



Special Agent Anastacia

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Description: Agent Anastacia has always been protective of her personal space. Her co-workers respect her wishes and her world proceeds in the secure way that makes her happy. Until she's asked to step out of her comfy zone and take her war-stricken, newly orphaned, Ukrainian cousin under her wing. Fifteen-year-old Hanna needs a lot of understanding, comforting... love. Not particularly something Ana feels she's capable of providing.

Now Nash Ralph, a life-loving, carefree, firefighting hotshot who they meet on their journey to the lake area, has those traits and lives them without feeling his insides twisting into a traumatic mess.

They say opposites attract. But for Anastasia and Nash, they just set each other off and sparks fly. Ones they have to ignore when young Hanna recognizes the killer who murdered her parents and bodies begin dropping like flies.

Wild forest fires, dead bodies, a challenging killer to arrest, and a romance that's hotter than the approaching flames makes this story a page turner till the end.

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Prologue

When the army tank arrived in their small Ukrainian village outside of Mariupol, her parents, fearing for Hanna's safety, had shown their fifteen-year-old daughter a hiding place they'd built inside the house. A place she was to flee to in case they were attacked.

Her father had worked on it for days, making the tiny room invisible to anyone who didn't know it existed. Unfortunately, there would only be room for one person.

Being that both her father and mother were heavy-set and carrying extra weight from all the wonderful meals her mother cooked, they'd never fit in with her. But as they'd explained often, it was not for them that they had decided to cut off a part of the kitchen area to make the space. It was for the daughter they both adored more than their own lives.

At the time, she'd dismissed the idea that things could deteriorate to where they'd actually need it. After all, those horrible images she saw on her phone and she heard the adultswispering about, happened to others. Right? Never to her. Little did she know her secure world was a ticking time bomb.

Today, that time bomb had finally exploded. Her parent's apprehensions had been real. That morning, everyone on the street had seen the lone army tank enter their small dirt road with only six houses. They watched as one of the soldiers entered three of the houses with the inhabitants inside where the sounds of the gunshots were heard distinctly.

That's when her parents had forced her unceremoniously into her hidey hole with her new kitten. Her mama's voice had broken into sobs, but she'd forced out words for Hanna to remember. "Go now, myla dytyna, darling child, be safe and remember my sister, your aunt Diana. She's ready to care for you." Holding her face, mammo placed a hard kiss on her mouth and then followed with words never to be forgotten. "We love you more than you'll ever know."

Her father had hugged her so long that her mother had forced him to stop. "Enough, Tato. She needs to hide now." Fear ripped her voice to shreds. Her arms tugged at her daughter. "N-ow!"

Hanna clung, refusing to let go. Her young arms held his body, while they both cried so hard, they literally shook with emotion. "No, Taty, no. Please, Mammo. Let me stay with you. I'd rather die than hide away."

"Don't be foolish, my girl." Voice hard, her mother slapped her face to get her to stop and listen. Shaking her... fury in her tone, she barked out the words, "Dying would be the easy part. It's what many of the young girls suffer before they're killed that we worry about."

"Here, take Daria and keep her safe." Coming to his senses, her father shoved the pretty kitten into her arms and forced her into the dark cavern, his gruff tone convincing her to swallow the scream. When they disappeared behind the closing door, prayers for their safety filled her soul.

No sooner had they shut her in, she heard one of the soldiers enter their home. She heard her parents begging for their lives, only to be shot in mid-sentence while the killer laughed.

Without thinking, she opened her wall closure in time to see the man strutting out, his Russian uniform filthy and tattered, a huge spider-like tattoo covering his wrist, and a

half-smoked cigarette being spit from his mouth. With her brain not functioning, she rushed to her father's side. Without making a sound, she swallowed the disbelief coloring her ordeal. A noise made her look up. There stood another soldier, a young man, whose horror of the bloody scene matched her own.

Frozen, unable to move, she watched as tears filled his eyes. Then his trembling finger rose to his lips where he made the sign for her to be quiet. Stumbling, cursing, she heard him being sick outside the door before he joined the other man on the road.

That devil had gone to the tank and had come back with a boxful of bottles filled with gas and cloths. Watching from behind her mother's lace curtains, she saw him light another cigarette. The sickened, younger soldier – who'd pretended Hanna wasn't there – pointed to her house and spoke loudly, "All clear in there."

"Yes. Because I shot the rubbish."

"What are you going to do with that?" Obviously untutored in how the Russian army sometimes worked in these situations, the younger officer pointed at the bottles.

"Fuck, idiot. I'm going to burn the place to the ground so the trash can't come back and live here again."

Hanna watched an excruciating expression fill the arguer's face. She listened, understanding the Russian words clearly.

"Why bother? Mariupol is in ruins and only the outskirts have a few miserable peasants living in scattered areas. We've completely destroyed the beautiful city. Can't we just leave things as they are? Do we have to annihilate everything?"

"Yes, dummy. Yes. It's our orders. You're new and haven't seen any action yet. What... they train you for two weeks, give you a gun, and send you to help the rest of

us who've fought for months? Just do as I say, idiot."

"No. I didn't want this war. I tried to leave, and the government forced me to choose between jail and the army. Now I wish I'd chosen jail."

"Wah wah! Quit crying baby. Do as I say. Take these bottles and throw a few inside the house over there." He pointed to where Hanna still watched, glued to the scene as if her body had lost its ability to work.

Her savior childishly shook his head, words trembling, spittle flying. "No. I won't. Look, let's not this time."

His comrade heaved his own burning bottle over to the house across the lane and kicked a small box filled with bottles toward the man in shock. "Get to work and quit grumbling. In case some are still alive, it's better to watch them burn than let them kill our comrades later."

Seeing only stubborn refusal, the older soldier lifted another bottle, puffed at his cigarette so the glowing ash turned hot enough to light the fuse, and went to throw it toward Hanna's house himself. Just as he lifted his arm, a shot rang out. Before the soldier's body hit the ground, the bottle dropped uselessly in the dirt and the flame expired.

Hanna watched then as the boy who'd shot his own partner, lifted his face to heaven and screamed like a madman, as if giving God hell for having placed him in such an agonizing position. The horrific cries of unbearable pain for what he'd done drove him to lift his gun one more time. Hand shaking, eyes clenched, he aimed it at his head and again pulled the trigger.

Squeezing the kitten so hard it wriggled and mewed in protest, Hanna dropped to the ground and saw no more.

Chapter One

Anastacia arrived early to the Los Angeles International airport and found a parking space in the P7 section. Having had a meeting at the Bureau before driving to pick up her cousin arriving from Poland, she undid her holster. Then she stored both her gun and it's holder in her middle console.

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Just as she reached to her left side to remove her badge, she spotted what seemed to be a tiff between another couple who'd parked in the lane ahead. Not liking the way the older male thrust himself up against the younger woman, she hesitated and then rolled down her window, wanting to hear their discussion before interrupting an argument she had no business being involved in. Going on the premise it could be just a small squabble that sometimes spiked during the upheaval of traveling, she didn't move.

Until she watched as the bearded bully grabbed the female by her arm and twisted it up around her back. "You just had to go and piss me off, didn't you? Couldn't help yourself. Now we'll be going back home and to hell with visiting your family."

In a voice filled with tearful misery, Ana heard the stark words the woman uttered, and her heart hardened.

"I knew you had no intention of taking me home to Vancouver as soon as I saw where you pulled in. This is short-term parking, Manny. You were never going to follow through with your promise, were you? This is just your way to torture me." She wiggled to break his hold, but he just tightened his grip, knowing the pain he caused and liking it.

Chuckling, his tone filled with a mean snarl of a sicko playing with a wounded kitten or puppy, knowing it couldn't fight back, he sneered, "You don't deserve to go anywhere, you lazy slut. Why should I pay for tickets to visit your folks just to have them look down on me like I'm garbage. Nah... I never did intend for us to go to Canada."

Crying hard, the redheaded woman begged, “Honey, I’m sorry. Forgive me. I didn’t mean to upset you. Please, let’s just go and have a good time. My mom said she’d pick us up and take us to the hospital. You know my dad’s not going to last much longer. I just want a chance to say goodbye before he dies, Manny. Please baby.”

The overweight loser waved away her argument, his hand coming very close to smacking her. Close enough for her to flinch and hide her face. “Christ, can you hear yourself? Begging like some loser to go and see daddy. Know what, baby. I don’t care if the old fool croaks. Good riddance. Then maybe you’ll know I’m the only man in your life who matters.” The jealousy in his voice sickened Ana, but she still hesitated to become involved.

Then she saw what happened next.

Seeing her precious chance to go home dissolving, the girl in the skin-tight, leopard-print dress tried to pull away. Sadly, her ankle buckled, and her four-inch heels wouldn’t hold her upright. This time when the creep twisted her arm, the force he used had her bent over on her knees, and taking the opportunity, he hauled off and kicked her in the stomach more than once.

In seconds, Ana left her car and was on the scene. Before the asshole knew what hit him, Ana had him in a hold with his arm now being the one twisted up behind his back. “Don’t try to move numbnuts, or I’ll hurt you worse and claim self-defense.”

Too stupid to follow orders, twisting from her hold, he whipped around, his big hand clenched to punch his attacker. Unwisely, he swung... and missed.

Swiveling back to face her, he yelled, “Hey lady, who the fuck do you think you are? This is none of your Goddamn business.”

Grinning, Ana used the same words her father used to say as a joke, “I’m your worst

nightmare, Manny.” She ducked his next swing but used the opportunity to bring her own fist up to connect with his stomach, hurting him good.

Not willing to accept that he was ill matched, he ignored the pain and rushed her once more. Again, she connected, then grabbed his flailing arm to bring him facedown on the ground, her foot on his back while her hands kept control of his twisted arm.

“Ow, bitch. Let go. Fuck. You’re hurting me.”

“Yeah? Sucks to be you, right? Kinda like your poor lady friend felt when you forced her arm behind her back and started putting the boots to her.”

“She’s Judy, my wife,” he said, as if that detail gave him the right to act like a spineless neanderthal. Grunting his words and spitting into the cement, he added, “W – we were just having a little spat. Tell her honey.” He tried wriggling and Ana made him pay by adding more pressure.

“You’re not going anywhere, Manny, so relax.” Ana watched the victim who hadn’t moved. “You okay, Judy?”

Once freed, the redhead had rolled over next to the car, crying so hard it took her a moment to react. When she saw that she wasn’t in danger any longer, she painfully pulled herself to her feet and looked at Ana. Then she turned to her indignant, frothing husband and suddenly the fear cleared from her expression, leaving only hatred.

“No, I’m not okay. What I am... is a fool. He’s never going to change.” She leaned toward him and added, “Manny’s a mean prick who likes to hurt women because he hasn’t got the guts to take on anyone his own size.” Poking her finger hard into the side of his cheek she added, “I hate you. You’re a stupid bastard who thinks it’s funny to dangle this chance in front of me and then punish me for some stupid

offense that's in your own stupid head. I can't take it anymore." Glancing now at Ana – sniveling and unable to wipe her face – Judy added, "I-I just wanted to go home and see my dad." Tears soaking her cheeks, sadness obvious, she hung her head while her long straight hair hung over her heaving shoulders.

Other passerbys slowed to see what was happening and Ana spoke to them. "I'm with the FBI, Agent Marchenko. Mind telling the airport security we have a situation here, and I could use a little backup? Thanks." Nodding, the two women hurried to do her bidding.

Alone again, Judy mumbled heartbrokenly. "He promised to take me home. He even let me pack our bags, said we'd catch a flight this afternoon, but now I know, the sick fuck just wanted to torture me. He never had any intention of following through."

Ana, held on to the grumbling wriggler, but listened to the words that made her decide on a course of action. "You say you have your bag packed? Now's your chance. He's not going anywhere. How about you skedaddle and catch your flight home?"

"I-I can't. He has my passport."

"Yeah, well I can't search him, but you can."

In seconds, Judy's haggard face lit up from within... the opportunity for freedom making her eyes glow. She rifled in his jacket pocket and found what she needed. Then she grabbed his wallet, tore out a credit card and whipped around to the trunk where she pulled out her suitcase. Lastly, she stopped for a final word with Ana.

"You... you're an angel, Agent Marchenko. I can't thank you enough. I'll never forget you for helping me get away."

Ana nodded. “Go on Judy. And don’t look back. Get home safe.”

Grabbing the handle of her suitcase, Judy rushed to leave, but in seconds, she turned to whip off her killer heels and taking one, she hauled off and beat the prick on the back of his head with the sharp protrusion. “Manny, you can wear these fuckers, asshole. See how much you like walking on stilts.” Then smiling joyfully at Ana, bare feet not slowing her down whatsoever, she stomped toward where two officers were headed Ana’s way.

By the time Ana had explained the situation, security had cuffed their perp and taken Ana’s particulars in case they needed to follow up on the arrest. Heading toward their office, they’d wait there for the police, leaving Ana free to continue on her way.

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Satisfied that she had done her good deed for the day, Ana hurried to the arrival area.

Chapter Two

Thankful not to be late, yet at all surprised that the connecting plane from Warsaw, Poland had a slight delay, she decided to go for a coffee. Walking around to pass the time, she made note of the colorful panels, walls of windows, and tunnel-like terminals that made busy LAX an international gateway.

Her mother, Diana, had drilled her with so many instructions of how to behave when she saw her young cousin, that for the first time in years, Anastacia felt her nerves tighten. As Hanna's arrival drew near, Ana's stomach clenched and she told herself for the hundredth time, she should just be herself.

Right, the straight-faced, hard-assed cop she'd spent so many years creating the persona for. That oughta make the girl feel right at home. Fuck!!

Her mom had begged her. "Relax, honey. It's taken us so long to finally get poor Hanna here, we need to make her feel at home. Treat her like a long-lost friend or sister."

Except Ana had no idea what that would feel like, since she was an only child. Plus, her friends were the men and women she worked with. And they were all like her – hardened from the job, quick to take offense, and full of sarcastic humor to hide real emotions. Hell, she hadn't felt this nervous since her early training days in Quantico.

It didn't help that she'd recently been involved in one of the worst cases in her career.

Over the last three months while covertly investigating a human trafficking ring, she'd seen things that had sickened her to her very soul. People selling others, weaker, younger, sad humanity that had no way to protect themselves.

Having to sit back while gathering enough evidence to put the syndicate of bastards away for a long time had almost killed her. Seeing those young people's lives destroyed and not being able to rescue them right away had been one of the hardest jobs she'd ever been asked to perform.

She knew what the victims were forced to do to survive, and it kept her awake at night. While the agents gathered more data, proof of the whole organization's involvement, each day started another nightmare of doubts and indecision.

Finally, seeing her struggles, her boss had sat her down and read her the riot act. "No vigilante shit this time, Marchenko. I'm warning you. This gets played by the book. You hear me?" His blue ice cubes glared into her so deep, she had to force herself not to cringe. "We want to send every one of those creeps away for life. And to do that, we need the goods on them... all of it. You rock the boat even a little, and they'll slink back into their slimy world, shutting down everything before we can get the top rung of the operation."

"Yeah, yeah. Trust me, it's what I keep on saying every time I see another shipment of girls and boys arriving from overseas. It's killing me. But what keeps me going is your word that I'll be in on the takedown."

"Hold it together, agent, and that's a promise."

And two days ago, he'd kept that promise. They'd scuttled the whole rotten business, releasing over a hundred kids either back to their homes or into the social system, and jailing or killing the rest of the scum involved in the case.

It had been one of the most satisfying days of her five years with the FBI.

Suddenly, a strident beep-beep noise warning her to move brought her introspection to a close, making her remember why she wandered alone at the arrivals gate. Her mother had recently gotten Covid and though the symptoms were pretty much over, she didn't feel right exposing an airport filled with people to her germs.

That's where Anastacia came in. Forced to take a break from her taxing job to let her recent flesh wound heal, she'd been coerced to stay with her mom.

Remembering their last phone call with her mom pleading, "I can't go through it all by myself, honey. You have to help me. We have to save Hanna. You know I promised my sister. For sure, she'll need both of us. Please stay here at home while you're off work."

Helping her mom through miles of red tape and bullshit to finally get her cousin Hanna to America, her mom was over the moon that they had success at last. Now that Hanna was orphaned, Diana felt she could give the girl a new life away from bad memories and painful times. And she looked to Ana for support.

"I need you, Ana. I'm not strong enough to handle a traumatized teen all by myself. Even with your father's support back when you were young, you know I found being a mom a demanding job."

Since the unexpected death of Anastacia's own father three years before, Ana knew having someone to nurture would bring her mother back from the brink of an imminent breakdown. She'd been heartbroken over the sudden death of her husband and hiding away had been her way of accepting her new station in life. Only the situation with her sister's daughter, the emails, facetimes, and finally the accepted invitation had kept her getting out of bed each day.

Over the last few months, while Hanna recovered from the devastating butchery of her own family and close neighbors, they'd all gone through hellish situations with bureaucracy and stupid red tape that had stood in the way of her coming to the US.

Throughout that time, Hanna, still dealing with her parents' murders and being a witness to their bloodied bodies, barely held it together. She'd admitted that visions of the killer who'd cold-bloodedly taken their lives still traumatized her. And normal activities like eating and sleeping were difficult.

That part of her nightmare, Anastacia could relate to. Or so her mother reminded her. "You've seen your share of killing, especially over this latest case, honey." She pointed at the bandage on Anastacia's shoulder. "You'll probably understand Hanna's trauma better than any of us."

Most likely true. Ana shrugged... then winced.

Her mother's determination to stay in touch with her sister had kept them involved in the ongoing horrific situation in Mariupol. When she'd found out what had happened to her family, Diana wouldn't rest until they were able to dig through the official records, to find that Hanna had survived... and then offer her a home.

And Anastacia was here to meet the youngster, make her feel welcome, and drive her to the house where her mother waited with open arms.

Jesus!

Rubbing her hands down the sides of her suit jacket and matching navy slacks, wiping away the traces of her earlier scuffle, she scanned the group of passengers now arriving. Feeling slightly foolish wearing her business clothes, the type she wore everyday to work, she shook off the strangeness and decided maybe her mother had been right. Her normal suited appearance might be off-putting considering everyone

else in the airport looked to be informally dressed for the sweltering weather outside. Hopefully, Hanna wouldn't notice her clothes, being too busy getting acquainted with the person wearing them.

Wait. There she was. The young girl in torn jeans and a navy, short-sleeved blouse. Her dishevelled appearance and frizzy blonde hair – results from the long trip – gave Ana a start. They could be sisters.

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On tiptoes, Anastacia waved. Being that she was tall and slender, reaching over the people next to her, she got noticed. Then she felt silly. But was glad she'd done so when Hanna's eyes flew to hers and palpable relief blazed from tired blue eyes. Eyes that suddenly filled and drew Anastacia forward in time to open her arms to the youngster who so obviously needed their security. Hanna clung tight, her body heaving with relief for seeing her cousin.

In that very instant, Anastacia accepted a simple truth. Family mattered. And Hanna was family. The moment they touched; Hanna became one of the most important people in her world.

The same mushy, protective heart that made her such a good agent understood this silent oath. Never again, would she allow anyone to hurt this precious young girl.

Chapter Three

Back home with her happy mom, Anastacia and Hanna spent the rest of the morning visiting with her and awkwardly catching up with girl's news from Poland. Never once did they broach the subject uppermost in all their minds – the death of Hanna's parents – Daniela and her loving husband.

Nor did they talk about the death of Mariupol itself. The beautiful city no longer existing because of the actions of the vicious maniac who ruled Russia.

It wasn't the time nor the place to bring that particular herd of elephants into the open. Not until Hanna felt reassured and ready to share would they delve into her past.

In the meantime, they plied the girl with good food, many stories of their community, and pastimes that were foreign to Hanna. In the following days, visiting local attractions such as Beverly Hills, Rodeo Drive, Hollywood and Vine, and driving around the sights of the famous city kept them busy. Exhausted, they'd spend evenings at home watching various TV shows which also became part of their entertainment.

Not owning a television at her own place, Ana respected her mother's reliance on her many television sets too much to dis her addiction to the TV screen, her habitual form of entertainment. Agreeing to join in for movie nights, she even watched some of her mom's favorite news shows that constantly played in the background. Ones that spent a fair amount of time presenting Breaking News and updating details about the war in Ukraine.

Thankful that her mother was careful to turn the channel when Hanna appeared, Ana often found herself caught up in the rhetoric and feeling sad for what the people were suffering.

Almost immediately, Hanna caught Diana reaching for the remote and realized what her aunt was doing. "Please, Titka, don't change the channel. I want to see what's happening in my country." Begging them not to shelter her from the truth, Diana hesitated.

Seeing this, Hanna reiterated. "Let me watch. I can't be protected forever. I need to see what is going on with my people." Her blue eyes beseeched. Then her next words terrified. "One day, I swear I'll return and help in the fight for our freedom."

Alarmed and still hesitating, Diana's eyes flew to Ana, seeking her input.

Anastacia sensed the importance to Hanna, knowing without a doubt that the girl would find another way to get the news she craved. So rather than forcing the girl to

sneak around, she nodded her agreement. From that moment, Diana left the remote on the table.

Within a short time, they accepted they had a problem. Hanna became glued to the screen all hours of the day and night. Twice, Anastacia had been roused in the middle of the night from the distant sounds of people talking and found Hanna cross-legged, sitting close to the screen where they were updating the audience about the ongoing fighting in Ukraine.

Standing back and spying on the teen as more and more horrible images appeared, she saw Hanna's clenched hands beating viciously on her knees and copious tears streaming, dripping off the girl's flushed cheeks. That's when she herself faced the truth about how unhealthy the behavior must be. This impressionable fifteen-year-old needed to heal, not be reminded constantly of what she couldn't change.

Her mother finally took the initiative. "Ana, darling, I think we made a grave error in deciding Hanna could deal with watching the news. I'm very sorry but I feel strongly that we need to get her away from this influence."

Relieved that her mother had noticed the problem too, Ana nodded. "I agree, Mom. But it's hard to refuse her permission to watch TV when they're all over the house, basically right in front of her. What can we do? Hide them away?"

"No. I don't know. But, she's becoming unhealthy, even paranoid... so unhappy she cries herself to sleep every night. I can't handle much more. What if you take her to the cabin for a while."

"Me? You mean just the two of us?"

"Yes. Yes, it's best that way."

“Mom, the cabin hasn’t been used since before Dad died. Because of the memories, you’ve refused to go there. Remember? It’ll be a mess.”

Her mother’s expression disintegrated from thoughtful to distressed. “Honey, after I lost your dad, I fought off a breakdown... and a dependency on wine. It took everything I had in my sorry soul to stay calm. I’m not a strong person like you. Thankfully, you take after your father, even choosing the samekind of career. I’m weak, a coward.” Diana sniffed, her hands wringing, fingers clawing and gripping.

“You aren’t weak, Mom.” She remembered the words she’d heard her father often say. “Just a soft-hearted darling.” Ana hugged her awkwardly... never being the one to normally instigate displays of affection. In fact, she seldom needed to. Her parents had always been first to reach out, and the responding came easier.

Looking extraordinarily pleased, Diana continued, “Your father used to tell me that all the time.” Her smile slowly fading, she kept arguing. “Honey, I don’t know what else to do about Hanna’s grief.”

Ana took a few moments to think about the idea and finally spoke. “So you’re saying you want us to leave you here and go there now. And you’ll be okay with that?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of for Hanna to have a place to heal with no outside influences. You know your dad always refused to have a television there.”

“True. He knew your obsession with watching what he called the idiot box and told me more than once that he preferred to spend time hiking, fishing, and bonding with the surrounding nature.”

“You mean doing the things he loved. And while he was alive, I admit to being thrilled about it. But with him no longer with us, I can’t think of anything I’d dislike doing more.” She grimaced to prove her point. “So, I’m thinking it would be better

for you and Hanna to go alone.” Watching Ana’s face close down, her way of hiding her true feelings, she added, “I’m sorry, honey. I can’t go with you, not yet... maybe never.”

“I get it.” But did she?

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Trying to win over Ana, Diana's tone changed. "You like Hanna. I can tell. Darling, I've never seen you so gentle with anyone before... well other than me. I swear, if you had a sister, it would be the same."

"I do care about her, Mom. She's fragile right now."

"So you'll take her?"

"Do I have a choice?" Ana's lifted eyebrows spoke for her.

"See. I knew you'd understand. I'll help you girls organize everything. Can you get more time off work?"

Ana accepted the inevitable, knowing the arguing had ended the way they'd both expected... with her mom getting her way. "Sure, they owe me months of vacation time. Right now I'm on sick leave so there's no problem there."

Over the next few days, Ana and her mother arranged everything they would need and packed it all in Diana's big SUV Highlander, a larger vehicle than the new electric Mustang that Ana owned. Even the rack above was used to store more crates and cases until Anastacia finally put her foot down. "Mom, enough. You've given us way too many staples."

"Ana, you mustn't forget that most of the food left in the cabin is outdated and should be tossed. Plus, you'll need more cleaning supplies and bedding. We always did have a problem with bugs. I'm wondering if any of the linens are even salvageable. Trust me, you'll be grateful when you get there."

“Have you said anything to Hanna yet?”

“No. I figured we’d tell her tomorrow morning, give her just enough time to pack her personal things, and then hit the road. I’ve made sure all her clothes are washed and ready for a suitcase.”

Chuckling at her mother’s methods of organizing to get her way, she scoffed. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“I didn’t want her to have many reasons to argue. Pray God she doesn’t refuse outright.”

And the next morning at the breakfast table, that’s exactly what happened. “I won’t go Titka. Ana, please don’t make me. I need to stay current with the Ukraine news on the television.”

For the first time, Diana got to see her daughter’s FBI persona, and she could only applaud and be thankful that the cold-eyed gaze and harsh tone weren’t directed at herself.

“Hanna, we weren’t asking your opinion. I’m telling you what is happening. Now, gather whatever you want to bring and be ready to leave in an hour.”

Chapter Four

Nash ran for safety, his burning lungs giving him hell. The wildland flames had jumped the firewall, forcing him to order his men to evacuate. Christ, the fucking wind had shifted just when they thought they had beaten the worst of the fire. Left with a small window of opportunity to escape, he blessed the Almighty for that

narrow exit path.

Coming up behind the others in the clearing, he stumbled to where his men were all hovered together, many coughing, trying to clear the smoke, their eyes tearing and their noses running. Others wiped at their blackened faces, cussing or laughing because they'd beaten the devil that had tried to kill them.

The rookie idiot of the group screamed "woo-hoo", throwing his fist in the air and bellowing, "God, I love this job," while the more experienced just smiled... a dozen faces of white teeth gleaming through satisfied expressions.

Then in the distance, they heard the sound of a pass device... a distress call.

from the Personal Alarm Security System. Nash did a swift summary of the people he'd been working with. "Where's JC?"

The others looked at each other, everyone either shrugging or staring towards the wall of flames they'd just escaped.

"Fuck!" Nash knew instantly that the newbie hadn't taken the same route as they had. He'd obviously lost his way and needed saving.

In a voice not one of his men would ignore, he gave a command before suiting up. "Stay here." Then he dove back into the inferno.

Throughout his long career as a firefighter, he'd experienced devastating heat, overpowering smoke, and periods of stifling darkness while the sun hid behind billows of gray. And it never failed to humble him, knowing his puny defenses were nothing compared to the strength of his adversary.

He heard again the sound that had brought him back into the devil's pit. Yep... it

came from his left. With just a small sliver of a chance to get past the wall of death, Nash noticed where a treetop had burst into an orange glow but near the bottom of the trunk, he spotted an opening. Wrapping up in his fire blanket, he ducked his head and pushed into the aperture, running through flames and jumping over the dense forest floor. Glowing amber and reddish embers amidst the swirling ground smoke were everywhere, shooting at him, making every movement painful and terrifying.

As always, he felt thankful for having been dedicated to his exercise agenda. He'd always known that if he wanted to depend on his body, he'd need to treat it well and keep it in top physical condition.

With his overworked muscles throbbing, he vaulted over radiating heat, pushing his way past the blazing bushes and fiery undergrowth. "Help me, man. Come on. Time's running out. I need to find him." Mumbling to the Almighty came easy when alone and terrified. Finally, Nash spotted his man down about five feet in front of him. "Thank you, Jesus." He sent up his usual prayer, something he never failed to do when faced with this kind of critical situation... which surprisingly happened more than one could imagine.

After a quick check, it became clear that his newbie had succumbed to the low oxygen and was passed out. Skidding next to JC, Nash beat out the flames that had started to collect around the dude's feet. "Hey, man. Wake up." His voice came out thick and hardly understandable, his throat swollen from the agony he'd just forced it to handle.

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Not wasting the time they didn't have and with his last ounce of strength, he heaved JC over his shoulders in a firefighter carry and turned back in the direction he'd come. Except now, the opening had become an impenetrable wall of a glowing, orange inferno.

Swiveling to look in other directions, he spotted a very small window that might work. He'd have to run through the flames, but he prayed it could be their way to escape. There might be enough of an opening on the other side... a pathway to escape the worst of the blaze.

No time left to ponder, he dove through, running hard, balancing his burden. Under his breath, he again called on his partner above... the God he always kept close in times like this. Suddenly, he felt a spray of water and knew his men had flagged down one of the pumpers, an engine they sometimes used to help with a rescue.

Heading towards safety, he barely made it out before collapsing, allowing his men to carry both him and JC the rest of the way. His second in command, Chuck Ono, flung his hand around Nash's back, holding his arm over his shoulder, guiding him as far away from the smoke as possible.

All during his assist, he nagged, making Nash smile. "Stupid son of a bitchin' hero. You could have been killed; you know that? Christ, you should have been killed. It was pure luck we aimed that hose in the right direction. Pure fucking luck... you hear me?"

Voice thready, he whispered, "Man, the folks in the next county heard you. I'm weak, not deaf." Nash grinned before he sipped on some water and accepted the oxygen

mask passed to him. But before he used it, he croaked, “What’s our status?”

Chuck grunted but replied. “We’re relieved for now. They want us back at base camp.”

“Good. We need to get JC there for sure. I imagine the fire load has doubled from that wind shift.”

Gloomy, Chuck shoved his grimy hands into his sweaty hair. “Yeah... looks like the South ridge is gonna be another long fight, and we’ve been at it for sixteen hours already.”

“You know... I doubt I’ve ever seen the beast flip so fast and turn so deadly. Man, there’s a lot of structures and homes in them hills. At least around here, most of what burned was forest lands away from civilization. I think we’re gonna be in for a whole different kind of battle from now on.”

Spitting to the side, then blocking one nostril and clearing his nose, Chuck followed up with a bout of coughing before he finally grumbled, “I agree. No rest for the wicked.”

“Yeah? Speak for yourself.”

Chapter Five

Anastacia wouldn’t succumb to the little voice inside her head that made excuses for Hanna’s behavior. The kid was being the worst version of herself, and Ana had no intention of allowing the behavior to continue. Not having any idea of how teens acted in Ukraine or what kind of conduct might be acceptable, especially for a fifteen-year-old newly orphaned girl, she had no time for sulks, sniffing, and loud sighs.

Ever since they'd backed out of her mother's driveway, Hanna had become the best actress of a girl who didn't get her way and wanted everyone in her vicinity to know about her peevs and grievances. Thing is, Ana had a lot of experience with this type of thing. It's not that she didn't have sympathy for what Hanna had experienced in the past... of course she did. But mollycoddling the girl wouldn't help in the long run. It would just give her permission to stay weak and defenseless.

With that in mind, Ana broke the silence. "Hanna, the place where we're heading is off the beaten track. There are a few other cabins around, but the closest neighbors would be approximately a mile, and the others even farther. My father loved this log house, grew up as a boy spending a lot of his summers with his own father here. I guess you could say, he put up with city life, built a good home for me and my mom, but he came alive when he spent time in isolation."

She looked over at the huddled figure, nestling as close to the door as possible... meaning, of course, she was as far away from Ana as she could get. Unable to ignore Ana's words, the kid slowly loosened her crossed arms. Finally she asked, "What was your father like?"

Happy to get a response, Ana answered. "As I said, he loved the solitary and simplicity of life in the cabin. I guess having to deal with the underworld in his job as Chief of Police for the last ten years of his career, he'd seen too much of the ugliness in the world. One time, he confided to me that he'd followed in his own father's footsteps as a policeman to help others, you know – save the world kind of thing. He wanted to feel that he made a difference, and the city would be a better place because Police Chief Danilo Marchenko had lived."

"Did he make a difference?" Ana had Hanna's complete attention now.

"Well, they do say he was one of the best ever to hold down that position. Unfortunately, a year before retirement, he died unexpectedly in the performance of

his duty. He'd gone to the bank during his day off and became involved in a holdup taking place. Of course, being the man he was, he couldn't ignore what was happening."

"Wow! That must have been terrifying." Hanna's voice rang with conviction.

"Being Dad, he'd talked the bank robber down, almost had him handing over his gun. Until the security guard thought that gave him the opportunity to take a shot and be a hero. Let's just say, the fool made a stupid decision and left two people injured, one mortally. He killed my father who stepped in front to take the bullet, saving the criminal who then shot the guard in self-defense. Bad day for everyone."

"You must have been so angry, you and your mother. That's a horrible story."

"You think so? See, the way I figure, my dad got to die doing exactly what he most wanted... saving people. The young Mexican man holding up the bank... he had a wife he loved being eaten away by cancer, and they couldn't buy medical insurance because they were poor illegals. Since he had no money to pay for her pills, he'd been forced to watch the woman he loved slowly perish, and he couldn't stand it. Seems to me, he'd made the wrong choice but for a good reason. Can't fault a guy for loving his woman."

"But he shot the guard."

"Yeah, in the leg. In self-defense. Then he'd thrown his gun down and tried to stop the blood flowing from my dad's wound."

Completely invested in the story now, Hanna turned to face Ana, her expression open and interested. "Can you tell me what happened to him? Did his wife die?"

"Well, his lawyer got him to accept a plea deal which involved a shorter sentence and

then sending him back to Mexico with no chance of ever returning. Considering he'd intended to rob a bank; he got off lightly."

"And his wife? Did she die?"

"Oh, no, she was given a clean bill of health after her chemo treatments. And she recently gave birth to their first child."

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“What? How could that happen?”

“Well, us Americans can be wonderful people if given all the facts. They covered his story on TV, and the truth caught folks with big hearts and a willingness to help. They started a GoFundMe page for her and with that money, she was able to pay for her medical treatments here before returning to be with her husband in Tijuana. Exactly what my father would have wanted.”

“Your father sounds like a good man. My Tato would have liked him.”

Hoping to keep the conversation flowing, Ana asked, “What was your father like?”

Hanna sniffed but answered. “As a farmer, he struggled all his life. He and my mother were a team. But they made me see that my future should be different. For me, they wanted a better life and so they sent me to a private girls’ school starting in the sixth grade. Then the war arrived, we lost everything and were forced to move into a tiny village where Tato still owned his mother’s old house. I remember it reeked of cats and there were kittens everywhere nearby.”

“Did you have a kitten?”

“Yes. Daria. We kept her in the house, but many of the kittens became feral because food was scarce.” Hanna’s expression underwent a breakdown – from thoughtful to distressed. “I almost killed her.”

Sudden tears welled up and over. Swiveling to face Ana, wet eyes wide, Hanna added, “I didn’t mean to. I’d never hurt my beautiful Daria on purpose. When Tato

and Mama made me go into the enclosure he'd built for me to hide in, I refused. But because there was no time to argue, he forced me inside and then threw our kitten into my hands to make me behave." Her bottom lip began quivering as she explained. "I held her so tight; I almost strangled her."

"But you didn't."

"No. She lived. But she never returned. She ran away."

"You frightened her."

"Yes. I don't know if it was from squeezing so hard or because I turned into a crazy person myself, and she panicked."

Ana swerved over to stop the car and reached for Hanna's hands. Holding them tightly, she asked, "What could you have done differently that day?"

"I don't – I don't know."

"Okay... then what do you regret the most?"

"Not dying with my family." Her instant response gave credence to her words.

"Hmm. I get that you love and miss them. But did they want you to die with them? Or would your death have made theirs less worthy. Think about it. Having no one to remember them by, to have kind thoughts about their bravery. I'm of the mind that your dying would have been a waste." Ana watched Hanna's tears stop falling. Then she saw the girl swipe her hand across her face.

Before Hanna could reply, Ana hit her with the question that she prayed would make a difference. "More important, Hanna... what do you think?"

Hanna stared at Ana, but their eyes weren't connecting because Hanna was a million miles away. Ana sat waiting, letting the girl absorb what had been said. As she watched the girl relive the last moments of her parents' lives, she noticed that her shoulders relaxed and the stiffness in her neck muscles softened.

"Tell me." Ana wanted the girl to put in words what was in her mind. Ana knew that the best way to start drawing pus from a wound was to continually add warm compresses. If Hanna speaking her pain took the place of those treatments, then the more she talked, the better chance the wound of bitter memories had not to become too infected.

"I can't stop thinking about those last moments. When they were still alive. They didn't give me a chance. Mamo slapped me to stop my arguments. And Tato forced me into the enclosure. They both did. I wanted to stay with them... die with them."

"What did they say to you? Their final words I mean."

Hanna hung her head, unable to look Ana in the face. Embarrassed, she muttered, "Tato said the Russians kept young girls alive for a reason... so for me it would be worse than dying."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes. Now I do. I've watched the news reports and read even more online about that kind of thing. I guess my father and mother knew what would happen and couldn't stand the thought of me getting raped."

"Good. Say it the way it is. Raped. Yes, that's probably what would have happened. But, then what? Do you honestly believe that after they were finished doing God knows what to your body, they'd have let you live?"

Suddenly, Hanna's face rose with an expression of clarity in her eyes. "One man would have... yes. He's the one who held his finger in front of his mouth, warning me to stay quiet. He wouldn't have hurt me. I know it."

"But you said there was another soldier with him who would have, right? He's the one your hero shot to save you."

"He did." Tears began to choke Hanna, making her words hard to understand. "Then he sh-ot himself."

"Excuse me?"

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“I – I couldn’t tell you.” She broke down crying so hard, Ana had to pet her, shushing her like one would a baby. “Oh my God, Ana, he-he shot himself in the head after saving me. He took his own life.” Hanna swiped at her dripping flood with the back of her hand, leaving a mess of snot and tears on her damp cheeks. “So young. Not - not much older than me. I have his identity card.”

“You do? What was his name?”

“I don’t know. Some neighbors found me unconscious and cared for me. Once I woke up, I went to his body to pray for his soul. That’s when I snuck it away, hiding it with my stuff, and never looked at it. One day, I wanted to tell his parents that he was a brave and - and good man.”

“Hanna, that couldn’t have been easy. I’m proud of you. He should be remembered and blessed for being human and putting those sentiments above his nationality.” Ana found some tissues in her pocket and handed them over to the teen now slumped in her seat. Exhausted from the emotional storm, she whimpered, “I miss my home so much, my Mamo and Tato. Why does the world have to be so cruel?”

Ana shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve asked that very same question often in my job and never found an answer that works.”

Chapter Six

Nash drove around the area of the Big Bear lake that was still relatively unscathed. Breathing a sigh of relief, he took the mountain roads he’d traveled on as a kid, enjoying his first day off in weeks.

Fighting forest fires might be a backbreaking job, but he was good at it. Ever since he'd become aware of the increased dangers from Global warming in the state of California, he'd put his expertise to work, doing what he'd taken training to do... managing men and dealing with fires.

He'd experienced all aspects of this career, starting on a handcrew, moving into fighting forest fires as a hotshot firefighter, even maintaining and driving the engines. After his first summer of experience, he'd earned the choice to explore helitack, smokejumping, or dispatch positions. And after more than a few years, he'd become proficient in most of those roles.

But his favorite place was in front of the fire and so he'd chosen to stay in that position. Therefore, as a superintendent of a Hotshot crew, he had twenty-three men under his supervision, good men, tough as they come.

They'd spent the last two months fighting numerous outbreaks, working sometimes fourteen to sixteen hours a day and that's during the good times. Often, they'd have to stay on duty twenty-four hours plus with no rest for weeks. Finally, his boss gave him the nudge with a – this is an order and not up for discussion. “Nash, get lost for at least a week. You and your boys. We'll need you in good shape for the next big breakout we all know is coming. The weather reports are saying we'll be hit with another heat wave and lightning storms added in.”

“Jesus. It never ends.”

“Nope, it as hell doesn't.”

“In fact, it's getting worse. That fire tornado blew my mind last week. Never seen anything like it. Who knows what's coming next?”

“You can say that again. Like I said... get lost and come back rested.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t know why you’re grounding us now but—” Seeing his boss’s thunderous expression and finger pointing to the exit, Nash gave up. “Fine. We’re gone.”

Today, the third day of his vacation, he’d finally caught up on his sleep and the world began to seem normal again. Aimlessly driving around the lake, he sang along with the tune on his phone, left his arm outside the open window, and steered down the empty road. Coming around a curve, he spotted a parked Highlander, pulled off the road crookedly... as if there’d been a problem.

Slowing down, he saw two women in the front looking upset. Unable to ignore their distress, thinking they might have had car trouble, he stuck his cold beer into the holder, parked his truck, and headed over to see if he could be of assistance.

Before he could tap on the window, the driver flung the door open and confronted him, her body language speaking plainly that she wouldn’t be happy if he had any naughty ideas.

The tall woman met him eye-to-eye, haughtiness obvious in her expression. And since he was almost six feet and three inches tall, that didn’t happen very often. Before he could control himself, he grinned in a relaxed way, the few beers he’d imbibed making his tongue loose. “Whoa. You’re a big girl now, ain’tcha?”

When he saw her eyes flashing, obviously not enjoying his teasing comment, he decided he’d pushed too far. Not too smart, buddy.

“What do you want?” Her tone alone could shrivel a happy disposition.

Hopefully looking chastised, his grin sliding into a respectful and less teasing look, he admitted, “It seemed like you might be having trouble.” He pointed at the way her car was parked crookedly. “Just making sure you’re alright.”

“No need to worry. We’re fine” She opened her door without taking her eyes from him. “Ahh... thanks.”

He held the door from closing and peered around her at the frizzy-haired teenager in the passenger seat. Leaning in, he asked, “Everything okay, honey?”

The girl’s blue-eyed expression underwent changes from embarrassment – to relaxing slightly – into almost friendly. “Yes, sir. My cousin is a police woman so she’s taking very good care of us. She has a gun.”

Nash’s face broke up, he couldn’t help it. “She does, eh? Well, I’ll be careful not to get her too riled up. Wouldn’t want her to shoot me.”

The driver stepped in between and brought his attention back to her. “How many beers have you had?”

Nash continued to grin, his way of dealing with any uncomfortable situation. “Enough to forget my manners, ma’am. Ya’ll have a good day now, you and your daughter.”

A young voice laughingly called from the far seat. “She’s my cousin, not my mother. We just look alike.”

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The woman who'd given him a steely stare like he should be under glass in an Insectarium, bristled and then asked... impatience heavy in her tone, "We good here?"

"Yep." He lifted his hand to his forehead in a mock salute. "Ya'll take care now."

"Yeah. You too." The prickly amazon got behind the wheel, started the car, and drove away, watching him through her side mirror. When he waved, he saw her turn her face away, pretending she hadn't been watching him. Funny thing, he felt a strange sadness when she disappeared around the bend.

Now why the hell would it matter that she'd left? He didn't know her, nor did he care. Right? Except, a niggling doubt kept nagging. Being truthful, he admitted he hadn't wanted to say goodbye. In fact, he'd felt a weird ache as they'd driven away. Like he'd just lost the chance of a lifetime to know a woman who challenged him.

Shaking off the sense of gloom, he returned to his truck and had to fight the idea of following the Highlander to see where it headed. Of course, he battled those instincts because it would have been just creepy.

A scoffing at his inner struggle made him grin self-consciously. Christ, he'd never had any trouble finding female companions. In fact, women often overwhelmed him to the point where he had to fight them off... no joke. People had trouble believing that uniformed firefighters had groupies like musicians, but it happened. Hell, the idea of him stalking anyone was a laugh. Mostly, it was the other way around.

Heading in the direction he'd decided to go, his phone rang with a ring tone that had

him answering instantly. Not surprised considering the news he'd seen lately about the number of fires in the state, he'd been recalled.

In less time than one would imagine, he'd organized his crew on a chat line to give them notice. Once he'd contacted them all, he headed back to base camp... back to work. They had another problem; this time it would be worse than the earlier ones. This time, they'd be flying into an area where people were caught in the direct line of where the wind change had occurred.

Chapter Seven

Long after she lost sight of the cowboy-like idiot who'd approached their car, Anastacia still ground her teeth, trying to let go of her pissiness. Thankful for having brought along her firearm and badge, as was her custom no matter where she went, she'd soon recognized the approaching stranger had only been guilty of nosiness if anything.

Once he'd opened the discourse, it became clear that it wouldn't be necessary to use any kind of force. Mind you, after being presented with his male ego, it had been tempting. Need help! Give me a break!

Shaking off her temper, she tried justifying it instead. In her line of work, she was seldom approached by a strange male, one who swaggered and talked like he knew them intimately. Bozo had a punchable face, especially after his insult that she could be the mother of an almost fully grown teenager. Sure, maybe Hanna hadn't left the car, but anyone with a brain and eyes could see she was fully grown and not a child.

Sighing, releasing the tightness in her shoulders, she gave one last glare through her side mirror and bit her lip when she saw him wave. Silly bastard thought she'd been watching him. It pissed her off to realize he'd been right. Trying to make sense of her irritation, she admitted to seldom meeting anyone she had to look up to. Maybe it had

only been a few inches, but it mattered when she considered that the crew she worked with were shorter, fatter, or dumber than herself.

“Are you okay... Mom?” Hanna giggled.

“Shut up.”

Hanna broke up and for the first time her infectious laugh flowed freely. “He was cute.”

“He was an idiot.”

“Ana! That man could be in the movies. Didn’t you see those muscles? His shirt bulged, especially the arms. He had a great smile, and did you see his tan?”

Ana grumbled words, not liking the subject but happy to see that Hanna’s teasing had lifted her sorrow. “Probably got it from a bottle or at the spa.”

“Nope. He looked like a working man to me. I noticed his hands. They were huge and calloused.”

Ana swung to direct her gaze at her cousin. “How the hell did you see that?”

“When he waved at me from the window. I like him. His green eyes were friendly, and he cared enough to stop and offer help in case we were stranded. That means a lot, right?”

Unable to prick Hanna’s belief in human nature, Ana kept it to herself the number of times she’d seen or heard of folks being robbed or killed by just this scenario. Strangers approaching folks in trouble.

“Hanna, listen to me. We were lucky he was a good guy, but it’s never a smart thing to let strangers come near if you’re in a dilemma. Best to wait for police. Just remember that, okay?”

“Spoilsport.” Hanna griped, happy to close the conversation. “Are we there yet?”

Ana grinned, knowing the kid was pulling her chain and liking it. Soon... was all she said. Driving through the wooded area where there were few homes and less traffic, she saw the forest as the way she remembered it over the years. Earlier, they’d traveled through some burned out spaces along the highway and Ana worried that their particular area by the lake might have been affected by the recent wildfires, but they seemed to have been miraculously unaffected.

“Actually, we’re about ten minutes from the turnoff to the lake. The cabin is about five hundred yards back, but we can see the water downhill from our front windows. It’ll be a bit of a hike to get there because the walking path will be overgrown by now I’m sure.”

“When was the last time you were here?”

“I came with my dad the summer before he was killed. Both Mom and I were at the cabin when we got the call they were taking him to the emergency room. Unfortunately, we got there too late. He’d died in the ambulance.”

“I’m so sorry.”

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“Yeah. Mom is still too upset to come here. She wanted to sell the place, but he left it to me, and I didn’t want to part with it. I have good memories growing up and spending a lot of my summers here.”

“But you said it was isolated? Being an only child, didn’t you miss not having your friends here?”

“That never bothered me because I was always allowed to bring whatever bestie I wanted to join us. Sometimes I did, but many times, I was happy to be here alone with Mom and Dad.”

“Sounds like you were close to them.” Hanna sighed, her expression saddening.

“I guess I was. Especially Dad. He was an introvert too, liked his space, and always understood me better than Mom. I guess it’s why I decided to become an FBI agent.”

“Follow in his footsteps you mean.”

“You could say that. Probably romanticized him and made my mind up early to go into law enforcement.” Ana turned to speak to Hanna. “You know, he always seemed so happy in his chosen field. It’s easy to see when a man loves what he does, and my dad was that man. Against my mother’s wishes, I wanted to be happy in the same way.”

“And are you? Happy? Do you like what you do?”

Ana shook her head back and forth. “Yes and no. It’s a good feeling when we bring

the bad guys to justice, but it sucks to see how many rotten apples there are out there too.” Before Hanna could reply, Anastacia pointed her finger.

“Here’s our small convenience store. Let’s go and pick up some cold drinks and buy some ice to take with us.”

Both girls left the vehicle and wandered to the front door, barely missing getting knocked over by two men whose attention hadn’t been on them. Instead, they’d been talking low, with the closest man strutting like he owned the world and taking more room than he should have. If Ana hadn’t known better, one could almost assume he did so out of pure spitefulness.

Neither of the men apologized and Ana felt shame at their behavior. She hated for Hanna to see the worst of their countrymen. Once inside, she walked up to the counter and waited for the older man to look up. His thick white hair tied back in a pony tail hadn’t changed since she was a young girl, and she felt the giddy smile break out.

“Hey, old man. You gonna ignore us forever?”

When Lew turned and saw who it was, he whipped his tall lean body around the counter and swept her up in a big hug. “Shorty! My God, girl but you’re a sight for sore eyes. Blasted guys in here earlier had me almost reaching for the baseball bat. Figured the day was a write off and now you’ve brought the sunshine back into my world.”

Jokingly, she shoved at his shoulders, pretending to fight him off but she’d hugged him as hard as he had at the beginning. “Let me go you old fool. I want you to meet my cousin from Ukraine. Hanna, this here goofball is Lewie, an old family friend. He’s been around here since Jesus was in diapers.”

Lew straightened, his face undergoing a transformation from joking to serious. He took Hanna's shoulders in his big hands, and when she seemed to be willing, he pulled her in for a hug. "Hey sweetheart. Happy to meet you and horrified at what's been happening to your country." They broke apart, and Ana watched Hanna's usually forlorn face break into a huge grin.

"Thank you. I'm happy to meet you too. I'm wondering... can you share stories about my cousin when she was my age?"

Ana broke in, laughing. "Uh uh. No telling tales, or I'll have to gossip with Maria about your sneaking—"

"Shush. She's on her way over." He cut her off by snaking his finger and thumb pinched together across his mouth saying, "I swear, she'd kick my butt into the next world if she knew about my smoking a bit of weed."

He pretended to check the window for his wife, making the girls laugh. "How long are you here for?"

"Don't know. Just wanted to get Hanna away from the city for a while. Figured there was no better place than the cabin."

"You got that right. Mind you, not everyone is as happy about this place as we are." He pointed at the door and griped, "Those two who left as you arrived are a good case in point. Assholes tried to give me a hard time, rude as sin."

"What happened?" Ana's cop antennae shot out. "They try anything?"

"Nah. Just kept after me about the spotty Wi-Fi in the vicinity and why didn't we have better reception. Couldn't find any snacks they liked in the store or the types of drinks they wanted. Told 'em to go buy from someone who gave a shit."

Ana laughed. “Did you know your New York attitude shines through when you get riled?”

Lew started to laugh. “I guess. Never with you though, Shorty. It’s wonderful to see you. So you know, I miss your dad every day. We always had a good time when he came here.”

“I swear it was one of the reasons he came back all the time... to bug you.”

“Yep. He did like to yank my chain, but it was reciprocal. He’d always bring some of my ahh... some medicine, and we’d have great times together laughing and going through multi bags of chips and snacks.” Lew’s sigh rang with emotion before he changed the subject. “You hear about the fires they recently fought not far from here. Bloody scared the hell outta me. I thought we’d be hit but those Hotshots fought like the devil and saved our asses. Every owner in the area have those men to thank. Gotta give it to the firefighters, they’re tough, hardworking, mother... ahh, lovers and worth their weight in gold.”

Ana, thankful to see Lew curtail his colorful language in front of Hanna, nodded. “I’ve been watching the news. Go figure, huge sections of California are in flames. Soon as they get one area under control, another breaks out.”

“Yeah, I was driving from my sister’s a couple weeks back, she lives on the other side of the park, about four hours drive, and they were lucky. The fire came within a mile of their place. Blasted smoke got so bad, we couldn’t breathe, had to clear out, get my sister’s husband, Lennie to the hospital for oxygen. He suffers from COPD.”

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“I’m so sorry. Did their place survive?”

“Just. Thanks to the crew who kept their home watered down and fought the blaze back. They worked hard long hours and saved the whole district. Not like those idiots just here, giving me a hard time. Strutting around with his effing scorpion tattoo, acting like a bigshot.”

Hanna’s expression underwent a dramatic change. “A tattoo of a scorpion?”

Both adults heard the shock in her voice, and both turned to see the color leave her face. “What?” Ana moved closer, put her arm around Hanna’s shoulder, and spoke with authority. “Tell me.”

“It can’t be. I saw him die.” Hanna lifted her stunned eyes to Ana. “The man who shot my parents had a scorpion tattoo.” She shuddered, then added, “But he died. I watched him get shot.”

Ana pulled Hanna’s face into her chest and caressed the back of the girl’s head, stroking her messy hair. “Hanna, it’s okay. No doubt there’s many Russian men with those types of tattoos. I’ve heard that criminals get them done in prison. And, they have a lot of men jailed in that country.”

Lew spoke up, “Yeah, and they let the sons of bit... idiots out and force them into the army to fight for their country. As if criminals give a hot-damn about their nationality.”

Ana hid her grin at Lew’s stumbling way of making a point. Just then Maria, his

partner, entered the store, which thankfully changed the subject. After introductions, they visited together until the girls gathered their bags and headed back to the car.

While they settled in their vehicle, Hanna spoke her opinion in a no-nonsense tone. “I like your friends, Ana. They’re very nice.”

“Most people around here are. We tend to look out for one another around here. Now, let’s go and see what mother nature has in store for us at the cabin.”

Chapter Eight

Hanna nodded and rolled down her window, liking the forest smells that took her back to her own country. While driving, she’d remembered the men they’d passed before entering the store. Had the rude, leaner man worn tattoos? He could be the right height whereas the other dude with him would be too short.

Her mind swam in circles, fear being the predominant emotion. Not wanting to let Anastacia see this reaction, she’d hidden it while they were meeting with her friends. But it hadn’t faded and having those memories haunt her now bothered Hanna. She couldn’t go around thinking that every immigrant who looked Eastern European might be another killer like the one from her horrid dreams.

Unwilling to share her fears, she glanced around as they drove a few minutes more before pulling onto a road that turned out to be a long driveway. An impressive log house awaited in the distance.

Determined to shake off her worries, she took the time to survey her surroundings and found pleasure sparking her heart. Ana had been right. This was a gorgeous spot. The large trees that framed the cabin gave the scene a forest-like appearance. She loved seeing late flowering bushes that circled the small piece of front lawn and raising her eyes, she noticed the lake shimmering in the far distance.

It looked surreal in its isolation away from the urban area they'd recently left. Her body relaxed into it's first real calm since the black day she'd lost her parents. Serene now, she let herself flow into the looming peaceful feeling.

Suddenly, she sensed utter silence and looked over to notice her cousin having a moment of her own. Trying to see everything through Ana's eyes, she took in the shabby look of negligence – a cabin unlived in – and understood how difficult it must be for Ana to see it like this.

There was a heavy wooden picnic table on what looked to be a slate patio, with an overhanging matching framed pergola acting as a cover for shade. Broken branches and piles of dried grass, weeds, and leaves surrounded that area, piled up against the furniture, giving it an unloved appearance.

Remembering how long the cabin had been uninhabited, Hanna understood the shoddy appearance. Even a couple of years of neglect mattered in this kind of climate, as noted in the overgrowth of the plants and the scruffy appearance of the place in general.

Without saying a word, she reached her hand across the center console and patted Ana's fist still clenching the steering wheel. As if she'd been burnt, Ana swiftly removed her hand but stopped in midair as if she woke from a dream. Before Hanna could withdraw her unwanted gesture, Ana grabbed her hand and clung.

“Sorry. I'm not used to anyone understanding how difficult this is for me. Seeing my father's sanctuary in such bad shape brings his death home to me like nothing else. He'd never let things deteriorate like this. Dad came here as often as he could get away and spent long hours manicuring those rhododendrons, deadheading them in the fall and cutting back the branches. Said working with beautiful plants and living in the forest helped heal the human madness he faced every day on the job.”

Hanna gripped Ana's hand, clinging harder. When she spoke, her voice softened with emotion. "My family used to have a beautiful house too. My father owned a wonderful farm with many employees. And Mother nursed in the local hospital. That's before the war destroyed it all. At the end, we moved to my grandmother's small country house outside of Mariupol to take care of the old woman before she died. Father and Mother provided for us from the huge garden... and we had some chickens." Hanna's laugh held no humor. "Chickens. Lord help us. They meant everything." Another snicker followed. "They reminded me that we were better off then most."

"You mean because you were alive."

"Yes. That had become the measuring stick to use by then. So many others had not only lost everything, but thousands had died."

Ana swore and without trying to hide the words. "Jesus Christ. It's a crazy world, isn't it?"

"Yes. Filled with mean, crazy, horrible... horrible people." Remembering the past, Hanna spit out the choking words from a dark place.

Hearing the hate-filled reply seemed to spur Ana on. Her hands encircled Hanna's face, forcing the girl to look into her eyes, insisting her words were heard. "Hanna, look at me. Right now you might believe everyone has a black soul but everyday I see a different truth. There are angels among us who prove the opposite. I've met many myself, and they bring me hope. Cling to that when you're feeling blue, and hate fills you up. Believe those words. Okay?"

Hanna's eyes filled with a softness that lessened the tension. "I do believe. You and your mom... you're my angels."

Chapter Nine

For the next few hours, Ana kept Hanna busy, helping her unload the car and bringing some semblance of order inside the cold cabin. She found a huge stack of dry logs her father must have chopped on his last trip and carefully built a warm fire. This helped dispel the feeling of emptiness throughout the high-ceiling, open concept of the living room, dining room, and small kitchen.

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Because heat rises, it warmed the upper loft area where the spare bedrooms were located too. Though there was a master suite on the first floor where her parents slept, Ana never considered using that space. In fact, not wanting to disturb memories of her father just yet, she didn't enter the area at all.

Thankfully, her mother had continued to pay the bills and so they had power which meant the lights worked and they could store their groceries in the refrigerator and even cook using the gas stove. While cleaning out the old bottles, jars, and rotten food remains from the fridge hadn't taken as long as Anaexpected, the mess still had to be dealt with. They basically scooped up the works into garbage bags and carried those into the mudroom till the morning's run to the local dump.

By the time they had unpacked all the boxes and cases, they'd lost daylight and were happy to nestle down on the large couch in front of the huge fireplace. Looking at the flames, it suddenly dawned on her that the wind had picked up so it might not be the smartest thing to light a fire while everything in the area was so dry.

Quickly, making sure the flames were out, she cleaned the grate from any sparks that might still be alive. Keeping their lights turned low, and turning on the record player her father could never part with, she choose his favorite Enya recording, and they ate their warmed-up lasagna, cheesy garlic toast, and drank mugs of chai tea while listening to the soft sounds of the wonderful singer.

Though Ana had given her mother a hard time for making them bring so many supplies – including the prepared meals stuffed in the cooler – Diana had obviously known what they would need and had packed responsibly. Now, the girls were gratefully enjoying the results.

Once they'd consumed the wonderful meal, they called Diana to put her mind at rest. "Mom, the conditions weren't near as bad as you convinced yourself they would be."

"I'm glad, darling. Did you stop and see Lew?"

"Of course. He sends his love. Maria popped in too, and we visited with her for a little bit."

"And the cabin. Is it in decent shape?"

Belittling the worst of the conditions, Ana laughed away the worry she heard. "Mom, everything here is fine. A few weeds and dust but nothing we can't take care of over the next few days. You relax... enjoy your shows and your casino friends."

"Well, I might go along with Tessa one evening for an hour or so. Just to get out for a while."

Laughing at Diana's way of downplaying her newest diversion, Ana sent her love and hung up. Gambling was a relatively new pastime for her mother but harmless because of Diana's tendency of being a spendthrift. Ana figured she went along with her new neighbor, Tessa, just to have a chance to interact with other adults and get out of the house.

Before she could share her thoughts with Hanna, a crashing noise interrupted the quiet. The disturbing sounds came from the back of the house.

Moving stealthily, Ana headed to a hidden wall unit where she'd stored her weapon along with her father's rifles. Using her thumbprint to unlock the safe gun storage, she reached for the rifle and checked to be sure it was loaded. Grunting with satisfaction, she lifted out the flashlight that had a powerful beam and a military-grade aluminium body that could be used as an extra weapon if needed. Hushing

Hanna, she pointed at her and then the closet, making an angry face when Hanna stubbornly shook her head.

Another loud noise followed and forced Ana to leave the argument in order to check into their noisy culprits. Following the sounds, she made her way past the kitchen toward the mudroom where the activity seemed to be most prominent. Ana took the lead but felt the presence of the younger girl trailing behind.

Slowly opening the door, using her flashlight rather than flipping on the overhead light, Ana first made out the mess of garbage strewn everywhere before focusing on the twin sets of glowing eyes that shot looks in her direction before scrambling to leave the same way they'd entered – through an open window on the furthest wall. Two furry bodies chittering and chattering hustled toward their escape.

Thinking their exit cleared the area of all wildlife, Ana turned back with a laugh on her face only to find herself in the path of the third, larger, angry varmint now trapped between her and its freedom.

Growling changed from a screaming bark to a snarl, which warned Ana that the large raccoon had no sense of humor about its dilemma. Before she could react, Hanna stepped between them, brandishing a broom she clutched in her hands and yelling in a harsh voice, convincing the animal she meant business. Her reaction forced it to leap away from Ana and follow its babies.

Gulping her shock and loosening her muscles, Ana let out a squeaky laugh along with Hanna who leaned against the wall, white-faced but wearing a big grin. “Were you really going to shoot the poor mama raccoon?”

“Hell if I know.” Slowly, Ana lowered her gun to a shelf, leaned against the wall, and shook her hands to help release the stiffness. “I’ve been attacked by a lot of animals in my life, but none wore a fur coat, had vicious dripping teeth, and four legs. Scared

the shit outta me.”

Hanna broke then, laughing so hard her body shook. She had to lean against the freezer and hold her stomach. “You should have seen your face. I thought you were going to pass out.”

Ana, not feeling the comical side as much as Hanna, straightened up and pointed her finger at the girl. “It’s not funny.”

“It’s kind of funny.”

“That beast could have slashed my face. You didn’t see it’s beady, mean eyes. It wanted to rip me to pieces before it killed me.”

“That beast maybe weighed thirty pounds, if that. Plus, you had a gun.”

Ana made a sour face of self-disgust, a sign that must have let Hanna know she’d stumbled onto something.

“You didn’t think to use the gun, did you?”

“Uh uh. I’ve never shot anything covered in fur in my life. Not sure I could have. Especially a mama.”

Suddenly, Hanna’s laughter eased, and she approached Ana wearing a sympathetic frown. “I’m sorry. I promise not to leave the window open again. I thought I was being smart by letting out the smell of the garbage.”

“Except it wasn’t. Smart. All you did was announce an open dinner invitation to the wildlife in the area.” Ana’s face resumed its natural pink flush, and she added, “Let’s just be glad the bears didn’t get the invitation too.”

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Hanna arched back, her hands covering her lips. With her wide eyes filled with horror, she croaked, “Seriously. Bears? Oh, my God.”

Now it was Ana’s turn to laugh.

Chapter Ten

That night, Ana lay in bed reliving the earlier traumatic break-in at the cabin and made derisive snorts at her letting down her guard in front of the girl she was supposed to be protecting.

Hanna had kept her cool by bringing the situation to a swift end and that alone made Ana happy. The girl had good reflexes and used them to save another without thinking of her own safety. It showed a lot of courage and in today’s world, especially her world, who knew what she’d be facing in the future. Therefore, she’d need all the bravery possible, and some training might not come amiss either. Ana had wondered what they might be able to do to fill the many hours each day and now she knew.

She’d start Hanna’s physical training as soon as they had the grounds cleaned and the dry, fire hazard brush cleared. Unable to sleep, she slid out of her bed and went back downstairs to pour a small drink of whiskey, a remedy her father had shared with her many times on sleepless nights.

Thinking of her father, she slowly made her way to the suite at the far end of the cabin. Hesitating, she stood for moments before making up her mind. Knowing her father kept this area of the house locked when he was away – because of the small

office off the bedroom where he often kept private police files – she retrieved the key from its hiding place behind a wall ornament. Ignoring the sadness that threatened to attack, she unlocked the door and turned on the lights. Shock kept her from advancing further into the room.

There were clear signs of a recent occupation. A rolled-up sleeping bag and pillow from off the bed lay in the corner of the room, nearest the window. And empty food containers were heaped into the garbage can. The small lamp that usually sat on the table near the bed was down on the floor where one could have some light but not have it visible from outside.

Being as how this side of the cabin faced the lake, it was the most sheltered from anyone's view and the most obvious part of the home for a vagrant to sneak in to. She checked the French-styled doors to the sheltered patio her father and mother loved to use for their early morning coffee and found it had been unlocked. Since it didn't look to be tampered with, likely the culprit used the key her parents kept hidden under the flower pot nearby.

Suspecting the truth, she still searched for the key, and sure as shit, it was missing. Quickly, turning off the lights, she scanned the area close by wondering if whoever had been using their cabin as a hideaway might be in the vicinity. Seeing no movement, she returned to the house and locked the door from the inside. Then she closed the heavy curtains and again lit the room.

Taking a plastic bag from the kitchen supply, she emptied the garbage can and rolled up the rest of the scraps left behind by the intruder. Doing a more detailed search, she found a backpack under the bed. Pulling on plastic gloves, she rifled through it enough to know there wasn't a firearm inside. Only what looked to be bundled clothing for a small female.

Intending to get the police to check for fingerprints, and not willing to make too much

of a fuss about some poor girl finding refuge, nevertheless, she needed to be sure it wasn't an escaped convict or someone similar. Around these remote parts, one could never be too careful.

Thankful that her mother had given the police department permission to clear away any government files from the office after her father's death, she felt certain whoever had made use of their hospitality, wasn't there to steal. If they had been, they would have broken through the door into the other part of the house to ransack it also. Instead, from the looks of the incident, whoever had taken advantage of their home being empty, probably used it more as a refuge or a means of protection from the weather and local animals.

Or maybe the police? Best to be sure.

Ana hated keeping secrets from Hanna, but she hesitated to say anything to the girl. Instead, the next day, she found a strong bolt in the garage and attached it to the inside of the bedroom door, knowing this would keep their unwanted visitor out.

Then she rifled through stacks of supplies in the shed and finally found the Amazon box filled with security cameras and fancy motion lights her mother had ordered, and her snickering father had refused to use. She'd heard him coaxing her mother, telling her numerous times, "Diana, darling, the place is safe. I hate having to repeat myself but we're not in the city now. We don't need to take these kinds of precautions. You know it's what I love about the lake. We can live normal here."

Thankful now for her mother's insistence that they should be using surveillance equipment at the cabin too – especially because they left it vacant so often – she read the instructions and carefully installed a few of the cameras to cover the area outside that back exit so in case their visitor came calling again, she might see the identity of the creeper for herself.

Satisfied that she'd taken care of that specific problem, the next few days were focused on the girls clearing away the garbage and underbrush that the local fire officials had been warning folks about. She'd seen signs everywhere about the hazards and warnings that it was the owners' responsibilities. Feeling even more guilty about unthinkingly building a fire on the day they arrived; she made up her mind not to take any further chances.

Once her and Hanna had done as much tidying as they could, she began coaxing her young cousin into taking her physical form more seriously. "Hey, lazybones, if you really meant what you said about wanting to join the army to help in Ukraine, then it's a good idea to start looking after your own physical health now. I like to run most days, and tomorrow morning I'll be heading out early. Want to come with me?"

"I'll pass." Trying to hide her sneer, Hanna kept her eyes down on her book. "I'm young and strong. Besides, you've been bullying me enough these last few days, working me like a dog outside."

"Okay. Your call." Ana started to walk away but stopped before leaving the room. "Just so you know, you'll be fed accordingly. You exercise, you eat all the crap food you want. Otherwise, it's rations for you."

"You can't be serious. That's like child abuse."

"Except, you're not a child."

"You're kidding, right?"

Hanna's expression was laughable, but Ana bit her lip to keep a straight face. "Not kidding. But your choice. I had planned on steaks, baked potatoes, spinach salad, and your favorite garlic toast for supper. Oh, right... followed by that frozen Strawberrycheesecake Mom sent along. Except... for you, it's chicken noodle soup

and five... no, four crackers. Sorry.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Hanna stared at Ana’s straight expression and muttered Ukrainian swear words under her breath. But she came dressed for running the next morning.

Once they were moving in unison, Ana glanced over to see Hanna’s face and rather than a grumbly expression, the girl looked to be enjoying herself. She’d arranged two messy pigtails in her curly blonde hair to keep it back from her face and wore a similar outfit to Ana’s own Lulu Lemon suit of black fitted pants and a chest-hugging top that criss-crossed in the back and embellished her ample breasts. Both of the long-legged female’s strides matched well, and they fell into a nice rhythm.

Ana loved mornings... before the heat had time to suffocate the freshness from the air. In the distance, the lake shimmered with a silvery-like appearance, rippling as the breeze formed tiny waves. Even the birds seemed to be accepting of the two lone runners and went about their everyday business. A calm seeped into Ana, and she sent a silent thank you to her mom for insisting on this adventure.

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The miles faded and before they knew it, the two women had reached Lew's convenience store, only to hear screams ripping through the morning calm. This unexpected threat created a reaction in Ana, one she knew only too well.

Her earlier relaxed spiritual mood immediately became focused, and her business-like persona broke out. In a hard tone that brooked no argument, she said, "Hanna, stay here. Let me go and see what's happened first." She thrust her finger toward the trees and then pointed at Hanna. When she saw Hanna hesitate, she barked. "Here. Hanna, now."

Expecting her orders to be followed, then quickening her speed, she approached the building just as Maria, covered in blood, stumbled from the door of the store and threw up over the side of the railing.

By the time Ana reached the distraught woman, she'd begun crying uncontrollably. Unable to stop, Maria rushed down the few steps and began dashing in circles, her hands flapping in all directions. Struggling to get to her phone, most likely to call for help, she wrenched at her back pocket and was finally able to pull it free.

As she approached, Ana's authoritative persona emerged. The mess of tears distorting Maria's face made Ana totally aware that something had not only upset the woman, but it had to be really bad to create this kind of reaction.

"Maria, It's me, Ana Marchenko." Forced to physically restrain Maria, she held her by her arms. "Calm down, honey. Tell me what's happened."

"He's dead. My God. Lew's dead."

“Okay. Calm down now. I’ll go in and check on him. Stay here.” Her hands reached to still the poor woman when she tried to cling. “It’s okay, Maria. It’s my job. I’ve seen it all. You stay here.”

As soon as Ana’s voice registered, Maria’s legs stopped working, and she dropped to the ground in slow motion. Hugging herself, phone now lying in the dust, she moaned pitifully. “Oh, God. Help Lew. Someone beat him up horribly. He’s dead. Oh, my God.” Tears added to the shock on the woman’s confused expression, and her lack of strength had Ana reaching for her to keep her from passing out completely.

By now, Hanna had come out of hiding and slowly approached. She crouched down also, but once she heard that Lew was in trouble, she darted forward to go into the store.

“Stop. Hanna, stop right there.”

The harsh tone of Ana’s voice did the trick, and the girl turned back. Her young voice reflected the fear obvious on her face. “But Lew’s in trouble.”

“I’m aware. But you need to stay here with Maria. I don’t want you contaminating the crime scene. I’ll take care of Lew. You just call 911.”

Once she knew that Hanna would listen to her orders, Ana made her way carefully into the store to see what one might describe as a blood-soaked mess. Poor Lew had obviously interrupted something unexpected, and that person or persons had turned on him, beating him so badly that he looked like a victim of a terrible disaster, the bullet hole in his chest being the worst of his injuries.

Carefully, moving to his side, Ana reached out to check for a pulse and thanked God when she found one... very weak, but there. She took a few seconds using an around-about route to where Lew kept the first aid supplies for sale. Quickly ripping open a

larger sterile pad package, she rushed back to place it over the bullet wound. Applying pressure to stop the bleeding, she called out to Hanna. “Lew’s alive. Tell them to get an ambulance here as fast as they can.”

While she waited by Lew, her hands putting on the pressure needed to stop the bleeding, she scanned the area, taking in the open cash register and the broken window next to the large cooler.

Next, she saw a bloodied can of beans on the ground beside Lew’s body and surmised it to be one of the weapons used in the beating. A wooden barbecue scraper still in its package also lay nearby coated with blood.

All around, she saw a mess of crushed candy packages, a box of broken sunglasses, torn chip bags, and a number of other items lying beside a stand that must have gotten knocked over and trampled in the skirmish.

Whoever Lew caught must have been breaking into the place. Looking upward, she noticed the smashed cameras in different corners and prayed they might still be able to pull out some evidence. If his videos were sent to a remote location, such as across a wireless telephone connection or the Internet, the recording devices might have stored the streaming videos up until the culprits broke them. It would be worth checking into.

Completely immersed in recreating the scene, she surmised that Lew must have interrupted the intruders who probably heard him arrive on his ATV. Likely, they laid in wait to attack rather than running away. That in itself said the break-in had probably been done by older folks rather than young teens who would have taken the opportunity to escape rather than confront the owner.

Sure, Lew wasn’t a young man, but he was in darn good shape and had a quick temper. Anyone local knew better than to mess with him. Which kind of told her

whoever did this wasn't anyone who lived nearby.

Thankfully, she heard the sound of a siren in the distance and kept up her vigil by Lew's body, her hand applying a constant pressure. Both an ambulance and the local sheriff arrived at the same time and so Ana stood back while the paramedics dealt with their patient.

Knowing that Maria would likely be traveling with Lew to the hospital, Ana wasn't surprised to see Hanna approaching alone. The girl's face wore an expression that worried Ana. The last time she'd seen this look was when they'd talked to Hanna on Facetime just after her parents were killed.

Chapter Eleven

Nash led his men further into the glowing brush fire, knowing they'd already been wrestling with the ordeal for twenty hours and were exhausted. Yet, they had no choice but to keep going. There were lives at stake, homes to save, and people caught inside the glowing furnace expecting help to arrive.

Working at the underbrush, they cleared the sides of the road enough for a firetruck equipped with four-wheel drive, high wheel clearance and rugged suspension that could gain access. These forest-fighting vehicles were designed to handle rough terrain and fight fires in areas that regular engines wouldn't be of much use.

Meanwhile, the men continued putting out spot fires. No sooner did they win with one area, another area sparked. Beating back the flames from the worst of the disaster, they grimly fought on.

Nash's instinct made him turn in time to see one of his older, less active men fall to his knees, trying to catch his breath from inhaling too much smoke. They'd expected to be relieved an hour earlier by an interagency hotshot crew, but he'd just gotten a

radio message that they'd been turned back to fight a larger fire on the other side of the hill. One that had candled wildly due to a shift in the wind and was no longer under control.

Approaching his man, Nash crouched next to him. "Do me a solid, Tiger. Take a break."

"Can't, boss. The bastard's winning. You need all hands on deck. I'm fine."

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“You’ve taken in too much smoke, and you’re old bones are getting pissed off with how badly you’re treating them. Go... sit for a while and rest.”

Tiger, Hank Border’s nickname for being one of the guy’s who’d rather fight than use diplomacy, pushed against Nash so he could get to his feet. “I said I was fine. Back off.”

Nash rose too, standing tall, and pushing his face into Tiger’s space. His assertive tone got through instantly. “Drop the attitude, jerkoff. I wasn’t asking. Get your ass over to the truck and ride shotgun for a while. And get some liquid in you.”

Tiger yanked off his helmet, his furious bloodshot gaze catching Nash’s. Glaring with resentment, their eyes battled for a few seconds until Hank’s stare crumpled first. Without another word, he nodded and slowly stumbled to do as he was told.

Glad to have settled that little emergency, Nash did a quick assessment and decided that now they’d have to put all their efforts into saving lives. Unfortunately, the properties they’d been trying to save from the oncoming menace would become victims of the flames. Most of his men were done and getting to those trapped folks had now become his priority.

He pushed his way over to where Chuck had half the crew chopping down vegetation, hoping to stop the flames from soaring over the top of them. “Hey Swift, I need you to closedown this section. We’re losing ground and there are twenty or so victims that need to get out of the basin toward the south.”

“What the fuck? Why haven’t they been evacuated?”

“Didn’t foresee the wind shift. The bitch’s turned a one-eighty and gave us all a shock we didn’t expect. Now those folks will be surrounded if we don’t get to them in the next little while. We need to open a pathway for them as an escape route. I need you and the guys to get to clearing the road in front of our trucks. Only way to get them out of danger is if we can drive them out.”

“Right. Got it.” Chuck whistled shrilly to the guys to pay attention, and Nash saw them all turn from their individual battles to come to where they stood. “We have to change our focus and work mainly to keep the road clear long enough for the firetrucks to get to some trapped folks. For now, they’re our primary target. Any questions?”

Nash watched as they all nodded and returned to work with a new vigor, forcing the worst of the flames back from the roadside to be able to allow their trucks a way forward. Forests burning were one thing, but people in danger meant a lot more to the tired men.

During this endeavor, the heat became almost unbearable, the smoke so thick that it made visibility almost non-existent. A call over his headphones told him that they were finally sending his requested water drops to help them clear the way.

A few minutes later, two helicopters swept overhead, ready to dump their loads and make their groundwork easier for a while before the outlying fire moved in again.

Responding to the warning to take cover, Nash swore. “It’s about time, Fuckie. I asked for this help ten minutes ago. My guys are exhausted. If we have any chance to tame this monster and save those who are trapped, you better refill and return pronto.”

A distorted chuckle over the earphones sounded. “Si, si, amigo. We’ll be back as soon as we can. You’re only about ten minutes away from where I understand the

evacuation vehicle's lineup came to a stop because of trees blocking the road. Better watch for those terrified souls who decide they might have a better chance escaping on foot."

"Okay. Thanks. You stay safe."

"You too, Nashville."

Nash spoke over the radio to his crew. "Fuckie says there's a lineup of folks evacuating in vehicles but were stopped by trees over the road. Some have probably left their rides, so stay watchful."

Working like demons, the team pushed forward and soon heard screams in the distance. "Help. Help us."

Arriving in time to watch both men and women struggling to move a large tree blocking the road, they stopped their fire trucks. Nash and his guys hurried forward to get everyone clear before the arriving helicopter showed up.

Nash had radioed ahead to the pilot with the exact area to dump and watched as the surrounding flames were being doused. As soon as the water settled, his hotshots began clearing away enough on each side of the road for both of his trucks to turn back in the direction they'd just come from.

A few of his men were rushing from vehicle to vehicle, yelling and encouraging folks to leave their possessions and get to their only chance of escape. He saw Chuck Ono carrying an older woman as she sobbed uncontrollably. The relief from being rescued obvious in every thank you she uttered.

Even Tiger, who'd caught his second wind, was carrying a kid over each shoulder while encouraging the mother forward.

Nash kept to one side waving his hand and yelling for everyone to move. “Come on, people. This fire won’t be held back for much longer. Get to the fire trucks. We’ll get you out of here.” Watching the end car in the lineup start burning, he knew they didn’t have a lot of time left.

“Is everyone cleared?” He yelled at the last of his crew who carried a child in one arm and a dog in the other, while the man and woman bringing up the rear each held a child and an animal in the same way. “Hey boss, guy says these pets are like family.”

“Then lets make sure they’re safe too.” Nash did one last scan of the area and could see they had no time left if they wanted to get clear. Once they had all the people safely inside the truck, the hotshots climbed on the top and crouched in whatever space they could find.

Seeing as how the bitch was closing in, he had only seconds left. Just as he turned to run to the last truck, a tiny deer banged into him blindly running to save itself.

Christ, help me! He muttered the term he’d grown up hearing his aunt use and dove to grab the terrified baby. Just pure luck had him able to wrap his big hand around the arched neck of the tiny soul and with a swing, he had it up in his arms and was running behind the slowly moving vehicle.

Chuck had watched for him. “Hurry. We need to get the hell outta here, boss. Let go of Bambi. You gotta get onboard now.”

“Not gonna happen. Here, catch.” With his last ounce of strength, Nash threw the baby upwards to have Chuck capture the struggling animal. Two seconds later, he’d climbed to the top of the truck himself. When they saw the archway of impending flames, he knew they’d have to move fast.

By now the surrounding golden inferno threatened to close off their escape route. Embers floating in every direction might have been electrifying, even thrilling if one were seeing this in a movie theater. But it spelled death to every person fleeing.

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“Take shelter.” His voice thundered with his order and everyone within hearing knew what that command meant. Each firefighter began covering themselves with their aluminum blankets for protection from flaming debris falling from above. Thankfully, there’d been room inside the vehicles for the civilians.

For the next five minutes, they remained protected, shielded from the worst of the flames but not so much from the scorching heat. Thankfully, the trucks drove fast and soon they’d cleared the worst of the threat.

Nash lifted his blanket, releasing his tight hold on the trembling animal he still cradled close. The big brown doe-eyes filled with bewilderment stared at him, blinked, and then closed... the trembling, tiny body lying limp in his arms.

Looking around at the huddles of co-workers, Nash watched as one by one they all began to push their way from their protective shields. Breathing air not contaminated with smoke felt wonderful. Holding up his fist, Tiger let out a yodelling yell. “Yee haw,” and the others joined in, smiles covering their dirty, grimy faces. Bloodshot eyes sought each other, and their high fives were given with exuberance and a shade of thankfulness if the truth were to be known.

On their way toward the city where they had a shelter set up for victims and a rest area for the fighters, Nash breathed a sigh of relief and took time to comfort his tiny pal who’d hovered under the covering with him. The baby’s whimpers of fear faded, but the shivering continued. Speaking low, his calm, husky voice filled with gentleness, Nash soothed the beast while cuddling it close.

Again, he felt a vibrating in the pocket of his filthy, yellow firefighter jacket having

ignored the last few times he'd felt it and reached in to bring out his cellphone. Seeing numerous calls from the aunt who'd raised him, he pushed in her number and held the mobile close. Using his special name for her, he said, "Hey Maria-ma, what's up?"

Chapter Twelve

The video surveillance at Lew's store didn't reveal near as much as Ana had hope for. The day after the incident, she'd left Hanna with Maria at the hospital and had gone to the sheriff's office on the pretext of delivering the bundle of burglar's possessions she'd found in her parents' room.

"Hanna, do you mind staying with Maria. I hate to leave her alone until her nephew arrives. She said he'd finally returned her call and would be showing up sometime today."

"Of course I'll stay. Poor woman's in a terrible state. Anyone can see how much she loves Lew and how terrified she is of losing him."

"Yeah, it's a second time around for both of them. From what my dad told me, Lew and his first wife broke up when she left him for a younger man. Go figure that out. Guess he stayed a bachelor for a lot of years until Maria came along. She'd also married young, but her husband died while fighting overseas for the military. Then she adopted her nephew to raise and stayed single until she met Lew. She calls it love at first sight. According to Lew, he calls it lust at first sight." She laughed as she remembered his words. "He does love to tease."

Grinning at Ana's words, Hanna's expression sobered before she muttered, "Goddamn bastards that shot him are scummy shitbags."

"Hey! Poopy mouth, what's with the language?" Ana's own thoughts of the insane

murderers had been kept to herself, wanting to protect innocent ears. Guess she was the naïve one, forgetting that teens all over the world had access to and probably used more cuss words than she did.

Hanna didn't look fazed but still apologized. "Sorry. I just thought I'd left those kinds of murdering freaks behind me."

Ana wrapped her arm around Hanna's shoulder and squeezed her body close. "Sorry to have to tell you this, but bad seeds grow everywhere." She let a moment pass and then added, "I need to stick around but if you'd rather head back to LA and stay with Mom, I'd understand."

"No. Please. I want to stay with you and help Maria. She's so needy right now. Plus, she told me her nephew is a fire fighter who barely gets a day off during this season. He's coming to see her, but she knows he won't be able to stay for long. I think she's afraid of being alone."

"Poor thing. Can't blame her."

"I know, hey? Those murdering ba... ahh, freaks are still out there doing who knows what to who else." Changing the subject, she added, "I prayed Lew would come through the operation, and now that he has, we still have to pray his strength holds up, and he makes it through another night."

"I know." Ana steered Hanna down the hall toward where Maria waited. "The bullet came close to ending it all. Doc said another inch to the right, and he'd be a dead man. Thankgoodness he's a fighter." She faced Hanna. "You okay? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I'm good. You go and help the sheriff."

Now... looking at the evidence, she watched the snatches of video with the local sheriff, her father's old friend Dave Chalmers. Trying to make sense of what the tape showed, they rewound it several times.

"There. That's when the motion started up the video. Looks like a couple of men breaking in. One's roaming around the store, heading to the camera at the back of the room. Can't make out their faces because of the balaclavas. But look here... at the hand that grabbed that wooden barbecue stick. He's wearing a long-sleeved shirt and gloves but just for a second, you can see white skin. Roll it back and play it again. Stop. Right there... see?"

Sure enough they could see white skin between the end of his sleeve and his glove and also make out the curving lines of a tattoo just before the stick smashed the camera and everything went black.

"Jesus, Ana. I've gone over that tape a dozen times and never noticed that split second of evidence. All we got from the footage was two male figures breaking through the window."

"Now we know at least one was a white guy, both looked to be medium height, and neither were overweight. Were there any signs they tried using the doors, either front or back?"

"No. Probably figured they were monitored. See... Lew had these alarm sensor gadgets that folks use for home security on their exits. He just pasted them on the doors as a warning for anyone who might have ideas to break in. Cheap bastard never did hook them up to a system. Guess the one he had on the window must have fallen off, and if these two did any early scouting they would have noticed that way was clear."

“I can believe that. Lew wasn’t one to overly fuss about security. Even Dad, who was more relaxed out here than ever in the city, had tried talking Lew into paying more attention. Lew just poo-pooed him and made jokes. Thing is... the locals would never do this to him, and he knew it. Therefore, I suggest you be on the lookout for transients and campers just passing through.”

“Yep. My theory too. But there’s only myself, Mrs. Perkins, who never leaves the office, and my deputy, old Pat. Man’s on his last year before retirement and hasn’t much get-up-and-go. He figures it got up and left about two years back after his latest asthma attack.”

Chuckling at Dave’s joke, she took his hand – the same hand who’d passed out lollipops to the neighboring kids from as long ago as she could remember. “I’ll be around for the next few weeks. Any help you need, I’m here for you.”

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“Fucking A, kiddo. I know you’re supposed to be taking care of your cousin, but I’m not too proud to admit I might need your know-how. I ain’t had to deal with this type of serious crime for years.”

Ana shook her head, her expression tough. “Sad to say, I have.”

Dave patted her arm. “I’d hate to ruin your vacation with your relative.”

“Not to worry. She’s as upset about this situation as I am. Look, let me go over the records you’ve made. Sometimes a fresh set of eyes can see what others missed. Did you get any information from the locals who might have passed by or seen anything?”

“No one’s come forward, not yet anyway. I’ll be going door to door today. Get as much info as I can on any strangers that folks might have run into.”

Before Ana could offer to take half the list, a tall man entered and strode forward, his face unsmiling. Obviously worried and in no mood to be put off, he broke up their discussion. Not paying attention to Ana, he marched directly toward Dave, his hand held ready to shake.

“Hi. I’m Nash Ralph, Maria Ralph’s son. I understand from Maria that there was a shooting at the store, and Lew is in the hospital. I wanted to speak with you about what happened.”

Standing back, watching the male bonding, Ana felt herself bristling. It was the same asshole who’d pestered her on the road when they’d driven here. Listening to his

opening spiel to Dave, it bothered her that he didn't call Maria mom and yet he said he was her son. Maybe she was old-fashioned, but the lack of respect seemed wrong. Shaking off her silliness, she stopped thinking that way. Truth was... a lot of kids referred to their parents by their first names and many times it was the choice of the parent. Meant nothing.

Eavesdropping in on the conversation, she hovered outside their circle and realized that for some crazy reason, the pushy guy just got her dander up as her dad used to say. Deciding she'd come back later; she made it to the door before Dave called her back.

"Ana. Wait up. I want to introduce you to Maria's boy. Nash Ralph this is one of our locals, FBI Special Agent Anastacia Marchenko."

Why Dave had to go and use her full title, she could only surmise it as being pride in her achievement. Whatever, she hadn't made her escape and would now have to be polite. After all, the guy's mom was important to her, even if she could give a damn about her rude son.

"Nice to meet you." She held out her hand with a token smile that faded quickly. "I'm sorry about Lew. It's been a really hard time for your ahh... mom?"

"She's actually my aunt, but she raised me after my parents died when I was ten. Then she adopted me. She's the only family I have... her and Lew. The sheriff just said you were first on the scene."

"Not really. Your aunt got there before us. We – my cousin and I – showed up soon after to see her freaking out at finding Lew shot. Poor woman. The shock hasn't worn off yet, and it's making her crazy. She needs you."

As she started to turn away, Ana looked back at Dave and reiterated, "You want an

extra pair of hands, I'll help all I can. Send me those files. You have my email address, right?"

"Will do. And I'd appreciate if you could return after lunch. We can parley the details then. I work better when I can bounce ideas off another person." The phone rang and apologizing, Dave picked up the call.

"Sure. See you then." Ana nodded at the hovering man and turned to leave.

Before she could grab the knob to open the door, his large hand beat her to it, and a male voice sounded too close for comfort. "Thanks, Sheriff. I'll be back too."

Chapter Thirteen

Nash followed Ana from the small jail building and blocked her way before she could get to her SUV. "I have a few questions I need answers to, and it looks like you're the person who was there and best able to bring me up-to-date on what happened."

Sensing her lack of response, he added, "Look, I'm sorry if I broke up your discussion with the sheriff earlier. Let me make up for it and take you for lunch. We can talk there."

"Thanks, but I can't. I have to get back to the hospital. Might be better for you to be with your aunt... take her for lunch." Her tone sound bitchy as hell and she instantly felt embarrassed at the nastiness. What the fuck is wrong with me?

He backed up. "Hey, lady. I looked in at the hospital and was told that my aunt is finally resting. They gave her something and decided it's best for her not to be disturbed for now. So.. about that lunch, let's forget it." He started to move past her.

Nash didn't get angry very often. Hardly ever. But this time he was pissed. Why the

hell this woman behaved as if he had a badcase of lice, he didn't know, but he wasn't in the mood to play games today of all days.

Suddenly it hit him, and he stopped. It was her... the woman in the SUV on the side of the road. The one he'd tried to help. He scanned her closely and knew in his gut she was the same person. Just as he went to say something about their previous meeting, she shocked the hell out of him.

"You're right. I'm sorry. That was shitty, and I didn't mean it. Yes. For lunch. I'm starving. Only cafe open this time of the day is the 365 Pub. Okay with you?"

Hesitating for just a second, he gave in, shoved the blackness away, and spoke in a carefully monitored tone, hiding his mood. "Fine. Lead me to it."

Once they were both settled with cups of aromatic, hot, black coffee, and their orders had been taken, Ana folded her hands around her ceramic mug and said, "So, what do you want to ask me?"

"Does the sheriff have any idea who might have shot Lew? Has the dude pissed anyone off or gotten into any arguments with customers lately? Or anyone owe him money he tried to collect? Hell, what reasons could there be for someone to shoot him. Was it even personal?"

"I guess you didn't get a chance to talk to Maria. When we found her, she was so shattered, she didn't make much sense... other than to say he had no enemies. We believe Lew returned to the store earlier than usual. The night before, he'd told her that he had bookwork that needed to get done. Lew was always an early riser, often complained about being an insomniac and had trouble getting a decent night's sleep. We think he got to the store well before opening, interrupted a break-in, and two male suspects beat him up."

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“He fought back.”

“Looks that way. From the mess in the store, I’d say a struggle erupted, and possibly, because Lew did fight back, they shot him.”

“Jesus! You figure it was some kids looting the place?”

“Didn’t say that.”

“Okay. So if we’re talking grown men, and there was more than one, don’t tell me they couldn’t have just controlled him without resorting to a bullet in the chest.”

Ana’s face dipped sideways in agreement. Finally, she added, “So, I was the first on the scene after Maria. The man took a beating and was already down when they shot him.”

“How can you know that?”

“I’m guessing because there were no blood spills anywhere else.”

“So you’re saying they didn’t have to shoot because he could have already been unconscious.”

“Don’t know. Maybe he saw their faces? Or knew their identities, and they didn’t want to leave him alive? Can’t be certain. But he did struggle and knowing Lew, he probably got in a hit or two. So maybe we watch out for anyone who looks like they’ve recently been in a fight. The sheriff intended to go door to door this morning,

and I'll go over the reports he's already gathered before we get together. We'll know more later."

Before Nash could offer to help, their hamburgers and fries arrived, putting paid to anymore conversation. By the time, they'd finished eating what they wanted, Ana pulled a twenty from her pocket and stood to leave.

"Hey. I asked you to have lunch. It's my treat." When he saw her hesitate, he added, "You pay next time."

"Sneaky way of getting me to eat with you again."

"Did it work?"

"Nope. See ya." She left her money and headed for the door.

Nash quickly added another twenty under his plate and followed her outside. When she stopped dead, he almost tripped over her. Her following protest made him grin.

"Christ you're a nuisance, aren't you? Do you ever take no for an answer without an argument?"

"Funny thing... you're the only woman who's ever argued." Shocked silence followed, and he saw the look of disbelief on her face. "Okay, that came out wrong. I meant that I'm a nice guy and ladies appreciate my sincerity. Hmm... except for you."

"Well, get used to it Bub." She pushed her way past him to grab the doorhandle of her vehicle.

Once safely behind the wheel, she started the car, and driving away, she checked the side mirror to see him waving as if he knew she'd look. Remembering their previous meeting, it made a smile break out without any permission from her brain whatsoever.

Speeding up, she decided that Nash Ralph reminded her of an overgrown kid looking for a 'good boy' followed by a pat on the head. Kind of like the family dog they used to have before she died of old age.

Hours later, after another hospital visit where she purposely kept a distance between her and Nash, she'd gone over Dave's transcripts, and nothing stood out. The evidence had been recorded perfectly... what there was of it. They had so little to go on.

Leaning on the back of one of the office chairs in the jail, scanning the crime scene photos on the white board, Ana wiped a spot of unnoticed blood from the crime scene off her jeans and pushed up the long sleeves of her black shirt. They'd beendiscussing the evidence they'd gathered so far, or the lack of it actually.

Just as Nash arrived, Mrs. Perkins – her face white and her middle-aged chubbiness encircled by her thick arms wrapped tightly around her stomach – stepped out from the inner office. In a wobbly voice filled with outrage, and in the tone of a person who's hard of hearing, she shouted, "Hey boss, you need to take this call."

Seconds after he had the receiver near his ear, his shaking hand pushed the speaker button. "Pat, repeat what you just told me."

The distressed sound of a man in shock appeared thready and filled with horrible news. "There's been another shooting. This time two victims. One male, one female."

Dave and Ana looked at each other, words unnecessary. It was Nash who spoke what

they'd been thinking. "The hits just keep coming, don't they? I do believe there's a serial killer loose in the area."

Chapter Fourteen

Once they arrived at the scene, Dave took a few seconds to back up the lookie-loos before they approached Pat. "What's the scoop?"

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“Chloe here was barking hysterically and disturbed the neighbors.” The fluffy, red-gold Pomeranian in his arms shivered, and its teary glazed stare appeared as distressed as Pat himself. “Sheriff, we all know Sadie never leaves her pet out for long. The guy next door, Allen, came to see what was wrong and walked in the open door to see the bodies. He ran and got me. I only live a few doors down the lane.”

“Okay. Give the dog to Allen and get your uniform on. It’s going to be another long day, and I’m gonna need you to canvas the area and see if any of the folks had outside security cameras or if anyone saw anything.”

“You got it, boss.”

Next, Dave approached Ana. “I’ve got protective gear in my car. I’d like you with me to check out the scene. Your experience will be invaluable.” He pointed at Nash. “I’d appreciate it if you would talk with these folks and see if anyone saw or heard anything. If so, keep them close so I can follow up and get their statements.”

Within a short time, Ana trailed the sheriff inside the residence to find a real mess, with dirty dishes, magazines, and beer cans strewn everywhere. Dave shared his thoughts. “Considering Sadie is known as a neat freak, this chaos is disturbingly out of place.”

They passed through the living room and into the kitchen, where again, food containers, dirty pots, and crusted dishes littered each surface. A prized farmhouse-styled table that normally sat in the middle of the room had been angrily shoved crookedly against the wall. And Sadie’s valued plant stand filled with a huge variety of violets had been knocked over – soil and broken pots lay scattered everywhere.

Continuing to the bedroom, they saw two bodies close together on the bed, and the mound of knitting that must have been on the bedside table now spread over Sadie and twisted in her hand. Her clothes were either missing or awry. She appeared to have been in a struggle and showed signs of strangulation as well as a bullet hole in the chest.

Whereas the male beside her lay also half dressed, his blue-gloved hand clutching at the knitting needle protruding from his jugular. Blood pooled under his head, his eyes open and filled with shock, and he was sprawled on his back. He, also, had been shot. Both wounds looked similar to the one Lew had, only this time the killer hadn't missed.

"Lord Almighty, this is nasty. Gotta tell you, in my whole career, I've only dealt with one murder, and it was a domestic disturbance situation gone awry. This here shit is a whole new ballgame for me. I'm glad you're with me today, Ana."

"I can tell you, it never gets easier, Dave. The worst of humanity in technicolor."

Throughout the following hours, between dealing with the crime scene, gathering information from the neighbors who might have noticed something, and making sure they filled in all the reports necessary when murder is involved, the second night was well in bloom by the time Ana agreed to be driven home by Nash.

"Sorry to take you out of your way. After spending the night before in the hospital waiting room, Hanna looked exhausted, so I coerced Maria to take her home in my car. She's staying the night with her. Neither wanted to be alone, and I agreed."

"Mom told me. I thought it a good idea too. Best not to take any chances with a killer on the loose."

"Right. And with Lew out of the woods now and recuperating, they both need a good

night's sleep. Doc says it's going to be a long recovery."

Nash's truck pulled to a stop in front of Ana's cabin, and she reached for the doorhandle. Before she could step out, Nash cleared his throat in an attention-seeking way.

"What?"

"This is where you live? In this isolated place with no lights? You got to be kidding. We just agreed it was safer for Hanna to stay with Maria, and you intend to stay out here by yourself?"

"Sure. Hey... remember? I'm an agent with the FBI. My niece already told you, I have a big gun, and I know how to use it." She grinned. "Don't fuss."

"I wouldn't, except I saw the bag of evidence you handed to Pat. You know, the one filled with the burglar's gear that had been squatting in your place. How do you know that wasn't the killer's stuff?"

"I don't. And I'm too tired to care."

"Well, I'm not. Come stay at Maria's with the rest of us. Trust me, there's room. And I'll be able to sleep better."

"Jesus, Nash, don't be a pain. I'm fine." She jumped out of the truck and headed toward the house, only to be cut off by a furious man who loomed over her.

"Bloody stubborn female without an ounce of working braincells in that ridiculously pretty head." He muttered the words loud enough to be sure she'd hear. Then he barked, "You insist on staying. Then I will too. Be a nice girl and get me a pillow for the truck, the seats aren't all that comfortable."

Chapter Fifteen

Ana couldn't figure out if she'd been played by a genius or stroked by a sincere do-gooder, but as she led the way inside where she firmly suggested he sleep if he insisted on his tomfoolery, she couldn't make up her mind.

Without looking behind her, she grumbled, "Quit grinning like a cheshire cat."

"Who, me?"

"Yes you. I'm too tired to continue arguing. My parents' suite is through that hallway. Make yourself at home. I'm going to bed."

"What... no goodnight story. Or better yet, a goodnight kiss?"

"About that gun I mentioned earlier..."

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Laughing, Nash held his hands out in front. “Yep. Got it.” He stepped back. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” Ana kept it short and sweet before heading to the loft above. Still shook that he’d gotten his way so easily, nonetheless, she did feel slightly better for not being alone in the spacious place. Once undressed and foregoing her usual choice of being naked over PJ’s, she pulled on a lightweight pair of shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, thankful that they had air conditioning.

Once she’d done her regular nightly routine, brushing out her thick blonde curls to where they haloed her head and cleaning her teeth, she added some moisturizer to her smooth skin and headed for her bed.

No sooner had she positioned her pillow and got comfy, her eyes flew open, and her brain began to unravel. Thoughts scattered like leaves in a windstorm, swirling everywhere, making sleep impossible. Finally, after an hour of tossing and turning, she slipped from her bed and looked out her door to make sure the way was clear.

Seeing only the under-counter kitchen lights glowing, she tiptoed downstairs, heading through the living room area for the liquor cabinet.

Other times when she found sleep evading her, she would often meet up with her father suffering from the same insomnia. They’d sit together and sip on her dad’s favorite expensive whiskey, discussing deep topics about life and dreams that seemed possible to talk about in the dark closeness they shared. During those precious times, she’d let the explosions in her belly soothe the wildness of her nature. Only then could she relax enough to be able to close off her mind and eventually get some rest.

No sooner had she poured a drink, a voice from the far end of the room startled her.
“Can you make that two?”

Stiffening, knowing she’d tried to avoid just such a situation, she released a long sigh of frustration. “What are you doing up?”

“Heard a noise.”

“Then you must have the hearing of an animal because I was quiet.”

“Yeah. I’m like a Doberman, my hearing has always been good.”

“Makes sense. A slobbering, big-nosed dog. Suits you.”

“Hey, Doberman’s don’t slobber. And you’re not funny.”

“Am so.” While she bantered, she poured a second drink and reached over to pass it to him. That’s when she realized her lack of clothing might be an invitation she had no intention of making.

Sauntering over to the sofa, she picked up the light fuzzy throw and sat down with it held casually on top of her. Hoping that by ignoring him, he’d take the hint, she was disappointed. Instead, he sat down beside her wearing a grin that spoke volumes about her thinking she’d fooled him.

“This is nice. Just the two of us. Together. After a hard day at the office.”

“Shut up.” She made a face at him to take away the harshness from her reply and leaned her head back against the couch. “Listen to the quiet. That’s what I love about this cabin.”

“Me, too. I had a place not far from here and it was the same peaceful setting.”

“You had?”

“It burned down earlier this year. The Mountain Fire devastated thousands of acres and is still on the move. One of our guys explained it as trying to put out a blowtorch with a squirt gun. The Santa Ana winds had gusts up to 80 to 100 mph, and fueled by abundant grass and scrub, it created a perfect storm.”

“I’m sorry. About your home I mean.”

“It happens. And mine wasn’t the only one. Many of the others had families. I’m just a single dude.”

“Still. It was yours.”

“Yeah.” He sipped his drink, sighed, and kept his gaze on his hands.

Unwilling to let him dwell on what couldn’t be changed, Ana leaned his way.

“What’s your particular job? Hanna said your mom told her you were a firefighter.”

“That’s right. I work with an Interagency Hotshot Crew, which means we’re front liners working on constructing fire lines, handling control burns along with tactical operations, and pretty much fighting the monster in the best way we can with the supplies we have.”

“You make it sound easy. It’s one of the toughest jobs out there.”

His side nod of agreement gave credence to the remark but with the underlying, unspoken phrase following...it-is-what-it-is. She waited and he finally added.

“Okay. So... it’s hard work. But without us, folks’d loose a hell of a lot more than we do now. Kinda like the way cops stop the crazies from taking over.”

“Except ‘the crazy’ we have running around this place seems more like a ghost. We have nothing on the guy except that his MO is to shoot people in the chest. From Lew’s scene at the store, we were able to determine that one of the guys was a white man with a tattoo on his wrist. Turns out that kinda describes the dead man we came across with Sadie’s body.”

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Nash waited but Ana had said all she intended. So he continued the conversation by adding, “I have a lot of respect for Sadie’s fighting skills, even if it got her shot by his partner. She never gave up.”

“How do you know that?”

“Dave told Pat in front of me. He was pretty spooked, and I doubt he knew who was nearby.”

Remembering the knitting needle that Sadie had used to fight off her assailant, Ana agreed. “She’s my kind of gal.”

Nash took a sip and then persisted, “You got anything at all from the dead man’s pockets? I heard there was no personal identification other than he appeared to be Russian. And we all know there’s a large community of European folks in L.A. Especially since the war with Ukraine.”

“Nothing specific so far. The killer cleared out all of their personal belongings, and I suspect he wore disposable gloves too. Though Dave called in a forensic team from the city to go over every square inch, chances are good they’ll be no prints.”

Ana felt his gaze watching her closely before he asked his next question. “Won’t Dave need more police assistance to find the killer? I imagine they’ll be sending in a task force to help in the investigation.”

“Yes and no. The people he usually depends on for backup are dealing with their own emergency right now. Seems they’re under a strict fire watch and need all hands on

deck for getting the local population to respect their eviction notices. You'll know more about that than I do."

Ana noticed Nash stiffening and waited, wondering if her words had upset him. Nash reached out for the whiskey bottle and before leaning back next to her again, he refilled both their glasses. Finally, he admitted what had been eating away at him.

"I should be there with them right now. And I will be as soon as I know Lew is strong enough to be moved to the city. There's no way Maria will let him go on his own... so she'll be out of this area too. Then I can breathe easy, knowing they're both safe."

Ana heard the worry he didn't try to hide and found it endearing. "Why you're a big mama bear about this, aren't you?"

"Maybe." He looked at her, and his expression softened. "Okay, so yeah... guess I am. But I have good reason. I've seen up close the havoc a wildfire plays. And right now, it's touch and go everywhere in these mountains. With the unrelenting heat pattern we've been dealing with, it's created a dry spell that's unprecedented. The forest is like a tinderbox and can go up anytime. What's worse, humans are responsible for 95% of the flare-ups that have dangerous results."

Ana thought over his words and took them to heart. "It's true that when we left the city, the heat had become unbearable. So much so, that when we arrived here, being that much higher elevation, it felt cool. I even built a fire the first night to warm up the place and—"

"You did what? That wasn't smart." Nash stiffened and his expression changed from relaxed to stern in seconds.

"Cool your jets. I'd seen the notices about outdoor fires and wasn't thinking clearly. But as soon as the cabin heated up, I made sure I'd put it out. This big barn get's

chilly after being closed down for three years with minimal heat.”

“Maybe. But don’t do it again. It’s dangerous. Sparks fly from chimneys that aren’t well cleaned.”

“Then we’re in luck because my dad had a thing about maintaining this cabin, and the fireplace was number one on his list every year.”

Nash relaxed and his grin reappeared. “Lady, you have an answer for everything. Does nothing ever stop your brain?”

Comfortable in the dark room, embraced in her cozy cocoon, sipping the last of her third drink, she giggled. Shocked at such a rare silly sound coming from her, she spoke without thinking. “Booze. That’ll do it. It’s why I came downstairs for a nightcap... to shut down my brain.”

“Has it worked?”

His deep voice stimulated, reminding her that she was half dressed, mostly snookered, and in the company of a man who intrigued her and made her pulse race. Words shot out of her mouth without her thinking them through... but funnily enough, she didn’t care. “Sometimes sex helps too.” Once the words were uttered, she’d have done anything to suck them back, but they hung in the darkness between them. She waited for his reaction. And it sure as shit wasn’t the one she expected.

Chapter Sixteen

Nash didn’t believe his ears. The lady had just given him the kind of come-on that any sane male in his position would take seriously and accept. He searched her features and found her watching him... waiting. Not breathing. The atmosphere tense with sexual innuendo.

He groaned with frustration.

The husky sound acted like an accelerant to the woman next to him. She let the blanket slip to the floor, quickly mounted his lap, and began to nuzzle his neck.

Without a doubt, he knew the alcohol was pushing boundaries she'd never cross sober. It mattered until her lips found his and began an exploratory search, tasting him and pushing her tongue inside so they were connected deeper.

Goddammit his hands ached to touch. Hardening instantly, his lower body welcomed her weight and ached with the need to feel a skin to skin connection. Trying to keep his control from weakening, he gently tried to pry her away, hold her back so he could look into her face while he asked the question that needed to be spoken.

Bloody hell... she wasn't having any of that nonsense. She had a goal and seriously intended to fulfill it, which meant struggling her way back into his arms. Pressing herself against his heat, making him slide even further down on the couch, he still tried resisting the temptation.

But from the first time he'd seen this woman, he'd had the hots for her, and it took every ounce of control he had not to just take what she offered and run with it. Have his way with her lush body and to hell with the consequences.

Finally, he tore his lips away from hers and wrapped his arms around her to keep her still. Muttering his thoughts aloud, he whispered, "Baby, are you sure this is what you want? I'm trying to be a good guy here but you're making it damn near impossible. I want you so much, it's killing me."

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“Shush. Quit talking. Don’t spoil it.”

“But—”

Biting off the words, rage apparent in every syllable, she repeated, “Qu-it tal-king.” She groaned her disapproval and started to push away angrily.

Knowing that pissing her off was the last thing he intended; he hauled her back in his arms and stood in one movement. Carrying her like she weighed nothing, which to him was easy, he moved to the staircase and began the climb.

Her arms were back around his neck, and she’d tucked her face in so close, her rioting curls covered her features.

Unable to view her reaction to this unexpected move, he went by the way she clung to him, cuddling into him and accepted it as her willingness for what he intended next.

Seeing the open door, he stepped inside and found the covers pushed aside. Carefully, he lowered her, expecting to follow her down only to see the saintly witch had passed out. A tiny snorebroke into his disappointment as she snuggled into her pillow while clutching it to her. Sitting next to her, he watched her sleep and finally got to see the composed, cool-assed lady without her mask.

Sighing with remorse, he hesitated for seconds before gently covering her body. He stared at the lush lips that had driven him wild and wondered if she knew what her kisses could do to a relatively sane man. Knowing by wavering, he was playing with

fire, he gently brushed back her soft curls, kissed her forehead with soft lips, and headed for the downstairs shower he'd already used once that night.

Unable to find his way around easily in the light from the full moon, he turned on the lamp and came to a dead stop.

What the fuck!

He called out. "Who's there?" But wasn't surprised when no answer followed.

Still shocked, he rushed toward the now open patio door and stopped when he came to the end of the cement surface. Staring into the night, he listened and heard sounds that he knew all too well. Heart racing, he followed the sudden smell and saw flames flaring up near the garden shed. The sight made his blood run cold. Grabbing the nearby hose, he prayed it would work and was thrilled when the water gushed out.

He knew exactly where to place the water for the best benefit and soon had control of the small blaze. Not taking any chances, he washed everything well in the vicinity and then ripped at the brush nearby, tearing it away from where the fire had been and spread the works out so he could soak them well. An hour later, exhausted, filthy, and sweat-drenched he turned to see Ana rushing toward him, her face a study in disbelief.

"Look at you! You're soaked. Why in God's name didn't you come and get me?"

Whaa??!!

He'd have taken great joy in shooting her down if her next move hadn't been to throw her arms around him and hug hard. Within seconds, she dragged him inside where she forced him to use her blanket and led him to the kitchen where she brewed a pot of strong coffee.

Chapter Seventeen

Ana was still furious about the danger Nash had faced alone. But at least she understood his reasoning. And agreed he'd had no choice but to fight the fire to have any chance of stopping it from spreading. His skills and quick thinking had saved their property, hell... probably saved the whole community.

Ana needed to quit bitching and instead thank the good Lord Jesus he was there in the right place at the right time. She knew it and was also aware that her fussing had shaken him, probably even thrown him off balance. But he'd allowed her the liberty and seemed to understand she'd only spoken out of fear for his safety.

It wasn't until he admitted that the reason he'd stepped outside in the first place had been to follow whoever had broken into the house that she stiffened... her eyes flashing.

Poking at his chest, she demanded, "Why in a fool's world did you go outside and give him a good target?"

"Ow." He made a face and rubbed at the spot like a little kid might soothe a sore. "Never thought about it that way. You figure it's our killer?"

"Hell if I know. But why take chances?"

"I'm glad I did, or it would've been too late for me to stop the fire."

He had her there... making sense again. Dammit, now she had to back off. "Right. You're right. Sorry." Apologizing came hard for Ana, well except when it was deserved. And God only knew Nash had been a hero, and she needed to get over herself.

Absentmindedly, she soothed him where her finger had drilled and then stepped away to go to the living room to retrieve her weapon.

Unaware of her intentions, Nash went to his truck to grab clean clothes and take his well-needed shower. During his absence, she quickly dressed and headed to survey the area outside where the squatter had broken in. Same as before, they'd used a key, and because Nash hadn't closed the recently attached inside bolt, it had been easy. Thank goodness he'd interrupted whoever it was, and they'd fled, leaving the patio door open. Otherwise, she might never have known they'd been invaded again.

According to his story, he'd stepped outside to get some air before hitting the sack. But he swore he'd closed the door tightly and turned the lock, sadly without thinking to slide the bolt shut too. Of course, it was before he'd joined her for a drink.

Hearing his story, Ana surmised that whoever had been squatting in their house had kept the key, and it only made sense that they would have used it again this time. The more she thought about it, the more she decided it most likely happened just that way.

After all, the key they'd hidden outside under the flowerpot had disappeared and was probably the same one the housebreaker had first used. Foolishly, she hadn't had the lock changed after knowing they'd had an unwanted visitor. Just added the bolt thinking it would work as a sufficient deterrent.

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Something poked at her consciousness... like a toothache not willing to be ignored. Why the hell would they come back knowing that the house was now occupied? Wouldn't they have seen the lights and the vehicle? What didn't ring true? What was she missing?

It was Nash who came up with a practical reason. "Could be, whoever stayed here left something behind and wanted it back enough to break in again."

"Okay. That makes sense."

"I do have my moments." Nash's sheepish act made her laugh.

"Oh, hush." Without even noticing, she pushed at him like a child might do to another in friendship. Theories were fighting for supremacy, and from experience, she knew she had to give them time to jell. Then she snapped her fingers. "I've got it... what's been bugging me. With all the stuff going on, I forgot that I hooked up a few cameras outside after realizing someone had been squatting here while the house was empty. Let's hope I knew what I was doing when I installed them."

She went for her phone and brought it to where Nash waited. Together, they opened her app, and both sat back frustrated. The motion lights had been smashed and the silhouette of the person breaking in simply looked to be a dark mass in human form. From the weird angle, they couldn't make out any features that might have helped solve the mystery.

Discouraged, Nash spoke first. "What are you going to do?" He had some ideas but knew he'd get further by questioning her rather than forcing his own thoughts before

she had a chance to voice her own.

Appreciating his tact, Ana grimaced. “First of all, I’ll be absolutely sure that bolt is in place from now on. And I’ll make certain that the inside door from the bedroom suite to the rest of the house is also locked, so even if he or she breaks the glass to gain entrance, they won’t be coming into the main house.”

“Good idea.”

“Then we’re going to go through the suite like kids on an easter-egg hunt. You up for it?”

“You bet.” He followed her back to his room where he saw his ruined sweatpants pooled on the floor so as not to make a mess on the furniture. “Frankly, between us, I’m having a hard time controlling my anger. The thought that a stranger broke into your home, snooped around, and carelessly set a fire, makes me wish I could get a few minutes alone with the prick.”

“Funny thing? Me too.” They grinned at one another before Ana turned on all the lights and they started their search.

An hour later, they ended up slumping side by side on the bed, both frustrated and seething with disappointment. “Nothing.” Nash smoothed his mustache, pushing it from side to side, a habit he had when stressed. “I thought I had it figured out.”

“Me, too. We’re still no further ahead as to why the culprit came back here tonight. Hell, we don’t even know if it’s the same person.”

“That’s kind of a given though, right?”

“True. But why set the fire?”

“Hell if I know.” Nash added, “They’d already made good their escape and must have realized I couldn’t see them. Are we even sure it was the same person who broke in, and the one who set the fire?”

“See... I don’t know that either and that’s pissing me off. In fact, everything about this case is pissing me off.”

Nash laughed at her disgruntled expression. “It’s light enough now to go and inspect the fire remains. Just maybe I can find some indication as to how it started.”

“Good luck. I’ll make breakfast, and then we’ll need to head back into town.”

Nash took his flashlight and did a survey of the ruins, carefully detailing everything in the vicinity.

What’s this now?

About two feet away, he spotted a couple cigarette butts on the ground by the nearest tree. Knowing a bit about evidence retrieval, he scooped the leaves up under the butts to lift them as a whole parcel and not sully any possible DNA. His brain worked overtime, firing questions at him.

Could this be the way they started the fire?

If so, why stay so far away... out here by a tree?

Were they waiting to watch their handiwork, and I disturbed them?

Son of a bitch... was I that close to the sicko?

He couldn’t be sure. One thing he did know, the brand was Marlboro which was one

of the most popular choices in the US. Also, the butts appeared dry, making him think they hadn't been there very long. Plus, no lipstick stains, which suggested a man had smoked them or a woman who didn't wear any makeup.

Not a lot to go on, but just maybe they could pull DNA from them and have a person of interest to question.

Chapter Eighteen

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Bothered and jumpy, Ana whipped around the kitchen making coffee and beating the omelette ingredients feverishly while her mind seethed in absolute turmoil. She couldn't believe she'd allowed Nash to get so close to her in such a short period of time. If only the silly bastard hadn't carried her up the stairs like she weighed nothing.

All her life, she'd hated being taller and stronger than her schoolmates. The fact that she didn't have rounded shoulders, and a persistent hunch could only be attributed to her father. He'd made a deal with her the first time he saw her stooping with her back bunched awkwardly when she was a ten-year-old.

Letting her mind wander to that incident, she remembered the serious look on his face when he'd sat her down and then perched in front of her. "Anastacia, my pet, let's make a deal. You know how you and your mother have been bugging me to stop smoking my cigars... well, I'll stop, but only if you promise me something. Something that means the world to me. Something I'd give up my favorite cigars for."

Willing to play the game, she had agreed. "What's my end of the bargain?"

"I need you to hold your shoulders back and your head up high."

"Excuse me?" Confused, she had argued. "But I do, Dad."

"No, you don't." He'd led her in front of the mirror and pointed at her slouched position. Then he gently pushed at her back to make her stand straight.

“See. Like this. I want you to act like you’re proud of your body. Right now, you might not believe me when I tell you how fortunate you are to take after my side of the family with your height. But one day you will be very glad that you’re tall and slender.”

“Don’t think so, Dad. I hate being called Giraffe and having the other kids make fun of me. It’s - it’s humiliating.” Tears threatened and were held back by pure willpower.

Her dad’s hand affectionately rubbed her shoulder. “So... you figure that by hunching your shoulders like you’re some kind of weakling is going to make that better?”

“No-o. That’s just dumb.”

“It is dumb because the more you do it, you’ll form a habit that’s almost impossible to stop. Here’s what I want you to do. Look those idiots in the eye, don’t turn away, don’t say a word, just stare them down. They’ll be intimidated.”

“How?”

“Because they’ll think you might follow up with violence.”

Ana remembered how the shock of his reply had made her voice squeak. “You mean you want me to beat them up?”

“Doubt if it’ll come to that. Even young people sense when you’re ready to back up your aggression with force. And in my dealings with folks, they usually yield before they get hurt.”

And it hadn’t been long before she’d found out her father knew what he was talking

about. From that day onward, she walked tall... and he quit smoking.

The odors from the cooking food brought her back to the present and warned her if she didn't remove the frying pan, the omelettes would be burnt. While Ana finished setting up their meal, she went back to thinking about the man who'd rocked her world with his warm mouth and strong body.

What shocked her even more had been the new easiness in their relationship. Considering she'd never reached such relaxed behavior with the occasional partners she been forced to work with in the past, being comfortable with this fool man – the one she couldn't seem to stop touching – frightened her silly.

There'd always been a constraint with others, no doubt put there by herself. But early on in her career, she'd learned a lesson about not letting anyone get too close. Happened with her first partner who got shot on the job, and Ana could never get over the guilt that she hadn't given him enough protection or stopped the attack in time. From that day onward, she'd enforced a distance between her and whoever she worked with... keeping everything purely professional.

Now, having Nash beside her as they walked into the jail rocked her steady world. Jesus only knew how much she liked that he was there, but she sure as shit wouldn't let anyone else know. Especially the cowboy himself.

And the fact that he'd found a piece of evidence they might use to expose her housebreaking culprit made her feel, at least for this mystery, good about his actions hopefully leading to a break in the case.

Dave seemed to be snoozing, his slumped body appearing exhausted. Ana hated to disturb him but had no choice. She spoke softly so as not to startle him. "Hey, Sheriff. Everything quiet?"

Like a weary old dog, he eventually shook himself awake. “Hey, Nash. Hey, Ana. Yep, maybe too quiet. It’s eerie. Didn’t get any usable prints at Sadie’s place, but we’d figured that would happen, didn’t we?”

He looked at the plastic bag in Nash’s hands. “What’s that you got there?”

Nash explained about the break-in and the fire behind the cabin before holding out the evidence. “I found this in the grass near the shed, and I’m hoping it might give us an idea as to who was out there.”

“Hmm. Could be. I’ll send it to the lab. It’s gonna take a few days.” Suddenly, the older man perked up, leaned over, and stared at the specimen. “Marlboro’s. Now where’ve I seen some of these suckers lately?”

Ana and Nash didn’t move or speak. Waiting for Dave to answer his own question, they both sensed it might be important.

“Got it!” He snapped his fingers. “There were a bunch someone had crushed in the leftover food containers at Sadie’s house. Never thought too much of it because it’s the brand she smokes.”

“But would Sadie put her cigarette out in scrap food?”

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“Not fucking likely. We’re talking about an obsessive neat freak.”

Ana was scared to ask but had to. “Did they clean the place out yet?”

“Not that I know of.” Dave stood so fast; his office chair hit the cabinets behind. “I’ll go over there right now and make sure they don’t get tossed.” He picked up his hat and then stopped, asking a question without having to make explanations. “I could use some help checking with the stores around here, seeing who else they know might be buying this brand.”

“On it.” Ana straightened from the tall cabinet where she’d propped herself up, and Nash pushed away from the wall he’d leaned against. Both followed Dave outside. Because the spread-out town only had three places nearby that sold cigarettes, it didn’t take them long to come up with a list of buyers, mainly residents of the area.

There was one person named who stood out. Only because the woman behind the bar who gave them the information happened to be the gossipy type and observed things others missed.

“Hey, Ana. Good to see you’re back in these parts. I can make you a coffee but the bar’s closed until noon. Who’s this good looking you have with you today?”

“Hey Nan, he’s Maria’s boy, come to check on Lew.” Ana waved at the tall hunk behind her. “Nash meet Nan, the lady who runs the bar, keeps everyone in line, and knows all the locals.”

Nan, a large boned woman, reached out a powerful-looking hand to shake vigorously,

saying, “I’m sorry to hear about Lew. What’s the world coming to when folks aren’t safe here in these mountains?” She cussed a string of words that might make a normal man blush before adding, “Glad to hear he’s doing better.”

Nash didn’t so much as blink over her behavior. Instead, he grinned at the barmaid with a respect Ana appreciated. “Thanks. Lew’s a fighter. It’ll be a while, but if all goes as planned, he’ll recover.”

“Good. So what can I do for you folks?” Nan searched Ana’s face, her own serious as all get-out.

“We’re helping Dave with the case and need some info about who you might have sold packages of Marlboros to lately?”

“Hmm... is that a lead to the killer?” Nan’s black eyes opened wide. “Wouldn’t have thought we’d have a murderer running loose around here. Like I said before, we’re a quiet community.”

“Hell, we don’t know for sure.” Ana, remembering how easy it was for Nan to trail off in different directions, wanted to keep her on track, and so she kept digging. “Anyone other than the locals buying that brand?”

“Hmm. Funny you should ask. There’s this kid who tried to weasel some outta me two days ago. I had to ID her cause she bloody lied about being twenty-one. Shit, the kid didn’t even look like she was out of high school.”

“Did she have any identification?”

“Not a believable one. Appeared homemade. The kind I’ve seen a hundred times from the brats around here.”

“Can you remember the name on it?”

“Sure. Said she was Mila Smirnova. I like the name Mila and had an unforgettable customer years ago with the same last name. Family owned property here in the mountains. Even asked her if they were related, but she froze up and left before saying another word.”

“Had you seen her before?”

“Nah. Well, wait. When I drove to work yesterday, I saw her on the street with an older guy, probably her brother. He was gripping her jacket like she was his prisoner... know what I mean? Yanking her along with him as if she was holding back.” Nan sneered before adding, “Sure didn’t look like he had any love for her. It’s like a lot of broken families today. If you ask me—”

Interrupting, Ana brought the subject back to what they had come to discuss. “You’re positive Mila wanted that brand... Marlboros?”

“Yeah. Said they were for her brother. Appeared kinda nervous, but I just put it down to her lying. Another thing, the kid was filthy, her long hair a mess of tangles, worse than someone living in the campgrounds. And you know what some of those idiots can look like after a week in the bush.”

Nash broke into the conversation. “Please tell me they’ve restricted open fires in those campgrounds.”

“Of course.” Nan glared at him as if he’d asked a dumb question and shouldn’t have. “There’s a huge fine for anyone breaking that rule, and the Rangers are enforcing it bigtime.”

“Good. It’s a tinderbox out there right now. I’m surprised you haven’t had any

wildfires yet.”

“Oh, we have. But smaller ones they’ve been able to contain. We’re all pretty savvy, especially the full-time residents.”

While they talked, Ana took a moment to survey the bar area and saw what she’d been praying for. “You have a camera pointing at the customers. Can we look at the footage for the day you say Mila was here?”

“Sure can.” In minutes, Nan returned with her laptop and rewound to the day in question. “Let’s see. It was about four in the afternoon. Yep. Here she is. The skinny girl with the wild, unwashed hair.” Nan pointed to the teenager. “See what I mean, she’s not old enough to be buying cigs. Don’t know why her brother didn’t come in hisself.”

The brown hair in question made it hard to see her features. Of course, the fact that she kept her face down didn’t help either.

“Her teeth are crooked. I remember now. And she had on long-sleeves when the temps were over a hundred. Hotter’n the Hades of hell out there, and that girl had been bundled up like it was a winter day. Fishy... if’n you ask me.”

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Ana revisited the earlier subject. “Can you remember where the Smirnova family lived.”

“Not really, but it won’t do you much good anyway. They sold out years ago. I kinda remember there was a scandal attached, but the details slipped my mind. Person best to help you with that would be Lew. If I recall, he brokered the deal. Back in those days, he used to be the only real estate agent around these parts. That was before he met Maria and bought the convenience store.”

Ana looked at Nash and saw that he was staring at her, his eyes flashing, making her feel certain they were thinking the same thing.

As soon as they stepped out of the bar, he turned to her. “What if it wasn’t a random shooting? Could they have planned to kill Lew and make it appear as a break-in gone wrong?”

“Beats me. This whole puzzle is insane. Two incidents in a matter of days and totally unrelated. One thing I do know, we need to locate Lew’s old files and find out exactly where that Smirnova place was.”

“So, you’re thinking what I’m thinking. That the girl might have something to do with this case.”

“Right now, I figure she might be our burglar.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Do you remember me bringing in a bag of evidence to Dave when we met there? The things left behind in the house. Now that I think of it, the sleeping bag wouldn’t have fit a full-grown man. And the only articles that appeared to be rifled through in the closet were my mother’s. I didn’t pay much attention at the time, thinking the person nosing around was searching for something to sell.”

“Hold it.” Nash snapped his fingers. “Remember we thought that last night’s break-in might have been because the thief left something behind? What if they did, only you’d gathered it up with the articles you took to Dave?”

Ana’s finger pointed to him in agreement. “Nice play, Sherlock. I think you might have hit on something. Let’s check if Dave sent the stuff away yet?”

As they made their way to Nash’s truck, his grinning made her bite her lip to stop from putting him down. She had to force herself not to react badly when he voiced his thoughts. “My dear Watson, I do believe we make a great team.”

“Yeah, about that. Don’t hold your breath.”

Chapter Nineteen

Hanna hadn’t wanted to stay the night in the waiting room and the next with Maria at her house. Or drive back to the hospital to see Lew, but she’d had no say in the decision. After all, Ana couldn’t hang with her when she needed to help in the investigation, which was totally understandable. But Hanna didn’t have to like it. Searching her mind for reasons for her nastiness, she finally admitted that the irritation was most likely rooted in fear.

For the first time in years, Ana had made her feel protected... safe, like nothing could happen to her as long as they were together. And that faith had been missing from her world for a long time. Though her family hadn’t personally been caught up in the war

until they'd moved to live at the farm in Mariupol, fighting had been a stench in the air and a fear in the belly of every Ukrainian alive. They talked, ate, slept, and lived the nasty war. And for a young impressionable girl, it had taken its toll.

Would she ever feel completely safe again? Probably not. And she accepted that as part of what she'd lived through. But Jesus help her, she desperately wanted to feel that life held out some hope for happiness. Didn't everyone deserve that? She prayed all the time for her country... and her people. And she'd sworn to return someday to help them. But for now... for these few years before she matured, couldn't she at least have a reason to wake up every morning and feel like it was worth it.

Ana had given her that. But now that her cousin was too busy to pay any attention, Hanna felt her loss deeply. Trudging along, her head in the clouds, she tried making sense of all that had happened. Earlier, she'd left Maria with Lew who seemed on the verge of waking up from his coma, and she'd promised she'd return with iced tea for them both to ward off the dry air of the hospital room.

Turning a corner in the badly-lit basement parking area of the facility – a shortcut to getting to the cafeteria – she tripped on something that made her stumble and fall. Only her strong arms and quick thinking stopped her from taking a face-plant on the cement.

Hearing a groan behind her forced her to move, triggering her flight mode seconds later. She'd expected to be alone and finding someone else in her space panicked her so badly that rather than running, she slipped again. That's when she turned to her expected attacker and instead saw a poor girl around her age who needed help badly.

She'd been beaten, and her scrawny body appeared to Hanna like one of the war victims in a bombing. Her clothes were tattered and as dirty as her face and hair were. The girl's hands reaching out to Hanna for help were shaking so badly that Hanna's fear evaporated instantly.

Instead of running away, she moved closer, leaning toward the girl who's eyes were trying to focus as she whispered in a broken voice. "Help me."

"It's okay. Don't be scared. I'd never hurt you."

As if the words had made sense, the girl pushed upwards, almost flinging herself toward her savior. "I need to hide. Please. Help me. Help—" Then she struggled as if trying to stand, all the while crying softly in pain. Without arguing, sensing there was no time, Hanna put her strong arms around the other's waist and guided her toward the hospital, and through the doors.

Loud screeching noises from an approaching car that drove in circles around the pillars came closer. Without the panicked girl having to say anything, Hanna understood by her behavior that the person in the vehicle was who they ran from.

Just in time, she closed the heavy door behind them and turned the lock. Then she snuck a peek through the small window and saw a man exit the van. He put the cigarette he carried in his mouth and used his hands to reach down for the sweater the girl had left behind. Then, he turned toward the door they'd gone through. By doing so, he stepped into the light.

Instantly, Hanna's heart stopped. Her pulse exploded with a crushing fear gushing through her system so rapidly, she couldn't breathe. Her legs lost all strength. And then she dropped to the ground. When the door handle jangled, she vaguely heard the indrawn squeal of the girl beside her and didn't notice when she hid herself against Hanna for protection.

Time stood still. She was back at the farm. Frozen in disbelief, wheezing and shuddering so badly, she hardly felt the girl pull her close and hold her. Together they stayed like that for a long, long time.

Chapter Twenty

Ana took the phone call without expecting bad news. After all, she'd spoken to Maria earlier and had heard that Lew had been taken off the ventilator and was coming around. That was wonderful news. It meant the doctor's believed he'd recover.

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Therefore, when she now heard such a strong panic in Maria's voice, she stiffened and saw both Nash and Dave swing her way. Had she made a sound? Could have. After all, when it came to Hanna's welfare, she'd become deeply invested. And to hear that Hanna had disappeared long enough for them to instigate a search rattled her terribly.

"Slow down, Maria. What do you mean she's missing?"

"Ana, I swear, everything was fine before she went to the cafeteria for iced tea. But then, I got caught up with Lew's doctors and didn't realize how long she'd been gone. Ana, she left well over an hour ago. We put out a message through the loudspeakers for her to go to the information desk. When she didn't show up, I got worried. Everyone in the hospital is looking for her."

"I'm sorry, Maria. What could she be thinking? This is a bad time for you."

"I know. Lew isn't waking up like the doctors expected and now this. I'm half out of my mind. Look, she couldn't have lost her way because we've been to the lunchroom more than once. Besides, she said she'd cut through the parking lot and that really only takes a few minutes."

"Did you ask the girls in the cafeteria if any of them remember seeing her?"

"No. That's just it. She never showed up. And we've checked everywhere in the hospital. What worries me is she isn't answering her phone. Now what kid in today's world doesn't constantly check her messages? Jesus, I can't believe this is happening, but I couldn't hold off calling you any longer. Can you come?"

“I’m leaving now. Don’t worry, we’ll find her. She’s not used to the area and might have wandered off for a walk and gotten lost. I’ll contact the local PD and get them to keep an eye out for her. You stay with Lew. See you soon.”

Since Nash wouldn’t take no for an answer, they drove there together, the silence surprisingly comfortable between them. Finally, he spoke. “I can see you care about Hanna a lot. If she’s the same girl you had with you in the SUV the first time we met, and then later in the hospital, I’m thinking she’s a sweetheart.”

“She is a sweetheart. Totally. And she’s been through hell. Came here from Ukraine almost a month ago and has finally begun to relax. If anything bad’s happened to her, I don’t know if she could take it. The girl’s a breakdown waiting to happen.”

“I’m so sorry. It must have been hell for her back home.”

Ana told him a bit about Hanna’s background, how she lost her parents recently but kept the finer details to herself. That was Hanna’s story to tell.

When they finally pulled up to the entrance of the hospital, he stopped, got out of the truck and went to the passenger side. Holding the door, he spoke softly. “I’ll park the truck. You go. I’ll catch up with you inside.”

“Thanks.” Ana swiveled his way to say thanks, and their embrace seemed natural somehow. They stood together hugging. She breathed in his male fragrance that made her think of walks in the forest, and she found her face nestled against his warm chest. “Thank you.” When she pulled away, she sensed he hadn’t wanted to let her go.

Funny thing. She hadn’t wanted to leave.

Nash drove around the back of the building where they had visitor's parking outside. He reversed into the only open space at the end of the lot, closest to the woods. When he stepped down from the cab to head inside, he heard a strange sound he thought for sure was a voice, but he had no idea where it came from. He stopped with his head down and listened.

This time it came louder. "Nash?"

Again, he stood still... waiting.

Long moments passed before the girl spoke louder. "Nash, don't look this way. We're hiding. In the bushes behind the truck."

Something in the tone made him sense he had to be careful. Not to rush or bring any attention to himself. As if he wanted to check something in the back of his vehicle, he sauntered over while trailing his hand against the side panel.

Pretending to check his tires, he crouched down. "Hanna?"

"Yes. It's me. We need help."

"Okay. Tell me what you want me to do."

"I have someone with me. She's been hurt. We need her to see a doctor. Can you help us?"

"Of course. Is it okay for me to come to where you're hiding?"

"No, don't. The car's still driving around, looking for her. We just saw it. You can't let him find us. He might shoot you. He has a gun."

Not understanding completely but aware she meant business; he offered a solution she might agree to. “How about I leave the back door of my truck ajar and walk toward the building. You can take your time to hide inside so when I return with Ana, we’ll drive away like nothing is wrong. There’s a clinic a few miles away we can go to. Will that work for you?”

“Yes. That sounds perfect. We can’t take any chances, or we’ll die. You have to understand, Nash. He’s the devil. A horrible killer.”

Swallowing the million questions stuck in his tight throat, he answered carefully. “I understand.” Then he pretended to check in the back, moving things around, while actually making room for his passengers. Being sure to leave the tailgate slightly open, he headed inside the building.

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It took everything he had not to turn around and see for himself how the girls were managing, but he'd promised not to bring any attention their way. Instead, he sauntered at a normal pace to get inside the building. Once clear, he rushed to the nearest window but saw nothing from that angle.

Wanting to get back to the girls as soon as possible, he approached the information desk and asked for directions to Lew's room, then quickly made his way there. Moments later, he left the elevator and saw where his mom stood, clinging to Ana's hands.

Moving closer, he heard Maria's words. "I swear Hanna was fine the last time I saw her. In fact, she offered to go and get the iced tea." As soon as Maria saw he'd arrived, she rushed to be gathered close in his arms and clung, tears cascading down her cheeks. "Nash. It's Lew. He's not waking up."

Nash held her close, his hand patting her back gently. "Mom, Lew's always been contrary. I've no doubt he'll wake up on his own time. Look, I talked to the doctors on the way here, and they don't seem too worried. His temperature is back down to normal, and he's not showing any signs of infection so the antibiotics must be working. You just need to give him a little more time."

Maria pushed away from his arms and wiped at the mess on her face, accepting the tissues Ana held out. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just so much to deal with, I guess I needed a cry and for you to tell me it's gonna be okay."

She turned toward Ana. "I'm sorry. I know you're worried about Hanna. Like I said, we have no idea what could have happened to the girl. There's no sign of her

anywhere.”

“You say she went through the underground parking to get to the cafeteria quicker?”

“Yes, the nurse told us it’s a shortcut... a lot faster than going through the hospital.”

“Okay, I’ll just go and take a look around and see if there’s any sign that was missed. Nash will stay with you.”

“No. Mom needs to be with Lew. I’ll come along with you.” His determined sternness brought both ladies staring his way. Realizing he’d spoken out of character, he added, “I’m thinking of Hanna. Two sets of eyes are better than one.”

Ana seemed surprised by his commanding tone, but she nodded. “We’ll keep in touch.”

Maria hugged them both before heading back into Lew’s room.

As soon as she turned her back, Nash took Ana’s arm and hurried her toward the door that Maria had pointed out. Once they were in the staircase and out of sight, he drew her close and told her about the incident by the truck. “We need to get backthere. I promised Hanna we wouldn’t give her hiding spot away, so we’ll get in the truck like nothing’s happened and drive away.”

“You say there were two of them?”

“It’s what Hanna led me to believe when she kept referring toweandsheneeds a doctor.”

Walking close together, keeping their voices low, they made their way through the dim parking area. Suddenly, Ana stopped and leaned down, taking Nash by surprise.

“What’s that? See under the car?”

Nash crouched and quickly retrieved what Ana had spotted. Standing, he handed over the smashed cellphone. “I think it’s been a victim of a hit and run.” Giddy, happy for knowing that Hanna was alive, and they’d be with her shortly, he grinned at Ana. Seeing her expression, his smile faded. “What?”

“It’s Hanna’s cell. Probably why she never answered any texts or contacted us.”

“Shit me, I didn’t know. It’s a bummer, but a phone can be replaced, right?”

Ana stared into his face, and her grim look disappeared to be replaced with a happy smile. “True dat. Let’s go and find out what this is all about.”

Careful not to bring any attention to themselves, they got into the truck, making sure not to glance toward the back while Nash drove slowly out of the lot. He scanned the area, remembering that Hanna had said the devil was driving a car, and since they’d spotted him, she believed he was still searching for them. Nothing seemed out of place and soon they were well on their way.

Again, word for word, he answered Ana’s demands, speaking of what transpired earlier between him and Hanna. Her questions came at him like cannon fire. “She said that he was the devil. Those exact words?”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“She begged me not to bring attention to them. Not to look their way.”

“Was she crying?”

“Not really. She was whispering, but I heard the panic. When I hesitated, she said something about not wanting to take any chances. Or they’d be dead. He had a gun. He’s a killer.”

“Considering what’s been happening lately, I guess we’ll have to take her at her word. Let’s find a place to pull over so we can see exactly what we’re up against.”

Once they’d driven for a few more minutes and were sure they hadn’t been followed, he pulled into a secluded spot. Both he and Ana went to the back of the vehicle to let the girls out and see what kind of a casualty they’d be dealing with.

Smiling, he lifted the back door. “You’re safe now Hanna. You can come out.”

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No one answered.

The truck was empty.

Chapter Twenty-one

Frantic, Ana questioned Nash yet again. “The devil. She said those exact words? The devil.”

“Yes. I told you that the last three times you asked. Why does that seem so important?” Nash drove like a bat out of hell, heading back to the hospital, to the last place where the girls had been seen.

Frustration reeling through her fear, she yelled the words without realizing she’d done so. “Because... it’s how she’s always referred to the man who killed her parents.”

“What?”

Calming her voice, she added, “When Hanna first arrived and was still processing her hideous past, we heard her say it over and over. Those exact words. The devil had killed her mamó and tato. It’s how she referred to the man in her nightmares and always in a voice filled with dread. Having seen the worst deadly sin happen in front of her, she could only equate it as that son of a bitch’s work.”

Ana remembered how every time Hanna had shared her past, she’d spoken those words as if they were sacrosanct... as if she’d witnessed pure evil. At the time, it had

made her skin crawl, and considering what she'd seen in her career, that didn't happen often. Yet Hanna's cryptic words had managed to strike at a buried fear she'd always kept under control. That same sense of loss she'd had when they'd called her to come to the bank where her father had tried to stop a killer... and failed.

"Ana?" Nash broke into her memories and brought her back from the dreadful place her mind had wandered. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just worried. Look, when Hanna told us what happened in Mariupol, she said the devil who had murdered her parents had himself been killed."

"Excuse me?"

Uncaring if she broke a confidence, she decided Nash needed to understand the full story. How could he follow her thoughts otherwise? And she felt like a crazy person just thinking them. Therefore, she explained the facts as told to her and her mother by young Hanna. When she came to the end of her recital, it sounded farfetched to her too.

Nash glanced her way, his face reflecting his lack of understanding. "Hold it. You say she told you that the devil was shot to death. She said that."

"Yes by the other Russian. To save her from getting burned or worse, being found, tortured, maybe raped... and then killed. It was a brutal situation, and she survived."

"Jesus. Poor kid."

"She's managed to move on but now you're telling me that she said she saw the devil. This is gonna sound crazy. But could it be the same freak who shot her family?"

“Christ, I don’t know. All I can tell you is she described the man in the car using that word.” Nash whipped the truck around the last bend and headed to the same spot where he’d parked before, thankful to see it was still empty.

Both got out of the vehicle, with Nash leading them to where he heard Hanna. “Over here. That’s where her voice came from.” They pushed past the bushes to where Nash surmised the girls had been hiding. Ana called out forcefully. “Hanna. Answer me. Are you still here? It’s safe to come out now. We’ll take care of you both.”

Nothing but an eerie silence.

Nash and Ana searched throughout the area, and it was Ana who spied the bracelet that Hanna never took off. It had been made by one of the child refugees in the Polish hospital where they had first taken Hanna for a physical. She’d proudly shown it to them, saying that the girl had been only ten but had started making the bracelets to earn money for the war effort. The one Hanna wore had been a special gift and was treasured as such.

Now it lay on the ground, dirty and left behind in the mud. A sign? Proof that the girl had been here. Proof that she was in terrible trouble. Unknowingly, Ana pushed at her chest, at the pain radiating throughout. The same pain she’d experienced once before.

It was Nash who brought her back from the black hole of misery.

Made her listen.

Helped her brain to function like a cop again.

“There’s got to be video of the parking lot, right? Hanna said the car was following them. We need to figure out what car and see if we can get a license plate number. She said then, so I’m thinking there would only be one man in the vehicle.”

Back in her cop mode, she grabbed at his calm, clinging tightly. “Yes, you’re right. That’s good. Let’s go talk to hospital security.”

An hour later, they’d reviewed the full day of tape and had a dozen cars that might fit the description of the one they were looking for.

Armed with the evidence, Ana called her friends at the Bureau with the information, praying they could come up with names and addresses to follow up on.

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Meanwhile, a frantic text from Pat that Dave had collapsed arrived, and they rushed back to the mountain. Nash drove like a bat out of hell, being careful that he didn't take any chances, but still got them there quickly.

Rather than watching the road, Ana worked her phone, getting as much information as she could from Lew's nurse, plus updates on the case from Pat who was still freaking out over Dave. Nash's voice cut into her concentration. "You know the old saying... it never rains, it pours?"

"Not sure it goes quite like that, but I know which one you're referring to, and you're right. Poor Dave. He's not used to handling this kind of an extreme case. I guess the pressure got to be too much for him. Pat says he's better now but resting."

"What happened to him?"

"He's just saying a breakdown, but I'm thinking, old guy like him, it could be his heart."

"Dammit, the stress is getting to all of us. You've got me believing that a ghost is behind the hijacking of the girls. Next you'll be saying he's the killer in town too."

Ana slapped her phone against her knee. "Hemustbe. There can't be two murdering whackos running around a normally safe place like our mountain. I ah—" She started another sentence and then stopped.

"Okay. What's that look about?"

“I’m trying to tell myself I’m not crazy. But I’m thinking we need to find out more about the link of the Smirnova family who used to own property here with the young girl Hanna’s protecting.

“I don’t think you’re crazy.” Nash reached for her hand and gripped it tight before she could pull back. Weird as it seemed, she didn’t want to stop the familiarity. Instead, she squeezed tighter and listened to his warm voice, while feeling less alone. “You’re a freaking genius, Ana, my love. You figure Hanna’s with the same girl Nan told us about in the bar, don’t you? The sad girl in the video. The one who’s brother mistreated her on the street.”

“It’s a possibility... right?”

“More than a possibility.”

“From the beginning, when Nan mentioned her name and the connection with Lew, this association has been brewing in my head. We have nothing else to go on until we hear back from the FBI on those plates. I say we check up on Dave and then go to the local land office and search old records for the Smirnova place.”

“I’m your guy. Glad we have some direction now.”

“Oh, no. I meant it would be something I could do. After we visit Dave, you have to get back to your mother. If you drop me in town, I can rent a car.”

Nash pulled in front of the jail, shut down the motor, and turned to Ana. Before she could see his intentions, he put both his hands on her cheeks to imprison her from twisting away.

His determined expression revealed a special light in his gaze that made her heart beat faster. He kissed her hard and then said ever so gently, the steel in his tone

undeniable, “Baby, you ain’t getting rid of me... so stick that in your pretty little bonnet. I’m a thorn in your side until I know you’re safe.”

She shoved his hands away, grumbling, using her hardest agent tone. “Bullshit. I’m a cop, remember? With a badge. And a gun... a big one.”

“Don’t care.” When she saw the gleam in his narrowed gaze, and the stiffness throughout his body, she knew there’d be no talking to the stubborn ox of a man.

“Fine. Have it your way, but don’t say I didn’t offer.” Opening the door, she slid out. By the time he’d come around to her side, she’d reached the sidewalk. Once he stood behind her, she spit words to reveal her annoyance. “Pretty little bonnet!? Give me a break.”

“I know... right? Just stating my case.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Don’t have to. Didn’t want to piss you off.”

“Well you failed.... dumb bastard.”

Through the window, she saw the smile on his handsome face and sighed.

Chapter Twenty-two

Not only was Dave in his office waiting for them, the man was furious. And Nash picked up on the reason first. “Okay. Okay. Calm down my friend. Pat’s just trying to look out for you.”

“Yeah, well the stupid son of a bitch didn’t need to be telling tales on his boss that

could get him fired.” Dave glared toward the open door that led to the other side of the jail. Of course, he knew Pat could hear his words and had shouted them on purpose.

In the distance, they all heard Pat’s reply. “Bite me and take your medicine.”

Ana’s arched look spoke volumes as she repeated, “Medicine?”

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Suddenly, Dave looked sheepish. “It’s my blasted blood pressure pills. Forgot to fill my prescription last week, and with all the shit going down in my jurisdiction, I got too busy to remember. Doc said me blacking out was a warning.” With his voice raised again, he shouted, “So... I got the goddamn pills, and all is fine.”

In reply, the scoffing grunt could be heard loud and clear... which Dave ignored. Instead, he looked toward Nash and Ana. “Now let’s drop this shit and get back to the case. Tell me what happened in town.”

Nash sat back and watched Ana calmly and succinctly tell Dave all that had gone down at the hospital, about how they were waiting on the addresses of the vehicles in question. When she mentioned the part about the Smirnova’s connection, he held his hand up. “That’s what Nan said?”

“Yes. She knew the ID was a fake. But she said the name was clearly Smirnova.”

“Hmm... I remember a Mike Smirnova. He’s the old man who owned a huge section back in the 90’s. Came from Poland I believe. Had a couple of boys, Boris and Vladimir who moved back with their mother to live with her family in Russia.” Dave’s following grin held little humor and a lot of contempt. “God love her, that woman was a nutcase, carried a bowie knife in her belt and had the personality of a crocodile, always snapping at folks. Only good thing I can say about her was her name, Mila. Her boys were like young, aggressive reptiles too. We weren’t sorry to see them gone.”

Both Nash and Ana straightened from their slouched positions. Ana spoke, her tone sharp. “Mila. Are you sure?”

“Of course. Why?”

“It’s the same name that the girl in the bar had on her ID, Mila Smirnova.”

“Now that can’t be a coincidence.” Dave shut his eyes tight and began talking. “Well, let me see. Lots of gossip around this story. Mike, who was at least twenty years older than his wife, became sick and before he passed, he sold the property to Sadie and her husband.”

Ana sat forward, snapping her fingers. “Bingo! There’s our connection. What happened?”

“Funny thing, he hadn’t left by the day Sadie and George took possession. When they went to move in they found the old man dead on the living room floor. Figured he passed from a heart attack.”

Old Pat’s voice sounded clear from the far room. “Because the stupid son of a bitch didn’t remember his pills either. See... that’s what happens.”

“Lord love a duck, Pat, drop it already.” Dave stood up and went to slam the door. Then he returned to his seat and leaned forward, his voice becoming stronger. “Sadly, two years ago, George died in a car accident and Sadie sold the big house and land to move to the smaller, more manageable place.”

Nash jerked forward, totally involved in the unraveling of the mystery. “Sadie? Our other victim. You’re a genius Ana. It could be why the killer picked her out. It wasn’t a random hit. This has to be the link.”

Ana shot to her feet. “Where’s the old Smirnova place?”

Dave jumped up, ignoring his desk chair smashing into the cabinet behind. He

grabbed his patrol car keys, and headed for the door, both Ana and Nash at his side.

Nash stopped dead when he saw the cruiser. “Hold it. If we drive up in a flashing police car, it might set off alarms for the killer if he’s there. Someone might get hurt. I say we take my truck with the company logos, and I can approach the house saying I’m with the fire department.”

Dave opened his door. “I need my vehicle. You can follow us. We’ll pull over before we get to their property, and depending on what we see there, we’ll decide on our best choice to approach.”

By the time they’d all belted in, tires shot gravel in every direction. Wheeling around, Dave sped down the main street towards the more secluded area where the roads through the forest were still gravel. Ana looked toward the cop and spoke with resolve. “You sure you’re up to this?”

“Yes, Mommy. I’m fine. Blasted Pat shoulda kept his mouth shut.”

“Maybe from your point of view, but from where I sit, I’m glad I know we have to treat you... ahh, gently.”

Dave grinned. “Gently. Right. Just try it, Buttercup.”

Laughing, she said, “You got any firearms in the trunk?”

“Yeah, a rifle that’s loaded and ready. Plus, there’s a small Glock in my glove compartment. Help yourself.”

Once Ana had the weapon tucked safely in her jeans, she felt better able to tackle any situation. Their destination, being a place where any unexpected chaos might be awaiting, had her clicking into her agent mode and preparing herself for the worst.

Sounding grim, Dave pointed out the windshield. “It’s just around this bend up ahead.”

“Maybe stop here. Nash had a point about barreling in and spooking the asshole into doing something stupid. Let’s do a recon and take our time before sneaking up. Maybe survey the surroundings. From a distance, we can check first to see if anything looks out of place.” Dave chuckled and pulled over, hiding the squad car on a side road with a dead end.

Nash pulled in behind them and hurried over to where they waited. “I’m thinking they’re further up this way.” Dave pointed toward a forested bluff of rocks. The three headed through the trees, making their way past the brush and stopped at the highest point overlooking the house.

“There it is. The Roddams live in the house now. A nice couple with two kids, one’s a girl around Hanna’s age.”

“Jesus H. Christ. She may be the girl with Hanna, the girl calling herself Mila.” Nash felt sickness explode throughout his body. When Ana turned towards him with a warning glare and a question unspoken, he shook his head. No way they were leaving him behind. He only hoped they were in time, and that if the angels were watching, they’d make sure he got a chance at the son of a bitch who deserved a good thrashing.

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The way Nash felt at the moment, he'd be just the guy to take care of business.

Chapter Twenty-three

Once they'd found a spot with a good view, Nash spoke up. "You guys thinking what I'm thinking? That the car Hanna mentioned could be there but parked on the other side?"

Ana pulled her phone from her pocket and showed the others the latest text that just dinged. "Christ. Now that I know the name of the folks who live there, this contact from the office makes sense. At the top of the list is a vehicle owned by Hattie Roddam."

"Fuck." Dave followed with a string of obscenities similar to Nan's own repertoire from the bar.

Ana couldn't help from pointing out the obvious. "Appreciate your sentiments, my friend, but maybe you're spending a bit too much time at the local drinking establishment."

Throwing her a grin first, Dave rounded the squad car to open the trunk and retrieve a rifle, binoculars, and two vests, while Ana and Nash headed toward the nearest peak hoping to have a better view of the yard. Once Dave joined them and passed over the equipment to Ana, he asked, "Can you make anything out?"

She answered slowly, scanning everywhere. "No car in sight. Could be parked on the side or in the old barn."

“Yeah, now I remember. Sadie’s husband George had a couple of horses when they lived here. There’s a few small sheds in the back of the property too, close to the lake road. Sadie used one for growing her violets. Had a business going, sold them to a plant shop in town.”

“It looks too quiet.” Nash voiced what they all thought.

Dave picked up on the statement, eagerness sounding in his tone. “Could be the family didn’t come here this week. They have a place in the city and visit only periodically during the season. It’s their cabin away... if you know what I mean.”

Ana heard the hopeful note in his voice and prayed he was right. But somehow in her heart, she knew he wasn’t. Too many things made sense and pointed to this connection.

Still... she agreed, “Okay. Before barging in, let’s dot our i’s and cross our t’s. I’ll see if they have a home phone, and we’ll call their number in the city. What’s the husband’s first name?”

“Let me think.” Dave scratched at his graying beard and closed his eyes. “It’s a short name, dammit, it’s right there.” He slapped at his forehead. “Steve. Scott. Sam... yes. It’s Sam. Sam Roddam.”

Ana got busy with her cellphone and soon had the right listing. She punched in the numbers, hit speaker, and all three waited. After four rings, a man’s voice answered. “Hello.”

Smiling now, Dave took the phone and began talking. “Sam? It’s Dave Chalmers, the local police chief at the lake. We’re here outside your place and think there might have been a break in. Are you and the family in the city?”

“What? Oh, God. No. My wife and daughter went there a couple of weeks ago. My son and I were going to join them on the weekend. Are they okay?”

Ana’s heart lay writhing in spirals on the ground while her blood turned to ice in her veins. When she’d first heard a man’s voice, she’d had a moment of thankfulness, imagining the family was safe. Now fear ravaged her. Pictures flooded of horrific images, and she had to take harsh control to put herself in the state of mind where nothing could be personal. That meant shutting down her frantic worry over Hanna.

It meant cutting all personal ties to the case.

And it meant she couldn’t let her heart rule her head.

Leaning forward, calmly she asked, “Mr. Roddam, is your daughter around fifteen years old with long brown hair?”

“Yes. Carly just turned fifteen last month, and she’s very hair proud... you know... always fussing with it, trying out different styles. Drives me and my wife batty. It’s her first time back at the lake. She’s been away studying in Paris for a year. My wife was so excited to show her all the changes we’ve made to the place that they drove down early. Can you tell me what’s happened?”

“We’re not sure. But we’re looking into it and can update you if anything changes.”

“Oh, my God.” The agonizing worry in his voice ramped up, and he began to stutter. “No. I mean, I’m o-on my way. C-coming tonight. Please keep them safe.” Before Ana could argue, he’d disconnected the call.

Obviously thinking what Ana didn’t put into words, Dave said them for her. “Shit me. We don’t need a crazy man here right now... no, we don’t.”

Nash ignored Dave's grumbling and spoke his mind, making sense of the situation. "We had no choice but to call. Better to know what we're up against. Looks to me like Hanna's devil is the guy who I'm suspecting is one of the Smirnova brothers."

Ana agreed with a nod. "And I'd say the dead body on the bed with Sadie is the other. And the girl Nan spoke about is Carly Roddam, the same one who's with Hanna."

"Which means those boys had to have come to this place at some point. When did Nan say she'd seen Mila – or should we say Carly – with her so-called brother?"

"Just a matter of days. You figure Les might have told them about the Roddams? Then they hit the old house and took the women hostage, or worse?"

Nash added, "And then found out the name of the people the Roddam's bought from and decided to go to Sadie's and wreak some kind of vengeance on her?" He grimaced after hearing his own words. "I don't know. That sounds kinda ludicrous."

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Dave interrupted. “It would, except now I remember the rest of the story. The scandal over the sale. The day before he died, old Mike cashed the check from the sale and got \$60,000 dollars in big bills. Then he came back here and a few hours later they found him dead.”

“Dead?” Nash’s shock was apparent before he added, “Right, I remember you told us.”

“Yep. Deader’n a doornail.”

Ana’s cop-brain kicked in. “Any sign of foul play?”

“Nope. None at all.”

Nash broke in with the question needing to be answered. “What about the money?”

“It was gone. Disappeared. We checked with Sadie and George, even the movers that arrived with them. They all swore the same thing... no one had seen the money.”

Chapter Twenty-four

With the daylight beginning to ebb, Ana knew they should make a move soon. They’d waited long enough without seeing any movement, and her worry over Hanna began to consume her. The inaction drove her insane.

Putting into words what had been blasting through Ana’s mind, Nash started. “We can’t just sit here and wait for something to happen. The girls could be in that house,

in trouble, and so could Mrs. Roddam. I need to know.”

Dave stopped pacing and came back to where they were watching the house. “Me, too. I’m antsy. Got this feeling we need to get down there.”

Without another word, Ana began to prepare alongside Dave. Taking the smaller of the vests, she removed her sweatshirt and didn’t so much as flinch while standing there in her white lacy bra. When she saw the shocked male faces, she chuckled. “It’s the secret girly part of me. I like nice undies. So sue me.”

While she talked, she continued to velcro on the safety garment and then replace the sweatshirt, stretching it away from her body so the vest didn’t show. Next, she replaced her gun in the back, shoving it into the waistband of her jeans.

Before she could move, Nash stopped her. “No way you’re going down there. I am.”

He saw her shift into a fighting stance and kept his voice steady but firm. Making them listen, he shared his point of view. “Look, it makes more sense.” When she jerked away, he spoke louder... quicker. “I’ll drive up in the truck, and they’ll see the forestry emblem. I even have a jacket in the back with my crests to prove who I am. And I can show them ID if they ask. I’ll warn them about the hazards we’re facing in the area, tell them I’m going door-to-door in the neighborhood. It’s legit, and they’ll believe me. I can get an idea of who’s in the house that way, right?”

He read Ana’s growing interest in the expression she didn’t try to hide. Finally, hesitantly, she nodded her agreement. And Dave, by claspings his arm, and smiling, he gave his permission. The following words he spoke low were meant to be taken seriously. “Be careful. We don’t know what’s going on down there. I sure as fuck don’t want your death on my conscience, got it?”

“Yes, sir, I will. Don’t worry. You’ll be able to see me from that spot there.” He

pointed to where they'd spent the most time. "If I need you, I'll signal."

Obeying an impulse she didn't question; Ana went with him to his truck. Knowing the danger he might be walking into left her mouth dry and swallowing impossible. Before he slid inside the vehicle, Nash gently put his hand on her cheek, sliding it to the back of her head, his fingers lifting her hair. He stared into her questioning eyes. And she could see his surprise when he made out her glazed stare, beseeching him to be careful. Her voice came out throaty with emotion. "Stay safe."

"You, too."

They didn't speak any more words, but their eyes flashed all kinds of messages that left Ana reeling. God help her... the man mattered more than she'd realized. Her chest tightened. Fear for his safety overwhelming her. Her eyes watered as the visions of what might happen flooded into her head. And her fists clenched in total frustration.

Because holding him back or clinging to keep him with her wasn't an option, she struggled to swallow her objections. God knew as well as she did, it was her job to deal with dangerous situations.... not his. As much as her heart wanted him to be safe, her brain knew his suggestion made sense. He'd have the best chance of approaching without setting off any alarms. And right now, the last thing they wanted to do was to make Smirnova nervous. If the girls were with him, and she had to believe they were, then all they could do was pray they were alive... as well as Carly's mother, Hattie Roddam.

Minutes later, Ana watched as Nash drove up to the front of the older, two-story cabin with its newly painted gray walls and red rose bushes out front. Dave passed over the binoculars, and she watched as the tall good-looker strode to the front door and rang the bell. While he waited, he pretended to smell the flowers, but Ana suspected it was his way of glancing inside the big window.

Moments passed and nothing happened. They observed him banging on the door and calling out this time. Still, nothing. Finally, he walked to the back of the house where he found another entry and repeated the knocking and shouting. Nothing at first. Then Ana saw him hesitate and stop to listen. Abruptly, he waved them to come and standing back from the door, he kicked it in like an actor in a movie drama.

Both her and Dave were in the cop car in seconds, driving like a bat out of hell. Braking sharply, spitting rocks, they both jumped from the car. With Ana in the lead, they joined at the back of the house where they'd watched Nash disappear.

Before she could mount the outside porch, Dave grabbed her arm. "Hold on in case we need backup. Don't know what's happening inside."

"Okay. Hurry. I'll wait to follow."

She watched Dave disappear inside and made her way over to the nearest window to see what she could make out. Seconds later, Dave appeared, looking mad as hell. "There's a pigsty inside, like the one we found at Sadie's. Blood too. But no bodies."

Nash joined them, disgust plain on his face but mixed with unease. "I swear I heard something. Sounded like a human cry. It's why I went inside. I just knew someone needed help. Hell, in my job we see it all the time. That sensation I get when I know I'm close to a victim was so real."

All three understood what he meant because they'd had similar experiences. Before anyone could say anything, Nash's head lifted again. Now, Ana heard it too. Dave, seeing their expressions, shook his head, exasperation clear in his words. "I don't hear nuthin."

Nash patted his arm and started in the direction where the sounds might have come from. "What's over there?" He pointed at a smaller building.

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“It’s Sadie’s old greenhouse, the shed George built where she could care for her violets.”

The three approached, guns drawn in two hands while Nash obeyed their motions for him to stay behind. Ana sensed that it wasn’t something he’d normally do, but after seeing her warning glare, he’d slowed to respect her unspoken, pointed directions.

Ana listened at the door before calling out. “Anyone here? Hello.”

A muffled noise sounding clearer now was enough for Ana to try opening it without any luck.

Then they distinctly heard a faint voice saying, “Help. Please, help.”

When the wooden barrier still didn’t budge, she moved a few steps back so she could kick at the offending door to open. Sure enough, with the right amount of force in the exact spot to make the most impact, it swung wide, and she held her gun in front before making an entrance.

In the darkened far corner, she could barely make out the bodies of two women, one lying on the ground while the other leaned over as if to protect. Showing the badge she carried everywhere, Ana spoke soothingly. “I’m Special Agent Ana Marchenko. This is Officer Dave Chalmers and Nash Ralph. We’re here to help you.”

“Thank God.” The female protector broke down into tears of relief, her voice husky... almost imperceivable. The bruising and cuts on her skin proof she’d undergone a lot of trauma. “The devil took my daughter and Hanna. B-but Beth’s

badly hurt and couldn't be moved. W-we need an ambulance."

While Dave hurried to his cruiser, the nearest connection to his office, Ana approached the two women and saw who she suspected was Hattie Roddam. Her bloody wrists were bound by zip ties to the leg of a counter and a strip of duct tape hung from the side of her scratched, bleeding face.

Nash approached with a pocket knife and cut away the ties on the women. Both watched while Hattie covered her mouth with hands that shook pitifully. She ripped off the hanging tape and didn't even notice the bleeding that followed. What they did see was a fighter with badly scraped cheeks, suffering from dehydration, but still protecting the injured.

Ignoring the stench of two people being held hostage for who knew how long, Ana suspected that Hattie had used the wood of the table to rub away the tape from her mouth, probably so she could call for help.

"Take Beth. Sh-she's been severely beaten. I t-tried to stop the bleeding but she's very weak."

Flooded with admiration for the woman's quick thinking, Ana watched as Nash did a quick examination before lifting the skinny body of the younger girl off the cold ground. Once he carried her outside, Ana bent to help the tall redhead stand.

Unable to bear her own weight, Hattie apologized. Licking at her lips, she tried to gather enough moisture to whisper. "I-I'm sorry. We've been locked away for maybe t-two days with nothing to eat o-or drink."

"Shush. No need to apologize."

Dave arrived just then holding out a welcome bottle of water. Ana lifted it to Hattie's

sore lips carefully, helping her hold it in place. More drizzled down the sides than went into her mouth, but it seemed to help.

“Let’s get you to the house so you can get more liquids in you and some food.” Both Dave and Ana supported the weak, trembling woman.

“I ne-ed a shower, but I don’t think I can do it alone.” Hattie began to weep.

“It’s okay, Hattie. I’m here to help. We can take care of it together. Hush now, darling. Don’t cry.”

As if having Ana there gave her strength, her voice grew stronger. “I-I don’t know where the devil is with Carly or if she’s still alive. He’s heartless, the rotten b-bastard.” Though she sounded faint, when she said the last word, it held a lot of venom.

She looked at Dave and added, “He’s scum. I want to k-kill him, Sheriff. I really mean it.”

Which is exactly what Ana felt too. And she had a sneaky feeling Dave agreed with them both. But if they had any hope of finding those girls alive, they’d need Hattie’s help. Therefore she had to keep the poor soul from completely unraveling. The sooner she could get the poor woman feeling well enough to talk, the better.

Chapter Twenty-five

Nash couldn’t believe that any human being could treat another the way those women had been left to suffer. Did the scum have any intention of returning? Had he driven away, leaving them tied up, uncaring if they died there? Christ, without water or food and with the younger girl in such bad shape, they didn’t have a hope in hell of surviving.

Lordy, he wished he'd get just get a few moments alone with the prick. If he had his way, Satan's spawn might rot in jail for the rest of his miserable life, but he'd like to leave some bruises on the heartless bastard first. All the while those thoughts unravelled in his head, he gently carried the poor half-dead girl in his arms toward the house, thinking she'd be better off waiting for the ambulance there.

Once he had her settled on the couch, he hurried to get water and a damp cloth to wash away some of the blood from her injuries. When he watched Ana and Dave taking most of Hattie's weight to help her inside, he passed his cloths and bowl over to Dave so he could help Ana.

Swinging Hattie into his arms, he smiled at her shock and said, "I'm one of the good guys, with Dave and Ana. I'll give you a lift. Where were you headed?"

Ana rushed in front of him, speaking to Hattie. "Where's the bath?"

With her head lolling on Nash's chest, Hattie whispered, "Upstairs, right."

In seconds, Nash had the poor dear sitting on the side of the tub, balancing her so she wouldn't fall. "Here's Ana. She'll help you. But if you need me, I'll be right downstairs."

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Leaving the women, he returned to Dave. “How long before the ambulance gets here?”

“I figure at the very least a half an hour, maybe longer.”

Nash hovered over their patient. “This girl is shivering, probably from shock. That old shed was dank and the ground cold.”

“Better to get those duds off her, yeah? They’re wet.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Nash had seen plenty of victims in shock and knew the girl was close. Her pulse was low, and her coloring too pale. “Here, help me.”

Together, they pulled the damp, soiled jean-shorts off the girl, removed her ripped blouse, and then wrapped her in the thick, clean blanket they found thrown over the back of the couch. Then he washed her face and neck, hoping the warm water would bring her around. Dave lifted her head off the pillow, while Nash carefully trickled water into her open lips, thrilled when she started to drink.

Dave sputtered, “Poor girl’s been abused terribly. Beaten. Filthy. Goddamn madman did this to her. I hope he comes at me, so I get a reason to shoot the scummy putz.”

Nash grinned, thinking that many of the men he knew had a similar way of thinking about these situations, wanting to protect those less strong... less able to fight. “I get you. I mean it’s hard to see this kind of dysfunctional garbage and not want to right the wrong. But at this moment, we need to get this girl to the hospital and then focus on finding the two girls still missing.”

Nodding, his nasty expression fading, Dave grumbled, “What’s that now? You sayin’ I gotta reel it in.”

Nash grinned one-sided. “Just sayin’ I’m first.” The two smiled at each other while continuing to administer to their patient. Slowly, the female regained consciousness and began to struggle, thrashing her arms, moaning in fear.

Using his warmest tone, speaking soothingly, Nash held her hands in his big warm ones. “Hush, Beth. You’re safe now. We got you, sweetheart. The ambulance is coming to take you to the hospital.”

As if his soft words evoked magic, she calmed and sighed deeply. Then she drifted back to sleep, her hand clinging to his.

Soon, they heard the sirens in the distance and breathed a sigh of relief. They’d done their best, but their patient needed medical care they couldn’t give her.

Once they had Beth on the stretcher and ready to be transferred, the two EMT’s went upstairs looking for Hattie. Knocking on the bathroom door, they asked for admittance. Ana opened to them, letting the attendants see their now bathed patient wrapped in a fuzzy housecoat. She refused to leave, saying, “Take Beth. Ana tells me my husband and son are arriving tonight. Other than getting pushed around and a few slaps, I’m fine. Just hungry and tired.”

After they did a quick exam of her bruises and patched up the bleeding cuts with salves and in some cases bandages, they nodded at each other in agreement and hurried to where they’d left the stretcher downstairs with Nash and Dave.

Once they’d cleared out, Ana called downstairs for Nash. “Can Hattie get a lift

please. We need to feed the poor lady and get more water into her.”

Nash ran upstairs and in seconds returned with Hattie in his arms. Ana pointed at the now empty couch and pulled the soiled blanket away first and replaced it with another she’d whipped off the bed. Meantime, Dave worked in the kitchen, arriving with a steaming cup of tea and a hot bowl of tomato soup rimmed with crackers.

He set it down on a TV tray he moved in front of Hattie. “Sorry for the slim pickings. Only thing I could find in the cupboard.”

Hattie’s sour expression expressed her chagrin. “I’m not surprised. Boris and Vlad raided the pantry and fridge of every bit of food they could find. Made me cook for them. Made me wish I had rat poison.”

Nash and Ana chuckled while Dave burst into a hearty laugh. “Glad you’re feeling better, Hattie. Eat and then tell us everything you remember about what happened here. We mean from the moment you were first taken hostage to the last time you saw the girls.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Hattie knew she slopped more soup than she sipped but for once in her lifetime of being so particular about every little thing, she didn’t care. Finally, after she finished off the last of the crackers, and the bowl sat empty, she leaned back and surveyed the other three anxiously being patient while drinking mugs of hot tea.

“Thank you for giving me time to eat and gather my thoughts. I know you’re all eager to hear what I have to say. First though, I can’t tell you how much it means to know that Hanna is with my Carly. Imagining her alone with that monster was unthinkable. You saying the girls escaped him once and could still be on the run gives me hope.”

She reached for Ana's hand. "I'm ready now, but bear with me. I'm trying to remember everything, but it's all a blur. Maybe if you ask me questions, I can stop my mind from wandering like a crazy person." Her lip wobbled until she bit it under control. "Honestly, I want to give you the information you need, I just don't know where to begin."

Ana tightened her grip on Hattie's hand. "I can't imagine what horrors you've seen and survived. If you need to take your time, we'll understand, okay? Best start with the first time you saw the Smirnova boys and what happened next." It seemed natural for Ana to be the inquisitor, and Hattie was thankful the other two hung back and just listened.

Hattie nodded. "Right. Best to start at the beginning. It's a blur of what day it was but I think probably the day after we arrived so that makes it a Monday two weeks ago. The doorbell rang and it was Beth who stood there, asking for directions. Though she wasn't tall, she had such beautiful skin, scads of silky dark hair, and big blue eyes. I remember thinking the pretty little thing seemed nervous, and though I felt goosebumps, I couldn't turn her away. She looked so helpless and needy."

"What directions did she want?"

"She said she was looking for Sadie and George Whitly. Seems they bought the house her great-uncle lived in years earlier. I told her that they had owned our house up to a few years ago, but we'd bought it after George passed. Unfortunately, I had no idea where they'd moved to. I wasn't even sure they were still nearby."

"What happened then?"

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“She wanted a drink of water. I invited her inside, and we went to the kitchen where Carly was baking cookies. The stranger seemed shocked to see another girl. In fact, that’s when she started to cry, begging us to call the police. Before we could get to our phones, the boys broke into the house and attacked. Vlad took our phones while Boris smacked Beth for trying to warn us. When she began to cry and begged him to stop, he suddenly pulled her into his arms and began kissing her. You wouldn’t know it seeing her now, but the girl’s beautiful.”

“Was she Boris’s girlfriend?”

“Yes. He protected her from his older brother. We could see the way Vlad looked at her... like he craved to have her too, but Boris kept control over that situation.”

Ana leaned forward, encouraging Hattie by giving her time to think, not rushing her at all. Finally, she smiled, her expression supportive. “And then?”

“It was horrible, living in fear all the time. I worried constantly about Carly who is mouthy and afraid of no one. She learned quickly that not everyone loved her like her family. It didn’t take long before Vlad slapped her around for being defiant and rude. I tried to turn his rage on me, but it didn’t work. I was terrified he’d abuse her, so I withheld the information he wanted, bargaining with him.”

“Information?”

“Yes. How to open the safe they found in our bedroom. It doesn’t hold more than a few thousand in cash and a gun but he didn’t need to know that. I told him there was ten thousand, and he wanted it. I said on the day they left and if they didn’t hurt either

me or Carly, I'd do what they wanted."

"They let you get away with bargaining?"

"I think Beth made Boris listen to reason. Seems money had brought them here, specifically the stash his father had hidden on the property before he died."

"Excuse me." Dave added his two cents, his tone shocked. "How did they know he'd hidden any money?"

Hattie looked at him and then back to Ana. "Seems their mother had died in the war, and the boys were notified that the Russian government was holding on to her belongings for them to retrieve. Once they got notice, they arranged to leave their posts to pick up her stuff. Among the parcels in the trunk was an old, unopened letter she'd received from her husband, Mike, telling her he'd cashed the check he got for selling the property and would bury the money in the very place that had made her pack up and leave him."

"How did you find out about all this?"

"Beth told us. She read the letter. Said the boys were furious about the mysterious message on where Mike hid the money."

"How did they know each other, Beth and the brothers?"

"She'd met up with the boys on their travels through Ukraine. It wasn't until they arrived in Los Angeles that she found out they'd both gone MIA from the Russian military. And even though they spoke perfect Ukrainian, they weren't born in her country like they'd told her. In fact, they were some of the prisoners Putin had released in exchange for them fighting his war."

Dave piped up. “I don’t get it. Why would she want to hitch her wagon to such assholes like those boys no matter what their nationality?”

“Because she’d lost her family and was alone, scared for her safety, and Boris led her to believe she mattered. Though Vladimir is the psychopath, he’s also persuasive when he wants to be. And Boris... he’s weak, charming, good-looking, and the ladies fall for his charisma. The idiot loved the opposite sex... hell, he loved sex. In a way that’s not normal... if you know what I mean. He never left the poor girl alone.” Hattie shuddered. “Lord above, without Beth interceding, he would have had his way with both me and Carly. I don’t know what was said, but she managed to keep him from straying.”

“And Vlad?”

“All he cared about was the money. And if there was one bit of decency in his devil’s soul, it might have been his care for Boris. The only time I saw him human was with his brother. You should have seen him after he shot Boris. He cried like a baby and railed against everything, putting his fist through the mirror in the bedroom. Said Boris was bleeding from his jugular, and he had no choice but to put him out of his misery. I don’t know what happened there, but after that incident, Vlad became even darker, meaner... downright chilling.”

Dave turned to Ana and saw her shudder, obviously visualizing the scene before the cop in her took over. As if she hated for her weakness to be noticed, she stiffened and urged Hattie to continue.

“So, you’re saying the reason they went to Sadie’s was to get her to tell them about the money.”

“Yes. They believed her family might have found it, and if so, they would get it back. They locked Carly and me in the downstairs bathroom and left us for days. Thank

God they left us some food, and we could drink from the tap. But they cleared out everything from under the sink except for a few towels and my paperback book I'd left in there. Boris thought it funny. Said we could read out loud to keep ourselves from killing each other."

"Just you two?" Again, Dave interrupted. "Beth went with them?"

"Not really. There was a complication." Hattie shook her head sadly. "It was the morning they woke up to find that Beth had snuck away... again. According to the argument I overheard between the brothers, she'd done it before, and Vlad was furious. Railed against her being any use to them.... she's nothing but trouble he yelled. For the first time, I saw Boris angry... take control. He pushed Vlad against the wall and threatened to leave if anything happened to her. Vlad backed down."

"You say she'd run before?"

"Yes. The last time, they found her in the woods. She told them she'd gotten lost, but she admitted to me and Carly that she'd tried to run away. Poor Beth. She'd begun to hate Boris, especially after he'd rifled through her belongings. She had a precious locket she'd kept hidden from them and was terrified if they found it, they'd pawn it for money. Guess it was all she had left from her mother."

"What happened after they found her?"

"She said they broke into the convenience store, looking for the real estate fellow who'd brokered the house deal between Mike and George and Sadie Whitly. Vlad figured Lew would know what happened to them. You know... like where they lived now."

At this point, Hattie's head lowered as if it weighed more than she could bear. Sniffing and blowing her nose in the tissues she found in her pocket, she whispered,

“Poor Lew.”

Ana poured more tea for her and spoke soothingly. “We were at the hospital earlier, and they say he’s going to make a full recovery. Maria is there with him.”

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“He’s alive? Beth heard the shot and figured Vlad had killed him. Thank God he didn’t.” Hattie gulped back her tears and smiled weakly before continuing. “So, where was I? Yes, Beth. Poor baby. Traumatized after witnessing the whole thing, she admitted the brothers beat Lew terribly and aimed the gun at him, wanting the address of Sadie’s house.”

“He told them.” Ana stated the fact.

“Yes. They’d threatened to hang around and kill his wife if he didn’t.”

Hattie drank more tea before continuing. “At that point, Beth said she couldn’t watch and had rushed outside with Boris restraining her to make sure she didn’t take off again. Then she heard the shot before Vlad joined them... smiling.”

Hattie drank yet again, her lips trembling before she got enough control to continue. “I felt so sorry for her. Poor girl. According to what she’d told Carly, she was so creeped out and sick to her stomach, that she wished she could die... admitted that what happened reminded her of scenes in the war she’d lived through before leaving Ukraine.”

“No doubt.” Ana brushed Hattie’s red hair back from her face gently. “How very sad.” Clearly needing to get Hattie back on track, Ana showed sympathy but also hinted for the rest of the story. “So... after they left Lew, they went to Sadie’s place?”

“Yes. When Vlad joined them outside after the shooting, Boris attacked him. Beth said he didn’t like that Vlad would kill a man in cold blood who so obviously couldn’t hurt them. Vlad argued, saying Lew could identify them. He pushed Boris,

and they got into a tussle, which gave Beth the chance to escape.”

“Right. That makes sense. But they had intentions of coming back here to get Mike’s money.”

“That was the plan, only they were gone longer than they expected and only Vlad returned with Beth.”

“How long were they gone?”

“At least three days. We didn’t have a clock or a window, so we had no way of knowing how many hours passed before Vlad arrived with Beth and no Boris.”

With her scarred hands clinched tight, Hattie stared into Ana’s eyes begging her to understand the horror she’d witnessed. “Beth looked terrible. Almost catatonic. Who knows what that maniac did to her? He forced us to the kitchen, flung her in the corner like a rag doll, and made me and Carly cook him food. We didn’t see Beth take the knife. And when she aimed for his neck, he moved just in time, so it went into his shoulder. If Carly hadn’t intervened and kicked the gun from his hand, he’d have killed Beth.”

“Did you get the gun?”

“No, he pushed us out of the way. The man’s fast. Like a rabid dog. Beth escaped. But he shot at her, which made her run into the shed for protection. He yelled at her that he’d kill us if she didn’t stop. In moments, she stood in the doorway, showing herself. Poor baby just hung there like a hollow ghost, head dropped to her chest, arms by her sides... crying so harder body shook. It was one of the most pathetic scenes I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Goddammit all to hell.” Ana seemed unable to stop the words. But she collected

herself and continued. “What did Vlad do after that?”

“He laughed. Then he forced us to go with him to the shed, tied me up with Beth, and took my Carly with him. My baby. He told her she needed to get him drugs and bandages at the hospital, and if she did, he wouldn’t hurt her or us. They were supposed to re-t-turn within a f-few hours.” Reaching the end of her endurance, anxious, frightened, and with all her motherly instincts at war, she began to release the flood of tears she’d held back to finish her story.

In a move totally foreign to the FBI agent, Ana took Hattie in her arms, holding her close, rocking her from side to side... commiserating with her. Because she now understood how pain could dig a hole deep into one’s heart and rip it to pieces, she was able to show empathy and how much she cared. Wasn’t that exactly how she felt about Hanna being missing?

Like an old man, Nash stood, his hands in fists, his face pale with fury. Dave faced him, said something, and the two of them disappeared into the kitchen.

Knowing that Hattie was close to a breakdown, Ana helped the poor woman upstairs to her bed and sat with her, waiting until her eyes closed and the pills she’d taken kicked in.

When she came back downstairs, she found Nash alone. “Dave went back to the office to see if any news has come in about the girls. He’s got Pat working late to cover the phones. He promised to keep in touch in case there’s any updates on the APB he put out on Hattie’s car.”

“Good.” Ana swung around... her back to him now so he couldn’t see the tears she’d held in while being supportive to Hattie. She lifted her hands to push away her curls,

her head threatening to explode from the stress she'd controlled.

Drained, her body weighing tons, she staggered.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Nash moved behind Ana, watching as her shoulders sagged and then began to shake from the unshed tears. Understanding her pain because the same coursed through his own body, he stepped closer.

Then he wrapped his arms around her, tugging her into his shelter, inviting her to take solace with him. "I'm sorry, darling. I'm so sorry. What a mess! But we'll find them. We just need one break. Someone must have seen the car."

She didn't answer with words, just incoherent mumbling and sighs that tore him to pieces. Sensing this was not the kind of behavior Ana normally let herself feel, he spoke gently, careful not to tread too hard. "The cops are checking every motel and hotel in the area. Dave just said they'd be going to empty cabins also, thinking he might be holed up in a place like that."

Taking a huge breath, her control slowly returning, Ana laid her head back against his chest and swiped at her cheeks. "We spoke of Vlad doing that earlier in the kitchen. Glad Dave got the ball rolling." Though she seemed to have gained some essence of herself, as if she liked the warmth and shared empathy, she stayed enfolded in his arms. In fact, she even locked hers over his to keep his in place.

Happy for her being there, knowing this closeness made the ongoing nightmare for him less difficult, he rubbed his chin against her wild curls. "You smell nice."

"You don't. Sorry."

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He laughed quietly. “Being a human transporter today has taken it’s toll.”

“I don’t mind. You were very kind. Both Beth and Hattie sensed you’re a good guy and trusted you. Guess it’s your firefighting skills.”

“Or my pleasing personality.”

“Don’t push it.”

“Right. Sorry. Because I’m hiding my monster tendencies is what I meant to say.”

Now she chuckled too, making him feel ten feet tall for bringing her back from the edge. “Let’s go and sit on the couch. We have to wait for updates anyway, which I doubt will happen in the middle of the night.”

“Yeah. And it might be a good idea if we were here to break the news to Sam and his son in person.” Nash knew he’d appreciate the same treatment if his family were dealing with an ongoing nightmare of this sort.

Grunting her agreement, Ana led the way into the other room, heading to the couch. “Good idea. I’m exhausted and my brain’s fried. Just need a couple of hours to renew.”

Nash grabbed the blanket Hattie had draped on her and covered them as they locked together. He sitting, she leaning against his chest, his arms cuddling her close. He angled down to kiss her, unable to stop himself, and she answered his light pressure in the same way... sharing yet not inviting more. It was all he wanted or needed. Just

to let her know his interest and his affection – no, his love hadn't faded. He'd just laid it aside for now.

While stroking her arms, he gently pushed her hair out of the way for his lips to find her forehead. Watching, he saw her sigh as if releasing the angst inside her beautiful body and then close her eyes.

Sitting and holding her close he sensed that this was not something she'd normally allow to happen. It made him feel like a skyscraper... a man so lucky to be the one she gave up her power for. Though he knew it was a moment out of time... a moment that might never happen again, he let himself sink into the beautiful sensations being created.

Feeling himself relax in the dimly lit room, he held her close and thanked God for giving him an experience that humbled him.

Because his job meant many hours of staying awake for longer than most humans endured, he didn't drop off. Instead, he kept watch, letting his mind ramble on about all kinds of things. About how lucky he'd been to meet Special Agent Ana Marchenko in her hour of need. How fortunate that they'd been able to work together.

He pictured his mother's happiness in knowing that Lew, her true love, had survived and was now on the road to recovery. He found himself praying that Hanna and Carly had managed to escape from Vladimir, that they might be safe and in hiding. To imagine any other scenario was too horrifying, and he forced his mind in another direction before the vile images could burst and take hold.

Eventually, he shifted to his guilt about not being with his crew, fighting the fires that still rampaged not too far from this region. In fact, earlier he could smell the smoke that the winds had carried north.

Thankfully, they'd been lucky in this district so far. But... he sensed that the possibilities were always floating... hot days, dry countryside, and lack of moisture meant something different to his people. The need to be ready.

Before, he could follow that line of thinking, he heard the noise of a vehicle outside. Careful not to wake his sleeping beauty, he left her in the darkness with the blanket around her to keep her warm. Closing the door behind him, he made his way into the kitchen to intercept the homecoming relatives that would be wanting an update.

Sam and his twelve-year-old son, Justin, first checked out Hattie. Finding her safe and fast asleep, rather than disturb her, Sam left the boy to cuddle with his mother, while he spent time with Nash, hearing a shortened version about the horrors his wife and daughter had been dealing with.

When Nash came to the part where Carly was still missing, Sam pounded the table, rage coloring his pale features. "How the fuck did I not know they were in such danger?"

"How could you?"

"I should have been able to sense it."

"Not when Hattie was being so careful to let you believe everything was fine. We know she wanted to protect you."

"Shouldn't it be the other way around?" Sam's bearded face cracked from the stress, his eyes filled, and he lowered his bald head to his clenched hands.

Nash, feeling pity for the poor man, headed for the stove to reheat the pot of coffee. Soon, he carried over a mug for himself and Sam. He sat and waited for Sam to manage restraint.

“Thanks, man. Sorry. I’m just so angry at myself... not at you. In fact, how can I ever thank you enough for saving Hattie? She’s my everything.”

Because of the new feelings rioting throughout his own body, Nash nodded, accepting the man’s sincerity. “So you understand, it wasn’t just me. The sheriff and an FBI agent called Ana Marchenko were with me. She’s the lady sleeping on your couch. It’s been a long day.”

“Still, I’m in your debt.” The man’s dark-eyed stare expressed his total sincerity.

Used to getting thanks in his own job, nevertheless, Nash felt warmed and that felt nice. “You’d do the same, dude.”

“Would I? I’d like to believe that’s true.” Sam’s following smile was pathetic. “I keep going over everything in my head. The few times we were able to talk, I guess Hattie hadn’t been alone. I kind of wondered why she sometimes sounded different... like weird, you know? But she always had a reason. Then the phone lines went down due to the fires south of here, and I just figured the technical problems had broken out in this area too.” His tone filled with guilt. “I didn’t even fret when I couldn’t get through.”

“Hey, buddy, not your fault. Those men didn’t allow the women any freedom. According to what Hattie told us, Vlad watched over them like a hawk or locked them in the bathroom so they couldn’t escape. We’re just thankful Beth and Hattie are free now and everything possible is being done to find Hanna and Carly.”

“Hanna?”

“Agent Marchenko’s cousin. As far as we know, at the moment she’s with your daughter. Hanna came recently from Ukraine. She’s a good kid about the same age as Carly. They’re on the run together, at least that’s what we’re praying. I know they’d escaped from Vlad earlier today.” Nash went on to tell Sam what happened in the parking lot of the hospital.

“You’re sure it was them?”

Not willing to instill any doubts, Nash nodded. “Yes. Hanna knew my name, and she answered to hers. They were afraid he’d find them, and as I told you... they were hiding. Now we’re hoping that the prick who’s responsible for all this torment didn’t track them down. The police have an APB out on your wife’s car and on all three of the missing.”

Before Sam could question Nash further, Ana erupted from the living room, her behavior back to full-on agent mode. “Dave just called. They found Hattie’s car.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

While Ana followed Nash to his truck, she felt a bit more like her old self. Thankful for the steel planted firmly back in her spine, she repeated what Dave just told her.

“Seems they located the car in the hospital’s underground parking lot. He said they found quite a bit of blood smeared around the drivers seat, probably from Vlad’s shoulder wound. No sign of the girls or of the bastard though.”

Perplexed, Nash said, “I don’t get it? Wouldn’t they have investigated that whole area earlier?”

“According to Dave, after the sighting you had of the girls, the local cops did a thorough search of the hospital grounds. They found nothing. I’m thinking Vlad didn’t either. Could be he returned once the heat was off to check again. Then decided to ditch the vehicle.”

“No matter, we’ll get the prick sooner or later.”

“Yep. “Ana appreciated Nash’s haste to get there because the antsy crap going on in her body was hard to restrain. If only they could find some trace of the girls, some hint of where they could be. Had they managed to ditch the son of a bitch or was he even now torturing them for having escaped earlier?”

Soon, they skidded into the lot and found a frustrated Dave waiting for them. “The forensic team is going over the vehicle now, then they’ll take it into the department for a more thorough inspection. I wanted to know if they discovered any clues we could use in the search.”

“Anything so far?”

Dave shook his head. “No. But I know why he decided to dump his ride. He ran out of gas. The gauge reads empty. Guess he didn’t want to show up on any video feeds while filling the tank.”

Ana gazed around the near empty lot. “Any reports of another car missing?”

“Not from this location. But morning is close, and I have no doubt some poor sucker on his way to work is going to step outside and find his vehicle gone. Mrs. Perkins came in early to relieve Pat and will man the phones and forward any calls.” Dave

seemed to do a survey of the two standing in front of him. His teasing grin made Ana take notice.

“What?”

“Might be time for you two to head back to the cabin. Not wanting to be rude but some personal refreshing is in order. If you know what I mean.” He waved his hand in their direction and both Ana and Nash looked down at themselves and then shuffled backward.

Nash chuckled. “Harsh but true. Okay. We’ll head back to the cabin and clean up. Meet you at the jail.”

“Good. Take your time. I’ll call if anything turns up.”

Driving back to her place, Ana put into words what Dave had said. “I guess we do need to shower and change our clothes. It’s been crazy these last couple of days.”

“I have my bag with clean clothes in the back.” Nash took his eyes from the road to look her way. “I’ve been thinking... it’s weird how relaxed I am with you. It’s like we’ve been close forever. And yet we really don’t know much about each other at all. Tell me about yourself. What made you want to be an FBI agent?”

Ana settled into her seat, getting comfy. “Let’s see. Mom was mostly a stay-at-home kinda gal who did various jobs but never seemed to settle into a career. My dad was with the police department, and he loved his work. And me... well my father schooled me on how important laws are and how crucial for them to be enforced. He often talked about how folks needed protection and somehow I knew I’d be good in that role.” Aware that she’d never revealed that information to another, she felt shaky and decided he needed to share his story too. “Your turn. Why firefighting?”

Nash turned away from her to look out the window on his left, appearing as if he were shy. “You might find this hard to believe but I started off wanting to be a minister. Took the training and worked in a church for a couple of years.”

Shocked by his answer, she questioned him. “Why’d you quit?”

“Lousy pay. Rotten hours. No patience left for all the problems facing those who came looking for answers no one could give them. I mean... I had answers, it’s just that most didn’t want to hear the truth. They didn’t want to work hard and pay their dues... if you know what I mean. So many of them thought they were entitled and didn’t understand why life and God wouldn’t just cough up their needs... follow their set of rules.” He glanced her way. “Sorry for rambling.”

“God, no. Don’t apologize. I’m interested. What happened?”

“Guess I started questioning everything too, and the more I did that, the less answers I had for those coming to me for help.”

“Okay. But why firefighting?”

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“I got caught up in a local fire and was asked to help out. When I saw how hard the professionals worked, their dedication, their togetherness, it felt like I’d just found my rightful path. Signed up the next day and began training. It’s brutal but exactly what I was made for.”

“It’s dangerous work, is what it is.”

“Look who’s calling the kettle black?”

“Right. You’re right.”

“I’ll admit there’s a time limit to this type of hands-on firefighting, and one day I’ll take the office supervisory job they’ve offered me more than once. But for now, I love what I do, and if I say so myself, I’m bloody good at it.”

“See. Me too.” Ana saw their road ahead and pointed. “Turn here. I get dibs on the first shower.”

When Nash caught her eye and winked, it didn’t surprise her when he made the next offer.

“We can team up and save water, right?”

“In your dreams, baby. In your dreams.”

“My dreams have come true, darling. They surely have.” Nash held Ana’s nakedness against the wall of the shower, hot water streaming down over their bodies.

She groaned at his words. “Quit being so cocky. It doesn’t suit your devout nature.”

“All due respect... I’m just saying my prayers came true.” He leaned in to kiss her and then whispered in her ear. “What made you change your mind?”

“You mean when I called you to join me?”

“Most beautiful words I ever heard.”

“Almost didn’t... call you that is. Guess talking about our jobs made me realize how dangerous life can be. Plus it didn’t hurt that the minute we walked inside, you started kissing me.”

“I love kissing you.” Pressing his nakedness against hers, he lifted her hands high against the walls of the shower and found her mouth with his... tongues dueling as they tasted each other deeply.

Their wet bodies touched in all the right places, his hardness seeking entrance, and her body turning mushy from the knowledge they’d soon be joined. Of it’s own accord, her leg lifted to wrap around his thigh, her way of giving permission for their lovemaking to hurry.

Nash knew different. He wanted these moments of their first time together to last forever. For her to experience the same passion that would soon be his. Finding the hot water an added stimulant, he searched her neck with his lips, trailing kisses to her shoulders and then her breasts, suckling, pulling, and nipping gently at the hardened tips, enjoying hearing her moans of delight.

“Nash. Now. Nash...”

Ignoring her groans, he took his time, trailing his hands down her body, caressing all the curves, searching, his fingers finding her heat, entering and watching as the woman exploded with cries and moans of shock.

Having her fall apart in his arms made him feel ten feet tall. Waiting for her tremors to subside, he continued his kissing and caressing, exploring her body, keeping her anchored in place for his pleasure.

Moments later, when she reached for him, touching and caressing, making him harder than he'd ever been before, he couldn't take anymore. His hands lifted her bottom, encouraging her to wrap both legs around his waist this time, and he entered the hottest fire he'd ever known.

Welded together, both moving in tandem, both mesmerized while in the throes of sexual intoxication, and both writhing in their moaned ecstasy, they pleased each other to the final explosion.

Trembling from the mind-blowing sex, forced to let her go, and with shaking hands on the wall either side of her, Nash held his body from falling. Then he leaned his forehead against hers and waited for his breath to slow, and his heart rate to follow.

While each endeavored to regain their equilibrium, and with his whole frame sensitized, he remained in place while the trembling subsided, and for his weak legs to strengthen where he could walk again. Seeing the woman in front of him needing his body to keep her upright, he grinned in sympathy.

“Are you as weak as I am right now?”

“Let's just say, if you weren't here for me to hold on to, I'd be on the floor.”

Chuckling, he searched for her lips again, but the sudden cold water made him think twice. Picking her up in his arms, he let her turn off the taps and grab a couple of towels before heading for the bedroom. On their way, she told him a secret. “Have I told you how much I like being picked up like I’m a tiny person? You’re the only man whose ever been able to do so.”

“Glad I could oblige, darling.”

Ana had to admit later that she liked Nash's way of drying her body much more than she did when alone and dealing with the chore herself. Though shivers from the cool air made goosebumps appear, Nash didn't hurry.

Instead, he followed up with kisses on every area where the towel finished its work. While happy to just let his own body drip-dry with one towel around his hips to catch the worst of the drops, his thoroughness earned him stars.

Still sultry from their recent intimacy and unwilling to stop his attentions, she found the earlier throbbing had returned with a vengeance. With her senses swirling, and her body melting, she reached her arms around his neck. Lifting on tiptoes, she searched for his mouth and gave him a searing kiss that had him breathing as hard as she found herself doing.

His husky voice whispered, "Again? You're not sore?"

"Again. Not sore and don't care."

Lifting her, he laid her on the covers and followed her down. This time, she wriggled her way to straddle him and began caressing his face, her hands threading through his wet hair while her lips caught his in a deep, drugging kiss. "My turn."

"Yes, Ma'am." Teasingly, he threw his arms wide and grinned with glee. "I'm all yours."

Within seconds, he went back to hugging, holding her close while she kissed his body in the kind of treatment he'd chosen for her. Loving the sound of his humming, she became shocked at the tightening of his muscles that made her aware of her power. The man under her was huge and rock hard, yet gentle in all the ways that counted.

When he surprised her by twisting their positions, she gladly lay under him, giving over her role of aggressor. Glued together by sweat and need, both striving, wriggling, loving the feeling of rubbing against each other, she finally captured his rigid heat and soon it became buried deep inside her.

His call of gladness filled her deeply, and she lifted so their joining could be complete. Arched and coiled, with him plunging, probing, weaving to stretch her body in order to gain the deepest possible pathway, incited beyond reason, she moaned her orgasm for the long seconds that it pulsed inside.

When her body tightened around his, spasming, draining him, ensuring he followed her to completion, she cooed purring noises that made her bite her lips to stop the impossible. Finally, slipping off her, he rolled to the side and lay there catching his breath. When she turned to look at him only to find him doing the same to her, she smiled.

He held his hand up for her to entwine her fingers, and she did. Their eyes connected, sending messages of shocked delight at how good they were together. Words weren't necessary. Instead they both leaned in to kiss gently, and then she snuggled against his length, closed her eyes, and drifted off.

Hours later, it was Nash who heard the noises in the house while she still slept.

Chapter Thirty

“Darlin’, time to wakey, wakey. We have a visitor.” Nash’s low tone conveyed instantly that Ana needed to heed his words. Slipping from her dreamworld happened in seconds, a skill programmed into one who’d done a lot of stakeouts earlier in her career.

“Any idea who it is?” Whispering, she slipped from the bed and grabbed the clean clothes she’d left on the chair for after her shower. Seconds later, dressed and ready, she moved over to her father’s night table and reached under for a secret drawer that sprung open to reveal a weapon.

Nash, dressed now too, stopped to stare, asking without saying a word. Instinctively understanding his unspoken query, she murmured low. “My dad always kept this gun here in case of... hell, I don’t know. His cop mentality followed him everywhere. Stay behind me.”

Nodding, he reached to open the door leading them back into the hallway to the living room. Glad now that they’d chosen to use her parents’ entrance and shower facilities, he liked not being trapped upstairs in a loft.

The late morning light illuminated the area well enough for them to make out any person who might be here. Again, they heard the sounds, coming from above. With Ana in front, he followed her to the stairs.

Before they could take more than a couple of stairs, Hanna strode from her room, stopped dead, and screamed in shock from seeing another person. The unexpected blast made him jump back, while grabbing the railing so as not to fall.

Ana’s calm voice broke the spell. “Hanna, you’re okay. It’s us. Me and Nash. My Lord, girl, you’re here.” By the time Ana had spoken those words, she had the gun hidden in the back of her jeans, and her arms were tight around the young, jubilant teen who’d rushed her. As cries of delight filled the house, they heard a voice from

the room she'd just left.

"Hanna. Who is it? Hanna?"

With the others talking at once, Nash finally made his way around the two still hugging and poked his head into the room where the voice could be heard. "Carly? It's Hanna's friend Nash. I'm with Ana. Are you okay?"

Carly came out from the closet where she'd hid after hearing Hanna's scream. Stepping closer, her fear tangible, he stopped and waited. "We're the good guys, honey. You don't have to be afraid. In fact, I sat with your dad, Sam, last night, and he's going to be one happy man when he hears we've found you."

Instantly, the girl broke from her daze, her suspicions gone, and she ran to him... into his open arms and hugged as if she'd never let go. Nash felt a sensation welling up inside, the same one he experienced during every fire where he'd managed to save a thankful victim... and it never grew old. Instead, he allowed himself to experience the joy once again, closed his eyes, letting the emotions renew his spirit.

Once the greetings were over, and they'd all accepted that the girls were safe, they sat around the kitchen table over steaming cups of fragrant coffee and wonderful smelling pancakes Ana had whipped up from the large box of mix. Hanna, who loved bacon, helped cook the meal, happy in her role as sous chef and cheerfully nattering with Ana in a low voice.

Pouring the icy cold orange juice, Nash helped Carly into the chair and took a seat himself. Glancing her way, he said, "I'm sorry about your leg, honey. No wonder you couldn't get into the back of the truck. I get it that Hanna couldn't lift you in herself."

"She probably could have if I wasn't so scared. After the first attempt, I was terrified in case he saw us."

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“So tell us, how did you get here then?”

“We cut through the woods around the hospital grounds and made it to the bus stop just as the bus pulled up. Hanna got us seats in the back, and we eventually asked the driver where we could transfer to get another bus that brought us closer to this area. Then we walked in from the lake road. It took forever. Hanna had to pretty much balance me. We stopped a lot.”

“See – this is my dilemma. I don’t understand why you didn’t just tell the bus driver about Vlad. Get him to call the police.”

“We thought about it, but Vlad promised if we told anyone about him, he would go back and kill my mother and Beth before they could catch him.”

“And you believed him?”

Carly’s blue eyes held a certainty he couldn’t argue with. “You don’t know him, Nash. He’s a psycho – like Mom said, the epitome of human depravity. So, yes, we effing believed him.”

Nash said no more.

After they enjoyed their meal, Ana took a good look at the wound on Carly’s leg and frowned. “Hey kiddo, this is infected and needs cleaning, likely a shot of antibiotics too.” She checked the wound closer, saw it oozing, and added, “Probably should be

bandaged to keep it clean. I think we need to take you home so your dad can drive you to the hospital and get that looked at.”

Stiffening, Carly instantly balked. “No. You don’t understand. I don’t want to see my family. If I contact them, Vlad will kill us all. He said so.”

Nash, seeing the girl’s sudden spike in agitation, cut in to calm the waters. “Right. It’s why you came here; to get Ana’s help.”

Hanna reached for Ana’s hand to get her attention. “I told Carly you could protect us. That you’re a cop and you have a-a gun. It’s why we came here... to find you. She’s trying to protect her family.”

Ana stared at Carly, her expression that of a cop interrogating a suspect. “Okay, look... tell me how you figure that Vlad will somehow know if you contact your mom and dad or go to the police? And that he will wage retribution. I can see you believe this so make me understand.”

Before the other girl could gather her thoughts, Hanna answered. “Yes, we truly believe he will know. Ana, he is the same man, the same devil who killed my parents. I recognized him.”

“What?” Ana’s shock couldn’t be forced behind her usual business-like mask. Even though the thought had crossed her mind, she’d never really believed the possibility. “Hold it. You told me that the man who shot your parents was killed by his partner to save you.”

Hanna’s lips began quivering, her eyes watering, and her hands fluttering in front of her chest as if she were losing her mind. “I know. I thought so too. Hewasshot... but I guess he didn’t die. I ran away with the other survivors and hid for days. It’s possible Russians came and found him still breathing... right?”

“True.” Ana watched her cousin closely. There would be ‘tells’ if she were lying to them. Signs that a professional like herself would be able to pick up.

Yet Hanna looked back at Ana, her gaze never wavering. “It’s the only thing I can think of.”

Satisfied that Hanna truly believed her conviction, she reiterated, “You’re sure it’s him.”

“Yes. First, I recognized his face, but my suspicions were confirmed when I spotted the spider-like tattoo on his wrist. I’ll never forget it. There was a healed wound that cut through the image, marking it as different from the others. Ana, after he shot my parents he lit a cigarette as if killing people meant nothing to him. His sleeve slipped back, and I saw the ink design. Vlad is that same man.”

Ana looked over to Nash who nodded back at her, letting her see that he accepted the truth of Hanna’s story. After all, they knew Vlad had meant to kill Lew, so it had already been established they sought a man who didn’t hesitate to use his weapon. And when he’d turned his gun on Sadie and Boris, they put it down to him killing the woman in retribution for her sticking a knitting needle in his brother’s neck. Since he couldn’t stand to see his sibling bleed out, he’d shot him too. All justified kills in a maniac’s mind, if there were such a thing.

After hearing Hanna’s story, they understood the bastard better.

Vladimir Smirnova was simply a cold-blooded, psychopathic killer.

Chapter Thirty-one

After breakfast, while the girls cleaned the kitchen, Nash joined Ana in the bedroom. “So... what’s the plan?”

“Carly needs to go to the hospital. I’d take her and leave you here with Hanna but I’m just not sure the girls want to be separated.”

“Maybe it’s better if I take her. She trusts me. Besides, I want to check in on Lew anyway and make sure Mom is okay. No doubt, Carly will want to see Beth also. Hanna will be fine if you stay here with her. Maybe you can get Dave to come over to take her statement. He’ll need to be updated on the latest events.”

“Right. Good idea. Let’s tell the girls so they know the plans.” Before she could walk away, Nash pulled her back, taking her in his arms. He kissed her soundly, liking the way her body became instantly pliant, and her lips inviting. “Hmm... I could get used to this.”

“Cool it, hot stuff. We have things needing our attention.”

“Fine but I’m gonna copy and paste this moment for every time I get the chance for a replay.”

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Laughing, Ana patted his cheeks. “You’re not funny.”

“I know.” Grinning, he kissed her nose. “Before I let you go, I wanted to warn you that I intend to call Sam Roddam. I sat with him last night, and the man is suffering. He needs to know his daughter is safe.”

“Yeah, I meant to tell you about that if you hadn’t distracted me. When I left the kitchen to go to the bathroom, I called their house and told Hattie we had the girls. I didn’t mention Carly’s injury so maybe you can call them back on the way in and let Sam know that you’re taking her to the hospital. He can phone ahead with his insurance information.”

“Should I let Carly know we’re in touch with them?”

“I would. Hell, let them talk to her but just make sure Sam doesn’t come to the hospital in person, or she might freak out. Explain to both of them that we’re trying to keep the girls off the radar, and the degenerate seems to have eyes everywhere. Therefore, to keep the girls from freaking out, we’re taking no chances. After what they told us, they’re terrified that Vlad will learn they betrayed him.”

“Right. In the meantime, you’ll let me know if Dave has any updates on the vehicle the sick bastard’s using now. I need to keep my eyes open in case he’s on the road.”

Chapter Thirty-two

Ana had to laugh at Dave’s shocked expression when he first saw Hanna. “You found her? Is Carly with you too?”

“Not at the moment. She’s with Nash on the way to the hospital for a leg wound that needs attention. Poor thing is suffering from an infection, and I’m worried it could get worse without attention.”

Dave approached Hanna and sat near her. “I’m glad to see you, Buttercup. We’ve been worried sick. If you’re up to telling me your story, we can get it written down in the report I need to have. Okay with you?”

“Okay. Can Ana stay with us?”

“Sure. But it’s you I need to interview so just tell me everything you remember happening from the first moment you were taken by Smirnova.”

“I was with Maria with Les in the hospital and left them to go to the cafeteria. I took the stairs to the shortcut through the parking lot. I remember thinking it was kinda dark and scary. I get spooked easy since the war. Anyway, I wasn’t paying attention to where I was walking and tripped over Carly, hiding behind a post from Vlad. She’d escaped him. Ran away when he let her out with instructions to get him some bandages for his wound where Beth stuck him with a knife.”

“I talked to Beth earlier at the hospital, and she told me about the attack. Poor kid. What happened next?”

“Strangely, Carly reminded me of the girls back home in the Ukraine who were running away from the Russians. So when she asked me to help her, I did. Just in time. We struggled to get into the building and were fortunately able to lock the door. Vlad tried to break in but he couldn’t get at us. We stayed there for a long time, until we felt safe to leave.”

“Good thinking. But why didn’t you go to someone in the building and ask for help?”

“Carly refused. Said he’d warned her that he had a way to watch their house and if anyone showed up, he’d know she called the police. Then he’d go in and kill Beth and her mom who he’d left tied up in the plant shed. She was terrified. I told her to stay where we were, and I snuck into a closet where I found some material we could use to bandage her leg. We were both scared Vlad would come and find us, so we decided to hide in the bushes.”

“That’s where Ana and Nash found you?”

“You mean Nash. I never saw Ana.”

“Damn. So Close.” Ana cursed before explaining how that happened. “Nash dropped me off at the front door and drove the truck to the parking lot. Would you have come out if you’d seen me?”

“Of course. Actually... Nash told us that you were inside and would be coming back with him. We had full intentions of getting into his truck then. Nash left the tailgate, which was facing the bushes, open for us. We tried to get in, but bythen, Carly had stiffened up so much she could barely move. She’s kinda skinny but I still couldn’t lift her. Besides, we were terrified that Vlad would see us. We’d watched him drive past a couple of times.”

Dave whispered, “Bastard,” snorted in disgust and added, “Understood. And according to Ana, you took the bus and got off along the lake road and cut through the forest.”

“Yes. I was praying that Ana would be here but she wasn’t... not until earlier. We didn’t hear her and Nash come in. I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired in my life. Both me and Carly just broke a window to get inside and collapsed. Her leg was ugly this morning. Just before Ana heard us and came to investigate, we’d planned to use the house phone to call her so she’d come and help us.”

Dave nodded in understanding. He folded his lips and his tightly held control made Ana instinctively understand he had to swallow his stream of cuss words that he used in times like this.

Finally, Hanna lowered her head, a way of ending her story, leaving both adults gulping from shame that their generation could have been instrumental in inflicting such nightmares.

Wars! In this day and age. Jesus help us. Would humanity ever learn?

Finally, the young girl's voice lowered, and she stammered over her next words. "I've known f-fear... I mean the spine-chilling, breath-choking, heart-breaking kind. It crept up on us Ukrainians, which maybe helped us to prepare. But I've never actually seen another as frightened as Carly. I think maybe when a kid is sheltered all her life, to come up against an unexplained nightmare so full of terror is more traumatic. I'm worried about her, Ana. She's in a b-bad way."

Suddenly Ana picked up on a tone in her cousin's voice. "Did he hurt Carly? I mean other than the leg wound?"

"He caught her trying to escape the first time and purposefully closed the car door on it. It cut her badly. Is that what you mean?"

Ana watched Hanna's eyes and decided to take it further. "Was that the only time he laid his stinking hands on her?"

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Hanna raised hers to share a look. “I don’t know. She shut down when I asked her.”

A vibration in Dave’s pocket let him know about the incoming call. He stood and moved a few feet away to answer. “Right. Thanks. Send me the photo and information on the vehicle.”

He stood in place for some time before joining the girls again. “Got the info on a car that went missing this morning. All the facts point to our perp. I sent the image and plate number on to Nash, and we put out an APB for the vehicle. I sent it to you too.”

Ana checked and nodded. “Got it.” Before she could add anything else, a warning blast happened on both their cells. She opened the app window and felt the chills rush over her body. “There’s a fire coming our way. It’s out of control and moving fast.”

“Son of a bitch. As soon as I left the office earlier, I got a sinking feeling about the high winds and smoke coming from the south. Christ Almighty, I think our luck has just run out.”

Chapter Thirty-three

Nash got the same notice from his crew while driving toward the hospital. He’d let Carly talk to her parents for the first ten minutes, but it upset her so badly, he had to shut it down. “Look, Sam. Carly can’t talk anymore. Poor thing is too upset.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Hey, stop. She’s with me, and we’re going to get her the help she needs for her leg,

man.”

“You gotta understand. I need to be there.”

“No. You can’t be with her yet so stop talking trash and scaring her worse. You need to listen to reason. She’s terrified for your safety.”

“Look, Nash. She’s my kid, and I don’t give a flying fart about my own safety. I care about hers.”

“Do you? If so, you’d listen to what she’s been saying. Vlad has her petrified so badly that until he’s caught and in jail, she doesn’t want to be the reason he carries through on his threats. She’s seen him with a gun and knows he’s used it. I’ll call you as soon as we get the animal behind bars. In the meantime take care of those with you, hunker down, keep your eyes peeled, and don’t do anything foolish.” He hung up and turned to look at the girl cowering on the floor in the front seat.

“Honey, he’s your dad. The man’s worried about you and wants to protect you. But he’s promised to listen to reason.”

Carly swiped at the mess on her face and then lowered her head into her arms, leaning on the seat. “Okay. Thanks. I’m sorry.”

“Carly, sweetheart, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for.” Just as he reached a hand to pat her arm – hating to see her involuntary flinching away from his kindness – his cell rang with news from Dave.

“Looks like Vlad stole another car and is on the move. Only a matter of time before the police pick him up.”

“Good. Send me the plate number so I can keep my eyes open in case he’s around

here.”

“Already done. Keep me in the loop about how things go at the hospital.”

“You know I will. Chao.”

Carly peeked up at him, and her weak smile made him sadder than he already felt. Before he could open another conversation, knowing that for her talk would be beneficial, he heard the heart stopping ringtone from the incoming call. When the special warning blast sounded, he knew it meant business. Answering the call, it didn’t surprise him to hear the voice of his buddy, Chuck Ono, on the other end.

“We’ll be seeing you soon, bro. Wind’s picked up, heading in your direction. The bastard’s coming your way.”

“Figured as much when I heard the ringtone. Keep in touch. I want to know when you’re within ten miles of me.”

“You know I will.”

Once they arrived at the hospital, it took all his calm prompting to get Carly to leave the safety of the truck. “Look, honey, I’ll be with you. Vlad will have to go through me to get to you and that ain’t happening.”

“He’s got a gun.”

Nash lifted his shirt for a few seconds and said, “So do I.” Being experienced in getting some ornery folks to listen to reason when they refused to leave their homes to the incoming flames, he carried a weapon in his vehicle. It was hidden from those who didn’t know where to look for it, and he only used it when absolutely necessary in saving lives. Today seemed to be one of those times.

Carly still hesitated. “Nash, that crazy sucker will use his.”

“Honey, this isn’t just for decoration, believe me. It’s for our protection, and trust me, I won’t hesitate to use it if he makes me.”

She stared at his determination and nodded. “Okay.” Then she reached up, letting him lift her into his arms, and they made their way inside the emergency entrance where – after hearing from her dad that she’d be arriving soon – the doctors were waiting to take her with them to their ICU.

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While they were tending to her wound, Nash called Maria to let her know he was in the building. “I’ll see you as soon as possible, Mom. I’m right here in the hospital. What room did they move Lew to?”

Carly overheard him talking and asked, “Is your mom here too?”

“My stepdad. They moved him out of the ICU into a ward. He’s one of Vlad’s victims. Thankfully, he’s going to pull through.”

Carly looked down for a few seconds and then glanced around at the many people nearby. “You should go and see him, Nash. I feel safe here with the nurses and doctors.”

“Are you sure? I can wait.”

“I know. Look, dude, you’re all but dancing in place. Go. I’ll wait for you, and then will you take me to see Beth?”

Nash winked; his smile special for her only. “Can do, honey. Thanks. I won’t be long.”

Moments later, Nash stood at Lew’s bedside with his arm around his mother’s waist. “Hey, Maria-ma. I’ve missed you.”

“Me too, ya big lug.” She hugged him so tight, he held his breath and stayed close, sensing her need.

Stepping back, she still gripped his hand as if she couldn't let him go. Then she pointed at the man on the bed with his eyes closed. "He's doing so much better today. The doc says he'll be out of here in a week or so."

"He's right here in case you thought you could talk shit about me and get away with it." Lew's eyes opened, and he grinned up at the two smiling down at him. "I'm fine. Just need a few more days for the old bones to kick in and stop whining every time I make a move."

Nash laughed and settled next to the man on the bed. Maria saw the look Lew aimed her way and the signal brought on her next question. "Can I get you a coffee, Nash? Maybe a donut to go with it?" Before Lew could speak, she stuck her finger up and added, "No. It's juice for you my love."

Pretending to be mollified, Lew spoke in a little boy's voice. "Can I have a donut too?"

Laughing, Maria answered, "I'll think about it. Back in a short while." She left the room and closed the door behind her, knowing full well that Lew wanted this time alone with Nash.

Lew pulled himself up, accepting Nash's help. "Want me to raise the bed?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I'm glad you came. I need to tell you something, and I didn't want to say anything in front of your mom. She's already freaking out about this whole nightmare with the Smirnova boys."

"So you know about it?"

"Pretty much. Dave came around yesterday, asking me questions, and said I was to let him know if I recalled anything more about old Mike and his family. I told him

about the sale of the property to Sadie and George and even about them finding Mike dead, but that kinda covered the gist of what I remembered. Then last night it came to me. One night, I met up with Mike at the bar after his wife, Mila, had left him. Always thought that crazy female didn't deserve such a pretty name. Lots of us back then thought the same. She was a cantankerous, mean-hearted bitch who never let up on the poor man."

Instantly, the thought popped into Nash's head – like mother, like son – but he didn't say it out loud. Instead, he asked, "So what was it you remembered?"

"Well, like I said, we were at the bar on a Saturday night and back in those days Nan had just taken over the place, and it was booming. The noise got to be so bad, I moved to a table in the back. When Mike came along, he asked if he could sit with me. We got to talking, and he admitted that Mila had left him, taking the boys with her back to Russia."

"How old were the boys then?"

"Young teenagers. The little fuckers were a handful even then. Truthfully, I figured it was good news myself, but he appeared downhearted and admitted it was mostly his fault. Said she'd gone to the old well to get water and had a breakdown right then and there. Threw the bucket at him and said it was her last time working like a mule. That was the day she took the boys and up and left him for good."

"And..." Nash sensed there was more to the story.

"Poor Mike worked like a dog to get water piped into the house and began filling in the old well. I guess he thought he'd get her to come back that way. But she never did. Funny thing, the day he had the heart attack, we saw the signs where he'd finally cemented in the hole. Doc figured his heart attack could have been from the strain of such hard work – you know, too much for the old ticker to handle."

Nash didn't move. His brain began untangling what Lew just mentioned and suddenly he saw the light. "Dave mentioned what Hattie said. You know – what Beth told her about the letter the boys found in their mother's belongings, didn't he? The letter Mike had sent to Mila that she never opened."

"Uh huh. The same letter where he wrote that he'd hid his stash in the very place that drove her away. It could be that old well, right? What if he stuffed the remains there before he filled it in and cemented it over. They never found any sign of the money around the house, and there's been a lot of renovating done since Mike sold it."

"Therefore, you're thinking it wasn't hidden in the house."

"Right. Look, we all knew that Mike had taken out \$60,000 in cash the day before he died. The police looked for it everywhere, even came to me with questions about the sale. I couldn't tell them anything, because I had no idea what he did with it. That's what I tried to tell Mike's boys when they showed up asking about the money and the old place."

"They brought up the money to you?"

"Yeah. Well the bastard who shot me did. The others were gone by then. I'll never forget the look on his face, Nash. His ugly grin said he liked pointing his gun at me... I mean loved it. First time I truly saw empty eyes. Christ almighty, I knew then I was gonna die. Imagine my delight when I woke up on earth and not behind the pearly gates."

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Chuckling, Nash took the offered hand and gripped it as Lew swallowed his emotional breakdown.

Thinking to tease the joker out of the spell, he joshed, “Hell, man, who says you’d land upstairs with the Big Guy and not in the burning cauldron below.”

Smirking, Lew answered, his voice ringing with smiles. “Other than stealing a few candy bars as a kid, smoking some weed, and using the Lord’s name in vain, I’ve been a goddamn angel. Besides, someone’s gotta be up there to greet you and your mom when you arrive, right?”

Full out laughing now, Nash grunted his agreement as Maria came in bearing sustenance.

As soon as he could leave, Nash headed back to find Carly waiting anxiously for him. “Sorry to be so long. Ma and Lew were happy to see me and needed to recharge. They had a lot to say.”

“I supposed. I’m glad Lew is better. He’s always been a good guy to me and my brother. We like going to the store and hanging with him.”

“The way he’s healing, he’ll be back soon. Are you ready to go and see Beth. They gave me her room number. She’s right down the hall from Lew.”

A few minutes later, holding tightly to his hand Carly led him from the elevator, stalling until he’d checked the corridor before they moved. They headed a ways down the hall, looking at the numbers on the doors until they came to a place where there

were two beds to a room.

Seeing the closest bed empty, they moved in further to check behind the closed curtain. Against the far wall, they saw a small figure lying in the bed, staring out the window. Immediately, Nash sensed her isolation, the solitary aura of a person alone in the world. His heart went out to the tiny person with such a huge load to carry.

Not so, Carly. As soon as she saw Beth, she squealed and flung herself toward the girl, landing on the bed and gripping tightly to the arms waiting to hold her.

“Carly. You’re okay. Thank God. Hattie? Is she okay too?”

“Yes, yes. We’re both fine. Well, they say Mom is kinda messed up, but she’ll get better soon. My dad and brother are with her now.”

Tears, raging a war on Beth’s face, smeared everywhere until she reached for the tissue box and grabbed a handful to use on herself. Nash watched as she tenderly wiped Carly’s face too. “I prayed. All night. I prayed so hard that he didn’t hurt you. How did you get away?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Maybe. I guess. It’s horrible.”

“I’m not surprised, but I’ll understand.”

“Okay.” Carly turned to see Nash begin texting, trying to get updates from Chuck.

“Nash, you can go. I’ll stay here with Beth. I’m fine now. I promise. We’ll be safe.

You need to go.”

Nash stepped in front of her, pulled her to stand so he could see into her eyes. Her sincerity made his spirit lift. Then he looked at Beth. “Honey, I’ve heard so much about you... all good. You feel okay with Carly staying with you?”

The girl’s smile brightened the whole room. “Yes. We have a lot to talk about. We’ll be fine.”

“Right. Okay. I’ll keep in touch. But until you hear from me, neither of you are allowed to leave the hospital, or this floor. I’ll text my mom, Maria to come and check on you. You know her, right Carly?”

“Of course. She’s with Lew at the store all the time.”

“Good. If you need anything at all, she’s in Room 412 with Lew. Call her, and she’ll get you food or whatever you want.”

“Okay. We’re good. Hanna needs you and so does Ana. Go. And Nash, thanks.”

“Be safe, ya hear?”

After both girls nodded, Nash headed out the door, his phone against his ear while he told his mother about Carly maybe calling on her to get them things from the cafeteria. Then he called Ana, thrilled at hearing her voice.

“Hey girl, how’re things where you are?”

“Smoky.”

Chapter Thirty-four

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Ana said goodbye to Dave and then wondered if they shouldn't have accepted his offer for a ride into town. Wanting some time alone with Hanna, she'd refused his suggestion that he take them with him, saying, "We can walk to the lake and then along the road to get to you if need be. For now, I think we're safe here, waiting for Nash. You go ahead."

"Okay, if you say so. There's a fuck of a lot of things I need to take care of back at the office."

"I know. Don't worry about us. If things get really bad, I have Dad's ATV here that we can use." She walked him to the door and opened it.

"As long as you're fine with me leaving." He stopped to look around. "It's getting smoky outside, but we've been smelling that stink for the last few days. Every time the wind changes to be exact."

"I know. It's a shame."

"Like I said, with the warning just issued, you and I both know that the fire's heading our way, eating up a football field of land every fifteen seconds. At that speed, it won't be long before it's crawling up our asses."

"Yeah. Thank goodness I tied the boat up on the lake. If things get too scary, we can make our way in that direction. I'm thinking we'd be safe out there."

"Sounds like a move. Look, we've been told to clear residents from all the outlying cabins. So tell Nash he needs to call me with instructions for the folks in town. I'm

thinking the sooner we begin evacuations there, the better.”

When Nash did call Ana, he was full of instructions. “Hey darling, get outside with Hanna and use the hoses you have on the property. Water down the grounds nearest the house, the roof and outbuildings as far as you can. Hopefully, it’ll deter the flames from lighting up your land.”

“I think the creek in the back might help a bit too. There’s not much water left but the ground is still damp.”

“Good. That will help.”

“Things are serious then?”

“You bet your sweet ass. My crew just contacted me that they’ll be arriving very soon, hopefully ahead of the fire. They need to set up a camp nearby and begin operations to stop the flames from crossing the lake. It’s the best form of defense in this area.”

“There’re a lot of homes on the other side, plus the hospital and the town.”

“Yep. And a serial killer on the loose. When it rains it pours.”

“Then bring on the rain.”

Nash chuckled. “Just a saying darling, but I know what you mean. Be there soon.”

“Yeah. Soon.” She hesitated. Affectionate words choked her. But so did shyness.

“Bye...” The words love you followed but not until he’d hung up.

Shaking off her sudden worry, she rounded up Hanna. “Nash wants us to go outside

and water everything in the vicinity. In the meantime, I'll get Dad's ATV out of the garage and have it ready in case we need a quick escape. If you have anything that you want to be sure to take with you, get it ready now and put it on the front stoop. We'll pack light but it might be our last chance to save our stuff."

Running through the rooms, Ana went straight for the photograph of her parents the last year they spent at the cabin together. The selfie she'd snuck had turned into a great picture, a keeper she never wanted to lose. Then she grabbed her own and her mother's jewelry boxes, filled with presents from her dad, and dumped them into her backpack. Spinning around, she had no idea of what else to take. In the end, it was all just replaceable stuff. Thinking a change of clothes might be needed, she rolled together some and stashed them in her backpack too. On the stairs she met Hanna coming from her room with a huge suitcase.

"No, baby. We can't take that on the ATV. Just grab what you really need for a night or two and whatever is precious."

Soon, they had organized their belongings and were hard at work watering down the property as per Nash's instructions. First, Ana headed for the shed, thinking about the last time they had been there and found cigarette butts they now suspected had been Vlad's.

Since hearing Beth's story, she'd determined her to be their break-in artist, trying to hide from Boris and the monster. Suddenly a thought entered, and she had a strong feeling her suspicions were right... something to put in the back of her mind and bring out when she had more time.

Once she felt the grounds were well saturated, she moved her water toward the house, aiming high to reach to the roof. Changing from the back of the property to the front was when she noticed the glow in the distance.

Shit!

What scared the bejesus out of her... it came from the direction of the lake but still seemed a long ways away.

Not ten minutes later, Hanna came towards her, waving her arms wildly. “Look behind us. Do you see it? There’s flames heading this way. We have to leave.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Christ, they were being surrounded. “Have you got everything you need?”

“Yes.” Hanna gripped her hands together, her face pale, and eyes pleading to be understood. “I’m really scared, Ana.”

“Don’t be. We’ll be fine. But we need to leave now.” Again, she turned the hose switch on and watered both herself and Hanna down good, then the machine, before tossing it away. Handing the better helmet to Hanna, she took the smaller one for herself. Then she climbed on the four-wheeler and gestured for Hanna to do the same. Wheeling around, they turned in the direction of the road that led from their cabin. Within a few minutes of their ride, they could see flames overhead, leaping from one treetop to another.

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Ana felt like she was going crazy. How could they have been so unaware of the coming danger? She'd heard tales of the speed of forest fires but had never seen one up close. Her hands gripped the throttle, and her instinct to go faster had to be controlled. She was well aware that their only hope to get away was using this four-wheeled vehicle. They needed to protect it at all costs.

Sticking to the wide path, she put her head down and kept going. Soon, with a wall of orange glow on both sides, heat like they'd never felt before, and a snowfall of burning embers floating around in the thick air, they kept traveling forward. Hanna brushed off sparks landing on them, yet many stung Ana's bare chest and arms. Ignoring the discomfort, she heard the younger girl choking on cries of the pain she also endured.

God help her, she'd never been afraid in a fight, but this attacker... she'd never fought against before. She had no understanding of its power, its plays, therefore she felt a kind of fear like she'd hadn't known in her life.

Having Hanna clinging from behind made her aware that her young cousin felt the same kind of horror. Through all the crashing, spitting, crackling sounds of the forest in peril around her, she still heard the whimpers of fear that Hanna made. With her face nestled into Ana's neck, her arms clinging tight around her waist, the younger girl's instinctive moans came through loud and clear.

Whipping around the last bend, a wall of red danger awaited them, forcing her to brake. Choking, smoke everywhere, her eyes watering both from the heat and the fumes of stinking pollution, Ana didn't know which way to turn. The blasted furnace closing in was killing them.

Just as she decided they'd need to try breaking through the mess in front of them and pray for a clearing on the other side, they heard a thundering noise that made them break out in a wild cheer. Voices raw, eyes streaming, they nevertheless both yelped with glee when the bush firetruck broke through the wall of flames and drove toward them.

In seconds, Nash had run to them, hauling each female from their perch on the ATV and basically throwing them towards his men who were there to help guide them inside the truck. While they tried to recover, Nash hugged each of them hard, his arms tight around Ana, clearly thankful that they were in time. He kissed her once, whispering, "I couldn't bear to lose you." Then leaving them to recover, he discussed their best chance to survive with his crew.

Nash directed his question to the navigator in the passenger seat next to the driver. "Any openings nearby to get the truck back to safety?"

"Doesn't look good, Nashville. Not unless we can get to the lake road and pray it's not as engulfed as here. From the map, I'd say there's a wider opening where the trees are further inland along the beachfront."

Ana heard them and leaned forward. In between coughing and choking, she shared what she knew. "To the right." She pointed at his navigation screen. "Just there. Another path. It's cleared. It'll take you to that road along the lake."

While the truck made the awkward three-point turns, Nash removed her helmet and swiped her face gently with trembling hands. "Is that where your father's boat is tied up? Oh Christ, please tell me it's not in a boathouse?"

"No. Thank God." She coughed, clearing her throat before being able to continue. He handed her his own canteen, sharing his precious water supply, and it helped cool her throat. "Thanks. That's much better." She gave it back. Their hands touched long

enough for their eyes to connect... a sweet message of gratitude passing between them.

“When we first arrived, I moved it out on the lake and tied it to the buoy we have there. I like to swim to it for exercise. The boat’s surrounded by water. It should be safe. Unless some floating embers... you know... like landed on it.”

She didn’t recognize her voice. It sounded harsh from the pain in her throat. Turning away from Nash, she glanced toward the windshield and almost lost it. They were driving through a wall of flames on both sides. How they managed to keep going, she’d never understand. Trees were burning, branches falling, many landing all around them. They heard the hissing and strange explosive sounds one wouldn’t normally equate with fire. But they just kept moving ahead.

It was like a scene from an apocalyptic movie... one she’d never thought to star in and prayed she’d never have to again. Fear rode her body, inserting itself in her brain, knocking everywhere for her to let it in... but she refused. Fighting her senses, she gritted her teeth and barely kept control.

Instead, she watched as Nash – in his rightful – position guided his men with calm and strength. They totally bowed to his orders, each one of them absolutely secure in his knowledge and power to keep them safe.

Thankfully, the lake road now lay just ahead to the left, and with a final burst of speed, they broke out of the flames and turned onto it. There they found the air less toxic and most of the flames behind them. They parked the truck ahead, and each man left to gear up.

Giving instructions to his crew, Nash had them scurrying around, everyone but the driver leaving the safety of the truck to work on the ground, putting out the hundreds of spot fires in the vicinity.

“I can help with that.” Ana pointed to where the men were working with rakes and swatters.

“Me, too.” Hanna spoke through her coughing spell. “I want to help.” She went to the door and jumped to the ground, grabbing a tool from the rack on the side of the truck where she’d seen the others get theirs. Then she moved close to where a fellow was busy at work, putting out the small fires smoldering along the shore. Imitating his movements, she worked alongside him.

Watching through the window, Anna felt a huge sense of pride for Hanna’s actions. The girl had grit and seeing it made her tear up. Not wanting Nash to see her emotional display, she stood to follow, but he held her back. “You’ve been burned, darling. Your leg.”

She looked down to see her jeans blackened and missing a small section where her skin shone through... red with blisters. “That’s strange. It doesn’t hurt.”

“It will. We have ointment for that. Tiger can fix you up. I need to get busy.” He kissed her cheek and left her seated.

An older man, who came out from behind the wheel, stepped closer holding a first-aid kit. He crouched in front of her. “Thank goodness it’s not too deep. This stuff will fix it up.”

Ana nodded. “Thank you for coming for us... ahh, Tiger. I was shocked to see the truck, but I’ll admit I’ve never set eyes on anything more beautiful in my life.”

Tiger chuckled before speaking. “Seriously... the boss almost ran in front of us; he was in such a hurry to get to you. Especially after we met Officer Chalmers who said he’d left you here and then couldn’t get in touch with you. Once he realized how bad the fire had become, he wanted to warn you to leave immediately.”

Ana nodded with understanding. “Makes sense. We were hosing down the house and grounds, and like a dummy, I got hot and took off my shirt. I’d left my phone in the pocket. Guess it’s gone now.” She coughed and drank more of the water.

“Hmm. You’re taking it well. I can’t tell you how many meltdowns we’ve seen over folks losing their cellphones.” Tiger shook his head sadly. “It’s a crazy-ass world today.”

Glad the tightness in her throat had eased, Ana bobbed her head in agreement. “You’re not kidding. Talk about crazy, can I ask you why anyone would choose such a dangerous profession? I mean, I’m an agent with the FBI, and in my career, I’ve been in a few tight places. But this burning bastard is way beyond the criminals and weirdos we face every day. This horror show has no mercy, no fear, doesn’t give a hoot in hell about life... be it human or nature. It’s humbling. Know what I mean?”

“Uh huh.” Tiger sat back on his heels and stared into her eyes, his filled with sincerity. “The truth?”

“Please.”

Searching for words, he scratched at his scarred face before answering. Finally, he said, “It’s the job. The winning. Saving property and people. Being the good guy. It gets into your blood. Don’t know how better to explain.”

Ana nodded, understanding washing over her like a tidal wave, forcing her to see the love of what he did through his eyes. Reaching out with a trembling hand – something that didn’t come easy – she rasped, her voice still not perfect. “Thank you.”

He nodded and stood, giving her room to stand herself.

“Am I good to go now?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be right behind you.”

Chapter Thirty-five

Even though he’d gotten his lady to safety, Nash’s stomach still clogged his throat. And the sweat pooling under his clothes wasn’t solely from the excessive heat. Never having experienced these symptoms before, he knew the truth. Today, he personally understood what others endured at the thought of someone they loved being caught in the very enemy he’d fought all these many years.

Seeing that fucking, glorious ATV racing at them through the flames had left him sobbing in relief, and his men cheering. Goddammit, he never wanted to live through

torture like that again.

He glanced over at the truck, wondering what took Tiger so long in applying a bit of ointment. Knowing he was needed out here to help his men, give them orders, and keep everyone focused, he forced himself not to go back and check.

Almost at the point of giving in, he watched the two exit the truck, old Tiger helping her like a gentleman, holding Ana's hand as if they'd shared a moment. Maudlin from the sight, he forced himself to get back on track. They needed to maintain control over the wildfires rocketing towards them.

"Keep the roadside clean as you can, boys." He watched as the men brushed aside burning, fallen tree branches that the fire had destroyed. "Leave the truck behind us until we see a clearing ahead. We gotta keep it safe. They're depending on us to get our equipment back to help in town."

Nash glanced across the lake at the hospital where more houses and businesses could be seen in the distance. On the hills behind, the red glow of a moving fire showed itself, waving flames torching from one area to the other... the beast jumping and skipping through the treetops like a happy toddler without a care in the world.

While the hotshots worked zealously with Ana and her cousin alongside them, he moved to Ono and pointed to where they could best place their suction hose that drained water from the lake." Now that this area is cleared, let's hook up the pumps and fill the tanks on the truck. Then unblock the road ahead as much as we can. We need to keep that rig safe."

"On it." His second in command, Chuck Ono's nod showed his agreement with the plan.

Answering the call blasting through on his radio phone, Nash listened to the static

message. Then he tried using his cell to no avail. Giving up, he moved to where Ana stamped with her boots at the small fires that caught in the dry underbrush.

“Dave’s on the radio phone. He’s worried about the Roddam’s place. Said he tried contacting them but no answer. I just called Sam now and same thing. Do you have a different number for Hattie?”

“Yeah but my phone’s somewhere back at the house. Sorry. I don’t remember her number.”

Nash called out to Dave waiting on the line. “Did you hear that? Hattie has her own phone. Can you try reaching her?”

Nash’s hearted plummeted. “Christ. Okay. We have access to a boat out on the lake. What if we try getting to them from that direction?”

Dave’s voice crackled, sounding like a million miles away. “Could work. The Roddams actually have access to the lake behind their house. Sam planned to buy a boat later this year and build a dock. He talked about it in the bar when they were here for Easter.”

Once Nash hung up, he turned to Ana. “Dave said the road is completely blocked to their property.” Then he pointed at a smaller raft riding the choppy waves the winds were creating. “Is that your motor boat?”

“Ahh... yeah. It must have broken loose from where I moored it.”

“Do you have a key to start the engine.”

“Not on me, but I know where Dad keeps one hidden. I’ll come with you.”

He hesitated but knew he'd need backup getting three people to safety. "Fine. Let's go, baby. But you do whatever I tell you. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I surely do."

His narrowed gaze pinned her in place. "Don't be cheeky."

"Who me? Wouldn't dream of it." Ignoring his glare, she led the way to the lake, kicked off her boots and tied them together, throwing them around her shoulders. Then she lifted her shirt and locked the gun in the holster on her waist. Lastly, she dove in and began swimming toward the boat like a trained Olympic athlete.

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Ana had no illusions about the suspicions both Dave and now Nash were withholding. The only reason the Roddams hadn't left their property like the rest of the residents were doing is because they were being stopped. And she had a good idea of who would be insane enough to do something so idiotic. Only a maniac who believed he had sixty thousand reasons. Crazy bastard couldn't help himself. Blinded to anything but the craving for his father's bounty, he'd obviously kept up his vendetta.

Getting that money mattered more to him than any one person or their lives. He'd do whatever he felt necessary in order to get his way. Realizing that with so much happening all at once, the cops had dropped the manhunt, she figured he'd made his way through town without anyone paying much attention.

Aware that neither of the Roddams had a clue where it could be stashed, Ana feared for their lives. With a murdering wingnut like Vlad, who'd have no qualms about threatening to kill whoever they held most dear, she instinctively knew their twelve-year-old son would be in the most danger. Hadn't he threatened Lew in the same way with Maria? It made sense that Vlad wouldn't hesitate to use Justin to get what he wanted.

Discovering her strength waning, and unable to believe that a sport she excelled in would let her down, she floated on her back to rest her arms and catch her breath. Nash stopped beside her, flipped the water out of his hair, and reached for her body. "You're exhausted, baby. No surprise. Fighting fires can take a lot out of you, and you've been going strong for hours. Let me help you."

Unwilling to give in and yet knowing she was only holding them up if she didn't, she

twined her hands into his belt and caught a ride beside him, paddling with her feet to keep them moving.

In no time, the big dude swam alongside the boat, lifted himself onboard, and then reached down to pull her in too. Letting him help, she soon scrambled over the side and lay in a puddle for seconds to catch her breath.

Like a puppy, Nash shook off the water and asked, “Where’s the key, baby?”

Pulling herself upright, she headed to the helm where an overhead canopy covered the steering wheel. In a small, hidden pocket on the side of the boat, she lifted the cover and reached in, pulling out a string with a key attached. She handed it to him and then moved aside.

In seconds, they were flying across the lake in the direction Dave had given him. “Can you see their house from the water?”

Throwing the towel she’d found in a cupboard aside; she pointed in a direction further north. “It’s around that bend. Remember when we were there doing surveillance?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the hill we hid behind.”

“Okay. I see it now. Should we drive right to their property? Do you think they’ll be able to spot us from inside the house?”

“If they’re looking, maybe. It’s pretty dark and smoky now so if we turn off the lights and float in, we might go undetected. They don’t have a dock so we’ll have to get as close as we can and use the rope to tie to shore.”

“Right. You’ve had more experience with this particular boat, how about you take over the wheel and ease us in. I’ll get into the water with the line and find a tree to use.”

“Okay.” Ana didn’t see the kiss coming, but when it landed, she succumbed with more passion than she expected. Her heart had taken quite a beating when she thought she might never see this man again. It had been too close a call. With that thought in her head, she clung hard. “Don’t get killed tonight, baby. I couldn’t stand it.”

“Backatcha, darling.” He kissed her again, then pulled back to look into her eyes. “We’re a couple now, right?”

She nodded first, then added a verbal reply. “Yeah.”

“I want a long honeymoon when the time is right. You good with that?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And kids. Lots of kids.”

“Whoa.” She peered into his grin and finally nodded. “Okay... yeah, but no more than four.”

He kissed her hard, then slipped over the side into the water, pulling the rope with him. Stopping, he turned back. In a loud whisper, he added, “And a dog.”

Grimacing, she leaned closer. “Gonna have to discuss that one. I might need some convincing.”

“Good. I’m a great convincer – got special moves that’ll probably work.”

Her “cheeky bastard” followed him into the darkness and only a chuckle floated back to her.

Chapter Thirty-six

Smiling with satisfaction, Nash looked for the perfect spot to tie up the boat. Understanding they’d just declared themselves made him happier than he thought possible. And the fact that he’d ensnared Ana into making promises turned his insides to mush. Now the idea of taking her into danger almost put him to his knees.

His brain told him to stop with her here and now. To get the stubborn woman as far away as possible. But he knew deep down, he couldn’t do it... nor would she let him. It was obvious, she’d fight him all the way.

On shore, he’d seen her checking her holster. No fool... she’d assumed they’d be walking into danger. Groaning, he had to accept that this treacherous mission was her stomping grounds. And all he could do – if worse came to worse – was try and get between her and a bullet.

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Wary, his heart gave battle, wanting them to have the future they'd just laid out. Feeling all kinds of fear at the thought that they'd likely be meeting up with the worst monster of all time, he forced himself to continue with the plan. Sure, he wanted to pick her up and force her back to safety, but it couldn't be acted on. It killed him to know the truth. Ana would fight him all the way.

When he closed his eyes, the image of poor Sam and his family appeared, and he knew they didn't have any other option but to carry on, pray they weren't too late, and that Vlad hadn't taken his revenge. He fought off his worries and moved toward the shore.

Once he'd found the perfect stump to anchor the boat to, he hauled it in as close as he safely could. Before he'd finished, Ana had slipped in beside him.

"The fire is everywhere. I didn't notice it until we rounded the bend. With so much smoke, it's hard to breathe."

"Yeah. Dave said the helicopter pilot just arrived and warned him that they'd spotted it flaring up in this direction. He'd watched most of the families evacuate except for the Roddams. It's what scared him into calling me."

"You're thinking what I'm thinking, right? That Vlad made his way back here for the money. He knows Mike had to have left it somewhere on the property. I bet he figures that the Roddams are hiding it."

"Christ, who knows what the lunatic thinks. We need to get to the house as quick as we can. The fire is moving fast."

He pointed behind the house to the south and sure as hell, Ana made out the flames headed in their direction.

“Okay, we need to stick together. I’m praying the family is still alive. And, if I can get a clear shot on Vlad, you can bet your sweet ass, I’ll take it. We haven’t a lot of time.”

“Right behind you.”

Soon, they approached the window in the kitchen area and looked inside. They saw Sam beaten and lying in a heap on the floor with Hattie kneeling next to him. Sure as shit, Vlad appeared in front of them with Justin hanging from his grip. “I’ll only say it once again. Either give me the money, or first the boy dies... then Sam.” He glared at Hattie. “Up to you, bitch.”

Hattie, on her knees, tears streaming, dripping from her trembling chin, beseeched the beast. “How many ways can I tell you?” She screamed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about and neither does Sam. I swear. Just give us a chance to get to the bank and take money from our account. We can get you fifty thousand in cash right away, I promise.” She began coughing, her face a mess of bruises and tears. “God, help us... you have to believe me. You can have my rings and whatever jewelry you want. Take anything. Please... just don’t hurt my son.”

Justin, hanging from the gripping, hurting hand, cried out, wriggling as much as he could. “Stop torturing my mom.” The kid had guts for sure, but his temerity just pissed Vlad off worse.

Ana hated that she didn’t have a clear shot, not with the boy being jerked to and fro in front of the bastard. Nash pulled at her arm and pointed to the back of the place. The flames had jumped from the trees and were now burning on the roof... with only moments for it to move to this part of the house.

“We need to get in there now. What if you shoot into the room, making him take cover and pray he’ll let go of Justin.”

“It’s worth a try. We don’t have much time.” Ana saw some flames ignite on the corner of the porch, moving ever closer.

Taking aim, she shot at the ceiling light, leaving the room in semi darkness. Happy to see that Nash’s plan worked, that Vlad had shoved the boy in order to take cover, she kept firing. Then she gave orders, yelling into the room. “Hattie, get out the door beside you. Help Sam. You too Justin. Do it now. I’ll cover you.”

She listened to the screams of the family as Hattie and Justin hauled Sam toward the doorway. She kept up a stream of bullets, forcing Vlad to stay hidden or get shot. Watching as the hysterical woman and her son yanked their loved one through the doorway without any care for him getting knocked around, she cheered them on. “Hurry. The house has caught fire. Run to the lake. Nash is here and will help you.”

Vlad continued firing his gun, but he never got the chance to get a good aim on her. Ana’s continuous barrage of bullets kept him down. Once the Roddams, were clear, she started to edge away, knowing there were only seconds to get to the water and safety.

Then suddenly she saw something that glued her to the spot. Nash had rushed through, into the burning room, heading toward the menace who had dropped his gun and was now begging, crying, pleading for help.

She watched her man run forward and haul the stupid bastard out from where he crept into the corner, too scared to help himself. Flames had burst out everywhere and a roar of sound made her aware that some of the roof had collapsed and the front of the

house glowed from the flames eating it up. Lifting her gun, she took aim to shoot that monster, leaving Nash free to save his own life.

Unfortunately, Hattie took that moment to appear, screaming for her to run. “Ana, you have to come now. The others are at the boat. Hurry. Please hurry.”

Only Ana could no more leave Nash than she could kill the man he’d chosen to save. Lowering her gun, she yelled her fury. “Fu-u-ck!!”

While the mounting smoke obliterated the scene, she had no way of knowing what was happening inside. Praying, crying, her heart in agony, she held her breath and fought against Hattiewho was pulling on her to come. “Ana! Hurry. The fire is everywhere. We need to leave. Now.”

“Nash. I can’t. He’s inside.”

“What? No! Son of a bitch.”

Fighting Hattie’s grip, needing to stay, she broke loose and forced herself to the door where the Roddams had escaped and got there just in time to see her brave lover with a bundle over his shoulder, stumbling toward them.

With Hattie leading the way, screaming her relief, Ana pushed Nash in front as they headed back to the boat. With every step she shrieked in anger, releasing her fright. “You fucking idiot! You almost died, saving that waste of skin. Are you crazy? I outta shoot you for putting me through that hell.”

As soon as they reached the water, Nash dropped the now unconscious man into the shallow water and then grabbed her close, holding her tight. “I’m okay, baby. Breathe. I’m fine. I-I couldn’t watch a man burn if I could save him... now could I? Same way you couldn’t shoot him when you had the chance. It’s... it’s the job.”

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Hattie had the boat untied and ran to them, pushing at each. “Christ you two. Do that later. We have to get away from the shore or your boat will be next in the fire’s list of victims.”

Nash lifted the now semi-conscious idiot and shoved him in the furthest place he could from the others. Watching over him, he gave a signal for Ana to pull out. Quickly, Hattie gave a shove and then clambered inside just as Ana pushed the lever to back the craft into the deeper part of the lake.

Once they got further away from the flying sparks, Ana felt secure enough that they could relax their fear somewhat. With sadness, she saw the flames as a wall between the lake and where her property lay. Heart sinking, she accepted that nature didn’t care who lived where.

Thinking of her dad, and how bad he’d feel knowing his precious cabin had most likely burned, she traveled on to where they’d originally left the truck, only to see that it was no longer there.

“I gave Ono and Tiger instructions to fill the water tanks and then get to town where they needed to help save as many of the buildings as possible. Looks like they followed orders. Can you get us close to the big dock behind the main street? We’ll see if it’s still standing.”

Heading south now, they saw more than a few people treading water and stopped to pick up as many as they could safely hold. Ana went to speak to Nash only to see him head for the side and then dive in. She followed him with her eyes and saw what had caught his attention.

A teenager – treading water while holding onto his large dog for dear life – had feebly lifted his hand to signal for help. Nash must have noticed him or heard his cries when no one else had.

Yelling for Hattie to take the wheel, she went to the side of the boat closest to Nash and lowered a lifebuoy, then slipped into the water herself to help him lift his victims. The dog, frightened they were there to hurt his master, showed his teeth in a fierce growl that stopped them from moving too quickly.

It was Justin who saved the day. Leaning over the side of the boat, he called the dog's name and got an instant response. "Tracker. Quiet boy. We're friends." Once the animal heard Justin's voice, he settled down, and they were able to get both him and his master safely onboard. Justin quickly moved in to help shelter the dog and his owner. "Here Jack, come sit with me." He even shared his towel with his friend.

Ana crouched by the pale, dripping lad, her tone gentle. "Did you and Tracker get separated from your family, Jack?"

"Uh huh. As soon as Dad opened the door, Tracker took off, and I ran after him. My mom and dad were trying to get my crazysisters into the car. After they saw how close the fire had gotten, they were hysterical, screaming and fighting. I hope they made it through to town. Tracker led me right to the lake, and he jumped in. So I went in with him. He saved us both."

"Don't worry. Most folks made it through according to the sheriff. But we'll check on your parents as soon as we can."

Just then, Hattie's voice rang out, warning them that Vlad was coming awake. Dripping... sodden and using a damp towel he'd accepted from Ana, Nash staggered over to where they'd left the coward in a heap. Ana followed... and remembering the last time she'd come out with her father, she had an idea about what they could do to

keep the killer contained.

Pushing past Hattie at the wheel, she rummaged in one of the compartments and found what she sought. A package of plastic ties were mixed in with her father's gear. Using more than one linked together, Nash secured Vlad's hands to the rail and his feet to each other.

When he saw Hattie hovering, glaring her hate, her fists clenched, he spoke calmly. "Ignore the prick, sugar. We'll be taking him where he belongs soon enough, and the sicko won't be seeing the light day for a long, long time."

Hattie spit her anger, her voice filled with hate. "Can't I just get in one good kick before that happens?"

"Will it change anything?"

"No, but it'll make me feel a hell of a lot better."

He grinned and hauled her close, giving her a side hug. "Violence isn't the answer, honey. Just thank God you're all safe. That'll help more." He didn't see Ana catch Hattie's eye, nor did he see the understanding flowing between them. If he had, he'd know that there were times when prayers didn't work for incensed females in the same way as physical action.

Closing in on the main dock, there were scads of boats all anchored in the water nearby. Some of the crafts showed lights but they didn't see any coming from the buildings on land. "It's eerie, everything being so dark."

Ana heard Hattie speaking to Nash and decided the woman had just voiced what she felt. His voice rough but tender, he said, "Yeah. Guess the fire ate through a lot of the power lines, destroying the town's electricity. Thankfully, the main places like the

hospital would have generator power that should have kicked in. See there?" He pointed in the direction where, in the distance, one could see the glow from the big windows.

"Yes. I see it." She added, thankfulness ringing in her voice. "I was praying it survived the flames."

"My men would have been doing everything they could to help the patients and save the building. First responders, plus doctors and nurses get protection from the get-go."

"Makes sense." Alluding to how calm things seemed after the horror they'd been through, she continued, "It seems safe here now, Nash. I don't think the fire burned through this part of town."

Ana joined their conversation. "You're right. Other than the lingering smoke, the stench, and the creepy darkness, most of this area looks untouched by the flames. Still... it reminds me of a horror show."

Slowly, Nash pulled her close, his arm around her waist. "Don't worry, ladies. Folks will have the flashlights and coal oil lamps they'd use to fall back on during any storm. In my experience, most outlying communities like this are prepared to survive catastrophes resembling the one we just endured."

Out of the blackness, they heard Justin calling for his mom. "Dad's awake, and he's asking for you."

Ana stepped up to take the wheel from Hattie. "I thought I saw him stirring. Guess he's regaining consciousness."

"Thank God." Turning to leave, Hattie stopped. "Do you think we can get him to the

hospital. He took a bad beating from that prick you saved, Nash. Fucker kicked him over and over, trying to get him to admit something he knew nothing about.”

Nash nodded, reaching his hand to hers, gripping hers in understanding.

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“From the look of him, I’ve no doubt Sam’s got broken ribs and a hell of a lot of contusions. Best to be sure none are dangerous to his internal organs. I’ll find out about the medical facilities available, and if the hospital is still operating.”

While Nash contacted Dave, Ana slowly eased the boat to the dock, tying it in place. Once moored, Ana and Nash stepped onto the metal flooring of the floating pier and watched Dave make his way toward them. A flashlight bobbed in one hand, and the other reached to shake with Nash and Ana. Once he’d closed in, Dave’s grin became noticeable.

“I knew you two could do it.” He watched some of their passengers scramble onto the dock and grinned. “Yep. These families are the last to be accounted for. Oh, good. You picked up Jack and Tracker. His parents are frantic about him.” Dave slapped Nash’s back. “Your men managed to stop the fire from taking out the town and used the helicopters to control the flames. It’s still a menace, but we’re safe for now. And the pub’s opened their doors for everyone to be together and recoup.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

“Please tell me that Hanna is safe.” Ana’s voice quivered with the alarm she’d been stuffing back inside her mind so as not to fall apart.

“Sure is. That girl worked with the firemen like a woman trained. Chuck raved about her and even Tiger gave her a compliment. And we all know that man wouldn’t say anything sweet if sugar was melting in his mouth.”

“Thank God. Is she at the pub with the others from town?”

“Probably. They needed a lot of help settling the folks. Can’t say a lot of them are happy with the outcome. Many lost their cabins, which is a shame. But what’s worse is that quite a few of the residents live here year-round. It’s their principal residence which will leave them homeless.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, but we still have a town, maybe a few casualties, but no deaths. Speaking of the dead, what you got in there?” Dave pointed at the dark shadow still tied inside the boat.

Nash stepped to the side and pointed in the direction that Dave had been staring. “Right. We have a present for you, just not too sure what you want us to do with him right now. Got any ideas?”

“Oh, man, don’t ask. My ideas would get me twenty-to-life.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Once Nash and Dave made sure that Sam got the help he needed from the ambulance they still had in use, they hauled the prisoner to the jail. There they had a makeshift cell mostly to accommodate rowdy drunks. Rather than take any chances, they left the zip ties to stabilize the fool’s hands while steering him toward the bunk.

“It’s too tight.” Vlad complained over his treatment. But his mouth snapped shut after he saw Dave’s narrowed-eye glare followed by an unsympathetic shove that upended him on the old, pee-stained mattress. “Shut up, asshole.”

Following Dave to his office, Nash accepted the shirt the sheriff passed over still on the hanger. “I keep extras here just in case. Never know when a sick drunk can’t control his stomach reflexes.”

Just as Nash lifted the article behind him to slip his arms in, the door opened, and Ana stepped into the room. She stopped dead and stared.

His skin shone from the healthy tan he sported, and his muscular frame became highlighted in the soft glow of lamplight. The perfect moment made her eyes widen in appreciation at his nakedness. But it was the smile illuminating her serious features that made his body tighten with need. A need he'd have to control with difficulty. All he could think about was getting her alone and doing again what they'd managed to do so perfectly together earlier.

Her husky tone cleared his fantasy world. "I figured I'd find you here."

He stared into her eyes, sending a silent message of passion and noticed her clenching her legs as if the reaction had zeroed in on her lower regions. His voice came out husky, and it wasn't all from smoke damage. "You disappeared."

"Yeah, I was helping the others to Nan's bar. Dave said the townspeople were gathering there for safety."

"Good. It's best they hang together in case there's a wind shift, and we need to leave in a hurry."

Her big blues widened in consternation. "Christ, could that actually happen?"

"Sure." He pointed to the window where one could still see flames in the far distance. "I've seen that malicious bitch change directions more times than I want to admit. As we know from our recent experience, the wind has a mind all it's own."

She stepped close to him, her wild blonde curls haloing her beautiful face. With the wet clothes still clinging to her tall form, she looked like a goddess from another century. The darkened room lit only from a coal oil lamp showered her features with

a luminescent glow that made him shiver from wanting her so badly. Unable to stop himself, he guided her into his arms and kissed her until she moaned. Aware that his body either had to be satisfied... or he'd bloody well have to pull back now, he stomped down on his desire, hardened his will, and stepped away.

At that moment, Dave returned to the office with extra towels and carrying a steaming pot of coffee. "Just made it fresh if you're interested." He opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of good whiskey. "It tastes splendid with this... ahh, sweetener."

Smiling, both her and Nash gleefully accepted his offer. The smell alone almost brought him to his knees in thankfulness for the caffeine hit he'd missed all day. Ana gratefully sipped hers and then used the dry towel on her hair. Dave seemed to notice her dampness predicament and said, "Perkins has an extra sweater in the lunchroom she often uses. That old harpy is always complaining it's too cold in here with the air conditioner on." He looked a bit sheepish and then added, "Glad I made her leave on the first bus outta here after we got the evacuation notice. Poor girl doesn't do well in disasters. Gets riled fast, and then it's hell to pay for both me and old Pat."

Ana shook her head and made a comment. "What I'd like to know is what would you do without the "poor old harpy"?"

Looking uncomfortably shy, Dave's seriousness let them know he meant it when he said, "I hope we never have to find out."

Happy now, Ana searched for the sweater, leaving Nash alone with Dave and able to question him. "What's the plans for getting this guy to the city." He chinned in the direction where they'd stowed Vlad. "Will the police send a van to pick him up?"

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“Don’t know what’s next. Never had to deal with two emergencies like these at the same time before. Guess Ana might know better’n me.”

“What will I know?” Ana slipped into the room, heading for her hot drink, stopping to add a good amount of the sweetener first.

“What’ll happen to our prisoner?”

Ana hadn’t given that much thought. After leaving the others at the dock, her only thought had been to find Hanna and make sure the girl had come through the disaster okay.

Thankful to find her making sandwiches with Nan to feed to the sheltered, she’d rushed to the girl. Both reaching for the other, Hanna spoke first. “Thank God you’re okay. I told Auntie Diana not to worry, that we’d gotten news that you were with Nash, and were both safe. She’s hysterical with worry.”

“Thank goodness you were able to speak with Mom. Since Dad died, she’s fragile. I’ll give her a call on the way back to the sheriff’s office. I just needed to see for myself that you were okay. How did it go with the firemen?”

Hanna’s eyes shone with sincerity. “They were so cool, Ana. I’m having a change of mind about being a cop. I’m thinking we’ll be needing firefighters in my country too.”

Chuckling, Ana gave her cousin a loving squeeze before releasing her hold. “You go, girl. You can be whatever you want. Thankfully, in the US, women have the right to follow their dreams.”

Ana glanced around. “Where’re the rest of the boys from the firetruck?”

“Oh, Nash gave them orders to clear the road heading out of town. He’s not letting them get too far from the lake though. Tiger said he’d be vigilante about the flames still hanging on around this area. They should be back soon.”

“Are you okay here with Nan and the rest of the families?”

“Sure. I’ve been busy helping wherever I can.”

From the corner of her eye, Ana spotted Justin sitting with a family, including Tracker and Jack. “I see some people we picked up on the boat over there. And Carly’s brother Justin is with them too. I’ll just stop to say hi before going to find Nash. Wanna come along and meet them?”

“Sure.” Hanna’s open smile made Ana thank God that her cousin had survived this disaster so well. After what she’d suffered in her young life, one could understand her having a nervous breakdown from all this recent stress.

Chapter Thirty-eight

After Ana left, Hanna fixed a plate filled with sandwiches and cookies and went back to where her newly acquainted friend sat alone on the floor leaning against the wall. Knowing Carly as well as she did, it seemed right for her to befriend her brother too. “Justin, I’m really sorry to hear about your dad having to be in the hospital. I hope he recovers. Fire is a horrible thing.”

Justin brightened when he saw Ana's cousin and her offering. "Hi Hanna." He took the plate and laid it on his knee. He seemed to take a minute as if wondering if he should tell her what really happened. Noticing the look of grief in her eyes, sorrow that had reared its ugly head again after the recent fiascos, he appeared satisfied. Questioning her in a tinny voice, he said, "You wanna know what really happened?"

"Of course."

"My dad didn't get caught in the fire. He was beaten. By the same monster who hijacked Carly. Then the shithead threatened to kill me to get my dad to talk. But he couldn't. My mom kept telling Vlad we had no idea about the info he wanted, and the psycho wouldn't believe her. He said he'd shoot me if they didn't give up where the money was hidden."

Hanna's shock made her stomach tighten. Her voice squealed with indignation. "Oh, my God. It's Vladimer?" She sputtered, her rage building. "That-that monster... went to your house and attacked you?"

"Yeah. We were lucky he didn't kill us all. If Ana hadn't saved us, he would have. I know it. We owe our lives to your Ana. And Nash. Except I'm kinda mad at him. He should have left Vlad inside the burning house instead of saving his life. The creepy dude didn't deserve to live."

Stumbling backwards from where she'd been crouching, Hanna collapsed next to Justin, leaning against the wall beside him. "Can you tell me happened?"

After taking a huge bite, with his mouth still full, he chewed frantically and then mumbled, "Sure. No one else will believe me anyway. I tried telling my friend Jack, and he looked at me like I'd lost my mind. Says I gotta stop watching cop shows on TV."

Hanna scoffed. “He’s wrong, isn’t he? Look, I get it, Justin. I was with Carly when she escaped from Vlad, and he searched for us. She told me what he did at your house with your mom and Beth.” Hanna’s serious expression convinced him that she would trust whatever he told her, and so he began the story. “After the alarms blasted on our phones, Dad made us gather our gear. He wanted to leave the house before we got caught by the fire.”

“I wish me and Ana had been that smart. We got caught, and if the fire truck hadn’t saved us in time, we’d have been burned alive.” She shivered, pushing the memory away, and then poked at Justin. “Never mind about me. I want to know about you. What happened next?”

“Right. Okay. Just as we had everything gathered by the door, Dad went to step out, but this horrible man rushed at him and pushed him back inside. He had a gun. And he was scary and – and mean as hell.” Justin looked at her, the tears lurking in the back of his eyes. “I was terrified.”

Hanna soothed him with her gentle touch, and her soft voice. “He wanted you to be scared. I’ve seen Vlad in action. He’s rotten all the way through. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“We almost weren’t. He kept smacking on my dad, kicking him and hitting him with his gun, screaming shit like ‘tell me where the money is hidden’. Stuff like that. My mom tried talking sense to him, make him see we had no idea what he was ranting about. But he didn’t believe either of them. Finally, when he could see my dad wasn’t talking, he grabbed me, held me up and put the gun to my face.” Justin’s voice cracked over his last words. “I was sure I was going to die.”

Hanna leaned into him and took his hand, clinging tight. “Sweet Jesus. You poor guy. How horrible!”

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Clearing his throat, Justin stared at the floor. She noticed his Adam's apple quivering while he forced himself to be calm. "Yeah. That's when Mom tried to negotiate... begging him – I mean on her knees begging – for him to see reason, saying that she'd give him all the money they had in their bank account in the city if he'd just come with us so we could all leave the house." Justin looked at her. "By then, the smoke was getting so bad, the fire alarms went off. And my throat felt like it was on fire." Justin shivered. "You know what that maniac did then?"

"What?"

"He shot the fire alarm. And started ranting again."

"What was he saying?"

"Nothing that made sense. He'd really lost his cool and began shaking me worse this time. When a shot rang out that came from the window, the moron threw me aside so he could take cover behind the cupboards. At that same time, the flames began burning on the ceiling and the room was filling with fire. That's when Nash appeared, making us leave. And while Ana kept shooting at the guy to keep him down, he helped Mom and me carry Dad to the boat they came in."

"So you're saying the devil died in the fire?" Hanna's voice filled with glee at the thought.

"I wish. Didn't happen. Nash ran back inside and saved the guy. Carried him out with flames all around them. I thought Ana was going to shoot Nash, she was so mad at him for taking such chances. She yelled at him all the way to the lake. By the time

they got the killer into the boat, and we pulled away from shore, we could see the house was a ball of flames. I'll never forget the terrible scene." He dropped his head to her shoulder, and they sat like that for some time.

Hanna held his hand tight and let him have these moments. Finally, she said, "I'm so glad you made it out safe. Is your dad going to be okay?"

"Yeah. Looks like. My mom called to say the doctors set his broken arm, and his ribs will heal. Now we just have to hope the fire doesn't come back so we can get out in the morning."

"You're right. I'll pray it works out that way. See you later. I have to do something now."

"Thanks. I'm glad you stopped. I needed a shoulder."

Hanna eased her way to the back of the kitchen and found the item she searched for. Then she slipped out the door, and with a flashlight showing her the way, she ambled toward the jail. There she peeked into the window and saw the three adults getting ready to leave the building. Listening, she heard Dave tell the others that he needed to check on the new boats that were still arriving.

Everyone standing, Ana spoke. "We'll come with you. I can use a bit of fresh air." Laughing at her silly quip, they left together, with Dave locking the door behind him and then slipping the key high up on the sill. Hanna heard him say, "In case Pat returns from his rounds. He lost his key when his truck burned earlier."

Hanna watched as the three faded into the darkness, and then she found the key and let herself inside.

She had one thing on her mind when she entered the building.

Only one thing that tortured her brain that it literally brought excruciating pain.

One action by her that would awaken the dead parts of her soul, and she could finally sleep at night.

Revenge.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Ana spoke her thoughts out loud. “Did they ever find out how the fires near the town got started?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because Vladimir smoked, and we both know by the number of butts on our property that he wouldn’t worry about being careful.”

“I guess if they do an inspection, the burn patterns might indicate the cause of the fire. Tobacco is made to stay smoldering if not put out properly. Are you thinking he set the fires on purpose?”

“Hell, I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“You do know the wind shifted and could have sent the flames traveling from the south fire, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I guess I’m just so angry at the fucker that I’m ready to pin everything bad that’s happened recently on him.” She handed Nash the keys to their boat, saying, “I should head back and watch over the prisoner until you return. Something tells me it’s not a good idea to leave him alone, even for a few minutes.”

As she returned the way they came, she found herself speeding up. Calling herself all kinds of a fool, nevertheless, she didn't feel right knowing he was alone. Something... something wasn't right.

When she went to reach for the key and didn't find it where Dave had hidden it, the tension revved up and began crawling up her back, making the sweat break out all over her body.

Slipping her firearm from the holster, she held it low and in front of her with both hands. Creeping inside without making a sound, she stayed in the shadows. Before she'd taken two more steps, she heard the commotion, and then a scream cry before it was cut off.

Coming around the darkened corner to where the cell was, her first glance showed the door stood open. Accustoming her eyes to the dim light from the office and the bit of glow from the dropped flashlight on the floor, she finally began to make out Hanna.

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With her back to Vlad, he'd imprisoned her neck with his hand restraints in a grip that had her barely touching the ground. In a voice thick with menace, he growled, "You're going to cut me loose. Do you understand me?"

With her air being viciously cut off, Hanna couldn't speak... she could only nod. Which she did.

As if he couldn't believe her, he twisted tighter, harder... cruelty covering his expression. Hanna's knees buckled leaving an opening needed by a sharpshooter.

That's when Ana pulled the trigger and shot the son of a bitch right between his eyes.

Chapter Forty

Sitting next to Hanna while she spilled her guts to Dave in his office, the girl clung tight, insisting Ana stay as close as possible. And even though Ana knew that it had been therapeutic for Hanna to express what had happened, she also understood the trauma was fresh and hurtful as hell.

Over and over, Hanna had turned to her cousin, clenching their joined hands. "Thank you." She gripped tighter. "You put him down like the animal he was. I needed to see it happen for me to ever believe him dead. Now... now I can heal."

"I had no choice, baby. I promised I wouldn't let him hurt you again, and I meant it." Ana's eyes went to the reddened wounds showing on Hanna's poor throat. Then she looked toward Dave to share her own misery at the thought of what Hanna had gone through.

His eyes were soft with understanding, and his voice gentle when he'd come back from taking care of closing the cell where the body still lay. "Not sure when the coroner can get here but he's covered for now." Dave held up the video he'd gathered from the camera installed in the cell area. "It's all here on tape. Shows exactly what happened. Doubt if there'll be much of an inquiry once the big cheese gets to see this evidence."

Nash's glance at the females made him decide to step in and shut down the investigation for the night. "Both girls have had enough for now, Dave. I'm taking them to the hospital. They'll get a bed for Hanna for the night and check out her injuries. The devil did a number on her face and throat."

Dave stood. "Good idea. I have something for you to give to Beth in case I don't get in to see her for a while. Ana asked for me to give the girl's belongings back. Don't see no reason to send them for prints since we know what happened and who the backpack belongs to, right?"

Ana kept her arm around Hanna's waist but looked at the sheriff after hearing his words. "Thanks, Dave. We'll be sure she gets it." She stopped on the way out and added, "Look, I'll be around, so if you need anything, you let me know."

"No problem. You two just take care of our Hanna. Poor girl looks on the verge of collapsing, and I don't blame her after everything she's been through these last few months." He turned to Hanna and added, "And thank you for telling me about what happened to your parents. I know how difficult it was to rehash that event. But it's in your testimony now and brings credibility as to why you came to the jailhouse tonight."

Hanna stopped walking toward the door. She looked at Dave, her eyes globby with the tears she'd been bravely holding back. "I know I broke the law, Sheriff. And I'm willing to pay for that. But so you know... I'm not sorry he's dead."

Dave grinned, his face finally showing his humanity and not just his official expression. “Neither am I, Buttercup, neither am I. Bastard deserved exactly what he got.” He leaned over and touched her cheek so softly, she let her face rest for a moment in his big hand.

A while later, when they reached the hospital, Ana woke Hanna from the nap she’d dropped into the moment they’d made themselves comfy in the back seat of Nash’s truck. He’d watched them cuddling through the mirror, and Ana had seen the special smile he’d sent her. Truth be told, the look in his eyes made her tummy flutter, and she had to turn away after a particular long hot glance they shared.

But since her cousin had clung to her, she’d no choice but to stay close to Hanna, which meant sliding in the same seat with her. Thankfully, she knew that Nash understood. In fact, she had no doubt he also understood her personal shock over the recent ordeal. Killing another human being was its own special kind of torture no matter how badly the person had lived.

Once they got Hanna’s throat examined, had her settled in a bed, and the nurse had given her the prescribed medication to help her sleep, Ana and Nash could finally be alone in the empty waiting room.

Nash led her to the couch and settled into the corner with her in his arms. At first they didn’t speak, but after a short while, once their closeness warmed them, he talked real low. “I’m so sorry, darling. You have to know I sympathize with what happened tonight. It must have been terrifying for you to see Hanna like that.”

Ana covered her face, yet the onslaught of tears she could finally release flowed through. Her voice trembled from her recent dreadful panic. “Vlad wanted to kill her, Nash. I saw the truth in his eyes. The only reason he didn’t was because he needed

her to help him get loose. Oh, my God, she looked so pitiful and scared.”

Ana’s body clenched... the alarm still real. “Goddammit. Whatever possessed her to go into the cell and confront him like that?” As soon as the words popped out, she wished them back.

Nash sighed. “I have no idea. It’s the one thing I keep asking myself too.”

Ana didn’t say anything, because she knew there was an answer she couldn’t share with him. But her mind went back to just after the shooting when Dave had found her alone in his office while Hanna was away using the washroom. He’d returned from checking the dead man holding an evidence bag.

When he’d appeared, she’d lifted her face from her hands. “Christ Dave, I wish the fuck I knew why she came here tonight to confront that scumbag.”

“She came to kill him.”

“Excuse me?” Ana straightened as if she’d been shot. “Why in the world would you say that?”

“I picked this up in the cell. It had slid under the bed.” Dave held out a kitchen knife resting in an evidence bag. “I’m not absolutely positive, but I’m thinking the poor kid took this with her to get restitution for him killing her folks in Ukraine. Look, between us, this bit of evidence goes to the grave with me. No one needs to know her intentions. And before you ask, it doesn’t show up on the video, so we’re safe. Far as I’m concerned, she’s suffered enough. And now that he’s dead, as she said herself, she can finally breathe.” He took the knife from the bag and wiped off her fingerprints on his pantleg.

“Thank you, Dave. You’re a good man.”

“Yeah. Well, so was your father. He did me a good turn a few years ago, covered for me when I got shitfaced over the loss of my wife and had an accident. He hauled me out of the gutter and got me sober. Today, its payback time.”

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It was Nash's kiss on her forehead that forced her to let the memories slide away and bring her back to him in the darkened room. "I'm sorry to be such a baby."

"Don't be. I've had my own moments through this ordeal."

He let her cry for a while, and when he sensed her slowing, he whispered, "Is it the first time?"

"What?"

"The first time you ever killed anyone?"

"No. Not really. Well, the first time shooting another while being so close... where I had to choose his life over hers. Christ, what if I'd missed or killed her? I've never been so scared in my life."

"It sure didn't show. You're one of the strongest women I know, Ana. And I have no doubt, you wouldn't have taken that shot if you weren't absolutely certain you had it."

Nodding, she admitted, "You're right. We train for times like this."

He kissed her then, and it seemed to soothe her enough for her to continue. "When I think back, it makes me feel sick. Hanna was so scared."

“I would’ve been too. Imagine that same monster hurting her like in her nightmares.”

“When she admitted them to Dave earlier – the nightmares I mean – I’d hate to have to tell you about the number of times either Mom or I had to comfort her at home.”

“Hey, I knew why you were holding it together. But don’t try to tell me it wasn’t hard.”

Ana scoffed but agreed. “Yeah. You’re right. But imagine if I fell apart too? Hell I had to keep my hands hidden so she wouldn’t see how much they shook. Thank goodness for Dave’s sweetener.”

Nash chuckled. “No kidding. We’ll have to buy him a new bottle.”

Chapter Forty-one

The next day, they visited Beth, bringing her backpack along to watch her rifle through it, desperately searching where she’d hidden her precious necklace. When she found it exactly where she’d left it, she broke down. “Thank you for returning this. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost the only keepsake I have of my mom. After my dad was killed, fighting on the front lines, she was all I had. Then when she died in a fire after the Russians bombed our building, I was devastated. I guess that’s why I took up with Boris. He showed me kindness... well, at first. Then his brother joined us, and things changed for the worse.”

A noise at the door brought everyone around to see Carly and Hattie coming into the room, both rushing toward Beth in the excitement of seeing her looking so much better.

Nash and Ana stepped back and watched their reunion, smiling at each other when Carly laid down next to Beth and took her hand in affection. “Mom and Dad want

you to come and live with us for as long as you want to. Please say you will.”

Beth glanced at Anna and Nash, the joy on her face obvious. Then she faced Hattie, her hand reaching. When Hattie held it and placed a kiss on the top before folding it into her own hands, Beth appeared stunned but blessed. “Are you sure? After all, I brought you nothing but trouble from the first day I knocked on your door.”

Hattie’s voice was soft with emotion. “We’ve never been more sure of anything before. And you should understand this, Beth. That trouble was on its way to us no matter if you had been there or not. I think God sent you along to save us from the worst.”

Beth, her face glowing through her tears, radiated with happiness interspersed with relief but still showing a slight bit of trepidation.

As if Hattie understood her fear, she added, “Sam and Justin will be here to visit soon, but trust me, after I explained what happened, they are both thrilled for you to join our family. We only hope you will agree. You need a home, and we need to know you’re okay. So what do you say?”

“Yes. A thousand times yes. Thank you so much.”

Ana and Nash left the three females then, happy to see them in an embrace with excitement spilling out of Carly as she tried to tell Beth about their home in the city.

Ana swung their linked hands, saying, “That was so sweet. I’m thrilled that they’ll take care of Beth. The poor girl’s barely out of her teens and needs a family.”

Nash still looked a little stunned but obviously happy to have witnessed the moment. “To tell the truth, I can’t think of a better ending to this whole shitshow. Oh wait, I can. I meant to tell you about the text I got from a friend who flies helicopters. He

says your log cabin is still standing. There's some damage, but those ole logs can take a lot of punishment. Says he figures it's salvageable."

Ana spun into his arms, hugging him with glee. "Oh, God, I love you. That's the best news you could have given me. Let's go and tell Hanna."

When she spun away, pulling him along, all he heard were her words she'd spoken in a moment of excitement. While she tugged at his hand, he pulled her into a quiet corner and questioned her. "Did you mean that?"

"Mean what?"

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“That you love me?”

“What?”

“You said it. That you love me.”

She stopped dead. “I did, didn’t I? Then yeah, I guess I meant it. You couldn’t have given me better news.”

“Right. So it was just because of what I told you. Then you didn’t mean it for the lifetime I’ve planned for us?”

After hearing the serious note he couldn’t hide, she stopped. “You’re supposed to say it first.” The twinkle in her eyes gave away her sudden solemn tone.

“Says who. Admit it. You meant it forever.”

Ana hit a pose, her hands at her hips and her expression playfully mean. “You do remember I have a big gun?”

Laughing, Nash backed away, hands held up protectively. “Darling, I adore you, love you... worship you.” He scooped her close again and laughed when she muttered, “Big baby.”

Epilogue

Though Nash had to report back to his crew, the fires soon fizzled out in their area

due to the storm that took the mountain region by surprise. Rain came down in buckets and was a welcome relief to everyone.

Once they got the all-clear to use the roads, most of the folks headed back to the city and those that had no where to go were miraculously invited to stay with those who did.

Dave was able to report that the department had no intention of taking the situation of Vlad's death any further. And Ana's own people made their report according to their policies and found it to be a clean kill. No repercussions. No prosecution. The file was closed.

Once the girls were able to leave, they headed home where Diana had a huge surprise waiting for them. She'd found the relatives of the Russian whose identity card Hanna had taken from the dead man who'd saved her life.

"I hope you don't mind, Hanna, but when you showed me the envelope and said you'd never read the card inside, I couldn't help myself. Ask Ana, she'll tell you how nosy I am. When I was cleaning your room, it ate away at me until I opened the envelope. I guess the last name stayed with me, and when I saw it in a social media post, I reached out to ask them if they knew of a soldier called Karl Alexeyev who had the same last name."

"You did, Titka? Of course, I don't mind. What did they say?"

"He was their son. They'd moved to England because of the war. They hated what was happening in their country. With the death of their dearest only child, they couldn't stay in Russia any longer. We've started corresponding, and they seem like lovely people. I hope you don't mind. I've never mentioned your secret. That's yours to share."

"No. I'm – I'm happy. Especially that they were against the war too. I didn't know

how or even if I could find them, and yet I so much wanted to tell them about him...
Karl you say? That was his name?"

"Yes. Karl Alexeyev. His last name means defender. I have their phone number, and we can organize a Zoom call anytime... if you wish."

"Yes, please. I need to tell them about what a kind man Karl was and that they should be proud of him. That he saved a young girl's life. And that he'll always be loved... and not just by them."

Days later, Ana smiled and held her cousin's hand while Hanna shared parts of her story with the older couple who looked like they'd been given the most precious gift of all... sweet memories to cherish of their very brave and honorable son.

~*~*~*~