



Undercover with the SEAL (Norse Security 2)

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Category: Romance, War

Description: Ex-SEAL Hunter Odenson has always been a big guy. Musclebound, strong, and silent, it's easy for people to judge him on his body and forget that he has brains too. Hunter's looking to change that reputation at Norse Security by earning the team leader position. At least, that was the plan before he got stuck as bodyguard to a Hollywood actress. While there's no better eye candy than Alexandra Valentine, Hunter figures it's a job that entails more handbag watching than strategizing covert ops.

Alexandra Valentine has made a living playing the ditz. Hollywood likes their blondes bouncy and brainless and Alexandra has been smart enough to give them what they're looking for. However, after years spent being the butt of the joke she's ready to snatch screen time back as a leading lady. Going deep undercover into a sex slave ring was supposed to prep her for her first dramatic role, but when things go wrong and she loses her best friend to trafficking, Alexandra's method acting becomes a real-life crisis.

Alexandra hires Hunter under the guise of protection, but all she wants from the big boy is the training and muscle to save her best friend. When Hunter discovers the position with Alexandra isn't what it seems, he's psyched for the chance to prove he's ready for leadership. But sliding into the world of desire lights a fire under their own attraction. As tensions mount and they delve deeper and deeper into the world of sex, Hunter will need to decide if their growing love or his need to save the day is more important.

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If someone would've told Hunter Odenson a year ago he'd be playing babysitter to some spoiled ditzy Hollywood bombshell instead of dodging sniper bullets and landmines in Mosul, he would've laughed in their face.

Yet here he was, striding onto a Tinseltown backlot searching for the bombshell in question. He ignored the stares of people he passed and searched the numbers on the huge warehouse-sized buildings, squinting in the ever-present southern California sunshine.

Sound stage eleven loomed ahead and he walked down a shaded alley to a side door with a red light beside it. A sign below warned not to enter if the light was flashing. Hunter gave the thing some serious side eye then snorted. Not a flicker in sight.

He'd wanted to set up this initial meeting at a nice restaurant, maybe get to know his client over a casual lunch, set the ground rules for their new, temporary partnership right away—when they were in public, he was in charge. Behind closed doors, Alexandra Valentine could do what she wanted with whoever she wanted, as long as it wasn't illegal and it wasn't with him. End of story. Besides, this was all a front anyway. His real reason for being here was a missing persons' case the firm had been hired to investigate on behalf of Ms. Valentine. The whole bodyguard thing was just a front to keep nosy people away from the truth.

Inside the cavernous building, it was pitch black. Hunter stood in the gloom, blinking hard to clear his vision and figure out where to go next. Obviously, this was the wrong place, even if the numbers matched the information Loki had given him

earlier. He added misdirection to the growing list of things he intended to discuss with his boss when he talked to him again.

Once his eyes had adjusted, Hunter walked farther inside the empty sound stage, hoping maybe the crew had left some clue behind as to where they'd gone. He didn't have to wait long. As a man who'd done three tours of duty as a Navy SEAL and led countless special ops, he recognized the sounds of gunfire.

The minute the click-click-boom of bullets rattled through the building, Hunter went into stealth mode, cursing the fact he didn't have his usual weapons with him. All he'd brought was a standard issue Glock, thinking even that would be overkill for guarding America's reigning comedy queen. But as he peered through the open door on the other side of the sound stage and into the alleyway beyond, it became clear he'd just gotten a whole lot more than he'd bargained for.

"Fuck." He pulled his gun and clicked off the safety, peering through a crack in the door to see two thugs standing over a woman tied to a chair. How the hell this could happen in the middle of a huge movie production company, Hunter had no idea. Then again, terrorists always used the element of surprise to wreak their havoc on the world.

He rolled his neck, hating the way the starched white collar of his button-down shirt cut into his skin and the way the tie he'd worn felt more like a noose. Fighting in this damned monkey-suit was going to be hell. One more beef to chew over with Loki.

Go to Hollywood, his boss had said. If you do well with this assignment, maybe I'll promote you to Group Leader.

And yeah, maybe Hunter's ultimate goal was to prove he was more than an imposing tower of brawn, that his brains were as impressive as his muscles, that he was smart enough to do more, be more. He wished this particular scenario had played more to

his mental skills than his physical ones, but he did what he needed to do to get the job done.

“Where should we start?” one of the thugs asked the other, drawing Hunter’s attention back to the task at hand. The woman tied to the chair was facing away from him and there was a burlap bag over her head, preventing him from seeing her identity. Her hands were zip-tied behind her back and her ankles were tied to the front legs of the chair. She looked small, much tinier than the assholes leering at her. If it was one thing Hunter hated it was a bully, so now these pricks would not only feel his wrath in general, he’d have to whoop their asses into next year too.

“I don’t know,” thug number two said. He had a knife in his hand and traced the shiny blade down the woman’s arm, not hard enough to cut her pale skin, just enough to let her know wh

at was coming. The thug leaned in to speak close to her ear. “Maybe we just slowly peel her skin off, inch by inch until she tells us what we want to know.”

Hunter clenched his jaw, his nostrils flaring. These scumbags were talking about torture—or Enhanced Interrogation Techniques, as the CIA liked to call them. They were technically illegal around the world but still in use anyway. Hunter was far too familiar with such tactics and they made his already knotted stomach churn. Whoever the fuck these pieces of shit were, they were going down.

He kicked the door open, gun drawn, and used the distraction of the loud banging of metal against metal to grab the first thug from behind, slamming his head into the building and knocking him out cold. Thug number two faced Hunter, his wide eyes dropping to the Glock before meeting Hunter’s gaze again. All the color drained from his face and he dropped the knife immediately. He raised shaking hands into the air.

“That’s right. Not so brave now are you, asshole?” Hunter sneered, kicking thug

number one's legs out of the way as he crouched beside the woman's chair. The bag was still over her head so he couldn't tell for sure, but they must've gagged her too, if her muffled grunts and groans were any indication. Keeping his gun and his attention focused on the trembling thug before him, Hunter reached down and grabbed the knife from the ground to use it to cut the zip ties around the woman's ankles. Except when he brought the blade to the plastic, it was dull as dishwater. Couldn't slice through butter, let alone a human being. His confusion increased as he discovered the zip ties were loose too. Loose enough for the woman to escape herself, if she gave it half an effort. He checked the tie around her wrists and found the same.

What the—

A low murmur grew from behind him as Hunter reached up to tug the hood from the woman's head and a fall of pale blond hair spilled out around her shoulders.

Shit. Just shit.

"Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air where we can see them," a voice boomed over a bullhorn from behind him as Hunter peered up into the face of the very woman he'd been sent here to guard. A woman whose eyes sparkled with fury. She freed her hand from the ill-fitting zip tie behind her back and yanked the gag from her mouth.

"Nice work, idiot," Alexandra Valentine said, her tone frosty despite the warm California day. "That's a whole day's shooting down the drain."

Hunter carefully placed his Glock on the ground then turned slowly to face the camera crew and security guards filling the opposite end of the alleyway. He'd missed them upon his initial explosion out of the building, being occupied with rescuing what he'd thought was a damsel in distress. Turned out it was just more Hollywood bullshit.

Why in the hell had he ever agreed to do this job?

The armed security guards rushed over, kicked his gun out of the way, then proceeded to pat Hunter down while another man Hunter assumed was the director checked the guy he'd slammed into the wall and knocked out.

"Look, I'm really sorry," Hunter said, remaining as non-threatening as possible while the guards questioned him. Well, as non-threatening as a man who stood six-five and was two-hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle could look. They had him facing the wall of the building as they frisked him then put him in handcuffs to await the police. "This was all a big misunderstanding. I'm here on assignment."

"Yeah?" Security guy number one asked, the radio at his waist crackling with unintelligible voices. "What kind of assignment is that? Resident Idiot?"

Security guard two snorted. "Maybe. Lunks like that are usually dumb as dirt. Look at him, he's big as a house."

Hunter gave the men a deadpan stare over his shoulder. Wasn't like he hadn't heard it all before. From the day he'd turned six, he'd always been the biggest kid in his class. Hell, even the teachers had been afraid of him. Didn't do much for a guy's self-esteem or his social skills, but the SEALs had made his size into an asset. They'd shown him that he could turn his biggest weakness into a force for good. "I'm here as the personal bodyguard for Miss Alexandra Valentine."

"Like hell you are," Alexandra said, deftly shedding the rest of her restraints then stalking over to lean against the wall beside him, her arms crossed and her expression pissed. "You realize you ruined the end of my movie."

"I said I was sorry." He didn't look at her and instead stared at the ground, doing his best not to notice how plump her pink lower lip looked or how she smelled faintly of

strawberries. “It won’t happen again.”

“Damn right it won’t.” She scuffed the toe of her shoe against the pavement. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“I got stuck in traffic.” He took a deep breath for patience. Hunter was used to being the man in charge of the operation, not some lackey to be ordered about. “Then I got lost on the lot.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a crappy sense of direction.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a shitty attitude.”

She watched him, silent, one brow raised, and Hunter could feel the promotion he’d worked so hard for trickling away like rainwater down a storm drain. She was going to call Loki and have him pulled from the case. And why not? He’d fucked everything up since the moment he’d set foot in Hollywood. He didn’t belong here in the land of the beautiful and the home of the perpetually perfect. He was too big, too rough around the edges, too broken. He never should’ve agreed to take this assignment. He should’ve stuck with what he was good at, what he was known for—running ops and kicking ass, not necessarily in that order.

“What’s your name, tough guy?” Alexandra asked, flipping her long blond hair out of her eyes.

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“Hunter Odenson.”

Her laughter filled the air around him like chimes. “You’re kidding, right? What are you, some Viking in disguise?”

“No.” He met her eyes at last. Blue. They were blue like the clear Caribbean Sea. “And spare me all the jokes. Believe me, I’ve heard them a million times already.” Medics arrived and crouched near the guy on the ground, who’d regained consciousness and was now being examined thoroughly. Hunter winced and looked away. “Sorry about your actor friend there.”

“Marty?” Alexandra glanced down at the guy, then smiled. “He’s got a hard head. I’m sure he’s fine. Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Navy.”

“Nice.” She gave him a slow head-to-toe appraisal that sent a zing of awareness straight to his groin before he tamped it down hard. This was business. Nothing more. “You know what, Hunter Odenson? I think you’re going to work out just fine.”

“You do?” Hunter said, shocked. The security guards began hauling him away toward the end of the alleyway where a squad car had pulled up. Wouldn’t be the first time he’d had to talk his way out of a tough situation. However, it would be the first time he’d been surprised by a woman in a long, long time. Sure, he’d had his share of relationships since he’d been out of the SEALs, but nothing permanent, and nothing that required him to use his brain more than his cock. He looked back at Alexandra, feeling an odd throb of satisfaction knowing she was still watching him too, and

called over his shoulder, “Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

2

Alexandra was in her trailer getting prepped to reshoot the last scene again by the time her prospective new bodyguard showed back up. It was cute how he’d told her to stay put and wait for him and how he looked like he expected her to obey. She took enough of that crap on set and in the industry. She sure as hell wouldn’t sit and stay like some dog for the people who worked for her. Not that Hunter Odenson worked for her exactly. In truth, she’d contacted his security firm, Norse Security, to help find Beatrix Camden—a friend from school and a fellow actress whom Alexandra feared had gotten in over her head in what had started out as an undercover method acting experiment. Now, no one had heard from poor Beatrix for going on two months and Alexandra’s instincts told her something was horribly wrong.

A knock sounded on the door before it was pulled open and in walked the man sent to find her friend. She didn’t doubt he’d been a Navy SEAL or that he could more than hold his own in any fight. What she did doubt at the moment was whether or not he was the right person to provide her personal security. He certainly had the physical aspects nailed—tall, muscular, coolly arrogant and intimidating in a way that would make most women swoon. And yeah, he was gorgeous too, Alexandra admitted. But in Hollywood everybody was beautiful. She of all people knew looks could be deceiving and had learned the tough way to look beyond the outer package to what was underneath.

Time to see if Hunter Odenson lived up to his fierce name. She needed all the fierceness she could get to save her best friend.

“Have a seat,” Alexandra said, pointing to a bench across from where the hair dresser and makeup artist were fussing around her. She liked to keep up her dumb-blond pretense when other people were around, so she planned to milk his cover as her new

bodyguard to the fullest. “Get things straightened out with the cops?”

“Yes,” he said, giving an assessing look around the trailer before dropping down onto the seat. “You didn’t wait for me.”

“You’re not my boss.” Alexandra said it with the same sticky sweet tone she used for most of her dumb bimbo roles. Over the years, it was a persona she’d perfected, to the point most people didn’t know the real woman from the roles she played. It was fine, she supposed. She should be grateful. She was well-paid, successful, invited to all the best parties with all the A-list people in the industry. But she’d paid a high price for fame, keeping her true heart and soul and brains hidden behind a slick wall of ditz and dream-girl fantasy.

Not that Hunter needed to know that or that he’d even care. She didn’t know him well enough yet to tell. Besides, he was here to find Beatrix. That was all. She crossed her legs and watched as he followed the movement with his gaze, a hint of color dotting his high, tanned cheekbones. Seemed Mr. Tall, Tough, and Taciturn wasn’t immune to her charms after all. “Tell me about yourself, Mr. Odenson.”

“Hunter,” he said, his eyes meeting hers. Green. His eyes were green and surprisingly gentle for a man of his sharp edges and impressive bulk. An array of emotions flickered across his gaze in a matter of seconds—surprise, wariness, attraction, resignation—and for a moment Alexandra found herself envying the ease with which he showed his emotions through his eyes. Critics were always complaining about her performances being one note—flat. He shifted in his seat, as if uncomfortable, and fidgeted with his tie. “Not much to tell. Everything’s in my resume.”

“Right.” Alexandra pouted her lips while the makeup artist applied a fresh coat of gloss, then narrowed her stare on him. “Now tell me what’s not on it.”

“Like what?”

“Like why an ex-Navy SEAL would want to come out here and babysit a media darling like me.”

If her statement put him off-kilter at all, he didn't show it. His expression remained the same cut-in-stone façade he'd had since he'd removed her hood at the film set and Alex had gotten her first look at him in all his stud-muffin glory. Except now there was the tiniest flicker of respect in the depths of his sea-green eyes.

“I don't know where to start.” He shrugged. “Most people don't care about what I do in my off hours as long as I get the job done.”

“Hmm. I wish I had the same problem.” Alexandra waited until the hair stylist had removed the protective smock from around her shoulders, then got up to walk over to a full-length mirror to adjust her clothes. “Honestly, I can't remember the last time I've been able to go out and just have a nice dinner somewhere alone without the paparazzi hounding me.” She glanced up and caught his watchful gaze in the mirror before concentrating on adjusting her boobs in the too-tight top again. “Not that I'm complaining or anything.”

“Could've fooled me,” Hunter said, pushing to his feet and heading for her wardrobe rack nearby. He pulled out a garment bag and eyed it like it might explode any second. “You have a reputation as being a bit of a party girl.”

“No.” Alex gave him a mock wide-eyed look of horror. Then she snorted and continued adjusting her trailer-trash-bimbo attire. When she'd asked the director about her clothes, all he'd said was more cleavage. Then again, the film they were working on here wasn't exactly Oscar-worthy material. More like Police Academy met Training Day, with a bit of bawdy burlesque thrown in for shits and giggles. Her standard fair in Hollywood these days. It hadn't always been like that. When she'd first come to town with Beatrix, she'd wanted to pursue important roles, make a real difference with her art. Too bad lofty ideals didn't pay the bills. She'd soon been

typecast as the pretty, dumb blonde and the money started flowing in. Alexandra didn't like to think of herself as a sell-out, more like a scavenger. She stockpiled money away for the day she'd be too old or too ugly to play in these teenaged wet-dream flicks anymore and could afford to hold out for work that actually meant something, work that was fulfilling and meaningful. She shrugged and met Hunter's eyes in the mirror. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"True." Hunter stepped aside to allow the hair dresser and makeup artist to leave the trailer then stepped closer to Alex, the heat of him sending tiny shivers of awareness through her body. He towered a good foot and a half above her own five-four frame, yet his size didn't intimidate her at all. In fact, she really didn't even notice it—well, if you ignored the fact that she had a crazy urge to see what he looked like without all those layers of clothes on. Once the door clicked shut again, he exhaled slowly. "Right. Let's get down to business then. Tell me about Beatrix."

Alex's sunny demeanor fractured slightly at the thought of her missing friend. "She's been gone for eight weeks now and I'm starting to get scared."

"When was the last time you heard from her?" Hunter asked, taking a seat at a small dining table and pulling out a notepad and pen. "Any idea why she might have disappeared?"

"I do have one idea," Alexandra said, swallowing hard against the rising lump of dread in her throat. She prayed she was wrong, because if this really was the reason Beatrix had vanished then chances were good she'd never see her best friend alive again. They hadn't meant for it to go so far. It had only been an exercise, a chance to take their acting technique to the next level. But now Beatrix was missing and things only looked bleaker by the day. Slowly, she made her way to the table and took a seat across from him. Their knees collided and Alex pulled away fast, excusing herself and doing her best to ignore the zings of electricity sizzling through her system from their brief point of contact. "Um, Bea and I were in the same method acting class

together downtown.”

Hunter made some quick notes on his pad, then looked up at her. “Go on.”

“One of the tenets of method acting is to become your character. To crawl inside their skin, so to speak, and live life in their shoes to really bring forth the sincerest and most emotionally expressive performance possible. Bea and I wanted to become the best actresses we could so we took this advice to heart. She was starting to get a lot of offers for stage work in New York and one of the young, up-and-coming playwrights sent her a script for a new production dealing with the plight of human sex trafficking.”

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The scribbling stopped and Hunter looked up at her. “Please tell me you didn’t...”

“It sounded like a good idea at the time.” Alex winced, knowing how stupid it sounded in hindsight. “We hung out on some street corners in East L.A., made some connections, got inside one of the rings and were really learning so much about what was going on. We’d planned on taking what we learned to law enforcement as soon as we were done and have the whole thing shut down.”

“But?”

Alexandra squirmed in her seat. “I told Bea to be careful. I wanted to leave. My instincts told me something was wrong, that the people who had accepted us and confided in us were starting to treat us differently. Bea insisted on going back in one more time. She said she’d be fine. The last text I got from her was two months ago.” She pulled out her phone and slid it across the table with shaky fingers, Bea’s text shining brightly on the screen. “‘Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.’ That’s it. That’s the last time I talked to her. I tried texting her back and none of my messages were returned.”

“Did you go to the police?” Hunter asked, his attention focused on the screen.

“Yeah, but they had nothing. No leads, no trace of Bea after weeks of work.” She squeezed her eyes shut against the sting of tears. “She’s just another statistic to them, but to me she’s my best friend. I have to find her, Hunter. I have to. Please say you’ll help me.”

“I’ll do my best.” He passed her phone back to her, their fingers brushing, and the

sweet tingles started anew. “I’m sorry about ruining your movie shoot.”

“No big thing,” Alex said, reverting to her ditzy persona out of habit.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Dumb yourself down for me.” Hunter pulled away and sat back, watching her with a thoughtful expression. “It’s not necessa

ry.”

“Oh.” Stunned didn’t begin to cover what Alex was feeling at the moment. Most people saw her boobs and her blond hair and didn’t dig any deeper. But Hunter seemed to be far more perceptive than he looked. She’d have to be careful around him. “Sorry. And you should sit up straighter. Don’t play small because others can’t measure up.”

He raised a brow at her then pushed higher in his seat, a slow grin spreading across his full lips. “You’re not what I expected at all, Miss Valentine.”

“Nor are you, Mr. Odenson.”

A loud knock on the trailer door sounded, jarring them out of their newfound intimacy. “Five minutes to set, Alex,” a production assistant yelled.

“Thanks,” Alex yelled back, then pushed to her feet. “Well, I guess it’s back to work for me.”

“And me.” Hunter stood beside her and opened the door for them. “I’ll do some

research on what you told me while you finish filming.”

3

Hunter tugged at the stiff collar of his white tuxedo shirt for the umpteenth time, wincing whenever he glanced downward and caught sight of the hideous pink bow tie around his neck. Lord help him, he'd thought the day could only have gotten better from earlier.

He'd been wrong.

Bright lights flashed in his eyes and he squinted at the crowd jostling before them on the red carpet. Apparently his pretend role as bodyguard for Alexandra Valentine extended to being her pretend date at social functions when the original guy she'd lined up called off.

“Over here, Miss Valentine!” several photographers called above the steady din of the onlookers. The movie premier was for some new thriller that Alexandra wasn't even in, but it was being financed by her studio so they requested all their stardom to shine for the evening. The tie he'd worn was to match his pretend date's dress—a floor length magenta satin showstopper that hugged Alex's curves for days and showed off her exceptionally nice rack to perfection.

Not that he was looking. He was here to investigate the disappearance of her friend. That was it.

They moved about a foot farther down the red carpet and began the whole pose-smile-pose cycle all over again. Hunter would've much preferred to be back at the hotel in his room, wearing his comfy sweats and continuing his research into the sex trafficking trade here in L.A.

It was still hard to believe that Alex and her friend had been allowed to get involved in such a dangerous pursuit, acting classes or not. When Loki had first assigned him to the case, he'd mentioned Beatrix Camden's disappearance and that there might be some shady dealings involved. That had been the understatement of the century. Not that Hunter wasn't up to the challenge. He was, after all, trying to prove his abilities here. But these rings were nothing to toy with. Stories of rape, beatings, mutilations, and worse abounded on the Internet. And those were just the tip of the iceberg. Some of these groups had ties to the highest echelons of power within the mob and Columbian drug cartels. If Alex's friend had gotten too close and been sucked in, there was no telling if he'd ever be able to get her out again.

Then there was the not so small concern of them coming after Alex too. After all, if they'd discovered her friend was lying to infiltrate their network, what was to stop them from hunting Alex down and taking her as well?

Not that Hunter would let that happen. Not on his watch anyway.

But before his watch went any further tonight, he needed a drink. Preferably strong.

They'd made their way to the entrance of the auditorium at last and had just stepped inside the gilded lobby when a hand clamped down hard on Hunter's shoulder and a voice he'd not expected to hear rang in his ear.

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“Jesus, they’ll let anybody into these things, won’t they?”

Hunter turned to find his older brother, Carter, standing there in his penguin suit, some brunette he’d never seen before on his brother’s arm.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Hunter asked. “Shouldn’t you be in Ohio or something?”

“Financing, little bro,” Carter said by way of answer, sending the brunette over to the bar to get them drinks. Even though he stood six inches shorter than Hunter, Carter thought calling him “little” was the funniest thing ever. “One of my clients is looking to invest in the movie business and asked me to come out here and personally take a look at the records of several companies for him.”

“Hey,” Alex said from Hunter’s other side, tugging on his arm. “I see some friends over there. I’m going to pop by and say hi. Be right back.”

He watched her walk away, doing his best not to stare at the seductive sway of her hips. She was far more than her bombshell persona, as their conversation earlier had proven. She deserved to be treated as more than a sex object and Hunter intended to do just that. Now, if he could get his traitorous libido on board with the plan, he’d be all set.

“You tapping that?” Carter asked, sipping the bourbon his date had brought him.

Hunter gave him a side glare. “No. She’s my client. I’m doing an investigation for her.”

“Right.” Carter snorted. “Because all those adoring fans can be such a pain in the ass, huh?”

“For your information there are all sorts of threats in this town that would make your stomach turn.” He swallowed half his whiskey in one shot. “Besides, extra security is never a bad thing.”

“Security? Hell, all it took for me to walk in was a ticket and a pass through a metal detector. Not exactly high-level stuff.” Carter gave Hunter a dubious once-over. “On second thought, maybe you should stick around, little bro. You might come in handy after all.”

Growing up, Carter had always considered himself the most successful of the Odenson brothers, being a hoity-toity lawyer and all. And maybe if you went strictly by bank accounts, yeah, he was. But Hunter had done okay for himself in the Navy and their younger brother, Ben, was currently backpacking his way through Europe to find himself while he was still unattached. There were more important things in life than money, at least in Hunter’s opinion.

Alex was now circulating around the room, every once in a while glancing over to catch Hunter’s eye, and each time a tiny wave of warmth washed through him. Weird, that. Wasn’t like things were that way between them. They barely knew each other. Theirs was a totally professional relationship, but still. She struck him as a goodhearted person, if a bit lost. Hunter couldn’t pinpoint exactly why he thought that, except maybe for the fact she hid her true self behind a façade most of the time, as far as he’d been able to tell so far. That he had experience with. He was perfectly happy to let most of the world think of him as nothing more than muscle for hire, all the brawn and none of the brains. That was how most people treated him too.

“So, an investigation, huh?” Carter said, breaking into Hunter’s thoughts. “You working alone on this one?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to earn a promotion at the agency.”

“Promotion?” Carter sent the brunette back to the bar for a refill. “You should have that in the bag.”

Hunter didn’t respond, just downed the rest of his whiskey, savoring the burn on the back of his throat from the alcohol. Carter never missed an opportunity to get in a jab and he figured tonight would be no exception. He waited for the punchline to come, but it never did. Finally, he looked over at his older brother and saw him staring back with a thoughtful expression.

“What?” Carter said at last. “Can’t a guy compliment his sibling?”

“He can, but that’s not your usual MO. What gives?”

“Nothing gives.” Carter shrugged. “I just think that you’ve always been much smarter than you give yourself credit for. Add in all the strategy skills you learned in the SEALs and that’s an unbeatable combination in the business world.” He hiked his chin toward where Alexandra stood with her back to them across the room, her form-fitting dress showing off acres of creamy soft skin, and Hunter looked away fast, that tingle in his blood threatening to flash over into a wi

ldfire. “Listen, we Odenson men are the total package. You keep doing what you’re doing, little bro, and you’ll get that promotion before you know it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go schmooze with the producer to see if he’ll let me take a peek at his expense sheets. See you around.”

He strolled away with the still unnamed brunette on his arm and Hunter stood where he was, shifting his attention from his brother to Alexandra. Standing head and shoulders above everyone else in the room did have its advantages sometimes. Now was one of those times. From his vantage point, Hunter could clearly see Alex

standing beside a well-known computer guru and philanthropist, laughing and chatting. She really did have a lovely smile. And a kind heart. Not once, he realized, had she mentioned his size in a derogatory way since they'd met. For a guy who was used to taking regular slams about his bulk, that meant a lot. And it was another thing that pointed to the fact Alexandra Valentine was a whole lot smarter and deeper than her ditzy persona would suggest.

Then he spied Alexandra slipping her hand into the pocket of the computer guru's tux jacket and pull out his cell phone. Hunter's eyes widened in shock. Oh. Hell. No. America's comedy sweetheart did not just pickpocket one of Forbes' top billionaires. As he watched, she carefully slid the phone into her tiny beaded evening bag then excused herself from the group and headed back toward Hunter.

He was still gaping at her as she reached his side and took his arm, guiding him back toward the entrance.

"Let's get out of here," she said as they waved through the crowds, stopping occasionally to pose for selfies with her fans.

"Uh, what the hell did you do back there?" he asked, checking over his shoulder, expecting to see the billionaire's bodyguards barreling down on them at any second. "Why did you steal that guy's phone? Do you know who he is?"

"Of course I know who he is," she whispered as they finally reached the doors and pushed out into the cool night air. The perspiration on Hunter's skin chilled and made him shiver slightly. Alex kept a firm grip on his arm as she signaled the valet to have their limo pulled around. At least the maddening crowds had dissipated now, and things were calm and quiet once more. Well, as calm and quiet as you could get for downtown L.A. Car horns bellowed, tourists gawked and took pictures, and not one star was visible in the black velvet sky. Alex sighed. "I also know that Beatrix texted him shortly before she disappeared. I want to see if I can find the location that

message came from.”

“So you stole his phone.”

“Borrowed it. I’ll have it sent back to him when I’m done. I’ll tell him I found it on the floor or something.” She gave him a side glance, her lips tight. “Since when did you become such a stick in the mud?”

“Since forever.” He scowled. “Rules are there for a reason. Instead of committing a crime, why didn’t you ask him if you could see the phone, huh? Oh, wait. Maybe this is another part of your method acting. Trying out for a part as a petty thief next week?”

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Alex gave him a decidedly unladylike finger gesture then stepped forward as the driver came around and opened the limo door for her. “For your information, he wouldn’t have told me.”

“Why’s that?” Hunter asked, climbing into the back of the luxury car with her, his large form sinking into the buttery soft leather.

Alex waited until they’d pulled away from the curb and were merging into busy nighttime traffic on Sunset Boulevard before answering. “Because he’d never want his wife to know he goes to a sex club for kicks, that’s why.”

4

“What do you think?” Alexandra asked, coming out of her bedroom in full costume. She’d chosen a slick new black designer cat suit and a brunette wig for the night’s adventures—namely visiting Club Xcite for herself to see if she could get the lowdown on what had happened to Beatrix. Especially since her hired muscle seemed perfectly content to sit around and fiddle on his computer all night. She slid her oversized sunglasses into place and walked over to slam his laptop shut. “Hello?”

Hunter looked up slowly, as if paying attention to her was beyond tedious. “I was working.”

“Yeah? That’s funny, because last time I checked I’m not paying you and your firm to play video games. How do you like my disguise?”

“First, I was not playing.” His voice held a note of tension as did the faint lines at the

corners of his eyes. “I was gathering information from the FBI database on missing persons in the area to see if anyone else fit Beatrix’s MO. And second.” He paused to give her a slow once over. Her pulse raced a bit faster despite her wishes to the contrary. This man worked for her, was here to help find her best friend, not end up in her bed. Once his gaze settled on hers again, her skin prickled with heat. “And remind me again what you need a disguise for? Nice hair, by the way. Most natural blondes couldn’t pull off going that dark, but it suits you.”

“Thanks.” She tossed a long swath of fake hair over her shoulder then turned to grab her purse. “Since one of us needs to be actively looking for my friend, I’m going to the sex club to see what I can find out about Bea’s disappearance.”

“No.”

Alex turned back to face him, her nose scrunched. “What do you mean no?”

“You’re not going to that club. It’s too dangerous.” Hunter stood in front of her, arms crossed like a veritable wall of nope.

“Since you’re not doing anything to find my friend, I figured one of us should.” She gave him an impassive stare. “Besides, it’s too late. I’ve already set up a meeting with a known member of the trafficking ring Bea and I were trying to infiltrate. He’s expecting me.”

A flash of something—anger, fear, desire—flickered across Hunter’s eyes before he hid it behind a staunch expression of annoyance. “Cancel it. And I am doing something. I’m filling in the holes in your research so we can go at this problem with a clear picture of what we’re dealing with. Security is my job. Let me do it.”

She snorted. “Security is my job? That’s the worst line I’ve ever heard. And for your information there are no holes in my research. No one knows the details of what

we're dealing with better than me."

"You're not going anywhere tonight, Alexandra."

"Like hell I'm not." She started around him only to have him grab her wrist and haul her back around to face him. His grip was firm yet gentle, just like the rest of him. Not that she was paying attention. "Let me go."

"No."

"We're back to that again?"

He pulled her closer, the heat of him penetrating through her cat suit and the scent of skin—spicy aftershave and soap—surrounded her. "You have no idea how important this job is to me. If I can find your friend and complete this mission, I can finally get the promotion I've wanted. I will do everything in my power to find Beatrix. I promise. But you need to let me do it my own way. Please?"

The last word took her by surprise. In show business, she was unfortunately used to men forcing their own way. This guy though, he never used his size to push his advantage, at least not that she'd seen. In fact, he almost seemed to want to shrink in on himself in public, hunching his shoulders slightly to make himself look smaller. Odd for an ex-military guy. It was just one of the things about Hunter Odenson that was unexpected and made her even more intrigued.

Alex cleared her throat and shook off his touch, stepping back from him to put some distance between them. "Fine. But I'm not cancelling this meeting tonight. It was too hard to get in the first place and if I don't show up the guy might not see me again. I think he might know where Bea is and I can't risk losing the information."

"I'll go in your place," Hunter said, leaning his hips back against the table. He'd shed

his tux jacket and shoes and had undone the top couple buttons of his white shirt, exposing a tantalizing glimpse of smooth tanned flesh beneath. She had the crazy urge to run her tongue along the side of his throat, to taste the salt of his skin, to see if he was as scrumptious as he looked.

She shook her head to clear it. “No. You don’t think they’d have questions when a guy shows up in my place?”

“But you’re wearing a disguise.”

“Yes, but I still have these.” She cupped her breasts then instantly regretted it as his eyes dropped to her chest, masculine heat flaring in their gray depths. All at once her blood sizzled and molten desire pooled low and hot in her belly. This was so not good. Alex crossed her arms over her chest, hoping to hide her now-stiff nipples. “I mean, I’m still a woman. He’ll talk to me. You? Not so much.”

“Then I’m coming with you.” He pushed away from the table and headed for where his tux jacket and shoes were sitting over by the sofa. “No way I’m letting you out of my sight in that place. We can stop by my hotel on the way to the club so I can change too.”

Not exactly the way she’d planned things to go down, but they were wasting time arguing and she was tired. “Fine. But you’re only my pretend bodyguard, remember?”

He grinned and her toes might’ve curled just a little inside her black patent leather boots. Damn. Did the man have to be so sexy all the time? He opened the door, then shrugged. “Consider it my own form of method acting.”

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“You want me to what?” Hunter asked, giving Alexandra a dubious stare from the backseat of the limo they were riding in to the club. Playing her bodyguard on this case was one thing. Playing a docile submissive to her whip-carrying dominatrix character was quite another. Not that Hunter didn’t enjoy a bit of kink in his bed play to spice things up, but he was used to being in the command position.

“You heard me,” Alex said, tapping the handle of her purple leather whip against her palm. “It’s the only way this is going to work.”

The longer he sat there, the more this whole idea of attending this meeting at Club Xcite seemed like an awful idea. “I don’t think so.”

He faced forward and crossed his arms, staring out the tinted window beside him at the passing lights and scenery. Loki would be having conniptions right about now. Yeah, he was always pushing Hunter to move out of his controlling comfort zones and learn to plan strategically on the fly, but seriously. This could not be what he had in mind. Could it?

“Look, these people know me as someone else, not Alexandra Valentine. They expect me to be a strong, powerful woman.” Alex flipped the long dark hair of her wig over her shoulder to reveal a steel studded dog collar that hadn’t been there w

hen they’d left his hotel room. She must’ve pulled it out of her purse and put it on when he wasn’t looking. “If I go in there and act different than I usually do, they’ll suspect something. If we want to stay safe, you need to follow my lead.” She tossed something onto his lap with a grin. “Or leash.”

Oh. Hell. No.

“Forget it.” He shoved the braided black leather leash and collar away like it was toxic sludge. “This is ridiculous. You shouldn’t even be going inside that place. When we get there, you stay in the car and I’ll go inside and meet this guy. End of story.”

She snorted. “I can tell you exactly how that would turn out.”

“Me too. I find out what we need to know about your friend’s disappearance and you stay out of trouble. Sounds perfect to me.”

“No. You won’t even make it past the bouncers at the door. Please listen to me.” Alex leaned toward him, enough to give him a nice view right down the front of the open, unzipped front of her cat suit. Through the shadows he glimpsed creamy skin and scarlet lace and an unwanted flick of fire seared through his veins. He swallowed hard and stared down at his hands clenched tight on the seat on either side of his jeans-clad legs. “Bea and I spent months developing these contacts. These people trust me, as much as they trust anyone. Bea’s life is on the line here. Please don’t make this any harder than it already is, okay?”

The word “harder” made his cock twitch against his consent. Hunter growled and shook his head. “There need to be rules, contingency plans in case something goes wrong. We haven’t had time to establish any of that. We’re attacking this problem blind and that goes against all my training.”

The limo stopped near the curb outside a non-descript looking brick building in what appeared to be a warehouse industrial district. A perfect location for discretion or acts of the nefarious variety. Hunter’s growing unease burst into full-blown paranoia. On the pavement outside loitered what looked like an assortment of drug dealers, pimps, and mob thugs, with the occasional hooker thrown in.

“No way. We’re not doing this tonight. You call your contact back and tell him something came up. We’ll meet with him later. Driver—”

“No.” Alex’s commanding tone cut through the tension in the car like a scalpel.

Shock, more than anything else, shut Hunter up. He glanced back at her over his shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“I said no.” She gave him a hard stare. There went that tap-tap of the whip again and damn if he didn’t feel those soft, muffled hits straight in his groin. His traitorous cock was now at half-staff and Hunter felt more confused than ever. This was not him, not who he was. He was a leader, the guy everyone else looked to in tough situations. Yet this petite blonde, with her tantalizing curves and diamond-bright eyes, had him pounding with want and desperate to do her bidding with just a sharp word. Perhaps there was more to this method acting than he’d given her credit for. “Now open the goddamned door and get out of the car before I make you get out.”

From the determined set of her soft pink lips and the glint of power in her gaze, Hunter had no doubt she’d make good on her promise. His pulse kicked up a notch, whether from adrenaline or desire, he wasn’t sure. But he found himself reaching for the door handle and opening it, climbing out onto the pavement then reaching back inside to help Alex out.

Hell, he even stood still and bent a little to make it easier for her to fasten that damned collar and leash around his neck. What the absolute fuck was happening to him?

“Come,” she said, walking several steps ahead of him toward the club, leading him around like the dog he now felt like. Thank God Loki and Camden weren’t around to see his humiliation. He’d never hear the end of it. Even so, there was something about surrendering his will, about letting her take charge of him, about allowing

her—trusting her—to take care of him, that was infinitely seductive. And infinitely exciting. He was hard as a rock now, had been from the minute she'd put the leash on him, and he'd damned near embarrassed himself when she'd said the word come.

They stopped at a black painted door and Alex looked up confidently at the hulking bouncer standing guard at the entrance. "Hello, Tim."

"Mistress," the guy said, bowing his head slightly.

Hunter raised a brow, but otherwise didn't comment.

"We're here for a meeting with Louis."

"Yes, mistress. Go on through." The guard eyed Hunter warily as he passed through the door behind Alex, but he didn't try to stop him. Huh. Maybe Alex did have a special touch around here. Her "touch" certainly seemed to be working on him anyway.

On the surface, the interior of Club Xcite was pretty much like any other nightclub Hunter had been in back in Virginia where he lived—black walls, black furniture, black floors to hide the dirt. Alternating strobe lights and disco balls hanging from the ceiling lit the space in a kaleidoscope of rainbow colors and alcohol flowed freely. Electronic dance music throbbed through the overhead sound system and the air smelled of warm bodies, piped in air freshener, and certain illicit substances.

"This way," Alex said, leading him through the melee of people toward a set of red-painted doors set in the back wall of the club. Hunter guessed that one of them led to the secret "party" rooms in the back, where VIPs gathered for fun and festivities. Or, in the case of this place, quickie sex and illegal shenanigans. The other door, though, he wasn't so sure about. Could be a second entrance to the back, he supposed. But that didn't make much sense. It was harder to keep track of two doors instead of one

and control the flow of people in and out. If this club was a front for a sex trafficking ring, as Alex had said and the evidence suggested, then those in charge would want to keep as much control as possible. Which meant that second door wasn't an entrance to a brothel. More likely it led to the offices of the manager then.

They stopped outside the door on the right and Alex spoke to another beefy guard stationed there. It took all of Hunter's willpower to remain docile and silent while she flirted her way into the room. His SEAL-trained instincts demanded he take charge, command this mission, put himself between Alex and whatever danger lay beyond that door. But given the malevolent looks the guard was giving him at that point, unless he also wanted a hard punch to the face, he'd best do as Alex told him to do and bide his time.

Soon, the guard bowed slightly and waved them through the door, his gaze locked on Alex's swaying hips as she walked into the office with Hunter following obediently behind her. The room was surprisingly well-lit and tidy, compared to the chaos in the club beyond. A portly bald guy with beady black eyes and tattoos clawing up his neck watched them from behind a desk. Still more guards flanked him on each side, dressed in leather and sunglasses, despite the late hour.

"Mistress Alex," the man said, his gaze running over her lasciviously. "To what do I owe the honor?"

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“I’m here to discuss a deal with you,” she said. “One that could be mutually beneficial.”

“The only deal I’m willing to make is the one that lets me fuck your brains out right here on this desk, you bitch,” the fat guy snarled. “How dare you invade my personal space like this without an invitation?”

Hunter started to respond, but Alex yanked hard on his leash, choking him and causing him to stumble, off balance as he coughed and hacked, Hunter crashed to his knees near her stiletto booted feet. Mortified, he caught his breath as all eyes in the room landed on him.

Good thing the other guys weren’t here. He’d never hear the end of this shit.

Alex stared down at him with a harsh glare. “So hard to find good slaves these days.”

He wanted to tell her exactly where she could shove her comment, but the mission was too important to risk. Hunter kept quiet through sheer force of will, staring up at her with warning in his eyes. When they got out of here, there was going to be hell to pay.

“Which is what I wanted to talk to you about, sir,” Alex said, continuing. She perched on the se

at of a leather wing chair in front of the desk and tightened her grip on Hunter’s leash, keeping him on his knees. “I crave fresh blood.”

“And I crave my face buried between your thighs,” the guy said.

Just like that, Alex cracked her whip hard across the desk, the tail snapping through the air with precision, flicking the end of the guy’s nose. Seconds later a trickle of red blossomed on his ruddy skin. Wherever the hell she’d learned to do that, even Hunter had to admit it was pretty fucking impressive.

The guards went to pull their weapons and Alex used her whip again, this time to disarm them and leave them gaping at her, astonished. The fat man blustered in his seat, dabbing the end of his nose with a tissue. “What the fuck is wrong with you? What do you want?”

“Slaves.” One of the guards moved to grab his weapon from the floor where it had fallen and Alex stretched her whip tight between her hands with deadly promise. “Try it and you’ll regret it.”

Hunter reconsidered his opinion that she needed his bodyguard skills. Honestly, any woman who could wield a whip like that could take care of herself and any problems that came her way. Despite the situation, he felt his body responding to her confident authority again. Damn. He’d always been a sucker for strong women.

“What the fuck makes you think I know where to get you slaves?” the club manager asked, his words somewhat muffled behind the tissue blotting his nose.

“I’ve been hanging out at Club Xcite a long time. Let’s not play these games, eh?” Alex flashed him a sinister, cold smile. “I’m well aware of the activities you partake in behind closed doors. The girls that are run like chattel through here. Now, I’m in need of new sex slaves for my pleasure and you can procure them for me. Tell me when and where and I’ll pay you handsomely for your time and services.”

“How do I know you ain’t no cop?”

“You’ve seen me in the club. You know me. Have I ever reported anything I’ve seen in here?”

The manager sat back, tossing his bloody tissue in the trash as he appeared to consider her deal. “What’s wrong with your boy toy there? Can’t get it up anymore?”

Hunter tensed under the lies, but kept his gaze steadfast on the floor. Let this stupid fucker think whatever he wanted. In the end, they were all going down.

“He gets it up just fine, but won’t listen worth a damn. I’ve tried repeatedly to beat it out of him but he requires a stronger hand than mine to break him.” She gave Hunter a side glance, her pink mouth turning up into a half smile. “I’ll be sending him to a friend of mine back east to train him properly. Until I get him back, however, I need replacements. That’s where you come in.”

The guy sat silently, staring at Alex so long that Hunter thought perhaps he hadn’t heard her. Hunter ran through his head what he’d do if things went to shit. There was a gun on the floor about three feet to his right. If he dove fast, he might get to it before the guard and could shoot their way out of what was fast becoming a claustrophobic space. If not, then he’d tug Alex onto the floor with him and try to shield her body with his as best he could while they made for the door. Chances were good either way they wouldn’t make it.

Fuck.

Finally, the manager sat forward and clasped his hands atop his desk, his black gaze narrowed. Hunter’s thudding heart felt lodged in his throat, and his breath seized in his lungs, ready for action. “You’re right, mistress. You’ve proven yourself trustworthy.” He rubbed the end of his raw nose. “Present actions excepted.” He took a deep breath and smiled. “I have a new shipment coming in tomorrow night. Find an adequate safe house to keep them in and you can have first pick.”

Hunter exhaled slowly, his mind racing. This was good. Totally unexpected, but good. And Norse Security had safe houses all over the country. Surely they'd have one here in the L.A. area. He'd call the team's resident tech guru and all-around information god, Camden, and ask him once he and Alex were safely out of here.

"Perfect." Alex stood and tugged on the leash again, waiting until Hunter stumbled to his feet before heading for the door. "As a member of the club, you've got my cell number on file. Call me when the shipment arrives and I'll give you the location."

6

Alex managed to hide her trembling until they were safely back in the limo, but then she couldn't stop her shivering. God, talk about an adrenaline rush. Sure she was used to playing a dominatrix in the club, but she'd never had so much riding on it before, nor had she had a slave at her feet. Speaking of her slave...

She winced as she looked over at Hunter, who was taking off his collar and rubbing the bruised flesh underneath. "Sorry about that. Guess I got carried away a bit with my role. But I was afraid if I told you too much before we went in, you'd never agree to it."

"Don't worry about it," Hunter said absently, pulling out his phone to dial. He'd shifted back into the cool remote guy who couldn't seem to care less whether she existed or not. Normally, Alex wouldn't mind. She wasn't in the habit of chasing men who obviously weren't interested, but damn if she hadn't liked having the powerful Hunter crouched at her feet. Maybe more than she cared to admit.

As they left the industrial warehouses behind and headed back toward downtown L.A. Alex pulled off her wig and glasses, doing her best to pick up tidbits of information from Hunter's one-sided conversation. So far, she'd learned he was talking to someone named Camden and they seemed to work together at the security

agency.

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“Yeah, we need the nearest safe house in town,” Hunter said, staring out the window beside him and ignoring Alex completely. She couldn’t help giving him a slow once-over through the shadows. He did look fine in his tight black T-shirt and soft faded jeans, those powerful thighs and broad shoulders sparking a river of molten heat through her bloodstream. If things had been different and Bea wasn’t missing, Hunter was exactly the type of man she’d go for—tall, dark, dangerously sexy and smart. Infinitely mysterious and powerful. And surprisingly, he’d gone along with her act in the club with hardly a protest. Could it be that he secretly craved a woman to take charge in the bedroom? Through Club Xcite, she’d met a lot of men who ran multi-billion dollar companies during the day, and wanted nothing more than to remain on their knees at night. Was Hunter one of them?

He ended his call then set his phone aside. “We’ve got our safe house set up. My buddy Camden’s going to text me with the location soon.”

His assumption that she didn’t already have a plan rubbed her the wrong way. “Maybe I had one set up too.”

“Yeah?” Hunter gave her a dubious stare. “Where’d you find it? Safe Houses R Us? It’s not like there’s a listing site on the Internet, you know.”

“I know that. I’m not the ditzy blonde I play on screen.”

“No, you’re not.” His gaze turned inquiring. “Where’d you learn to use a whip like that?”

Alex crossed her arms and looked away, feeling far too exposed under his scrutiny.

“Italy. I learned from a dungeon master in Florence. She was amazing. And you’ve obviously never seen my movie, *Bad Cops 3: Alarmingly Armed*. The production company execs were the ones who paid for all my training. My role in that film was as a dominatrix wrongly accused of murdering her sub—a famous politician.”

“Huh.” Hunter shook his head. “Guess I should pay more attention.”

“Guess you should.” She watched the passing lights for a while before asking, “So, where’s this safe house your friend has?”

He squinted down at his screen then smiled. “We can check it out now, if you want. Cam just unlocked it.”

“Is he in town?”

“Nah. He’s a computer whiz, so he can do pretty much anything with technology.” Hunter leaned forward to give the address to the driver then slumped back in his seat. “We’ll need to make a few modifications to fit our needs, but it looks like it’ll work out good. And it’s fairly close to the club, which will make transport easier.”

The thought of Bea being shuttled around to God knew where—alone, scared, quite possibly hurt or abused—made Alex’s stomach churn. “And this place is secure?”

“As secure as we can make it. I’ll add some booby traps too, to give us an extra jump if someone tries to break in.”

“Booby traps?” Alex scrunched her nose, tired and cranky now. “Sounds silly, like a bunch of high school pranks or something.”

Hunter’s expression hardened as he turned his full attention to her. “First, the traps I’ll set are nothing like childish pranks. And second, do you have any idea how

demeaning you are when you say shit like that? I'm a fucking ex-Navy SEAL. I've lived through horrors you can't even imagine. I've survived because of my skills on the battlefield. If anyone can stop a bunch of ill-trained guards and a fat-ass sex club boss, it's me."

Alex crossed her arms and stared out the window, feeling both ashamed over what she'd said to Hunter and admiration for his response.

They pulled up outside a non-descript white ranch-style home on a quiet suburban street a few minutes later. Alex got out without waiting for Hunter and walked around the limo to stand on the sidewalk in front of the house. It looked like something straight out of a fifties TV sitcom.

"Let's get inside before the neighbors notice us snooping." Hunter walked up to the door and punched a code into the tiny keypad on the wall. Soon the lock snicked open

and they walked inside. The lights must've been on some kind of motion detector because they came on automatically as Alex passed through the living room into the open kitchen then into a small laundry room and down the hall to the three bedrooms. He followed at a more leisurely pace, texting on his phone the whole time, messaging his buddy back in Virginia, Alex assumed.

"Cam says there's a safe room in here too." Hunter led her into the master bedroom with an unimpressive but clean attached bath. He pulled open the walk in closet and shoved aside the few garments hanging in there to reveal a steel door with another keypad in the back wall. "Hold this."

Alex took the phone he handed her and watched as Hunter punched in another code. The steel door slid aside to reveal a small fully stocked studio apartment, complete with flat screen monitors on the walls, a mini-fridge, toilet, sink, cot, and cases of bottled water. It was enough for at least a month's stay, if not longer. "Wow. Good

thing I'm not scared of enclosed spaces.”

If she stretched out her arms, her fingers nearly touched the walls. Then again, a safe room wasn't made for comfort, but for security. The shiny metal walls were bulletproof, she assumed.

“It's bombproof too,” Hunter said, as if reading her thoughts. “Still want to go searching for something better on the Internet?”

She ignored his jab and shook her head. “No, I guess this is adequate.”

“So glad it meets with her highness's approval.” Hunter snorted and rubbed the reddened skin on his neck again. “Excuse me if I don't kneel.”

“You're not going to let me forget that, are you?” Hands on hips, she stared him down across the small space. “It's called acting. Method acting, in case you forgot. I'm good at what I do, what can I say?”

“Oh, you're good all right.” He took a step closer as the overhead fluorescent lights flickered. “Just keep your whips and collars to yourself from now on.”

“I didn't hear you complaining about it when you had it on.”

“Lady, I—” Hunter stepped closer, only inches away now as his heat and citrus-spicy scent surrounded her. Whatever he'd been about to say was cut off by the sound of the steel door swishing closed. Seconds later an ominous beep sounded and the lights dimmed. “What the fuck?” He texted furiously on his phone. “Thank God we've got service in here.”

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“Hunter, what’s happening?” Alex asked, staying close to him. Small spaces weren’t her favorite thing, but she could deal. It was the thought they might be locked inside that bothered her most. Once when she’d been little she’d accidentally locked herself inside her dad’s tool shed in the back yard. Her parents had been gone at the time and the babysitter was more interested in her boyfriend than Alex’s whereabouts. By the time anyone found her she was cold and hungry and had wet herself. It had been humiliating. “Please say we can get out of here.”

“Um.” He scowled at his screen. “Cam says there’s some technical glitch on his end and the safe room is on a timer. Apparently, we’re stuck in here until six o’clock tomorrow morning.”

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“What?” Hunter asked, realizing how ridiculous his answer sounded. “I’m telling you the truth. Cam says there’s nothing he can do about the time. It kicks on at midnight. It’s twelve-oh-five now. See?”

Alex squinted at his phone screen then sighed. “Where are we supposed to sleep in here?”

“You can take the cot against the wall. I’ll bunk down on the floor.” He shut off his phone to conserve the battery then shoved it into his back pocket. Figured they’d get stuck in here. His timing had felt off since before they’d went to that damned club tonight. There was something about Alex that seemed to get all his well-ordered plans into a snit. At least they didn’t have to worry about anyone attacking them in here. Things were locked up tighter than a drum. He checked the door and the keypad to be

sure. “Are you hungry?”

“Not really. I do have to...you know.” She glanced awkwardly back at the toilet in the corner. Right. Privacy seemed to be the one thing they didn’t have in here.

He wandered back there and luckily found a pull out screen to at least make things a bit more discreet. “There you go. I’ll, uh, hang out on the other end of the room and maybe pop some popcorn. I could go for a snack about now.”

“Great. Thanks.” Her tone sounded less than enthused as she walked behind the screen. Soon, the sound of her grumbling filled the air. “Uh, I don’t supposed there’s any spare clothes in this room, is there? This cat suit is sexy, but it’s not exactly comfortable long term.”

“Let me take a look.” Hunter started digging through the plastic storage containers, glad for the distraction. Luckily, he found a bin full of plain white T-shirts, basic men’s and women’s undies, socks and gray sweatpants. He grabbed a set of things for each of them, then closed the bin and shoved it back into place. He hung her things over the top of the screen for her. “There you go. Not exactly magazine-cover ready, but they’re clean and comfy.”

While Alex took care of business at one end of the room, Hunter changed clothes at the other. Truthfully, he was exhausted. It had been a long-ass day that had started out wonky and had only gone downhill from there. Hopefully tomorrow they could start fresh and make better choices.

Once he’d pulled on his sweats and T-shirt, he folded his clothes and put them aside then opened a pack of microwave popcorn and set it to popping. Soon, the air filled with the delectable smell of butter and his stomach rumbled. He cracked open a bottled water and drank half in one long swallow before grabbing the remote for the flat screens on the wall and clicking them on. If he was lucky, maybe they could pick

up some local channels at least so he could watch the news. Hunter liked to keep informed of current events. In his business, it could mean the difference between success and failure. He zipped through the security feeds then several black screens of nothing before finally finding a local network affiliate.

“Thanks for finding these,” Alex said, coming around the screen at last. She had her leather cat suit tucked under one arm and her T-shirt tied around her hips, he assumed to help keep up the too-big sweatpants she was swimming in. Still, she looked adorable and sweet and he had to tamp down the nearly irresistible urge to hug her and kiss her silly. Alex set her clothes on the end of the cot then washed her hands at the sink, drying them on a dishtowel. “That popcorn smells pretty good actually.”

“Help yourself.” Hunter’s words emerged gruffer than he’d intended, his throat suddenly constricted. He coughed and headed for the toilet himself. “Uh, excuse me a minute.”

“Sure.” Pretty pink colored her cheeks as she turned away. “I’ll, uh, get the popcorn in a bowl.”

“Sounds good.” Hunter disappeared behind the screen and leaned his head against the cool metal wall, hoping his reactions to her weren’t as apparent as they felt. Awareness and want throbbed through him like a tribal beat. He was hardly some blushing virgin, but Jesus. He’d never had such a strong need for a woman before. It felt chemical, elemental, inevitable. That last one scared him more than anything. The last person in the world he should be thinking about getting involved with was Alexandra Valentine. They were too different. Hell, they even lived on different sides of the country. They had separate careers, separate lives, separate goals and hopes and dreams. But as he stood there, listening to the sound of her soft hums as she worked in the tiny kitchenette, Hunter couldn’t help picturing her in his bed, in his life.

Sighing, he flushed the toilet then straightened his clothes before emerging from behind the screen and washing his hands at the sink. “I can make another bag of popcorn if we need it.”

“Way ahead of you, dude.” Alex pointed at the microwave where a fresh bag popped. “Take a seat on the cot and enjoy.”

As they sat there watching late-night talk shows and stuffing their faces, Hunter couldn’t remember a night when he’d had more fun just hanging out with someone than he did with Alex. Eventually, he yawned and moved to se

t the bowl aside without disturbing her. She’d fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder. He’d planned on sleeping on the floor, but it couldn’t hurt anything to snooze up here, at least for a little while. Hunter grabbed the covers and pulled them up over their legs, his back resting against the metal wall and his arm around Alex as he closed his eyes and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

8

The next time Alex opened her eyes, it was to see the metal door to the safe room sliding open and the awareness of something warm beneath her cheek. She shifted slightly to look up into Hunter’s sleeping face, his quiet snores fluttering the hair near her temple. He looked so peaceful, so relaxed, so damned gorgeous her chest ached.

Which was bad. So, so bad.

This guy was here to help find Bea. He was playing the part of doting bodyguard because she was paying him to do it. Last night, at the club, he’d submitted to her demands because she’d left him no choice. Luckily, her idea had paid off and they’d gotten the club boss to agree to send over the new batch of sex slaves—a group Bea would hopefully be a part of. Alex knew that each day her friend was missing put

another nail in Bea's coffin, but she couldn't give up. She and Bea had been through far too much together, both inside and outside this mess. Bea was one of the first people she'd met after moving to Hollywood. Bea kept her grounded, kept her true to her art form. Bea always said that the only way to give an honest performance was to become the character for a while. That's what had gotten them into this disaster.

And if the club boss had truly bought her big, bad dominatrix act last night, then that just might be what got them out of it too.

Hunter stirred, yawning hugely before blinking down at her with drowsy, hooded eyes. "Good morning."

His sleep-roughened voice sent a thrill of need straight through her, but Alex resisted the urge to curl around him and kiss him until they both forgot about leaving this room and this house and just decided to stay in bed and make love all day. That wouldn't help them find Bea. Nor would it go over very well with the producer of the TV show she was booked to shoot today.

After stretching, Alex pushed away from Hunter reluctantly and stood. "Morning."

He rubbed a hand over his face then checked his watch. "Five after six. Seems Cam was right for once."

"Yeah." She looked away from his rumpled appearance and sexy stubble-covered jaw and slowly backed out of the room. "I'm, uh, going to hit the shower. Busy day ahead."

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“Right.” Hunter got up too, his expression unreadable, but a hint of disappointment in his tone. “You take the master bath. I’ll use the guest one down the hall. What time do you have to be on set?”

“Producer wants me there at eight.” She waved a hand over her outfit. “I’ll need to go back to my house to change first though.”

“Sure. Fine.” Hunter grabbed their clothes from the night before then followed her out of the safe room and back into the rest of the house. The metal door hissed shut behind them and he punched in the lock code on the keypad. “Meet you in the living room in forty-five minutes then.”

“Sounds good.” Alex took her cat suit and boots from him then watched him walk away, feeling oddly bereft. Silly, since they weren’t involved in any way other than professionally. Forget about the fact she’d snoozed last night away in his arms or that he’d made the warmest, cuddliest pillow she’d ever had. They were partners in finding Bea. That had to be her top priority now. Her only priority.

After a quick shower, she pulled last night’s outfit back on, feeling more like a hooker and less like a strong, confident dominatrix in the harsh light of day. She twisted her damp blond hair up into a messy top knot, neatly folded the sweats and T-shirt she’d worn to sleep in, then zipped up her boots and headed for the living room where Hunter was already waiting. He looked as handsome and hard-edged as usual in his wrinkled T-shirt and jeans.

“I just got off the phone with Cam and Loki at my agency,” he said when she walked in, his gaze darting to her before quickly looking away again. Perhaps she wasn’t the

only one affected by this sizzling connection between them. “Loki wants you wearing a tracking device whenever you’re out in public now. In case they decide to snatch you too. I’ve got one in my stuff at the hotel. I’ll have the driver stop there first so I can pack and check out, then we’ll head to your place so you can change and I can get you wired up.”

“Is that really necessary?” Alex sat down at the opposite end of the beige sofa from Hunter. “Seems kind of invasive. I doubt the boss is going to come after me, at least not until they deliver the sex slaves.”

“I’m sure Bea didn’t think they’d take her either,” Hunter said, his gaze lowered. “I’m here to find her, but I’m also here to keep you safe. I can’t do that if I don’t know where you are.”

“How big is this tracking device?” she asked. She’d have wardrobe changes on the set today and didn’t want to have to deal with nosy questions from the dressers.

“Not big. The one Cam gave me is about the size of a chocolate chip. They’re made to slip into someone’s pocket or purse without them knowing.” He pulled it out and held it up. Yep. Looked like a tiny black square. “I’m guessing it won’t be long before the sex boss makes the connection between his cat suit-wearing Dom and America’s comedy sweetheart. Your disguise was good, but it wasn’t that good. This will allow me and the team to keep track of you no matter what.”

“Huh, okay. Very James Bond of you.” Alex laughed. “Time to get our spy on, huh?”

“To act the spy, you must be the spy.” Hunter winked. “Did I get that right?”

“Close enough.” She peeked out the curtains behind them and spotted the limo pulling up to the curb. Alex also noticed several neighbors taking note of the new arrival. Guess she’d have to ditch her private driver for the time being. “We’ll be

staying here until we get Bea back then?”

“Yeah.” Hunter stood and shoved his phone into his back pocket. “Cam’s going to walk me through some adjustments to the security system here so that the guys back at the Norse Security offices back in Virginia can monitor what happens here as well. We don’t want anything slipping through the cracks.”

“Okay then.” Alex crossed her arms, feeling unsettled. Being an actress meant she was used to the spotlight during her working hours, but not so much in the privacy of her home. Still, she’d put up with just about anything to save her friend. “We should get going. Don’t want to be late for my job.”

By the time Hunter got checked out of his hotel and Alex got changed and a bag packed to take to the safe house, it was nearly time for her to be on set. Miraculously, the driver maneuvered through the mid-morning traffic and got her there only a few minutes late. She apologized profusely to the director who graciously didn’t dwell on it.

Hunter stayed close as Alex made her way through hair and makeup and wardrobe, not getting in the way, but hovering on the perimeter of things. Always watching. She could feel the weight of his stare on her even though she wasn’t looking at him, and she found it oddly comforting.

Her part today was a kindergarten teacher who comforted a child in her class after he’d been bullied. The kid playing the part of the bullied student was the child star of the TV show and single-handedly brought in the second-quarter revenue for the network. Impressive stuff for a boy of nine. Hunter remained just off set as the director blocked out their scene and ran through their lines with them before shooting the first of many dailies for the editing department to use. Between takes, Alex found herself toying with the tracking device in her pocket, glad for its presence, and feeling somehow more closely connected to Hunter because of it.

Finally, the emotional comforting scene was ready to shoot and they closed the set to all non-essential personnel. Alex somehow convinced the director that Hunter was essential, so he stood off to the side, watching everything.

When it was over, both Alex and the kid were crying and she knew deep inside that she'd given a good performance. Funny thing though, when she searched for Hunter, he was nowhere to be found. Strange, after he'd hovered so close all day. After watching the digital takes with the crew and getting the all-clear from the director, Alex asked some of the stagehands if they'd seen Hunter. They pointed her toward a side door where he'd stepped outside for some air, he'd said.

Sure enough, she found him leaning against the side of the white-washed metal building, staring off into the distance, his usual icy façade brooding. She walked over to him and leaned back against the warm metal beside him. "I wondered where you got to."

He shrugged, but remained silent.

"Everything okay?" she continued to prod, sensing everything was most certainly not okay.

"I don't want to talk about it." Hunter shoved away from the wall and she reached out to take his wrist, stopping him when he turned his back on her. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Alex asked. After waking up in his arms this morning, and knowing that he was tracking her every move, she felt like she knew him, felt like they shared something that she wasn't quite ready to walk away from yet. "What's wrong? Please tell me. Is it Bea? Did you find out where she is? Did you find—"

She stopped abruptly, fearing the worst. Oh God. Had they found Bea's body? Was she gone, dead, never to return? Bile rose in Alex's throat before she swallowed it

down hard. If anything happened to Bea, she'd never forgive herself.

"No." Hunter swore under his breath, facing her once more. "Nothing like that." He raked a hand through his short dark hair, still in that military buzz cut ex-soldiers the world over seemed to love. "It's that scene...the one you were shooting in there. I just..." His gruff voice trailed off and he turned away. "Forget it. It's stupid. Never mind."

Intrigued now, Alex let her hand slide down until she laced her fingers with his. "Tell me. Did you not like the scene?"

Dots of crimson colored his high, tanned cheekbones and he kept his eyes lowered. "It was fine. You're a really good actress. So is the kid. Maybe too g

ood."

“How do you mean?”

“He reminded me of someone.”

“Who?”

“Me.” He shook his head and gave a humorless chuckle. “Hard to believe, right? This brick wall of muscle was bullied as a kid? But it’s true. In a lot of ways, it’s shaped who I am today.”

“I’m so sorry that happened to you,” Alex said. She squeezed his hand tighter in a show of support. “No child ever deserves to experience that.”

Hunter moved back in beside her again, leaning against the building, but not pulling his hand free from hers. “I was a big kid, always the tallest in my class from first grade on. Because I grew so fast, I wasn’t exactly the most graceful guy around. Took me a while to figure out how to move right with all this extra height and bulk, how not to intimidate people with my size.” He shrugged, his smile sad. “Anyway, because of all this, I was pretty awkward and shy, didn’t talk much in class or out of it. I did spend a lot of time watching people though, sizing them up. There was this one guy, Tommy Martin. He was a real prick. Used to bully pretty much everybody but me in class. Seems like every week he’d pick a new target. Well, one day, I’d had enough. I decided I’d come up with this elaborate plan to stop him.” He laughed, the sound deep and self-deprecating and the sheer intimacy of it made Alex’s toes curl inside her shoes. “Don’t even ask me what the plan was because I don’t remember now. The only thing that comes to memory is that it was complex and involved three paperclips and a yoga mat. Hey, what can I say? I was a fan of MacGyver back in the

day.” Hunter laughed and Alex giggled. “So, I had this plan and I was going to trap him in his bullying and then humiliate him in front of the class. Except this all took place during math and right when I was about to start, the teacher called on me to answer her question. Hell, at that point I didn’t even remember my name, let alone what the fuck she’d asked me. I ended up looking like a total doofus in front of everyone, including Tommy, who never let me forget it after that. Even the teacher joined in, telling me that it was a good thing I was big and athletic because I’d never amount to anything academically.”

“That’s awful.” Alex’s heart ached for the boy he’d been and the hurting man he was now. “I’m so sorry, Hunter. She had no right to say that. And look at you now, you’re smart and accomplished and you’ve achieved so much in your life.” When he didn’t look at her, she tried a line from the scene, thinking it might lighten the mood. “Hey, niceness is priceless.”

Instead, it only earned her a dubious look from Hunter.

“Seriously?” This time he did pull away, his demeanor shifting from friendly to frosty. “If you’re done in there, we should get back to the safe house. I’ve got a lot of work to do with Cam on the security system to get things set up.”

Alex sighed as he walked away, feeling like an idiot. He’d opened up to her and she fed him a stupid line from the script as though his pain meant nothing. As she went back inside to change and grab her stuff, she hoped she’d get a chance to explain herself and make it up to him later.

Hunter finished tweaking the last of the hidden security cameras at the safe house according to Cam’s instructions. “Are you getting the feed?”

“Hang on,” Cam said over the speaker phone. In the background, the sounds of Everly—Cam’s soon-to-be wife—and their newborn baby cooing echoed through the line. Hunter felt a pang of loneliness deep in his chest. He’d always wanted a family of his own someday, but first the military life and later his work for Norse Security wasn’t exactly conducive to settling down. Lately though, it seemed to be on his mind more and more.

Maybe it was Cam settling down or maybe it was the breezy California lifestyle.

Whatever it was, he didn’t want to be thinking about that right now. Not with his promotion in the balance and the life of Alex’s friend at stake. There’d be plenty of time to dream about a spouse and kids and something to come home to besides frozen dinners and a cold bed after he successfully wrapped up this mission.

“Yep. Got visual. Have the actress go to the basement and say something so I can confirm audio down there,” Cam said.

“Alex?” Hunter called from atop his ladder. She peeked around the corner from the kitchen, frowning at her phone screen. “Run downstairs and say something so we can confirm sound works down there.”

She looked up at him and raised a brow.

“Please?” Hunter amended.

Alex raised her chin and walked to the stairs with the regal air of a queen. Seconds later he heard through his earpiece, “Check one, two, three.”

“Got it,” he said.

“Got it here too,” Cam confirmed. “Awesome. You should be all set for the sting.”

“Great.” Hunter sounded about as enthused as he felt, which wasn’t much. Not that he didn’t want to find Alex’s friend and wrap this up as quickly as possible, but the thought of dealing with that scumbag from the sex club again made him sick. He hated bullies of all kinds, but there was a special place in hell for people who hurt women, children, the elderly, and animals. Basically anyone smaller or more vulnerable than themselves.

Hunter closed up the camera he’d been working on, then climbed down off the ladder. “I’ll text you guys when the meeting with the boss is set up,” he said to Cam before tapping his earpiece to end the call.

“About the meeting,” Alex said from behind him, back upstairs again. “I just got a message from the manager at Club Xcite. He said the boss will be here tonight at nine to check out the location and make sure it’s adequate for their needs and secure enough for their business affairs. And we’ll have to plan on having at least ten people to house. From the shipments I’ve seen come in through the club before that’s an average number.”

Scowling, Hunter texted the info to the guys then stalked past Alex to grab a bottled water from the fridge in the kitchen. They’d done all they could to get this place ready. Depending on the number of girls and men the boss had, they could easily accommodate six in the basement and a couple more upstairs if need be. He’d made sure there were sufficient bathroom facilities, bedding and food for that many, plus him and Alex. Wasn’t much left to do now except wait. He cracked open his bottle and took a long drink before watching Alex over the rim. “Guess that means I’ll be your boy toy again, huh?”

“It’s what the boss will be expecting, given last night.”

“Yep.” Hunter squeezed his bottle harder than intended, the plastic crackling loudly in the quiet house. It wasn’t the submission that bothered him, it was how being

under the control of this particular woman affected him. Jesus. He damned near embarrassed himself in that club, his cock hard as iron and all his senses completely attuned to her. All it took was one crack of that whip of hers and he was all but begging for her. And that was unacceptable, especially tonight. He'd need all his wits about him to stay on top of the situation and handle things if he needed to. "What time is it now?"

"Going on seven." She leaned her hips back against the counter opposite him and shrugged. "Hungry?"

Yes. His cock twitched despite his will. She'd meant for food, he knew that. Hunter cleared his throat and turned to face the sink, shoving his wicked thoughts aside. "We should eat now, if we're going to, then get ready." He hazarded a glance back at her over his shoulder. "I want everything planned out between us so there are no surprises on our end."

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“Yes, sir.” She gave him a mock salute then held out several takeout menus. “What do you want? Pizza, subs, or Chinese?”

“Where’d you find those?” Hunter asked.

“In the drawer over there. Why?”

“No reason. They must be leftover from a previous mission here.” Most likely from Loki, who had a penchant for junk food and tended to eat when he was stressed. He stared at the menus in her hand. “I honestly don’t care. You pick.” She handed him the menu from a place called the Double Dragon and he picked out his usual. “Kung Pao Chick

en and an eggroll.”

“Spicy, huh?” She grinned. “No problem. I’ll call it in and have it delivered.”

“Thanks. And make sure you tell your limo driver to take off now. I don’t want that sex boss to send thugs over here to check it out ahead of time and find a limo parked out front. We’re taking enough chances with you going to your film sets every day. Why make it any easier for them to connect your dots?”

She nodded and wandered into the living room to call the restaurant while he kept busy setting out plates and silverware and napkins. Alex eventually walked back in and set her phone on the counter to charge. “I don’t think I said it before, but thanks.”

“For what?” Hunter looked up at her from setting the table.

“For setting this up.” Her voice was uncharacteristically demure. “And for earlier. I like that you told me about you getting bullied as a kid. It makes us seem closer somehow.”

“Hmm.” Embarrassed heat prickled up from beneath the collar of his gray T-shirt. He’d not meant to spill his guts like that and tell her about his issues growing up, but he’d been upset and she’d been there and there was something about Alex that made it so easy for him to talk to her. He turned away to grab a couple glasses from the cabinet. “Whatever.”

“Not whatever,” she protested. “That was obviously a defining moment for you, an incident that hurt you deeply and helped form the man you are now. I feel like I can relate to you better.”

“Perfect.” He plunked the glasses down on the table, not wanting to get into all that again. Not now when they had that asshole from the club about to show up in a few hours and pollute the place. “How long until the food gets here?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Cool. I’m going to go take a shower and change for tonight.” He stalked out of the kitchen, barking orders as he went. “Don’t let anyone in and don’t answer the landline if it rings. Wait until I’m back out here before you shower or change. Understand?”

When she didn’t say anything, Hunter turned around to see her giving him another salute, this one of the one-fingered variety. He hurried into his bedroom to hide his smile. She didn’t take any shit from him, and damn if he didn’t like that. After he stripped, showered and shaved, he pulled on a clean pair of faded jeans and another black T-shirt, same uniform as the night before for consistency’s sake. He ran his fingers through his damp, short hair then headed back out into the living room to wait

for the food while Alex got ready.

She barely said two words to him as she passed and he hated to admit that he missed that tiny glimpse of intimacy they'd shared earlier in the kitchen. Had she really liked that emotional crap he'd spewed that afternoon? As an ex-SEAL, he was used to keeping all his feelings bottled up inside. Spouting off about being picked on and feeling sad was a fast trip to an ass whooping in the military. And it wasn't like he and the guys at Norse Security sat around all day talking about their emotions. Loki would have him sent for a psych eval if that ever happened. He slumped down on the sofa and pulled out his phone to check his emails. Mostly junk and a few new baby pics from Cam and Everly.

Little Annika Rose was so stinkin' cute. Instead of fluffy pink bows, Everly had her decked out in a tiny set of gray flannel overalls with embroidered tools on them. Next to her in the pic was one of the many tiny stuffed toys with tech inside that Cam had made for her, saying that babies learned at an exponential rate. Their little minds absorbed information like sponges and the earlier you started teaching them the better. That little girl was one lucky kid.

Alex walked out just as the doorbell rang with their food. Seeing her in the cat suit, with the brunette wig and glasses, brought back all his fiery reactions from the night before and Hunter pushed to his feet, heading for the door to distract himself before he did something stupid like sweep her up into his arms and carry her to the bedroom, strip off that leather inch by delectable inch and make love to Alex all night long.

"Uh, go on into the kitchen," he said, his words emerging harsher than he'd intended. "I got this."

"Tell me about your family," Alex said, making small talk as they dug into their food.

She usually didn't indulge in all this high-sodium, high-fat goodness so this dinner was a special treat. As Hunter bit off half of his eggroll in one bite, she guessed it must be one for him too. Funny, in the few days they'd been working together, she'd not seen him go to the gym once. She'd assumed a guy like him with a killer physique would spend a lot of time looking after it, but it appeared he came by his bulk naturally, just like his good looks. She picked up her chopsticks and took a bite of her spicy pork with noodles. Flavors of cinnamon, brown sugar, and garlic filled her mouth and she couldn't help doing a little squirm of happiness in her chair. "This is fantastic. So, do you have brothers, sisters? Parents?"

He swallowed his bite of food and swiped a paper napkin across his mouth before answering. "Two brothers, one older, one younger. And yes, I have parents. I wasn't born in a test tube."

"Are they still alive?"

"Are you always this nosy?" He gave her a narrowed stare. "Yeah. Both alive."

When he didn't continue, she prodded some more, wanting to keep the conversation going and, honestly, to learn more about him. He was surprisingly quiet and self-effacing, way different than most of the ego-maniacs she met around Hollywood. It was refreshing and sweet and intrigued her to no end. "Tell me about them."

"All of them?" he asked, scrunching his nose. "Seriously?"

She shrugged and nodded.

"Okay, then. Well, my mom's the perfect suburban housewife. Kind, caring, was always ready with fresh-baked cookies when I got home from school. But she could go full Momma Bear too if needed, like when I got bullied. She told me that if I was just myself around the other kids, they'd like me more and I'd have more friends." He

took another bite of his chicken and fried rice. “She’s still my top supporter, no matter what I’m doing. It means a lot to me, her unwavering confidence in me, even if I don’t always deserve it. Her name’s Rebecca.”

Alex tilted her head, wanting to ask why he felt he didn’t deserve her support and confidence, but not wanting to break the sense of intimacy that had formed between them now. “Go on. What about your dad?”

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“His name’s Trent and he’s an accountant.” Hunter gave a sad chuckle. “I think he was always more confused by me than anything else. He’s a smaller guy, maybe fifteen, and he could never figure out where all this came from.” He waved a hand over himself dismissively. “Plus, he’s an accountant, so super smart and great at math. He works as a controller for some Fortune 500 company. All those facts and figures were never really my thing, so we didn’t have a lot in common.” His expression grew dejected. “I think he took my difficulties with math to mean I wasn’t all that smart. He never came out and said that, but the way he was always steering me toward sports, hoping I’d get an athletic scholarship for college, kind of said it all.”

“Hmm.” Alex twirled another bite of noodles around her chopsticks. “Believe me, I understand people judging based solely on the way you look.”

Hunter watched her a moment, chewing quietly. “Does it bother you?” he finally asked. “People thinking you’re nothing but a dumb blonde?”

Alex frowned slightly. “At first, yeah. It hurt. But now it’s how I make my money, so I go with it.”

“Must be hard, hiding your intelligence all the time though. Don’t you just want to scream sometimes and tell everyone where to get off?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted, grinning. “But I learned my lesson when I was younger that being too smart isn’t always such a good thing either.”

“How so?”

She hadn't intended on dredging up her painful childhood memories, but Hunter had shared things about himself with her, so it only seemed fair. "When I was seven, my parents had this dinner party. All their friends came and at my bedtime, my parents had me come into the room to perform a goodnight song for their guests. Even back then I was a little performer." She laughed. "Anyway, after I did my spiel the adults all applauded for me. I took that as encouragement to show off how smart I was and began to wander around the room spouting off trivia and asking all sorts of smart ass questions that no kid that age should be asking. Things about politics and world affairs and stuff I'd overheard my parents discussing. Eventually all the party guests went back to their conversations and cocktails without me. Never wanting to be ignored, I wandered over to where a couple of women were talking about my dad's skiing hobby. They didn't know I was there, I don't think, because next thing I knew they were talking about my dad sleeping with one of them. Maybe both. Who knows? The point is, if I'd just been a regular dumb kid and gone to bed when I was supposed to instead of staying up to impress everyone with my big brains, I'd never have discovered my father's affairs and my parents might still have been married."

"You can't blame yourself for that, Alex." Hunter finished his food then stood to take his plate to the sink. "You were a child. A precocious child, sure, but still just a kid. And if your dad was sleeping around then it sounds like the divorce was on him, not you."

"Maybe." She ate a few more bites of her food before taking her things to the sink too. "I've just always wondered what it would've been like if I'd not known. If that night had gone differently. And honestly, it's helped shape who I am. Like I said, these days it's easier and less risky for me to play stupid and get the parts and the fame and the money, than to reveal who I really am."

"Wow." Hunter cleared the table and put their leftovers in the fridge while Alex was hed and dried the plates and silverware. "Tough stuff."

“What about your brothers?” she asked as she dried the dishes. “You didn’t tell me about them.”

“Oh. Well, Carter’s my older brother. He’s a lawyer and thinks he’s all that because of it. Lives in the Midwest and has a successful practice there. I actually saw him the other night at the movie premier. He said he was in Hollywood on behalf of one of his clients who’s an investor.”

“Nice. And the younger one?”

“Ben. He graduated from college last year.” Hunter flashed an indulgent smile. “Kid’s off backpacking across Europe trying to find himself. Good guy, if a little spoiled. He was a ‘surprise’ baby, so all of us treat him special because of it.” He shook his head and gave a self-deprecating snort. “What about you? Any siblings?”

“Nope.” She smiled up at him, arms crossed. “I’m an only child.”

Their conversation was interrupted by loud banging on the front door. Alex’s pulse pounded as she stared at Hunter. “He’s early.”

“Where’s the collar?” He headed out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the bedrooms. “And the leash.”

“I’ve got them,” Alex said, following behind him. Somehow asking him to kneel at her feet like a dog seemed wrong after what he’d just shared with her. “You don’t have to wear them though. We can figure something else out.”

“No.” He took the items from her and fastened the black leather studded collar around his neck. “There’s no time. Besides, being your bitch wasn’t as awful as I thought it might be.”

He winked and Alex felt a white-hot flash of pure desire straight to her core. He liked giving up control during sex? She'd never really considered taking on the role of dominatrix outside the club, but she knew her stuff and if he liked her being in charge, maybe they should explore that connection further. Later, of course, once they got this meeting with the club boss out of the way.

She nodded, lowering her gaze, feeling suddenly shy. "Oh, right. Okay."

"Hey." Hunter tipped up her chin with one finger, his gray eyes warm as the pounding on the door continued. "Not all men are like your dad. We don't all cheat and lie and cut down a woman's worth and intelligence. I happen to like my women smart and sassy."

"You do?" Alex adjusted her fake glasses and wig.

"Yep. I do. Now, would you like me to answer the door, Mistress?"

As it had the previous evening, having this huge, muscled, gorgeous man serving her gave her a rush of need she'd never felt before. She wanted to control him, not because it made her happy, but because it pleased him. And damn if that wasn't the most potent aphrodisiac in the universe.

At her signal, Hunter opened the door to the same two bodyguards they'd seen the night before at Club Xcite, with the club boss standing behind them—looking as portly and mobster-ugly as always.

"Mistress," he said, shoving the two guards aside and jostling his way into the house. He gave Hunter a dismissive side glance, sneering at the leash Alex was leading him around by. "Slave."

Hunter gave no outward indication of the slight, other than a quick glare in the boss's

direction before lowering his gaze obediently again.

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“Well, show me around this dump so we can get moving. I’m behind schedule as it is.” The boss reeked of cigarette smoke and liquor from the club and his tacky cheetah print bomber jacket and black shades were straight out of cliché central. Alex managed not to roll her eyes at his cheesy persona and shut the door behind them. “Where you gonna keep the girls?”

“Basement,” Alex said, walking toward the stairs, the lead on Hunter taut as she tugged the leash. “Slave, lead the way.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he murmured, brushing past her. His arm bumped hers, and even through the leather of her cat suit, Alex’s skin prickled with awareness. They made their way downstairs, the wood creaking under the weight of the boss and his thugs. Once there, they stared around the space like it was the Taj Mahal and not a tiny underground lair in the middle of suburbia.

“Fuck. Them gals are gonna think they died and gone to heaven in this place.” The boss cackled as he checked each of the bedrooms and the small but well-appointed bathroom. And yeah, maybe it was way nicer than they should have made it, but after the horrors those poor women had been through already, they deserved a clean, safe place to rest. “Looks like you’re running a goddamned hotel, not a sex slave ring.”

“Are you questioning my choices?” Alex asked, using her most commanding voice. She met the boss’s glare with a steely stare, not giving an inch. Perhaps all those nights of method acting in the club would pay off after all. “I don’t like it when people question me.”

She reached for her whip then halted as the guards revealed the guns holstered at their

waists. Instead, Alex flipped the dark hair of her brunette wig over her shoulder and made for the stairs again, Hunter in tow. “I’ll show you the rest of the house quickly, so you can get on your way.”

Upstairs once more, they made a fast tour of the bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, and ended up back in the living room where they’d started. Unease still lingered inside Alex. This was all going so smoothly. Too smoothly. But she wasn’t about to argue at this point. Maybe the club boss was really as dumb as he looked.

“When can I expect my new slaves?” Alex asked, holding the door for their unwelcome guests. “And it better be soon.”

“Tomorrow night, Mistress.” The crime boss said as he passed her on his way out to the porch, his bodyguards flanking him once more. “There was a slight delay in the shipment. I’ll have them here by ten p.m. at the latest.”

Alex watched them walk away, not aware of how cold she was until she felt Hunter’s warm hands on her shoulders.

“Good job, Alex. We’ve got a time and date. That’s what we needed. I’ll contact Cam and Loki and let them know so we’re ready.”

She nodded, but didn’t turn away from the door, staring at the red tail lights of the boss’s car as they disappeared around the corner. All her senses were on high-alert—from adrenaline, or Hunter’s touch, she wasn’t sure. All she did know was that they were in too deep now to not see this through and she just prayed Bea was alive and well and would be among the slaves delivered here tomorrow night.

Hunter watched Alex at the door, feeling a nearly overwhelming urge to pull her into

his arms. But the look on her beautiful face was so sad, so distant, that he remained where he was, frozen in place. When the silence became deafening, he finally said, “We’ll get her back. Don’t worry. If she’s there tomorrow night, we’ll get Bea back.”

She slammed the door shut then turned slowly to look at him, the leash still in her hand. Her movements caused it to pull taut, reminding them both of the roles they’d just played. As usual, Hunter’s cock pulsed at the loss of control, at the sheer submissiveness implied in that thin cord binding them together.

Damn, he wanted her. So bad he ached. But he didn’t want to screw up this mission. Not now. Not when there was so much at stake for both of them.

Heat, along with a shadow of fear, blazed in Alex’s pretty blue eyes. “What if she’s not?”

“What if she’s not what?” Hunter asked, his voice croaking out of his constricted throat, need riding him hard now. He stepped closer to her, as if in a daze. “I’ll find her, I swear.”

“Will you?” Alex whispered, tipping her head back to meet his gaze. “Slave?”

His cock went hard as steel at that word and Hunter moved forward, backing her up against the wall beside the door, an arm on either side of her head, caging her in while still keeping their bodies several inches apart. This close, he could see the pink flush in her cheeks, hear the catch in her breath at his nearness, smell the faint floral scent of her perfume. Slowly, he reached up and tugged off her wig, leaving her long blond hair to tumble down over her shoulders like a silky curtain. The glasses were next, tossed aside to land somew

here on the carpeted floor. Right now, Hunter didn’t care about them. All he cared about was the warm, wonderful woman in front of him and seeing how far she’d let

him take this. All she had to do was say the word, and he'd stop. But holy fuck, he prayed she wouldn't.

Her pupils were dilated and her soft pink lips were parted and she looked like she was every bit as turned on at the moment as he was. She swallowed hard and he became fixated with the tiny pulse point at the base of her slender throat, couldn't stop staring at the way it hammered in time with his own.

Hunter was so hard now he hurt, but if Alex didn't want this, he wasn't going to force her. She reached up to remove his collar, but he stopped her, placing his hand atop hers. "No. Leave it. Tell me what you want."

Recognition dawned slowly in her expression, and she twined the leash a tad tighter around her hand before tugging on it lightly. The pull caused him to press against her, only a mere breath between them now. His hardness nudged her belly and Hunter had to bite back a groan of frustration.

"Ask me nicely, slave," Alex said, her tone husky with want. "And use my title."

Knees tingling with desire, Hunter flexed his fingers against the wall, grateful for the support as he bowed his head and said, "Please tell me what you want, Mistress."

"Better," she purred, her small smile widening into a wicked sexy grin. "I want you to do whatever I tell you to do. I want you to pleasure me until I can't take it anymore and I want you to allow me to do the same to you. I want to fall asleep in your arms tonight and not have to worry about anything because I know that you'll be right there beside me, protecting me from anything that comes our way. And speaking of coming..."

Yeah, his knees might've buckled right about then. Good thing she'd already tugged on his leash again, signaling him to drop to the floor anyway.

Alex stood over him, her bright blue gaze filled with feminine power and infinite passion. “See anything you like down there, slave?”

Considering he was face level with her leather-covered thighs, hell yes. He saw heaven on earth right there between her legs. He started to reach for the zipper of her cat suit, then halted. “May I, Mistress?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

That was all Hunter needed to hear. First, he removed her boots, taking his time and keeping his gaze locked with hers. Then, he drew the zipper down slowly, revealing more and more of her creamy flesh. He licked his lips once it reached the bottom, inhaling the scent of her warm body and the hint of female arousal mixed in. God, it had been so long since he’d wanted a woman this badly. Maybe he never had before. Moving control of the leash from one hand to the other, Alex shrugged out of the cat suit, pushing it down her legs as he watched until she stepped out of it completely and kicked it aside. Her standing over him in nothing but a red lace bra and skimpy lace thong was about the most erotic thing Hunter had ever seen.

In blatant invitation, she leaned her shoulders back against the wall and thrust her hips forward, feet and thighs apart. “Lick me, slave.”

Hunter didn’t need to be asked twice. He leaned forward and placed a hand on each of her legs to steady her as he traced his tongue over her slick folds through the lace of her panties. Alex moaned low then scolded him. “No hands. Not yet.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he said, the flavor of her wetness filling his mouth and igniting his senses. Spicy and sweet and complex, just like the woman herself. Unable to stop himself, he licked her again, and again, until she was writhing beneath him, her fingers twining through his hair and holding him closer as she directed his movements. “That’s good, slave. Right there. Yes. Oh, God. More. Harder.”

Her thighs were shaking around his head and her breath was panting. Hunter hazarded a glance up at Alex and saw her head thrown back against the wall, her eyes

closed as she lost herself in his lovemaking. His eager cock pressed harder against the confines of his jeans, demanding release.

“Take them off,” Alex demanded.

At first, Hunter was confused, given where his thoughts had been moments before. “Mistress?”

“My panties,” she said, breathless. “Take them off.”

He did so, sliding the soaked red lace down her legs before tossing it aside to join her cat suit. Soon, she unhooked her bra as well and threw it over onto the pile, leaving her completely naked. “Make me cum, slave.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Hunter redoubled his efforts, using his lips and tongue to caress her swollen clit, wishing he could touch her as well as taste her. Alex toyed with her breasts with one hand while continuing to guide him with the other. No blushing virgin here, Hunter thought, but then again neither was he. He liked a woman with experience, a woman unafraid to ask for what she wanted. Seemed he and Alex were more than compatible in bed.

Alex gasped and her thighs shook as she came hard, crying out his name over and over. He nuzzled her through wave after wave of ecstasy until she finally slid down the wall to sit on the floor in front of him, her expression dreamy and sated.

The leash had long since slipped from her hand to dangle loose around his neck, but neither one of them needed commands anymore at this point. Alex used his T-shirt to clean up, then hoisted it over his head and tossed it onto their ever-growing pile of clothes. “Mistress, I—”

“No.” Alex reached out a shaky hand to trace her fingers over his lips. “Please. Let’s

not pretend anymore. Not now, unless you really want to.”

“I’m good. As long as I have you.” He kissed her then, hot and deep, before leaning back and grinning. She slid a hand down his bare chest, making him shudder. Her fingers grazed the waistband of his jeans before dipping inside to tease the head of his cock. “Hmm, that feels amazing.”

“Know what would feel more amazing?” Alex slid her arm around him and laid back, drawing him down atop her on the living room floor. “You inside me. If you want me.”

Hunter damned near choked on his tongue. “If I want you? You’re kidding, right?”

“No.” She looked away as if suddenly shy. “I mean, I know you get off on all that submission stuff, but honestly I’ve never really tried it with anyone but you.”

“And I’m not usually submissive. I guess I’m only a slave for you, Alexandra Valentine.” He punctuated each word with a kiss to her cheek, ear, or neck, until his head was resting in the valley between her breasts. He reached up to gently tease her taut nipple and she arched beneath him. “I don’t bow to many people, baby. The fact you can order me around like a five-star general is unique. Just ask the guys.” He frowned. “On second thought, don’t. Let’s keep this stuff between you and me, okay?”

“Okay.” Alex met his gaze again and grinned. “I do have one request.”

“Anything.” He couldn’t resist taking her nipple into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it before letting it pop free. “What?”

“Can we take this to the bedroom instead?” She glanced around. “Rug burns.”

Hunter was on his feet the next second and had her in his arms. “Your wish is my command, Mistress.”

In the bedroom, conversation gave way to groans and sighs as Hunter kicked off his jeans and grabbed a condom from his back pocket, putting it on before joining Alex on the mattress where he’d placed her. Every inch of her was exquisite—toned, taut, soft and incredibly inviting. He kissed or licked or otherwise worshipped every spot he could find on her before positioning himself at her wet entrance. “Are you ready for me?”

“Always,” she said, pulling him down for another kiss as he slid balls-deep into her. The tight heat of her nearly had him coming on the spot. Sheer willpower alone held him back. After giving her body time to adjust to the size and length of him, Hunter began moving inside her, withdrawing almost completely before thrusting back inside her again. Soon, they’d found a natural rhythm, with her meeting his movements and driving them both higher and closer to orgasm. He’d wanted this to last all night, but he wanted her too badly.

Hunter clenched his teeth, reaching between them to tease Alex’s clit again. “Are you close, baby?”

“Hmm, yes.” Alex bit her lip, her eyes closed again, lost in sensation. “So close.”

“Good.” He changed his angle of penetration slightly and that was all it took. She cried out, her back arching as she rubbed against him and came hard. Hunter pounded into her, seeking his own blissful release. Once, twice, then the world exploded in a million iridescent shards of pleasure. His muscles shook with the intensity, and he collapsed atop her, his head resting on her chest between her breasts, his eyes heavy and his breath ragged.

“That was...” he started, then realized Alex was already asleep, her breath evening

out into the familiar patterns of slumber.

“Amazing,” he whispered into the darkness, rolling to his side and pulling Alex with him, then covering them with the sheets before drifting off himself.

The next morning, Alex woke to a cold, empty bed and enough steamy memories of the night before to make a crow blush. Man, she was hardly a timid virgin, but she'd never had her world rocked so thoroughly before. Seemed Hunter Odenson was quite possibly a god after all—a sex god, that was.

Smiling wide, she rolled over onto her back and listened for sounds of him moving around the safe house. Considering the fact that tonight was the big showdown, the one and only chance she might have to get Bea back safe and sound, Alex had not expected to sleep soundly or to wake feeling so refreshed and energized. Kudos to Hunter for making both those things possible. Kudos to him too for just being an all-around great guy and friend during this mission, in general. Things sure hadn't started out smoothly that first day—with him blasting onto her film set like a Chuck Norris reject—but over the last several days she'd grown to respect him as a person and a professional.

Warmth and happiness bubbled inside her bloodstream as she gave a full-body stretch. The thing that surprised her the most about Hunter, though, was

his kind and gentle heart. Most people didn't see it, hidden away behind all that towering muscle, but it was there. Knowing he'd let her glimpse his real self, the side of him that he guarded from everyone else, made her feel special. Special and cared for and...

Alex stopped herself from going any farther. Yes, she liked Hunter. A lot. Way more than she should, probably, considering he'd be on the first plane back to the east coast

when all this was over. But there it was. She liked him. More than liked him after last night. What's more, she trusted him. And in her line of work, she'd learned not to trust many people. In the entertainment industry, everyone seemed to be searching for something or looking for their next big break. All Hunter was interested in was keeping her safe and finding Bea.

Sure, he also wanted to complete his mission and get his promotion, but he'd never once made her feel stupid or cheap or like a piece of meat as so many other guys in her business did. Hunter made her feel smart and cherished and worthy. Hunter made her feel like she could take on any challenge and win. Like she could be the successful woman she'd always wanted to be, as long as she had him by her side.

The sound of his deep voice drifting in from the living room put a quick kibosh on those dreams. From what she could hear, he was on the phone again with his office back in Virginia. With a sigh, Alex got up and padded quickly across the room to the master bath, the hardwood floor cold on her bare feet. Once inside she shut the door then leaned back against it, eyes closed. She could not let herself fall for Hunter Odenson. That would be the height of dumb.

He was not staying. He was not her usual type. He'd never expressed an interest in anything more than one night of incredibly hot sex with her. To blow it all out of proportion and want more was beyond idiotic.

Resolved to put those crazy thoughts out of her head, Alex jammed on the shower to let it heat up while she took care of business, then brushed her teeth. By the time she stood beneath the steamy spray she felt nearly like her old jaded self again. Hunter was a nice guy, a good guy, a smart, decent, generous, fiercely loyal and brave guy. No reason to go all gaga over the dude, right?

Damn, she really wished Bea was there to talk to about all this. Bea was her sounding board, her go-to gal for all matters of the heart. Bea would know exactly what to do

to get Alex out of this situation. But first, Alex needed to rescue her best friend from her predicament. She just prayed Bea was alive and well and hadn't been beaten or raped or otherwise mistreated by the sex boss and his thugs.

After rinsing off and toweling dry, Alex made her way out of the master bedroom to the guest room she'd claimed as hers the day before. There she found a clean set of sweatpants, a T-shirt, and socks from the safe room set neatly on the bed and her heart squeezed. Another show of Hunter's sweet, thoughtful side. She changed fast, swapping out her damp towel for the clothes, then headed out to find Hunter in the kitchen now, sans phone, his back to her as he cooked something wonderful-smelling on the stove. Her stomach growled loud enough for him to hear and he glanced back over his shoulder at her.

"Hey," Hunter said, a glint of appreciation in his gaze as he looked her over. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby." She grinned and leaned against the counter, admiring his perfect firm ass in those tight faded jeans. "You?"

"Same." He was naked from the waist up and his feet were bare too. She thought about all the wicked things she'd like to do to him to make his toes curl, things they hadn't had time for the night before. "Hope you like omelets. I got up early and walked to the mini-mart down the street. The selection of groceries there wasn't great, but I at least got us some milk, bread, cheese, eggs. All the staples."

"Cool." Alex took a seat at the small table and watched him fry up their breakfast. "And I love omelets."

"Good. Me too." He winked at her then pointed at the toaster. "Make yourself useful."

“Yes, sir.” She got up and stuck a couple of slices of bread in.

“That’s my line.” Hunter grinned. “Coffee’s fresh too.”

“Awesome.” While she fixed herself a mug, Alex did her best to steer their conversation out of dangerous flirting territory and back to the task at hand. Otherwise, she was liable to jump him right there on the kitchen floor and nobody would eat—or do anything else—for a long time. “So, what’s the plan for today? We need to be ready when the boss shows up with his team tonight. You do think he’s going to show, right?”

“Yeah, he’ll show.” Hunter’s smile faltered slightly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He tried to shake off her question, but the tiny lines of tension around his eyes gave him away. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “I got a weird feeling from the boss last night. Like things went a bit too smoothly, you know?”

“Hmm.” She sipped her coffee, watching him over the rim. “You think he might try to double cross us with the slaves?”

“Maybe.” Hunter shrugged, muscles rippling beneath the smooth tanned skin of his back. Alex bit her lip to hold back a moan of appreciation. “I ran it by the guys earlier, just in case. Loki says we need to be prepared for every contingency. I agree with him. So, my plan is to spend today running through scenarios with you in case things go south. That way we’ll both be prepared and know what to expect in a worst-case scenario. Sound good?”

Alex nodded. “Sounds great. We do something similar in the movies. During our read-throughs of the script we’ll try different ways of saying things, different types of

blocking for the scenes. It helps make sure we have the best set-up possible. Also helps make sure all the actors feel comfortable with each other and what we'll be doing when the time comes."

"Yep." Hunter grabbed two plates from the cupboard while Alex buttered up two pieces of toast and shoved two more fresh slices of bread in the toaster. While he dished up their food, she finished the toast, then put silverware and napkins on the table. By the time they sat down to eat, it was like they were an old married couple. It felt way nicer and more perfect than Alex expected.

She swallowed her yearning along with a bite of eggs. He'd added cheese and small chunks of sausage to them, making them gooey and salty and damned near the best eggs she'd ever had. "Wow, this is terrific!"

"Thanks." He looked away, though a tiny smile formed on his full, soft lips. "It's nice to cook for more than just me."

"You cook too?" She chuckled. "And just when I thought you couldn't get more perfect."

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“You think I’m perfect?” He did meet her gaze then—astonishment, mixed with admiration, lit his handsome face. “Well, I think you’re kind of perfect too.”

“Really?” All she wanted to do at that moment was crawl into his lap and kiss him senseless. Alex would have too, except a knock on the front door interrupted her. Her gaze darted from the front door to Hunter then back again, her heart skipping in her chest. “Expecting someone?”

He scowled, whispering. “No.”

Holding up a finger for silence, he got up and walked into the living room, sticking close to the walls as he made his way over to the windows beside the door. When he lifted the curtains and peeked out, his frown only increased. He looked back at Alex and shook his head.

“What?” she mouthed. “No one’s there?”

Hunter shook his head, giving her a look that screamed stay-where-you-are. He quickly skirted his way back toward the kitchen then on toward the hallway, whispering as he passed her, “I need to get my gun. It’s in the master bedroom. Stay put and don’t let anyone in until I get back. Understand?”

Alex nodded fast. She grabbed her table knife like a weapon, her gaze locked on the front door. If the sex boss or his thugs tried to break in, she’d jab them in the eye with her knife, dammit. The thing wasn’t sharp, but it could do some damage to soft tissue if landed the right way. She wasn’t exactly an expert in self-defense, but she’d had training in martial arts for some of her roles and s

he'd paid attention. She could take care of herself, if she needed to. At least she hoped she could. Those skills had never been put to the test in reality.

She could hear Hunter chamber a round in his gun in the bedroom and relaxed slightly. At least until she heard the knob on the back door in the kitchen jiggle. Oh shit! Whoever had knocked was trying to get in a different way. Definitely not a salesman then, or anyone else reputable.

Heart thudding loud in her ears, Alex slid from her seat and inched toward the living room, doing her best not to panic, yet unable to stop shaking. "Hunter?" she called, hoping he heard her weak voice. "Hunter, get out here. Someone's trying to get in the back."

"What?" he said, moving back toward her down the hall, gun in hand just as all hell broke loose. The front door shattered as it was kicked in. At the same time, the back door crashed open and one of the huge thug bodyguards from Club Excite stepped into the kitchen.

Hunter fired at the thug in the living room, but his shot went wide, pinging off the wall. The guard lunged at him and they slammed to the floor in a flurry of punches and curses. Meanwhile, Alex had swiveled to face the new arrival in the kitchen, table knife in her shaky hand as she backed slowly away. "Don't even think about touching me, you asshole. I swear to God I'll shove this fucking thing through your temple and straight into your sorry excuse for brains."

Yeah, it was a line from one of her old movies, but it seemed appropriate.

The thug stared at her then shook his head. "Ain't nobody touching you but the boss. We got orders."

"The boss?" Alex turned fast as a hand closed painfully on her shoulder. "Don't

touch me!”

“Alex?” Hunter yelled. “Get away from her, you filthy piece of shit!”

He landed a nasty right hook into the thug’s left kidney and the sickening sound of cracking bone filled the air. Alex swallowed hard against the rising bile in her throat and fixed the sex boss with her best fearsome glare.

“Take your hands off me, before I remove them for you. Permanently.”

The boss laughed. Honest to God, he fucking laughed at her threat and Alex kicked him hard. She went for his nuts, but their height difference and his gut sticking out in front of him had her blow landing somewhere around his mid-thigh instead. He swore and stumbled slightly, but kept his tight grip on her arm. There’d definitely be bruises from that later, but it was the least of her concerns.

“You’re coming with me, you little bitch,” the boss said, dragging her toward the door while Hunter—who’d managed to shake off his attacker and get to his feet—was jumped from behind and tackled to the floor again. “I like you a whole lot better without that godawful wig and glasses too. You’ll fetch a nice price on the black market. Blondes always sell well.”

“Stop it!” Alex fought against him, managing to land a few hits to his head and chest, but overall she was outsized and out muscled. “Put me down!”

The boss had now picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes as he headed back out the front door. Neighbors were standing around pointing and whispering, but no one tried to help her. Jesus. This was like her worst nightmare come to life. Were these people so used to violence on their streets that it meant nothing to them anymore? As the boss opened the trunk of a black unmarked sedan and shoved Alex inside, she caught the eye of one of the women watching the

whole thing unfold and she knew. It wasn't that these people were immune to the violence. It was that they were scared. Scared the violence might turn on them too. So they did nothing.

Alex screamed and tried to escape as the boss slammed the trunk closed on her, leaving her in utter darkness. Where was Hunter? Was he alive? Would he rescue her in time? The yells of the boss outside, telling the crowd to go home, nothing to see here, followed by the roar of the engine and jostle as they backed out of the driveway, had her heart sinking.

The last thing Alex heard as they pulled away in a screech of tires was Hunter's voice yelling her name from somewhere close by, then nothing as the rumble of the roadway took over everything else.

13

Think, Alex. Think.

She swallowed hard against the disorientation and adrenaline-fueled fear constricting her throat and forced herself to calm. She'd been in this situation before. Not in real life, but for one of her campy, B-list movie roles. Grit, Guns, and Glory or some other idiotic name they'd given it. The film had not even had a theatrical run, going straight to DVD, but it had taught Alex some particular skills—namely how to escape from the trunk of a car. Her character in the movie, a bimbo with a heart of gold named Glory Hill, had been abducted by the bad guys and needed to escape or be killed. Alex snorted in the dark confines of the trunk, wrinkling her nose at the hint of burning rubber, motor oil, and mildew in the air. Never would've guessed life would imitate art quite so closely.

Wriggling around, Alex managed to trace her sock-covered toes along the side of the trunk, feeling for the corner. In the prop vehicle they'd used for the movie, there'd

been an emergency safety release lever near the rear tail light. It was a federal requirement for all vehicles made in the US after 2002. Usually they glowed in the dark, but when she squinted through the gloom, Alex didn't see anything. Great.

The car bumped over a pothole or curb or something and knocked her head against the trunk lid. Alex cursed and rubbed her sore scalp. "Ow!"

Well, crap. Maybe this car was older than 2002. Or maybe the sex boss had ripped out the emergency release lever, considering Alex probably wasn't the first person he'd locked in here. Her toes sank into a slight depression in the rough carpet she was laying on and she pressed harder with her foot. Must be the tail light. If she could pull the carpet away and kick the thing out, then at least she could try and alert someone that she was in here.

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Sweat broke out on her forehead as she struggled to turn herself around in the tight space. Her breath echoed loud and her heart raced. Finally, Alex managed to get herself turned around so her head was facing where the taillight was, or where she thought it was. Fingers scrabbling, she tore at the carpet in that corner, desperate to get beneath it to where the tail light was.

Her mind kept looping back to Hunter. Was he still at the house? Was he okay?

At last the carpet came free and out popped the emergency lever. It must've gotten hidden behind the carpet somehow. Alex felt a strange urge to shout a woohoo at her good luck, but stopped herself. The last thing she needed now was to draw the sex boss's suspicions. Surprise would be key to her getting away from him. She clutched the neon green plastic lever in her damp palm and forced her rapid breath to calm. Her best bet to get out of here without breaking something would be to wait until the car stopped at a light then make a mad dash for freedom. Except she had no idea where they were or if they'd stop anytime soon.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait long. The sound of the tires bumping along slowed and gradually other noises drifted in—Latin pop music, shouts in Spanish and a faint odor of spices and fried corn. El Pueblo. They must be near the old historic monument and marketplace. That made sense, since the safe house Hunter had taken her to was close by. Alex guessed they'd been driving for maybe twenty minutes, which would put it at around ten-thirty, maybe eleven at the latest. The place should be crawling with people. If she got the trunk open and climbed out, she could get lost in the crowds and hopefully get away. Get back to Hunter.

The car's brakes gave a grumpy squeak as the vehicle halted.

Her chest squeezed, her pulse tripped. This was it. Now or never.

Alex closed her eyes and pulled hard on the lever in her hand, praying she'd have enough time to get out before the light changed. Like a Jack in the Box on steroids, the trunk lid flew open and she acted on pure impulse, fumbling out of the back of the car and blindly racing away. The sun was so bright after the total darkness of the trunk that she really couldn't see anything. Even if she could, her eyes were watering so badly it probably looked like she was crying uncontrollably. Still, Alex made her way toward the blurry, colorful shapes moving in front of her, the pavement warm on her feet through the socks. She clutched the too big sweatpants with one hand to hoist them up so she wouldn't trip. Alex spoke minimal Spanish, enough to get by, and recognized the whispered comments of the people she passed—vieja loca, crazy lady. At least no one seemed to recognize her. She could only imagine what a mess she looked right about now, but at least she was out. Free.

Shouts issued from behind her and Alex stumbled. Oh, God. He'd seen her. The boss was after her. Running forward, she managed to duck behind a vendor cart selling tacky souvenirs to the tourists. Her vision cleared and she spotted the sex boss about twenty-five feet away, scanning the area. He had his cell phone to his ear and looked pissed as hell.

Hunter. She needed to get back to the safe house and see if he was all right. Warn him that the sex boss was still looking for them. And Bea? Oh, God. What would happen to Bea now? No way would those slaves be arriving tonight as planned, at least not at the safe house. Maybe at the club though. They'd have to find a place to stash them until the boss found a new place to hold them, right? And they were too valuable to send back. He wouldn't want to risk exposure or losing his cash investment. Alex had spent more than enough time at Club Xcite to know money ruled in the seedy underbelly of LA's human sex trafficking rings. Wealth would buy you just about anything in this town.

Finally, the sex boss stalked away back toward the car that still idled at the curb. Alex watched from around the corner of the cart as he slammed the trunk shut and climbed back into the vehicle, still on his phone. She didn't breathe again until he'd pulled away in a screech of tires, horns honking behind him as he cut off several cars.

Right. Okay.

Alex straightened and adjusted her ill-fitting clothes as best she could. She gave the cart vendor a tentative smile then asked the woman in broken Spanish if she had a cell ph

one Alex could use to make a call. When she'd been abducted, she and Hunter had been ready to share a nice breakfast. One he'd cooked for her after they'd spent the night making love together. It was so sweet and nice and made her heart ache with the need to see him all the more.

She started to call for an Uber then realized she had no money. Well, guess the walk might do her good anyway. Give her time to think, as long as she didn't run into the sex boss on the way and get taken hostage again. It wasn't far, only a couple of miles. She usually ran five miles a day with her trainer. And yeah, she had no shoes, but as long as she kept to paved areas and side streets, she should be fine. Alex clicked the phone off and handed it back to the woman, thanking her again for her help. "Muchas gracias."

The woman nodded slowly, eyeballing Alex's outfit with trepidation.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Alex squared her shoulders and headed for the side street lining the marketplace. No way was she heading out in front again, just in case the sex boss was still cruising around trying to find her. She slinked through the crowds and disappeared down an alleyway behind a small chapel, saying a silent prayer Hunter was still at the safe house and that she wasn't too late to salvage

something from this disaster of a mission.

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Hunter tested the ropes around his wrists, binding his arms to the chair the thugs had him tied to in the kitchen of the safe house. His ankles were bound too, the knots snug, but nothing he couldn't break out of if he'd had the incentive and opportunity. For now, he stayed put—partly because he needed time to formulate a plan to find out where that asshole sex boss had taken Alex, and partly because he felt it was his penance.

He'd been such a fucking idiot, losing his concentration like that. But when he'd seen that filthy piece of shit's hands on Alex, hauling her out the door, Hunter had lost it. Plain and simple. A searing, uncontrollable anger had welled inside him at the thought of anyone mistreating his woman and he'd gone ballistic.

His thoughts snagged.

My woman?

Yeah, okay. The sex with Alex had been pretty damned amazing. Incredible even. He'd never given up control like that to another person and fuck if it wasn't freeing as hell. Until Alex, he'd never realized how tightly wound his need for control was during his daily work. The fact he could give that up and let someone else be in charge in the bedroom turned him on more than anything else ever had before.

And no, he hadn't given much thought to what would happen between him and Alex after this mission was over. He lived and worked in Virginia. Her career depended on staying in L.A. Long distance relationships were always a struggle. Then again, he wasn't even sure Alex wanted any kind of thing with him beyond their one night of incredible sex. Maybe to her it had just been a simple hook up. Nothing more.

His chest ached at the thought of leaving her behind once all this mess was done, walking away and never seeing her again, never smelling her sweet, lemony scent, never tasting the salt of her skin, never hearing her cry out his name as she came apart in his arms.

He cared for her, way more than was wise at this point. Hunter wasn't exactly ready to call it love yet, but the warmth in his gut and the tingle in his blood felt like more than mere like or want. It felt deeper, stronger. He longed to know all about her, to share all about himself with her. More than just what they'd already told each other. He wanted her to meet his parents. Wanted to meet her family too. Wanted to just relax and be together for a while to see if they were truly compatible, truly meant to be together without the adrenaline rush and distractions of this case pushing them closer. And if she was the one then...

Dammit. Damn it all straight to hell and back.

Frustrated, he growled and struggled against the ropes again, loosening them a tad more. These thugs were morons. Couldn't even tie a decent knot for fuck's sake. If they'd been on his SEAL team, he'd have kicked their asses into shape right quick. For now though, all he could do was sit there and glower at the guard across from him, who was currently too busy texting on his phone to pay Hunter much attention. The other guard, the one he'd smashed in the face earlier, was still in the living room, sitting on the couch with a bag of frozen peas on his eye. It was the one leaning against the kitchen counters who'd struck Hunter over the head with a frying pan on the front porch as he'd stood there yelling after the car that Alex was locked inside of drove away. Yep. That had been an idiot move all around on his part.

With a resigned sigh, Hunter rolled his stiff neck and stared out through the open kitchen to the curtained windows in the living room beyond. A shadow passed in front of them and he frowned. Was someone out there? He'd not had a chance to message Loki for backup before all hell had broken loose earlier, so it couldn't be

that.

Pounding sounded on the front door and his heart stumbled.

Alex?

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No. Had to be the sex boss, back again. Or maybe more of his lackey cohorts. Most likely he'd dumped Alex off somewhere then returned here to deal with Hunter himself. The thugs had not done anything more to him other than tie him up. That usually signaled some kind of interrogation to come. Hunter tested his wrists again, found the ropes loose enough to slip off without much trouble, and bit back a sinister grin. After Alex's abduction and God knew what else once that bastard had her all to himself, Hunter was going to enjoy beating the living shit out of that guy. It was divine justice for what he'd done to Alex and every other poor soul they'd taken and sold into sexual slavery through that disgusting club of his.

Sure enough, the thug with the ice pack got up and opened the door to the sex boss. He stomped in—short, squat, with fury in his beady little black eyes. The guy stalked right over to Hunter and kicked him hard in the shin, sending the chair he was tied to skittering back a few inches. “Who the fuck are you, huh? Who you fucking working for? Tell me now and I might let you die without torturing you first.”

As if to prove his point, the sex boss pulled out a wicked looking blade, slightly curved and razor-sharp—if the way the edge glinted in the overhead lights above was any indication.

Hunter, jaw tight against the pain throbbing through his ankle, didn't respond.

The boss moved closer and yanked hard on Hunter's short, buzz-cut hair, forcing his head back so his neck was exposed. The cold metal of the knife blade stung against his skin. “Ain't so tough now are you, dumbass?” The guy snorted and glanced down at the SEAL tattoo on Hunter's left bicep. “You're ex-military, that much is obvious. Guess being a soldier don't stop you from being a pussy too, huh?”

This drew a chuckle from the thug against the counter and Hunter made a mental note to break the fucker's nose once he got out of this shit. Hard to laugh when your sinuses were filled with blood. Still, he just stared at the sex boss, meeting his gaze head on without so much as flinching. His only response was, "Fuck you."

"Heh." The boss pressed the blade tighter to Hunter's neck and the knife bit into his skin. A warm drop of blood slowly trickled downward. "Shit for brains. Don't have to be smart for them military guys to take you either, huh? Lucky you."

No. Lucky you. If he wasn't pretending to be tied up right now, he'd end this assclown so fast he wouldn't know what hit him. But first he needed to find out where Alex was and what had happened to her, then he needed to find out about the slave drop that night. Was it off entirely? Would they stash the women elsewhere? And if so, where?

Apparently fed up with his lack of response, the sex boss cursed loudly then hauled off and backhanded Hunter hard across the face. The blow took the wind out of his sails for a second, but otherwise did no lasting damage. He didn't let the boss know that though. Instead, he let his chin drop down to his chest, keeping his eyes closed, hoping that if they thought he was out cold, they might start talking.

It took all of about a minute. Not exactly a brain trust he was dealing with here.

"You hear from our trafficke

r?" the boss asked the thug in the kitchen.

"Just got a text," the thug said. "He's not happy about the switch."

"Don't give a shit if he likes it or not. Can't have them sluts delivered here now. Place ain't safe." The boss hauled off and kicked Hunter again, this time in the

opposite shin. Hunter bit back a nasty snarl of rage. When he got out of this chair he was going to kick this guy's fucking ass into the next goddamned century.

“You deal with the blond or you need me to do anything?” Footsteps entered from the direction of the living room and though Hunter had his eyes closed, he recognized the voice of the thug he'd beaten earlier. “She still out in the trunk?”

“No.” There was a loud crash as glass smashed against the wall of the kitchen. The boss must've thrown a cup or plate or something from the sink, Hunter assumed. “She got away.”

“What?” the thug asked, his tone reflecting Hunter's own surprise.

“She. Got. Away.” The boss bit off each word like a curse. “Are you deaf as well as stupid? Bitch got the trunk open and ran off while I was stopped at a light. I searched around trying to find her, but that El Pueblo place is swarming with fucking tourists today. Don't worry about her. She's dumber than a box of rocks and won't get far on her own. Stupid twat doesn't even have shoes on.”

Hunter's heart both soared at the knowledge that Alex was free and sank at the knowledge that she was out there on her own, without any money or protection. She was smart, far smarter than anyone ever gave her credit for, and resourceful—given her quick knack for disguises and the way she'd concocted their master-slave plan from the start. She'd be okay. She'd be fine, because the alternative was unacceptable.

As the boss and thugs argued amongst themselves, Hunter squinted one eye open and hazarded a glance out into the living room again. Once he freed himself, he'd need to make quick work of the three men in the kitchen then bolt for the front door. Not easy, but there wasn't another alternative that he could see. The thug had taken his phone and smashed it, along with Alex's, after he'd tied Hunter up. He needed to get

free, get out, then get to a store to buy a new burner phone and call Loki with an update. Norse Security's intrepid leader would help him formulate a plan to take down this Club Xcite and all their illegal activities once and for all.

But first...

Hunter wiggled his wrists to slide the ropes off his hands while the thugs were still engrossed in their argument, now switching from the slave drop tonight to the sorry state of the strippers at the club. One thug thought the girls were being fed too much and were getting fat. The other felt they ought to brand them all in case one of the girls got free.

Real gentlemen these schmucks were.

As he slowly worked his way free to avoid the notice of the boss and his guards, Hunter spotted that same shadow outside the windows. His pulse tripped. Not the boss then. But who? The only other person who knew about this house was...

Alex.

Had to be. El Pueblo wasn't that far from here. Given she was barefoot and likely sticking to back alleys all the way, the timing was right.

Good girl.

Now all Hunter had to do was get out to her in one piece and get them to someplace safe. The ropes slid free of his hands and hit the floor with a quiet clatter. All that was left were his ankles. Unfortunately, all three thugs turned at once to face him, their gazes flicking from Hunter to the ropes, then back again.

"Well, well, well." The sex boss stepped forward slowly, his evil grin growing with

each step, the knife blade glittering in his hand. “Looks like Prince Pussy woke up. How about we carve him up like a Halloween pumpkin for his little girlfriend to find?”

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Through the gauzy curtains over the front windows of the safe house, Alex was able to make out the shapes of the two thugs and the portly outline of the sex boss as he advanced on Hunter in the brightly lit kitchen. Her already jangled nerves went into overdrive and adrenaline flooded her system. Time to put all those martial arts moves she'd learned for her roles into action.

After a deep breath for courage, she slammed open the front door and stepped into the living room, doing her best Wonder Woman pose to boost her confidence. "Touch him and you're going to regret it."

Three astonished looks met hers from the kitchen—the two thugs and the sex boss. Hunter just sat there on the chair he was tied to grinning at her with pride radiating from his gorgeous blue eyes. Then, everything seemed to happen at once.

Hunter took advantage of the momentary distraction to headbutt one of the thugs in the gut, while simultaneously grabbing the sex boss's wrist and twisting hard, causing him to drop the knife. Alex's gaze flicked from Hunter to the small pile of rope on the floor and realized he'd somehow gotten his hands free, though his ankles were still tied to the chair.

The third thug advanced on Alex in the living room, menace radiating off him in waves. He stood a good foot and a half taller than her and gave even Hunter a run for his money in the muscle department. But they always said the bigger they were, the harder they fell. Whoever the hell "they" were.

Alex snorted at her own joke and began circling the thug in the living room, careful to keep one eye on the kitchen and the other on her attacker. The sound of wood

splitting echoed through the air and she glanced over to see Hunter ram backward into the second thug, shattering the back of the chair upon impact with the thug's abdomen. Even she winced. That was going to definitely leave a mark.

"Give up now, bitch, and I might use lube when I rape the fuck out of you," thug two said, with little tact and even less intelligence. "Your choice."

"Really?" Alex shrugged. "I go for choice number three."

The thug looked confused, frowning. "Huh?"

"Choice three." She eyed his frame for weak points. There weren't many. Still, no one was immune to the old SING technique—solar plexus, instep, nose, groin. The thug stopped and seemed to think about her statement for a moment and Alex seized her chance. Head lowered, she ran straight at the startled man, elbow up and aimed straight for his mid-chest. A loud OOOFFF sounded as she made contact, then fast as sin, she stomped her heel down on his foot. When he bent over in pain, she rammed her elbow into his nose, satisfaction flooding her system. Cartilage cracked and blood spurted. Alex was normally squeamish about any kind of violence, but when her life and the life of the man she cared for was at stake, she'd do whatever it took to survive.

The thug reared back clutching his battered face, and Alex delivered her final blow. One hard slam of her knee straight between his legs. She barely had time to get out of the way as his huge body heaved forward. He dropped to his knees, his face draining of color beneath the blood as a high-pitched wheezing noise escaped from his mouth. Then he keeled over face-first into the carpet, holding his injured dick and crying like a tiny baby.

"Jesus Christ, woman!" Hunter called from the kitchen. While his attention was diverted, the sex boss made a run for the back door. Hunter tried to catch him, but

with his ankles still bound to the chair, walking fast was difficult. “Fuck!”

Alex ran for the door too, but it was too late. Moments later an engine roared to life and the sex boss took off in a screech of tires and burning rubber. Which left only Hunter and Alex and the two thugs who were currently moaning on the floor.

She immediately dropped to her knees and reached for Hunter’s ankles to undo the ropes. “I was so afraid they were going to kill you before I got here.”

“I was kind of afraid of that too,” Hunter said, wiping away a drip of blood from his nose. Seemed the thugs had roughed him up a bit anyway. Alex stood and ran her fingers over his bruised, beautiful face. “I’m glad you showed up when you did though. Where the hell did you learn to fight like that?”

“I told you. Movie roles.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips gently before lowering to flat feet again and looking around. “What do we do now?”

“Now.” Hunter stepped around her and closed the back door. “We clean this shit up then we call Loki for back up.”

“What about the thugs?” Alex began picking up pieces of broken chair from the kitchen floor. “Do we call the police on them?”

“Not yet.” Alex headed back toward the master bedroom. “Let’s lock them in the safe room for now. That way we can have the cops pick them up in the morning. You and I have more important things to do tonight.”

Alex shook her head and grabbed a garbage bag, her tone teasing. “Is sex all you ever think about?”

“Yes.” Hunter returned and stuck his head around the corner of the kitchen, a wad of

white Kleenex sticking out of one nostril to staunch the blood. “But I wasn’t talking about that. I heard them talking before you arrived. They thought I was knocked out. We still might have a chance to save your friend and bring the sex boss down, if I can get a plan together.”

“What?” She looked up at him, surprised. She’d been so focused on saving Hunter, she’d forgotten all about poor Bea. Guilt and shame flooded in, along with a glimmer of hope. “How?”

“My guess is they’ll take the slaves to Club Xcite tonight instead of here. If we can get enough reinforcements, I can take a team in there and end this shit.”

“Okay.” Alex blinked several times, running through things in her head. “Do you know enough people out here to do that? Get a team together, I mean.”

“No.” He waggled his fingers toward Alex. “Grab his feet while I take his shoulders.” Together they moved first one, then both, of the still out-of-it thugs into the safe room. Hunter waited until the metal door slid shut, then punched a code into the keypad on the outside of the room, smiling at Alex again. “But Loki does. He’s got friends all over the world. One phone call should take care of it.”

“Guess we’ll be making a stop at the mini-mart again, huh?”

“Guess so.” Hunter slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. He kissed her so thoroughly she nearly forgot her name, let alone what the hell they were doing. “Thanks again for saving my life, baby. Now, call that driver of yours to pick us up so we can get those phones then get to your place for a nice hot shower. My back is killing me.”

Two hours later, Hunter was clean and dres

sed in a fresh T-shirt and clean jeans. They were safely ensconced in Alex's home, and he was planning out the best way to both put an end to the human trafficking ring at the club that evening and get Bea back safely at the same time. He took a seat on the sofa on the opposite end from Alex, the new burner phone he'd bought at the mini-mart still pressed to his ear as it had been since he'd walked out of the shower an hour prior.

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“It’s your mission, Hunter. You’ve got complete control. Run it how you see best. I trust you on this,” Loki said, his deep voice oddly distracted. “Listen, I’ve got to go. Make sure you update me once things go down so I know if I need to call in more manpower, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Hunter nodded, still a bit shocked. This was his big chance for the promotion and Loki seemed to be willing to give him every shot of making it. They were friends outside the agency, but professionally, he’d never been sure quite where Loki stood with him. Now, there was no doubt. Loki was one-hundred-percent on-board with Hunter. It made him feel both happy and humble. He cleared his throat. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime.” Loki’s smile was evident through the phone line. “Call me. And be careful, dude. We’re still digging out from the aftermath of that Aeon debacle with Cam.”

“Will do.” Hunter chuckled as he ended the call. Cam, the agency’s tech guru, had been gunning for his own mission for months and Loki had finally given in and used him to retrieve a valuable car that had been stolen from the federal government. The whole thing should’ve been a piece of cake, especially for Cam who basically ate, slept, and pissed computer code. But things had taken a turn for the complicated when a gal Cam used to know turned out to be a thief with the same objectives as Cam—get the car back at all costs. The two had ended up getting the car together, though it was more than a tad worse for the wear. They’d also ended up in love and married at the end of it all. Hunter hazarded a glance over at Alex, who was busy texting on her own phone. Marriage certainly wasn’t on his mind at the moment, but maybe he and Alex could have something lasting after all this anyway. He was

willing to explore the possibility. “Loki’s called in favors from his west coast friends. We should have all the help we need tonight.”

“Good.” She looked up from her phone screen and grinned at him. “The bartender sent me pics of the club’s interior with flash, so we can actually see where all the nooks and crannies are in the place. Lots of hiding spots, which is good. I’ve been there many times, but you saw yourself how dark it was in there. These should help you put your men where you need them to be.”

“Cool.” They moved closer on the sofa so they sat shoulder to shoulder and Alex scrolled through the pics for him. Hunter couldn’t resist leaning over and burying his face in her long, soft hair. God, he’d missed the sweet citrusy scent of her, the taste of her soft skin. She shivered as he nuzzled the sensitive spot where her neck met collarbone. “We’ve got a few hours to kill before we need to get ready, you know.”

“We do?” Alex giggled as Hunter pulled her back into the cushions with him, her new phone falling to the floor as she slid her arms around his neck. “And how do you suggest we spend our time?”

“Oh, I’ve got more than a few ideas,” he said, pulling her down for an openmouthed kiss.

“Only a few?” She raised a brow as her hand crept between them to stroke his hard cock through his jeans.

“Way more than a few.” Hunter rolled over, taking Alex with him until she was squarely beneath him and his hands were under her pink top, resting on smooth warm skin. “Best get started now so we get to them all, Mistress.”

Alex stood in the shadows across the street from Club Xcite, doing her best not to fidget in her new costume. With her scarlet red wig, skimpy black leather dress, and goth style makeup, she looked nothing like her normal self or even the brown haired, bespectacled Dom from a few days earlier. Then again that was the point.

“Everything’s in place,” Hunter whispered from beside her. “My team has got every angle covered inside. No way these guys are making it out of here without handcuffs and a police escort. You remember the plan?”

She nodded. “Stay quiet, stay submissive. Don’t react when I see Bea. Let you handle the dangerous stuff. Got it.”

Of course, all of that was subject to change once they were inside. Bea was her best friend. Depending on the condition they found her in, Alex might have to break open a can of whoop ass on the sex boss all over again. Her blood boiled just thinking about the awful things Bea had had to witness and maybe even endure because of that asshole. If anyone deserve a kick to the face, it was that bastard.

“Good. Let’s do it.” Hunter tugged gently on the black braided leash around Alex’s neck and led her across the street to the club. For his part, he looked different too. Purple dye in his hair, eyeliner, fake piercings in his nose and eyebrow. Still hot though. Alex bit her lip as she stared at his ass in those tight leather pants. God. The man could make a garbage bag look sexy.

The bouncer stopped them, as usual. Alex kept her gaze lowered, even though she had in dark contacts to cover her blue eyes. Didn’t want to risk recognition at this point and blow their cover. Hunter slipped the beefy guard two hundred-dollar bills and got them in the door.

Inside, the club was as murky as ever. Pink and blue neon lights reflected weakly through the smoke-filled air. The low thrum of electronic house music throbbed

through the speaker system, and the room smelled of warm bodies and the sharp tang of alcohol. People clustered around the space, drinking or dancing or talking. Adrenaline prickled through Alex's nerve endings as she realized unseen eyes watched and waited for Hunter's signal.

A murmur broke through the crowd as the door leading to the restricted back area of the club banged open and the sex boss walked out, two new guards flanking him. The guy scanned the room then locked gazes with a hard-edged Asian guy at the bar. They exchanged chin hikes then the Asian dude strode across the room to where the sex boss stood with his guards.

This is it. Please be okay, Bea. Please.

While Alex watched, she felt the tension in Hunter's body as he stiffened beside her, the leash still clutched in his hand. His expression was unreadable, but she could tell he was poised to strike by the rigid set of his broad shoulders. Shit was about to go down.

The sex boss and the Asian exchanged a few words she couldn't hear, then the sex boss snapped his fingers loud. The music in the club cut off with a screech and the two guards flanking him disappeared back through the door into the restricted area. When they emerged again, they were each accompanied by two figures, hard to tell if they were male or female, with bland gray hoodies on. Even with their faces mostly covered, Alex imagined they'd all be filthy and shivering, marred with dirt and blood. The guard's firm grip on their arms worked as well as any set of handcuffs and their feet were covered with cheap rubber flip flops that could be bought for less than a dollar at any drug store. All of them wore the same plain black leggings.

Bile rose hot and bitter in Alex's throat. She swallowed hard to keep from vomiting. Bea was there, in the back next to the smaller of the two guards. Her short dark hair was sticking up all over her head and her bottom lip appeared to be split and swollen,

but otherwise she looked unharmed. Well, as unharmed as one could be in that situation.

Despite the horrific scene, Alex's heart leapt. "She's there," she whispered to Hunter. "In back, on the left, near the door. It's Bea."

"Quiet." Hunter tugged on the leash without looking at Alex, shocking her into silence. His voice held an edge of steel she'd not heard from him before. She was used to being on the dominant side of things, but Alex had to admit seeing her man playing the alpha male was incredibly hot too. Maybe they'd have to switch things up the next time they were in the sack. If they got out of this mess, that was. Hunter continued to stare straight ahead, a small muscle ticking near his tight jaw. "Stay. Put. Understand?"

Much as she longed to

run across the room and tackle poor Bea in a bear hug, she didn't want to put her best friend's life at risk. Or anyone else's for that matter. She knew Hunter was packing, she'd seen him check the magazine in his Glock before concealing it in a special holster beneath his purple T-shirt and leather vest. She assumed the rest of his team was armed as well.

None of that quelled her fears when the sex boss pulled that nasty looking knife out of his waistband again and started waving it around, threatening the Asian man. Apparently, there was some dispute over price. The other people in the club continued on with their business as if nothing was going on—either in on the deal, Alex supposed, or part of Hunter's team.

Suddenly, the sex boss reached back and grabbed Bea by the arm, yanking her forward so hard she stumbled and fell to her knees. He dug his fingers into her short hair and forced her head back to expose her neck. Hunter took a step forward, his free

hand raised to signal his team.

“For that price you get three, not four,” the sex boss yelled. “This one goes.”

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He raised the knife to slit Bea's throat and Hunter gave his signal. Within moments, chaos ensued. Fights broke out amongst the patrons while Hunter dropped Alex's leash and charged directly for the sex boss. He wanted revenge, a concept Alex was all too familiar with.

During the pandemonium, shots rang out and the four women still chained together huddled on the floor for survival. Alex rushed over to them, shoving through a crowd of flailing people to reach Bea, who was staring wide-eyed as Hunter bashed the sex boss's face in with his fists.

"Bea!" Alex dropped to her knees and pulled her best friend in for a tight hug. At first, Bea resisted and it took a minute for Alex to remember her disguise. "It's me. It's Alex!" She pulled off the wig. "I'm so sorry about what happened. If I'd had any idea you'd get taken I never would've let you come here that night alone."

"Lex?" Bea blinked several times before collapsing against her, head on Alex's shoulder. "Oh my God. I was afraid I'd never see you again."

"Are you okay? Did they hurt you?" Alex pulled back slightly to cup Bea's cheeks. "Did they—" She couldn't bring herself to say the word rape. Bea shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. "No. They wanted to save me for the Asian guy. If you hadn't brought in the cavalry when you did, I don't... I don't..."

She dissolved into sobs and Alex held her while she cried. Around them the action began to die down as Hunter and his team got control of the situation. The few patrons involved in the sex boss's scheme were arrested as was the Asian dude. The sex boss was down for the count, his face bruised and battered as he sprawled on the

sticky club floor. Hunter straightened and looked around, his expression desperate. “Alex! Alex, where are you?”

“Here,” she said. “Right here beside you.”

The emotion on Hunter’s face quickly morphed from concern to relief as his gaze flicked from Bea to Alex then back again. He slipped his arms around both of them and squeezed. “Is she okay?”

“As well as can be expected under the circumstances.” Alex rested her head on his chest, taking comfort in his heat and scent. “She should probably still be checked at the ER to be sure.”

“Yep.” Hunter gave Alex a quick kiss then released her. Pushing to his feet as the sound of sirens wailing filtered in from outside, Hunter began commanding his team like the true leader he was. Alex couldn’t have been prouder. He was going to get that promotion he wanted so badly. No doubt in her mind. And even if it meant he’d leave her behind and head back to the east coast, she was happy for him. Sure, her heart would be broken. She loved Hunter. But she also loved him enough to let him go, if that was truly what he wanted.

Alex struggled to her feet then helped Bea up. They stood off to the side while the cops came in and took over the scene. One of the officers took Bea’s statement and offered her a blanket. Alex stayed by her side, watching Hunter expertly work the room. After Bea had answered all the police’s questions, they loaded her in an ambulance, along with the other women to take them to the hospital for treatment. Alex told her friend she’d meet her there.

First, she had to say goodbye.

Alone at last, she and Hunter walked to the door of the club together.

“Well, I, uh. I guess this is it then, huh?” Alex tucked a stray lock of her blond hair behind her ear. “Case closed. Mission complete. Sayonara, sweetheart. Hasta la—”

Hunter put a finger to her lips, silencing her. “I don’t want to leave you, Alex. I know it sounds crazy and I know things could never work out between us, but I care for you more than I ever thought possible in just these few short days. I wish there was a way we could stay together, get to know each other even more.”

Alex’s pulse raced at his words. “You care for me?”

Hunter nodded. “So much I ache.”

“Oh, my.” Laughter bubbled up within her before she could stop it.

“What’s so funny?” He frowned.

“Not funny.” She bit back her giggles. “Joy. I care for you too, Hunter. In fact, I love you. I don’t want to leave you either.” Alex flung herself into his arms and held on tight. “And if you really want to be with me, we’ll find a way. I promise.”

“We will?” He picked her up and kissed her hard. “Yes. I want to be with you. I want to give this thing between us a shot. But how can we if I’m working in Virginia and you’re starring in movies out here? I won’t have you give up your career for me. You’re too talented.”

“Who said anything about giving up my career?” Alex squeezed him tighter. “More like branching out, trying new things.”

“Branching out how?”

She pulled back and grinned. “You’ll see.”

“That sounds like trouble to me.” Hunter kissed her again. “And in case you were wondering, I love you too, Alexandra Valentine.”

“I thought you said you only cared for me.” She narrowed her gaze on him. “Have a sudden revelation of the heart, did you?”

“I’ve had nothing but since I started working with you. You’re funny, smart, kind, generous, loving—”

This time it was Alex cutting him off. “You think I’m smart?”

“Brilliant.”

“Whelp, now I love you even more.” She kissed him again deeply then slid down to her feet once more. “Now, let’s get to the hospital and check on Bea. Afterward, we’ve got a future to plan.”

18

Six months later

“Cut!” the stage director yelled from the wings, and Hunter looked up from his phone. “Okay. Let’s break for lunch, people. We’ll continue rehearsals at two.”

Finally. His stomach growled as he finished thumbing in his text to his second-in-command at the agency, then shut off his phone and stowed it in his pocket as Alex approached up the aisle from the stage.

“Hey, sweetie.” She bent down and kissed him on the lips. “Ready to eat?”

“When am I not ready to eat?” He grinned and stood, taking her hand as they walked through the lobby of the historic Broadway theater. Turned out Alex had been right. She did have new things to explore on her career path. Like working in plays in New York City. It was still a couple hours away from Virginia, but way closer than L.A. And it gave them the opportunity to spend time together, which these days was not as often as he’d like.

They walked outside into the bright spring sunshine and headed toward the deli on the corner. Hunter loved their corned beef while Alex was a diehard pastrami fan.

“How’s the case going at the office?” she asked, slipping her sunglasses on as they weaved down the busy sidewalk, dodging tourists and other pedestrians as they went. “The human trafficking trial is coming up next month, right? They still want me to testify, yes?”

“Yes.” He held the door for her then followed Alex inside the busy restaurant. The smells of fresh baked bread and smoked meats slapped him in the face and made his stomach growl louder. The guys behind the counter were shouting orders to each other and the customers were angling for any free tables in the joint. He cocked his head toward the dining area. “Why don’t you get us a table, baby? You want your regular?”

“Yep. Thanks.” Alex sped off toward a newly opened table for two near the windows, flashing her trademark winning smile at a man who had also made a beeline to claim it. Hunter chuckled as the guy blinked then graciously bowed before walking away. Hunter knew how that guy felt. He’d been thoroughly dazzled by Alex himself. So much so that things had gotten way more serious way faster than he’d ever expected. Serious to the point that—

“Next?” the guy behind the counter yelled, waving Hunter up to the register. “What can I get you, pal?”

Hunter rattled off their order then stepped down the line to pay and wait for pick up. He patted his jeans pocket while he waited, feeling the small lump there. This wasn’t exactly the fairy tale location he’d planned for popping the big question, but sometimes you had to think on your feet. A lesson he’d learned all too well out in L.A. He’d gone in there, a solid plan in place. Then Alex had come along and blown all his ordered, neat ideas clear out of the water. And he loved her more each day for that.

Loki had even complimented him on his ability to improvise under stress when he’d given him the promotion at the agency. Things had worked out fine in the end, even if they were different than he’d expected.

He grabbed the brown paper bag of food when his name was called then made his way over to the table where Alex sat, looking beautiful as al

ways. New York life agreed with her. Her hair was straight and pulled back into a simple ponytail. She had on minimal makeup and just a plain white T-shirt and jeans, yet Hunter didn't think he'd ever seen anything so exquisite in his life.

He took the seat across from her while she dished out their food. "Rehearsals going okay?"

"Yep," she said as she unwrapped her sandwich. "I thought Bea might have a hard time with the material, seeing as how it's based on what we went through at that sex club, but I think it's actually been good for her. Cathartic."

"Must be all that Method acting, huh?" Hunter winked as he bit into his corned beef.

"Must be." Alex wiped her mouth. "Word has it there's already Tony buzz for her role in the play even though it hasn't even opened yet. I pray that's true. No one deserves that award more than Bea."

Hunter swallowed his bite of sandwich then took a sip of his iced tea. "No one but maybe you. You went through a lot too, to get her back safely."

"I already got my reward." Alex reached over and laced her fingers with Hunter's, her smile full of so much love it made his chest hurt. "I'm so happy."

"Me too, baby. Me too." He took a deep breath then reached into his pocket to pull out a small black velvet box. "And I want to continue being happy forever after." Hunter opened the box and set the sparkling diamond solitaire engagement ring on the table in front of Alex. "Will you marry me, baby?"

Her gorgeous eyes widened and Alex blinked several times at the ring, her gaze darting back and forth between it and him. "W-what is this? W-what's happening here?"

Their conversation had drawn the attention of several tables around them and soon quiet settled over their little corner of the diner. Hunter cleared his throat and brought Alex's hand to his mouth to kiss her fingers. "I love you, Alex, and I'm asking you to be my wife."

"Oh, God." Tears slipped down her cheeks and she gave him a watery smile. "Yes! Yes, Hunter Odenson, I love you and I would love to be your wife!"

He was pretty sure the cheers inside the diner could be heard all the way in Virginia.

Hunter stood and pulled Alex from her seat, slipping his ring on her finger before tugging her closer for a passionate kiss—which drew more cheers and whistles from the crowd.

"Best lunch ever, baby," he whispered near her ear once their kiss ended.

Alex held him close and giggled. "Best life ever, sweetheart."

End of Undercover with the SEAL