



Saving Finley

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action

Description: This is your formal invitation to the party.

Gifts mandatory.

Your RSVP is confirmed.

Jac laid the note with the rest of them and paced the room. They had become ominous, and this one scared the hell out of him. Gifts? It could not be good.

For the first time since they had received these notes, something made sense in an indescribable, jarring way. This one was happening. No more games, except this was the most messed up game of his life.

“Oh, God, Jac. Finley and Storm have been kidnapped.”

Jac rubbed his neck and waited as his wife sent out the alarm.

“Game on. This is my family and my house you walked into with your sickness. You started it. I’m ending it. Watch your back because we are going hunting.”

The hunt is on to find the kidnappers who threaten Finley’s security. The team and their women join forces to figure out who the aggressors are. If it isn’t a concussion, kidnapping or being shot at, or a bomb going off, or physical attacks that get in the way. Finley is hoping for her security and her happily ever after. Unfortunately, there is plenty more in store for her, Levi and Cash before they can reach for the brass ring of forever.

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Prologue

Two weeks earlier

Finley looked across the room for someone she knew to join her uncomfortable situation. She wasn't without skills, being a prior active-duty Marine, but she hated to make a scene when she didn't have to. She prided herself on creating an exit without mess. Tonight might not be one of those times.

Looking at the hall where the bathrooms were located, Finley wished she'd gone with the two women who'd sat on either side of her. They were acquaintances she'd met at one of Ivy's yoga classes. Yoga helped with her shoulder and strengthening her core without putting too much stress on the sometimes-cranky joint.

The women, Karleen and Linda, were being harassed, and it was obvious to Finley when she entered the bar that no one was coming to their rescue. So she joined the fray and changed the man's mind.

"Hey, Karleen, Linda. Sorry, I'm late. Walk with me to the bar, and let's get some food to go with our beverages tonight. I hear they have some craft beers that sound interesting." The relief on the women's faces was unmistakable. Finley looked back over at the man bothering the two women and smiled. "Sorry, I'm going to steal the ladies away. Have a good night."

"Hey, we were chatting. Go on and get your food and drinks. I'll watch out for these two until you get back."

Finley firmed her tone. “I want them to help me decide which craft beer to try. It’s a girl thing.” She had the women start with her again.

He grabbed the back of Finley’s shirt. “Hey, I don’t put up with bitchy women.”

“Good, because I don’t put up with men being dicks.” She twisted and kneed him in the jewels, and when he let go, she led her new friends to the bar.

The bartender nodded in her direction and then proceeded to fill their order. Now, the two women had gone to the bathroom to regroup, and one not-unattractive man moved to sit on Karleen’s vacated bar stool next to Finley. He wasn’t ripped like most other men in her sphere, nor did he seem to carry himself as confidently as the men in her life, but she didn’t feel the need to roll her eyes.

“Hey, I saw what you did over there,” he said.

“Did you?” she replied. Her sixth sense perked up, and her gut began bubbling as another man sat on the other side of her on Linda’s vacated stool. Where were those ladies?

The new man spoke. “You’re kinda hot with that fast move you did back there.”

“Look, he was harassing and wouldn’t take the wordno. So I stopped him. That’s it. Now, if you will excuse me...”

Finley tried to get up from the stool when each man touched the thigh closest to them and squeezed. She put her weight back onto the padded seat and immediately felt a man behind her.

“Hey, tough stuff, remember me?” said a voice behind her. The jackass. He must have finally gotten his breath. So they were all ganging up on her. Wusses. She

calculated the best course of action and then put it into play.

She placed her hands on the bar top as though she were reaching for her beer and made her calculated move. She suddenly threw her fisted hands back into the faces of the men flanking her and threw her head back hard. She caught the original idiot's mouth and chin, and she hoped some of his nose. He yelped like the wimp he was. She slipped off the stool, sliding between the men, and backed away from the trio, trying to reassess what she should do next.

The entry door opened, and another trio of men surrounded her before she processed things. Men she knew. The heart pound that she was feeling began to slow. Levi, Cash, and Mark stood, larger than life, between Finley and the men she wounded. There was a pride in what she had done when necessary but a relief that she had backup.

Mark spoke. "Gentlemen, it appears that you have met your match. This woman is no longer in your sights for anything, ever. Understood?"

They mumbled something like agreement as they pulled themselves together.

Cash spoke first. "You okay, darlin'?"

"I' good." She watched the men slink away to a table far in the rear of the place. "But I'm done here."

"Hang out with us for a few while we get a beer. It's been a long week," said Cash. Levi slipped his arm around her waist and leaned in. "You sure you' good?"

She nodded. Mark grabbed Finley's glass and ordered three more beers. He pointed to a table that they all headed toward. "I need to check on Karleen and Linda. They've been gone a long time."

“Want me to come with you?” asked Levi.

“In the ladies?”

“Won’t bother me. Do you want me there?”

She kissed his concerned lips. “Nope.” She’d never done that spontaneously before. It was a little possessive and a little ballsy. She needed that control tonight.

The bathroom was empty. They must have slipped out the back for safety. She hoped she hadn’t been set up. As she quickly remembered their faces when dealing with the man’s aggressiveness, she was sure it wasn’t. They were just frightened. It was unlike the similar experience she had had while stationed overseas. She shook that memory from her mind. She’d come out on top then, too, but barely, and she had no backup. She preferred the illusion of backup, even if she hadn’t needed it.

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She came back to the table, and the men pried the story out of her.

“Fuckers. I should go over there and teach those assholes some manners,” said Levi.

“Like swearing in front of ladies?” asked Mark.

“Message received,” said Levi. “Sorry, Fin.”

“I don’t care about that. I’m still angry about men who think they have the right to invade women’s spaces and ignore the word no.”

“Agreed. Now, tell us what happened tonight.” prompted Mark.

As she relayed the events, the men made grunts, and they cast disgruntled looks over at the men until, just before Fin and the guys were about to leave for home, the disrespectful trio left the bar by the furthest route from Finley’s group as they could. Mark’s group laughed as they watched the men leave.

Cash had quietly rubbed her thigh most of the time they were at the table, and Levi had his hand on her neck. If Mark noticed, he didn’t let on, but she knew that observation was a honed skill for these guys. The move of possession left her confused, but she didn’t make any attempt to stop the contact with either man. For the first time since she’d left home, she felt she was cared for in more ways than an employee or friend. This felt more intimate, and Finley knew, as she bade goodbye to everyone, that she was in trouble because she liked it. So much.

One week earlier

Finley put her little charge down to sleep, grabbed her monitor, and brought it with her as she closed the nursery door behind her. Storm Reynaud, son of Jacquard and Charlotte Reynaud, known as Sharlee to all but her husband, was an easy toddler. He'd had an early dinner and fell asleep mid-bite. He'd be up later to enjoy being the center of attention along with Mark and Jessie's newborn, Anora.

Jac and Sharlee were a dynamic couple who, together with some very active prior military colleagues, kept the world safer and, at times, their world a little too chaotic. At present, however, Jac was making a racket about mysterious notecards with cryptic messages that seemed to be coming from some unknown source. There was no threat, but it left the reader with a sense of foreboding or at least unease, and that irritated the normally even-keeled man. They were all just a hair more cautious safety-wise.

But tonight was Friday night, and they were all going over to Mark and Jessie's house for a welcome baby party. Little Anora Jenson was two months old today. Jessie was the agency accountant, and Mark was one of Jac's best security agents. Jessie seemed fully recovered and was ready for some socializing. Because she was still nursing and Mark didn't want her to be away from their two-month-old for long, she'd be returning to the office next week with little Anora and her nanny in tow.

Sharlee had set up a nursery for Storm in what used to be the smaller of three conference rooms to be used when she was in the office for more than six hours. She didn't want to be too far from her toddler on most days. The room was situated next to her technology department, which consisted of her and Kaden for direct team support. Kaden was boots on the ground as a trained operative when needed. He'd recently added a drone to his skill set, which had proved invaluable when Oakley needed it most. They also hired two techs who mostly kept maintenance schedules, onboarding, and general networking questions for the building.

Finley enjoyed the change in scenery when they went to the agency. That's where she first met Levi, a former Marine and an agency employee. Sharlee had gone into the office, bringing Storm and Finley with her. Things had continued from there, and now she and Levi were friends with benefits. It was a comfortable relationship that asked no more from the two of them than sex. Finley didn't know what passionate sex really was, but this good sex.

Levi had become more intense the last few times they'd "benefitted" each other, and she wondered what that was about. Was he getting feelings for her? She had begun to worry about that on her part as well and considered if it was time to end the physical part of their relationship. It would put them firmly back in the friend category, but she struggled because she didn't think that was what she truly wanted. Her phone rang.

"Hey, Levi. I was just thinking about you."

"Hmm, was it hot and nasty or boring and mundane?"

"Those are my choices?" she asked with a smile. "I'll have to plead the fifth, then."

"Withholding vital information, huh? I've got a method that will surely get the truth out of you."

She laughed. "It will have to wait because we're busy tonight. Have a gathering to attend, remember?"

"That's tonight?" She could hear in his voice that he was rubbing the back of his head in frustration. "Hell, I've got to go. I'm not even home yet, and I need to get cleaned up. I'll see you there, but don't think I'll forget you withholding information."

"What are you going to do about it?"

“I was thinking I’d bring in my enforcer to make you sorry you weren’t honest with me.”

“Haha. And who is your enforcer?”

“Cash.”

She laughed. “Whatever.”

He got serious. “I will.”

“Do it,” she said with a bravado she wasn’t sure she could back up.

Was she ready for that? Until recently, she’d only occasionally caught a good look at Cash when he’d taken on the house security. She hadn’t interacted with him. Jac usually assigned house security in rotation, but Cash came the most often. She wondered if he did that so he could spend more time in her company.

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During the bar incident, she hadn't given much thought to the possessive way he kept his hand on her, rubbing her thigh. But now, it was clear that he had staked a non-verbal claim of some kind. Since then, he'd touched her more in passing, rubbed her neck, and been more protective. He had a way about him, and he was watchful, not just because it was his job but because he'd been kind and considerate with that expected touch of bossy all Jac's security experts had.

Did she want to bring in another person to their dynamic? Was that what Levi was suggesting? Cash had been there when she had faced down bullies in the bar. She knew he was interested in her, and that night a few weeks ago, it felt right, but until Levi explained that he and Cash were childhood friends, she was worried it would cause trouble, and drama was not her thing. Did this mean they were okay sharing her? The evidence suggested that exact situation.

To her amazement, since that bar incident, Levi relaxed more with Cash around and allowed him to slide into their outings when they were both available. Cash had even kept her company recently when Levi was out of town. She didn't need the protection, but the companionship was enjoyable, and she found she looked for him when she wasn't on duty.

And they were so different, each feeding a need that she had. He wanted to be seen as a strong, capable woman with skills that complemented her partners, and Levi was that man. He was protectant but careful to allow her to be her own woman. He would place his hand on her neck as much to stake a claim as to show his dominance to the world, but not to her. He didn't need to demonstrate his position with her because they were partners in the truest sense.

Cash had shown himself to be more comforting, more nurturing than she would have thought Jac's people to be. Cash, when working, had a straightforward manner that completely disappeared when he was on alert. He was just as kickass as any of the other security guys, but like the men in the Alpha group, when they found their forever woman, it all changed. The world got the brick wall effect, but their women got the coddling, the chiding, the rules.

Her belly tightened, and she felt that familiar tingle between her thighs when she considered being with both men. Would it be more friends with benefits like she and Levi? She didn't think she could do that, or would they want to be a trio? Is that what you would call it? She was sure there was a little wetness between her thighs as she spent a couple of minutes envisioning it.

She hadn't told either man that she was looking for something more than companionship. With Levi, it had been effective stress relief, but she wanted to see what it was like to have more. Would it be too much? Likely. She was attracted to both, but they were alpha males, defined as too much of everything in a relationship. Did she want that in her life? Two bossy men? Was she brave enough to give it a try?

"Fin? Hey, I won't bring him if it's too early to explore. Or if it turns you off. It's not an issue, really." Levi's voice startled her. He was still on the phone.

"Let me get used to the idea. I can talk to you later tonight. Besides, Cash is coming with us tonight, so we'll talk."

"Okay. I'll see you in about an hour."

As soon as she hung up, she didn't want to try. It was too far off the mainstream to consider it, right? Finley had enough of the segregation mentality when she was enlisted. She certainly didn't want that to be a thing that caused her to lose the job she loved. Should she talk with Sharlee about things? Probably not. Sharlee spoke to Jac,

and Jac had a big mouth sometimes.

At first, Finley was hesitant to add Cash to their outings, and he hadn't suggested more than friendship.

Sex with Levi certainly hadn't included anyone else. No sex with anyone had ever involved more than one partner, but now she wondered what it would be like. She tried to guess what Jac and the rest would say. Something to ponder another time. It would work better if she could relegate that conversation in her head to a more appropriate time if there were one. Levi had started that whole idea of two in her head again, and damn if she couldn't get rid of it.

Cash, a childhood friend of Levi's, had joined Jac's band of merry men about a year ago. He was on a different team, but had begun to hang out with them. Finley was once again tangling with two men, but it wasn't just to date; this was for both mentogether. Maybe she had always wanted to try being with two men at the same time. The two men were comfortable with each other, but was she?

She hadn't been more intimate with Ryker than a kiss and a little fondling. She was glad now that they hadn't since he'd found Oakley. In the last few months, though, she and Levi had agreed on a friends-with-benefits arrangement when it suited both of them, but no expectations to get more serious. It was a means to find release, but it hadn't been as good of an idea these last few days, and she didn't know why. And last weekend, Levi had promised "more to come." She didn't know exactly what that meant, but she hoped they would have a chance to discuss it tonight, maybe with Cash.

As a kid, Cash moved into Levi's hometown, and they had become fast friends that continued into adulthood. Levi had invited Cash to go out with them a few times, and it was clear how much the men were bonded. When she ended things with Ryker and turned fully towards Levi, Cash was right there to fill in Ryker's place but standing

next to Levi instead of in competition with him.

Tonight, they would enjoy themselves. Jessie had been pressuring her husband to allow them to get together for weeks. Mark finally relented. They all needed this. Ryker and Oakley had gone through a rough time recently from the radical group mixed up with psychotropic medications. She'd been kidnapped, drugged, harassed, and more. Everyone had rallied around, but it was touch and go for too long. All was resolved, and things have settled back down. It's time to relax and enjoy themselves.

Finley was off the clock after five most nights, and glancing at the wall clock, she was almost there. Sharlee was home already, getting ready for the party, and then she would take the monitor, and Finley would shower and change. They used the monitor as the official handoff if the toddler was sleeping.

The plan was they would have dinner at Jessie's, and that meant another hour of feeling famished. She'd skipped the afternoon snack, and she felt it now. Finley had a healthy appetite, and waiting another hour was risking a group of hangry people before they were fed, including her. She might grab a little bit of cheese before they left.

In the years after a complicated few years in high school, college was the last place Finley wanted to go, so she joined the Marines against her parent's wishes. Basic wasn't difficult as she had always been athletic and enjoyed being outdoors and moving. However, women were still seen as not capable in some areas of the Corps.

She wasn't a docile woman, but she wasn't a bitch either, and she spoke up when necessary to not get walked on. Some respected that, others... didn't. Competition was fierce, and the politics even worse. She wasn't influenced by whose dick was bigger, and it had cost her. She'd met some incredible people, but the few jerks ruined it for the many good.

After three different assignments in eight years and not any significant improvement in the way she was treated, Finley decided to call it quits. Just before she finished her enlistment, she'd torn her rotator cuff, which gave her a medical discharge. Instead of working with her, they eagerly approved a medical discharge without making sure she was set up with restorative therapy.

So she found herself leaving with some monthly compensation for a bum shoulder, excellent gun skills, disillusionment, and disruptive memories from a deployment that occasionally lived in her dreams, but not much else.

As soon as she was separated from the Marines, she got an attorney, a second opinion, and a shoulder expert, and she worked hard to get some stability in it. She was at probably eighty-five to ninety percent, and that was much better than she'd even hoped. She was satisfied with that.

One day, soon after she had separated from the military, Ryker Bennett, the attorney she engaged to handle the disability paperwork for her, was talking to someone outside his office. They seemed friendly. She overheard the man say he needed to find a nanny to put up with them and their crazy lifestyle. Finley always enjoyed kids, even though having one of her own wasn't in her life plans. She had several much younger siblings, which helped with her experience when she considered applying for the job. What else did she have to do right now?

She'd stopped Jac before he got into his car and handed him her card. On it was nothing more than her picture, name, phone number and a quote, "Once a Marine, always a Marine."

"I might be interested in your nanny search," she said to the striking man, who she was sure was overly arrogant and in complete confidence of his control of his environment.

She hesitated a moment, wondering if she would be opening herself up to another degrading experience, until he smiled. Jac's smile was brilliant, and she didn't use that adjective often. He shook her hand, took the card, and glanced at it. He looked at her up and down as though seeing into her soul. It should have creeped her out, but oddly, it simply gave her a feeling of trust and safety.

“Not interested in joining one of my security teams?”

“Nope.”

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He paused, then nodded and reached inside his jacket, pulled out a pen to write his phone number on the back of her card, and said, “Call me tomorrow, and we’ll talk.” She did.

Before Storm Reynaud was one month old, he had a nanny, and she had a civilian job that introduced her to all kinds of crazy friendships. Friends who had skills, like she did. They loved deeply, and their tight circle of friends had grown to include more wives and girlfriends. Finley thought Jac was overprotective of his little family, but as time passed and the things she had experienced while nannying little Storm continued, she was convinced he was right on target with his concerns.

She fell into the rhythm of the crazy household, glad the Marines had taught her well, but while she enjoyed training with the guys of Jac’s original team, her shoulder gave her an occasional twinge. The guys would scold her, like she was one of theirs to protect, and make her sit out of physical contact too often or go easy on her, which was unacceptable, so she went a different direction and learned Krav Maga on her own. And she’d gotten good. Professional Ivy, good.

Jac hadn’t agreed with her bowing out of the workouts so often and called her on it just the other day. “Where have you been, Finley? I should dock your pay for missing so many formations.”

Finley laughed. “I’m a civilian.”

“Hell, woman, we’re all civilians, but that doesn’t mean you should stop your PT.”

“I’ve been working on my Krav Maga. It’s great to have when you need it. Want me

to show the guys more moves?”

“I’ll see if they are up to being humiliated.”

She laughed again. “Men. It’s not a manhood thing. It’s a skill set.” Jac just laughed and went to work. Yeah, she loved this motley family.

Finley enjoyed challenging Ivy, Kaden’s wife, who taught Krav Maga, among other martial arts disciplines, and the other ladies, as their prowess improved. Finley still showed up occasionally with one of the teams to participate in their physical training routines. She liked teaching them a new move and watching the guys try to show each other up. Testosterone at its finest.

Running was fine, but more than an occasional obstacle course was all they would let her do. She didn’t like running, but it served a purpose, so she sometimes added it to her private routine. Levi and Ryker had joined her occasionally until Ryker found Oakley. Now Cash had joined her yesterday. It was primarily accomplished in companionable silence, which she enjoyed.

At first, she and Levi had a good time with no entanglements. Levi didn’t seem like he was into anything but a good time. She kept telling herself that was all she was interested in, too, but now that it wasn’t just Levi but Cash as well, she had begun to pay more attention. Seems so did Levi. He touched her more than before. Had become a little protective and a lot dirtier talking. Probably Cash’s influence.

She wasn’t sure how she liked the protector part, but she’d be lying if she didn’t get a little thrill from his increased attention. Cash touched her easily, scolded just as effortlessly, and she wouldn’t be surprised if he spanked sometimes. Levi was not that kind of man. When they had gone from strictly friends and relief sex to dating, things were stilted at first, but now she thought they were over that first bit of awkwardness.

On the last date, it had been fun with both men, and she was surprised at how much she enjoyed the prospect of romancing the two. Two men. That still stopped her, but Cash was natural in his interactions with her, and Levi was now as well. It was falling into a rhythm she'd have never thought possible.

"Finley, where is everyone?" asked Jac as he strode in the garage door. She didn't know what Jac's net worth was, but she imagined millions, if not billions. His home and business certainly spoke of wealth. And she was well paid.

"Spring and Florent are packing some treats to take with us. Sharlee should be finished primping soon; Storm is napping," she said, handing the monitor to Jac with a smile. "Tag, you're it. I'm headed for the shower."

"Got it. I'll head up with you so I can do the same. Ready in an hour, you think?"

"Sounds about right." Finley headed off to her suite next to Storm's room, and Jac continued on to his and Sharlee's suite at the far end of the hall.

Stripping down and starting the shower was her daily signal to change gears and relax. It was Friday, so that would carry through until Monday morning if all went well. She was free evenings and weekends unless there was something going on and she was called into action.

Standing under the hot, invigorating spray of the massaging shower heads, of which there were three in a shower the size of her entire barracks room, allowed Fin to release her stress and allow her mind to drift back to the men who wanted in her life. Both were self-assured to a fault sometimes, cocky really, but it seemed to be a prerequisite to working for Jac. She knew they both toned it down when they went out as a group. When each performed their job, they could be perfect gentlemen, but their protective mannerism was kind of nice when someone would try to hit on her and not hear her "go away."

Paying attention to her hygiene, she finished her hair and the rest of her shower, foregoing addressing that insistent tingle between her thighs at the thought of Levi meeting her sexual needs. Sharlee said she was playing with fire to leave things undefined. Maybe she was. But Sharlee had no idea what the whole situation was.

“Fin, get an understanding before you play for too long. Guys are jerks when it comes to their penises. You have to rope their dicks and put boundaries around them before you let them get too much freedom.”

Finley had laughed. “But what if I like the free-range lifestyle?”

Sharlee had given her a considering look and then shook her head. “You don’t, really. It’s carefree in some ways, but I’ve watched you for a little while now, and you want more. Ryker wanted more, and you were afraid of it, so you backed away. I’m glad it worked out how it did, but first, look inside yourself and decide what you really want and need. Not what looks safe, but what you desire for the long haul. That is what will define your next move.”

Finley had smiled and finished lunch, but she found herself giving that conversation more and more thought. And it confused the hell out of her. What would Sharlee say if she told her she was attracted to two men, and they knew it and weren’t freaked out about it? In fact, they had suggested a ménage. Somehow, without having told her boss, she figured she might already know.

Stepping out and grabbing a heated towel from the rack, she reminded herself that living with Jac and Sharlee was like being a hotel resident. She dried her body and then her hair before moving on to the next stage. Finley rarely did more than apply blush and mascara and dress the most comfortably she could get away with.

She could hear Storm waking and his mama scooping him up to walk down the hall to their bedroom, talking intently to him in almost a conspirator’s whisper. Sharlee

was an unstoppable powerhouse on the computer, but to those she loved, all her tenderness could come out. Storm was getting a dose of it now. Fifteen minutes later, Finley was ready to go.

“Hey, did you have an outfit you wanted him to wear tonight?” Finley asked Sharlee.
“I can grab it for you.”

“Nope, I found something. Can you take his bag down when you go?”

“I can. I think Spring has the little prince’s snacks and juice supplies ready. Need an evening bottle?”

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Sharlee began walking toward Finley, stopping at the nursery room door to take a final look in to make sure she didn't forget anything. Not that a mere look would give her that answer. This nursery was fit for three young princes, full of everything a child could need or want.

"Yes, but I'm trying not to have a rescue bottle at night. I'm having limited success."

"Well, his bag is stocked, so no worries."

"Jac, we need to get going," said Sharlee as the two women and toddler descended the stairs. She continued. "Cash is on protection detail this month, so he knows the routine. Dawn is gone for the weekend, so we must clean up any messes ourselves," Sharlee reminded Finley, extending her conversation to Florent, Spring, and Cash as he entered the room.

"Got it, but you need to tell Jac. He's like that kid's book where everyone makes a huge mess, only he doesn't clean it up," said Cash.

"Lord, don't I know it," said Sharlee.

Cash gave Finley a knowing look. She wasn't the neatest person outside of her own room and the nursery, either. She ignored him until he leaned into her and said for her ears only, "I'll clean up for you, baby, but I'll punish you if it's too bad." His lips swept past her ear, and he stood back up. "The cars are out front," announced Cash. The man had made her panties wet, and now he was all business. His former CIA background showed up strongly when needed, without any transition.

“Ren, are you driving?” asked Sharlee.

“I am, in case Spring wants an earlier night.” He was always putting Spring’s needs ahead of his. Finley smiled.

“Come on, people. It’s time to go,” said Jac as he took the stairs in a controlled but quick descent. He grabbed his son and talked to him as Sharlee put his son’s coat on and wrapped him in a blanket, plopping a bright knitted cap on his head.

Jac’s phone was ringing, and then Sharlee’s cell started. Finley’s and Cash’s phones began to go off. Jac shifted Storm in his arms and answered his phone, as did the others. They could hear gunfire in the distance on their property.

“Fuck.” Jac began corralling the small group. He handed Storm to Finley. “Everyone to the safe room. Lock us down, Cash.”

Cash was already doing that. Iron grates fell down in front of the bullet-proof windows and the steel doors. Finley was only used to seeing it when they tested the system every month. It still amazed her how this estate could be shut down like Fort Knox. Then there was the safe room.

Finley ran to grab the jug of water and the can of toddler formula still on the counter when Sharlee took Storm from Finley’s arms. She followed everyone inside the hidden room that was set up for just about any disaster. It was like an apartment, stocked for ten or twelve people. Jac was thinking of expanding it, taking the empty, unused part of the large pool area for the extra space. Finley knew that was a done deal now.

Once everything was locked down, Storm and Spring were playing over by the crib set up for him while his parents started firing up the computer system. The toys were housed inside the crib, giving the two lots to explore. Finley met Cash’s protective

stance with her own battle-ready posture. She'd not seen him in full defender mode. He was impressive. Hard. Intense. A little tremor went through her.

Jac was in mission form. "Who called you, Cash?"

"Johnson at the gate. He said they discovered someone climbing the fence, and there were a couple more nearby. They have alerted the police, but it's Friday night."

"Who fired?"

Cash answered his boss. "Not the gate."

Jac turned to his wife. "What about you, Charlotte?"

She spoke without taking her eyes off her computer screens set up in the safe room. "Becky said someone had shot at them as they were pulling out of their garage."

"Sitrep on them?" asked Jac as he answered another call.

"All good. They are inside and in their safe room. I'm trying to connect with everyone. Mark is connected and safe but still situating Jessie, the nanny, and the baby. Cops called."

Jac added more. "Kaden just checked in. It's all good there, but it's the same story. Shots as they were leaving. Police have been called."

A voice recording came through the room. "Hey, this is Levi. Tell Jac I just got my tire shot out when I was pulling onto the road. It does not look like a random drive-by. I'm safe in the apartment building, and the cops called. Turning on my camera. Connect me when you can."

Monroe spoke over the camera at his house. “Hey, I think someone is pissed off at us. I’ve gotten several messages to dial in, and I think we didn’t get shot at because we just moved into our new house. No safe room yet, so I might rethink this tomorrow. Mal doesn’t need the stress, and I don’t need to worry about her safety, and with the baby coming, fuck, I didn’t think this out well.”

“Yeah,” said Jac. “I think you need to come this way once things calm down until your safe room is finished and things set up properly. That might be a couple of weeks.”

“Right. We’ll figure it out.”

Garrett came over to his camera feed. He was not happy. “Callie tried to fucking follow the shooter here. A family of four had just gone inside the building when we exited. I had to chase after my girl as she tried to take the bad guy down.”

“Listen, no one shoots at me and expects nothing in return. Besides, a bullet hit the building, and a piece of brick flew through the air and hit G-Man here.”

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“Well, while she was giving chase, I did get a partial plate. Not much to go on, but it’s something. Woman, I’m going to scorch your ass. Get out of the damn window.”

“I’m watching to see if they come back.”

Garrett grumbled and left the camera view. A muffled smack followed by Callie’s surprised yell could be heard in the background. No one commented.

“Now, what do we do?” asked Finley.

“Now, we wait for the cops, then we figure this all out,” said Jac.

Sharlee’s phone rang again, and she listened, then held the line as she relayed the information. “Ryker said someone just shot at his car. He’s pretty pissed about it, too. Said he didn’t often have to deal with your messes, but since he hasn’t pissed anyone off recently, it must be you.”

“Right. Make sure he calls the police and lies low tonight. We’ll have to rely on LPD because there are too many variables to send our guys out for support. I hope Oakley can handle the safe room confinement for a few hours.”

“She’s not alone, so she should be okay,” said Sharlee. “She can call Jocelyn if things get tough. Being a psychiatrist doesn’t always work when it’s you who needs the coaching.”

Cash spoke up again. “Intruders ran when they heard the sirens. The front gate security has been doing sweeps with the floodlights, and I don’t believe that anyone

got over the fence. They weren't engaged at the gatehouse, so do you figure it was all targeted scare tactics?"

"Sure looks like it," said Jac. "Those damn notes."

Finley joined Spring and Florent and played with Storm. It was apparent that the events shook up Spring. Finley gave Florent the take care of her look, and he nodded.

"Spring, why don't we look in the storage cabinet to see if there is anything to munch on since our dinner is not going to happen tonight?"

"Um, okay."

Finley didn't know why, but her gut was cramped with the suspicion that something terrible had begun. She sought to make eye contact with her employers, who had grown to be her staunch friends, and saw they felt it too. It had been two hours, and no further threat occurred. The police were gone, and Finley glanced at Cash.

"So, can we leave the room now?" she asked when Jac opened the door.

Jac shook his head. "The security team is going to make one last sweep. Cash, you and I can do a sweep of the house and make sure it's secure before anyone leaves this room. Charlotte will do one final sweep with the cameras."

"Jac, the cops have come and gone. Nothing is going to happen. It's quiet on all fronts," said Finley. Yes, she knew she sounded petulant, but she was done hiding.

Sharlee called to her husband, pulling him away before he could answer Finley. "Jac, before you go. Here is what I came up with on the partial plates."

Cash leaned down and spoke into Finley's ear while the others were distracted. "Do

not go anywhere until you are given the go-ahead. This is not worth risking your life or anyone else's. Don't challenge me on this."

She belligerently looked up into Cash's serious face. His "or else" stare was loud and clear. His nose flared like a bull, and his right eyebrow was raised high. He meant business. She'd never felt that belly flop, followed by a tingle between the thighs so strongly with Cash before. How could he be turning her on right now? But there was no denying her body's reaction.

"Finley. Understand me?"

"You aren't bossing me around, Cash Rogers," she whispered fiercely.

"You will listen to me when I am trying to keep you safe. Say yes, Cash, or you will be finding yourself over my knee later while we go over this again."

She huffed out her irritation. "Yes, Cash."

"Good girl. It won't be long before you are pulling out that vibrator and relieving your stress." He smiled and stepped away before she could respond to him.

Her words were whispered but her inner voice was yelling at him that he wasn't the boss of her. The second voice taunted her that she wanted him to be, didn't she? She followed the rules, and it seemed the rules had changed right under her nose. Well, hell. It looked like life was going to be changing a lot in the near future, and she wasn't sure she could weather the change of direction.

Chapter 2

Levi Morrison, the youngest and most recent addition to the Alpha Team, was usually the man in the background. He rarely called attention to himself, and except for

taking his Marine mate Finley out, he didn't seem to have a very intense lifestyle outside of his job, and that was the way he liked it. He was fiercely protective and would take the riskier jobs without hesitation. The rest of the team agreed that the man "had skills." He also had a thing for Finley Royer.

Cash was with her right now, so her safety wasn't in question, and that left him to try to figure out what the hell was going on with the drive-by shootings. The police said they thought it was random, but Levi knew better. Every member of the Alpha team, including Ryker and Jac's house, was targeted. Now, they needed to find out why and put an end to it.

Jac seemed to think that it was tied to those damn notes after the trouble the women had gone through. And maybe he was right, but why? Who would know such intimate details like that? Why now, when there was only business as usual to concentrate on? He walked away from the video feed connecting him to his Sharlee and the team to clear his head.

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In the Marines, he was an Explosives Ordinance Disposal expert, otherwise known as the bomb guy. It was a risky job that he was damn good at, but after being replaced by robotics more and more, he decided he'd try a civilian life. He was young enough to go back in the service if he wanted to, but at twenty-eight, he'd turned into a gym rat, spending all hours coaching flabby executives who had more money than sense.

Then, one day, Jac walked in looking for someone associated with his ongoing job. "You work here?"

Without looking up, Levi said, "Yep."

Jac watched him for a moment before he inquired, "Marine?"

Levi hesitated before looking up and nodding. "That's right, but you weren't."

Jac grinned. "Army."

Levi chuckled. "That's about right."

"Hey, now. Is that any way to talk to someone about to give you a decent job?"

Levi didn't smile. "Got a decent job."

Jac looked around. "No offense, but not for a Marine."

The men talked for a while, and before Jac was distracted by another person in the building, which must have been his original reason for stopping in, he handed Levi a

card. "Call me."

Within two weeks, Jac had him entirely up to speed and on one of his teams. Later, he moved to the Alpha team, and that is where he met Finley, a Marine who had left the Corps a year earlier who'd become Jac's nanny and, later, Levi's friend. The Alpha team that he now felt was his new band of brothers, included Mark, Garrett, Callie, Carter, Kayden, Monroe, Sharlee and Jac. Recently, his school buddy had appeared and was working close security, often for Jac's house.

Others Jac called family included Ryker, who was Jac's closest friend and the agency attorney. He was now with Oakley, who was a psychiatrist. Becky, who belonged to Carter, was Jac's personal assistant. Jessie, who was the agency accountant, had been claimed by Mark. Ivy, who was Kayden's and Finley, Jac and Sharlee's nanny, helped to train the agents in martial arts. Finley could handle herself with firearms, but due to her shoulder, she was no longer a sharpshooter. Mallory was a pharmacist and Monroe's wife. Callie belonged to Garrett. They were all his friends and now had become Cash's friends as well.

Cash came on the video feed and checked in on everyone. "You guys all done with LPD?"

"Yes, I'm thinking of getting Oakley out of lockdown. She's at her limit," said Mallory.

"Do one more recon sweep before letting her out. Stay on here until you stand down," said Jac. "The same goes for all of you. If you've done one final clear, come out of safe mode."

"I'm signing off. I've got too small a place to not know I'm clear," said Levi. "I'll be in first thing. Office or yours?"

“Mine.”

“Roger. Out.” He sent a text to Cash to call him later and fill him in on how Finley and the others were, really. Then he started shutting down his safe room.

Levi had relaxed more around Finley. She had calmed down as well. With her, it had always been more friends than lovers, but at times it was both. Cash had come along soon after Ryker was no longer in the picture. Levi couldn't be happier that Cash was working alongside him, but wanting to share Finley was different.

He didn't have as much concern over Cash being with Finley as he had with Ryker. For some reason, Levi didn't experience any threat of competition for her attention. However, a feeling of rightness had settled over him at the prospect. He'd known about Cash's penchant for sharing in relationships, but Levi had never engaged in a threesome. He'd considered them a few times in the past when the opportunity had come his way. With Finley, he didn't balk at the idea. He still wasn't sure. Intrigued. Hell yeah, especially since the co-dating seemed to be working out well. At least Finley hadn't called a halt yet.

He and Cash had some deep conversations concerning Finley. They'd have more, but for now, things were going along as best as he could have expected. Never one to consider a menage relationship, Finley seemed agreeable to at least explore it. Cash had already had one relationship that had started as a triad before it had ended abruptly, so it seemed as though they were going to feel things out. Levi found that this new concept appealed to him.

Levi couldn't be that soft person that every woman wanted and, if Cash were to be believed, needed. He was sometimes too hard, competitive, played hard, and worked hard. The softer side of love was something he had never learned. Cash filled that gaping hole easily. It seemed like the two of them made a perfect partner for Finley.

Being a securities agency that worked for high-profile people, even occasionally the government on unofficial business, was something his friend characterized as “A lot like the CIA. Only without the internal politics.”

The money was very good. The work was intense at times, but no more so than when the women associated with the team members found trouble. Something that happened more often than he would have liked. Thank God Finley was a sensible, low-key woman with a protected job. Nothing would get to her, but he wasn't a fool. Tonight had rattled him.

Once Levi had switched from another team to the Alpha team, he had decided he would do whatever he could to stay. He liked these guys and enjoyed their work ethic. It aligned with his own values and ethics close enough to make it easy to find his rhythm with each member of the team. Their wives and girlfriends, as they arrived, changed the rhythm of life some, but not too much. The priority switched to home first, then work. A new flip for everyone. His teammates were fierce when in protection mode and untouchable if it concerned one of their women.

They were all good women and the best choice for each of the guys, but while he thought they good matches, he wasn't sure that the team was ready for the complete upheaval in dynamics these proposed life changes would bring to the table. He wondered what they would say about him, Cash, and Finley trying things out.

Since all the engagements and marriages, Levi had learned that women were wily and aggressive when needed, like Fin when pushed. He had already had his fair share of run-ins with his teammates' women, both good and bad, and he was not ready to add one to his inner sanctum. Or at least he had thought that was the case until recently. It seemed that now he was the last man standing; no one was satisfied with leaving him alone.

The women tried to get him to go on dates, check out their friends, and more. They

were the sweetest women he had ever known outside his own mom, and she had actually been less willing to manipulate him than these ladies. As a confirmed bachelor who enjoyed his freedom openly, he had, despite his confirmed single status, begun to crave Finley's company more and more. It shocked him, and now, with Cash, he wasn't convinced it was just circumstance.

Levi looked around himself often and questioned if he was putting things in the right perspective because all his comrades had fallen. Fallen in love, that is. His phone rang, so he grabbed the cell. It was Cash.

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“How’s Finley?”

“Obstinate, as always, but she’s fine. Upstairs, looking for her vibrator if I were to guess.”

“What?”

Cash laughed and explained their interaction, where he promised to spank her.

Levi shook his head. “She’s not into that.”

“I’d argue that point. I think you aren’t into it, but she is very definitely intrigued, at least.”

“She’s going to lay you out one day, man.”

Cash chuckled. “Probably, but then I’ll have a reason to lay my hands on that luscious ass.”

Levi groaned. “Finley isn’t like that.”

“We’ll see. I think you’d be surprised at what she likes. I think she will be too.”

He had a love/hate relationship surrounding Ryker when he’d found his forever because not only did it highlight that Levi was the last man standing, but it also emphasized the fact that he had been using Ryker as a counterbalance with Finley. No more advance than Ryker made, but just enough to keep things even. With Ryker

off the playing field, things were left wide open for Levi, and that scared the hell out of him. And still, he couldn't keep his distance from her. Cash had seemed to be a balancer of a different kind.

He hung up with Cash and hit the shower. He'd done some reps while waiting for the police and keeping an eye on the building he lived in. Time to sleep. Tomorrow would come early, and it would likely be a very long day.

The next morning, after doing a quick check-in with Cash, he headed to Jac's place after changing his tire. While he drove over to Jac's, his mind returned to the thoughts of his relationship with Finley. If he made his relationship known, at least the women would leave him alone.

He'd tried to offset the women's need to get him settled down by spending more time with Finley. She was the only other single woman associated with Jac's inner circle and a Marine to boot, so it seemed natural to gravitate toward her. He counterbalanced the gut twist every time he saw the others enjoy their couple time with Finley when she was available and when she was open to sharing her free time, which had turned out to be often.

As he began to hang out more with Fin, those thoughts and feelings of staying single all the way morphed slowly. In fact, the change was so incremental that he had not yet identified it until Cash had pointed that out. He'd disregarded his observation. The event a few weeks ago had changed all of that. Their connection went so much past both being Marines and even past the connection with Cash and Jac and Sharlee with little Storm. When shit hit the fan last night, he realized he felt things for Finley Royer.

Without realizing it, he had begun to listen for her laugh. A full, throaty sound that invigorated him when he heard it. The trio had begun to communicate through non-verbal messages more often, finding the other's eyes on Finley or hers on them and

erupting little squabbles of disagreement that excited him, not irritated him. Levi acknowledged that he must have been lonelier than he'd thought.

He never felt the pull he saw the other guys deal with when it came to their women. Watching the other guys give in to their women, cater to their needs and wants, and put their lives on the line for them had previously instilled fear, not warm fuzzies. And one by one, he'd watched them fall. Not too long ago, he had thanked God no woman had ever had that kind of power over his emotions. Yet.

Finley was all woman, but she tried to hide that fact behind a solid Oorah, but it didn't fool Levi. He knew that while Finley showed signs of being rough around the edges and on the cool, calculating side, it wasn't true. She was soft and vulnerable in the shadows. Cash had told her she was, but he had to witness for himself.

She'd gotten word that their family dog had passed away of old age after living a full life. Finley had been devastated, and Levi was glad to have witnessed the soft inner center of the woman he had grown very fond of. It was the one and only time he'd seen her cry, and he was glad he did. The thing was, he didn't know what to do about vulnerable Finley. Cash had.

Comforting wasn't his forte normally, but this woman seemed to bring out parts of him he hadn't experienced in years. And thankfully, Cash was all in on the softer side of love. It taught Levi he could have deep compassion and a connection with a woman. Feelings that were previously foreign, but seemed to settle his inner restlessness now. He didn't worry that he couldn't meet that part of Finley, because Cash did. He could be the competitive, motivational one, and Cash could be the disciplinarian and the comforter.

He was glad that Cash had been with her when shots were fired at them. It had been hard enough to have her so far from him when he was overcome with the urge to get to her and protect her. Levi knew that if he couldn't be there, he was thankful Cash

was.

Pulling in front of the gate, security checked his trunk and the inside of his car before letting him enter the estate. Levi appreciated the step up in security for Finley and the other's sake. Time to figure this mess out and put an end to the game others were playing. Cash met him at the door.

"You good?" asked Levi as the men slapped each other's back in an aggressive male hug.

"Yep. Fin is grumpy, but that's to be expected. She didn't get a real dinner, and I told her she couldn't have her way a couple of times. She's punishing me by ignoring me this morning."

"That's her chosen response. She'll get over it."

Cash shrugged. "Her safety comes first. You're the first. Grab some coffee."

Finley was a woman who loved her solitude, but not as much as she might have let on. Levi had watched her as she began to come out of her shell and connect with the team's women. She seemed to enjoy it, and while it appeared to lighten her mood, she was always behind one or two steel protective shields of her own creation. He suddenly wanted to get through those self-imposed barriers.

When had he wanted to slay dragons for her or any woman? Finley was more than capable of slaying her own demons, and he loved that, but he could acknowledge in himself that he wanted to slay those enemies with her. That wasn't affection. That was admiration and comradery. It was some kind of fucked up that his analogy didn't sit as well as it should.

Ryker had spent long hours with Finley. Sometimes, they would all three go places

together, and Levi had wondered if Ryker, who seemed very inclusive, was looking for a threesome. He didn't. He later pulled Levi aside to tell him a few home truths that Levi needed to hear.

“Finley doesn't care about those things many women do. Not the money, the prestige, the nice manners or anything else that impresses her. I'm coffee with cream, and she is dark silk, straight up. I can be as down in the dirt as I need to be, but I won't enjoy it the same as she does. She is a little rough around the edges, and she cultivates that. The bad girl persona isn't who she is. It's the mask she slips on to cover up her more vulnerable center mass.”

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Levi listened but wasn't sure Ryker was on target then, but now? Yeah, and he wouldn't admit it to the man that he'd been right on. "See, I like a tablecloth on the table, and she'd eat lunch standing if it suited her needs. The two of you have similar tastes, lifestyles, and gruffness, and I see a longing for connection in both of you. I also see fear of letting go of your tight control. It is a hard thing to do but take the chance. It will be worth it. Finley might seem all hard planes and sharp edges, but she is also soft and squishy inside. Just don't expect her to let you in enough to see it. You will have to steal the moment to find out. I guarantee that once you do, you'll know."

Levi cocked his head to the side. "She's less bothered with conventions, and you like them."

"Well, more than Finley does, that's for sure. Besides, I want a wife and a family. Finley would likely be fine with the wife part, but kids are not in her future plan. Not now, anyway."

"She's Storm's nanny, so I get not wanting to have more to take care of. I'm not much of a kid person, either. I mean, I like them, but..." he shrugged.

"And that right there is a big reason why you will do well with Finley or someone like her. You like beer rather than wine. You love football and baseball, and I'm more of a soccer guy. I have even gotten excited about a chess game or tennis. Golf..." he just shook his head. "And there is so much more that connects you. She is an intelligent, kick-ass woman. I know she is intensely committed to Storm and his wellbeing. You will do great together. I wish you well."

Levi grinned. "Thanks, man." He sobered. "I think."

Ryker grinned. “Besides, I don’t like to battle for the top position. Not that I have any experience with Finley, but a guy can kind of tell.”

“Eww, shit, man, TMI. But I can hear the insecurity.” Levi laughed. “A man that is confident in who he is doesn’t have to be on top.”

“Yeah, but he wants to be.”

And that was something he knew for sure he wanted, Finley, laid out waiting for him, but she wasn’t a woman that was that open with her sexuality. They fucked, but making love was a different thing. Would she like that? Would she even soften enough to enjoy sex with two? He could see her battling for dominance. He couldn’t surrender it all to her, so he hoped she would accept a shared position. Maybe. They both knew there couldn’t be three leaders. Shit, who knew what was going to happen in this mess? Damn, Ryker had gotten him started thinking all sorts of things concerning Finley.

Now, with these shootings last night, things had gotten dicey. Finley didn’t seem at all fazed by the event, but she hadn’t heard the restrictions yet. She would definitely have something to say, and he didn’t relish the fight ahead. Maybe Jac would take that on before he had to. He was proud of her. Hopefully, life will get back to normal soon. Until then, since Cash was a ready target, she might give Cash a run for his money. Levi knew when to take a step back.

Today, things would go back to routine, business as usual. With no further incidents, there wasn’t anything else to do but resume everyday life. Cash watched Finley as she went about her daily tasks. She was organized, task-oriented, and decisive, and the world would see only those things, but he saw more. Levi was a lot like Finley in that he also took things at face value and tackled them head-on. Levi was learning to go beyond the written page and read between her lines. Cash already did.

Finley might not know it, but according to Cash, she was a tenderhearted woman who did whatever it took to meet the needs of those she loved. To her detriment, at times, like that bar incident a while ago. She was a fierce protector of Storm, and he did not doubt that his girl would die to keep him safe. She would attack all who threatened her friends, but would she stand firm for herself? He feared she wouldn't. Not for long, anyway.

He and Levi had just had another long, raw talk about Finley. Levi hadn't realized it entirely, but he was falling for her, and Cash already knew she was the woman for him. He would work on her softer side and bring out that nurturing attribute in their relationship when Levi struggled.

Cash had already had a menage relationship, and he had enjoyed it. He'd been single, and if he had found Finley alone, who knew how it would turn out? It didn't happen, and he didn't care. Levi was his best friend since forever, and Finley fit them. They'd talked the idea of a relationship out to get on the same page.

"Levi, have you ever had a committed relationship?" asked Cash.

"Once, I thought I was in one, but when things began to go sour, I ended it pretty quickly."

"And she good with it?"

Levi sighed. "No. She made a scene, but we both knew it was over."

"Did you talk about it?"

"Cash, I told you, we both knew. There wasn't anything to discuss."

"Wrong. What I'm hearing is you decided. You can't do that with Finley."

“I would never hurt her. She’s important to me, but she has always said she wasn’t ready for more. Neither was I until recently. I mean, I think I might be ready for more.”

“Levi, I’m confident enough to say she’s the one for me.”

“What the hell? How can you know?” Levi’s look of disbelief drew a smile from Cash.

“Man, I’ve been dating for as long as you have. It’s time. I want a permanent connection. I want a wife and maybe even kids. But a dog. I definitely want a dog.”

Levi leaned back in his chair. “But what if things don’t work out? Aren’t you worried about that?”

“No. See, I’ve never felt this way about another person. Never. I would walk on coals for this woman. I think you would, too, if you thought about it. If you allowed yourself the permission to care deeply... acknowledge that care.”

“Cash, are you saying you love Finley? After only a short time?”

“I’m saying I think I’m well on my way there. She smiles, and I’m putty in her hands. She sasses me, and I want to slap her ass then make love to her. Not fuck her. Make love to her.”

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Levi sat picking at his Pilgram sandwich while Cash ate his Monte Cristo sandwich with confident gusto and devoured his fries like he had the key to the world.

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?” asked Cash.

“I want to try.”

“Man, it’s something you either feel or you don’t. Doesn’t she make you want to be with her when you aren’t with her? Want to protect her when you think she might be in harm’s way or doing something that she shouldn’t? When she takes unnecessary chances, don’t you want to kiss her senseless and smack that pert ass rosy?”

“Our relationship has been full of respect,” said Levi. “I don’t spank.”

Cash nodded. “And full of restrictions. Spanking is my main kink, and if she isn’t into it, fine. I’ll be fine without it. I won’t be fine without her. Let yourself go and see how you feel about her. Allow your feelings to develop. I’ll give you a week to pull your head out of your ass before I declare myself. I’d like to do it together. The other night, when that shit hit the fan and bullets were flying, I didn’t want to let her out of the safe room at Jac’s. She followed my lead and stopped trying to convince Jac to let them out of the room when I stepped in and quietly told her to shut it down, or I’d spank her ass.”

Levi laughed. “I remember you saying that, and I bet she torched your ass.”

“You’d think so because that is how she has portrayed herself, but she didn’t. She balked a moment, then agreed to wait until released.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t talk to you.”

Cash grinned. “For a day, and I spent that whole day goading her to speak to me. She gave in by dinner. I play to win. So should you.”

Levi left lunch with a lot of thinking to do, and whatever he needed to do, he would do, but Cash was serious. One week and he was going to share his thoughts with Finley and let things be as they would be. Levi needed to be ready with his full decision of how he felt about her enough to know if he would be in or out.

Cash had grown up in a typical family with two parents, two siblings, both sisters, and a family dog. His grandparents were still alive. Nothing out of the ordinary. He’d moved to Memphis at the age of ten and met Levi on day two of attending his new school. He could still see Levi’s ten-year-old self walk up to Cash and look him over.

Then he said, “I hear you’re new. I could do it with a new friend. You’re him. Come play tetherball. You good at sports?” Cash had shrugged. “You’ll get good.” They had been friends ever since.

Now it was time to start reeling these two into accepting the idea of the three of them. He hoped like fuck it worked.

Chapter 3

Levi picked up his phone. “Hey, Fin, I’m off the next two days. Have you got any plans?”

“Yes, but you are welcome to join Storm and me.”

“Good. Then, after Sharlee or Jac take over, we can grab a bite to eat, and there is this sci-fi flick I think might good. You up for it?”

“Sure. Is Cash meeting us?”

“He probably can. I’ll call him. Where are you going to be later?” He listened and then asked, “Which park?” Levi listened. “Got it. I’m on my way after I do my PT and get some breakfast.”

Time to take his exploration to the next level. See if there is anything more than friendship on the horizon. He dialed Cash.

“Hey, want to meet Fin and me at the theater for that new sci-fi flick we were talking about?”

“Working tonight. Sorry. But I think you need to figure things out with Finley, and alone might help. We’ll do something at the weekend.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Cash was right. Levi needed to see what he really thought about Finley. Not love, but more than friends with benefits. Push himself to open up some. Encourage her to do the same. He headed to the office gym.

Finley had taken Storm out for their morning run. She laughed to herself. Her drill instructor would have loved Storm because, at twenty months, that boy ran

everywhere. No one who knew Finley would have thought, in their wildest dreams, that she would enjoy being a nanny. She hated immaturity in the Marines that she served with and didn't allow herself to show the world anything but a hard-as-nails persona, but taking care of kids fit her like the last piece of the puzzle. She had begun to show her budding inner circle of people there was something more beneath the surface, and it was scary being vulnerable. Baby steps.

She had no desire to have her own children, and that was evidently an oddity. She'd kept in touch with a couple of female Marines, but they had pretty much dropped their military persona and embraced the civilian life. Finley had never wanted to be a wife with 2.3 kids, so when she was fed up with the patriarchal regime the military said didn't exist but was loud and proud behind closed doors, she started to put feelers out that used her skill set.

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She had been damned good at her job, but knew she'd never be considered for the jobs that involved things like Levi had done while still in the military. Explosive Ordinance was not something that she was interested in, but in other male-dominated jobs, they remained bottlenecked for women. The glass ceiling was still alive and well in some military jobs. They say things had changed but too little, too late for her.

Ready to prove she still had plenty to offer, she began shaking the bushes for a meaningful job. After the short introduction with Jac and after she had done some research into his outfit, she had gone in to have a conversation with him. The introduction to Jac's world had started as an oral expedition into the world of mercenary life meets civilian security and ended up with Jac asking her if she would be his kickass nanny.

"I'm going to need to count on your skills and your responses. You will be taking care of the person most important to me and Charlotte, my wife. I can be an asshole, and I need to know you can handle that."

"No problem, sir."

"First lesson in this outfit, I'm Jac. We operate on a first name or call name basis here to keep your head out of the military realm. We do things differently using the same skills. You will be using yours to keep my son happy and healthy when both of his parents are unavailable."

"Understood." But she hadn't, not entirely.

"Jac approves of you? You're hired," said Sharlee.

Sharlee laughed, and Jac grumbled, but they officially offered Finley the job the next day. It was love at first sight when she met the newborn, but the work involved in those first weeks was huge and the learning curve was steep. That was more than eighteen months ago, and she loved it. Loved living in a house that was literally a mansion equipped with armed guards. She had training sessions every month on something new and had all the Envy apples she could ever want. Plus, she had many nights off, and while she was surrounded by hunky men, she had only eyes for a little blonde powerhouse with chubby legs and a winning smile. Until recently.

Finley smiled about that now because she later learned that within three hours, Sharlee knew so much about her that she could have picked out a wardrobe for Finley, bought Christmas presents for Finley's family, and recited her first book report. And she laughed when Sharlee mentioned that Finley never had a steady boyfriend that lasted over a month.

Finley had shrugged. "You know how it is. He's cute, there is a dance coming up, you like to dance, you hook up. When it is all said and done, the guy is a sloppy kisser, thinks he's God's gift to women and can't even shave yet."

"Yes, but then you grew up."

"Precisely. I grew up, and they didn't. Right, some did, but they were dry. Well, that might be the kettle calling the pot black, but really, I need more substance than the first impression of, you're cute, shower often, and want sex."

And while Finley and Levi had begun to spend more meaningful time together, sexy, no commitment times, he was still her friend and pal more than anything. These days, things were different. Cash changed the dynamics because he was not a pal at all. He was bossy, demanding, and hot as sin. He called to her naughty side while Levi was pushing in a familiar way. She quickly scanned a room for either men, these days and was disappointed when she didn't find at least one of them.

They often took jobs out of town, but that made the coming home more exciting. Levi was sexy and familiar. Cash made her blood boil and her sex simmer. He was more in tune with her womanly side. Where Levi was into sci-fi movies and sports, Cash watched her, touching her often, cuddling, and taking control. She was all those things and more, but each seemed to meet her needs on all her levels, each with their own style. And damn if she didn't need them both.

This morning, as she ran through a rustic part of the small town of Lexington, she enjoyed it as the sleeping scene greeted the morning and thought of her life. Would it ever be settled down? Levi was going to take a job out of town soon. He liked those. And what about Cash? He had been on house security the night that things went to crazy with bullets flying. Something told her it was about to get messy again and the stakes would be higher.

The little slice of countryside that awoke with the dawn as she ran through its brisk air, rested from its long quiet night, peacefully basking under the warmth of the rising sun, gave her an incredible peace. One she had never experienced outside of this place. She entertained the thought of never leaving here.

The quaint main street, lined with historic red-brick buildings and charming lampposts, showcased its proud southern heritage. Some would say that Kentucky was not southern, but it certainly held its charm like it was. A gentle breeze whispered through the once lush trees that framed the picturesque town square, where families gathered to enjoy the lazy summer days. Fall had claimed some of those leaves, but they were beautiful in their brilliantly colored display.

"Finley!" called a voice from across the still grassy patch of land.

She paused mid-step, shifting her gaze towards the source of the greeting. A cool acknowledging smile graced her lips as she offered a small hand wave in response to a parent of someone in Storm's play group, returning to her focused stride without

missing a beat. She had grown to love this suburban area outside of Lexington.

In the world of Jac Reynaud's circle of friends and family, she was more than just a veteran Marine employee; she was a trusted friend and confidante to their women, a role she embraced with quiet acceptance and growing peace. That was a new feeling unfamiliar to her before becoming a nanny. Maybe she should share her man's dilemma and get some input from those women.

From a distance, it was easy to see that Finley was a woman who carried herself with the confidence of someone who had faced adversity and emerged stronger for it. Finley also knew that it gave the impression of a shield or barrier between her and those outside her inner circle, which were most people. Yet, beneath her stoic exterior, there was a vulnerability that she worked hard to hide.

Maybe if she let someone in a little more, it would be okay to share that bit with them. It was this hidden softness that endeared her to those who knew her best, a reminder that even the strongest of warriors could be tender-hearted. She sometimes forgot that side of her, too. Cash saw it and she didn't know how he could peer in further than others. She knew that he was more interested in getting in. Levi might be as well.

Comparing them was an exercise in futility. They were different people with distinct personalities, but she was attracted to both of them. She was dreaming of having them both and damn if she didn't want to try it. She feared what would happen if she did.

She finished her run and passed the Gander's gate. She would bring Storm over there today. The old stately trees and long-established walkways edged with a beautiful, wild English garden were incredible to experience, and the Ganders would often come out to visit with little Master Storm. The older couple were enjoying their own grandchildren now, but Storm was next door, unlike their own grands, so an unofficial grandparent status had been agreed upon. Of course, the sweets they

always brought him didn't hurt.

The Ganders lived there before Jac's father bought his property next door, and their friendship endured through the years. She entered the Reynaud property, and the security gateman waved as she walked past. Her gut twinged, going on low-level alert. She looked around and saw no one. The scare of a few weeks ago had abated as no other events materialized. She still worried a little about the earlier trouble, but Jac said he had everything under control. She had to believe him.

They hadn't found the culprits, and the security cameras that all of Jac's employees had in an overabundance showed plenty and yet, in the dark, not enough. Cars were visible, but not plates. Movement but not faces. The direction of movement, but there was no way to continue tracking. She had to let it go.

"Enough of this daydreaming," she chided herself. "I have things to do today."

Chapter 4

After a quick shower, she started downstairs, colliding into a conversation already in progress at the bottom. Sharlee was dressed in her "I'm staying home" clothing, and Jac was in his workout clothes.

"I don't want to wait too long to decide if there will be a number two or not. If Storm gets a sibling, they need to be close enough to share the same things and bond."

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“Charlotte, I understand what you’re saying, and I don’t disagree in theory, but we have the perfect nanny for Storm. What if she isn’t into having two charges in the day?”

“Well, we were talking about having a daycare on-site at the office. That would be the perfect time to do it. Then, when I went back to work after the baby, we could have them close but still well protected.”

“And still, what about Finley? She’s family, and we need to make her part of the conversation. If our energetic little man is all she wants to handle, then we need to find another person to add to the mix, and frankly, I’m not ready for that round of interviews again. Finley came to us on a prayer, and I don’t know if you can make that happen twice,” said a doubtful Jac.

Sharlee sighed. “But Finley would be there with us to decide on the right fit. She would be working with the extra person as much as us.” Jac didn’t answer, and Sharlee sighed. “I suppose we can wait a little bit longer to decide, but the time is coming to an end faster than we think.”

“No, we could have five years apart. Get Storm into kindergarten before adding our second.”

“We could, I suppose. I just wish we could make the baby a girl. That would work so much better. Another boy, well, closer would work.”

“Let’s table it until things have calmed down a bit.”

“I’m not sure that will ever happen, but okay, for a little longer.” Sharlee looked up as Finley came around the corner. “You missed an indecisive conversation that we have decided to table for now.”

Finley smiled. “I got the gist of it. And to respond to whether I will stay on for two or not, the answer is yes. But I want to renegotiate my contract before that happens.” She reached for a plate to put her breakfast on.

Jac nodded. “I’d expect nothing less. Well, ladies and my little gentleman, I need to do some cardio and then head to work. Anything special on the agenda today?”

Sharlee recited some of the work she meant to tackle, and then he turned toward Finley.

“Storm and I will go over to the front gardens next door and play for a bit before we go for a swim at home. Levi is off today, so he is going to meet us there later. The rest is yet to be seen.”

“Remember to activate your Keep Safe program on your phone,” said Sharlee. “I’m glad I was able to modify the program to be active and on standby.”

Finley grabbed up Storm from his second breakfast. “I always do.”

Sharlee nodded as Jac walked off. “I know. I am just always a little worried for you both, especially when things are hopping like now.”

Finley stared at Sharlee for a few moments. “You do know that I can kick ass from any position, right?”

“Yep, but you will have Storm, and that complicates things.”

“I have everything under control.” Finley gave a final smile and carried her charge upstairs for a change. They were headed for warm breezes and sunshine.

Scooping up the baby backpack for outdoor fun, the two were soon heading for explorations. The day was beautiful, and the weather was perfect. It would get hotter in the afternoon, but for this morning, there wasn’t anything to hinder a fun adventure in the gardens. As Finley grabbed the stroller and was opening it up at the exit, her cell rang.

“Hey.”

“Hey. You guys headed out?” Levi’s voice gave her a smile.

“Yep. Right now. Are you still able to meet us?”

“On my way right now,” said Levi. “Cash is working, so it’s just us tonight.”

“Okay, so we can go to the Thai place for dinner. Cash is not a fan.”

Levi laughed. “He is not.”

Turning her phone on speaker, Finley talked to Levi as she settled Storm into his seat, checked one last time that all was right, ended the call and put her phone in her back pocket.

“Let’s go, Storm. Guess who is visiting us today? Levi.”

Storm answered her and seemed quite content to chatter away and not be understood often. Finley allowed her thoughts to drift, occasionally agreeing or chattering responses back or just changing the direction of his interest. Storm didn’t seem as challenged with her conversation as she was with his, but they enjoyed the walk. The

well-groomed property on both sides of the fencing was resplendent with beautiful thick lawns that Storm loved to run through. Trees were dotted strategically throughout the property and along both sides of the wrought-iron fence.

As she pushed Storm through the large Reynaud property to the hidden gate in the woods that separated the two properties, she thought about the conversation Sharlee and Jac were discussing this morning when she went looking for Storm and her own breakfast. She would stay for another child, but a daycare in their office building? She wasn't so sure about that. They would need to think about that with Mallory and Becky now pregnant. That would be four, with Jessie's baby. Maybe they could work out some rotation between them.

It would be possible if they had at least one nanny per one or two children, but a baby took up so much of one person's time it wasn't safe for more than two with the procedures that would have to be executed if there were danger like a few weeks ago.

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“Not that you are hard to handle, you understand, Master Storm.” The toddler turned back in response to hearing his name. “It’s just that there is so much going on that one adult responsible for two charges is the limit. Don’t you think?” Storm nodded while he grinned and jabbered back, perfectly content to have this conversation with his nanny.

As Finley pushed the stroller on the path with the babbling toddler running alongside in this idyllic setting she moved with purpose, her long, measured strides taking her down the familiar sidewalk. At twenty-eight years old, she cut an imposing figure. Standing just over five feet six inches tall, her lean, muscular frame was an undeniable testament to her military background and her dedication to fitness. Her wavy, dark hair was pulled into a tight bun, revealing sharp cheekbones.

Her intense hazel-green eyes scanned her surroundings with the efficiency of someone trained for combat. There were guards at the front gate of Jac’s house and a locked gate at the front of the Gander’s house. Finley felt as safe as she had ever been outdoors with Storm. She listened for Levi.

Jac came from money, and his business did a lot of good for people and brought a number of high-stakes criminals to light in a lucrative way. Jac said his job was sometimes to simply shine the light where it needed to be, but the rest was out of his hands. And while Finley didn’t usually ask, no one kept things quiet around her. She was just as vetted as any of his other employees and they all had a job to do. Hers was to keep Storm safe from assholes who thought getting to Jac and Sharlee through their son was an easy task.

She’d happily show them how wrong they were. Finally, as they reached the gate, she

rang the bell that was attached to the neighbor's house, announcing that she was entering their garden. She waited for one of the Ganders to ring back over or say something over the speaker, but they didn't. Odd.

"They must be out of the house already, Mr. Storm. Hold on while I start your mama's brilliant program." She flipped on the Keep Safe program, leaving it on standby easily accessed on her phone. "Now we are ready."

She put in the code to open the tall, fairytale-like gate that allowed them to gain entry into a world of fauna and floral delights. Storm was already pointing and babbling, trying to get out of his stroller that she had placed him in when his little legs had grown tired. Their grounds were extensive, and it was a lot to ask a little one to traverse it all on foot. He loved the garden gnomes and looking glasses amongst the fairy lights that were not on now, but the garden fairies and lovely other decorative animals throughout the beautiful plot of land didn't need illumination.

Once he was out of his stroller, Storm explored. He knew this place well because they visited often.

"Hey, there you two are," said Levi. "Let me see what you're doing." He opened the gate and walked through.

Storm, who was used to big, strapping men in his world, grabbed Levi's hand, comfortable with him as one of his people, and attempted to pull him in the direction of a particularly colorful group of flowers and fairies.

"Isn't it beautiful out here today?" Finley breathed in deeply, the sweet scent of blooming flowers mingling with the earthy aroma of grass. She pushed Storm's stroller beside the gate, her eyes scanning the vibrant scenes around them.

"Absolutely," Levi agreed, his gaze lingering on the joyful expression of the toddler

enjoying the day. “It’s been a while since we’ve had such nice weather.”

As they continued their meandering, Finley couldn’t help but feel at ease, the tranquility of the garden soothing her busy mind. The warm sunlight seemed to chase away the shadows that often lingered, leaving her feeling lighter, more carefree.

Levi wasn’t experienced with young children. Unlike Finley, who was the eldest of four children, each four years apart, Levi was an only child, the product of two only children. He tried but Storm was a busy little guy and putting his hand into flowers and grabbing a few blooms to yank out was something he would do often without gentle redirection. Finley walked in Levi and Storm’s direction.

“Storm, look what I found. A butterfly!”

Storm turned and ran his best to see the butterfly. His mouth was open and his eyes wide in discovery. The chirping of the birds was enchanting as Finley laid the blanket down for them to explore the newly cut grass, and surrounded by the scent of overturned rich, dark soil. Putting her hands out to encourage Storm to come and explore with them, Levi pretended to be a bear chasing him to safety. He plopped down amid screams, giggles, and squeals.

After some chasing and playful gobbling by Levi, Finley started to walk down one of the trails found throughout the wooded area surrounding the garden. Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows on the path ahead. Finley kept a watchful eye on Storm as he toddled beside her, his tiny hand gripping her fingers tightly. Levi walked on her otherside, his presence a reassuring reminder of their deepening connection.

“Storm’s growing up so fast,” Levi said, his voice tinged with awe as he watched the small boy navigate the uneven terrain with surprising agility.

Finley smiled, warmth blooming in her chest at the shared affection between them. “He is,” she agreed, then added, “I’m just grateful I get to be a part of his life.”

Levi glanced at her, his eyes softening. “Still think kids aren’t in your future?”

“If you mean that I produce, then yep. No changes there. I just don’t want that responsibility. I love being the nanny, but the mommy role just doesn’t appeal to me. Does that make me seem odd?”

“Odd? No. I’m relieved, really. I mean, I’ve always thought I might have a kid but feel empty without one? No. I just imagined the woman I eventually hooked up with would want one. But if she didn’t, I’d be fine. If I was with you? I would be more than fine.”

“Not sure Cash would be okay with that. Maybe we could adopt?”

“Cash said he would at least need a dog.”

She laughed. “A dog I can do.”

An unexpected blush crept up Finley’s cheeks, but she didn’t have the chance to respond as Storm suddenly tugged at her hand, pointing excitedly at a nearby squirrel chattering away. She crouched down, her protective instincts kicking in. “That’s right, buddy. It’s a squirrel. But we need to keep our distance and let it go about its day.”

“Skwerla!” Storm echoed, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Exactly,” Finley said with a laugh, ruffling his hair. She looked up at Levi, who was grinning at the sight.

“Come on, little man,” Levi said, crouching down next to them, his fingers brushing against Finley’s as they both held onto Storm. “Let’s see what else we can find in this park, huh?”

As they continued their wandering, Finley couldn’t help but feel a sense of contentment. She wasn’t unhappy at all, but truly content? She didn’t know if she had ever been that. Even though she knew that happiness could be fragile, she allowed herself to imagine a future with Levi and Cash.

Storm squealed again.

“If the Ganders are home, they will know you’re here, little noisemaker man.” Storm squealed and screeched amid the raspberries Finley was giving him to feed his belly.

But peace was never meant to last.

As they quieted down, the comforting noises of the park seemed to stop. Suddenly, the moment was shattered as Finley noticed a man in the distance, his eyes trained on them with unsettling intensity. A man was walking very slowly past the high outer gate. Her heart raced, and her combat ready mind kicked into gear. This wasn’t a neighborhood. These were large estates with plenty of land between them. No sidewalks. She didn’t see a vehicle. Odd. Out of the norm. She glanced at Levi, who had also taken notice of the stranger. They exchanged a glance, their hands tightening around Storm’s.

“Stay close,” Levi murmured, his jaw clenched. “I don’t like the looks of this guy.”

“Neither do I.” Finley kept her voice low, trying not to alarm Storm. She’d learned the hard way to trust her instincts, and right now, they were screaming danger.

“Did you hear that?” Levi’s voice suddenly sounded tense, his brow furrowed as he glanced over his shoulder.

“Maybe it’s just the wind,” Finley suggested, though her heart began to race, her senses on high alert.

“Perhaps, but pay attention.” Levi bit his lip, unconvinced. He tried to focus on the beauty surrounding them once more, but something felt... off. He was on high alert and nothing would change that.

“Levi, look.”

Finley nodded subtly toward a man standing by an ancient oak tree just on the other side of the front gates of the Ganders’ garden, his dark hair partially obscuring his face. He seemed to observe them intently, his cold eyes unblinking.

The once-peaceful garden now seemed suffocating, the laughter and cheerful chatter from earlier fun was drowned out by the blood roaring in Finley’s ears. Desperation gnawed at her, every step feeling heavier than the last. They needed to get back onto their side of the fence, but without knowing if their observer had a weapon, she had to be cautious.

“Levi, what’s the plan?” She fought to keep her voice steady, but Storm seemed to zero in on her change of tone. He became a little restless.

“Let’s just see what it is he wants. He could be lost.”

“I’m keeping my and Storm’s distance.”

“Damn it.” Levi’s hand instinctively reached for the small weapon he always carried, but he hesitated. Storm was with them, and he didn’t want to put him in harm’s way. He moved closer to Finley, his voice barely a whisper. “We need to get out of here. I’ll try to access my gun without bringing any attention to me. You should try to make your way back to the fence. It’s a distance from here, but you could make it if you seemed like you were busy cleaning up.”

“Agreed.” Finley’s heart pounded in her chest, fear clawing at her throat as she kept

her gaze locked on the stranger. She had nothing to go on but her gut that was churning. Evidently, Levi's radar was going off too.

Levi, always one to take an immediate open protective stand around Finley and Storm, allowing her to respond less aggressively because of Storm, yelled to the man.

"Can I help you?" Finley moved as though she were showing Storm something on the ground ahead of them. They moved slightly closer to the fence.

"Yes, I'm looking for Roan Gander. Is this his address?"

"What address do you have?" asked Finley, as though she wasn't inching further away from the gate.

"I don't know. I was given coordinates," said the man who had walked up to the gate.

Finley pulled Storm up close to her. She reached for her phone and pulled up the Keep Safe program. They were two well-trained Marines, but she had a vulnerable child and that made things complicated if it went south.

Her cautious instincts were heating up and her need to get Storm away from even the shadow of possible trouble was coiling in her gut tight. She tried to play it off, but her core was zinging. Deciding to make an active move toward safety, Finley picked up the bamboo wrap on the ground. Grabbing the toddler, she wrapped him against her, pulling the thin blanket around them, securely knotting it to her like a sling and putting on her pack. The stroller was against the inner gate where she'd left it. Then she stood beside Levi as he continued to talk to the man but at an angle to the fence, bringing them closer to the connecting gate.

"Why don't you call the Ganders and ask them where they live? It will be easier and faster," said Finley.

“Roan is my brother, and it’s a surprise. I live in another state.”

“But, Roan,” she stopped from said he didn’t have a brother. Or that they had lived here for nearly thirty years. This man didn’t look like he was in his fifties.

Levi must have caught on to the change in Finley and the essentially odd information the man was feeding them. He shrugged.

“She had the best idea. Just give your brother a call.”

“Well, hold on while I do that.”

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Levi deliberately turned Finley in the direction of the forest coverage that would make them invisible from the front gate.

“Something isn’t right. Let’s get through the gate and back on defensible territory.” Levi was ushering them ahead of him, not running, but at a faster pace than typical. “Initiate your keep safe program.”

“I already did.”

Levi’s eyes darted between the suspicious man on the outside of the gate and Finley, his instincts screaming danger. He had to get them out of this park and to safety, but how? A sudden blur of movement caught his eye—another figure in the shadows.

“Finley, on my signal, take Storm as fast as you can down that path,” Levi instructed, nodding toward a nearby trail that led away from the stranger to the gate at the property edge. “I’ll buy you some time.”

“Levi, don’t—” she began, her voice wavering with fear.

“Go!” he urged, stepping forward to confront the ominous figure.

Finley hesitated for only a second before holding Storm to her tightly and getting them to the gate as quickly as she could. Her heart hammered against her chest. She cast a worried glance at Levi as she calculated where to put Storm. Through the fence was the safest place, but for a free moment to defend his safety she could put him back in the stroller.

Finley hit the activate key again, mute, and slipped the thin phone inside her deep front pocket. She was glad she had grabbed these pants. They were loose and full of pockets, like tricked out camouflage pants. Storm was taller now than even amonth ago. He was growing, but right now, smaller would have been better.

“We need to—”

“Just get you two through the fucking gate, Finley. There’s no time to—”

Just as Levi squared up to the threatening man, another figure emerged from behind him, wielding a blunt object. Levi barely had time to register the new threat before a crushing blow connected with his skull, sending him crumpling to the ground, unconscious.

Finley looked back in time to see Levi drop like a stone. The scream froze in her throat. She couldn’t stop to check on him. Her mission was to protect Storm. Always. She ignored her worrying self, that wanted to check on Levi and reached for the gate now within her grasp.

She placed her hand on the keypad and just as she hit the second number; she felt someone bear hug her from behind. She hit the third number on the keypad, and it buzzed as though it was the wrong number. Simultaneously, she felt a sting in her neck. Storm’s terrified cries rang in her ears as she struggled in vain against her captor. The gate and fence were too high to place him over onto Reynaud’s land.

Panic surged through Finley’s veins as she reached for the gate to try again, but the same strong arms remained wrapped around her, dragging her away from Levi’s crumpled form and the gate she so desperately wanted to get through. She tried to tighten her hold on Storm, but she felt her loss of muscle control almost immediately — first her arms, then legs. She was just able to twist and fall, hopefully on her side to protect her charge from her body weight, as she felt the darkness come in on her.

Finley faintly heard Storm whimper. Then nothing.

Chapter 5

This is your formal invitation to the party.

Gifts mandatory.

Your RSVP is confirmed.

For the first time since they had been receiving these notes, something came of them. This one was really happening. No more asshole games. Jac rubbed his neck and waited as his wife sent out the alarm.

“Finley and Storm have been kidnapped.”

“On our way.”

“Gotcha.”

“Give us twenty.”

The audio message that hit every Alpha team member’s cell phone and computer email was answered immediately. Without further information, within twenty-eight minutes, every member of the team had arrived. Ryker, his Oakley, and a man he had defended before becoming good friends, Colonel Benjamin Darington, US Army Retired, entered fast on their heels.

The Reynaud residence was descended on in a stream of operatives with a mission. The men came geared up; the women came grim-faced and just as determined. When they were all assembled, Spring and Florent exited the kitchen area and counted

heads before a tearful Spring was placed in a chair. Florent's hands settled possessively on her shoulders, offering her a little squeeze and a gentle rub. Many seemed to take notice of the change in their relationship, but today, that wasn't the focus. That was for another day unfilled by fear and low-level chaos.

Cash stormed in from checking the premises and asked, "Where is Levi? He was with Finley and Storm. And how do you know that they were kidnapped?"

"We can't get Finley on the phone. And if Levi was with them, we can't raise him either."

"Fuck," said Cash. "Let me try." He did, but with no result.

Levi's vision swam as he groggily came to, the world around him a hazy blur. Pain throbbed at the base of his skull, spreading through his entire head like wildfire. It took him a moment to remember where he was and what had happened, but as clarity returned, so did the urgency of the situation. He was immediately on alert, but his body couldn't follow.

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“Finley! Storm!” he choked out, attempting to sit up with little success.

Nausea washed over him, and he had to wait a moment, vomit, then steady himself before staggering to his feet, only to find himself back on the ground. His eyes immediately locked onto the abandoned stroller, a chilling reminder of their failed escape. No, maybe they just left it. That would be expected. He held his head as another wave of nausea erupted.

Even though he had already given his status away to anyone who may have been watching, he slowly checked his environment to make sure that there was no one around. He then pulled and dragged himself to where the stroller sat, empty and solitary, next to the connecting gate. He pulled his phone out and tried to call Finley in the hopes that she had gotten to the other side of the gate and was getting help. In his heart of hearts, he knew that was not the case. Their attackers were now hers and Storm’s abductors.

He didn’t have time to wonder about who they were. It was time to call Jac. The faster they were on this, the quicker they could get them home. He found he was more devastated than he had been when troubles hit the other women although he loved them like sisters and were ready to do whatever it took to keep them safe, Finley was his. Cash would be glad to hear it. Damn, his head hurt.

What he felt for Finley was anything but platonic. He was twisted up inside, and even though his head pounded almost unbearably, his mind centered on the fear Finley must feel. Out of control was not what his Finley liked. She was strong physically and mentally, but emotionally? He found he had no idea. Emotion wasn’t her strong suit, or at least letting people in wasn’t. Not knowing that about her bothered him.

Cash understood enough to believe she needed to experience good outcomes when she became vulnerable before she could learn to be that with them. He determined he would change that once they had them back home. They would both know their girl.

“Where are they?” Levi whispered, his chest tightening with dread.

Anger threatened to consume him as he scanned the Ganders’ garden through eyes that were still bleary, desperately searching for any sign of Finley or Storm. But they were gone, taken by men who had appeared out of nowhere. They were better operatives than that, better observers, better protectors. How could they have both missed the sounds of incoming? How had he ignored his gut for too long? He gingerly searched for his phone and, while still in his pocket, he hit his distress button. His attackers were amateurs, or they would have never left it in operational order.

What had been a restful morning enjoying the neighbor’s property had turned into a nightmare of unbearable proportions. Levi was angry and hurt, and frustrated about the pain he was in and his inability to do more than acknowledge they were gone and he had to call Jac. He wanted to berate himself for not keeping them both safe, but it was not useful. He had to concentrate on finding them, even when concentrating hurt so damn badly.

Levi rolled over and closed his eyes, waiting for some of the team to find him. With his eyes closed, he listened, which was easier than looking at the moment. He heard the wheels crunch on the gravel and while he expected it was one of the agency Ford Explorers arrived. He waited on alert. Opening his eyes to verify that he was right, just as a black SUV with tinted windows pulled up to the park, Levi’s heart leaped into his throat. The doors swung open, revealing familiar faces. Monroe and Garrett stepped out of the company car. He reclosed his eyes.

Jac brought the SUV to a screeching halt behind Carter, and everyone piled out, their

boots crunching on the gravel as they raced towards Levi, boots thundering on the earth. They found him half sitting, half laying on the ground, disoriented and bleeding, his hand resting weakly on a wheel of the empty stroller.

“Was attacked,” Levi managed to choke out, his voice barely a whisper. “Took them... into the woods.”

“Everyone, fan out and search the area,” Jac ordered, his voice thick with urgency. “We’ll find them. We have to.”

As the team scattered into the dense underbrush, Levi couldn’t help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the team members around him. They were more than friends; they were family. And together, they would face down whatever and whoever had their loved ones, each determined to bring Finley and Storm back home where they belonged.

“Levi!” Callie cried out, dropping to her knees beside him.

“Fin... Finley?” Levi mumbled, his eyes struggling to focus on her face. “Storm... I tried...”

“Hey, you’re gonna be okay,” Callie reassured him, quickly assessing the gash on his forehead and feeling for the source of blood at the back of his head. “Just stay with us, alright?”

“Levi? Shit. Are you okay?” Monroe stepped close, extending a hand to stay his attempts to get up, which wasn’t hard. Levi felt weak as a kitten. “Settle, man. I’m trying to see if you need an ambulance.”

“No ambulance. We have to find Finley and Storm. There is no time to coddle me.” Levi closed his eyes and wished his brain to right itself.

“Coddle? Hell, man, I’m just trying to make sure you stay alive. Sharlee is working on tracking them. We’re well on our way to finding and intercepting them.”

A man Levi remembered with Ryker, Colonel something, he thought, asked him a question. “What happened, son?”

Levi’s vision blurred as he struggled to focus on the faces of his concerned friends hovering above him. The Colonel had a commanding voice, but he wasn’t as emotional as Jac, who had to be mad with fear over the abduction of his baby boy. The metallic tang of blood mixed with the earthy scent of the forest floor filled his nostrils, grounding him in the moment.

“Finley and Storm were taken,” Jac informed Levi, his voice taut with urgency. “We need your help to find them.”

“Right,” Levi muttered, gritting his teeth against the pain throbbing in his temples. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his head. “I... I remember being here at the garden park with them. Someone was at the gate. Finley didn’t believe him. Then, before we knew it, Fin was heading for the gate with Storm and someone came up behind me. It all happened so fast.”

Monroe began taking a better look at Levi, checking his head for the injury level. Garrett rounded the corner just as Carter and Mark came through the adjoining gate. Callie stood behind Levi as though taking a bodyguard position.

“The gate signal system was jammed. The keypad didn’t work,” said Carter.

“Where’s Cash? He needs to know about this,” said Callie.

“He knows,” said Mark grimly. “He’s protecting the house.”

Carter added, “And going out of his fucking mind.”

Garrett looked around the area, then his puzzled look landed on his wife. Callie supplied Garrett’s unspoken question of where Jac was. “Jac and the Colonel are going around the back of the property and visiting the Ganders. Evidently, they usually play with Storm when he comes.”

Levi hissed. “They aren’t home. At least they never responded when Finley tried them. We figure they are gone somewhere. But some goons came from inside the yard, so they must have accessed the property from the house.”

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“Okay, we will get things wrapped up here and you and I are making a quick trip to my friend. He’s a doctor with a private clinic not too far from here. Let’s see if we can get you patched up there.” Levi opened his mouth. “Or it’s the emergency room. I’m not sure urgent care will take you.”

“Clinic.” Levi allowed the men to help him up.

“I was afraid you would opt for that. I hope we’re making the right decision.”

Levi tried again to stand, unsuccessfully.

Carter looked at Levi. “Fuck this. He lifted his teammate like he carried his pregnant wife, cradling him to protect his head and get him safely in the car.

“Carter, stay with Monroe. He may need help with Levi.” Garrett looked at the remaining two. “Scan the yard for any details that will tell us something. Take pictures but don’t touch or remove. We’ll leave most of this for the cops.”

“Hold on just a little bit longer, Fin. We’re coming as soon as we can,” whispered Levi as he lay in the back seat of the SUV.

His thoughts were consumed by worry as the sun pushed through the day from morning to midday. In his heart, Levi swore that he would do whatever it took to bring them home or die trying. He knew they all would do the same. He accepted help from Monroe and Carter to get out of the vehicle. Damn, his head hurt.

Cash arrived just as Monroe pulled away from the curb. “Where’s Levi?”

Mark nodded in the direction of the moving SUV. “He’s getting medical care. Got a rock to his skull. He’s conscious but in pain.”

“Couldn’t wait for an ambulance?”

“Refused one.”

Cash swore. “Of course he did.”

“Who is covering the house?” asked Garrett.

“I called in three backup guys who weren’t out on a job. I have one doing a sweep of the grounds, one in with Sharlee and the girls, and one doing sweeps of the house and monitoring the cameras. There are now two at the gate as well.”

“Excellent.”

“What about the stroller and this note?” asked Callie behind the two men.

“Fuck. Grab the note and take the stroller home. No kidnapping, so nothing of their things left behind,” said Garrett. “First, read us the note.”

The words written on it made their guts clench.

“Welcome to the party, Jac. I have something you want and you have something I want. Let’s exchange our gifts, shall we? There is quite a market for my gift, but I’m willing to trade. Bring five million dollars to the old warehouse on Oak Street at midnight, or you’ll never see them again.”

Mark said what they all were thinking. “Fucking bastards. Whoever they are, they are going down hard. That warehouse was condemned and taken down a month ago.”

Cash added, “Sharlee and Kaden are working to get through the barriers. The tracking starts and stops like there is a firewall stopping them, but they will figure it out and we’ll find them.”

Callie called out. “Found the rock they used to give Levi his headache.”

“Leave it. It validates our version of events. The only thing we’re not telling is that the abduction took place. Other than that, we are on the level,” said Garrett.

The group murmured their agreement. A few moments later, Callie yelled out again. “G-man.”

The men all walked over to where Callie stood. She pointed to the ground.

“A syringe,” said Cash as Mark reached down to pick it up. “Hell baby, what is going on here?”

Chapter 6

Once they had all the information they needed from the park, Jac called the Sheriff’s department. His people thinned out, leaving the scene to Garrett and Cash because Garrett was taking lead and Cash wouldn’t leave the area. Garrett wanted his wife to head back to the house, and this made it easy to get her to go because Callie hated dealing with the local police. Jac and the Colonel then made their way to the other two.

Jac’s teams knew he always tried to cooperate with the locals because it worked best for everyone, especially him. “Better to work with the locals than need them later and have to call them in. They get testy whenever we’ve done it before.”

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While each organization kept a respectful distance they had been mutually helpful at times and Jac tried to keep it between their lines when possible but it was hard to not second guess the decision when, within moments of their arrival, the park had transformed into a frenzy of activity as the sheriff's deputies wasted no time in their investigation. Jac came over to let them know he had just gone to the Ganders' back door and they were tied up, gagged.

"We untied them and removed their gags, but we used gloves so as not to muddy your DNA clues. Evidently their security guard was on break and the housekeeper opened the door to two men who overwhelmed her, then took the security guard by surprise leaving it simple to subdue the older couple. No one appears hurt, but we already called an ambulance, and I left one of my guys there to wait for your crew to arrive."

"Mr. Reynaud, where is your son?"

Cash had his arms crossed, legs spread in an aggressive stance. He noticed the other officer who was standing off to the side of the lead policeman seemed to view him as a possible threat so Cash dropped his arms. He expected Jac to order him to stand down, but he didn't. It was the most he was going to compromise. The other man seemed to relax a hair. Good enough.

"With his nanny in hiding." Jac always went generic when he could and technically he was truthful. He was with Finley, he prayed, and they were in hiding of a sort. He just didn't know where that was, exactly. Not yet. The wording might have been off a little, but all is still technically true.

“It was an attempted kidnapping is what your man at the gate said so if the would-be kidnappers didn’t succeed, can you tell me why your child and employee are in hiding?”

Jac looked at the officer as though the man was missing the problem. He waited for the officer to catch up with his error of thought but when he didn’t indicate that he tracked, Jac gave the impression that he was filling in details that should have been evident to the average person.

“What would you do if your child had almost been kidnapped, your nanny terrorized, your bodyguard’s skull smashed in, and you had no clue who it was? If you were a man like me, who hid and protected people for a living, doing that for your child and a woman that is part of your family’s life would be natural. When I have eliminated the threat, then I’ll bring them out of hiding.”

Jac left out that he hunted people as well and his best skills and resources were fully activated as of the moment the firstKeep Safe distress signal was sent. Cash knew Jac’s reputation preceded him, so words were unnecessary.

The officer scratched his head. “I’m going to need to talk to the people involved.”

“When things have shuffled and Levi is recovered enough, both he and Finley will share what they know.”

“And your son.”

“No problem. As previously mentioned, my man was incapacitated and is getting treatment right now. My nanny is with my son and I can assure you she isn’t without protection as well.” Cash had to look down. The only protection his girl had now was herself, but that was pretty damn impressive. “But since he is twenty months old, and he is great at jabbering, that might not help but could be entertaining.”

The officer hesitated, then nodded. “As soon as, then, for the other two. Have you considered it was someone close to you that might be the culprit? Or possibly someone with a grudge?”

“Absolutely, on both counts, but it isn’t one of my group. No offense, but these are my people and family, and no one messes in their kennel or jeopardizes their safety without the rest of us getting involved. Finley activated the Keep Safe program on her cell that my wife helped to develop and has continually enhanced. Talk to her if you need more on that. Otherwise, if you will excuse me, I have two very important people to protect. I am also going to check in on my injured personnel before looking for the criminals who tried to take my son and his nanny. The same people who hurt that kind elderly couple’s staff and terrorized them in the house behind us. If you need more, come over to the house.” Jac pointed in the direction of his home.

“That where you live?”

“Correct. My office is on Rendezvous Road, but they are in lock down until this is over, so you’ll have to go through me.” Jac pulled out a business card from his back pocket and a pen from his jacket and wrote his personal cell number on the back and Becky’s office cell number.

“Here is the easiest way to get in contact with me. The second number is my assistant’s number.”

Jac nodded and walked off, his ear already to his phone to call his guys back to the house. The Colonel, who said nothing while the cop was talking to Jac, said, “I find it interesting that the officer never asked who the men with you were. It would seem they were a little lost as to what direction to take things.”

Cash’s heart was pounding like a drum in his chest, aching to get back to the house and find out the status of everything. He wondered how Levi was. The police were

organized but not as intense as his team. Cash knew that Jac normally enjoyed watching as they worked with practices precision, each member focused on their task. Jac's approach was to divide and conquer, knowing his guys were operating with laser focused care.

Today, the whole crew was impatient to end this. And end whoever did this. So was Cash. He had two people to worry about, plus little Storm.

"These damn games are coming to an end," said Jac as he headed through the gate and to his house. Cash couldn't agree more than the four men crossed the side estate grounds back to the house.

Once everyone had gathered back at Jac's, they accepted the finger foods that Spring brought out as they walked and talked in the large meeting room. Spring's face was blotchy from crying and it seemed that Mallory, the most maternal of the group, was comforting her as she helped her put out the food. This was family.

"How are the Ganders?" asked Sharlee. Jac rubbed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. He sighed in frustration.

"Fine. A little shook up and they have no idea that there was anything more than an attempted kidnapping. They didn't know that until I told them. They were devastated. I said I'd send someone over to look at their security system and we would upgrade where it needed to be tightened."

"Right, so here is the most recent update," said Kaden. "Aggressors are unknown as of this moment. That will not be the case for long." Waiting was not easy for this group of people and Cash needed to fill his time fast. He headed for his security team on-site.

Jac had called Monroe no less than three times in the two hours they were at the

doctor. Cash called twice. Levi wanted to laugh at their impatience, but it hurt to even think, so laughing was out for now. And Finley and Storm were gone. That was certainly no laughing matter. In fact, he felt a kind of desperation in the background of his mind when nothing else seemed to make sense. That feeling was overshadowing everything else. The car ride to Jac's made him nauseous, but he'd get through.

Levi walked in with ice on his head, Monroe hovered like a helicopter pilot over a target exfil in a high value individual rescue. His over-protective teammate steered him to a chair and pressed a new cold compress on his head, removing the warmed one from Levi's hand. Levi gently tried to push him away, but Monroe was not budging.

"Hell, man, are you okay?" asked Garrett. He looked at Monroe. "Did the Doc clear him?"

"To come here, yes. To hop into the field or do anything active on his feet? Not for at least a week. He is better serving the cause here, filling in every blank he can, so we have the fuckers who bothered to mess with our own. But likely thinking isn't easy and won't be for a while. No computers, videos, nothing digital for this week."

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“I’ll live if that’s your question,” grumbled Levi. His words came slowly, and he felt he had to enunciate them carefully. His tongue felt thick and unwieldy. “In my logical head, I might believe it isn’t my fault, but I know I fucked up. I should have been more watchful of my environment. Finley counted on me to be her backup, and I didn’t do enough when they needed my help the most. Finley was going to protect Storm at all costs, and I know she is protecting him even as we speak. But we have to get out there and find them.”

“It was your day off of being hyper-focused,” said Monroe.

“I wasn’t as aware as I should have been.” He acted as though he had more to said, but closed his mouth.

“Shit, that isn’t true. Don’t do that to yourself or you’ll sabotage the good you can offer the team,” said Carter.

“Lock that up in a box to open when this is all over. Right now, there is no time or room for it,” said Garrett. “We found a syringe, so we know she was likely drugged.”

“You need nothing but downtime, man.” Cash’s voice was full of concern. “Sleep okay for you?”

Monroe shook his head. “Not really, but it’s okay if he falls asleep organically and we keep the lights down. We just want to make sure he is changing positions. If not, then we can go to waking him every hour.”

The dim glow of Sharlee and Kaden’s computer screens cast eerie shadows on the

walls in the corner of the room where the lights were low for Levi. Everyone had tried to give them their space, but as they rotated closer to check on Levi, the same screen light highlighted the tension that hung heavy in the air.

Levi sat in the sofa lounge chair Monroe led him to before placing the dark sunglasses on his face to block the lights and helped him lean back on the pillows Mallory moved for him. Monroe came back with heat for the back of his neck and left the cold for the top of his head. The pain meds were working enough to take the harsh edge off his headache. The anti-nausea meds were working, and a light blanket landed on his lower half, courtesy of Chase.

“Stop fussing,” Levi said, his voice thick and raspy.

“Take the nurture now, asshole, because when you are well, I am kicking your ass for not going to the hospital. You should be admitted with nurses watching over you right now.”

Levi answered with his middle finger before dozing off. When he woke up next, he saw Callie sitting next to him with Cash pacing the room.

“What’s happened?” He asked in his groggy, sleep raspy voice.

“Nothing new, man,” answered Cash.

“Levi, if you can, I need you to walk me through what happened, step by step,” Callie, a former operative from Homeland Security said firmly, her eyes scanning him with an intensity that left no doubt about her expertise. Part of her job had been to draw out information that victims might have forgotten. Her ability to connect and make that happen was impressive.

Mark was a great interrogator, but that wasn’t what they needed with Levi. He was an

operative that had a sizeable head injury. Learning what wasn't first remembered was something Callie often did without effort. Monroe, along with Mallory and Oakley, sat near, but not too close to Levi to monitor his response to his injury. Cash walked over and stood, overseeing the questioning.

"Alright." He took a deep breath, trying to steady his shaking hands. "We were just walking, enjoying the morning. Then, we noticed this man watching us. He seemed... off, somehow. Then when I asked him if he was looking for something, he gave us some squirrely answers that I know sounded off to me, but Finley began gathering her things. Something the guy said cued her to things being wrong."

"What did he say?"

"Something about wanting to know if his brother lived at that address."

"Roan doesn't have a brother," said Jac from the doorway.

"Must have been what cued Finley. She obviously knew that."

"Can you describe him?" Garrett, a prior alphabet agency employee and military man, asked while jotting down details in a notepad.

"Uh, yeah. He was tall, wearing a black hoodie and jeans. His hood was partially up, but he was balding and heavy set. Unshaved. No beard, just maybe two days of hair growth. And sandy blonde hair, both facial and the bit I could see on his head. Had sunglasses on, but I caught a glimpse of a scar running across his cheek." He ran a finger over his own cheek to demonstrate.

"Got it. It's enough to work with. We'll cross-reference that description against local video databases," Garrett said, before turning to Callie. "Let's help Kaden and Sharlee analyze the security camera footage from the Ganders' place."

“The guy who went after Finley was nearly as tall as Carter, but he didn’t move as confidently. Like he didn’t do this for a living. And shaggy. Hair, clothes. And he wore a surplus OD green coat. It looked like Army. Heavy. Too heavy for a kidnapping job and this weather.”

“It was to hide him, but not a smart move. Definitely amateur,” said Cash. “That good, real good. Unskilled, unpracticed, more likely to panic and ditch if things get rocky. My girl has skills and we can definitely make it rocky.” The room went uncomfortably quiet.

Levi spoke up, holding his head as if it would fall apart at any moment. “Yeah, man, she really does. She’ll take care of Storm and the assholes. Our girl is going to be fine.”

The pause continued for a few seconds before Mark spoke. “It’s important that we look at what evidence we have while Sharlee and Kaden find them. It could help get to them faster.”

They examined the ransom note Callie found attached to the stroller. They photographed it, preserving every detail, as they discussed possible handwriting matches and paper sources. For the time being, they agreed they had exhausted the notes issue.

“Any luck with the cameras?” Mallory asked Monroe as she approached, her hand resting protectively on her pregnant belly.

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“Still working on it, babe. We are all working on checking for any sign of Finley, Storm, or the kidnappers.”

“I can help. My eyes aren’t broken.”

Jac nodded. “That’s a good idea. You ladies get your instructions from Charlotte.”

Kaden had gotten up to stretch, walking over to stand with Ivy who stood near Levi, their expressions a mix of concern and determination. “We’ll find them, Levi,” Ivy whispered, her hand resting on Kaden’s arm. She leaned into her husband, sharing a sympathetic look with him.

“Damn right we will,” Kaden agreed, his jaw set with resolve as he pulled his wife closer.

As though standing was wasting time they couldn’t afford to lose, Kaden kissed the top of Ivy’s head, firmly grasped Levi’s shoulder and nodded at Cash before returning to the computer. He shoved a small sandwich in his mouth on the way.

Jac sat heavily next to Levi. “It’s only been a few hours. It feels like years, but it hasn’t been. They can’t be too far from us and whoever it is wants money, which good because it means no one is getting hurt. We’re not giving up. Not until we bring them home.”

“I know,” said Levi. Jac turned to find and meet Cash’s eyes and nodded. Cash sighed and nodded to his boss.

“I know too. Doesn’t seem to help, but it’s all we’ve got right now.” He paused for a minute, sending an unspoken question to Levi.

Levi said, “Yes, it’s what you think it is between me and Finley. And Cash.”

Another pause and Jac nodded. “Okay, then.” He slapped Levi on the back and got up. His question was answered and restlessness plagued him again.

Chapter 7

“Jac, Levi, people,” Sharlee called out to the room as she approached the center of the room, holding her remote in her hand, her eyes mirroring the other’s determination. “We found something.” She stopped walking and directed everyone to watch the large monitor on the wall.

“Footage from the Gander’s nearby security camera,” she explained, holding up her tablet. “It’s not the best quality because they haven’t upgraded in years, but we managed to catch a glimpse of the kidnappers’ van.”

“Can you enhance it? Get a license plate or anything?” Levi asked, his voice tight with urgency.

“We’re working on it,” Sharlee assured him, her gaze never leaving the screen.

“Could this help us narrow down their location?” Garrett asked. “Any luck getting them on other cameras along the way?”

“Possible. Kaden is working on that.”

Mark said, “Several of us can look at video feeds on the streets surrounding. Do we have permission to do that?”

Sharlee shrugged. “Do we need any?” Her statement was clear. Didn’t matter.

“Keep me updated,” Levi said as he attempted to stand. He wasn’t quite able to hide his grimace. His frustration was nibbling at the edges of his resolve. “I need to be out there, searching.”

“Levi, you know we’re doing everything we can,” Garrett said, placing a hand on his shoulder and firmly pushing back down to his seat. “And you also know that you need to stay here. You have a concussion, man. As much as we’d like to let you out there, you and Sharlee are better here. Plus, we have no real direction yet and we don’t have any plan until we know where we’re going. We can’t have you going half-cocked and then make a mistake or worse.”

“Mistake?” Levi spat, his voice cracking with emotion and pain. “Like I did earlier? I know I fucked up, but I’m not sitting here when there is a job to do. Not while they are out there because I didn’t protect them well enough.”

Cash appeared out of nowhere. He was still keeping the house safe. Monitoring everyone on the premises and keeping a tab on the gate and cameras. It kept him busy. “Cut that shit out. Levi, we need you as up to speed as you can get, because Finley will need you when we get her back. I’m going to leave the three men here to help monitor the women and house behind, but I need you to do the backup. Just be on hand if we need you to cover bases with Sharlee. It’s a better use of our manpower.”

“I fucking hate this,” said Levi.

“Me too, my friend. Me too.”

“Trust us, Levi,” Callie urged, her eyes full of empathy. “We’ll find them.”

Sharlee appeared beside him, hugging Levi as he clenched his jaw. Tears threatened to spill over as he nodded in agreement. “We are almost there,” she whispered.

He turned away, staring out into the encroaching darkness. The shadows seemed to laugh at him, taunting him with their secrets and the unknown fate of those he held dear. His head was beginning to pound again and out of nowhere, Mallory appeared with more pain meds. Levi hesitated but took them when she encouraged him.

Cash sat next to Levi and stared at him before speaking. “Let me be the manpower for us today. You took a huge hit for the team, so staying here avoids us having to take care of you while we are going to get Storm and our girl.”

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“That wouldn’t be necessary,” said Levi angrily.

“Maybe you don’t think so, but we are looking at you from this side of the pain, and I swear that is how it would be. We’d need to dedicate a man to babysit you, and I know that isn’t your goal. Stay here. I’ll be our representative. I need you better when she comes home because she is going to need to feel protected and understood.”

“You are better at that shit than I am.”

“And you are getting better. You can do this.”

“Okay. You’re right. My head hurts like a bitch.”

“Glad you agree.”

Levi watched Jac as he stood in the center of their makeshift command room in his previous living room. Sharlee had taken over the room for her “home office” and Jac was fine with that. They had a family den they used for relaxing and entertaining, besides a slew of other dedicated rooms like his media room, recreation room, gym, and indoor pool area. The size of his house and the number of dedicated rooms didn’t matter today. His face was a mask of determination as he addressed the team, waiting for his next move.

Levi loved the people in this room and he had been part of saving each one of the women from one threat or another. These relationships were hard earned and cherished. It was no secret that Storm was the apple of his parents’ eye. Jac had said he wasn’t sure about children, but when Sharlee had told him she was pregnant, he

was sure.

Levi and the rest of the agency noticed that Jac smiled whenever he looked at a Sharlee. The other members of the team were the same with their partners. Levi wondered if he wanted that with Finley. He didn't know, but he did want to explore that angle with her. He wondered if she was like Jac. Not thinking she was into mothering, but if it happened, she would be fine with it.

The way he felt about Finley right now was painful, and that had to indicate some kind of important feeling. He knew it was time to admit the feelings he had for her were real. Very real. Levi had always taken care of his girlfriends, but his emotions never were engaged to the level they were with Finley. The job was to first get her back unharmed, then help her get past this event and see where these feelings led them.

As though Jac was reading Levi's train of thought, he said to no one in particular. "Having a child with Charlotte has been the crowning accomplishment and joy of my life. Watching our son grow through infancy and now as Storm is tackling his toddler years, life has come alive in this house. He's always giggling, running, climbing, and keeping Finley on her toes. That woman is more than up for the job, though."

"Jac, we are going to find them soon, very soon," said Levi, speaking as much to his friend as himself.

"Yes, we are." Jac took a deep breath and blew it out. "Garrett, we need the rest of our strategy and plan. What you can pull together at this point, that is."

"Monroe and I have been working on that."

As Garrett began to discuss the situation, Levi reminded himself that Finley had not only served the Marine Corps with distinction but had also taken on Storm with her

typical calm demeanor and can-do attitude. That little boy never ruffled her feathers, never disrupted her calm, purposeful way. The only one he ever saw show some raw emotion between them was Cash.

Not that Levi or Finley were cold people, she simply didn't let many people in, until now. And she knew how to compartmentalize her needs over the needs of her charges or her responsibilities. Now Cash and he were in her inner circle. It was precious to him. To them. And he would learn to open up and bring her all the way into his heart. Cash was his lifelong friend, and he had no trouble getting down in the dirt with his emotions. Levi would learn too.

Levi, Cash and Storm were the people she let down her defenses for. Not finding them wasn't an option for anyone. They would bring them home safe and sound. Then their private lives would change forever. His, Cash's and Storm's, anyway.

Cash reappeared. Damn the man. "Okay, Cash. Get in there and bring our baby home."

"You got it. Time to kick some ass and take names."

"Damn it," Garrett muttered, clenching his fists. "We need to get organized better than this and we can't if we don't know where we're going. Get the notes out here on the table. Grab your partners. Let's work out a plan on how we are going to find them." His eyes met Jac's, then Cash's and lastly Levi's eyes and the understanding between them was palpable - they would do whatever it took to bring Finley and Storm home safely.

Callie, her face set in a fierce scowl, asked, "We can keep on the videos while we wait."

Monroe began cataloguing things in place at this point. "Kaden and Sharlee are

working on tracking their location, but it's still a work in progress."

"She's doing the best she can," said Jac, glancing over at his wife, the pain evident on both parents' faces.

"Still getting blocked. It's almost like we are being teased with the prize, then it's being yanked away. Don't ask me what or how we are getting the information because that is a government and trade secret. And," she said with menacing tones to whomever it applied, "don't ask me to stop."

No one responded. There was nothing to say as everyone watched her and Kaden sit in front of a bank of computers, their fingers flying across the keyboard as their eyes darted between multiple screens. Despite the panic that obviously threatened to overwhelm her, Sharlee remained focused, her jaw set in grim determination.

While she held fear in her eyes, her resolve to find her son and their friend was unyielding. It was obvious how Sharlee was putting her fear in a box and pulling out Vapor, her alter ego. Vapor was well known in the underground internet world. She was going dark, diving deep, and she was unrivaled in that universe. She'd find them soon.

Ryker and Ben Darrington approached Jac and Garrett as Cash was doing a sitrep on property security. Ryker spoke. "Colonel Darrington has offered, when we nail down the location of Finley and Storm, to fly a few of the team to the location, using his helicopter for aerial reconnaissance. That might allow us to get in quickly and come in dark. The element of surprise may be a big factor when the time comes to go in."

Jac reached out his hand to shake Ben's. "Thank you. I'll take you up on that offer. We have a couple of prop planes and Carter has said we should consider a helicopter, but I've put it on the back burner. Probably will be looking at that again. Of course, I'll pay for gas and whatever else you need to make it happen."

Ben nodded. “I’ll need to go and get the bird. Is there a place I can land?”

“Yes. Cash, show Ben the runway.”

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“You got it.”

As the team moved in and out of the room, working on helping in ways they could, Sharlee continued her relentless pursuit of Finley and Storm’s location. She’d been working for several hard hours now, hacking her way through layers of security and firewalls to access the built-in GPS tracker embedded in Storm’s shoes and Finley’s cell program. But something wasn’t right - the signal seemed to be jammed, flickering in and out as if someone or something was interfering with it.

She would hack through the mire and try to get a location and then the signal would ping like molecules in an erupting volcano. She couldn’t keep her signal docked long enough to read the location. Someone was personally monitoring her efforts. Fuck. She was the best, or close enough to count.

Kaden was working on another work around when Sharlee leaned forward. “Okay, you motherfucker. You want to play hardball? I love hard ball. Time to go dirty, Kaden. Time to go for a deep dive. Hold my feet.”

Chase watched Levi as he dosed off, blessedly free of pain and giving his brain a much-needed rest. He watched his teammate agonize over the computer, saw Storm’s mom, Jac’s wife and more than that, he saw the Vapor emerge to take on the battle. She pointed something out to Kaden and he began to type rapidly on his keyboard.

“Come on, come on...”

Sharlee muttered under her breath, her heart pounding in her chest as she willed herself to stay calm. Levi knew her mind must be racing with horrifying possibilities,

each more terrible than the last. She couldn't let her fear consume her; she had to focus, for Storm's sake and for Finley's. He was never prouder to know Charlotte Reynaud than right at that moment. She was a master in her world. Sheer genius.

"Charlotte," Jac said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I know you can do this, but I think you need a break, baby."

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I won't let them down, Jac. I promise, but you can't stop me right now. I'm close... I think I have uncovered the sequence. His strategy."

"Okay, sweetheart. I know you won't let anyone down because you couldn't if you tried, baby. Not if you tried," he assured her, his voice thick with emotion. He squeezed her shoulder gently and kissed her lips before leaving the room to join the search effort.

He and Garrett followed Cash and the Colonel outside. Garrett wanted to speak to the guards about the helicopter on its way in and Jac needed to be occupied. Levi decided the Colonel good people. He, Jac and Garrett were a tough act to follow. Their combined experience would help in more ways than one and Levi was grateful for so many good operatives.

Soon Cash was back in the room and pacing. Then sitting in the chair next to Levi. Then pacing again. He was beginning to worry about Cash who wouldn't settle enough to catch his breath.

"Cash, I can hear you thinking. I'm as scared as you but if you don't calm your mind, you're going to lose your shit at the wrong time and then you will be like me, incapacitated," said his friend who spoke with eyes closed.

Cash laughed roughly. "That's the pot calling the kettle. But you're right. I'm trying

not to get inside my head, but this waiting is fucking killing me.”

They could hear Sharlee muttered. Her expression was full of renewed determination. Sharlee murmured out loud as she dove back into her work, navigating the labyrinth of code and encryption that stood between her and the information she so desperately sought. As the clock ticked away, her fingers flew faster and faster across the keyboard, her mind racing to keep up with the demands of her task. It was incredible to watch.

Periodically, Kaden would lean over and say something low to her and she would nod and go back to the board. Levi closed his eyes again and Cash sat with Monroe and Callie, watching the remaining women talk quietly among themselves as they reviewed the last traffic cam recordings.

“Gotcha! You hairy asshole. The turtle always wins the race.” Sharlee finally exclaimed, triumph flashing across her face as she locked onto the elusive signal. The relief that washed over her was short-lived, however, replaced by a renewed sense of urgency. They were running out of time, and every second counted.

“Locked and loaded,” said Kaden as he threw up his hands and rolled his chair away from the keyboard in victory.

“Jac!” Sharlee called out, her voice cracking with tension. “I found them! I’ve got a location!”

Chapter 8

Finley felt herself slowly coming awake. Oh, her hangover was something fierce. What was she doing last night? With whom? As she rubbed her head the memories began to flood in. Storm! Running. Trying to get to the fence and through the gate. It wouldn’t accept her pin number. Panic. Watching Levi crumble. She squeezed her

arms but Storm was no longer in them. Storm! Where was he? Moving cautiously was not an option.

Finley frantically looked for the toddler while trying not to vomit from the pounding head and vertigo. Her vision fell on his sweet face, lying next to her, sleeping. Too late, she realized that she should have been more cautious in her physical movements to better assess the threat. This whole day had gone to hell, so why should the direction change now?

It needed to change because she had to get this sweet boy to safety. The events of the day came crashing into her mind, filling her with new dread and that forced her brain to think clearer. Her training kicked in. Ascertain the situation, eliminate the threat, secure the package, execute the exfil. Careful not to wake Storm, Finley searched and found no one in the back section of the cargo van except for a woman who huddled in the back corner, watching her intently.

The scent of fear was strong, an essence Finley thought was hyped imagination for fiction and media splash, but after being deployed, she knew it wasn't. She had smelled fear strongly in the Middle East, and she could smell it here. The vehicle must have been a delivery van because the back was separate from the front and it had no seats where she, Storm, and the other woman were. An advantage. The van was still moving, taking them further from home and safety. A disadvantage, but workable.

After laying there for a few more minutes to verify it was just the three of them, Finley gingerly sat up, thankful that Storm was a hard sleeper. "Where are we?" she asked the other woman, her voice coming out a mere dry croak.

"Not sure where we were or where we are." The woman spoke in an unnaturally quiet tone, so Finley took her cue and did the same.

“Were you abducted, too?”

The woman hesitated before answering. “Once upon a time I might have gotten angry about that assumption, but now,” she shrugged. “I’d say I’m ready to leave, and that isn’t being allowed, so maybe?”

The woman certainly gave the right impression of being afraid and hyperaware. “Okay. I need to get out of here and contact my friends. The baby needs his family. I’m Finley, by the way.”

“I know. I overheard them say you were a nanny to the little one over there. And his name is Storm Reynaud.”

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Instead of agreeing, Finley counted with, “What’s your name?”

“Darcy Steiner. I’m from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Well, a few years ago, I was.”

“We were abducted from just outside Lexington, Kentucky. Do you know long I’ve been out?”

“A few hours.” Darcy nodded at Storm. “That little one cried a while, but he seemed to settle so long as he was with you. He curled up tight to your side and went to sleep. He moves a lot when he sleeps.” She looked at Storm, and Finley wondered if that was a look of longing. Did she have children she is away from? Not important, her military brain told her. Stay on the task at hand.

Finley realized that meant the little man would be up soon. She looked around for her pack. “I had a backpack of supplies. I know it was on my back when they drugged me.”

Darcy pointed to another corner. “Will dumped it out looking for something, but I guess he didn’t find it. He left the supplies all strewn out, so I repacked them. I gave the little man one of the pacifiers. I thought it might help him. It seemed to.”

Finley scrutinized the cargo area and saw rope, a few canvas tarps, chains, steel hooks, and a great array of odds and ends she could use for weapons, if need be.

“What did they use this van for?”

“They didn’t. It’s stolen. Why?”

“Darcy, do you want to stay with these guys?”

“Not anymore. I liked that they paid attention to me. Gave me what I needed and Will treated me nice. Then this other man that I have rarely seen since showed up. He seemed to slowly take over. The guys are not as bright as you’d think. Some of them aren’t even from the original group when I first went with them.”

“Brought in recently?”

“Like yesterday, on two of them. Will was nice to me in the beginning, but recently, he and the others treated me differently after ‘Ace, the Avenger’ arrived. I became expendable and Will said I needed to lie low if I wanted to survive. I had a sucky life before joining up with the group, but after this guy showed up, I wasn’t wanted but wasn’t allowed to leave.”

Finley listened and asked quietly, “Do you want to leave?”

“I do now, but I’m not smart enough to get that done. I told Will, I guess he goes by Snake now, to just leave me somewhere, but he said he was under orders to keep me around. I’m stuck.”

“What if I could help you?”

Darcy looked at Finley and gave her a half smile. “You are in the same boat as me. Well, except I think they plan to get a ransom for you.”

“My boss is special forces and runs a civilian agency that hires ex-military. I’m a Marine turned nanny.”

Darcy’s eye grew large. “No shit? So you really think you can get away? But you have that little guy.”

“Trust me when I say this little guy has kickass parents that have equally kickass friends that won’t stop at anything to rescue us. If you honestly want to get away, they will rescue you, too.”

Darcy nodded. “They will come after you and the boy. These guys will kill me before they let someone rescue me. I know too much for them to allow me out of the group. I’m not wanted, but not safe to release. I think Will is the only reason I’m not dead and now that I have seen all this,” she shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, not if I can help you and Storm get away. You seem to be a nice lady. And I hated they took that little one.” Darcy nodded, more firmly this time. “Yeah, I’ll help you and if you can get me out too, that would good.”

“Done. Now, if we’ve been gone a few hours,” she ran her eyes down the inner leg pocket of her pants. The phone was still there. “Looks like they should be doing something soon.”

Darcy continued to whisper to Finley while never lowering her guard. Finley was tied up. That had to change. She hoped Darcy would come out of the corner of the cargo hold to help her.

“Darcy, I need you to bring me my pack and grab the knife out of it.” She couldn’t believe they hadn’t seen it. Storm began to make little noises that Finley couldn’t do more to comfort him than speak soft reassurances to. “Please help me. I can’t comfort him if I can’t hold him. He’ll cry and this little man has a voice. It will alert the men in the front and they will figure out both of us are awake and come back here. I need more time to formulate a plan. Come on. I’ll get us all out of this if you’ll help me.”

“Will said they needed to drop the kid off with another member of the group. That isn’t good because that means you are expendable and no one is nice enough to watch a little kid.” She thought a moment and as she hesitated, Storm began to whimper. Darcy spoke softly to him. “Okay,” she said with a nod of her head.

“Thanks.” Darcy cut through the rope in time for her to soothe a groggy and fearful Storm.

Darcy drew Finley’s pack over closer to her. “What are we going to do?”

“After I give Storm some food and hydrate him, I’m going to change him.”

“Yes, and?”

Finley smiled. She began to scratch the spray paint off the windows that was meant to black out the contents inside, namely her and Storm. “You need to write the words: Help. Call Police in letter reversal. You know, so it is readable from the other side.”

Darcy's eyes widened in disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. When you're done, I need you to scrape a patch off of that small corner of the window and by the time you're done, I should be done. We are going to put our faces in the window one at a time and Storm's too. Look entreating. Frightened. Your message and our faces in the window and especially Storm's will help get us noticed. I'll put Storm's dad's phone number on there, too."

Finley didn't really think anyone would call because of the scams and spoofs everywhere these days, but stranger things had happened, and Darcy needed something to occupy her mind while Finley came up with a real, executable plan.

"But what if they find out?" whispered Darcy fearfully. "The guys."

"Well, if they do, then they do, and we do the best we can to escape. There's a shovel here. Even some hand gardening tools. We should be able to do some damage if we have to. I'm trained in hand to hand. I'm trained in martial arts, so we have more at our disposal than they do."

"They have guns," Darcy said.

"Understood. You ready?"

Darcy took a deep breath. "I'm going to have to trust you because you're the best chance I have of getting away from them."

Finley nodded and handed Storm another bite of the sandwich she had intended to

feed him earlier while overseeing Darcy's work. She was using a hand trowel to make the lines thick enough to be seen. As Finley watched Darcy etch out their plea, she ran through possible scenarios to get out of the van. As she fed Storm, who was beginning to enjoy the freedom of riding in a vehicle without a car seat to subdue his toddler tendencies, she wondered if there was a rest area on the road they were on. A woman needed to pee after so many hours locked away.

"Darcy, what do you do when you need to pee?"

"What?" After she thought a moment, she nodded. "I tell the guys I need a gas station. They know why."

"Okay. When I tell you to, I want you to get their attention and ask for a gas station. Then I'll pretend to still be out when they get back here to let you out. You will have to take Storm with you. Say you can change him at the same time. Grab the bag. Then when you get inside, lock the door and don't come out."

"But what if they break down the door?"

"Those doors can be pretty sturdy. If it isn't, don't risk yours or Storm's life. But no matter what happens, when you get inside that bathroom, you must press this button." Finley showed where the homing device was at the base of the backpack. "It will send a boosted SOS signal to Sharlee, Storm's mom. Leave this dirty diaper in the garbage for evidence Storm was there. If you have to return, bring the pack back. It will help Sharlee locate us quicker. Stationary is better but any signal helps. I don't know how strong my phone signal is in a moving vehicle."

"Got it."

When they had done all they could to attract attention to the cars behind them and done all the prep they could from the inside, Finley said it was time to put things into

play.

“It’s showtime, Darcy. No matter what, if you stay in the bathroom, you will be discovered by Jac’s team. They are big and scary and can do some impressive damage, but they won’t hurt a fly if they know you are with me and protecting Storm. Tell them Water Lily and Finley needs her own bed. They will know I approve of you with Storm because I am always complaining about sleeping in different beds when it’s vacation time. It’s a joke they will all know.”

“And Water Lily?”

“Safeword.”

“Got it. Are you sure? They could kill you,” asked Darcy, her voice still little more than a whisper.

“They can try but I’ve got mad skills they have no idea about.”

“Right, you were a Marine.”

“Yep, and I’m a Krav Maga practitioner and a great kickboxer.” Finley noticed Darcy’s lost expression. “Martial Arts.”

“Oh, right.”

After another fifteen minutes, it was time to try to get their captors’ attention. Darcy banged on the van divider.

“What?” came the gruff, muffled response.

“Pee!”

“What?”

“Gas...sta-tion!”

There was no response. Darcy lifted her hand to bang again, but Finley stayed her hand. “They heard you.”

“How do you know?”

“They stopped talking. Now, let’s see if they do as they are supposed to do.”

About ten minutes passed and it didn’t seem like they would stop. Either it was a long, empty road they were on, or they had no intention of stopping. Finally, the vehicle pulled off the road and seemed to be driving into a driveway or parking lot. Finley knew they could have stopped on the side of the road, but she had hoped they all needed to pee as well. It would draw less attention if they weren’t all urinating on the side of the road.

Finley got into position as they heard the front door of the truck opened. It went off without a hitch. Good boy, Storm, for allowing Darcy to take him with her. It helped that his interest was piqued by the different environment. The side door wasn’t closed and she could hear the conversation between the two guys standing close. It had to be late afternoon. By the light, she’d guess five p.m. and her stomach rumbled along with her newly discovered need to pee.

Another man approached loudly as though he were running and flatfooted. He spoke a few words before Finley heard, “Motherfucker.”

Then the van door closed, and she heard running footsteps in the direction that the other had come from. Finley sent up a prayer for protection and quickly pulled out her cell phone. She tried to call with no luck, so she texted.

“Track these coordinates. Storm may be safe at these premises. Get here and follow the phone to me.”

There seemed to be a huge ruckus, and when Finley tried to open the van's side door, it didn't open. As she was trying to coax the door to release, she heard shouts and one set of sneaker'd feet running back to the van. Then the front driver door opened and slammed shut. No one joined him. He pulled out of the drive like a crazy man with a lunatic after him.

Thank God Storm is safe. Finley couldn't believe anything else. She pulled out her phone again, but there was no reception. Back in the boonies again. With Storm safe, Finley could concentrate on finding a way out of this mess. The first thing was to open the door or break through the window. She started looking for some good window-breaking objects.

"Come on, guys. I need you now more than I ever have."

Chapter 9

Callie gently shook Levi. He'd been asleep for three hours and she didn't want to wake him but she had promised him earlier in the day so when he didn't rouse enough to open his eyes, Monroe spoke up.

"He's moving around in his sleep, so he good. The two of them agreed he wasn't well enough to go on the rescue, so Cash will go. Let's leave him."

Callie stood over her teammate for a few more seconds before nodding. "Okay, but I want it noted I did try, because he's going to be pissed that we let him sleep through."

Cash walked over. "Let him be pissed at me. Leave him sleeping. It will help his healing, and that is the most important thing, since we have adequate help to bring Finley and Storm home safely."

The three of them left Levi on the lounge sofa, sound asleep. Monroe placed the pain

killers on the little table next to him so he had relief when he did wake up. Turning, he joined the others.

Ryker came out of Jac's home office. "Okay, I have some things that need to be reviewed but so far as I can see, there are no present employees unaccounted for or that have been here at the house except all of us and the extra coverage occasionally. Also, criminal records have cleared as well as recent firings or disgruntled employees. How far back do you want me to go, Jac?"

"Since we got things off the ground. I know it's a while, but this isn't random, it's targeted and whoever it is has to have been here at some point to know where I fucking live. They've been playing cat and mouse, whoever he, she or they are, for a while and they even knew when our big cases were done due to the timing of the messages. Has to be close. Damn close."

"I'll keep digging, going backwards from where I stopped. Leave the ladies with me and Kaden."

"Good. We have some decent coordinates, and we're on our way to grab Storm and Finley."

Sharlee looked at her husband and grimaced. "It's still patchy, but I'm trying to piggyback a satellite signal. I have a current message. Wait. The SOS signal from Storm's backpack is sending a beacon signal. I've locked on to the signal burst. It seems to be stationary." Sharlee began to run her fingers over the keys fast as lightning.

"Send it to our phones," Jac instructed. Cash could feel his own heart pounding in his chest as hope surged through him. Jac's anticipation had to be more. "Let's move, people! Kaden with me. Cash with Garrett. We're bringing them home!"

“Finley is still a moving target right now, Jac. The backpack is stationary. I can direct you, but you need to find them using your own instincts. You will need to go in two different directions. It will take me a few minutes to pack up my gear.”

“Charlotte, you will be more help here.”

“I won’t. Anything I can do here, I can do on-site. I need to be there, Jac. I promise I won’t leave the vehicle, but I have to be there when you find my baby.”

Jac stared at his wife and the nonverbal communication they had was understood by the whole room. He nodded agreement. “Okay, Kaden, you stay with the women and be home communication. I’ll leave four guys with you and Levi.”

From the sofa, a groggy Levi responded. “Not happening Jac. I was there when this went down. I have to be part of the recovery.”

Garrett spoke up. “Stand down Jac. I’m the lead and you need to be the dad right now.” The Colonel spoke up. “The man has a point. And I agree that so long as Levi good to go, he can come with me,” the Colonel looked over at Monroe, Mallory and Oakley, and received a nod of assurance. “I can take the helicopter in and land within sight and sound if possible. I’ll take Levi with me to be my second. If needed, I can transport injuries.”

Garrett nodded in the Colonel’s direction. “Right. So Charlotte and Jac are with Carter. Carter, you drive.” Jac nodded. “I agree with that.”

Garrett laughed. “You don’t know how to stand down, do you?”

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Jac gave him a serious stare. “I haven’t stood down from a command until I left the Army. And then, that wasn’t for long before I started bringing on these knuckleheads. I’ll do my best to follow your lead. It’s all I can promise.”

“Good enough.” Garrett turned to the Colonel. “Ben and Levi will bring the chopper in after we are sure of where we’re headed.”

“Callie, and I will take Ryker with us. He might be able to use those rusty, dusty, negotiator skills of his.” Ryker nodded, not offended at Garrett’s attempt at levity.

“Monroe, you, Cash, and Mark are in the third vehicle.”

The engines of the black SUVs roared as they tore through the winding back roads, tires kicking up dirt and gravel in its wake, slowed things down. Once they pulled back onto a larger main road, things went faster. Everyone hoped they would be able to stay on better roads for a while.

“I appreciate your calmness, Carter. I would have gripped the wheel so tightly I might have broken the steering column or my finger joints.” Jac glanced at Sharlee. Her face was drawn and pale as she clutched her phone, guiding him to the location she had managed to track. She had set up a satellite system to guide them, but sometimes the road was in amongst trees and nature that blocked the signal. Jac put his arm around her shoulders and she slumped a little into his hold, only to straighten again as they continued ahead.

Levi and the Colonel had arrived quickly to wait for the go signal to lift off. Ben had brought his chopper in closer earlier in the day, so it was ready when needed.

“Now I know what it feels like to be on the other side of this kind of thing. Most of us have been through similar but it wasn’t a child. I can’t imagine the fear and worry. We’ll get them home tonight. Your job will be, of course, to stay out of the way so they can grab baby boy and Finley and get out.”

“Cash will get Finley, and I feel certain Jac will grab Storm.”

The Colonel nodded. “Your job is to support only. Like mine. I haven’t had this happen to me or a loved one, but I’ve come close to being captured a time or two. I can imagine it could kill the soul when it’s your loved one.”

“I hadn’t realized my feelings for Fin were this strong. Cash said his were and that if I was honest, I’d see mine were too. I truly thought we were just pals, but I am finding that it isn’t as easy as that.”

“Nothing ever is. Easy and love just don’t happen in the same vortex.”

“It doesn’t seem to. I hope she’s alright.” Levi’s voice trembled a little. While the sleep had done a great job at helping him feel better, he still felt shaky.

“We won’t let it be any other way, son.” Sharlee came over the radio.

“Turn left up ahead,” she instructed, her voice wavering slightly. “We’re getting close.” She relayed the same message to the others, hoping not to broadcast their intent to the police as well. She instructed, in her best detached voice, to head to the coordinates as she texted them. She then sent the same message to Ben and Levi.

“Everyone be ready,” Garrett called out over the communication devices. Tensions were high and that was a good thing because it made a person more observant and more responsive. The feeling of determination and loyalty radiated through all the vehicles.

Levi felt odd because he hadn't claimed Finley. It wasn't anything he had considered before today. It was nearly dark, and he hoped Finley wasn't hurt and that Storm was with her, so he wouldn't be too frightened. He wanted this nightmare to be over and to fall into bed for a long sleep with Finley beside him. Cash might have something to say about that, but hey, he and Fin had been through the ringer. They deserved to pass out together.

In response to the new coordinates, the chopper lifted into the sky and seemed to eat the miles in seconds. "The target is a mom-and-pop gas station," said Ben.

Sharlee responded. "We see it. Colonel, tell us what you see from your vantage point."

"Nothing really. No van. No cars really except an older model truck."

Garrett came on the mic. "Colonel, drop her down in the back if you can. Carter, you park around the side to the left of the front. Mark, go to your right. We will pull up in the front."

"Roger that," came the responses.

"Got it," said Ben. "We have an entry but didn't see any others. Awaiting response order."

The other two were suspiciously silent.

Carter spoke. "Jac and I will enter from the back. Sharlee is remaining in the vehicle, monitoring."

Garrett spoke. "If there isn't a door on your side, Monroe, go clockwise until you find a door and that is your entry and guard door. I believe that will be the front."

There was silence for what Levi thought was too long and as he reached to leave his seat, the Colonel said, “Ease, son. We have to let them get the job done. No heroics. We are ready to assist when called in. This is our station right now.”

Levi couldn’t believe that the man was so calm. He wanted to yell at him, but knew the older soldier was right. He impatiently stood his position.

Soon after that, the team began to walk out the front door. “Colonel, they’re exiting the building. All seems under control.” The two men in the chopper joined the group. Sharlee leaped from the SUV and headed into the crowd when Jac strolled out of the door with a crying Storm.

“Who is that young woman?” asked Benjamin.

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“No idea. Where is Finley?” asked Levi. His heart came crashing hard, his chest was tight and aching as he realized she wasn’t among those exiting.

“Where is Finley?” asked Levi.

Cash answered him with a sad, then fierce look. “Not here. Where the fuck is she?”

Carter spoke. “Finley set it up to keep Storm safe and this young lady, Darcy, who says Finley told her to hit the SOS and wait for help. The word she gave was Water Lily and described us pretty well. She also said for her to tell us she wanted her own bed, so hurry up.”

That was Finley all right. “Her safe word and that woman is particular about beds. But where is she?” Levi asked again.

Cash looked at Sharlee, who held her son in one arm and handed her cell to Cash before wrapping both arms around her baby. She was holding it together, but tears were streaming down her face. Jac wrapped his family in his arms and just rocked them for a moment.

Cash turned from the scene, thankful to have Storm back safe and sound, but his heart stuttered as he thought of their girl stillmissing. He stared at the display on Sharlee’s phone. Levi came to stand beside him, their shoulders brushing as they shared space to find their girl. Sharlee had locked a location and the Keep Safe program was still activated, so Finley’s phone was still working.

Mark nodded at the cell phone. “That’s where we’re going. That is where Finley is

going to be.” His confidence bolstered Levi and Cash’s faith that Finley would be okay and be their next pickup.

Monroe added that he had called the cops. “I gave them the information they would need. Seems they got lost on their way here. Two men came in when Darcy and Storm didn’t come out of the bathroom. The shopkeepers tried to call the authorities but were made to lie down while the one who came in with Darcy tried to get into the bathroom. Seems that door was solid and they couldn’t kick it in. The store manager told the men that the only key was in the bathroom with the woman and child. The report they are going to give to the cops is that two men were trying to get the woman and child from the bathroom but failed.”

“Thank God,” said Carter. “At least they won’t connect it to us.”

“Mark added, “Seems one left in the van they came in and the other man, when he couldn’t get the two out of the bathroom, took off out the back. This owner has the description of them.”

Garrett nodded. “We aren’t done, so Colonel, you take Sharlee, Storm and Darcy back to the house. Keep an eye on this one,” he nodded in Darcy’s direction, “Until we get Finley and verification as to what actually happened.”

“Yep, I’ll take them home and come back if you need me. I’ll be on standby.”

Sharlee grabbed her tablet and gave it to Mark as she got her phone back from Levi. “You are the most techie guy out here right now, so here is my tablet with the coordinates. Lookslike she has stopped moving. That stationary signal is weak and these coordinates are where you are going. Go get her back safe for us.”

Mark nodded. “Got it. Take the little man home.”

Garrett nodded at Jac. “We could use your help but understand if you need to go with Sharlee and Storm.”

“Nope. I’m all good if the Colonel good with his passengers.”

“Yep. Heading out now.”

As soon as the helicopter lifted off, the rest piled into the SUVs and Monroe, Cash, and Mark took the lead. Levi took Sharlee’s place in the vehicle with Jac and Carter. Garrett and Callie with Ryker brought up the rear. The road to get to the coordinates wasn’t the best they’d seen. In their urgency, slowing down was hard for them all to accept, but necessary to make sure they navigated the unlit roads safely.

“Fuck. This shit road is making it take too long to get to Finley,” said Levi.

He heard the chatter from others and his own head had an intense dull thudding, but Cash had gone quiet. He’d seen his friend crawl inside of his head before, but there was an intensity about this time that Levi wasn’t sure he’d experienced before. His friend had spent all day worried he’d lost the two people he had expected to share his forever with. Cash was holding on by a thread. Levi decided if Finley would take them both, then he was all in, too.

“Just ahead. I’d say it was that old building,” said Mark. Cash sat up straighter and surveyed the surrounding area as they found a place to pull in the vehicles and stop.

“Be prepared for anything,” warned Garrett, his eyes scanning the thick woods that bordered the narrow road.

Without words, the men began to grab their gear as they assessed the property. The team knew all too well the dangers that could lurk within because they had worked many missions in wild vegetation surrounded by inky darkness. It was a veritable

minefield of possible traps.

“Garrett, let’s split into smaller groups,” Mark suggested. “If we cover more ground, we have a better chance of finding her.”

“Agreed,” Garrett said. “But we stay in contact,” he advised, his gaze raked over the determined faces of his friends. Comrades. Family. “We are covering all exits. Stay with your vehicle personnel. Carter, your crew check the area near that creek to the north, in the back. Levi, if you think you aren’t able to do this, stay back. We can’t afford to worry about your injuries.”

“I’ good. Might not be a hundred percent, but I’ good enough.”

Garrett scrutinized him for a good long moment before nodding. “Look for doors and windows. There is a little flicker of light behind that ragged curtain in the front. Likely where she is. We just don’t know who is with her.” He turned. “Monroe, you and Mark cover the east. We will head west with the intention of clearing things in the front entry. Cash, you and Callie with me. We focus on grabbing Finley. Let’s see what the front has to offer us.”

The night vision goggles went on, the weapons were checked in their holsters and sheaths to make sure there was unimpeded access, and they headed for the building, alerted to the environment, the doors and windows, and focused on the feeble light inside. They kept their equipment in excellent shape, but one final cursory check that all was operational was second nature to this team. Suited up to do battle, they moved stealthily, carefully making their way to their assigned zones.

The shadows shifted as the full darkness descended and the night filled in the areas holding the small slivers of light nearly captive. Normally they liked going in like this, but they also had typically scoped out the place in one way or the other. They had to go in cold here and were looking for one of their own. It raised the stakes

considerably.

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As the team moved through the dense foliage, their every sense heightened. Levi could feel the sweat on his brow and the thudding of his heart in his throat that matched the dull thud in his head. He had no idea what Cash was doing, but he didn't expect Cash to be any more composed than he was. Time was slipping away, and with each passing minute, the fear for Finley grew more palpable. It was time to switch off the fear and settle into the neutral place he went when it was mission active. A familiar calm alertness descended, and he focused on the objective: locate and secure hostage, neutralizing any barrier in his way.

They quickly swept the interior of the structure and found the building empty. The feeling of despair and unfulfilled expectations was tangible. The light was a flashlight, which means someone had been there recently. Very recently. Had they missed them? A quick walk through cleared the building of any inhabitants and any sign there had been any except for the flashlight. Strange to leave it on when it could be seen through the worn spots in the cloth covering the windows. Definitely a deliberate ploy to gain their attention.

"Fuck," said Levi.

"It's a sign," said Cash. "A message."

Mark nodded. "Yes. She wanted us to know we are close, and she is alive."

"What?" asked Ryker. "How would she have been able to do that?"

Levi grunted. "My girl has some skill."

Jac nodded. “She does indeed.”

“Think about it. The flashlight is facing forward, toward the front door. She wanted us to stop here.”

“You’re right,” said Cash. “We need to do some recon.”

The group made one more cursory review of the building and then exited to scope the surrounding area. “Fuck it’s dark,” said Carter.

Garrett spoke sharply. “Quiet and concentrate. Mark, has she moved?”

“Doesn’t seem to have.”

“Good, she’s here then.”

“Hold on, baby girl,” whispered Cash.

Levi murmured, “Stay alert, we’re almost there, Fin.”

“Over there!” Garrett whispered suddenly, pointing towards another dilapidated building partially concealed by overgrown vegetation.

The team sprang into action, adrenaline pumping as they rushed towards the structure. As they neared the entrance, they heard a faint grunt. Levi’s pulse raced, recognizing the sound immediately. “That’s Finley. She makes that same sound when she doesn’t win a competition and... it’s her,” he breathed, hope surging through him. The others heard it too, and their pace quickened, determination etched on their faces.

“I wished we had more toys at our disposal,” said Callie.

Sharlee was now home holding her son tight and working on what information she could get them, which was very little. Kaden was the drone person, and he was home manning the main comm system. They disbursed through hand signals and whispers into their coms about where to go. The team looked inside the structure cautiously and discovered the general layout of the building. This was less of an open equipment shed like the first building but not any less ramshackle and it seemed like a strong wind would bring it down flat to the ground.

“This isn’t structurally sound. Go with caution,” said Jac. “Pair off.”

When they were ready, each two-person team burst through the door careful to not bring down the walls, weapons at the ready, only to find Finley, battered but alive, cradling her ribs and mid-section with her arms. Relief washed over the team like a tidal wave, followed by a surge of joy. Then silence.

“Finley!” said Levi with a nearly soundless cry. The group watched carefully what Finley did instead of rushing forward to embrace their friend. Cash went down on his knee to scoop Finley up in his arms, but Levi stopped him by grabbing onto his arm.

“Stop. Look at her. She’s hurt. And they’ve wired her.” Levi addressed Finley. “Baby, is this live?”

She croaked an answer. “Yes. They said my boyfriend would figure it out.”

“Fuck,” said Cash. He grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Levi, can you do it?”

Levi looked at the wires and took off his outer shirt. No timer, nothing too scary, but his head still hurt and his focus wasn’t as good as it should be. “Clear the building and then get out. You too Cash.”

“Nope. I’m here with you and Finley. I’ll be the moral support. You be the fixer.”

As the men carried on with a low conversation and the others cleared the building, Finley barely seemed to notice them. She was so badly hurt and propped against the wall in the dirty corner. When Cash sat next to her and grabbed her other hand, she let out a muffled cry that told them she was hurt more than they had thought.

“Fuckers,” he said quietly.

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At least they had left her alive, thank God. How badly they hurt her would be assessed after they got out. Cash left her on the floor where she sat for the time being while Levi did his thing.

“At least I’m alive.”

“Yes baby, you are,” answered Cash. He touched her arm and she hissed.

“Fuck, man, don’t hurt her more,” said Levi. Cash ignored him. He wasn’t sure there was any place that wasn’t hurt on his baby. Levi was stressed. They all were.

Jac got into Finley’s line of sight. “Are you alone?”

“Yes, thank God. Storm?”

Jac smiled. “At home, which is where you are going just as soon as our man Levi unhooks you.”

“I’ll need wire clippers, screwdriver, and a knife.” Both appeared instantly. “Thanks. Now clear out. If you’re staying Cash, you’ll have to be my second set of eyes. Mine don’t work as well as they usually do.”

“Shit. I forgot. I’ll play second. Tell me what you need.”

The team was still cautious and cleared the building before their guard was dropped a degree. The rest of the team surrounded Cash, Levi and Finley, who tried valiantly to cry silently. The only real evidence was the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Finley spoke, but it was obvious she was in considerable pain. “He’s gone. He left two at the gas station and the driver rushed to the van and left. Storm? Is he alright? Did you find Darcy?”

“I promise he’s fine,” said Jac gently, casting a cautious look at Levi. “Yes, we found Darcy. Tell me how bad you’re hurt?”

“Not as bad as you’d think. Is this someone’s idea of a game? All that was left was this one guy, the driver, and no one was here when we got here. Evidently, that wasn’t to plan either. He just hightailed it out of here after he took his frustrations out on me and tied me up.”

“Thank God you’re okay,” Jac said. “We have so much to talk about, but right now, we need to get you out of here.”

After a few more moments of work, Levi shook his head. “Fuckers. It’s dead. The box is dead. Nothing in it. No detonator, no nothing.” He pulled the wires out of the connectors.

“Let’s take it all. Maybe he left prints,” said Garrett.

Cash tried to help her stand, but the anguished cry said it all. “Let’s get her out of here. Guess it’s the cradle carry for you, Fin.”

Carter grinned. “That’s my call to duty.”

“No, just help me up again. I can do it. I can walk.” Finley tried and gasped.

“Okay, you tried, baby,” said Levi. “Now let Carter help.”

They all knew Carter was their Goliath, and they didn’t have any shame for using him

that way. Cash helped her to stabilize herself, cringing when she whimpered. Carter helped her to settle into his arms as he walked her to the vehicles. Levi sighed. He was so happy she was well and alive, and he was so damn tired. Cash walked ahead, doing his best to clear the path. Levi was beside Callie on one side and Monroe on the other side of Carter. The rest covered the protection in front and back of the group.

Once they redistributed in the SUVs Carter driving Levi, Cash, Monroe and Finley, and had pulled out, Monroe started to work on Finley. Her exhaustion was easy to read.

“Let me see you,” Monroe murmured, kneeling beside Finley to assess her injuries. His hands moved quickly yet gently, checking for broken bones and wounds.

As Monroe quickly assessed Finley, Callie’s voice came over the radio. “We need to get everyone out of here. I saw movement in the trees where we just left,” she declared, her voice firm but laced with concern.

Garrett and Jac spoke at the same time. “Watch for tails.”

“Or interceptions,” said Mark.

Levi nodded, his thoughts a whirlwind of emotions—relief, anger, and a fierce protectiveness for Finley. He looked over and saw Cash was feeling it, too.

“You have company,” said Sharlee. Her tone was urgent.

“I’m okay. Just get us out of here,” said Finley, her voice full of her fear.

Monroe spoke into the Bluetooth connection. “Roger that. We’ll have to finish the assessment for everyone once we are out.”

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“Agreed,” Jac said, taking charge once more. “Take us home.”

“Done,” Garrett replied.

“Split up and head home,” said Jac.

“Going straight. Heading east. Heading south.” Each told their direction, but nothing else.

“Meet you all back at the ranch,” said Callie. Monroe groaned.

Callie laughed. “Well, it sounded right, anyway.”

Chapter 10

The next evening was stormy and dreary, but spirits were high as the Alpha team gathered in the dimly lit room, their expressions somber yet determined. It was time to debrief and figure out what they had learned from the harrowing experience that had nearly cost them Levi, Finley, and Storm. Shadows played against the walls, heightening the tension and urgency of their purpose, but it was couched in the gratitude that their people were all safe.

“Alright, everyone,” Jac began, his voice steady but tinged with underlying emotion. “We need to discuss what happened, learn from it, and plan our next steps—especially concerning Darcy.”

He glanced at the enigmatic woman, who stood apart from the group, her arms

crossed defensively over her chest. She had stayed in a guest room with the door locked from the outside last night. She had Callie as a sidekick all day.

Finley was exhausted even after a night at home. She slept with Levi because he was recovering from his rock to head experience. Both had some restlessness all night. Levi was attentive but still not feeling well. Cash was on a rollaway in the room. He was a great caretaker and cuddled with her in the large armchair in the room when she woke with nightmares in the night. Poor Levi had been as exhausted as she was, but Finley had the nightmares.

Cash's arms around her in the dead of night gave her the sense of comfort and security she lost yesterday. Levi was her companion, her cohort in crime. The man she connected to as an equal partner. Cash had proven he would nurture, protect, and get firm with her when needed. Levi was intent on boosting her to the best of her abilities. She would have to fight first before he would join in. Both men would demolish her enemies before they made it to her. She loved them both for their different personalities.

Finley was in mental control from the moment she was fully awake in the van until she was at the mercy of that asshole who took his frustrations out on her. When she saw the guys in that room with her, she thought she would fall apart. Her training, her dignity, and her upbringing of playing things down got her through. But once she was in the bedroom with her guys, she'd lost it and cried until there were no more tears. Annihilated, she had fallen into a deep, heavy sleep that made waking up from the nightmares that much harder.

Cash was always so nurturing and gentle, Levi was the "buck up Marine" kind of guy and it was Levi she needed when they'd rescued her. The guys seemed to know that. Cash gave Levi the first contact. Cash, once he understood the situation, would have helped clear the area, but he had backup, so he dropped to his haunches to make sure their girl was okay. Levi saved her from what she thought was a bomb. She needed

them both.

She had thought Carter scooping her up was going to be much more awkward than it was. Monroe took care of her until they got to town. The trip to Monroe's doctor friend wasn't a walk in the park, either. Her ribs were x-rayed and wrapped, blood and urine samples taken, and he even had a portable CT machine that she was made to endure. Her cuts and abrasions were cleaned and bandaged as necessary. Monroe was given a long list of instructions. She ate a little when they finally returned to the house and then fell into bed to fall apart.

"You don't need to do anything with me. I appreciate that you got me out of there, Finley and the rest of you, but I can deal with things alone. I have most of my life and I haven't gotten less intelligent since taking up with those guys."

Finley spoke up. "You didn't take up with them, Darcy. They enticed you with their cause, which wasn't anything but hot air. And they mistreated you horribly once that Ace Avenger guy showed up." Finley gingerly turned to Jac. "They didn't want her around anymore, but she knew too much or had seen too much, so they kept her around. She wouldn't have lasted much longer before someone decided they didn't want that liability any longer."

Darcy shrugged, but her vulnerability was obvious. "But I'm out now and I can handle things myself. Just where is here? Finley, you said outside of Lexington, Kentucky. Not sure I can hitchhike home. I might need to borrow bus fare, but I'll pay you back. I've always worked."

Jac asked, "Where was the last place you knew where you were?"

"About winter last year, I knew we stopped in Chicago because Ace," she shrugged, "that's what they call him, or boss, needed to meet some people. He didn't trust me enough to leave me with the rest, so they brought me. Promised they'd sell me if I

made a peep. I didn't."

Finley watched as Levi, who sat on one side of her, rubbed a hand over his face. His head was likely pounding, his mind racing with questions and anger. She nodded when his next question verified her assumptions.

"How could this have happened? Let's back up. First off, how did these men manage to get so close without us knowing?" asked Levi.

Cash patted her hands as they sat folded in her lap. She turned her hand up to grasp his, and he raised her hands to his lips before replacing them and released her to stand up.

"I'm trying to think about that. I have gone over this whole place with a fine-toothed comb. Unless they have already been here at your invitation, the cameras don't show anything unusual." Cash looked over at Kaden.

"Cash is right. I don't find a thing out of the ordinary. So, Jac, I hate to say it, but it's someone connected to you privately or in business. And we have no way of knowing how far back it goes." Mark was darkly intense. Jessie rubbed his thigh, and he seemed to relax, slightly.

Jac spoke. "As far back as the first note. A year and a half ago. When did Ace appear, Darcy?"

"About a year ago?"

"Okay. Hell, I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but it must be someone who has known us for a while and is privy to quite a bit of information. Not as much as you all, but enough," said Oakley.

“I haven’t allowed my name connected to this place, but if you have enough information, you can find us on the tax rolls,” said Sharlee.

“And other places,” said Jessie. “Court documents, birth records, and someone in the same caliber of expertise as Sharlee wouldn’t think it difficult.”

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Colonel Darrington shook his head. “If we knew who it was, the other questions might be a quick answer.” He turned to Darcy. “Can you tell me who it is that is the boss? Is there a name you’ve heard besides Ace?”

“No. I wasn’t allowed in his company, really. Some called him Ace, but I might be wrong about that being his name. It was a while ago. Finley said he was referred to as the Avenger, I think.”

“Yes. We just don’t know if Ace and Avenger are the same person.” Carter paced.

Garrett frowned, his jaw clenched. “It’s clear we underestimated our vulnerability and our exposure. They have been watching us for a while, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.”

“Which means we need to up our security measures,” Callie interjected, her eyes narrowing as she studied Darcy. “Starting with figuring out where Darcy fits into all of this.”

Darcy’s eyes flashed with defiance, and she stepped forward. “I’ve already told you, I want nothing to do with Will, who now likes the name Snake,” her voice bitter in memory, “and his new boss’s plans. I was just trying to survive.” Her voice revealed a hint of hesitancy beneath the steely exterior.

“Maybe,” Callie conceded, her gaze softening slightly. “But we can’t afford to take any chances. We need to verify your story and decide how to proceed.”

“Agreed,” Jac said, nodding. “In the meantime, we’ll keep Darcy under watch until

we know more.”

Finley turned to face Darcy, who still stood off in the corner. “They will keep you safe as well as keep the guys and gals happy.”

“Fine,” Darcy muttered, her shoulders sagging in resignation and something else. Was it relief? “Finley, I’m sorry you were hurt. You won’t hurt as much in a few days. Takes about two weeks to breathe without it causing too much pain, though.”

“Thank you, but how...” Finley stopped talking and just shook her head. “Oh. Darcy, I’m so sorry.”

Several sharply inhaled breaths were heard, mostly from the men, but the deep growly sound came from the man closest to Darcy. “Fucking unacceptable.”

Darcy seemed surprised. “It’s fine. Really. I survived.”

“Let this be a lesson for all of us,” Kaden spoke up. “We need to be more vigilant and prepared for anything. We can’t let our guard down. And everyone needs to have their phone on the company tracker and every woman needs her Keep Safe program and a permanent tracker concealed in her purse or a pendant or something.”

“Especially with Anora and Storm. Becky’s home belly-bakery is in full swing and Mallory’s baby bun almost out of the oven,” Sharlee added, not having put her toddler down this morning, even though he was fed, clean, and fast asleep in her arms. No one could blame her.

Kaden added, his eyes instinctively going to his wife, whose hand was on her belly. Ivy didn’t notice, but Finley did. Interesting. “Our family’s safety is our top priority.”

“Absolutely,” Jessie agreed, holding Mark’s hand tightly. “We’re lucky this time, but

we can't afford any more close calls."

"Then it's settled," Jac said, his gaze sweeping the room, locking onto each member of his team. "We review our security protocols, verify Darcy's story, and strengthen our defenses. No more underestimating our enemy. The women are on yellow alert, second-level protection. Finley, Anora, Storm, Rebecca, Mallory and Darcy are on level one." Mallory opened her mouth, and Jac held up his hand. "Whatever you are going to say, forget it. We're going to talk about security and I would rather you stay here under extra protection."

Monroe nodded but Mallory said, "No offense, Jac, but they were abducted from right next door."

Jac didn't hesitate in his response. "Understood. We are still the best protected. No one is going to be put in a vulnerable position again until we are done with this."

"Jac, I'd like to volunteer to be on protection detail over Ms. Roberts."

"That could work. Darcy? You good with that?" asked Jac.

"You're asking me?"

"I am."

The woman blushed. She looked at Finley, who hadn't officially met the Colonel nor gotten his rundown. Fin looked up at Levi, who hadn't left her side since the rescue, with a silent inquiry. He nodded. She turned to Cash, who also nodded.

"It's a safe choice, Darcy."

Darcy answered, "I guess. But no funny business."

Colonel Darrington nodded solemnly. “Done. You’ll be expected to follow my instructions. They will be to keep you safe, so not a negotiable request. And since we will be spending a lot more time together, call me Ben. In fact, even though I’m known as Colonel, Ben works for all of you.”

A chorus of agreement echoed at his invitation. Finley could feel the renewed sense of determination surge throughout the room. Levi was talking to Cash.

Jac spoke up. “Ryker, in between your own work, I’d appreciate it if you finished the list you were working backward on of the employees that either might have a vendetta or left the company under less-than-optimal circumstances.”

“Of course.”

“Kaden, starting tomorrow, work through the business associates. Start eighteen months ago and continue working back from there. They need to have been around at least that long. The notes started soon after that, so eliminate anyone terminated after that. We can go back and include more recent people if we don’t turn up anything in our present parameters.”

“The rest of you have assignments or schedules to keep. We will do the best we can to keep to that. Levi, if you are feeling up to it, could you assist Cash in the house security starting tomorrow night? I have the relief team here for one more night, then you and Cash will take over.”

“Nothing too strenuous,” admonished Monroe. “And you, young lady, are down for the count for at least a week. Nopicking up Storm or Anora, either. There are plenty of others here to do that. You are off duty until further notice.”

“Monroe, that’s unreasonable. How about we re-assess Friday?”

Monroe nodded. “Sounds good.” Finley smiled smugly. “Of next week.”

“What?”

Cash grinned. “You heard the man. Don’t even think of going against that because we need you back full on and if you push, you won’t be ready for much longer. You and Levi go spend some quiet time together. I’ve got shit to do.”

Finley tried to hide her disappointment that Cash wasn't joining them. "That sounds nice." Cash leaned in close. "Later tonight, I will ask you all about it while I tickle that clit of yours as you hold yourself perfectly still. I might even slip in a fun spanking if you're good."

Her expression faltered. "Oh, that's nice, but...I'm not sure if I can—"

"On your pussy. Your ribs won't be able to handle a real spanking for a little while." His wicked grin drew a moan. "And there are so many ways to punish a disobedient nanny."

She could feel the heat rise up her chest and neck and how it burned her cheeks. The few times Cash had Finley sucked in her breath and let it out slowly as she tried to get her responses under control.

"Alright, team," Jac said, his voice strong and resolute. "Let's get things back in our home court with the advantage to us."

"Jac," said Mark, "Jessie and I are going to get Anora now instead of tomorrow."

Jac's face softened. "Absolutely. We need our family whole again."

Finley and Levi were having an intense conversation in the corner of the room. Jac called over to them. "Finley, as part of the house security, Levi and Cash are your bodyguards until further notice. You up for that Levi?"

"Yep. I was just explaining that to Finley. We wouldn't be happy without knowing she was safe at all times."

Finley spoke up, her voice not as strong as it typically was, but there was no doubt that she was adamant about what she said. "I can handle my own self. We have

vulnerable people that need more protection than me.”

Jac walked closer. “Normally, I would agree. You’ve proven you are more than capable of handling yourself and protecting Storm, but given the circumstances and until this is resolved, no one is alone. And before you get that thought in your head that I don’t trust you, I do. Implicitly. My son is here, safe and healthy because of you. Darcy is free for the same reason. But the buddy system is the best protection we have right now. And you’re hurt.”

“Sure,” said Finley.

Cash spoke up. “We still don’t know if it is just a one-time attempt to get at us or will they attempt to do this shit again.”

“Precisely. I have an extra bodyguard on Storm. We are all using a higher level of protection because we don’t know what this maniac is really after.”

Ryker grinned. “You are popular, my friend.” He slapped Jac on the back. “I don’t personally think that we all want to stay in the same place... I feel like a sitting duck. No offense to your security company, but I think I’ll take Oakley back into town and stay at a friend’s place. He’s out of the country and we’re keeping an eye on the place. Completely unrelated to this side of my life. I can continue to work on this there.”

“Whomever it is, they seem to want to get to me, but for what purpose?”

Garrett spoke up from the sofa that he was sharing with Callie. “We are working on that. Therefore, we are erring on the side of protection.”

Callie laughed. “Did you just say, therefore?”

“Yep.”

“Yes, we will keep working on all of it.” Jac turned to Finley and Levi. “You two have had a rough twenty-four. Guard each other.” He walked away, expecting no argument. Sharlee handed their son to Jac, and the two of them wandered off to bed.

Levi slipped his arm around Finley and smiled when she relaxed in his embrace. “Let’s go baby badger, let’s get in bed, I’m exhausted.”

“I am too. But in the morning, we’re going to discuss this arrangement and this baby badger moniker is not sticking.”

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Levi grinned. "Cash will love that name." Finley groaned.

"Badger? That's a great nickname," said Darcy as she stepped up to Finley. "You were definitely brilliant in working out the rescue."

Finley gave Darcy a little smile. "Thanks. See you tomorrow."

Finley then turned to Ben and said, "Take care of my friend here. She gave me all I needed to get them out safely."

"I intend on doing just that." Ben turned to Darcy and smiled as he slid his hand to her back and stopped to ask, "Where are we sleeping? Your room or mine?"

"Both," squeaked Darcy.

Spring bounced from the chair Florent had placed her in when they gathered in the back of the large room to hear the information. "I'll show you where." Her enthusiasm made several smile, including Florent. "Spring, come straight back. It's your bedtime too."

Spring blushed and nodded before she led the weary couple up to their room. She chatted to them the whole way up. "There is only one bed in this room, but it's a king, so I can't imagine you would have any problem sharing. I mean, I guess you can each stay in the separate rooms again, but I'm not sure if Jac will good with that. Oh, I can get you a few more pillows if you need to create a blockade, but why would you want to? Finley has two men, and they seem to do fine. Florent says I sleep better if he is in the bed with me. I bet that is the same for you two."

Ben cleared his throat and gave Spring an indulgent smile. "I'm sure you're right. Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll figure it out."

Spring nodded and stopped at the linen closet to grab pillows. She handed two to Colonel Ben. That's the name she decided to call him. Ben was too informal, he was a little intimidating, and he asked them to call him Ben. So, Colonel Ben fit for Spring and he hadn't corrected her.

"And you have your own ensuite. It's pretty big, really. Oh, here we are. The rooms are pretty soundproof, so no worries there. And there is a king in this room too, so all good."

"But I'm not sharing with him." Darcy pointed back at Ben.

Spring looked stricken. "I already had a whole conversation explaining about that but... if it isn't okay, I don't know what to do. Jac and Sharlee went to bed. Our housekeeper is out tonight, and, well, she gave Darcy's room to Monroe and Mallory. They haven't built their safe room yet. I can't make those kinds of decisions easily. I can go ask Ren. He'll know what to do."

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. Darcy, you sleeping away from me is not working for me. You are my responsibility for now and I'm dogmatic about keeping you close to me. Guess you'll figure it out. Don't keep Spring from Florent. There are consequences if you get her in trouble with her daddy."

"How did you know?" Spring's eyes widened, her voice hushed.

Ben offered a knowing smile. "Sweetheart, there are signs and it's okay. Most good men take care of their women and that often comes with some bossiness wrapped in gentleness and hot bottoms."

Finley watched Spring turn bright red. “Spring, honey, thanks for escorting us and giving us all the information and grabbing more pillows, but it’s probably time for you to get back to Ren before he comes looking for you,”

Spring gave Finley a grateful smile. “Yes. He knows how easily I forget the time when I’m doing some things. Good night.”

They all bid her good night and listened for a second as she whistled herself down the hall to descend the stairs. She was such a sweetie. Finley sighed a little. It had been a very long day, now into the wee hours of another day, and she was exhausted. She wished she had Spring’s endurance and energy. Even after twenty-four hours of being back home, she was dragging.

Ben waved a sputtering Darcy into their room and closed the door. Levi leaned down to speak close to Finley’s ear. His quiet, deep voice resonated in her core. “It’s your bedtime too, baby. And don’t even think about not letting me in your bed. I don’t want to spank your perky backside because I’m not much into spanking, but I can get into it if it keeps you healthy. Or give that assignment to Cash. He is definitely into spanking.”

Then he licked her ear, and the tremors shook her entire body. Her sex slickened even more when Levi put his hot hand against her lower back, just above the camber of her bottom, and led her into the bedroom. It was the first time she would be sleeping with both men in the bed at the same time.

“Shower?” Levi asked.

“I don’t need another one. Thanks.” Her voice was heavy with tiredness.

“Take the bathroom to get ready for bed. I’ll grab the hallway one. It’s still early. Cash will be here in a while.”

Finley smiled. “Better hurry. I bet there are several guys doing the same thing for their bedmates.”

It felt awkward, and Finley hated that. She had hoped for a very different ending to the evening. Sleeping with both men, even though it was just sleeping, seemed unbelievable. Before she walked into the bathroom, she wondered if she had given too much of her life away in an effort to protect what was taken from her those years ago. After that event, she would have never thought herself to be in a permanent relationship and definitely not in a relationship with two. The balancing of personalities, even now, gave her pause.

Her mind drifted to that fateful evening when her earlier sense of control was yanked from her. As a seventeen-year-old at a friend’s overnight birthday, her lewd father was making an Italian feast and Finley walked into the kitchen for some carbonation when that huge, beefy hand that reeked of garlic and onions covered her nose and mouth. It had effectively stolen her breath, then her dignity and her security, highlighting her inability to keep herself safe. His wife walked in just as he was touching her breasts. She shooed Finley out. They divorced three months later.

She’d kept that secret, and it wasn’t Finley now, but at what cost? Her ability to protect herself wasn’t in place then, but that wasn’t the case soon afterwards. She’d been a naïve kid, but she’d never forgotten the lesson that assault had taught her. For so long, she had believed that it had taken from her more than her joy, her security, it had taken her future.

Today, all she did was protect her little charge, focus on staying fit and ready to defend. No real release of herself. Maybe she was safe enough now, fit enough, in control enough that she would be able to let down her guard a little, let go a little. It was frightening.

She thought of Levi and knew she had let down her guard, in part, for him. Her libido

had made itself known, and it was a relief to know she still had those tingling feelings of arousal, but it was so unfamiliar, she wondered if it was sustainable. Or even real sexual arousal. Now she got that warm, achy sensation with two men. Hard to ignore the implication.

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Finley turned when Levi said something. Her mind was wondering so much the last day and a half. Exhaustion, Finley told herself. Nothing more. And that thought disappointed her. She kind of wanted to have some honest, raw feelings for Levi and Cash. Sleep first.

Chapter 11

Day one after the abduction and rescue, Finley spent in bed with Levi and then later on the sofa watching everyone else. Her body hurt like hell and if she hadn't had Mallory pushing her pain pills consistently, she would have been crying in pain. She was glad no one expected her to do anything because that was all she could do...exist. She'd never hurt so badly in her life.

The women took turns checking in on her and covering her when she fell asleep. She hurt all over and when Cash wanted to pick her up, she refused to let him.

"It's easier for me to walk with assistance than to endure being carried."

"Okay, sweetheart, but I need you to go back to bed. I'll get your dinner brought up to you, and I'll help you change into something easy. You need to rest comfortably."

"Nothing is comfortable."

"I'm so sorry that you are having to deal with this pain. I'd do anything to take it from you but since I can't, I'll do my best to keep you well taken care of."

"Thank you."

Cash kissed her lips lightly. “Of course. Let’s see if we can get you into this tee shirt without too much pain.” He helped her into his tee shirt, and she settled under the cover. Sleep was drawing her under quickly.

Dinner was taken away by the housekeeper with a frown. Cash watched it leave, and he frowned too.

“I tried to get her to eat, but she says she isn’t hungry. She ate just enough to have her night pain pill.”

“I guess we can’t expect too much right now.”

“I’m in the room, guys.”

“You are,” said Cash. “And it’s time for you to get ready for bed.”

“I can put you in the bath or stand in the shower with you,” said Levi.

“I don’t know if I can do that yet. I can’t get out of the tub because everything hurts.”

“I can life you out,” said Levi.

“No, because there is no place you can touch that I don’t hurt.”

“Okay, shower?”

“No, the thought of a spray of water on my skin incites fear. No, not tonight guys. But I do need to get in the bathroom. Alone.” Her expression swept the room to encompass the two men. Levi rolled his eyes and Cash said, “You’re lucky that you hurt, otherwise that look would have earned you an ass warming. Instead, I’ll go finish the security measures and be back soon.”

Levi smiled and nodded. “Probably every female is getting ready for bed with at least one male telling her to hurry. Now move, woman. Get in and get out. You need your sleep.”

Yet he waited until she closed the bathroom door before he snagged his shaving kit and sleep pants he’d borrowed from the house supply. He’d planned on hanging out with Finley yesterday, then taking her out for some barbeque. She loved that stuff. However, all hell broke loose and while he had been pissed and scared for her life and Storm’s, there was no doubt in his mind that she would take care of business every time. If Cash would ever let her.

He was a man who wanted a kickass woman to handle herself but was comfortable asking for help when she needed it. Cash was the one who encouraged her to cozy down. It wasn’t that Levi didn’t like a soft woman, but he respected the place they chose for themselves. Cash was not bothered by stepping on her “I can do it myself” mentality. He would say she could, but why would she want to if he could do it for her?

She would protect her charge and anyone else she could, but who would protect her if not them? Levi knew that Finley had stayed on the fringes of their little community that Jac had formed. She would participate but often hide behind her little charge, using him as a reason to opt out of going to activities the other women did.

He felt her withdraw when it appeared as though she would be included too tightly in the shenanigans of the women or the tightness that military life engendered in the men. He imagined it had felt awkward at first, being an employee, female, but not a significant other. He thought she was being cautious, but now he wondered if it was just habit or fear. Her behaviors could have been so ingrained now that she didn’t know how to let down her guard. Afraid to join in just in case she wasn’t good enough. Accepted unconditionally. Levi, Cash and the others knew that was an error in thinking, but did Finley?

He and Cash had been having a few conversations about where they wanted things to go and had even encouraged Finley to dream with them, but it was as though she wasn't trusting they would last. And while no one could predict with absolute certainty the success of their relationship, a lack of trust was not helpful. Something had to give if their girl was to ever find true happiness.

Levi wanted to live his life, and it was becoming increasingly clear. Strike that, no doubt that she was the one he wanted to spend it with. He'd never thought of marriage and the thought, even now, made his mind stutter, but not as much as in the past. He got hard when he thought of Finley, and that had started when Ryker found Oakley. But it had really begun in earnest when Cash told him to get his head out of his anal cavity. It was like he needed the way cleared for him and a kick in the ass to stop dinking around.

This kidnapping event really affected him. He had always been a protective guy, but he could be that with total strangers for his job, and it rolled off him once that assignment was done. But with Finley, it was a different story. He had started to take more notice of her own self-care and risky habits, which were few, but when there was the first hint of danger, it nearly debilitated him for a split second, watching her take on the challenge. That was his job. His and Cash's.

Yesterday, Finley, after he had gotten his head out of his ass in point five seconds, he was maneuvering her and Storm to safety. The problem with that was they were following two different rules of engagement. He fell back in the defender mode and let her jettison her and her charge out of harm's way. Unfortunately, their enemy had calculated this move, and they hadn't enough time to come up with more than a quick plan. Then he was hit, and she was alone. Even now, the slight throb of his head didn't compare to the loss of contact with her during the ambush.

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He had expected Finley to lose respect for him when he didn't protect them, but she didn't. He had expected that Cash would think he was ineffectual since he had not gotten their girl to safety, but Cash hadn't said anything and in fact, had worried about him when he had seen him. Levi had worried about things that didn't even cross anyone else's mind. He needed to stop kicking up things that he had no control over and stand in the gap for the things he could control. That included figuring thisshit out and taking care of the threat so they could all go on in peace and safety.

Levi finished in the bathroom, sucked in a cleansing breath and decided today was the first day of taking Finley as his. He was claiming her because his life would be empty without her. He would take up the thinking that Cash had encouraged him to. Yesterday, he had a deep, uncontrollable need to have her with him, belong to him. The trigger that forced him to look at his emotions came when they were in danger and was solidified when he couldn't find her, and then it was cemented in place when they finally found her. Not in a caveman or me Tarzan, you Jane kind of way, but in a committed, agreeably bonded, you complete me way. Cash had his way, Levi had his, and that was how this whole thing would work.

Cash was the boss of Finley. He cuddled, listened, pampered, and Levi had no doubt he would punish if needed. That was not Levi. It never would be him. He was the negotiator. There is always another way to harmony with him but he was learning that there were some non-negotiable things outside of his work and that didn't seem as hard to deal with as he'd imagined.

Mark was an unapologetic caveman in a suit. Carter was a loveable protector kind of caveman. Even Jac, when Sharlee let him, had displayed the "I'm in control" publicly. But Finley wouldn't react well to that, and he wasn't that man, so he would

step back and allow Cash to be front and center when that was needed in the relationship. Both men were protective, watchful, and possessive.

Levi was discovering that he wanted in her life more than he had ever expected to be in anyone's life, permanently. He had no doubt that Finley would only allow a slow, steady assault, not a sweeping in or an ambush. A slow frontal attack would work best. He was about to deploy his strategy. Cash would have to work out his own attack. Levi smiled to himself. This could be more fun than he had anticipated.

Finley was already in the bed. She learned a lot from being a Marine. Fast showers, shooting a gun, and in her case, instead of working in dangerous situations in-country, she learned about strategizing the attack by clerking for an officer in intelligence. That experience taught her how to avoid trouble. Tonight, Levi had gathered her close and had not let her out of his sight. He nearly went in with her to the shower. She had drawn the line, or rather the curtain.

They'd slept together a handful of times, but as friends with benefits, not as a forever arrangement. He was going to change that as soon as he could.

"Move over Fin."

"I like this side of the bed. You move to the other side."

"Finley, I need to be on this side of the bed."

She turned and asked, "Why?"

"Closer to the door."

She grunted. "Go around. I don't need protecting."

“Finley, one last time, move over.”

Without turning over, she said, “Levi, no.”

He chuckled. “Okay, have it your way.”

The bed suddenly moved, and he shoved it so she was facing the wall and he was facing the door. Finley grumbled.

“What are you doing? This isn’t your room or your furniture.”

“I had to do what I needed to. That works for me.”

She scurried to the other side. “Now I’m on this side.”

Levi chuckled. “In case you didn’t realize, we are both equally able to see the door, but I like you moved. I can spoon you and still see the door. If a bogeyman comes in here, I can either leap out of the bed or roll over to cover you. And not to burst your bubble, but I think that Cash will probably come in on the door side and you’ll be sandwiched in.” He shrugged. “King sized bed.”

“Levi, I don’t need protection.”

“Still getting it,” said Cash as he strode into the room. “Everyone else is bedded down for the night. Security complete. Gonna take a shower and I’ll take the outside, baby.”

Finley yawned again and grunted her irritation. Levi grinned to himself. She wasn’t angry, she was playing a part. One Cash had no problems addressing. He walked to the bed. Before she could react, Cash leaned down and kissed Finley solidly on the mouth.

“Now go to sleep before I put some heat in that incredible ass to help you get there.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Typically, I would agree,” said Cash. “But you were just stolen right from under our noses just one day ago, so you’re going to have to get used to the restrictions until we find these fuckers. Be right back.”

Cash smiled arrogantly and walked into the bathroom. He closed the door, but since he was out in a quick five, steam barely had time to escape the room. Cash crawled in beside her and, after another yawn, he leaned down to kiss her in the crook of her neck. She giggled. She actually giggled.

It took a moment for Levi to realize that his girl was fucking giggling. His stoic Finley. He connected with Cash’s grin on the other side of Finley and smiled. She liked that. This was the part he wondered if they could do together and Levi still wasn’t sure but he could support Cash and accept support from Cash without crossing swords which was not going to happen. Ever.

“Just let us do this, Fin. I was scared shitless and I’m still processing what my world would be like without you.” Levi put his engorged cock up against her firm backside and molded himself between her cheeks.

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She stiffened, then arched when Levi's hand settled on her hip and Cash's lips touched her throat, his hand molding around the back of her neck. "I know. I wasn't afraid for me, but I thought of Storm's safety, then Darcy's. Then I worried you might have been killed or how hurt you might have been. I was worried about myself, but it's easier to deal with if you have others to take care of."

"I know all about that." Gingerly, Levi pulled her in even closer. She hissed. "It was all I could do to stop imagining how horrible my life would be without you in it. You mean something to me, Finley, and not just a friends-with- benefits arrangement. I want more with you. I want it all."

Cash leaned in again and moved down to her pert breast, his mouth hovering over the dusky pink nipple. "We want all of you and will give you all of us in exchange." He sucked her nipple into his mouth.

"I'm broken, Cash. I'm not a soft woman. I don't know how to be one and I don't know that I even want to be." He sucked harder on the breast that had escaped bruising, and she arched more, releasing a moan. "So good."

"Baby, you aren't broken." Levi leaned into whisper close to her ear. "You are the exact woman we've been looking for in our different ways. It's you we are drawn to, not some expectation. You are the one."

Cash very carefully rolled Fin on her back for easier access to her other nipple. Her upper breast was turning purple, so he carefully took her nipple in his mouth, careful not to suck as hard before releasing it with a quiet pop. "Yep. The one and only."

Levi slid his hand through the dark curls covering her sex and inched his way toward her trove of delights.

Finley let out another uncharacteristic giggle. “It sounds a little like that fantasy program. But that is how it has to be with me. Just one. I won’t share.” Both men froze. “Oh, that didn’t come out right. I’m sharing with you two, but not anyone else. Ever.”

The men relaxed. Levi, who wasn’t very playful in sex or anywhere else, nipped her shoulder, then licked the stinging skin. “Not cool, baby. You have to watch the wording. My ego is fragile.”

She hissed when Cash’s hand tapped firmly on her unblemished exposed thigh. “Not at all. You need to learn to think before you speak.”

She pushed his head away from her breast. “No, that is me. I’m hard and pushy and am not able to compromise easily. You aren’t going to like being with me. I mean, Levi is kind of that way too, but you, Cash, you are flexible. Much more than I’ll ever be. You have to know that now.”

“Oh, there are some soft and squishy parts in there, but I don’t want you to change, Fin. I want you as you are.” Cash kissed her lips deeply, heating all of her as her skin reddened and she began to wiggle.

Levi kissed her. “Sure, we’ll have bumps in the road, but I’ve realized I want to mean more to you and have you to ourselves. I thought I could never share but this works. I don’t know how, but it does. Cash has different things to give you than I do. We are not the same man, nor will we ever expect all the same things from you. It will be more than difficult sometimes, but as far as anyone else being allowed to watch your ass as you walk ahead of me, no fucking way.”

“Exclusive,” said Cash. “That is what we are offering you. Levi will feed your nonsense side and I will feed your adventurous side.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think I have that side, Cash.”

He laughed hard. “Baby, you do such adventurous things that I might have to tame the beast at times. Will you try to relax and just let this happen? I mean, you even giggled.”

“I did no such thing.”

He laughed and Levi joined in. “Sorry babe,” said Levi, “you did.”

She stared at them and signed in agreement. “Okay, I can try.”

Cash continued his kisses down her neck and shoulders, lightly touching his lips to every bruised area without putting pressure as he went. Levi’s hand toyed with her clit using a whisper light touch. She wiggled to get more contact. He grinned, then his expression became somber. “That’s all we can ask. You know, I thought Ryker was crazy to stop shopping around when he found Oakley, but I am beginning to come to his way of thinking. Someone to call your own sounds pretty nice, about now.”

“Don’t get too mushy, Marine. My stomach isn’t completely settled from his week’s field exercises.”

“Brat. You okay for now?” asked Levi.

“For now.”

She tried to use her version of a come hither look on Levi. He just shook his head, the edge of his lips twitching in its attempt to not smile.

“Well Cash, should we give our woman what she needs that she never knew she could have? I mean four practiced hands, all intent on making her smile, moan and groan?”

“And scream. Don’t forget scream.”

Levi nodded. “Oh, yes. Scream. Finley, other than your ribs, show us your tender places so we can be gentle.”

“I’m just bruised where you can see. I’ll yelp if it’s too much.”

Cash nodded. “Let’s begin.”

The two men were developing the same nonverbal communication they had derived from a close childhood and adult friendship and used that to assess their woman’s needs. Finley was a little nervous about her bruised body, but found herself fascinated when they seemed to read each other’s moves so completely. Really amazing since their roles were not as natural as both were dominant men, but demonstrated it differently. It had never been an issue before this moment, so it was time to solve the problem now.

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Cash was a breast and tit man and he was a great kisser. Levi was a breast man himself, but he did love some good butt stuff.

“When you are healed up, I’m going to have a great time spanking this ass to a nice fire engine red and then, if you good, I’ll take that tight ass. Feeling your heat around me as I pump into that hot ass will be so damn good for me and you. You can suck off Levi and as I take that ass.”

“Then it will be my turn. I can see how this could good for everyone. Don’t you, Finley?” She groaned at the implication. She was combusting with this dirty talk.

Levi had told Cash he had never really dirty talked to Finley, but that was what Cash was doing right now, and Levi seemed to pick up on the lingo quick. Two of his fingers were in her pussy and she knew he was bathed in her copious lubrication. She squirmed and tried to hump Levi’s fingers that were deep inside her. He moved even further to that deep, sensitive spot he’d found one day. He was so glad he did. With Cash playing with her breasts intently with his fingers and mouth and Levi touching her clit occasionally but playing with her pussy and rimming her back hole, she had to wiggle and those little noises were hers, too.

Levi spoke in a stern voice. “No moving, Fin.”

“But make all the desperate noises you want, baby,” said Cash.

She whined, but did her best to comply. The men worked her over, giving her an almost overload of sensations. They touched, kissed, licked, sucked, teased every erotic zone she knew about and Finley was gleaming with perspiration and her moans

were truly becoming frantic.

“I have to come now. I can’t wait.”

Cash rolled her just a hair, slapped her butt and sucked hard and pinched both nips as Levi pinched her clit. She arched and froze for a moment before her cries overtook them in the room. She went off like a fourth of July fireworks display. Her men exchanged a look as she cuddled down between them. She ached in even more places than when they had finished. She offered to relieve their obvious need, but they declined.

“No baby. Tonight was all for you. I hope we didn’t hurt you.”

“Cash did. He smacked my butt.”

Cash laughed. “You don’t mind very well.”

“But Levi doesn’t smack my ass.”

Levi grinned. “I don’t know about that. I might take it up if you can’t behave.”

Her eyes widened. “What? No. I can’t have to worry about both of you.”

Cash shrugged and rolled onto her. “Follow instructions.”

“Yeah, like that will ever happen,” she said.

“Good. I like sassy,” said Cash.

Levi kissed her temple. “Snuggle in, baby. Time to sleep.”

She answered with a huge yawn. She was glad to be home again.

Chapter 12

The next week was spent in everything from strategizing and assigning different team members and their mates to review work, personnel, and assignment records, clients, and closed circuit, including surrounding security videos, to doing the daily background work and jobs in progress. All this, on top of business as usual. The one thing that gave the team the most stress was the complaints issued by their women. Jac seemed to be deaf to the objections of the females in the family, but their significant others weren't so immune.

"Everyone has a buddy for protection, and that will happen here. Levi, you are officially Finley's bodyguard and Finley you cover Levi and work with Anora's nanny and bodyguard and whenever Charlotte needs the relief, to watch Storm and Anora."

Finley's ribs still ached a lot, but her bruises were not nearly as bothersome. "So get rid of the bodyguard. I've got Storm."

"Nope. You aren't battle ready and neither is Levi. Closer, but I can see that when you walk, you limp and go gingerly. Levi is better, but not quite ready either. You're fine to cover each other and the kids. The kids keep the extra coverage."

"Jac," said Finley.

"Stand down, Finley. That is your assignment until further notice. I get that you want to help and this is what will help right now. Cash has the house covered." He turned to Cash as he sauntered in with a danish and cup of coffee. "I might consider keeping you on site full-time when this is all over. We'll talk later, Cash."

Cash nodded and dropped a kiss on Finley's head, offering her a bite of his food before he checked in with Kaden and perused the camera screens. Jac added another gate guard as extended temporarily. Two were better than one. Cash would continue to coordinate and keep connected with them as well.

After a full week of concentrated effort by all, Jac presented the team with a list of individuals they have encountered in their previous missions, both on foreign and domestic soil, who may have a grudge against them and could be involved in the kidnapping.

"I have Jaccabee Mason."

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“The dog-napper? The one who said he’d get even for us destroying his lucrative but very illegal reselling of stolen priceless dogs?” asked Garrett.

Kaden laughed. “They can’t have been priceless because they were sold.”

“And you don’t know he didn’t love each of those dog and took them off their owner’s hands for the good of the animal,” Callie said as she tried to keep a straight face.

“Alright, but I want him checked out, anyway. I’ve got them all on here and we are going to divide and conquer on who we follow up with. Levi is here with Finley. Finley is here and help keep up with Storm.”

Monroe interjected firmly, “But no lifting him.”

Jac nodded. “What he said. Mallory, have you gotten your office set up in one of the rooms yet?”

“Not yet. I kind of thought I’d help you all for a while.”

“Okay, you and Monroe take this part of the list. You stay here in the house, though.” Jac’s tone meant business. He was more intense since someone invaded his inner sanctum. “If there needs to be someone leaving the property, it can be Monroe. Mark, as Jessica and Anora’s daytime bodyguard, is on duty. You grab a partner, do the local people and leave Levi with the out-of-state ones. He can sit on the phone and take a break when needed. I’ll need to go to the office with my list.”

Levi grimaced. “Jac.”

“I know what you’re going to say, but I’ve already thought about this. I know that most of you just fall into your places without much conversation with me. You have your areas of comfort and expertise and I’m messing with that rhythm. Tough. Finley and Charlotte are going to split duties for Storm, and Jessica’s nanny will split duties with Jessie so she can get some work done. Mark will be in the street tracking down local ex-employees and trades people we have worked with.”

“That’s usually me,” Levi pointed out.

Jac nodded. “And now it isn’t. I don’t need you in the street. You can identify people.”

“That means I’m valuable to help find them.”

“Valuable, yes, but not in the street. That’s an order.”

Jac was calm. He was back in control, and his emotions were settled again. Cash knew he had to be worried, but this man had confidence in his team. Levi would understand he wasn’t sidelined because Jac had lost confidence in him, but he needed to ask. Cash waited for it.

“Jac,” his tone indicated that he wasn’t going to argue. “Have you lost confidence in me?”

“Hell, Levi. You have done what I expect my people to do, try to protect those around them. It was because of you that we got the information we did. It kept the men in blue off our backs so we could find Storm and Finley without interference. You have been tenacious. I let you participate when you had a concussion, man. I’m not happy about my weakness, but there it is. I am back in full control of things and

I'm now taking care of you and Finley. It's a good plan, and it doesn't say anything, but I am taking care of my own. We good?"

Levi nodded. "We' good."

Jac walked off in the direction of what Garrett called the nursery brigade to greet Jessie's nanny, who had just arrived. Jessie was introducing her to the few people she didn't know and Mark seemed to be giving orders as keeping with his personality. Well, Finley would be occupied so the two bodyguards could handle the nursery brigade. Jac still didn't stay too far from his son, and Cash understood completely.

Cash took note of who would be in the house and who would be off the property. In an alert or emergency, that information would be invaluable. He hated to leave her for even a moment, but she would be occupied and it was important to him to be part of the team when they discovered who it was and brought them down. No one messed with his people. Cash grinned at himself. Now he sounded like Jac.

Cash continued surveying the room to note the inhabitants. Finley sat fully engaged in the women's conversation. Jac had given everyone the option yesterday of going home together at night, but only Ryker and Oakley had not returned this morning. It looked like all the team's spouses came with them.

Callie seemed to fit in even though she was a full team member and his Finley did as well. Neither of the women were not the type who did girly things like the other women would do. Finley, at thirty-two, was in the middle of the women's ages, but even then, she seemed to silently control the area. She was more disciplined than all but Callie, and even then, Finley kept herself to herself, until recently.

Sharlee could ride on both sides of the fence as far as the women went. She took the lead as Jac's spouse, and her professional abilities, put her above the rest, but when it came to being one of the girls, she was all in.

Cash wondered what had drawn him to her. She wasn't the eternal sixteen-year-old like Ivy. Kaden went for that kind of woman and Cash was glad he'd found her. Callie was hard and all business-like except around Garrett and when they weren't on duty. But she, like Garrett, was always on duty a little. The other women were professionals as well, but without the need to be "on" all the time. Sharlee and Jac were a couple like no other, so comparison was not possible.

Finley was hard, but she had an inner kindness. She loved little Storm, and her gentle side slid out for him. Her barriers were down, her shields put away, and she was loving, gentle, and even carefree. Before the incident, Finley had shown that side to him and Levi. Then the intruders had taken his girl and Storm. Suddenly he had lost Finley, not only his friend, but his woman. That's when he knew it put paid to his bachelorhood and he knew Levi felt that reality slam into him as well.

Just then, she lifted her head and smiled at him. He immediately returned the smile. Yeah, he was going to keep Fin safe in spite of her resistance to that and he was going to help bring down the people responsible for kidnapping his woman and Storm. He didn't even focus on Darcy. She was Jac's problem, the team's problem and now, the Colonel's problem. But Finley? She was his. Theirs.

"Okay people, you all have your assignments. Finding the culprits and keeping our people safe is objective number one." People dispersed.

Sharlee leaned over to scoop up her son and said to Finley, "Okay, I'll put him in the play yard next to me and I'll get some work done if you'll keep an eye on him."

"Got it."

"Anora needs feeding and a nap," said Jessie, "so I'll put her down and Nanny Shay can take over. Then I'll get some work done." They went into Jessie's and Mark's room. When she returned, the bodyguard was doing his job with Shay and Anora.

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Finley knew that Levi hesitated to leave her even in another section of the house, but she was perfectly safe. She saw he was standing close. “I’ good Levi. Go ahead and start your work. When Storm naps, I’ll come find you.”

“I’ll just be in the next room.”

She nodded and put her head down. It surprised her when Levi walked up and lifted her chin. “We are going to find whoever did this.” He dropped a kiss on her lips and backed up, finally breaking eye contact and walking away.

Finley didn’t like to share about herself, but she had begun to open up to Levi. Cash was a little easier to talk to about feelings, but Levi was much easier to talk to about most other things. Cash wanted to fix things. Levi let her just dump and process. She usually saved the deeper, emotional conversations with Cash. It didn’t deepen her and Levi’s connection, so she worked harder to change that. She’d thought her lack of desire for the things that Ryker and most of these men wanted, a home, a family, two point three kids, would make it unlikely that she would ever find Mr. Right. Levi had agreed that kids weren’t anything that he had thought about. But Cash embraced the idea of family.

Neither Levi nor Cash had backed up when she expressed kids weren’t in her future. She loved being the nanny, but having her own didn’t appeal. She knew there would come a time that this group would be done with having children and she’d have to find a new job or create one but for the foreseeable future, the next ten or fifteen years, she would have a place with the team’s families.

Levi had not only embraced her thinking, but he had also actually sighed in a little bit

of relief. He liked that she wanted to travel wherever the urge took her. That she wanted to work out with him and the team. She was competitive and Levi challenged that part of her. Her short time dating both Ryker and Levi had been fun and eye opening. Ryker had seen it as she had. They weren't compatible.

Cash, however, was a different story. He wanted what most men wanted—the whole package and Levi just wanted her as the whole package. Neither were wrong, just had different future ideas. It was difficult to understand that she had actually found a kindred spirit in Levi, but when Cash came along, it challenged her thinking and forced her to decide if she could at least consider the possibility of family someday.

She loved the women, and they were so open and inclusive. Giving her that girlfriend element that she hadn't had most of her life. She wasn't blind to the fact that not everyone connected with her. And yet, these women did, and now Cash had her wondering about a different life.

"Talk to me," said Sharlee as they both watched Storm nap. "I want to check in with you."

"I'm fine."

"Finlay, you know I don't believe that, not completely. I'm not fine."

Finley stared ahead, but not seeing the furniture in front of her. "I had to survive the Marine Corps. To do that well, I had to put a hard shell around me. I had to hide my personality to show myself worthy of being a service member next to the stoic and staunchly macho men I served with. It changed me. When I left that life, finding Jacquard Reynaud was something I hadn't counted on."

Sharlee chuckled. "I know that feeling. I don't think many meet Jac for the first time and think it's no big deal. The man has always exuded strength and presence."

“Yes, but that was the best day of my adult life to that point. He was strong and gentle with you and his newborn, but with Jessie as well. That hasn’t changed as more women join the group. He’s opinionated but compassionate. He was passionate about his family and the family he had created through the agency and I wanted that.”

“We women knew that you had to join us at your own pace and in your own time.”

“I was content, but now that cohesiveness and bond we’ve forged seems to be threatened. The kidnapping makes me so angry.” Her voice shook with emotion. “No one takes me or what I’m protecting. I hate someone got the drop on me, held me against my will and touched Storm.”

Then, to have knocked out Levi was another level of pissing her off. That anger got her through when she eventually woke up, but it was still eating at her now it was all over. Darcy had helped her escape, and she hoped that Colonel Darrington was taking care of her.

“You know, if this hadn’t happened, Darcy might be dead by now,” said Sharlee.

“True, but even though it helped Darcy, I can’t stop my anger.”

“Could it be that your safety felt violated, and that bothered you? Scared you? Maybe left you with a little bit of fear?”

Finley watched Storm sleep. He’d fallen asleep in the play yard with his stuffed animals on the big fluffy blanket in there for that purpose. “And it made me doubt my suitability to a nanny.”

“Baloney. You are the best we could have ever gotten, and I thank my lucky stars that I found you, or rather, Jac found you. That hasn’t changed. We have confidence in you, but you have to find your own faith in your abilities again.”

Sharlee patted Finley's thigh and stood up to stretch. Kaden did the same and left for more coffee.

"Anyone else want coffee?" asked Kaden.

"Oh, I'll have some," said Mallory.

"No, she won't. Thanks."

"Monroe, I've only had one cup today."

"And look at the size of that cup. That's enough, baby."

"Okay, then I'll get some hot chocolate."

"Herbal tea."

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“Monroe, I liked it better when you went to work and I stayed home.”

Monroe chuckled at his wife. “I’m beginning to see why. You are a pharmacist. Too much caffeine is a no-go and you know it.”

Mallory sighed. “Fine, but I’ll be glad when you go back to work.”

Monroe grabbed her mug as he laughed quietly. “Herbal tea it is.”

After lunch, Levi stood with Sharlee and Kaden as they maneuvered their way through the dark web looking for any connections or chatter related to the kidnapping. Becky was working on Jac’s mounting correspondence. He had gone into the agency office and taken Carter with him. They had been in constant communication with the house. Becky had begged to go with them to the office and had been shut down hard.

“Becky, you’re pregnant,” said Carter.

“But barely.”

Jac laughed, and Carter glared at him. “There is no such thing as being barely pregnant, baby. You are or you aren’t and since you are, it’s important to stay safe. You are not going into the office.”

“But you’ll be with me. You both will.” Becky gave them impressive puppy dog eyes.

Carter shook his head. “Sorry baby, there is no discussion.”

Finley knew this was how these guys were: direct, confident, protective. Levi was just that man when he dealt with the other women, and in his job. But with her, he hesitated. Cash had no trouble putting her in her place or scooping her up for a kiss. Was he just an easier lover? Maybe she was too tough or seemed too hard for Levi to be able to accept his protection, his leadership. She sat with that thought. She did still have that outer shell of protection at times, but she’d thought Levi had seen through it and known it was a protection for herself. She let him and Cash in. She was learning to let all the guys in, slowly.

What would it be like if Levi came on super protective, not this guarded, protective side he had ramped up since the incident? She wasn’t sure she would like it. That was Cash. Levi was more of an equal opportunity boyfriend. And speaking of last night, Levi was never one of those people like Carter or Monroe, all cuddy and possessive with a bite if their women stepped out of the safety bounds they’d laid out for them. She’d always said she didn’t want that, but with Cash, yeah, it was hot. She’d thought she didn’t like that kind of over-the-top macho business and she didn’t with Levi but when he was a little sparky, like last night, then she could get into it.

The day had stretched on and on. Finally, late afternoon began to bring people back into the fold with results. Or the lack thereof. Levi hadn’t come up with anything that made him suspicious. Most ex-employees had moved on, worked in other places and had done fine with the loss of their jobs.

Kaden lifted his head. “Hey, we need the security tapes from the surrounding areas near the incident site reviewed again. Jac and Carter are reviewing the protocols and systems in place at the agency to ensure there are no vulnerabilities that could have been exploited by the kidnapper. I also could use someone to go back over today’s CCTV.”

Mark came in late in the afternoon and looked tired. “I came up with nothing that would suggest anything subversive. Hopefully, someone has found something we can sink our teeth into.”

Jac walked in with Carter, followed by Garrett, Callie and Monroe, who had exited the home office they had set up. Jac spoke to Sharlee. “Call the rest of them downstairs.”

Sharlee sent the message. Others appeared, including Jessie with baby and Shay, their nanny, in tow. Jessie gave Shay directions to the kitchen and left her to take a break. After everyone settled and most sat down, Jac rubbed his face.

“Anything guys?”

Callie spoke. “I wish I could say we found a suspect, but honestly, we haven’t. If we are still running on the personal angle, then we have to look into your background, Jac.”

“Charlotte has been doing that. Have you come up with anything, honey?”

“Nothing with a bullseye on it. But I have run across one name that cross-references on the employee list. Caleb Rodney is an ex-employee that took it pretty hard when he was fired. I don’t think it was the firing that made him mad, it was the closing of his lucrative business.”

“I should have thought of him. Who had him on their list?”

Garrett spoke up. “Callie and I did, but we couldn’t locate him. The last address we found took us to an apartment that wasn’t his.”

Mark asked, “How do you know?”

“Well, the big, burly man who answered the door behind his wife was a good clue.”

Jac nodded. “So, let’s find him.”

Kaden spoke. “I also found some chatter on the web. It was cryptic and before I could run my program through the whole thread, it disappeared. I don’t think I was detected personally, just that someone not included on the line was tapping on their door. I got out pretty quick with no tail. I had Sharlee make sure my trail was clean.”

Sharlee continued. “The intel was a recruiting site for those less than savory positions. This one was advertising for chatting with a woman and kid playing in the bluegrass. Kentucky obviously. Also got a couple of handles of people who threw their hat in for consideration. It is obvious that if whoever it was hired from this site, there would be no way to know who hired them. It is all handled virtually through aliases and middlemen on multiple servers.”

“Damn,” said Mark, “but at least it’s a place to start.”

“Especially with Caleb’s name thrown in. He would have contacts and know how to hire this way,” added Monroe. “Wonder if this Ace or Avenger would jingle any bells?”

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Jac turned to Levi and Cash. “You weren’t here when we had Caleb working with us. I think Callie was gone, too.”

“Callie,” she said, “You called me Callie. I’m proud of you, Jac.”

He grunted. “You don’t even put Katrina on your official documents.”

“For a reason. Thanks for that. Now, sorry to interrupt. Carry on.”

He grunted again. “Anyway,” Jac gave Callie a disgruntled stare, “Caleb Rodney ran our hangar and runway until we found he was using both Carter’s and the company plane to run drugs. We brought in the Feds and they were glad for the lead. I thought they had him, but he made himself known for a while, on the run, and then silence. I guess I assumed the Feds had found him. They didn’t deny it. I should have dug deeper.”

Sharlee threw the photo up on the wall.

“Just to refresh everyone’s memory. This is him.”

There was conversation about him and memories of his time with the agency, but nothing else. Darcy, who had been quietly sitting with Ben, rather closely, had fallen asleep. Ben didn’t wake her up. No one else noticed but Finley. She didn’t think anything about it except she was glad Darcy was so comfortable with the Colonel that she could doze off on him.

“Okay, people, not quite back to the drawing board. We have eliminated plenty and

found a few solid leads so our focus can narrow. Let's keep at it."

Chapter 13

Afew days later, as they gathered for their daily briefing, Monroe said, "Since we have been at this for more than a week with no luck finding Caleb Rodney, and we can't find anyone else that has it out for Jac or any of us, we are literally dead in the water."

Garrett added, "It's damned irritating. We've gone over the calling cards left for Jac and checked as to who might have left them. The gate guards have said various people have dropped them off. The last one was left in the stroller."

"No prints, no familiar handwriting, no clue, nothing of any use from the cards," said Monroe. "They are all so very different."

"I had thought it was the crazy lady after Mallory. But she's still in a mental institution," said Kaden.

"Not Jessie's problem, people, because most were killed by their own folly. The rest are sitting in federal prison or reside in another country," said Jac. "And Charlotte's troublemakers were taken care of a while ago."

"Callie's turncoat feds are dead or in prison, too," said Garrett.

"Same with Ivy's mother's connections. Really all staying at the agreement as far as we can tell," said Kaden.

"Becky's was family and associated persons, so nothing that involved Jac besides she was his personal assistant and that connection with a wannabe client," added Callie.

“I still want to take his head off,” grumbled Carter. Becky patted his hand.

“So, that means that this is about Jac or Jac and the company,” said Monroe.

Levi spoke up. “So, we have examined everything we know to look at. What’s left?”

“Not sure, but there’s something. We’ve begun to chase our tails, trying to locate Caleb Rodney. He’s gone underground pretty good. Sharlee can’t find him,” said Carter. “I know that drives her nuts and she won’t let go, but even her leads have dried up for now. It still doesn’t fit for him because of the time. He would be drawing attention to himself and being on the run from the cartel and the feds can’t good for your health.”

Jac paced. “It seems that we are being toyed with but it is also evident that we messed up their plan because we recovered our people before they could use them for pawns.”

Kaden spoke up. “It means they could try again.”

Cash swore. “The hell they will.”

Finley said. “I can get with Darcy and we can try to recreate the people who were in the van. Then run them through the recognition program and maybe do something with their identifications.”

Sharlee nodded. “Just the driver. The other two were apprehended. We have a program that allows you to put the different features together yourself and the program will sketch it.”

Finley looked at Darcy next to Ben, and Darcy nodded. “That will work.”

Later that afternoon, Carter dropped Becky off because Jac was spending time at home with his son. He'd tried to knock off early to come home since the kidnapping, and Becky came to help him cover all his office work.

"Hey, Becky," said Finley. Darcy was right behind her and she offered Becky a half smile.

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“Hey, how are you two ladies doing?” asked Becky.

“Getting by. We’re going to work on that computerized sketch program for Sharlee. We might come up with something.”

Becky came in closer, whispering, “I hope this gets figured out soon. I’m just about toast between my overprotective Carter and a boss who is worried about everyone. It’s making me moody and you know, being pregnant makes me moody enough.”

Becky walked into Jac’s home office, searching for him. Darcy and Finley headed to Sharlee, who had already loaded the programs they would need on a laptop. Levi and Ben sat on the other side of the room watching the women but also working on following up on some leads that were shaky but what else could they do until they got lucky?

Cash was busy staying on top of who was in the house and keeping security tight. He and Levi took turns doing security rounds, but Cash did the majority of the house security. He needed that control, but it kept him busy most of the day. Levi knew that Finley missed him.

“Are you and Finley an item?”

Levi looked at Ben with a thoughtful smile. “Finley, Cash and I.”

“Really? I thought that was what I’d understood the other night, but things were pretty dicey that day. You good with sharing?”

“Honestly? I wasn’t sure, but we’re finding our way. It’s where I believe I want to go. Cash is all for it. Finley? Sometimes I’d say yes, but other days?” He shrugged.

Ben nodded. “What do you think is holding her back?”

“I’d say fear of what committing would be like. What she would be required to do and how much would she have to give up? We were friends for nearly the whole time she’s been here. Cash and I since we were ten. Without realizing it, I have grown attracted to her in a more than,” he used air quotes, “friends-with-benefits way. Cash has never had a committed relationship like this, but he’s shared before.”

“And the sex side. Is that a threesome as well?”

Levi laughed. “If you mean do we cross swords, nope, not happening. We have been figuring out what works for us. It might turn out to be an either-or situation as far as the sex side of things. You know, she gets the king bed and one or the other shares space with her. We don’t mind sleeping together with Fin, or having some fun, but full-on sexy times two, yeah, not as appealing.”

“Ah, so you’re worried she might not want to stick with this type of arrangement?”

“Sort of, but it’s more than that. I don’t want her to wake up some day and realize that she doesn’t have anyone significant in her life and she goes looking for him, singular. The day she was kidnapped, I decided that was what I wanted to be to her, significant. Cash was waiting for me to declare. I just don’t know if she is ready for it all.”

“Thought about asking her?”

Levi scoffed at the question. “Of course. But you don’t know Fin. She has a heavy protective coating that you can’t break, but if you have a key, she just opens right

up.”

“Do you have the key?”

“Sometimes I think I do. Sometimes, when we’re lying in bed after sex all relaxed, she tells me things I didn’t know or that I only suspected about her and her upbringing. The military was hard for her. Not only was she female in a macho MOS, military police, but she was also ridiculed by some of her friends and family back home. They didn’t understand her joining up.”

“Man, that’s fucked up. When a person takes a hard hit like that, it’s difficult to see the world as anything but levels of hostile.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t all bad, and she tries to focus on those things. She doesn’t want kids and she figures most guys do. She’s a nanny now, and having kids isn’t her goal. She loves Storm and if Sharlee has another one, then she would love that one too.”

“Just not her own.” Ben leaned over to grab another paper to peruse.

“Right. Cash is all fine whether we have a family or not, engage together or separately. So long as he has her, the rest is open to define. Finley has that distant soft look in her eye sometimes when she looks at Anora, but I’m trying to interpret as I go.” Both men look over at the women. Levi continued. “You seem to have settled Darcy down. She was a little jumpy there at first. Finley says she helped things work in getting Storm to safety. And Fin’s hard to impress.”

Ben nodded and shared a ghost of a smile. “She’s getting her bearings and seems to trust me a little.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

“Me, too,” said Ben.

Chapter 14

It had gotten quiet with most of the team gone to their own homes. It was coming up on two weeks and nothing further had happened. All the potential leads had all but dried up. Jac hated that he was being dangled on a chain, but until they found more to sink their teeth into, there was nothing else he could do. He did this cat and mouse for his clients, but for himself, it was maddening.

The women demanded to go home at least at night and the guys had to agree. There was no reason not to at this point. All that remained during the day were Ben and Darcy, Levi, Cash and Finley, and Storm’s additional bodyguard. That Jac wouldn’t allow Finley to protect Storm on her own, as she’d done previously to the kidnapping, bothered Finley.

Ben stood after a long morning of no results. “I think I’m taking Darcy back to my place. I’m not someone anyone would expect as related to any of your organization and so Darcy will be fine with me. I’ve got good security and Mark upgraded me a little. Added a few more cameras.”

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“Yeah, I agree. We can talk about whether Darcy should just go about her life or whether staying close is safer for now. I honestly don’t know and while I’d like to keep her a little longer, she can decide not to stay at any time.”

“I’ll ask her and let you know. For now, though, I’m taking her home. She is jittery today and kind of withdrawn.”

The men parted company. Finley watched Darcy go with the Colonel and she hoped it was the right decision to let her leave from Jac’s. She also hoped she’d stick around a while.

Reading people had not been her best talent these days. No matter what Jac said, she wondered if he was honestly confident in her abilities. After all, she didn’t prevent the abduction, but she was out-manned. She couldn’t talk about it any longer because the guys were exasperated with her inability to let that worry go. She was better now, and Jac, deciding to bring in an additional bodyguard for Storm, made her crazy. Then the fact that Jac and Levi agreed he should stay with Finley as a second set of eyes infuriated her, and yet she found a peace with one of her guys around. This was such a clusterfuck, but these men of hers had skills when it came to distracting her. She was still achy, but she had an ache of another kind. Time to let her show her appreciation for Cash and Levi. And time they let her.

With everyone now back in their own homes except the regulars at the Jacquard residence, it was subdued they went to dinner. Soon, she found she wanted to go up to bed early. Ben had brought Darcy back for the night because she had expressed concern that she would be alone with Ben. She seemed to crave female company, and Ben knew couldn’t provide that outside of Jac’s group. She promised she would go

home with Ben tomorrow and make up her mind about her next step in the future. Soon enough, they shooed her off to bed with Finley, Sharlee, and Storm. Florent had already put Spring to bed. She was so tired, but she didn't go to sleep. She pushed to stay awake. He sternly sent her to bed, and that seemed to settle the battle.

The next morning, right after breakfast, the discussion was getting back to work. Typical day job work. "Levi, I'm ready to send you off for an afternoon assignment. Finley is giving me some pretty hard side-eyes, and you need a change of scenery. It should be a short and sweet court appearance, for our client, that is. Here is the dossier. Be on site at client's home by noon, escort to attorney's office, on to court, then escort back home. No expected threat other than a general one the client fears might occur, but keep on your toes."

Levi seemed to sigh in relief. What he needed was an assignment and finally he had one. Jac and Sharlee resumed their work routine, and Finley took over completely for Storm. Cash did his thing at the house as Darcy, Jac, Levi and the Colonel prepared to leave the house for the day. Darcy walked into the front room with the Colonel right behind her as she grabbed a coloring book she had left. There was a sudden screech. "Oh, my God. You found him. That's him. That's Ace."

"Fuck," rippled throughout the room. Finley sat down hard next to Darcy, who had dropped onto the sofa, a stunned expression on her face. Levi put his hand on her shoulder.

Cash, who had been out of the room the first time the photo was shown, turned to Finley. "Did you see him, baby? Is this the guy?"

"No, I never saw him, but if Darcy says that's him, then it is." She looked at Darcy as though asked permission to share more. "She's afraid of him. He can get violent if someone stands in his way of getting what he wants."

Darcy wiggled uncomfortably and stood up. The Colonel placed his hand at the back of her neck, settling it at the base before squeezing. Finley knew it was to help, but seeing Ace's photo was more disarming than Ben's hand was comforting. Darcy took a step back, and Finley understood her need to feel the heat from Ben and his comfort. His arm slid around her hip and he drew her even closer. Her head fell back on his shoulder. Finley was making great effort to learn how to accept that from her guys. Her guys. It gave her such a shiver of anticipation.

"Finley didn't see him, or she wouldn't likely be alive. I didn't know his real name, and he rarely came around, but I know that is Ace. The man who set up the kidnapping. He's an angry man." She lowered her voice. "And dangerous."

"Darcy, did Ace hurt you?" When Darcy didn't reply, another wave of angry curses echoed. Finley's men drew closer to her.

Jac spoke to the room at large. "I want to find out everything you can about this asshole now. He is going down."

"Jac," Levi got his boss' attention.

"No, you aren't going off today. I can't risk it with this new information. I'm sending someone else. I need eyes on Finley. Charlotte, get everyone on screen." Jac looked at the people on the video feed until he located Carter and next to him Becky. "Rebecca, get the other team leaders on the phone. I need to find a fast replacement for Levi this afternoon." Then, to no one in particular, "This asshole has messed with me and mine for long enough. Time for another hunting trip."

There were simultaneous conversations started. "Coordinate with Garrett. He is still the lead on this case, but I'm clearer headed now. More useful than when we were trying to find them."

Garrett asked Kaden to send out the photo. “Make sure every employee has a copy and let them know to expect him to be armed and dangerous. Remind them of the protocol and send them what we know, including his last known make and model of car in the correct color.”

It wasn't like there was a higher threat than before, and things had gone quiet, but now that they had confirmation that it was Caleb they were searching for, it seemed to boost the urgency. The women agreed to stay home. All other lines of inquiry were ditched.

Garrett clapped his hands. “Finding the verification that Rodney is the person we are looking for makes this no longer a needle in a haystack. It's now a target with a bullseye. The odds are now in our favor and I like those chances much better. I like the driver's seat.”

“It does, indeed.” Jac filled in more blanks for the ones who didn't know about the Caleb incident. “Caleb Rodney has to be seeking revenge.”

Carter nodded. “Likely, but I'm not understanding why he made an advance and then backed up so far and for so long. Then another quick hit, only to retreat once again. Now, it's a huge advance and everyone knows you never slack off your advantage. It's not a logical strategy if you are trying to overtake your enemy. You keep the pressure up until something gives.”

Kaden spoke. “Remember, he isn't prior military. He was a mechanic that got greedy and now blames others for his situation and for ruining his life.”

Ben was now sitting on the sofa and held Darcy close as they listened to the conversation. Her trembling was much less than when she walked in and spied Rodney's photo on the wall. But because she did, the puzzle pieces fell into place.

Callie clarified. "So this yahoo is currently running from the Cartel and the Feds. Why hasn't someone found him yet? I mean, I get why the Feds might not have found him, but what about the Cartel? Doesn't that seem fishy?"

"Good point," said Mark. "Unfortunately, at least where the alphabet agencies are concerned, they aren't having any more luck than the rest of us. He is taunting them by coming up to the surface for a quick appearance, but when he sees they shift gears and hunt him exclusively, he goes into deep hiding. Then things go quiet. That might be what is going on now."

"Meaning he was up too long, and the Feds got wind and focused on him, so he did a deep dive?" asked Finley. "So what keeps him from leaving the country and be done with it?"

The Colonel answered. "He is after revenge, but to do that he needs something to keep the heat of the Cartel off him while he does it. So he messes with Jac, then the Cartel notices and then he makes sure the Feds see him and as they pursue him, it keeps the Cartel at bay. Then he slips into the shadows and waits for another opportunity."

Jac's stare was hard, cold, emotionless when he spoke. "We find him, deal with him as needed, then we walk away with clean hands and go back to our lives. He isn't familiar with our techniques, but he soon will be."

Jac emphasized the importance of discretion and caution during their investigations, reminded the team to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to their activities. "We won't have the element of surprise, but we can make the expected become the unexpected."

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“Charlotte, go dumpster diving. Whatever you can find.”

She fist-pumped in happiness. “Yes!”

Levi came up behind Finley as she leaned on the door frame and watched Storm sleep. The bodyguard was also watching the toddler sleep, and Levi kissed Fin’s ear.

“Come out for a walk with me. You rarely go out and this is a great time to do it. Storm has plenty of eyes on him. I’d like to get my eye on you getting sun and fresh air. You look tired, and honestly, I’m worried about you.”

Finley turned sharply to blaze him for his remarks and came face to face with the first man who made her pussy weep with desire with just a look. To be fair, the expression on Levi’s face was demanding, cajoling, expecting, and challenging. Her libido made her core sizzle. She hesitated. Levi wouldn’t push her, but he looked like he wanted to. Cash wouldn’t have been as accommodating, so her men must have had a conversation and elected Levi as the messenger. Her stomach rumbled with the need to jump this man’s bones. Time to be honest.

“I know I haven’t been out much, but...” she shrugged.

“I know there must be some reticence in exposing yourself, but you would have gotten away quicker if you were not protecting Storm. You’ve got skills, woman, and because of that, I’m so glad you were there to take care of that little guy.” Levi nodded in Storm’s direction. “But now, let’s do a little of that protecting and comforting for you. Please?”

said not to him was hard. She wanted to do what he asked, and after one more glance into Levi's intensely caring, almost loving eyes, and she caved. Did she love him? Maybe? Did he love her? Did they know what that was? Where did that thought come from? She did companionship with others, she did friends with benefits when it suited them, but love?

Cash was all in on the love angle and she was trying, but sometimes she didn't think she could trust that freely. Love required a lot of trust. That was for normal people. It was for men like Cash who embraced it, and it might even be for Levi, but Finley had seen what was supposed to be love go terribly wrong with dramatic fallout and pain. Nope, not for her, but she couldn't deny Levi.

"Okay but let me get my gun first."

"Your gun. We're not leaving the grounds."

"Just in case."

She was grateful that Levi said nothing more and simply followed her to the door of their shared room and watched her unlock her portable gun case, check the chamber, check the safety, then slide the little derringer into her leg holster that she strapped on over her jeans. Time to go. He followed her downstairs and when she hesitated at the front door, he steered her to the side exit. Had he always been so tuned in to her, or did the kidnapping make that happen?

Cash appeared seemingly out of thin air. He smiled. "I'm glad you're going outside. I was beginning to worry."

"About going outside? Pfft. There was no need to gang up on me." She was quaking in her military style boots, so to speak.

“I apologize,” said an unabashed Cash.

He dropped a kiss on her unsuspecting lips, and she knew, when Cash looked over her head to Levi, that they were doing that silent communicating. She loved to hate that they did that so damn well. It was all the confirmation she needed that they had planned this.

“Have a nice walk. See you later.” Cash walked off without a backward glance.

As they slipped out the side door, Finley had to pretend to herself that it was an inner room door, not one that led outside, where she had not succeeded in meeting the challenge of keeping Storm safe. Where all her training failed her. Failed Storm. Where she and he had been abducted. Levi seemed to realize her declining thoughts, and he zeroed in on her waning resolve to take a walk. He slid his hand down her back and resettled his warm palm at the camber of her waist where her back met her ass. Finley could feel reassurance radiate from his hand. It said, “I’m right here and you are safe, secure, and all mine.” She allowed herself to fall into that encouraged state of being.

The door softly closed behind them and for a split second, Fin stiffened, but Levi slid his hand over to the far side of her waist and pulled her into his side. It was the perfect protective move without saying a word. How did he know to do those things? Levi had never shown much in that way, but today and actually, since the day of the kidnapping, he’d shown so much more connectedness with her than she’d ever expected from him. At first it was confusing and even now it confused her some but it was different today.

Different in that, he quietly observed her and responded without asking for any clarification or even seeming to need it. That wasn’t how their relationship went, nor was it how it was supposed to go now, and yet it felt right. And even that positive change created uncertainty in how she dealt with him or how she was about to

respond. It seemed the rules were all new and uncommunicated. Unagreed upon. When had this happened and why hadn't she noticed?

Finley was surprised at the warmth of the sun as they walked away from the edge of the roofing along the building's outer wall. There was an intimate breeze, but it too was warm instead of chilly, as she would have expected. In fact, Finley realized she expected it to be cold outside, contrary to the timing of the year but the bright sun, the blue sky, the slight breeze was perfect weather and she needed to allow herself to feel the joy.

"It's okay to be perplexed about the world that you are in right now, but I wished you would trust your people. Trust me to do what you need and to respond to you honestly. Trust Cash. I get that being abducted wasn't on your list of things to do, but you've trained with us. You knew what to do to keep Storm and you safe until we could find you."

Finley remained quiet for a few more moments as they walked. Finally, she responded. "I know, but I envisioned it working out more in my favor."

"How do you mean? You have bruises, aching ribs, and a few other wounds of war, but Storm wasn't harmed, just a little scared and bewildered. You even protected Darcy; a woman you didn't know. Win-win in my book. Tell me how you see that differently."

Finley stopped and tried to step back from Levi, but he prevented her from taking more than one step away and she loved how he subtly took control, but hated to admit her thoughts. "You don't understand. I failed. I was supposed to stop the kidnappers from even getting to him, and I didn't. Jac doesn't even think I'm trustworthy anymore and who can blame him? I wasn't paying attention enough, wasn't strong enough, or smart enough to figure something was wrong early on. I could have prevented it if I had immediately returned to the house."

“You could have, but there wasn’t anything about the situation that was alarming until it was too late. If you had left, who was to say they wouldn’t have followed you? You still activated your Keep Safe program alert, protected Storm and Darcy, and helped everyone escape. The only person who was harmed was you. First you were drugged.” She’d forgotten that. “Then you were beaten and still you got the others to safety. It isn’t the method so much as the result. Although, the next time you even hesitate when I give you direction, I will light up that sexy ass. You got me?”

She knew he was trying to be serious, but the idea that Levi would exert his dominion over her was enough to bring a smile to her face. Levi had never pushed her, never demanded. He’d always been straight with her, honest, and stood his ground, so maybe he was trying to be the kind of man he saw his friends and Cash be. Finley couldn’t deny that his efforts to try out being that kind of man with her did bring a tingle to her lower regions and making her nipples draw into hard peaks, but that just wasn’t him.

“Finley, I’m not playing around here. I almost lost you and it fucking killed me. I don’t ever want that to happen to you again and I sure as hell don’t ever want to nearly go insane trying to find you.”

“But you got a concussion.”

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“And I’ll likely get another before my career is over. I imagined all kinds of scenarios when I came to and discovered you were gone. Then when we found Storm and Darcy, but not you, I was so damned afraid you sacrificed yourself for them. I understand that thinking, but hell, woman, it almost paralyzed me with fear.”

“Cash seemed a little peeved with me as well. But what was I supposed to do?”

“I just can’t fucking lose you.” Yep, he was speaking honestly. His language had gotten rougher.

“Hey, I can take care of myself. I had already screwed up earlier. I wasn’t going to do that again. I had to make it right. Besides, they were not the well-trained type of kidnappers. I think they hire out for easy jobs and who wouldn’t think that a toddler and his nanny wouldn’t be a cinch?” She snapped her fingers.

“Maybe. But from now on, when I say do something, it’s for your own good, with your protection in mind, and you better do it.”

“Fine. You and Cash are going to mother hen me to death. I’ll do the best I can to accommodate you on that. Not.” She grinned and shook her head. “I’ll try to be safer, but you know that I’m not good with bossy men. I like to do the opposite.”

“Do I detect a little brattiness? Good. I was worried this whole event might shut you down.”

“Nah, I’m tougher than that.”

Levi nodded and pulled her in tight for a kiss that started light and developed into the kind of kiss that had begun to not just rev her engine for a little fun but stoke her furnace. It was deeper, more passionate and intimate, and was more delicious than his old kisses. Or maybe she had changed and now felt them more. Being abducted made a person more needy or thankful. Making love with their mouths made her body temperature rage. The groan that his kiss elicited was throaty and full of desire. He ended the kiss slowly.

“I want you so badly,” he whispered, his voice uncharacteristically raspy.

“Can we find a place to relieve this driving need?”

“Not unless you want to be the next porn movie star. Jac has cameras overlapping cameras. Cash might enjoy the voyeurism, but no one else. Tonight, if you aren’t too sore, we will make it happen.” He dropped another kiss on red, swollen lips. “Okay?”

“Yeah. I guess.” She smiled at him. “With or without Cash?”

He shrugged. “If he isn’t working, he can join, but if he is, I’m going to taste, anyway.”

“I like my options. I win, no matter what.”

“If you aren’t too sore and not lying about it, either.” Levi dropped another kiss on her reddened lips. “I know you’re having abduction reenactment nightmares, but have you thought about talking to Jocelyn O’Connor, the therapist friend Jac has on contract to help his people work through issues? I hear from the other women they have gotten lots of support to work through the events in their lives.”

“I don’t know what I would talk about, really.”

“How about the incident itself and, at some point, discuss the new need to bring your gun to work in this highly secure yard?”

“Not a standard response, huh?”

“It could be, but I’m not the professional that would know that. However, I’m confident, if she were honest, she’d agree with me.”

Finley walked a little further. “Let me think about it.”

“You do that and I’ll get her contact information. Just in case.”

Chapter 15

Cash reached over to draw Finley close as they lay in bed. The days were dragging on and he and Cash had taken turns doing a few off-site jobs to break the monotony. Because they hadn’t found Caleb Rodney and there hadn’t been even a peep out of anyone vaguely identified as associated with him, the team was feeling dead in the water. They’d catch him, but how long would it take?

Finley said. “We women want to go out. How long will we have to wait to enjoy life again?”

“Probably today. Jac had a team meeting, and we all decided it was time to back off. I’m sorry we haven’t finished this yet. However, it doesn’t mean you are free to roam the community alone, but with things as they are, we have a business to keep going.”

“I heard Jac and Sharlee talking about two big jobs they are accepting. I know they hate it, but Jac is practical and so I get it.”

“Right, I do too. Unfortunately for you, though, either Levi or I will always be in the

house with you until it is finished.”

“I figured.”

Cash slid his hand down her taut belly and made a beeline for the slickness at the juncture of Finley’s thighs. “I don’t have much time left to play around this morning baby so get up on your hands and knees, present to me that firm ass and spread your gorgeous thighs. I’m going to tease a little before I put my cock in your hot opening and take you hard and fast.”

“Mmm. Do I get a say?”

“Yep. You get to say, okay? And you will take all of me because you want it hard and fast.”

“I’m still a little sore from last night, so don’t forget,” said Finley as she put herself in position. Her core began to tingle and ache. Damn, these men were a drug.

“Fin, are you feeling too tender?”

“No, but just not too hard and fast.”

“Noted. And if you don’t let me know if it’s more than you can take, I will roast this beautiful ass until it glows.”

“Promise I will, but if I don’t tell you, you won’t know.”

He slapped her backside hard. “I will now and then you will know that I know.”

She lifted her bottom to encouraged his touch again. He caressed her, sliding his finger into her slit. “So good.”

“Be still,” Cash answered as he ran his finger through her arousal and circled her clit, just like she liked it. “Taking what is mine, baby.”

“Hurry, I’m feeling neglected.”

He laughed and slapped her bottom hard several times. Finley grunted then again as he plunged in, no sliding slow and easy but a true claiming. He and Levi loved differently. Cash was dirty talking and energetic. Levi was deliberate and slower. Both met her needs in different ways and at different times.

She loved how Levi could time their orgasms to be overlapping. It made it seem as though they were in sync. She felt they were. Cash could make her feel like a wave crashing the rocks when he brought her off, and that was exhilarating and exhausting. She felt electrified.

Cash reached for her breasts and tits, pulling and pinching as he pounded into her sexy core. The buildup was fast, like a freight train. He reached around and pinched her clit several times. He pounded his need into her pussy, kissed her shoulder, smacked her ass. The buildup was intense. When she felt herself tittering on the edge of her climax, he bit her backside and that shoved her over the brink. She cried out, her voice mingling with his groan of release. After another five minutes, he kissed her with tenderness.

“Thank you, sweetheart. I’ve got to shower and get out to check the security. Lie around a little longer, then shower and have breakfast. No skipping it.”

“I need to work out.”

He laughed. “Not enough right now?” She gave him a look. “Okay, well, you know how to make that happen.” Another groan. “Gotta go or I won’t leave all day.”

“Oh, I could do that...but not today. Got things to do.”

He laughed and hit the shower. Cash was closing the bedroom door in ten minutes.

Later that day, as Jac told Finley to stay inside with Storm a while longer, she

released a sigh. Jocelyn had been working on her reasoning skills about the event, but she resisted any direction today. Levi tried to reason with Finley. “I don’t know, hon, but I think it will probably go back to the way it was soon, even for you. Of course, you and Storm won’t likely go out for a good while longer without escort, but you will be able to go out with him.”

She sighed. “And I’m worried I’m not upset about that.”

“Fin. Did you make that appointment with Jocelyn?”

“Last week. We’ve talked. I realized that when running the track or barbequing outside held no appeal, I knew I needed some help.” She turned to snuggle in closer and place her head on his right pec. “You are not very comfy.”

“Ah, but you are.” He reached over and Finley realized his hand was on its way to massage her breast, and quickly turned away. “Levi, what has gotten into you? There are people in here. I would have expected that move out of Cash, but you?”

He chuckled. “Baby, if you don’t think these guys cop a feel when they are in this room debriefing, you are delusional.”

“Well, not me, and not here.”

“I think I should check you out to make sure things are okay.” He raised up on the sofa to lean over her. “Starting with your lips.”

His kiss had her melting into a puddle of goo. “Levi, we aren’t alone.”

He sighed. “Fine. But when we are, be prepared.”

Finley grinned. “Can’t wait.”

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It had been a few days later when everyone was in the swing of only business as usual. She watched Storm as was their typical routine, and Finley was mentally exhausted. Jocelyn had called her back and offered another session during Storm's nap, and Finley felt as though a weight was lifted. The event didn't feel better, but sharing herself with someone who only wanted to know how things were affecting her rather than the factual events and how they related to the resolution. Finley appreciated being heard, and that was important. She didn't realize how much her earlier life experiences influenced her response in this event. And Jocelyn was straightforward and personable. Connectable in a way that Finley hadn't expected.

Sharlee had taken over for the night and Finley went to her room off the nursery to find her tablet. The guys were all gone except for house security, which, for once, wasn't one of her men. She knew a few good books were out that she had wanted to read. She heard Jac and Sharlee in the hall.

"You think she's doing alright?" asked Jac.

"I do. Jocelyn was a good call, and Finley has enjoyed the conversations with her. I think we should offer Jocelyn's services to Darcy."

"You think things are okay with Darcy? Not fishy?"

"Not fishy. Her story checks out. Her background matches and I think the Colonel may be more interested than we had expected. See how watchful he is about her? Kind of like Florent and Spring, and every one of you guys with your women."

Jac groaned. "Well, they have to figure their own selves out. Finley is more than

covered, so I say my duties as the unofficial leader of the pack are over as far as private lives are concerned. This last one took me by surprise. Finley and Levi always appear to have their emotions locked down. Then Cash was a dark horse. I think it might work.”

“I don’t think Finley and her guys are going to want to live all their time under our roof, so you had better start working on that solution. She must be on the property for when we need her, but we take over at night so usually she can just go to her place. Figure out where that place will be when this is all over.”

Jac laughed at Sharlee. “Charlotte, I am never going to be done, am I?”

“No, and you don’t want to be. This is family.”

“This is family.”

Finley heard him enter the room. It was Levi. Their stealth was different. Cash was more fluid, Levi was more direct. Both good, but she had practiced hearing and interpreting even the smallest sounds in the night, so she wasn’t fooled. Levi leaned down and kissed her ear. That startled her.

His next kiss was timed to land on her lips when she turned her head. Good strategy. He softened the kiss and went deeper, adding more caressing. Finley was finally relaxing and feeling cherished, a feeling she was beginning to get used to. He continued down her cheeks and jawline, nibbling and soothing as he went. She moaned as he followed the column of her neck, leaving little nibble marks along a line of flushed skin.

She turned further into him as she slipped her hands around his warm abdomen and explored his stomach, his tightlypronounced muscles flexing as he pulled her to the center of the bed and pushed her flat.

“Mmm, are you home for the night?” she whispered. Her breathing became more shallow as he explored her body.

“I am. Are you all alone tonight?”

“Mmhm. All alone. No one has come to kiss me goodnight.”

He was breathed harder. “No one? That’s a crime. Here, let me take care of that.”

The scent of his deodorant and warm, quickly heating man mixed with his shower gel and her arousal was a fragrance combination that was intoxicating. He hadn’t showered in their bath, so he likely stopped in the main hall bathroom. Finley knew about pheromones but had never believed how powerful they were until now. She couldn’t get enough of his manly scent.

“Levi, I need more.”

He reached for her tank top and she lifted her arms to pull the scrap of material over her head. He immediately swooped down, taking a plump breast in his mouth as he kissed and sucked on her nipples one at a time. He held them in his hands, hefting them, squeezing and manipulating them until the nipples were hard peaks and her needy cries grew desperate. He sucked them again. She could feel the tug and tingle of her sexy core as he continued to love on her. Her clit throbbed, and she felt the slipperiness grow along her slit.

Levi lifted his head and gave her a smile, a wicked glint in his eye. “I’ll be back.”

Levi’s hands skimmed down her still partially tender rib cage carefully. He tickled her waist and tantalized her lower belly with his fingers and lips. Finally, he hooked his fingers in the elastic at her hips and drew down her panties all the way off her legs. He tossed them over his head to land somewhere near her tank.

Spreading her wide, he kissed her trimmed mons hair and trailed his kisses into her channel, licking and sucking as he went. “Mmm, you’re delicious, and your scent drives me wild.”

She didn’t know if she had ever been so wet. Levi had gone down on her, but she hadn’t been comfortable with his head between her legs then. Why? She didn’t know, but her thoughts of how he couldn’t have enjoyed it were reasoned away using techniques Jocelyn had taught her, and now it was nirvana. No more friends with benefits, it was just benefits. Jabbing his tongue inside her opening before hooking his finger where his tongue had been, looking for the spot that Finley wasn’t sure existed.

“I don’t think that magic spot really exists, Levi.”

“Oh, you have a spot right around... got it?” She jerked in response to his finger on her sensitive inner magic. He’d located her G-spot. What an erotic zone.

“How did you... this is incredible. I can’t believe you found it.” The pressure he put on that small patch of flesh was indescribable but it soon had her panting and wiggling with her increased need encircling her and his magic fingers and tongue were becoming overpowering.

“Now hush, so I can enjoy my snack. Then we will take care of the rest.”

The internal rise of her heated orgasm gripped her hard. She exploded in an overpowering release that was almost frightening. It was so strong. Levi kissed and soothed Finley as she began to relax again.

“That was...”

“I know, baby. Let’s see if we can’t go there again only with me balls deep inside.”

“Yes, please. Hurry! I’m humming.”

With a quick flip, he put Finley on top so she didn’t feel pinned down. She’d appreciated his thoughtfulness. To be honest, she didn’t know if she could handle it or not, so better to be cautious for now.

“Mind if I join the party?” asked Cash.

Finley’s body was buzzing, her voice raspy. “You have three seconds to strip and join or you have to wait.”

Before she had finished her sentence, he was climbing up and took her mouth while she was on top of Levi. Pulling back and reaching around her back to her full breasts, he leaned over and took one plump fleshy mound in his mouth while manipulating the other. Cash stood back but didn’t let go of her nipples so Levi could maneuver her into place over his cock. It didn’t take long for Levi to place her right on top.

“Ready? Slide down and ride me, Fin.”

She wasn’t fond of this position. Taking control in the bedroom wasn’t her thing usually, but right now, she wasn’t sure she could do it any other way, so she was happy to learn how to give him pleasure.

“Lean forward and put your hands on his chest, baby,” said Cash. “Levi needs some toys.”

Levi played with her nips, manipulated her breasts and helped her build speed making sure her angle of entry and exit encouraged rubbing her clit and raising the intensity of her need.

“Sit up now, Fin. I’m close baby, let’s get you taken care of. Cash.”

“On it. I’ll take the high road and you take the low road.”

Levi let go of her breasts and Cash resumed his earlier position, holding and massaging them as Levi slid his hand down and began teased her clit while holding her hip in one hand and pumping inside her heat. One hand left her breast, and she expected Cash to latch his hot mouth over the freed nipple, but a finger rimmed her darkest entrance. Finley groaned. Cash spoke into her ear. “I’m going to have to put my finger in her this time but soon a plug and when you are ready, you will take my big, fat cock in this little, tiny spot to stretch you to your limits.”

She began to frantically impale herself on Levi’s cock, imagining impaling Cash’s big cock and feeling the pull of her nipple, his mouth now on the other one. Her clit was feeling the growing harshness of Levi’s taunting.

Levi put his hand on her hips and canted his pelvis to meet her coming down. She took up the rougher speed, her palms securely planted on his chest. “Rub your clit, Fin.”

“What?” she gasped.

“Do it.” Her thumb moved over to worry her bundle of erotic nerves again. The finger at her ass had breached her back entrance, bathed in the arousal fluids of her

sex. She cried out with the delightful pain of her breasts and nipples.

The pressure was building to unbearable proportions and finally, when she succumbed to her climax, Cash backed away long enough for Levi to flip them over. As Levi pounded his own need for completion, Cash played more with her clit, extending her release, and kissed Finley. Finley was glad they had settled the birth control issue a while ago. The implant was the right choice for them. A lot of sex, no worries. Making love with two came much more naturally now.

She lay there tired but in a good way and she had destressed completely. She laid on the bed recovering and didn't realize Cash was in the shower already. Her feelings of contentment and love for these men were difficult to believe. And the truly amazing thing was, she didn't feel panicked or squeamish at the thought of loving someone. Of someone loving her and the expectations, the responsibilities, the earlier fear she didn't have what it took to be a good forever lover. She wasn't ready to jump in with both feet, but jumping was not off the table in the future. Commitment was never her problem, it was the worry that she would not be enough. Jocelyn was helping with that, too.

She often wasn't enough, and that had been something she had gotten used to. Therapy was teaching her it didn't matter as much what others thought. She had high standards, but it had always seemed not to be high enough to meet others' expectations. Not her fathers, not her commands, her fellow Marines, no one's until she found Jac and his created family. Until she discovered Levi and then Cash thought she was more than enough.

She laid in Levi's arms, cooling off, sweaty, her mind and body humming with satisfaction. Relaxed. Levi lay next to her and seemed to be recovering as well, saying nothing but communing with her spirit. Cash slid onto the bed on her other side and laid his hand on her thigh. He squeezed it gently. As she dozed off to sleep, she knew this was what she had been missing. Fear of what she would have to give

up didn't bubble up this time. Progress.

Levi lay beside his Finley and marveled at the way their feelings had changed. Well, his had changed, and if the way she was cuddling more and not looking to sleep on her own side after sex was any indication, she was softening to making a commitment. Even if there wasn't any sex, it was distinctly obvious that Finley wanted to be held by him, and he wanted it, too. Cash was not reticent at all, but Levi had been more careful to follow her lead. It was good.

And tonight, when Cash took a supporting role, it just worked. Maybe they had the makings of a triad or throuple, after all. He was ready to admit it was what he wanted and didn't know if he could go back from this place now that they had landed here. Only time would tell, but he would do his damndest to keep growing this relationship.

Sometime in the night, Cash woke to Finley's hot mouth on his dick and Levi in her hand, finishing him off; they each went to the bathroom to clean up and snuggled back into their beginning position, Finley crashing first and Cash right behind her. They were going to need to wash sheets a lot more often at this rate. And towels. Nice.

Levi's last thought before relaxing into sleep was maybe the kidnapping attempt didn't get what Caleb Rodney wanted, and he thought it too risky to try it or anything else again, making the threat evaporate. It was his hope that he would quit, but as much effort as he had put into those notes and the long game, he didn't believe that things would play out that way. Levi tightened his hold on Finley, pulling her a little closer as he fell into a contented sleep.

Chapter 16

The next week was an easy, typical week for everyone, and life had settled back into

its old patterns with the men still sensitive to their women's safety, but things had lightened up considerably. Friday, Jac's car alarm went off while he was at lunch with Charlotte. Annoyed, he scanned the area for possible sources. He usually tried to park in the front, but the place had been filling up fast when they had arrived, making it necessary to park to the side of the lot, away from the windows.

When he arrived to turn off the alarm, no one was walking in the little café parking lot. No one had entered the café, either. Odd, and in light of recent events, he was cautious, but it was easy to shrug off. He shook his head, checked the car with the program downloaded to the fancy auto system, and didn't discover anything out of the ordinary.

As he was resuming his meal, he received a call from the alarm company saying his plane hangar alarm went off, and Jac told them he was too far and to dispatch the police. Jac called Carter to meet the police while they settled their bill before returning to the office.

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“I’ll run some checks. This doesn’t sound right.”

Becky handed Jac her desk phone. “It’s Carter.”

“Hey, thought the hangar was locked up,” said Jac. “You been out there lately?”

“It is locked, and I was out here last week. I had Kaden take a look at the camera feed while I headed over there, and he said he didn’t see anything but a kid walking his dog, but he’d take another look.”

“Place was secured inside and out?” asked Jac.

“Yep. Damnedest thing I’ve seen in a while. Nothing seems damaged or touched. It might have been someone trying to get in, but we don’t know how. Maybe we should check out the alarm system to make sure there aren’t any problems with it.”

“Good idea. I’m with Charlotte so she can work on that with Kaden. Odd, my car alarm went off about the same time,” said Jac.

Carter was the on-the-spot strategist. “Okay, then we will have to work on this. Can’t have things go off for no reason. We should check in with the teams and make sure that is all that happened.”

“Coincidence, I’m sure, but it’s a good idea to check and if not, Charlotte will be able to track any hacking. Come back and let’s all meet for a contingency plan if that is the case.”

“You got it. On my way.”

Within the hour, all available operatives were in the gym, which was larger than the conference room that was used for one team at a time. The gym could hold forty people in folding chairs comfortably. Standing twice as many. Levi hated to leave Finley today with the upset, but she still didn't want to leave the estate and certainly not to go to his office.

“No, my office is here. This house. I need to keep an eye on Storm, even if Radcliff is my backup.”

Levi was going to argue, but there wasn't any need. He knew when Finley had that determined expression on her face and the little lines that appeared between her brows, there would be bloodshed if he pushed her too hard. Instead, he gave her a kiss that he hoped curled her toes before he left. Cash was on a detail job today. Otherwise, he might have carried her and Storm to the car himself. Levi smiled. Cash could be a little abrasive at times.

“Rad, I'm leaving now so keep an eye on them,” Levi said.

“I gotcha, man,” said the security expert on duty at the house today.

Levi walked in just as Jac was starting the meeting. “Settle down and listen up. We have had a few things happen today. Alarms going off and we don't know why. Our system and cameras don't show anyone, and yet the hangar and my car alarm went off about the same time.”

Monroe cleared his throat. “Mallory's vehicle alarm went off today, too. Was about one this afternoon.”

“Callie, didn't you say your alarm went off?” asked Garrett.

“Yeah, and right about the same time.”

After several others mentioned the same occurrence, Jac asked for a show of hands and fifteen others had the same thing happen. “Hell, Jac, we were targeted,” said Garrett. “Again.”

Monroe looked at Mark, who nodded. “We’ve been wondering about electronic access. This seems to back that theory up.”

“It would appear to be the most likely scenario,” agreed Jac. “What have you found out, Charlotte?”

“Kaden is running system analysis, but it seems that like type cars, like our Ford SUVs were hacked. Why the hangar, though?”

“He’s leaving his calling card,” said Mark. “The asshole. He’s having great fun.”

“I agree, but there isn’t anything we can do unless we can identify where he came in and accessed us. Also, that takes a lot of surveillance and planning to hit so many at the same time. The good thing is if he cast that broad of a net, then he will have left a digital trail that can be followed,” said Kaden.

Charlotte shook her head. “Yes. There is a trail and we just have to find it by locating and then following the digital breadcrumbs. We are analyzing a number of areas and when we find what we are looking for, then the fun begins for us.”

“Do we think the families are in danger?” asked Monroe.

“I’d stay alert. Don’t go anywhere alone. Everyone should use the buddy system. It’s going to be a little cumbersome right now, but it’s the best we can do until we know what we are dealing with.”

Garrett nodded. “He wants us to be on alert all the time because it is morale busting and exhausting to be on alert for an extended amount of time. Makes you sloppy. We should keep on doing what we do, as though we didn’t really notice this event happened to anyone but ourselves. We will be watchful, but Caleb Rodney thinks we missed it.”

Jac went on to show everyone who Caleb Rodney was to the business, who he was now, and the danger he could bring with him. “Keep an eye out for him. You have a digital picture that Rebecca sent to your phones.” As he was talking, phones pinged throughout the room.

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Becky added a little more information. “I have also sent his bio and pictures of his recent associates. That should make it a lot easier to identify and detain him.”

“Jac, should we be looking for him or be on the lookout for him?” asked someone from the blue team.

“On the lookout. We have exhausted our connections and information as to where he might be. The Feds, the local cop shop, and a few of his past known associates that have a beef with him and who owe me a favor. We will know something if any of them get info.”

After several more questions and answers, the room cleared out to get on with the rest of their day.

“I’ve sent all the information to all the employees. I also sent it to all the women so they would be informed.” Becky sat down hard.

“Good. How did they handle it?” asked Garrett.

Becky gave him a wry smile. “I presume you mean the ladies. Well, some took it in stride. But not everyone.”

Kaden laughed, “What did Ivy say?”

“I’m not ratting on anyone.”

Kaden laughed harder. “You just did. Don’t worry, I won’t give you up.”

“Gee thanks.” Becky went back to Jac’s office, followed by Sharlee and then Kaden talking on his phone, most likely to Ivy.

“Should I move Finley and Storm?” asked Levi.

“Nope. They are safe because he is just playing games with us to fuck with our minds. We are just refusing to be annoyed.” Jac rubbed the back of his neck in obvious frustration. “He won’t go for them again, is my guess. The element of surprise is his best strategy.”

“That’s your strategy? Refusing to be annoyed?” asked Carter with a frown as he watched his wife leave the room.

“You got a better one? I’m all ears,” said Jac.

“Well, don’t you think it’s prudent to plan our next moves?” asked Carter.

“Yes, and I’m happy for you and Monroe to tease that out and bring it to the table tomorrow, but other than having a plan for the most likely scenarios, it’s all a waiting game.”

After talking a little longer, the gym emptied and life went on as best as it could. Levi had passed the point of frustration. He was ready to push a response out of Rodney and get this over with.

Two weeks later, Jac had the team, their families, Ben and Darcy, who lived at Ben’s place for now, come for dinner.

“Are you sure?” asked Cash. “Sounds kind of risky to me.”

“While I’m not quite ready for an outdoor event, I’m more than ready for some fun.

The tension is still high. Mistakes are more likely to be made if the worry isn't alleviated. The women are frustrated and I don't blame them."

Levi whistled. "Caleb is playing a long game and I hate it. I edge for fun and because the payoff for our girl is incredible and worth the work. What is this asshole aiming for as his reward?"

"Revenge. You know it's best served cold."

"Maybe cold, but not molding. Shit, we have to get another break. Finley is holding on by a thread lately. Did you know she thinks you don't trust her since the kidnapping?"

"Damn. I never expected her to interpret a bodyguard like that. I told her I did. She is in charge of Storm like normal. I just want Storm and Finley to be safe, and for now, that means more security. I'll have to talk to her."

"I think that will help. If nothing else, it will show her that you speak her language. If she can see your sincerity through your actions, it will encourage her to believe you trust her."

"Thanks Levi. I can do both. But since we are on this subject, you, Cash, and her?"

"Still good. Well, at least on my part and Cash's, but I think I can speak for Finley, too."

"Think we better switch Cash to full-time house security so that we can make sure this works. Need to help the last men standing."

"Not for much longer, I hope. And I'd talk to Cash. He isn't one to go with the flow unless he has a good reason to agree. I like the street work as much as I do. Maybe

we tag team it so we each get a change of pace.”

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“You’re right. Why couldn’t everyone be as easygoing as me?” asked Jac.

Levi held his grin. “I have no idea.”

The calls came in just after dawn. “This better be fucking important,” said Jac, as he stopped playing with his wife’s nipples. Sharlee moaned. “Shh, baby. I’ll make it up to you.”

Cash could hear muffled sounds over the phone. He was too angry to do more than feel a split second’s regret that he was interrupting the couple’s wake-up. “Do you have a new gate guard?”

Jac’s voice was instantly on alert. “No. What’s going on?”

“I’d like to say nothing, but the driveway has shit all on it.” Cash could hear his boss walking across the room. “Like what?”

“Debris. Nails, screws and scraps like someone raided a construction site before it was cleaned up. Or where a building was torn down. Concrete bits, rebar... just shit.”

“Fuck. I’m coming down.”

Levi and Cash looked up as the front door opened. Finley stood between them. All were in PT gear. Their boss stood in pajama bottoms with a shirt in his hand, a thunderous expression pinned to his face. “Fuck. Who’s on the gate?”

“Hector and he promised he did not know anything. He came on at six, just before

dawn. We were going for a run and found it. It wasn't him because these things have dew on them. Had to be before he came on."

"Who did he relieve? And who was monitoring the cameras?"

Behind the men came Sharlee's response. "Kaz."

Finley snorted. "Kaz is known to sleep half his shift when he has the ten to six shift."

Levi studied Finley's disgust. That wasn't like his girl. "How do you know, baby?"

She hesitated at the endearment, but then shrugged her shoulders. "I've come across him a few times."

Jac gave Finley a hard look. "Why am I just hearing about it?"

"Well, he said he has a second job, and he didn't get enough sleep between the two. I told him if I found him again, I'd report him."

"Again, how do you know he's done it more than once?"

Sharlee stepped in. "I've caught him a couple of times and told him to take a different shift. He did, and I thought that was all done with. Evidently, not."

"Kaz doesn't have another job and if he did, he was to report it to me for clearance. It doesn't matter what the circumstances, he is to man his post awake. This isn't over, you two, but I have things to do, so we'll finish discussing it later."

Cash leaned into his girl. "Fin, go get breakfast. I'll come find you when we are done handling this. Don't worry."

She looked over at Jac as he dialed a number and walked off over the yard. Sharlee looped her arm in hers. “Don’t worry. Jac will just yell a little. He’ll try to bluster a little more with me, but I have the secret weapon to cool his temper down.”

“I feel bad about it and I know better, but Kaz is such a nice guy.” Finley looked toward the front gate.

“Well, I hope he wasn’t telling you a lie because he just lost this job,” said Cash. “He’ll need a backup.”

Finley nodded. “Hope I keep mine.”

Sharlee stopped and turned to grab both of Finley’s arms. “You are family now. The only way you won’t work here is if you quit, and even then, you’ll always be family. One isn’t dependent on the other.” She squeezed Finley in a side hug. “Besides, if that happened, you’re with Levi and Cash. The most likely scenario is that you’d be another spouse that Jac tries to recruit for his own uses in the agency.”

Finley forced her smile and nodded. It was amazing to belong, but she wanted to keep her job. Another reason for Jac to not trust her.

Sharlee spoke as the two walked toward the dining room. “Whatever that worrisome thought is, get rid of it. Jac respects a person who owns up to their mistake and makes changes. We’ll tell him that and he’ll be fine.”

“I hope.”

“I know.”

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Later that day, Jac was discussing with Garrett and Monroe what had happened. When he saw Levi and Finley with Storm, he waved them in and scooped up his son. After a few moments of playing in his daddy's lap, Storm scooted off and went to a toy box in the corner. There were multiple boxes, just like the one in this room, all over the house.

"So, I hear you had a junkyard greeting this morning," said Monroe.

Levi grunted and sat down, pulling Finley down with him. The shocked expression made Garrett laugh. "Not used to being part of a couple yet, I see."

Levi smiled. "She's working on it. Cash is more hands on than I am, but we are both learning." He let her up when she'd sat for a couple of minutes.

"Where do you think the yard decorations came from?" asked Garrett.

"Don't know. I'm more interested in figuring out how they got it on the lawn."

"Could they have thrown it over the fence?" asked Monroe.

Jac crinkled his face. "Maybe, but they went all the way to the front steps so no way a person can throw that far. No way we wouldn't have known by the noise. They should have set off the alarms. I think they were able to just walk in past Kaz."

"And disable the alarms on the way? What did he say when you talked to him?" asked Levi.

Cash strode in. "I can answer that. We haven't found him yet. He might have another job and that would be good because he doesn't have this one any longer. Unfortunately, he wasn't home."

Jac's angry face matched Cash's, but he had better control. Cash was pacing. Jac spoke calmly. "Charlotte is trying to locate him from the house cameras. He always parks his car at the end of the drive next to the gate and we have his plates on record. We'll find him. He was due to come back on shift tonight."

Garrett whistled. "Don't want to be in the room when that meeting happens."

Jac grunted. "Charlotte will find him."

"It pisses me off that we have all these people, all this equipment and knowledge and this fucker is playing with us," grumbled Garrett. "I mean, how?"

"Agreed," said Jac.

Levi said nothing for a few moments. He tried to enjoy his coffee, but the reality was there wasn't anything enjoyable about being played like a puppet on a marionette's strings. The room was quiet with an anticipatory air that unsettled him. Cash sat down on the other end of the sofa.

"Jac, this is the kind of game that we can't play any longer. As far as psychological warfare goes, this shit is demoralizing at best. Finley can't seem to get past it, but she tries to put on a good face. She thinks you don't trust her one day, and the next believes she'll never be safe or that Storm will forever be in the crosshairs of someone seeking revenge or a name, or something." Cash stood as he finished speaking.

Jac nodded grimly. "I've entertained those same thoughts too many times to say.

Charlotte is tortured over this asshole leaving breadcrumbs and then being gone. She tracks him and then by the time she locks and loads, the fucker is gone. She believes she knows who is setting up the playing field, and it's all I can do to keep her on the right side of the law for most of this."

Garrett looked at Jac. "Now, don't take this the wrong way. If I were to catch Callie getting risky, like acting as a lure, I'd shut her down and beat her ass, but sometimes it can work in our favor. Rodney wants to play ball. Let's bring our own ball and play in our field."

Levi nodded. "I'm all for trying. Jac, we have to hear him out."

"What happened to the boy wonder who quietly did his job under the radar?" asked Jac.

Levi grinned. "He found his forever and is in protection mode. I'm a force to be reckoned with."

Jac chuckled. "Understood. Garrett, explain."

By the end of the conversation, Jac was on board and Levi was ready to put things into play. He then sat down with the woman. "We're about to have dinner. I know everyone is hungry, but this is important. I think you'll agree."

"I don't know why we couldn't just do this after dinner," said Sharlee.

"Because this is done best before we eat. I don't want anyone to get indigestion because of me. Our next meetings are going to be in person and I don't want anyone to tap into the lines or cameras or any other device that might allow them to hear what's going on. I've got my phone forwarding to the front desk so that someone will answer, but they won't get any information about what's going on in the room. I want

everyone else to turn their cells off.” Jac waited while everyone else did what he requested.

“I can make this room secure,” said Kaden. Sharlee nodded in agreement.

Jac looked around the room. “Just bear with me for right now. I need my own sense of security to be in place. I’m done playing games and I think the rest of us are too. Did anyone think to invite the Colonel tonight?”

“We did. Didn’t you want us to?” asked Mark.

“I did, but not so sure about Darcy being in the mix. The jury is still out as far as I’m concerned. No, Charlotte, I understand you have cleared her, and I know this sounds a little bit obsessive, but I just wanted to make sure that we were as locked down as we could be to have this conversation. Kaden, secure the room, and everyone turns their phone off.”

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“Jac, what’s going on?”

“Good question. I think we are one step behind Rodney because he has someone as good as Charlotte doing his surveillance and eavesdropping, and that someone has no morals. So, we change the game and do it our way. Charlotte, I’m going to give you whatever resources you need and you can do whatever it takes to find Caleb Rodney. I want you to screw with his computer guy. I want you to do whatever it takes to bring him out into the open.”

She solemnly nodded. “Got it. Expose hacker.”

They all knew what it was taking for Sharlee’s husband to give her full rein because he had more than a good idea of what she could do, and that was way more than any of them understood. Maybe Kaden had a clue, but Levi was sure he didn’t know to what lengths she could go to get her objective. The message was clear. Do what it takes to end this.

“Once we know where to send the information, I want the team to draw him out.”

Callie asked. “Draw him out? Like be bait? What makes you think that he will come to you? It looks like a trap. The man is going down, but I don’t think he’s that stupid.”

The debate ensued until Monroe whistled into the room, stopping all conversations. “Better. I don’t believe I’m going to say this but if we are looking at the best strategic move, we have to look vulnerable and that means, bring the women into play.”

Cash was usually more reactive than Levi, but Levi shook his head. “I’m not putting Finley in the line of fire or any danger. I can’t believe you’re suggesting we do.”

No one spoke, waiting for Monroe’s response. “Understood. I am not suggesting they be vulnerable as in unprotected. Unwatched. But we have to draw him out with something believable. It’s been about three weeks since the last random cluster-fest,” he smiled at Mallory when he left out the expected curse word. She smiled back. “We just need to figure out what would be believable.”

“Not counting this morning,” said Sharlee.

“I could walk a pretend Storm in a stroller,” offered Finley.

Mark shook his head. “Thanks for the offer, but that’s too obvious.”

Sharlee nodded. “He’s too big now to not notice him. Too difficult to make believable.”

Ivy spoke up. “I could have the ladies over for a defense class.”

“Right, but we have those at the office, usually. So that won’t work,” said Kaden.

There were other conversations, and then Jessie grinned. “Mallory is having a baby.”

Becky smiled agreement. “She is.”

Jac shook his head. “Not news, Jessica.”

Callie bumped him with her elbow. “Right. But what do women do when a friend is having a baby?”

Finley nodded. “They have a baby shower. It’s perfect.”

“Yes! That works,” said Sharlee.

Ivy bounced in her seat. “Does that mean I get a gun?”

“NO!” said every man in the room.

She pouted. “I don’t know why.”

Kaden grinned. “That’s why. We’ll work on your aim later, but under no circumstances are you to carry or even pick up a gun until I say so.”

Ivy crossed her arms. “Fine, but I think on-the-job training would be just as effective.”

“Well, it’s not, and I don’t intend to explain it further. No one carries a gun.”

Kaden’s deeper tone sent a deep red flush traveling up her neck and cheeks. Ivy slid down in the chair and Kaden leaned over to speak quietly in her ear while Garrett tried to hide his smile. Ivy was always bringing sunshine to a dark corner of the room.

“So a baby shower would be great, but we need to figure out how to let them know that the women will be predominately unprotected. It is a well-known fact that we don’t let them do much without some kind of on-site protection.”

Garrett was right, and Levi was not going to let Finley go anywhere without him. Cash looked skeptical. “So, what’s the plan to make them appear unprotected because that isn’t going to happen in reality?”

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Carter, who had stayed quiet until now, leaned forward, placing his muscular forearms on the conference table. “Up to a point, I agree. Both Mallory and Becky are pregnant and so it is extra tricky. But here’s the thing. I think, once we get the information out there, it’s going to be a rough go to make it look like they are just having a party and we are all in attendance. I doubt we will get the response we are looking for. I propose, the night before, several of us slide into the house, hopefully undetected, so we are on site. Then, everyone who is still home, bring our women at the appointed time. Use some of the other teams to drive some of the women.”

Jac nodded. “Actually, that is a great idea. Then we have someone hidden in the back who, once we are a short distance away, can drive our vehicles further away after we exit. That will allow us to come in from the ground.”

“Yes, but I think it’s important that they see Monroe and me stay. It’s Monroe’s house, and Becky is pregnant, so if anyone is watching, I don’t leave Becky home alone for any reason. I have a bodyguard that is usually on duty for her.”

“You don’t think you should just have a bodyguard and not you?” asked Kaden.

“I wouldn’t normally send him on a Saturday to watch over Becky. If we want them to think they are really vulnerable, we go as usual.”

“Now, for protection with the women, we can work out the actual details, but Levi and Mark can go in at night.” Jac looked over to see if Becky needed any clarification. She shook her head. He continued. “Callie will go armed. Finley and Charlotte as well. The rest, we will be ready to come in when signaled, so don’t be heroes.”

Becky smiled. “Heroines.”

Jac raised his eyebrow. Ivy giggled. It broke the ice in an otherwise stress-filled room.

Mark added. “I want to run scenarios for a few days and then prepare the girls, so this Saturday is cutting it close.”

Garrett shook his head. “No, I think if we are doing it, we do it fast so they don’t have much time to pull together a good response. They will be flying by the seat of their pants. We can do this in our sleep.”

“Agreed,” said Jac. “Each of you will work with your partner to help them understand how things will go down. Cash, you brief the gate guards and the house security about the safe room where the children and Shay will be. You choose your crew.”

“Okay, I’ll dig around and make it look like I’m encrypting this invitation, but it will be something his web guy can figure out. I have to make him work at it or he’ll know it isn’t real.” Sharlee made a few notes and leaned back in her chair. “And the invitation is going to say Sunday, then, on Friday, I’ll change the time to Saturday. Shorten his timeline to prepare. If he is as anxious to make this happen, he’ll think one less day of prep won’t hurt.”

Cash nodded. “He isn’t and never has been an operative, so he doesn’t know. Success is in the planning.”

“Agreed,” said Garrett. “Okay, anything else?”

“Um, yeah,” said Mallory. “Is this going to be a pretend shower?”

“I think that would be best. We have to be on guard. We’ll give you a proper shower

soon,” said Callie.

Mallory nodded. “Good. I guess we still need to get things that look like we are having a real shower.”

“Good point,” said Monroe.

“We’ll grab things. How about 2pm for the shower?” asked Sharlee. “Saturday. Ignore the Sunday on the invite.”

“Perfect,” said Mallory.

“And what about Darcy and Oakley? They aren’t here. Or the Colonel or Ryker,” said Becky.

Jac turned to Becky. “I’m going to talk to them later today, but why don’t you give Oakley a call before the email invitation goes out, so they are up to speed? Use your personal cell. Don’t share intel, but give her a personal invitation. Leave Darcy to Ben.”

“Okay.”

Levi leaned over and kissed Finley’s cheek in full view of everyone in the room. Cash was always touching her in public, and she seemed to have gotten used to that. Levi felt they had reached a much closer spot in their relationship, but he had trouble being publicly demonstrative. To his surprise, she didn’t say a word and in fact acted like it was nothing unusual, but he knew differently. Levi considered that a huge win. Now to end this so she could relax and they could go back to how things were or how they wanted them.

Chapter 17

Charlotte called from the front room of their house. “Jac, I found him.”

“Where is he?” asked Jac as he entered the room carrying Storm. He was followed by Garrett, Monroe, Cash, Levi and Finley.

“What do you mean, ‘where is he?’” Sharlee asked.

“Baby, you just said you knew where Kaz was.”

“No, not Kaz.” She sighed. His confusion was evident.

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“Not Kaz?” Jac repeated.

“Rodney then,” supplied Levi.

“Better. I found his hacker Knight Armor. I can plant the information now. I have it all set up, so I’m going to release it. This guy is going down.”

Finley moved closer. “How long before it hits the target?”

“Oh, I’d say it will hit his radar in about fifteen minutes. I have disguised it pretty well and he’ll try to trace it for a while until he figures out it won’t matter what the originating IP address is because it’s the message that is the gold mine.”

Cash nodded as he pulled Finley in close. “Finally, the ball is in our court and I don’t intend to give it back.”

Garrett slapped Jac on the back. “Let’s practice our plan again this evening at Monroe’s place. I’ve got things to do before we meet up. I’m one of the party crashers, so I don’t have to be early.”

Monroe looked in Finley’s direction. “Callie and Finley are working with the ladies this afternoon. Good to practice with the guys again, as we are close. We can’t afford any missteps.”

“We’ll be ready to dry run tonight,” said Finley. “The Colonel has been working with Darcy about coming out in the open, but she’s still pretty skittish. She says Ace-Caleb Rodney, is a bad man. Why would you hire such a jerk, Jac?”

“I never saw that side of him until I fired him. Then he was gone so fast, I just figured he was pissed his operation was terminated.”

Finley nodded. “Do you think Jocelyn would talk to Darcy? It might help.”

Jac shrugged. “I don’t think Jocelyn would mind, but will Darcy allow it?”

“I’ll try to get her to call.”

“This reminds me of that case not long after I started with the foreign secretary of something. It was so exciting.”

Jac turned to stare at his wife, then he smiled. “I thought my follow up with you was pretty good too.”

Sharlee blushed. “I’m choosing to forget that part.”

“I imagine you are, but I consider it one of the highlights of that job.” He dropped a kiss on his wife’s lips. “I knew you were mine from that moment forward.” She smiled back.

Florent entered the room. “How many for dinner?” He looked expectantly around the room.

“Mallory said if I am late again tonight, she is going to eat every sweet thing in the house. She has a large stash I haven’t found yet, so I can’t risk it. I’m headed home.”

Levi laughed. “What about that famous rubber paddle?”

“I had to put it away when Mal got pregnant. It will reappear sometime in the future. If you want to borrow it, just give me a buzz. I hate for it to remain unused for so

long.”

Finley gave Monroe a laser look. “You just keep your toys of torment to yourself.”

He grinned. “You might like it.”

Before Finley could respond, Monroe was laughing as he walked to the front of the house. She blushed. Jac turned to Ren.

“I have additional security here for tonight for the kids, as well as Mark, Jessica, and Shay. So, I think that’s five extra. Maybe six. And pull-out extra evening snacks. You know how guys eat.”

Florent laughed. “I do, indeed.”

That evening, after dinner was over, Levi left to meet Carter so they could enter Monroe’s house on their last dry run before tomorrow afternoon. Mark didn’t want to leave his family overnight, and no one blamed him.

“Becky and I can leave Friday as though we are going for the weekend. Then circle back and I can leave her with Sharlee. I’ll ride with Levi to Monroe’s.”

“That works,” said Garrett.

Jac had Cash’s extra security plus Florent and Spring, Anora and Shay, and Storm all go into the spacious “safe room” which was a labyrinth of homey, comfortable rooms in a second basement surrounded by stone, steel and concrete. Jac’s father figured the third world war could happen over their heads and nothing would touch them. Jac hoped he was right.

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The front gate was manned by two security again and that wouldn't change until this mess was ended. No surprise, Kaz hadn't shown up for his shift and hadn't shown up at his second job that Sharlee had discovered just before dinner. They hadn't time to worry about more than that right now. All codes, passwords, and electronic logs were changed. Alarms were reset, some cameras were stationary and some on pan. He had extra precautions inside and out. It would have to do.

They drove off the estate with another car following them as safety. Jac wasn't going to play chase through the country roads tonight. He had things to do. Dropping the women off, as was the plan, the only vulnerable time was the moment the women left the vehicles and when the men returned, which was nearly five minutes.

"We can hold them off if they jump in immediately, Jac. Don't worry." Sharlee leaned over and kissed her husband as they pulled into Monroe's drive. They waited for the gate to open and Sharlee gave him the rundown. "I have my weapons. Finley has hers, and Callie has hers. Ivy has her martial arts, and we can protect the others."

Finley nodded. "Ivy good at playing the weaker sex, drawing them close enough to nearly castrate them."

Jac chuckled. "That girl is something else. Kaden has his hands full. Okay, it's been long enough for it to look like I gave you the rules and pick-up times, etcetera. I'll be back soon." Another quick kiss and the women got out of the car. Monroe met them at the door and ushered them in.

Soon, Becky, having picked up Ivy, who lived next door, pulled in and parked. They would have come this way, so they didn't want to be out of character. Monroe met

them and escorted them inside.

Ben had called Monroe earlier to discuss the hesitancy that Darcy was having to expose herself, even if it was practice. Ace had done a number on her security. Finally, they convinced Darcy to get in the car after Finley was conferenced into the call and talked her through the trip.

Oakley arrived with Ryker, who walked her to the door himself, handing her over to Monroe with some hesitancy.

“Fuck, I hate this.”

Oakley kissed him with determination and whispered in his ear. “Practice, baby. Just practice.”

“Yeah. I know.”

He returned to the car and was pulling out of the little circle drive when Colonel Ben and Darcy drove in. She jumped out of the car and ran into the house through the door Monroe held open. She burst into Mallory’s front room and sat away from the picture windows. No one said anything. They let her do what made her feel the most comfortable. Finley wanted to reassess if Darcy needed to be here at all. She’d talk to her guys.

All this was practice, but tomorrow night, Levi and Carter would do this to count. The ladies talked as they would on Saturday night. They helped decorate now and occupied themselves as they would then. Finley caught Callie’s eye and then slid her gaze over to Sharlee. They were the only ones with guns. They agreed that when the cue was received of incoming, Becky and Mallory would quickly slip into the bathroom closest to them and then into the safe room through the storage closet. There were several ways to get into the safe room, which spanned the entire basement

level. Monroe wanted there to be no blocked exits.

Darcy, if she had to be here Saturday, would dive into the winter coat closet at the opposite end of the house, along with Finley and Ivy. They would get into the safe room that way. It would be tight, but they would get it done. She would do that tonight. The room was almost decorated, and the anticipation was making the room crackle. Levi, Monroe, and Carter would send the rest of the women to the other entrance in the master bedroom at the opposite end of the house. They should all be out of the living room and safe in ten seconds or fewer.

The guys would be the welcoming committee and Jac would bring in the response team. It should be over soon. Practice ran smoothly. The men knew that was not likely to happen in the real events but if their women were safe, the men could finish it. Finley could only hope as they all went home that it would be as well orchestrated Saturday.

Later that night, while lying in bed, Finley asked the guys about Darcy.

“She’s so scared. Why does she have to go to Mallory’s? We don’t need her.”

Levi answered her. “We do, baby. They know we have her and they want her back. That won’t happen, but it is what they want, so she is necessary.”

Finley looked at Levi with a furious expression. “So, you are using her as a decoy?”

“You are all fucking decoys, and I hate it. I know we’re good at what we do, but these are our women. We’re putting our hearts on the line for some asshole I don’t even know but want to annihilate.” Cash sat up in bed.

“Your heart?” asked Finley, sitting up next to him.

“Yes, my heart. And if you don’t believe me by now, I guess I’ll have to work harder to get you there.” He pulled her close. She took a deep breath as he lowered his head. She opened for his kiss and just before she was ready to give into her quickly rising libido, He released her mouth.

A moment after Cash raised his head, Levi kissed her temple to get her attention. “And my heart.” He took her mouth more gently, kissing her throat and the top of her shoulder, raising her chin to receive his mouth again. She was flooding. Her panties were drenched. These men.

“Okay then.”

“Good,” said Cash.

“Okay then,” said Levi.

After a few moments of recovery, Levi spoke up again.

“Finley, we have to play this as straight as we can. Rodney will think this is a trap if we do anything out of the ordinary or what isn’t expected. You know that.”

“I hate this. I don’t even know if Darcy is being taken care of. I mean, I don’t know this colonel. Neither do you, really.”

“I think he is who he says he is because we verified it. He’s a good guy. And she doesn’t seem to hate being with him,” said Levi.

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“Quite the contrary, from what I have seen. She stays with him as much as she can. She wanders off with you, but the minute Ben walks in the room, it is a beacon for her.”

“Fine, but I’m responsible for Darcy. It’s my fault she’s in Rodney’s sights.”

Cash shook his head as he laid down. “Would you listen to yourself? No, you rescued her because she said she wanted out. You protected her and now we are keeping her safe until this is all over. Then, if she wants, she can leave to wherever she wants to go.”

Finley sighed and ran her hand over Cash’s warm skin. “I know. I just feel responsible.”

“You want something to be responsible for, honey? I have this lonely piece of equipment that, if it isn’t used enough, it gets rusty. A responsible owner would make sure that didn’t happen. I have some oil here that might help,” said Cash.

She laughed. “I have already ridden, tasted, and been fucked by that scrap of equipment tonight, so I’ll have to pass. I’m tired.”

“He’s offended, but he’s tired too or there would be feelings to mend.”

Levi laughed. “What about my bit of equipment? Solidarity feelings here.”

She leaned down and kissed his cock’s silky head, running her tongue around the spongy helmet. Levi groaned. She leaned down, kissed the head one last time, and

rolled over to get into her standard spooning position. The slap on her ass wasn't unexpected.

"You'll pay for that, brat."

"But not today, sir."

Cash's laugh was deep as rolled to his back, his hand resting between her thighs.

Levi chuckled as he became the big spoon to her little one, pulling her in tight. "But not today."

Final dry run complete and successful. Levi knew the guys were confident. This was a much less intense operation that had been executed hundreds of times before, but the stakes were never higher. Sharlee hated not being able to man the house alarm system, manipulate the web access and remote controls of the internet access but Kaden was going to do that and he had honed his skills so well over the last few years, that if Sharlee decided to pack it all in and be a mom, he could take over with a little learning curve.

The biggest difference between Kaden and Sharlee now was her networking access and the deepest web familiarity. She was an exceptional hacker. She still did an outside job or two to keep her hand in. He was a hardware man before Sharlee had helped him up his game. He still loved hardware and could build nearly anything computerized, but now he could do more.

Sharlee got to carry her little customized SIG firearm. She practiced every month with it at Jac's insistence. "You can only keep that if you are putting in the practice with it." So, since Jac could sometimes make her nervous, Finley helped her tighten her shot.

As Finley went over the final preparations in her mind, she sent a text message to Darcy to check in on her. Something she might never have thought to do for anyone a few months ago.

Finley: Hey, you doing okay? Ben treating you well?

Darcy: I' good. Ben's good.

Hm, not what she really asked, but she knew Darcy was a bit overwhelmed these days and she didn't want to push her out of her comfort zone right now with it being just hours before the guys started the mission. The baby shower was tomorrow, but Levi and Carter snuck in tonight. They would take the alarm offline for three minutes to allow them to get in, then put it back online before cutting the lights. The guys would bed down in the room they entered and then be ready for the afternoon adventures.

Ivy had asked the question Finley was sure most of the women wondered. "Why are you crawling in the night before? It would make more sense to just walk in the door early the next morning."

Kaden answered his wife. "Because we can't let them know anyone is inside. They didn't count on. Going in a door when Rodney's gang might be watching all day Saturday would ruin the mission and the element of surprise."

While Ivy digested that, Oakley asked, "So I get all that, but why turn the alarm on at all before the guys get in place?"

"Because that is what they would normally do. If they are monitoring the system, it will be on a loop that would indicate the system is up, but it will actually be down for three minutes. Then the mirror effect will be removed and it will show real display again. Go much longer and you run the risk of someone noticing a redundancy."

Kaden added, “If you look closely, it can be detected, but unless they are monitoring the tiniest tremor of video disruption, which you wouldn’t expect or notice by just keeping watch, then no one will catch on. Besides, by then, Monroe and Mal will be turning off the lights to go to bed. It would be natural to have lights on and then go off. It encourages those who may be monitoring us to let their guard down.”

“You guys think of everything,” said Jessie.

“We have to, or we could lose livelihoods and, more importantly, lives,” said Garrett.

After a few more questions and answers, everyone went home.

That night, Levi and Carter executed the first part of the plan without a hitch, and Finley slept terribly. Cash came in late and crawled into bed, holding her tight, but she tossed all night. Cash tried, but nothing could quiet her thoughts and fears. They couldn’t text or call because of the possibility of the messages or conversation being intercepted. They were too close to ending this to risk jeopardizing anything.

Finley lay awake for too long, falling into a fitful sleep around two. Cash must have crashed after that. She was up by seven and felt like crap. The bed where Cash had slept was cold. No one slept well, evidently except Storm. Fin smiled at his antics this morning. Sharlee kept Storm with her, and Finley tried to fall back to sleep with minimal success.

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She took a hot shower, skipping her gym time today. Breakfast and coffee might help with her energy level, even though she wasn't the least bit hungry. Florent must have clued into the lack of appetite because he'd made her a scramble and toast. One egg, a few veggies, and no cheese or greasy meat or potatoes. Just enough, but not too much.

"Thanks Ren. You gauged me well today."

"I thought this might be kind to your belly." He left her with herbal tea instead of coffee and walked back to the kitchen.

Sharlee wandered through the dining room following her son, whom she'd followed out of the room not five minutes earlier. "Looks like Florent read you, too. Guess we aren't as calm as we think we are."

Finley smiled. "He did, and you're right. I don't want to admit that I'm a basket case, but I am."

"He knew I had to eat to keep Jac happy, but what I ate was equally important." Sharlee leaned in closer and whispered, "You know I think that Spring is sweet on him."

Finley smiled because it wasn't new information. She replied, "And I believe it's reciprocated."

"I wondered. When this is all over, I might put some energy there."

Finley just smiled and watched Storm leave the room again, followed by his mother. Sharlee made fun of Jac's interference when he thought two people should become a couple, but she was just as bad. Finley would never tell her, but it was fun to watch. Diversion over, she decided to work on her exposure therapy and opened the front door to walk on the porch without escort or protection of any kind. It was getting easier, but she still broke out in a cold sweat, just not as dramatically.

Levi was over this waiting game. Monroe kept both men updated. Breakfast was great, but he didn't have as big an appetite as he normally did. He was worried about Finley. She was getting better about stepping outside, and she had gone with Sharlee inside Monroe's place, but it was hard. He knew that if she hadn't been armed, even though it was strictly unnecessary, she may not have been able to do it.

He usually practiced with her after breakfast, but she would have to practice alone today. Maybe she would skip it, but he knew she wouldn't. She was determined to overcome the fear of stepping outside alone and unarmed. She didn't share her struggles with anyone but Jocelyn, Cash, and him, but even that had been hard for her.

Monroe was back upstairs again. He grabbed their plates and cups. "They found Kaz."

"Where was he?" asked Carter.

"In a ditch behind his house. Dead."

Carter shook his head and frowned. "Shit. I hate that. He was a nice guy. Well, until recently. But even then, I really liked him. Wonder what Rodney had on him?"

"Don't know, but I hope it was something big because otherwise, Jac is going to be more than a little pissed."

“You don’t think he did it himself?” asked Levi.

Monroe sighed. “Nope, two bullet holes in his head. Not something you can do alone.”

“Rodney,” Levi asked.

“My guess, or more likely, one of his goons. Okay, the party should be starting in about an hour, so I’ll leave you to do your thing. I’ll do mine. Let’s put a stop to this bad carnival game.”

Levi waited with Carter in silence, each in their own headspace. When the first doorbell rang, their resting stance was gone. “Game on,” said Levi. Carter nodded briskly.

Each woman entered and played their part, but the tension in the room was palpable. They had recorded the conversation the other night of the women laughing and decorating so that when they got the signal for incoming, they would exit to the safe room, but the sound of women inside would continue.

Finley was worried. Where was Darcy? Had she chickened out? Had Ben? She didn’t know either of them well enough to figure out whether that was a possibility or not. The women tried to keep up the conversation, but anyone who knew them knew this was subdued for them. She was glad that the children were in the safe room at Jac’s with their security personnel, a caretaker, Florent, and Spring. They gave the housekeeper the day off. The gatehouse and house security were beefed up. And all she could do was her part and hope the rest went to plan. These guys good, but it still made her nervous.

The doorbell rang again, causing Finley to tense and relax at the same time. Darcy came. As Monroe went to check the door, he was immediately on alert. He waved

frantically at the women. Finley pushed Becky and Mallory toward the bathroom. The other women scattered. They went without resistance. Once she had cleared the room, she took note that Monroe said something in his communication piece just as the door burst open.

Several men not belonging to them poured into the room. Finley pulled her gun instead of running for cover. Instinct took over, and she hid well enough, but Levi and Cash were going to be pissed. She'd deal with them later. She figured Levi would be down in seconds or was likely already in place to take out some bad guys. Carter was a big man even among the guys Jac employed, so if they were close, it would be hard to miss Carter.

She stayed hidden and heard Monroe talking. "The women left to get a massage."

"Fuck. I didn't see any of them leave. You used to do this better. Might be time you retire. But that's right, you can't. Your Mallory is pregnant. Need to keep your job. Where have you got them hidden?"

Whoever was talking seemed to know Monroe. Must be Caleb Rodney. She listened to his voice and his words, but didn't move from her spot behind the sofa in the corner of the room.

"Why would we? We didn't expect trouble." Closet doors were opened and shut. Someone was in the kitchen.

"Where's Jac?" Rodney asked.

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“Why don’t you call him and ask?” said Monroe.

“Why don’t you call him for me?” asked Rodney.

“Why don’t you just talk to me in person?”

Finley felt her breath leave her chest as she heard Jac speak. This was turning into a shit show. Jac was supposed to arrive, but was it supposed to play out this way? Could they have been sure how it would play out? She hoped nothing happened and then she hoped it did. They were not going to let this go. It would end today.

Suddenly the sofa moved. Fuck! Finley slowly positioned her pistol in her hand while processing her next move. The person who moved the sofa wasn’t looking down. It was as though something else had taken his attention. Finley knew she had to be positive about her action. The problem was, she had no idea where anyone was except by the sound of voices. Sweat beaded along her forehead and over her top lip. She could hear every pounding beat of her heart in her chest and the echoing beat in her ears.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

Fuck! Darcy. She had walked right into the shit show. She was afraid of this man she called Ace, and what she was most afraid of was him finding or seeing her. She was scared to death of him, and that was what was happening right now. Finley had promised that Jac’s team had this covered, and it had all gone to hell in a handbasket. What to do?

“Well, come in. Join the party. You left without telling anyone where you were going, Darcy. We were worried, so we came to find you. Glad you showed up.”

Darcy screamed but didn't say anything. Where were the rest of the guys? How many were there with Rodney? She couldn't look, but she hated not knowing for sure. And her heart went out to Darcy. She had to be scared out of her mind.

“Cat got your tongue, girl?” asked Rodney. “Glad to see me?”

“You know I'm not.” Darcy's voice trembled.

“Hey darlin'. You didn't tell me there were going to be new people here. Monroe, did I miss the memo that I should bring more wine?”

The Colonel was playing this up well. He even had a bottle of wine. So was this by design or accident? He wasn't about to come in normally. Maybe he did because Monroe didn't come to the door or someone had alerted him. Or he heard Darcy scream. Good guy he didn't leave Darcy alone. She'd have to up her opinion of him.

Monroe answered. “Gate crashers.”

“Don't you hate when people barge in when they are clearly not invited for a reason?” asked the Colonel. “Come here, darlin'.”

“Shut up!” yelled Rodney. He sounded like things were getting out of control and evidently that unsettled Caleb Rodney. “Who are you?”

“Oh, didn't Darcy tell you? I'm her new main squeeze.” Finley could hear a loud kissing noise. What was the Colonel doing?

Rodney spoke again. “What? Never mind. Darcy, I intend to make you sorry you left.

But right now, I have other things to deal with. Jacquard, you never go anywhere alone. Where's your backup team?"

"More to the point, where is yours?" replied Jac.

Rodney laughed and then went silent. "What the hell! Speed, Crazy, Rush! Snake!"

Levi's voice said, "Are you looking for someone? We have about seven or eight accounted for. Did we miss anyone?"

"That's not possible. Where the hell did you come from?"

Mark's voice was heard from the back of the house. "I got five with Garrett and Ryker. He's a pretty good shot for a lawyer. Lost the Colonel though."

"I'm in here. It sounded like it was more fun at this end of the house."

Levi spoke into the room. "Finley, you can come out and take care of Darcy. I think being our distraction might have been more than she bargained for."

As Finley stood up from behind the sofa, a gun went off. Jac moved and before she could drop back down into the narrow spot, she came from there was a scorching, searing pain like a red-hot poker tearing through her body. It surprised her as everything went black.

Chapter 18

Levi watched in helpless disbelief as he realized the emergency medical technicians were not able to staunch the bleeding before the ambulance rushed the person most precious to him out the door with Levi, driven by Kaden, following closely behind. His gut cramped in fear praying like he had never prayed before. He held off calling

Cash because he was on duty but when they got to the hospital and they wouldn't let him in to see her right away, he called Cash.

"I'm on the way. How is she?"

"I don't fucking know! She's bleeding. Bad."

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“Fuck. Hold on. I’ll be there soon.”

The emergency room had been a clusterfuck of traumatized and worried people, Levi among them. He still was angry that he was denied entrance to her room. There wasn’t any room anyway with the crowd of people surrounding and milling around Finley, intense expressions and deliberate, sharp movements.

Kaden, joined by Carter, forcefully guided Levi to the waiting room only to have him stand guard at the entrance. Soon, Cash joined him, their eyes trained on the treatment room where their everything lay. Sharlee was talking to the personnel who had come looking for information on Finley. Soon, a member of the medical staff called for Mr. Morrison. Levi turned from the spot where he had been standing.

“That’s me. How is Finley?”

“Mrs. Morrison is doing as well as could be expected. She has lost a fair amount of blood, but she’s holding her own on that score. Do you know her blood type in case we need to supply some? We’ve typed her, but it good to know in advance.”

To his credit, he didn’t blink an eye at the reference to Finley as his wife. He was also glad he’d read her second set of dog tags that she kept on her bedside table. “AB positive.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely because I have O positive and we discussed, I can donate to her.”

“It’s possible. Is that what you would want to do if necessary?”

“Of course.”

“I have AB positive,” said Cash.

“We’ll type you both then and make sure it is compatible, and then we’ll go from there. Hopefully, we can list at least one of you as available if blood is needed. I’ll check on her while you are getting that done and if it looks necessary, I’ll get one of you to donate in advance, so we’re ready if that’s okay.”

“Let’s do it.” Levi turned to Callie, who stood closest. “You hear that?”

“Yep. I’ll tell the others.”

Levi nodded and he and Cash left the room with the doctor. “Is she in real danger?”

The doctor looked at them for a moment. “I understand you are both prior to the military.”

Levi nodded. “Marines.”

“Tough couple. And you are?” he asked, looking at Cash.

Levi answered. “Cash has AB blood.”

“Ah, a relative. Okay, well, she’s critical, but it seems that is mostly from blood loss more than internal damage. Of course, you understand that we could get in there and find something we didn’t expect, and all bets are off.”

“I do understand, but Finley is tough. She’ll pull through,” said Levi.

Levi was never more focused on things as he was at this moment, and he'd done enough missions to have some pretty intense situations to compare to. But this was personal. Finley was his heart, lying in a triage room getting constant one on one by people who anticipated something as yet unidentified would go south on her and it damn near destroyed him.

"Can we see her?" asked Levi.

The doctor hesitated before nodding. "You can look from the doorway. Don't let the tubes and wires spook you because it is helping take the stress off her body. You want that."

"Understood."

The two men stopped in front of a room next to the physician and Levi tried to school his expression and tamp down his fear. He closed out the hallway noise, the machines beeping, the attendant's words as they monitored her, and the room cleaner as she tried to clear the discarded equipment wrappers, and the blood, Finley's blood, from the floor.

He looked at Cash, who was focused on Finley, their strong woman, who was agonizingly still. The doctor said, "She isn't in pain because we are making sure of it. It's tricky due to where the bullet landed, just a few centimeters from severing her artery. Heightening her state of jeopardy and she lost a lot of blood, but it's all good now. She is stabilizing and when we have the right team assembled and she is stable enough, then we will go into surgery."

"What is her risk?" asked Cash.

"All surgery—"

“What is Finley’s risk?” Levi asked.

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The doctor nodded as he led the men away from Finley. “If we can get her stable and into surgery within the next fifteen-twenty minutes, they good. Very good. The longer we take afterthat, the harder it will be to keep her stable throughout the surgery, lowering her success rate.”

“Let’s get our part done so we’re ready for when she gets out of surgery.”

“Yes, lets.” Levi and Cash were handed off to a nurse, and the doctor returned to his patients.

Soon, both men returned to the group, waiting for word about what was happening with Finley. In that time, all the women had arrived and the Colonel with a distraught Darcy. She was sitting in his lap when the two men re-entered the waiting room. Cash filled them in while Levi talked to the nurse.

“All good. They had blood on hand if she needed it, but looks like Finley has come through without issue. We can’t see her until she comes out of recovery and they will decide if she needs intensive care or the medical/surgical unit.”

“Did you see her at all?” asked Darcy, her trembling voice told of her fear for Finley. And possible reaction to the afternoon’s events.

Cash had not spent much time with or thinking about Darcy except deciding if she was someone safe for his girl or the rest of them. Today, however, he could see how frightened she was of Caleb and of the men he had with him. He hoped she was able to recover from this whole experience with Rodney’s group of drug running terrorist.

Cash smiled at the woman. “I did. She was not conscious, but I learned it was because they were prepping her for surgery. I gave them a blood sample, and it didn’t seem as though they needed more than the bit I gave them in the beginning. Levi could have given blood, but I was a closer match. We have the same wonky blood type.”

Levi joined them. “She is doing fine in recovery. I was told she lost a lot of blood but was lucky in that they didn’t find any vital organs were damaged. We won’t know until they come to give us the official report, but the nurse checked, and she seems to be holding her own.”

Callie spoke up. “It looks like that report is coming toward us.”

Everyone looked in the direction of the door expectantly. The surgeon walked directly to Levi.

“Mr. Morrison?”

“Yes. How is she?”

“She came through the surgery without any surprises or mishaps. She’s stable and in the recovery room. The bullet missed her major arteries and nicked her liver, which just insulted the liver but caused no real damage. The biggest threat was her loss of blood that happened because it did nick a smaller vein at the entry point. But all sewn up tight and ready to begin the healing process.”

“I was told I’ll be able to see her?” asked Levi. He indicated Cash, “And her relative.”

“Yes, but as supportive as your friends are, they will have to wait until tomorrow for a visit. Finley isn’t likely to be awake much, if at all, tonight. You’ll be able to stay

the night if she is in med/surg, but not if she is in ICU. Only one of you can stay the night. I don't think we will need intensive care, but she isn't out of recovery yet. I'll have someone come and get you when she is brought to the floor."

The room seemed to release its tension as they watched the surgeon leave the room. The police had shown up and after getting some information from Jac, Monroe and Carter, they had spoken to Darcy and Ben, but the rest of the women were not identified as being present, nor the rest of the team. They explained Levi away by saying he had come to pick up Finley and had walked into the mess just as the villains were subdued and the gun had gone off, hitting Finley.

Levi said all he knew was Finley was shot, and the guys had the shooter but had to turn him and his goons over to the police. Jac said the Feds were informed and picking them up tomorrow. Garrett said he wasn't sure the cops believed them, but the Feds claimed jurisdiction so fast, it didn't matter if the cops believed them or not; it wasn't their case any longer.

Once the nurse came for Cash and Levi, the rest of the group went home with promises to return as soon as they called them.

"And you will call," said Jac.

"We will," agreed Levi before following the nurse.

Chapter 19

Finley's eyes fluttered open and then immediately shut again. God, she felt like she was hit by a semi. Her head and body ached. Her chest didn't hurt exactly but it felt wrong. Moving was laborious, and she chose not to do that. Parched. Her throat was like a desert and she wanted to cough, but she couldn't. Something told her that might be a good thing.

“Hey baby. Try to open your eyes.”

Cash was here. She wanted to smile, but her face didn't follow her instructions. Neither did her eyes. She tried to make her fuzzy brain work. What was all this about? Why did it hurt to open her eyes? Did she have the flu? Then what had happened was suddenly playing in her mind in full living color, even up to the gunshot and her pain.

“Levi safe?”

“I'm here, honey,” said Levi.

She tried to move, but it didn't work. She couldn't really and she wondered how badly she had been shot. She opened her mouth, but nothing would come out except the sound of dissatisfaction.

“You're okay, baby. You' good, Fin,” said Cash.

“Open your eyes for me, hon,” said Levi.

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Levi didn't normally use so many endearments in a couple of sentences. "Are you thirsty, baby?"

She heard Darcy whimper and Ben say something to her. Callie spoke. Were they all in her room?

"I told the nurse but I don't imagine she is going to be happy with all of us crowded by the door and in the room so we'll go to the waiting room before they run us out," said Garrett.

"I'll come and update you all soon," said Levi.

Jac said something about a private room, and Cash laughed. "I already asked. They are working on it."

"Mrs. Morrison? I'm Dena, your nurse. Can you open your eyes for me? It's a beautiful day out there."

Finley tried to answered, but she could only get out a croak. "She needs water," said Levi, with more than a little bit of protector in his tone.

"Didn't they leave any in here?" asked Dena.

"It's lukewarm and from last night," said Cash.

"Well, let me check her out quickly and notify the doctor and then grab some fresh water."

She heard Levi give a little dissatisfied grunt, and Finley put her hand out to where she thought he was standing. He immediately grabbed her hand and held it securely. Finley could feel her body relax. Nurse Dena patted her shoulder.

“That relaxed you, didn’t it? Husbands tend to do that. Don’t you want to have a look at this hulking man at your side? He’s a real looker.” The nurse smiled when she saw Finley’s eyelids flutter. Levi smiled at the incentive she’d given Finley. “I’ve turned the lights down. Try to open your eyes for me.”

“Is Cash still here?”

“Right here, baby.”

She relaxed further. Nurse Dena looked from one man to the other.

“Close family,” said Levi.

Finley tried again, and it was easier this time. “Everything is blurry.”

“Can you identify anything?”

“Levi.” Cash moved closer. “And Cash.”

The nurse’s voice was brisk and perky when she grabbed the water container. “Perfect. I’ll be back with your water and the doctor should be here soon.”

“Husband?” she whispered with her eyes closed again.

“Sharlee made that happen so I could get all the information and be here all night,” said Levi. “I’m going to get that woman a spa day.”

“And the nurse thinks I’m some kind of relative, so I’ve had pretty free access to you,” said Cash. “It helped that we share a select blood type. I’ll get you a spa day after you heal.”

Levi laughed just as the doctor knocked on the open door.

After the quick review of how Finley was doing, he patted her hand and said, “I’m pleased with the progress and happy you are awake. Ice chips are on their way. I prefer no liquids for a little while longer. Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Good. So let’s go until dinner tonight with just ice chips, then you can have whatever you want. I’ll come back and check on you after that,” said the surgeon.

“Okay,” said Finley.

“Thank you,” said Levi. Cash just gave the doctor a chin lift.

Throughout the next few days, friends came and went from Finley’s room, never leaving her alone. Finley was pleasant and mostly slept during that time, but on day three, her attitude changed, bringing a smile to their faces. Her men were more than ready for her to go home.

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“What did you do with my clothes?” Finley asked Levi as she threw back the bedcovers. “I’m ready to go home.”

Cash sighed. “I know, baby, but not before you are released.”

Levi reached out to snag her hand, and she deliberately moved it. She was moody, but he wasn’t risking her health or safety. He would do what he could to make it easier, but once your girl was shot before your eyes, your priorities become crystal clear. He understood what his friends had gone through when they were kidnapped, shot at, drugged and so many other things. He would do whatever it took to keep her safe. He looked at Cash. They both would.

He firmed his voice. “I’m not having this conversation every ten minutes.” He waved his hand over the big tablet that Carter had brought by last night to keep her entertained. “Find something to occupy yourself for a little while longer. When your scan comes back, then you can go if everything good.” She opened her mouth and his right brow raised sharply. “Not before.”

Finley sat gingerly in the second hospital chair with a heavy sigh. “I’m just tired of being here. I can sit and lie down at home. And you two have gotten moody.”

Cash cleared his throat. “We’ve gotten moody...”

Levi shook his head and Cash stopped talking. It wouldn’t help anything if he or Cash argued with her or pointed out that she was touchy. Of course she was testy. She’d been shot. His gut still cramped at the memory of watching her drop milliseconds after Caleb Rodney’s goon came around the corner and fired. How did they fucking

miss him?

Jac had later disclosed he'd called his contact at LPD before he entered the fray. Their timing was off, as was typical. Even a few seconds earlier would have changed the dynamics and the trajectory of the bullet and where his Finley stood. Levi had to touch her again. He'd almost lost her and letting her out of his sight was not going to happen for a very long time.

"Mrs. Morrison?" said the new nurse at the door.

"Fin, she's talking to you."

"Oh," said Finley with a sheepish grin. "Yes?"

"Your scan came back just fine, so the doctor said he will write your discharge papers. I'll be back to grab your vitals and give you your next dose of meds before we wait on his orders. Then I'll tell you what you'll need to know to break out of here."

"Thank you," was Finley's sweet response, but once the nurse left the room, Finley grinned. "Finally getting out of here. Thank God."

Levi stood. "I've got a phone call to make and I'll be right back."

"Why can't you make it in here?"

Cash laughed. "Because it concerns you."

Finley ignored Cash. "Levi, I don't need a babysitter."

"Of course not. You already have a bodyguard."

“I don’t want—”

“I’ll be right back, baby,” said Cash,

The car ride home was uncomfortable but Finley thought she could tolerate anything, endure all bumps in the road if she could sleep at home, in her own bed or better yet, their bed. Levi had been so sweet and so tender the last few days. She didn’t exaggerate when she said she felt like she’d been hit by a bulldozer. Because she did. Having two men wait on you was something every woman should experience.

“Callie is going to pick up your meds,” said Cash as he drove toward home.

“They have the wrong name on them,” she asked with a bit of panic.

“No worries. Mallory helped with that by sending the medication insurance through as Royer-Morrison.”

“But Morrison isn’t my name, Levi.”

“Do you want it to be?”

“But what about Cash?”

“We’ve agreed you can legally marry Levi and informally marry me,” answered Cash.

“Okay, but don’t I get a choice, and does it matter if we get married at all?”

“Insurance likes a clean line, baby,” said Cash.

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She fidgeted in her seat, wiping her hands on her sweats. “Someday that might be nice, but if that’s your proposal, Levi Morrison, you can forget it. I will expect a proper proposal and a proper evening planned around it. With Cash. Got me?”

“Loud and clear, and it wasn’t a proposal. Even I know that is special.”

“Oh, well, good.”

“You’ve got to start giving me more credit, woman,” said Levi.

Her voice went soft and gentle. “I do give you lots of credit. Both of you. I have always just sucked things up and carried on, no matter how hurt I was inside or out. It was just expected that I would weather any storm, but with you, I don’t do it because it’s expected. I do it because you are both there with me to weather it with me. It’s incredibly empowering to know I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do alone. You two have given me that, and I’ll never take it for granted.”

Levi’s voice softened as well. “I hope I always earn that trust and deserve your faith in me. When I saw your face when you were shot, I nearly died inside. I just knew this was fatal and yet, I prayed and begged God to keep you with me. We didn’t really know for sure if you were hurt badly or it just look so horrible. There was so much blood. You were white as a ghost.”

“I’m sorry I scared you. I don’t remember any of that.”

“No, you weren’t conscious.”

“And I will never accept an assignment where you have any chance of being in danger. Not knowing anything, but you were shot and rushed to the hospital nearly ended me. Don’t do it again,” said Cash.

She chuckled. “No, I won’t. And I can’t believe all our friends kept coming. I know Jac and Sharlee considered all of you family and they have included me, but I’ve never had to put them to the test. They are every bit as sincere with me as they were with everyone else. It means more to me than you will ever know.”.

“This group is pretty impressive, that’s for sure. We’re here. Now, when Cash parks, you will let me open your door and help you out. Understood?”

“Always so bossy.”

“Finley.”

“Yes, fine. I’m a little tender, anyway.”

Levi chuckled. “Whatever you have to tell yourself, baby.”

Chapter 20

“Reynaud.”

He listened for a moment and Levi watched his boss and friend as Jac’s face drew tight. Jac looked over at Levi and his expression almost turned apologetic. What was going on? Garrett stood in the doorway with a grim countenance. The rest of the room settled in their seats. Shit, it had to be pretty bad.

“The Feds have done it again,” said Jac at the team assembled in the conference room across from his agency office. The occupants of the room sat and waited for Jac to fill

in the blanks.

“They had some information and wanted more, so they called me.”

“About what exactly?” asked Cash.

He and Levi had been sitting in Jac’s office going over the plans to resume work after Finley’s two-week post-surgery check-up this afternoon when Jac had gotten the call. He had Becky call in the team and Cash went to place a call to Finley. He figured he should check on her now because it was likely going to be a long meeting.

Finley had healed well, and as the doctor had predicted, once the bruised tissue was healed, she would feel like a new woman. But they still hadn’t made anyone’s version of passionate love to her because of the risk of undoing what had healed. Thus far, Levi’s dick had been complaining and Cash was taking a lot more showers than he used to.

The stitches had disappeared as expected, and her energy was returning. She was still hesitant to go out of the house, but she agreed to start back with Jocelyn and try to overcome that fear. However long it took, Levi would wait because his girl’s safety and confidence were important. She meant everything to him, and his patience was endless when it came to her. Something told him that was an indication of not only love but being in love with her, and that gave him a warm, satisfied feeling.

Jac walked across the hall to the conference room after he’d hung up and Levi watched Garrett and Jac share a non-verbal message.

“Okay, now I’m worried. What’s going on?” asked Cash.

“Hold on until everyone arrives, so I only have to share once.” Thirty minutes later, everyone, including the Colonel and Darcy, arrived, confused. Now they all stared at

Jac.

Jac drew in a deep, soulful breath. “It’s Caleb Rodney. The Feds let him go.”

Levi laughed. “They did no fucking thing. What’s really going on?”

“I’m so sorry, but they did. They had him tracked and expected to follow him to his hideout, or source, or something that would give them more information than they’d gotten out of him. The son of a bitch slipped away from everyone. His two trackers, the electronic tracker on his clothes, and the long-range monitor.”

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“Fucking hell.” Levi didn’t care that female ears were close by. He was angry. “Now, what are we supposed to do? Finley is already having to struggle to get past some of the fears brought on by this asshole.”

Garrett sighed. “Hell, if I know.”

“Find him,” said Jac.

“What do you mean, find him? If he gave the slip to the alphabet agencies, I’m not sure we can find him,” said Cash.

“We can because it’s personal with us.” Jac stood. “There’s more at stake than a job.”

Cash paced. Levi followed suit. Sitting didn’t do anything to work off his tension. “Yes, it is. Unfortunately, I don’t think he did this alone.”

“Agreed,” said Garrett.

“Right. I agree, but we don’t know who the second is or if it is his cartel who wants him more than we do. It can’t be his closest men because we got them.”

“I guess we go hunting and find out.”

“No,” said Finley. “Absolutely not. He could have so easily killed me, and he doesn’t even know he didn’t. No, you aren’t going to put yourself at risk. I couldn’t bear it if something happened to any of you.”

Callie spoke up. "I know that's what you fear, but if we don't find him, we won't ever be able to relax."

Finley looked at Levi. "Please. It's too dangerous."

Levi reached for her hand, but she drew it away. "Fin, baby, I have to protect you and end all of this. You know that."

She turned to Cash. "Fine, then stay here and protect me. Don't leave my safety to others."

Cash pulled Finley into his arms. "Finley, baby, you're killing me here."

"Don't care. I need to know I don't have to worry about you. Please. I can't deal with it right now."

Monroe walked into the room. "Nice of you to join us," commented Mark dryly.

Monroe ignored him and focused on Levi and Cash, then Finley. "Are you upsetting that woman? No stress, remember?"

Levi said, "She wants me to stand down from the hunt for Caleb."

"Of course you're standing down. Both of you have to keep Finley and the house safe. Besides, you are very little use when your emotions make you loose cannons. We can run the op better if you stay home."

"Hell, man, tell me how you really feel," said Cash.

Monroe turned to Levi. "Levi, you know we've all been through it. We've all held back at some point because it isn't in the mission's best interest to be out of control.

Stay with Finley and give her support. She's the most important bit right now. Let us take care of the rest."

Darcy leaned closer to the Colonel, and Ben leaned down to hear what she was said. He whispered back, and Darcy nodded. Sitting straight again, Ben looked around the table and made eye contact with Jac.

"Darcy says there is another person that Rodney seemed to confide in. She doesn't know his name, but if Finley wants to help her again, she thinks she can describe him well enough for that sketching program they used earlier. They might get a pretty good likeness to help you identify him."

"Sure, I'll help you. But why can't she speak for herself?"

Carter spoke gently which belied his size, speaking directly to Darcy. "How do you know Rodney and this other man were close or friends?"

Darcy spoke quietly from the protection of Ben's arms. "Right before the kidnapping, I overheard Ace telling this man that he was the only one he could trust anymore."

Mark asked. "Did you hear anything else?"

The friend said, 'That man always landed on his feet no matter what was happening to anyone else around him, but not this time.' and I think he might have been talking about Jac now that I know what they bonded over."

"And what was that?" asked Jac.

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“A hatred of the man who had everything. They mentioned respected security team, kickass wife, son, and even the fucking government liked him.”

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“At first I didn’t know what was significant and what wasn’t. Since, I’ve worked hard to block so much of that part of my life. It must have been buried. I’m sorry.” Ben drew her close.

Becky said, “So it must be someone that knows you, Jac. Knows you well.”

“Or not at all, but believes Caleb Rodney’s stories,” said Garrett.

Darcy shook her head. “This guy came to Ace the time I heard them, not the other way around.”

Jac leaned back in his chair. “Okay, you two can come, but you stand down if you feel you might jeopardize the mission or you are ordered to do so.”

Levi nodded. “Understood, Sir.”

“Right. Levi, you and Ben take Finley and Darcy back to the house and get them set up with the sketching program. Kaden, go home to Ivy and get her prepared to move back to the house.”

“She’s going to pitch a fit.”

Jac looked as though he completely understood. “Sorry, but you know how to handle that by now. It’s part of being your wife and our family. Rebecca, go home and get your things. Carter, escort her.”

“Mallory has already started packing. We’ll make our way over there. Are we calling Ryker?”

Garrett nodded. “Better do it. We can’t risk Oakley, and Ryker is going to want to see this to its finish. Callie and I will get there sometime tonight. I’ll be so damn glad to sleep in my bed more than a week at a time.”

Jac nodded. “We all will. Mark, is your mother-in-law still with you?”

“No, but we do have Shay. How should we work that?”

“Jessica, Anora, the nanny and whatever work she needs should come with them.” The depressive feelings were immediately drowning the room in frustrated anger.

“Cash, I need you to set up the house security. Make it tight.”

Later, with nothing to do and the men all working on finding Rodney, Finley took the women down to the pool since going out for a walk was not going to be allowed and she couldn’t get herself out the door without some kind of protection, anyway. The women were all ready to finish their day and a swim before dinner sounded appealing. Finley swam laps because she was more than ready to get some muscle burn to remind her that some things were the same. Hard work and determination always brought in results, so she swam another lap past what she felt was her endurance level.

Shay didn’t like to swim that much, so she had already taken the children out of the water and had taken them for naps. Spring went up with her, carrying a very sleepy

Storm. Finley continued, determined to finish this lap when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“I’m finishing this lap,” she gasped, breathed heavily.

The next thing she felt was hands grabbing her then settling under her arms and she was bodily lifted from the water. Finley was sitting on the side of the pool with those same hands holding tight. She was breathing so heavily that speaking was not possible. She got a whiff of a familiar scent that was not chlorine from the pool. She groaned when she heard his voice.

“Finley Kaye, what do you think you’re doing?” said Cash sternly.

“Doing laps,” she said, not quite as breathless as she was a moment ago.

“You know better than anyone that when you are working out in the water that you can’t push yourself as hard as onland because you could fucking drown. You were sinking. And everyone is gone.”

“I was not. Sure I was tired.” She took a few breaths and tried to bring her voice to a more modulated, less shaky tone. “But I was fine.”

“You were not and if you don’t have the sense that God gave you to be self-aware and safe, you aren’t going to be sitting very well for a long time. You get me?”

“What? You are not doing that to me. It is not going to happen.” Her voice was stronger now. When she tried to stand up, she found she was a little lightheaded.

“Let me help you.”

“No, thank you.”

Cash barred her exit from the poolroom. “Listen. You are my woman now, my partner, my other half and if you think I am going to sit back and allow you to cause yourself harm because you don’t want to stop when it gets unsafe, there are a lot of things you aren’t going to like about being with me but mostly it’s because I am not going to allow you to go to the extreme. I know you’re frustrated, but we are headed out after dark, and I have to know that I don’t need to worry about you here. It screws with my head.”

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“You found him?”

“Kaden did and Sharlee confirmed it. You have to promise me to follow all instructions. It’s a rule, one of which you will be getting more of soon, so get used to it. No more swimming tonight. Always stay with another person and don’t wait up for us because I’ve no idea when we will be back.”

“What does that mean? I thought you weren’t going.”

“Baby, it means what it sounds like. We are going. I’m not sure how long it will take to re-capture him and question him. Jac has some information he wanted to share and we know he is hiding out with another person. We hope to snag him or her aswell. Now, let me get you up and back to the room before I follow my first inclination and paddle that overworked ass before I let you change.”

“Cash, I’m okay.”

“You’re more than okay, but when I get back and this is all over, we are going to talk about this and a few other things that I’ve been holding onto until this mess is resolved.”

She tried to stand up and found it took a couple of times to get up. She felt Cash’s hard stare, but chose not to engage. She knew he was right.

“I’ll change down here in the bathroom. I left my clothes in there.” She noticed the pool and the bathroom had cleared.

“You ran everyone off.” The surprise in her voice bothered Cash. She wasn’t aware of her surroundings and that could be deadly.

“No, their men came and got them to talk to them about tonight. I’ll talk while you change.”

An hour later, dinner was barely over and the guys all left from the table to gather their gear, kissing their women before taking off, leaving Cash to introduce the additional security for the duration. The gate was locked and barricaded to stop anyone from entering. The grounds were well lit. Florent told Spring to stay with the other women and when she insisted on helping him clean up, there was a distinctive smack on a bottom.

“I told you they were an item,” said Sharlee as she took up her seat at the computer. Kaden was gathering his stuff because he was going to go as computer and manpower backup.

“Jac is right. You are a gossip.”

“No more than he is.”

“Sometimes,” laughed Kaden. “Sometimes.”

Grabbing his drone, he headed to load his equipment in one of the SUVs and, once in the car, he reconnected to Sharlee. Themen loaded up and headed out the door, leaving a room full of anxious women behind.

Chapter 21

The night air was thick with anticipation as Jac led his team through the foliage surrounding the building on the outskirts of town. Shadows flickered under the pale

moonlight, casting an eerie glow over the abandoned warehouse that loomed before them. The tension in the air was palpable; each member of the group knew what was at stake.

“Alright, everyone,” Jac whispered, his voice low and urgent. “Caleb Rodney is inside. He’s cornered now, but there is another person with him. We can’t underestimate him. Stay sharp.”

Callie and Garrett nodded, their expressions resolute, while the rest of the team took their positions around the perimeter of the building. Kaden stayed in the vehicle with his computer and the drone was sent up. Sharlee was at home base. They moved silently, a tight-knit group bound by loyalty and determination. Rodney would not get away from them now.

Jac approached the entrance cautiously, pushing open the rusted metal door with a creak. The dimly lit warehouse stretched out before him, its dark corners filled with shadows and secrets.

“Jac, there are two heat signatures in the area of the center space,” said Kaden through his earpiece.

“Come on out, Caleb,” Jac called, his voice echoing through the empty space. “We know you’re in here.”

A figure stepped out from behind a stack of crates, smirking confidently. It was Caleb Rodney, his eyes cold and calculating. His gaze locked onto Jac, the heat of their shared animosity filling the room. Jac signaled for his men to hold their position.

“Congratulations, Reynaud. You’ve found me before the Feds,” Caleb sneered. “But do you really think this changes anything?”

Jac's jaw clenched as he fought back a surge of anger. He stared down at Caleb, his voice low and dangerous. "Unless I have signaled the Cartel. They can handle you from here. I'm looking for why you went to all this trouble."

Caleb's smirk widened, but he remained silent, his eyes challenging Jac to push further.

"Answer him, dammit!" Levi demanded, taking a step forward, his fists tightening at his sides. Mark grabbed his arm.

"Or what?" Caleb taunted, treating the outburst as coming from Jac. His bitter resentment for Jac evident in every word. "Are you going to hurt me? Is that what you've become, Reynaud?"

"Enough!" Jac roared, his patience wearing thin. "You've been playing games for too long, Caleb. You've endangered the lives of my family and my team. Now, tell me why and who's working with you."

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The fact that Jac knew about another person seemed to stall Caleb for a full minute. The atmosphere in the warehouse grew heavier, charged with the weight of their confrontation. The team stood ready, their eyes never leaving the scene unfolding before them. They knew that the answers they sought would determine not only their safety but the future of their tight-knit community.

As Caleb stared defiantly into Jac's eyes, the battle lines were drawn—a test of wills between two men who had once called each other comrade. Caleb's eyes blazed with anger and resentment as he looked at Jac.

“You think you're so righteous, don't you? Always playing the hero,” he spat, his defiance unwavering. “But you're not as perfect as you pretend to be, Reynaud.”

“Stop trying to deflect, Caleb,” Jac warned, his patience running thin. “You're the one who's been pulling the strings behind the scenes, putting our loved ones in danger. Selling your services to those who murder for fun, sell death to children in the form of drugged candy and to their families. You are a destroyer, so maybe, compared to you, I am much closer to the definition than you are. Maybe not a hero, but a defender, a protector.”

“Me?” Caleb let out a derisive laugh. “You've got it all wrong, Jac. You're the one who brought this upon yourself and your family. How many enemies have you made over the years? How many people have you pissed off?”

“Enough of your games!” Jac barked, taking a step closer to Caleb, eyes narrowed in determination.

“See for yourself,” Jac said, pulling out a thick folder filled with documents and photographs. He tossed it on the floor between them, the contents spilling out. Among them were recordings of conversations, damning evidence that linked Caleb to the real kidnappers and his former military liaisons in his drug running. It included copies of all Sharlee could get.

“Still want to deny it?” Jac challenged, his heart pounding in his chest as he stared down at Caleb, who had gone down on a knee to gather and peruse the papers.

Caleb hesitated, his gaze flickering between Jac and the incriminating evidence scattered before him. For the first time since their confrontation began, a flicker of uncertainty crossed his face.

“Look at it, Caleb,” Jac urged, his voice taking on a forceful tone. “This is your handiwork. You were working with someone from our past, someone we both know. And now, because of you, my family and my friends are in danger.”

Caleb’s eyes darted from the scattered evidence to Jac, his breath hitching as the weight of the proof bore down on him. The smug defiance that had twisted his features moments before was replaced by shock and disbelief. His mouth opened and closed, struggling to find words that could save himself.

“Y-you can’t possibly think this is enough to take me down,” he stammered, grasping at straws. But his voice lacked the confidence it held just moments ago. He knew the truth: he’d been outsmarted and exposed.

“Enough? We will let the government figure that out. They are in possession of a full copy.” Jac’s tone was ice cold, his eyes never leaving Caleb’s face. “You tried to destroy my life, my team, everything I’ve built. You put innocent people in danger. Not only is it enough to bring you down, but your conspirator as well. The mastermind to this whole operation. And he is here with you.”

Around them, the team watched Caleb with a mix of disgust and anger, their hands poised near their weapons. They'd trusted Caleb once, but now he was nothing more than an enemy to be dealt with. The exits from the great room were covered by them and their drone.

Caleb's chest heaved with each labored breath, fury bubbling beneath the surface. He'd planned every detail meticulously, believing that he could exact his revenge on Jac and his team without ever being discovered. But now, cornered and exposed, his carefully crafted world was crumbling around him.

"You think you're so clever, don't you, Jac?" Caleb spat, trying to regain some semblance of control. "But you're not untouchable. Neither are your friends or family."

Jac's jaw tightened, his muscles coiling like a predator ready to strike. "I'll make sure you pay for what you've done, CalebRodney. And anyone else involved in this. You can count on that."

Caleb bared his teeth, the desperation in his eyes betraying the bravado in his voice. He knew he couldn't fight his way out of this one. But he couldn't let Jac and his team walk away unscathed.

"Go ahead, try it," he taunted. "But just remember, Jac, you'll never be safe. Your family will never be safe. You'll always be looking over your shoulder, wondering if today's the day it all comes crashing down."

"Silence," Jac roared, his patience finally snapped. He stepped closer to Caleb, every inch of him radiating power and authority. "You've lost, Caleb. It's time for you to face the consequences of your actions."

Caleb exhaled slowly, the fire in his eyes momentarily extinguished by the realization

that his revenge plot had failed. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, no longer defiant but rather resigned to his fate. The anger still simmered within him, but now it was tinged with desperation, fear, and a sense of loss.

“Mark my words, Jac,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “This isn’t over.”

“Believe me, I know,” Jac replied, meeting Caleb’s gaze without flinching. “And when it is, we’ll be ready.”

A bead of sweat trickled down Jac’s temple as he stared into Caleb’s eyes, the tension in the warehouse thick enough to cut with a knife. The team held their breath in anticipation, their unwavering loyalty to Jac and their families fueling their determination to see this through.

The tension in the warehouse was palpable, a living, breathing entity that wrapped around each person present like a weighted chain. Jac stared down at Caleb, his eyes cold and unyielding as he took control of the situation.

“Who’s your accomplice, Caleb?” Jac asked, his voice low and dangerous. He glanced at his team members, who stood by his side, their faces reflecting the same determination that fueled his own. “This isn’t just about you and me anymore. You’ve dragged my entire team into this mess. We deserve to hear from your lips who else is responsible.”

Caleb hesitated, his eyes darting back and forth between Jac and the exit, as if calculating the odds of making a run for it. The desperation that had been simmering beneath the surface now threatened to boil over, and it was clear he was struggling with the decision between loyalty to his comrade and self-preservation.

“Come on, Caleb,” Jac urged, leaning in closer. “You’re already going down for this. Don’t protect someone who wouldn’t do the same for you.”

For a moment, it seemed as if Caleb would remain silent, his jaw clenched tight and his gaze fixed on some unseen point in the distance. He hesitated, his gaze flickering between Jac and the rest of the team. The internal struggle was evident on his face, torn between protecting his comrade or facing the consequences alone.

But then, something shifted within him, and the defiance that had driven him thus far seemed to crumble under the weight of Jac's words.

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“Fine,” Caleb spat, the word bitter on his tongue. “His name is James Walker. We served together back in the military. After you left him vulnerable and unprotected.”

The name echoed throughout the room, sending shivers down the spines of those present. A former military brother, now an enemy. It was the worst kind of betrayal.

“Corporal Walker? He was my clerk.”

“I’m surprised you remember him. He doubted you would. He said you left, and the unit tanked after you weren’t there to keep them together. He remembered you and your deception. You said you’d keep the unit cohesive and operational after the previous commander left. Then you left. He never forgave you for leaving the unit, either. Said you abandoned them all when they needed you most. Just like you did to me when I was on the run from the Feds.”

“You broke the law on so many levels, ethically, morally and legally,” said Levi.

Caleb stood and turned to Levi. “You had better watch your leader here. He bails when the going gets tough. Sorry, I didn’t have enough time to visit with your girl. She is a looker and tough. I like tough.”

Levi took a step forward. Mark grabbed his arm. “Not worth it, man.”

Caleb nodded. “He’s right, you know. I’m not worth it.” He turned back to Jac. “When Walker approached me while I was on the run after you threw me out of the hangar to be pursued by the hounds of hell, I said you abandoned me when I needed you most.” Caleb’s eyes burned with anger as he continued. “So, we planned to bring

you and your precious team down. He had already orchestrated the notes before we hooked up. We orchestrated the kidnapping, and that anonymous note in the stroller was just the beginning.”

Jac cut him off, his expression darkening as he processed the new information. “No one expects a command to stay indefinitely. That isn’t how the military works, man. You know that.”

Levi watched as a mixture of betrayal and anger coursed through him, but he kept his emotions in check, focusing instead on the task at hand. Levi saw the expressions race across the face of his boss and friend. The pure agony that his own men had done this to him cut deep. Jac was an honorable man and led his troops well, if the stories were right, so knowing how he connected with those he cared for had to make this an almost mortal blow.

“We’ll deal with Walker, and you’ll face the consequences of your actions.”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed, his hesitation now replaced by a cold resignation. He knew he had sealed his own fate, but it was clear that he still harbored a deep-seated resentment towards Jac.

“Good luck with that,” he sneered. “You might have won this round, but there’s no telling what Walker has planned next. And trust me, he won’t go down without a fight. You helped me help him by spending so much time with me. He slipped out when you entered. There is an underground tunnel.”

As Caleb’s words hung heavy in the air, the men felt a renewed sense of urgency. The danger to the team, their families, was far from over. But as Cash looked at the faces of those around him, each one steadfast and unwavering in their loyalty, he knew they would face whatever challenges lay ahead together.

Carter walked back into the room. “We left Kaden in the SUV. He might have seen our second man leave the building. Or at least disappear. He’s long gone now.”

“Let’s move out,” Jac ordered, his voice steady and commanded. “We’ve got work to do. Kaden, send up your drone. Two of you, find and follow the tunnel.”

“Who would’ve thought?” Mark muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. “Our own comrade-in-arms, betraying us like this.”

“Let’s just focus on finding him,” Carter said quietly, “and end this,” he said as he lightly placed a supportive hand on his teammate’s shoulder as they emerged from the end of the long tunnel, empty-handed.

“Jac, I’ve got a hit on Walker’s location,” Kaden said, his eyes glued to the drone’s feed. “He’s holed up in an old bunker about two miles east of here.”

“So, he didn’t double back to the warehouse. I wonder if he’s gotten wind of us on his ass,” said Jac. “Seems odd that Caleb didn’t realize that Walker set him up to take the fall.”

“Wouldn’t matter if he did,” said Levi, “It’s about to finish.”

Kaden nodded. “See, his heat signature isn’t moving. I wonder if he’s holed up waiting for a buddy?”

“Or waiting for us,” said Callie. “He has to know he doesn’t stand a chance with all of us and just one of him.”

Garrett rubbed his neck. “You can do a lot of things to even the playing field, but not sure he has that ability right now.”

“I’ll take Mark,” said Monroe, “and we will do more recon to make sure it isn’t a trap.”

“Good.” Jac’s jaw clenched, his resolve steeling further. He looked around at his team, every face filled with determination. “This ends tonight. We bring Walker in and dismantle whatever he’s been building. We do this together, as a team, and we make sure our families are safe.”

“Agreed,” Cash added, his dark eyes glinting with barely contained fury.

“Let’s do this,” Callie said, her voice resolute and unwavering.

“Callie, stick with Garrett,” said Jac. “You are a great team member and I need us to be on our A game. But you are also Garrett’s other half, so don’t make any heroic moves.”

“I’ll be cautious.”

Garrett and Jac both nodded.

As the team advanced toward their objective, Cash couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding crawl up his spine. This was personal for all of them, and the stakes had never been higher. The man they were about to confront had once stood by the side of several of them - now he threatened everything they held dear. It made him unpredictable and extra dangerous. They would not underestimate him because they were already at a disadvantage with their emotions involved.

The cold night wind whipped around them as they approached the bunker. With each step closer, the tension in the air grew thicker, the gravity of their mission bearing down on them like a crushing weight. As Levi reached for the door handle, his heart pounded in his chest, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions... and good, healthy fear. Need to shut it down and focus.

And then, without warning, a deafening explosion ripped through the night, shaking the ground beneath their feet and sending them reeling backward. A fireball erupted from the warehouse they expected to be Walker's bunker, its flames reaching for the sky as if grasping for vengeance.

"Get down!" Jac shouted, throwing himself to the ground and shielding his face from the blast. His ears rang with the sound of the explosion, his vision blurred by the blinding light. As the dust settled and the team struggled to regain their bearings, the reality of what had just happened began to sink in.

Their target had known they were coming, and now he had vanished in a fiery blaze. But it wasn't over yet. They needed proof he didn't just blow up an empty building

and that the man they had thought inside was indeed Walker and he was indeed dead. If he had escaped, they would find him. No matter where Walker was hiding, or what he had planned next, they would find him.

Chapter 22

The black SUVs rolled to a stop, headlights cutting through the darkness. Jac's gaze fixed on the ramshackle barn where Kaden's drone had identified that Walker or someone had ended up. He wasn't alone this time. Hell, it might not have even been Walker in the blown-up building but it didn't matter because the drone identified him or a person a mile down the road meeting up with several men and holing up in this old barn.

Levi was fucking mad. It took twenty minutes for his ears to stop ringing but at least he hadn't gotten more than a few scratches and the rest were far enough back to avoid real injury. His jaw clenched. This ended tonight, but it wasn't going to be easy.

"We go in hard and fast," Jac said, steel in his voice. "Take no chances. Shoot to kill."

His team nodded, faces grim. They'd been waiting for this moment. It was an order Jac had never given.

Jac caught Callie's eye. "You and Garrett take the south entrance. Clear anyone in your path. We'll hit the front."

They gave a sharp nod and slipped into the shadows, their footfalls silent.

Levi's heart hammered against his ribs, as he was sure everyone was experiencing. Lives depended on their precision, and they had the skill to make this happen.

“Let’s move,” he growled.

They rushed the barn doors in perfect sync, a well-oiled, well-practiced machine. Shouts rang out as they breached the entrance, guns sweeping side to side. Two of Walker’s men dropped before they could blink. Levi barely registered he’d brought down one of them. It was a means to an end he would later deal with.

But Walker was nowhere to be seen. He wouldn’t have recognized him if Sharlee hadn’t sent over a likeness on their way to this spot. Where was he? He and Jac advanced, knowing each team member was covering their area with precision. They would find him.

A shotgun blast split the air. Jac dove behind a crate as splinters exploded around him. Levi took cover nearby. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. He fired back, nailing the gunman between the eyes.

“Walker!” Jac bellowed. “This ends now!”

Mad laughter echoed through the barn. “I’ve been waiting for you, old friend.”

Walker stepped from the shadows; wild eyes fixed on Jac. In his grip, a knife glinted at Callie’s throat.

Fuck. Levi’s blood turned to ice. Callie’s eyes were wide with fear, her body rigid, but she was a skilled operative. She would not make a wrong move. Where the fuck was Garrett? Fear of the fate his teammate may have met tried to overtake him, but he pushed it aside.

“Let her go, Walker,” Jac said through gritted teeth. “Your fight is with me.”

Walker pressed the knife harder, drawing a thin line of blood. Callie hissed.

Garrett appeared behind them but didn't move closer. Blood was dripping down along his face, matted in his hair, but he was upright and good to go as far as he could see.

"Drop the gun, or she dies," Walker hissed.

Jac hesitated, his mind racing. Levi knew Jac couldn't risk Callie's life, but not all the men were in this room, which meant there was additional backup. Also, seeing that Walker was not accompanied by any of the men they'd identified on the drone, meant he might not have backup. Much better. With a curse, Jac lowered his weapon with a signal of hold. The team had created their own signals, knowing that other military personnel would not understand them. It had been a good move.

"Good boy." Walker smirked. "Now put it on the ground and kick it over."

Jac complied, the gun skidding across the floor just short of Walker's feet. If Walker wanted the gun, he'd have to go down and lean over. Levi and Carter, who was hidden behind some ancient farming equipment, kept their sights trained on their enemy, waiting for an opening.

Suddenly, a shot rang out from above. Walker howled, the knife clattering away as he clutched his shoulder. Mark stood in the loft, proverbial smoking gun in hand.

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In a flash, Jac tackled Walker to the ground. They grappled furiously, exchanging blows. But rage fueled Jac. He smashed his fist into Walker's face over and over until he went limp. Cash and Carter dragged him away from the ex-compadre.

Panting, Jac staggered to his feet. Garrett wrenched Callie away from the scene as she flew into his arms, clinging, hesitant sobs escaping.

"It's over," Garrett soothed as he allowed Monroe to examine her neck in the safety of his arms. "You're safe now. Let it go, baby."

"Looks good to go home," said Monroe.

Garrett mouthed thanks as he headed toward the exit with her, but his girl resisted leaving as she pulled herself together. Garrett sighed. He'd almost gotten her outside. He'd have to talk to her about this job, he thought as she walked over to talk to Carter and Kaden. Might be time to review the strategy. As the eldest of the group, he was the old man. And this old man, at forty-six, was beginning to feel his age. Training with the guys, but sticking to the admin was where he needed to focus.

The team regrouped, slapping each other on the back as they tied up the men they had subdued. Other than the man Levi had killed, there were no other casualties. Monroe checked on Jac, who was recovering a little slower than he liked. "Might need to hit the gym a little more often, brother."

Jac laughed. "Or have less stress in my life."

"Nah," answered Monroe. "You thrive on stress, but this was a little too close."

“A hell of a lot, too close.” Jac rubbed his short haircut. Monroe nodded.

“Fuck yeah.” The relief was nearly debilitating for Levi. He wasn’t used to having skin in the game, and this one was heavily involved. They had survived the nightmare. He looked around and made eye contact with Cash. The relief was easily seen.

Walker and his men would face justice alongside Caleb and his men. The Feds showed up quickly and another round of explanations were given. Jurisdiction wasn’t his problem, and Jac waved as the locals showed up. Good thing they had practiced this bit, too. The scenarios were well practiced and executed with precision. The retelling would be the same.

Garrett approached, embracing Callie from behind. She leaned into him, suddenly exhausted.

“Let’s go home,” Garrett said. Callie nodded.

Levi sighed in relief. Home, where they could rest and recover. He took one last look at the building where they’d almost lost everything. Then he turned away. This fiasco was finished. Their family and friends were safe. That was all that mattered now. Levi was sure he wasn’t the only one who felt weary.

Callie climbed into the vehicle beside Garrett. As they pulled away, Levi watched as she laid her head on her husband’s shoulder. He wanted what they had. What all his team members had, forever. Levi took the driver’s seat.

“It’s over,” Garrett murmured.

Callie closed her eyes, allowing herself to believe it. “What’s going to happen to Darcy? And will the Colonel stay or leave the group?”

Levi drove with one hand on the wheel, the other wrapped around his phone, debating if he should call Finley or not. The adrenaline of the mission was fading. In its place crept in exhaustion and relief.

“You were amazing in there,” Garrett said to Callie. “As always, but I wonder if it’s time we reassess our position. After we get married, of course.”

Callie gave a tired smile. “Couldn’t have done it without you watching my six.”

“Always.”

“But if you think that is an acceptable proposal, you need to talk to some of the guys.”

He laughed. “Roger that.”

Cash laid his head back on the seat as he listened to the comradery that his friends had. He had that with Finley, but the banter wasn’t as good as it could be. They had lost that when things got serious and then deadly. Time to relax, get his girl back to embracing life, and enjoy their future together.

They rode in silence for a few miles, decompressing. The rest of the team followed in a convoy, everyone ready to be home.

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The message went out. Debrief tomorrow morning at nine a.m. at the house. When Levi saw it while Finley was in the shower, he sighed. The last bit of business before this wholeshitshow was over and they could go back to protecting VIPs unrelated to their personal lives.

“What are you thinking?” asked Finley as she walked out of the bathroom, steam trailing behind her. She tucked the end of the towel between her breasts. She smiled when Levi grinned largely. He reached for her, and she twisted playfully away from his grasp.

“Stuff. Sharlee sent out a group text. Debrief downstairs tomorrow at nine. Gives us time to sleep in.” Levi held up his phone. He continued to follow Fin with his eyes but made no move on her.

“Good. There is always an incredible breakfast on those mornings, and I am already salivating over it,” said Finley.

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“Sounds good, but not my best way to start the morning,” said Cash as he entered the bedroom.

“Nope, definitely not,” said Levi as he reached for Finley again and she evaded his hands by grabbing the lotion and began to spread the sweet-smelling moisturizer on her legs.

Finley smiled and rolled her eyes dramatically. “It looks like Ren and Spring have stepped up their game this last week and looks like Florent had decided age difference isn’t such a huge problem, after all.”

Levi nodded. “And if we’re gossiping, what about Darcy and Colonel Darrington?”

Cash responded. “Ben keeps things very close to the chest, but he is showing some protectiveness I recognize in the claiming process. Things I am engaging in myself.”

Fin hummed. “And Darcy can’t seem to keep her eyes or mind off of him.” She reached her hands out to touch her guys.

“Well, I know how she feels. I can’t seem to keep my mind off of someone.” Levi reached for Finley’s body.

“Or your hands,” she said.

Levi stopped his touching. “Complaints?”

“Never.”

Cash grinned. “Good.” He reached out his hand to caress her breast. “Levi can get your warmed up and I’ll take a quick shower. We can celebrate tonight.”

Levi looked at Fin, his brow lifted in question. “What do you think, Fin? Ready to make this an official part of our lives?”

“Sex? Um, we have already. But I’ve had so much healing that I’ve been mostly receiving. I’d like to reciprocate.”

Cash smiled but spoke seriously. “My pleasure is knowing I gave you pleasure. I do enjoy you sucking my cock, or taking me inside your hot body, but you are my primary goal.”

“Our primary goal,” added Levi. “So, Cash will shower, and I will do warmup.”

He reached for her arm, and this time she allowed him full access. He whipped the towel off her now dried body and kissed her gently. Finley took the kiss further, and he followed her lead. Before they released each other, the kiss was hard, deep, and they were gasping. Finley hadn’t ever shared a kiss like that with Levi before. She got gentle and sweet, but not hard and desperate.

Her hands explored every place she could touch. His nipples were erect, and he groaned, and she teased them. Levi followed her lead and tweaked her nips, lowering his head to kiss her breasts and suck on her nipples, his tongue caressing them each in turn. His hands squeezed and massaged her sensitive globes to the cadence of her sounds of arousal.

“Fuck baby. Those sexy moans are sweet music to my ears,” whispered Cash in her ear. He kissed her temple, then her lips. Four hands on her skin, hyper arousal flooding her needy channel.

Cash sat against the headboard, and the two men rearranged Finley with her back to Cash's front. Her ass nestled against his stiffened rod, his hands on her breasts while Levi kissed down her belly to her trimmed pubic area. His tongue parted her plump lower lips, then he plowed into her molten heat. Concentrating on her pussy while Cash played with her breasts and kissed her lips, she released hard, crying into Cash's mouth, battling with his tongue for supremacy.

"Wow," she said, as she gained her equilibrium and breath.

"Yeah, wow," said Levi.

The men did that silent communication thing and Levi took Cash's place as Cash flipped Fin over to her hands and knees, spreading her legs wide.

"You feel okay, baby girl?" asked Cash.

"I'm more than okay."

"Good," said Cash. "Take Levi in your mouth sweetness and hold this position. No matter what I do to you."

He tested her readiness for his cock, and soon she heard the tearing of a condom wrapper. "I'm coming in, baby, and you are taking all of me. I'll go slow but no partial entrance. I'm coming all in."

Levi caressed her hair and breasts as she circled her tongue around the soft spongy mushroom top that had turned a deep purple color and licked his long smooth shaft that had expanded more than she remembered it before. He was aroused, and she had never known sucking cock would get her so hot.

CASH NUDGED HIS FULLYerected penis slowly into her slick entrance. Finley

was becoming more aroused, and he needed to get his cock engaged quickly or those two would beat him to the finish line. The timing needed to be Levi first, Finley, then Cash. He fully seated his cock and waited and breathed. His entrance caused Finley to push back on his member.

“Move,” came her muffled, urgent command.

Cash slapped her ass enough to be noticed. “I’m in charge of my pace, and if you push me, I’ll not let you come.” She whimpered, and he slapped her other butt cheek. “Suck on Levi’s cock. Make him come nice and hard.”

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Time to stop talking and fuck her. He would later make sweet love to her, but right now was all about need and desire. He pumped slowly and then increased his efforts until he was pounding her ass.

“Fuck, Fin, I’m coming. Pull back if you aren’t swallowing.”

She shook her head and took him deeper. Impressively, she held out for most of his flow before backing off. The rest fell on her chest just as her own orgasm came crashing and crashing as Cash tweaked her engorged clit. Finally, he pounded and lost his rhythm as his own fire shot through his cock and he spewed his own release.

They lay in bed and breathed heavily, still caressing and kissing, until Finley yawned.

“Go to sleep, baby,” said Levi, covering her up.

“We can wake you up later to make love after you’ve had some rest,” said Cash.

“I’ll be walking bow-legged if this keeps up.”

“What a wonderful goal,” laughed Cash. “Right after I spank your ass, we will work on changing your walk.”

“You aren’t spanking me, Cash.”

“Wanna bet? You earned it and I promise you will get it. You just wait. There are rewards for taking your spanking well.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what kind of reward?”

“You get the reward after you earn it. You’ll see.”

She grunted her dissatisfaction with his answer, but was too tired to argue further.

Epilogue

Sharlee hurried through the dining door, exuberant. Her boots squeaked against the polished floor as she raced into the breakfast room and went directly to Jac.

“I’ve got it,” she gasped triumphantly. “I know exactly who was behind Rodney, maybe even Walker, but definitely the Caleb Rodney garbage.”

Jac was on his feet in an instant, his chair crashing to the floor behind him. His jaw tightened. Becky righted the chair. “Talk to me.” He turned to Becky. “Sorry and thanks for the recovery.”

Sharlee slapped a file folder onto the table. Photos and documents spilled out. Jac sat down again. “Remember that international shipment Rodney organized a few years ago? The one that he said went ‘missing’ but Carter intercepted the transfer of what we thought was drugs, but it wasn’t?”

Becky nodded, leaning forward. “Weren’t the contents classified?”

“That’s what he wanted us to think.” Sharlee jabbed a finger at a grainy photo. “But I did some digging. Turns out the crates contained artifacts. Ancient relics bound for a private collector.”

Carter’s eyes narrowed. “You think Rodney stole them?”

“He meant to because he was told it was filled with drugs for distribution. But someone beat him to it.” Sharlee turned over a shipping manifest, revealing a name scrawled on the back. “This guy - Martin Walsh. He got wind of the shipment, hijacked it en route. Left Rodney with nothing.”

Jac crossed his arms. “So Caleb Rodney sold the promise of a stash to his neighborhood cartel he was going to deliver that night. But somehow, Walsh played him, and the crate had artifacts. It cost Caleb Rodney a fortune and his freedom.”

“All of which he blamed on you for interfering, but Caleb never got that shipment because it didn’t exist. Walsh did. He couldn’t have done it without leading Rodney on, so he could claim the freight and Walsh could keep it out from his name. There never were any drugs or someone else claimed them.”

His gaze hardened. “That’d be enough to turn anyone vengeful.”

Jessie chewed her lip. “Anyone who was neck deep in dealing. But how did Caleb trace it back to us if we didn’t have it?”

“He didn’t.” Mark’s gravelly voice rumbled from the corner. “Walsh must have fed him false intel. Made it look like we were involved. Like we retrieved the container, not Walsh.” His massive hands curled into fists. “Rodney was just a pawn for the Cartel and the bigger players.”

Carter added more. “He thought he could jump in the mix, but it didn’t work. Walsh must have fed different info to the Cartel link, so they went looking for Caleb. Cleaning up all his loose ends. But why wait this long for his revenge?”

Jac answered him. “He needed to gather followers and do it from his hiding spot. Wherever that was. Since he wasn’t the note sender, he had no idea one game was already in motion until Walker approached him.”

“Again, Caleb Rodney was used and exposed. He just didn’t learn to distrust the people he dealt with. I bet he knows it now.”

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Jac continued. “Just to tie up some loose ends. None of the previous attacks were Caleb or Walker, but the notes were all Walker. He had been planning separately from Rodney. They just found each other at the right time to take a good stab at destroying things. The car alarms, shooting at tires, garbage in the yard, kidnapping, assault on Finley and Darcy’s assaults were all at Caleb’s command.”

“So, nothing other than what was happening in the last month,” said Garrett.

Kaden spoke up. “Well, yes and know. He’d gotten his information about Jac and the team from someone because Sharlee and I have kept things cleaned except for what we want out there. So there had to be more to this. Another accomplice.”

Finley whispered. “Kaz. I can’t believe it because I really liked him.”

“We won’t ever know how that played out, but I hate he’s gone, too,” said Cash.

A somber silence fell over the group as the revelation sank in. Mark stood near the window, his hulking frame silhouetted against the late afternoon sun. He gazed out at the trees bending in the wind, lost in thought.

Since Anora was born, his priorities had shifted. No longer was he a lone wolf - now he had a family to protect. A new life to shelter from all the darkness he had known.

Jessie came up beside him, slipping her hand into his. She didn’t have to ask what troubled him. As always, she knew.

“We’re going to make this right,” she said softly. “For Anora’s sake. For all our

sakes.”

Mark’s jaw tightened. “I let this happen. I should have seen Walsh coming.”

“There’s no way you could have known.” Jessie turned his face toward her. “But we know now. And we’re going to end this. The right way. Sharlee is sending messages to the Feds. Walsh wasn’t hiding at all. He’s an art dealer. She gave her information and the whereabouts of Walsh to the agents. They will be interested in the artifacts, so even if there are no other ties, the relics are enough to nail him.”

Mark searched her eyes, finding the strength he needed. With a nod, he squeezed her hand in silent promise. They would face the coming storm as they did all things now - together.

On the other side of the room, Carter pulled Becky close. She leaned into him, the chaos of recent weeks showing on her drawn face. He pressed a kiss into her hair.

“You okay, tough girl?”

She huffed a tired laugh. “Hanging in there.” Sobering, she traced her fingers over his chest. “I almost lost you, you know. When that bullet was fired, we watched from the monitors in the safe room. I thought you were in the line of fire. You almost ...”

Carter tilted her chin up, meeting her conflicted gaze. “But you didn’t lose me. Takes more than that to stop me.” He smiled crookedly. “Besides, I had to stick around. Still have our happily ever after to get to.”

Becky’s eyes glistened as she pulled him into a fierce kiss. No matter what lay ahead, they would face it as partners. Survivors.

Colonel Darrington watched the couples draw strength from one another, a

bittersweet ache in his chest. So much had changed in a few short weeks. Walsh's web of lies had shaken them all, but also revealed truths that could no longer be ignored. It was over. The friendships he had forged this last month were important to him. Most importantly was his Darcy.

His gaze found Darcy across the room. She stood apart, arms wrapped around herself, staring out the window into the gathering fog. He went to her, standing close but not touching.

"It's over now," he murmured. "Walsh, Walker, and Rodney won't hurt anyone else."

Darcy glanced up, shadows haunting her eyes. "Is it really over? Seems there's always another monster waiting." She shivered slightly.

Gently, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Maybe so. But we'll face the next one together just like we did this one."

Darcy searched his face. This man who had somehow become her port in the storm. Slowly, she leaned into him, the tension easing from her body as his arms came around her.

"Promise?" she whispered.

"I promise, little girl." Darrington's voice was gruff with emotion. No matter what lay ahead, he would protect this woman who had claimed his heart. He pressed a kiss to her hair, the promise sealed between them.

Around them, the others exchanged knowing looks. After the darkness, a new light was dawning. They were an even larger family now, bound by hardship and hope, just as all families are.

“Okay, Oakley and Mallory are passing out my whiskey. Sexton single malt. You sip this, you don’t drink. You are going to love this one,” said Sharlee. “I have grape juice for Mallory and Becky because they are baking in their belly and Jessie, who is nursing.”

Kaden cleared his throat. “And for Ivy.”

The quiet was immediate, and then the congratulations exploded. Finley looked around. God, she loved these people.

The next afternoon, Sharlee checked the time. “Mallory’s original baby shower starts in an hour. Do you think she’ll still want to have it?”

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Finley laughed. “Are you kidding? That girl needs something positive right now. We all do. We need to find our normal again. I’m sure Ivy and Kaden have already started decorating but feel free to send a message to everyone, including the Colonel and Darcy, to see if they are all ready to party.”

Sure enough, when they arrived at the house, Ivy and Kaden had transformed it into a cheery baby oasis. Mallory took one look and burst into tears.

Ivy rushed to hug her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Mallory said, laughed through her tears. “Pregnancy hormones and reaction to the past month.” She hugged Ivy. “Everything is perfect. Thank you so much.”

Jessie appeared, holding baby Anora. “Who’s ready to celebrate?”

The women gathered around, fussing over the baby and playing with Storm. The men cracked beers, smiles on their faces. They were soldiers, but also friends. Family. Times like this is what made things worth it all.

Finley let the joyful energy wash over her. They had faced danger and prevailed. Now came healing.

She slipped her hand into Levi’s, meeting his eyes. In them she saw the same mix of relief, gratitude, and promise of days yet to come. Together. What she had never expected to happen, finding friends closer than family, not one but two men to love and who showed her love, and a career in which she was appreciated and valued.

Things were better than good.

Levi gave her hand a squeeze. “I know that look. What’s on your mind?”

Finley hesitated. “I was just thinking...we’ve been through so much together. All of us, but I’m finally happy. Truly happy.”

She glanced around at their friends, laughing and mingling, bonds forged on fire. She searched for Cash.

“We’re more than a team, we’re a family. We have all fought for our beliefs and ourselves. I think that binds us tightly. I stood on the sidelines watching, but being a part of the action this time, it changed things around me, my relationships, and inside me. And with you.”

Cash nodded. His expression was serious as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder carefully. “You’re right. Things have changed. We’ve changed. For the good.”

He gestured to where Ivy and Kaden stood with their arms wrapped around each other, foreheads touching. Becky and Carter were in the kitchen, mixing a virgin cocktail and brushing lips when they thought no one was looking.

“We’ve always had each other’s backs,” Levi said. “But now it goes deeper. I can’t imagine my life without any of them in it. Without you in it.”

Finley’s throat tightened with emotion. She and Levi had been acquaintances, friends, and finally lovers. She and Cash had been friends, then lovers. But this felt like something more.

“Marry me,” she blurted out in front of the two men that meant more to her than she could have ever imagined. Her question sent shock rippling through her even as she

said it. The room went silent.

Where had that come from? She'd never wanted to get married, but Cash had always held that option wide open. When Levi had indicated in his not real proposal that he was thinking they were going down that road, it was scary. But now, she could really get on board, and she didn't need flowers and dinners and big splashes of showmanship to accompany a proposal. She hoped Cash and Levi didn't either.

Levi's eyes widened. For a long moment, he just looked at her. She started to backpedal. "I know guys like to do the asking, so just..." Then a smile spread across his face.

"Nothing would make me happier," said Levi.

Cash laughed and said, "Absolutely perfect."

He pulled her close and kissed her deeply as their friends whooped and cheered.

"But that was naughty, and I intend on spanking that ass for it. I could get into spanking that gorgeous backside every night." He quickly passed her over to Levi, who sealed the answer with his lips as well. Finley had never felt so full of hope, love, and possibility.

Jac broke in with Storm in his arms. "I'm going to need to have a conversation about how we make this work. My nanny was single. Not sure how a married nanny will meet the need."

Finley smiled at her boss. "We'll work it out."

"Damn right we will," said Jac. His lips twitched in a repressed smile.

The team gathered at Kaden and Ivy's sprawling farmhouse, a place that had become like a second home. Laughter and happy chatter filled the air as they set up for the celebration. Mallory sat beaming on the sofa, one hand resting on her swollen belly as friends fussed over her.

"I can't believe our little one will be here so soon!" she said to Ivy, who smiled and squeezed her hand.

"I know! We're all so excited to meet the newest member of our family."

Florent and Spring emerged from the kitchen, bearing trays of food - barbecue ribs, cornbread, coleslaw. The mouthwatering smells made everyone's stomach rumble.

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“Grab a plate, y’all!” Spring announced.

As they lined up buffet-style, Darcy gave Colonel Darrington’s arm a reassuring squeeze. He met her gaze, gratitude shining in his eyes. This woman who had accepted him so fully, who made him feel whole.

They filled their plates and found seats in the immense living room. Laughter and chatter continued as they ate. For now, the darkness and dangers of their work seemed far away. Here, they were just friends, celebrating a new life and new joy.

When the food had been devoured, Carter raised his glass. “To Mallory and Monroe, and their precious baby on the way. We’re so happy for you both.”

“Hear, hear!” came the chorus of replies as glasses clinked.

Mallory dabbed at her eyes. “We’re just so lucky to have you all. Our family.”

Smiles abounded, along with a few more damp eyes. After everything they’d endured, this camaraderie and love meant everything.

As the evening wound down, talk turned to plans. The nursery to finish, security upgrades to install, contingency plans to craft. Though threats remained, they would do everything to keep their family safe.

Spring found Florent on the back deck, gazing out into the night. She joined him at the railing, studying his sharp profile.

“Some party, huh?” she said.

He huffed a laugh. “Mallory and Monroe deserve all this joy.”

“Yeah.” She shuffled her feet. “So, I was thinking...”

Florent turned, one brow quirked. Waiting.

Spring’s pulse quickened. “Maybe you’d want to grab dinner sometime? When things settle down?”

His expression softened. “I’d like that.” He brushed his fingers over hers where they gripped the railing.

Anticipation blossomed in her chest. There would be time to explore this spark between them. For now, it was enough to stand together under the velvet sky.

They rejoined the others as the party wound down. Laughter echoed around the room as Carter told an animated story. Kaden and Ivy curled together on the couch, his hand resting on her belly.

Tomorrow the work would begin again. But tonight, there was friendship, family, love. The things that made it all worthwhile.

Spring met Florent’s gaze, a new warmth in his eyes. Yes, they would be okay. As long as they stood together, they could weather any storm.

Finley stepped out into the night, taking a deep breath of the cool air. So much had happened, so much revealed. But they had come through the darkness, together.

She headed for her car, keys in hand, looking forward to a hot shower and her bed. But she paused as she noticed a figure leaning against the driver’s side door. Levi.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Thought you could use some company on the ride home.”

Warmth bloomed in her chest. After everything, he was still here, still had her back.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

They climbed into the car, a comfortable silence settling between them. Finley asked where Cash was. “Right behind you, darlin’”. As Levi pulled onto the road, Cash reached over, covering her hand with his own.

“You good?” His voice was gravelly, laced with unspoken emotion.

She threaded their fingers together, squeezing once. “Yeah. I’m good.” Levi placed his hand on her thigh as he drove.

And she was. They all were. Not perfect, not unbroken. But here. Together. And their futures looked bright. And for now, that was more than enough.

THE END