



The Wrangler

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Category: Romance, Western, Suspense

Description: She's the boss's baby sister, off-limits and irresistible. Now he has to protect her... or lose her forever.

Keely Malone is used to being chased, but it's always been for her talent as a world-class set designer, not her life. After a high-profile fashion show in Milan, a mix-up with her suitcase brings trouble she never saw coming: uncut diamonds and a dangerous criminal determined to get them back.

Jesse Bryant doesn't do babysitting duty. But as a top operative at Silver Spur Security, he has no choice when his boss asks him to keep his younger sister safe. From the moment he lays eyes on Keely, Jesse knows she's trouble wrapped in irresistible charm. When a break-in at her home confirms the threat is real, Jesse vows to protect her.

Forced into close quarters on a secluded Texas ranch, sparks ignite between Keely and Jesse as danger closes in. With time running out, Jesse and the Silver Spur team must take down Nico's operation before Keely becomes the ultimate target.

In a high-stakes game of survival and seduction, will Jesse claim Keely as his forever, or lose the one woman who's unraveled his control?

The Wrangler is a pulse-pounding, steamy western romantic suspense filled with action, danger, and intense chemistry. Perfect for readers who love protective alpha heroes, strong-willed heroines, and thrilling romantic suspense!

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KEELY

Milan, Italy

Keely Malone stepped back and surveyed the final touches on the stage, her gaze skimming over the delicate interplay of steel and silk, of sharp modernism and decadent opulence. It was a masterpiece, if she said so herself.

“Perfecto, signorina,” Matteo, the lead lighting designer, murmured, hands on his hips. “The show will be unforgettable.”

She flashed him a quick grin. “Damn right it will be.”

Her job was done. Tomorrow, Milan’s fashion elite would marvel at her work, and she’d be halfway across the Atlantic, sipping champagne and pretending not to notice her brother’s latest attempt at playing overprotective caveman.

The familiar tickle at the back of her neck started the second she stepped into the Via della Spiga. Someone was watching her.

Again.

She didn’t let on that she knew, keeping her stride casual, her heels clicking against the cobblestones as she weaved through the throng of impossibly stylish pedestrians. It could be any number of people. A pickpocket. A lovesick designer looking to

poach her for another project. A reporter sniffing around for an inside scoop on the show.

Ever since she'd spotted him trailing her back at the fashion venue, all sharp angles and brooding authority, she'd known Reed had sent one of his Silver Spur guys to babysit her. Did he think she hadn't listened when he taught her to never enter a room without assessing potential escape routes or how to thwart a kidnapping attempt? Her brother meant well, but he was a giant pain in the ass.

And, of course, it had to be Jesse. Jesse Bryant—the man was impossible. He was always so serious, always regarding her as a problem to solve rather than a woman to admire.

Even if she hadn't caught the brief glimpse of his scowl, she would've known by the way her pulse kicked up. Jesse had that effect on her—on everyone, probably—but he'd never been one to acknowledge it.

A mistake on his part.

Well, if he was going to shadow her all over Milan, she might as well make it interesting. Keely bit her lip, holding back a smile. Game on.

She ducked into a side alley, quickening her steps before emerging onto another street. The city was a maze, and she knew every shortcut, every hidden courtyard. She slipped into a boutique, watching from the reflection in a mirrored display as a broad-shouldered man prowled past.

With a flick of her hair, Keely slipped out the back of the boutique, cutting through the café's narrow alleyway, weaving between tables as she murmured soft apologies in Italian. The air smelled of espresso and fresh pastries, but she had no time to linger. She stepped onto the next street, quickened her pace, and let out a quiet laugh.

Let's see what you've got, cowboy.

She slipped between a pair of strolling tourists, took a sharp right, then ducked into a side alley, her heels clicking against the cobblestones as she made another quick turn. Daring. Testing. Winning.

Keely grinned to herself, slowing her steps as she prepared to loop back toward the main street. Poor Jesse. He must have been furious—probably scowling and muttering curses under his breath, already planning a gruff, bossy lecture about safety for the moment he caught up with her.

Except... The moment she rounded the corner, she crashed into a solid immovable object. All broad shoulders, muscled torso and controlled stillness, watching her like a predator who had known exactly where his prey was going to run.

Her grin faltered.

“Shit.”

A slow, wicked smile curved Jesse's lips. “Lose something, darlin'?”

Damn it.

Keely let out a dramatic sigh. “I was hoping for someone more exciting. Maybe a dark and dangerous Italian looking to sweep me off my feet.”

Jesse arched an eyebrow. “That so?”

She waved a hand. “Instead, I get you.”

He stepped closer, crowding her, forcing her to lift her chin to meet his gaze. “And

what exactly is wrong with me?”

Keely knew better than to play with fire. Knew Jesse wasn't the kind of man she could push too far before getting burned. But she'd been living on the edges for too long, pretending she didn't notice the way he looked at her when he thought no one was watching. She refused to believe she was the only one feeling this pull between them.

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So, she tilted her head, looking him up and down. Slowly. Deliberately. “You’re predictable.”

Jesse’s eyes darkened. “Am I?”

He didn’t reach for her. Didn’t touch her.

And somehow, that was worse.

Because Keely knew—knew—that if Jesse ever laid his hands on her, it wouldn’t be gentle. It wouldn’t be polite.

It would be commanding, unapologetic, and amazing. Jesse was one of five members from her brother’s unit that had banded together to open and operate the Iron Spur, San Antonio’s elite lifestyle club. Her brother Reed might be one of the owners, but he wasn’t the only member of the Malone family that played there.

The thought sent a thrill through her, but she smothered it before it could show on her face. “You’re here because Reed told you to be. Not because you want to be.”

Jesse’s jaw flexed. “You think I don’t have better things to do than chase your ass through Milan?”

“I think you resent being here. And I think,” she lowered her voice, stepping closer, “that you hate how much you like the chase.”

Jesse snorted, and for a second, just a second, Keely thought he might snap. That he

might grab her, press her against the wall, and remind her exactly what kind of man he was.

But Jesse was too disciplined for that.

Instead, he let out a rough chuckle. “You’re a brat.”

She smiled. “And, as I said, you’re predictable.”

Jesse shook his head and grabbed her wrist—not rough, but firm enough that there was no mistaking the power behind it. “Enough games. We’re leaving. Now.”

Keely’s belly flip-flopped, but she refused to let him see it. “Or what? You’ll toss me over your shoulder?”

Jesse's lips curled into a deliberate, mischievous smile. “I’d like to see you try to stop me.”

Oh, hell. This was not going the way she wanted at all. She needed to stop pushing. She needed to let it go. But where was the fun in that?

Keely leaned in, her lips a whisper from his ear. “Be careful, cowboy. Someone might think you actually want to be here.”

Jesse took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, his grip on her tightening for half a second before he let go. “Get in the SUV, Keely.”

He’d called her a brat. Reed often called her the same. Neither of them was wrong. There was a reckless part of her that wanted to argue—to push his buttons—just to see how far she could push him. But there was something about the way he said it—the quiet command, the finality in his voice—that sent a thrill straight through

her.

For the first time since this game started, she considered surrendering. Not because she had to. Because she wanted to. Instead, she flicked her hair over her shoulder and sauntered toward the waiting SUV. “Next time, try to keep up.”

Jesse’s voice followed her, low and full of promise.

“Next time, I won’t let you run.”

The following day, Keely adjusted her oversized sunglasses as she strolled through Malpensa Airport, her designer carry-on rolling smoothly behind her. She wasn’t in a rush—she never was when she traveled. Milan had been good to her, as always, but it was time to head home.

As she moved through the terminal, the faintest whisper of unease crawled up her spine. It was subtle, nothing overt, just the kind of awareness that came from experience. Someone was watching her.

She kept her stride easy, casually pausing near a glass storefront, adjusting the strap of her purse as she checked her reflection.

And there he was. Jesse again. She thought she’d given him the slip this morning after leaving the hotel, but then it shouldn’t be surprising that he was here. He probably just accessed her flight itinerary and knew where she’d be.

Leaning against a column like he owned the damn place, arms crossed over that ridiculously broad chest, those sharp blue eyes locked onto her. He wasn’t trying to hide—not really. He wanted her to know he was there, that she’d failed at slipping away unnoticed.

A gradual smile tugged at her lips as she turned, walking away like she hadn't just spotted the man assigned to babysit her.

Reed sent Jesse, one of the firm's best operatives, instead of one of the newer guys, and she supposed she should be flattered by that. The idea sent a thrill through her, even as she rolled her eyes. Jesse was one of the best—a problem solver, quick thinker and dominant, especially in high-pressure situations. His discipline was clear; she had never seen him lose his temper or become truly ruffled. But she liked to think she got under his skin in a way no one else did.

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And if he was going to follow her all the way back to Texas? She might as well make it fun.

She boarded her flight, tucking herself into her first-class window seat, and let out a satisfied sigh. Over sixteen hours of luxury service awaited her. A glass of champagne, a plush blanket, and a long, peaceful flight.

Until she remembered him. Keely leaned just enough to peer past the curtain dividing first class from coach. Sure enough, Jesse was there, already settled into an aisle seat, long legs sprawled out in a way that made it obvious he was too big for the cramped space.

A wicked idea struck. She pressed the call button.

Moments later, a flight attendant approached, all polished professionalism. “Miss Malone, is there something I can do for you?”

Keely smiled sweetly. “Actually, yes. That gentleman back there...” she gestured toward Jesse, who seemed wholly unaware of his impending relocation “—he’s my bodyguard, and I’d feel so much safer if he were sitting next to me.”

The flight attendant beamed. “Of course, Miss Malone. We’ll have him moved right away.”

Keely settled back in her seat, waiting. Seconds later, she heard the unmistakable clomp of Jesse’s boots approaching.

Then his voice, deep and unmistakably irritated. “Keely.”

She turned, schooling her face into an expression of pure innocence. “Jesse. Fancy seeing you here.”

His jaw tensed, his hands on his hips. “You know damn well what you just did.”

She gestured to the empty seat beside her. “Why don’t you take a seat? The airline frowns on people standing in the aisle, glowering and intimidating people.”

“So, does that mean you find me intimidating?”

“Not at all. I find you to have many of the same qualities found in Neanderthals.”

Jesse groaned, then dropped into the seat beside her, his sheer size making the luxurious first-class seating space feel smaller.

As soon as he buckled in, he turned his head toward her, his voice low and edged with irritation. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Keely sipped her champagne, pretending to think about it before leaning over. “Hot news flash for you cowboy, I don’t even try.”

Jesse’s fingers drummed on the armrest, his knee brushing against hers. “You think this is a joke?”

“I think you being forced to sit in coach when you could be up here is criminal,” she said breezily. “You should talk to Gavin and Reed about that. I did you a favor.”

His eyes narrowed. “Right. Because you’re so concerned about my comfort.”

“But of course. Why else would I do it?”

He exhaled slowly, like a man counting down from ten before doing something reckless. “Someday, Keely, the right guy is going to come along and jerk a knot in your pretty little tail.”

“You think I have a pretty tail? Why Jesse Bryant, you sweet-talking devil you, that may be the nicest thing you ever said to me.”

He made a growling sound. “You just wanted to mess with me.”

Keely grinned. “True, and here you are.”

Jesse didn’t respond immediately, but she felt the shift in his energy. He was watching her now, really watching her. She wondered if she might have pushed him just a little too far this time. He looked like an irritated bear someone had poked at the wrong time.

Jesse leaned in just enough that she could feel the heat radiating off him, the scent of leather and clean spice wrapping around her like a damn cloak of temptation.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, darlin’,” he murmured, voice like sandpaper and silk all at once.

Her pulse skipped, but she tilted her chin up, refusing to give him the satisfaction of rattling her. “And what are you going to do about it?”

He didn’t answer. Not with words.

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Instead, he reached over and plucked the champagne flute from her fingers, setting it down on his own tray table.

Keely blinked. “Hey...”

“You’ve had enough.”

She let out a breathy laugh. “You do not get to tell me when I’ve had enough.”

Jesse turned in his seat, angling his broad body toward her, his stare pinning her in place. “You keep pushing, Keely. But we both know what happens when a brat like you finally pushes too far.”

Her stomach did a slow, traitorous flip. Because damn him, he was right. And she hated he knew it.

She folded her arms. “Are you threatening me, cowboy?”

Jesse chuckled, low and dark. “Not a threat, darlin’. A promise.”

Keely swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, as she realized her long flight had just gotten a whole lot longer.

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JESSE

Jesse Bryant had spent years training in the most dangerous environments, honing his skills in combat, survival, and strategy. He had faced down warlords, infiltrated high-risk zones, and once even neutralized a threat in the middle of a blackout with nothing but a knife and his bare hands.

Yet, nothing in his experience had prepared him for Keely Malone at thirty-five thousand feet. The woman was relentless. She sat next to him with all the grace of a queen on her throne, legs crossed, as she snatched her champagne flute back, taking a sip while she studied him with eyes full of mischief.

“This is nice, don’t you think?” she mused, tipping her glass toward him. “Us, sitting together, enjoying a luxurious flight...just the two of us.”

Jesse let his breath out slowly, forcing himself to focus on the pages of the in-flight magazine he wasn’t really reading. “It’s not just the two of us. There’s a whole damn plane full of people.”

Keely waved a hand dismissively. “Details.”

Jesse gritted his teeth. It had been exactly twenty minutes since she had arranged for him to be moved to first class, and she had been pushing him ever since. She knew exactly what she was doing. And that was the problem. She was too damn good at it.

“I could get used to this,” she continued, her voice full of lazy amusement. “Private jets are nice, but I do love the way the first-class staff treats you. Don’t you, Jesse?”

He flicked his eyes up at her, scanning the slow, deliberate way she sipped her champagne, the way her lips wrapped around the rim of the glass. It wasn’t lost on him that she was performing for him. And damn it, it was working.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Keely?” His voice came out rougher than he intended.

She hummed. “Immensely.”

Jesse let out a slow, controlled breath. “Glad one of us is.”

“Oh, come on.” She nudged his arm lightly, all playfulness, no concern for the way her touch sent a pulse of heat through him. “You can’t tell me you aren’t having fun.”

Jesse turned his head, locking eyes with her. “And what exactly makes you think that?”

Keely tilted her head, considering. “Because you could’ve refused to be moved, but you didn’t.”

Jesse rolled his jaw. Damn it. She was right. He could have asked the flight attendant to move her back to coach, but that probably wouldn’t have worked. People in service industries didn’t tend to listen to people like him. They listened to people like her and her brother Reed. Hell, he could have just ignored her antics completely.

But he hadn’t—because he didn’t want to. And that? That was dangerous.

Jesse forced himself to lean back, crossing his arms over his chest. “You think you’ve got me all figured out, don’t you?”

Keely leaned in, her voice dropping just enough to make his muscles tighten. “I think you’d like to pretend you’re completely unaffected by me. I’ve seen you watching me when you don’t think Reed or I will notice—dark, hungry, yummy.”

Jesse let out a quiet chuckle, but there wasn’t any amusement behind it. He turned his head, leveling her with a look that had made hardened criminals cower.

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“Keely,” His voice was nothing but gravel, “I am not a man you want to play with.”

Something flickered in her eyes, something sharp and knowing. “You’re wrong Jesse. You’re the man I’d love to play with, and therein lies the problem, isn’t it?”

Jesse held her stare, knowing damn well she had no idea what would happen if he ever let go. He wasn’t some wannabe metrosexual Dom—the kind she usually played with and whom she topped from the bottom. No. If he ever stopped pretending that she wasn’t the one woman he wasn’t supposed to want... God help them both.

Keely sat back, satisfied. “See? This is fun. I knew you’d be glad I had you moved up here next to me.”

Jesse ran a hand down his face. “You’re exhausting.”

She just grinned. “And you’re so much fun to rile up.”

Jesse bit his tongue to keep from saying something he shouldn’t. She was Reed’s sister, and therefore, off limits. The moment that seatbelt sign dinged after landing, he was getting off this plane and putting some distance between them... before he did something really stupid.

By the time the plane touched down at San Antonio International, Jesse had his plan locked down.

He would get her home, make sure she was secure, and then he’d hand her back over to her big brother or anybody else Reed at Silver Spur Security wanted to assign her

to. He'd taken one for the team. The fact was when Reed announced he needed someone to go to Milan; the guys had drawn straws, and Jesse had drawn the short one.

"Thank you for agreeing to watch over my sister," Reed had said. "I know she can be difficult..."

"Difficult?" Jesse scoffed. "Let me be plain—the only reason I agreed to chase your sister all over Milan is because I drew the short straw." Reed had looked surprised at the notion that none of them relished the idea of providing protection to Keely, who was uncooperative, to say the least. "The fact is, I'd rather wrangle rattlesnakes than your sister."

If he spent one more second in Keely's orbit, he was going to forget why she was off-limits.

The seatbelt sign blinked off, and Keely was already moving, collecting her designer carry-on and standing like she didn't have a care in the damn world.

"You in a hurry?" he asked.

She tossed him a look over her shoulder. "I'd rather not get stuck behind slow walkers."

Jesse sighed, standing to his full height, stepped into the aisle so she could exit their row, and followed her off the plane. The second they stepped into the terminal, she was on the move, striding through customs like she owned the place.

And hell—for all he knew, she did. Reed Malone's baby sister was a complete and total brat and was completely oblivious to that fact.

The agent at the counter barely glanced at her passport before waving her through.

“Welcome home, Miss Malone.”

Jesse wasn't far behind, but when he reached the same agent, the man actually paused and looked him over.

“Anything to declare?” the agent asked, his gaze dipping to Jesse's boots like he was hiding contraband in them.

Jesse gritted his teeth. “No.”

The agent gave him one last assessing look before finally waving him through.

Keely stood just beyond the customs area, holding her suitcase, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

“That was easy,” she mused.

Jesse slung his carry-on over his shoulder, eyeing her with suspicion. “They barely looked at you.”

Keely lifted a shoulder. “What can I say? I travel a lot. They know me.”

Jesse let out a slow breath, scanning the baggage claim area. “You ready to go?”

Keely turned, sauntering toward the exit without waiting for him to follow. “Depends, cowboy. Are you?”

Jesse cursed under his breath and moved after her, ignoring the way his body responded to everything she did. This woman was going to kill him. And the worst

part was, he was starting to enjoy it.

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Jesse stepped into the warm Texas air and let out a slow breath. Home. Finally.

Keely strolled beside him, rolling her suitcase with an effortless grace, oblivious—or maybe just indifferent—to the way his patience was wearing dangerously thin.

He had spent the last several days in her orbit and the last seventeen hours or so in close cover, enduring her teasing, her effortless charm, her mouth. The woman had a way of making his blood heat with nothing more than a well-placed glance, and worse? He was pretty sure she knew it.

He ran his hand down his face, reminding himself why he was here. Not because he wanted to be. Forcing his thoughts away from dangerous territory—wondering what it would be like to see Keely, laced into that sapphire blue corset of hers with thematching booty shorts, on her knees, submitting—not because he forced her, but because she wanted to. If it ever happened, he would replace those booty shorts with a skimpy thong.

Jesse's groin tightened—his cock hardening and pressing against the fly of his jeans. What might it be like to have her unbutton his fly with her teeth, letting his cock out to play and then using her mouth to get some relief?Jesus, Bryant. Get your head on straight.He shoved the thought down, hard, and focused on the task at hand.

“Your car service on the way?”

Keely stopped, tilting her head at him with the same infuriating amusement she'd carried all damn day. “Excuse me?”

Jesse crossed his arms. “You got two choices, darlin’. Either you call for a town car, and I follow, or you ride with me. Either way, I’m not letting you leave here alone.”

Keely tapped a manicured finger against her chin, considering. “So let me get this straight—you’re giving me the illusion of choice, but really, you’re just bossing me around?”

Jesse arched an eyebrow and grinned. “Pretty much. It seems you’re starting to catch on.”

She huffed out a laugh. “I love when men try to tell me what to do.”

Jesse’s lips twitched. “Funny, because last I checked, you don’t listen worth a damn.”

Keely took a step closer, narrowing the space between them. “That’s because most men say nothing worth listening to, so I ignore them.”

Jesse held her gaze, refusing to let her bait him. She smelled like vanilla and something sweet, something that shouldn’t have been enticing but had his muscles locking tight all the same.

Finally, she sighed dramatically. “Fine. I’ll ride with you.”

“Smart choice.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t get used to it.”

Jesse took her suitcase without asking and led her to his black pickup. If she was going to ride with him, she was going to do it his way. He tossed her bag in the bed of the truck before opening the passenger door for her.

Keely paused, arching an eyebrow of her own. “Are you going to strap me in too?”

Jesse leaned against the door frame, lowering his voice. “You really want me to answer that?”

For the first time since they’d landed, she faltered. Just for a second. Jesse caught the way her pupils dilated, the slight hitch in her breath. He had her. And they both damn well knew it.

Keely cleared her throat and slid inside the truck, crossing her legs like she wasn’t the least bit affected. He wondered what he’d find if he shoved his hands between her legs. Jesse shut the door, shaking his head as he walked around to the driver’s side.

This woman was going to ruin him.

They drove in silence for a while, the city lights flashing past the windows as they made their way through San Antonio.

Keely leaned against the window, fingers tapping idly against her knee, watching the skyline.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” she said eventually.

Jesse didn’t take his eyes off the road. “Do what?”

“Babysit me.”

Jesse let out a short laugh. “This ain’t babysitting, sweetheart. It’s making sure you don’t get yourself into trouble.”

Keely turned her head toward him, her gaze sharp. “And what kind of trouble do you

think I get into?”

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Jesse glanced at her briefly. That look. That challenge in her eyes. His hands flexed on the wheel.

I know the kind I'd like for you to get into... with me.

Instead, he went with, "The kind that keeps Reed up at night and calling in favors to keep your ass out of a mess."

Keely sighed. "Reed worries too much."

Jesse let out a low hum. "Wonder why that is."

She shot him a look. "You think I need a bodyguard?"

"I don't know. You're rich and your brother has enemies. I think you're reckless," Jesse said bluntly. "I think you make a damn habit of slipping past security just for fun. I think you don't take your safety nearly as seriously as you should."

Keely was quiet for a beat, then shrugged. "I can take care of myself."

Jesse's hands gripped the wheel tighter. "Not the point."

She shifted slightly in her seat, studying him. "Why does it matter to you, Jesse?"

His jaw locked. Because if anything happened to you, it would kill Reed. Because if anything happened to you, it would kill me.

Jesse didn't answer her.

Keely sighed again, dramatically. "You're no fun."

Jesse let out a rough chuckle. "And you're a brat."

Keely grinned. "It's nice to know I'm appreciated for more than my family's money."

Jesse shook his head, keeping his focus on the road. He'd spent years keeping his control intact, making sure he never crossed a line he couldn't walk back from—and then there was Keely, a line-crossing menace.

They pulled up to Keely's place, a charming single-story Spanish Colonial home, characteristic of San Antonio. It featured white stucco walls and a red clay tile roof, embodying the traditional aesthetic of the region. The arched doorways and wooden beams added to its historic charm, while the shaded porch with its rustic wooden door invited a warm, welcoming atmosphere. A small courtyard enclosed by stucco wall and a wrought-iron gate enhanced the home's curb appeal, complemented by lush native landscaping, including agave and mesquite trees.

It was dark now, but Jesse had seen it before. Reed had no way of knowing, but Jesse had followed his sister home from the club on more than one occasion, only to return to his place just outside of town to take a long, cold shower.

Jesse killed the engine. When Keely started to open the door, he reached across her and pulled it shut. "You wait for me."

He got out of the truck and grabbed her suitcase from the back. The moment his fingers curled around the handle, something felt off. It was barely perceptible—just a slight shift in the way it moved. A little heavier than a suitcase full of her clothes should be.

He went around to the passenger door and opened it, frowning. “You pack bricks in here?”

Keely stretched her arms over her head, sighing. “Don’t be dramatic.”

Jesse hesitated, then shook his head. I must be imagining things.

He hauled it up the porch steps, held his hand out for her keys and waited until she placed them in his hand and used the app on her phone to switch off the security system. He opened the door and set the suitcase just inside. Before leaving, he would sweep the perimeter to ensure her security for the night. Then he’d call it in and head for home.

Keely breezed past him, already kicking off her heels. “Will you be a dear and bring in my bag? The damn thing weighs a ton,” she called back over her shoulder.

Jesse hesitated. He shouldn’t. But something about the suitcase still nagged at him. Maybe he should check the inside just to be sure. When he knew she was safe, then he’d leave.

Before he could inform her of his decision, Keely turned, stretching up on her toes, pressing a quick, unexpected kiss to his cheek.

“Thanks for the ride, cowboy.”

Jesse went completely still. Her lips were soft. Warm. Just the briefest touch, nothing more than a tease—that was not the kind of ride he’d like to give her. But damn it if it didn’t almost undo him. Before he could make a complete fool of himself—dragging her to him and crushing her lips with his before sweeping her up and taking her to bed, she grinned and stepped back, heading toward the back of her home like she hadn’t just set his world off-kilter.

Jesse let out a slow breath, dragging his fingers through his hair. Keely was going to be an even bigger problem than she had been in the past. Deep down, he already knew—that suitcase wasn't the only danger waiting for him inside.

KEELY

Keely kicked off her heels the moment she stepped inside, wiggling her toes against the cool Saltillo tile floor with a satisfied sigh. Over seventeen hours on a plane, an infuriatingly attractive bodyguard, and a whole lot of smart-ass banter later, she was finally home.

Jesse stood in the doorway like he belonged there, arms crossed, broad shoulders nearly filling the damn space. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes? He locked his eyes on her—almost as if he imagined her naked—following her every move, as if he was waiting for her to do something reckless. Which, to be fair, wasn't an unreasonable expectation.

She threw him a quick glance over her shoulder. "You going to stand there all night, or are you coming in?"

Jesse let out a quiet breath, stepping inside but not moving far. "I should go."

Keely shook her head, already heading toward the kitchen. "Probably, and yet, you haven't."

A low, rough chuckle. "Keely..."

She held up a hand. "Nope. You're not leaving yet. You hungry cowboy?"

Jesse sighed, and she could practically feel his reluctance. Which only made her want to push him further. Keely opened the fridge, grabbing two cold beers before tossing him one. He caught it easily—of course he did—the man probably had reflexes like a damn panther.

She popped the cap off hers and leaned against the counter, studying him. “I’m heating a taco pizza. Lottie left it for me, and I feel obligated to eat it before she asks for a full review.”

Jesse hesitated, turning slowly to lock the door behind him. “Taco pizza?”

Keely grinned. “It’s exactly what it sounds like. And it’s amazing.”

Jesse rolled the bottle between his hands, then—finally—moved further inside, closing and locking the door behind him. “You need to turn your security system back on.”

“Why? The door is locked, and you’re here.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed. “It’s Jesse. The wayward traveler is home. Do me a favor and turn on her system and put her back on the patrol rotation, will you?” There was a pause where, presumably, whoever was on the other end of the phone did as he or she was asked. “Thanks.”

He ended the call, but said nothing else to her. Score one for the cowboy.

He settled onto the barstool by the island, watching her as she set the oven to preheat and pulled the pizza from the fridge. Keely tried not to notice how effortlessly dominant he was, even when he wasn’t trying. The way he filled her space with no need to take up more of it. The way he watched her—not like a man checking out a woman, but like a man who saw everything.

It was unsettling. It was also... a little thrilling.

“You do this often?” he asked, voice low, rough.

Keely slid the pizza onto a tray. “Heat food? I mean, yeah. I love cooking, but I’m also not about to waste something Lottie made.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

She paused, glancing up. “Oh?”

Jesse held her gaze. “You invite men in for pizza and beer a lot?”

She tilted her head, considering. “Are you asking if I bring men home?”

Jesse didn’t flinch—but something in his body language shifted. His jaw locked, his grip on the bottle tightening. Well, that was interesting.

She shrugged, sliding the pizza into the oven. “I travel too much to date.”

Jesse took a slow sip of his beer. “That doesn’t answer the question.”

Keely turned, resting her hip against the counter. “No, Jesse. I don’t make a habit of bringing strange men into my home. But while you may be strange, you’re not just any man, are you?”

His eyes darkened. “Keely...”.

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Keely grinned. “You’re going to love this.”

Jesse shook his head. “Doubt it.”

She laughed, setting plates on the counter, enjoying the fact that—despite himself—he was relaxing. Jesse Bryant wasn’t the kind of man who let his guard down. And yet, here he was, in her kitchen, watching her with something that wasn’t quite amusement but wasn’t full of exasperation either.

She liked it—way too much.

She needed a distraction before she did something stupid—like close the distance between them just to see if Jesse kissed the way she knew he would.

Keely pushed off the counter, heading toward her suitcase. “Before I forget, I grabbed something for Reed while I was in Milan. Could you give it to him in the office tomorrow? It’ll only take a second for me to get.”

She rolled the suitcase into her bedroom and tossed it up on the bed that dominated the room. Jesse was right; this sucker was heavy. She inserted the key in the lock—none of that fancy TSA-approved lock for her. If they wanted to see in her bag without her being there, she was damn well going to know about it from the forced lock. She tried to turn the key, only it didn’t work. Keely pulled the key back out, wiped it off and tried again with the same result.

“Jesse? Can you come open this damn lock for me?”

He joined her and grinned, flipping out the switchblade he kept in his pocket and prying the lock open. “You know you should really have one of the new combination locks...”

“Not happening.”

He chuckled and headed back to the kitchen. She flipped open the suitcase and then took a step back from it. There was a reason the key hadn’t worked, this wasn’t her suitcase. It looked like hers. Same designer brand. Same deep green color. Same black leather trim, but the moment she flipped it open, she knew.

Keely frowned, reaching for the expensive-looking black jacket on top, shaking it out. A small baggie fell from the pocket. It was plastic and filled with clear pieces of something. She held the bag up so she could get a closer look. Keely froze, her breath catching.

Diamonds. They looked to be uncut and unmarked.

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed, looking towards Jesse.

Jesse moved in an instant, pushing up from the stool and reaching her side before she could so much as blink.

His voice was deadly quiet. “Keely. What the hell is this?”

Keely swallowed hard, her pulse hammering in her throat. “You mean these?” She shook the bag in front of his face. “They look like diamonds to me.”

She looked at the suitcase again, at the expensive clothes that weren’t hers, the high-end luggage that looked just like her own but clearly belonged to someone else. A realization hit her like a punch to the gut.

“They aren’t mine and this isn’t my bag,” she said.

Jesse took the bag of diamonds from her, rolling it between his fingers. His expression was flat. Controlled. But his eyes? Blazing with fury. Why was he pissed at her? She had done nothing.

Keely looked at him, at the hard line of his jaw, at the way his shoulders squared like he was preparing for something. Something bad. And then she realized his anger wasn’t directed at her.

“Jesse?” she whispered.

His gaze snapped to hers. “Where the hell is your actual suitcase?”

She shook her head, a horrible feeling settling in her stomach. “I don’t know.”

Keely didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Because this wasn’t just a mistake. This was something else. And whoever this suitcase belonged to? They were going to want it back.

Her breath caught in her throat as she took in the rest of the suitcase’s contents. The luxurious designer jacket on top—definitely not hers—the immaculately folded clothing that looked like it belonged to a man who had expensive taste and probably more money than morals.

This was bad. Really, really bad.

The air in the room shifted, thick with something sharp and dangerous as Jesse stood beside her, holding the bag. His fingers curled around it, the small plastic crinkling, but his focus was laser-sharp.

“Keely,” he said, his voice low and lethal, tossing the bag back into the suitcase.
“Where the hell did you get this suitcase?”

She swallowed hard. “The airport. Baggage claim. Same place as always.”

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Jesse's jaw went tight. "You didn't check it before we left?"

She knew that tone. It was the calm before the storm.

Keely lifted her chin, irritation spiking despite the ice-cold fear crawling up her spine. "No, Jesse, I didn't stop to inspect my bag for illegal diamonds before leaving the damn airport."

His expression darkened, but he said nothing. Because this wasn't just a mix-up. This was a problem—a serious problem.

Jesse stood, his entire body brimming with control, like he was holding back from exploding. His voice was rough but controlled when he spoke. "Anyone could've grabbed your bag by mistake. You realize that, don't you?"

Keely did. And that was the scariest part. Someone else had her suitcase. And if they'd opened it and realized their mistake, it probably meant they were looking for this one. A chill crawled down her spine.

She looked up at Jesse, and for the first time in forever, she felt danger closing in.

"What do we do?" she asked, and damn it, she hated how her voice shook just the slightest bit.

Keely sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the diamonds. Who the hell did this suitcase belong to? And why did she have the sinking feeling that whoever was missing it wouldn't just let it go?

“Your security system is armed, and so am I. Your house is back on the list for frequent patrols. I’ll let them know there may be a problem. I’ll stay here until I can talk to Reed and he can figure out how to keep you safe.”

“I am safe. My house has a top-of-the-line security system and you’re here with your gun.”

He smiled. “And I’m not leaving until I check in with your big brother... you know, my boss? I can call him now if you like...” he glanced at his watch “...but he was scheduled to do a scene tonight at the club. One he’d been looking forward to. Besides, as you said, we’re safe here, the alarms are all set, we’re on the drive-by schedule and I have my gun and an extra clip.”

“Don’t call Reed. We can tell him in the morning. I’m sure he’s looking forward to providing her some aftercare—I love how you Doms call getting laid aftercare. He’s going to be pissed at me as it is, but you can go home...”

“Not happening, Keely. Your choice is me or your big brother.”

“Fine. You. We can put the diamonds in the floor safe in my closet after we eat. I’m starving.”

“You wouldn’t have been if you’d eaten more than a salad on the plane. Why didn’t you select one of the entrees—roasted duck breast with cherry sauce or lamb chops with mint pesto...”

“Eww,” she made a face. “Besides which, neither duck nor lamb is a good choice when you’re on a diet.”

“You’re on a diet?” he asked incredulously.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m always on a diet. Besides, I knew the taco pizza was waiting for me.”

The timer on the oven went off, and she brushed past him to get it out. She really was hungry. If they’d been offering pasta on the flight, she’d have screwed the pizza and indulged.

As she served Jesse his pizza, she stared back at her bedroom and at the suitcase that contained the baggie of gems. Somehow, she didn’t think this was over. Those diamonds belonged to someone, and she didn’t think it would take long for whoever it was to figure out the bag had gone home with the wrong person. Once they knew where she was, she didn’t like her odds at surviving the encounter. Maybe it was a good thing that her house had an excellent security system and that Jesse was willing to stay the night. Maybe she should try to be a little bit nicer to him, but then again, maybe not.

4

JESSE

Jesse had spent too many damn years training himself to never let his guard down. But right now? His body didn’t give a damn about protocol.

After eating, the exhaustion just seemed to sink into his bones, dragging him down before he could stop it. Jesse made an entire security sweep of both the interior and exterior of the house, checking all the gates, doors, and windows. He barely sat down and registered the feel of Keely’s buttery-soft leather couch beneath him before his muscles gave up the fight, the long day catching up to him all at once. He stretched out, his gun on the floor beside him.

The last thing he remembered was Keely’s voice, soft and teasing, somewhere in the

background.

“I’m going to laugh so hard if you snore.”

He’d tried to muster a comeback, but his eyes were already shutting, his body already slipping into the dark.

KEELY

Keely stood at the edge of the couch, staring down at Jesse’s completely passed-out form.

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He looked different like this—his usual iron control stripped away by exhaustion. The sharp lines of his face had softened, his broad chest rising and falling in slow, steady breaths.

She should have gone to bed immediately. She should have just left him there. But instead, she hesitated, eyes lingering longer than they should. Jesse was always tense, always ready for a fight. But now? He was just a man. A very dangerous, ridiculously attractive man, but a man nonetheless.

With a quiet sigh, she grabbed the throw blanket draped over the back of the couch and carefully laid it over him, her fingers grazing the solid strength of his shoulder. Jesse stirred slightly, but he didn't wake. She let out a slow breath.

Keely had spent years pushing him, flirting with him just to see him grit his teeth and hold the line. But this? This was the first time she had ever seen him completely unguarded.

A small, ridiculous part of her wanted to press her lips to his forehead, to smooth a hand over his chest like some lovesick idiot. Instead, she shook her head, turning away quickly before she did something she couldn't take back.

“Goodnight, cowboy,” she murmured, stepping away.

Jesse didn't stir.

NICO

Outside, Nico Alvarez watched.

The French doors leading in from the patio were his way in.

Keely Malone had been stupidly predictable, assuming the white stucco walls that surrounded her home would keep someone out and keep them from peering through her windows. He'd thought this would be a quick break, enter and grab. He'd been doing those since he was a child. And if she heard him or got in the way? That was easy too, just a quick slit across her throat—although given what he'd learned about her, he might stay awhile and indulge himself.

But looking through the window, he spotted a big problem sprawled on the couch. Jesse Bryant.

The name alone was enough to piss him off. Silver Spur Security had interfered with his business before, but this? This was personal. Because she had his suitcase, and he wanted it back, needed it back.

Nico didn't hesitate. He moved like a shadow, his boots silent as he slipped toward the patio doors, a thin blade glinting in his hand.

Keely didn't even know what she was sitting on, but he sure as hell did. And if he couldn't get away clean, then neither she nor Jesse Bryant would be alive to remember it.

JESSE

Jesse's brain yanked him from sleep at the first sound, as if someone had flipped an internal switch inside him.

A creak. Soft. Barely there. But wrong.

His eyes snapped open instantly, instincts firing before his mind had even fully caught up. His pulse was already steady, his muscles awake and ready. And then... the scream. Keely.

Jesse launched off the couch like a missile, grabbing his gun as the blanket fell away as he moved, his mind already calculating threats before he even had eyes on her.

She'd rolled off her bed and pushed past the intruder and was now standing outside her bedroom door, her wild hair a mess around her face, hands gripping the door frame of her bedroom, her chest heaving. She stared at the shadowy figure in the middle of the bedroom.

Intruder. Jesse's gun was already in his hand, safety flicked off in one smooth motion. "Move, Keely!"

She bolted sideways just as the man lunged. Jesse fired, the bullet slicing through the air, barely missing the bastard's shoulder as he pivoted. Damn it. He'd hesitated—just for a split second—because of Keely's too-close proximity. The lowlife didn't hesitate.

He rushed Jesse in a burst of speed and adrenaline, and suddenly, they were colliding—the force sending them both crashing into the wall.

Jesse barely absorbed the impact before he spun, using the intruder's own momentum against him, throwing a hard elbow into the guy's ribs. The man grunted, but he didn't go down, which told Jesse exactly what he needed to know. Professional—not just some random thief.

Was this planned? Had they known customs would wave Keely through? Hers was a high-end suitcase, and it seemed odd that two of the same brand and color had been on that flight. The scumbag hadn't been here just to retrieve the diamonds, he'd been

here to eradicate a problem.

Jesse saw red. He surged forward, gripping the guy's shirt and slamming him backward, driving punch after punch into his ribs, his stomach. Anything he could reach. The man gritted his teeth, absorbing the blows before twisting violently, slamming Jesse into the counter. Jesse's skull rang for half a second, but he gritted through the pain, catching the assailant's wrist before he could reach for a knife strapped to his belt.

Oh, hell no. Jesse let out a feral sound, catching the guy's wrist and twisting until the knife clattered to the floor. Before he could deliver the knockout punch, the man suddenly lurched back, slipping away so fast Jesse nearly lost his grip.

A pro, through and through.

The guy snatched the knife off the ground, moving like a blur, pivoting hard and diving toward the patio door. Running. Jesse lunged after him, but it was too late. The French doors leading out to the patio burst open, glass shattering, wood splintering as the guy vanished into the dark.

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Jesse cursed viciously, heart pounding, body still coiled for a fight.

But he was gone. Jesse snorted, scanning the room before turning on his heel—Keely.

She was standing in the corner, breathing hard, her hands clenched into fists. And her eyes? She kept her eyes locked on him; they were wide with adrenaline, brimming knowing that her world had just changed.

“You okay?” His voice came out rough, thick with the rage still clawing at his throat.

Keely nodded too fast. “Yeah. Fine.”

She wasn’t fine. Not even close. But Jesse couldn’t focus on that now.

His fingers were already moving, unlocking his phone, hitting the all-hands-on-deck button without hesitation. A signal that would light up every Silver Spur operative’s phone, pulling them in immediately.

This wasn’t a routine call. This was a red alert. A warning that they had an actual threat—to someone who was either on the team or a family member—and that the threat had already made it past the normal security protocols.

Reed’s plans, whatever the hell they were, would have to wait.

Because right now, there was only one priority.

Immediate. Fucking. Backup. Now.

Jesse's gut told him what he already knew. The intruder would be back. And next time? He wouldn't be alone.

5

KEELY

Keely stood in the wreckage of her once-perfectly normal night, arms crossed, barefoot, and entirely too aware of Jesse Bryant's towering presence at her side.

He appeared carved from granite, radiating coiled strength and razor-sharp focus, as if about to hurl the intruder through a wall. Only problem was, the intruder was now long gone. The shattered French doors still rattled slightly in their frame.

She inhaled deeply, rolling her shoulders back. She'd been through worse. Jesse hadn't looked away from her once. His eyes flicked over her—assessing, searching, waiting for a crack in the surface. She gave him nothing.

"Keely," his voice came low and steady, "are you sure you're okay?"

She tipped her head slightly, glancing around. "Well, someone destroyed my door, turned my house into a crime scene, and some psycho just tried to sneak in to do God-knows-what, so..." She let out her breath slowly, lifting one shoulder. "I've had better nights."

Jesse's mouth pressed into a hard line, his sharp gaze scanning her body like he could see straight into her soul. It should have unnerved her. Instead, it did something else entirely.

Something dangerous.

He stepped closer, towering over her now, his voice quieter. Steadier. “Keely.”

She blinked up at him. “Yeah?”

“You’re standing in glass.”

Oh.

She glanced down, only now realizing she was still barefoot. A few shards of broken glass glittered in the dim kitchen light, dangerously close to the balls of her feet.

Before she could react, Jesse moved. He wrapped one muscular arm around her waist, lifting her off the damn ground like she weighed nothing before setting her on the edge of the counter. Keely let out a breath, stunned at the way her body reacted. The heat of his hands. The dominant way in which he just moved in, scooped her up and put her somewhere safer.

“Jesse,” she started, but before she could even process what was happening, the door burst open.

And all hell broke loose. The cavalry had arrived—a little too late, but still.

Her brother came first. His eyes found her instantly, scanning for injury, for damage, for anything out of place. His jaw was tight, his entire presence a storm brewing under the surface.

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Behind him, the rest of Silver Spur Security poured in like the damn SEAL unit they had once been. Gavin Briggs—all business, sharp eyes, not missing a thing. Hawke Turner—big, lethal, and entirely too ready for a fight. Dawson Hart—calm, cool, but carrying the kind of energy that said he wouldn't hesitate to rip a man apart.

The moment Reed's gaze landed on Jesse, his expression shifted. Jesse was still standing in front of her. Still close. Still too damn protective.

Reed frowned. "What the hell happened?"

Jesse didn't move. Didn't flinch. His voice came out like steel. "Intruder. Came in through the patio. Gone before I could take him down."

Reed's expression darkened. "Keely?"

She lifted a hand, wiggling her fingers. "Still here, no bullet wounds, no stab wounds, so let's call it a win."

No one laughed.

Gavin's gaze flicked between Jesse and Keely, his mind clearly working through the scene. "Who was it?"

Jesse's jaw clenched. "Didn't get an ID, but he was a pro. Not some random break-in. We assume he was here for the diamonds. He didn't get them."

"I put them in my safe," added Keely.

Dawson scanned the wreckage, nodding slowly. “Diamonds?”

Jesse nodded. “I’ll have a full report by morning, but there was a mix up in suitcases. When Keely opened what she thought was her suitcase, she found them.”

Hawke crossed his arms. “We need to move the diamonds and Keely. Whoever that was, he’s coming back.”

Well, thank you for that, Captain Obvious. She knew that. Jesse knew that, and so did the rest of them.

Her brother’s attention snapped back to her. Reed took a step closer, his face a mix of frustration and something deeper. “You okay?”

Keely tipped her head, considering. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Reed repeated.

She nodded, her voice steady. “I screamed. Jesse took care of it. Now we’re here.”

Reed’s gaze flicked back to Jesse, something unreadable passing between them. Then, before Keely could prepare, Jesse spoke.

And everything changed. “She’s with me.”

The words hung in the air, sharp and unyielding. The room went dead silent. Keely stared at him, her chest tightening.

Her brother’s eyes darkened immediately. “Excuse me?”

Jesse didn’t hesitate. Didn’t back down. “She’s mine to protect.”

Keely's stomach dipped. The words weren't casual. They weren't an offer. They were a claim. A public, unshakable, undeniable claim. And from the way every single man in the room reacted, they all understood exactly what it meant.

She thought she should say something. Stand up for her rights, but all she wanted at the moment was to feel safe. And safe meant being with Jesse.

Gavin muttered a curse. Dawson and Hawke exchanged glances.

Reed? Reed looked like he was going to commit murder.

“What the hell do you mean, ‘she’s yours’?” he demanded.

Jesse's jaw ticked. “I mean, I’m handling this.”

Reed took a step forward, his entire body language shifting to something dangerous. “Keely is my sister, and...”

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“And she’s mine to protect,” Jesse interrupted, voice low and final. “So that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Reed’s nostrils flared. Keely held her breath. Jesse knew how dangerous Reed was, didn’t he? But from the way the others were looking between them, it would appear they thought Jesse was just as dangerous.

As for Jesse, he never broke eye contact with her brother. Never wavered.

Jesse had made the claim, and Keely had no idea how the hell to feel about it.

Keely could feel the moment the air in the room shifted, the weight of Jesse’s words sinking in like a live grenade.

‘She’s mine to protect.’

Not Reed’s. Not Silver Spur Security’s. But his—Jesse’s.

Reed’s jaw locked so tight she swore she heard his molars grind.

“You wanna run that by me again?” Reed’s voice was low, controlled, but Keely knew her brother well enough to recognize the storm brewing beneath it.

Jesse didn’t flinch, didn’t back down. He stood there, all calm and unshakable, broad arms crossed over his chest, owning every inch of the space like he was ready to go to war over her.

“I said, I’m handling this,” Jesse repeated, voice even, but edged with something final. “I’m protecting Keely.”

Reed’s eyes darkened. “She’s my damn sister, Jesse.”

Jesse nodded once. “And she’s my damn responsibility.”

Keely’s stomach dipped. She was used to Jesse stepping in, keeping an eye on her when Reed got overbearing. But this? This was so very different.

Reed’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “What the hell does that mean?”

Jesse’s voice didn’t change. Didn’t waver. “It means if someone’s going to put their ass on the line for her, it’s going to be me.”

Gavin let out a low, frustrated growl under his breath. Hawke and Dawson exchanged pointed glances, like they could already see how this was going to go south.

And Keely? She could barely breathe.

Because Jesse Bryant wasn’t just making a professional call, he was making a personal one.

Reed snorted, running a hand through his hair. “You’re too close to this.”

Jesse’s jaw ticked. “And you aren’t? Besides, you don’t have a say in this.”

“The hell I don’t.” Reed stepped closer, shoulder to shoulder with Jesse now, the heat between them enough to melt steel. “Tell me right now—is this about the job? Or is this about something else?”

Silence. A long, heavy, impossible silence. Then Jesse's eyes flicked to hers.

And in that single heartbeat, she knew. This wasn't just about the job. This was about her. About them. Something dark and undeniable passed between them, a pull that had been building for years, buried under rules and lines neither of them had been willing to cross.

Keely's mouth went dry. Reed noticed. His expression shifted, a flicker of something dangerous and knowing flashing across his face.

"You son of a..."

Gavin stepped in, fast, cutting between them. "Alright, that's enough."

Reed didn't move, didn't blink. "This isn't happening."

Jesse exhaled, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "It already has."

Keely felt that deep in her bones.

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Reed turned on her. “And you’re okay with this?”

Keely lifted her chin, locking eyes with her brother. “I’m not some kid you get to make decisions for, Reed.”

His nostrils flared. “You’re my sister.”

She softened just a fraction. “And you’re my brother. But Jesse’s right. I need someone to watch my back, and I want it to be him.”

Reed cursed under his breath, running a hand through his hair. “Goddamn nightmare.”

Keely sighed, suddenly so damn tired of all the posturing. “Alright, boys, let’s all drop the testosterone levels for a second and focus on the actual problem.” Five sets of male eyes turned to her. Keely rolled her shoulders, standing a little straighter. “We have a suitcase full of uncut diamonds, an intruder who’s not afraid to play dirty, and no idea what the hell we just stepped into. We should probably deal with that before we start measuring dicks, don’t you think?”

Dawson choked on a laugh. “She’s not wrong.”

Reed shot him a glare.

Keely crossed her arms. “So, what’s the plan?”

Jesse breathed deeply through his nose, like he was barely holding onto his patience.

“The plan is you’re staying out of it.”

Keely blinked, then laughed. “Oh, that’s cute. You think I’m going to just sit back while you all play hero?”

Jesse’s eyes darkened, his expression going dangerously unreadable. “That’s exactly what I think.”

Keely’s blood heated.

“Oh, cowboy. You really don’t know me at all, do you?”

A muscle in his jaw flexed. “I know enough.”

“Yeah?” She tilted her head. “Then you know I don’t take orders from you.”

Jesse moved fast, stepping into her space so suddenly she had to tilt her chin up just to hold his stare. The air between them burned.

“That’s part of the problem, you’ve never taken orders before,” Jesse murmured, voice low, rough, “but that’s about to change.”

Keely’s heartbeat kicked up a notch. Because this wasn’t just about the job. This was about everything. Everything they’d been dancing around for years. Everything she’d never wanted to admit, even to herself, that she wanted. But she knew it now, and feared there was no way to go back to a time when she hadn’t.

Jesse flexed his hands at his sides like he was fighting the urge to touch her. Finally, he straightened. “You wanna be involved?”

Keely lifted her chin. “Damn right, I do.”

Jesse held her gaze for a long, drawn-out moment filled with stillness. Then, finally, he nodded. “Fine.”

Reed snorted, exasperated. “You can’t be serious.”

Jesse didn’t look away from her. “If she wants in, I’ll spend a lot of useless energy trying to keep her out, so she’s in. But on my terms.”

Keely’s pulse jumped. Because they both knew what that meant. Reed muttered something about bratty sisters, asshole friends, and poor decisions before stalking off.

Gavin, Hawke, and Dawson exchanged pointed glances, but said nothing.

Which left her and Jesse—alone in a room full of people with nowhere to hide.

Keely licked her lips. “Your terms, huh?”

Jesse looked at her like he already regretted this decision. “My terms,” he confirmed. “Starting with rule number one.”

Keely arched an eyebrow. “Oh, this should be good.”

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Jesse leaned in, voice dangerously low. “You do what I say when I say it.”

Keely’s breath caught. Because there was no mistaking the undercurrent in his voice. The unspoken warning. The promise. Jesse wasn’t just talking about the job. She’d seen him in full Dom mode, and it was pretty impressive.

For the first time in her entire life, Keely wasn’t sure she wanted to fight him on it.

God help her.

6

JESSE

Jesse tossed the bag of uncut diamonds onto Reed’s desk, the dull clink of stones against each other punctuating the silence in the Silver Spur office.

Reed barely looked at them before pinning Jesse with a sharp glare. “And you’re taking her where?”

Jesse crossed his arms, unmoved by the challenge in his best friend’s voice. “My place. No one knows about it except the team. It’s safe.”

Reed’s expression didn’t shift, but Jesse caught the barely perceptible flex in his jaw. The protective older brother routine was understandable, but right now, Jesse didn’t give a damn if Reed liked the arrangement or not.

“Jesse...”

“She stays with me,” Jesse interrupted, voice hard. “No argument. No debate. I don’t want to risk moving her to a safehouse they might know about, and she certainly can’t stay here or the club—as they already know about both places.”

Reed rubbed a hand over his face. “You’re really pulling the ‘I got this’ card?”

Jesse held his ground. “Yes, because I do have it.”

Reed stared at him for a long moment before finally nodding. “Fine. But if anything happens to her, I don’t care how long we’ve been friends—I’ll kill you myself.”

Jesse didn’t flinch. “You won’t have to. If anything happens to Keely, I’ll already be dead.”

He turned slowly, picking up Keely’s suitcase, already packed with whatever essentials she’d thrown together in the chaos. She didn’t argue when he told her they were leaving, which—if Jesse had to guess—meant she wasn’t as unaffected by the threat as she wanted to pretend.

Good. She needed to take this seriously. Because whoever wanted that suitcase back wasn’t finished with her.

Jesse pulled off the main highway, steering his truck onto the dirt road that wound down to his home just outside the city on a few acres. Keely sat in the passenger seat, legs crossed, eyes on the rolling hills outside her window, the glow of the setting sun casting the landscape in gold and amber.

“This is yours?” she asked, voice softer than usual.

Jesse nodded. “Yes. I don’t enjoy living in town. I like to have some space around me.”

It wasn’t much—just land, space, and quiet, but it had been his since he’d left the Navy and returned to San Antonio. The house, a sturdy old farmhouse with a wraparound porch, stood at the end of the road, isolated, untouchable, safe.

That’s what mattered.

Keely let out a breath. “I didn’t know you lived out here. Somehow, I thought maybe you had a place along the river walk.”

Jesse slanted his eyes at her. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, darlin’.”

She met his gaze with something unreadable, and for once, she didn’t fire back with one of her usual smart-ass remarks.

He pulled up to the house, killed the engine, and grabbed both of their bags out of the back before opening her door for her. Keely followed him up the porch steps, her movements graceful despite the long day, despite the shitstorm she’d walked into.

“You coming inside?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Why? Are you going to make me taco pizza? Or maybe I’ll just sleep in the pickup’s bed.”

Jesse ignored her sarcasm and pushed open the front door, guiding her inside.

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The house was warm, lived-in, nothing like the sleek, modern places Keely frequented except for her own homes. Exposed beams stretched across the ceiling, a stone fireplace centered the main room, and the open-concept kitchen blended into the living space with its handcrafted wood counters and old-fashioned farmhouse sink.

Jesse dropped the bags on the couch. “Make yourself at home.”

Keely wandered inside, fingers trailing along the rough wood of the dining table, eyes scanning the space. “This feels like you.”

Jesse quirked his eyebrow. “And what does that mean?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Sturdy. Strong. A little rough around the edges, but somehow calm and comforting.”

He leaned against the counter, arms crossed. “That supposed to be a compliment?”

She turned, watching him with that damn look—the one that always meant trouble. “I guess that depends.”

Jesse felt the warning signs flare under his skin. This didn’t feel like her usual banter. It felt... different. Keely knew damnwell what kind of line she was skirting—and yet, she kept pushing.

The biggest problem was that he didn’t know that he wanted her to stop, and God help him, he wasn’t sure he had the energy to resist much longer.

Keely's laughter rang through the house, light and teasing, as she tossed her boots near the door. "So, what now? You're going to give me a list of rules to follow while I'm here?"

Jesse narrowed his eyes. "You need rules to keep yourself out of trouble?"

She grinned. "Depends. Are you going to punish me if I break them?"

Jesse went absolutely still—a fact that didn't go unnoticed by Keely. She knew exactly what she was doing—testing, prodding, seeing how far she could push him before he finally snapped.

Jesse clenched his jaw. "Keely."

She tilted her head, all innocent curiosity. "Yes, Sir?"

Jesse moved before he could stop himself, closing the space between them in an instant, backing her up until her spine met the wooden door behind her. She sucked in a breath, but she didn't pull away. Didn't stop pushing.

Jesse braced both hands beside her head, boxing her in. "You keep playing games with me, darlin', and I promise you won't like the outcome."

Her lips parted, her pupils blown wide, but she still lifted her chin, defiance gleaming in her eyes. "And what if I do? What if that's what I want? What if that's what I've always wanted?"

Jesse's control snapped. His hand wrapped around her throat, firm but not restricting, just enough to hold her still—to remind her who was in charge. Keely trembled, but not from fear.

Jesse leaned in, his voice low, dangerous, raw. “I don’t play like the men you’re used to, Keely. I don’t tease. I don’t flirt. And I sure as hell won’t let you top from bottom.”

Her breathing hitched, her hands resting on his chest, but she didn’t push him away. Didn’t tell him to stop. Jesse watched her, felt the rapid thud of her pulse against his palm, and let the truth settle between them. She was tempting him past reason—one more step—one more provocation—and there’d be no coming back.

Keely swallowed hard, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. “Then what do you do, Jesse?”

Jesse let out a slow breath, forcing himself to release her, to step back before he did something he couldn’t take back. He turned on his heel, walking toward the kitchen, putting distance between them before he forgot all the reasons why she was off-limits.

“Go to bed, Keely.” His voice came out rough, gritted with restraint.

Silence. Then—soft, satisfied laughter. “What’s the matter cowboy, aren’t you going to feed me?”

Jesse gripped the counter, his knuckles turning white. This woman was going to ruin him.

He knew better.

He’d spent his whole damn life following rules, enforcing control, keeping a firm grip on the things that mattered most. But then there was Keely Malone—and that woman had never met a line she didn’t want to cross.

She was in his house, walking around like she owned the place, testing him with every glance, every challenge, every soft, teasing breath. He could feel her in every inch of the damn room, could hear the quiet shuffle of her bare feet against the wood floor, the way her breath hitched every time he got too close.

She was testing him, and he feared he was way too close to failing.

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He took a casserole of chicken and cheese enchiladas out of the freezer and put them in the oven to bake. He served her dinner and then ignored her while he cleaned up the kitchen. She'd been playing with fire all night—pushing him with her words, with her body, with that damn mouth of hers—he couldn't decide if he wanted to kiss it or put a ball gag in it.

Jesse turned away from the sink to find her standing right there, staring up at him with a challenge in her eyes, her chin tilted in defiance. The soft glow of the lamp cast warm shadows across her face, and Jesse could see the rise and fall of her chest, could feel the undeniable pull between them.

“You don't scare me, you know,” she whispered, voice low.

Jesse stepped in, closing the distance so fast she gasped. “That a fact?”

Her lips parted, her breath coming faster, but she didn't move away. Didn't push him back.

“You want to test me, Keely?” His voice came out rough, more growl than question. “Because I don't think you understand what happens when I stop holding back.”

Her hands pressed against his chest, but not to push him away. She was feeling him, testing the strength beneath his skin, the barely leashed control in his muscles.

“I think you like it,” she whispered, the words pure provocation.

Jesse cursed under his breath, and then he was on her.

He spun her hard, pressing her against the counter, his hands resting on hers as she gripped the edge, his body caging her in. Her body went soft against his, her breath catching, her hands slipping from beneath his and running up his forearms, nails digging in just enough to drive him wild.

Jesse's mouth was at her ear, his breath hot against her skin. "This what you want, darlin'?"

She shuddered. He brought his hands down to her hip. His grip tightened, one hand sliding back up to her jaw, holding her still, making her look at him. Making her see exactly what she'd unleashed.

"You don't play games with a man like me," he warned.

Keely licked her lips. "Maybe I don't want to play."

Jesse cursed again, his resolve cracking. His fingers slid into her hair, tilting her head back, his other hand sliding up from her hip to the curve of her waist, pinning her where he wanted her.

When his lips finally crashed against hers, she gasped into his mouth, her fingers tightening around his arms, pulling him closer, deeper, harder. She was heat and softness, all wrapped up in defiance and need, and Jesse wanted to devour her. Keely moaned against his mouth, shifting, pressing her body into his, her hips rocking just enough to send his blood boiling.

Jesse groaned, gripping her hips, anchoring her in place. "Be still."

Keely shivered, but obeyed. And damn it all, that did something dangerous to him. Jesse pinned her harder, his lips trailing down the curve of her neck, his teeth grazing just enough to make her squirm. He could smell her arousal, feel her nipples

stiffening under her thin sweater.

She wanted this, and God help him, he did too. He always had, but then reality crashed back. He was supposed to be protecting her; not taking her in his goddamn kitchen. Jesse cursed and wrenched himself back, his body still pulsing with need, his breath ragged.

Keely blinked up at him, her lips kiss-swollen, her eyes dark with desire and frustration.

Jesse scrubbed a hand over his face. “This can’t happen.”

She swallowed, her chest still rising and falling, her body still pressed against the wall like she wasn’t sure her legs would hold her.

“Why?” Her voice was shaky, and Jesse hated that he liked it.

“Because you’re in danger,” he ground out. “And I don’t cross that line when I’m supposed to be keeping you safe.”

Keely rolled her lips together, trying to regain control. And then—the challenge was back. Jesse should have known she wouldn’t let this go.

She tilted her head, observing him cautiously. “So, if I wasn’t in danger...”

Jesse’s jaw flexed. “Don’t.”

She stepped forward, testing him again, and Jesse had to force himself to hold still, to not reach for her the way he wanted to.

“You don’t play fair,” he muttered.

Keely's lips curled slightly. "I never said I did."

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Jesse let out a long, slow breath, forcing every muscle in his body to calm the hell down.

“Go to bed, Keely.”

She studied him for a moment longer, then nodded, turning toward the hallway. But before she disappeared, she tossed one last glance over her shoulder, her voice full of heat and promises she damn well knew she shouldn't be making.

“You're not going to sleep, are you?”

Jesse watched her disappear into the dark. No. No, he sure as hell wasn't.

7

KEELY

Keely awoke to the sound of Jesse's voice, low and lethal, just outside the bedroom door.

She blinked at the morning light filtering through the sheer curtains, her mind catching up to reality. The heat from last night still lingered in her skin, in the memory of Jesse's hands, his mouth, the feel of his body pressing her against the wall.

But she wasn't thinking about that now. Because Jesse didn't sound pissed. He sounded deadly.

She slid out of bed, padding silently toward the door. When she pushed it open, she found Jesse standing by the front entrance, still shirtless, wearing only a pair of low-slung jeans that clung to his hips.

Gavin, Hawke, Reed, and Dawson were all standing nearby, their energy coiled tight, radiating danger. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

Jesse's voice came out cold and sharp as steel. "How the hell did he find us?"

Her stomach clenched. The intruder?

Keely stepped forward. "What happened?"

Jesse didn't turn, but the other men did.

Hawke raked a hand through his dark hair. "We found a message at the end of the driveway."

Dawson held out a photograph. "You need to see this."

Keely stepped forward, snatching the photo from Dawson's outstretched hand. Then her breath caught. The image was dark and grainy—taken just before dawn—but the message was clear. They had staked a wooden post into the ground just outside Jesse's land and nailed a butchered rattlesnake to it, its blood still fresh and dripping into the dirt.

Five words were sloppily painted in red beneath it.

I ALWAYS COLLECT MY DEBTS.

Keely's stomach flipped, but she forced her breathing to stay even. Jesse's voice was

pure gravel. “Do we know who he is?”

“I downloaded pictures from the security cameras, and we ran him through facial recognition. His name is Nico Alvarez, and we’re already digging into who he is,” said Dawson.

“He knows who you are, Keely,” said Jesse. “He knows where we are. This isn’t a warning.” He pointed at the picture. “That isn’t a threat, it’s a goddamn promise.”

Keely sat on the edge of the farmhouse kitchen table, arms crossed as the team pulled up every last piece of intel they had on Nico Alvarez.

Gavin stood at the head of the group, scrolling through a tablet, his mouth set in a firm line. “Alvarez isn’t just a dealer. He’s deep into conflict diamond smuggling, running a direct pipeline from West Africa into Europe and the U.S.”

Keely swallowed hard, but she wasn’t about to let fear seep in.

“So, what?” she asked, tilting her head. “I just happened to grab the one suitcase filled with his blood diamonds?”

Jesse’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “That wasn’t an accident.”

Dawson shook his head. “We think it was a drop. Someone was supposed to pick it up after you left the show.”

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Hawke added, “And now that you’ve seen what was inside, you’re a liability.”

Keely forced herself to breathe. This was just another problem to solve. She’d handled high-stakes before.

But it seemed Jesse had other ideas.

“This ends now,” he growled.

Keely lifted an eyebrow. “Yeah? How, exactly?”

Jesse turned toward her, his body too close, too intense, radiating command in every muscle. “You’re done. No more running, no more pretending you’ve got this under control. You don’t.”

Keely straightened. “Excuse me?”

Jesse caught her upper arm and turned her to face him, leaning in, his voice deadly calm. “You’re under my protection, Keely. And that means you listen when I tell you something. You don’t argue. You don’t push back. You just do what the hell you’re told.”

The air went thick between them, and not just with anger. Something else simmered there—something unspoken, something dangerous.

Keely’s pulse spiked, but she refused to back down. “You don’t get to decide that for me, Jesse.”

His jaw flexed. "I just did."

Her body lit up with challenge, with something hotter, something reckless.

Keely lifted her chin, refusing to look away. "What are you going to do? Tie me to the bed?"

The danger in Jesse's expression shifted. Something darker flickered in his gaze, something unreadable. He leaned in closer, so close she could feel the heat of his breath on her lips.

"Don't tempt me, darlin'," he murmured, voice rough as sin.

Keely's breath hitched. Her whole body reacted, her blood pounding, her skin tight and hot and restless. She should have pushed back harder. Should have fought him on principle alone. But instead, she trembled, wanting to know what would happen if she kept pushing.

Jesse watched her for a long moment, then breathed deeply, reining himself back in. He stepped away, putting just enough distance between them.

"For now, you're staying put," he said, voice firm but softer than before. "We'll figure out our next move. We've got patrols roving the property, and someone will be watching the security feed twenty-four hours a day."

Keely let out a breath, still flushed from the moment before, from the heat rolling off him in waves. "Fine. I will do what you tell me," she muttered, mostly just to see what he'd do.

Jesse's eyes narrowed. "That didn't sound convincing."

She lifted a shoulder, teasing now, because God help her, she liked the way he reacted to her defiance. He muttered something under his breath, something unintelligible but definitely a curse, before turning away and joining the others at the island. Keely watched him go, her pulse still a little too quick, her skin still tingling.

Nico Alvarez might have sent a warning, but she was certain Silver Spur Security could handle him. But Jesse Bryant was a whole different kind of threat, and she had no idea how to handle him.

The debate had gone on for too long, voices overlapping, strategies tossed back and forth, none of them feeling solid enough to Keely. Jesse stood near the kitchen counter, arms crossed, his broad shoulders looking even bigger in the dim light. He had said little in the last ten minutes, just watched as Gavin, Reed, Hawke, and Dawson tossed out ideas about what to do next.

Keely had tried to take part, but every time she opened her mouth, someone cut her off, like she wasn't the one with her name on a goddamn hit list.

She leaned back against the couch, crossing her arms. "If you all could stop acting like I'm not in the damn room, that'd be really great."

Reed pinched the bridge of his nose. "Keely..."

"No," she snapped. "I'm serious. You're all sitting here debating my future like I don't get a damn say in it."

"You don't," Jesse said, his deep voice cutting clean through the noise.

Everything stilled.

Keely's head whipped toward him, heat prickling at the back of her neck. "What did

you say?”

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Jesse pushed off the counter, his boots heavy on the hardwood as he walked toward her. “You heard me, I said, you don’t.”

She lifted her chin. “You don’t get to make that call.”

“I already did.”

Something unreadable darkened Jesse’s eyes, and his jaw was clenched. Final. Immovable.

Gavin let out a breath. “Jesse...”

Jesse didn’t look at him. “We’re leaving.”

Reed’s expression hardened. “Leaving? Going where?”

Jesse still didn’t look away from her. “My family’s place in the hill country. It’s in the name of an offshore holding company. I did that in case something happened to me. There’s no reason to tie it to me.”

Keely’s stomach dropped. He wasn’t talking about this house. He was talking about the other one—the one she’d heard Reed mention once, in passing, when they were at the club. A place so far off the grid it didn’t even exist on paper.

Jesse turned, daring anyone to challenge him. “You all can keep digging into Alvarez, track his movements, whatever you need to do. But I’m taking Keely out of play. She’s safer away from the city.”

Reed took a step forward, his voice deadly quiet. “You don’t get to take my sister somewhere without running it by me first.”

Jesse’s expression didn’t change. “She’s not safe at her house. He knows she’s here. I need to get her somewhere safe.”

Reed’s hands clenched at his sides. “You sure this is about her safety? Or is this about something else?”

A silent storm passed between them, something that had nothing to do with the diamonds or Alvarez and everything to do with Keely.

Jesse didn’t blink. “It’s about keeping her alive.”

And just like that, the conversation was over.

Keely should have argued. Should have told Jesse to go to hell, that she wasn’t about to be dragged into the wilderness by some caveman. But she didn’t. Because deep down, she knew—if she was going anywhere; it was going to be with Jesse.

The truck bounced over the dirt road, kicking up dust and heat as Jesse drove deeper into nowhere.

Keely had stayed quiet for most of the drive, watching the landscape shift from highways to rolling pastures to vast, empty land that stretched for miles. This differed from his place just outside of town. This was untouched land, the kind that felt as if outsiders had never set foot on it—no neighbors, no distractions, no exits.

He pulled up in front of the house—a small single-story house with a wraparound porch, its rust-colored tin roof blending into the landscape. The sun was setting behind the hills, casting golden light across the land, making it look almost... serene.

But Keely felt anything but. She turned in her seat, her voice sharp. “So, this is your grand plan? Drag me out to the middle of nowhere and keep me locked up?”

Jesse killed the engine, resting his hands on the steering wheel for a beat before turning to face her. “It’s not a prison, Keely.”

She let out a short laugh. “Feels like one.”

Jesse breathed out, his fingers drumming once against the wheel before he opened the door and stepped out. “You can either sit here and sulk, or you can come inside. Your call.”

He grabbed their bags from the back, not waiting for her to follow.

Keely muttered a curse under her breath before climbing out, slamming the door harder than necessary. The air smelled like wildflowers and cedar, the wind soft against her skin as she took in the complete silence. No cars. No voices. Just her and Jesse and miles of nowhere. Maybe things were looking up.

Jesse was already on the porch, unlocking the door, his body all rough lines and unshakable control. He pushed it open, stepping inside, and after a long beat, Keely followed.

The inside was warm and rustic, all wood and exposed beams, and like his other house, featured a kind of great room that combined kitchen, dining and living space all in one room. It smelled like the outdoors and leather, like him.

Jesse set the bags down by the staircase, then turned to face her. “It’s safe here.”

Keely crossed her arms. “Isn’t that what you said about the last place?” He growled, and she held up her hands in mock surrender. “Sorry. So, tell me, when does this little

exile end?"

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Jesse's eyes stayed on hers, steady, unyielding. "When I say so."

A fire lit in her chest, an equal mix of frustration and something else she wasn't ready to name.

"Of course," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "You're just loving this, aren't you?"

Jesse took a slow step forward, closing too much distance, making her stomach dip.

"You think I enjoy keeping you here?" His voice was low, edged with something dangerous. "You think I enjoy knowing there's a man out there who wants you dead?"

Keely inhaled sharply, but he wasn't finished.

"You think this is fun for me, Keely?" Another step, his heat searing into her, his presence too much, too overwhelming. "Because I can promise you, darlin', I'd rather be anywhere else than spend the next few days fighting every damn instinct I have to keep my hands off you."

Her pulse slammed into overdrive. She should say something—something to remind him she wasn't his to protect, wasn't his to control. But instead, she just stood there, body humming with something she couldn't ignore. Jesse's gaze dropped to her mouth, just for a second, then he let out a rough breath and turned away.

"Get some sleep, Keely."

She watched as he disappeared outside, leaving her standing there, breathless, restless, furious.

This wasn't just isolation. This was something else, and she had a feeling she would not come out of it unscathed.

8

JESSE

Jesse had always been a man who thrived on control. It was what made him good at his job, what made him the man his team depended on when things got ugly.

But Keely Malone? That woman had a goddamn gift for tearing his control to pieces, and she knew it. The moment they settled into the ranch, Keely turned it into a battlefield.

She wasn't reckless—not in the way some people were—but she was deliberate. Calculated. Every move, every choice was designed to push him, to see how far she could go before he snapped.

The first time had been minor. She'd left the front door wide open while Jesse was outside, despite him telling her twice to keep it locked. It was a test. He knew it. She knew it.

"You think I don't check these things?" he'd asked, closing the door behind him, voice even, controlled.

Keely had shrugged, leaning back against the couch, her body all casual defiance. "It's not like there's anyone out here. I mean you can see for miles and miles and there's nothing to see but miles and miles."

Jesse had taken a slow breath, rolling his shoulders back. “There’s always someone.”

She hadn’t argued, but the second time he went outside, the damn door had been left wide open. She’d taken one of the ranch’s ATVs—one Jesse had explicitly told her not to touch—and gone tearing off into the hills without telling him. Open rebellion.

By the time she returned, the sun was beginning to set, and she got off the ATV, stretching her arms open wide and spinning around. Jesse had been damn close to losing it right then and there. He’d grabbed her by the wrist so fast she let out a startled gasp.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he’d growled, voice low and edged with fury.

Keely had blinked up at him, feigned innocence dripping from every syllable. “Taking in the view.”

Jesse had fought the urge to shake some goddamn sense into her. “You don’t just take off like that.”

Her eyes had danced with amusement. “Why? Were you worried?”

He’d gritted his teeth, dropping her wrist before he did something stupid. “Get inside. Now.”

She’d gone. Slowly. On her own damn time, with a deliberate sway of her hips.

And now? Now she was testing him again.

Jesse had been chopping wood near the barn when he heard it—the sound of Keely inside the house, blasting music loud enough to shake the damn walls, and wasting

valuable energy. A hidden solar panel system supplied the only electricity.

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He shut his eyes, exhaling hard. This made three—three times he had warned her, three times she had ignored him, three times she had openly defied him.

Jesse strode toward the house, boots kicking up dust, muscles tight and rippling with anger.

Inside, Keely was in the kitchen, her back to him, standing at the stove like she hadn't just made a decision she was going to regret.

He stepped inside and slammed the door behind him.

Keely jumped, turning toward him, eyes shining with mischief. "Something wrong, cowboy?"

Jesse rolled his shoulders back. "Turn it off."

She looked at him with an innocent expression. "It's just music."

He didn't repeat himself. Keely held his stare for a beat, then slowly reached for the knob, turning it down but not off.

Defiance.

Jesse closed the distance between them, placing both hands on the counter beside her, caging her in.

"You're trying to see how far you can push me," he said, voice rough.

Keely tipped her chin up, not backing down. “And?”

Jesse let out a low chuckle—one with no humor in it.

“You’re about to find out exactly how far.”

And then he grabbed her by the waist, spun her, and pressed her face-down against the counter.

Keely let out a startled gasp, her hands flat against the surface, her back arching slightly as Jesse braced her in place.

“Jesse...”

“Three warnings, darlin’,” he murmured, his voice all steel and dominance. “And you ignored every single one of them.”

Keely’s breath hitched. “You wouldn’t...”

Jesse’s hand slid to the small of her back, pressing her down gently, firmly.

His other hand landed the first slap to her ass. Her leggings would offer her some protection, but not much, and none at all when he stripped them off. She gasped, her body jerking slightly against him. He reached up, grabbing the waistband and peeling them down—she wore no panties. Of course she didn’t.

“Oh, I would,” he said darkly.

Another sharp slap, this one just a little harder. Keely yelped, her fingers gripping the counter.

“You don’t listen,” Jesse murmured, his palm smoothing over the sting of his last hit.
“You don’t follow orders.”

Keely’s breathing wasn’t steady anymore.

“Jesse...”

He delivered a succession of five more swats to her firm buttocks, two to each side and a third one in the middle. Each was measured, a precise, hard smack. He watched as her body reacted, as she fought the urge to press back into his touch.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” he murmured in her ear. “To push me until I handled you?”

Keely let out a ragged breath, her pulse racing under his fingertips. Jesse’s control began to fray. He let go, stepping back, giving her space.

Keely stayed where she was for a second, like she needed a moment to collect herself. Then, slowly, she turned around, her cheeks flushed, eyes wide, lips parted and slapped him across the face.

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Jesse reached up to touch his cheek, forcing himself to take a steadying breath.

“Do that again, and you’ll regret it. From now on, this is how it’s going to be,” he said, his voice still rough. “Got it? You’re going to listen to me and do what I say.”

Keely swallowed, then licked her lips. “Depends.”

Jesse clenched his jaw.

Keely took a step forward, pulling up her leggings as she lifted her chin. “That all you got, cowboy?”

Jesse let out a low, rough laugh. Oh, she had no idea what she was asking for, but she would, and soon.

Jesse knew he had made a mistake the second he laid hands on Keely. Not because he regretted it—hell no—but because now that he’d touched her, he knew keeping his hands off her was no longer an option. Her warm, heated flesh had felt so right under his touch, and that was a problem.

Keely had always been a storm in a silk dress, a woman who knew exactly how to push him, how to make him want her even when he knew he shouldn’t. But this wasn’t some casual temptation. This was something far more dangerous, something Jesse had been trying to bury under rules and restraint.

Because Keely wasn’t just another woman. She was off-limits, the one woman he couldn’t have, the one woman he couldn’t afford to crave. Yet, here she was, standing

in front of him, chest rising and falling, eyes burning with a challenge she wasn't ready to take back.

"You really don't listen, do you?" Jesse's voice came low, dark, edged with heat.

Keely tilted her chin, her hands resting against the counter like she needed something solid to hold on to. "I hear just fine."

His gaze locked onto hers. "Then why do you keep testing me?"

She licked her lips, that wicked gleam in her eyes igniting something primal inside him. "Maybe I want to see what happens when you finally stop holding back."

Jesse let out a slow, measured breath. He could walk away now. Should walk away. Instead, he closed the distance in two steps, gripping the counter on either side of her. Keely's breath hitched, but she didn't back down.

"Is that what you want, darlin'?" His voice was rough, filled with promise. "You want to know what happens when I stop holding back?"

Her pulse fluttered against her throat. "I want you to stop pretending you don't want this as much as I do."

Jesse cursed under his breath, and then his control snapped completely.

His mouth crashed against hers, claiming, devouring, staking a claim he had no right to make. Keely moaned into the kiss, her fingers fisting in his shirt, pulling him closer, as if she couldn't get enough. Jesse didn't stop her. Didn't try to slow down.

Because this wasn't something he could control anymore. This was need, raw and unfiltered, burning through him like wildfire. He grabbed her by the hips, lifting her

effortlessly onto the counter, spreading her legs wide enough to pull him in. He lifted her sweater and pulled it over her head, removing her bra before fisting her hair as he trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her throat, across her collarbone, down to the sensitive skin just above the swell of her breasts.

She was soft beneath him, pliant, her body a contradiction of defiance and submission, the perfect balance that had always driven him wild.

Keely arched into him, her breath coming hard and fast. “Jesse...”

His name from her lips was his undoing.

Jesse pulled back just enough to grip her jaw, forcing her to look at him. “You want this?”

Her wide pupils and kiss-bruised lips didn’t stop her from saying, “Yes.”

Jesse’s grip tightened, his thumb brushing over her bottom lip. “Then you take it my way.”

Keely shuddered. “And if I don’t?”

Jesse let out a low, dark chuckle. “Then you’re not ready for this.”

Her nails dug into his arms, her thighs tightening around his hips. “I was born ready.”

Jesse shook his head, pulled her leggings off and then scooped her up and carried her into the the bedroom, setting her in the middle of it and trailing long, slow kisses down her throat before continuing down her torso. She started to reach for him and he grasped her hands, bringing her arms over her head, placing them there firmly.

Her body lay splayed on his bed like a virgin sacrifice, but he didn't feel like a monster about to devour her. Everything about her called to him. Everything about her felt like home.

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He stepped away and stripped out of his clothes until he was as naked as she was. His cock was hard and was close to reaching his navel. It ached and had ached every time they were in the same room. Cupping one breast and teasing the nipple with his thumb, he swirled his tongue around the other nipple, giving it the edge of his teeth before moving on to the other.

He climbed onto the bed, hovering over her before moving down, slipping his hands beneath her ass and lifting her up to meet his mouth. He nuzzled her clit and licked her labia. She was already wet. He very much doubted the spanking had done anything to curb her disobedient nature, but it sure as hell had warmed her up for him.

The scent of her arousal threatened to cost him his control and drive him into a frenzy, but he tamped down his need and lowered his mouth to her sex, feasting on it. He speared her pussy with his tongue again and again, delving deep with it curled and then flattening it out to sup on her honey. It coated his tongue and tasted delicious.

Keely writhed on her back, trying to get away from him, but he held her steady. She would learn from the beginning that he was the one who controlled their sexual encounters. He continued to ravish her sex with his mouth, and she cried out, trembling as she came.

He gave her no respite and crawled up her body, covering her and taking his place between her thighs as he settled at her core. He pulled her legs up around his waist. Keely tried to bring her arms back down and with one hand he raised them back, pinning them above her head. With the other hand, he captured her hip.

His mouth hesitated a moment above hers. As his lips captured hers in a dominant

kiss, he thrust deep inside her. It took every last measure of control not to just start pounding into her as hard as he could. Instead, he pulled back slowly before kissing her as he stroked in her, setting up a rhythm that she easily caught.

Releasing her hands, he brought his hands under her ass, cupping her buttocks as he massaged and squeezed them. Every moan, every sigh, every touch of her hand called to him in a way no woman before her ever had.

She called his name when her pussy spasmed around him. Even though he didn't want it to end, he couldn't help himself. Her orgasm brought forth his own, and he ground against her as he spilled himself deep inside her.

Later, Jesse sat at the edge of the bed, barely catching his breath, running a hand down his face. He should have stopped this before it started. But he hadn't and couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Keely lay sprawled across the mattress, the sheets twisted around her body, her hair a wild mess against his pillow. She was utterly wrecked, her skin still flushed, her lips curved in lazy satisfaction, and God help him, he'd never seen anything more beautiful.

But Jesse wasn't a fool. This? This was a mistake—not just because his attraction to her was more than physical, but because he genuinely cared.

More than he should. More than he ever intended.

Keely stretched, humming softly, then turned on her side, propping her head on her hand. "You're thinking too hard."

Jesse let out a breath. "And you're not thinking at all."

She grinned, completely unbothered. "I'm thinking just fine. Mostly about how good that was. I suppose we should have had the safe sex talk before we fucked, but the fact is we both play at the Iron Spur, which means we're both clean and I've been on birth control for years."

Damn it. That hadn't even occurred to him, but she had a point about them both being free of disease, and god help him, he wasn't sure he really cared if she was on birth control. Jesse rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the feeling creeping up his spine. "This changes nothing."

Keely arched an eyebrow. "Funny, it sure felt like it changed something."

He shot her a look, but she just grinned. Her body was still languid and relaxed, like she hadn't just turned his world upside down.

"You keep pushing me, Keely." His voice came out rough, the warning clear.

She shrugged. "And you keep letting me."

Jesse exhaled through his nose, standing up, reaching for and pulling on his jeans. "This was a mistake."

Keely sat up, pulling the sheet around her. "Now, that's just rude."

He turned to face her, jaw tight. "You're in danger. That hasn't changed. Nico isn't going to stop just because we spent the last several hours tearing up the sheets."

Something flickered across her face—something vulnerable, brief, but unmistakable.

"You think I don't know that?" she asked quietly.

Jesse hesitated, because hell if he knew how to answer that.

She ran a hand through her hair, exhaling. "Look, Jesse, I know what this is. You don't have to get all broody about it. I don't plan to."

Jesse studied her, the way she masked her emotions behind that affable grin, the way she pretended like this hadn't just changed everything—for him, for her, for both of them. He stepped closer, brushing his knuckles down her jaw, watching as her breath hitched, as she leaned into the touch she claimed meant nothing. He didn't look back as he left the room.

Because he knew if he did, he wouldn't be able to walk away. And walking away was the only thing keeping him sane.

KEELY

Keely had started to believe, for a few fleeting moments, that they might have bought themselves some breathing room. It had been almost a week since Jesse had dragged her out to the middle of nowhere, and despite her frustration at being caged, she couldn't deny that the isolation brought a strange kind of calm.

No phone calls. No emails. No looking over her shoulder, reminding her she had a price on her head. It was the first time she'd felt remotely safe since she'd found those diamonds.

Then something ripped it away in the space of a few moments. It started with the sight of dust coming up the long drive, heading straight for them. Keely had been in the kitchen, stirring sugar into her coffee, looking out the window when she saw them—not Jesse's truck. Not someone who belonged here. No one belonged here but her and Jesse.

She moved from the kitchen window to the front, setting the mug down, careful to stay out of sight. Dust kicked up as three SUVs rolled down the driveway—too fast, too controlled. The lead vehicle slowed first, stopping about fifty yards from the house. Then the doors opened.

Her pulse spiked. They'd been found. Jesse was outside, near the barn, running through drills on a makeshift target range, armed only with a paintball gun.

Keely didn't think—she moved. She grabbed Jesse's Glock from the kitchen counter, the one he never left far from reach, and sprinted for the door. She didn't get two

steps before gunfire erupted. The first bullet shattered the kitchen window, glass spraying the floor behind her. Keely ducked low, clutching the gun as she forced herself to breathe, to think.

Jesse. She needed to get to Jesse.

Her heart pounded as she slid toward the back of the house, dropping to her knees and crawling. She couldn't afford to be seen. More gunfire ripped through the air, the deep, brutal sound of automatic weapons cutting through the quiet Texas morning.

Then—Jesse's voice.

“Keely! Stay down!”

She didn't listen. Not when he was out there alone. She reached the back door and eased it open just enough to see Jesse crouched behind the small outbuilding where he kept the ATV and other essential equipment. He'd exchanged his paintball gun for a rifle and his expression was deadly.

He looked up, catching sight of her, his entire body tightening. “Get back inside!”

Keely ignored him, her grip on the pistol firm. “Not a chance.”

“Goddamn it...”

Another round of bullets cut off his curse. Jesse swung out from behind the small building, firing three precise shots, dropping two of the men before they could make it to the house.

Keely moved, sprinting low across the back porch, heading straight for Jesse. She slid in behind him, breathing hard, her fingers wrapped too tightly around the pistol.

Jesse grabbed her by the waist, yanking her flush against him. “I told you to stay inside.”

Keely’s breath caught, but she fought past the heat curling low in her belly. Not the time.

“You seem to have forgotten. I don’t take orders well,” she said, forcing a calm she didn’t feel.

Jesse’s jaw clenched, but before he could say something infuriating, another round of gunfire split the silence, hitting the building and the dirt beside it.

He pushed her down behind him, moving to a new vantage point. “You see how many?”

Keely peeked over his shoulder, her hands shockingly steady. “Five. Maybe six. Moving toward the porch.”

Jesse muttered something low and deadly, then adjusted his grip on his rifle. “Keep your head down. Only shoot if you have to.”

Keely bristled. “I’m not a damn damsel in distress, Jesse.”

His eyes burned as they flicked to hers. “Then don’t get yourself killed.”

Keely swallowed hard. They fought side by side, moving in perfect, unspoken sync, like they’d done this a hundred times before. Maybe all that time they’d spent having sex in the past few days had been good for more than just making her feel good.

Jesse took out another man as he tried to flank the barn, his rifle kicking back against his shoulder.

Keely spotted movement from the corner of her eye—another figure darting toward them, gun raised. She didn't hesitate. She fired, the pistol jerking in her grip as the man collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

Jesse glanced at her, his gaze flicking to the body, then back to her face. Approval. Pride. Something else. But before he could say anything, the last two shooters appeared.

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Keely saw the flash of metal as Jesse took out one assassin—one left. The glint from the sun off another gun barrel being raised caught her attention. Her breath froze in her lungs. Jesse moved—he must have seen it too. One second, he was standing beside her, the next he was shoving her out of the way, turning his body toward the bullet meant for her.

A sickening, brutal sound filled the air. Jesse stumbled back, gripping his side, blood seeping through his shirt. Keely's vision narrowed to red. She raised her gun and fired. The last shooter dropped, dead before he hit the ground.

Keely was on her knees, hands shaking as she reached for Jesse. “No, no, no—stay with me,” she whispered, pressing her hands against his side, trying to stop the bleeding.

Jesse let out a ragged breath, his face pale, but his eyes were still sharp, still focused. “I’m fine,” he muttered, but his body disagreed.

Keely's heart slammed against her ribs. “You’re not fine, Jesse. We need to get you inside.”

He let out a rough breath, then grabbed the back of her neck, pulling her closer. Keely froze. His fingers were wet with blood, but his grip was steady, his gaze burning into hers.

“Keely,” he rasped, voice frayed. “You listen to me. Right now. No more games.”

Keely's throat closed, her fingers pressing harder against his wound. “I’m not leaving

you,” she whispered.

Jesse eyes softened, his grip softening just a fraction. “I know.”

His eyes flickered, his body swaying slightly, and Keely’s heart lurched. Panic rushed through her, but she shoved it down. She needed to get him inside. Now.

“Come on,” she breathed, looping an arm around him, forcing his much larger body to move.

Jesse gritted his teeth but didn’t fight her. Together, they stumbled toward the house, blood dripping into the dirt, the scent of gunpowder thick in the morning air. Keely’s hands shook, but she refused to stop. Because Jesse had just taken a bullet for her, and she wasn’t about to let him die for it.

Keely had never known fear like this.

Her heart slammed against her ribs, her breath coming too fast as she dragged Jesse inside, his body solid and unmoving against her. Blood soaked through his shirt, warm and sticky against her fingers, but he kept himself upright, jaw locked, determined to make it to the couch without collapsing.

“You’re an idiot,” she bit out, maneuvering him onto the cushions, grabbing one of the throw pillows and shoving it behind his back. “A goddamn reckless idiot.”

Jesse let out a rough chuckle, wincing as he tried to shift. “If this is what getting shot gets me, remind me not to do it again.”

Keely’s vision blurred for a second, a rush of panic and fury colliding in her chest. She had almost lost him because he’d stepped in front of a bullet meant for her, like it was nothing.

She ripped his shirt up, her hands shaking as she assessed the wound—a deep graze along his side, bleeding too much, but not deep enough to kill him. Jesse watched her, his breathing uneven, but his eyes sharp.

“You going to patch me up, or just keep ogling me?”

Keely’s hands clenched, her nails biting into her palms. He was grinning at her, bleeding out on his couch, and acting like this was just any other day of the week. She had never wanted to shake someone more in her life... or kiss them.

She shoved the thought down and grabbed the first-aid kit from the kitchen, slamming it down on the table beside him. “Shut up and hold still.”

Jesse obeyed, letting her clean the wound, his muscles flexing beneath her touch as she pressed gauze against the tornflesh. Her pulse wasn’t steady anymore. Her hands weren’t, either. The moment she had seen him fall, everything had changed.

“You can’t do that again,” she whispered, not looking at him.

Jesse let out a slow breath. “Keely...”

“I mean it,” she snapped, finally looking up, her throat tight, her chest burning. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to throw yourself in front of me like your life doesn’t matter.”

Jesse’s gaze darkened, his jaw ticking. “It mattered enough to keep you breathing.”

Something inside her snapped. Without thinking, without caring, she grabbed his face and kissed him. It wasn’t soft. It wasn’t gentle. It was unfiltered, desperate, and all-consuming. Jesse groaned against her mouth, his hands gripping her waist, pulling her onto his lap before she could stop him. Keely’s fingers tangled in his hair, her

body pressed flush against his, her need for him a wildfire she couldn't contain anymore.

He was alive, and she needed to feel every inch of him, needed to remind herself that he was still here, still breathing, still Jesse.

Jesse pulled back, his forehead resting against hers, his breath ragged. "Keely..."

"Don't you dare tell me this was a mistake," she whispered, voice shaking.

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His grip tightened, his fingers digging into her hips, holding her there like he wasn't ready to let go. Then, quietly, like it was the hardest damn thing he'd ever admitted, he rasped, "I'm falling for you."

Keely went still. Her heart stopped, then restarted, slamming against her ribs. Jesse's gaze was burning, his walls shattered, and for the first time since she had met him, she saw everything he had been holding back.

She swallowed hard. "Say it again."

Jesse pressed his lips softly against hers, just once, before pulling back. Reality crashed back in. The dead men outside. The bullet wound he'd taken for her. They knew Nico Alvarez wasn't finished with them yet. The fact that Jesse Bryant was falling for her.

"I'm falling for you," he repeated. "But we have bigger problems to deal with first."

"So, you're saying falling for me is a problem?"

He chuckled before cupping the back of her head, pulling her close, and kissing her hard. When he came up for air, he said, "Call the office. Tell them we're coming in..."

"We're going to the hospital..."

"No. They can patch me up there. Tell them we're coming in, ping them from my phone so they know where the house is, and tell them we're going to need someone

to clean up the bodies.”

“I think we should call 9-1-1 and have them send an ambulance and the cops.”

“Not your call. If you can’t do what you’re told, give me the damn phone and I’ll do it myself.”

Keely inhaled deeply, forcing herself to step back. Jesse was right, and he knew far better than she did how to handle this. She picked up the phone and did as he asked, surprised at how calm her voice sounded. After hanging up, she cleaned and bandaged the wound as best she could.

She helped Jesse out to his truck. Surprisingly, the barrage of bullets hadn’t hit it. He didn’t even protest when she helped him into the passenger side and got behind the wheel. She floored the truck, steering around the bodies and getting them the hell out of there.

This wasn’t over—not any of it.

10

JESSE

Jesse had spent most of his life preparing for war. He’d suffered dozens of wounds, leaving their scars on his body, yet nothing prepared him for the gut-wrenching fear of losing Keely. Keely handled herself better than most trained soldiers and ensured his wound received treatment.

He’d trained his body, his mind, his instincts, all with one purpose—to protect, to survive, to win. But as he sat in the dimly lit conference room of the Silver Spur Security offices, his team surrounding him, maps and weapons spread out across the

wooden table, he realized this fight was different.

Because this time, it wasn't just an op. This time, it was Keely.

They'd locked off their floor of the building so the only way up was via a private elevator they'd had installed. Someone could try to climb up, rappel down or come at them with a helicopter, but when they'd moved in, Gavin and Reed had paid to replace all the windows on their floor with bulletproof glass.

Reed stood at the head of the table, arms crossed, his face carved from stone. His eyes burned with something Jesse knew too well—rage, frustration, and fear.

“We hit them before they hit us,” Reed said, his voice sharp. “I’m done waiting for Alvarez to make his move.”

Gavin nodded, his expression just as serious. “We tracked down his last known location—he’s holed up in a compound outside of town. Security’s tight, but nothing we can’t handle.”

Jesse rubbed his bearded stubble on his jaw. “And the diamonds?”

Hawke pulled up a file on his tablet. “We’ve picked up some chatter. He knows we still have them. We think he was planning a trade before Keely ended up with the wrong suitcase.”

Jesse’s jaw clenched. “So this was never about her. It was about losing his payday.”

Dawson tapped a knife against the table. “Doesn’t matter. We all know guys like Alvarez don’t just walk away.”

Reed’s gaze flicked toward Jesse, something unreadable in his eyes. “This isn’t just

another job. If we go in, we go in knowing there's no backing out."

Jesse met his stare. "I never back out."

The words settled between them. The plan was simple—hit Alvarez hard, take out his men, and end this before it got any worse. But simple didn't mean safe, and there was a myriad of things that could go wrong.

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Keely's voice broke through his thoughts, soft but strong. "Then let's finish this."

Jesse turned toward her, taking in the fire in her eyes and the cold steel in her voice. If he'd ever doubted it, he knew for certain that she was her brother's sister. He'd heard the same tone of voice from her brother more than once over the years.

He'd always known she was fearless, and God help him, he had never wanted her more.

They'd moved from the office to the club. The Iron Spur was in a fortified building at the edge of town and it, too, boasted bulletproof glass as well as other security measures. It wasn't open for business for the next few days, and they all figured they'd be safer and more comfortable holed up there than in the office. In addition, there was less chance of collateral damage.

Jesse stood in the doorway of one of the privacy rooms, watching Keely as she sat on the edge of the bed, looking out the window like she could see what was coming. He knew that feeling. The quiet before the storm—the way the air thickened before a fight, before someone spilled blood, before the battle truly began.

Keely didn't turn when she spoke. "Do you think we're going to make it out of this alive?"

Jesse stepped inside, his boots solid against the wooden floor. "No doubt. We don't lose."

She let out a soft breath, not quite a laugh, not quite disbelief. "That so?"

Jesse moved behind her, sliding his hands over her shoulders, feeling the tension coiled tight in her muscles.

“We end this,” he murmured against her ear. “And then we figure out what comes next.”

She turned then, looking up at him, her gaze searching. Jesse knew what she saw—a man who was barely holding it together, a man who wanted her so damn badly it was tearing him apart.

Her fingers curled into his shirt. “What if this is our last night?”

Something inside him snapped. Jesse grabbed her by the waist, lifting her off the bed and into his arms, his mouthcrashing against hers in a kiss that wasn’t just desperate—it was claiming. He moved back to the door and kicked it closed behind him, grateful that Keely reached down to engage the lock.

Keely moaned into his mouth, her body molding perfectly against him, her fingers tangling in his hair as he carried her back to the bed. He laid her down slowly, his weight pressing into her, his hands trailing fire over her skin.

She arched into him, her breath ragged, pleading.

“Jesse...”

“Shh,” he murmured, his lips trailing down her neck. “I’ve got you.”

Her breath caught, her body shivering beneath him. He needed this. He needed to feel her surrender, needed to show her exactly what she meant to him. His fingers slid down her sides, slow, measured, deliberate.

Keely gasped, her back arching as he took his time, his hands mapping every inch of her, his mouth leaving a trail of fire down her body. She was his.

And tonight, he was going to make sure she knew it.

With a low growl, Jesse claimed her mouth in a kiss that was both punishing and passionate. His tongue demanded entry, exploring every inch of her mouth as if it were a territory to conquer. Keely moaned, her hands tangling in his hair, encouraging his aggressive display of desire.

Jesse's hands roamed over her body, her clothing doing little to hide the evidence of her arousal. He cupped her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her hardened nipples, eliciting a gasp from her lips. Keely arched her back, offering herself to him, her lithe body trembling with need.

With a swift motion, Jesse tore at her clothing, stripping her naked and baring her breasts to his hungry gaze. He bent his head, taking a taut peak into his mouth, suckling and biting gently until Keely was writhing beneath him. His hands traveled lower, skimming the moist heat between her thighs, making her hips buck against his touch.

"Please, Jesse," she whispered, her voice hoarse with desire. "I need you inside me."

He growled in response, his fingers delving into her wetness, stroking her sensitive flesh. Keely cried out, her body trembling on the edge of release. Jesse positioned himself at her entrance, his thick length pressing against her. With one powerful thrust, he filled her, claiming her body as his own.

Keely cried out, her nails digging into Jesse's shoulders as he began to move, his strokes deep and relentless. The bed creaked with each thrust, adding a primal rhythm to their passionate dance. Jesse's control slipped as he pounded into her, his primal

nature taking over.

"You're mine, Keely Malone," he groaned between thrusts. "Mine to protect, mine to use and mine to pleasure."

Keely's eyes blazed with a mixture of passion and defiance. "Yes, Jesse, yes!"

Their bodies moved as one, driven by primal instincts and a growing emotional connection. Jesse's thrusts became more urgent, his own release building. Keely's inner walls clenched around him, milking his cock as she soared towards her own climax.

With a final, powerful lunge, Jesse buried himself deep within her, his groan echoing through the room as he spilled his seed, marking her as his own. Keely's body convulsed around him, her orgasm ripping through her like a lightning strike.

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As their hearts pounded and their breathing slowed, they remained entangled, sweat-soaked and sated. Jesse, still inside her, gently brushed the hair from her face, his expression softening.

“I love you,” he said, quietly.

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I do if it’s true, and you’d best tell me the same.”

She laughed softly. “And if I don’t?”

He chuckled. “I’ll spank that pretty ass of yours until you can’t sit down until sometime next week.”

“Well, in that case, I love you too, cowboy.”

He rolled from her, pulling her close. Keely lay against his chest, her fingers tracing lazy circles over his skin.

Jesse’s heart was still pounding, but for the first time in a long damn while, he felt... at peace.

She sighed, her breath warm against his skin. “I think I might be in trouble.”

Jesse tilted his head, looking down at her. “Why’s that?”

Her fingers stilled, her voice quieter now. “Because I don’t think I’m ready to lose you.”

Jesse felt the words like a punch to the gut. He tightened his grip on her, pressing a kiss to her hair, breathing her in.

“You’re not going to lose me,” he murmured.

Keely let her breath out slowly. “Promise?”

Jesse held her closer, his jaw tight. They had a war waiting for them tomorrow.

But tonight? Tonight, she was his.

And that was the only thing that mattered.

Jesse had never known a woman who infuriated and wrecked him in equal measure.

But Keely Malone had never been like anyone else. She was fire wrapped in silk, soft in all the places that made a man weak but strong enough to drive him to his knees.

And right now? She was his. When this was over, he’d have Reed to deal with, but Jesse didn’t care. He would never let her go.

Jesse had meant to keep his hands off her. He had meant to keep things controlled, professional. But that was before she had wrapped herself around him, kissed him like she needed him to breathe, and whispered his name like it was the only damn thing keeping her tethered to this world. Now, there was no turning back.

She lay beside him, her body flushed, her breathing deep and even. His fingers slid along her bare thigh, tracing slow, unhurried lines, watching as she shivered beneath

him.

“You trust me?” His voice was rough, edged with something dangerous, something untamed.

Keely’s eyes fluttered open, her lips still kiss-swollen, her gaze heavy-lidded but clear.

“Yes.”

The word hit him like a bullet. He knew she had never trusted anyone—not like this, not enough to relinquish control, to allow herself to be taken, owned, claimed. He vowed to himself to never take that for granted. The minute this thing was over, he’d have a collar around her neck and a ring around her finger. Reed be damned.

Jesse wrapped a hand around her wrist, guiding it above her head, pinning it to the mattress. “No second-guessing. No trying to take control.”

Keely swallowed hard, nodding. His grip tightened, just enough to hold her still. “Say it.”

Her breath hitched, but she obeyed. “No second-guessing. No trying to take control.”

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Jesse brushed his lips along the shell of her ear, his voice a dark promise. “Good girl.”

Her whole body shuddered beneath him. And then Jesse did what he had been dying to do since the moment she first challenged him. He took his time wrecking her for a second time that night.

Keely lay boneless beside him, her head tucked against his shoulder, her fingers tracing absent-minded patterns over his chest.

For once, she wasn’t fighting him. For once, she was still. This was what he could bring to her. Well, this and discipline... God knew she needed both. Jesse pressed a kiss to her forehead, breathing her in, locking the moment into memory.

Because at dawn, everything would change.

Her voice was soft when she spoke. “What happens when this is over?”

Jesse stiffened, his fingers halting their movements. She lifted her head, looking up at him, searching his face for answers he wasn’t sure he could give her. How could she ask that?

“I mean it, Jesse,” she whispered. “What happens to us?”

Jesse let out a slow breath, tilting her chin up so she couldn’t look away.

“I’m not letting you go.”

Her breath hitched, eyes dark and dilated, lips parting just enough to make his chest tighten.

“Don’t say that if you don’t mean it,” she whispered.

Jesse brushed his thumb over her lower lip, his voice a vow, absolute and unshakable. “The instant this is over, I’m going to borrow one of the training collars and put it around your neck. Then I’m going to fuck you stupid, and while you’re recovering from that, I’m going to go find you the perfect permanent collar and engagement ring.”

“Is that your idea of a romantic proposal?” she teased.

“Nope. You asked me what was going to happen after this was over and I’m telling you.”

“What if Reed objects?”

“We’ll fight. I’ll win.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because your brother is too much of a gentleman and I have no problem fighting dirty, if the cause is just. And you, Keely Malone, are the most just thing I’ve ever known.”

She swallowed hard, like she wanted to argue but couldn’t bring herself to. So instead, she just pressed her forehead against his chest, breathing him in.

The following morning, Jesse was almost finished dressing when she opened her eyes. He watched as fear crept into them when she saw the tactical gear.

He came and sat on the bed next to her as he checked his Glock and the two extra clips. “It’ll be all right, Keely. We don’t lose; besides your brother wants to kill me himself.”

“I take it he’s not happy about us?”

“It’s nothing personal. As Gavin pointed out, he’s made it a rule to never play on the nights you’re at the club. I think he’d like to think you’re still a virgin. But I’ll bring him around... no matter how many fights it takes.”

“Jesse, I’m afraid.”

He knew what that admission had cost her. Leaning over, he fisted her hair, tilting it back and kissing her deeply. “I told you, this unit doesn’t lose. Ever.”

Keely let out a soft breath, then nodded once.

Jesse released her, then turned toward the door where Reed, Gavin, Hawke, and Dawson were now waiting.

“You and I are going to have a long talk, little sister,” said Reed.

“Anything you want to discuss, you can discuss with me,” said Jesse.

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Reed looked at her, his brow furrowing. Keely smiled mischievously, “What he said.”

They were ready. This ended today. Jesse cast one last glance at Keely. Then he joined the others to get ready for the fight.

11

KEELY

Keely sat at the long oak conference table in the Iron Spur’s private meeting room, arms crossed, eyes locked on the screens displaying real-time satellite feeds of Nico Alvarez’s compound. The heavy air in the room crackled with the unspoken understanding that tomorrow, one of two things would happen: they would end this, or they would die.

Jesse stood at the head of the table, arms braced against the wood, his jaw set in that immovable way that made it clear he was barely holding his temper in check. His eyes darted between the monitors and the team, but every time they landed on her, she felt the heat of his disapproval like a brand against her skin.

“We go in before dawn,” Reed said, dragging a hand over his face. “Alvarez has twenty men, maybe more, scattered across the compound. Perimeter guards, rovers, and a secondary team on standby in the city. We need to get them in one place.”

Dawson leaned back in his chair, twirling his combat knife between his fingers. “If we can get Alvarez to show himself, we can cut the head off the snake and take the entire operation down in one move.”

“Easier said than done,” Gavin muttered, scrolling through the tablet in front of him. “He’s paranoid as hell. The only way he’s coming out of that fortress is if we give him something he wants bad enough.”

Keely straightened. She knew exactly what that something was. “Me.”

Jesse’s head snapped up so fast she half expected him to break his own damn neck. “No.”

She ignored him, looking at the rest of the team. “I’m the one he’s after. He wants his diamonds, but more than that, he wants to make an example out of me. He can’t let me walk away from this. If I offer to meet him, tell him I’m willing to trade, he’ll take the bait. He’ll think he can get his diamonds and kill me—two for one. He won’t be able to resist.”

Jesse’s palm slammed against the table, rattling the glasses of whiskey they hadn’t even touched. “I said no.”

She met his glare with one of her own. “I don’t remember asking for your permission.”

The room went silent. No one spoke, no one moved. Jesse’s entire body coiled tight, his breathing deep and controlled, but she knew that look. She knew him all too well and knew he was close to breaking.

“Keely...” Reed started, but Jesse cut him off.

“Out. All of you.” His voice was a low growl, pure authority, pure command.

Hawke stood first, exhaling sharply. “You two fight it out. We’ll be at the bar.”

One by one, they filed out, leaving her alone with the one man who had the power to unravel her. Jesse waited until the door clicked shut before rounding the table, his steps measured, his presence looming.

“You’re not doing this,” he said, voice lethal.

She lifted her chin. “I am if it’s our best chance to catch this bastard.”

His hand shot out, fingers curling around the back of her neck as he hauled her up, pressing his body flush against hers. “This isn’t a goddamn negotiation, Keely.”

Her pulse pounded, heat curling low in her belly, but she refused to back down. “It never is with you, is it?”

His grip tightened, just enough to remind her who she was dealing with. “Not when it comes to keeping you alive.”

She reached up, fingers curling around his forearm, feeling the raw strength beneath his skin. “You can’t keep me locked away, Jesse.”

He leaned in, his breath hot against her ear. “Watch me.”

She shuddered, but not from fear. The way he controlled a room, an op, her—it shouldn’t thrill her the way it did, but damn if it didn’t make her want to push him harder. Test the limits of his restraint.

“I can do this,” she said softly, pressing against him, using every weapon in her arsenal. “We know what he wants, how he thinks. If we can get him out in the open, you’ll have a clean shot.”

Jesse’s fingers flexed against her nape before releasing her. He stepped back,

dragging a hand through his hair, his control fraying at the edges.

“If this goes south...”

“You’ll be there.”

It wasn’t a question. For all his growling and bossing her around, there was no denying the truth in his voice. Jesse Bryant didn’t make empty promises.

She took a breath, then turned back to the table. “Then let’s figure out how to do this without me ending up in a body bag.”

Jesse muttered a curse, but he moved to stand beside her, arms crossed as he stared down at the blueprints of Alvarez’s compound. “Fine. But if you deviate from the plan even once, you won’t like how I handle it.”

She bit back a grin. “I don’t know, cowboy. I think I like how you handle me just fine.”

Jesse muttered something under his breath, but the heat in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. As much as he didn’t like it, he agreed with her and wouldn’t stand in the way of what he knew would be the best plan.

The air crackled with unspoken energy as Keely paced the dimly lit back room of the Silver Spur offices, running through the plan in her head for the hundredth time. The team had gone over every possible scenario, every potential outcome, but none of it made this any easier.

She was walking into the lion’s den, and she knew Jesse hated it.

“I still don’t like this,” Jesse muttered, arms crossed over his broad chest as he leaned

against the edge of the table. The room's overhead lighting cast sharp shadows across his face, deepening the scowl he hadn't dropped since they'd finalized the details of the meeting with Nico.

Keely stopped pacing and met his gaze head-on. "I know."

"That's it?" He straightened, his muscles coiled tight as he took a step toward her. "You know? You think that makes me feel any better?"

"No," she admitted, taking a deep breath. "But it's the only answer I have. If there was a better way, you or Reed would have come up with it."

Her big brother was no more of a fan than Jesse was. The silence stretched between them—dangerous and unyielding. On paper, the plan was simple. She would present herself to Nico as a desperate woman looking to save herself by returning the diamonds in exchange for Nico calling off his hunt. The goal was to bait him into lowering his guard just long enough for Jesse and the rest of the Silver Spur team to take him down.

Jesse raked a hand through his hair, his frustration rolling off him in waves. "I could go in your place."

Keely shook her head. "No. He knows I'm a far easier target. He agreed to meet me, not you."

"That's what worries me," Jesse ground out. "Nico doesn't leave loose ends, Keely."

She squared her shoulders. "Neither do we."

Jesse let out a rough breath and turned away, gripping the back of the chair hard enough that his knuckles turned white. His control was fraying, and she knew why.

This wasn't just another op for him. This was her, and Jesse didn't enjoy taking risks with the things he cared about.

Dawson stepped into the room, checking his watch. "It's time."

Keely nodded, ignoring the way her pulse spiked. She turned toward Jesse, but before she could speak, he was on her, backing her up against the wall in one swift move.

His fingers gripped her chin, tilting her face up to his. His eyes burned with something fierce, something furious. "You come back to me," he demanded, his voice low and lethal. "No heroics. No bullshit. You do your part, and you get your ass out of there."

Keely swallowed hard. "Jesse..."

He cut her off with his mouth, his lips crashing against hers in a kiss that stole the breath from her lungs. It wasn't soft. It wasn't gentle. It was possession, command, a promise and a warning all at once.

Keely moaned into him, fisting the front of his shirt, trying to pull him closer even as she knew she had to let go. Jesse's grip on her tightened before he finally tore his mouth from hers, his forehead pressed against hers as he exhaled a sigh.

"You come back to me," he repeated, his voice gravelly with emotion.

Keely nodded, unable to find the words. Jesse closed his eyes for a second.

The abandoned warehouse loomed in front of Keely like something out of a nightmare. Rusted steel beams jutted up into the night sky, the scent of damp concrete and decay thick in the air. Its seclusion—miles from the nearest town—was both a blessing and a curse. No one would hear the gunfire when things inevitably went to

hell in a handbasket.

She adjusted the strap of the bag slung over her shoulder—the case filled with fake diamonds had been rigged to look like the real thing—and took a slow breath. Jesse and the team were already in position, hidden in the shadows, watching her every move.

“You got eyes on me?” she murmured under her breath, barely moving her lips.

Jesse’s voice crackled softly in her earpiece. “Every step you take.”

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His presence steadied her, even as she stepped into the warehouse's open space. A single overhead light flickered, casting eerie shadows across the cracked concrete floor.

Nico Alvarez stepped out from the darkness.

12

JESSE

Jesse adjusted the scope of his rifle, sighting in on the man who was about to die.

The abandoned warehouse was a sprawling mess of rusted metal, shattered glass, and decay—perfect for an ambush, perfect for an execution. His grip tightened around the barrel as he watched Keely step inside, her stride confident, her chin high, every inch of her radiating calm control.

But Jesse knew better. He could see the pulse flickering at her throat, the slight hitch in her breath as she took in the dozen or so men spread throughout the space. She wasn't afraid, not exactly, but she knew she was walking into the jaws of a predator.

And Jesse was one breath away from ripping those jaws apart.

"Keely's inside." Dawson's voice crackled through Jesse's earpiece. "We've got eyes on the perimeter. No snipers. No lookouts. Alvarez came in cocky."

Reed's voice was sharper. "That doesn't mean shit. Stay sharp."

Jesse barely heard them. Jesse focused on Keely and how Nico Alvarez leaned against a rusted-out support beam, a cruel grin twisting his face. His attire—dark slacks, an open-collared shirt, and a gold chain gleaming against tanned skin—showed a man who thought he was untouchable.

Jesse's finger twitched over the trigger. He wanted to end this now. One shot, one kill. But Keely needed time to the evidence they needed. He forced himself to breathe.

The second she got what they needed, the second Nico lowered his guard, Jesse was going in. And if anyone so much as looked at her the wrong way, he'd make sure they regretted ever being born.

Even though they weren't in the room, they had good vantage points and their comms system ensured they could hear and record every word.

Keely stopped five feet from Nico, crossing her arms over her chest. "You don't waste time, I'll give you that."

Nico tilted his head. "Neither do you, *cariño*. That's why you're here, yes? You want this done. No more running."

Keely snorted, playing her part. "I don't have a choice. You made sure of that."

Nico chuckled, the sound slick and mocking. "You always have a choice, *chica*. You could've disappeared, changed your name, gone off the grid. But instead, you came to me." He stepped closer, eyes gleaming with dark amusement. "Why?"

Jesse listened through the earpiece, every muscle in his body locked down tight as he watched the scene unfold through his scope.

Before Keely could react, Nico moved, closing the space between them in a flash. Jesse's jaw clenched as Nico grabbed her wrist, yanking her in close until his face was inches from hers. Keely stayed still, her body language calm, controlled—but Jesse knew better. She was fighting every instinct to lash out, to shove Nico back, to put space between them. But she didn't. She couldn't. Not yet.

Nico's voice came through the comms, smooth and mocking. "You seem awfully confident for a woman with no leverage."

Jesse tracked the way Keely lifted her chin, keeping her voice steady. "I'm not stupid. I assume you've done your homework and know who my brother is. You and I both understand that if I end up dead or missing, my brother and his team won't stop hunting you. I don't think you want to spend your life looking over your shoulder any more than I do. It's in both of our best interests to conclude our business and walk away."

Jesse's trigger finger itched as Nico studied her, dragging out the silence. Nico laughed.

"Fair enough," Nico said, loosening his grip slightly. "Maybe I underestimated you."

Jesse growled low in his throat.

Gavin's voice came through the earpiece, tight and controlled. "She's handling it. Hold."

Jesse didn't want to hold. He wanted to put a bullet through Nico's skull and drag Keely out of there. But Keely had been determined, and in the end he had agreed this was their best plan.

And Jesse? Jesse had let her walk away from him, straight into danger. He swore to

himself that this would never happen again. Jesse watched through the scope as Nico ran a slow hand over his jaw, considering. Then he moved in close, too close, leaning down so his breath brushed against Keely's cheek.

"Let's say I believe you," he murmured, grasping her chin and tilting her head back to search her face. "What's to stop me from taking you for insurance?"

Jesse's world went red. His finger curled around the trigger.

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Dawson's voice snapped through the comms. "Not yet."

Jesse was going to kill every single one of these motherfuckers.

Keely didn't even blink. "As you said, I'm not stupid. I may have agreed to meet with you, but I have an insurance plan of my own. If I don't check in with Silver Spur in the next five minutes, they'll burn your whole goddamn operation to the ground."

Nico stilled. His eyes flickered with something new—calculation.

Jesse let out his breath. She had him.

Nico's grip loosened. He stepped back, nodding slowly. "Smart, chica. Very smart."

Keely forced a casual shrug. "So? Do we have a deal?"

Nico's lips curled. "You think you're good at making deals? He turned slightly, gesturing to one of his men. "Bring her a chair. Let's talk."

Jesse's breath evened out. Keely had done it. Nico had bought the lie, had let his guard drop just enough.

It was time.

That was the last mistake Nico would make for a long time—maybe ever. Jesse didn't hesitate. His voice was sharp and lethal as it cut through the comms. "Now."

Jesse was already off the rooftop, moving fast, his rifle secured to his back, his Glock in hand. The explosion hit seconds later—this one a distraction, a warning.

Keely wrenched free, dropping low, moving toward the cover he'd told her to get to.

Gunfire erupted, bullets slicing through the darkness as the Silver Spur team moved in. Jesse was already pushing forward, his rifle trained on the first of Nico's men, dropping the bastard before he reacted. The mission had officially begun, and Jesse had only one focus—reaching Keely.

Jesse barely registered the orchestrated chaos. All he saw was her.

Keely had put space between her and Nico. He'd turned toward the explosion, pulling his own gun, his men scrambling around him. Jesse shot the first of Nico's thugs.

Gavin and Hawke came in from the left, Dawson and Reed from the right, a wall of bullets tearing through Alvarez's men. Jesse moved through the wreckage with single-minded purpose, every muscle primed, every instinct screaming to get to Keely.

Nico lunged after Keely, grabbing her wrist.

Jesse moved like a predator through the carnage, his gun an extension of his arm, his focus locked on one thing—Keely.

Gunfire cracked through the warehouse, a brutal symphony of destruction. Bodies hit the floor, screams tore through the air, and the acrid scent of gunpowder burned his lungs. But none of it mattered. Not the chaos. Not the bodies. Not the blood.

Only her.

Keely was somewhere in the wreckage, and every second Jesse wasn't at her side was another second too long.

Hawke took out a man to Jesse's left, a single shot between the eyes, while Gavin and Dawson flanked the back, cutting down Alvarez's guards before they could regroup. Reed moved like a goddamn machine, knife flashing, taking out two men in a brutal, silent sweep.

But Jesse wasn't thinking about them. He was thinking about Keely, about the moment he'd seen Nico's knife glint under the overhead light as he yanked her against his chest.

Adrenaline surged through his veins, his vision narrowing on the far end of the warehouse. He saw her—fighting.

Keely twisted against Nico's grip, her body straining, her hands grabbing at his arm where he held the knife to her throat. Her eyes met Jesse's for a split second—fierce, defiant, but there was something else there, too.

Trust.

He had to get to her. Jesse moved fast, taking out two of Nico's men with deadly precision. One shot, two shots, both bodies hitting the ground before they had a chance to fire back. He was twenty feet away, his Glock raised, his finger steady on the trigger.

Then Nico snarled something in Spanish and dragged Keely back, pressing the blade tighter against her throat.

Jesse froze. "Let her go," Jesse ordered, his voice like gravel, rough and uncompromising.

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Nico let out a low, amused chuckle. “Or what? You’ll shoot? You wouldn’t risk putting a bullet through your pretty little plaything.” He pressed the knife harder, just enough to nick Keely’s skin. A thin line of red bloomed along the curve of her throat.

Jesse’s blood turned to ice.

Keely barely flinched, her voice calm despite the blade at her throat. “If you were going to kill me, you’d have done it already.”

Nico’s expression darkened. “You really should learn when to shut up, *cariño*.”

Keely’s fingers twitched, her body shifting just slightly in Nico’s grip. Jesse knew that movement. She was setting him up.

Damn, but he loved her.

His grip on the gun tightened, his stance widening, his entire body aligning for the shot. Nico saw it. His lips curled, his hand shifting the blade, preparing to end this with a single stroke.

Jesse didn’t let him. His bullet tore through Nico’s skull, right between his cold, dead eyes.

For a split second, the world stopped. Then Keely was shoving Nico’s body away, stepping over him like he was nothing more than another problem she’d solved.

Jesse reached her in two strides, grabbing her by the waist and yanking her flush

against him, his hands running over her arms, her back, her throat—checking, making sure.

“Are you hurt?” His voice was hoarse.

Keely’s fingers fisted in his shirt. “No.”

Jesse barely breathed before he crushed his mouth against hers, his hand gripping her jaw, owning the kiss, staking his claim. He tasted adrenaline, tasted victory, tasted her. Keely moaned into his mouth, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, her body melting against his like she’d never belonged anywhere else.

Dawson’s voice crackled through the earpiece. “Warehouse is clear. Alvarez is down. We’re moving out.”

Jesse pulled back, resting his forehead against hers. “It’s over.”

Keely let out a shaky laugh. “I’d say you just made damn sure of that.”

Jesse glanced down at Nico’s body, at the gaping hole in his head, and let out a slow breath. Keely was safe, and that was all that mattered.

As the team swept the warehouse, securing weapons, bodies, and any intel they could salvage, Jesse didn’t take his hands off Keely. She was still alive, still breathing, and he needed to feel that.

Reed walked up, his eyes scanning Keely before flicking to Jesse. “Nice shot.”

Jesse didn’t let go of her. “You doubted me?”

Reed huffed. “Never.”

Keely rolled her eyes. “What is it with you guys and the dick-measuring contests? Because I could really use a drink.”

Jesse let out a low growl. “You could really use some goddamn obedience training.”

Keely’s lips curled, her eyes flashing with heat. “That so?”

Jesse’s grip on her waist tightened, his breath ghosting over her ear as he leaned in. “Damn right.”

Keely’s pulse jumped. Jesse felt it, felt the way her body responded, how she softened just a fraction, how she wanted what he was promising.

Reed cleared his throat. “I don’t need to hear whatever’s about to come out of your mouth.”

Gavin walked past, clapping Jesse on the shoulder. “Come on, Reed. Let’s get out of here before someone else tries to kill us.”

Jesse brushed his lips against Keely’s one last time before pulling back. “You ride with me.”

Keely stared at him. “I always ride with you.”

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Jesse's eyes darkened. "That's right, darlin'. And when we get back? You and I are going to have a very long, very thorough conversation about following orders."

Keely swallowed hard, her pupils dilating as her breath hitched. He could tell she liked the idea.

Jesse grinned. This was far from over. He was about to make damn sure she knew exactly who she belonged to.

13

KEELY

Suddenly, Jesse went down, and Keely's world stopped. One second, he was standing, solid, unshakable, the man who had just ended Nico Alvarez with a single, ruthless shot. The next, his body jerked as a gunshot rang out from somewhere behind them, and a dark bloom of red spread across his side.

"No!" The word tore from her throat as Jesse staggered, his knees buckling.

Keely lunged, catching him before he hit the filthy warehouse floor. His body was too heavy, too limp, but she would not let him fall. She hit her knees, her arms wrapping around his torso, feeling the hot slickness of his blood between her fingers.

"Jesse," she gasped, her hands pressing against the wound. Crimson soaked his shirt, and he breathed raggedly. "Stay with me, cowboy. You hear me?"

His eyes found hers, burning with a mix of pain and something else. Something softer. He opened his mouth to speak, but the surrounding chaos prevented him from being heard.

Gunfire erupted again—one last, desperate attempt from the remaining men in Alvarez’s crew.

“Cover us!” Reed’s voice was a roar, cutting through the noise. “Take them down!”

Dawson and Hawke moved in, firing shots as they systematically eliminated the rest of Nico’s crew. Gavin kicked a rifle out of a dying man’s grasp, putting a bullet between his eyes for good measure.

Keely barely registered any of it. Her hands were soaked, and her heart was pounding like a metronome on crack.

“Jesse,” she whispered again, panic clawing at her throat. “You stay with me.”

His fingers twitched where they rested over hers, his jaw clenching like he was trying to reassure her. He lifted one bloodied hand, cupping the side of her face. “You’re okay,” he rasped.

Keely let out a choked, humorless laugh. “I’m okay? You just got shot, Jesse! You’re not okay!”

His lips barely curved, something infuriatingly Jesse in the expression, even as blood seeped from between her fingers.

“We need to move, now!” Reed’s voice cracked through her panic, his boots hitting the floor beside them.

Keely turned on him, fury and desperation mixing in a volatile storm. “Then fucking move him!”

Reed didn’t argue. Hawke knelt on Jesse’s other side, yanking off his belt and wrapping it around Jesse’s torso, just above the wound. Jesse hissed, his whole body tensing, but he didn’t fight it.

“You keep that pressure there, Keely,” Hawke ordered. “Do not let go.”

Like she would. Like she could.

Her hands were shaking, her breath coming in sharp, uneven bursts. Jesse’s skin was paler than she’d ever seen it, a fine sheen of sweat forming on his forehead.

No. No, no, no.

“You hang on, Jesse,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “You stay with me. You don’t get to do this. You promised.”

His gaze, still steady despite everything, locked onto hers. “Not to worry, darlin’, I keep my promises.”

Hawke and Dawson lifted Jesse between them, moving fast toward the warehouse doors. Jesse let out a low groan, his jaw tightening as his boots dragged against the floor.

Keely was beside them the whole time, refusing to let go of him.

“We’re five minutes out from exfil,” Gavin reported, one hand pressing to his earpiece as he moved in step with them. “SUVs are rolling in now.”

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Keely wasn't listening. Jesse's body wasn't moving right. His muscles were stiff, his breath coming in short, ragged bursts. Blood was still seeping between her fingers.

That bastard had shot him.

If Jesse died, no. She would not think like that.

"We're almost there," she breathed against his ear. "You're going to be fine, Jesse."

Jesse made a rough sound, something like a chuckle, but she could feel the strain in it. "Didn't know you were an optimist."

"Not usually," she admitted, gripping his hand. "But I'll be damned if I let you bleed out in this shithole."

The SUV screeched to a stop outside the warehouse. The doors flew open. Dawson and Hawke hauled Jesse inside, laying him out across the backseat. Keely climbed in from the other side, placing his head in her lap. She was not about to let him out of her sight.

Reed was in the driver's seat before the doors even closed.

"We've got a hospital two miles out," he said, throwing the SUV into gear. "I'll get us there. Hold him together."

Keely was trying. Her hands pressed firmly against his side, her forehead nearly touching his as she whispered to him, every second counting.

“Jesse, I swear to God, if you die, I will...”

“Kill me?” His lips twitched again, his voice rough, barely there.

She almost laughed. Almost.

Instead, she leaned in closer, her mouth brushing his temple as she whispered, “No. I’ll never forgive you.”

Jesse’s fingers twitched against hers, squeezing, just barely. He was still there. But for how much longer?

The hospital was coming into view, the red glow of the emergency sign cutting through the darkness.

Reed slammed his palm against the horn, announcing their arrival as he pulled up hard against the curb. The moment the SUV rocked to a stop, the ER doors burst open, doctors and nurses spilling out.

“Gunshot wound—male, mid-thirties, massive blood loss!”

The second the medical team swarmed, someone dragged Keely back.

“No...”

“You have to let them work!” Reed’s arms locked around her, holding her tight, stopping her from climbing onto the gurney.

Her entire body screamed at the separation. Jesse’s eyes flickered open one last time, searching for her. She caught his hand before they pulled him through the doors.

“I’ll be right here,” she whispered, her voice fierce, desperate. “I’m not leaving you.”

Jesse’s fingers squeezed around hers. Then he was gone, vanishing through the hospital doors, doctors and nurses surrounding him, voices sharp, movements urgent.

And Keely? She stood there, her hands covered in his blood, her heart threatening to crack in her chest. Reed’s grip on her arm was firm, steady.

“He’s one of the toughest sonofabitches I’ve ever known, Keely.”

She inhaled hard, swallowing against the rawness in her throat. “He’d better be,” she whispered.

Because she hadn’t just fallen in love with the sonofabitch, she’d let herself need him. And if she lost him now, she didn’t know if she’d ever recover.

Keely paced the length of the waiting room, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

Hours had passed. Maybe minutes. Maybe a lifetime.

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Reed sat nearby, arms crossed, his eyes dark, unreadable. Gavin stood against the wall, checking his watch every few minutes like time meant something. Hawke had disappeared to find coffee, and Dawson... Dawson had tried to get her to sit, to calm down, but fuck that.

She had too much energy, too much panic clawing at her insides, and no outlet for any of it. She had never been this afraid in her life. Not when she'd seen the diamonds. Not when Nico had dragged her away with a knife pressed to her throat.

But this? Watching Jesse, a man so strong, so unbreakable, bleed out in her arms? That was the nightmare she feared she couldn't wake up from.

The doors swung open, and Keely spun so fast she nearly tripped over herself. A doctor—mid-forties, kind eyes but a face lined with exhaustion—stepped forward, pulling off bloodied gloves.

“Miss Malone?”

She shoved past Reed before anyone else could speak. “Is he okay?”

“The bullet missed any major organs,” the doctor said, “but there was significant blood loss. We had to transfuse him and repair some internal damage. He's stable, but the next twenty-four hours are critical.”

Stable. Critical.

Keely's legs nearly gave out, but she gritted her teeth and forced herself to stay

upright. “Can I see him?”

The doctor hesitated.

Reed stepped forward. “Doc, I suggest you say yes. She’s not going anywhere.”

The man nodded, stepping aside. “Five minutes.”

Keely didn’t walk to the room. She ran.

Jesse looked too pale. Too still.

Wires and monitors surrounded him, the steady beep of the heart monitor the only sign that he was still here. His chest rose and fell, but it wasn’t right—not the way it should be. Jesse was larger than life, indestructible. Not like this.

A strangled noise caught in her throat, and she nearly collapsed beside the bed, her hands trembling as she reached for his.

“You jackass,” she whispered, squeezing his fingers. “You promised.”

His skin was too warm, too clammy. His hand didn’t squeeze back.

Keely swallowed against the lump in her throat. “You’re not allowed to die, Jesse. You don’t get to leave me, do you understand?”

Her voice cracked, but she didn’t care.

“I love you.” The words spilled out before she could stop them, before she could take a breath and think about what it meant to say them. “Did you hear me? I said I love you, and I’m not losing you, so you’d better wake up.”

Silence.

Keely pressed her forehead against his arm, her entire body trembling.

Then... a slight twitch followed by a squeeze.

Her breath hitched. Keely lifted her head just in time to see Jesse's eyes flutter open.

His gaze was heavy-lidded, groggy, but focused. His lips curved just slightly.

"Darlin'," he rasped.

And just like that, she lost it.

Keely let out a choked sob, burying her face against his shoulder, her hands clutching his like she'd never let go. Jesse's arm barely moved, but his fingers tangled in her hair, holding her close.

"Told you," he murmured, "not leaving."

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She pulled back just enough to see his face, to memorize the way his lashes flickered, the way his lips parted as he breathed her in. “You asshole,” she whispered.

Jesse chuckled, but it was weak, the sound rattling in his chest. “That’s five.”

She kissed him. It wasn’t gentle. It wasn’t careful. It was desperate, full of love and frustration and everything she couldn’t say. Jesse groaned into her mouth, his grip weak but possessive as he cupped her jaw, tilting her closer.

“You can’t do that again,” she whispered, her forehead pressing against his. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Jesse grinned. “I’ll try not to get shot again. No promises.”

Keely let out a half-laugh, half-sob, shaking her head. “You asshole.”

He grinned, but it was small, pained. “You already said that.”

She kissed his knuckles, pressing his hand to her cheek. “I love you, Jesse.”

His breath hitched.

Keely swallowed hard. “And if you ever scare me like that again, I will tie you to the bed and leave you there for a week.”

Jesse’s lips quirked. “Nope. If anyone does any tying anyone up, it’s me tying you to the bed—come to think of it, I kinda like the sound of that.”

She rolled her eyes, but the laughter that bubbled up was real. “You are impossible.”

His hand lifted weakly, his fingers brushing through her hair. “And you’re mine.”

Her throat tightened. Jesse let out a slow breath, his eyes slipping closed again, but this time, this time, she wasn’t afraid.

14

JESSE

Jesse woke to the scent of Keely—warm vanilla and something sweet—something uniquely her. It wrapped around him, grounding him before he even opened his eyes.

The steady beep of the heart monitor told him he was still in the hospital. His side ached dully, reminding him of the bullet he’d taken. The fact that Keely was beside him, curled into his side, her fingers laced with his, told him everything else he needed to know.

She hadn’t left him. He probably didn’t want to know what she’d had to do to pull that off; he was just glad she’d done it.

He turned his head slightly, careful not to jostle her. Her hair was a wild mess against his chest, strands falling across her cheek. Her breathing was deep and even, her body warm where it pressed against his. He found the sight unexpectedly devastating.

Keely Malone, all stubborn fire and reckless defiance, had stayed. The woman who let no one in, who fought tooth and nail for control in every aspect of her life, was here—holding his hand in her sleep like she didn’t care if the whole damn world saw it.

Jesse felt something shift inside him, something permanent and untamed. She was his.

He wondered if she knew she'd been his from the moment she walked into his life with her sharp mouth and wicked eyes, challenging him at every turn. He'd spent a long time pretending he could keep his hands off her, but the second she let him in—truly let him in—there had never been another option.

He had never belonged to a woman before, not like this. Not in a way that felt like his goddamn soul had tied itself to hers. He thought about the many conversations he'd had with Vanessa Ellington, the best-selling romance author who also played at the club. She believed in love at first sight and soul mates. Jesse had believed in neither... until he'd met Reed's bratty little sister.

Keely stirred, her lashes fluttering as she shifted against him. Jesse squeezed her fingers, watching as her brow furrowed slightly before she blinked up at him. For a moment, she just stared.

Then she shot upright so fast she nearly ripped the IV out of his arm. "Jesse?" Her voice was rough, panicked, still thick with sleep.

He grinned—damn, that hurt—and squeezed her hand again. "Mornin', darlin'."

She pressed both palms against his chest like she needed him to breathe, as if she didn't trust her eyes alone.

"You're awake."

"Noticed that, did you?"

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Her eyes snapped to his, the fire in them flaring to life. “Don’t be an ass, Jesse. I thought you...”

She cut herself off, shaking her head like she couldn’t even say the words.

Jesse shifted, cupping the back of her neck with his free hand, pulling her down until her forehead rested against his. “I’m right here, Keely. I’m not going anywhere but home with you.”

She shuddered. Her breath ghosted over his lips, her fingers gripping his hospital gown in tight fists. “You promised me, you bastard.”

Jesse chuckled, even as the sound came out rough. “Yeah, you mentioned that earlier. Pretty sure you cussed me out while I was unconscious.”

Keely lifted her head, glaring at him. “You deserved it.”

“Probably.” He ran his thumb along the nape of her neck, soothing her even as she vibrated with emotion. “You gonna let me make it up to you?”

She swallowed, her throat bobbing. “That depends.”

Jesse quirked an eyebrow. “On?”

Her fingers tightened in the fabric covering his chest. “Did you mean it?”

His pulse kicked up. “Mean what, darlin’?”

She inhaled sharply, her voice a strained whisper. “That you weren’t leaving. That this—us—wasn’t just some heat-of-the-moment bullshit.”

Jesse’s chest ached, and it had nothing to do with his injuries. He caught her chin between his fingers, forcing her to look at him. “I don’t say shit I don’t mean, Keely.”

Her lower lip trembled, but she caught it between her teeth, biting back whatever emotion threatened to spill free. “Then say it now.”

Jesse’s jaw ticked. He hated that she doubted this. Hated she thought, even for a second, that he would walk away. So, he did what he always did when Keely pushed him too far.

He took.

Jesse fisted the back of her hair and pulled her down, crushing his mouth against hers in a kiss that left no room for questions, no space for doubt. Keely gasped, her hands flying to his shoulders, but she didn’t push him away. She never pushed him away.

He devoured her. Licked into her mouth like he owned her, like he was claiming her, like he needed to make damn sure she understood.

She was his.

Not just in bed. Not just in the dark, but always and in all ways. None of this keeping things confined to the bedroom shit. Keely needed a keeper, and he’d elected himself to the job... for life.

Keely moaned into the kiss, shifting so she was half on the bed, her body pressing into his like she needed to feel him as much as he needed to feel her. Jesse let out a rough groan, his free hand sliding down her back, gripping her hip, anchoring her.

Then he pulled back, just far enough to brush his lips over hers as he murmured, “I meant it, darlin’. As I’m laid up, I’ll see if I can’t get one of the guys to find me some collars and a ring to choose from.”

Keely’s breath stuttered.

Jesse pressed another slow kiss against her mouth, softer this time, but no less possessive. “I love you.”

She trembled, her fingers digging into his shoulders. “Jesse...”

He nipped at her lower lip, breathing her in. “Say it.”

Her lashes fluttered, her body melting into his. “I love you.”

Jesse exhaled, his grip tightening. “Again.”

Her voice wavered, but her eyes burned with defiance. “I love you, you overprotective, infuriating, impossible asshole.”

A grin tugged at his lips. “That’s my girl.”

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Keely let out a shaky laugh, burying her face in the crook of his neck. Jesse stroked a hand down her spine, content to hold her for as long as she needed.

After a long moment, she pulled back, studying him with those sharp green eyes of hers. “So... when do I get to take you home?”

Jesse chuckled, already regretting it as his ribs protested. “Soon, darlin’.”

Keely huffed. “Not soon enough.”

Jesse caught her jaw, tilting her face up so she had to look at him. “You’re not getting rid of me, Keely. You belong to me.”

She swallowed hard, then nodded. “Good. Because you’re mine, too.”

Jesse’s gut clenched, a wave of something fierce and right rolling through him.

Yeah. He was hers. And he wasn’t going anywhere.

Jesse had fought enough battles to know when a war wasn’t over. Sure, Nico Alvarez was dead, his empire dismantled, and Keely was safe, but as he sat in his hospital bed, waiting for the inevitable confrontation, he knew damn well that the hardest fight was still ahead of him.

Reed Malone.

Keely’s brother. One of his closest friends. The man who could either accept what

Jesse already knew in his bones—that Keely belonged to him—or make his life a living hell.

Jesse dragged a hand through his hair as the door swung open.

Gavin walked in first, his usual cool demeanor in place. “Well, well, look who’s not dead.”

Dawson followed, grinning. “Shame, too. We had a hell of a wake planned. Open bar and everything.”

Hawke leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “I was gonna say some real nice words about you, man. Guess I’ll save them for next time.”

Jesse rolled his eyes, shifting slightly in the hospital bed. “Y’all that disappointed I pulled through?”

Gavin shrugged. “Nah. Just means you get to pay your tab at the Spur next time we go out.”

Jesse chuckled, but the sound was rough. He wasn’t at a hundred percent yet, not even close, but he’d survived worse. Hell, if he could survive Keely, a bullet to the gut was nothing.

Speaking of Keely—she had gone to grab coffee, leaving him alone for this. He wasn’t sure if she was giving him space to handle his business, or if she just didn’t want to witness the bloodshed when her brother arrived. Because he was coming. Jesse could feel it.

And sure as hell, a second later, the air in the room shifted as the door opened again.

Reed.

He stood in the doorway, his posture deceptively relaxed, but Jesse knew better. Reed's eyes were sharp, his jaw tight, his gaze locked on Jesse like a heat-seeking missile. The conversation was coming, and there was no stopping it.

The room went quiet.

Dawson muttered something under his breath. Hawke let out a low whistle. Gavin, the only one dumb enough to poke the bear, clapped Jesse on the shoulder. "This should be fun. Try not to bleed out before we get a chance to grab a drink."

And just like that, the team filtered out, leaving Jesse alone with Reed.

The silence stretched.

Jesse didn't look away.

Reed crossed his arms over his chest, his stance solid, unshakable. "You gonna tell me what the hell you were thinking?"

Jesse let out a slow breath. "You really need me to spell it out?"

Reed's eyes darkened. "Twice you put yourself between her and a bullet."

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“I’ll do it again,” Jesse said, his voice calm, unwavering. “Every damn time.”

Something flickered in Reed’s expression. “You love her.”

Jesse met his gaze, steady and sure. “Yeah. I do.”

Reed snorted, shaking his head. “Shit.”

Jesse braced himself. He expected a fight, a warning, maybe even a goddamn punch to the face, but Reed just stared at him for a long moment, something unreadable in his expression.

Then, finally, he spoke. “Don’t fuck it up.”

Jesse blinked. “That’s it? No threats? No lectures?”

Reed ran a hand over his face, exhaling. “She’s my sister, Jesse. My little sister.” His voice was rough, worn at the edges. “I’ve spent my whole damn life making sure she had everything she needed. That she was safe. That no one broke her.”

Jesse swallowed hard. “I’m not gonna break her, Reed. I’m going to spend the rest of my life doing the same. I love her, and she loves me.”

Reed’s gaze sharpened. “So, I’ve been told.” He took a step closer, his voice dropping. “I’m not supposed to threaten you, but I don’t care. If you ever hurt her, I will end you. No hesitation. No discussion.”

Jesse inclined his head. “Understood.”

The two men held the stare for a long, weighted beat before, at last, Reed nodded once and turned toward the door. He paused just before stepping out. “And Jesse?”

“Yeah?”

Reed glanced over his shoulder, something dangerously close to amusement in his eyes. “You’re going to make this legal, right?”

Jesse let out a breath. “Collar and ring as soon as I can get someone to help me find what I want.”

Reed grunted. “Good.” Then he walked out, leaving Jesse alone with the realization that he’d just won the most important battle of his life.

A second later, Keely stormed in, coffee in one hand, frustration in her eyes. “Please tell me my brother didn’t try to murder you while I was gone.”

Jesse chuckled, his ribs protesting the movement. “Nope. He just threatened my life and left. Real civilized conversation with the usual dick measuring.”

Keely rolled her eyes. “He’s lucky I love him and so are you.”

Jesse’s gaze locked onto hers. “Yeah?”

She grinned. “Yeah.”

Jesse reached out, snagging her wrist, tugging her down until she was practically in his lap. “Say it.”

Her body softened against him, and whispered, “I love you.”

Jesse didn’t waste another second.

He took her mouth, kissing her like he’d been starving for it—because he had.

Keely moaned against his lips, her hands fisting in his shirt, her body pressing flush against his. Jesse swallowed the sound, deepening the kiss, owning it.

When he finally pulled back, her flushed cheeks, bright eyes, and uneven breath were clear.

Jesse pressed his forehead to hers, his grip possessive. “We’re going to make this work, Keely. Whatever it takes.”

She inhaled sharply. “Even if my brother tries to kill you?”

Jesse chuckled. “He can try, but I’ll win... my dick is bigger than his.”

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Keely's laughter was breathless, her fingers threading through his hair as she whispered, "God help me, I love you."

Jesse kissed her again, slower this time, but no less consuming.

She was his, and nothing was ever going to change that.

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KEELY

Keely had spent the last few weeks proving that Jesse was as stubborn a man as ever lived, and he was a lousy patient.

He healed fast—too fast, really. The doctors had said he needed time, but Jesse being Jesse, he'd spent the better part of the recovery process grumbling about being trapped at her house. He was bored. He wanted action. He wanted to move.

To step foot in The Iron Spur again. Keely had been patient. She'd let him get away with his grumpy bullshit while he was recovering, but now? His excuses were gone, and her waiting was over.

Which was how she found herself standing in front of him, hands on her hips, trying her best to glare him into doing what she wanted.

Jesse just crossed his arms, watching her from the couch with that infuriating, too-calm expression. "I said no."

Keely huffed. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, darlin’,” he said, his voice deep and sure. “I’m being smart.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Explain that logic to me.”

Jesse dragged his hand over his jaw. “I don’t need to go to the damn club to prove anything to you.”

“It’s not about proving anything,” she argued. “It’s about us enjoying what we do together.” She stepped closer, planting a knee on the couch beside him. “Jesse, you and I both know this is part of us. It’s what we want. What we are.”

His eyes darkened. She saw the way his jaw flexed, the way his fingers twitched like he wanted to do something to her. She had him.

Keely trailed a hand down from his chest, her voice softening. “Come with me.”

Jesse grabbed her wrist before she could go any lower, his grip firm but not punishing. “You don’t fight fair, baby.”

Keely grinned. “Never have.”

Jesse stared at her for a long moment, then let out a rough breath. “Fine.”

Victory surged through her, but before she could celebrate, Jesse yanked her down, flipping her onto her back in one swift move. Keely gasped, blinking up at him as he pinned her wrists above her head.

Jesse’s voice was all grit and promise. “But when we go, I want every damn person in that club to know who you belong to.”

Her whole body lit up.

“Yes, Sir,” she breathed.

Jesse grinned, slow and wicked. “Good girl.”

The Iron Spur was packed with people.

The energy in the air crackled, a mixture of excitement, curiosity, and intense anticipation. Keely had always loved the feeling of walking into the club. But tonight? Tonight was different.

Because tonight, she wasn’t just one of the subs who came to play; she was Jesse’s sub and his collared sub at that. He’d wasted no time finding an exquisite collar to place around her neck, which he’d done at home with her brother and the rest of the team in attendance.

Keely had never been nervous a day in her life. At least, that’s what she’d told herself. She’d faced down killers, walked into the lion’s den with nothing but the team at her back, and somehow had stayed alive. But this? This moment, in the quiet sanctuary of her home, surrounded by the people who had become family—this had her heart pounding in a way nothing else ever had.

The living room was warm, intimate, the soft glow of candlelight flickering across the walls. Jesse stood before her, a little less steady than usual, but his eyes locked on hers with an intensity that stole her breath. The others—Hawke, Dawson, Gavin, Roxie and Reed—stood just beyond them, silent witnesses to the moment that would change everything.

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Keely inhaled deeply, trying to calm the rapid beat of her pulse. She wasn't nervous because she had doubts. No, there wasn't a single hesitation in her bones. She was nervous because this was real. Because Jesse, the man who had fought beside her, bled for her, loved her, was about to place a collar around her neck, claiming her in a way no one ever had before.

He lifted a hand, running the back of his fingers along her jaw before gripping her chin, tilting her face up to his. "Look at me, Keely."

She met his gaze, falling into the storm of possession and devotion that burned there.

"You're mine," he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "Have been from the second you walked into my life. And tonight, I make that permanent."

She swallowed hard, nodding once. "I'm yours."

Jesse reached into his pocket, pulling out the collar he had chosen for her, and the moment Keely saw it, it took her breath away.

It was stunning.

A delicate chain of platinum, woven like the intricate links of a lasso, adorned with small but brilliant black diamonds nestled between the metalwork. The centerpiece, resting just at the throat, was a single, deep blue sapphire, cut into an elegant teardrop, framed by the faintest etching of western scrollwork. It was a collar designed for her—strong, refined, undeniably beautiful, but with an edge of raw power beneath the surface.

Jesse had thought of everything.

He held it up, his fingers deftly working the clasp as he stepped closer. “This isn’t just a collar,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble only she could hear. “It’s a promise. That I’ll protect you. That I’ll love you. That I’ll own every damn part of you.”

She let out a shuddering breath, her hands instinctively reaching for his, not to stop him but to feel him as he placed the cool metal against her skin.

Jesse wrapped the collar around her throat, securing it with practiced precision before brushing his thumbs along the sapphire at her throat, a silent gesture of ownership.

Keely’s body softened, a deep sense of home settling in her bones.

Hawke let out a low whistle. “Damn, that’s a hell of a piece, Bryant.”

Dawson crossed his arms, nodding in approval. “Suits her.”

Gavin chuckled. “She looks like she was born to wear it.”

Reed, however, said nothing. He studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable, then gave Jesse a slow nod. “Take care of her.”

Jesse’s grip on her chin tightened just slightly, his voice pure steel. “Always.”

The ceremony was simple. No grand speeches, no unnecessary theatrics—just the presence of the men who mattered, the weight of the moment sinking into her bones, and the man before her, claiming her in the only way that had ever mattered.

Jesse’s fingers slid into her hair, tugging just enough to make her eyes flutter shut.

“Say it, Keely.”

She breathed out, letting the last of her resistance go. “I’m yours.”

He kissed her, stealing her breath and sealing the vow already written in their bones. And as the others raised their glasses, as her brother silently accepted what had always been inevitable, Keely knew—this was just the beginning.

She had expected him to be stiff when they walked into the club, maybe even a little reluctant, but the second they stepped inside, he owned the space—literally and figuratively. His presence was undeniable, a walking storm of dominance and confidence. The club noticed, too. He was already wearing his leathers. She’d dressed at home as well, wrapping a coat around her for the trip from the house to the club.

Once inside the Iron Spur, conversations stalled as Jesse took her coat, revealing her blue corset with a black lace overlay and matching thong. Submissives stole glances his way. Keely could feel the curiosity burning in the air—because everyone in this place knew Jesse. He’d been a part of this world for years, but he’d claimed no one. Until now.

Keely swallowed hard, her pulse hammering as Jesse’s hand settled low on her back, guiding her forward. People watched, and Jesse grinned. Possessive son of a bitch. He led her straight to the bar, his fingers trailing along her spine as he ordered a drink.

“Something for you, darlin’?” he asked, his voice rough against her ear.

Keely barely heard him. She was focused too intently on how people looked at them—or how Jesse practically dared them to look. But when one man, a Dom she vaguely recognized, let his eyes linger too long, Jesse moved.

Keely let out a startled gasp as he spun her on the barstool, dragging her between his

legs.

The club stilled.

Jesse gripped her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “You wanted to be here, didn’t you darlin’?”

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She swallowed. “Yes, Sir.”

His thumb brushed her bottom lip. “Then let’s be real clear about something.”

Keely barely had time to breathe before his mouth crashed against hers. The kiss was brutal, claiming an undeniable mark of ownership. Jesse’s fingers tangled in her hair, holding her still as he deepened the kiss, his other hand gripping her hip.

The club watched. Keely shivered.

When Jesse finally pulled back, his gaze burned into hers, his voice rough enough to scrape.

“They all know now,” he murmured.

Keely’s chest rose and fell, her lips tingling, her body buzzing.

“Neanderthal,” she whispered.

Jesse tilted his head toward the hallway leading to the private rooms. “Come with me.”

Keely obeyed.

Jesse took her to one of the privacy rooms and shut the door behind them. Keely barely had time to blink before she was against the wall, Jesse’s hands gripping her thighs, lifting her until she was wrapped around him.

His tone was pure dominance as he growled and snatched her thong off, revealing her now bare pussy. “Fuck, baby.”

Keely grinned, but it faded the second Jesse’s hands tightened. He carried her to the bed, laying her down like she was something precious—then he was on her.

His fingers traced the leather cuffs hanging from the headboard.

Keely’s breath hitched.

Jesse’s eyes flashed. “Color.”

“Green, Sir,” she breathed. “Always green.”

Jesse didn’t hesitate. Within seconds, he had her wrists secured, her body stretched beneath him, her chest rising and falling as anticipation curled through her veins.

Jesse’s voice was deep, steady. “You trust me?”

She nodded.

“Words.”

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered.

Jesse dragged his thumb along her jaw. “Good girl.”

His hands explored, his mouth teased, his body commanded. He treated her as if he owned her pleasure, and Keely surrendered beneath him.

She gasped, writhed, begged—and Jesse took his damn time, making sure she felt

every second of it before he removed his leathers.

He positioned himself above her body, between her legs, where he could stare at her hungrily. He hooked her knees over his elbows, spreading her wide, and when he finally entered her, it wasn't fast or hard. It was deep—slow—intimate. It was too much, and she closed her eyes.

“Open them,” he commanded. There was no hiding from him. There never would be.

Obediently she opened them, and the look of pure lust that met her gaze made her gasp. He watched her as he pushed all the way in until she could feel his balls snug up against her. He groaned, savoring the moment... the connection.

He drew back and thrust in again, this time slamming into her so she moaned. She loved the ferocity with which he loved her. He held nothing back as he pounded into her savagely, whispering low, dirty promises. He was ruthless in the way he used her, and Keely reveled in his ability to so completely command her—heart, mind, body and soul.

She could feel his cock swell and begin to twitch as he gave a final, harsh thrust and ground himself against her, his cum jetting into her as she fell over the edge and screamed in ecstasy, her pussy spasming as she clamped down hard, as she writhed in his hold.

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He didn't untie her right away. Instead, he kissed her. Soft. Reverent.

"I love you," he murmured.

Keely's heart stopped.

Then she smiled. "I know," she whispered.

Jesse chuckled, finally reaching up to free her wrists. The second she was loose, she curled into his arms, letting the world fade away.

Because here, in his arms, she wasn't just Keely Malone. She was his. And nothing was ever going to change that.

Keely was still catching her breath, her body humming with satisfaction as she lay sprawled across Jesse's chest. His heartbeat was strong beneath her cheek, steady and sure, as his fingers traced lazy circles on her bare back.

She didn't want to move. Ever.

But she knew Jesse. Knew that while he'd given her everything inside this room, he still had one more thing to say.

His deep voice rumbled against her ear, low and full of certainty. "You're mine for good, Keely."

A thrill shot through her, not just from the possessiveness in his tone, but from the

truth in it.

She tilted her head, meeting his gaze, her lips curving into something soft. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Keely grinned, but she knew if they stayed in here much longer, she wouldn’t let them leave. She pressed her lips to his one last time before rolling off the bed, grabbing a robe from one of the hooks.

“No need for that,” he rumbled.

“You ripped off my thong. It’s not useable.”

“Like I said, no need.”

“I can’t walk back into the club with nothing on but my corset.”

“Let me give you a choice—you can go like you are or you can go with no corset and an ass that’s a lovely shade of red.” Seeing her distress, he softened. “You’re glowing, darlin’.”

Keely tossed her hair over one shoulder. “That’s what happens when you’re thoroughly wrecked by a dominant cowboy.”

Jesse chuckled as he stood, pulling on his leathers before coming up behind her, his hands bracketing her hips. “Damn right it is.”

She sighed, leaning back against his warmth. “Are you really going to make me walk out there with nothing on but my corset and thatminelook all over your face?”

Jesse kissed the side of her neck, his lips brushing her pulse. “I gave you a choice.

Besides, do you think there's anyone in the club who doesn't already know?"

Her heart tripped because he was right.

Everyone had seen what he'd done at the bar. Everyone had seen the way he'd claimed her. And there was no way anyone could miss the collar or the sapphire and black diamond engagement ring that sparkled on her finger.

And now, they were about to walk out there and make it permanent.

Jesse caught her chin, tilting her head so she had no choice but to meet his gaze. "You ready?"

Keely took a deep breath, then smiled. "Always."

He took her hand and led her back to the bar. Looking around, she realized she wasn't the only sub who had little of anything on. In fact, some of them had nothing at all. Roxie was naked and sitting between Gavin's legs.

The moment she and Jesse stepped into the main lounge, a roar went up. Keely blushed as people turned, as a few subs sent her knowing looks, as some of the club's long-time Doms raised their glasses in silent approval. But the best reaction came from the Silver Spur team.

Gavin whistled, Hawke leaned back in his chair with a slow shake of his head, and Dawson lifted his beer in salute.

And then there was Reed.

Her big brother looked pained, staring at them like he needed something stronger than whiskey to get through this moment.

Keely arched an eyebrow. “Say something, Reed.”

Her brother raked a hand through his hair. “I need a goddamn drink.”

“There’s one in front of you,” laughed Gavin.

“I need another.”

Laughter erupted around the seating area reserved for them. Jesse’s arm tightened around her waist, his voice easy, steady. “Don’t worry, Reed. I’ll take good care of her.”

Reed narrowed his eyes. “You better.”

She saw something pass between them—something unspoken, something solid. Keely let out a slow breath. Reed would always be overprotective, but he knew Jesse. Trusted him, and that was enough.

Gavin grinned. “With that settled, it’s time for a toast.” “To Jesse and Keely. May their fights be short, their make-ups be legendary, and Reed not have a stroke.”

Dawson laughed. “May Keely always find lots of new ways to make Jesse’s life

interesting.”

Hawke chuckled. “Like she needs help with that.”

Jesse shot him a look, but Keely just beamed, taking the drink Dawson handed her.

She turned, standing on her toes to press a slow kiss to Jesse’s jaw. “Ready for forever, cowboy?”

Jesse’s voice was dark with promise as he vowed, “I’ve always been ready.”