



Silent Sins

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Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: Rescuing his black-sheep younger brother from yet another mess is nothing new for former SEAL and current Redemption Creek operative Mason Ortiz. Being forced to team up with a brilliant—and seriously controlling—FBI agent absolutely is, though. Mason will do anything to get his brother out of danger, but Special Agent Avery Ellis is only going to compromise this mission, in every way possible.

Between his wayward younger brother and the headstrong agent, he'll have his hands full just keeping them all alive, don't even add taking down the smugglers pouring black market pharmaceuticals into the country.

Just when Mason thinks his brother and Avery are safe, the game changes. A new enemy emerge, an entity powerful enough to make them all disappear, Mason's Redemption Creek team included.

Redemption Creek: Where ranches run forever, granite peaks touch the sky, and wounded hearts seek home. Betrayed by their superiors, the former soldiers of Black-out Squadron are determined to carve out new lives. Their plan? Seek justice for folks who can't fight their own battles.

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“What do you mean you’re shutting down the investigation?” Fists on her hips, Special Agent Avery Ellis glared at her supervisor. “That trucking company is dealing in stolen goods. Or counterfeits. Or both. We’re talking on an international level, Ryan. My contact was killed for giving me that lead.”

As usual, Avery’s SSA—Supervisory Special Agent—Ryan Goshiro, remained unperturbed. He eyed her placidly over the top of his computer monitor and shrugged. “Your contact had a heart attack. I’m sorry the timing was crummy, but that’s about the only sinister thing going on here.”

“Heart attacks can be induced.”

Ryan leaned on his elbows and rolled his eyes. “In spy novels. The Bureau likes to live in the real world. It doesn’t take a lot of explanation, Avery. You’re done. Orders from up top.”

“But—”

He raised a hand, stopping her. “I’m not saying there’s nothing to investigate with this trucking company. You can circle back to it later. For now, I’ve been ordered to redirect agency resources to more compelling cases. End of story.”

“What about the two other deaths? You can’t tell me three deaths in two months are a coincidence.”

Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I have told you that. Several times.” He fixed her with a long look. “Give it up, Avery. I’m shutting this down. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to listen.”

No. She didn’t.

His eyes narrowed as if he could see her brain working. “You’re an excellent agent. If you’d just learn to be a team player, you could have a great career. Don’t blow this.”

Like your father did.

She heard the words as clearly as if Ryan had said them out loud.

Officially, Averson Ellis was a hero to the Bureau, an agent who gave his life to save fellow law enforcement officers. But the backstory was far more complicated. Her father was a hero to his fellow agents, but to the higher-ups, the men and women who rode desks, he was despised. Because he’d saved those officers by going rogue.

The instant she earned her badge, Avery had looked through his file.

Works outside the system.

Unwilling to adhere to standard protocols or commands.

Resistant to input from superiors.

The list ran on, using countless other ways to say the same thing: her father had been a burr in the system’s backside his entire career. And then he died in the line of duty.

She hadn’t planned on following so closely in her father’s footsteps, but five years into her own stint with the Bureau, she understood. Ryan could have written those

words about her.

Sometimes rules interfered with seeking justice.

She'd prayed on it long and hard, but the answer kept coming up the same: she could do what was right, or she could be a "good" agent.

The answer didn't require much thought, let alone prayer.

Ryan shoved his keyboard away and jumped to his feet. "Don't do this, Avery."

She raised her hands, palms out in a gesture of surrender. "If the case is closed, it's closed. For now."

Ryan seemed to be weighing her words. "Okay. I'm not saying it's forever. Just for now. Priorities change. You know that. As our workflow changes, we can circle back to this. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay. Three men are dead."

Her supervisor wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and squeezed. A vein pulsed in his temple. She was pushing him hard, but at this point, she didn't much care.

"Natural causes, Avery. All of them. Did you read the ME's reports?"

She had. And her intuition was still screaming. But Ryan had read them too.

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Arguing would get her exactly nowhere. She blew out a breath. There had to be options.

“You’ve got a zillion hours of vacation time,” Ryan pointed out. “Take some.”

“Soon,” she promised.

“Now.” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared her down. “I’m serious. Get out of the office for a couple weeks. Things’ll look a lot better once you’ve toasted yourself on a tropical beach. You need the break.”

More like he and her fellow agents needed the break from her.

Fair enough.

But the thought of taking time off—doing nothing—when she knew more people could die ...

Not. Gonna. Happen.

Her lips parted, but she caught herself before she could dig a hole she’d never be able to climb out of. Instead, she nodded. “You have a point.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Best to do this now, before she changed her mind. She tapped a finger on the edge of his desk. “You win. Let’s make it official. As of ten seconds ago, consider me on

vacay.”

Ryan’s lithe frame sagged in relief. “You got it. I’ll even do the paperwork for you.” He made a shooing motion with his hands. “Get gone, Agent Ellis. I don’t want to see your face for at least two weeks. You hear me?”

Avery turned on her heel, waving at him from over her shoulder. “Loud and clear, sir.”

“Avery?”

His sharp tone stopped her in the doorway.

“Keep your head down. The owners of Rain Bay hang with some bad people. You and I know you’re off the case, but Rain Bay Trucking doesn’t. Do yourself a favor and pick a beach in another time zone.”

“Sure. I appreciate the warning.” She shut the door behind her on the way out, the gears already turning.

2

Two dayslater

Mason Ortiz powered through another set of shoulder presses, gritting his teeth as he pushed the heavy weights skyward. The strain burned through his muscles, a welcome distraction from his dark mood.

November winds whistled through the canyon outside the open doors of the headquarters’ gym, the biting chill foretelling the winter on its way. Winter came early in the Eastern Sierra, especially to the small towns like Redemption Creek that

butted up against the soaring granite mountains. But inside, Mason built up a hard-earned sweat.

Anything to outrun his melancholy. It wasn't like him to mope, but ever since Bridger and Jane's wedding last month, he'd been kinda down. Strange, because he was stoked for his teammate. There was no doubt Bridger had found his soulmate. Everyone on the team, Mason included, was thrilled for the couple.

And yet their happiness seemed to add to the empty ache in his own heart. Seeing Tai with his arm around his new love, Tenaya, didn't help. Again, Mason was stoked for the guy, but seeing his bros start coupling up was ... weird.

The fact that he was even thinking about this kind of stuff was weirder still. He didn't do feelings. Didn't do romance or flowers or any of that mushy stuff. No Ortiz man did.

Mostly because they were so bad at it.

He was still in his twenties when he'd decided he'd stick to things he excelled at: soldiering and fighting and firearms. Stuff that required hard work, mental toughness, and a penchant for ignoring any kind of feeling, physical or otherwise.

He gripped the dumbbells harder, lifting faster, trying to burn away the feels, and prayed to the Lord to send them a new mission. Too much downtime made him crazy.

His watch buzzed on his wrist. Again. And again, he ignored it.

It was his brother's new number. He'd just talked to Paul a couple weeks ago, when his estranged brother called with news of his new diesel mechanic job. Mason was relieved the guy had finally landed an actual grown-up job for once, but that didn't

mean Mason was ready to be best buds.

Paul had a lot of growing up left to do before he'd let him back into his life. Plus, talking to his brother wasn't going to help his lousy mood. Only time and prayer and a whole lot more sweating would do that.

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His watch buzzed again. Mason gritted his teeth. When Paul wanted something, it had to be now.

Tai Kaholo, his teammate, and the only man in the gym who could outlift him, eyed him over a hefty barbell. “You gonna get that?”

Mason tensed his abs, hefting his own weights higher. “Haven’t decided yet.”

Tai shot him an odd look but stayed silent. Good man. Mason didn’t want to talk about his failure of a brother right now. Or ever.

Paul was the one sore spot in his life, a constant disappointment. This new job could be the start of a new life for Paul, but only time would tell.

Mason finished his workout, pointedly ignoring the phone. Four calls. Then five. He towed off sweat at the back of the open gym when Graham, their mentor and latest teammate, strode over and shoved the phone into his hands.

“Call your brother,” the older man insisted, expression brooking no argument. Before Mason could respond, Graham walked away, pausing at the door to mime “call now” before disappearing.

Mason stared down at the phone, anger simmering. He was a trained operative, a battle-tested SEAL. So why did the thought of calling his loser brother tie his guts in knots?

Whatever the reason, Paul was not going to go away. Not the guy’s style.

He lifted a quick prayer, asking his Savior for patience, and jabbed at the voicemail icon, steeling himself.

His brother's confident drawl came over the line. "Yo, my man. You're one hard hombre to get ahold of. Listen, I need your help. Wait. Don't hang up. It's not what you think. I mean yeah, I'm in trouble, but it's not my fault. Really. I'm ..." The confident voice faded, returning as a frightened whisper. "It's my new job. There's something really wrong going down here. I need your expertise, bro. I feel like this could get dangerous. Call me. Please?"

It was the please that did it. Paul lied and cheated and blustered. He never begged.

Mason hit redial.

His brother answered on the first ring. "Can't talk now, Mason," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the sound of air wrenches and clanging metal. Then Paul continued louder in hearty dude-speak, clearly intending to be overheard. "Bro! It's been a minute. Can you make it tonight?" He paused, as if listening to Mason's reply. "Great. We're hanging at the Triple T. Probably around seven. Come hungry. They've got the best steaks in Seattle."

Mason clenched and unclenched his fist, eyes on the jagged peaks piercing the hard blue sky. Whatever Paul was in the middle of, it was bad.

"Triple T, Seattle. Seven p.m." Mason repeated the instructions, studying his watch. Kate or Tai would be available to fly him out. They kept the Pilatus ready to roll down the runway at a moment's notice, and they had no current missions. A three-hour flight time, max, in their private jet. "I'll be there," he added. Paul was showing his tell—the empty boasting. Mr. Confidence was running scared.

"You won't be sorry," Paul insisted, his voice rich with fake heartiness. "Bring your

A game. The way I'm running the pool table lately, you're gonna need it."

Alarm bells clanging in his head, Mason stared at the blank screen. The sweat dripping down his sides cooled fast in the autumn chill. He'd never heard his brother so frantic. And his final warning was exactly that: a warning. Code from when they were kids.

"Bring your A game," meant prepare for trouble.

Back in the day, trouble meant a showdown with angry football players Paul had conned out of money. Or as Paul got older and into deeper trouble, helping him escape a confrontation with the local cops.

Whatever the issue, his brother needed help.

Mason glanced outside at the bright fall sky, resigned. Rescuing his trainwreck of a baby brother was his specialty. Even when it killed him.

He sank down on the bench in the locker area and called out to their virtual Wi-Fi assistant, asking for a Seattle weather report.

"Rain, Pilgrim," came the reply in the deep John Wayne drawl their cyber expert, Paige, thought was so hilarious. "Then drizzle and more rain."

Mason glanced at the blue sky visible through the open gym doors. Rain. It figured. With Paul nothing went right.

3

Somewhere behind the thick mass of dark clouds the sun would be thinking about setting. Which meant the workers in the Rain Bay warehouse on the other side of the

vast parking lot would head home soon. And Avery could grab that hot shower she'd been dreaming about for the last hour.

She lay prone on the roof across the street, binoculars trained on the single parking lot exit across the way. Rain drizzled down, trickling along her arms where it slipped under the sleeves of her rain slicker. She shifted, the tarpaper digging into her elbows.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text. Keeping the binoculars steadied, she awkwardly fished the device from her pocket. A text from Ryan.

U having fun yet?

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Avery rolled her eyes even though no one could see her up here. She texted back.

Totally.

Not technically a lie. Doing her job brought her satisfaction, as did seeking justice however she could. Even if it meant suffering cold and wet on this rooftop stakeout.

Ryan responded with a string of thumbs-up emojis.

Good girl.

Avery grimaced. Ryan wouldn't be nearly so enthusiastic when he discovered she'd ignored his command to stand down. An airtight case against these trucking crooks would help smooth things over.

Three employees of Rain Bay Trucking had died in the past two months. Healthy guys in their thirties and forties. The company called it coincidence, and Ryan agreed, but Avery knew better. A car accident, a drowning, and a sudden heart attack. In men with no risk factors in their medical files.

The last man to die, RafaelPereira, had come to see her not a week before his supposed heart attack. He'd contacted her through a friend of a friend of an old neighbor, deeply worried about the new job he'd taken at a Rain Bay Trucking facility. The pay was great, but he soon realized the incoming trucks carried illicit cargo. He didn't have many details yet, but he was terrified. He wanted to walk away, but he feared for his life.

She'd gotten supervisory approval to start a preliminary investigation, but before she could dig up anything, Rafael was dead. That's when she uncovered the other two deaths.

Six days later, Ryan ordered her off the case.

No way she was backing down now.

The sound of a helicopter had her pressing back into the shadow of the stairwell enclosure. Raising her binoculars, she spotted the logo of a local sightseeing service. The aircraft passed harmlessly overhead.

Still, she needed to remain vigilant on her own out here with no backup. She had no idea if Rain Bay had surveillance drones or other high-tech security, but better safe than sorry. She thrived on working solo anyway.

Settling back into position, she resumed scanning the facility below. Like the other days she'd spent observing, truck after truck pulled in hauling cargo containers from the Port of Seattle. From noon on, a parade of delivery vans rolled out the exit doors at the far end of the warehouse. Lots of merch flowed through that warehouse daily, all of it overseen by an army of armed guards and a forest of security cameras, covering every angle of the vast parking facility that ringed the building.

A ridiculous amount of security for a truck transport company. Unless they were transporting gold bars.

Or contraband.

Add that to the results of her investigation into the company's financials, and alarm bells rang in her head. A year ago, the company got a huge infusion of cash, enough to build this second stand-alone facility.

Every instinct told her Rain Bay was using this warehouse as a switching station to distribute illegal goods. But she still lacked the kind of concrete proof Ryan and the higher-ups couldn't ignore.

Frustration roiled in her gut. Why didn't her superiors see what she did?

Trucking black market goods generated big, dirty money. Enough to encourage certain people to apply pressure and steer the FBI's focus elsewhere.

Not outright corruption—she refused to believe that of her agency. Just ... redirected priorities. Even for important cases.

Didn't mean she had to like it. And thanks to her abundance of unused vacation days, she didn't have to obey it either. Not for another ten days, anyway.

A tall, dark-haired male exited the warehouse below, wiping greasy hands on a rag. Avery grabbed her camera, zooming in on him.

The newest mechanic. She'd been watching him the past two days, even tailed him to his rundown apartment complex. And of course, she'd run his plates. His registration and insurance were current, but the guy had a past. Paul Ortiz, age twenty-eight, a few low-level arrests for public intoxication, a DUI seven years ago, and three arrests for assault—although from the field reports themselves it was obvious the assaults had been mutual. More fights than attacks. No charges filed against any of the participants. Still, Ortiz obviously had an edge to him.

Turning him might be her way in.

It had to be.

She was running out of time—and leads—to jumpstart an investigation.

After snapping some photos, she packed up her gear and headed off the roof, tailing Ortiz's aging Ford pickup to his apartment complex.

The guy seemed clueless that he might have a target on his back. Impulse pushed her to march upstairs and knock on his door. But years of training reined in the urge. Coming on too strong would only alienate him. Still, she needed to make contact soon, before she ran out of vacation days ... or he ended up dead.

Decision made, she fired up her beige Volvo, but before she could pull away from the curb Ortiz headed back outside. Head down, a Seahawk's ball cap pulled low over his forehead, he hurried back to his vehicle. His limbs looked tight, his gait quick and choppy.

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Her skin prickled. Paul Ortiz was not a happy guy. Something had him stressed out, big time. Maybe he wasn't so clueless after all.

Tensing, Avery ducked below the dash as he pulled out of the lot, and then she followed him back down the rain-slicked streets. Something was shifting.

About time.

This case consumed her thoughts 24/7, in part because it reminded her so much of the one that got her father killed. He, too, had been forced off an investigation only to continue it solo in secret.

In the end, he'd sacrificed his life, taking action when others refused to. Avery had no death wish, but the same relentless drive for justice burned in her bones. She wouldn't quit either. No matter the obstacles or warnings, she intended to expose the ugly truth.

Eyes straining to see through the steady drizzle, she set her jaw, careful to keep a few cars between her and Ortiz's truck.

Justice would be done—with or without the bureau's backing. If her hunch paid off, Rain Bay's newest mechanic would be her way in.

All she needed to figure out was a way to make first contact.

The man called Ghost slouched against the graffiti-slathered brick wall of the derelict hotel, his eyes sweeping over the crumbling buildings lining the pothole-ridden street. The air hung heavy with the stink of rot and abandonment, the perfect setting for the shady deals that thrived in this forgotten armpit of Seattle.

He sucked in a breath, savoring the foul tang of home. The roots he'd long outgrown but still needed.

It had been ages since he'd spent any real time on the streets, but this job—his magnum opus—demanded his full attention. Not that he was complaining. Being back on the streets kept him fit, honing his reflexes and his taste for blood. Sharpening the blade.

He was almost there. Inches from escape.

When the Ghost vanished this time, he'd be reborn so wealthy he'd need a calculator to keep track of the zeros.

Next to him, his young righthand man, Javier, fidgeted nervously. His fingers drummed a jittery rhythm on his thigh as he eyed a crew of street thugs swaggering their way, skulking in the shadows like the bottom-feeders they were.

Once the group passed, Javier whipped out his phone, his movements twitchy with agitation. "Yo, Ghost, check this out."

In his rush, Javier's elbow jabbed Ghost in the ribs, a rookie move that would've earned anyone else a swift beatdown. Ghost simply cocked an eyebrow, snatching the phone from Javier's hand. "Easy there, youngblood," he cautioned, his voice low and gravelly.

Ghost's eyes narrowed as he watched the grainy video on the screen, showing the

roof of the warehouse across from their latest score, Rain Bay Trucking.

On the video, a familiar figure crouched near the edge, her dark curls whipping in the wind.

“That fed’s still sniffing around,” Javier said, his voice tight.

“I can see that,” Ghost replied, his eyes glued to the screen.

Javier bounced on his toes, practically vibrating with nervous energy. “Thought you said your boy in the suit was gonna handle her. Make her back off.”

Ghost handed back the phone, his face unreadable. “Guess she didn’t get the memo.”

“Or your boy didn’t handle his business.”

Ghost shot the kid a hard look. Questions were one thing, but that snotty tone was pushing it. There was way too much Javier didn’t need to know.

“I didn’t mean—” Javier ducked his head, swallowing hard. “No disrespect. I’m just lookin’ out for you. I don’t trust suits. You know that.”

“For now, the guy’s useful. That changes, I’ll handle it myself.”

Javier nodded, bobblehead style. “So what’s the plan with fed girl?” He shoved his hands in his baggy jeans pockets, rocking on his heels. The kid was like a live wire, sparking with nervous energy. “We could stage an OD. Or she catches a stray bullet. Wrong place, wrong time, you feel me?”

Ghost didn’t answer right away, his mind racing through the angles. He had his so-called partner to think about. Until he cut the dude out.

The city's noise filled the silence between them, distant sirens wailing, bass thumping from a passing ride, shouts and laughter from the crew on the corner.

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“Not yet,” he said finally, his voice barely audible over the racket. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

Javier’s forehead wrinkled, confusion written all over his baby face. “But if she keeps poking around ...”

“Then we’ll deal with it. For now, she’s spinning her wheels. No way she can touch us without backup.”

Understanding lit up Javier’s eyes, a slow grin spreading across his mug. “And if she tries, she crashes and burns.”

Ghost nodded, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Javier was young and impulsive, but he caught on quick. That’s why Ghost kept him close, shaping him into the kind of loyal dog his operation needed. The kind of dog he used to be, before he fought his way to the top.

“But for real, what if she don’t quit?” Javier asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ghost’s smile vanished, his face hardening. “Then we’ll make it look like she ate her own gun. Wouldn’t be the first time a fed cracked under pressure.”

Javier let out a low whistle, his eyes flashing with a mix of fear and respect. “You’re hardcore.”

“Don’t forget it,” Ghost agreed, his gaze drifting back to the video.

Agent Ellis was a wild card, unpredictable and driven. She could be a valuable asset, a pawn to manipulate and toss aside when she'd outlived her usefulness. Just like the sucker who thought they were equal partners in this venture.

What Ghost wouldn't do was underestimate her. He was too much like her to make that rookie mistake. He'd watch and wait, letting her do her thing. And when the time was right, he'd make his move.

One way or another, Agent Ellis would learn what happened when you crossed him. But not today. Today, she still had a role to play in the game he'd set in motion.

And Ghost played to win.

5

A few minutes past seven, Mason pushed through the doors of the Triple T Steakhouse, his guard up the second he stepped into the dim interior. The soles of his boots stuck to the dried beer splattering the faded linoleum, the twangy wail of country music blasting from the blown-out speakers against the back wall. Definitely more of a dive bar than a restaurant, despite the name.

Fantastic.

The overpowering stench of cheap booze, stale fry grease, and charred meat hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. He scanned the room for his brother, worry gnawing at him.

Please, Lord, don't let Paul be back on the sauce.

The kid had kicked his budding alcohol problem years ago. As far as Mason knew, he'd been stone-cold sober for over three years. But then again, it's not like they'd

been exchanging Christmas cards.

He shoved the pointless thoughts aside and kept scanning the joint. Three of the ten high-backed booths along the wall were occupied by couples in office attire, probably just off the clock. No threat there.

Over at the pool tables, a crew of meatheads were focused on their game, beers in hand. Two sported facial scars—brawlers for sure. The others moved with the loose aggression of guys who could take a punch as well as they could throw one. They sized Mason up for a second before going back to their shots. He filed them under potential threats. Too slow and too untrained to give him any real trouble, but too tough to write off completely.

Still no sign of Paul. Mason wove through the mostly empty tables, his senses on high alert. Whatever mess his brother had landed in this time, Mason could only pray it didn't involve the bottle or a bookie. Some things even he couldn't fix.

He swallowed hard, the knot in his gut tightening. This whole situation had bad news written all over it.

He just needed to find Paul and get him safely out of here. Then he could start digging into what kind of trouble his wayward brother had fallen into this time. Rescuing Paul was his responsibility, just as it had been since they were kids. However much it cost him. At least he no longer had to worry about hiding the details from their mom. Given her place in Heaven, she'd know everything anyway.

A quick laugh from the corner of the bar farthest from the door made him start. Paul's laugh. He swung his head in that direction. Yup. His brother sat, elbows on the bar, his attention focused on the pretty woman occupying the stool next to him. Mason snorted, feeling something south of disgust but north of full-blown anxiety. Things couldn't be too bad if Paul was making eyes at a pretty girl.

Oh, who was he kidding? This was Paul he was talking about. The kid had the common sense of a tire iron.

Mason wove through the tables toward the bar, keeping his brother in his sights. Relief washed over him. Paul looked okay—tired and stressed, but at least he hadn't been skipping meals. The perpetual knot in Mason's chest loosened a notch. He hadn't seen his brother looking this healthy in ages.

At the bar, a clear soda sat at Paul's elbow. Another point in Paul's favor. Looked like he had his booze problem under control. But who was the woman with him?

She was a looker—smooth dark skin and thick, glossy hair. More concerning was the way she hung on Paul's every word. She was way out of his league. Which could only mean one thing—trouble.

It looked like they were flirting. Mason's steps faltered, irritation spiking. Now? Really?

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Glaring daggers, he ate up the last few steps, ready to drag his brother outside.

Oblivious to Mason's irritation, Paul sat up straighter, gaze eager and expectant like a puppy. Grinning from ear to ear, he waved Mason over. "Mason, hey! Come meet Candy."

Mason stopped beside them, eyeing the woman hard. Up close, she was even more stunning. But her smile didn't reach her sharp eyes. His instincts screamed—this was no ditzy party girl. Her casual body language clashed with the intelligence in her gaze.

His gut feeling solidified. Whoever she was, this woman had an agenda. No way it involved trying to score a date with his brother.

Paul tipped his glass at him. "Candy, meet Mason."

"Hey," she said smoothly, raking an appraising gaze over his body.

He nodded absently, his focus on Paul. "You two known each other long?"

Paul made a face, looking pleased. "About ten minutes, right Candy?"

Mason crossed his arms, his stare icy. "We should get going," he told Paul pointedly. He wanted this woman away from his brother yesterday.

Paul's grin wavered. "Oh, um, yeah sure." He turned back to the woman, his voice reluctant. "I gotta run, but it was really nice meeting you."

She touched his arm lightly. “You, too. Be sure to keep my number. Maybe we can hang out sometime.” Her knowing gaze shifted to Mason, lingering. “Or double date. My roommate’s a lot of fun.”

Mason’s hands curled into fists. In a heartbeat, everything clicked. The tells were all there. Whatever trouble Paul thought he was in, this woman was involved.

Which made her the enemy.

He grabbed his brother’s arm, yanking Paul off his stool and steering him toward the exit. “Nice to meet you,” he muttered over his shoulder.

Paul tried to shake him off. “Aw come on. One drink won’t hurt.”

Mason dug his fingers in harder, his patience evaporating. “I don’t drink. And neither do you anymore. Let’s go.” He propelled Paul outside, ignoring the woman’s surprised look.

Once they hit the parking lot, Mason released his grip. Paul elbowed him good-naturedly. “You didn’t have to be so rude. I think she was into me.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Jealous much?”

Mason headed for his beige rental sedan. “She wasn’t into you.”

“I know women. She was definitely giving me signals.”

Mason kept walking. “No signals. She’s law enforcement. Either Seattle PD or FBI. Maybe ATF.”

“What?” Paul paled instantly. “No way. How can you tell?”

Mason rattled off the clues: the practical shoes, the heavy purse, the strategic seating, placing herself between her target and the only exit.

With each detail, Paul's confident grin faded. "What are we gonna do?"

They weren't going to do squat. He'd handle it. Alone. Like always.

Mason opened the passenger door, waving Paul inside. "First, we're getting you somewhere secure. Then you're telling me everything, from the very beginning."

After Mason took care of business. He jammed his hand into his pocket, pulling out a thick zip tie.

Paul jerked away, his head smacking the passenger window. "Hey, what the—"

Mason grabbed his wrist, forcing his brother's arm close to the grab bar, then yanking the zip tie tight with a satisfying tug. "I need to have a chat with your new girlfriend. Don't go anywhere." Mason slipped away before Paul could argue further.

Whatever the woman's game was, she was flying solo. The perfect opportunity to find out what she wanted with Paul.

He strode back into the bar, senses on high alert. But the woman had vanished. He stalked through the joint and shoved through the back exit into the alley.

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The hunt was on.

6

The instant the scowling man dragged Paul Ortiz out of the restaurant, Avery slid off the barstool. Now what?

She could tail them and step in if needed. Whatever she decided, she had to watch her back. This Mason guy looked tough and smart. Something told her he was a lot more than just Paul's buddy.

Whatever his real game was, the man screamed danger.

Seemed like Paul knew him, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. The new guy could be a cop. Or hired muscle from Rain Bay. The fact that Paul didn't seem too bent out of shape about being hauled out didn't prove a thing.

She opted to slip out the back in case the other guy was waiting to jump her. Avery felt the weight of her service weapon in her purse as she headed for the kitchen door, sidestepping discarded produce boxes to peek around the overflowing dumpsters flanking the exit. Silence greeted her. But still, she didn't budge. Let her eyes adjust to the dark. Her senses flared. The man was out there somewhere. She drew her weapon but kept her badge tucked away. If possible, she needed to get to her car and follow her mark without blowing her own cover.

She darted between cars, senses on high alert. More than once she spun around, sure he was right behind her, only to find empty air.

Her nerves thrilled at the chase even as frustration mounted. No matter which way she turned he anticipated her, effortlessly evading capture. She paused behind an SUV, steadying her breath. The engine ticked softly as it cooled in the damp night air. She should fear an adversary this skilled, yet her instincts whispered that he meant her no harm.

Something in his economical motions, the way he'd refrained from directly engaging her, told her he was a pro of the highest caliber. He could take her down if he wanted, and they both knew it. But that didn't seem to be his goal. He only wanted to shake her long enough to get his charge away safely. Chasing her wasn't the mission itself, just an inconvenient necessity.

She risked a glance around the bumper. A shadow detached itself from the far side of the lot. No mistake—he was toying with her. Unsure whether to be impressed or pissed off, she darted right, only to spot him waiting where she intended to go. She reversed course, a reluctant grin tugging her lips. However this ended, she had to admit—she was enjoying the challenge.

She spotted Paul in a sedan. Strange his contact was the only one tailing her, but she didn't have time to dwell on it as a shadow moved just beyond the light at the end of the lot. Her pulse jumped. The man was good.

Avery darted behind a pickup truck, her soft-soled shoes soundless on the pitted asphalt. The drizzling rain soaked through her clothes with clammy dampness, sending a shiver across her skin. She peered around the tailgate, squinting into the shadows between the sodium lights.

There—a hint of movement by the chain-link fence. She crouched, circling wide along the bumpers until the shape of a man crystalized.

Tall, broad-shouldered, face obscured by a ballcap.

Mason.

She ghosted forward, senses tingling. But quick as a blink he was gone, vanishing into the night like he'd never been there at all.

Pulse kicking up, Avery turned in a slow circle. Nothing. Just her and the echo of her own soft breaths. Impossible—where had he gone?

A scrape of a boot on loose gravel sounded behind her. She whirled, but only dark air met her gaze.

Admiration and frustration churned within her. However he did it, the man moved like a ghost. Clearly this wasn't his first rodeo. She strained to catch any hint of his passage over the patter of rain. But Mason had vanished as completely as if he'd never existed.

She decided to lay low until they split. If she couldn't tail them, so be it. At this point, it was more important Paul didn't know he was being followed.

She circled back toward the restaurant's rear entrance, hoping to hide out until the duo left. If she was lucky, maybe she could tail them. But just as she reached the door, Mason materialized from the shadows.

Even in the dim light she could see he was built, his muscular frame towering over her. He moved with coiled power and precision, fully engaged, focused wholly on her.

And dangerously attractive. His angular features were masculine yet refined. His hair curled damply against his forehead from the rain, the sides almost reaching his collar. His eyes bored into her, intense and unreadable in the low light.

She raised her weapon. “Stay back.”

He complied, raising his hands slowly. “You won’t shoot me.” His voice was a low rumble that resonated through her bones.

She scoffed, adjusting her grip, even as his nearness made her pulse skitter. He smelled of rain and pine and something undefinably male that had her senses prickling with unwanted awareness. The heat from his body seemed to reach out and grab her across the short distance.

She tensed, shoving down the unwelcome attraction. Now was not the time to notice broad shoulders and a rugged, handsome face.

“I’m warning you,” she repeated, glad the shadows likely hid the effect this stranger had on her.

His hands remained raised, though his body language clearly indicated she posed no threat. “Duly noted,” he said, his tone just edging into sarcasm. Then he met her gaze. “You’re not going to shoot me.”

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She scoffed, steadying her aim. “And why’s that?”

“No FBI agent would shoot an unarmed man point blank.”

Shock jolted through her. “How did you—?”

“I’ve got a gift.” His smile was brief, barely a twitch of his lips. “Why’re you tailing Paul?”

She shook her head curtly. “That’s classified.”

“Nice try.” He huffed a laugh.

The sound sent a flutter through her core that she swiftly quashed. No time for that.

She inclined her chin, gaze flinty. “I’m serious.”

His smile widened a fraction, transforming his severe features. “Me, too.”

She sucked in a breath at the sight. Focus, she reminded herself. Butterflies could wait. She steadied her nerves and her aim. “You don’t want to tangle with me. Move along and we can both walk away.”

His eyes glinted in the low light. “Not until you tell me what you want with Paul Ortiz.”

She shrugged, taking care to keep her weapon aimed at the center of his chest. “Guess

we'll be here a while."

He smiled, another heartfelt, knee-weakening grin. "That's up to you."

Before she could respond, he struck, sliding out of range and grabbing her weapon with astonishing speed. It all happened in the space of one breath: the move, the hands on her weapon, the gentle bending back of her wrist until her grip loosened.

Stunned, she rubbed her wrist. "You're fast."

"Lots of practice."

He grabbed her other arm with his free hand. "Let's go," he ordered, pulling her back toward the front parking lot. "Seeing as how this is gonna take a while. It's probably best we talk somewhere less public."

She was speechless for a second, furious with herself for letting him get the upper hand. But every second she hesitated, he towed her a couple feet farther, heading straight for the vehicle where her mark waited.

"You don't want to do this," she warned. Resisting would only tire her unnecessarily, so she gave in, matching his pace.

"No kidding," he responded. "I'll apologize later."

No one exited the building. Of course. Where was the rowdy, liquored-up after work crowd when she needed them?

They were at the vehicle now. Paul swiveled his head around, eyes wide, mouth agape.

Mason leveled her weapon at her and ordered her into the back seat. Gun still trained on her, he whipped a serious hunting knife from behind his back and leaned in on the passenger side.

Paul's hand was zip tied to the front grab handle. He jerked against the restraint. "Untie me."

"Gimme a sec," Mason insisted. He fixed Avery with a solemn look. "We just want to talk for a minute. Stay calm and quiet, and you'll be out of here in less than five."

"Take your time." Sarcasm thickened her voice. "The longer you take, the easier it'll be for my people to locate me."

His dark look morphed into a sweet smile. "I'll take my chances."

Careful to keep her gun trained on her, he snipped the zip tie around Paul's wrist with one quick motion.

"You drive," he ordered the other man.

Scowling hard, Paul heaved himself out of the vehicle and headed around to the driver's side.

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Her captor leaned in the back seat. “Scoot over.” He motioned for her to move, and slid in next to her.

She eyed her handgun, but she had to admit, his reflexes were way better than hers. Struggling for it in the confined space could only result in disaster.

He grunted softly, clearly reading her mind. Eyes locked on hers, he handed the weapon over the seat. “Put this in the glove box,” he ordered.

Once Paul had her Glock secured, Mason fished the keys from his pocket and handed them up, too. “Keep to the side streets. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

Avery glared at him. “You don’t want to do this,” she repeated.

He laughed mirthlessly. “Can’t disagree there, ma’am. Desperate times ... you know how that goes.”

She should be terrified with these unknown men. But oddly, she wasn’t.

Angry. Check.

Frustrated. Absolutely.

And intrigued. Seriously intrigued.

Paul fired up the engine. His eyes were wide in the rearview mirror. “You sure you want to—?”

“Drive,” Mason ordered. “Go.”

As the car lurched forward, snapping her head back, she made a new plan. Watch, wait, and listen. Gather every sliver of info she could, and then, when she saw her chance, she’d run.

7

One eye on his captive, Mason craned his head, trying to make out any landmarks in the dark. The mist was clearing at least, leaving the Seattle streets slick and shining with fresh rain. The hilly city was ablaze with lights, reflecting off damp pavement as Paul nosed the rental car onto the street.

Mason focused on the woman crammed into the seat beside him, acutely aware of her floral perfume mingling with the scent of rain in the enclosed space. She radiated fury, arms crossed tightly, full lips pressed into a hard line. But she couldn’t hide her quickened breathing or the way her pulse fluttered at the base of her lovely throat.

He kept his knife at the ready, hyper aware of her proximity. She was all coiled energy and defiance, ready to erupt into action at the slightest opportunity.

“Circle around the neighborhoods. Stay on quiet streets,” he told Paul gruffly, eyes never leaving the agent’s stormy gaze.

Her eyes flashed, and he felt a ridiculous urge to smooth the little furrow between her brows. He had to keep his wits about him and ignore her distracting nearness. Getting information was his sole focus ... no matter how aware of her he was.

It wouldn’t take long to get the information he needed from this agent, then they could drop her wherever she wanted.

“You are in so much trouble,” she warned, eyes flashing.

“Probably,” he agreed mildly. Grabbing her was a desperate move, but he couldn’t think of any other way to make her talk quickly. Subtle interrogation wasn’t his specialty. He left the talking to Bridger and Fenn. Usually, he just threatened people or knocked a few heads together.

He met her defiant gaze with a steady stare of his own. Hopefully they could handle this without violence. But one way or another, he was getting answers.

The woman shifted farther away from him, until she was crammed up against the door. “My backup’s going to start getting antsy.”

“Nice try.” He made a sympathetic face. “I know you’re flying solo.”

“Am not,” she insisted. “My partner probably already called for backup.”

“Doubtful. I swept the area before entering the restaurant. There was no one around. No fake utility vans. No other agents loitering nearby.”

Her lips thinned. “Doesn’t mean they aren’t on the way. You really think I’d go into a situation like that alone?”

“Yup.” He gave her an earnest look. “Whatever case you’re working, it seems off the books. Unofficial.”

“You don’t know anything about it.”

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“I know enough.” He let confidence fill his voice. “For one, a seasoned agent like you would never have let me get the drop on you if this was an authorized op.”

Her eyes widened fractionally before she masked it.

“It’s okay, I’ve been there,” he said gently. “Sometimes you gotta break the rules to get justice.”

Her gaze shuttered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He held her stare, unwilling to back down. “I think you do. And I think you know that I know it too.”

Her lips tightened. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“Fair enough. But I recognize that look in your eyes. You’re on a mission, and you won’t let anyone stop you. Not even your superiors.” He let understanding fill his tone. “Like I said. Been there.”

She looked away, jaw rigid.

He suppressed a smile. Getting through that prickly exterior was going to take some doing. Luckily, he’d always enjoyed a challenge.

She must be afraid, yet she was no pushover. No whining or bargaining for her freedom. She had a cool head and a sharp tongue. He had to admire that, even if she’d consider him an enemy for life after this.

Well, what was one more adversary? He'd certainly faced worse. For now, he needed information, and she clearly wasn't going to give it up easily. He'd have to get creative if he wanted answers.

And he'd have to do it fast. Now he knew she was on her own, probably running a totally unauthorized op, but he couldn't expect to hang onto a trained agent for long.

Even with the windows up, the smell of damp vegetation and fresh rain mingled with the scent of the agent's perfume. Mason tried to make out her features in the transient light from passing streetlights, but mostly all he could make out was the silhouette of her thick curls. He peered at her, wishing for better light. But the shadows cloaking them suited his purposes for now. All he needed was to gain her trust enough to learn why she was after Paul.

He kept his voice low. "I'm Mason Ortiz, retired SEAL, currently an operative with a private security firm, Redemption Incorporated. This dufus is my younger brother, Paul. I got a call from him earlier today asking for help. Sounds like he's found himself caught up in some trouble. Wrong place, wrong time kind of deal." He shot Paul a look in the rearview mirror. "Or so he says."

The woman's eyes never left his during his recitation. He could feel her soaking in the info. But instead of reciprocating, she let the silence grow.

An excellent technique.

Mason cleared his throat. "This is the part where you're supposed to tell me what you were doing back there."

The quip earned him a cute, tight-lipped smile. "I don't think so."

"You're not undercover," he guessed. "No agent would carry a real badge and ID on

an op. I'm willing to bet yours are in that purse."

The woman's eyes flashed. "Fine. I'm FBI, and no, I'm not undercover."

Mason admired her grit. "I appreciate your honesty. Why are you after my brother?"

She lifted her chin. "Need-to-know."

He nodded slowly. Getting full cooperation was apparently going to take more creativity. "How about we start with something easier. How about a name?"

"How about not?"

"I could just call you Candy if you'd prefer."

She gave him a death glare.

"No? How about I dip into your purse?"

"Go ahead. Won't hurt my feelings to add robbery to your growing list of charges."

Mason wracked his brain, trying to figure out how to get this woman to reveal why she was after Paul. He still didn't even know what kind of trouble his brother was in, only that this agent was connected somehow.

He scuffed a booted foot against the floorboard. "Fine. We'll start." He tapped Paul on the shoulder. "Tell me what you did."

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Paul held up his hands before quickly grabbing the wheel again. “I didn’t do anything. I just took a new job, that’s all. Everything was fine until ...” He trailed off, shoulders hunching.

Mason didn’t bother to hide his skepticism.

“No really,” Paul insisted. “All I did was take a great new job, the one I called you about like a month ago. Truck mechanic for a big company, Rain Bay. They run their own fleet, plus they handle logistics for a bunch of other trucking companies. Turns out, I was so good at it I got promoted last week.”

Mason was even more skeptical now. “That’s only a month into the position.”

“Three weeks, technically.” Pride replaced Paul’s troubled look for a second before fading quickly. “Anyway, that’s when things got weird.”

“Weird how?” Mason pressed.

Paul slowed the vehicle, turning down yet another empty side street. “I got moved up to the A team. They work in a whole separate warehouse. Everything there’s some huge secret. It took me a week to figure out why.” He paused, looking at the woman in the mirror.

She smiled faintly, her vibe steady and reassuring. “It’s okay. I think I know what you’re going to say.”

Paul tensed. “If I talk, I’m dead.” He slowed the car again, turning to meet Mason’s

gaze beseechingly. “I’m telling you, all I did was take a stupid job. I just took a job, man. A legit job for once. I didn’t start any trouble, I swear.” His voice wavered. “But I’m deep in it now. The company’s moving illegal merch. They’re not gonna let me leave. You gotta believe me.”

Mason studied his brother’s anxious face. He seemed genuinely afraid. Was it possible he was telling the truth this time? That for once, Paul wasn’t the cause of his own chaos?

The woman interrupted his thoughts. “He’s right. That’s why I was tailing him. Your brother’s in danger.”

8

“What do you mean, Paul’s in danger?” Mason narrowed his eyes at Avery, making him look even more threatening.

Not that she was concerned at this point.

She studied Mason, then Paul, then Mason again, taking in their similarities and differences. Now that she knew they were related, she could see the resemblance. While Paul’s hair curled in the mist in thick, dark waves, Mason’s longer locks were far lighter. In the dim light, they looked more brown than blond, but she suspected the sun would quickly create golden streaks. Different coloring, for sure, but both had the same, intense green eyes.

Paul was a shade taller, but easily twenty pounds lighter, in every sense of that word.

Mason carried himself like a warrior—shoulders back, spine straight, a coiled intensity in his movements. A protector’s energy radiated from him. Paul lacked that gravitas. She knew his type well. Sweet, but not overly motivated or responsible.

Easily swayed.

Not Mason. Once he set his mind on a goal, moving him would take a mountain of dynamite, and more luck than she could ever hope for.

Paul started driving again. She calculated her chances of escape. Slim to none. Mason wouldn't hurt her, but he'd easily outrun her. And his brother would likely assist. No way she could outpace two fit males.

She might as well make the best of this situation. This could still be her opportunity to turn Paul and gain an inside ally. As long as Mason didn't whisk his brother away first.

She had to talk fast and win them both over.

She gestured at Paul. "I want to hear the details, then I'll explain." She tipped her head at Mason. "Special Agent Avery Ellis, by the way."

The tiny concession earned her an outsized grin.

"Agent Ellis." Mason acknowledged her introduction, then tapped his brother on the shoulder. "Go on. Tell us the full story."

Paul explained how he'd gotten hired by Rain Bay Trucking as a mechanic. The pay and state-of-the-art facility impressed him.

"Then, last week, they sent me to another warehouse I didn't even know existed," Paul continued. "The bosses there gave me a promotion right away. Bigger raise, better hours. Only catch was I couldn't talk about work to anyone. I mean like seriously, no one."

“Why’d you call me?” Mason asked.

“The first warehouse is on the level,” Paul said. “As far as I can tell, it’s a regular shipping facility, but at the other warehouse they’re bringing in stolen goods.”

Avery jumped in quickly. “You see any paperwork proving that?”

“No,” Paul admitted. “It’s just a feeling. Everything’s on complete lockdown. We’re not allowed to open the cargo holds of the trucks without a supervisor present, or a security guard. Weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. The wrenches, like me, that work the incoming trucks never work on outgoing vans. And the forklift guys who unload the cargo don’t talk to anybody. I mean literally. I’ve never seen anyone in the breakroom but the guys who work alongside me. And even with them it’s ... weird.” He shook his head.

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Energized now, Avery leaned forward. “Weird how?”

He shrugged his thin shoulders, shooting his brother a look.

“What kinds of goods are we talking?” Mason asked.

Paul shuffled nervously. “There’s a lot of different stuff. I try not to look too closely, you know? All I can tell you is the rigs I’ve worked on so far have been carrying pallets of pharmaceuticals. Totally full loads.”

Now she had two independent reports confirming the med angle. “They’re counterfeit. Or stolen.”

Mason scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Sounds like you’ve been investigating for a while.”

“A couple of weeks. I’m just starting to make real progress.” Because she might have another inside guy now.

She met Paul’s gaze in the mirror. “Have you talked about this with anybody at work, maybe in the breakroom or over a beer?”

Paul jerked back, eyes wide. “No way. I like breathing.”

She believed him. He seemed genuinely scared.

A little shiver of triumph warmed her. She’d been right about Rain Bay Trucking.

And she understood why Mason had taken such drastic measures to protect his brother. Given what she knew of the company's sketchy background, Paul was in real danger.

Mason turned to her with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about all this. Just tell us where you want to be dropped off. I'll make sure Paul stays hidden until you wrap up your case."

"No."

He cocked his head. "No, you don't want to be dropped off?"

"No, your brother's not disappearing. Not yet."

The stunning SEAL rolled his shoulders back. "Yeah, he is. Paul's out. Effective immediately."

She bit her lip, searching for a way to make him see her dilemma. "Paul has to go back. I need someone on the inside. I don't have time to find another informant. He's the only one who can do this."

Mason stared her down. "Not gonna happen. I'm happy to help. My team, too. This is exactly the kind of thing we do. But not my brother. He doesn't have the skill set."

"Hey—" Paul protested.

"That's non-negotiable." Mason cut him off.

Yeah? Well so was her mission.

Paul threw her a look in the mirror. His eyes gleamed. He was totally interested. If

Mason wasn't there, he'd agree in a hot second. So how to convince his over-protective brother?

"If he runs, he'll never be safe," she argued. "You know that, right?"

Mason pressed his lips together, unwilling to concede.

Not a problem. She was just as stubborn. Maybe more so.

"The people fronting the money for this kind of operation aren't fooling around," she added, focusing on Paul. "They've killed before and they'll do it again. If you disappear, you'll never be able to stop running."

Paul's body tensed. "You mean like join witness protection or something?"

"Pretty much."

Mason clapped a hand on the back of his neck and squeezed.

Good. Maybe she was giving him a headache. He deserved it for messing up her plans.

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“No,” Mason argued. “It won’t be like witness protection.”

“It’ll be worse.” Avery gestured at Paul. “He’s not helping the government. He’ll have zero official support.”

Mason growled softly. “He won’t need any.”

“Whatever you say,” she agreed placidly.

“I’ve got resources,” Mason announced. “My team and I’ll have no trouble keeping him safe.”

Frustration constricted her throat. There was confidence and then there was megalomania. She’d been on this case for a couple of weeks, and even she didn’t know who pulled the strings. “You have no idea what you’re up against here,” she insisted.

Mason shook his head. “Give me five minutes. My team’ll have—”

Avery cut in. “That mechanic Paul replaced? He’s dead. And he’s not the first one. Rain Bay silences liabilities.”

Mason’s jaw tightened. “Exactly why Paul’s not going back there.”

Ignoring the determined SEAL, she focused on his brother. “It’s exactly why you need to. I need hard evidence to take to my superiors. The Bureau will reopen the case and you can jet. Just another day or two. Help me put these people out of

business and you'll get your life back."

Now Mason's mouth dropped open. "Get his life back? You're crazy if you think I'm letting him go back there." He crossed his arms. "He's done, effective immediately. The threat level is way too high."

Paul interrupted stubbornly. "I'll do it."

Mason scowled, voice hardening. "No. You won't."

"Yeah, actually I will." Paul focused on her. "He's my brother, not my daddy. I'm in."

The rugged SEAL looked like he'd just swallowed a stone. He raised his arms, anchoring his large hands against the front and back seats, as if tempted to shove them apart. Then he pinned her with a steely look. "The only way this goes down is if I'm involved. Where Paul goes, I go. Which makes me your new partner, Agent Ellis."

Avery hesitated. Both the Ortiz men were unknown quantities. Especially Mason. But one glance at his resolute expression and she knew he wasn't backing down.

He glared at her, jaw tight. "Your choice."

Paul slapped the steering wheel. "Yeah man, let's kick some butt and take some names."

Avery turned away, staring out at the rain-slick street. Not a contingency she'd expected. She wasn't big on partners, especially one she had no idea if she could trust. Ortiz might rat her out to her boss before she could get the go-ahead. Or take matters into his own hands.

He didn't look like a hothead, more the opposite, actually. But who knew? People did strange things under pressure.

Just how desperate was she to make a case against Rain Bay?

Very. Even more so confirming that they were smuggling meds. Were the drugs even real? If so, they weren't getting to their intended recipients. If they were fake, people who needed medications were ingesting who knew what.

Devastating outcomes either way.

She studied the older Ortiz from under lowered lashes. The man did have a presence. If he was legit, having an overqualified partner might not be the worst thing.

It wasn't like she had much choice. Without Paul on the inside, her investigation was pretty much dead in the water anyway.

She lifted a silent prayer to her Savior and took a leap of faith. "Fine. But I have a couple conditions of my own."

Mason looked slightly stunned by her audacity.

"Number one. We do this by the book," she insisted. "Whatever evidence we come across has to be gathered legally. I can't risk the case being thrown out on a technicality. Are we clear?"

"Crystal." He rocked back on his heels and crossed his arms. "The second?"

"No team. I shouldn't even let you tag along, let alone your team."

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He seemed to chew on that for a minute. “Paul, grab her gun for me.” He nodded toward the glove compartment. Once he had the Glock back in hand, he spun the service weapon around and held it out toward Avery, grip first. “No team. You’ve got a deal, Agent.”

The metal was warm from his touch, igniting unexpected feelings within her. Working with Mason Ortiz would be a challenge in more ways than one.

9

At Mason’s direction, Paul circled back to the tavern and rolled the rental car up next to his battered pickup truck. While Avery and Paul unbuckled their seatbelts, Mason stared across the parking lot at the neon sign above the tavern door, thoughts churning.

Having his brother placed in danger like this left an acrid taste in his mouth. Mason knew better than anyone the horror of watching helplessly as loved ones faced unknown threats.

He tapped his thumb on the armrest. Maybe he shouldn’t have made that deal with Avery. It was Paul’s life they were gambling with. Not a good feeling. Plus, though his initial impressions of the woman were positive, he had no idea how she’d react going forward. She’d handled his abduction way better than he had any right to expect, but her reaction might be way different when faced with an enemy willing to do anything to get their way: through her, around her, or straight over her dead body.

He blew out a breath. Thinking gave him a headache. Bridger and Tai and the others

usually handled that. He specialized in action.

Which was why he had no intention of leaving his team in the dark on this. He'd been careful when he agreed to Avery's terms. He'd keep his word, like he always did. He promised not to call the team to Seattle. He hadn't promised not to loop them in.

Which he would do the minute he got back to his motel.

Paul opened the driver's door, activating the dome light. As he unfolded himself from the vehicle, Avery opened her door.

Mason's watch beeped an alert, jolting him from his dark spiral. The bug detector app Paige insisted he install was going haywire. A flush of anger fired through him.

Irritation rode him hard. He should've known Miss Special Agent hadn't put all her cards on the table. He grabbed her wrist. "Hold up."

She turned on him, teeth bared, and yanked back hard. "Let go."

He dug his fingers into her wrist, waggling his free hand impatiently. "Hand me your purse."

She tried to tug free, irritation flashing in her eyes. "I said let go."

"You're wired," he accused bluntly.

One eye on the furious agent, Mason released her and exited on his side of the car. She hadn't raised her weapon. After he'd disarmed her so easily earlier, he doubted that she would. But mad as he was, he almost welcomed another tussle.

He moved away from the car, eyeing his watch display. But as he walked, the signal

weakened. It wasn't coming from her.

Relief flooded him. He shouldn't care, but knowing she wasn't trying to scam them torched a whole layer of anger. He returned to the vehicle. "Sorry."

She climbed out on her side. "Yeah right."

The details of the timeline tumbled through Mason's head, until the picture cleared. Of course, it wasn't her. His tracker would have gone off the minute he first encountered her. Mason scrubbed a hand over his jaw, puzzled. He should have thought of that. Now he'd interjected even more distrust into an already sketchy partnership.

Something he could stress over later.

If she wasn't the source, where was the signal coming from?

He scanned the parking lot. There were still plenty of vehicles. Loud music and drunken laughter poured from the restaurant behind them. They'd have company any minute.

He waved his wrist around until he pinpointed the source. Paul's truck.

"Unlock it," he ordered, his voice low.

His brother scrambled to obey.

Mason elbowed him out of the way and yanked open the driver's door. He leaned in, trying to avoid the pile of used fast food wrappers lining the back edge of the old bench seat like a litter of leaves. It didn't take two seconds to track the signal to the base of the steering column. Shoving the food wrappers toward the passenger door,

he pulled out his phone and punched the flashlight on, shining the beam on a small black square. He snapped a couple photos before backing out of the truck and shutting the door.

Both Avery and Paul opened their mouths, but he held up a hand, shaking his head hard. The bug was clearly a tracker, but what if it was also a listening device? It looked too small, but he'd send the photos off to their tech expert, Paige, for analysis anyway. Until she confirmed its capabilities, they'd assume the worst.

Finger to his lips, he motioned Paul and Avery back to the outer edge of the darkened parking lot. As they walked, he texted the photos to Paige with a brief explanation.

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Avery's face was etched with concern. "There could be more in Paul's apartment."

"No doubt."

Paul looked anxiously between them. "What do we do about them?"

"We leave them," Mason and Avery said in unison.

He couldn't help smiling at that. What was that quote Tai muttered all the time?

Great minds think alike. And fools rarely differ.

He hoped they tipped the scales at the front end of those wise words, but only time would tell.

Paul's mouth dropped open. "Leave them? Are you serious?"

"If we take them, whoever's tracking you will know," Avery cautioned Paul. "Touch them and you might as well disappear now."

Mason caught his brother's eye. "She's right. We need them to think you're clueless."

His choice of words drew a sour laugh from Paul. "Like that'll be hard, right?"

Usually, his bro's hangdog demeanor got under Mason's skin, but this time, all he felt was compassion. Paul seemed lost and afraid.

Shouldering her purse, Avery pointed at the back of the restaurant. “I’m gonna head home. You,” she pointed at Paul, “get yourself to work on time tomorrow and do exactly what you normally do, okay?”

Paul hesitated before nodding.

Mason edged close enough to loom over her. “Where do you want to meet up tomorrow? We’ve got a lot of planning to do.”

She fished out her car keys. “Hattie’s Diner on East Ninth.”

“Good food?”

“Legendary.” She backed away. “Bring your wallet. You’re buying.”

Mason laughed as he watched her walk away.

He wanted to believe in her, and not entirely because she was smart and cute and brave. But he wasn’t about to trust her.

One thing he knew for certain—he’d be watching her every move until she proved herself. A fed could be a strong ally, but the stakes were too high to simply hope for the best.

For Paul’s sake, he had to be vigilant. No matter how intriguing his new “partner” might be.

10

The morning sunstreamed through the diner’s windows, warming the vinyl booths and coaxing curls of mist from the damp pavement outside.

Across the table, Mason polished off his plate of biscuits and gravy. He ate with military precision, focused and economical. Yet somehow, he still managed to look intimidating even while enjoying his food. Since sitting down twenty minutes ago, he'd charmed the waitress and cook alike.

To her, though, he gave nothing but cool politeness. Fine. She didn't want a partner any more than he seemed to.

Pushing away her bagel, Avery met his gaze. "We need a strategy."

Mason chased the last of the gravy around his plate with his last bite of biscuit. Once finished, he folded his hands on the table and looked at her directly. "Ten bucks says you already have a plan."

She bristled, though she wasn't sure why. Of course she was prepared. But his noticing grated on her for some reason.

"I did have a plan, before you barged in."

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He ignored the jab. “What kind of evidence do you need to make your case?”

“Testimony won’t be enough. Their lawyers would shred your brother on the stand.”

Mason made a dismissive sound. “Wouldn’t be necessary. He’d be dead long before any trial started.”

“No joke. I need hard proof to get traction here.” She leaned forward, serious again. “So let’s figure out how to get it.”

He stared her down, his green eyes radiating intensity. “Tell me what you need.”

They bantered back and forth, compiling a list of must-have evidence Avery needed—mainly proof of the cargo coming in on large container trucks and some smaller, local delivery trucks—and whatever cargo was heading out on the constant flow of UPS and Fed-Ex vehicles leaving the facility. The trucks that came and went were the real deal. As far as she could tell after running their plates, they were all running legitimately.

“I need to get a look at that cargo.”

Mason rolled his eyes. “Well, I need to talk to Santa Claus, but that’s not gonna happen. Paul’s not allowed to have his phone on the warehouse floor. No way he can take photos. Plus, if they caught him?—”

“I know. I wasn’t going to ask him to take that kind of a risk. I just want him to give me info on how things work inside. Once I know how many employees work his

shift, their jobs, etc., I figured I could come up with a plan.”

“Makes sense.” Mason nodded at her untouched bagel. “You gonna eat that?”

She pushed the plate toward him.

“I have a plan, too,” he announced as he slathered half a bagel with cream cheese.

“You wanna fill me in on it there, cowboy?”

He chewed for a minute. “I’m more of a lumberjack than a cowboy, just FYI.”

“What’s the diff?” She couldn’t believe she even asked.

He aimed the bagel at her. “Small stuff. Cowboys ride to the rescue. Lumberjacks build a cabin, stock the firewood, prepare stew and then whisk the heroine away before the danger even starts. No need for rescue.”

The temperature in the diner went up a few thousand degrees. Or maybe it was just her. She cleared her throat. “Are you going to share this plan?”

He pushed the plate away from him and sat back, a satisfied gleam in his eyes. “I ran your investigation by my people last night.”

“You what?”

“Don’t stress out. We’ve all had higher security clearance than the entire FBI, including the director. Nobody on my team’s going to rat you out.”

“You should have discussed this with me first.”

He raised a dark eyebrow. “That’s not how I roll. You’re putting my brother in danger. I’ll do what I have to do.”

When he put it that way, the man had a point. Not that she’d let him know she agreed. She made an impatient gesture with her hand. “We can argue about that later. What did you tell them, and what did they find out?”

He gave her a long look before answering. Under other circumstances, she might have called it smoldering, but given their non-existent relationship, she guessed it was more of an I-hate-this-but-I’m-trapped-into-working-with-you-for-now vibe.

He lined his napkin up with the edge of the table, clearly considering his words. “They’re still diving into the company’s background, but they agree the deaths of those three men seem suspicious. Highly statistically unlikely at the very least. There’s also some question about where Rain Bay Trucking got the infusion of cash it needed to build that fancy new warehouse. There’s no record of a new investor.”

“So you’re thinking they used illegal money?”

“That’s what my team thinks.”

Even though Mason’s team didn’t have any definitive info, she loved the idea that there were professionals doing the background work that she had neither the time nor the resources to conduct on her own. Once the Bureau got onboard with her investigation, she’d have all the backup she needed. Until then, Mason’s team would be a welcome addition. As long as they stayed in the background.

She smiled at him across the table. “So for now, we see what your brother can come up with.”

His strong, tan fingers dug into the tabletop. His face hardened and he swung his gaze

back to her. “You’ve got two days, then I’m pulling him out.”

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“Two days! We didn’t agree on a timeline.”

“This isn’t a negotiation.”

Her first instinct was to turn him down flat and leave. But that would leave her back at square one, with no insider info. And less time on the clock. Not a great strategy.

Two days would give her time to change Mason’s mind. Besides, if Paul couldn’t get the info she needed in two days, how could she be sure he’d get it in two weeks?

It was now or never.

“Fine. Two days.” She slid out of the booth. “Saddle up, or grab your axe or whatever.”

He was on his feet before she could blink. “Where we headed?”

“That’s need-to-know. You got a jacket? It’s gonna be wet later.” She slapped a hand down on the check and slid it toward him. “Don’t forget to pay on the way out.”

11

“I’ve got one question.”

Mason lay prone on the rooftop next to Avery, binoculars trained on the warehouse while container trucks rumbled inside.

Avery continued to look through her own binos. “Just one?”

“For now. If this investigation is off-books, how’re you hiding it from your SAC?” Avery’s supervisor, or Special Agent in Charge, would expect updates, and face-to-face meetings, on her current cases.

“I’m on vacation.”

Elbows digging into the tarpaper, Mason refocused his binos on the warehouse. “Some vacay.”

“This is about as good as it gets. Plus, I hate vacations.”

He couldn’t resist a long look at the pretty agent. “Me, too.” He shuddered silently. Too much of his own company was ... not the best.

He turned his attention back to the action. Ten trucks, each hauling a well-used cargo container had entered. So far none had exited, which made sense if they were offloading cargo to redistribute, as Paul described.

No delivery vans had left from the other side of the warehouse, either. Again, totally normal. From what Avery said, the stuff didn’t stay in the warehouse long. The cargo got delivered in the early morning hours, and then went out as legit UPS or Fed-Ex deliveries later in the day.

Another sign that Agent Ellis was correct about the smuggling. Most warehouses the size of Rain Bay’s facility had deliveries in and out around the clock. Whatever was being processed here was either too dangerous—or too expensive—to risk leaving it sit too long. Hiring enough security to guard huge shipments of expensive contraband, like drugs or jewels, would attract too much attention. They’d need a private army to truly secure a building the size of Rain Bay’s warehouse.

So don't leave anything around for thieves to grab. Clever. And dangerous for Paul. And Avery. Mason preferred to deal with stupid criminals. Far less risk that way.

Despite the sunshine, worry ate at him. He should be enjoying this—hunkered down with a talented, beautiful woman who considered roof surveillance a fun date activity.

Another time, when his brother's life wasn't hanging by a thread, Mason could appreciate a day like this. But right now, all he could think about was Paul, hoping he was okay inside that warehouse.

Mason knew logically his brother was fine for the moment. But his bro was no professional. He had always had a big mouth and quick temper. Odds were good that Paul would slip up, say the wrong thing and blow this whole op.

Finally, a truck with an empty bed exited. While he could see through the building's rolled-up door, Mason focused on the interior of the warehouse, cataloguing potential entry points, planning how he could breach the warehouse and extract Paul if needed. Not that he'd have any warning if his brother was in trouble. Paul couldn't access his phone while working.

All Mason could do was watch and wait. And stew.

He shifted restlessly, gravel digging into his elbows. This passive surveillance went against every protective instinct. But he had to trust Paul could keep his cool and gather the intel they needed.

At least Agent Ellis had proven savvy so far. If anyone could build a case off his brother's limited evidence, it was her.

As long as she didn't get them all killed first.

He snuck a glance at her silhouette, hair whipping in the breeze. Restless energy wafted off of her. He'd served alongside too many impulsive hotshots not to recognize the signs. Agent Avery Ellis was a maverick, with everything—both good and bad—that label implied.

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People often mistook him for the same, but his teammates knew differently. Unless forced to by circumstance, he was deliberate. Contained. Precise in his planning. Every good sniper had the same qualities. And face it, he was more than good.

Mason's thoughts turned to what his team had uncovered about Avery Ellis last night. Hired by the FBI five years ago, she'd earned commendations for valor and investigative skills. But most telling—she was a Bureau kid, following in her legendary father's footsteps.

That set off alarm bells for Mason. He had to admire her dedication, choosing such a dangerous career after experiencing profound loss. On the other hand, having something to prove often created hotheads prone to emotional decisions.

He studied her profile as she scanned the warehouse complex below. The determined set of her jaw was all too familiar. He saw the same stubborn tilt on Paul's face whenever his brother insisted he had a foolproof get-rich scheme.

But Paul's half-baked plans always exploded in his face. If Avery was blinded by some quest to avenge her father, this whole op could blow up too. Mason needed her clear-eyed, not chasing ghosts.

He cleared his throat. "Tell me about your dad."

She stiffened, eyes never leaving the warehouse. "What about him?"

"How'd he die?" Mason asked gently.

Her throat worked. “Killed breaching a hostage site. Took a bullet saving a bunch of local cops.”

Mason nodded, hearing the echo of old pain in her voice.

She looked at him then, eyes overbright. “Serving is worth the risk. I won’t let his sacrifice, or anyone else’s, be for nothing.”

Message received. Her drive came from a noble place, however reckless it seemed. Together they would do this right: smart, mostly legal, and as safe as possible.

But he wouldn’t let her honorable crusade turn into a death trap for Paul.

Or a suicide mission for one beautiful, determined Special Agent.

A sound from Avery interrupted his daydream. Crouching low, Mason hurried over to her vantage point and lay flat, peering through his binoculars. “What is it?”

She pointed at the warehouse exit. “That’s not normal.”

A vehicle with blacked out windows tore out from the delivery loading docks.

“Definitely unusual,” Mason confirmed.

Alarm shot through him. Paul.

He grabbed his infrared binoculars—the tinted windows obscured nothing to the special optics. He counted three men—the driver and two in back. None of them Paul.

Avery started to rise, intent on pursuit.

Mason stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Nope. No way you’ll get down to your car fast enough.”

“But—”

“It’s not worth alerting them.”

She glared at him, pulling her arm out of his hold, but the anger seemed to fade quickly.

Yeah. Hothead. He’d have to watch that.

He ripped open his backpack and handed her a thermos of hot coffee. “Don’t drink it all,” he ordered.

He stretched his legs, twisting from side to side to keep his back limber while he pulled out his phone to text Paige. She’d have a trace on those plates in a second.

Avery put the thermos top to her lips. He watched, mesmerized, as the steam from the hot brew bathed her face. Between her beauty and her fire, the woman did intrigue him. He could see himself with a woman like her. Driven. Committed.

And just the right amount of crazy.

Ghost stood on the terrace of the high-priced flat, the golden light of the setting sun casting a warm glow over the landscape. He lifted his glass of whiskey, watching the amber liquid catch the fading rays. The drink of the newly rich, he mused, a wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Of old white guys, and street kids like him, who made good.

The space was stupid expensive, but the neighborhood was ultra-exclusive. No one who knew him in his other role would run into him here. A great place to do business. The luxury intimidated, and besides, he liked it.

The sound of hurried footsteps interrupted his thoughts. Javier rushed out onto the terrace, his face etched with concern. “The bookkeeper didn’t admit to anything. He swore he hasn’t talked to anybody about the op.” Disgust laced his voice.

Ghost took his time putting down his glass, the crystal clinking softly against the metal table. He turned to face Javier, his eyes narrowing. “You finished it, right?”

Javier nodded, his shoulders tensing. “Course.”

“Left him where he’d be found easy?” Ghost’s voice was low, a dangerous undercurrent running through his words. Offing the mechanics had been a message to the wrenches. This warning went out to his new partner. Stenberg might believe he ran the show, but he was about to be proven wrong.

Cooperate, or die.

Actually, cooperate, then die was a better fit. Stenberg wouldn't outlive his usefulness, either.

"Like you said." Javier shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his unease palpable.

"Good." Ghost picked up his glass again, taking a slow sip of the whiskey. The smooth liquid burned a path down his throat, a familiar warmth spreading through his chest.

Javier continued to look worried, his fingers tapping nervously against his thigh. "So now we don't have an insider. That gonna be a problem?"

Not even close. But he couldn't let Javier in on his biggest secret. Not yet. Probably not ever.

You never knew who you could really trust. He knew that from intimate experience. Take Javier. He liked the kid. A lot. But who knew what the kid had going on behind his back?

Because everyone had a hustle.

He knocked back another slug of whiskey, blinking hard against the burn. "You worry too much."

Using the gang's money to front Rain Bay's "expansion" had earned him a seat at the table. Now he planned to take the whole thing. Offing the bookkeeper was only smart business. He didn't need the guy anymore.

And it would terrify Stenberg. Win-win.

Ghost gazed out over the sprawling city below. The twinkling lights of the buildings and streets lined the horizon beneath the darkening sky, like fat chains of diamonds strung along the base of the mountains. The cool evening breeze ruffled his hair, carrying with it the distant sounds of traffic and sirens. He inhaled deeply, the scent of the city mixing with the earthy aroma of his whiskey.

He turned back to Javier. “Be ready when I give the word. No loose ends.”

Javier nodded, his posture straightening. “No loose ends.”

Ghost dismissed him with a wave of his hand, his attention already turning to the next phase of his plan. As Javier’s footsteps faded away, Ghost allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. The wealthy suburbs of Seattle were a long way from the two-bedroom place on the fringe of skid row, and now, with the world at his fingertips, he was determined to seize every opportunity that came his way.

He raised his glass to the dying sun, a toast to his own success. The amber liquid glowed like molten gold, a symbol of the wealth and power he had fought so hard for.

Another couple days, and his net worth—and his power—would blow sky high.

The best part? No one would see it coming.

13

That evening, Avery bustled around her cozy houseboat on Lake Union, tidying up before Mason arrived with Paul to go over the day’s surveillance.

She’d just finished showering after their long day spying from the rooftop. The hot water had finally chased away the chill from her bones. Too bad the pleasant heat couldn’t chase away her frustration with this case.

All she could do in the moment was pray, and hope the Lord would see fit to light the way forward. Prayer lifted, she hurried around the small house, straightening pillows and dusting shelves, but as the minutes ticked by, her nerves grew. She rarely had guests over. A couple girlfriends here and there, but for the most part, she joined friends and family at their places. The older folks didn't like making the drive over to her side of town, and her contemporaries all had young kids, and bigger houses.

The charming craftsman-style houseboat had been in her family for generations, inherited from her grandmother. With its beautiful woodwork and leaded glass windows, it was a beloved retreat for Avery. Just not the most spotless one.

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She wasn't much of a housekeeper on her best days. And FBI agents didn't exactly major in Martha Stewart-esque homemaking skills. But suddenly having Mason see her private space made her anxious to spiff up the place.

Which was ridiculous. This was a planning session, not a date. No need to fluff pillows or hide the stack of paperwork covering the coffee table.

Avery paused by the sad little houseplant she couldn't keep alive. She shifted it from the table to the counter and back again. "Get a grip," she told herself. She was here to take down a criminal empire, not impress some guy.

It wasn't like a dead plant would amaze Mason anyway. With a sigh, she tossed the plant in the kitchen trash and resolved to keep focused on the investigation.

Her inconvenient attraction to the terse SEAL didn't matter. When this was over, he'd be back to his globe-trotting missions. Why that didn't sound as appealing as it had about twenty-four hours ago, she had no idea.

Mason and Paul arrived carrying barbecue takeout from her favorite local spot. Avery's stomach rumbled appreciatively.

Avery set out the takeout containers, and they dished up generous portions. "I'm guessing everything went okay with the pickup?"

They decided Paul should drive to a local Indian casino he frequented for dinner and slip out the back, where Mason awaited. That way, his vehicle wouldn't be travelling anywhere that might alert Rain Bay's surveillance team.

Mason nodded, swallowing a bite of brisket. “Paul slipped out the rear exit right on time, just like we planned. I was waiting in the alley to pick him up.”

“Nice work,” Avery said.

Mason smiled. “It is coming together pretty nicely so far.”

Her cheeks flushed at the compliment. She was suddenly glad she hadn’t turned on every light in the place, opting for a cozy glow.

Paul glanced around the snug cabin as he ate. “This is a great place.”

Mason grunted in agreement. Or so Avery decided.

“It’s been in my family for generations,” she said. “My great-grandmother actually grew up on this boat when it was still used for fishing. She lived here her whole life and left it to my grandmother, who left it to me.”

Mason eyed the scrollwork on the beams. “Must take a lot of upkeep.”

Avery laughed. “A serious understatement. I can disassemble a Glock blindfolded but keeping this thing floating, and tidy, isn’t in my wheelhouse.”

Mason grinned, a stunning sight. “Copy that. Give me a sniper rifle over a Swiffer any day.”

They both laughed, but Mason soon turned his attention back to his food.

After eating a few more bites, Mason updated Avery on the blacked-out SUV. His team had tracked it to a self-storage facility, where it went inside for an hour before exiting with two men in front.

“No way to know if passenger three was still inside,” he said. “And no justification yet to get cops involved since we can’t prove criminal activity.”

Frustration rose in Avery’s chest. Another dead end, at least for now.

Paul spoke up as they ate. “I didn’t see who took off in that SUV. I was clear on the other side of the warehouse then.”

He looked pale and tired. Mason watched him with concern.

Avery felt the stress too as their window of opportunity dwindled. If they couldn’t substantiate the criminal enterprise soon, Rain Bay would continue operating with impunity.

She had to find an angle, something to force official action. As a federal agent, she should be better equipped for this. Instead she felt powerless, reduced to skulking around with no backup.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Paul dug into his pocket and then held out his hand where a few white pills rested in his palm. “I thought these might be helpful.”

Mason’s expression darkened. “Tell me you didn’t swipe those from inside the warehouse.”

“Seriously?” Paul scoffed. “No one saw me. How stupid do you think I am?”

“You really want me to answer that?” Mason replied.

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Avery wanted to smack him in the head. Couldn't he see his brother was trying to help?

Paul's face fell at the criticism before he covered it with a cocky grin. "I did a pro job. I grabbed them off the floor of the trailer I was repairing. Stupid driver tagged the corner of a building. One of the pallets inside broke. There were little white pills all over the floor. Easy to pocket a couple. No cameras and no witnesses."

"Uh huh," Mason said skeptically. "Just be more careful, alright? One slip and this whole op blows up."

"I'm not an idiot," Paul muttered.

Avery knew that longing for approval all too well.

"What?" Mason asked, clearly noting her disapproval.

She bit back a rude reply. Mason was touchy enough as it was. Unlikely he'd appreciate relationship advice from her. Or anyone.

She plucked a pill from Paul's palm. "Let's see what these are. Might be just what we need."

As she researched the markings on her laptop, Paul shot her a grateful look. Her distraction had been welcome, even if the brothers' complicated dynamic ran deep.

In less than a minute, she had IDed the pills. "Wow. These are expensive." She eyed

the two men. “They’re a specialized form of statins, used by patients who can’t take normal cholesterol meds.” She paused for effect. “A month’s prescription runs three to four thousand dollars.”

“A full pallet would be worth millions. Multiple millions,” Mason calculated.

“Do you think they’re real?” Paul asked.

Avery stared at the pill in her hand. “Doesn’t matter. If they’re counterfeit, they’re still worth millions.”

Paul stared at the pills in his hand, mouth open. Understanding brightened his eyes. “Because people will think they’re real.”

“Exactly.” Avery turned the pill over in her fingers. Her instincts had been right about the criminal activity here. Whether stolen or fake, these drugs represented massive illegal profits.

She met Mason’s gaze, seeing her own excitement mirrored there.

“I know you don’t want to alert the Bureau yet,” Mason said, “but I can find us a confidential lab here in Seattle. It won’t be hard to get those analyzed.”

That she’d have to think on. Paul was a civilian, so the fact that he took the pills wouldn’t necessarily preclude them from being used as evidence. Maybe.

She considered the legalities. But what did she care? At this stage, she wasn’t building a case for the attorney general, she just needed enough facts to goad Ryan into convincing the higher ups to re-authorize her investigation.

She smiled gratefully. “That’s a sound plan.”

Mason set down his fork. “I’ll text my people. We should be able to drop off the evidence first thing in the morning.”

The three of them sat in charged silence as the implications sank in. This pill sample was the hard evidence they’d desperately needed. Part of it, anyway. Now, she just had to prove that it was either counterfeit or stolen.

The sample also proved the danger to Paul was escalating rapidly. She’d suspected the trucking company was involved in transporting some kind of contraband, but pharmaceuticals? They might as well have been dealing with illicit drugs.

Mason’s gaze was granite as he stared her down. “I’ll hang around as long as you want me, but Paul works one more day to wrap things up, then he’s done.”

Fear constricted her throat. She should argue, insist they needed longer, but the words died inside her. One look at Mason’s implacable expression crushed any debate.

Honestly, he was right. The risks were too great now.

“Okay,” she conceded softly. “One more day.”

Paul started to argue, but Mason cut him off. “Not negotiable. We get what we can tomorrow, then you’re out.”

The gravity of their situation pressed down on Avery. After tomorrow, things would come to a head, for better or worse.

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Mason stood in Avery's cozy houseboat, a thundercloud of tension roiling overhead despite the tranquil view of black water and glittering shoreline outside.

Paul was pounding away at him, arguing against Mason's decree that tomorrow was his last day undercover at the warehouse. "I can handle this longer if I need to," Paul insisted. "If there's more evidence I can get I want to stay."

Mason folded his arms across his chest. "Too dangerous. You're done after tomorrow."

"I'm not five," Paul shot back.

Mason shifted uncomfortably, not wanting Avery to witness this family discord. He kept his voice low. "It's my job to watch your six. Don't fight me on this."

But as usual, the guy refused to back down. "I can make my own choices."

"Not on my watch, you can't." Frustration mounting, Mason glanced at Avery. He hated airing their dirty laundry in front of her.

Paul followed his gaze and muttered, "I knew I shouldn't have called you for help."

Mason scrubbed a hand over his face, working to control his temper. Keeping Paul safe had to be the priority, popular or not. If that drove the wedge between them deeper, so be it.

Before the strained silence could drag on, Avery's phone chimed with an alert. She

scanned it quickly.

“A body was just discovered in Tacoma. Adult male, matches the description of our mystery passenger.” She raised her eyes to Mason’s. “This could be it.”

Instantly Mason was all business, argument with Paul forgotten. “Location?”

“The industrial district, not far from that self-storage facility,” Avery replied. “They already have an ID. Vic’s name was Rohit Sharma.”

Paul paled. “There’s a guy by that name who works in the Rain Bay office. Same first name at least. Nobody really uses their last name there. The management doesn’t like it. But how many Rohits can there be here, right?”

Mason’s gut twisted. Exactly.

Avery pulled up a photo of the body and showed them.

Paul’s jaw tightened. He gave the image a quick glance before looking away. “That’s definitely him. He works ...worked... in the back office. I don’t know what he did there, but that’s the guy.”

Mason put a steadying hand on his brother’s shoulder, exchanging an ominous look with Avery. “Sloppy work.”

“No kidding.” Avery looked puzzled. “We’re surrounded by water. Not hard to make a body disappear.”

“Unless they wanted to send a message,” Mason said darkly.

The implication made his blood run cold. Rain Bay clearly had no qualms killing

potential leaks. And they wanted their partners and employees to know it.

Mason met Avery's steely eyes. Come morning, they'd find a way to get a look at that cargo. Then he'd persuade Paul to disappear.

First, though, he was getting Paul and Avery to a safer location. His intuition was knocking. Hard. Whoever was behind this operation had money and resources. No way they wouldn't be aware of Avery's initial investigation. It was possible they were the ones who got the mission cancelled.

Highly likely, actually. If he were a betting man, he'd put money on that.

He pulled up a mental map of his many safe houses on the West Coast, and winced. Amazingly, he had none within even a couple hours' drive of Seattle. Unlike Tai and Bridger, he'd never spent much time in the Pacific Northwest. He preferred desert, or high mountains. Lakes and creeks and dirt roads that stretched for miles.

So, yeah, he'd have to create a safehouse on the fly.

Or borrow one.

He grunted out loud, drawing Avery's attention.

She stared him down. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

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“You’re planning something, and I’m not going to like it.”

How did she do that? He prided himself on his poker face, but the woman read him like a book.

Mason sighed. No point in denying it—she’d see right through him. “We need to get you two somewhere secure until we can figure out our next move.”

Avery’s eyes narrowed. “And I’m supposed to just follow you blindly?”

“Copy that.” Mason kept his tone even, but firm. “This is escalating, Avery. You’re a target now.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he held up a hand. “I get that you don’t know me, don’t trust my skills. But keeping you and Paul alive until we can crack this case is my priority.”

Paul shot Mason a grateful look, but Avery crossed her arms stubbornly. “And where exactly is this secure location? A black-ops bunker?”

That made him laugh. Hard. “Not exactly. It’s my buddy’s place. He’s never there anymore. You’re not gonna want to hide, but you’re going to love the house. That’s a guarantee.”

“So we’re going to hang out at some stranger’s home without their knowledge?” Avery shook her head disgustedly. “And you wonder why I have trust issues?”

Mason felt his temper flare but forced it down. Getting angry wouldn't help. He locked eyes with her, willing her to see his sincerity. "I'm trying to protect you here."

She studied him carefully for a long moment. Then, surprising him, she gave a curt nod. "Fine. But I want to get the okay from your buddy first. Clear?"

Relief washed over him. "That won't be a problem."

If he knew Bridger, the guy would have the place stocked with Mason's favorite foods before he made it halfway across town.

Paul cleared his throat awkwardly. "So where is this friend's place?"

Mason grimaced. "Laurelhurst."

Avery's brows shot up. "You can't be serious."

Mason shrugged apologetically. The fancy neighborhood at the edge of Lake Washington was wall-to-wall mansions. Not exactly his style. Or Avery's, obviously. "Bridger had more money than sense when he bought the place. He's kind of embarrassed about it, to tell you the truth. He's been talking about selling it since we started up Redemption Inc., but then along came marriage, and an adopted kid. He'll get around to unloading it soon."

"You're taking us to stay at a mansion?" Avery protested. "Really under the radar there, don't you think? Are you really going to ask for permission?"

Mason pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting back his exasperation. "I'll call him right now. You can hear it from him directly."

Avery widened her stance and crossed her arms. "Let's do that."

“Fine.” He needed to clue Bridger in anyway. Eyes on Avery, he punched up Bridger’s number.

His friend answered on the first ring. “Mason. You best be calling with a sitrep,” he warned, but his voice held only lightness. Joy, even.

Grinning, despite himself, at his buddy’s hearty greeting, Mason responded to Bridger’s happy tone. “Sounds like post-honeymoon life’s treating you well, my friend.”

“Copy that.”

“Mind if I put you on speaker? I’ve got a situation.”

“Affirmative,” Bridger assented, his tone holding none of the curiosity Mason knew the man was feeling.

Mountain jays cawed in the background. The familiar sounds shot him with a huge dose of homesickness. Beautiful as Seattle was, for a big city, he was not a metropolis guy. He needed dirt beneath his boots. The crunch of morning frost and the scents of pine and sage and snow.

He punched the speaker button and held the phone out so Avery and Paul could hear. “I’ve got Special Agent Avery Ellis here, and my brother, Paul.”

“Hi, kids,” Bridger called out. “Watcha need, Ortiz?”

“We’re looking for a bed for the night. Probably a couple nights. Okay if we crash at your place?”

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As Mason knew he would, Bridger agreed instantly. “Anything we can help with?” he added.

“Just logistical support for now.” The team would have this handled in a nanosecond, but he had agreed to do this Avery’s way. For now.

“Copy that. Keys are under the mat,” Bridger said. A kid’s high, joyous laughter rang out in the background. Bridger’s soon-to-be-son, Kellen.

“Hey, Dad, it’s getting dark out. You said we could play one more game of Night Ranger before bed.”

“On my way, bud,” Bridger called out. “We good?” he asked Mason. “I gotta jet.”

Between the wondrous happiness in his friend’s voice and the thought of having a family—a wife like Jane and a fantastic boy to come home to—Mason’s chest constricted.

“Be safe, bro.” Bridger ended the call.

Mason eyed Avery. “You good with that?”

For a heartbeat, he thought she was going to argue, but mercifully, she finally nodded. “For now.”

“Cool.” He pocketed his phone. “We’re leaving in ten minutes. Gather what you need.”

“What about me?” Paul asked. “We’re going to swing by my place first, right?”

“Negative. What part of ‘lay low’ don’t you get?”

Paul flapped his arms helplessly. “Dude. I don’t even have a toothbrush.”

“I’m heading back to my motel later to clear out my room. I can grab whatever you need from the store on my way back.”

Paul tensed. “What about my truck?”

“It stays at the casino. They’ll have it towed. Eventually.”

Paul’s mouth dropped open. “That pickup cost me thirty-five hundred bucks.”

“I’ll buy you a new one. Not a problem. You ending up dead, however, is a problem. You follow me?”

He braced for another argument, but his little bro merely nodded meekly.

Excellent. At this point, Mason would take what he could get.

“We’ll head out in my rental.” He thought through the plan out loud. “We’ll leave Avery’s car in her parking spot.” He caught her eye. “There’s no evidence that you’re being shadowed, but we should plan for the worst-case scenario. That’ll buy us more time.”

Avery hadn’t moved. From the set of her jaw and the fire in her eye, he predicted a coming storm. Tempting fate, he tapped his watch. “Tick tock, Agent Ellis. Eight minutes and counting.”

She eyed the collection of pans hanging above the stove. He widened his stance, ready to duck if she chucked one, but her hands flattened on the counter. “Just one thing. Does your friend’s place have a spa? I want to know if I should pack a swimsuit.”

The woman had gumption. Maybe too much. Despite his attempts to keep his communications professional, he couldn’t stop the grin that split his face. “No spa. Run that sass at me again, though, and you’ll be sorry.”

Paul leaned in her direction. “Careful. He’s big into forced pushups. Must be all that soldiering.”

She eyed Mason from head to toe, and back, as if she was studying a prize steer. “Yeah. He doesn’t scare me.”

Mason folded his arms, going for a bored look, but he couldn’t help rocking back on his heels. Agent Avery Ellis had fire, that was for sure. He liked spice. Always had. Only not on the job.

He had a bad feeling this was just the initial spark before everything went up in flames.

15

Zap.

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The red light on Bridger North's vest flashed, signaling a kill shot.

Hands to his chest, he let his own weapon slide away and crumpled to the ground, going for maximum theatricality. "Noooooooo! I'm too young to die."

A loud snort emanated from the growing shadows to the south. The mesquite bush shook as the thin nine-year-old rushed out from behind it, laser rifle held above his head, his small face alight with triumph.

"That's three kills for me and ... ZERO for you."

Bridger climbed to his feet and dusted himself off. "Nice shooting there, Dead Eye, but it's time to head inside."

"Awe," Kellen protested mildly, but immediately strolled toward the back door, bow-legged, as if he were Gene Autry or John Wayne.

Bridger followed, his pulse still pounding from the exhilaration of playing laser tag with Kellen in the backyard. The boy had a natural talent for the game, his quick reflexes and sharp eye making him a formidable opponent. Once the kid got some meat on his bones, the days of taking care to let the boy win would be over. Bridger planned to savor this childhood part while he could.

Jane looked up from where she was sitting on the couch, a grin spreading across her face as she took in their flushed cheeks and bright eyes. "Looks like you two had fun," she said, her voice warm with affection.

Kellen nodded eagerly, his eyes shining with excitement. “I totally kicked Dad’s rear,” he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Jane raised an eyebrow, her gaze flickering to Bridger. “Is that so?”

Bridger shrugged, a rueful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “What can I say? The kid’s a natural.”

Jane chuckled, shaking her head. “Well, as much as I hate to break up the party, it’s a school night.” She pointed at Kellen, her expression turning stern. “Scoot, mister. Time to brush your teeth and get ready for bed.”

Kellen’s shoulders slumped, but he nodded. “Okay,” he said, turning to head down the hallway.

But before he disappeared around the corner, he paused, miming shooting Bridger one last time. “Pew, pew,” he said, his voice low and serious.

Bridger slapped a hand to his chest, groaning pitifully as he feigned a hit.

“Too slow, Dad.” Kellen rolled his eyes. “You snooze, you lose. So sad.”

As the boy clattered off down the hallway, Bridger’s heart squeezed. Dad. The title still felt new and unfamiliar, but every time Kellen used it, a warm glow spread through his chest.

It had only been a week since he and Jane had returned from their honeymoon, but already, Bridger couldn’t imagine his life without her and Kellen in it. The Lord had blessed him beyond measure, giving him an instant family to love and cherish.

Jane cleared her throat, surreptitiously wiping away a tear as she pointed after Kellen.

“That’s going well.”

Bridger threw himself over the back of the couch, pulling her into his arms and burying his face in her hair. “Better than well,” he murmured, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo. “I never thought I could be this happy.”

Jane hugged him back, her arms tight around his waist. “Me neither. I can’t believe the adoption will be finalized in less than a week. We’ll be a real family.”

He’d never imagined himself as a father, but now that he had Kellen in his life, he couldn’t imagine anything else.

But even as he savored the moment, Jane surprised him by pulling back and fixing him with a serious look. “So when are you going to tell me about Jason?”

Bridger forced himself not to freeze, keeping his expression carefully neutral. Good thing he was an expert interrogator, because if Jane were a professional spy, she’d be a great one. Her instincts were on par with her big brother’s.

“What about Jason?” he asked, trying to buy time. He’d wanted to let her savor their newlywed status a little longer before worrying her with the latest not-great news about her brother.

But his new bride saw straight through him. “What? Bridger, tell me.”

He fidgeted with a knickknack on the bookshelf next to him, avoiding her gaze. The truth was, he was deeply worried about his colleague and new brother-in-law. Jason was Delta Force, the toughest of the tough, but no one could go up against an unseen enemy with a reach as big as the Consortium’s alone.

Not that Bridger was going to communicate any of that to Jane.

He took a deep breath, finally meeting her eyes. “We just heard from him. He’s in Prague, following a new lead.”

“That’s good, right? At the wedding he agreed to bring you and the team in on this.”

“He did.”

“But?”

Bridger scratched his head. How to put this delicately. “He checked in and asked us to look into a few things, background research mostly, but he didn’t share his itinerary.”

She frowned. If her big brother were here right now, he’d be getting an earful for sure. “And you can’t chase after him blindly or you’ll risk alerting the Consortium to his location.”

Bridger tried to smile, but it fell flat. “Exactamundo. For now, we’ll just have to wait until your bro feels more cooperative.”

Jane sank deeper into the couch. Bridger could see the struggle on her face as she fought to keep her composure. “So I guess he won’t be making it to the adoption,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Not likely. But as soon as we get through this op Mason’s on, we’re going to get more aggressive about bringing Jason home.”

Jane snuggled into his side, her fingers threading through his. “I like aggressive,” she murmured, a hint of a smile in her voice.

“Figured you would.” Bridger kissed the top of her head. He’d do anything for her and Kellen. Literally anything.

But would that matter against the Consortium, or against her brother's bullheaded determination to expose the secret society on his own?

"So, what's the latest with Mason and his op?" Jane asked, her voice light but curious. "Kate told me he's teamed up with some hotshot FBI agent. That doesn't sound like Mason."

Bridger chuckled, leaning back against the couch cushions. "No, it doesn't. From what Mason told me, it sounds like things are getting pretty interesting."

Jane raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. "Interesting how?"

"Well, for starters, his brother Paul is apparently a piece of work. Smart as a whip, but with a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas. And then there's this FBI agent, Avery Ellis. From the intel Paige gathered, she's a real spitfire. Determined, clever, and not afraid to go toe-to-toe with Mason."

"Oh, I bet he loves that." Jane smiled. "The guy's a boulder. Granite. Strong, silent, calm, and immovable."

Bridger burst out laughing, his shoulders shaking. "You've got him pegged, sweetheart. Mason's one of the finest men I know, but he's not exactly a people person."

Jane giggled, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "I don't think I've ever heard the man string more than three words together at a time."

"Mason's a man of action, not words. He's all about the mission, the objective. Emotions and personal relationships? Not so much."

“Poor guy,” Jane said, her voice softening with sympathy. “It can’t be easy, living like that. Always on guard. Always needing to be in control.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Wouldn’t that be something? The immovable object meets the unstoppable force.”

Bridger pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “There’s something about the tone in his voice when he talks about Avery. It’s ... interesting.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say our boulder is intimidated.”

“Or maybe just tongue-tied. If he likes her ...”

Bridger felt like he’d just been slapped upside the head. Mason and Agent Ellis?

Wee haw.

He wondered what the Lord had in store for their dedicated protector. Bridger could speak from experience when he said God had a way of knocking a guy upside the head when necessary. If the Lord had Mason in his sights, Bridger’s friend might be in for the lesson of a lifetime.

“I’m guessing the team will be off to Seattle soon.” Jane sounded thoughtful.

“Most likely.” After tonight’s call from Mason, Bridger was thinking exactly that. “But I’m sitting this one out,” he added, his voice firm.

“Not necessary.”

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“It’s completely necessary. I’m not leaving you or Kellen for the moment.”

“You have six days before the hearing, and I’m planning the party. Kellen and I will be fine.”

“I know you will. But I won’t.” Bridger raised her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles gently. Whatever Mason needed to finish this op, Bridger wasn’t necessary to it. If things changed, he could fly down in a matter of hours.

But until forced to leave, he wasn’t giving up one second of time with his precious new family.

The rest of the team could easily handle this. Then, after the adoption, he’d dive back in and they could get back to the business of bringing Jane’s brother home. It wouldn’t be easy, but with God’s help and the support of his team, they could accomplish anything.

Even the seemingly impossible. Like getting Jason to let them help bring the Consortium to justice before the guy ended up dead.

Because after that, the cabal would come after the rest of them.

16

Avery blinked awake, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. The silky sheets felt cool against her skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of the sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the sleek, modern bedroom and the

heavenly, high-thread-count sheets. She sat up, the luxurious fabric pooling around her waist as memories of the previous day flooded back. Another Rain Bay employee dead, and at least one semi-truck full of stolen—or counterfeit—medication heading for the black market.

And here she was, in a borrowed mansion on the shores of Lake Washington, a world away from the gritty reality of her investigation. She slipped out of bed, her bare feet sinking into the plush carpet as she padded across the room. After a quick change of clothes, she headed down the floating staircase, the aroma of rich, freshly brewed coffee luring her toward the kitchen.

Whatever Bridger did before building the personal security firm with Mason and the others must have been highly lucrative. Either that, or the man was a trust-fund baby. No way SEAL pay stretched to cover an eight-figure home he didn't even use.

A puzzle for another day.

She paused in the doorway, taking in the sight of Mason, his broad shoulders stretching the fabric of his t-shirt as he worked the espresso machine with the precision of a barista. The same way he seemed to do everything else. Perfectly.

As much as she appreciated his assistance, she would need to rein in his special ops tendencies to do whatever it took to obtain the objective. She needed to keep their search for evidence as legal as possible, or risk jeopardizing the entire case. It was a delicate balance, one she would have to navigate carefully as they moved forward.

He glanced up, his emerald eyes locking with hers. “Coffee’s on, or I can whip you up a cappuccino? Latte? Macchiato?”

She moved into the kitchen, brain on overload with so many choices. She pointed at the tiny cup in front of him. “Whatever you’re having is fine.”

He whistled. “Going for the straight espresso. Impressive.”

She made a face. “Belay that. Coffee’s good.” Despite spending her entire life in Seattle, in her opinion, good coffee was more cream than brew. Espresso was way out of her league.

As he poured her coffee, he nodded toward the laptop open on the granite countertop. “Say hello to the team. I’m updating them. Team, Avery. Avery, team.”

Avery leaned in, smiling at the faces on the screen. Bridger, the leader, was undeniably handsome, with a winning smile behind the dusting of stubble that only added to his rugged charm. His blue eyes sparkled with warmth and intelligence, making it easy to see why he commanded such loyalty from his team.

“Thanks for the house, Bridger. It’s incredible.”

“Mi casa es su casa,” he replied with a playful wink.

The other two men on the screen were equally impressive. The first, tall and dark-skinned with a neatly tied man-bun, exuded a quiet strength and intensity. His deep green eyes seemed to miss nothing. Avery had no doubt that he was a formidable presence both on and off the battlefield.

The second man had a lean, classical face that could have graced the pages of a high-end fashion magazine. His arresting eyes, a striking blend of green and gold, held a glint of mischief that hinted at a quick wit and a penchant for trouble. Despite his almost too-pretty appearance, there was an unmistakable air of competence about him, suggesting that he was just as skilled as his teammates.

Man-Bun loomed closer to the camera, eyebrows raised. “Yo, Mason. You didn’t mention that your mysterious FBI agent was a knockout.”

Mason's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Avery, meet Tai. Tai, Avery."

Tai winked at her. "Careful, bro. Keep spending time with a woman like that, you might just end up—"

"Can it, Kaholo," Mason growled.

Their other teammate leaned into the frame. "I'm Fenn. A pleasure, Agent Ellis. I'm here to say, we're not all as rough around the edges as my man Mason. If he gives you a hard time, feel free to let us know. Mason's almost house trained, but we're still working on a few of the details. Don't let his bark—"

"Okay, briefing complete. Bye-bye." Mason collapsed the screen.

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Avery laughed, shaking her head. She could get used to this easy camaraderie.

Paul stumbled into the kitchen, hair spiking skyward in a truly impressive example of bedhead. He yawned widely. “Man, that media room is sick. I could live in there.”

Mason slid a mug of coffee toward his brother. “Looks like you tried to. Get any sleep?”

Paul shrugged, sipping the coffee. “Who needs sleep when you’ve got every video game in the known Universe at your fingertips?”

Avery hid a smile behind her own mug, appreciating the way the sharp edges of Mason and Paul’s sibling dynamic seemed to be wearing off.

Mason turned to her, all business now. “We need a plan for today. I say we stake out the warehouse, follow a delivery van, and see where it leads us.”

Avery set her mug down. “We can’t just tail them without probable cause. It’s not legal.”

Mason’s eyes flashed with impatience. “Legal won’t get the job done. We need to act, and fast. Plus, you’re not exactly officially on the case, if I remember.”

“Exactly why I have to do this by the book. The further we color outside the lines, the more we risk tanking the case completely.”

No. It was time for her to make the parameters clear. “I get that you’re used to using

force—reaching for the quickest, fastest tools—but we need to be more subtle here.”

His head jerked back. “You think I’m the reckless one here?”

Avery backpedaled, realizing her misstep. “That’s not what I meant. I just meant that you’re quick to reach for your normal tools. The ones that work in your world.”

Mason leaned back, crossing his arms. “You’re just as quick to reach for your FBI playbook.”

The tension in the room was palpable, both of them standing their ground.

Paul choked on a mouthful of coffee. “You guys sound worse than me and Mason.” He leaned forward, a glint of inspiration in his eyes. “In the gaming world, when you’ve got two players with different strengths, you team up. Use the best of both.”

But that only worked if both parties cooperated. Mason didn’t strike her as the compromising type.

“Okay,” she relented, picking up her mug again. “I’ll consider your thoughts. But we stick as close to the law as possible.”

Mason glared down at his cup for a long moment. “Fine. We’ll do it your way. For now.”

Avery nodded, surprised by the concession. “Okay. Let me grab my things, and we’ll head out.” She paused, remembering the small evidence bag of pills in her purse. “We need to locate a lab today and get that sample analyzed.”

Mason tilted back his mug, draining the last of his fancy espresso drink into his mouth and swallowing. “I’m thinking we should wait. Paige will get back to me soon

with a contact. After today, we might have more evidence to add to the analysis.”

Anger heated her cheeks. And just when she was starting to trust that he actually heard her. She jammed her fists on her hips. “And why would you think that?”

His expression grew wary. “No reason. Just trying to be efficient. You never know what’ll come of our op today. No need to make multiple trips to a lab.”

“Right. Because more samples are going to fall out of the vans we follow.”

“Could happen.”

With a great deal of help that Mason was probably dying to provide. He’d already made it clear he was ready to get this done.

As was she, to be fair. But how many times did she have to remind him they had to follow procedure?

As she climbed the stairs, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she might have made a mistake hitching her wagon to a man as hardheaded and dangerous as Mason Ortiz.

17

The mist rose off the surface of Lake Washington, but Mason barely noticed the ethereal beauty as Avery drove away from Bridger’s sprawling mansion. His mind was consumed with thoughts of the woman beside him. He gripped his black backpack tighter, trying to focus on the mission at hand, but his traitorous eyes kept sliding to Avery’s profile, illuminated by the soft, golden glow of the rising sun.

He couldn’t deny the attraction anymore, the magnetic pull he felt toward her. It was more than just physical desire, though that was certainly part of it. No, there was

something about Avery's fierce determination, her unwavering commitment to justice, that called to him on a deeper level. He admired her strength, her intelligence, the way she refused to back down even when the odds were stacked against her.

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But he couldn't let himself get distracted. Not now—not when so much was at stake. Paul's safety, the success of the mission, everything hung in the balance. Mason had to stay focused, had to keep his emotions in check. He couldn't afford to let his guard down, to let Avery see how much she affected him.

So he sat in silence, his jaw clenched tight, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He would do his job, would see this mission through to the end, no matter what it cost him. Even if it meant burying these new feelings, pushing them down deep where they couldn't interfere.

After a lifetime of practice. He was good at it.

But as they drove on through the misty morning, Mason couldn't shake the nagging sense that this time, things were different. That Avery was different. And try as he might, he couldn't ignore the part of him that wanted to pull her close, to feel her warmth against his skin, to lose himself in her touch.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He had a job to do, and he wouldn't let anything, not even his own traitorous heart, get in the way of that. But as Avery glanced over at him, her eyes bright with determination and something else he couldn't quite name, Mason knew that this mission would test him in ways he'd never been tested before. And he could only hope that when it was all over, he'd still be the same man he was when it began.

As they neared the industrial area where the Rain Bay warehouse was located, the weather settled into a steady drizzle. The kind of weather Mason usually hated. As a SEAL, there was nothing worse than running an op in the rain. Most guys said they

hated heat. A few considered snow the worst. But for him, it was the steady drip, drip, drip of water down the back of his neck, seeping into his boots, chilling him to the bone. He'd rather broil in the heat any day. And don't even get him started on the pleasures of a nice, Artic wind.

But today, he didn't mind so much. Because of Avery.

That scared him more than anything.

They parked up the street from the warehouse, the steady patter of rain against the windshield filling the silence between them. Mason unzipped his backpack, pulling out the various pieces of his disassembled sniper rifle. He worked methodically, his hands moving with practiced ease as he snapped the pieces together.

Avery watched him, her eyebrows knitting together in concern. "What are you planning on shooting?"

Mason held up one of the black bullets, the metal gleaming dully in the dim light. "RFIDs," he explained. "Tracking bullets. I'm going to tag one of the delivery trucks."

Understanding dawned on Avery's face. "Because the warehouse is probably wired with anti-bugging devices, jammers, and detectors."

"Exactly. Delivery trucks won't use those, though. No need. The bullets will allow us to track the vans without getting too close."

Avery leaned back in her seat, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Impressive."

Mason felt a flush of pride at her approval. He finished assembling the rifle, then

turned to face her, his expression growing serious. “Can I ask you something?”

She nodded, her dark eyes searching his face.

“Why did you choose to be a special agent? Given your dad’s messed up history with the Bureau, I mean.”

Avery was quiet for a long moment, her gaze distant as she stared out at the rain-soaked street. “It’s hard to explain,” she began, her voice soft. “I just knew I had to be an agent. It was like this ... this pulling in my gut. Like I didn’t have a choice.”

“Like Maverick,” Mason murmured, not intending to say the words out loud.

Avery scrunched up her nose. “Top Gun?”

Mason nodded, feeling a bit sheepish.

She smiled wryly. “I know the movie. But I’m not sure my reasons for joining up were the same. I’m not looking for redemption for my father. He doesn’t need it. He did the right thing, staying with that investigation and saving those officers.”

She paused, her brow furrowing as she tried to put her thoughts into words. “I think I did it to understand him,” she mused. “To understand his sacrifice.”

Mason was stunned, humbled by the depth of her dedication. He’d never met anyone who could see so clearly, who could cut through the noise and get to the heart of things.

She turned to him, her gaze probing. “What about you and Paul? I mean, I’ve heard of sibling rivalry, but you two have a really bad case.”

Mason hesitated, the old instinct to keep his feelings locked away rising up inside him. But something about Avery made him want to open up, to let her see the man behind the stoic mask.

His hands paused. “Paul’s rebellion,” he said finally, his voice rough. “It forced me to be the good one. Always. I saw what his choices did to our parents. The worry. The self-doubt. There was no way I was going to add to their burden.” He fell silent, the realization hitting him like a punch to the gut. “Him playing the idiot forced me to be the good kid. I resented it. Still do, I guess.”

Avery reached out, her hand resting lightly on his arm. “That’s a big insight.”

He snorted. “You sound surprised?”

“You strike me more of an action guy than a feeling guy.”

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“You think?”

She grinned, but her eyes were serious. “I’m not into dealing with feelings, either. But maybe ... maybe Paul felt shoved into the role of rebel.”

“Can’t imagine how.”

“Go with me a sec. Was there ever anything you weren’t good at as a kid?”

Mason thought about it. He’d been a decent student, a hard worker. A leader and a star athlete. “Probably not, no.”

“So think about how hard of an act that would have been to follow,” Avery pointed out gently.

Mason felt like he’d been sucker-punched. “You’re saying I didn’t leave any room for Paul to excel.”

Avery shrugged. “It’s just something to think about. But I’m an only child, so I’m not exactly an expert.”

“You sound pretty expert to me,” Mason said, impressed despite himself. “That’s a lot of shrink-speak.”

“Impressed?”

“That’s one word for it,” he grumbled, but he couldn’t quite keep the smile from his

face.

Avery laughed, the sound warm and rich, and Mason felt something in his chest loosen. He couldn't remember the last time he'd talked like this with anyone, the last time he'd let someone see beneath the surface.

But as much as he wanted to stay in this moment, duty called. He tucked the sniper rifle back into his backpack and reached for the door handle.

"Go time," he said, his voice brisk. "I'll text when I'm ready to be picked up."

Avery nodded, her expression sobering. "Be careful out there."

Mason flashed her a grin, trying to ignore the sudden tightness in his chest. "Always am."

He slipped out of the car and into the misty morning, the weight of his backpack a familiar comfort against his shoulders. As he jogged up the hill to take up his position, he pushed aside the thought of leaving, of walking away from Avery and the unexpected connection they'd forged.

For now, he had a job to do. He just hoped this little mission would get Avery the evidence she needed. The rest ... well, the rest could wait.

18

Avery gripped the steering wheel of Mason's rental car, her knuckles turning white as she followed his directions through the earpiece. He was a mile down the road, waiting for her to pick him up like some sort of secret agent. The streets were empty, and the misty morning made the suburban neighborhood feel like the set of a horror movie.

As she turned the corner, she spotted him emerging from the side of a picture-perfect house, looking like he'd just stepped out of a Tom Cruise action flick. Black tech clothing, a black backpack slung over his shoulder—the whole nine yards. She had to admit, the man knew how to make an entrance.

Mason strode toward the car, his movements so fluid she half expected him to break into a choreographed dance number. Her heart started doing its own little tango as he approached, a mix of excitement and dread coursing through her veins.

He rapped on the window. “Out,” he ordered, his voice leaving no room for argument.

She bit back a snarky comment about his lack of manners. So much for Mr. Sensitive. But hey, she didn't need a soft guy. She needed a dangerous one, and Mason fit the bill. She slid out of the car, the damp air sending a shiver down her spine, and moved to the passenger side.

Mason got behind the wheel and handed her a small device with a screen that looked like it belonged in a sci-fi movie. “Tracker,” he explained, his tone clipped. “It's reading the RFID tag on the delivery van.”

She studied the screen, trying to make sense of the blinking dot. “Fancy. How'd you get your hands on this kind of tech? Raid a NASA surplus store?”

Mason shrugged, his eyes fixed on the road. “Perks of our new business.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Right. And what exactly is this new business of yours? Spy Gadgets R Us?”

He didn't answer, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was getting herself into something way over her head. The high-end tracking equipment, the black ops

getup—it all screamed trouble. She glanced over at Mason, taking in his chiseled profile and the way his hands gripped the steering wheel like he was ready to take on the world.

Part of her wanted to demand answers, to know just what kind of “perks” his new gig provided. But another part of her was afraid to ask. Her stomach churned, and she regretted the greasy breakfast sandwich she’d scarfed down earlier.

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What kind of business required this level of surveillance? And more importantly, how far was Mason willing to go to protect the people he cared about?

As they sped through the damp streets, following the blinking dot on the tracker, she could only hope she hadn't made a huge mistake. They tailed the van to several houses, watching as the driver dropped off cardboard boxes. She snapped photos from a safe distance, her phone clicking softly in the quiet car.

An hour later, the van was empty and heading back to the warehouse. Her mind raced, thinking about all those packages. Each one could be the key to cracking this case wide open.

"I don't see any way to get a search warrant," she mused aloud, frustration coloring her tone. "The pills Paul found won't be enough, not even with his testimony. Maybe we can dig into the backgrounds of the people who got the deliveries? See if anything shakes loose?"

Mason interrupted her, his voice sharp. "Enough fooling around. I'll get you the evidence you need."

She blinked. "How?"

He gave her a look that made her blood run cold. "You don't want to know."

She swallowed hard, meeting his gaze head-on. "Yes, I do."

Mason shook his head, his jaw tight. "Seriously, you don't. I'm going to take you

back to Bridger's place and have you check on Paul. Then I'll handle this. My way."

She should argue. Order him to stand down. But as he navigated them back to the swanky neighborhood, her mind whirled. The truth hit her. She didn't want him to stand down.

How had she gone from being a stickler for the rules to this? She closed her eyes, sending up a silent prayer. Was it right to adhere to the law one hundred percent? Or should she follow her gut and let Mason help her find the evidence they needed to take down Rain Bay?

"Hey," Mason interrupted her thoughts as they crossed the causeway, the waters of Lake Washington glinting in the pale sunlight. "This isn't your decision, if that makes you feel any better. I'm doing this for Paul. He might be a blockhead, but he doesn't deserve to run for the rest of his life just because he took the wrong job. I'm doing this. You can't stop me."

She nodded, a lump forming in her throat. He was right. She couldn't stop him. But ...

"Turn around," she said suddenly, her voice ringing with determination.

Mason glanced at her, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"I'm coming with you. This is my investigation. My responsibility."

For a long moment, Mason eyed the road ahead, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, a grin spread across his face. "Sir, yes, sir," he said, his voice laced with amusement.

Avery couldn't help but smile back, even as nerves fluttered in her stomach. Her

father had died doing what he knew he had to do. Letting Mason cross some legal lines would hardly cost her her life, though it might sever the shaky hold she still had on her career.

If that meant saving lives, so be it. She was all in.

19

Mason strode into Bridger's mansion, two small cardboard boxes tucked under his arm.

Avery followed on his heels, her footsteps echoing on the polished marble floor.

"You know, when I said we needed evidence, I didn't mean for you to go all Ocean's Eleven."

Mason let out a short, sarcastic laugh. "Oh, come on. It was more like Ocean's One. I didn't need a whole team to pull off a little heist."

"Little heist? Mason, you just stole packages from peoples' doorsteps!"

"Borrowed. I borrowed packages. Meds that are probably fake. And dangerous."

Avery sighed, rubbing her temple. "That's not the point. This whole breaking the law thing is new to me."

Mason stopped and turned to face her, holding out the boxes. "You want me to put these back? It's no problem, but there goes your investigation. Either we move ahead, or I get Paul out of here. You choose."

Avery's cheeks flushed with anger.

“Don’t forget you agreed to this,” he added.

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“I know I did. But ... there has to be a better way than this.”

“Well, unless you’ve got a magic wand hidden in that FBI-issued pantsuit of yours, this is the best option we’ve got.”

Avery’s jaw clenched, her eyes flashing with frustration. For a moment, he thought she might actually stomp her foot. But then she took a deep breath and nodded.

“Fine. But if this blows up in our faces, I’m blaming you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He turned and continued down the hallway, the weight of the boxes feeling lighter with each step. She could have stopped him at any moment, but she’d let him swipe those packages. Okay, so maybe he was pushing his luck with this one. But something told him that Avery was the kind of woman who appreciated a man who took risks. And if that risk just happened to involve a little bit of law breaking, well, that was just icing on the cake.

Paul looked up from his seat on the leather couch, a grin spreading across his face. “Look who’s a felon now. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Mason shot him a warning look, his jaw clenching tight. “Enough.”

He wasn’t in the mood for Paul’s jokes, not with Avery standing there, her face pale and drawn with worry.

The unspoken feelings made his stomach ache.

Setting the boxes down on the glass and chrome coffee table, he turned to face his brother, his expression stern. “Grabbing the deliveries wasn’t ideal, but we need the intel. And to be clear,” he added, his gaze locking with Paul’s, “I did it. Avery had nothing to do with this.”

Paul’s smile faded, replaced by a look of concern. He glanced over at Avery, taking in her stiff posture and the way she was worrying her lower lip between her teeth. “Hey,” he said softly, his tone apologetic. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be running my mouth.”

Mason grunted. “That’s one thing we can agree on.”

Avery gave Mason a tight smile, but the worry in her eyes didn’t fade. He could see the gears turning in her head, the way she was no doubt weighing the risks and consequences of what they’d just done.

“Whether this helps or not,” he said, “no way I want you taking the fall for my actions.”

Avery looked up at him, her eyes wide and vulnerable. “Mason, I—”

He cut her off with a shake of his head, his expression softening. “I’ll put the packages back as soon as I take a couple pills out of each to sample. We can test them alongside the sample Paul grabbed.”

Mason waited for the scolding, but to his surprise, all he saw was trust in her eyes. She was putting her faith in him despite the risks. It made him ache in a way he didn’t quite understand.

Turning his attention back to the boxes, he pulled his folding knife out of his pocket and slit the packing tape, revealing the pill bottles inside. He snapped a few quick photos with his phone, taking note of the same online pharmacy listed on all of the labels. The pills inside looked exactly like the samples Paul had gotten from the warehouse, small and white and innocuous. The labels on each individual container looked legit, containing the name of the patient, the prescribing doctor, the dosage, etc. A lot to research.

He fingered one amber bottle. “We need to bring my team in on this.”

Avery hesitated, pushing a hank of dark curls out of her eyes. He could see the conflict in her expression, the way she was torn between her desire to do things by the book and her need to get to the truth.

He lifted one of the containers, turning the label so she could read it. “We don’t have the time or the resources to trace all the leads here on our own. Even if you could use Bureau resources, my people are faster.”

Avery sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. “You’re right,” she said, her voice soft and tired. “Let’s call them.”

Good. Excellent.

Within minutes, they had the team on a video chat, their faces filling the large screen on the far wall of Bridger’s living room. Bridger, Tai, Kate, Fenn, Paige, and Graham all looked serious and focused, their eyes sharp and alert as they listened to Mason and Avery’s report.

“We’re here to offer logistical support,” Bridger said, his deep voice calm and reassuring. “Until the Bureau jumps onboard, of course. We won’t proceed with anything without your say so, Agent Ellis.”

Avery looked touched by their deference, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “And thank you, Mason, for making this all possible.”

He caught her eye, his lips quirking up in a small smile. “Anytime.”

Together, the group quickly hashed out a plan. Paige had found a discreet lab where they could have the samples tested without raising any red flags.

Tai, ever the practical one, asked the question on everyone’s mind. “What are these meds for, exactly?”

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“They’re long-release statins,” Avery explained. “At least they’re supposed to be. For people who don’t respond to regular statins.”

Fenn pulled a face. “Cholesterol drugs. Gee, Ortiz, could you have found a more boring smuggling ring to crack?”

Kate smacked him in the belly so hard the guy doubled over. Then she winked at Mason over the video feed. “You’re welcome.”

“Copy that. I owe you one.”

The gorgeous pilot grinned back. “Not to worry. It was my pleasure.”

“These meds are super expensive,” Mason added. “As in thousands of dollars a month.”

He thought about the modest homes they’d grabbed the packages from. If these drugs turned out to be fakes, not only were lives at risk: but these guys were stealing from people who could little afford it.

Oh the counterfeiters were going to pay. As if he wasn’t made enough already.

Graham’s eyes narrowed. “It would be hard to tell if a person was taking fake pills. You’re taking a drug that’s supposed to help prevent the buildup of cholesterol,” he mused. “So it’s unlikely anyone’s going to notice it’s not working until they see their physician every six months or so. And maybe not even then, right?”

“No kidding,” Paige added. She swept a hank of pink hair out of her eyes and frowned at her computer screen. “Hang on a sec, guys.” Everyone quieted while she typed. When she looked up, she shook her head. “This pharmacy is fake.”

Avery inched closer to the computer. “Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.” Paige looked straight at the camera now. At Avery. “There are sites people can check out to see if the online pharmacy they plan to use is legit or not. SpeedCo Pharmacy,” she pointed at the box in Mason’s hand, “isn’t registered on any of them. Not one.”

“Why would a fake pharmacy dispense real drugs? That makes no sense at all,” Avery said, her voice hard and unwavering. “The drugs must be phony, too.”

“It gets stranger,” Paige added. “I can’t find a physical location for the pharmacy. No warehouse. No distribution center. Nada.”

Mason grunted. “Surprise, surprise.”

Bridger’s normal grin disappeared. “It’s a good thing you called us in, Mace.”

Kate eyed Avery stonily. “Agent Ellis? How concerned do we need to be about your fellow agents? It seems strange you got called off such a promising case.”

“She says her people are good,” Mason interjected. He didn’t blame Kate for considering all the options, but Avery had already told him she wasn’t concerned about her colleagues, or her superiors.

“Cases get back-burnered all the time,” Avery explained, in a much softer voice. “I can see why you’d ask. We’re probably looking at tens of millions in profits here. But I can vouch for my boss, and my other superiors in the Seattle office, anyway.”

Tai nodded quickly. “Good enough.”

But Mason knew the team—Paige especially—would dive deep into each agent’s background. The owners of Rain Bay Trucking, too. If there were any common threads, she’d find them.

In the meantime, no sense in antagonizing Avery.

Mason nodded in agreement, his mind racing with the implications. He thought about how close Paul had come to being in even deeper trouble, how grateful he was that his brother had reached out. Maybe he’d even tell him that sometime, when all this was over.

Paige’s face filled the screen again, her expression grim. “Heads up, guys,” she said, her voice tight with tension. “More trouble.”

Mason felt his stomach drop, a cold sense of dread washing over him. He glanced over at Avery, saw the fear in her eyes.

Paige looked uncharacteristically guilty. She spoke directly to Avery. “So, after Mason first read us in on the case, I tagged, uh, people at your office.”

Avery tensed next to him. “Tagged them how?”

“Internet notifications,” Paige explained. “In case someone else at your agency is looking into things. Make sense?”

“Not exactly,” Avery admitted. “But go on.”

Paige swallowed and nodded hard enough to make her colorful bangs sway. “I can totally explain my procedures later, but right now, you guys need to know that

someone in Avery's office accessed traffic cam footage from the North Seattle neighborhood you two just left." Paige's words came out in a rush. "Mason, you were caught on camera taking those two packages. And in one set of footage, Avery can be seen in the vehicle across the street."

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Mason closed his eyes. Oh man. Not good. He'd looked for cameras before swiping the packages, and had spotted them. But he'd thought they were far enough away. He could protect Avery from knives and bullets. Information, not so much.

He looked over at her, saw the panic written all over her face. "It's okay," he said softly, reaching out to take her hand in his. "We'll figure this out."

But even as he spoke the words, Mason couldn't shake the feeling that things were about to get a whole lot worse before they got better.

20

In. Out.In. Out.

Avery stood in the middle of Bridger's opulent living room, trying to smother the wildfire raging in her chest. She took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of leather and wood polish that permeated the room. Felt how the soft fabric of her t-shirt brushed against her skin, causing a whisper-light sensation that grounded her in the moment.

But even as she tried to anchor herself, her mind raced with worst-case scenarios.

She clenched her fists, feeling the bite of her nails against her skin. The pain was sharp and immediate, a welcome distraction from the rising tide of panic that threatened to overtake her.

Across the room, Mason and Paul were arguing in hushed tones, their voices rising

and falling like the tide, but she barely registered their words. They sounded far away, as if they were speaking from the bottom of a well.

Her gaze darted around the room, taking in the gleaming hardwood floors and the tasteful artwork that adorned the walls. She tried to focus on the details, the way the light glinted off the polished surface of the grand piano in the corner, the intricate pattern of the Oriental rug beneath her feet.

But even as she tried to ground herself in the physical world, her thoughts kept circling back to the same terrible truth. Her career, her very freedom, hung in the balance. And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Ryan had accessed traffic cam footage of her sitting in a car while Mason committed a felony.

She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs from her brain. “Maybe Paige made a mistake,” she said, her voice sounding small and uncertain even to her own ears. “Maybe the request was related to something else. I haven’t been to work in two weeks. I have no idea what new active cases may have come along.”

Mason and Paul exchanged a glance, their expressions skeptical. Yeah. She felt it, too. She was grasping at straws.

Before she could voice her thoughts, her phone exploded with a flurry of texts and calls. She fumbled for the device.

“It’s Ryan,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “I should answer.”

Mason held up a hand, his expression serious. “Read the texts first,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “Best to have as much info as you can before you talk to the guy.”

Avery nodded, her fingers shaking slightly as she opened the messages. Short sentences bracketed by capitals and emojis. One from her friend, Alise, and several from other fellow agents all wanting to know what was going on. The final one was from Ryan. There were no tiny, superfluous faces. No exclamation points or caps. Just a chilling order.

Call me. Now.

The phone shook in her hand. Ryan knew. He'd guessed about her rogue investigation, and he was not happy.

Taking a deep breath, she hit the call button, her hands trembling so badly she nearly dropped the phone.

Ryan answered on the first ring. "What were you thinking? Avery, you crossed a line this time. Big time. You've broken rules before, but this has gone beyond what I can protect you from. What I want to protect you from."

Avery's head snapped back. Her cheeks burned as if she'd been slapped. She'd always known that her tendency to push the boundaries could get her into trouble, but she'd never imagined it would come to this.

"I can explain—" she began, but he cut her off.

"I don't want to hear it. If I get any inkling that you're still working this case, you're fired. And even if you drop it now, you need to prepare for the possibility of getting fired anyway. You have no idea what you're messing with here. This is way above your pay grade. Stop. Now."

With that, he hung up, leaving Avery staring at the phone in stunned silence.

Mason touched her arm gently, his expression sympathetic. “How do you want to handle this? We can walk away, no problem. We have contacts. I’ll make sure this doesn’t bite you in the rear.”

Paul nodded in agreement, his usually mischievous face uncharacteristically serious. “So what if I have to create a new life?” he said with a shrug. “The one I have now isn’t that outstanding anyway.”

Avery was touched by the brothers’ generosity, but she knew she couldn’t accept it. “I can’t quit,” she said, her voice firm despite the tremor in her hands. “Unless I finish this, I’m going to have to resign from the Bureau. There’s no certainty that I’ll be safe even if I do walk away from the case.”

Paul frowned, his brow furrowing in confusion. “I don’t understand. Why can’t you drop it?”

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But Mason understood. He always did. “Someone tipped Avery’s supervisor off about our little delivery van stunt,” he said, his voice grim. “No way the guy would have randomly checked into traffic cam footage.”

Paul’s eyes widened as realization dawned. “Wait, you think Avery’s boss is in on this?”

The world around her slowed to a crawl, sounds becoming muffled as if she were underwater, her mind struggling to process the revelation. She didn’t want to believe it, couldn’t bear the thought that someone she trusted could be involved in something so corrupt.

“Rumor and innuendo helped sink my father’s career just as much as his own rogue behavior did. I’m not going to do that to someone else. Ryan, and my fellow agents, will remain innocent until proven guilty. I’m adamant about that.”

Mason nodded reluctantly. “I’m willing not to jump to conclusions,” he said, his voice measured. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not gonna be guarding that cliff.”

Avery felt a rush of gratitude for his understanding, for the way he seemed to know exactly what she needed.

Was Ryan on the take?

Her whole body trembled. She couldn’t imagine him selling out. Not her old friend. Ryan was always a straight arrow. Kind and smart and dedicated.

Ambitious. But not ruthless or unethical.

She pressed her palms to her temples and closed her eyes, trying to slow down her whirling thoughts. Not Ryan. No way.

That would blow apart her whole world.

When she opened her eyes again, Mason was watching her closely, his gaze dark with concern. “We need my team here, not consulting over stupid screens.”

Avery hesitated. “I can’t ask your team to take that risk. It’s bad enough I’ve involved you and Paul. I could get fired, likely will, but you all could get arrested.”

Mason just smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Yeah, that’s not gonna happen. Besides, federal prison? Please. We’ve been threatened with worse.”

He caught her gaze, his expression strong and steady and confident. “This is what we do. It’s literally what we do. And not to brag, but we’re pretty great at it.”

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. Despite their unorthodox meeting, Mason’s steady presence had been a gift from her Savior, a reminder that even in the darkest of times, she was never alone.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded slowly. “Okay,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “How could this possibly get worse?”

Mason grinned, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “I’ll contact Bridger,” he said, already reaching for his phone. “The team will touch down in Seattle inside of three hours.”

As he dialed the number, Avery sent up a silent prayer, asking for guidance and

strength. She didn't know what the future held, but she knew one thing for certain—with Mason by her side, she could face anything. Even the possibility of losing everything.

21

“Bridger's not coming,” the stunning pilot, Kate said as she bounded up the stairs to their teammate's mansion behind the rest of Mason's team.

Avery watched the impressive group file into the mansion, duffle bags in hand. Having met them online in no way prepared her for the sheer presence of Mason's friends. The men were all sharp and fit, taking up more space than their muscled bodies actually required, filling the room with sheer personality and swagger.

Tai was ... scary. The man was huge, but it was the way he moved that was even more frightening. He moved quickly and silently, but his smile and ready sense of humor made the intimidation factor fade quickly. The older man, Graham, reminded her of an aging gladiator. Scarred and battered, but still standing tall. And still powerful as ever.

She guessed Mason and Tai and Bridger were growing to look more and more like their older colleague as they aged equally as gracefully.

While ultra-fit, Fenn was leaner, and truth be told, by far the most classically handsome of the group. But for the air of edgy anticipation, he could have been a male model, only his intensity and the way he studied the space, silently doing recon, gave away his military background.

The two women, Paige and Kate, the pilot, were even more impressive, if that was possible. Kate was tall and stunning, with model-looks and a fire in her eye. Shorter and slighter, blonde Paige was all sweetness on the outside, but despite the Barbie-

pink streak in her hair, Avery already knew the woman had a core of steel and a mind like a supercomputer.

If anyone could help, it was these amazing folks. She was glad Mason called in the cavalry.

And that surprised her. In the space of 48 hours, she'd gone from being a secretive lone wolf to looking forward to being part of a team. Well, part of Mason's team.

A temporary situation, for sure.

Mason made the formal introductions, his deep voice echoing off the high ceilings of the mansion. The team members were cordial to Avery and uber-professional, but she could see the way they looked between her and Mason, as if they knew something she didn't.

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They were nice to Paul, too, who was uncharacteristically quiet.

Avery got it. She, too, was feeling like the entire Marvel Universe cast just descended on them.

When Fenn tried to engage Avery in conversation about the case, Mason slipped between them, his broad shoulders blocking Fenn's view of her. "Why don't we get to work making a plan?" he suggested gruffly, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Tai cleared his throat, his deep voice rumbling through the room. "Anybody else starving?"

Avery felt her cheeks heat again, and she shook her head. "I'm no cook."

"Mason is," Tai said. "The man's a maestro of the grill."

Fenn nodded enthusiastically. "And the stovetop and the panini press and the?—"

Mason glowered at Fenn and held up a large hand. "We get it."

A new color in his cheeks, he stalked off to the kitchen. The team followed, waving Avery and Paul in with them.

Once the big group gathered enough chairs and stools, they started tossing around ideas for ways to move forward while Mason studied the contents of Bridger's fridge and began prepping food.

Paige would dig deeper into the corporate angle to get a better handle on who actually owned Rain Bay Trucking. And she'd take care of getting the three drug samples to a lab. She'd also keep on top of the investigations into the deaths of the three Rain Bay employees.

Avery turned to Paige, her brow furrowed in confusion. "How did you learn that my boss accessed that traffic cam footage?" she asked, her voice low.

Fenn cut in, his voice filled with admiration. "There isn't a system Paige can't hack."

"But it's the FBI," Avery protested.

Fenn and Paige exchanged an amused look.

"Everything can be breached, given enough time," Paige insisted, her voice matter-of-fact. "The Bureau's system isn't even that sophisticated. Now a Russian Oligarch's tech domain? That's a challenge."

Avery twisted her fingers together. She had to ask, but the words stuck in her throat. "How did Ryan know to access that footage?"

"You mean who tipped him off?" Paige brushed long, golden bangs away from her eyes. "I'm not sure yet. The main server's easy to hack, but Bureau-issue cell phones, not so much. He probably got a text or a call. I'll find out though, okay?"

Paige's sympathetic expression made tears rise in Avery's eyes. She blinked them back and nodded. It could be nothing. An anonymous tip or a call from some other agent or a local LEO. Just because Ryan looked at the footage didn't mean he had any connection to Rain Bay.

But it didn't mean that he didn't, either.

While Mason chopped and cooked, tossing boxed pasta into a huge stockpot, the team asked Avery and Paul to go back over the fine details of the case. By the time Mason plated up the meal, she'd caught them up to the present.

Over plates of pasta primavera, Mason and Paige exchanged a look. "Should we ask her now?" Paige asked him, her voice low.

Mason shrugged, but he didn't look happy. Which made Avery's stomach hurt. "The drug samples will make great evidence," he said, "but we need to prove who Rain Bay is buying from ... and selling to, right?"

Exactly. Whether they were buying stolen pharmaceuticals and reselling them, or buying and distributing counterfeit meds, the info would be invaluable. And they couldn't spend the rest of their time following delivery vans around.

"Right," she agreed. "Plus, I'm hoping for some leads on the murders. Solid info on the four victims would help."

Paige jumped in, her voice eager. "What we need is access to the warehouse's data files."

Avery was confused, and she told them why. She was okay with them looking at whatever files Paige could access. Then she was hoping their surveillance, and Paul's testimony about the pills he found in the warehouse, would give the Bureau enough evidence for a legitimate search warrant.

Paige explained that that wasn't the problem. "The problem is getting our hands on the data files in the first place. They're not on a networked system."

Avery's continued confusion must have shown on her face because Fenn took up the explanation. "Paige has accessed every Rain Bay database she could find. And that

online pharmacy's a dead end. It's basically just a storefront that accepts orders. There are no related data files to access. Nothing. The files must be stored on a non-networked computer. Or maybe even on paper. Whatever file system they use exists only in a physical location. My guess is it's located inside the warehouse."

"So we're done," Avery said.

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Yup. Done. All that was left now was for her to face whatever consequences her superiors had in store for her.

And she'd likely never know whether Ryan was involved.

"Looks like this is the end of the road."

"Or not." Mason stared her down. "We can handle this. Not a problem."

"Aside from the fact that breaking and entering is against the law, yeah, it is a problem." Avery shook her head. "The place is patrolled by armed guards and has extremely sophisticated defenses. Way more than a normal warehouse. That's part of what convinced me something weird was going on there."

"Not at night," Paul said abruptly, drawing everyone's attention. "At night there's no merch to guard. They use a four-man crew."

Graham looked up. "To handle an empty warehouse? That's some major overkill."

Mason held up a hand like a stop sign. "No more details in front of Avery. She needs plausible deniability."

"What I need is for you to stop planning an illegal activity."

She was a federal agent. She couldn't be part of planning a break-in. Sitting by while Mason stole packages was bad enough. No way she'd let them skirt the law on her behalf.

But deep inside, she was angry. Angry that Ryan and their superiors had pushed her to this point. Angry that Ryan made her doubt him. And angry that she was going to miss out on a real-life military op with real-life heroes.

She and Paul made eye contact across the table. She could see the same regret in his eyes.

Paul's look hit her like a bucket of cold water, reactivating her need for justice. And just like that, she changed her mind.

She wanted in on anything that would help destroy Rain Bay.

Even if it ended her own career. Which was probably toast already anyway.

Remaining in the FBI wouldn't honor her father. Seeking justice—and saving lives—was all that mattered.

“Never mind deniability. I'm all in,” she said, before she could change her mind. “Let's do this.”

22

Avery was in.

Mason wasn't totally clear on how he felt about that.

The determination shining from her deep, dark eyes told him just how committed she was. She'd be well aware of the consequences.

Just not the consequences for him.

Now he was responsible for her safety and her career. He wanted to call this off in the worst way, but his team could handle the op. No doubt there.

He paused at the head of the table, hands braced on the polished wood as he surveyed his team. The energy in Bridger's luxurious dining room was electric, a mix of anticipation and determination that set his nerves thrumming.

Combat energy.

He locked gazes with Avery.

She didn't even flinch.

Something twisted in his gut—a mixture of admiration and worry that he didn't care to examine too closely.

But there was one huge, open issue they needed to resolve before they dug into the details of the mission. "Once we do this, they're going to know we hit them. There'll be no more hiding this investigation."

"You're thinking they'll close up shop and run?" Tai instantly saw where he was going.

“Bingo.”

Avery paled. Mason felt like he’d just punched her in the gut, but it had to be said.

“Of course,” she practically whispered. “I should have thought about that.”

From across the table, Kate waved her hands. “Wait. Wait. Wait. Who says they don’t already know about your investigation? I hate to bring it up, but either your immediate supervisor works for them, or he got clued in by someone who does.”

“A shockingly good point,” Fenn teased.

Kate shot him a burning look, which he ignored. As usual.

“The point is,” Fenn continued, “they haven’t disappeared yet. I say it’s worth the gamble.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “This from the man who’ll bet on anything. Literally anything.”

Fenn pressed a hand to his heart. “A man’s gotta have some fun.”

Kate snorted. “You’re a man with many problems. Lack of fun isn’t one of them.”

Clearly unfazed, Fenn winked at Avery. “Says the woman who can’t even spell the word.”

Fenn’s quick wit earned him a tiny smile from Avery. Mason couldn’t help but envy

the man's style. How come he couldn't coax a smile out of her? All he ever got were wary looks. Or angry ones. Then again, the first time they met he did sort of kidnap her. Suddenly, he had the urge to make it up to her.

But now wasn't the time. "It's your call," he said.

The smile faded. She stared down at her hands for a long moment, her thick curls obscuring her features. When she looked up again, fire burned in her eyes. "Let's do this."

He clapped his hands together. "Okay. Looks like we have a mission to plan. Let's run through the deets."

Paige raised her hand, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Speaking of deets, I have a surprise for you guys."

Mason raised an eyebrow. "What kind of surprise?"

She grinned, reaching into her bag and pulling out a small, sleek device. "Meet Phantom. It's a little something I've been working on. It's untested, but it's designed to help us bypass things like Rain Bay's security systems."

Fenn leaned forward in his chair. "You're telling me that tiny thing can get us past their state-of-the-art security?"

"Uh, yeah." Paige's grin widened. "Not only that, but it'll make us practically invisible."

The team leaned in, intrigued, as Paige launched into an explanation of the Phantom's features—an EMP generator, ultrasonic emitter, wireless signal jammer, IR mask, and universal keycard, all miniaturized and combined into a single, easy-to-use

device.

“Hold on,” Tai said, his brow furrowed. “How do we know this thing won’t fry our own equipment?”

Paige’s mouth dropped open. “Give me some credit. Phantom is designed to target specific frequencies and wavelengths. Your adorable little drones will be perfectly safe.”

Mason let out a low whistle. “Impressive.”

Avery nodded, her eyes wide with excitement. “This could be a game-changer.”

“Exactly,” Paige said, her cheeks flushed with pride.

The team erupted into excited chatter, ideas flying back and forth as they incorporated Paige’s invention into their plans. Mason felt a surge of pride as he watched them work, their minds sharp and focused. Coolest found family. Ever.

“What about the security guards?” Avery asked. “There are four of them. We can’t expect to avoid them entirely.”

A valid point. One that had been weighing on his mind as well.

Paige grinned hard. “Guys, I got you covered.”

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One eye on Avery, Mason folded his arms across his chest and waited for Paige to dazzle them all one more time.

Paige held up her sleek device. “I’ve been working on a little something extra, just for this occasion.”

Mason watched, intrigued, as she tapped a button on the side of the box. A soft, pulsing hum filled the air, and he felt a tingle of anticipation run down his spine.

No—it was more than a tingle. It was a heavy wave of ... energy.

“Ultrasonic frequency generator,” Paige explained. “It sends out pulses of low frequency sounds. Ultra-low frequency infrasound. They’ll disorient anyone within a 50-foot radius, making it harder for them to focus or coordinate their movements. It’ll be like being drunk. Very drunk.”

Graham scratched his chin. “What about us?”

Tai snapped his fingers. “Noise cancelling headphones.”

Paige pointed straight at him. “A point for the tall man. The headphones are over-ear. They won’t interfere with our comlinks.”

Tai whistled. “This isn’t your grandma’s mission.”

Mason’s eyebrows shot up, impressed by Paige’s ingenuity. He glanced at Avery and saw the same look of admiration on her face.

“That’s brilliant,” she said. “So we’ll have a window of opportunity to slip past the guards while they’re off-balance.”

Mason nodded, his expression serious. “Exactly. But we’ll still need to be careful.” He eyed Paige. “You think the effect’ll last long enough for us to get them tied up?”

The computer expert didn’t hesitate. “Absolutely.”

He turned to Tai. “I want you on overwatch.”

Tai nodded, his fingers already dancing over his keyboard. “Got it, boss. I’ll have eyes on the perimeter and the interior.”

Mason looked around the room, his gaze settling on each member of the team in turn. These were the people he trusted with his life, the ones who had his back no matter what. “We get in, get the evidence, and get out. No heroics, no unnecessary risks. Understood?”

A chorus of nods and murmurs of assent filled the room. Avery looked equally determined.

She reached out, taking his hand in hers and giving it a gentle squeeze. “We’ve got this,” she said, her voice steady and sure.

A rush of warmth zinged through him, almost as powerful as Paige’s Phantom.

But the excitement was short-lived. Paul slapped a hand down on the table, his eyes wide and determined. “I’m coming with,” he announced.

Mason stiffened. “Absolutely not.”

Avery shook her head. “Paul, it’s too dangerous. You’re a civilian.”

But Paul, being Paul, doubled down on that stubborn glare he perfected in the second grade. “I know that warehouse better than any of you. I can help.”

“Help?” Mason scoffed. “More like get yourself killed.”

“You don’t even know me. I’m not helpless,” Paul shot back, his chin jutting out defiantly. “I know the risks, and I’m willing to take them.”

Mason opened his mouth to argue, but to his surprise, Tai spoke up. “The kid’s got a point, Mace. His background knowledge could be invaluable.”

Graham nodded. “Agreed. We could use all the intel we can get.”

Mason looked to Avery for support, but she just shrugged helplessly. “They’re not wrong. Paul’s insights could give us a real edge.”

He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Fine. But you’re staying outside as a lookout and getaway driver only. You can guide the team over the comlink. No arguments.”

Paul’s face lit up, and he nodded eagerly. “I hear you. That’s fair.”

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As the team finalized their plans, Mason pulled Avery aside. “I don’t like putting Paul in harm’s way.”

She laid a hand on his arm, her touch sending another jolt of electricity through him. “I know. But he’s capable, Mason. More than you believe, I think.”

He held her gaze for a long moment, searching for any hint of doubt or hesitation. But all he saw was determination and faith—in Paul, in the team, and in him.

“Okay,” he said finally, his voice rough. “But if anything happens to him ...”

“It won’t,” she said firmly. “He’ll have you.”

Great. Nothing like a little added pressure.

He watched as the team filed out of the room, their voices echoing down the hallway as they made their final preparations. He sank into a chair, his head in his hands as he tried to process the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside him.

He was about to lead his team, his brother, and a special agent—a beautiful, dedicated woman—into the lion’s den. A fierce protectiveness bloomed in his chest, catching him by surprise.

He had feelings for Avery Ellis. Protectiveness. Yearning. Feelings that skirted suspiciously close to serious liking.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart. They had a job to do, and he

needed to stay focused. But as he stood to join the others, he couldn't shake the feeling that everything in his life was about to change.

23

It wasn't fear that squeezed the air out of Avery's lungs. Okay, it was fear, but not the usual kind. The fear that choked her was about the future. About her current willingness to ignore the law in order to solve a case.

Was this the battle her dad fought? Follow rules or save lives?

The team surrounded her as they approached the back side of the Rain Bay warehouse, its dilapidated exterior barely visible in the oppressive darkness, but all Avery wanted to do was turn and run. The night air hung heavy and still, and the only sound was the soft crunch of gravel beneath the team's boots. She tried to take a calming breath, but the unfamiliar tactical gear felt constricting, like a second skin that didn't quite fit. Kate and Paige had insisted on the state-of-the-art outfit, but Avery couldn't shake the feeling that she was an imposter playing dress-up.

Beside her, Mason moved with fluid precision, his dark form blending seamlessly into the shadows. He radiated a quiet intensity that simultaneously put Avery at ease and set her nerves on edge.

"You ready for this?" His whisper was barely audible, but it sent a shiver down her spine.

Avery swallowed hard, her mouth dry as sandpaper. She nodded, not trusting her voice to remain steady. The truth was, she felt woefully unprepared for what lay ahead.

What this one decision might cost her.

The entire team was outfitted in state-of-the-art black tactical gear, their clothing a mix of lightweight, breathable fabrics and reinforced panels designed to offer both mobility and protection. Each member wore night vision goggles and a built-in communication system, allowing them to stay in constant contact with one another. Their utility belts held an array of cutting-edge gadgets: compact flashlights, multipurpose tools, and small, high-powered cameras for gathering evidence. The only jarring note were the old-school headphones.

“Seriously, what’s with the retro headgear?” Avery whispered to Mason, eyeing the bulky headphones with skepticism.

Mason grinned, his teeth flashing white in the darkness. “Don’t knock the classics. Sometimes old-school is the way to go.”

Wow. The man even made dorky headgear cool.

Aside from the headphones, the advanced tech gear provided by the team was topnotch. She’d left her FBI identification and badge at the mansion, but not her Glock. The decision had been a tough one, but if it came down to needing to protect one of the team, she didn’t want to risk being un-armed. She wore a sleek, form-fitting black jumpsuit, its material designed to regulate body temperature and wick away moisture. Her hands were clad in thin, flexible gloves that allowed for maximum dexterity while still providing grip and protection. On her feet were black, lightweight tactical boots, their soles designed for silent movement and superior traction.

At their hips, each team member carried a handgun loaded with XREP electroshock non-lethal bullets. Her Glock carried the same rounds. These innovative rounds were designed to deliver a powerful, incapacitating electrical charge upon impact, effectively neutralizing targets. The weapons provided a crucial option for the team, allowing them to subdue any threats they might encounter within the warehouse

without causing permanent injury or death.

Avery marveled at the cool composure of Mason and his team, their faces set with grim determination as they prepared to breach the building.

“Last chance to back out, Avery,” he told her, his voice a low rumble in her ear. “No one will think less of you if you do.”

Avery shook her head, her jaw set with determination. “Not a chance.”

He nodded, a flicker of admiration in his eyes. “Alright then. Let’s do this.”

As they neared the warehouse, she lifted a silent prayer, asking for protection and guidance. She was doing the right thing. Bringing Rain Bay to justice was worth the risk. But a small part of her feared what they might find inside, especially if it implicated Ryan in any wrongdoing.

“You okay?” Mason’s voice, low and concerned, cut through her thoughts.

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She managed a tight smile. “Yeah, just ... nervous, I guess.”

“You’d be stupid not to be. Trust the plan. Trust the team.”

“I do. It’s just ... this is a big step, you know?”

“I know.” His eyes held a depth of understanding that made her heart flutter.

The team paused in the shadows, still on the far side of the fence, their earpieces crackling to life as Paul’s voice filled the channel. “This is Paul. I mean, uh, Delta Fox.” He quickly changed to the mission nickname Fenn had jokingly given him. “All clear on the perimeter,” he reported, his words tumbling out in an excited rush. “No signs of activity or—” A sudden clatter interrupted him, followed by a muffled curse. “Sorry, sorry,” he muttered, his voice sheepish. “Dropped the little ear thingy.”

Mason’s jaw tightened, his eyes flashing with annoyance. “Paul, focus,” he growled, his voice low and commanding. “No more distractions.”

Avery shot him a sympathetic look, understanding his frustration. Paul’s enthusiasm was endearing, but it could also be a liability in a high-stakes situation like this.

“Sorry, boss,” Paul replied, his tone chastened. “Won’t happen again.”

Mason sighed deeply.

Avery pointed at the far side of the building. “There goes the security sweep. Guards’ll be inside now until the top of the hour.”

The team huddled in the shadows, waiting for Tai to deploy his drones and have a look around from the air.

Avery curled her fingers around the cold metal of the chain-link fence, trying to keep herself in the moment. It was the best way she knew to make sure her senses, and her reaction times, stayed sharp.

“The exterior is clear,” Tai informed them, his attention on the monitor controlling his dark, silent drones.

With a nod from Mason, the team moved forward, their footsteps quiet on the pavement. Paige took the lead, the device clutched in her hand like a talisman. As they neared the door, she raised a fist, stopping them in their tracks, and fired up the machine. “Go, baby.”

Red lights flickered, changing to amber and finally a steady green. “Sound generation is working,” Paige told them over the comlink.

She pulled out the clone she’d made of Paul’s keycard. Untraceable back to him, the card would show an anonymous entry. An instant later she swiped the keycard across the lock, and the door clicked open with a soft beep. “We’re in.”

The sharp tang of rubber and machine oil filled Avery’s nostrils. The space was cavernous, the darkness broken only by the faint glow of emergency lights. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the gloom as she followed Mason and Paige deeper into the building.

The others peeled off, shadows slinking toward the outer edges of the warehouse. The plan was for Fenn, Tai, Graham and Kate to box in the four disoriented security guards at the back of the building, securing their arms and legs with zip ties while Mason guarded her and Paige as they tackled the computer in the office.

Their progress was slow and methodical, each step carefully placed to avoid making any noise. Every creak and groan of the old building set her nerves on edge. She could feel the tension radiating off the others, their bodies coiled like springs ready to snap.

“Hold up,” Tai warned over the comlink. “We’ve got two guards still in motion.”

Mason raised a fist to signal a stop.

She and Paige froze. Waiting.

After a moment, Tai came over the comlink again. “Nighty night. All four guards down.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Mason ordered.

As they approached the main office, Mason signaled for them to halt once more. He pulled a small screen from his vest and held it to the door.

“Heat detector,” Paige said. “He’s making sure the office is empty.”

“It’s clear.” Mason pocketed the device again. “How’re the guards looking?”

“All four zoning out. Just the way Paige said,” Tai announced. “Securing the cargo now.”

“They’re kinda cute when they’re buzzed,” Fenn added.

Mason pushed the door open.

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Paige and Avery filed in behind him, handguns at the ready. But as Mason said, the office was empty, the only sound the hum of the computer monitors. Avery exhaled slowly, her shoulders sagging with relief as she tucked away her gun.

Mason took up a position by the door. “Ladies, you’re up.”

Paige headed straight for the older-model computer perched like a trophy on the desk in the center of the room. She moved quickly, her fingers flying over the keyboards as they worked to bypass the security systems and access the files. The progress bar inched forward, each second feeling like an eternity.

“Almost there,” Paige muttered, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Just need to crack this last firewall and ...”

A sudden movement caught Avery’s eye. She whirled around, her hand reaching for her weapon. A security guard stood in the doorway, his eyes wide with shock and alarm, a pair of over-ear headphones around his neck.

“Don’t move!” Avery shouted, leveling her gun at the guard.

But he was already reaching for his radio, his finger fumbling for the button.

Mason reacted instantly, crossing the room in two long strides, and slamming the guard against the wall. The man’s head cracked against the plaster, his eyes rolling back as he slumped to the floor.

The telltale blare of an alarm rang through the building.

Mason growled into the comms, his face grim. “The guard hit the alarm before I could stop him. We’ve been made. Get out, now!”

“I need another ten seconds,” Paige protested, but Mason yanked her toward the door.

“No can do. Run.”

24

Where had that guard come from?

Mason’s breath rasped in his ears as the team raced through the warehouse, the sound of their footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. There was no telling how fast the security company could mount an armed response. Most likely, they’d be long gone before any vehicles rolled up, but that didn’t slow him one bit.

Better to get out clean.

“Where did that guy come from?” Tai wondered over comms, echoing Mason’s own thoughts. “He never showed up on infrared.”

“Storeroom,” Paige answered, her breathing labored from their escape. “I bet he was napping in a storeroom. Might have masked ... heat signature.”

Tai groaned. “Makes sense. My bad for not checking.”

Finger on the trigger of his weapon, Mason flipped down his night vision goggles, staring hard into the angular shadows of the huge space. Letting his intuition guide him. “Cut the chatter,” he ordered.

The air was thick and heavy, the heat of the night pressing down on him like a

physical weight. Sweat trickled down his back, his shirt clinging to his skin as he ran. So much for anti-sweat technology. Not that he cared about comfort.

Avery and Paige were mere feet behind him. The others wouldn't be far behind.

He tapped his comlink. "Yo, Paul. Fire up the engine. We're coming in hot."

No response.

He tapped his earbud impatiently. "Paul, do you read? Dude, answer me!"

Silence. Nothing but static and the echo of his own ragged breathing. A cold sense of dread settled over him, a sickening certainty that something was very wrong. "I need a radio check on Paul."

Paige answered first. "I got nada."

"No joy," Tai responded.

Then Graham. "Nothing here."

If Paul had dropped his comlink again ...

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“Could be equipment ...malfunction,” Tai pointed out.

Otherwise known as incompetence. Tai was too much the gentleman to point out that Paul probably dropped the thing again.

“What if it’s not?” Avery shoved him in the back. “Don’t wait for us.Run.”

He hesitated, mind whirling as he attempted to formulate a new plan. He didn’t want to leave them. But both Paige and Avery were completely capable operatives. And the rest of the team would be thundering into the main warehouse bay in a second.

She shoved him again. “We got this.Go!”

“Git.” Paige made a shooping motion. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“Copy that.” He shot into overdrive, flying through the warehouse.

At the exit, he froze, listening before slipping silently out into the night. The cool air hit him like a slap in the face. He scanned the parking lot, searching for the familiar shape of their vehicle in the shadows beyond the fence.

And then he saw it—the SUV, its door hanging open, the interior dimly lit and empty. His blood turned to ice in his veins.

“No,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the pounding of his heart. “No, no, no ...”

The driver's door gaped open like a wound, the interior empty, uselessly lit by the dome light.

Mason bit back a shout of rage. Guilt and self-recrimination twisted his gut.

Footsteps pounded behind him, then came the ragged breathing of his team as they regrouped around him. Their gazes landed on him, their faces pale and drawn in the dim light of the parking lot.

"Mace ..."

He barely registered their presence, his attention focused solely on the empty driver's seat.

It was a sight that would haunt him, a nightmare made real. He imagined the struggle, Paul's fear and desperation. He hung his head. Please, Lord, keep Paul safe until I find him.

"Mason, we have to go," Tai said, his voice tight with urgency. "Those guards are waking up, and we can't afford to get caught here."

Mason shook his head, his jaw clenched with stubborn determination. That, and anger, were the only things holding back the intense shame. He'd let Paul down. "I'm not leaving without him."

Tai had his drone monitor in hand, staring at the screen. "There's no indication of anyone within a six-block radius at least. My guess is he's long gone."

"I agree," Paige added. "Let's get back to Bridger's place. I can access every security

cam in the state from there. We'll find him."

Avery stepped forward, putting a hand on his arm. "Us getting caught isn't going to help. We need to regroup."

He wanted to argue, to insist that they stay and fight. But they were right. With Paige's Phantom down, the guards would rouse soon. The guy he took down in the office might even be up already.

He stepped aside to let Fenn take the driver's seat. He wanted to be able to concentrate on their surroundings. "Alright."

Without a word, the team piled into the SUV, Fenn taking the wheel with a white-knuckled grip. Mason fingered his M18, the fear and anger burning in his chest like a physical ache.

With no signs of pursuit, Fenn drove slow enough for them to eye the area, but Mason saw nothing. No pedestrians. No other vehicles. Not even a lousy pigeon. Whoever took Paul had vanished.

The drive back to Bridger's place was a blur, the streets of the city passing by in a haze of neon and shadow. When they finally reached the mansion, Mason was out of the vehicle before it stopped moving. He stalked inside, his body coiled with tension and barely-contained rage. The others followed behind him, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous foyer.

In the living room, Mason slammed his fist against the wall, the pain barely registering through the haze of his anger. "I should have been there," he said, his voice raw with self-recrimination. "I should have protected him."

Avery stepped forward, her face etched with concern. "This isn't your fault," she

said, her voice soft but insistent. “We all knew the risks going in, Paul included. He made his own choice.”

“He’s my brother. I’m supposed to keep him safe. I’m supposed to be there for him, no matter what. And I failed.”

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He could see the guilt in her eyes, the weight of her own sense of responsibility for the mission's outcome.

She backed away. "Paul's got the best of the best searching for him. You and your team can do anything. You know that."

"Lord willing," he whispered the fragment of a prayer. Of a plea.

Paige chose that moment to burst into the room, laptop in hand. Fenn and the others followed.

"We have another problem," Paige said. "Before we headed out, I started a search on the informant who tipped off the FBI about the footage of Mason and Avery taking those packages. It was Lars Stenberg."

"The company owner?" Fenn pressed a hand to the top of his head. "That makes no sense."

No. It didn't. Mason's stomach clenched. This case was getting weirder by the second.

And Paul was dead center.

Desperation surged through him, a wild, reckless need to do something, anything, to save his brother. But even as he opened his mouth to speak, he realized the truth. They had no leads. No clues. No way of knowing where Paul had been taken or who had him.

All they knew was that the trucking company's owner had caught on to their investigation. And he'd made sure Avery's supervisor knew it, too.

"Maybe Stenberg's not involved in a bad way," Tai speculated. "Could be he wants the FBI to shut down the operation."

Graham palmed an apple. "Or he senses he's on a sinking ship and wants to cooperate so he won't face prosecution."

Avery shot Mason a look. "Whatever the reason, we can probably cross Stenberg off the list of kidnappers. Alerting Ryan only increased Bureau scrutiny on his company. Not exactly the move of a criminal genius."

"Agreed." Mason fingered the folding knife in his front pocket, aching to take action. Eliminating a suspect was progress, no matter how miniscule. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

He slipped away from the group, his feet carrying him out onto the balcony overlooking the city. The night air was cool against his skin, the sounds of the city distant and muffled. He leaned against the railing, his head bowed and his eyes closed as he tried to steady his racing heart.

He could feel himself slipping, retreating into that dark, lonely space he had been so many times before. The guilt and self-recrimination were like a physical ache, a pain that throbbed in his chest with every beat of his heart.

Once they had Paul back, he would have to face his own inner demons, the ones that whispered to him in the night and urged him to violence.

But for now, he had to be strong. For Paul, for Avery, for his team. He had to keep it together, to focus on the mission and the people who needed him.

He had to focus on finding his baby brother.

26

After Paige dropped that bombshell about Stenberg's actions, the team quickly dispersed, as if Mason's friends were desperate to avoid the cloud of emotion, by drowning their feelings in work.

Avery knew the feeling well. But she didn't have a specialty. She wasn't even part of their team. Alone in the vast living room, she perched on the edge of a sleek couch. Even the spectacular view of Lake Washington seemed off, dimmed by the oppressive, low-hanging clouds.

She clasped her hands tightly in her lap as she tried to quell the rising tide of guilt and fear that threatened to overwhelm her. The group was scattered throughout Bridger's futuristic mansion, each member silently going about their specific chores with a focused intensity that was both reassuring and unsettling.

Despite how she'd urged Mason not to wallow in guilt, she wasn't doing a great job of taking her own advice. The operation played out in her mind, frame by frame. If only she hadn't urged Mason to bring Paul. She should have dredged up enough evidence against Rain Bay after that first mechanic contacted her.

Her eyes drifted to Mason, who was pacing the terrace outside like a caged animal, his jaw clenched and his eyes hard with a silent, simmering rage. If she thought he was competent before, now she saw his deadly side in full force. It was equal parts frightening and reassuring, the way he seemed to have a wall around him, totally in professional mode with no emotions except for the barely-contained fury that radiated off him in waves.

She wondered how much of that anger was directed at her. She deserved every ounce

of it and more.

She wanted to go to him, to offer some kind of comfort or apology, but before she could move, Graham appeared at her side.

He grabbed her arm gently. “Now’s not the best time. The guy needs space. Trust me. I’ve been where he is now. Nothing you say is going to help. You’ll only be putting yourself in the crosshairs.”

The man was right, but it didn’t make it any easier to watch Mason suffer in silence. Once convinced she’d stay put, Graham patted her arm and headed for the kitchen.

Suddenly, her phone chirped, breaking the heavy silence. She pulled it out with shaking hands. The video was grainy and soundless, but the image was clear enough—Paul, bound and gagged in an empty cargo container, his face bruised and his eyes wide with fear.

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The accompanying text made her blood run cold.

BACK OFF THE CASE AND HE GOES FREE. NO COPS. NO FBI. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.

Her hands trembled so hard she dropped her phone. “G-Graham?”

By the time she bent to scoop it back up, he was at her side. He took the phone from her fingers and swore under his breath. “Yo, guys! We have contact.”

He held the phone up toward the terrace and waved Mason back inside.

Mason flew back through the door, hand out for her phone. An odd thing happened as he studied the screen. The anger drained from his face, leaving him looking almost peaceful.

That frightened her more than the emotion.

The others rushed in. Mason thrust her phone toward Paige. “Put it up on screen.”

Without a word, Paige took the phone to her computer. In seconds, she had the hideous video playing on the huge computer monitor that dominated one wall of the room. The team crowded around, their faces grim as they studied the clip for any clues or signs of Paul’s location.

“Can’t glean much from this,” Fenn said, his brow furrowed with concentration. “Light’s leaking in from somewhere, but no way to tell if it’s from a bulb or the sun.”

“It’s only been an hour since the abduction,” Tai pointed out. “Best guess is that he’s being held somewhere in the area. Could be an empty room. A basement. Anything.”

Not much of a clue. “That’s hundreds of miles of coastline. And millions of people.”

Hands on his hips, Graham shook his head. “Their demand makes no sense. How would they even know if Avery did stop investigating? They’re asking for something they’ve got no way to verify.”

Exactly what she was wondering. She’d never heard of such a nebulous ransom demand.

Mason paced in front of the screen. “Or this is a feint. They want something else.”

That had to be it. Ordering her to drop the investigation sounded plausible for half a second, but really, it was stupidly illogical. Graham was right. There’d be no way for her to prove she was walking away. Besides being idiotic. Once Paul’s abductors returned him—if they returned him—they’d lose their leverage.

Mason nodded, his expression grim. “That tracks. Not that I care. Once we rescue Paul, the answer won’t matter.”

As long as they found Paul before the kidnappers made their real demands clear.

Paige and Tai worked their keyboards, trying to trace the source of the video call.

“As soon as we have a location, we move out,” Mason said, his voice brooking no argument.

Fenn rubbed his hands together. “Copy that.”

With the exception of Paige and Tai, the team broke into a flurry of action. Duffle bags appeared from the guest rooms. Mason took off toward the back of the house, reappearing with his gear. Avery watched as he began packing and repacking the go-bags, his movements precise and methodical. She could see the tension in every line of his body, the fury and worry that radiated off him in waves.

She tried to work up the courage to approach him, to offer some kind of comfort or support, but before she could, his phone rang. She listened to his side of the conversation. Bridger calling to express his concern and offer his help.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Mason said, his voice clipped and cool. “We’ve got this handled.”

He hung up without another word, going right back to his obsessive packing. Avery noticed that he was reloading his handguns with real bullets.

“Are those necessary?” she asked, her voice tentative.

Mason’s eyes flashed with a cold fury that made her take a step back. “One hundred percent. All bets are off.”

Avery swallowed hard, trying to find the right words to reach him. “Mason, I understand how you feel. But using lethal force ... it’s not the answer. We have to be better than them.”

He shook his head, his jaw clenched with stubborn determination. “This is my call. I’ll do whatever it takes to get Paul back safely. But I’d never take a kill shot when something else will do. You have my word on that.”

Frustration surged, mixed with a deep, aching sadness.

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“I know what it’s like to feel responsible for someone else’s safety, to be willing to do anything to protect them. But Mason ... this isn’t the way. We have to stay true to who we are, to what we believe in. Otherwise, what’s the point of any of this?”

For a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes, a crack in the hard, unyielding facade he had put up. But then it was gone, replaced by a cold, emotionless mask that made her heart ache.

“Your concerns are noted,” he said, his voice flat and distant.

She forced herself to turn away, to focus on her own tasks and responsibilities. There would be time to deal with her personal feelings later, once Paul was safe and the mission was complete.

For now, all she could do was pray that they would find him in time, that they could bring him home without losing themselves in the process.

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Ghost watched the video feed intently, his eyes fixed on the phone’s small screen. The grainy image flickered and danced, but he could see the fear etched on the mechanic’s face, the way his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Javier would pay for this. Hard.

“What was it that couldn’t wait?” Lars Stenberg stomped his way into his own office, red-faced and furious.

Ghost quickly pocketed his phone and planted his hands on the man's desk, as if claiming ownership. Which he would do when the time was right. After he finished cleaning up Javier's stupid mistake.

"The next shipment's coming in early. You'll need to meet the ship Thursday."

The man's fat lips pressed together. "There's no need to check the cargo on deck. I don't like being that exposed. Just have them load the container and we'll check it here."

Ghost dug his fingers into the thick wood. Exactly the kind of stupidity he couldn't tolerate any longer. "You might be okay handing over a million in cash without seeing the merch, but I'm not."

"Then you check it."

His fingers twitched, but he forced himself to leave his weapon in its holster at the base of his spine. All in good time. "How about we do it together?"

Stenberg shifted from foot to foot, his large belly swaying. "Fine. But we need to come up with a new system."

"Agreed." Stenberg wasn't going to like the change, though.

Sending that tip to the FBI from Stenberg's computer had been a genius move. One more tiny thread tying Stenberg to Goshiro. The two figures who'd shoulder the blame while he stole the whole operation.

And disappeared.

The older man flapped a hand at him. "Can I have my desk back now?"

He pushed away from the desk and headed for the door. “I’ll see you at the dock in two days. Eight a.m.”

“Hmmm.” The man pretended to ignore him. A lame power move.

And yet another reason Ghost looked forward to what was coming.

For now, he needed to keep Stenberg believing that things were rolling smoothly.

Good thing he excelled at hiding his feelings.

On the way back to the car, he contemplated how to handle Javier’s disaster. Show mercy, or revenge?

Maybe he’d let Javier’s reaction dictate the next step.

The minute he exited the warehouse, Javier fired up the engine. Ghost slid into the vehicle and pinned the kid with a hard look.

Javier tapped out a rhythm on the steering wheel, right eye twitching. “You were right,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “The dude’s friends haven’t called the police yet.”

“They’ll trace the call any second. Then they’ll make a play for him.”

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Javier's eyes widened. "Should I double the guards? Get ready to take them out?"

He shook his head. "I wanted them to trace the call. They can have him."

Javier's jaw dropped, his face a mask of shock and disbelief. "What? But why?"

"Because that was a stupid thing to do." He let the raw anger bubble up now. Let it spice his voice. Instill terror. "I told you to stay back. Watch and wait."

"But he was just sitting there."

The urge to shoot Javier in the face warred with his need to remain calm. Javier deserved to die, but Ghost might yet have some use for him before the end. Still, this couldn't go unpunished.

Ghost thrust out his hand. "Give me your gun."

Hands shaking, Javier unholstered his pistol and handed it over, grip first.

He took his time checking it out, noting the round in the chamber. Javier waited silently, hands digging into the steering wheel, ready to flee. Or crumble.

Ghost savored the sharp tang of sweat wafting off his second in command. Slowly, lovingly, he raised the weapon, sighting in on Javier's forehead. "I should end you."

Javier's Adam's apple slammed from the bottom of his throat to the top again, over and over.

Once Ghost sensed the man was at his breaking point, he bent his arm, pointing the weapon at the roof. “One more chance. One. Next time, you won’t walk away.”

Javier slumped in his seat, and pressed his hands to his chest. His mouth worked, but no words came out.

Message received.

“Did he see any faces when you took him?”

“N-n-no. We made sure of that. He can’t ID any of us.”

“Good. Then the guards should walk away. Let his friends come. Those guys are SEALs. The real deal. Let them come get their guy, and they’ll disappear. No harm done. This time. Anyway, I have another job for you. Something way bigger. One last detail before the beautiful finale. We need the woman. We need Avery Ellis.”

Javier nodded, his face now a mask of determination. “When do you want me to get her?”

His smile widened, his eyes glinting with a cold, cruel light. “I’ll let you know.”

Javier’s eyes gleamed with a fierce, predatory light. Every ounce of terror morphed into determination. Excitement. Exactly the way he wanted the kid, hot for action and ready to do whatever it took to get the job done. To save his own skin.

Only a few more pieces needed to fall into place and he could pull the trigger.

Bait and switch. Bait and switch.

“Hello, you beauty!”

Paige’s exuberant shout echoed through the room, jolting Avery awake.

Muzzy-headed and disoriented, she lifted her head from her arms, blinking in the soft light of Bridger’s kitchen, trying to clear the nightmares from her head.

She’d fallen asleep at the breakfast bar.

A glance at the clock above the stove made her stomach twist. It had been two hours since Paul’s abduction. Two hours of helplessness and fear.

At the table by the window, Paige shot to her feet. “I have a location on that text,” she shouted, her voice ringing through the house. “We’re a go.”

Footsteps clattered. The team rushed into the room, their faces tense with anticipation.

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Extraction was the most perilous part of any kidnapping. But Mason and his team were experts. And while the Bureau had to play by the rules, Mason and his crew made their own.

As the others pressed forward, their bodies coiled with muscled intensity, Avery hung back, her mind racing. She'd been dreaming, her thoughts tangled in a web of disturbing, disjointed images.

But there had been a thread, a message hidden in the chaos. If only she could recall it before it dissolved in the harsh light of day.

An inside man.

The words echoed in her mind, a cold, insidious whisper. The bad guys had been one step ahead of them from the start, anticipating their every move. There had to be someone on the inside, feeding them information.

She glanced at Mason, his face hard and vengeful, his eyes burning with a fierce, barely-contained rage. She couldn't voice her suspicions, not yet. Not until she was certain.

If she was wrong, if she sent them chasing after a false lead, it could cost Paul his life.

She had to be sure, had to find the evidence that would confirm her fears.

Paige and Tai hunched over a laptop, their fingers flying across the keys as they

zeroed in on the location of the text. “It’s the original Rain Bay Trucking warehouse,” Paige said, her voice tight with concentration. “There’s a cluster of cargo containers in the back lot, stacked two or three high. Probably fifty of them.”

Tai pointed at the screen. “There’s a power cord snaking to one of them. It’s plugged into the cement base of a streetlight in the lot.”

Fenn snorted, his face twisted with disgust. “Sloppy,” he muttered, shaking his head.

Kate pulled her blonde hair back into a ponytail with quick, sharp motions. “What if it’s a trap?” she asked, her voice low and urgent.

Mason shrugged, his face hard and unyielding. “Of course, it’s a trap. We plan for that. Go in expecting the worst. Tai will deploy drones long before we get close enough to engage the enemy,” he said, his voice steady and confident. “We’ll know exactly where Paul is, and how many guards are on him. Plus, we have Paige’s Phantom. That’ll help level the playing field.”

Avery stepped forward, desperate to help. “What can I do?” she asked, her voice soft but insistent.

Mason turned to her, his face softening for a moment. “I need you to stay put in the safe house,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “We can’t risk you being seen by law enforcement. And I can’t spare the personnel to get you out of trouble if something goes wrong.”

Avery nodded, pretending reluctance even as relief washed over her. This was exactly what she wanted: a chance to investigate her suspicions without interference.

If she was right, she’d read the team in and get their help handling it.

She watched as the team geared up, their faces set with grim determination. They moved with a fluid, practiced efficiency, checking their weapons and strapping on their gear with silent, focused intensity.

These were the people she had come to care for, the ones who had risked everything to help her seek justice. And now, they were putting their lives on the line once again, for one of their own.

Looking tense and focused, Mason strapped on his tactical vest. “Stay off the computers,” he ordered her. “Stay quiet. We’ll be back in a few.”

“Right. Makes sense.” Not that she was going to obey.

He smiled faintly. “A few extra prayers couldn’t hurt, though.”

“Consider it done.” That part she had every intention of carrying out.

As the team headed out into the night, their footsteps echoing in the stillness of the house, Avery settled in to wait and pray.

The minute the SUV disappeared, she made the call.

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Phone in hand, Avery dialed the familiar number. She was taking a huge risk, going against Mason’s direct orders to stay off the grid until the team returned. But she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling she was missing a giant piece of the puzzle.

She took a deep breath as the phone rang, trying to calm her nerves. She hadn’t spoken to Dima Mathison in years, not since they had graduated from the academy together. At NATS they had bonded over their struggles with the physical training,

pushing each other to keep going when their bodies screamed for them to quit.

Dima had excelled at cybersecurity. Avery had always admired her determination, her refusal to give up no matter how tough things got. And now, as an agent in the Atlanta office, specializing in white-collar crime, Dima was exactly the person Avery needed to help her unravel the mystery of Rain Bay Trucking.

“Mathison,” the familiar voice answered, crisp and professional.

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“Dima, it’s Avery,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I need your help.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. Avery could almost hear the gears turning in her friend’s head.

“Avery, it’s been a while,” she said finally, her voice warm but cautious. “What’s going on?”

Avery took a deep breath, trying to choose her words carefully. How to get the info she needed without alarming her friend. “I’m working on a case,” she said, keeping her tone light and casual. “I was hoping you could help me get some information on a local Seattle company, Rain Bay Trucking.”

Another pause, longer this time. Sweat slicked her palms. She knew she was asking a lot, making a request out of the blue and outside official channels.

“Of course,” Dima said finally, her voice still friendly but with an undercurrent of concern. “Just wondering why your tech crew in Seattle can’t handle that.”

Avery forced a laugh, trying to sound nonchalant. “I know, right?” she said, sighing heavily. “The truth is, my investigation’s been back-burnered.”

“Boy’s Club gets the resources first?” Dima guessed, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“You know it,” Avery replied, feeling a surge of gratitude for her friend’s understanding. “Can we keep this on the QT? The higher-ups get bent out of shape if it looks like they’re not covering every base at all times.”

“I hear you,” Dima said, her voice softening. “You caught me at a good time. We just wrapped up a big case. What do you need?”

This was the tricky part.

“I’m trying to tease out any connections between Rain Bay Trucking and the Bureau. I have reason to suspect the company’s been trying to get info out of the Bureau, but my supervisors aren’t convinced. Unless I can offer up evidence, they’re shutting down my investigation. I was hoping you could look up a few quick things for me.”

She waited for the explosive response she was sure would come. But to her surprise, her friend seemed to take the request in stride, as if it were just another routine task.

“Sure thing,” Dima said, her voice brisk and businesslike. “I can do a departmental security audit, looking for any potential vulnerabilities or weak points in our systems or protocols that could be exploited by an outside entity.”

Yes! Her shoulders sagging as the tension drained out of her. “That would be great.”

“I can also analyze the department’s general communication logs,” Dima continued, her voice thoughtful. “Look for any unusual patterns or frequencies that might indicate unauthorized contact by outside parties.”

Avery nodded, her mind racing. “And maybe a review of the access logs for sensitive databases or restricted areas?” she suggested, trying to keep her tone casual.

“Good thinking,” Dima said, and Avery could hear the smile in her voice. “I’ll get right on it.”

A wave of exhaustion washed over her. She had been running on adrenaline for days, her mind and body pushed to the limit. But now, with Dima’s help, she finally felt

like she had a chance, like she might be able to unravel the mystery before it was too late.

“Thank you, Dima,” she said, her voice soft and sincere. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Dima laughed, the sound warm and familiar. “No info is free, girl,” she teased, her voice light. “You owe me one.”

Avery grinned, feeling a rush of affection for her old friend. “More than one. Whatever you need, whenever you need it.”

“I’ll text you on your personal cell when I have something,” Dima said, her voice serious again. “It’ll take me a while to call up the data and comb through it. Might be a couple hours. Might be tomorrow.”

“No problem. I need to keep this under the radar for now,” Avery said, feeling a flutter of anxiety in her chest.

“I hear you, girl. Just like running the gauntlet out on the exercise yard. We women have to stick together.”

Avery ended the call, her hands shaking slightly as she set the phone down on the table. Nothing else she could do now but offer up a prayer for the team’s safety.

But even as she waited, her mind raced. She was missing something, some crucial piece of the puzzle that would make everything fall into place.

The old mantra ran through Mason's brain, bringing calm. Focus.

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The warehouse loomed ahead, a hulking beast of corrugated metal and weathered brick. The original Rain Bay facility was a far cry from the sleek, high-tech building they had infiltrated earlier, its façade worn and shabby, its windows grimy with neglect.

But it was the silence that set Mason's teeth on edge. The warehouse itself was a hive of activity, with trucks backed up to the loading docks and forklifts buzzing like angry bees. But here, on the far side of the property, there was nothing but weeds and trash, the asphalt cracked and broken beneath their feet.

He shifted his weight, the familiar bulk of his tactical gear a constant reminder of the danger they faced. The Kevlar vest felt heavy against his chest, the weight of responsibility bearing down on him like a physical force. His hand rested on the grip of his Glock, the metal cool and reassuring beneath his fingertips. The weapon was loaded with real bullets, a last resort he hoped he wouldn't have to use. But if it came down to it, if it meant protecting Paul or his teammates, he wouldn't hesitate. Not for one millisecond.

It was a trap. Obviously. But he pushed the thought aside, his mind focused on a single, overriding goal. Get in. Get Paul. Get out. Everything else was just noise, a distraction he couldn't afford.

He glanced at his team, saw the same grim determination etched on their faces. They knew the stakes, welcomed the risks. Exactly why he loved them so much.

"Comms check." Tai's voice crackled over the earpiece. "Everyone online?"

A chorus of affirmatives came back, the team's voices steady and sure.

Tai hunched over his tablet, his fingers flying over the screen. "Drones are in position. I've got eyes on the prize."

Mason peered over Tai's shoulder at the thermal image on the screen. A single, glowing figure, huddled in the corner of a cargo container at the back of the lot. "That's him. That's Paul."

"Let's get this party started," Fenn said, his voice hard with determination.

They moved out, their footsteps silent on the cracked asphalt. The back wall of the warehouse would hide them from the workers, its walls a patchwork of rust and grime. The air was thick with the smells of the port, of diesel fuel and rotting fish, but Mason barely noticed, his mind laser focused on the task at hand.

They reached the fence, the rusted links giving way easily beneath Tai's bolt cutters. One by one, they slipped through the gap. The lot was a maze of cargo containers, stacked three high in places, their doors sealed with heavy padlocks.

"No security," Graham murmured, his voice low and tense. "This feels off."

"No kidding." Mason clenched his jaw.

They moved through the maze of containers, their weapons drawn, their eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of movement. The headphones they wore blocked out the noise of the port, the low rumble of engines and the clang of metal on metal. But Mason could feel the tension in the air, the crackle of adrenaline that surged through his veins.

They turned the corner, weapons at the ready. And there it was, the container that

held Paul, its door unguarded and unlocked.

Mason reached for the handle.

“Hold up.” Graham’s voice stopped him, low and urgent in his ear. “Could be booby-trapped.”

Mason cursed himself, his face flushing with anger and embarrassment. It was a rookie mistake, a careless error that could have cost them everything.

“We’ve got this,” Fenn said, his voice steady and sure. “Let’s check it out.”

Paige stepped forward, high-tech scanner in hand. “We’re clear,” she said at last, her voice heavy with relief. “No traps or wires.”

“Copy that.” Mason reached for the handle.

Behind him, Fenn clicked on a flashlight, shining it on the door. “After you.”

Mason lifted the lockrod, twisting the handle toward him until the door swung open.

The beam of Fenn’s flashlight cut through the darkness inside. And there was Paul, seated in the far corner, legs drawn up, face bruised and swollen, mouth secured with duct tape. Above the tape, his eyes glittered with fear.

Mason was at his brother’s side in an instant, his hands shaking as he cut through the ropes that bound him.

Paul slumped forward, his body trembling with exhaustion and relief. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, his voice thick with tears. “I’m so sorry, Mason. I shouldn’t have—”

But Mason just shook his head, his arms wrapping around his brother in a fierce, desperate hug. “No apologies,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “This wasn’t your fault. It was mine. I never should have let you come along.”

Face buried in Mason’s shoulder, Paul mumbled something unintelligible. For a moment, they just held each other, the rest of the world falling away.

“Thank you,” Mason whispered, his voice choked with tears. “Thank you, God, for bringing him back to me.”

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Hands gripped his shoulders. Fenn grinned down at him. “How about we blow this popsicle stand?”

While Graham and Kate helped Paul to his feet, Mason clambered upright. Though pale and dirt-streaked, Paul looked none the worse for wear. Just facial bruising. No obvious deep wounds. “You good to go?”

Paul offered a wobbly grin. “If we have to.”

With his arm wrapped around Paul, Graham guided him out. “Unless you got snacks, I’m gonna vote we boogey.”

Fenn hung back long enough to sweep the area with his light. “Place is clean,” he said.

It didn’t take two seconds for the team to make it back across the empty lot and through the hole in the fence. Once out of sight of the property, Mason stopped to fumble for his phone, his fingers clumsy with excess adrenaline. He needed to text Avery, needed to let her know that Paul was safe, that they were on their way back.

But before he could even unlock the screen, Paige’s voice crackled over the comms. “Already done,” she said, her voice warm with amusement. “I’ve got your six.”

A rush of gratitude and affection washed over him. His team, his family, they had his back, no matter what.

And Avery, too, he realized, his chest tightening with emotion. She hadn’t wanted

him homing in on her investigation, but even at first, when she had no reason to trust him, she'd been a calm, steadying force. And a welcome one.

He needed to tell her that, needed to let her know how much she meant to him. But first, they had to regroup and plan their next move.

Paul might be safe, but no way he'd let Avery go up against these jokers on her own. And he knew she would. Agent Avery Ellis could match him stubborn for stubborn.

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Mason ignored the reheated bowl of chili in front of him, eyes fixed on Paul as he recounted his ordeal. The team had gathered in Bridger's spacious living room, the air thick with tension and anticipation as they listened to Paul's story.

"Except for the guy that locked me in the container, I never saw their faces," Paul said, his voice shaking slightly. "They kept a hood over my head until just that one guy was left. He had tattoos, like gang tattoos, on his arms."

Mason exchanged a glance with Tai, his brow furrowed in thought. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something. He turned to Avery, expecting to see the same look of determination on her face, but instead he found her staring off into the distance, her expression preoccupied.

"Avery?" he said softly, his voice tinged with concern. "Everything okay?"

She blinked, seeming to come back to herself. "Yeah, sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I just ... I don't understand. Why go to all the trouble of kidnapping Paul if they were just going to lead us to him with that text? It doesn't make sense."

No. It didn't.

“These folks haven’t been sloppy so far, so why start now?” she added.

Tai tucked a hank of hair behind his ear, his gaze on the middle distance. “Maybe it was a distraction. You know, like a magician waving his right hand so you don’t see what he’s doing with the left.”

While the others nodded in agreement, Avery stared at her hands.

Mason watched her closely, his suspicion growing with every passing moment. She was onto something. He recognized the energy radiating off her.

Before he could question her further, Paige looked up from her computer. “Guys, I found something.”

The team gathered around her, their eyes fixed on the screen as she pulled up a series of files and documents. “I’ve been digging into the backgrounds of the Rain Bay executives,” she said, her voice tight. “Lars Stenberg about drove the company into bankruptcy two years ago, and then, all of a sudden, the place jumps into hyper-mode.”

“Can you trace the new funds?” Mason asked Paige. They’d failed to get into the onsite computer, but maybe there were public records available.

She shook her head. “Nothing obvious. I’ll keep searching, but ...”

“How about checking tax records?” Kate prompted.

While the rest of them converged on Paige, Avery stepped away, heading for the far side of the kitchen, phone to her ear. Mason stared at her back while she talked—or most likely listened—her body growing more tense with each second. The call ended quickly, but when she turned back around, the grim set to her face told him plenty.

He stepped in front of her. “Avery, what’s going on? I know you’re onto something, I can see it in your eyes.”

She hesitated, her gaze darting away from his. “It’s nothing,” she said, her voice unconvincing. “I just ... I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

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“You and me both. You’re holding something back. Tell me.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. “I called in a favor. From an old friend at the FBI. I asked her to look into some things for me, off the record.”

“What kind of things?”

Avery’s eyes met his, her expression pained. “I think someone in the agency is leaking info to Stenberg.”

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“I didn’t want to alert you or the team until I had more information.”

Avery faced Mason, her eyes searching his for any sign of anger. She had been keeping her suspicions to herself, not wanting to alert him or his team until she had more information. But now, with the truth out in the open, she could only hope that he would understand her reasons.

“I didn’t want to waste your time, or deflect your energies from rescuing Paul. It could be anyone from a director to an administrative assistant to a janitor. Or I could be completely off-base altogether.”

Mason’s eyes softened, a flicker of understanding crossing his features. “You didn’t want us focusing on Goshiro. Starting trouble he didn’t deserve.”

Avery’s mind went from red alert to green in a heartbeat. The panic that had been

coursing through her veins fizzled out, replaced by a sense of relief that was almost jarring.

He understood, even without her having to explain. It was a testament to the bond they had formed, the trust that had grown between them.

“You do have a tendency to jet off on your own,” she said, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. “I didn’t want to set something in motion I wouldn’t be able to control.”

“Like a runaway train, maybe?” Mason chuckled, the sound warm and rich in the stillness of the room. “I’ve got a great crew,” he said, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “But we don’t exactly play well with other teams, if that makes sense.”

“Totally. I feel the same way,” she admitted, her voice wistful. “Only I don’t have a team of my own.”

Yikes. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she had to say next. “I need to identify this inside person working with Rain Bay,” she said, her voice low and urgent. “I was worried that it might be my supervisor, Ryan. So far, I haven’t been able to find any evidence to support that, which makes me happy.”

The light in Mason’s eyes flattened. “You like him.”

“I trust him,” she corrected. “He’s a friend.”

Was it her imagination, or did Mason’s broad shoulders just relax?

She shook off the idea. Probably just wishful thinking on her part.

“Paige did a deep dive on Goshiro’s background when we first met you,” Mason said. “She didn’t find anything to suggest that he’s dirty. In fact, he’s a success story. Kid from the streets makes it into college on an academic scholarship and catches the eye of an FBI bigwig who mentors him into the academy.”

A tale she knew well. Ryan wasn’t shy about telling stories about himself. She had been so focused on her own suspicions that she had forgotten about the resources Mason and his team brought to the table. If Paige hadn’t found anything, then it was unlikely that Ryan was involved.

“It’s going to take some time for my FBI contact to dig into this,” Avery cautioned. “She’s got to be careful.”

Mason’s eyes met hers, a flicker of concern crossing his face. “No kidding. You trust her?”

“Completely. She’s smart, and she’s a friend.”

“Good enough.” Mason grinned at her, the tension gone. “If you trust her, that’s good enough for me, Special Agent.”

“Good to know.” A new kind of tension swirled between them. The kind that gave her butterflies, not stomach aches.

Graham waved at them from the living room, dissipating the delightful feeling. “Paige has a plan,” he called out.

Avery followed Mason back to the group, feeling ten pounds lighter. No more secrets. She could trust him, and his crew, to weigh her ideas with the same seriousness they gave each other.

“If we want to throw Stenberg off-balance, I’ve got an idea,” Paige announced. “He’s co-hosting a gala at the art museum. Tonight. Might be a good time to let him know we’re onto him. See how he handles it.”

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Mason shared a wolfish grin with Graham and Tai. “Oh, it’s on.”

Kate looked between her and Mason. “Avery should go, too. A little FBI action’ll help rattle his cage.”

“Definitely,” Mason agreed quickly. He cocked his head, his expression endearingly boyish. “Would you do me the honor of being my plus one?” he asked her.

Go as Mason’s date? No brainer there. But this wasn’t a date. And there were too many dangers.

Fenn jerked a thumb at Mason. “Fair warning. He can’t dance.”

“Dancing’s overrated,” Mason cut back.

“Not if you do it well.” Tai put a hand to his face, blocking Mason from view. “Which he can’t.”

“Whatever,” Mason muttered.

Much as she wanted to join in their light-hearted banter, she couldn’t imagine showing up to rile Stenberg when she’d been ordered off the case. “What if someone from the Bureau recognizes me?”

Mason scoffed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “This is a thousand-dollar-a-plate affair,” he said, his voice dry and knowing. “When’s the last time anybody at the Bureau rubbed elbows with that crowd?”

Fair enough. The donors at the gala were so far removed from her world that they might as well be on another planet. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Great. It’s a date. You. Me, and five special ops soldiers listening in on comms.”

Avery nodded, her cheeks flushing with a heat that had nothing to do with the temperature in the room. A date. With Mason. The thought sent a thrill of excitement through her, a sense of anticipation that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

But even as she basked in the glow of his smile, she couldn’t shake the nagging sense of unease that tugged at the edges of her mind. The longer she spent with Mason and his team, the harder it would be to go back to her old life.

The sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted Avery’s self-assessment. Fenn’s sharp blue gaze swept over the two of them. “You two are going to need some serious wardrobe help. The rest of us, too.”

The gala. They’d need clothes. She considered her closet back at her condo. There was one black dress that might do ...

Tai grimaced. “The gala’s black tie. Stores’ll be closing in a couple hours. Where are we going to find gowns and tuxes this late?”

Fenn sketched an elegant bow and wagged his cell phone. “Ladies. Gentlemen. Leave this to me.”

“You can phone in a tux order?” Mason sounded skeptical.

Fenn’s handsome mouth dropped open. “Uh. No. We’re not wearing off the rack. Do you have any idea how bad we’d look?”

Mason made a sound. “Who cares?”

“Uh, me? But that’s not important now.” Fenn turned his back on Mason, clearly a lost cause, and addressed the rest of them. “Unless you want to look like rent-a-guards, we’ll be wearing tailored tuxes. The mobile tailor will be here in less than an hour. Don’t worry,” Fenn added, addressing Avery. “He’ll have a whole rack of choices for you, too.”

Although she was closer to Mason’s who-cares style of fashion than Fenn’s haute couture, his thoughtfulness touched her.

Mason, not so much. He glared at his friend. “You’re enjoying this way too much, Scarborough.”

Fenn looked up from his phone. “Copy that.”

Kate looked almost as glum as Mason. “This means serious heels.”

Paige’s face fell, too. “Ugh.”

“Look on the bright side,” Tai said. “Stilettos make for nice weapons.”

“Yo, guys.” Paul waved to get the room’s attention. “What about me?”

Mason stiffened. “What about you?”

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Paul opened his mouth to add something, but slumped in his seat instead. “Stay here and stay quiet. I know.”

“I think we can do better than that,” Mason quipped, but his voice was softer than usual. “It’s probably not a great idea for Stenberg to see you. You might look familiar, but Paige could probably use some help running comms from somewhere safe.”

“Totally.” The cyber-wonder smiled enthusiastically.

Paul blinked, clearly surprised to be included. “Sweet.”

Fenn checked his watch. “Four hours until go time. Let’s get this party started.”

As the team dispersed to their respective bedrooms to primp, Avery couldn’t help but feel a pang of envy at their family vibe. It was like watching a bunch of siblings getting ready for a big night out, teasing and joking with each other. She’d never had that kind of closeness with anyone, not even her own family.

But she couldn’t dwell on that now. Nope, she had more pressing matters to attend to, like the fact that she’d have to wear heels for this undercover assignment. It had been a blissfully long time since she’d had to squeeze her feet into those torture devices masquerading as footwear.

She could already feel the blisters forming, and the night hadn’t even started yet. Oh, the joys of being a female agent in a man’s world.

Mason tugged at the collar of his tuxedo, his jaw clenching with discomfort as he surveyed the oversized ballroom taking up a whole wing of the art museum. The place dripped with crystal and art, the walls adorned with towering vases of exotic flowers and the air thick with the scent of perfume and money. It was the kind of operation that made his skin crawl.

He hated the tux, the way it felt like a straitjacket against his skin. He hated the shiny, useless shoes that pinched his feet and made him feel like a clown. But most of all, he hated the fakery, the way the wealthy and powerful pretended to care about the causes they claimed to support while they sipped champagne and schmoozed with their peers.

But he didn't hate having Avery by his side, looking like a million bucks.

The guests mingled and chatted, their laughter ringing hollow in his ears. What a waste. Should've donated their money directly. More efficient. Less pretentious.

But then he'd have missed Avery. Stunning in emerald green. Curves hugged, eyes sparkling. Sophisticated. Poised.

And way too good for the likes of him.

Fenn might annoy him to no end, but the guy had taste for miles.

"You look amazing," he said, his voice low and sincere as he offered her his arm. "Like a different person entirely." Ugh. He squeezed his eyes shut. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. That was not what he meant to say. "I mean ... I didn't mean ..." Man. What was he, a seventh grader?

“It’s fine. I know. And thank you.” Avery smiled, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she took his arm. “You clean up fairly well yourself. Black tie suits you.”

“You sound surprised,” he said, his voice dry. He certainly was.

Avery shrugged, her eyes darting away for a moment before meeting his gaze once more. “The tux only makes you look tougher,” she said, her voice soft and intimate. “It’s like a warning sign, telling everyone to take heed.”

He had never thought of himself as dangerous. Not in the way that Avery seemed to mean. Like lady-killer dangerous. But hearing her say it, hearing the admiration and respect in her voice, made him feel ten feet tall.

He tapped the comlink in his ear, checking in with the rest of the team. They were all in position, ready to move at a moment’s notice. Kate and Fenn were pretending to be guests. The two stunning specimens dressed to the nines, their cover identities carefully crafted to blend in with the crowd.

Paige and Paul were hiding in the basement of the museum, with Paige running the comm system and Paul providing backup in case things went south.

“Why do I always have to be the waiter?” Tai grumbled over the comlink, his voice tinged with mock outrage. He and Graham were circulating through the crowd, silver trays in hand.

Fenn chuckled, his voice crackling with static. “If you were a normal-sized human, we’d be able to tailor a ready-made,” he said, his tone teasing.

Mason shook his head, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. His team was the best in the business, but they were also a bunch of overgrown children sometimes. Still, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

As they made their way through the throng of guests, Mason noticed a silent auction taking place in one corner of the room. Many of the pieces on display had been donated by Stenberg himself, and Mason couldn't help but be impressed by the man's taste.

On a whim, Mason placed a thirty thousand dollar bid on one of the pieces, a landscape that seemed to glow with an inner light.

Avery's eyes widened in surprise. "How does a retired SEAL have that kind of disposable cash?"

"Who says I'm going to win the item?"

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Avery shook her head, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She seemed to take his explanation in stride, and for that, Mason was grateful. He couldn't tell her the whole story. It was classified, and it wasn't his alone to share. Maybe someday, if things between them continued to progress ... but for now, they had a job to do.

A sudden buzz rippled through the crowd. Mason's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing in concentration. At the top of the wide staircase, a portly man in a black tuxedo appeared, his black shirt and tie clashing with his red face and wispy white hair.

"Snow White is in the house," Tai announced over the comlink, his voice tinged with excitement. "Activate operation Poison Apple. Evil Queen, are you a go?"

Mason shot Avery a glance, his eyes rolling at Fenn's ridiculous code names. "Queen is a go," he muttered, his voice low and gruff.

"Dopey and Grumpy are in position," Fenn added, his voice crackling with laughter.

Graham and Paige checked in, their voices calm and professional. As always.

Time to rattle the man's cage.

Mason tried to ignore the electrical current that spiked through him at Avery's nearness. They moved through the crowd, their eyes locked on their target, that familiar sense of purpose rising to the surface of his awareness. This was what he was meant to do, what he had been born to do.

Avery's pulse pounded as the crowd surrounded the stage, their excited chatter filling the air. The gala was a glitzy affair, with guests dressed to the nines in sparkling gowns and sharp tuxes. Someone fiddled with the mic at the podium. The feedback made Avery want to stick her fingers in her ears.

"I'm going after Stenberg now," Mason murmured, his breath tickling her ear. "He's got a great audience."

No doubt. A dozen of the most well-dressed people in a well-dressed room surrounded the man, all laughing at some amusing anecdote he'd just launched.

The things money bought. Clearly fake respect was high on the list.

As Mason guided her through the throng, she found herself wishing that this was real life. Not the glitz and glamour and obscene wealth, but the thrill of working alongside a man like Mason. He was everything she had ever wanted in a partner, strong and capable and fiercely loyal.

But wholly unattainable. Not that she was looking.

As soon as they got within earshot, Mason leaned in and whispered to Avery, "Excuse me for a sec." Then he called out, "Yo, Stenny. Great party. Kinda stingy on the caviar, though. What's up with that?"

The crowd around the man stilled, all eyes darting between Stenberg and Mason as if they were watching a tennis match.

Mouth open, Stenberg looked like he'd just been hit in the face with a pie. "And who are you?"

Mason made a rude sound. “Please. Nice try, Stens.” Ignoring the others, Mason pushed his way to the portly man’s side and threw an arm over the shorter man’s shoulders, pulling him aside.

Avery watched the exchange, ignoring the stares of the guests now drifting slowly away from the scene.

A minute later, Mason slapped Stenberg on the back and headed back toward her.

He wasn’t grinning, exactly, but he had the look of a cat that got the cream.

When he didn’t speak, she prompted him. “Scare him much?”

Mason grinned, sending a shiver down her spine. Before responding, he activated his comlink. “Mission accomplished,” he announced. “He tried to play dumb, but I think I spiked his blood pressure. I think I should poke him again a little later. Let him chew on my warning for now. Everybody enjoy.”

“You just want to stick around to see if you won that painting,” she teased.

“Maybe,” he agreed, his tone suspiciously nonchalant. But Avery could see the gleam of excitement in his eyes, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

She excused herself to the restroom, her head spinning with the events of the evening. The mini-mission had been a success, and she was on a date-ish thing with a gorgeous SEAL. Life, at the moment, was good.

But as she turned the corner into an interior hallway, her breath caught in her throat. There, with his back to her, was Ryan. Legs spread wide, hands on his hips he seemed to be staring down the hallway. Despite the tux, she would have recognized his silhouette anywhere.

What was he doing at an all-star gala?

She slipped into an alcove, her body trembling with shock and fear. Low, urgent voices tempted her to risk a look. Still in position, Ryan had been joined by Lars Stenberg. Heads bent low, they seemed lost in a private conversation.

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“ ... not to worry about this. They’re just fishing. I told you I’d handle Ellis. And her friends,” Ryan ordered, his voice tight with tension.

No need for Dima’s report now. She had her mole. Ryan, her mentor, her friend, had been working with Rain Bay all along. He had helped them cover up their crimes, had taken their blood money in exchange for his silence and complicity.

She pulled back into the space just as Stenberg turned to clomp down the hall. He passed the alcove without looking up. What should she do now? Confront Ryan? Or should she go to Mason, tell him what she had discovered and let his team handle it?

Before she could decide, a shadow fell across the alcove. Ryan inched into the space, his eyes cold and hard in the dim light.

“Hello, Avery,” he said, his voice sharp as ice.

35

Would he kill her?

Disable her and flee?

Avery stared at Ryan. His tux was so black it seemed to suck all the light out of the room. The bulge under his arm indicated that he wore his sidearm.

Even if he wasn’t armed, she had nowhere to run.

Her mind was mush. Ryan, her supervisor, the guy who'd been riding her about the Rain Bay case was helping Lars Stenberg. It was like finding out Santa Claus was a drug dealer.

Stupid details assaulted her. Ryan's serene expression. The tang of his cologne mixed with desperation. The string quartet downstairs playing something classical and boring, the kind of music that made her want to stick a fork in her eye.

She squared her shoulders, looking him right in the eye. "You're the leak," she said, her voice as steady as she could make it.

Ryan shook his head and scratched his nose, his face a mask of innocence. "This isn't about your drug trafficking case. I'm under orders to look into Stenberg about an unrelated matter. Need to know."

She snorted. "You're lying. You have a tell, you know. You touch your nose when you're not being straight with me."

He stared. She had him. He was backed into a corner, and he knew it.

"Fine," he said, his voice tight. "I'm working for Stenberg. But it's not what you think."

Avery felt like she was going to hurl. The room spun around her, the walls closing in like a trash compactor. Ryan and Stenberg? It was like finding out your favorite teacher was a serial killer.

"I don't care what it is," she said, her voice shaking with anger. "You're a sworn law enforcement officer, and you're helping cover up murders and a counterfeit drug trade. How could you?"

Ryan grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into her skin like claws. The heat of his desperation rolled off him in waves.

“The guy is blackmailing me,” he said, his voice frantic. “I had no choice.”

Avery yanked her arm away, glaring at him. “What could he possibly have on you?” she demanded.

Ryan sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve got a gambling problem. I’ve had it for years, but I’ve been good at keeping it off the radar. Stenberg runs a card club, among other things. Two years ago, he extended me a hefty line of credit. By the time I realized who I’d borrowed from, it was too late. He refused to let me pay him back. Said he’d come calling for a favor one day. And now he has.”

Avery shook her head, trying to wrap her mind around what she was hearing. The air in the alcove seemed to be getting thinner. A bead of sweat trickled down her back.

Ryan, a gambler?

But something about his words rang true. She prayed silently, begging her Savior to help her sort truth from lies. Her life depended on it.

“So what now?” she asked, her voice hard. “You’re just going to keep helping him?”

“No!” He shot her a pleading look. “I want to use my inside status to help you bring him down. We can take him out together.”

“Right. Sure. Which makes so much sense after you shut down my investigation.”

He grabbed her arms, squeezing hard. “Because I knew you’d ignore me. I didn’t want anybody else in the office knowing about the case. I knew you’d find the link to

me eventually. I figured I'd have time to talk to you first. Convince you to work together. But that gonzo SEAL showed up. You two made progress way faster than I expected." He released her arms and kicked at the carpet like a toddler. "I'm sorry I didn't clue you in sooner. I was wrong."

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Avery hesitated, her mind reeling. The sound of the string quartet was getting louder, the music swelling to a crescendo that made her head throb. She wanted to believe him, but she knew her judgment was clouded. She needed time to think, to figure out what to do next.

Time to decide whether Ryan was telling the truth or not.

“I’m glad you want to fix this mess,” she said, her voice neutral. “I’ll get back to you.”

She turned to leave, but Ryan grabbed her arm again, his grip like a vise. “Hurry,” he said, his voice cracking with desperation. “If we don’t take Stenberg down soon, I’m as good as dead.”

Like those mechanics? And the bookkeeper? She bit her tongue. No point in antagonizing him when she was defenseless.

He pulled out a phone, fingers shaking as he texted. “I just sent you a text. It’s a burner phone. Call me anytime,” Ryan said, his eyes boring into hers. “But make it soon.”

“Sure.” Maybe. She pushed past him. The click of her heels on the marble floor echoed through the hallway, a sharp staccato that seemed to mock her with every step.

She had no idea what to do next, but one thing was for sure: she needed to find Mason. If Ryan was telling the truth, they’d have Rain Bay shut down in a matter of

hours.

And if he was lying? Then all bets were off.

36

“Take the little green one,” Tai urged Mason as he proffered the tray of hors d’oeuvres.

Mason wrinkled his nose, but complied. Thai shrimp on stale crostini with a pesto smear. He wasn’t much of a fusion cuisine fan. The decidedly average tidbit didn’t change his mind. “Meh,” he said to Tai’s back as his friend walked away.

He scanned the ballroom. If Avery didn’t return in the next thirty seconds, he was heading after her.

But just then, she appeared at the top of the stairs. She was a vision in that stunning green dress, the fabric clinging to her curves like a second skin. But as she got closer, he noticed the paleness of her face, the troubled look in her eyes. Someone had put that look there. Whoever it was needed a serious butt-kicking.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice low and gruff as she reached him.

Avery shook her head, her hands trembling slightly as she grabbed his arm. “Ryan. He’s dirty. Working with Stenberg. He’s terrified. Says he wants to help us take Rain Bay down.”

Rage surged through him, hot and fierce. He should have known.

“Where is he?” he growled, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

“No, Mason, wait,” Avery said, her grip on his arm tightening. “We can’t just grab him. We need to think this through.”

“Yeah, we can.”

“She’s right,” Paige’s voice crackled over the comlink in his ear. “We need the charges to stick. We need to be smart about this.”

Mason gritted his teeth, the muscles in his jaw working as he tried to rein in his anger. They were right.

“Fine,” he said, his voice tight with barely contained fury. “But I want everything on Goshiro. Every dirty little secret.”

“Already on it,” Paige said, her fingers flying over her laptop’s keyboard.

Just then, a voice came over the loudspeaker, announcing the auction winners.

“The winning bid for the Lightner landscape goes to ... Mr. Mason Ortiz, for the sum of thirty thousand dollars!”

Mason blinked, his mind taking a moment to process what he’d just heard. He’d won the auction? For a painting he didn’t even want? Thirty thousand to impress a lady he’d never see again in a couple days.

“Well, look at that,” Tai said, his voice dripping with sarcasm over the comlink. “Our Mason’s an art collector. Who knew?”

“Shut up, Tai,” Mason grumbled, his face heating with embarrassment. “It was for the mission. I had to bid on something to blend in.”

“Sure, sure,” Tai said, his voice still teasing. “Whatever you say, Picasso.”

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Mason rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. His team might drive him crazy sometimes, but they were the best group of people he'd ever worked with. Not that they'd let him forget it.

"Okay, people, time to call it a night," he said, his voice taking on a note of authority. "Stenberg's plenty rattled, and we've got research to do."

He took Avery's hand, his fingers lacing through hers as they made their way toward the exit. Her skin was soft and warm against his, and he could feel the tension in her body starting to ease as they walked.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice low and gentle as they stepped out into the cool night air.

"Not really. I can't believe Ryan would do something like this," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I trusted him. I looked up to him. And now ... now I don't know what to think."

Mason squeezed her hand. He knew what it was like to be betrayed by someone you trusted, someone you thought was on your side. It was a pain that cut deep, and it never really went away.

"We'll figure this out," he said, his voice firm with conviction. "I promise. Let's concentrate on taking Stenberg's operation down. We can sort out Goshiro's part later."

Whether Goshiro really wanted to help them or not, the man's future was shot. Avery

had to know that. Still, no reason to pound that home now.

She smiled up at him, her eyes shining with gratitude and something else, something that made his heart skip a beat.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice sincere. “For everything. I don’t know how I would have gotten through this train wreck without you.”

Mason grinned, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on the back of her hand. “You’d probably be a lot less stressed, for one thing,” he said, his voice teasing. “But hey, what’s life without a little excitement?”

Avery laughed, the sound of it like music to his ears. “With you around, I don’t think I’d ever have to worry about being bored,” she said, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

She was strong, and brave, and beautiful. Together they could take on anything.

Even a dirty fed and a trucking operator with delusions of grandeur.

Speaking of said dirty fed, priority one when they got back to the mansion was a deeper dive into Ryan Goshiro’s story.

So far, they’d only gotten what Goshiro wanted them to find. That changed now.

37

Headphones in place, the beat of the music thumping through his skull, Mason pounded the heavy bag in Bridger’s trendy home gym like it owed him money. He’d been up all night, pouring over the files that Paige had dug up on Ryan Goshiro, and the more he read, the more his blood boiled. He’d been at it for over an hour, his muscles burning with exertion and his skin slick with sweat. But he couldn’t stop, not

until he'd worked out every last ounce of rage and fury.

Whether Goshiro planned to help take down Rain Bay or not, the man was a liar and a cheat, and Mason was going to make sure he paid for his crimes, which were multiplying quickly.

Paige had finally heard back from the lab. All three pills were counterfeit. No huge surprise, but the evidence served to tighten the noose. Once they could prove that Rain Bay knowingly distributed fake meds, Avery could get a real investigation relaunched.

But first, he needed to work off some of the pent-up frustration and anger that had been building inside him all night. The gym was empty and quiet, save for the sound of his fists hitting the bag and the steady thump of his heart in his chest.

Finally, when his arms felt like lead and his lungs were screaming for air, he stepped back from the bag, his chest heaving with exertion. He grabbed a towel from the bench and wiped the sweat from his face, his mind already racing with plans for the day ahead.

It was time to get boots on the ground, to confirm or deny Goshiro's sob story about being a gambler in debt to Stenberg. Thanks to Paige's online sleuthing, Mason knew just where to start.

He headed upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. He needed to grab a quick shower and some breakfast, and then he'd track down Avery and Paul.

Half an hour later, he found Avery in the kitchen, nibbling on a piece of toast and looking like she hadn't slept a wink either. Her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, and there were dark circles under her eyes that even her makeup couldn't hide.

“Eat fast,” he said, grabbing a banana from the fruit bowl and peeling it with quick, efficient movements. “We’ve got work to do.”

She raised an eyebrow, her mouth full of toast. “And what work would that be?” she asked, her words muffled by the bread.

Mason grinned, taking a big bite of his banana. “We’re going to confirm the info I dug up on your SAC,” he said, his voice low and conspiratorial. “The team’s going to keep tabs on Stenberg, figure out the best way to keep tracking him. You and I are going to check out Goshiro’s story about being a gambler.”

Avery’s eyes widened, and she swallowed her toast with an audible gulp. “And how exactly are we going to do that?”

“Underground card room. We’re bringing Paul.”

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Avery blinked, her mouth falling open in surprise. “Paul? Your brother Paul? The one who just got kidnapped and held for ransom?”

Mason shrugged, taking another bite of his banana. “We need the sleeze factor. He’s a big boy. He can handle it.”

Just then, Paul walked into the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower and his eyes bright with excitement. “Did I hear something about an underground card room?”

“Copy that, little brother. You’re coming with me and Avery on a little field trip.”

Paul’s eyes widened, and he practically bounced on his toes with excitement. “Seriously? You want me to come with you guys? On a real mission?”

Mason’s grin widened, and he leaned in close. “We’re gonna need your poker skills.”

“Sounds like you need my ‘sleeze factor,’ too.” Paul stared him down. “Yeah. I heard that.”

He swiped a hand over his mouth. Whoops.

“No worries. I’m actually kinda flattered. I won’t disappoint.” Paul’s face split into a huge grin. He punched the air with his fist. “Oh yeah. I’m totally in. When do we leave?”

Mason tossed his banana peel into the trash. “As soon as we gear up. Avery and I will

hang out, but I want you to slip into a game. Goshiro claims he was a regular at the place. Supposedly lost himself a lot of cash there.”

Paul nodded, his expression serious now. “Can do. Whatever you need.”

“Get yourself ready. We’re going for a down-on-his-luck-dude-looking-to-make-a-fast-buck vibe. You feel me?”

Paul snorted, rolling his eyes. “You mean loser vibe,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I get, it. I’m supposed to lose.”

Mason slung an arm around his brother’s shoulders. “People don’t wanna talk to guys that take their lunch money.”

Paul considered that and grinned, his eyes sparkling. “Let’s do this.” He hopped off the stool and headed back toward his room, Avery trailing behind.

Mason watched them disappear down the hallway, his cheerful façade turning serious. He and Avery couldn’t risk entering the club. Unless they were willing to play, it would seem odd. But they’d be close enough to run interference if something went sideways. He didn’t love the idea, but it was the best he could do.

If Paul needed rescuing, Mason would make sure he was the most dangerous man in the room.

38

Avery slumped in the diner’s vinyl booth, the cracked and peeling surface sticking uncomfortably to her skin. The air was thick with the greasy aroma of frying bacon and the acrid scent of burnt coffee, a combination that made her stomach churn. She rubbed her eyes, the gritty sensation behind her lids making it feel like someone had

taken a belt sander to her corneas. She and Mason had been holed up in this dingy little spot down the street from the secret gambling den for the past three hours, waiting for Paul to emerge with any new dirt on Ryan.

By now, she'd had enough sitting. Enough stress over Ryan's betrayal. And enough wrangling with herself over her growing feelings for Mason.

The sooner they got the evidence on Rain Bay, the sooner he and his team would jet back to their fantastical lives. And she could get on with repairing her own.

The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a face that looked like a road map of late nights and early mornings, sauntered over to their table, her shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. She carried a pot of coffee that smelled more like a tire fire than a morning pick-me-up.

"Refill, honey?" she asked, her voice raspy from years of smoking.

Avery pushed her empty mug away, the ceramic scraping against the laminate tabletop. "No thanks. I think I've had enough."

Mason raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching like he was trying not to laugh. "You? Turning down coffee? Who are you and what have you done with Avery?"

She shot him a glare, but she was too tired to put any real heat behind it. She felt like she'd been run over by a truck, then backed over for good measure.

Ryan Goshiro, the man she'd looked up to for years, the man she'd thought was as straight as an arrow, was—at best—living in the center of gray.

Her world had been flipped upside down, and she was struggling to find her footing.

The FBI had always been her north star, the thing that kept her on the straight and narrow. She'd followed in her father's footsteps, determined to uphold his legacy of justice and honor. But now, with Ryan's betrayal ...

Where did she go from here?

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She was jolted out of her thoughts by the sight of Paul slinking across the busy street toward them, shoulders slouched. He looked like he'd just lost his last penny and his favorite dog.

But as soon as he entered the diner and slipped into the booth next to Mason, his demeanor changed. He broke into a grin that could have powered a small city, his eyes sparkling like he'd just won the lottery.

"Your boy's story checks out. He tops the list of legendary losers," he announced. Then he raised his hands, feigning a bow. "You're welcome."

Mason snorted, rolling his eyes so hard Avery thought they might pop out of his head. "Careful, little brother. Your head'll get too big for those skinny legs to carry."

The warning didn't dim Paul's enjoyment in the slightest. "Right. Because I wouldn't want to take credit for being soexcellent."

Mason lifted his mug to his lips. "At least you think so."

She couldn't help but grin at their antics. It was a welcome distraction from the dumpster fire that was her life at the moment.

But the levity was short-lived. Mason turned to her. "He says he wants to help, so I say we use Goshiro exactly the way he used you."

Exactly. "Whether he assists our investigation or not, he's on the hook for major felonies. If he was even tangentially involved in those murders ..."

Mason nodded, but there was a gentleness in his eyes. “Agreed. But his part in this can be sorted later. Let’s knock Rain Bay down first. Goshiro’s earned whatever comes his way.”

Too true. She’d have to let go of the anger, for now, at least.

Once they took down Stenberg and his operation, Ryan would face his own music. And she’d move on. Somehow.

Paul waved the waitress over. “Hey, beautiful. I’m starving. What’s good here?”

Their waitress sauntered to their table, pad in hand. “Are you serious?”

“Uh ...” Paul floundered, whether because the woman appeared unfazed by his charm or because of her pointed honesty.

Mason caught her attention. “He’ll have the two-egg breakfast. Eggs over hard, bacon extra crisp.”

For some reason, Mason’s order seemed to catch Paul off guard. “You remembered,” he said finally.

“Why wouldn’t I? You ordered that every time we ate out growing up. Literally,” he added to Avery. “Every. Time.”

Paul clasped his hands together behind his head. “Still do. Nice to know you care.”

Mason pretended surprise. “Care? It’s more like one of those ear worms. Never been able to get it out of my head.”

Paul wasn’t buying it. The more Mason protested, the harder he grinned.

If there was one thing she'd learned about the former SEAL over the past few days, it was that he had the integrity of a Boy Scout and the emotional range of a teaspoon. Traits that were uncomfortably close to her own.

Which wouldn't make for a good match. They were too alike, too stubborn, and too set in their ways. And besides, their lives were as different as night and day. He was a man of action and adventure, jetting around the globe on a moment's notice.

She was firmly rooted at the Bureau, bound by rules and regulations. And red tape. So much red tape.

It was for the best, she told herself. They'd close this case, and then they'd go their separate ways. Back to their diverse lives.

But as she studied his rugged profile in the dim light of the diner, she couldn't help but feel a pang of regret. What if, in another life, things had been different? What if they'd met under different circumstances, in a different time and place?

She shook her head, pushing the thought away like a pesky fly. There was no use dwelling on what-ifs and might-have-beens.

Right now, she had a scumbag to catch and a fellow agent's career to crater.

She slipped her phone out of her purse. "I say we meet with Ryan ASAP."

"Copy that. Set it up somewhere public. I want to see him coming from a mile away."

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No kidding. Never again would she trust so blindly. She thought for a second, and texted a time and location. “We’ll meet him in two hours at a city park on the Sound. He’ll have to walk in a half a mile to the beach. We’ll get there first and see him coming.”

This time.

39

After dropping Paul back at Bridger’s place, Mason drove Avery to the meeting location. The November sun hung a few fingers above the horizon. Goshiro better not be late. Mason had no intention of keeping Avery out on the beach once the sun went down.

The quiet beachfront park was a welcome respite from the chaos of the past few days. Mason chose a weathered wooden bench at the far south end of the park that gave him a view of the gravel path and the wide sliver of beach cut off from the rest of the park by thick vegetation. Beside him, Avery fidgeted, her face tight with strain and her hands clenched in her lap.

Every tap of her feet made him want to connect his fist with Goshiro’s jaw.

The revelation of his involvement with Stenberg had hit her hard. Why wouldn’t it? He couldn’t imagine learning that someone on his crew—someone he counted on to have his back— was playing both ends against the middle.

The sound of footsteps on gravel drew their attention, and they looked up to see Ryan

approaching. He looked haggard, his face lined with exhaustion and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Much as he valued his Christian faith, Mason couldn't help thinking it was just a tiny portion of the suffering the man deserved. Not how the Lord would want him to react, but he had to be honest.

And it wasn't like the Lord didn't know about his struggles with extending forgiveness and grace.

With the sun at his back, the man's shadow touched them first.

Mason rose. Hand on the M18 tucked into the holster beneath his arm, he motioned Goshiro to stop. "Hands up."

"Seriously?" Goshiro complained, but instantly obeyed.

Ignoring the 'tude, Mason patted him down. "He's clean," he told Avery.

Ryan ignored him back, staring hard at Avery. "Thanks for meeting me. I know you have no reason to trust me, but I want to help take down Stenberg and Rain Bay."

Avery let out a bitter laugh, the sound harsh in the tranquil setting. "Let's make one thing clear. I don't trust you. At. All. So we'll take this one step at a time."

Ryan flinched as if she had struck him, but he didn't back down. "I know I don't deserve your forgiveness," he said, his voice low and earnest. "But I want to make things right."

Mason fixed the guy with a piercing stare. "Are you saying you have a plan?"

“I am.” Ryan took a deep breath, as if steeling himself for what he was about to say. “The key is to catch him exchanging money for the counterfeit drugs. I can give you the time and place of the next exchange, and you can set up a sting operation to take him down.”

Avery shook her head, her eyes flashing with anger. “And why should we believe you?” she demanded. “How do we know this isn’t just another one of your lies?”

Ryan met her gaze unflinchingly, his expression somber. “Because I’m done being Stenberg’s puppet. The longer I let this go on, the harder it’s going to be to climb out of the pit.” He flicked Mason a look. “And you’ve got him.”

Her face scrunched in confusion.

“He thinks I’ll hunt him down if he crosses you,” Mason explained. “He’s right,” he added, gaze burning into Goshiro’s.

She bent her head, toeing circles in the sand. He knew she was struggling with the idea of trusting Goshiro. But he also knew that they needed all the help they could get if they were going to pull this off before Stenberg disappeared.

But it didn’t matter what he thought. “Your call,” he told her.

“Okay,” she said finally, her voice heavy with resignation. “Give us the info.”

The wind gusted, making the edges of Goshiro’s jacket flutter. “You’ll need me there.”

“Not gonna happen.” Mason didn’t wait for Avery to chime in. They in no way needed the weasel messing things up. Or double-crossing them.

“Stenberg’ll figure something’s wrong. He’ll bolt.”

Mason folded his arms over his chest. “Don’t care.”

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“Wait.” Avery held up her hand. She gave Goshiro a hard look. “Are you saying you’ve been at these exchanges?”

The question hung in the air.

“No,” Goshiro protested. “Of course not. I gave him intel on law enforcement movements to help him set up his buys. That’s it. I swear. I’ve never trafficked contraband.”

Mason wanted to spit. “You just make it easy for other people to do it. That’s much better.”

Goshiro fisted a hand. “It’s not—”

Mason silently egged him on. Take a swing. One swing.

Avery jumped to her feet, Goshiro in her sights. “Mason’s team will handle this. I’ll turn over what we have to the brass. They’ll decide the next steps. And your fate.”

“But you’ll tell them I helped.”

“If you actually do, yes. I’ll make your contributions clear.”

The tension in Goshiro’s face eased. He took a step toward Avery, but Mason slammed a hand into his skinny chest before the guy could take another. “Back off.”

Goshiro raised his hands. “Sure. Absolutely.” He caught Avery’s gaze. “I won’t let

you down. Not this time.”

He turned away, long legs eating up the distance back to the trail.

“Too little. Too late,” Avery muttered.

Mason reached for her hand, threading his fingers with hers and squeezing gently. Despite the coldness of her fingers, a gentle glow filled him.

He’d never been a huggy guy. Not like his teammates.

But something about Avery’s touch eased his mind. His soul.

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

40

Ryan’s call had come less than twenty-four hours later. None too soon for Avery. The more time she spent around Mason and his uber-competent crew, the harder it was going to be to watch them leave.

At least the meet would keep her busy.

Avery crouched behind a stack of crates, the fishy scent of seaweed mixed with diesel fuel assaulting her nostrils. She peered through her binoculars, focusing in on the massive container ship harnessed to the dock below and trying to ignore the way the drizzle was slowly soaking through her jacket and making her skin feel clammy.

Rain again. Of course.

Beside her, Mason was doing the same, his face a mask of concentration. She

couldn't help but admire his pinpoint focus, the way his eyes narrowed like a hawk zeroing in on its prey.

She shook her head, trying to banish the thought. This was no time to be getting distracted by her partner's rugged good looks.

The comlink in her ear crackled to life, and she had to resist the urge to flinch. It was still taking some getting used to, having a direct line to Mason's team. But she had to admit, it was a handy little gadget.

"Just like old times, huh?" Mason's voice came through the comlink, low and teasing. "You. Me. Drizzle. Watching for bad guys."

Avery snorted, adjusting her position slightly. "Yeah, except this time we've got backup," she said, tapping the comlink. "And a whole lot more tech."

"Can't argue with that."

Just then, Paul's voice came through the comlink, loud and excited. "Hey, do you think they have any snacks on that ship?" he asked, his voice eager. "I'm starving."

Avery bit back a laugh. Leave it to Paul to be thinking about his stomach at a time like this.

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“Yo, dude.” Mason responded. “Stake out. Not picnic.”

“Yeah, fine,” Paul said, his voice disappointed. “I could really go for a candy bar right about now.”

A groan came over the comlink. “Man, now I’m thinking about a Snickers,” Tai complained.

“Snickers? What kind of jarhead are you?” Fenn added. “I thought you Marines went straight for the pure chocolate. For me it’s Hershey’s all the way.”

Mason sighed, and Avery could practically see him rolling his eyes. “Can you please focus on the mission? We’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Right, sorry,” Paul said, his voice sheepish. “I’ll keep my mouth zipped from now on.”

Mason spoke again. “No worries, bro. I was talking to the supposed professionals.”

Avery felt a warmth spreading through her chest, a fondness for the two brothers. It was nice to see them starting to thaw out, shedding some of the tension and resentment that had built up over the years.

She only wished she could be there to see how things progressed between them. But for her, the winding down of this mission was bittersweet.

On the one hand, there was the familiar jolt of energy that came with being on the

culmination of closing a case. From getting ordered to abandon the investigation to being within minutes of taking down a counterfeit drug ring, it was heady stuff. The kind of thing that kept her in the Bureau, despite all the long hours and sleepless nights.

On the other hand, there was a sense of melancholy, a wistfulness for what might have been. She couldn't help but think of her father, wondering if he'd felt the same way at the end of a case. Was he up there somewhere, watching over her, proud of the agent she'd become?

She blinked back tears, trying to focus on the task at hand.

Tai's voice crackled over the comlink. "Heads up, guys. Our boy Lars is in the house."

Avery snapped to attention, her eyes glued to the parking area. A shiny black Mercedes rolled into the lot, picking its way slowly between the machinery littering the dock in front of the huge ship. The vehicle stopped at the base of the steel gangway. Stenberg climbed out of the vehicle and hustled up the walk, head on a swivel.

"Nervous much?" Kate's rhetorical question made Avery want to laugh.

A slender man in a ship's overalls met the owner at the top of the gangway.

She and Mason watched as Lars followed the first mate around the deck, weaving between cargo containers until they reached one that they opened and went inside. Tai's tiny drones would take the surveillance from there.

The ship's officer was silent, following Stenberg's directions to open the container, then the pallet. Lars appeared nervous, shifting from foot to foot.

The team listened as Stenberg inspected the merchandise, his voice impatient and demanding. He was particularly picky about the fake prescription labels and barcodes on the packages, examining each one with a critical eye.

Finally, he seemed satisfied. “Load it up,” he ordered the man. “I’ll transfer the funds now.” While the crewman re-secured the container’s doors, he pulled out a cell phone.

“I’m loving this,” Tai said. “Getting some nice screen captures here. Bank website. Accounts. Transfer amounts.”

“Copy that.” Mason sounded fully satisfied.

As was she. They had Stenberg now.

How stupid to get caught exchanging funds for counterfeit meds in public. Tai’s drone footage would be completely admissible in court. Add that to her eyewitness account and she could now tie Stenberg directly to the purchase of counterfeit meds. Plenty of evidence to arrest him, certainly. Tying him to the four murders would easily follow. Even if he hadn’t known about them, or ordered them himself, they were committed in the service of hiding his criminal activity. In the eyes of the law, he’d be just as guilty as the actual murderer.

For the first time in weeks, she tasted victory.

“It’s done.” Stenberg told the first mate.

Without a word, the man led him back toward the gangplank.

“How do you want to play this?” Mason asked her.

“We’ve got enough for an arrest,” she said.

“Tell me you brought your badge?” Mason teased.

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She laughed. She couldn't wait to see the look on Stenberg's face. "Right next to my handcuffs."

"Let's do this," Mason crowed. "Most vulnerable point will be between the gangway and the vehicle. Avery and I will take Stenberg. The rest of you, secure the evidence. That about right?" he asked her.

"Works for me. Thank you all," she added, and stuffed her binoculars in their case.

Before the crewman could lead Stenberg off the ship, another man in a ship's coveralls joined them. "Mr. Stenberg, the captain wants to see you."

Stenberg muttered an oath. "What now?" he protested but followed the crewman.

Half an hour later, Stenberg still hadn't emerged from inside the ship. Tai deployed his drones, but the interior of the accommodations—the tower that held the offices and crew cabins—was a maze of stairwells and dead ends.

"I got nothing," Tai admitted. "Bridge has been empty the entire time. All other rooms with windows, too."

But most of the rooms in the five-story white tower would be internal. Windowless.

Mason had long ago sat up. He stared through his binoculars again, checking the deck. "I'm not liking this."

"Copy that," Graham agreed. "No way he's having tea and cookies."

Avery watched the last of the crew head down the gangway, duffle bags over their shoulders. There'd be barely a skeleton crew left on board until the ship was reloaded. The solution was obvious. "We should head in there."

"Copy that," Mason agreed. "Avery and I will get eyes on the prize," he told the team.

"My drones'll have your six," Tai assured them.

Now they had to figure out a way to board the ship unseen. Avery studied the area one more time with her binoculars. Dock crew in hardhats swarmed around the ship, directing the massive, claw-like cranes that plucked the containers off the deck as easily as children unstacked blocks. The deck of the ship itself, though, was deserted.

Maybe they could simply walk onboard.

Mason wasn't studying the ship. He had his binoculars trained on a modular office at the back of the lot. "I have an idea. Follow me."

He stowed his binoculars and sprinted toward the stairs. By the time she climbed to her feet, he was already two stories below her. Once she reached the dock office, he was already exiting the modular structure, two sets of overalls and a couple yellow hard hats in hand.

He held them out. "Don't say I don't travel in style."

She accepted the oil-stained garment. Whew. Sweat and machine oil. Nice.

Still, it would get the job done. Disguises on, they headed toward the gangway with purposeful strides. The rest of the team hung back, monitoring the comms in case they needed to intervene.

Guided by Tai's drones, Avery and Mason wound their way through the complicated structure. At least they didn't run into any stray crewmen.

Checking every door they passed, they quickly realized that the bottom levels were empty. Most of the crew had indeed headed off to shore. They had one level to go before they reached the bridge. Tension mounted as they headed toward the final room.

"Stay behind me," Mason ordered.

Weapon raised, he inched toward the door and tried the handle. The latch opened smoothly. He peered inside, then swung the door wide. "Unoccupied."

Avery shoved her way past him into the room. Her stomach plummeted. Except for a couple round table and chair sets, a few posters about workplace safety and a galley set up on one wall, the plain white room was completely empty.

Avery's stomach plummeted. They'd started at the base of the accommodations tower. Between her and Mason and the tiny drone army, there was no way Stenberg could have slipped past them.

No way in the past ten minutes. She wanted to kick the wall. Somehow, he'd found another way off the ship.

Mason lowered his weapon. "Looks like we're done here."

She followed suit. "Looks like."

"I'm looking through security footage of the docks," Paige said. "I've got nothing. If Stenberg slipped away, he swam."

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“He’s behind the wall,” Tai announced.

Mason shot her a skeptical look. “Uh, dude? There’s nothing here.”

Two fly-sized drones buzzed around the blank wall facing them. “There’s a heat signature behind that wall,” Tai insisted. “Check the floor.”

Sure enough, curved scrapes arced from the corner of the wall out into the room. The left panel opened.

“The back wall moves. Stenberg disappeared behind a movable wall,” Tai said over the comlink, his voice grim.

“Panic room,” Mason muttered, his eyes narrowing.

“Yup,” Tai agreed.

Paige’s voice chimed in over the comlink. “I’ve got the ship’s schematics pulled up,” she said, her voice focused. “There’s no evidence of another exit. I’m betting that’s Stenberg in there.”

Mason nodded, his jaw clenching. “Find a way to shut down the cranes and block all exits to shore,” he ordered, his voice firm. “Nobody gets off this ship until we find the target.”

The team affirmed over the comlink. Graham, the team’s sniper, was hiding across from the docks, ready to take down any escapees with a nonlethal round.

“I’ve got clear sightlines on the dock side of the vessel,” he announced, his voice calm and steady.

Mason approached the edge of the wall, his weapon in hand. Avery followed close behind, her own gun at the ready.

“How are we going to get in there?” she asked. “If it’s really a panic room, it’ll only open from the inside.”

Fenn’s voice crackled over the comlink. “I’m on my way,” he said, his voice eager. “I can get us in there in no time.”

Mason shook his head, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Belay that,” he said with amusement. “I just found a way in.” He turned to Avery, his eyes twinkling. “They didn’t latch the door.”

Avery raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. “I’ll cover you,” she said, as Mason prepared to swing the door wide.

The steel door swung open on oiled hinges, revealing the interior of the panic room. But what they saw inside made them both freeze in their tracks.

Stenberg was dead, his body sprawled on the floor, face up.

“Single shot to the chest,” Mason muttered.

Avery felt her stomach lurch, bile rising in her throat. This was not how she had expected this to go down. Had Ryan done this? He could have snuck onto the ship before they arrived.

The thought made her sick. No sense jumping to conclusions.

She stared at the body, her mind clicking into gear. “We need to secure the scene and call law enforcement. Now.”

41

Avery scanned the room, taking in the details for the first time. The windowless space was large, outfitted with a wall of bunks, lockers, a rudimentary kitchen, and shelf upon shelf of packaged foods. The area was clearly designed to house the ship’s small crew for days, or maybe weeks at a time.

“No signs of a struggle,” she said, her voice still shaky. “Looks like he was taken by surprise.”

The smell of blood and gunpowder hung heavy in the air, making her nose itch. She could taste the coppery tang of it on her tongue, and she had to fight the urge to gag.

“Single shot, close range,” Mason said, his voice clinical.

A chill ran down her spine. Whoever had done this was likely still on the ship, maybe even watching them right now.

She forced herself to focus, to take in every detail of the scene. The angle of the body, the placement of the wound, the way the blood had pooled around him.

“No shell casings,” she said, her voice steady. “Either the killer used a revolver, or they policed their brass.”

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Mason nodded, his eyes scanning the room. “No signs of forced entry, either,” he said, his voice low. “Which means the killer had a key, or they were let in.”

She nodded. “There’s no way we would have heard shots over the noise of the cranes.”

“I’ll use the drones. Check every inch of the ship,” Tai announced.

Mason turned to her, his face grim. “You need to preserve the chain of evidence. Stay with the body. Start documenting the crime scene. I’m heading out to search the ship. The shooter’s probably still on board.”

“Be careful,” she warned.

He smiled, baring white teeth. “Right back atcha.”

Mason disappeared through the doorway. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, and started cataloguing the scene.

She moved methodically, taking in every detail. The smell of blood and gunpowder was overwhelming, but she forced herself to focus. She noted the position of the body, the placement of the wound, the way the blood had pooled.

The sound of the cranes outside was deafening, the clanging and banging of metal on metal reverberating through the walls. Definitely no way they would have heard the shot.

She was just about to start photographing the scene when a shadow fell across the doorway behind her. She whirled around, her hand already reaching for her gun, but it was too late.

A solid form tackled her to the ground, knocking the wind out of her. She struggled, trying to break free, but her attacker was too strong.

She felt the cold metal of a gun barrel press against her temple, and her blood ran cold. This was it. This was how she was going to die.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable. But the shot never came.

Instead, she heard a familiar voice, low and urgent in her ear. “Avery, it’s me. Don’t move.”

42

M18 in hand, Mason eased through the maze of shipping containers stacked on the deck of the massive cargo ship. The metal boxes towered over him, creating a labyrinth of narrow passages and dead ends perfect for an ambush. Not that he expected to stumble on the shooter. If it were him, he’d be hiding in some obscure corner of the ship, biding his time until he could escape unnoticed.

Graham’s voice came over the comlink. “No sign of the target on the upper decks,” he said, his breath coming in short bursts as he ran. “Moving to the lower levels now.”

Kate’s voice followed, her tone clipped and professional. “Sweeping the engine room,” she said, the sound of her footsteps echoing over the comlink. “No sign of the shooter here either.”

Fenn chimed in, “Checking the crew quarters. Nothing so far.”

“Drone footage shows the captain heading off the ship about ten minutes before Stenberg drove up.” Tai informed them. “It wasn’t him.”

Mason nodded, his jaw clenched. With multiple cranes plucking containers off the deck, the exterior of the ship would be cleared of personnel. The fact that the crew seemed to have disappeared made sense. Shore leave was probably a rare commodity.

“Copy that,” he acknowledged.

He rounded a corner, his eyes scanning the narrow passageway between the shipping containers. The sound of his own breathing was loud in his ears, drowning out the distant clanging of metal on metal.

Mason had cleared the front half of the ship. He was working his way toward the stern. Once he finished, he’d head back to help Avery.

Paul’s eager voice came over the comlink. “I’ll head up to you guys,” he said, his voice rising with excitement. “One more set of eyes won’t hurt.”

Mason shook his head, his jaw clenched. “Negative,” he barked. “Stay put, Paul. That’s an order.”

The last thing he needed was Paul confronting a killer.

Paul grumbled something under his breath, but Mason ignored him. He had more important things to worry about than his brother’s wounded pride.

Like checking in with Avery.

He tapped his comlink. “Avery, come in. Do you copy?”

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Silence.

He tapped his comlink again, cupping a hand over his ear to block out the shudder of the cranes' throbbing engines. "Avery, come in. Do you copy?"

More silence.

He tried a third time, his voice rising. "Avery, it's Mason. Do you read me?"

Still nothing.

Paige's voice crackled over the comlink,. "Mason, the comlink is working. It's possible the walls of the panic room are blocking the signal."

He nodded, his jaw clenched. "Copy that," he said, his voice tight. "Keep trying to raise her. Stern portion of the deck is clear. I'm heading back to the panic room."

Suddenly, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold. A scream, high and piercing, echoing through the narrow passageways of the ship.

Avery's scream.

He took off running, his boots pounding against the metal deck as he raced back through the maze of shipping containers, moving so fast he clipped the corner of a container with his shoulder. The force of the collision spun him around. Shoulder on fire, he shook off the pain and aimed for the base of the accommodations tower.

Inside the stairwell, he paused, closing the watertight door behind him as quietly as possible. Then he listened.

The thick door muffled the sounds of the cranes. Except for the pops and squeaks of ropes and metal, and the low thrum of the air system, there was nothing. No footfalls. No conversation.

He stole silently up the five stories to the level of the panic room, eyes and ears straining for any indication of the shooter. Or Avery.

Finally on the proper level, he inched out of the stairwell and slipped down the windowless hallway toward the first tight turn.

The clank of footfalls hit his ears first. Two sets, with no discernable rhythm. Then harsh breaths. Again, two sets.

He slipped his M18 out of its holster and flattened himself against the near wall. He'd see whoever was coming before they spotted him.

A moment later, the sight that greeted him froze every cell in his body.

A man in a dark tech shirt and pants cleared the corner, one hand clamped around Avery's upper arm, the other holding a pistol to her head.

The man looked up, his eyes locking with Mason's.

Ryan Goshiro.

Mason raised his weapon, his hand shaking with rage. "Let her go, Ryan," he said, his voice low and dangerous. "It's over."

Goshiro froze. Then yanked Avery closer. “How do you figure that?”

Fury lit him up, but he fought it, struggling for clarity. One breath. Two. And the scene crystalized, every detail sharp and glittering. Adrenaline and experience took over. Time slowed. Gaze locked onto Avery, willing her to trust him, he ticked off his tactical advantages.

Superior speed. Superior experience. Superior firearms and close combat skills.

None of which mattered with a gun at Avery’s temple.

M18 aimed at Goshiro, center mass, he locked eyes with his opponent. “What now?”

Though his skin looked pale and clammy, Goshiro’s eyes burned with a dangerous adrenaline high. “Bro, it’s not complicated. Avery and I walk out of here.”

No way. Every hostage situation he’d ever gamed said don’t let the abductor walk. But what was the alternative?

Mason’s jaw clenched. He couldn’t let Ryan take Avery.

But he also couldn’t risk her life.

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He couldn't even alert the team. Goshiro would see him activating his comlink.

He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving Ryan's. "Okay," he said, his voice tight with tension. "You win. I'll call off my team. Just don't hurt her."

Ryan smiled, his eyes glittering with triumph. "I knew you'd see reason," he said, his voice mocking. "Now, put down your gun and kick it over to me."

"Mason, don't!"

Avery's plea decided it. Relinquishing his weapon would buy her time. Goshiro would probably shoot him, but unless he took a head shot, or got ridiculously lucky, Mason wouldn't bleed out before he alerted his team. Most civies, even monsters like Goshiro, had a hard time shooting someone in the face. Or so he'd have to hope.

And if the man was too stupid to take him out, well, Goshiro would regret it.

With a silent prayer to his Savior for Avery's safety, he lowered his gun to the ground and kicked it, sending it skittering past Goshiro.

"Hands up. You first," Goshiro ordered him back down the hallway.

Excellent. Having his hands up would only make him quicker when he got a chance to strike. So far. So good.

Mason started toward the stairwell, his steps measured, his senses straining to hear Avery's footfalls behind him. Goshiro would be tight on her six, ready to blast his

way out, if the situation deteriorated.

But Mason lived for chaos. The instant Goshiro blinked, Mason would be on him.

43

“Where do you see this going, dude? Because I see it going all bad.” Mason called over his shoulder, his voice purposely low and steady.

Inside, he seethed, but calm would intimidate his opponent.

“Depends on your next move, SEAL.” Unfortunately, Goshiro didn’t sound panicked, either.

If letting it slip that Goshiro knew about his background was supposed to rattle Mason, the guy clearly didn’t know SEALs very well.

At the stairwell, Goshiro stopped him. “Turn around.”

Mason gritted his teeth and obeyed, his mind whirling as he took in the scene before him. Avery was pressed against Goshiro’s chest, her eyes wide with terror as he held a gun to her head.

He wanted nothing more than to rip Goshiro’s arm off and beat him with it. A nice fantasy, but here, in the real world, he was going to have to act like an adult.

For now.

He took a deep breath and reverted to his training. The first mistake Goshiro made would be his last.

If only he could risk activating his comlink.

Avery met his gaze. The corner of her mouth lifted in a heartbreaking attempt at a smile.

If he didn't want to tear Goshiro apart before, he sure did now.

Eyes still on his, Avery reached up to brush a stray lock of hair out of her eyes.

The comlink. She'd just activated it. Hooyah!

A brilliant move, one that showed just how quick-thinking and resourceful she was. Even in the face of mortal danger, she was still looking for ways to fight back, to turn the tables on her captor.

Stiffening, Goshiro shoved the pistol against her head hard enough to bend her neck. "Don't move."

Mason's hands clenched into fists, his jaw tightening with barely controlled rage. He wanted to choke the life out of Goshiro, to watch the light fade from his eyes as he gasped for air.

Seeking calm, he lifted a silent prayer, begging the Lord to keep her safe, to see them both through this nightmare.

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Goshiro's voice broke through his thoughts, cold and commanding. "I know you've got a walkie talkie or something. I want a car brought to the bottom of the gangway. Have the doors open and the engine running."

"Done." Mason tapped his comlink.

At least Goshiro didn't realize Avery had comms too.

"Head's up, guys. We have a hostage situation here. Goshiro has Avery. He's demanding a vehicle at the gangway and clear passage off the property."

"You okay with that?" Tai responded immediately.

"That's affirmative." He wasn't, but the team would know what he meant. "He wants the doors left open and the engine running. Make it happen."

Kate broke into the conversation. "So no good options at the moment."

"Copy that."

"Give me sixty seconds to get into position," Graham advised.

Nice. He wouldn't bet on the sniper being able to get a clean shot at Goshiro, but sometimes success was more about being prepared than being lucky.

Once outside, the killer would have his whole team to contend with.

Goshiro watched him, his eyes cold and dead.

But before Mason could say a word, Paul's voice crackled over the comms, eager and excited.

"I'll bring the car around," he said, his voice filled with a child-like enthusiasm that made Mason want to scream.

"Affirmative," Tai agreed. "Saves the rest of us for tactical."

Yeah. It did. But that didn't make Mason any happier. "Stay safe."

"Once you drop off the vehicle, back away and take cover." Kate addressed his bro. "Do not engage. Avery's life depends on it."

"Understood," Paul said, his voice filled with a seriousness that belied his earlier excitement.

Goshiro wagged his fingers in a gimme gesture. "Now take it out."

"Going dark." He warned the team before digging the earbud out of his ear. He held it up.

"Smash it," Goshiro ordered.

Not a problem. He let the device drop from his fingers. It bounced on the linoleum before he stomped it with the heel of his boot.

Goshiro nodded. "Now move. Once we get outside, you lead us to the vehicle."

Mason led the way down the stairwell. Hope glimmered in his belly. Once they were

outside, someone should have a shot.

But as they hit the gangway, Mason's hopes began to fade. He led them to the SUV, carefully eying possible sightlines for the team, and making sure he stayed clear so he didn't block a shot.

But Goshiro wasn't an idiot. He kept Avery so close no one could risk firing.

Holding Avery against the side of the vehicle, Goshiro tipped his chin at Mason. "Over there. On the ground. Do it."

Not a problem. With him out of the way, it gave his teammates a better chance to fire.

But no shots rang out.

Cheek on the cold cement, heart in his throat, Mason was forced to watch as Goshiro slid into the vehicle, dragging Avery in after him. The driver's side window rolled down and Avery tossed her phone on the ground.

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The last thing Mason saw as they pulled away was Avery behind the wheel, her eyes wide with terror.

Mason leapt to his feet in time to see the vehicle disappear down the street. “Nowhere far enough you can run, Goshiro. Nowhere on this earth.”

44

Avery’s mind raced as she followed Ryan’s directions to head south on the interstate, toward Tacoma. Her training kicked in, bringing an icy calm. She began to assess her options, calculating the risks and potential outcomes of each move. Ryan sat beside her, his service weapon trained on her, a cold, blank expression on his face as he divided his attention between her and whoever he was texting. She kept her expression neutral, not wanting to give away any hint of her thoughts.

Her eyes darted to the rearview mirror, checking for any signs of a tail or potential backup. Nothing so far.

Avery mentally reviewed the layout of the interstate, trying to anticipate where Ryan might be directing her and what his endgame could be. She hoped her comlink had remained active, providing a lifeline to her team, but she knew she couldn’t rely on that alone.

She snuck brief looks in his direction, analyzing his body language for any clues about his intentions. He was a skilled agent, too. Underestimating him could be a deadly mistake. But she also knew that she had the training and the experience to handle this situation. She’d find a way out of this mess, one way or another.

Though she didn't dare say anything that might alert him to the fact that she still had her earbud in, she prayed the Lord would find a way to make Ryan sloppy. All it would take was one unguarded utterance that Mason could track ...

She couldn't believe how calm she felt, given the circumstances. Maybe it was because she knew that, for the moment, everyone else was safe. Mason, the team, they were all out of harm's way.

The only one in danger was her.

Ryan looked completely different than the man she had worked beside for years. Gone was the boyish charm, the easy smile. In its place was a stark blankness, a fury that radiated from him like heat.

How had she never seen it before? How had she been so blind to the truth about him? Until the truth smacked her in the face, she had never believed he could be a mole, not in a million years. And yet, here they were.

Clearly trying to swallow down his panic, Ryan barked out terse directions, guiding her off the interstate and onto a series of winding back roads.

She followed his instructions carefully, fully aware of the comlink still nestled in her ear.

She knew that Mason and the team would be coming for her, but she also knew that they wouldn't be able to help if she was already dead. She needed to find a way to convey their location without giving away the comlink, to buy herself some time until they could reach her.

Two exits later, Ryan ordered her off the interstate and into a large industrial area smashed between the highway and a swampy lagoon that bled into Puget Sound. The

industrial spaces bustled with activity, giving her a moment of hope, but he quickly directed her around the back of the largest development. Now there were only soaring concrete walls on one side, and the boggy shore along the other. Except for the discarded fast-food wrappers caught in the weeds, there was no sign of human inhabitation.

He directed her to pull off onto a narrow, rutted track that led down to the water's edge. The tires crunched over the gravel and loose stones, each jolt sending a shudder through the vehicle's frame. As they bumped along the uneven ground, Avery caught sight of their destination: an old fishing shack, slowly sinking into the marsh that surrounded it. The weathered wood was grey and splintered, the roof sagging under the weight of years of neglect.

The salty tang of the marsh filled her nostrils, mixed with the faint, underlying scent of rotting vegetation. The air was heavy and damp, clinging to her skin like a clammy shroud. In the distance, a seabird cried out, its mournful call echoing across the desolate landscape.

"Stop here," he ordered, his voice cutting through the oppressive silence.

Avery's mind raced as she surveyed the scene. Quiet, isolated, out of sight of prying eyes—the perfect place for a murder. The soft ground would make it easy to dispose of a body, and the constantly shifting tides would erase any evidence within hours.

She was tempted to shove the vehicle in Reverse and floor it. Risking a gunshot seemed slightly less dangerous than allowing Ryan to get her into that shack. Her foot twitched on the brake pedal, her hands tightening on the steering wheel as she weighed her options.

But the moment evaporated as the crooked door to the shack flew open and a young Asian male stepped out, a pistol dangling from one hand. Dressed in baggy pants and

a flannel shirt far too large for his thin frame—a style she privately referred to as Gang Casual—the thug’s face brightened when he saw Ryan.

Avery shoved the car into Park. The odds of escaping just went from slim to none.

“Out,” Ryan ordered her, exiting from his side of the vehicle. The damp ground sucked at his shoes as he stepped out onto the marsh.

The younger guy dipped his head deferentially and gestured at the rotting structure, a sly grin on his face. “You like?”

Ryan barely glanced over, his expression unreadable. “It’ll do.”

Avery took a deep breath, the cloying scent of the marsh filling her lungs. All she could do now was keep him talking, try to buy herself some time. “Why are we here?” she asked, her voice steady despite the fear that gripped her. Her skin prickled with goosebumps as a chilly breeze swept in off the water, carrying with it the faint, mournful cry of a seabird.

Ryan smiled, a cold, cruel twist of his lips. “You’ll see,” he said, motioning for her to get out of the car.

She did as he asked, her mind racing as she tried to figure out his plan. Was he going to kill her here, leave her body to sink into the marsh? Or did he have something else in mind?

The younger guy handed Ryan a length of thin nylon rope.

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“Keep your gun on her,” he ordered his assistant, and pulled her toward the building.

Like pieces of a puzzle finally clicking into place, she began to see the truth. He could have killed her as soon as they escaped the docks, but he needed a distraction.

Mason and his team would put all their effort into locating her. But they couldn’t track Ryan at the same time. He was going to disappear.

But he’d leave her to die first.

How could she have been so wrong about him? How could she have trusted him, worked beside him all these years, and never suspected a thing?

The old cabin was listing, the floor beneath her feet slanting downward at a sickening angle. She looked around, her eyes widening in horror as she realized that the back corner of the room was already filled with murky, brackish water.

Ryan pushed her roughly into the shack, his gun trained on her head. “Sit,” he ordered, shoving her hard across the tilting floor.

She stumbled and fell to her knees, scraping her palms on the rough planks. Before she could right herself, he grabbed the back of her shirt and hauled her toward the far corner. The floor there had already disappeared beneath a foot of dark water, as if the entire structure was sinking, corner first, into the sea.

While his soldier trained his handgun on her, Ryan secured her arms behind her back and her feet at the ankles. He raised his booted foot.

Avery flinched away, ducking her head to protect herself for the coming blow, but his kick landed on the wooden slats of the wall next to her. Again and again he kicked the wood until it broke away from the thicker stud. Then he yanked her back against the rotting back wall, wrapping the remaining line around the stud over and over again before securing it with strong knots, leaving no play in the line.

“I’m not going to kill you,” he said, his voice almost gentle. “What would be the point? I just need to keep your SEAL friend and his team busy until I can make my escape. Once I’m clear, I’ll get word to them about your location.”

Avery looked into his dead eyes. Killer’s eyes. He was lying. He had already murdered so many people, what was one more to him?

But she kept her face blank, her voice steady. “You can’t kill everyone who knows what you did.”

He shrugged, a cold, dismissive gesture. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure they find you. Eventually.” He paused. “One more thing. I’ll be taking this.” He plucked the comlink from her ear, holding it up to the light with a triumphant smile.

Ryan crushed the device beneath his heel, grinding it into the dirt with a sickening crunch. Then, with a final, mocking smile, he and his accomplice walked out of the shack, leaving her alone in the rising water.

Avery listened to the sound of Ryan’s footsteps fading away. She had to find a way to let Mason know where she was.

But as she struggled against her bonds, the rough rope biting into her skin, she knew it was hopeless. Ryan had tied her too tightly, the knots too complex for her to unravel on her own.

She was trapped, helpless, with no way to escape.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw something else that made her heart stop in her chest. Algae-covered waterlines, running along the walls like some kind of twisted, green graffiti.

And the tide was rising. Living on a houseboat had ingrained the natural swings into her very being. High tide would be in four or five hours. And it would be a big one. Autumn tidal swings were large. Three to four feet.

Panic surged, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Water marks, oily lines and patches of algae, striped the walls like nasty bathtub rings. The highest of them reached almost to the ceiling at the lowest corner.

At even a moderate high tide, her corner of the room would be completely submerged.

She felt a scream building in her throat, a desperate, primal cry for help.

If Mason didn't find her, she was going to die here, alone and afraid, with nothing but the sound of the water lapping at her to keep her company.

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Mason's rugged features flashed before her eyes. The dark blond curls she'd been so tempted to wind around her fingers.

Too late now.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Hands on his hips, Mason stared at the empty space recently taken up by the SUV Goshiro and Avery drove off in.

And Paul.

He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Of all the times for Paul to go all action hero. The video footage from Tai's drone ran over and over in his head. A continuous loop of disaster. Paul put the car in Park, exited as ordered leaving the driver's side door open. But then, after he rushed to the passenger side to open that door, he slipped into the back seat. "I can't believe he snuck back into the vehicle."

Paige bumped her hip gently into his. "He meant well."

Sure. And now Paul had handed Goshiro another hostage. Brilliant.

He wanted to call his brother on the comlink, but Paul was a civilian. He'd react to a sudden voice in his ear. If he was with Goshiro, any attempt at contact would put him in even more danger.

"It's what you would have done," Kate pointed out.

"Not helpful."

"But true," Graham added.

"Seriously. I wish I would have thought of that," Fenn added.

"Yeah, but you're a trained operative," Mason muttered. Still, a surge of pride, tiny and not nearly as strong as the terror tightening his throat, shone through. His little brother was smart, but he was also in way over his head.

A sound came over the comlink. Something scratchy and indistinct. Wind?

He glanced at Paige, but she shrugged.

Then Paul's voice came through loud and clear. "Yo," he said, his tone casual, as if he was just checking in from a day at the beach. "I've got eyes on Avery. As well on the place Goshiro took her. He doesn't know I'm here. I'm in the bushes about fifty yards away from the shack. Goshiro met another dude, young. Looks like a gangbanger. The younger dude just drove off in the SUV. Alone."

Mason's heart skipped a beat. "Paul, stay put. We're on our way."

But Paul wasn't finished. "My phone's in the SUV," he said, his voice excited. "You can track Goshiro's accomplice with that. And the shack's not hard to spot. There's nothing else around it and it's falling into the water. Not like right this second falling, but you know, like soon."

Mason couldn't help but grin at his brother's roundabout dialogue. "Good work, Paul," he said, his voice warm with pride. "We'll be there soon."

Paige's fingers were already flying over her keyboard again. "I'm on it," she said, her voice focused. "I'll have his recent route in half a sec."

Mason stood, adrenaline coursing through his veins as he adjusted his tech gear and checked his weapons. The XREP bullets came out of his M18, replaced by lethal rounds.

No second chances for Goshiro or his accomplices. No chance of an XREP malfunctioning and failing to deliver a charge. The rest of the team followed suit, their faces grim with determination.

But just as they were about to move out, a sound came over the comlink that made Mason's blood run cold.

It was the sound of a struggle, of flesh hitting flesh and bones cracking. And then, suddenly, Goshiro's voice filled the air, cold and mocking.

"Deal's off, Mason," he said, his voice dripping with malice. "You violated the rules. The tide's coming in quickly. Paul and Avery'll be under water before you make it. Over and out."

The comlink went dead.

46

Avery struggled against her bonds, the rough rope biting into her skin as she twisted and turned on the damp, rotting floor of the old fishing shack. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps as she tried to calm herself, to think of a way out of this nightmare.

But then, just when she thought things couldn't get any worse, the door burst open with a sickening crash, and Ryan stormed in, dragging an unconscious Paul behind him like a sack of potatoes.

Despair washed over her, a cold, dark wave. Paul's face was deathly pale, a nasty gash on his forehead oozing blood, a huge goose egg already forming beneath his hair.

Ryan grabbed a length of rope from a nearby pile of debris and quickly bound Paul's hands and feet, leaving him lying on the floor next to her, his feet in the water, like a discarded piece of trash.

Ryan dropped the calm act. Face distorted by rage, he kicked Paul in the back. "You

can blame yourself for this.” He threw the words at her, his voice dark with bitterness. “No one was supposed to find Stenberg until that ship was fifty miles off the coast. You’ve cost me millions.”

Avery knew better than to respond. All her hostage negotiation training kicked in, flooding her with caution. Above all, don’t antagonize the abductor. Ryan must have planned to take over the trucking company. No other reason to kill off his partner.

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Only now he'd have to run. Because of her and Mason. No wonder he wanted them dead.

Ryan seemed to regain his equilibrium, but Avery could see it was only a thin veneer of calm. "My homey, Javier, will be back in a few. We're gonna create a little surprise for your SEAL, just in case the guy does manage to figure out where you are in time."

Her stomach dropped. She knew exactly what Ryan meant by "surprise." The thought of Mason and his friends walking into a trap made her blood run cold.

Ryan wrinkled his nose. "It stinks in here."

And then he was gone, the door slamming shut behind him with a sickening finality.

Paul remained motionless. Was his head injured? Did he have broken bones? She yanked against her restraints, digging the rope into her skin, but the knots held. She couldn't even reach him to check his pulse.

Ryan was going to boobytrap the shack. She lifted a silent prayer, begging the Lord to keep Mason safe, to warn him and his team of the danger.

And then, just as despair was starting to set in, inspiration struck.

A few feet away from her, half-buried in the debris on the floor, was an old, rusted tackle box, its lid caved in, its sides dented and battered.

Adrenaline surged through her veins, melting the icy chill from the water. If she could just reach it, if she could just get her hands on something sharp ...

She wiggled and squirmed, angling her body toward the box and stretching out her legs. The ropes bit into her wrists, her muscles screaming in protest as she stretched and strained, trying to reach the box with her bound feet.

It was slow going, and more than once, she thought she might dislocate her shoulders from the effort. But finally, after what felt like an eternity, she managed to snag the edge of the box with her heels and drag it end over end toward her.

She maneuvered herself around, twisting and turning until she was able to wedge the box behind her back, using it as a makeshift sawhorse to cut through the ropes around her wrists.

It was a painstaking process, and more than once, she had to stop and catch her breath, her heart pounding in her chest as she listened for any sign of Ryan or his accomplice returning.

But she kept at it, sawing away at the ropes with single-minded determination, even as the water crept higher.

Finally, with the box now half submerged in the filthy water, the ropes gave way, the fibers snapping one by one until she was free.

As she pried apart the knots at her ankles, she looked up. Paul was awake, his eyes cloudy with fear and confusion.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice hoarse and shaky.

Avery nodded, tears of relief pricking at the corners of her eyes. “I’m fine,” she said,

her voice barely above a whisper. “But we have to hurry. Ryan’s helper will be back soon. They’re going to set up a boobytrap.”

Paul nodded, his face grim with understanding. “I talked to Mason,” he said, his voice filled with hope. “The team’s tracking my phone. They’ll be here as soon as they can.”

“We have to figure out a way to warn them.” Fast. The water was rapidly rising, already lapping at Paul’s legs as he lay on the floor.

Two against one might work, but they’d never make it against two armed men. They had to escape before Ryan’s accomplice returned.

Avery quickly calculated their options as she cut through the remaining rope securing her ankles. Her mind raced as she tried to come up with a plan. They didn’t have much time before Javier came back.

Or Mason and the team arrived.

The only good news was that Ryan had bound Paul’s hands in front of him, a sloppy mistake that might give them the edge they needed.

Paul rolled toward her, his face set with determination, and held out his hands. While she held the box down with her feet, he sawed away at his bonds.

But how to get past Ryan? They were unarmed, outmatched, and rapidly running out of time.

She closed her eyes, sending up one last, desperate prayer.

Please. Please let us find a way out of this.

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Avery listened for any signs of Ryan's accomplice, Javier, returning for him, but heard nothing but the sound of the water lapping at the walls and the distant cry of seagulls.

They had to make a move now, while Ryan was still alone.

Avery crouched next to Paul. Looking through the murky windows, she eyed the ruined dock outside the shack. "If we can just get away from here, we can hide in the undergrowth until Mason and the team arrive."

Was there anything in the ruins they could use? The odds of getting very far weren't good, but if they could at least get away from the shack, Mason and the others wouldn't be surprised by whatever boobytrap Ryan had planned.

"The undergrowth is thick along the banks," she whispered. "But Ryan and Javier are armed. We need a distraction."

Paul pointed out the broken window at the small boathouse at the end of the rotting dock, its weathered boards barely visible through the mist. "I can wade out to it," he said, his voice filled with determination. "Maybe there's something there I can use to get the guy's attention."

"Paul, no," she said, her voice cracking with emotion. "It's too dangerous."

But Mason's brother just shook his head, a small, sad smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "You're probably a lot faster than me," he said, his voice filled with self-deprecating humor. "I always meant to exercise, but you know how it is. I never find

the time for consistent cardio. My bad.”

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, her heart breaking at Paul’s brave attempt at humor. He was risking his life for her, putting himself in harm’s way to give her a chance to escape.

“You’re a special man.”

Paul just shrugged, his eyes filled with a kind of resigned acceptance. “At least one of us thinks so,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

The sadness in his tone touched her, the quiet resignation that seemed to emanate from every pore. She knew in that moment that she would do whatever it took to make sure Paul escaped the danger that she had brought down on them both.

This was not his fight. It never had been. She was the one who had poked the hornet’s nest, the one who had put them all in danger with her relentless pursuit of the truth.

And now, she would deal with the sting.

“Okay. You head out to the boathouse, see if you can find something to distract Ryan. I’ll head for the bushes.” It wasn’t a lie, exactly.

She’d head for cover, after she got Ryan’s attention.

Paul hesitated for a moment, his eyes searching her face for any sign of weakness, any hint of uncertainty. Finally, he nodded. “Be careful.”

“You, too.” Impulsively, she reached for his hand. “Paul. Wait.”

She gripped his cold fingers tight and bowed her head. Paul had never joined in when

Mason or the team lifted prayers, but she needed him to know the Lord was with him. “Keep us safe, Lord,” she prayed. “Keep Paul and me and the team close in your heart.”

“Amen,” Paul added. Then he shrugged sheepishly. “I always meant to get myself right with the Lord again. He’s sure sent me a huge wake up call, right?”

She gave his hand a final squeeze before releasing him. “The Lord has never given up on you. And neither will I.”

Paul nodded sharply. He crouched low, wading through the rising water, and slipped out the sagging back door, lowering himself over the jumble of broken planks into the murky marsh.

She scrambled uphill, to the front of the shack and put her eye to a large hole, trying to locate Ryan. He was leaning against a nearby tree, back to her. She pressed her cheek to the splintered wood. So far, so good. He hadn’t heard Paul slip into the water.

All she had to do was keep him away from Paul until help arrived. She breathed deep, two huge breaths, as if preparing to dive under water.

Ready. Go.

With a loud, keening cry, she launched herself out the door.

48

Mason crept through the undergrowth, rifle clutched tightly in his hands. He was approaching the structure from the south. Alone. The rest of the team had fanned out, planning to encircle the area then tighten the noose on Goshiro.

“He’s a hundred feet ahead of you,” Tai informed him. “Be advised. Avery’s down. He’s got his gun on her.”

Mason’s nostrils flared. He wouldn’t dwell on her terror. It was time to dive deep into machine mode. No emotions. No mistakes.

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He allowed himself one indulgence a mental plea to Avery. I'm here. I got this.

And then he crept forward through the brush, senses open, footsteps silent.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what lay ahead, and then with a fierce, determined set to his jaw, he popped his head up from the bushes, his eyes scanning the scene before him: Goshiro, standing over Avery, who cowered in the mud at his feet, a handgun pointed straight at her head.

The man could pull the trigger at any second. Despite his vow, Mason's stomach churned with fear and desperation. He raised his M16, his finger hovering over the trigger. He could take the shot, but Goshiro's finger was on the trigger.

He couldn't risk it. If Goshiro flinched, Avery died.

"Yo, Goshiro." He dropped his rifle and raised his hands overhead, desperate to divert the man's attention.

Graham's voice burst over the comlink, tinny and distant. "I'm not in position yet."

Tai's voice followed, equally strained. "I don't have eyes on Paul."

Paul was probably still in the shack, unconscious, most likely. But he couldn't think about that now, couldn't let his emotions cloud his judgment.

Every warrior instinct swelled within him, blocking out all emotion as he focused completely on his prey. Hands still high, he tromped through the undergrowth toward

Goshiro, his voice ringing out across the clearing. “Stop!” he yelled.

Anything to buy Avery precious seconds to get away.

“Looks like this isn’t going your way,” Mason called out, his words dripping with sarcasm. “How about we talk about Plan B?”

Goshiro’s face hardened into a mask of fury, but his shooting arm didn’t tense. As long as Mason kept talking, he might just get close enough ...

With Avery on the ground, watching, Mason and Goshiro locked eyes, their gazes filled with a kind of primal, animalistic fury. Over the comms, Tai and Graham’s voices crackled in his ear.

“We’re in position,” Graham announced. “The instant I have a shot, I’ll take it.”

Mason’s mind raced, trying to devise a way to warn Avery to stay down without giving away that the team was out there. But to his horror, Goshiro seemed to understand his intentions, his eyes narrowing with a kind of cruel, calculating gleam.

“Plan B doesn’t work for me, brother.” With a sudden, violent motion, he bent down and dragged Avery to her feet, clearly intending to use her as a human shield.

Mason’s breath caught in his throat. He couldn’t let Goshiro use Avery as a bargaining chip.

But just as he was about to lunge at Goshiro, a deafening explosion rocked the clearing.

The force of the blast knocked him off his feet. He hit the ground hard, the breath knocked from his lungs as he rolled to the side, his ears ringing with the aftershock.

For a moment, he lay there, stunned and disoriented, his mind reeling.

He forced himself up on his elbows. And then, through the haze of smoke and debris, he saw it.

The shack, or what was left of it, a twisted, mangled heap of wood and metal. Flames licked at the remains and trailed along the debris of the dock that stretched out into the water, terminating at a pile of junk engulfed in thick, black smoke.

A figure stumbled on shore through the weeds, his clothes singed and torn, his face blackened with soot and ash.

Paul.

49

Time shifted into slow motion. Every detail, every sound, every sensation, etched itself in Mason's brain.

Avery slammed into Goshiro, knocking him off his feet. She must have been prepared for the explosion, using it as a diversion to catch him off guard.

"Hold your fire," Mason ordered over the comlink and launched himself at the pair.

He leapt straight for Goshiro's gun, tearing it out of the man's hand with a sickening crack of bone. Goshiro howled in pain, his eyes wide with shock and fury as Mason flipped him over, pulling his hands behind his back and pressing a knee into the man's spine.

"Can't breathe," Goshiro wheezed, his face pressed into the mud.

“Don’t care.”

But then he felt a hand on his arm, warm and gentle, and all the feelings rushed back. His eyes started to sting, his whole body feeling like the rush of blood after a tourniquet was loosened.

“Mason. Stop.” Avery’s voice was soft and pleading. “We’re okay. Paul and I are okay.”

“Copy that.” A flood of emotion threatened to overwhelm him.

He pushed back the feels, concentrating on the task at hand. After zip-tying Goshiro’s wrists, Mason climbed to his feet. “You’re gonna want to stay put,” he advised the creep.

Then he reached for Avery. Soaking wet and shivery, she looked like the best thing he’d ever seen.

As Mason pulled Avery into his arms, the relief that washed over him was so intense it nearly brought him to his knees. He held her close, feeling the warmth of her body seeping into his own, chasing away the chill that had settled into his bones.

He buried his face in her hair, breathing in the scent of her, a mixture of sweat and salt water and something uniquely Avery. Gradually, his pulse began to slow, his breathing evening out as the reality of their survival sank in.

“Thank you Jesus,” he whispered, his voice rough with emotion.

Avery clung to him, her fingers digging into his back as she trembled in his arms.

Around them, the marshland was a flurry of activity as the rest of the team secured the scene. But for Mason, the world had narrowed down to the woman in his arms, the miracle of her presence, the overwhelming gratitude he felt to whatever higher power had brought her back to him.

He closed his eyes, sending up a silent prayer of thanks. Their Savior truly had been watching over them, guiding them through the darkness and bringing them back into the light.

Paul, too.

Graham and Tai reached them a moment later, their faces grim with determination.

“She’s good,” Mason said, waving them on toward the shack. “Paul’s over there.”

“He saved us,” Avery whispered. “He’s quite a guy.”

Mind too jumbled to form words, Mason cupped the back of her head in his hand and pulled her close. Just breathing. They stayed like that for a long moment, their breath mingling in the cool, damp air, until the sound of sirens filled the clearing.

“He is. Just don’t tell him that,” he said once he could speak again. “His head’s already way too big for those skinny shoulders.”

Avery laughed—a delightful sound that sent shivers all the way to his toes—and stepped out of his arms.

Graham and Tai flanked Paul, who was sopping wet and covered in blood and soot, but grinning widely.

His brother stopped a few feet away and wiped water out of his eyes. “And you told me never to play with matches.” He shook his head playfully. “Dude.”

Mason thrust out his fist for a fist bump, his voice rough with feeling. “Nice work, bro. Nice work.”

Paul’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “No way to hide it. I’m all kinds of awesome.”

Emergency vehicles sped down the dirt lane, sirens blaring. Tai stepped forward, his voice calm and authoritative. “I’ll handle first contact.” He loped toward the oncoming parade of lights.

Graham waved Paul toward him. “Help me with Goshiro.”

“What about his little helper, Javier?” Paul reminded her.

“Ryan sent him to get supplies for their... Their boobytrap,” she said. “Black SUV.”

Graham stopped her. “Got it. I’ll inform the officers on scene.” He jogged off after Tai.

Mason pulled Avery close again, searching her face for any sign of pain or distress. “You okay?”

“Not a scratch.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:11 am

This could have gone down so much differently ...

He shook off the ugly thoughts. Any mission could turn into a disaster. It's how things went in his world. But when you cared about someone. Really cared ...

He didn't know how Bridger and Tai did it. How they stifled the overwhelming worry.

Something to chew on. Another day.

Avery wriggled out of his hold smiled up at him, her eyes soft and tender.

He wiped a chunk of mud off her cheek. "I think I need a vacation."

"Me, too," Avery agreed, her lips curving into a playful grin.

Mason raised an eyebrow, his mind flashing back to their first meeting, when she'd told him that she hated vacations, that she'd never really gone on one.

"Seriously?" he asked, his voice filled with mock surprise.

Avery shrugged, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Never had a reason before."

The ground shifted under his feet, his heart swelling with a fierce, protective love that he'd never felt before. Whatever this woman wanted, whatever she needed, he'd be there to fulfill it. Forever.

Now, if he could only find a way to convince Avery that they had a future ahead of them ...

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The next morning dawned bright and sunny, the kind of jewel-bright autumn day Seattleites treasured. Avery stood in Bridger's kitchen, her fingers absently shredding a bagel as she watched the team file in, one by one. The sun was barely up, but she'd been awake for hours, her mind churning with thoughts of Mason and the future that she knew could never be.

She told herself it was just the excess adrenaline, the lingering effects of the previous day's chaos and danger. But deep down, she knew the truth. She dreaded the moment when Mason would walk out of her life, taking with him all the fantasies she'd been spinning in her head.

Because that's all they were. Fantasies. She wasn't built for relationships, and from what she could tell, neither was he.

The team looked refreshed, well-rested after a night's sleep. All except for Mason, who looked like he'd been wrestling with a tractor. His longish, gold-streaked hair was rumpled, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

Avery felt a pang of sympathy, but she pushed it down, focusing instead on the events of the previous day. They'd been at the crime scene for hours, well into the evening, as local law enforcement called in the Bureau.

Javier had been caught speeding away from the scene. He wasn't even cuffed before he admitted everything, how Ryan had been his mentor for years. "The Ghost," Javier called him.

A fitting nickname for sure.

Avery had been prepared to be fired on the spot, had even welcomed it in a way. But to her surprise, the district supervisor had commended her for her tenacity, praising her for decimating a counterfeit drug ring, unmasking a rogue agent, and tying him to a string of murders.

“I can’t believe Goshiro was able to maintain his ties to his old gang for all these years.” Supervisor Kantor shook her head. “That’s gonna be one big, black eye for the Bureau.” She winced like she had a terrible case of heartburn.

“After your vacation time is over, I want to see you in my office,” Kantor had told her. “We have a lot to discuss about your future in the Bureau. All of it good.”

But now, as Avery watched Mason avoid her gaze, she felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

She turned her attention to Paul, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his face alight with excitement.

“I decided I’m gonna go back to school, finish my business degree,” he announced, his voice ringing with pride. “Can’t run my own shop without it.”

Mason’s face softened, his eyes shining with pride as he clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Outstanding.”

Paul blinked, his lips parted as if surprised at Mason’s wholehearted approval.

“Copy that,” Tai added.

Graham grunted. “Smart move, kid.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:11 am

Paul shrugged his thin shoulders, ducking his head.

Kate cleared her throat, her eyes darting between Mason and Avery. “I hate to shut this party down, but we have a lot to do for Kellen’s party tomorrow. I’d like to be wheels up ASAP.”

Mason’s eyes widened, and he smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Right, the adoption ceremony,” he said, his voice filled with chagrin. “I can’t believe I almost forgot.”

He turned to Paul, his face serious. “You should come with us.”

Paul hesitated, his eyes darting around the room as if he was looking for an escape route. “Nah, that’s okay,” he mumbled, his voice barely audible.

But Mason shook his head, his eyes blazing with conviction. “You’re family. We want you there.”

The rest of the team nodded, their faces warm with acceptance and love.

“He’s right, Paul,” Tai said, his voice gruff with emotion. “You’re stuck with us now. Sorry, not sorry.”

Paul cleared his throat, clearly unable to speak.

Avery wasn’t sure she could say anything either, without bursting into tears. So much healing had come from such a horrible situation.

Mason turned to her then, his eyes searching her face with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat. The team, sensing the shift in the room, quietly slipped out, leaving them alone in the kitchen.

Avery braced herself, preparing for the terse goodbye that she knew was coming.

Don't cry. Do not cry.

Mason took her hand, his eyes nervous and uncertain. He seemed to be stalling, his free hand fidgeting with the hem of his shirt as he searched for the right words to let her down gently.

"Wait a sec," he said finally, his voice rough with emotion. "I have something for you."

He disappeared from the room, leaving Avery alone with her bleak thoughts and the pounding of her heart. When he returned, he was carrying the landscape painting he'd bought at the auction, the one she'd admired so openly.

"For you," he said, his voice soft and tentative as he held it out to her.

Her eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat as she took the painting from him, her fingers trembling slightly. "Mason, I ... I don't know what to say. This is too much. You don't have this kind of money ..."

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "I do, actually. There's a lot about my background that I wish I could tell you, but ..."

"But you'd have to kill me."

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Something like that."

But then his smile faded, his eyes growing serious as he looked at her, his gaze filled with an intensity that made her heart skip a beat.

“Avery, I ...” He ran a hand through his hair. “Boy, this is hard.”

“Just say what you need to say,” Avery encouraged him.

“You still up for that vacation?” he asked, not quite meeting her eyes. “We’ve got an extra seat on the Pilatus. By my calculations, you’ve got another week of vacay. Come with us.”

She hardly dared to breathe. Did she have the courage to dive into water this deep, to take a chance on a future that was so uncertain?

She wasn’t sure, but before she could figure out a way to answer him, Mason set the painting aside and took her hand, his fingers caressing the sensitive skin in a way that made her skin tingle and her breath catch in her throat.

But still, she couldn’t bring herself to take the leap.

Mason seemed to sense her hesitation, his eyes filling with disappointment even as he tried to hide it behind a brave smile. “Too soon. I totally get that. You know where to find me.”

And then he turned away.

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She froze, watching him collect his bags, open the front door, and jog down the wide front stairs, heading for the car that would take him back to Redemption Creek and the life he'd built there.

She closed her eyes, sending up a silent prayer for illumination, for the courage to take the leap and join the future that Mason had offered her.

And then, before she even realized what she was doing, she was racing after him.

“Wait!” she shouted, her voice ringing out across the driveway.

Mason turned, his eyes wide with surprise and hope.

“I’m still technically on vacation, and I know exactly how I want to spend it.” She launched herself toward him.

He dropped his bags and caught her in his arms, lifting her off the ground and spinning her around in a dizzying circle. “Outstanding.”

Avery laughed, her heart soaring with happiness as she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on tight. The feel of him, strong and steady against her, washed away the ugliness of Ryan’s heinous betrayal and filled her with hope for a bright, shining future.

Together.

CHAP 51: EPILOGUE

The golden light of the setting sun filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the crowd huddled in Bridger and Jane's living room. Mason's heart swelled as he surveyed his team, his family, gathered to celebrate this momentous day. His gaze settled on Avery, and gratitude surged through him. She was here, by his side, smelling, somehow, of green apples, the promise of something extraordinary stretched before them.

He sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

Fenn peered out the front window. "I can't believe the adoption's finally official. It's been a long road for them."

Kate grinned. "They deserve this. Kellen's one lucky kid."

"And he's stuck with us now," Graham added from the couch. "Poor kid won't know what hit him."

Tai, hunched over his drone monitor, shot a smirk. "Between Bridger's dad jokes and Fenn's puns, he's gonna have a lot to put up with."

"Hey!" Fenn clutched his chest in mock offense. "My puns are legendary."

Kate snorted. "Legendary for making people flee, maybe."

Paige, perched on the arm of the couch, rolled her eyes. "You guys are ridiculous. Kellen's going to be so loved."

"Kid's been through hell," Mason said, voice gruff. "So have Bridger and Jane. It's time for a real family."

Graham grunted. "Too bad he got this two-bit outfit."

His daughter, Tenaya laughed and elbowed him in the ribs. "Careful there, old man, you're the senior member."

The grizzled marine grinned. "Top dog. Just the way I like it."

Avery slipped her hand into Mason's. "What little boy wouldn't want his own set of action heroes for a family?"

Action hero? Did that mean Avery included him in that group? Mason's heart swelled with pride and something deeper. Something he wasn't quite ready to probe too deeply. This thing with Avery was so new, he wasn't sure how to act.

Or how to feel.

Tai hunched over his drone monitor, the screen's glow illuminating his face. "Bridger's Jeep just turned off the highway." His whisper cut through the good-natured bickering and laughter.

"Shh! Everyone, hide!" Tenaya flapped her hands, ushering people into position.

In the commotion, Avery sidled closer to Mason, her shoulder brushing his. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light. "Thank you for welcoming me into this extraordinary family of yours."

Mason's throat tightened. He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze, trying to convey all he felt in that simple gesture.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:12 am

Across the room, Tenaya rose on tiptoe to kiss Graham's weathered cheek. "I'm so happy we reconnected, Dad."

The gruff ex-drill sergeant turned away, but not before Mason caught the glimmer of tears in his eyes. He engulfed his daughter in a bear hug, holding on until she laughed and pushed at his chest.

"Dad, you're going to crack my ribs!"

Tires crunched on gravel outside, and the room fell silent. The front door burst open, and Kellen catapulted into the house, Bridger and Jane on his heels. Jane swiped at her damp cheeks, her smile wobbly but blinding.

Kellen skidded to a halt and fumbled for the light switch. The moment the room flooded with brightness, the team erupted in cheers. "Congratulations!"

The boy stood frozen, eyes wide and mouth agape. He blinked once, twice, then a grin split his face. He wrapped his slender arms around himself and bounced on his toes, a bubble of laughter escaping him. "No way! I've never had a surprise party before."

Mason's vision blurred, hot tears spilling down his cheeks. He felt Avery's arm slide around his shoulders, and he leaned into her solid warmth, accepting the comfort she offered.

He wasn't the only one. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. Tai had his big, old arms wrapped around Tenaya. Graham stood next to them, trying to look serious, but

totally failing. Paige and Paul hovered next to the punch bowl, both swiping at tears. He even saw Fenn reach for Kate's hand. For once, she didn't inch away.

Bridger and Jane appeared in the doorway, arms linked and faces aglow. Bridger raised a hand, and the raucous cheering faded.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, voice thick with emotion, "I'd like to introduce Mr. Kellen Jason North."

Kel danced in place, his small body vibrating with energy and emotion. The room exploded in fresh applause and whistles. Mason whooped and clapped until his palms stung.

Leaning close to Avery, he said, "He took his uncle's name. Cool."

The team swarmed forward, engulfing the new family in hugs and congratulations. Mason hung back with Avery, sensing her hesitation.

She tipped her head toward the joyful knot of people. "You're truly blessed."

"More than I deserve," he agreed, watching his friends - his brothers and sisters - celebrate. But not, he realized, more than he wanted. Having Avery here was a start, but he wanted more.

He wanted a future with her in it.

Avery's elbow nudged his ribs. "They look like they've been a family forever."

Mason nodded slowly. "In God's eyes, I think they have been. No matter what they went through to get here, this was ordained."

"I hope so." Avery turned to face him fully, her gaze searching his. "If that's ordained,

then maybe this is, too."

For a breathless moment, Mason struggled to pull air into his lungs. He was no stranger to the power of dark emotions, but the sheer force of this joy, this rightness, brought him to his knees.

He twined his fingers with Avery's, the rest of the room fading into the background. "Count on it."

Then, before his courage could desert him, he hauled her into his arms and kissed her, pouring every ounce of hope and promise into the press of his lips on hers.

This, right here, was exactly where he was meant to be.