



Ride with the SEAL (Norse Security 1)

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Category: Romance, War

Description: When ex-SEAL Camden Thursday enters the garage at two in the morning, he's intent on grand theft auto. Instead he's confronted with more than a hot car—there's a sexy mechanic too. His high school crush, wrench in hand, projects a "Dangerous Curves Ahead" warning far more tempting than any joy ride, but Camden isn't here to try the road less traveled. He's here to jack a car and prove he can do more than manipulate computer code for the black ops service he works for: Norse Security. So while Camden is looking to get physical on this job, he was hoping for someone to punch, not someone to plunder...

Everly Knight is the baddest bad girl in town. As the daughter of a mobster and a name in the auto industry for hot cars, she could rest on her laurels and let her reputation proceed her. However, Everly has a deep dark secret: she wants nothing more than a shiny, new, legal garage all of her own. She's just a few thousand away from cashing in and figures that one last illegal car theft could finance her legal dreams. That is until the geek from her past shows up as a hunky hero; letting Everly see that it's possible to become more than just a tough girl.

Camden may be all muscle, but it's Everly who can stall the entire operation. She holds him hostage and offers an ultimatum: Take her on the ride or find himself a sitting duck for the mob. It's not a hard choice when the bombshell revs his engine. But with warring goals and secret missions, they'll find themselves fighting for their futures and racing toward a love they never saw coming.

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Camden Thursday was over-prepared, as usual.

Still, despite hours of memorizing code and enough binary hacks to make his eyeballs explode, nothing could have prepared him for what he was looking at now. Sure, he'd expected the tech in the Aeon Turbo G90 to be mind-blowingly impressive—given it was the most advanced vehicle on the roadways today and the federal government had the only prototype in the world. Or at least they had until the damned thing had been stolen and ended up here at Knight's Body and Repair—quite possibly the seediest garage in Washington, D.C. What he hadn't expected, however, was the female mechanic apparently trying to hijack the thing out from under his nose at two in the morning.

Luckily, Cam wasn't just a computer whiz Brainiac—as the other guys at Norse Security seemed to think. He was also a former Navy SEAL with the brawn and physical training to handle any situation. Breaking himself out of that geek hacker box they'd put him in was the main reason why he was here. Well, that and this was his first mission for his new employer, a chance to prove to himself and the other guys he was just as GI Joe as the rest of them, that he was more than the resident “tech guy” on their team, more than a brain on legs.

Silently, he waited until the woman was busy fiddling with something under the vehicle's hood, then crept over to grab her from behind in a bear hold, preventing her from using that nasty looking wrench in her hand on his skull.

“What the fuck?” she gasped, struggling to escape from his hold. “Let me go!”

He managed to corral her kicking legs between his own muscled thighs and pinned her against the car, holding both the woman's wrists behind her back in one hand while reaching for her utility light with the other. Cam aimed the light at her face to see her better and—

Holy shit!

Of all the people to run into tonight, it would have to be his high school crush.

Everly Knight still looked as beautiful as he remembered—all long, thick dark hair and big, brown doe eyes. She seemed to recognize him too, if her disdainful once-over was any indication. That surprised Cam, since he looked a lot different than he had twelve years ago. Adding one hundred pounds of new muscle would do that to a guy.

“Well, if it isn't Geek Squad. All grown up and looking for trouble,” she said, her gaze narrowing. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“The name's Camden. Camden Thursday.” He stared down at her, noticing a slight bump on the bridge of her nose that hadn't been there before, like maybe she'd been in a fight or broken it. He frowned. “And I can ask you the same thing. This doesn't belong to you.”

“Not yours either.” She squirmed against him and damn if it didn't set off an array of interesting sparks through his bloodstream. He'd been without a woman for too long, that had to be it. The last thing he needed right now was to start thinking with his cock instead of his brain. He was more than capable of handling a mission on his own, same as Kevin and Hunter. And he wouldn't prove his point by screwing an old flame. Even if she'd been up for it, which judging from the glare she was shooting him right now, she wasn't.

Cam took the wrench from her hand, just in case she got any ideas about whacking him with it, then released her. He stepped back but still kept a wary eye on Everly. From her grease stained jeans and rumpled black T-shirt, it was pretty apparent she'd been working on the Aeon, but why? There'd been nothing wrong with it when it was stolen. At least that's what he'd been told. "What do you want with that car?"

"What do you want with it?" she countered, crossing her arms over her chest and highlighting her magnificent rack.

"You gonna answer all my questions with more questions?" Cam slapped her wrench against his palm, hoping to dispel some of his nervous energy. "It's two in the damned morning."

"Maybe." She picked up a nearby rag and wiped her hands. "And thanks for the update."

Cam exhaled slowly and prayed for patience. They'd grown up in the same tough neighborhood, both from the wrong side of the tracks. Her dad had owned this auto body shop back then too, Cam remembered. Rumor had it he had ties to the mob and they ran a chop shop on the side out of this hole in the wall garage. Cam glanced around the gr

ungy place, through the stacks of ragged tires and used vehicle parts scattered about and noticed the crooked, rusted metal sign tacked to the wall proclaiming "Knight's Body and Repair. We pay for scrap metal."

He'd bet good money they were still in the "salvage" business now, if Everly's peeved glare was any indication. She gave a dismissive sigh then tossed her towel aside and went back to poking around under the hood of the Aeon. Was she stripping it for parts already? He couldn't let that happen. Norse Security's contract with the feds was for the car returned intact and in good working order. And with the software

working, of course. For that's where the Aeon's real value was—the high-tech computer chips inside the car. Which made this the perfect mission for Cam.

“Funny seeing you again after all these years?” Everly said, her tone as flat as her stare.

“Hmm.” Cam set the thick, steel wrench aside and determinedly kept his gaze from roaming over Everly's well-formed ass sticking out from beneath the hood as she worked. What he needed to concentrate on was getting inside the car and driving it the hell out of here, but he couldn't do that with Everly tinkering around under the hood. There had to be a way to get her to move. And if there wasn't, then dammit, he'd move her. He wasn't a man who typically got handsy with women, unless they specifically asked him to. His momma, single and poor as she'd been, had still raised him right. But Cam was on a tight schedule and Everly seemed in no hurry whatsoever to finish up whatever the fuck she was doing with the Aeon's engine. It occurred to him that she was stalling for time, same as him, and that if this place was a front for the mob and she was after this stolen vehicle too, then most likely she wouldn't let him take it without a fight.

He looked around again, wondered how long it would be until the mob showed up to claim their prize. Not long, he guessed, based on the fact the car was sitting out in the open with no attempt to hide it. Best to make his move fast.

Cam's gaze darted back to the hood and he found Everly watching him now too, the gleam in her dark eyes calculating, whip smart. He remembered that about her too. He'd always been a sucker for intelligent women.

In the end, they both made a dash for the drivers' side door handle at the same time, then wrestled awkwardly to get into the vehicle. So much for avoiding confrontation. Once the door was open, they battled to claim the drivers' seat. Somehow, Cam managed to beat her into it, but that didn't stop Everly from sitting down on top of

him, right in his goddamned lap.

Man, good thing the guys couldn't see him now. Getting turned on by a squirming suspect trying to jack him out of his mission goal. No way would Everly get this car.

No. Fucking. Way.

And yeah, maybe she did feel good, her sweet curves rubbing against him in all the right places. Didn't mean he was giving up this fight anytime soon. Hell, no. He was a SEAL for fuck's sake. He'd trained to endure the harshest torture, the most brutal conditions. Bumping and grinding against Everly Knight in a stolen, top-secret vehicle was a walk in the park compared to that shit. Nothing on earth would keep him from getting this vehicle under his control and getting it back to the Norse Security Offices as soon as possible. And no one—not God, and certainly not beautiful, bewildering Everly Knight—was going to stop him.

Cam wrapped an arm around her waist and leaned forward to hiss in her ear. “You trying to drive this car or ride me ‘til I cum, sweetness?”

She gave an angry snarl. “Get your fucking hands off me and get out of my car!”

“Your car?” He snorted. “Last time I checked, this vehicle wasn't registered to you. It's the property of the United States of America.”

“Yeah? Well, that means it isn't yours either.” Everly dug her nails into his forearm, teeth bared, and Cam growled. “I'm not going anywhere,” she said. “And I wouldn't sleep with you if you were the last man on earth, asshole.”

“Want to bet?”

They wrestled some more until it started feeling way too good and Cam's body

reacted in kind. Everly too seemed to be breathing a bit harder than before and her skin looked flushed. Cam rested his forehead against her back and caught her scent—cinnamon and vanilla and a hint of motor oil. She stopped struggling for a moment. He smiled and took advantage, giving Everly one last hard shove and managed to push her out the door before he slammed it shut behind her. The locks slid into place with a satisfying click.

Cam took a moment to gloat as a stunned Everly wheeled around to face him. He had to admit the air tight seals on the vehicle were excellent. He couldn't hear a single one of the furious curses she was hurling his way, though her furious expression and obscene finger gestures were easy to interpret. Cam just grinned then focused on studying the electronic control panels lighting up the dashboard.

Tech was his specialty. He had a Master's degree in Computer Science from USC that he'd earned while still working with his SEAL team around the world. Time to put those skills and all his late-night research to good use. A new idea occurred as he reached into his jacket pocket for the gadget he'd brought. He'd bet half his budget for this mission that Everly had been trying to hotwire the car to get it out of here before the shop opened again in the morning or before the mob showed up to claim their goods, but that would never work. Part of the Aeon's brilliant design was in its top-notch security system. No regular keyless entry or ignition system here. Nope. To start this vehicle, you needed a ten-digit passcode.

Of course, he didn't have the passcode either, but Cam was betting on the fact he could use the gadget in his pocket to discover it. He plugged the small black codebreaking device he'd developed into a hidden USB port beneath the Aeon's dash then sat back, giving Everly a little wave and smile. She answered with a double-barreled set of middle fingers and walked over to pick up her wrench again.

Cam cringed. Would she actually try to use that thing to bust in? Good luck, considering the Aeon had been designed with special bulletproof, shatterproof glass

built to withstand enormous pressures and impacts. Then again, she'd always had a lot of spunk. In school, she'd always been in trouble, it seemed like. Always sitting in the principal's office waiting for a reprimand. Cam had been a model student back then, despite never having enough money and his mom working two jobs to support them.

Finally, Cam's device beeped as the last digit clicked into place. He reached forward and pressed the Start Engine button with a grin.

Nothing happened.

He scowled and pushed once more.

Nada.

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Well, shit.

Cam juggled the wires connecting his device to the console and tried a third time.

A knock on his window had him turning slowly to see Everly standing there, holding two spark plugs in her palm. With her other hand, she mimicked the same smartass wave he'd given her earlier. Her full lips curved into the same fake smile.

After a deep breath for patience, Cam pressed the button to lower the window. The glass hissed downward. "Put them back."

"Nope. Not until you give me that passcode."

"Not going to happen."

"Guess we're stuck here then."

They stared at each other across the span of a few feet, neither giving an inch. A standoff without the guns. Then the rumble of an engine approached and two headlights flashed through the glass near the top of the garage doors on the opposite side of the squat cinder block building. The sound of crunching gravel pinged through the air like an alarm. Someone else had arrived, and Cam didn't think it was the good guys.

"Expecting company?" His gaze darted from the reflection of the open bay door to the rear of the Aeon to Everly.

“No.” She cursed under her breath and rushed back to the front. A couple of squeaks issued, then the hood slammed down to reveal Everly with her hands on her hips, her expression concerned. “Try the engine again.”

He did. This time the Aeon purred to life, just as a series of loud bangs issued from the

closed bay doors. It would only be a matter of minutes before they discovered the open bay behind him. If he was going to get out of there, now was the time to do it. With a last glance at Everly, Cam jammed the transmission into reverse and pressed the accelerator, backing cautiously toward the exit. Before he reached it however, two hulking thugs filled the entryway, guns drawn.

“Shit!” Everly raced to the Aeon’s passenger side and yanked on the locked handle. “Let me in! Please! C’mon, Camden! They’ll kill me if you don’t. Please!”

Something about the way she said his name, the desperation in her voice, tugged deep inside him. Common sense said he should leave her here, let her deal with the consequences of her actions, take the car and get back to the Norse Security offices as ordered. Too bad his SEAL honor wouldn’t let him. She was a woman in trouble, a damsel in distress. This was not part of his original plan, and having her along would only complicate things, but he couldn’t leave Everly here to face those thugs alone. It would be a death sentence.

Once she’d scrambled into her seat and closed the door, Cam punched the gas, hurtling backwards. He’d not felt any telltale thuds or bumps, meaning the car was intact and the two thugs hadn’t gotten run over. He closed his window as the two thugs recovered themselves from where they’d tumbled to the ground, then came at him again, weapons ready. The tinted glass made it hard for him to ID the two goons and vice versa.

Cam exhaled slow, wincing as bullets pinged off the Aeon's exterior. Kevin, or Loki as the guys called him, would be fucking furious if there was so much as a dent in this car. His orders were to return it in perfect working order, tech and all other parts intact. "Which escape route's the best?"

"This alley leads to the main road and will give us the best chance of losing them." Everly must've caught his incredulous look because she shrugged. "That's what I've heard anyway."

"Uh huh. Right." Cam glanced into the rearview mirror at the open exit behind him and said a silent prayer before peeling out of the garage in a squeal of tires and burning rubber. They bumped down the pothole-riddled alleyway, the pitch darkness split by two high-intensity halogen headlights. "Best buckle up. I'd hate to lose you so soon."

She chuckled. "Baby, as long as you got this car, you ain't losing me at all."

"Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart." Cam swerved out onto the deserted main thoroughfare, glancing into the rearview mirror to see the two thugs stopped at the side of the curb beneath a street light, bent over and out of breath from their foot chase. One of the men had his cell phone pressed to his ear calling in their escape. Their figures grew smaller as the Aeon zoomed away. Cam downshifted and stared out the windshield, heading back toward the Norse offices.

Shit.

There went his perfectly planned idea to drive this sucker straight back to Norse Security. If the mob was after them now, he needed to make sure he lost his tail before returning to home base. The guys would not look favorably on him bringing all that trouble to their doorstep. First though, he needed to lose Everly Knight as soon as possible.

Everly stared out the window at the passing scenery, a Virginia is for Lovers sign reflecting in the headlight beams. They'd been driving for what seemed like hours and her ass was beyond numb. Her stomach was growling too, but she didn't expect a guy like Camden Thursday to care much about that.

"Where are we going exactly?" she asked, unable to take the deafening silence any longer. "You're gonna need gas soon." She cocked her chin toward the glowing gas pump on the control panel, now flashing an ominous red.

Cam scowled into the rearview mirror then returned his gaze to the roadway ahead. "I want to make sure they're not following us."

"Who?" She scrunched her nose. "You mean those guys from the garage? Don't worry. They'll have to run their plans by their capo first before they can do anything else." Her phone buzzed in her pocket, but she didn't pull it out, fearing she already knew who it was, what it was. "Besides, I haven't seen another car on this road in hours. Trust me, you can stop."

"Trust you?" Cam snorted, his handsome features cast in greenish light from the dashboard's glow. "I don't think so. You tried to steal this car out from under me. Hell, for all I know you had already stolen it in the first place. And you talk about those mob thugs like you're one of them. No way I'm going to trust you."

"Paranoid much?" Everly shook her head and glanced back out the window. "Look, over there. It's a gas station with a twenty-four-hour pizza joint. Please. Seriously, you don't want this vehicle to run out of gas. For all its fancy technology, I've seen the fuel lines. Old school. You get some rust or dirt built up in there and it's toast. Won't start again. Besides, you don't want to be walking around when those guys catch up to us again. Military guy or not, they'll blast your ass into next century."

Cam gave her some serious side-eye. “How do you know I’m military?”

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“You mean besides the buzz cut and the caveman attitude?”

“Funny.” With a sigh and mumbled curse, Cam flicked on the turn signal and merged off the highway onto the exit ramp leading toward the gas station. “I’m going to stop and I’m going to buy gas. If you need to pee I’ll walk you to the restroom and wait outside until you’re done. Understood?”

“What are you? My boss? I don’t think so.” Everly narrowed her gaze. “You’re going to buy gas and then we’re going inside to eat because I’m starving. The only reason I’m still in this car with you is because I choose to be. I’m not letting this baby out of my sight until it’s returned to me again. You have nothing to do with it.”

“Wow. For a second there, I almost believed you.” He gave her a flat look as they pulled into the gas station lot and up to a pump. “You make a break for it, sweetheart, you’re on your own.”

“Like I said, I’m not going anywhere until I get this car back. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Not disappointed,” Cam said as he climbed out of the car. “Annoyed. Irritated. Confused. Yep. All of the above.” He slammed the door before she could respond.

Arrogant ass.

While Cam pumped the gas, Everly finally pulled out her phone and checked her messages. Yep. It was as bad as she’d thought. The text shined in bright black and white in the dull florescent lights of the gas station overhang:

Get that car & the guy back here in 48 hrs

or forget the money

Dammit. Everly shut off the phone and raked a hand through her hair, leaning her elbow against the door. This wasn't going to plan. Not at all. She'd known since the age of five that to cross the mob was nothing but a death sentence. She'd seen how brutal and violent they could be firsthand. She still couldn't shake the memories of the day she'd snuck away from home to visit her father's body shop and seen them beating her father to within an inch of his life, all for making one lousy decision without getting his capo's permission. She shuddered at the remembered blood and gore and the deep-seated fear her father would be killed before her very eyes.

He hadn't been, thank God. Only black and blue for weeks afterward, but young Everly had learned her lesson well. Never step outside your box and you'd be safe. Her box, these days, consisted of working in the body shop, repairing cars during the day, and stealing and chopping up hot bikes and vehicles at night for the local mob. She'd dreamed of getting out and getting a place of her own, a legit garage, a legit life, but had never had the means until now.

That's where the Aeon came in.

This one car, this one job, could net her enough to start her own business and live debt free for at least a year. Then Camden Thursday had to show up—all brains and brawn and pure, infuriating obstinacy—and fuck it all up. Potentially.

According to the text, she still had forty-eight hours to correct her mistake and return the Aeon. Forty-eight hours Everly planned to use to her advantage.

Failure wasn't an option. Never had been.

Cam climbed back into the car and hooked up his device again. She tried to peek at the passcode, but he covered it with his hand, shooting her a dark scowl.

“Who do you work for?” he growled, his expression dark. “You wired?”

“What?” Everly didn’t try to hide her disgusted tone. “No. And if anyone’s wearing a wire around here it’s probably you. You working for the feds?”

He froze for a second, then jammed the Start Engine button again once his device beeped. The Aeon roared to life and he pointed toward the deserted pizza joint attached to the gas station mini-mart. “That where you want to eat?”

She made a smartass show of looking all around them. “Unless you plan to gnaw on some raw corn from that field over there, yeah.”

Irritation oozing from his every pore, Cam zoomed forward into an empty spot in front of the door and shut the car off again. “I’ve had about enough of your attitude. I forgot what a smart mouth you have.”

“Really?” She got out of the car and chuckled. “I still remember what a stick in the mud you were back in school. Did they have to surgically remove your head from the principal’s ass or what?” Everly smacked him on the shoulder as she headed inside the restaurant. “And don’t worry, Geek Squad. I’m just getting started.”

He shoved into the place behind her and they stared around the em

pty booths and tables. One gum-smacking pregnant gal stood behind the counter, watching the all-night news channel. Cam stalked over to a booth in the far corner without asking Everly.

By the time she got to the table, he was on his hands and knees, peering beneath it.

She slid into her seat and propped one foot on the bench, staring down at him like he'd grown a second head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Checking for bugs."

"Like roaches?"

"Like listening devices." He finally straightened and slid into his side of the booth, those broad, muscled shoulders filling out his black leather jacket nicely. Not that she was looking. Nope. This was not the time and he was definitely not the guy to hook up with. Back in school, Camden Thursday was nothing but a teachers' pet, always got good grades, always did the right thing. Basically the polar opposite of Everly. Hell, he was probably on some divine mission from God to get the Aeon back.

Too fucking bad. She was going to get that car and get it to her potential buyer or die trying.

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Take that Camden Thursday, with your perfect teeth and your perfect smile and all that tanned, toned skin just begging to be stroked.

Confused, Everly put both feet on the floor and grabbed a menu as the pregnant waitress waddled over with two glasses of water.

“Welcome to Fred’s,” the server said, still smacking her gum. “You know what you want?”

Cam spoke before Everly could. “Large pepperoni, ham, and pineapple and a pitcher of soda. Thanks.”

Everly raised a brow at him. “That for both of us or just you, soldier boy?”

“That’s all, thanks,” Cam said to the waitress, dismissing her. Once the server was out of earshot, he said to Everly, “Stop being so rude.”

“Stop telling me what to do.” She glowered at him. “You’re not my boss.”

“Who is?”

“That’d be none of your business.”

“Pretty sure you trying to hotwire the car I’d been sent to retrieve makes it my business.”

Everly crossed her arms, the chilled air of the diner making her cold. Or maybe it was

the frigid attitude of the man across from her. Cam might look a whole lot sexier than he had in high school, but he sure as hell didn't act like it. "And who exactly sent you to retrieve my car?"

"The Aeon's not yours. It's federal property."

"You working for the feds then?" She narrowed her gaze. "You still enlisted?"

"No." He scrubbed a hand over his buzzed dark hair. "I'm not. I work private security now."

"Right." She sat back, studying him as the waitress returned with their drinks. Once they were alone, Everly leaned forward again, not missing the way Cam's gaze flicked downward to the V-neck of her black T-shirt before returning to her eyes. Okay, then. Maybe not so frigid after all. She'd never been a gal who relied on her feminine assets to get what she wanted, but in this case she'd use whatever weapons were in her arsenal to achieve her goals. Her future depended on it. "So, you got a girlfriend, soldier boy?"

Cam stared at her a moment before looking away. "Not pertinent to my mission. Sorry."

"Your mission?" Everly snorted. "Isn't every guy's mission to get laid?"

"Not tonight, sweetheart." Cam gave her a gorgeous little half-grin that curled her toes inside her Chuck Taylors and made her knees tingle. "But maybe later."

She quickly tamped down her unwanted attraction to this man. She had enough danger in her life already without getting involved with Cam Thursday. "In your dreams."

He straightened, as if remembering they were on opposing sides. “You never answered me before. You working for the mob? I know your father was involved in mafia affairs.”

She shrugged, remaining evasive. The less he knew, the better. “How’d you know I like pineapple on my pizza?”

“I didn’t. I took a chance.”

There was that grin again and damn if her body didn’t respond, a spray of fireworks blasting through her nervous system. What the hell was wrong with her? She had the mob breathing down her neck, a potential buyer dangling by a thread, and all her body seemed to care about was the totally unsuitable man across from her. She was hardly a blushing virgin and had had plenty of relationships over the years, but it had been a while since she’d dated anybody seriously. It had been too long since she’d had a man in her bed. That was it. Had to be.

The waitress brought their pizza and Everly’s appetite returned full force. They dug into the delicious food and she couldn’t help smiling around a bite of melted cheese. “This is amazing.”

“No lie there,” Cam agreed, his own mouth stuffed with sauce and dough. “So, you like working on cars?”

“Yep. Learned from my dad growing up and it’s a part of me now. Wouldn’t want to do anything else.” She finished her first slice and reached for a second. “What about you? What’s your dream job?”

“I’m doing it. Got my Master’s in Computer Science while I served as a Navy SEAL. If it’s tech related, I’m your guy.”

“Wow.” Everly chased down a bite of pizza with a sip of soda. “A SEAL, huh? Never would’ve guessed that from the skinny little geek in high school.”

“Sometimes people surprise you.” Cam wiped his mouth, his gaze steady on her. “Sometimes they don’t.”

“Yeah.” Everly devoured her second slice of pizza and took a third. “So why does a solider end up in my family’s garage in the early morning hours to steal back a car for the federal government? What’s so special about the Aeon?”

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“Besides all the high-tech computer chips on board?” Cam swallowed a bite of his fourth slice. “It’s rare. Rare things are always valuable.”

“True.” Everly sat back, stuffed at last. “And that’s why you want it? Because it’s valuable.”

“Sure.” He offered her the last slice and she declined. He downed it in three bites, then grinned. “What about you? Isn’t that why you want it?”

She blinked at him a moment, still not trusting him enough to give the full truth away. “Yep.” Her phone buzzed in her pocket, reminding her of the deadline looming over her. “Valuable. That’s it. You ready to get out of here? Those thugs probably have the capo’s permission to tail us by now.”

Cam sipped the rest of his soda then pulled out his wallet and slid out of the booth. She followed him to the register where he paid then grabbed a couple of mints from a basket on the counter. He handed her one then held the door for her as they walked out into the misty early morning. Dawn was just starting to streak the sky as she climbed back into the Aeon. “Right. Let’s go.”

Everly didn’t feel like she’d learned everything she needed to know about Cam and his mission, but it felt like she had the upper hand at any rate. He liked looking at her, liked her body, and he was a gentleman. All things she could use to her advantage when the opportunity arose. Plus, he might be a whiz when it came to the car’s computer chips, but there was no way he knew more than her when it came to what was under the hood. She’d been rebuilding engines since high school. Cam wouldn’t know a piston if it bit him in the ass, let alone all the advanced machinery onboard

the Aeon. That gave her the advantage she hoped.

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Cam scooted halfway beneath the Aeon's chassis. They were still at the Pump and Pie, parked off to the side now in the shadows. Good thing he had brought along his trusty Mag light attached to his key chain. The military-grade flashlight was tiny, yet powerful enough to illuminate the underside of the vehicle while he did a scan for trackers. For once the info-mericals hadn't lied.

"Now what the hell are you doing?" Everly asked.

From where he was crouched beside the vehicle, he could see the tip of her white sneaker tap-tap-tapping against the pavement. She was agitated. That thought sent a wicked little frisson of satisfaction through him. Good. She'd been a pain in his ass since they'd hightailed it out of that two-bit chop shop of her father's. A

bout time he got a little payback.

Cam carefully checked every inch of the underbody before standing and walking around to the back of the Aeon to switch out the license plates. He didn't look at her as he spoke, keeping his gaze on the task at hand to avoid losing one of the tiny screws holding the plate in place. In the pre-dawn gloom, it would be impossible to find, even with his flashlight.

"I was looking for bugs and trackers," he said as he loosened the screws then slid the old license plate out of the holder and affixed the new one the guys had given him before he'd left the offices. Cam wasn't sure where exactly they'd gotten the fake registration and he wasn't about to ask. This Aeon had ties to the federal government and for all he knew they could've gotten the big guns involved—FBI, CIA, even NSA. Best to keep his head down and not ask questions.

“Trackers?” The derision all but dripped from Everly’s tone. “You think the mob gives a shit about trackers? They’ve got spies everywhere. For all we know, that knocked-up waitress was one of them. She could be calling us in right now.”

Cam glanced back inside the pizza joint and spotted the server behind the counter again. Sure as shit she was on the phone too. His stomach took a tumble before he shook it off. Everly was just paranoid. She’d grown up with mafia crawling out of the walls. Now, she expected to find them everywhere. And while Cam was likely to agree that they needed to get on the road sooner rather than later, he doubted the mob had stooges this far out in the boonies.

“And the only bugs you’re likely to find down there are ants. Maybe a cockroach or two.”

He stood and tossed her the old license plate, which she caught one-handed. “Get in the car.”

“Fuck you,” she said, looking like she was going to hurl the plate back at him. “Stop telling me what to do.”

“Stop acting like a spoiled brat and maybe I will.” He grinned then turned at the sound of another car pulling into the gas station lot. Instead of stopping at the pumps, the old black sedan pulled up to the front of the pizza joint and cut the engine. Cam stayed close to the building’s wall and squinted down at his watch. Three-fifteen a.m. Not exactly the prime time for a snack.

Warmth pressed against his back and he realized Everly was right behind him now. Her breath stirred the tiny hairs on the nape of his neck and Cam suppressed a shiver of unexpected delight. That spot had always been a pleasure zone for him. He shook off the inappropriate feelings and scowled as two men got out of the sedan and walked up to the pizza shop’s door. They looked like rejects from a Blue’s Brothers

movie—all black suits and ties and menacing attitudes. Hardly part of the local farming community prevalent in this rural part of Virginia. “Looks like we got company.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious,” Everly said over his shoulder.

He gave her a flat stare and she had the decency to look ashamed.

“Sorry.” She gave a slight shrug. “Sarcasm’s my go-to when I get stressed.”

“No?” Cam did his best to look and sound aghast, dishing it right back to her.

She grinned and he felt the tight knot of tension in his gut uncoil slightly. They were stuck together right now, for better or worse. Might as well make the best of a difficult situation.

“You recognize either one of them?” he asked, pressing back against the wall to allow her to sidle past him. She stayed close, her soft curves sliding against him again and conjuring the same zings of awareness as before. His blood pumped loud in his ears, drowning out the roar of crickets and everything but the woman who stood so close he could smell her flowery shampoo.

Everly leaned around the corner a bit more to see inside the shop’s front windows then turned back quickly, knocking into him. Cam put a hand on her hip to keep his balance. The heat of her skin tingled against his fingertips. “I think they saw me.”

“What?” Cam frowned. “Nah. It’s pitch black out here and we’re in the shadows. I doubt—”

The sound of the bells jingling on the front doors warned of approaching danger.

“Shit.” Cam inched back along the side wall of the building, tugging Everly along with him, until his rear hit the dumpster in the corner. Nowhere else to go and he’d be damned if he’d leave the Aeon here unprotected anyway. He’d worked too fucking hard to get it, to get this solo mission, and he wasn’t about to fail now. “Did you recognize either of those goons?”

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“No,” Everly whispered from the shadows. “But then again, all the soldiers start to look alike after a while.”

It took Cam a minute to realize she wasn’t talking about military soldiers like him. She was talking about the low-ranking guys in the mafia. The Aeon was a bit too far away to make a dash for it now, judging by the sound of the footsteps headed in their direction. What they needed was a distraction then, something to throw the guys off the scent of the car and keep them from finding it. On impulse, he shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it around Everly, then took her hand. “I’ve got an idea, but I need you to trust me.”

She was silent for a moment, so long he feared she’d tell him to fuck off again. Then she sighed. “Fine. Whatever it is, make it quick. They’re almost here.”

That was all the encouragement Cam needed. Before Everly could say another word, he had her in his arms and kissed her for all he was worth. At first, she struggled against him, but then she relaxed slightly, her lips softening beneath his. He took advantage and swept his tongue along her lush lower lip, discovering at last the answer to a question that had plagued him since high school—what did Everly Knight taste like? Sugar and spice and everything naughty, that was what. There was a hint of pineapple and garlic in there too from their pizza. It all mixed together to form a combustible cocktail of pure awesome.

Still, Cam did his best to keep a modicum of control. After all, he was only kissing her to create a distraction, or at least that’s what he was telling himself. Peeking one eye open, he picked Everly up and her arms went around his neck and her legs around his waist. Moaning loud, he stumbled down the sidewalk with her and around the

corner, running smack into the two goons in the funeral suits.

Keeping one hand on the back of Everly's head to press her face into his neck just in case these guys had recognized her, Cam gave them his best astonished stare. "Oh, shit. Sorry guys. Guess we got a little carried away."

The two men stood like a solid wall of black doom. They exchanged a look then tried to peer around Cam to the area where the Aeon was parked in the darkness.

"C'mon, baby," Everly groaned, her hot breath scorching the side of his neck and making his damned cock twitch to life. She ground herself against him in blatant invitation, her fingers twining into the hair at the back of his neck. Cam's knees shook before he steeled himself. This was all for show, not real. Not at all. No matter how it felt at present. "I wanna fuck you all night long."

Cam gave the two goons an embarrassed grin. "Women."

Goon number one nudged goon two and their stiff posture relaxed slightly. Without a word, they backed away slowly. The door to the shop opened and out came the pregnant waitress with a pizza box in her hand.

"Order ready," she said, handing it to the two guys.

Okay, so maybe the goons really had come for food. Cam glanced at their sedan again. It was old and rusted and hardly government-issue. Not what he'd expect a bunch of mafia guys to ride around in either. The two men handed the waitress a fifty then continued to back toward their car. And it was entirely possible the waitress had been on the phone because she was taking their order. It all fit. Maybe too well. That knot of tension that had loosened when he'd kissed Everly now pulled tighter again.

He didn't breathe again until they'd pulled out of the parking lot. She squirmed out of

his arms and handed him back his jacket.

“What the hell was that all about?” She stared as the sedan’s red tail lights faded into the night. “Who were those guys?”

“No idea.” Cam took his jacket from her and licked his lips, still tasting Everly there. Distracted, he rushed back to the Aeon and entered the passcode before starting the engine. Everly climbed into the passenger seat, her expression concerned. “But we need to get out of here.”

“Where are we going to go?” Everly huddled into her corner of the seat, looking as confused as Cam felt. “Can’t go back to the shop.”

“Nope.” Cam flicked on the headlights then pulled out of the gas station. “You’ll see.”

4

They pulled up in the driveway of the nondescript white bungalow on a quiet side street just outside Fredericksburg. Everly had been snoozing in the passenger seat for the past hour and Cam was careful as he shut off the engine not to wake her.

He undid his seat belt, then got out, gun drawn. Norse Security had purchased this property a few years back as a safe house to use when needed for missions. Technically, Cam didn’t have permission to be here now. This would only strain his already tight budget for this case too, what with utilities and food he’d have to pay for, but dammit, he needed a quiet place to think.

So far, all his best laid plans on this mission had gone to shit. Then there was that ill-advised kiss with Everly in the gas station parking lot. He was glad she’d fallen asleep on the way here. Saved him from having to deal with a bunch of questions he

wasn't prepared to answer. Things like why he'd deepened the kiss when a simple meeting of lips would've done. Or why his cock got hard as granite each time she touched him. It was all damned inconvenient. And confusing. And bewilderingly hot.

Cam walked the perimeter of the small home, checking for anything out of the ordinary, then jumped the chain link fence in the back and scanned the yard before fishing out the extra key they always kept stored under a rotted board at the corner of the small utility shed. He let hi

mself in the back door then performed a quick check of all the rooms in the house, turning on a few lights as he went. The sun was starting to come up and the neighbors would be up soon. He wanted to make sure he and Everly were inside and the Aeon was well-hidden in the small garage before then. No sense drawing any more unwanted attention at this point.

Once he'd confirmed everything was all clear, he went outside again, through the front door this time, and walked around to Everly's side of the vehicle. She was awake now, staring at him through the windshield. He gestured for her to come out and she opened her door hesitantly, looking around at the quiet blue-collar neighborhood like it was an alien planet or something.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice still husky from sleep.

He felt that gruff tone all the way to his toes. Cam shook off the erotic images filling his head—of them hot and heavy against the wall, Everly grinding against him as he drove hard into her, urging them both toward completion—and looked away. "Just outside Fredericksburg. This is a house owned by my security company. We'll be safe here for now. Why don't you go inside while I pull the car into the garage in the back?"

She crossed her arms and gave him a sour stare. "Right. So you can take off with the

Aeon and ditch me here? I think not.”

Too exhausted to argue anymore, Cam acquiesced. “Fine. Then make yourself useful. Open the garage door while I get the car started again.”

“Or you could open it while I drive the car,” she offered, her smile sticky sweet.

“Yeah. Nice try. I’m not giving you the passcode.” Cam tapped his fingers on the hood of the car. “Garage door. Now.”

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Everly grumbled under her breath while she did as he asked, standing off to the side near the fence after pulling up the overhead door. Cam got the Aeon into the garage with only a minor snafu when a rake fell on it. He winced slightly, hoping it wouldn't leave a mark, but fearing it probably would, then cut the engine and climbed out. Once the car was secure, he closed and locked the overhead door then led Everly inside the house, just as the neighbors were starting to stir.

Everly looked around the place, her expression unreadable. "Not as bad as I expected."

"Hey, it's no Ritz-Carlton, but it's clean and well-stocked." He opened the fridge to show her bottled water and beer. Then he pointed to several boxes of power bars on the counter. "You thirsty? Or hungry?"

"No." She rubbed her arms. "What I'd love right now is a shower."

Cam showed her where the bathroom and guest bedroom were, then left her to it. The last thing he needed was to stand around, thinking about her naked and wet. He double-checked that all the doors and windows were secure, then settled at the kitchen table with a bottle of ale and his cell phone. Time to check in with the guys.

His boss, Kevin "Loki" Low, answered on the second ring. The guy was a former SEAL himself and still kept those crazy pre-dawn hours. "Norse Security."

"Hey, Lok. It's me."

"Where the fuck are you?" Loki demanded, sounding none too pleased. "You were

supposed to be back here at headquarters an hour ago.”

Wincing, Cam took a swig of his ale before continuing. “Things went... awry.”

“Awry?” Loki’s tone was less than forgiving. “Shit. I knew better than to send my tech guy out on a mission like this. Is the car still in one piece?”

“Yes. The Aeon’s fine.”

“Then what’s wrong? Why aren’t you here?”

“Well, I kind of got involved with someone.”

“Involved?” Cam could just picture Loki’s raised brow and narrowed gaze. “How?”

“There was someone there when I got to the garage to grab the Aeon. Knight’s daughter, Everly.”

A string of curses that made even a well-seasoned guy like Cam blush issued through the phone line. Loki finally exhaled slow then said, “Where are you now?”

“At the safe house, in Fredericksburg. Everly’s here too.”

“What?”

“Look, she helped me, okay?” Cam scrubbed a hand over the top of his buzz-cut hair. “She’s really good with cars and engines and stuff. I used to know her in high school. She might come in handy on this mission.”

“No.” Loki bit the word out, harsh as acid. “If you need tactical support, I’ll send Hunter.”

“I don’t need Hunter and I can handle this on my own. You never would’ve gotten the Aeon out of that garage without the passcode, which I was able to hack, remember? So, quit giving me shit. I’m the right guy for this mission, I swear. I just need to make sure I can trust Everly.”

“I’m not sure you can.” Good old Loki. Always the voice of reason. “Is she hot?”

Cam wrinkled his nose. “Hot?”

“Yeah. You said you knew her in high school. She in your spank bank or what?”

“Fuck.” Cam rubbed his hand over his face. This was not the conversation he wanted to have at this moment. Not with Everly on the other side of the wall in the shower and not after that steamy kiss they’d shared that had left him with a raging hard-on and enough fantasies to last for a good, long time. He couldn’t tell the truth to Loki. Not without seriously embarrassing himself. “No.”

A silent beat followed, then Loki said, “Well, whatever. You watch yourself. And her. I never trusted a woman as a wildcard and I’m not about to start now. This mission’s too important. Get some sleep tonight and call me again in the morning. Let me know when to expect you.”

The line went dead and Cam stared up at the ceiling, wondering when the fuck his life had gotten so complicated. An annoying buzzing sound kept issuing from somewhere in the house and Cam pushed to his feet to investigate. He found the culprit in the guest room, amidst the pile of clothes Everly had discarded to take her shower. Her phone was halfway sticking out of the pocket of her faded jeans, the screen lit up with a text.

After a quick glance to make sure the bathroom door was still closed across the hall, he picked it up and read the message. No specific person listed as the sender—just

Knight's Garage. Which most likely meant the mob who'd taken over her dad's place. Apparently, Everly had forty-eight hours to get the Aeon back to them or she wouldn't be paid.

Cam considered this as he put her phone back. Honestly, he shouldn't care less whether she got her money or not. He was here to complete his own mission and prove his point to the guys that he could handle things solo. But as he headed out of the bedroom and back toward the kitchen, that damned message niggled in his brain. What money? Why did she need it? Was she in some sort of trouble? He didn't know a huge amount about underworld chop shops, but he'd guess that since the Aeon was rare, parts wouldn't be all that plentiful, or lucrative. So why else would they want the car? Could the mob be after the same valuable technology that he and the federal government were? And if so, why had they picked Everly to steal it for them? She was a lot of things—smart, industrious, distractingly gorgeous—but definitely not a computer whiz. Not like him, anyway. She worked with her hands, was good at it too. He couldn't change a tire without a manual.

Which made this whole situation even more confusing than it already was.

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He needed to find out what Everly needed the money for, the sooner the better. If she was in trouble, then he'd deal with it. They might be complete opposites, working on different sides of this mess, but he'd known her back in high school—and yeah, maybe Loki hadn't been entirely off the mark in the naughty fantasy department. Anyway, if Everly needed help, he was probably the only person at the moment who could give it.

With a sigh, he slumped back down into his chair at the table and lifted his bottle to take a good long swig. Just then the bathroom door opened and steam billowed out, followed by a half-naked Everly wrapped in a towel. She looked fresh and clean and...and...

Fuck it all to hell and back.

This was not good. Not good at all.

Cam clunked the bottle back down on the table, ma

naging to keep his mouth shut and not gape at her, but just barely. Based on the way his senses rioted every time she was around, he was in far more danger here than she would ever be.

“You finished in there?” he asked, not making eye contact as he sidled by her, eager for a cold shower to dampen his unwanted arousal. “My turn then.”

While Cam took his shower, Everly dressed in her same old clothes then wandered into the kitchen to have a bottled water and a powerbar. There was a TV in the living room, and Wi-Fi too, based on the strong signal she got when she checked her emails on her phone.

Feeling restless, Everly took her stuff into the living room and flopped down on the sofa, remote in hand. There was nothing on this early in the morning except farm reports and the local news. With reporters droning on in the background, Everly pulled up the text on her phone again.

Forty-eight hours. Shit.

What she should be doing was going outside and trying to rig up that device Cam had to steal the passcode for the Aeon and drive the hell out of here. She had no reason to stick around and every incentive to go—the money from this job would be more than enough to get her out from under her dad's shop and the mafia's thumb and get her established in a place of her own.

She'd dreamed of owning her own body and repair place since she'd rebuilt her first engine at the age of twelve. It was a dream come true. It was her calling, the only thing she'd ever been really good at. It was the sole thing keeping her going right now.

Maybe not the sole thing...

She bit her lips and caught a lingering trace of Cam still there—salty sweetness from the pizza they'd shared, a hint of spice too, and endless yearning desire. Truth be told, she'd always kind of found him cute in high school, in a hot nerd sort of way. He'd reminded her a bit of Clark Kent in his pre-superhero days, all awkward moves and buttoned-up perfectionism. Seeing him now, minus the glasses and pocket protector, all corded muscle and simmering strength—well, Camden Thursday had grown into a

fine-looking stud. She was sure the military had helped, but there was something else about him. A quiet reserve, a steadfast commitment to doing what was right, that seemed to draw her in like a moth to a flame.

Honestly, she could take care of herself. A gal didn't grow up in a garage full of men and not learn a few ball-busting self-defense moves. She could've escaped from Cam more times than she could count by now. Hell, she could walk out this very minute and never see him again.

Then the bathroom door opened and he stepped out into the hall—skin glistening with water and nothing but a damp towel slung around his hips to hide all his toned, tanned flesh—and Everly knew she wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. It wasn't just the Aeon keeping her here, though that was part of it. The other part was Cam himself. He intrigued her, kept her guessing. And Everly couldn't remember the last time she'd been with a man who challenged her like that. It was almost like a game of cat and mouse between them, and damn if she didn't find it delectably fascinating.

He padded into the master bedroom to dress, and she swallowed half her bottle of water in one gulp, doing her best to dislodge the lump of need from her throat and stop herself from running after him and tackling him to the bed and doing all the wicked things to him that she'd only dreamed of until now. Things like licking every inch of his salty skin, hearing him moan her name, seeing him with his head thrown back, eyes closed, begging her to make him cum...

Everly cleared her constricted throat and focused on the TV, willing her feral libido back into submission. Now wasn't the time, and this certainly wasn't the place. Not to mention she was still working on a job. A job that held her future in the balance. She couldn't mess this up, not for Cam, not for anyone. She couldn't afford to lose her head or her heart over—

“Whatcha watching?” Cam asked, flopping down on the opposite end of the sofa. He’d put his faded jeans and olive-green T-shirt back on, but his feet were bare and his hair was damp, and damn if all she could think about now was making those bare toes curl in ecstasy.

Everly looked away fast and frowned. “Nothing. The news.”

“Right.” He stretched out and propped his bare feet up on the coffee table, twisting the cap off of a fresh bottle of ale. “So tell me again why you want the Aeon?”

She snorted. “Nice try. I never told you the first time. How about you tell me why you want it?”

He watched her over the rim of his bottle, those green eyes of his far too perceptive.

“Fine. Since you won’t tell me that, tell me how a nice geek like you turned into a robo-soldier.”

Cam swallowed a mouthful of his drink then sighed. “Do you remember what happened to Petey?”

“Pete Marshall, you mean?” Everly frowned. “Yeah, everyone in our neighborhood remembers. Those teens who killed him ended up getting tried as adults.”

“I was there that night. When he died.” Cam’s voice grew quiet, pensive. “He was my best friend. A nerd like me. We were walking home after the school’s science fair with our winning project—a copper clad volcano that erupted baking soda lava. Jesus, we were so proud of that damned thing.”

He gave a wistful laugh and laid his head back against the couch cushions, eyes closed. Everly felt the insane urge to hug him tight, to erase that sharp edge of pain

etching his handsome features, but refrained as he continued. “Anyway, we were about three blocks from home when those punks cornered us. They wanted the prize money we’d gotten along with the blue ribbon. It was only fifty bucks, for Christ’s sake.” He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “Without any kind of defensive training, we were sitting ducks. I tried to defend myself, tried to help Petey but those guys were so strong and we were way outnumbered. When I had a chance I managed to get away and run home to call the cops, but it was too late. Petey was dead.”

“Oh, God. Cam, I’m so sorry.” Everly reached over to take his hand, but he shied away. “I didn’t know you were involved in that. I just knew that Petey was dead and the guys responsible were prosecuted.”

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“Yeah, well afterward, I vowed never to be that vulnerable again. I scraped together enough money to enroll in some self-defense classes at the YMCA. Once I tackled those, I was good enough to earn a scholarship to a local dojo. I got my black belt in karate before I graduated high school. Then I joined the Navy. Rest is history.”

“Wow.” Silence stretched between them and her nerves prickled. To ease the awkwardness, Everly tried her question again. Somehow, she felt closer to him now, knowing what had made him the man he was today. “C’mon. It’s just the two of us now. Why do you want the car? You said the security company you work for needs to recover it for the government. What’s their interest in it?”

Cam exhaled, toying with the hem of his T-shirt. Such nice hands, big and smooth with long, tapered fingers that looked like they’d play over a woman’s body just as deftly as they flew over his computer keyboards. He frowned, transforming his cute baby face into darker, deeper emotions. The sound of cracking knuckles filled the air. “It’s the technology,” Cam said at last. “The government’s interested in finding other applications for its use. Since tech is my specialty, I’m perfect for this job.” He fiddled with his drink, then looked up and caught her staring. “All right. I told you. Now you tell me. Why do you need the money from this job?”

Everly did her best to hide her astonishment and failed miserably, if his raised brow was any indication. “You looked at my phone,” she said, hoping her anger would help diffuse the powder keg of attraction she felt for this man before it ignited and burnt her to nothing but a pile of ash. “You spied on me. You had no right to touch my stuff, asshole.”

“True.” Cam sat forward, resting his forearms on his knees, not denying her

allegations at all. “But if you tell me the truth, maybe I can help you. If the mafia’s involved then—”

“I don’t need your help.” She pushed to her feet and stalked into the kitchen, not trusting herself not to touch him if she sat there beside him much longer. Why couldn’t he have been the asshole she kept accusing him of being? Instead he had to go and be all nice and sweet and helpful. She clenched her fingers at her sides, battling the rising tide of yearning inside her. No one had cared about her well-being in a long, long time. Not since her dad had gone to prison after a warehouse raid five years prior. And Lord knew Everly’s mom had never cared. Not when Everly was nothing but a big disappointment. All she cared about these days was marrying up in the mob, finding the next big meal ticket to raise her profile amongst the mafia wives.

She tensed at the sound of Cam’s footsteps coming up behind her.

“Listen, I’m sorry I—”

Everly reacted without thinking, turning fast and using her body weight to shove him hard against the wall. Cam reacted quickly, clasp ing her wrist and twisting Everly until she was flat beneath him, switching their positions. Back against the wall, she panted, each breath rubbing her sensitive nipples against his chest, while Cam stared down into her face—his gaze flickering from her eyes to her parted lips then back again.

“Tell me the truth, goddammit. I can’t help if you won’t tell me.”

“Why do you want to help?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, then leaned closer, so close his heat penetrated her clothes and seared her skin. Close enough for her to smell his scent—soap and warm, clean male—and see his pupils blown wide with arousal. “I want...”

“What?” she whispered, unable to stop herself from pressing her hips tighter to his, loving the feel of his hardness against her soft heated core. “Tell me what you want, baby.”

“I want you.” The gruff words emerged as little more than a growl. Cam bent his head and his lips hovered over hers, mere millimeters from contact.

Everly raised on tiptoes, wanting to close that small gap between them more than she wanted her next breath. She would’ve done it too, if the sound of an engine pulling up in the driveway, followed by the sound of a slamming car door, hadn’t stopped her.

6

“Shit!” Cam pushed away from the wall and away from Everly despite the fact that every cell in his body screamed for him to stay where h

e was and finish what they’d started. He clenched his fists and switched his brain over to SEAL mode. “We got company. Wait here and don’t move.”

She still stood, back pressed to the wall, just as he’d left her—looking wild and wanton and infinitely desirable. Everly blinked at him several times, her expression dazed.

“Understand?” he said, his tone harsh to break her out of her reverie. “I don’t know who these people are. I need to grab my shoes and jacket and weapon from the bedroom.”

He rushed through the living room and into the hall, ducking low to avoid revealing his moving shadow through the curtained windows. Once he’d reached the bedroom, he yanked his socks on then jammed his feet into his shoes before shrugging into his jacket and grabbing his gun. He cocked it on the way to the window. Sticking close to

the wall, he lifted the edge of the curtain to peer out over the front yard and the driveway.

Who the fuck was it?

The guys wouldn't show up here without a warning call first. Unannounced visits in their line of work were a sure way to end up flat on your ass with a boot to the trachea—or worse. Nope. It wasn't Loki or Hunter. Cam frowned. Whoever the hell it was drove a big ass Humvee too. Damned thing blocked the entire end of the driveway and half the alley entrance.

Cam sighed. There had to be a tracker on the Aeon somewhere. That was the only thing that made sense. He'd checked the vehicle over as best he could outside that gas station, but he must've missed it.

As footsteps neared the front stoop, adrenaline seared through Cam's nervous system like lit kerosene. Time to get out of here. He ducked and ran down the hall again, scrambling through the living room, just as the front door slammed inward, wood shattering from the impact of a booted foot. He barely caught a glimpse of one of the huge thugs from earlier filling the doorway before Cam veered into the kitchen to haul Everly out the back door and—

She was gone. The backdoor was open, allowing the early morning chill to seep inside.

Son of a—

“Tell us where the fucking car is and we might kill you quick,” one of the thugs growled from behind Cam. “Otherwise, we'll have some fun first.”

Whatever the hell those two goons had planned for their victims, Cam was one-

hundred-percent sure it would never be classified as fun. He fired two rounds blindly into the living room, hoping to buy a little time, then charged through the open back door and down to the small wooden garage in the back yard. The overhead door was open and the lights were on inside the Aeon, but of course the engine wasn't running. Cam sidled around the passenger side and eased open the door to clamber inside. He cringed at the sound of the Aeon's beautiful paint job dinging off the rough wood exterior of the garage, but it couldn't be helped. This was a life or death situation and he'd take his hide over the vehicle's any day.

Everly gave him an inquiring look from behind the wheel, her hand extended. "Give it to me."

“What?”

“The passcode.”

“Or we could switch places and I’ll drive us out of here.” Bullets pinged off the outside of the Aeon’s exterior and Cam once more thanked God for bulletproof glass. The silhouettes of the two thugs filled the garage door behind them as they let loose their arsenal. So much for returning the Aeon unblemished. Cam exhaled slow then grabbed his device from his pocket and plugged it into the ignition column of the Aeon. He switched it on then grabbed Everly’s arm to tug her down beside him. The car might be bullet-proof but that didn’t mean all the flying shrapnel didn’t freak him out a bit. “This’ll just take a second.”

The goons moved closer, one with his weapon aimed in the side windows of the vehicle, the other aiming for the tires.

“Fuck.” Everly said, glancing out her side as the thug jiggled the locked door handle. “Anytime now would be awesome, Geek Squad.”

“Don’t call me that,” Cam gritted out as he watched the passcode slowly click into place.

“Open the fucking doors now, assholes, or you’ll regret it,” thug number two yelled.

The distant wail of sirens filled the air and Cam’s already tense shoulders inched a tad higher. One of the neighbors had to have called the cops. Loki was going to have Cam’s nuts in a vice over this shit. First the Aeon got damaged and now their safe

house was compromised.

One goddamned passcode number to go.

“Get ready,” he said to Everly.

“For what?” she snarled. “They’ve got us fucking trapped in here like a couple of rats.”

His device beeped and Cam reached past her to push the Start button. The Aeon’s engine revved to life and he shoved Everly behind the wheel. “Go!”

“Where?”

He darted a look to the back wall of the garage then back to her.

“Jesus!” She gripped the wheel in a white-knuckled grip. “You can’t be serious.”

“You got a better idea?” Cam asked. “Either we bust out of here or they’ll kill us.”

The thugs began slamming the butts of their guns on the windows and the whole vehicle shook.

“Floor it, goddammit, or we’re both dead!” Cam yelled, hating the way she flinched but needing to break her out of the shock she was obviously in. “Do it! Now!”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she murmured over and over as she slid the transmission into Drive then jammed the accelerator pedal to the floor. The Aeon lurched forward then careened through the back of the garage. The thugs leapt away from the sides of the vehicle, covering their heads as shattered wood flew through the air. Everly veered out into the alleyway in a screech of tires and burning rubber, hurtling at breakneck

speed for the open end of the pothole-riddled road. “I can’t believe I just did that.”

Cam peered over the back of his seat to see the two thugs running for their Humvee. “Keep going, they’ll be right on our tail soon.”

“Where am I headed?”

“Away,” Cam sat back and prayed the huge vehicle wouldn’t fit down the narrow alleyway. The Aeon was much slimmer and barely made it. “Just get us away from here.”

They swerved out onto the main thoroughfare then drove for what seemed like hours, but couldn’t have been that long. The sun had finally risen above the horizon by the time they’d exited Fredericksburg and were back amongst the cornfields again.

“Pull off on the next access road,” Cam said, still checking periodically over his shoulder to see if the Humvee was gaining on them. Luckily, it seemed his prayers had paid off and they hadn’t followed. That didn’t mean they were safe yet though, not with a damned tracker on the Aeon.

Everly did as he asked and they ended up in the middle of tall stalks of yellowing corn. Not the most impressive hideout ever, but perfect for what he needed. Cam got out to search the area behind their seats. Hopefully there’d be some kind of emergency kit they could use.

“What are we doing here?” Everly asked, standing beside the vehicle. “Anything I can help with?”

“Yeah,” Cam said, handing her a flashlight. “There’s a tracker on the car. I’m sure of it. Help me find it. We won’t be able to lose those thugs until we do.”

“Right.” She took off for the front of the Aeon while he searched the back using the flashlight app on his cell phone. Unfortunately, that was about the only thing the device was good for at that point since he had no bars of service out here in the middle of fuck all.

“I think I found it,” Everly called a few minutes later.

Cam trudged up to where she was crouched near the corner of the front bumper. He peered underneath and spotted the small black rectangle with a tiny flashing red light. Yep. Damned tracker all right. How he’d missed that the first time he’d looked at the gas station, Cam wasn’t sure. He’d searched every inch of the underbody. Meaning Everly was either very lucky, or she’d known exactly where it was the whole time. He yanked the tracker off the vehicle, then straightened to meet her gaze.

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His suspicions must've been written all over his face, because s

he backed up a step or two and crossed her arms defensively. "Listen, I had no idea where that damned thing was, I swear." When he didn't respond, she continued. "You asked me before why I was in my dad's garage, alone, at two in the morning trying to steal this car. Well, I'll tell you. Because I'm trying to escape the mob too. I've got a new garage space waiting for me. All I have to do to afford it is get this Aeon for my buyer. I do that and I'll make enough to afford the rent and escape this shithole life of thieving. Believe me, you won't find anyone who wants to help you get this car out of the mafia's hands any more than me. But you need to trust me."

"Trust you?" He snorted and shook his head. She was on the passenger side of the vehicle now, he near the drivers' side door. It would be easy to toss the tracker her way, hop inside the still running car and leave her in the dust. That would be the smart thing. The safe thing. But for some reason that he didn't want to examine too closely at the moment, he couldn't do it. Maybe it was the almost-kiss they'd shared in the safe-house kitchen. Maybe it was all those years of fantasies he'd harbored about her. Maybe it was the way she'd lit up when talking about her dreams for the future and the passion in her voice when she talked about owning her own garage.

Whatever the hell it was, Cam found himself dropping the tiny tracker to the ground and crushing it beneath his heel before yanking open the Aeon's door and leaning his arm on the car's top. "Get in."

"What?" She hesitated. "You mean you trust me?"

"I didn't say that, sweetheart." He tapped his fingertips against the cool metal. "All I

know at this point is that you've got skills that might prove useful." Cam allowed his gaze to flicker down to her lips and chest before returning to her wide dark eyes. His skin still tingled from the feel of her pressed tight against him and damn if he was ready to let that go yet without exploring all those delicious possibilities. "Right now, I don't know what to believe about you. But either you get in the car and we figure this out as we go, or you stay here amongst the corn and walk a mile or so to find help. Either way, I'm taking off. Your choice."

Her doe eyes narrowed and she glared at him as he slid into the drivers' seat and revved the engine again. There were several gouges and scraps on the Aeon that he'd seen, but nothing a good buffing wouldn't remove. Hopefully, by the end of the day he'd have this car safely in Loki's hands and could walk away from this mission a success.

The passenger door opened and Everly slid into her seat. She stared straight ahead, her delicate jaw tight. "Fine. No way am I losing this deal now. I've got too much riding on it."

7

Everly woke up to bright sunshine in her face and more farm fields blurring by outside her window. Judging by the sun's position in the sky it was a bit past noon. She straightened and stretched, working out a particular sore kink in her neck before glancing over at Cam behind the wheel. "Where are we?"

He narrowed his gaze out the windshield, his expression contemplative. "Based on what I'm seeing, I'd say we're square in the middle of Nowhere, Maryland. Population, us."

She snorted and sat back, circling her ankles in front of her to restore some circulation. "How long was I asleep?"

“Couple of hours. Based on how hard you slept, you needed it.”

“Yeah.” She blinked at the digital clock in the dashboard. Twelve-thirty. “In my line of work, odd hours are a given. Never know when you might have a chance to catch a few winks, so you get used to sleeping when you can.”

“I hear you,” Cam said. “Used to be that way on SEAL missions too. And with the tech jobs I work for the agency, I’m on call all hours of the day and night. When they need me, I’m there.” He reached over and switched on the stereo then tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the country pop tune filling the air. Finally, he looked at her again, his green eyes assessing. “So, what’s your plan?”

“My plan?” She ran a hand through her disheveled curls as she checked her reflection in the mirror. What she wouldn’t give for a bathroom and a toothbrush right about now. Honestly, her plans for how to handle this situation were about as empty as the landscape around them. She’d expected this job to be quick, easy, and over by now. Never in a million years had she expected to be saddled with Camden Thursday, let alone to like him so much.

It was a problem, one she had no solution for yet.

Instead of responding, Everly just shrugged and flipped the visor up again then crossed her arms as she stared outside. Finally, she said, “Where are we going now?”

“Well, we can’t go back to the safe house, that’s for sure. And I don’t want to head to the Norse Security offices until I’m sure we’ve lost our tail. So, I’ve been driving around in lazy circles since you fell asleep, burning through our gas and keeping an eye out behind us.” Cam smiled. “The good news is, no one appears to be following us.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“The only place I’ve seen around these parts besides the grain silos and the small one stoplight town is that building over there.” He pointed to a crumbling brick warehouse with faded lettering on the side proclaiming “White’s Piano Manufacture and Repair.” “Not exactly a five-star resort, but it’ll have to do.”

Everly squinted at the abandoned structure as Cam pulled the Aeon into the gravel lot. They got out and Cam muscled his way through a wide set of wooden, barn-style doors and inside the ramshackle interior. Weak beams of sunlight filtered through the grimy windows and dust motes swirled in the shadows. “Wow,” she said, checking it all out. “This place must’ve sat empty for years.” She pushed the corner of a tarp aside with the toe of her shoe and spotted the gleam of metal. Bending, she discovered an array of tools—screwdrivers, wrenches, wire snips, even a hammer and a saw. Everly assumed they’d been left over from the workers building pianos. Her phone buzzed from her back pocket, reminding her she needed to check in with her buyer, give them a final price for the job. Unfortunately, she couldn’t do that until she’d given it a thorough inspection. As she stared at the tools an idea occurred. Cam acted like an overprotective mother where the car was concerned, but maybe being stuck in this place together, he’d let her do her thing as long as he was here to watch. She could give him some story about searching the engine to make sure the mob hadn’t tampered with it too.

Everly straightened and turned to Cam, who was keeping guard at the door. “You should bring the Aeon in here, keep it out of sight.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “This place is filthy and the exterior’s dinged up enough as it is. Last thing I need is to give Loki any more reason to kick my ass.”

“Loki?” Everly raised a brow at him.

“My boss.” Cam shook his head and looked away. “That’s his nickname. Kevin’s his real name, but he’s Norwegian and used to play a lot of tricks when he was in the

military, so the name stuck.”

“Got you.” Well, damn. Her plan wasn’t working so far, but maybe if she applied a bit more pressure. “Yeah, I’d hate to see anything else happen to such a lovely vehicle, sitting out there exposed to all the elements like that. It’s a risk.”

Cam frowned. “It’s a bright sunny day. What could happen?”

“You sure you got all the trackers?”

His gaze narrowed on her. “What are you not telling me?”

Bingo.

She smiled slow and tapped a wrench against the palm of her hand, the cool metal stinging her skin. “Nothing. I swear. But I’d think a guy like you who wants to control every detail would want to be sure. Let me check the engine.”

“What? Nah.” He brushed off her suggestion. “I don’t like the idea of you poking around under the hood.”

“Why? You still don’t trust me?”

“No more than you trust me.”

“Touché.” Damn, he was sexy when he got all worked up like that. She shoved aside the errant thoughts and focused on her objective—getting a fair price, selling the car, starting her new life. No matter that niggle of unease that was starting to form the more she got to know Cam. She liked him, more than was wise, but that didn’t mean she ought to throw her future away over him, right? She stepped closer to him and resisted the urge to run her fingers through his short dark hair just to see if it felt as soft as it looked. “Listen, we can sweep up in here first and make sure nothing will hurt the car’s paint job. Then you can sit and watch me while I work. I promise nothing will happen to the car. I just want to look under the hood and make sure everything is as it should be. That should put your mind to ease.”

“Nothing about you puts me at ease, Everly,” Cam growled, exhaling loud as he walked past her to pick up a broom. “But you put that idea in my head about another tracker and now I can’t get it out. So yeah. Help me clean this place up so we can pull

the Aeon inside.”

She snorted. “Good to know. Honestly, it’s good you’re letting me look. After all the shots fired by those two thugs, I can check to make sure there’s no damage we didn’t see.”

Cam rolled his eyes and grabbed two somewhat worn looking brooms from where they rested against the wall. He handed one to Everly then began to clear out the center of the large open space.

“You know,” Everly said a few minutes later, swiping her arm up to scratch her itchy nose. Her dust allergies were not happy. “Fixing cars is a lot like coding computers.”

“How so?” Cam asked without looking at her as he tossed some debris out of the way.

“Well, when you write your code, you’re telling the computer what parts to put where to get it all to run as a cohesive whole, yeah?”

His gaze flickered to her before darting away again. “Yeah.”

“That’s what I’m doing under the hood of the Aeon. Tinkering with the individual parts, removing some, inserting others, all to get the car to run at optimal performance. I love it. It’s like a big puzzle, just waiting for me to solve it.”

“Hmm.” He rolled an upright piano that surprisingly still looked in decent shape against the far wall of the factory floor. “I suppose I can see tha

t. About the similarities between the two things. Didn’t know you were into engineering though.”

“I’m into all sorts of things,” she said, then wishing she hadn’t at his heated look. She hadn’t meant that to sound dirty, it just came out that way. Everly shrugged it off and finished sweeping the debris from the floor into one big pile. “That’s another reason I want to open my own garage. To show people that women can be mechanics too. If only I didn’t have to worry about the office side of things.” She used a flat piece of plywood to help scoop up the dirt and rubble and dump it into a big steel barrel. “Accounting has never been my strong suit.”

“Really? I love the number side of things. It’s my specialty.”

“I thought tech was your specialty.”

“Both.” Cam emerged from the shadows, gritty and grimy and so gorgeous her toes curled inside her sneakers. He smiled, slow and sexy, then swiped his hand through his short dark hair, leaving it adorably mussed. “Math and coding go hand in hand, since it’s all binary—based on ones and zeroes. Anyway, once you get your place going, let me know. I can help you set up a system to handle your inventory and accounting for you. All you have to do is type in the numbers and it’s done.”

“How much would that cost me?” Everly asked warily.

His gaze narrowed on her. “Nothing. I write crap like that in my sleep. All it would take me is an hour or so to set it up. You’d have to get the computer and stuff is all.”

“Wow. That sounds awesome. Thanks.” Everly blinked back the unexpected sting of tears. In her family, nothing came for free. Someone offered to help or do something nice for you, they damned well expected the debt to be repaid. She’d never met anyone who’d offer a gift like that without guaranteed return. Then again, she’d never met anyone like Cam. Period.

On the heels of that thought came a fresh wave of guilt. Sure, he was being generous

now, but that was only because he thought he had the Aeon in the bag. Little did he know that she planned to use her time under the hood to do some recalibration of her own and get a message to her buyer. The idea of double-crossing Cam made her stomach turn, but if she didn't get the money for this job, she had no future. Besides, after he discovered what she'd done, he'd never want to talk to her again, let alone help set her up in business.

8

A few hours later, Cam stared around him at the various vehicle parts strewn about the cement floor of the old piano factory. Perhaps agreeing to let Everly tinker with the Aeon wasn't the best idea after all. Beside his feet her legs stuck out from beneath the vehicle, where she was currently checking out the car's undercarriage. Cam couldn't resist doing some surveillance of his own, namely on the lower half of Everly's fine figure.

Seemed his high-school crush had never really gone away. Despite their less than ideal circumstances, Cam had to admit she was still the most beautiful woman he'd seen up close—all smoldering dark beauty and sharp, quick wits. A lethal combination for a guy who tended to get more turned on by a woman's brains than her breasts, although Everly's magnificent rack didn't hurt either.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket again, and Cam pulled it out with a sigh. Another text from Loki flashed onscreen wondering when he planned on arriving at the Norse Security offices with the Aeon. Cam shook his head and glanced out the open door of the factory at the setting sun. They'd been here for a whole day and there'd been no sign of those two mob goons, which was good. There'd also been no sign of anything more than corn, one gas station, and one fast food place for miles. He thumbed in a quick response then shoved the device back in his jeans pocket. Loki wouldn't be happy about not getting the car until tomorrow, but dammit, Cam didn't really fancy another run-in with those thugs tonight and beside, the car wasn't exactly

in working order at the moment.

He leaned slightly to see down the side of the vehicle, the smooth shiny paint marred here and there by dings and scratches from the bullets and gravel kicked up by the tires during their earlier escape down the alley. Loki wouldn't be happy about those either. Then again, considering Loki was back in his office safe and sound, he'd just have to deal with it.

Cam nudged a nearby auto part with the toe of his boot and frowned. "Are you sure you know how to put all of this back together again?"

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An aggrieved snort issued from beneath the vehicle, followed by Everly's long shapely legs shimmying slightly as she slid out from under the vehicle. She sat up and peered at him, eyes squinted, looking stunningly gorgeous despite the dust and grease streaking her skin. "You still don't trust me, do you?"

"Hmm." Cam made a show of considering that before giving her a flat look. "No. Not any more than you trust me."

"Right." Everly climbed to her feet, her arm brushing against him as she moved under the open hood. Tingles raced through the left side of his body from the contact before he shook them off. She wiped her hands on a rag then placed her hands on her hips. "How many times are we going to have this conversation? I'm a licensed mechanic. I've got over a decade of experience. There isn't an engine on this planet that I can't figure out how to take apart and put back together again. Just because I've got boobs doesn't mean I'm stupid or any less capable of doing my job than a man. Any questions?"

"Are you working for the mob?"

She blinked at him several times, a bit of the color draining from her flushed cheeks. Everly looked away and the corners of her mouth turned downward. "We've talked about that too. I told you I wasn't."

"But your family is?"

"I don't have any control over them."

“What about them over you?”

Expression exasperated, Everly cursed under her breath and crossed her arms. “I do what I want. Have since I turned eighteen. There were times I needed the money, yes, so I helped my dad out on occasion. But this isn’t one of them. I told you why I need this car—to make the sale and get the money to start my own place, free and clear of my parents and their underworld connections. Don’t believe me? That’s your problem.” She walked away. “Now, leave me alone so I can get this vehicle back together again. Having you loom over me all the time makes me nervous.”

Cam stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets. Truth was, he did believe her. The girl he’d known in high school had been rowdy and fun and flirtatious, but she’d never run with the truly bad crowds, had never gotten into trouble. And one really couldn’t help their parentage. So far, she’d been nothing but helpful on this little adventure too—well, if you counted trying to steal the Aeon out from under him helpful. But damn if he couldn’t understand her motive behind that too. Honestly, if he’d been in her situation, he’d have done the same thing.

Carefully, he made his way through the maze of parts laid out on the floor and stood before the open door of the factory. There was a slight breeze blowing now and brilliant streaks of orange, pink, gold, and purple lit the sky. Night was coming and with it cold. They hadn’t eaten all day, except for a few energy bars he’d picked up at the gas station when he’d stopped to refuel. He remembered seeing a burger joint and a dollar store about half a mile down the road from where they were. With luck he could make it there and back before it got too dark outside.

“You hungry?” he asked Everly over his shoulder. “I’m going to walk into town for bedding supplies and can pick something up at the fast food place, if you want.”

She turned to face him, a wrench in one hand and a smile on her face, and his breath caught in his chest. Hair mussed and clothes wrinkled, she still affected him as no

other woman had. Cam swallowed hard as she approached slowly. Part of him warned she might bean him with that wrench and take off with the car, once it was fixed. The other part of him realized he was a goner anyway. He'd stopped Everly Knight from stealing the Aeon, but somewhere along this convoluted path, she'd stolen his heart.

But as she drew nearer, he could see the spark in her dark eyes wasn't malicious.

To the contrary, it was grateful. "I'm actually starving." She rattled off her order and he committed it to memory, just like he had everything else about her. "Oh, and if it's not too much trouble, I'd die for one of their cherry pies for dessert."

"No trouble at all," he said, his voice emerging far gruffer than usual. Cam coughed to clear the sudden congestion from his throat at the mental picture of her licking gooey cherry pie filling from her fingers. "I'll, uh, I'll just go then and be back shortly."

He backed toward the door, loath to leave her for more reasons than just the car. She followed that small smile curving her lips and making him wish he could feel her mouth beneath his—taste her, touch her, see if she smelled as good as she looked.

Yeah, the walk was a great idea.

Cold air and shadows surrounded him as he stuck to the gravel berm of the two-lane highway. Thankfully, there wasn't much traffic and he made it into the small town with no problems. After a trip to the dollar store where he bought two travel pillows and a couple fleece blankets emblazoned with football logos—along with other personal items they'd need—he headed to the burger joint and got their food then started back toward the factory. His mind wandered as he walked, wondering about Everly's mysterious buyer for the car. She'd mentioned having a deadline for the sale, but it seemed unlikely she'd make it now. Guilt stabbed him deep. Why? He

wasn't sure. Yes, he liked her. Yes, he believed she really did want to get out from under her father's crooked business dealings and start over. But neither of those things negated the fact he had his own mission here, his own purpose and goals. This was supposed to have been his chance to show Loki and Hunter that he was more than a coding geek, that he could handle the brute, physical side of stuff too.

Still, he was worried. Everly's father was heavily involved with the local crime families. The two thugs who'd tried to ambush them three times now wouldn't stop. And chances were high that this buyer of hers was involved in the mob syndicate too. After all, Aeons weren't cheap, nor were they readily available. Whoever she'd set up to buy the car didn't care where it came from and obviously had the financial means to pay for it. Plus, where else would she meet a person like that other than through her father's connections?

By the time he returned to the factory, Everly had gotten most of the parts off the floor and the majority of the engine put back together. She was just finishing up under the hood when he walked in with the bags of stuff and set them atop a crate they'd turned into a makeshift table. He went around setting up and lighting the candles he'd bought, setting the old factory aglow with warm, golden light.

"You've been busy," he said, grinning.

"So have you." She tossed her rag aside and took a seat on another, smaller crate to open her bag of fast food. "Don't suppose you got any wet wipes or hand sanitizer?"

"Both actually." Cam pulled the things from a white plastic bag. "I also got us each a toothbrush, toothpaste, travel deodorants, a couple large bottles of water, toilet paper, and paper towels."

"Wow." Everly laughed. "Aren't you just the survivalist."

“No. I’m a SEAL. Well, ex-SEAL. And a former boy scout. They teach us to always be prepared.”

“Do they now?” Everly finished cleaning her hands and face with a wet wipe then dried off with a paper towel before shoving it all into the trash bag Cam pointed to. “Well, thanks for getting all this. I’ll pay you back for my half after this is all over.”

“No need.” Cam cleaned his hands too, then tore into his food, hard pressed to remember when a burger and fries had ever tasted so good. “I’ll just add it to my expenses for this mission.”

She took a few more bites of her burger, making these cute little humming noises as she chewed. Cam was glad to see she wasn’t one of those gals who picked at their food like it was toxic waste or something. He liked women who were comfortable with themselves and who they were. So far, Everly seemed to fit that in spades. “How did you come to work for them?”

“Loki recruited me after I got discharged from the Navy. Our other guy, Hunter, is an ex-SEAL too. Anyway, I handle all the tech stuff for the team—computers, coding, hacks, all that sort of thing. But this mission came up with the Aeon and with its advanced technology, it was right up my alley.” He shoveled in more food before continuing. “So yeah, it’s nice to get out of the office, you know? Spread my wings and show these guys that I’m more than a nerd.”

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“Yeah, it’s nice to break out of your mold and have people see you differently.” Everly finished the last of her fries and burger then started on her cherry pie. Cam did his best not to stare at the way her pink tongue lapped at the sweet pie filling on her fingers or the tiny splotch of cherry red at the corner of her mouth. If he leaned in over the crate, he could lick that off himself, maybe move a few millimeters to the side and kiss her at last, then... “...so that’s why I’m doing this too.”

* * *

Everly bit back a smile at the dazed look on Cam’s face. It was obvious he hadn’t been paying attention to what she was saying. Then again, he wasn’t the only one who had trouble concentrating when the other was around. She hadn’t missed the way his gaze had tracked her movements as she’d ate her dessert, or the way his pretty gray eyes kept flicking to her lips. Hell, her whole mouth tingled because of it.

She took another sip of her drink then got up to throw her trash into the bag. Anything to break the sizzling connection between them. It was giving her all sorts of wicked ideas where Cam was concerned and breaking her focus. And she couldn’t afford to lose focus right now. Not with one deadline passed with her buyer and another looming the following day. Thank God she’d been able to call him while Cam was gone and explain the situation. And yes, maybe she’d fudged some of the details a bit. Wasn’t like the guy needed to know they were camping out in the middle of nowhere overnight. She’d simply explained that she’d run into a bit of a bind and wouldn’t be able to deliver the Aeon until the following day.

Her buyer had been surprisingly accommodating, which only set her nerves more on edge. This was a huge deal, her chance of a lifetime to escape her father’s clutches

and start over fresh. Sure, her buyer was most likely just as bad as her father—an attorney from DC with supposed ties to underworld crime, but at this point Everly didn't care. As long as she got her money and got the hell out of there, that was all that mattered.

Or it had been.

She glanced over her shoulder at Cam, who was finishing up his own apple pie for dessert. Man, he was becoming a problem. Not because he treated her poorly, but because he was just so damned nice. She'd always known he was good guy, even back in high school. He used to offer to help her carry her books and stuff. Not that she'd ever taken him up on his offer. Back then she'd run with a different crowd and couldn't risk losing face with the cooler kids. Now they were working for different sides again, and still he respected her, even as he battled against her. Warmth suffused her bloodstream as he wiped his mouth with a napkin, still chewing his last bite, while he carefully swept up the crate where they'd eaten and disposed of his trash. Such a detail-oriented, concerned guy. Then again, those traits were probably what made him so good at his job.

He brushed past her and she couldn't suppress a shiver of want that ran through her from the brief contact. Cam looked over and caught her eye and for a second time froze. She could see them—naked and together—limbs entwined as he made love to her so slow and good and right. Something tightly coiled inside her gently unfurled, leaving a trail of need in its wake. Flustered, Everly turned away. “I should, um, get the rest of this car back together so we can get on the road again in the morning.”

“Leave it for tomorrow,” Cam said, walking back over to where the bags sat on the floor next to the crate. “We're both tired and need the sleep. I'm up with the dawn anyway and can wake you early.”

“Oh, okay.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and watched as he secured the

side door to the factory with a thick steel crowbar slid through the broken bar lock. Everly went through the bags to avoid staring at his muscled form as he walked back toward her, his easy graceful movements, the way his tight jeans cupped his ass to perfection. That pang of need sharpened to a knife's edge inside her. She pulled out the blankets and pillows and set them inside the Aeon. "Guess we're sleeping in the car tonight, huh?"

"Guess so," Cam said, looking around. "Unless you prefer raccoons and rats as your bedmates. Maybe even a snake. I'm sure with all these farm fields around here they have some doozies. In fact—"

"Car it is." Everly patted the Aeon's top. "All right, boy scout. Where should be the, uh, 'ladies' room'?"

If she wasn't mistaken, a slight flush dotted his high cheekbones, and that only served to make him more endearing. Cam cleared his throat and handed her a roll of toilet paper and a rusted-out piece of metal they'd found when they were cleaning out the place earlier to use as a makeshift shovel. "Around the corner outside seems like the best place to me. Hidden from the road, but close enough to the door that if something comes after you, you can get inside quick."

"Right." She snatched the items from his hand then took care of business. By the time she returned, Cam had their bedding all laid out inside the car and the seats reclined into a comfy, makeshift bed. He'd also set out her personal supplies on one side of the crate with his on the other. Such a gentleman. She used the wet wipes again to clean her hands and arms and face, then toed off her shoes and set them on the floor in the passenger side before crawling beneath her blankets while Cam went outside too, then returned and cleaned up before extinguishing the candles around the room. With hi

s car door still open, the light from inside the Aeon helped him see where he was

going.

“This isn’t so bad, eh?” he said, slamming the door behind him and plunging them into darkness. The sounds of him scooting around beneath his blankets on the leather seat filled the air and Everly couldn’t help but smile. As her eyes adjusted, she could see a faint shadow of him in the dim moonlight streaming in through several holes in the roof far above them. He clicked the button to lock their doors then laid down on his seat to face her across the console. “Kind of like a weird camp-out, right?”

“You got the weird part correct.” The travel pillow wasn’t exactly supportive and the blankets weren’t quite long enough to cover both her feet and her shoulders at the same time, but none of that seemed to matter to her traitorous heart. It thumped along joyfully at the nearness of Cam, his warmth permeating through her thin cotton T-shirt even though there was a gear shift and a good six inches between them. She could feel the weight of Cam’s stare on her even though she couldn’t see him and felt compelled to say, “Thanks.”

“For what?” His voice was hushed, reminding her of crushed velvet.

“For going to get all this. This vehicle might have been designed for luxury driving, but sleeping in it is another matter entirely.”

“Agreed.” Cam snorted. “I’ll be lucky not to have a serious crick in my neck and back tomorrow.”

“Same here.” She snuggled a bit closer to him. “And thanks for... well, everything.”

His raised eyebrow and military background was apparent in his clipped tone. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but you’ll need to be more specific.”

“You know, for helping me escape those mob goons.” She didn’t say what she feared,

that those men might well be back tomorrow, with reinforcements. Her father's sort didn't give up easily when it was something they wanted, and they most definitely wanted this car. The Aeon was a legend on the black market and would bring in a ton of revenue just for the advanced engine parts alone, not to mention all that technology Cam was so fond of. Everly closed her eyes and prayed for forgiveness for what she'd planned for tomorrow. She'd given her buyer approximate coordinates for the piano factory and a meeting time of ten a.m. Risky? Yes, but so was continuing on this wild goose chase with Cam. Each second more she spent with him made her want him all the more. And he wasn't something she ever deserved to have. He was one of the good guys. She flirted too closely with the bad. All she hoped was that he'd understand why she'd betrayed him when the time came and might forgive her someday.

"Hey," Cam whispered, drawing her out of her thoughts. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing." Liar. She shrugged and burrowed farther under her blanket, like that might protect her from the hurt that would come with the sunrise. "I'm just tired, that's all."

He reached out and took her hand, lacing their fingers together beneath the covers. "Get some sleep then." His thumb stroked over her skin and she damned near cried from the sweetness of it. Cam treated her like a lady, treated her like some precious object he needed to protect and cherish. No one had ever done that before. "I'll be here to take care of you."

Her heart clenched. God, she'd waited her whole life to hear a man say that to her, and now that she'd finally found him, it was the last man on earth she could ever be with. They were too different, on two different sides of this problem, with different goals and aspirations. Yet, at that moment, all Everly wanted to do was curl up beside Cam and never, ever leave. She found herself moving as close to him as the vehicle

would allow, squeezing his fingers tight with gratitude and overwhelming affection. “Cam, I want you to know that no matter how this turns out, I like you. More than I should.”

His deep chuckle curled her freezing toes inside her socks. “Yeah, I’m becoming rather fond of you too, kid.”

“Kid? We’re the same age.”

“I know. But I like thinking of you as smaller than me. Makes me feel all macho and strong.”

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She snorted. “I could kick your ass six ways from Sunday, mister. You don’t grow up around a bunch of tough dudes in a garage without learning some self-defense skills.”

“And somehow that only makes you hotter.”

Stunned, Everly blinked at him in the darkness. So she wasn’t the only one who felt this simmering attraction between them. Sure, there’d been that near-kiss back in the safe house kitchen, but who knew if that was just heat-of-the-moment adrenaline or what. But no. This was real between them. A real problem, her conscience not-so-helpfully added, if you don’t get it under control.

Everly tried to pull her hand away, but Cam held tight. “Listen, I know that was inappropriate, given our situation,” he said. “But we’re all alone tonight in this cold, lonely factory with no one to see or hear us at all. I think you’re hot. There, I said it. I had a crush on you for years back in high school, and though it’s totally wrong to act on it right now, I wanted you to know.”

Silence stretched between them as Everly let his words warm her from the inside out. Knowing he wanted her, that he’d wanted her for years, made her nearly giddy. She’d always had him in the back of her mind too, all these years, as the cute, geeky guy who’d been completely out of reach. Now, here they were, lying side by side in a cold, uncomfortable car, making midnight confessions in the dark. “I thought you were cute.”

“Cute?”

“Hot.”

“Hot.”

“Yes.” She laughed again, doing her best to ignore the way his thumb was tracing lazy patterns against her palm and the corresponding molten heat gathering in her core. Sleeping in this car would be bad enough. Trying for anything more amorous could land them both in traction. Still, it didn’t stop her from stoking the fires a bit more. “Back in high school, you were this nerdy hunk. Now, you’re all-grown up and gorgeous to boot.” Before he could respond, she yanked her hand away and turned to face the passenger side window, unable to keep the smile from her face at his grunt of protest. “Now, go to sleep. We need to get up early in the morning.”

9

Cam awoke the next morning with a warm weight on his chest and a dull pounding in his head. He blinked open weary eyes and tipped his chin down to see Everly snoozing away atop him. It took him a minute to realize where they were—sleeping in the Aeon inside the dilapidated piano factory. He yawned and stretched, wincing at the crick in his neck and the gear shift gouging into the side of his thigh. Carefully, he scooted up higher in the leather seat and realized Everly had somehow contorted herself across the console so that the top of her body was sprawled across him and her legs were still on the passenger seat, tangled in her fleece blanket.

This close, he caught the sweet floral scent of her perfume and felt the steady thud of her heart pressed against his. As if sensing his perusal, Everly slowly looked up at him, her face dreamy with the remnants of sleep and her smile slow and sexy. Before he could react, she closed the small distance between them and kissed him, her lips softly brushing his as her tongue traced the seam of his mouth. Cam gave up any pretense of resisting what he’d battled so long and cupped her head, keeping her close with one hand while using the other to haul her the rest of the way over to lie atop him. With her thighs spread, knees resting on either side of his hips, he pressed her closer, allowing her to feel the full extent of his rapidly growing arousal.

Everly groaned and plunged her fingers into his hair, delving deeper between his now parted lips, tasting him, learning the feel of him, urging his passion higher and higher. It was like a dream. It was like his every fantasy come to life. It was...

Over.

Everly pulled away and frowned out the drivers' side window. "What's that banging noise?"

Still dazed, Cam blinked several times before straightening. His hands were on Everly's hips, keeping her where she was, his cock throbbing with need. He shook his head to clear it and realized the pounding he'd thought was in his mind was actually

coming from the door of the factory. "Fuck."

He helped Everly back into her seat, adjusting his too-tight jeans before unlocking the car and climbing out. He leaned back inside and pinned her with a steady stare. "Stay here until I assess the situation."

Panic flitted across Everly's features. "What time is it?"

"What?" Cam rubbed his face with one hand then checked his watch. "Shit. We overslept. It's five after ten."

"Oh, crap." Everly was out of the car and around to stand beside Cam before his still-sluggish, pre-caffeinated senses registered what was happening. "Listen, before this goes any farther, I want you to know that when I kissed you it wasn't because of any distractions or—"

"Huh?" Cam pushed away from the Aeon and started toward the door, her words barely entering his thoughts. His plan was to get rid of whoever was on the other side

of that door then get the hell out of there as soon as Everly finished putting the car's engine back together. It couldn't be the guys from the team. Loki was waiting for his text before he'd intervene and no way was Hunter up and moving around this early in the day. Which meant it had to be those thugs that had been chasing them.

Shit. Just fucking shit.

Before he pulled the crowbar free of the door lock, he turned to call to Everly, "How fast can you get the Aeon up and running?"

She raked a hand through her hair, then opened the drivers' side door to pop the hood. Cam did his best not to stare at her perfectly formed ass or remember the way said ass had felt rubbing against him just a few blissful minutes ago. His traitorous cock twitched in response.

Everly grabbed several smaller parts off the floor, along with her trusty wrench. "Give me five minutes."

Great. He could stall them that long, even without his morning coffee, right? If not, then he'd resort to brute force. Nothing like a righteous ass-kicking to get him going in the morning. Cam yanked the crowbar free then held it at his side as the door creaked open, ready to strike should the need arise. But instead of the two mob goons who'd been tailing them for days, he found some random dude in a tailored business suit staring back at him. Cam's reflection gleamed in the guy's aviator shades and two hulking bodyguards flanked the sharp-dressed stranger on either side.

"Can I help you?" Cam asked, leaning a shoulder against the metal doorframe, blocking the entrance. "You lost?"

"I'm here to see Everly Knight. We had an appointment."

“She’s busy,” he started to say, but was cut off by Everly wedging herself in beside him.

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“I’ve changed my mind. The Aeon’s not for sale anymore.”

Cam scrunched his nose and looked over at her. “What the fuck are you talking about? That car was never for sale to begin with.”

“It was, but I’ve withdrawn my acceptance of the offer.” She glanced at Cam then back to the stranger. “I’m sorry.”

“I still need to collect my property,” the guy said, stepping forward as his bodyguards barreled through both Everly and Cam to head inside. “I don’t give a shit about the car.”

“Wait a minute.” Everly trailed along beside him, scowling. “There’s nothing that belongs to you here. Get out. I said I don’t want your money.”

Cam stalked over as one of the bodyguards raised a beefy fist and prepared to bash in one of the Aeon’s taillights. “Stop it. What the fuck is happening here?”

He grabbed for the guard’s fist, but it was trying to grab a solid block of granite. Cam was two-hundred-fifty-pounds of solid muscle, but even he was no match for these behemoths. Whoever the hell the guy in the suit was, he paid for the most gigantic protection a man could get. The guard slammed his fist into the car’s rear end and plastic shattered. The guard didn’t even flinch. He pulled away, taking a hunk of broken taillight and twisted metal with him while his cohort reached inside to pull the safety latch. The trunk hissed open to reveal twelve neatly stacked plastic kilos of cocaine inside and Cam’s stomach bottomed out.

At the man's nod, the guards began collecting the drugs and carrying them outside to their waiting Humvee while their leader leaned against the Aeon like he was strolling through a DC park and not smuggling enough coke to make a Colombian cartel lord proud.

Common sense told Cam he should just let this dude take his stash and leave it at that. But something about the guy's narrowed gaze and calculating expression had his hackles rising.

He cocked his head toward Everly, signaling for her to get back to fixing the engine in case things went south on them. Luckily, she didn't argue this time.

"Tell me," the guy said as his guards carried off another armload full of coke. "Why is such a fine automobile stuck out here in the middle of nowhere? Seems odd, unless you knew about what was hidden in the trunk."

"We didn't know about your drugs," Cam said, keeping his voice low and steady. "My only concern is the vehicle."

"Huh." The guy pushed away from the car and walked slowly around the perimeter. "It is a fine piece of machinery. What's your interest in it, specifically?"

Cam swallowed hard. He'd spent the last forty-eight hours protecting the Aeon and its technology with his life. He wasn't about to give it all up now to some random dealer with delusions of grandeur.

"Parts mostly," he said, hoping his lie sounded convincing.

"Parts?" the guy raised a dark brow at him. For some reason, he reminded Cam of a crazy-ass drill sergeant he'd had to deal with once during SEAL training camp. The guy had thought he was so clever, questioning everything, but Cam had always seen

right though the man's bullshit. Same here. This dude might be dressed like he stepped off the pages of GQ, but he was nothing more than a criminal. And chances were good both Cam and Everly had seen too much. No way was this dealer letting them walk out of here alive.

He inched toward the front of the car to see how close Everly was to getting the engine back together, all the while keeping an eye on the guy in the suit, matching him step for step on the other side of the Aeon. "Yeah, parts. This is a rare model of vehicle. Only a few in the whole world. Owners pay top price for black market parts. Since you said you don't give a shit about the car, figured we'd turn around and scrap it to make up for our lost revenue from the sale."

"Right." Suit guy narrowed his beady black eyes on Everly. "You failed to mention any of this in our text correspondence."

She looked up at Cam before flicking her gaze back to the engine. "Didn't think it was relevant."

"I see."

From what Cam could see, Everly had all the parts back inside the Aeon and was just finishing tightening the last bolt. Good thing she was quick. The two guards returned from making their last run of drugs outside and now stood blocking the entrance to the factory.

Suit man walked past the front of the car just as Everly slammed the hood shut and joined his colleagues by the door. "Too bad, really. You shouldn't have lied to me, Ms. Knight. I know your father too well."

"My father has nothing to do with this," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "This was my deal. My money."

Cam gave her a sideways glance as the guards drew their weapons and aimed at them. He prayed their silent communication wouldn't fail them now. With one hand he reached slowly behind him, fumbling for the Aeon's door handle while taking Everly's hand with the other. They'd have only seconds to make it inside the bulletproof vehicle once the shooting started. He'd do his best to protect her from the fire.

"Time to say goodbye," suit guy said, nodding.

Tugging hard, Cam dove fast for the floor, pulling Everly down beside him. He managed to get the Aeon's door open and shove her inside as bullets pinged off the car's exterior. Thank God above the guards seemed to have poor aim. He managed to get inside and lock the doors, then fumbled for his passcode device. "Please tell me this thing will run."

"It should." Everly crouched on the passenger side floor while Cam did the same on the drivers' side, plugging his device into the ignition and turning it on. Seconds crawled by as one-by-one the numbers clicked into place then finally a beep signaled it was ready.

Cam raised up higher to peer out the windows. The thugs were closer now, still blasting the Aeon with ammo. The trunk was still open and they aimed inside it—he guessed to hit the gas tank and cause the whole damned thing to blow.

Time to get the hell out of Dodge. He jammed the Start button on the car. The engine churned, but didn't fire.

"Shit!" He glared over at Everly. "I thought you said it was ready to go?"

“It should be.” She frowned. “Try it again.”

He did. Nothing.

The longer they stayed here, the less chance they had of escaping this alive. Getting out of the Aeon was a death sentence, but cowering inside wasn't much better. Eventually those bullets would hit something not protected and they'd all be fucked.

“You're sure you put it all back together correctly?” All the fury and hurt inside him bubbled over, spewing out in his words. “Or is this just another lie, huh? Have you ever told me the truth, even one damned time, Everly?”

“Of course I did.” Her scowl darkened. “Maybe it's your stupid device that's the problem.”

“There's nothing wrong with my device. My coding skills are exemplary.”

“Yeah?” Everly raised a sarcastic brow at him. “Then why the hell are we still sitting here, Geek Squad?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

More shots fired. This time a bullet zinged through the trunk, c

lean through the plush leather backseat, and out the floor of the car.

“Fuck.” Cam said a silent prayer and jammed the Start button one final time, eyes

closed and hopes dwindling. The engine churned, churned, then purred to life. “Yes!”

“Get us the hell out of here!” Everly cried, covering her head as several more bullets whizzed out of the backseat and through the floor. “Please!”

Cam maneuvered himself into the drivers’ seat and yanked the steering wheel hard to the left toward the entrance. Loki was going to kill his ass when he saw all the damage to this car, but it couldn’t be helped now. With a snarl, he jammed the accelerator pedal to the floor and charged straight for the door of the factory. Suit guy’s eyes widened as the Aeon barreled toward him and he leapt out of the way at the last minute, leaving the path clear to the outside. Cam ducked as the car smashed through the thin metal walls of the warehouse and out into the bright sunshine. Tires squealed and the smell of burning rubber filled the car’s interior as they peeled out onto the two-lane highway and sped away, heading out of Virginia once more.

10

They’d been on the road about an hour when Everly couldn’t keep silent anymore.

“Like I said, I’m really sorry about what happened back there in the factory. I honestly didn’t know much about that buyer, only that he had the cash to back up his offer and that he wasn’t on my father’s list of preferred customers.”

Cam didn’t look at her, just focused straight ahead, his fixed expression as unreadable as it had been since they’d escaped the shootout. It hovered somewhere between disappointed and coldly furious.

“I need the money. I gave up my dream for you back there, refusing that deal. Isn’t that worth something?” she said, slumping back in her seat to stare out at the landscape blurring past.

“You could at least tell me where the hell we’re going.”

“Why?” Cam’s normally smooth voice sounded jagged and sharp. “So you can text your buddy and tell him where to find us again? Maybe this time he and his guards will finish the job.”

“You’re pissed about what happened,” she observed.

“Damn fucking straight I’m pissed!” A small muscle ticked near Cam’s tight jaw and he gripped the Aeon’s steering wheel with a white-knuckled grip. “Having people try to blow my head off will do that. Haven’t even had any damned coffee yet.”

“Then stop and get some.”

“Right. For all we know that asshole drug dealer is following us. I’m not stopping until I’m sure they’re gone.”

“Fine. At least stop to close the trunk then. You can’t see shit out the back window and next thing we’ll get pulled over by a cop. This car’s stolen, in case you’ve forgotten. And I’m sure law enforcement would be mighty interested in all those bullet holes in the trunk and the smashed taillight.”

With a muttered curse, Cam slammed on the brakes, squealing to a halt on the berm. Mumbling to himself, he yanked off his seatbelt and threw open the door, stomping around the car to slam the trunk closed—didn’t help that it took three tries—then stalked back to climb into his seat once more. Everly kept her gaze lowered, biting back inappropriate laughter. The situation wasn’t funny, not really. If anything, it was terrifying. She’d lost her dream and nearly her life. Yet at that moment, all she could picture was Cam slamming that trunk, only to have it turn right around and pop back open in his face. Perhaps it was the absurdity of it all. Perhaps it was the excess adrenaline still shivering through her system. Whatever it was, Everly’s eyes stung

and her shoulders started to shake and pretty soon she dissolved into a quivering mass of giggles.

Cam gave her a stern, disbelieving stare. “This is not funny.”

By then, she was too far gone, tears streaming down her cheeks as she rolled with laughter. “I-I’m s-sorry,” she managed to get out.

“Sorry?” Cam’s full lips puckered into a sour-lemon look, but his chest started to tremble. Soon, he was chuckling right along with her. The tension curdling in the air between them dissolved at last. When they’d both laughed themselves silly, sagging in their seats like a couple of sacks of potatoes, Cam rolled his head to the side and looked at her, his devastatingly sexy grin firmly back in place. “What a fucking mess, eh?”

“Got that right,” Everly said, holding her sore stomach. She hadn’t laughed that long or that well in a long time. In fact, being with Cam was more enjoyable than being with any other man she could remember—minus the bullets, of course. The warmth inside her was short lived, however, as the magnitude of what she’d done sank in. She’d blown the deal, blown her one shot at getting out from under her father’s thumb, blown any chance she could go back to her father now and beg his forgiveness. His ties to the mob were too strong. They’d kill him too if they’d thought he’d gone soft on her. And why had she done it? Because of some sappy feelings for a guy who probably wouldn’t look twice at her after this was all said and done. Why should he? Cam was smart, successful, gorgeous. He could be with any woman he wanted. No way he’d pick a loser like her. She closed her eyes and sighed. “What the hell are we going to do now?”

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Cam pulled out his phone and thumbed in a text. Seconds later the device buzzed with a response. “Well,” he said, “according to Loki, we need to lay low again. Too much heat on us right now to head back to the Norse Security offices. I’m guessing anywhere familiar to your father would be out too, correct?”

Everly nodded. “I’m sure you’re tired of hearing it, but I really am sorry. For everything.”

“I know.” Cam said, sliding his phone back into his pocket. “Me too. I wish we’d met again under different circumstances.”

“Me too.”

He exhaled slow and stared out at the deserted stretch of back country road ahead of them. “There’s only one place I can think of where I’d feel one-hundred percent safe right now.”

“Where’s that?” Everly asked, straightening. Safe sounded like heaven.

He winked and gave her a crooked half-grin. “Nope. Fooled me once, sweetheart. Even old Geek Squad here wises up after a while.” He reached over and grabbed her wadded up fleece blanket off the passenger side floor and used his pocket knife to cut a strip off of it. “You want to come with me, you wear this.”

“What is that?”

“A blindfold.” He held it between his hands. “Can’t take any chances this time.”

She wanted to argue, but what was the point? If she got out now, she'd be a sitting duck, plus Everly had no idea where they were exactly. She could wander for hours before finding a kind soul to help. She swallowed hard. "Fine."

"Good girl." He tied the fleece strip around her head, then let her get settled in her seat again before starting the engine. With her sight gone, her other senses seemed hyper alert—the sound of Cam's voice and the low, sweet melody of the classical station on the radio; the smell of fresh air and fertilizer when he cracked open a window somewhere along the way; the prickle of heat and light on her skin from the sunshine. Eventually, it all must've lulled her into a dreamless sleep because the next thing she knew, they were pulling to a stop. There was a grinding noise—a motor, a chain, a steady squeak, whirr, squeak. Garage door opener. Yep. Cam's car door opened and closed, then his footsteps echoed as he walked around the car and stopped near her side. Another door opened, and his hands were on her shoulders, guiding her out of the vehicle—his touch warm and strong and reassuring. He shut the door behind her then clicked the locks on the Aeon before slipping off her blindfold.

Everly blinked several times, her eyes adjusting to the dim light of the cement garage. Unlike her father's place, this space was neat and tidy, with everything put away where it belonged and even the bicycles hanging from racks on the ceiling. Along one wall were shelves of wires and cables and what looked like old computer parts.

Cam took her hand and led her across the garage to a door in the corner. "Please excuse the mess. I wasn't expecting com

pany."

"This is your house?"

"Yep. And I should warn you that it's completely off the grid. I run off solar panels on the roof, water comes from a well on the property, and my Internet connection

runs through the dark web, not some commercial provider. Your cell phone won't work here either. I've got the whole place on lock down."

"Seriously?" She snorted and followed him inside what she expected to be some dingy pigsty a la The Matrix. What she found instead was a spic and span, if somewhat Spartan, ranch-style home decorated in tasteful shades of tan and white. There was no sign of the aforementioned mess either. This place was even tidier than the garage. For a bachelor, Cam obviously took care of his home. "Wow. This is really nice."

"Thanks." He tossed the Aeon's keys on a side table then led her into his living room, complete with a tan leather sectional sofa and a huge flat screen TV. Of course, he had a state-of-the-art gaming system too. The room opened into a walk-in kitchen with stainless steel appliances and mocha-colored granite countertops. Down a short hall were his master bedroom and a guest room and a door with a keypad on the wall beside the lock. "Each of the bedrooms has its own bathroom, so we won't have to share. I'll find you some of my old sweats to sleep in."

"Sounds good." She waited near the guest room door as he walked away, unable to keep her curiosity from surfacing. Everly pointed toward the mysterious black door across from her. "What's in that room?"

Cam turned at the door to his room, his slow smile causing her heart to beat faster. "That's where the magic happens, sweetheart. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

His slow head-to-toe appraisal of her left no doubt that he remembered their steamy morning kiss just as well as she did. And that he'd like to repeat it. And yeah, making love to Camden Thursday just might be fatal to her trembling heart, but damn. What a way to die.

He returned with an oversized grey sweatshirt, a pair of flannel plaid sleep pants, and white socks a few moments later. “This should do okay for you until tomorrow.”

“Yep.” She took the bundle from him and backed into the guest room, suddenly shy. “I’m, uh, going to take a quick shower.”

“Sounds good. I’ll order dinner. What do you like on your pizza?” He leaned an arm against the doorframe, looking entirely too adorable for his own good.

“Anything except anchovies. And olives.”

“Got it. I’ll get some breadsticks too. And soda.” He winked and turned away. “See you in a few. Have a nice shower.”

11

Have a nice shower?

Cam gave a short, disgruntled sigh. How stupid had that sounded? God, he was such an idiot sometimes, despite his MENSA membership. No wonder he couldn’t keep a steady relationship. No self-respecting woman wanted to be with a socially-backward goob like him. Well, that and the fact he had to keep his job a secret, for the most part. And there was the minor issue of him being gone for stints at a time on jobs. When he’d been in the military, short and sweet had been awesome. All the pleasure, none of the messy ties and emotions that went along with having a steady partner. Now though, he found himself wanting those connections.

Not that he didn’t love his house, nicknamed Fortress Thursday, but someday he wanted kids, a wife, a person by his side through thick and thin, good and bad.

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After finishing his call to his usual pizza place for delivery, he walked back to his bedroom and stripped, ignoring the sound of rushing water from Everly's shower and all the wicked images it conjured. He stalked into his own bathroom and jammed on the water in the travertine-tiled stall, letting the steam build before stepping inside the thick glass walls and scrubbing down. It felt good to clean off the grit and grime of the last hours and have time alone to think on everything that had happened.

If someone would've told him last week that he'd be running around the Virginia countryside with his old high school flame by his side, Cam would've laughed in their face. Once they'd graduated, he'd honestly never expected to see Everly again. They'd never run in the same circles and she'd certainly never looked at him twice back then.

Things sure had changed.

Despite all the conflict between them and the mess her attempted sale of the Aeon had caused, no way had she been faking the passion burning like wildfire between them in the car this morning. He'd felt her pulse kick into high gear, seen her pupils dilate, smelled the slight tang of her arousal. Jesus, even the memories got him all hot and bothered again.

Letting his head fall back under the warm water, Cam closed his eyes and slid a soapy hand down his chest, deciding to take care of business now before it caused problems later. His cock was so hard it hurt and he clasped it firmly in one hand, stroking from base to tip as he leaned a shoulder against the slick tile wall and imagined it was Everly touching him, teasing him, making love to him with her fingers and her mouth and her tongue. Pressure built inside him, urging him onward,

urging him to go faster, faster. He bit his lip, panting as his need surged to nearly unbearable levels. What he wouldn't give to have Everly ready and willing, those dark eyes filled with desire for him and him alone. He'd worship every sweet inch of her with kisses and licks then bury himself so deep inside her they wouldn't know where she ended and he began. She'd cry out for him, cry out for more, cry out his name over and over as he brought her to climax again and again and...

With a deep groan, Cam's balls tightened and he came hard all over his hand and lower chest. His knees wobbled and threatened to buckle and if he hadn't had the wall for support, he would've crashed to the floor. Edge off his tension, he cleaned up then exited the shower, drying off fast and slinging the damp towel around his hips before walking back out into the bedroom to pull on fresh sweats. The pizza guy would be there any minute. Once dressed, he grabbed his wallet off the dresser and headed back toward the living room just as the doorbell rang.

Checking the footage from the security cameras mounted on the garage for the driveway and on the front porch first for confirmation, he unbolted the front door and handed the pizza guy a fifty, told him to keep the change, then quickly grabbed their food before relocking and securing everything. He and Everly had dealt with more than enough trouble the past few days. The last thing he needed was to bring it right to his doorstep by letting his security slip now.

He'd just finished setting everything out on the breakfast bar, along with plates and napkins, when Everly wandered into the room. She looked so adorable and small inside his clothes that his heart did a tiny flip. For a moment, all he could do was stare at her, mesmerized. Her long hair was damp and her cheeks were pink from her hot shower and Cam didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful sight in his life. Forget his crush in high school. That had been a kid idolizing the girl he knew he'd never get. Now, they were both adults, both here and attracted to each other, both single. At least he was. He'd not really gotten around to asking her about that yet.

“Food ready,” he said, clearing his tight throat as the words emerged rougher than he’d intended. “What would you like to drink?”

“Soda’s fine,” she said, slipping onto one of the stools at the bar. “This looks really good.”

“Oh, it’s amazing. Trust me. Martello’s has the best pies in the area.” Cam poured them each a glass of soda then took a seat beside her, sliding her glass over toward her plate. “Dig in.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Everly said, loading her plate up with two breadsticks and cheese sauce, two slices of pizza with everything but anchovies, and a glob of marinara dipping sauce. She took a huge bite of food then glanced sideways at him, as if just realizing he was there. Her pretty doe eyes widened slightly as she chewed, covering her mouth with a napkin. “Sorry. Don’t mean to act like a pig, but I’m suddenly starving.”

“I like that you have an appetite,” Cam said, grinning. He loaded up his own plate then dug in, speaking around a mouthful of breadstick. “Shows me you’re not afraid to indulge your passions.”

Everly shrugged and swallowed another bite of pizza. “Well, I am Italian. We’re a passionate people.”

Cam battled the torrid images of them tangled in his sheets, writhing together, driving each other to new peaks of desire, and instead devoured his first piece of pizza in three enormous bites. He took the second one a bit slower, thankful his daily workouts kept his metabolism high.

They ate in silence for a while, enjoying the food, until finally Cam couldn’t help from asking a question that had been bugging him since that morning. “So, tell me

the real reason you decided not to sell the Aeon. You had a pretty sweet deal going there.”

Exhaling slowly, Everly pushed her empty plate away then wiped her mouth. “Truth?”

“Always.”

“The truth is, I realized that if I sold that car to a guy like that, I’d be no better than my father. My whole point in getting out of there and getting away to start over fresh was to stop doing illegal things. That sale was so illegal it wasn’t even funny, and that was before we discovered a whole trunk load of cocaine.” She snorted then leaned an elbow on the granite counter, resting her chin in her hand. The move caused the wide, stretched-out crewneck of the old sweatshirt he’d given her to slip precariously off one shoulder, exposing an expanse of creamy flesh. Cam forced himself to concentrate on her words and not the luminous softness of her skin. “So, yeah. I decided that I couldn’t start my new life like that, have it based on criminal activities and fraudulent funds. Yes, I need the money, but not that way.” Her smile turned sad. “It’s funny. My entire life I thought ‘legal’ was a place I could get to, like a dot on a map, and once I was there I’d be free. Turns out it’s not like that at all. It’s the same world, just a different street.”

“What are you going to do now?” Cam asked, finishing the last slice of pizza.

“Not sure.” She picked at a non-existent dot on the smooth countertop. “Guess I’ll have to apply for a loan like everyone else. My credit’s crap, but if I want a no

rmal life, I have to begin by going through the same things other people do. Not that I like feeling scared for my future and vulnerable. That parts sucks.”

She sniffled and his heart broke. Without realizing it, he reached over and took her

free hand, squeezing her chilled fingers gently. “Believe me, I understand. Went through something similar after my discharge. If the guys at Norse Security hadn’t come calling, I don’t know where I’d be. But please know I’m here for you. I’ll help you any way I can, I promise.”

“You will?” she asked, blinking teary eyes at him. “Why?”

Cam couldn’t resist any longer and reached up to cup her cheek, stroking the wetness from her skin with his thumb. “Because I care. I know that sounds nuts after all the stuff you’ve put me through these past few days, but I do. I want to help. We’ll figure this mess out together, okay?”

“Okay.” Everly flashed him a watery smile and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. The scent of her—soap and floral shampoo and warm, clean woman—nearly made him dizzy with want, but he didn’t need her thinking he was taking advantage of anything. He rose to collect their trash and toss it in the bin under the sink before shoving their dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

“Relax,” he said to her over his shoulder while he rinsed their plates in the sink. “Go watch TV or whatever. If you like videos games, I’ve got it all set up in the living room.”

“Not much of a gamer,” Everly said, her stool creaking as she got up. “Or a TV watcher. No time.” She came around the island to stand beside him at the sink. Cam shoved the last plate in the dishwasher then clicked the door shut. Towel in hand, he turned to find her far too close for his comfort. She was staring up at him with those expressive dark eyes and the walls he’d built around his heart melted. Everly reached out and placed a hand on his chest, right over his thudding heart and stepped closer still, until her breasts brushed against him and made his blood race with need. “What I’d really like tonight is to finish what we started in the car this morning.”

Cam held his breath, afraid that if he spoke this dream would disappear like smoke. Finally, he managed to whisper, “Why?”

“Why what?” She slid the hand on his chest up to the nape of his neck, stroking the sensitive skin there and making him shiver. “Why do I want to make love to you?”

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“Yes.” The word squeaked out like he was still a hormonal teen, but he couldn’t help it. He wanted her more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life. She was gorgeous and smart and funny and if he didn’t touch her soon he might implode. But he had to be sure. Sure that she wanted him for who he was, not out of some misplaced sense of gratitude for helping her escape earlier. “Why me?”

Her other hand cupped his cheek, her thumb tracing over his lips as she pressed tighter against him, moaning low as his hard cock pressed insistently against her soft belly. “Because you’re the most intelligent, decent, kind man I’ve ever met and I can’t stop thinking about how you taste and feel when you’re holding me close. Because I don’t deserve a guy like you, but that doesn’t make me want you for my own any less. Because if you don’t kiss me again soon, I think I might die.”

Yep. That was all it took. Cam captured her lips with his, his tongue stroking hers, learning her flavor all over again—sweet sugar and spicy heat. She tightened her grasp around his neck and he lifted her into his arms, walking her down the hall and into his bedroom where he deposited her in the center of the mattress before following her down.

Their clothes disappeared in a flurry of tugs and chuckles, leaving them both naked, skin to skin, and Cam reveled in the feeling. Everly was beautiful, every single inch of her. He started at her lips and continued downward, loving the way she arched hard beneath him when he nibbled on a certain spot behind her ear. He traced the delicate column of her throat with lips and tongue, stopping to pay homage to her collarbone before moving lower to her breasts. Berry pink nipples strained for his kisses. Cam chuckled and lowered his head, suckling first one then the other, savoring the scrape of her nails against his scalp as he nuzzled. Her soft cries and

appreciative moans were all the encouragement he needed.

Leaving her gorgeous breasts was hard, but knowing the treasure that awaited him made it a bit easier. His cock throbbed with need, pre-cum leaking from his tip already, but he refused to rush. He'd waited years for this moment and he wasn't about to hurry. He teased his tongue around her belly button, then dipped lower, gently spreading her thighs wider to reveal the glistening folds between them.

"So lovely," Cam said, dipping his head to trace his tongue over her slick flesh. "So, so lovely."

Cam, I-I—" Everly whispered, meeting his gaze down the length of her body. "Please."

"Please what, sweetheart?" he asked, settling himself between her thighs with a devilish grin. "Tell me what you want."

"Don't stop."

"Never." Cam continued to make love to her with his lips and tongue, inserting first one then two fingers inside her, preparing her for him. Everly writhed, bucking, moaning, clutching his hair, his shoulders, anywhere she could reach, pressing tighter and tighter against him until her breath caught and she climaxed hard. Cam continued to gently stroke her folds and inner thighs until he kissed a path up her body again.

Everly stretched beneath him, beautifully sated and smiling, kissing him deeply before pushing him over onto his back and straddling his hips. "My turn."

Cam wasn't sure he could take her exploring his body, but he gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, focusing on anything but the amazing feelings she stirred in him—need, affection, pulsing desire, intense...like?

His eyes snapped open, his concentration shot. Her long hair brushed his lower stomach as her lips skimmed his abdomen before heading south. Oh God. What he felt for Everly went way beyond like, but he wasn't prepared to identify exactly what his emotions were at that point, not when she'd taken his cock in hand and was working him so good, just the way he liked, and then...

"Fuck," he groaned low, his head falling back against the pillows and his eyes closing as her lips sucked the sensitive head, her tongue teasing the underside. It was his earlier fantasy come to life, it was everything, his entire universe. Gently, he threaded his fingers through her silky hair, wanting the pleasure never to end but afraid if he didn't stop it this would all be over too soon. And he wanted this night to last.

Finally, he managed to pull Everly away and she stared up at him with wide, dark eyes. "Don't you like it?"

"Yes." He pulled her down beside him once more. "I love it. But if you keep that up, I won't last."

Cam kissed her deeply as he reached behind him to fumble in the nightstand drawer for a condom. He ripped the tiny foil packet open with his teeth and put it on, then rose above her once more, positioning himself at her wet entrance. "Are you ready for me, sweetheart?"

"I've been ready since the first time I saw you, baby." She locked her ankles behind his back in confirmation. Cam tried not to think too hard about that statement as he slowly pushed inside her, marveling at the tight, wet heat of her surrounding him. He was no blushing virgin, but he'd swear it had never been this good before. Everly seemed to have the same opinion because she squeezed him closer and grinned. "You feel amazing."

"Ditto, sweetheart." He bent to give her an open-mouthed kiss and began long, slow

thrusts that soon had them both moving harder and faster, chasing oblivion. At last, Everly's fingers tightened against his scalp and she arched hard. Cam bent to whisper near her ear, "Are you close?"

"Yes," she moaned, biting her lip. "So close."

He reached between them to stroke her swollen clit and soon, she gasped, falling over the edge into another hard orgasm. Unable to hold back any longer, Cam drove into her faster, faster, until his muscles locked and reality shattered and he came hard inside her.

When it was all over, Cam laid down beside Everly on the bed a

nd drew her close into his side, feeling sleepy and content and happier than he could remember being in a long, long time. She stroked his chest over his heart and eventually her breath evened out into the patterns of sleep. Cam switched off the light on the night stand and soon joined her in slumber.

12

The next morning, Everly cracked open one eye to see where the murmured voice was coming from. She glanced around the unfamiliar room and took a moment to remember where she was. Cam's place. Cam's bedroom. Cam's bed.

A tingle of wanton giddiness shuddered through her as she recalled their passionate lovemaking the night before. She couldn't suppress her naughty grin. It was always the geeky ones who surprised you.

The voice, it turned out, belonged to Cam, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, talking to someone on his cell phone. She only got one side of the conversation, but from what she gathered, he was talking to his team at the security place about the

Aeon.

“No, I don’t like,” Cam said, growling low. He ran a hand through his short hair. “I won’t have her used as bait. Let me do it. I can run both. I’ll talk Hunter through what needs to be done. He can handle it. No, I’m not trying to do everything.” He glanced back at her over his shoulder, then said, “Yes, I know that, Loki. I need to go.”

With a sigh, he ended the call then tossed the device back on the nightstand before scrubbing a hand over his scruffy face. “Morning, sweetheart.”

Everly pushed herself up to sit back against the pillows, clutching the sheet to her chest as she leaned in to kiss his back. “Good morning, baby. Trouble already?”

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“No.” He exhaled and stared down at the floor. “That was my team on the phone. Loki thinks we need to find out who the real buyer was for the car. He thinks this won’t be over until we do. I hate to say it, but I agree. And I’m not talking about that drug dealer who showed up. That asshole had no idea what the Aeon was worth. He just wanted his smack.” He sat back on the bed beside her. “There has to be someone else backing him, someone who won’t stop until they get that car.”

“Hmm.” Everly frowned. Now that he put it that way, it made sense. “What does Loki think I should do then, repost the car for sale?”

“Yep. Except I told him no. I won’t have you used as bait.” Cam reached over and took her hand. “If anyone’s going to post it, it’ll be me. That way my butt’s on the line, not yours.”

“What about all the security stuff?” Concerned, she laced her fingers with his atop the sheets. “You’re the best at what you do. I’ve seen it. I’d hate for someone else to get hurt because of this, especially you.”

“I’ll be fine. And like I told Loki, I’m so good, I can teach someone else to do what I do. Hunter’s not bad on a computer. He can do what I tell him and run it all behind the scenes.”

“Okay. So, how do you plan to get word out that the Aeon’s on the market again?”

“Dark web.” He shrugged. “I figure this person, whoever they are, has the financial means to monitor all channels of communication. If I put it out there, word travels fast. All we need to do is get the car to a familiar spot I can easily defend and

schedule a meeting.”

“Where?”

“Not sure yet. Can’t be too open. Don’t want to run the risk of outside collateral damage. Can’t be random private property either. Don’t want anyone asking too many questions about what we’re doing. Needs to have an easy escape route too, in case things go bad and we need to run.”

“Huh.” Everly grinned. “You know you just described my dad’s garage, right?”

Cam frowned. “I never thought about it, but it is kind of perfect, isn’t it? Any chance you can break us back in there without anyone noticing later tonight?”

She snorted. “Piece of cake. Place is usually a graveyard on Tuesday nights anyway.”

He winced at her choice of words and she laughed.

“Sorry.” Everly scooted out of bed, grabbing her sweatshirt and tugging it on before pulling on the enormous sweatpants he’d given her the night before. Even tied as tight as possible, she still had to roll them up three times at the waist to keep from tripping over them. “This is great. We can spend the day planning out our attack and you can get your post up on the dark web and then tonight we can head over to my dad’s garage and—”

“Wait a minute.” Cam stood too and walked around the bed toward her, in all his naked glory. And damn, but he was glorious—all chiseled muscle and sexy sinew. “I don’t remember saying you were coming with me to the meeting.”

“Of course, I’m coming with you. I won’t let you face this alone.”

“Let’s see how things play out today first.” He stepped closer and slipped his arms around her waist, his warm hands sliding beneath her sweatshirt to stroke her bare skin, making her shiver. “Right now, I need a shower.” Before she could protest, he swept her up into his arms and headed toward the bathroom. “And so do you. We’ll take one together, unless you protest.”

“No protests here.” She giggled, kissing his neck. “Bring on the water, baby.”

He jammed on the shower then turned to her, his expression serious. “I mean it, Everly. I don’t want to see you get hurt. If anything happened to you, I don’t think I could bear it.”

She hugged him tight, the warmth inside her bursting into fireworks of something more. “I feel the same. That’s why I want to do this meeting together. We’ve already proven we make a pretty good team and I know you have my back. There’s no one I trust more at this point.”

“Agreed.” He kissed the top of her head, then stripped off her sweats before leading her into the steamy tile shower. “For now, let’s see about getting you cleaned up.”

“Aw, darn.” She pressed him back against the tile wall, her slow smile increasing at the feel of his hard length pulsing hot and heavy against her hip. “I was hoping we’d get down and dirty again.”

13

“You sure you want to do this?” Cam asked Everly for the umpteenth time. They were crouched outside her father’s garage in DC, the Aeon parked in the driveway outside the open bay door. The place appeared deserted, at least for now. That would change as soon as their mysterious new buyer, GL574, showed up. If Cam’s hunches were correct this would be the drug dealer’s head honcho. He didn’t like putting

Everly in harm's way, but she'd already gotten them into the locked garage and turned off the security system. No going back now. Still, if there was any way to keep her from danger, he'd do it. "Look, I can probably handle both things myself and—"

"Which part of Hell. No. didn't you understand, baby?" She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Besides, I'll be fine. I know how to take care of myself, don't worry. And you'll have enough on your hands hacking into my father's computer system in the shop."

He wanted to argue, but she was right. In order to pull off what he planned to pull off, he'd need all his brainpower focused on coding. First, he had to bust through her father's firewalls, then he needed to establish a secure connection to the mainframe at Norse Security—with Hunter's help—then, if all went well, he could download the software he needed directly through the Aeon's onboard Wi-Fi, allowing him to manually control the car without actually being inside it.

Everly checked her watch then nodded. "I should get in there. The buyer should arrive any minute. I'll see you on the other side."

"Hey," he said, grabbing her arm before she could walk away. "If things go south, I just want you to know that I really enjoyed our time together last night. I like you a lot and I'd like to spend more time with you when all this is over. If you want—"

The rest of his words were cut off by Everly kissing him. When she pulled away, her sunny smile could've lit the dark night around them for years to come. "I like you too, baby. A lot. And I'd love to see you again." A car approached and she pushed away from him. "But first, we've got some bad guys to catch."

Cam watched her walk safely inside the brightly lit garage then pressed his back to the cold outer wall of the building as a black sedan swerved to a stop beside the Aeon in the driveway. Considering everything that car had been through over the past

seventy-two hours, it looked pretty damned good, but he knew Loki was still going to lose his shit when he saw it. Their mission had been to return the vehicle in the same condition as when it had been stolen—perfect. Now, there were several bullet holes through the trunk, a smashed taillight, numerous scratches and dings to the paint, and a weird smell permeating the inside that Cam could only assume had something to do with the drugs that had been held inside there.

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At any rate, he'd learned his lesson. Tech was his home, where he belonged. He'd had enough of these outside adventures to last him a lifetime. If he could get out of this alive, with Everly by his side and the Aeon relatively intact, he'd consider it a success. He'd deal with Loki's tirades later.

The drivers' side door on the black sedan opened and out stepped one of the two hulking thugs who'd originally shown up at the garage that first night. The guy walked to the back door and opened it. Another man emerged, older, grizzled, with black eyes and salt-and-pepper hair. Maybe five-ten, with a hooked nose and thin lips. He looked familiar, but Cam couldn't quite place him. As quietly as he could, Cam pulled out his cell phone and snapped a quick pic of the man as he eyeballed the Aeon, then sent it through to the database back at Norse Securities. Within seconds, he had a hit. Benedicto Girrelli, a rival mob boss from outside DC, near the Alexandria area.

Great. Just what they needed around here. More mobsters.

A quick Internet search showed he was an enemy of the current DC boss and had recently paid off a huge civil suit settlement to keep the charges hush-hush regarding a new set of larceny, possession, and racketeering charges. Cam sighed and clicked off his phone before shoving it back into his pocket. Now that he knew who they were up against here, he wanted to get inside Everly's father's office and into his computer as quickly as possible. He peeked around the corner of

the building again and saw Girelli and his guard head through the open bay door and into the garage where Evelry was waiting. His chest tightened and adrenaline seared through his blood like lit gasoline. After a quick check of his weapon, Cam sidled

around the corner and over to the edge of the cargo bay door. A glance inside showed the two men standing near a beat-up old Toyota Camry, staring down at Everly's legs visible from beneath the car.

Good girl.

While she kept them occupied, he slipped inside and hid behind a nearby rack of tires stacked full to the ceiling. As Everly slid out from under the Toyota and stood to face Girelli, Cam weaved through the piles of parts and debris in the garage, keeping his eye on the darkened glass of the doorway to the office in the far corner of the room. His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it. Probably Hunter, wondering why he wasn't in position yet.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Girelli, but the price isn't up for negotiation," Everly said, snippets of conversation reaching him through the racks of tools and equipment and over the pounding of blood in his head. "I don't care what kind of arrangement you had with my father before this. I'm in charge of this sale now."

Distracted, Cam kicked a stray wrench laying on the floor with the toe of his boot and sent it skittering across the concrete. He froze, his breath unnaturally loud in his ears. Through a set of tires beside him, he peered through to where Everly and the men stood, all staring now in his direction.

Everly, quick on her feet as always, did her best to cover. "Rats. The whole place is crawling with them. Need to get an exterminator in here next week to handle the problem."

Girelli narrowed his onyx gaze on the rack behind which Cam was hiding and gestured to his guard. The thug walked over and Cam hid in the shadows, breath held, praying he wouldn't be seen. Cold sweat trickled down the back of his neck, his fingers twitching at his sides, ready to pull his gun if needed, but hoping like hell he

wouldn't have to. A shootout indoors would be too dangerous. What if Everly got shot? What if she... He stopped himself before completing that thought, eyes squeezed shut.

The thug looked through the tires on the rack, even stuck his head around behind it, but thankfully didn't see Cam in the dim light of the corner. He strode back to where Girelli and Everly stood waiting, and Cam finally inhaled again. Right. Best get his ass to the office and fast.

While Everly continued to stand firm on their asking price with the buyer, Cam eventually reached the office door and managed to duck inside. It was super quiet in here, nothing but the sound of the air vents above blowing lightly through the papers on the desk. Cam couldn't afford to turn on any lights—the glow from the desktop would be enough of a problem. He managed to move the monitor so it faced away from the door and booted up the computer, waiting impatiently while it ran through its diagnostics before powering up fully. Not exactly cutting-edge technology, but as long as there were network capabilities, he would make do. Once on, he dimmed the screen to its lowest settings, then got to work, opening up a coding screen and logging into the dark web. From there, he pinged the mainframe at Norse Security and waited for Hunter's response. Seconds ticked by like hours and he carefully pulled out his phone from his back pocket to thumb in a quick text. Where the hell are you, H?

Within seconds, a small window appeared on the computer screen asking for his password from Norse Security. With a quick thank you to the gods, he signed in and accessed the files he needed to download. As the transfer ran, his phone buzzed again with a response from Hunter.

Could ask you the same thing, dude. You're late. Everything okay?

Cam chuckled.

Fine. Busy. We'll talk soon.

A beep sounded as the last file completed downloading and Cam got to work unpacking the zip files and feeding them into the Aeon's onboard system. He'd know when it was done by a celebratory honk of the Aeon's horn. Not exactly subtle, but by that point he didn't care. Ducking, he walked over to the door and peered outside to see Girelli and his goon advancing on Everly. Seemed her stall tactics were running out of effectiveness. The thug grabbed Everly's arm and jerked her hard to the side, while Girelli pulled a gun from the pocket of his black blazer. It took every ounce of willpower for Cam to stay put and not bust out there for some serious ass whooping. Still, Everly held her own, proving she was every bit as capable of taking care of herself as she'd said. She twisted fast and jammed her elbow straight into the thug's groin, causing him to let her go as he doubled over in agony. Girelli, however, anticipated her moves and simply raised his gun, pointing the barrel directly between her eyes. The office was soundproof—a feature Cam was sure Everly's crooked father used to full effect in his dirty business dealings—which prevented him from hearing what the other man said. His hand was on the door handle, ready to crack it open so he could rush to Everly's defense, when the computer behind him beeped again. At the same time, Girelli turned suddenly to stare at the Aeon behind him.

Cam was in.

Just in time too, thank the gods. He rushed behind the desk and typed in a flurry of coded instructions then hit send. By the time he was back at the door and had it open, the Aeon was revving its engine, high beams glaring directly at Girelli. Like a machine possessed, the car peeled out, barreling directly ahead toward a frozen Girelli. Cam ran over and grabbed a stunned Everly, tugging her out of harm's way, and the Aeon sped forward in a squeal of tires and burning rubber.

The thug went down first, still keeled over by the jab to his nuts. The Aeon clipped him with the corner of its bumper, sending him sprawling face-first down on the

concrete, his head smacking against the metal bars of one of the tire racks. He didn't move afterward.

Girelli fired a few shots, but they bounced off the car's exterior. He backed up, tried to run, tried to get out of the way, but it was too late. A sickening thud sounded, followed by a bone-smashing crack as Girelli's body was thrown into the air then landed on the pavement hard. The gun clattered away, useless.

Cam yanked out his phone and quickly typed a stop command into the Aeon's programming. Unfortunately, it didn't receive it until after it had crashed into the back wall of the garage, leaving the once pristine hood of the car crumpled and steaming as water from the radiator hissed.

Yeah, Loki was not going to be happy about that at all.

"Hey, sweetheart," Cam said, leaning back to cup Everly's cheeks. "Okay?"

She nodded, staring around at the carnage of the garage. "Better than this place. My dad's going to have a cow when he sees this."

"No worse than Loki's going to freak when he sees the Aeon. I can safely predict they won't be letting me out in the field again any time soon, if ever." He snorted. "Just as well. I think I learned my lesson."

"You did?" She slipped her arms around his waist and stared up at him, an emotion he wasn't quite ready to name yet warming her dark eyes. "And what was that?"

"That sticking with what you're good at is the best idea."

"Huh." She looked around then back at him. "Then I guess it's a good thing you kept me around. I can work out the body damage in the Aeon. No problem."

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“Right.” Cam let her go to pull out his phone and send a quick text to Hunter, letting him know it was all over and the Aeon was secure, if not quite in perfect condition. Seconds later a response came through, not from Hunter, but from Loki. On our way. Cam turned off his phone and returned it to his pocket, then slipped his arm around Everly and led her toward the still-open cargo bay door. “Glad to hear that. I’ll let you talk to my boss then when he gets here and explain how you’ll get that car back to new again.”

“Piece of cake.” Everly laughed. “I’m used to handling mobsters and thugs on a daily basis. One grumpy security guy shouldn’t be a problem.”

As they walked outside into the cool, dark night, Cam snuggled her closer into his side, feeling lighter and happier than he had in years, despite the mess they’d left insi

de and the explanations that lay ahead. “Did I mention Loki isn’t exactly a typical security guy? He’s an ex-SEAL too.”

Everly scoffed. “Well, I handled you just fine, didn’t I?”

Beneath the soft yellow glow of a nearby streetlight, Cam turned to face her, pulling her closer in his arms. “That you did, sweetheart. That you did.”

14

Six months later...

Cam pulled his Camry into the parking lot of the industrial park where the Norse

Security offices were located. Instead of pulling into his assigned spot near the door, however, he continued on around the building to a more industrial section of the complex and one metal warehouse-style building in particular.

A large sign had been hung over the two cargo bay doors at the front. Everly's Garage and Body Shop, it proclaimed in bold, red block letters, with the phone number and website listed underneath. The website had been his idea. He'd designed it, of course, with all the latest features and the best SEO money could buy to draw in customers to his girlfriend's business.

In the end, Loki hadn't been nearly as pissed as Cam had expected about the shredded Aeon, perhaps in part due to Everly's reassurances that she could repair all the damage done. Sure enough, she had—or would—once he finished with reinstalling the software that had been stripped along with all the damaged processors during the rebuild process. That's why he was here today, in fact.

Well, that, and to bring his sweetheart lunch.

He parked and got out, reaching back inside to grab the bag of fast food he'd picked up on his way in and also a very special present he hoped he was brave enough to give her today.

Inside, he found a scene not so different from that first one all those months ago, the night he'd met Everly again, the night he'd rediscovered his heart and his true calling. Cam waved to the other mechanics working for Everly then headed over to the far corner of the long space where the Aeon was sitting. A familiar pair of shapely legs, clad in soft, tight, faded denim stuck out from beneath the front bumper of the car.

"Time for a break, sweetheart," he said, stopping near her feet.

"Just one more second, baby," Everly said from under the vehicle. "Need to tighten

this bolt a tad more.”

He glanced around while she finished her work. Unlike her father’s place, Everly kept her garage spic and span, everything in its place and scrubbed clean. All the work bays were full of vehicles and mechanics busy working on them. In the short time she’d been open, Everly’s Garage and Body Shop had already become a customer favorite, being voted most affordable and most reliable in a local township newspaper poll. Cam was so damned proud of her, he could nearly burst.

“Done!” Everly said, wheeling out from under the Aeon on a flat wooden dolly. “I’m glad you’re here. I’m starving.”

“Me too.” Cam took his time walking around the car, admiring her work. From the paint job to the replaced taillight and hood area, it looked as good as it had that night they’d stolen it from her dad’s garage. Funny, but in a weird twist of fate, the government hadn’t wanted it back after Cam had wrecked it into a brick wall. They’d requisitioned it off and purchased a new vehicle, decommissioning this one. Even though it was perfectly good again. Would’ve been a waste too, if Cam hadn’t talked Loki into letting him buy it—on an installment plan, of course. Everly had chipped in too, saying it would be their first real purchase together as a couple.

Cam traced his fingers over the sleek lines of the vehicle, loving everything about it. Everything about the woman who’d fixed it up and given it new life again too. Honestly, for a geeky kid who’d grown up watching old 80s TV shows on cable, the Aeon was about as close to having his own real-life Knight Rider car as he was ever going to get. Now, if he could just get her to talk to him like the TV car had, he’d be all set. Considering the level of technology Cam planned to install on her, she just might take AI voice technology to a whole new level.

“If you’re done drooling over your new baby, c’mon in the office so we can eat before it gets cold,” Everly said, wiping her hands on a rag as he trailed behind her. “I

need to talk to you about something too.”

“Oh, okay.” His stomach dropped to somewhere near his toes. In Cam’s experience, those words weren’t necessarily good. And yeah, maybe they had been living together blissfully for the past four months, and yes, maybe she was his best friend and confidant—other than the guys. But was it possible Everly wasn’t as happy about being with him as he was about being with her? Lord knew she could do so much better than an ex-solider like him. He unpacked the Italian grinders he’d picked up for them, then took a seat beside her in front of her desk. “What’s up?”

She fidgeted under his gaze, which was weird. Everly never fidgeted. His tension grew as she toyed with the paper and foil wrapping her sub, the scent of caramelized onions and peppers filling the air from their food. “Well, the thing is, I’m late.”

“Late?” He frowned, wanting to pull her into his lap and kiss away the tiny lines forming between her dark brows. “For what? A meeting? A payment on this place?”

“No.” Everly kept her gaze steadfastly on the toes of her black boots. “My period. I’m late this month. I swear to God I never lied to you. I’ve been on birth control the whole time. The pill plus you usually use a condom and well...” She shrugged and shook her head. “I finally went to the doctor yesterday to be sure and—” Everly threw her hands up in exasperation. “He said I’m about six weeks along.”

Cam blinked at her a moment, her words slowly sinking into his befuddled brain. “Wait. Are you telling me you’re pregnant? We’re going to have a kid?”

She gave a little nod, still staring at her toes.

“Jesus,” he whispered, stunned. A dad. He was going to be a dad. Cam opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, words failing him. “Wow.”

“Listen, I know you love your schedules and plans and this wasn’t on the radar at all and I understand if—”

Before he could rethink his actions, Cam was on his knees before her, the small black velvet box he’d been carrying in his pocket for days now in his hand. The diamond solitaire engagement ring inside glittered beneath the overhead florescent lights. “Marry me.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:14 am

Now it was Everly's turn to look stunned. Her gaze darted from Cam to the ring then back again. "Why? I don't want you to rush into anything or feel pushed into it because of what I just told you."

"You think I walk around with five-thousand dollars in jewelry on me for no reason?" He gave her a sincere grin. "Everly Knight, I've loved you for as long as I can remember. You were my fantasy girl in high school and then I got to meet you and get to know you during the whole Aeon mess and these past six months living with you have been the happiest of my whole goddamned life. Please say you'll marry me and make me the happiest man in the universe. And not because of the baby or because of anything else, other than that you love me too and want to be with me. Forever."

Tears gathered in her beautiful brown eyes and she reached out a shaky hand to trace her fingers over the lovely ring. "Oh, Cam. I love you too. So much it hurts. I'd be honored to be your wife."

Elated beyond anything, Cam wrapped his arms around her and eased her down to the floor in front of him, pressing her tight to his chest as he kissed her tenderly. "I can't wait to have a kid with you."

"Me too." She laughed through her tears while he slid the ring onto her finger then kissed her again. "To our future."

Cam placed his hand gently over her stomach and smiled. "To our future. All three of us."

End of Ride with the SEAL