out of the car yet. "Are you okay?" Tessman asked.

"Okay? No I'm not okay, Carter. That had to be the most horrific thing I've ever seen, and I'm left with a really big question that I don't know the answer to. Do the ends justify the means?"

"How do you not know the answer to that?" Tessman asked.

"That man was waterboarded, fucking nearly drowned. He could have been killed,"

she charged.

“Better him than you,” he said. “And he wasn’t killed. The team knew what they were doing.”

“That room was set up for that,” she charged. “The supplies were there to do that.”

“Yes,” Carter confirmed.

“Was there no other way?” she demanded.

“You were there. No, Becca, there was no other way. Neither him nor the other scumbag were going to give anything up, but we now have answers we didn’t have.”

“Well, I guess when you put it that way, it’s all well and good, and we’re all happy,” she shot back sarcastically.

“Do you think anyone liked what went down in that warehouse today?” Tessman demanded. “Is anyone happy?”

“No one seemed to mind it,” she shot back.

“Really? Why do you think that? Because every single one of us did our jobs without whining about it? I’ll tell you, Becca, if you think that’s who I am, who any of us are, you are dead wrong. Sometimes tough actions have to be taken, and we have to step up and take those actions no matter how much we hate doing it. We got answers. And now with those answers, we can get justice for your sister and her family.”

“What will happen to the three of them?”

“The CIA will take them into custody, as well as Jude Ross, and clean up their mess,”

Tessman said. “Shepherd will have more info for us tomorrow morning at the debrief.”

“I just want to get upstairs and take a hot shower,” she said. She was still chilled to the bone. She held her hands together in front of her chest like she was praying, but it was an attempt to warm up.

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Tessman reached over and took hold of her hands. “You need to talk to Lassiter if you won’t talk to me. Mentally and emotionally, you have a lot to deal with, finding out exactly what happened and why. Are you still taking it in?” he said with the most gentle, kind voice he could muster.

Becca locked eyes with him. He was the same calm, kind Carter who’d been there for her time and time again over the past week. She shook her head. “I’m not okay,” she confessed.

“You’re still cold,” he said, rubbing his hands over hers. “Let’s get you upstairs and into a hot shower. That’ll help. Then I’ll tuck you into bed and put an extra blanket on you.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“If you want me to. I kind of thought you’d want me to be far away from you after what you saw at the warehouse.”

“I thought so too, but now, no, I want you to hold me tonight. I don’t want to be alone.”

“You got it,” he promised.

Becca jolted awake. Sunlight flooded into the room through the window. They hadn’t bothered to close the curtains the night before. Her back was pressed against Carter

and his arms were around her. She liked to wake up next to him. She wondered what would happen now that the case was solved. How soon would they arrest everyone involved so she would be deemed as safe?

“You okay?” Tessman asked. He lay on his side and held her in his arms. He’d been awake but hadn’t moved, as he didn’t want to disturb her sleep.

Becca relaxed back into him. “Yeah, I’m fine. What time is it?”

“Just before seven hundred,” he answered.

“Thank you for staying with me last night.”

A grin curved on his face. It was almost laughable that she thanked him. He loved to hold her as he drifted to sleep, and he loved to wake with her there as well. “Can I make you a cup of coffee?”

She grasped his arm to keep it in place. “Not yet. Can you just hold me a while longer?”

He tightened his grip on her. “Baby, I’ll hold you as long as you’d like.” He pressed a kiss to the back of her head. “I like waking this way. It’ll probably be safe for you to go home in a couple of days. And with this case over, I’ll probably be assigned to a new one on Monday.” He didn’t like that thought.

“Will you deploy for it?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said, though he was sure it was the case.

He knew several of the teams had returned from their missions the night before. Next week’s assignments should be coming out soon. Delta Team plus Sebastian ‘Crash’

Roth and Bravo Team's Kenny 'Ducky' Gallup would be back to HQ, completing their DEA Partner Mission within the next few hours. He wanted to touch bases with Delta Team member Brian 'the Birdman' Sherman to see how Brielle, his wife, was really doing after this case. This case had gotten to him, and he didn't even have children. He'd known it had been rough on Jackson, so he assumed with Brielle being a woman, it was harder for her.

"But I think Shepherd will want you here a few more days, just to be sure there are no threats against you."

"How will he know?"

Tessman laughed. "He just will."

"I still feel there is something left unresolved in all this," she said. Or was it that she wanted there to be, so she'd remain with Carter longer?

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But I still think there was something time sensitive about them getting that proof from me that I didn't even know existed. Honestly, with the volume of stuff from Nicole's house, I would never have gotten through it anytime soon. They could have waited until things settled down and then either burglarized my house or burned it down, thus burning down the proof if they didn't know if it was in paper or electronic form. Their persistence at trying to find it is suspicious to me, Carter."

"I could have Brielle take another look to see if there is something more there, something else hidden."

"Yeah, maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea."

Tessman left Becca to get dressed after they had coffee and ate muffins and yogurt, both stocked in the apartment by Angel. He'd offered to get a hot breakfast for them from a local diner, but she declined. He caught up with Delta Team in the Team Room. They'd just debriefed with Shepherd after a successful mission. They were all looking forward to a few days off.

"This last case was a hard one. I just wanted to see if you've talked with Brielle," Tessman said to Sherman after he'd greeted the team.

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“Yeah, it was rough on her,” Sherman said. “Brielle and I talked every night. She brought Bastian in bed with her most nights.” He paused and chuckled. “So now I’ll have our baby between us and have to wrangle with my wife to get him back in his crib so I can make love to her.”

“Sorry,” Tessman said with a grin.

“You’ll understand one day,” Sherman said. “Rumor has it you slept in the apartment with the client.”

“Where’d you hear that rumor?” Tessman asked.

“Yeah, where did I?” Sherman teased. “You’re not denying it.”

“No reason to,” Tessman said with a grin. “Anyway, I just wanted to be sure Brielle was ok. I know this case bothered Jackson, two dead kids, so I knew it had to bother Brielle,” Tessman said.

“You got the bastards that did it, that’s all that matters,” Sherman said.

“We did. I’m sure all involved will be buried in some hole, never to see the light of day again. We have our debrief at zero nine hundred and I hope Shepherd will confirm that they’re all rounded up.”

“Yeah, Brielle left Bastian with Dahlia to come in for the debrief. I can’t wait to get home to him. I hear you helped with the drunk beating on Dahlia’s door the other night.”

“Yes, a fucking seven-foot mountain.”

Sherman laughed. “Had Bubbles been home, he probably would have just shot the motherfucker.”

Tessman chuckled with him. “I’m not sure we would have subdued him if Kegger hadn’t tased him.”

“Kegger does like his taser,” Sherman said. He offered his hand. “Anyway, thanks for checking on Brielle.”

“I’ll catch you later,” Tessman said after shaking Sherman’s hand.

Shepherd already sat at his conference table with Brielle when Tessman and Becca entered his office. Jackson rushed in moments later. Flores, Winston, and Robinson were the last to arrive.

“Thank you for being on time ladies, and gentlemen. I have a packed day,” Shepherd began. “Mason asserts that Jude Ross went rogue and the development of the two drugs, and all that followed was not an approved CIA mission. They scooped Ross up at his residence last night and are still interrogating him. Mason has promised that if anyone else was involved, they will be found and dealt with.”

“Do you believe him?” Flores asked.

“As of now, I have no reason not to. He knows that we have copies of the interrogation tapes from last night, and I’ll burn him if he lies to me,” Shepherd said. “One of his people was responsible for the deaths of six innocents, including children. That will not be taken lightly by any agency. I think we can expect that

Mason and the CIA will be on their best behavior for the foreseeable future.”

“What about Well-Life and whoever is working on those drugs now?” Winston asked.

“It’s been shut down. The FDA and its Office of Criminal Investigations are all over that place this morning. Nick DeSoto’s boss, Neil Eddy, took over the research when Nick died. It’s being looked into if Eddy knew the extent of the fraud and cover-up. They’ll proceed appropriately, depending on what they find.”

“But it’s stopped, right? The research has been stopped?” Becca asked.

“Affirmative. The FDA’s OCI is working the case, will make arrests, and prosecute those guilty of any wrongdoing,” Shepherd answered. “They may be in contact with you, Becca. I would remind you of the NDA in answering any of their questions.”

“I understand,” she said.

“One last thing,” Shepherd said. His gaze went to Brielle.

“I finally got access to the contents of the package the driver was delivering when he saw Nick DeSoto’s body in the house,” Brielle began. “It was a letter from Senator Mark Henshaw, thanking Nick for meeting him the previous day and referring the issue to him. He promised to follow up on it and stop the drug from any further development.”

“Holy shit, damn, fucking A,” several of the team members cursed, their voices overlapping.

“Senator Henshaw sat on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. They have jurisdiction over the FDA and are responsible for oversight of

the drug approval process,” Brielle said. She paused and gave Becca a small smile as she reached over and laid her hand on top of Becca’s. “Your brother-in-law was a whistle blower. He was a hero.”

Becca teared up. “Thank you, Brielle.” Then it occurred to her. That was the urgency. Getting that letter. It was the link that suggested they had motive and that they killed the Senator too.

“So, they killed Henshaw too?” Jackson summed up. “Davis, with the Schaumburg P.D. has us to thank for the closure of another one of his homicide cases.”

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Shepherd nodded. “He was appreciative when I contacted him last night.” He scanned the table. “Anything else?”

“No, sir,” several team members said, coming to their feet.

“Becca, please stay. Everyone else is dismissed. Enjoy your long weekend. Next week’s assignments will be emailed to you tomorrow morning.” After the last person left, and the door was closed, Shepherd spoke to her. “It’s safe for you to go home, but I’d prefer you have one of my people with you the next few days, just to be sure.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’m sure Carter wouldn’t mind being my babysitter a few days longer.” And the truth was, she wanted the extra time with him, especially if he potentially would be deployed the following Monday.

“What’s next for you?” Shepherd asked.

“I’m not sure,” she answered honestly.

“We could use you on the team with the domestic violence cases and to provide legal advice on other cases,” Shepherd said.

“Thank you, Shepherd. I will definitely consider it.”

“That’s if you can stomach the work we do. I purposefully let you see what happened at the warehouse last night so you could make a fair evaluation of possibly working for us.”

Shepherd truly impressed her. Carter had said once that Shepherd was calculated, played 3-D chess while everyone else was playing Chinese checkers. She believed that was true. “Can I take some time and think about it? I think first, before I commit to anything, I need a little time away to deal with everything that happened in the last month.”

“Of course. Reach out to Joe Lassiter if you need to,” Shepherd said. “The offer stands whenever you might want to take me up on it.”

“Thank you.”

Shepherd came to his feet and presented his hand across the conference table to her. She also stood as she shook his hand.

When she left Shepherd’s office, she went looking for Carter and Angel. She wandered down the hallway towards Angel’s desk. She found both Angel and Michaela in the kitchenette. “Hi,” she greeted, entering the room. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Not at all,” Angel said. “How are you? I heard what happened last night.”

She wondered if Angel truly knew all that had happened. “I’m fine, thank you. It’s over and I get to go home today,” she said. “But I wanted to thank you again for everything you did for me.”

Angel embraced her. “You’re welcome. So, are you going to stick around and help on more of Briana’s domestic violence cases?”

“Probably,” Becca confirmed. “I’ll, of course, stay in contact with Simone Hoch and make sure her case proceeds, but I need to take a little time away before I dive into anything.”

“Completely understandable,” Michaela said.

“Wow, Michaela, you are carrying so low, much lower than when I saw you last, a few days ago,” Becca said.

Michaela flashed her a weary smile. “I am aware. Angel and I were just discussing that. I was at the OB this morning and he said the baby could come at any time. He seconded your medical opinion on the location of the baby,” she said with a chuckle. “I’m already dilated to three and one hundred percent effaced.”

“Looks like I might win the baby pool,” Angel said with a smile. “Why are you in? You should be at home.”

“I’m just wrapping up a few things in the lab and getting it ready for me to be out for an extended period. I had so much energy the last few days, but today I am just zapped.”

“Oh, you are close to having her. That is so typical,” Angel said with excitement. “Don’t you remember the day I had Johanna? It was Memorial Day, and we were all at Madison and Cooper’s house for a cookout. I felt absolutely drained, and that was after two days of having so much energy.”

“Diana timed your contractions. Yes, now I remember,” Michaela said.

“Are you having any contractions?” Angel asked.

Becca watched the two women and listened to their conversation, recalling when her sister had both her nieces. She’d been with Nicole the day she went into labor with Riley. She remembered it similarly to what these two ladies described. The memory caused tears to fill her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Angel asked, pulling Becca from her memories. She assumed Angel was talking to Michaela. “Becca, are you okay?” she repeated.

“Yes, sorry. I was just remembering when my sister went into labor with my niece, Riley. I was with her at her house.”

Both Angel and Michaela embraced her. “It’s okay, sweetie,” Angel said. “Cry, grieve, you’re going to have these days. Don’t try to hold back the tears.”

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Becca swiped at her cheeks. “I know, but my sadness shouldn’t be making an appearance on your exciting day, knowing you’re so close to bringing your baby girl into the world.”

“You can’t control it,” Michaela assured her. “I am a little sad, myself, missing my parents during this time. My mother died when I was a child, but my father just died last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Becca said.

“Thank you. We’d been estranged for many years. I’m just glad we reunited before he died,” Michaela said. Then the expression on her face changed to surprise, and she glanced down at her leggings, which were suddenly saturated with liquid. “I think my water just broke!”

Angel calmly pulled her phone from her pocket. She dialed and waited for a beat. “Hi Lambchop, I’m in the kitchen on five with Michaela and her water just broke. It’s showtime, Daddy.”

Becca grabbed the paper towels from the counter. She tore several off and spread them over the floor near and under Michaela. They instantly soaked up the water that was beneath her. Shortly thereafter, a tall, muscled, bald man entered the room. He scooped Michaela up in an embrace that didn’t leave Becca wondering if this was Landon, or Lambchop, as some called him, Michaela’s husband. He was euphoric and fussing over Michaela and her baby bump. Becca hung back and watched, impressed by his gentle nature, a complete departure from what she’d expect based on his rough appearance.

“They make a cute couple and with their coloring, I bet that is going to be a beautiful baby they made,” Becca said to Angel after he’d whisked Michaela from the room. They’d make a quick stop in her lab to grab her things and then they’d leave for the hospital. “His appearance doesn’t match his personality, though. He was so cute, fussing over her.”

“Lambchop was a SEAL, one of the best,” Angel told her. “He’s also our team pastor. But don’t let that fool you. He’s as tough as they come and he’s also a total marshmallow when it comes to people he loves. That little girl of theirs is going to have two amazing parents.”

“And the rest of you in her life, too. From what I’ve seen so far, this is an amazing community of people.”

Zulu

Becca drew in the last potent sip of the fruity tropical concoction and held it in her mouth, savoring the flavor. She glanced at her watch. The flight from Chicago would be landing any minute. Excitement skipped through her. It had been a long month since Shepherd had offered her a permanent job. This time away had done wonders for her to gain a new perspective and to deal with everything that had happened enough that she felt she could move forward in her life.

She and Carter had stayed in touch as they’d promised, texting and talking on the phone, usually daily unless work got crazy for him. And then he’d send a quick text apologizing for not having the time to talk. Her feelings for him had grown with the passing of time.

They’d spent hours talking about anything and everything, enjoying long in-depth discussions where they both bared their souls without hesitation. She could honestly say she knew Carter better than she had any other man, ever, and she had shared parts

of herself with him that no one else ever got to see. She missed him greatly and couldn't wait to see him.

The danger of his job was no longer an issue for her. The feelings she had for him overruled the fear of losing him. Life had taught her that someone did not need to have a dangerous job for violence to find them. She also knew that life was fleeting, therefore it had to be lived. And she planned to do just that.

She stepped away from the pool bar, knowing the call would be coming in three minutes. If Shepherd was anything, he was precise. Upon hitting the sand, she kicked her sandals off and walked barefoot through the warm sand. Ahead of her, the waves lapped at the shoreline, the incredibly beautiful turquoise water shifting into a stunning aquamarine color farther out. The sky was cloudless and the most incredible shade of blue.

The eighty-five-degree breeze caressed over her skin, which had become nicely suntanned over the last month. Her sundress rustled, as did the nearby palm trees. This was indeed paradise. But all good things must come to an end. Wasn't that the expression?

Her phone rang, startling her, even though she expected it. The display read 'Shepherd Security' and a smile formed on her face. "Hello," she answered.

"Hello, Becca. It's Shepherd."

"Thank you for calling." She'd reached out to Angel a few days before to ask for a phone appointment with the Colonel. "Is that position you offered me last month still on the table?"

"Yes, it is," he answered.

“I’d very much like to work for your organization. I plan to be back in the area in about a week.”

“Don’t you want to know the employment terms?” he asked.

Becca smiled into her phone. No, she really didn’t need to. She knew all she needed to know about Colonel Sam Shepherd and the organization he ran. Carter had already shared the particulars of time off and the other job perks with her. The salary was irrelevant. “I’m sure you offer a fair and competitive employment package, and if there are any issues, I’m confident we can come to an agreement.”

“Me as well,” Shepherd said. “Reach out to Angel when you’re back and let her know what day you’d like to start with us. She’ll set it all up and get you an appointment on my calendar for first thing in the morning of your start date.”

“Thank you, Shepherd. I’m looking forward to it.”

“You’ll help us do a lot of good. Enjoy your last week in St. Thomas,” he said and then disconnected the call.

Becca stared at her phone. How did he know she was in St. Thomas? She’d told no one but Carter.

Tessman gazed out the window at the familiar sights as the plane taxied towards the terminal at Cyril E. King Airport. Rae leaned in close to him to look out the window too. She was excited. This was her first time visiting any island. Tessman looked past her and smiled at Wilson, seated in the aisle seat. Wilson returned his grin.

“I say after we check into the hotel, we head over to Coki Beach, like usual, and get

in a quick dive from the beach,” Tessman said.

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Wilson nodded. “You mean after Rae and I check in? You’re basically checked in already.”

Tessman’s grin widened. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You sure you won’t want a private afternoon with Becca?” Wilson asked.

“Oh, I definitely want a private afternoon with her, but we haven’t discussed that yet.”

“She’s invited you to stay in her room. Duh! What do you think that means?” Rae said sarcastically.

“I’m hopeful, but assuming nothing. We haven’t seen each other in a month.”

“Except on video calls,” Wilson reminded him. “Jesus Christ, Tessman, the lady is in one of your favorite places, checked into a hotel, waiting for you. What do you think that means? Or are you trying to back out because it’s becoming real now?”

“You better not be,” Rae warned. She’d met Becca a few times. Tessman had brought her over, and they’d had dinner and hung out several evenings before Becca left for her time away. Rae liked her, and she was happy for Tessman that he had a woman in his life. Rae was hopeful the four of them would spend a lot more time together.

Tessman raised his hands in surrender. “Not backing out of anything. Just not assuming either. Look, she’s been through probably one of the worse things a person can go through, losing her entire family. We’ve slept in the same bed before and not

had sex,” he said, not believing it himself.

“Well, that’s a first for you,” Wilson said dryly.

“Fuck you very much,” Tessman joked. “I’m being serious. So, that’s why I’m taking the approach on this I am. We’re close and I like her in my life. Yes, I’d like it to be a hell of a lot more, but that’s up to the lady and where her head is. Don’t forget what she’s been through.”

“You’re a true gentleman, Carter,” Rae said.

Wilson snickered. That wasn’t a description that usually fit his friend. He recalled their last trip to the island not very long ago. His life had changed drastically since then, with Rae and Lilly coming into his life. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibilities that Tessman’s soon would. He hoped it would be for him.

Tessman’s eyes were locked on Wilson’s. He could damn-near read his thoughts. He nodded. Yeah, Wilson’s life was different now from how it was during their last trip to the island. And Wilson would never tell Rae or Becca what his usual vacation antics were. He sincerely hoped his past life was just that, his past. He believed that Becca was his future, and he hoped she had worked through her loss and the incredible grief that went along with it, and got her head to a place that would allow him into her life.

His gaze shifted to Rae. Wilson was genuinely happy with her. And while Tessman had the hope of that happiness, had glimmers of it with Becca, Becca’s healing would determine if that happiness had a chance to flourish or if that glimmer would be extinguished. He hoped for the former.

The three of them deplaned and rushed through the airport, exiting into the warm Caribbean air. Rae looked around in wonderment, thrilled to be there. It was her first

trip out of the contiguous United States. Jimmy had surprised her with the trip and even arranged for Madison to keep Lilly for the four days they'd be away.

They caught a taxi to the resort. While en route, Tessman sent Becca a text message.

On our way to the hotel, ETA fifteen minutes.

Becca's reply popped in right away.

I'll meet you in the lobby. I've missed you.

He smiled, reading her reply.

I've missed you too.

As the taxi pulled up under the canopy in front of the hotel, Tessman saw a beautiful sight. Becca stood near the taxi stand wearing a white spaghetti strap sundress. Her skin was sun kissed and golden with her hair up in a messy bun, showing off tanned skin, which looked soft and kissable. Or maybe it was just that he remembered how soft her skin was and how much he wanted to kiss her neck, her chest, her lips, and everywhere else. It had been a long month since he'd last held her. He truly had missed her.

He was out of the taxi before the driver had come to a complete stop. He rushed to her and engulfed her in a hug. His lips crashed into hers and the kiss was lengthy and passionate. Yes, the only place he wanted to go was their room. An afternoon dive was the last thing on his mind.

When their lips separated, Becca held him tighter, her eyes closed, just taking in the incredible sensation of holding his body to hers. She'd longed for his embrace, his touch, his kisses for the entire last month. But it had been a month that she'd needed.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered in his ear.

“Me, too,” he said.

When she pulled further back, she smiled and let her eyes wander over his face. “I’m glad this worked out. I thought for sure something would happen at the last minute that would make you cancel your trip.”

“I was worried about that too,” he admitted.

“We’re going to go check in,” Wilson said to them as he and Rae stepped around them.

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“It’s nice to see you both again,” she said, completely breaking her embrace with Carter. She gave them both a hug in greeting. “Come on, I’ll show you our room,” she said to Tessman.

“Lead the way,” he said, twining his fingers with hers.

She walked him through the open-air lobby, through the lush grounds, around both pools, to the far building closest to the water. They took the elevator to the top floor, floor five, and walked the open-air hallway to the room she’d been in alone for the past four days since she’d arrived. She swung the door open and excitedly pulled him inside.

Tessman let out a long whistle, seeing the beautiful room. “This is nice!” He and Wilson never stayed at a place this nice. The wall in front of them was all windows, sliding glass doors, with a balcony. The ocean spread out, meeting the sky at the horizon, turquoise waters meeting the beautiful afternoon, dark blue sky.

“It’s a beautiful view,” she agreed.

His gaze shifted to her. “Not as beautiful as the view in here,” he said. He set his backpack on the floor and took her into his arms. “I’ll take looking into your eyes over the view out there any day. I missed you, Becca,” he confessed.

“I missed you. But you’re here now and I have a surprise for you.”

His lips turned up in an erotic smile. “You do?” He would love anything she had planned for the bedroom.

“I talked to Shepherd earlier today. He offered me a permanent position, which I accepted. I start next week.”

His grin spread over his face. “You did. Are you ready for that? A regular work gig?”

“Yes, I am. I can honestly say my head is in the right place now. I told him I’d be back in town next week. He told me to contact Angel and let her know when I’d like to start. My first day at the job is up to me. I think he’s going to be very flexible with my schedule.”

“He is with the others who are in the support positions. As long as you get the job done, he usually doesn’t care how or where you do it.”

“Yes, I talked to both Angel and Brielle about it before contacting him and accepting the position. They’re both very happy in their positions and find the work and family balance even.”

“Family?” Tessman asked, caught a bit off guard by the word.

She took a step back and took hold of both his hands. “Sit with me,” she prompted, pulling him towards the bed. “Carter, I’ve gone to school and worked, focused on both, always believing there would be time for my personal life, for a family. I loved my nieces and I’ve always wanted children and believed in time I would get married and have children. If the last few months have taught me anything, it’s that there is no guarantee of tomorrow. The other thing with my life is that I hadn’t met a man who I ever could see forever with, a home and children, until I met you. I want you in my life, but I have to know your destination is the same as mine. If not right away, at least soon.”

In that second, everything clicked into place for Tessman. He now understood how Wilson had moved in with and proposed to Rae so quickly and why his teammate, Burke, was commuting to Virginia to spend time with Donna and play daddy to her

three children. It wasn't about how long either had known either woman. It wasn't about timing or what a natural progression of a relationship was supposed to be. It was about feelings and knowing what was right when it was in your life.

It was exactly how he felt about Becca. His heart didn't need a set or prescribed amount of time to know it loved her. There was no magical timeline that living together, getting married, or having a kid should follow. He could see it all so clearly, his life with her, just as Jackson had said he'd seen before getting involved with Angel.

"I'm in love with you and that's never going to change," he said, professing his love for her for the first time. And it came out so easily, with no fear of rejection, no second guessing himself if that was how he felt. He knew he was in love with her. "Yes, that's my destination as soon as you're ready for it. I'll put a ring on your finger whenever you want it there."

"Did you just propose to me?" she asked.

Tessman grinned, the most contented smile he ever smiled. "Yeah, I think I just did." A thought that would have scared the crap out of him just a few months ago felt so perfect. "Though I think, actually, you proposed to me first."

He gripped her cheeks with both his hands, and he leaned in and kissed her. A soft, gentle kiss turned into something ravenous very quickly. They had a month's worth of love to make, both needing the connection, both hungry for the other. Hands got reacquainted with each other's body, clothes got stripped away. Exploration and passion coalesced in the most incredible sensations they brought to each other. There were no second thoughts. There was no stopping until they were both quaking with spectacular, fulfilling releases, breathless and clinging to each other.

And after, they lay in each other's arms while their heart rates returned to normal.

“You do realize St. Thomas is known for the jewelers and duty-free shops that line the downtown area.”

She smiled a guilty grin. “Why do you think I picked St. Thomas to end my travels and propose to you?”

Tessman chuckled. “I love how you think, Becca.”

“I love you, Carter. And I love the future I believe we’ll share.”

“So, you want to have kids?” he asked.

“Yes, not necessarily right away, but I know I do want to have a baby, your baby.”

“I was over at Lambchop and Michaela’s last week. I’ve seen the big man hold other babies, but watching him with his little girl...it made me think about having one of my own, probably for the first time ever. He and Michaela are so happy,” he said. “Let’s pick up a little gold necklace with a cross on it for Stephanie when we’re out in town getting your rings.”

Becca laughed. “You still need to teach me how to dive. Will we have time for it all in the four days we have here?”

“Yeah, we will,” Tessman guaranteed her. Then he kissed her again. “But we’re going to do a lot of this too, and we’re going to do it with no condom. No condom ever again.” He kissed her and then slid his suddenly re-hardened cock back into her. Round two would be the best sex he’d ever had. He was making love to his fiancé, the woman he loved, who would have his child. That thought fueled him and he spent the rest of that afternoon showing her how much he loved her.

The End