



Xavier's Mission

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Description: Former Army Ranger, Xavier Larson, is still dealing with PTSD and survivor's guilt from the helicopter crash thirteen months earlier that damaged his shoulder and killed his best friend. But his emotional battles don't stop him from flying for Team Eagle. Unfortunately, his European vacation is interrupted when his boss requests a favor; fly a scientist from Vienna to Geneva. When the flight ends in an unexpected crash landing, Xavier finds himself stranded with his passenger in the unforgiving Swiss Alps.

Allegra Wagner, Chief Medical Officer of the powerful NovoGlobal Corporation is happy to escape the crash with her life. But she is hellbent on delivering her chilling clinical trials for a developmental drug have been irrevocably compromised, putting millions of lives at stake. But first, she needs to figure out who wants to kill her and get off this mountain alive.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Xavier's two-fold protect Allegra and ensure her information reaches her boss in Geneva. As a team of two, they must navigate treacherous terrains, both geographical and personal. With the clock ticking, Xavier and Allegra find themselves entwined in a high-stakes dance of survival and redemption. As their ruthless enemy advances, they must form an unlikely alliance in a battle that pits integrity against corporate greed, all the while fighting their growing attraction to one another.

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CHAPTER1

Her heart raced as she stared at the screen. She blinked hard, unable to believe her eyes. There was no way. Checking again, she confirmed her first thought; the numbers were off. Way off. They weren't even in the same ballpark as they were supposed to be. A thin sheen of sweat broke out on her back as she continued to read the horror filling the screen in front of her. The implications of the situation were inconceivable.

Her phone dinged to signal an incoming text. The slight noise made her jump. "Shit," she mumbled as she glanced at her screen. Just her mother forgetting the time difference again. Reaching for her purse, she pulled out the backup flash drive she kept there for emergencies. This qualified. This was the mother of all emergencies.

She slotted the drive into the machine and clicked the button on the screen to begin the download. The bar on the screen seemed to be moving at a glacial pace. She noted the time in the corner of her screen. Two a.m. She'd stayed late to work on another project entirely and had gotten carried away until she'd stumbled on this file purely by accident. If she hadn't deleted the wrong file and then cleared her trash without realizing it, she never would've been in the backup file in the first place. And she never would have known the truth.

But was it the truth? Could it be possible? If this data was the real data, then lives would be lost. Was there a way this could be fake? She tried to make that scenario fit, but no matter how she flipped the puzzle pieces in her head, there was no way to make these numbers add up. No. This was the real data. Her stomach rolled.

A sudden thump against the wall of her office made her jump. Was someone here? The cleaners had gone through hours ago. She stared at the door to her office. There were windows on either side of it, but the blinds were half closed so she couldn't see anything clearly. There was no movement. No sounds. She let out the breath she'd been holding and tried to calm her racing heart. Stupid. The bar said eighty-three percent. This backup was taking forever.

She should call Damon and tell him what she found. As the CEO of NoVoGlobal, he needed to know this ASAP. She should send him the file. They needed to move on this immediately. Her hand trembled as she reached for the phone. Who had created the file, or rather who'd deleted the real file and given her the doctored numbers? Wasn't that information on here somewhere? She stared at the screen. Someone had to know about this. Someone had the data and purposefully altered it. Then deleted the file. They purposely covered this up. That thought sent a chill down her spine.

The thump happened again and she shot to her feet. She'd talk to Damon from home. The file finished downloading and she ejected the USB, tucking it into the pocket of her blazer. Clicking out of the file, she hesitated. Did she dare move it somewhere else? A few keystrokes later, she had a copy of the file and she moved it to a new location and renamed it. No one would think to look for it there.

She was being silly. Once she brought this to Damon's attention, the CEO would act on it. This was all some crazy misunderstanding. Some tech in the lab fudged the data, not recognizing the consequences. That's what must have happened. Try as she might to convince herself of the truth of that, a hollow feeling grew in her chest. She was grasping at straws to avoid seeing the truth.

Clicking out of where she was, she closed everything on her screen and shut down her laptop. She usually brought it home with her but as she was coming back to the office in seven hours even though it was Saturday, it didn't seem necessary. But still. Maybe she should do what she always did just in case someone was watching. Was

someone watching or listening to her? Her heart rate shot up again and her palms were slick with sweat.

She glanced out the large windows to her left. The blinds partially blocked the view so no one could see in. Taking in the rest of her office, she tried to determine if anything was out of place or if anything new was there. Isn't that what they did in the movies? She gave herself a mental shake. As if she could see any bugs or cameras planted there. Shit, she'd gone from normal to paranoid at lightning speed.

She packed up her laptop and put it into her old messenger bag and then headed across her office. Flipping off the light, she then pulled open the door and screamed.

"Son of a bitch, Connie," she snarled. "You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing here at this hour?" she demanded as she sagged against the door frame.

Conrad Ingram grinned. "I'm so sorry, Allegra. I got lost in work and didn't realize the time. My laptop was acting up and I had to troubleshoot. You know what the guys down in IT are like. They treat you like you're an idiot when you call them."

"Most people are idiots when it comes to computers," she said mildly, willing her heart to return to a normal rhythm.

Connie laughed. "True. Anyway, I was just on my way out and saw the light on in your office. What are you doing here?"

Connie's dark hair stood up in tufts. His brown eyes crinkled at the corners, looking tired but filled with mirth. Connie, as everyone called him, was the nice guy at the office. Middle-aged, with a growing belly and thinning hair, he was everyone's dad. He was also the head of the legal department and going through the mother of all divorces which, she suspected, was why he was at the office so late. He, like her, had no one to go home to so why bother going?

“Same thing. Fell down a rabbit hole looking at the study for Flomox.” She moved out of her office and closed the door and the two started down the hallway toward the elevators.

“How’s it looking?” Connie hit the button.

“Good so far. Lots of positive data but there are a few points of concern. I’m coming in tomorrow or rather later today to go over it again. I think we’ll have to see how the next batch looks before we move on it.”

He sighed. “Graham is not going to like that. He wants to move on this. I know he’s pushing to buy Scolari Pharmaceuticals already.”

They boarded the elevator and rode it to the ground floor. “I know but he’s just going to have to wait a bit longer. We could be spending a whole lot of money to buy a big dud. It would not be the first time.”

“True, but with Cytoxine getting FDA approval this week, he’s riding high at the moment. He keeps pointing out to everyone how he picked the big winner and that the money they’d paid for it is a drop in the bucket compared to what NoVoGlobal is going to make on it.”

Just the mention of the drug had her insides turning to liquid. “I know. Dealing with Graham has been getting harder and harder of late. And three hundred million doesn’t seem like a drop in the bucket to me, nor is the two billion he spent on the dud drug before that deal.”

They nodded to the security guard as they went by and made their way to the street. “If he gets his way and the drug flops, he’ll try to put the blame on you, you know,” Connie pointed out.

She nodded. “I know. I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t. All I can do is raise my concerns at the meeting next week and let Damon decide.” Her driver had gotten out of the car and come around, waiting to open the rear door of the BMW.

Connie touched her shoulder. “I do not envy you your position.”

“Thanks. Some days I don’t like it either.” She gave him a quick smile. “Have a good weekend.”

“You, too.” He turned and headed down the sidewalk.

Allegra went to the car and Jurgen opened the door. Sliding in, she put on her seatbelt and then put her head back on the seat. Fatigue hit her. The adrenaline that had slammed her veins when she was in her office had left her system just as quickly, leaving her feeling depleted, shaky, and slightly ridiculous. The conversation with Connie had been mundane and normal. The interaction had grounded her. That’s what Connie did for most in the company. Whenever someone was wound up, they went to see Connie or Connie sought them out and then worked his magic. He’d managed to head off many confrontations and help find equitable solutions among the C level people.

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What was she going to do about the data she'd discovered? What would Connie do? Maybe she should get a t-shirt with that on it. Connie would tell her to report what she found. And she would. It was the weekend. She'd planned on going in again in the morning and continuing to work but maybe she'd work on it from her apartment.

Out her window, Vienna flew by. One of the most interesting cities architecturally speaking, and yet she couldn't muster up the energy to pay attention. A shiver tripped down her back and her muscles tensed. No matter how she looked at it, what she found was a major problem for her company and someone she worked with closely didn't mind becoming a cold-blooded killer.

CHAPTER2

Xavier Larson stretched his left arm out in front of him and flexed his fingers. Today, the tingling wasn't god-awful. He'd pushed hard on his workout this morning, but his grip had held up. Once he stretched, the tingling should go away completely. At least he hoped it would.

Satisfied he got up from the weight bench and walked through the gym to the men's locker room. He opened his locker as his cell went off. "Larson."

"Xav, it's Hank."

"Hey, Hank. What's up?" His boss calling him on a Sunday morning was unusual in and of itself, but the fact that Xavier was on vacation made it highly irregular. He wasn't due back in Yellowstone for another week. His stomach tensed.

“I know you’re on vacation and I hate to bug you, but I need a favor. Can you fly an executive from Vienna to Geneva today?” Hank’s tone of voice said there was more to the story.

Xavier didn’t hesitate. Hank had done too much for him to even consider saying no. “I can do that,” he said. “What plane do you want me to use?”

There was a pause and the sound of keys clicking reached Xavier’s ears. “Yeah. There’s a Dassault Falcon 2000LXS at the FBO at Vienna International. You’re rated on that one, right?

"Yeah. I’m good to go.”

“Great. I’ll text you the tail number. You’ll need to haul ass because the client wants to get to Geneva pronto, and you’re gonna have to do a pre-flight check first.”

Xavier’s shoulders tightened. Ever since the accident, he hated being rushed when it came to flying. It didn’t matter that he would do everything necessary to make sure the plane was safe, the added pressure of having to do it quickly always made unease knot in his gut. He took a calming breath. At least he’d be flying with Joey. The good-natured Aussie was an excellent pilot and an all-around standup guy. But still, Xavier’s sixth sense told him there was more going on. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Hank paused again. “The woman you’re flying is a bigwig in a pharmaceutical company. She seems...intense. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t set off alarm bells. I can’t tell you anything specific but she’s pushing to get to Geneva as quickly as possible. I would turn down the job but a mutual friend asked me as a favor.”

“Understood.” Xavier moved the fingers of his left hand trying to work out the pins and needles but he knew the effort was wasted now. Once his shoulders tensed, nothing would diminish the tingling. Not until he managed to relax. “I’m at the gym.

I've got to go back to my rental and get my gear. It's gonna take me a bit to get to the airport. Tell the client that we'll be wheels up in about three hours. I also have to check the weather."

"There's some snow coming your way. You need to get airborne before it arrives if you can." There was a squeak that signified Hank had leaned back in his black leather desk chair.

Xavier grunted. Just what he needed. "Send me her contact info and I'll keep her updated."

"Will do. And Xavier, good luck. Be safe. I know I don't have to tell you but don't take any shortcuts."

Not in a million years. "Understood. I'll reach out from Geneva when the job is finished." He clicked off the call. "Shit," he mumbled as he grabbed his stuff from his locker. He'd shower at his rental and then head to the airport.

A half-hour later, he pulled up in front of his cabin. It looked just like a Swiss chalet which was exactly why he'd rented it. Nestled in the woods with a large patch of grass behind it where he sat and drank good beer while he watched the mountains in the changing light. This place had brought him a peace he wasn't sure he'd ever find again after what happened. He rented it every chance he got. The week here and there had saved him in so many ways. He loved Yellowstone and the guys, but sometimes he just needed to be alone to process what happened. Losing his best friend had been the toughest thing he'd had to face about the accident.

Shaking off that thought, he hurried inside and hopped into the shower. He'd sent a text to Joey before he'd left the gym and was still waiting for his co-pilot to get back to him. Joey lived closer to the airport. If he could get there first, he could start on the checklist. Thirty minutes later, Xavier was back in his car, go-bag beside him, headed

into Vienna. His cell went off. “Larson,”

“Xav? It’s Dave, from AV Aviation. Did Hank call you?”

“Yeah. I’m on my way to the airport. He sent me the tail number. This is another charter, correct?”

“Yeah, this plane isn’t Hank’s, but it’s solid.”

“Good to hear.” The tension in Xavier’s shoulders eased slightly. Dave was a good guy. If he said the airplane was solid, then it was.

Dave’s voice changed. “Listen, your co-pilot today won’t be Joey. I know you usually fly with him but he’s unavailable. The guy you’re flying with is Simon Lindstrom. He’s got lots of experience. Comes highly recommended. Should be fine.”

Xavier’s shoulders tensed right back up. “Where’s Joey?”

There was a pause. “I’m not sure. I’ve been trying to get a hold of him all morning for something else and he’s just not answering. He broke up with Penny a few days ago so I’m assuming he’s on a bender or something.”

Xavier eased his foot off the accelerator. Maybe he should go check on his friend. His phone dinged. He glanced at the screen. The incoming text was from the client, wanting to know when the plane could take off. Shit. “Do me a favor and go over and check on Joey. Just see that he’s okay.” Joey and Penny had been together for three years. The breakup was her idea, Xavier was sure. Joey was mad about her.

“I’ll head over to his hotel room on my lunch break. Anyway, Simon’s already at the airport. He’ll start the checklist and see you when you get there.” The call ended.

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He tried to convince himself there was no need to panic, but his heart rate wasn't getting that message. Ever since the accident, sudden changes to do with anything around flying made him break out in a sweat. He took a steadying breath. Having PTSD was nothing to be ashamed of but damn if he'd let it control his life.

Joey was good people, but this Simon guy had to be a good pilot if AV Aviation hired him. They were a great operation with an exceptional reputation. During the remainder of his drive, he tried to convince himself everything was okay, but as he parked his car in front of the FBO, his gut was swirling as much as his brain. Grabbing his phone, he hit Hank's number and was disappointed when the call went to voice mail. He didn't like this one bit. But he wasn't going to let Hank down. If this was a favor, Xavier couldn't be the one to not make it happen. Hank had saved his life by giving him this job. He got to fly again and travel all over the world. It gave him something to wake up for every day and something to come home from. It gave him a reason to keep going, something he wasn't sure he'd have again after losing his best friend in the crash.

Pushing those thoughts away, he grabbed his bag and headed through the FBO and across the tarmac to the jet. He went up the stairs and turned toward the cockpit. A man sat in the co-pilot seat. He immediately turned and offered his hand. "Larson? Simon Lindstrom." He had a heavy Austrian accent.

"Xavier."

"Nice to meet you." The other man offered a smile and then turned back to the clipboard he held. "Just getting the paperwork ready."

Xavier ignored the tightening in his gut, took off his parka and stored his stuff in the closet behind the pilot's seat. Then he took a second to study Simon. The man was big. Even sitting, he overwhelmed the small cockpit. He had short blond hair and his movements were purposeful. Military. Had to be. Takes one to know one.

"Where did you serve?" Xavier asked as he took his seat.

"Austrian Air Force. Ten years. You?"

"U.S. Army." He didn't bother to volunteer anything else.

"You fly? I thought Army guys stayed on the ground." Simon added a smile to show he was joking.

"I grew up flying then went into the army. Don't worry. I know what I'm doing." That was the point of the conversation. It was one thing for Dave to say Simon was a good pilot, but it was a different thing to have to fly with someone he didn't know. Simon must have felt the same. That fact and Simon's Air Force past made Xavier's shoulders relax ever so slightly. The tingling in his clenched fist lessened.

It was one flight, and they'd get through it quickly. Then he could spend the last few days of his vacation back in Austria at his rented cabin. He pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to Joey telling him off for taking another job. Then he got to the business at hand.

An hour later, the client pulled up next to the jet in the hangar. "Do you want me to handle this?" Simon asked in Austrian-accented English.

Dave must have briefed him because Joey usually dealt with the passengers. Xavier always nodded and smiled but stayed as far away from the clients as possible. Dealing with rich annoying people was not his strong point. He had little patience and

didn't care to enter into inane small talk.

Xavier nodded. "That would be great."

Simon got up and left the plane.

He finished the last of the paperwork and checked with the tower. They were good to go. Their wheels up time was in ten minutes. They needed to get the client in and settled quickly.

"Of course, Ms. Wagner. It will be a quick flight. One hour and twenty-eight minutes flight time," Simon called over his shoulder as he entered the airplane.

"Thank you," a woman's voice reached his ears.

Lindstrom introduced him. "This is Captain Larson."

Xavier turned to the client and lifted his left hand in greeting.

"Captain," she said but did not offer her hand. She turned and made her way to her seat.

Xavier turned back around and started the engines. He didn't ask the woman's name because it was on the paperwork. Allegra Wagner. She was an attractive woman, drop-dead gorgeous in fact. Her blond hair and big green eyes were sexy as hell. Hank said it was a favor for a friend, so he didn't ask but he idly wondered if that was true. Hank was happily married but Xavier couldn't blame the guy if he'd offered to do this woman a favor. She was a knockout and that was hard to resist.

He made an adjustment on the controls. He'd love to ask the guys back at Yellowstone what they thought. He missed the camaraderie with his teammates.

They'd all gone through hell together. The crash that killed some of their brothers in arms had brought them all closer than ever. Losing his best friend that way had been crushing, but the guys had helped him through it.

That closeness had gotten them all through rehab. Doing the last few months of rehab at Taz and Hannah's ranch had changed the course of their lives. They'd all thought they were done until Hank Patterson came along and offered them all jobs as part of Team Eagle. Xavier couldn't believe his luck. He got to fly again. Just like he did when he was a kid on his parents' ranch. Life was better than he ever thought it could be. So why was his gut such a mess? PTSD?

He glanced back at his passenger again. Yup, still stunning. The hair, the eyes, and a great set of legs, too. Her green sweater matched those pretty eyes. Her long tweed skirt covered her knees, and her feet were encased in winter boots. At least her long navy wool coat covered most of her body. The temp was dropping out there and even in a climate-controlled cabin, it would get chilly. Women. He'd never understand the choosing of fashion over warmth but after catching a glimpse of Ms. Wagner, he was kind of glad she had.

But the thing that had struck him was how stressed she seemed. She wore her anxiety like the coat over her shoulders. His job was to get her where she wanted to go and that would be the end of her their interaction. The last thing he needed in his life was stress. He flexed his left hand. The tingling had subsided to what he'd consider minor, and he aimed to keep it that way.

CHAPTER3

Allegra tookoff her coat and put it over the chair next to her. Then she strapped herself in and looked out the window into the hangar. She flexed her fingers on the armrest. Flying wasn't one of her favorite things by a long shot, but she needed to get to Damon before he left for the United States. She rubbed her temples. The headache

had set in the moment she'd found the file and hadn't let up since.

The big announcement was on Wednesday. Damon's travel plans called for him to leave Tuesday afternoon. She'd tried to call him but he'd replied with a text telling her that unless it was an absolute emergency he was out of reach. He had too much going on before the big board meeting this week and the announcement that Cytosine would receive FDA approval.

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She snorted to herself. Boy, was he in for a shock. They all were. Her discovery constituted an extreme emergency. The approval was based on fake data. There's no way in hell the FDA would pass Cytoxine if they saw the real data. No way. Which meant she had to stop the whole thing before Damon announced it. If he could fit her in his busy schedule. Prick. She'd never liked the man but had always done her best at her job, not that that would help her. He would throw her under the bus first chance he had. She'd already be gone if it weren't for her mentor who was close with several board members.

She'd wanted to talk to Damon on the phone but she was worried he wouldn't believe her and if she sent the data she'd collected by email he could ignore it. But, if she was right there in front of him, showing him the doctored numbers, then he couldn't ignore it. He couldn't dismiss her out of turn like he'd so often done in the past. Asshole.

He'd forced her to beg for a meeting and then only allotted her a thirty-minute window for tomorrow afternoon at his hotel. Not ideal but she didn't care. She wanted to be in Geneva on-site at the same hotel in case he could fit her in earlier or in case she managed to track him down today. They were going to need as much time as possible to manage the situation. She might hate the CEO, but she loved her job and believed in the work the company was doing.

Her heart fluttered at the thought of the big announcement. If the FDA made the announcement that Cytoxine had received FDA approval and then NoVoGlobal pulled the drug, the company would be in big trouble. Their reputation as a drug manufacturer would take a big hit they might not come back from. Customers would lose faith in their products. And the thing the board cared about the most, the stock

prices, would nosedive in a big way.

Not to mention those who try and jump ship to a new company would have the stink of this hanging over them. Well, she would anyway. Somehow this would be her fault. Damon would lay blame on her although she had nothing to do with it. He'd need a scapegoat and her job title made her the likely target. Chief Medical Officer meant she was ultimately responsible for the data, didn't it? Sure, if I'd seen the real data.

It didn't help that Damon wasn't her biggest fan and he'd only hired her because her mentor, who had sway with the board, demanded she be his successor. It also didn't hurt that she fulfilled a quota. He was a misogynist as far as she could tell. Oh, he'd never been obvious, but she'd been around enough women-hating men in the corporate world to recognize it when she saw it. She was at serious risk of being the scapegoat. Why hadn't she known about these bogus records? How could someone get away with falsifying the numbers? Because someone did it before I was given the numbers. That was the only possible explanation. Her stomach rolled.

She'd spent the whole day yesterday going over all the data she'd been given on the drug and had drawn out a timeline. There were no indicators that the drug was killing people. None. So either someone fudged the data from the beginning or, and she thought this more likely, when they increased the dosage the last time, that's when the research took a turn. That would be the most logical time for things to turn south and it would mean whoever had falsified the data only had to fudge one set of numbers. But how could they do that? The audacity of it made her nerves crawl as if ants were marching on her skin.

The co-pilot came over to her. "I need to review the safety briefing with you."

She tried not to sigh out loud. If she had to sit through this why couldn't the good-looking pilot have been the one to deliver it? There was something about this guy that

gave her the creeps. Maybe it was his pale, dead eyes, or his demeanor, either way, he set her teeth on edge. She was on edge anyway. Probably not this guy's fault.

The man went through a lengthy list of safety precautions, even pointing out that there were oxygen tanks behind the last set of seats, in case of unexpected depressurization. Great. Just another thing to worry about. When he finished, she nodded and thanked him. He went back up front and closed the cockpit door behind him.

The airplane began to taxi. Minutes later they were airborne. She stared down at the armrests she was gripping so hard her knuckles were white, and made a concerted effort to relax. Stress was the enemy. That's what her doctor told her. If she wanted to keep going, she had to reduce her stress. Her blood pressure was higher than it should be for her age and heart problems ran in her family. It was what killed her father. Reduce stress? Was she fucking kidding?

Allegra rolled her shoulders. Maybe the situation wasn't as bad as she thought. Maybe if they announced to the public that they needed more data before the FDA said anything, the fallout wouldn't be so bad. The stock might dip slightly and rumors would circulate in the big pharma world, but the bad press would die down in a few months. Then they could quietly scrap the project. There might even be a way to repurpose the drug, something it was good to treat in smaller doses, if her theory was correct that it was the change in dosage that had started killing patients.

She let out a long breath. Who the hell was she kidding? This was very fucking bad. They would have to scrap the project to insulate themselves from any damage. It would have to be done quietly once Cytosine dropped from everyone's minds which was never going to happen with Graham screaming about it from the rooftops.

The flight was smooth and for that, she was eternally grateful. She was in good hands with Captain Larson. Isn't that what Hank had said? And he did have nice hands. It

was one of the things she noticed about people, particularly men. She'd glanced at his hands when they were introduced. Larson had strong hands and she was willing to bet they were used to hard work. A callous or two never hurt. Gotta like a man that knew what to do with his hands. She wanted to mentally award bonus points to herself for noting the lack of a wedding ring. But the lack of a ring really meant nothing.

She went back to staring out the window at the cloudy sky as her mind whirled. She touched the outside of her skirt by the waistband, reassuring herself that the flash drive was still safely in the hidden pocket of her skirt. As long as she had the real data, she could stop things. She'd written everything up yesterday and had saved the file on her laptop but just in case there was a glitch, it helped to have the original documentation. She wanted to save it to the cloud but it was her work account so if she saved something, and they—whoever they were—were looking, they'd see it. Instead, she'd downloaded it to the USB and sent it via personal email to someone she trusted.

Glancing around the airplane, she took it in for the first time. Cream leather seats with beige carpet. Glossy wood panels as an accent. The whole airplane screamed luxury on a level she was not used to. This was above her pay grade under normal circumstances. It didn't matter that she was the Chief Medical Officer of a big pharmaceutical company, she still flew commercial and in coach most of the time as well.

This was a nice treat, one that had cost her quite a bit. It wasn't the money, she had plenty saved. Being in her late thirties and single, she'd been saving for years. Her nest egg was larger than she'd even anticipated. No, it was the favor she'd had to call in that made her uneasy. She hated to take advantage of anyone and certainly wouldn't want to lose a friendship over it.

Sunny Travers had been a good friend back in her L.A. days. They'd met when Allegra used to go to the Jasmine Door hotel bar to relax after work. Sunny had been

running the bar. They'd got to chatting and became friends. Allegra had left L.A. for San Francisco and a career in big Pharma. Sunny had stayed and moved up until she was running all the restaurants in the hotel. Allegra stayed in touch periodically and knew that Sunny had moved back to Montana when her grandmother had taken ill.

Now she was running a large spa resort there for Jameson Drake, the same man who owned the hotel chain but more importantly, her partner worked for Hank Patterson and the Brotherhood Protectors. She'd hated to make the call, but last time they spoke Sunny had mentioned that Hank now had guys in Europe and a group of pilots.

Allegra hated asking anyone for help, but the dire situation had made her suck it up. Sunny had come through and put her in touch with Hank who then booked the whole thing for her. She knew she owed Sunny a big favor but she also suspected she owed Hank. That was fair. She just didn't want to risk getting on a commercial flight. With the weather and the weird flying schedules these days, flying private was the only way to guarantee she'd get to Geneva in time.

At least that was the story she would tell everyone. When she'd been digging around yesterday, she'd discovered that the lead scientist on the study had died of a heart attack. He was in his mid-fifties and by the look of the picture in his personnel file, he wasn't in great shape so it could have happened, no question. But discovering that one of his assistants died in a car crash about two weeks after the lead guy's heart attack had set alarm bells clanging. Actually, it had set her heart pounding in her chest like she'd just run a marathon. But the thing that really put her over the edge was that the second assistant had also disappeared. Quit work the day after the other assistant's car crash and no one has seen him or heard from him since.

The sting in her fingertips told her she was gripping the armrests again in a death grip. That second assistant was either dead or on the run. Alarm bells could not ring any louder. It was a five-alarm fire, or DEFCON five. And that's what made her decide to take a private jet to Geneva. The thought of being in a crowd of people

where anything could happen or anyone could get to her had almost caused a panic attack. She tried to convince herself that she was jumping to conclusions, but every single instinct told her she was right.

She needed to get to Damon. Just another hour and she'd be in Geneva. She'd find a way to get in front of Damon, tell him everything and then she could relax. Or at least she wouldn't be so terrified.

The cockpit door opened, and the pilot came out. He was tall, taller than she'd imagined with piercing gray eyes. They were the color of the sky out her window. His dark hair was a little on the shaggy side, and it curled around his ears. He was wearing cargo pants and a collared shirt. Not exactly dressing business casual but the way he moved suggested to her that he was a man who knew what he was doing. Confidence filled every movement. She bit back another sigh. She worked with men like him every day. Their egos were always enormous. Although she had to admit, this pilot was very good looking and the way he moved seemed sexy, not overconfident. Maybe he had more of a reason to be confident than most. Under other circumstances, she might even ask him out for a drink.

"We'll be landing in about forty-five minutes," he said as he moved passed her to the restroom in the back of the jet. She heard the door close and then lifted her nose. He smelled good, she'd give him that. In fact, he smelled great.

How long had it been since she'd had a boyfriend? She mentally counted. Three years? No, four. He'd been a doctor and smelled like antiseptic if she remembered correctly. Her mother had been yelling at her for years that she was letting life pass her by in her quest to get to the top. She was pushing herself too hard and not stopping to smell the roses. If she died tomorrow, would she regret her choices? Her mother always knew how to ask the hard questions. It was what made her a great scientist and doctor.

Her father, she knew, would be proud of her if he'd been around. He'd died five years earlier and his death had spurred her on, fueled her ambition. Now, however, her mother's voice was loud in her head. Had she made the right choices? She was Chief Medical Officer which was what she'd wanted. She waited for the warm glow that just thinking about the title used to give her, but it didn't happen. When did that stop? When had she stopped really enjoying her work? Was it Friday night when she'd found the data? No, she had to admit, the job had lost its sparkle well before that.

Maybe she just needed to get laid. It had been a long while for that as well. No wonder she found the pilot so attractive. She needed to go out on a date or two once all this stuff was settled. Get a life again. No more staying at work until two a.m. All work and no play made her boring. But it also might have saved lives.

She put her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes. Soon, she'd get to Damon, and then she wouldn't be the only one who knew what was going on. The only one besides the person or persons who'd falsified the data. She needed to figure out who it was because until then, she didn't feel safe. It was possible they'd already killed two or three people and they were willing to release the drug and kill thousands more. No doubt they wouldn't hesitate to add her name to the list of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of science.

CHAPTER4

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Yup.Stressed.It came off her in waves.She isn't the only one. He stared at his reflection in the mirror as he moved his shoulder and arm around. Normally he'd never get up and go to the john on a short flight like this, especially not without Joey flying in the right seat. But his arm was going seriously numb. Not just tingling. He moved his shoulder through a few of the exercises the doctors had taught him, grateful when the numbness lessened.

What the hell had kicked it off? Had he pushed too hard at the gym this morning? He moved some more. Then he put his arm down by his side. He was fairly certain this episode was caused by stress. His shoulders were bunched and slightly higher than where they should be. It was enough to put extra pressure on the touchy, damaged nerve.Shit.Flying with Simon was just a bad idea. At least when he didn't have time to prepare properly for it mentally. He'd done his due diligence with the aircraft, but he hated flying with someone he didn't know. It was giving him serious anxiety.

He tried one of the techniques they'd taught him in rehab; to think of something calming. Make a list of things that made him happy, and relaxed. An image of Allegra Wagner popped into his mind. He'd love an opportunity to make her happy. Those eyes were so damned captivating. And the rest of her wasn't bad either. She was damn fine and he would love the opportunity to explore her perfect curves. He smiled at the thought. Now that would be relaxing.

They hit a little bit of turbulence and he gasped. Flying was still something he loved but after the helicopter crash, his joy wasn't quite the same. Conditions had to be perfect in order for him to relax and things were far from perfect on this flight. Simon seemed competent but he wasn't Joey. The weather was deteriorating and this whole excursion had come out of the blue. He liked more warning these days. Maybe he

was getting old. For sure he'd lost his edge. It was why he was just a pilot and not anything more. He missed being a Ranger more than he'd thought possible, but he knew he'd never again be able to handle a serious mission. His shoulder just couldn't take it.

He stared at his reflection and shook his head. Get it together. He ran through some breathing exercises with his eyes closed. His ears popped but he felt much better. He let out his last breath and opened his eyes. His shoulder was lower and his arm felt great. Better than it had in a long time. He grinned at himself. Now this was more like it. He was...euphoric. Fuck! The plane must have depressurized. He was suffering from a lack of oxygen. Euphoria was a symptom of oxygen deprivation.

Sucking in a huge breath, hoping there was some oxygen in it, he ripped open the bathroom door and practically dove behind the last seat pulling out a small oxygen tank. He pulled on the mask and tried to open the valve. His fingers weren't cooperating. The lack of oxygen was getting to him and making his vision blur and shrink. He closed his eyes and opened the valve by feel.

Sweet oxygen filled his lungs and he inhaled deeply. He grabbed another small tank and shoved it under his arm. Making his way toward the front of the plane, he lurched as they hit turbulence again. He glanced out the window. Snow. He forced his way to the passenger. She was sitting with her head back on the seat looking like she was asleep. He knew if he didn't get her oxygen soon, she'd be dead.

He slid the mask down over her face and then turned on the tank. "Come on...breathe," he mumbled in his mask. If this didn't work, he'd have to do mouth-to-mouth, a dicey proposition in this situation but he couldn't give up. This was a favor to Hank and after everything that man had done for him, there was no way he was going to let this woman die if he could help it.

Her eyelashes fluttered and her beautiful green eyes opened.

Thank God.

She glanced around, groggy from the lack of oxygen and then her eyes flew to his and she gripped his arm. “What’s happening?” she mumbled through the mask.

“Depressurization. Stay in your seat with your seatbelt and mask on until I tell you. Don’t panic. You’re fine. I’ll get us down to an altitude where we can breathe without the masks and then we’ll make an emergency landing.”

Her eyes were huge as he turned and hurried toward the cockpit. What made his gut churn...what he didn’t say...was that since the airplane hadn’t immediately gone to a lower altitude, he suspected Simon was dead. It would be too late to get him oxygen. He’d been without it for too long but Xavier would give it a try. He would always try just like he tried with Jamie. He did everything to keep his friend alive but shrapnel from the downed helicopter had ripped through his friend’s chest and there was nothing he could do. Xavier had never felt so fucking helpless in all his life.

He took a steadying breath in an effort to calm down. Breathing fast would use up more oxygen than necessary and until he knew the situation, he needed to conserve as much as he could. He had to clear his mind of that horrific past experience and deal with what was happening now. Live in the moment. The irony of it made him want to laugh.

Opening the cockpit door, he was stunned to find Simon wearing an oxygen mask with a parachute pack over one shoulder. The airplane was on autopilot and the oxygen alarms were going off. What the fuck? Simon immediately lunged at him knocking him backward into the wall. Instinct took over and Xavier fought back, grabbing at Simon’s mask.

Simon drove a punch into Xavier’s gut and tried to pull his mask off. Xavier bent over and used his shoulder to pin the man against the opposite wall. There wasn’t

much room to maneuver, and he'd dropped his tank. If the hose pulled out, he'd lose his oxygen supply. Simon made a grab for it, but Xavier twisted away. Simon went after him and they fell against the pilot's seat. Xavier swung with his right arm and connected with the man's jaw. The blow forced Simon to stumble backward into the main cabin.

Xavier picked up his oxygen tank and went after Simon but his co-pilot rushed him and pushed him back into the cockpit against the co-pilot's seat this time. Simon grabbed Xavier's tank and tried to wrestle it away. Xavier fought for control of the tank. He wasn't giving up. They hit turbulence again and Xavier lost his balance, falling against the control panel pushing the yoke forward and hitting all kinds of buttons with his back. The airplane immediately responded and angled downward. More alarms screamed.

Simon fell into Xavier and smashed him in the jaw. He grabbed Xavier's oxygen mask and pulled it off his face. Xavier lashed out but Simon had him pinned. He was losing the ability to fight back with no oxygen. His limbs were getting heavy and his lungs were screaming for air.

He fought to get the mask back but Simon held it too far out. Xavier couldn't reach. Instead, he flailed around looking for a weapon. Any weapon. The plane was gaining momentum on its downward trajectory. Alarms pierced the rushing wind sound as the plane plummeted downward. At this rate, they'd crash.

Xavier's left hand hit the metal tank. His fingers tingled and he struggled to get a good grip but finally he managed to pick it up and with his last burst of strength, he smashed the tank on the side of Simon's head. The man immediately let go of Xavier's mask and slumped to the floor. Xavier scrambled to grab the mask and put it back in place, taking a few deep breaths before turning and dropping into the pilot's seat.

He pulled hard on the yoke, but they were in a steep dive. The plane responded and leveled off, but now they were in the thick of the snowstorm. He pulled on his seat belt and then put out a distress call to the tower. Alarms were still going off. He tried to gain altitude but the plane wasn't responding.

Confused he went through the checklist in his head of what could be wrong. There. The de-icing for the wings. He must have flicked the switch off when he hit the dash. He hit the buttons for de-icing to come back on. It beeped and lit up, but it was too late. A substantial accumulation of ice on the wings had jammed the controls and they were too low.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, This is Delta Two Lima our wings are iced up. We're too low."

"Delta Two Lima We have you on radar. Can you get to the following heading?" The voice started reading off coordinates.

"This is Delta Two Lima, No chance, tower. The plane is already difficult to maneuver." The truth was the plane was less a magnificent flying machine and more like a flying elephant. There was no way he could do anything other than try to put her down without killing himself and his passenger.

"Tower, we're going down." The plane was dropping like a stone. He looked out his windscreen. He was flying blind into a swirl of snowflakes.

More alarms went off. "Pull up. Pull Up," the airplane alarm screamed at him.

I would if I could. He pulled with all his might, but the flaps were frozen and it would take too long for the plane to get rid of the ice. Trees suddenly appeared. They were heading toward the side of the mountain. He ripped off his oxygen mask now that they were low enough he didn't need it and yelled "Brace yourself!" He barely had

time to strap himself in before the belly of the plane scraped the tops of the trees.

The next minute was the longest and the shortest of his life. Like last time. The helicopter crash that had left him permanently damaged had come out of the blue. He hadn't been expecting it at all. This he saw coming. He wasn't sure which was worse.

The plane shuddered as it hit the trees and then the sound of tearing metal filled his ears as the wings were ripped off. They hit the ground hard and careened forward into the meadow, burying the nosecone and what remained of the fuselage in snow. Then the world went black.

* * *

Xavier opened his eyes sluggishly. Where the hell? Cockpit. It all rushed back. The fight. The crash. He glanced around him. His body hurt. The cockpit was dark. The windows that were intact were covered with snow but one window on the right side of the cockpit was gone and a large tree branch was stuck in it. It must have hit him and that's why he passed out he surmised as it was on an angle behind his seat. The open window brought light but also cold.

He took a minute to just breathe. How had this happened again? He forced himself remain to calm and then started an inventory of his body making sure everything was functioning. He was good. His left hand was numb but functional other than his left arm. The rest of him was bruised and battered but okay. He survived another aircraft crash. His limbs trembled and his breath quickened. How was he still alive? Why was he the one to survive? Why couldn't it have been Jamie? His mind raced.

His groan was ragged and agonized, and the smell of smoke and blood clogged his sinuses. He was no longer sitting in the cockpit of a private jet but rather lying injured on the deck of the aircraft carrier listening to his friends die around him. He couldn't breathe. The full horror of what happened hit him again. His hands shook as his lungs screamed for air. This couldn't be happening again.

He squeezed his eyes shut and managed to draw in some oxygen. Then a second breath. The pain in his chest eased off and he opened one eye. Cockpit of the downed plane, not a helicopter. Not a Navy carrier. He was alive and, better yet, relatively unhurt. He took a few more steadying breaths and then forced his focus to his current situation. He might be okay but he was not out of the woods yet.

Marshaling his strength, he tried the radio but there was no power. At least the tower would have an idea of where they went down. He slowly undid his seat belt. His left arm was as numb as his hand had been. He moved it around some and the tingling started. Not injured then, just stressed. He struggled to stand, his knees wobbling a moment before accepting his full weight. He turned trying to figure out a way around the branch. Glancing down he suddenly realized the branch had impaled Simon. The gaping hole in his torso was the source of the metallic smell of blood. If the man hadn't died from the knock on the head, then he was certainly dead now.

Fuck. Explaining how this happened was going to be fun. How had it happened? Seriously, what the fuck? He just couldn't understand what the hell Simon had been doing. His brain just didn't want to take anything in. Couldn't process. He took a moment to try and get his equilibrium back. Letting out another breath, he finally ducked down and crawled beneath the branch, going slowly in case his knees decided to give out. Then he pushed open the door to the rest of the fuselage. It must have slammed shut in the crash.

It turned out the rest of the fuselage was only maybe twenty feet. The whole back end of the plane was gone. Lucky to be alive didn't cover it. He choked back the bile rising in his throat.

Snow blew into the rear of the aircraft. Lots of wires were hanging and swinging in the wind. There were bits of glass and plane debris all over the place. He leaned against the wall just outside the cockpit door. He'd survived another crash but it just didn't seem real. His body shook and his vision blurred. This was just fuckin' crazy.

A groan reached his ears. He forced himself to focus as he stumbled forward, glass crunching under his feet. The passenger was slumped over the seat next to her, still strapped in. He hadn't seen her because the seat ahead of her had been ripped out and was resting on the seat next to it blocking his view.

Moving as quickly as his banging head would allow, he made his way to her, moving debris out of the way and off her. She groaned again when he touched her. What the hell had her name been? Allegra Wagner.

“Ms. Wagner,” he said as he ran his hands over her checking for injuries.

She’d sustained a scalp laceration, which was bleeding profusely, but there didn’t appear to be any broken bones. He’d be willing to bet she was bruised beyond belief just like he was. His rapid examination wouldn’t reveal any internal injuries. Only time would tell that. The thought that she might die paralyzed him, if only for a second. You can do this.

He cleared his throat and tried again. “Ms. Wagner,” he said in a louder voice. Her eyelids fluttered. “Allegra!” he snapped.

Her eyes opened and stared at him uncomprehendingly.

“Wha—what happened?” she murmured.

He held her chin with his fingers. “We crashed. What hurts?”

She struggled to sit up. “Everything.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Wait, don’t move. Tell me first what hurts. I need to know...” he was about to say something about her bleeding internally but caught himself. Freaking her out wouldn’t help the situation. “I need to know specifically what hurts so we can assess your injuries.”

She blinked and licked her lips. “My ribs,” she pointed to the ribs that were against her armrest. “My head,” she added as she pointed to the laceration. She brushed blood out of her eye and then stared at her hand. “I’m cut?”

“It’s just a small laceration.” She still seemed confused so he went on. “Cuts to the scalp bleed a lot. No need to worry.”

She nodded and then grunted. “The rest of me is battered. But not too bad.” She eased herself into a sitting position, against his protests. “I’m fine. Well, not fine but my head lac is okay and I’m pretty sure my ribs are only bruised.” She raised her green sweater and looked at her ribs. “Just bruised, see? If I had internal bleeding, you’d see a large pool of blood under the skin.” She dropped her sweater. “That’s what you were checking for, isn’t it? Internal bleeding?”

He hesitated and then nodded and immediately regretted it. He had a bit of a concussion if he had to guess. Moving his head wasn’t the best idea.

“I’m a doctor. I can diagnose myself. I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on it and let you know if my situation changes.” She looked at him with renewed interest. “What about you?”

“Just a bump on the back of the head.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Any double vision or nausea?”

“No. I’m fine.” Liar.

He was a lot of things, freaked out, in shock, struggling to keep it together, check, check, and check. But fine? Not a chance.

“What about the other guy? Wait! What the fuck happened?” She started to get up and crashed back down since her seatbelt was still holding her in place.

“I’m not entirely sure.” Xavier told her the truth. He didn’t really want to get into all that now. “Simon is dead.”

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“Are you sure?” She undid her seat belt and started to stand.

“Just wait a minute,” he said and put a hand on her shoulder again, trying to be patient. “He was impaled center mass by a tree branch the size of my thigh. So, yes, I’m pretty freaking positive.”

She relaxed under his grip. “You two were fighting.” She suddenly tensed again. Her pupils contracted and her knuckles turned white as she gripped the armrests.

Fear. She was suddenly afraid of him. Of him. He’d just saved her ass. “Simon attacked me. I have no idea why or what the fuck was going on but yeah we were fighting. I tend to do that when someone jumps me. You have any ideas about that ’cause I know it’s not about me.”

She stayed silent. Why was he not surprised? “Simon must have depressurized the airplane on purpose because he was wearing an oxygen mask already. You want to tell me what’s going on?”

She licked her lips but her gaze slid off his face and bounced around the plane. She knew something but she wasn’t about to tell him. Fine. He needed to calm the fuck down anyway. Let her settle a bit. Hell, let me calm down too. His hands were still a bit shaky. He was fighting flashbacks of his previous accident as he scanned the destroyed plane. A few minutes to calm down would help them both out.

“Just...just stay seated for a few minutes and let me assess the situation a bit more. I don’t want either one of us to hit any live wires or sustain any more injuries.”

She looked like she wanted to argue but she kept her mouth shut and gave him a quick nod.

Xavier moved away from her and went toward the back of what was left of the aircraft. He looked out. A long scar gouged the earth where they'd hit and slid. Debris littered the field. Farther back, trees were broken and bent. A few small fires had ignited where debris had caught but with the snow they wouldn't burn long. The trees weren't going to catch. They were too wet.

Un-fucking believable. He rested against the seat next to him. One thing at a time he reminded himself.

Think about everything logically. Rely on your training.

As a Ranger, he'd been trained for all kinds of situations. He needed to lean into that. Put all the swirling emotions aside. That was the only way through.

Straightening, he didn't bother to step outside. He knew they were surrounded by mountains. It might take crews a long time to get to them. Then again, it may not. It was hard to tell in the Alps. There were cabins and old roads all over the place but there were also pockets where no one went. They'd crossed into Switzerland's airspace, but he wasn't sure how far in they were.

He turned and almost walked right into Allegra. He hadn't heard her come up behind him.

She met his gaze. "It's amazing we survived."

"Yeah." He'd been thinking the same thing. He knew the shock of that idea and how it would affect him but she was going to have to come to grips with it on her own. His real worry was they weren't meant to be alive right now. Someone wanted them dead.

Simon wasn't trying to kill them for fun. He was a hired gun.

The question was, who hired him and who was he supposed to kill?

CHAPTER 5

Allegra studied the pilot. He seemed to know what the hell he was doing, but she hated to be left in the dark and fed bullshit. Pissed her right off. She touched the outside of her skirt once more making sure the flash drive was still there.

She turned and started looking through the rubble for the messenger bag that she always carried her laptop in, hoping the device survived the crash. She crouched down and started to pull up a seat.

"Wait!" Xavier barked.

She froze.

He came over and picked up the first aid kit that would've been crushed if she'd moved the seat. "What are you looking for?"

"My laptop."

He stared at her.

"There are important documents on it. Vital information." She wouldn't apologize. That report showed the timeline of the whole project, and she was sure the documents she'd gathered yesterday held a clue to the identity of the culprit. She just hadn't been able to figure it out yet.

"Look around you. We're stranded in the Alps during a snowstorm and the only

shelter we have is the wreckage of this airplane. I'm pretty sure your documents can wait."

He was right of course but she wasn't giving up. She'd find her bag and bring it with her assuming it hadn't been sucked out when the tail broke off. Fuck. If that had happened, she was screwed. She needed that file to prove her findings to Damon. She might be able to get it emailed back to her from her friend, but she might not. It would take her another day or more to pull it together again if the information was all still there. She'd worried that someone might delete it. She'd been focusing on that when she'd passed out and woke up to Xavier leaning over her adjusting a mask on her face.

In reality, she was focused on the laptop to ignore the fact that someone had just tried to kill her. Someone knew what she knew and wanted her dead. She didn't even bother trying to lie to herself and suggest maybe they were after the pilot. It was shocking somehow that they hadn't cared about killing him too. No, whoever doctored the documents knew she was on to them. Her days were numbered. Her knees turned liquid and she almost fell to the floor.

"Whoa there. Take a seat." Xavier started opening the first aid kit. "I need to clean up your head wound."

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She knew better than to argue. Focus on what she could control. Blood was still trickled down the side of her face. She sat in her seat and he found a foothold on top of some debris in front of her. She was eye level with his stomach and his shirt was riding up. The pilot had a hell of a six-pack. She bit her lip to keep from giggling. She was losing it. Now was not the time to be thinking about his abs. But the other side of her brain argued it was a hell of a lot better than thinking about someone wanting her dead.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked.

She glanced up. “What? Oh no. It’s fine.” The antiseptic stung a bit but that was it. She didn’t even have much of a headache. Of course, the absence of pain could be the adrenaline. What was more concerning was the fact that she was concentrating on the pilot’s six-pack instead of figuring out a solution to the problem of the crash, and what it meant to her personally, well, beyond the fact she could have died. Maybe the crash had scrambled her brain more than she thought. Am I in shock? That and she hadn’t had sex in more months than she could count. Why the hell are you thinking about sex at a time like this? She clamped her jaws together in an effort to keep it together.

“There,” he said, after applying a couple of butterfly bandages. “You should be fine.”

“Thanks.” She glanced up at him. His gray eyes focused on her, assessing her. “I’m okay. Promise.”

He nodded once and stepped back, tossing the first aid kit onto another seat that was still intact. “Okay, look for anything we can use,” he directed.

“To do what?” she asked as she stood, grateful to be focused on a task.

He’d started back toward the front of the plane, so he turned and looked at her.

“Survive.”

She shivered then, suddenly realizing the truth of his words and how cold it was getting inside the plane. They were in the middle of the Alps in a snowstorm and the sun was going to set soon. They needed warmth, food, and water if they were to survive, but at this point, mostly warmth. The reality of the situation hit her and her knees buckled. She crashed back into her seat rather unceremoniously.

Had the Captain brought down the airplane? It had been hard as hell to tell what was going on when the two men burst into the cabin during their fight. That had been a shock. She had been trying to calm herself over the oxygen mask thing when they’d suddenly come flying out. She didn’t know what to do. Still didn’t. Did she trust the pilot? He’d said it was the other guy. Somehow, she believed him which was weird but instinctively she trusted him.

“Idiot,” she murmured. Trust was earned, and so far, this pilot hadn’t done anything to earn it.

If he’d been the one who was sent to kill her then he wouldn’t have put the mask on her or come help her when they crashed. He’d had plenty of opportunities to kill her and hadn’t. That must be why she trusted him. It wasn’t instinct, it was her subconscious putting the clues together before her conscious brain could process them. At least that was what she was going with if anyone asked her. Trusting her instincts wasn’t something she was known for. She dealt in facts, and the cold hard fact staring her in the face was someone wanted her dead.

Allegra swallowed and tried to push that thought away by going back to the task at hand, survival. She surveyed the wreckage. It soon became apparent that things had

fallen to the left. That's the direction she'd been leaning to when she'd come to. The plane must've veered that way at some point. She then started a systematic search of the left side of the airplane, being super careful not to cut herself on any debris. She pulled a couple of water bottles out of a crevasse in the floor. They were still closed and although they were beat up a bit, they didn't leak.

"Captain Larson," she called, holding up the bottles. "Where should I put what I find?"

He glanced at her, holding what looked like frozen food containers in his hands. "Good job. Put them on the seat with the first aid kit." She nodded and moved forward slightly to drop the bottles.

"And call me Xavier. There doesn't seem much point in calling me Captain."

She shot him a brief smile. "Allegra." He'd already been calling her by her first name but it seemed rude not to offer it back. She bit back a bark of laughter. She could die of exposure. Stupid time to be concerned about being rude.

She walked to where she'd been and sorted through more debris. A few minutes later, she pulled her coat up from under a half-inflated life vest. "Oh, thank God," she said as she stood and pulled it on. She'd started to shiver a few minutes ago so it was the most welcome of finds.

"Nice," Xavier agreed. "That should help."

"Where's your coat?" she asked. "You weren't wearing it when I came on board so I assume it's tucked somewhere."

He nodded. "It's in that closet." He pointed to the closet that currently had a table of some sort jammed up against it. "I'll get it shortly. Right now, I'm trying to find

something to put the food in.” He stood suddenly with a black backpack in his hand. He pulled a pair of shoes out of it and started putting the food trays in. “Throw me the water and the first aid kit.”

She obliged and he added those. At least they had some food and water. Neither of them was seriously injured and they had warmish clothing and shelter of a sort. These were good things, she tried to remind herself as a lump of tears built in her throat. She tried to swallow but choked and ended up coughing. Just be calm. Everything will be fine. Help must be on the way. Allegra was noted for her even-keeled manner and laser focus at work. She could do this. Her knees wobbled a little but she ignored them. She could do this.

“That should keep us going for a few days.”

Allegra bit her lip. “Do you think it will take that long for someone to find us?” The rock in the pit of her stomach distracted her from the lump in her throat. She wasn’t sure she could push through if it meant spending days on the wrecked airplane. As tough and ambitious as she was, she still had a breaking point. Being in a plane crash and knowing someone wanted to kill her might have just pushed her passed it.

She needed to focus on something else. If it took too long to be rescued, then the announcement would be made and everything would turn to shit. She glanced around. Everything was shit. There was only so much worse it could get, right? She let out a long breath.

His gaze met hers, his eyes the color of steel. “It might. I’m not sure where we are exactly so it will depend on what roads are around us and how remote we are.”

She gave him a brief nod. “Thanks for being honest.” Her stomach rolled. She should tell him the truth. That it was her fault they were in this situation. She was the target. Someone was trying to kill her and he was just, what was the term? Collateral

damage. He stared at her with his eyes narrowed as if he could read her mind. She swallowed and asked, “Is it worth digging through the snow to see what else we can find? There might be a few blankets or pillows or something. Maybe more water.”

He shook his head. “Not worth freezing and getting wet. We’re better off to stay in here at least for the time being.”

“Okay,” she started her scavenger hunt once more but found herself sitting down in her seat moments later. Weakness had overcome her. The scalp lac had stopped bleeding but she was a bit woozy. No doubt, it was the adrenaline crash. And the shock of almost dying.

“You okay?”

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“Yeah. Just all sinking in, I guess.”

He nodded. “It’s a tough one.” He moved the tabletop out of the way and pulled open the cupboard with his coat in it. He yanked the parka off the hanger and put it on. The gray matched his eyes perfectly. Allegra snorted softly. Of all the things she could be thinking of, the fact that she was admiring Xavier and his coat meant she really might be losing it.

He glanced at his aviator-style watch. “We don’t have long before the sun sets. I’m going to poke around a bit outside.”

She frowned. “I thought you said it was a waste of time.”

“I don’t want both of us out there getting wet and cold, but I need to make sure there isn’t a slow leak of fuel or something out there. We’re gonna want to light a small fire to keep warm. I don’t want us blowing ourselves up.”

That made sense. She did not want to blow up. “Okay.”

“You stay there.” With that Xavier walked by her and out the back of the plane.

She shivered again. The temperature was dropping and the snow was falling harder now. It was not going to be a pleasant night. Xavier was right. They’d need a fire if they didn’t want to get hypothermia. Fatigue hit her in a wave. All she wanted to do was curl up and go to sleep. This was a nightmare she needed to wake up from.

She stared out the window next to her. It was time to face facts. Simon had tried to

kill her by depressurizing the plane at altitude. It wouldn't have taken long once all the oxygen had been depleted. Coincidence? She didn't believe in them. Her hands shook and she swallowed convulsively hoping to stop the nausea building in her stomach.

Who could it be? Connie was the only one at work Friday night but she just couldn't picture the friendly lawyer doing her harm. Premeditated violence went against his nature. That didn't leave many suspects. Graham? He would make the most sense but he knew very little about how data worked. There was no way he could manipulate it on his own but if he had an accomplice...she could see it.

But, how would they know that she knew?

"Shit," she mumbled. She'd been logged into the network so someone in IT would've been able to trace her movements online. If even one of her colleagues paid attention and was tech-savvy they could've done it themselves. She didn't think Graham was clever enough but she didn't know him that well. He'd just been an obstacle on her way to the top. She'd learned to deal with him when she realized Damon loved him and he wasn't ever going away.

That's how she thought of her co-workers. Obstacles, helpers and neutrals. Everyone fell into one of those categories and sometimes they moved between them. She hadn't realized how cold that was until just this minute. It had been her strategy. Nothing more. Now though, she suddenly had clarity. There were no friends for her at work, only colleagues. Her only friend, her mentor, had retired. Now she was just the cold bitch in the corner office. How had it come to that? How had she let it happen? Ambition had been her driving force, but maybe her mother was right. Was she missing out? Had she always been like this?

She let out a breath and the moisture droplets hung in the air. The temp was dropping, and fast. She pulled her jacket closed at the neck. Fear gnawed at her, but she shoved

it down deep. She had no time for fear. Her climb to the top had taught her that if nothing else.

She heard the sound of footfalls and turned to see Xavier coming back into the fuselage. He nodded to her. “We’re going to need to stay warm. The storm is getting worse. They won’t find us tonight.”

“What? What do you mean they won’t find us tonight? They know where we went down right?” she asked. Her stomach was at her knees. This just couldn’t be happening.

“The storm is too bad. They can’t see in it. They won’t send helos out in this, and airplanes can’t land here. Hopefully, there’s a road not too far but no one will come out tonight. They won’t risk other lives to save ours when they don’t even know if we’re alive.”

The air in her lungs turned frigid, blocking her ability to draw a breath. She had to get to Geneva. Damon had to know about the data corruption before the announcement. “Can we go find the road? Maybe there are people around?” She moved toward the opening in the fuselage.

He reached out and gripped her arm. “I get that you want to get out of here, God knows I do, too, but going out in that storm would be a death sentence. The weather is deteriorating. We’re staying here and keeping warm as best we can. It should only be one night and we have a bit of water and food.” He gestured toward the bag he’d packed.

“The bad news is—”

“Wait, that was all good news?” Was this guy crazy? How could this get any worse?

He waited a beat. “The bad news is we can’t light a fire in here because I can’t be sure there isn’t a fuel leak. I can smell gas, but I don’t know if that’s left over from the crash or it’s still leaking.”

“So how are we going to stay warm?” she demanded.

“Any way we can.” Xavier turned then and started moving fallen items off the floor.

“What are you doing?”

He pushed a chair over to the side and pulled the cushion off it. “I’m trying to make space and find soft stuff for us to lie on.” He threw seat cushions down on the carpeted area behind the cockpit. It was a small space but it was the most open space available.

This situation was going from bad to worse and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The cold air seared her lungs. She was damned lucky to be alive, she reminded herself. She needed to be grateful for that. If she didn’t get to Damon in time, they’d have to find a way to deal with it. She could do it. She’d survived a damn plane crash.

“Are you okay?” Xavier asked.

She opened her eyes. “Just reminding myself how grateful I should be to still be alive.”

He grunted and continued to yank cushions from the seats. He had them lining the floor in a sort of makeshift bed. “See if you can find any blankets.”

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Allegra scanned the wreckage. Where the hell was she supposed to find blankets? The back of the airplane was gone which meant so was her luggage and he'd searched the two front closets so if there were blankets, they'd be in there wouldn't they? It wasn't like there were overhead bins or anything.

He glanced up at her. "Check in that closet." He pointed to the one on the right behind the cockpit. It was the opposite one to where his jacket had been. "I thought I saw some in there."

She nodded and moved passed him, stepping very carefully on the cushion bed. No need to make them dirty. She started to giggle. She was about to spend the night in the fuselage of a downed plane during a snowstorm and she was worried about dirt on the cushions? The giggle turned into laughter and then more laughter as she doubled over trying hard to catch her breath.

"Hey," Xavier said.

But she couldn't stop. Hysteria. Shock. Prolonged exposure to stressful situations. The medical side of her brain identified the problem, as the emotional side of it wanted to throw her fucking hands in the air.

He came over, pulled her up and then wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay. You're okay," he said as he rubbed his hands on her back, keeping her close to his chest.

She leaned into his arms. Tears started to fall down her cheeks and her giggles wavered. She drew in a shuddering breath.

Xavier stared at her and for a minute she thought he might slap her but then he dropped his head and kissed her hard on the mouth. And just like that, her laughter stopped. Shock rippled through her. His lips were warm on hers. Inviting. She relaxed into his arms. Xavier raised his head and stared at her.

“Better?” he said but still stared.

“I...I just...”

“It’s shock. You’ve been through hell and your body is trying to process it. Laughter is just one way to do that.”

She wanted to argue with him but there was no point. He was right. She just lost her shit and he’d pulled her back from the brink. She should be grateful not pissed off. It was just so damned mortifying. Heat flooded her cheeks. It could’ve been worse, she reminded herself. He could’ve slapped her. Probably should have. Instead, he’d kissed her. Same shock value and a lot less pain, even some pleasure.

“I’m okay,” she mumbled finally. “Sorry. Just lost it there for a second. I’m fine now.” She realized she was still hanging on to him and he had his arms around her waist. She cleared her throat and inched away from him. Turning, she opened the closet. She stared. What was she looking for? Blankets, you ninny. Right. The heat in her cheeks warmed her as well as humiliated her as she dug through the closet. There was one on the floor. She brought it out and started to close the closet.

“Leave it open,” Xavier said as he took the blanket from her and handed her a piece of metal. “Put that in front of the door so it stays open.”

“Why?” She was totally confused, the effects of her breakdown still befuddling her thinking.

“There’s a broken window in the cockpit and even though the cockpit door is closed, some cold air is getting through. Having the closet door open helps block any drafts coming from that direction. At least it won’t blow on us directly.”

“Oh.” That made sense. She needed to engage her brain if they were going to survive. Enough nonsense, she scolded herself. As an emergency medicine doctor, she’d been trained to keep calm under extreme pressure. She was better than this. Better than freaking out.

The extra stress of the erroneous data added to the crash had put her over the top. She was sure of it. She’d had no sleep and had eaten very little. She would have to rectify that as soon as possible once they were rescued. Her game needed to be on point with Damon.

It seemed silly to even think that way, but Allegra knew herself well and she was goal oriented. She needed a goal if she was going to get through this in one piece and just surviving the night wasn’t going to cut it.

“Okay,” Xavier indicated the cushions, “why don’t you sit? I’ll get you a bit of water.”

He was treating her like she was fragile. Like she was going to lose it again any second. She couldn’t blame him honestly but she needed to set him straight.

“I’m sorry I lost my shit, but I’m fine. You’re right. Shock can sneak up on anyone. I’m alright now. Much better.”

He nodded and handed her a bottle of water. “Drink some slowly.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’ve got it. I’m okay. I can take care of myself.”

“Uh-huh,” he said and gestured to the water bottle.

She gritted her teeth. One small outburst and now she was a nut case. Great. She sighed. Whatever. She drank some water and then sat down on the cushions. She handed the bottle back to him and pulled her coat tightly around herself. Each breath leaving her mouth was creating a larger steam cloud. How low would the temperature drop? It already felt like they were flirting with the freezing range. It was going to be hard to keep warm without a fire.

“You’re sure we shouldn’t risk a fire?” she asked trying to keep her teeth from chattering.

He shook his head but didn’t turn away. “It’s too dangerous to risk. Plus, it’s not like we have anything to burn. I don’t want to burn random shit because we’re gonna end up breathing in whatever fumes are released and God only knows what chemicals are in everything. It’s too dark and too snowy to go out and find wood that wasn’t wet.”

He had a point.

“Okay then. We’re going to have to curl up together, skin to skin or as near to it as we can if we’re going to stay warm. So, which side of the cushions do you want?” she asked as she started pulling off her coat.

CHAPTER6

Xavier stared at the woman. She couldn't be serious, could she?

But then she shimmied out of her coat. Staring up at him with her big green eyes, she offered him an arm. "Pull, please."

She was serious. He bit back a sigh and took the proffered sleeve, giving it a tug. Normally he'd like nothing more than to be curled up with an attractive woman with a hot body but this...this wasn't his jam. The crash had brought back all kinds of painful memories. He was struggling to stay focused. Being close to a woman right now wasn't the best idea. Not a bad idea, just not the most appropriate thing. He didn't want to be close to anyone right now.

It wasn't that cold, was it? He looked out into the falling darkness. The snow was coming down hard. His breath looked like smoke in the air. Yeah, it was that fucking cold and going to get colder. He swore silently and tried to rein himself in. His heart jack-hammered against his ribs and a thin tremor rolled up his back. He wanted to just sit quietly and let what happened wash over him. He'd lost Jamie in the last crash, and this catastrophe had ripped the scar back open.

"Which side do you want?" Allegra asked.

He blinked and tried to focus on what she was saying. "Sorry?"

"Which side?" She gestured to the cushions.

He gritted his teeth. With his left hand numb there was no way he could lay on that shoulder. “I’ll take the right.” This was ludicrous but what choice did he have? Jamie would’ve loved this. He’d have been the first one to curl up to Allegra. He loved the ladies, and they had loved him right back.

She nodded and then scooted to the left edge. She pulled her coat out from underneath her and then spread it out over herself. “You need to get down here if we’re going to stay warm. Body heat with the coats will work much better than the coats alone.”

She was right. He moved over to the right side but couldn’t bring himself to sit down. His breathing rate increased and his gut was churning. Jamie’s face popped into his mind. He’d been laughing about something when they’d boarded the chopper. He’d been keyed up for the op. Anticipation always made that man grin. That smile haunted Xavier. One minute Jamie was laughing, and the next the chopper was caught in an out-of-control spiral. They crashed onto the deck of the aircraft carrier.

“Xavier,” Allegra’s voice cut through his memories, “are you okay?”

“Um...yeah. Sorry.” He ground his teeth and gave himself a mental shake. Focus on the task at hand. He knelt down and then took off his parka. “Let me help you,” he said as he positioned her long coat over her legs. “We can use mine for the top.” At her nod, he lay down beside her.

“It’s better if we spoon,” she announced and then quickly rolled onto her side facing away from him.

Xavier took a breath and then followed suit. He made sure to get her coat over his legs as well as hers and then put his parka across their upper halves. He paused and then finally put his arm over her and pulled her tight against himself. God, when was the last time he’d spooned someone?

Xavier held himself rigid at first but then slowly he relaxed. Holding Allegra grounded him. He'd been bottling his anxiety about the crash, and pushing it down. Being curled up with her relaxed him almost as much as sex normally did.

I'm okay.

He hadn't died in the crash. It was a good thing. He was alive and he was helping someone else survive. A hundred-pound weight was slowly being lifted off his chest. Breathing came easier. He owed Allegra a debt of thanks. Did she know how much she was helping him right now? Probably not, but he wouldn't forget it.

He moved his wrist to try and get some feeling back in his hand but it was no use. He was starting to relax but it wasn't enough. He needed his shoulder to unbunch for that to happen and in the current situation, frigid temperatures and sleeping on some cushions on the floor, that was unlikely.

He rested his head on his other arm with Allegra tucked under his chin. The scent of her hair filled his nose. Flowers of some kind. The warmth of her body worked with his. She'd been right. It was warmer this way. It was also starting to be more problematic. The curve of her ass hugged his dick perfectly. Yeah. Not good.

As the light faded, Xavier did everything he could to keep from responding physically to Allegra pressed against him. Since he started to relax, all of him was less tense. It was totally inappropriate for him to have a hard-on but what did she expect? She fit so perfectly against him. If things were different, he'd be doing all kinds of things to her at this moment that were guaranteed to keep both of them warm, if not hot and bothered.

He eased back slightly making a bit more space between them but immediately had a sense of loss once they were no longer touching. It was colder this way but safer. Allegra was too damned sexy to be crushed against him all night and have him do

nothing about it. She'd been through hell today, just like he had. The last thing she needed was some asshole hitting on her.

He'd been impressed by how well she'd handled the aftermath of the crash. One moment of nervous laughter that she'd recovered from quickly. He'd been a bit worried he'd have to slap her but when the moment came, he just couldn't do it. The kiss had worked just as well and he'd gotten to taste those lush pink lips of hers. Not a bad thing at all.

Shifting his weight slightly, he tried to ease the stress on his shoulder. He cursed Simon once more and whoever he worked for. Could he have been the target? Xavier didn't think so. Hank only had him doing mundane things. Flying clients around Europe mostly. Nothing crazy. Sometimes moving equipment but nothing that would attract negative attention. No, it wasn't him, which only left her as the target. What in the hell could Allegra possibly be involved in that caused someone to want her dead?

Xavier woke with a jolt. His heart hammered and sweat slicked his back. Allegra was tight against him again. He'd been having a nightmare. It had been about the chopper crash. Jamie's smiling face loomed large in his brain but that wasn't what woke him. He was cold and stiff but that hadn't been it either. Something was off. He stayed still and listened. Allegra's breathing was slow and even. Nothing. It was pitch dark in the fuselage, as it could only be in the middle of the wilderness with no light pollution.

Suddenly, he registered a faint sound. A buzzing. Snowmobiles. Possibly multiples. Rescue? He moved very slowly trying not to wake Allegra. He got up and stretched out his limbs. He was stiff and freezing without his parka but he didn't want to wake Allegra unnecessarily.

Quietly stepping over her, he went to the end of the fuselage. The sound grew louder. Darkness made it hard to see but he could tell the snow had eased off at least for now. He dug his flashlight out of his bag and left the safety of the aircraft.

The wind was light but he was shivering already. It was damn cold. His breath hung in the air, frozen droplets waiting for gravity to take over. He moved through the trees to the rise and looked down the mountain. Snowmobiles were on the way up. Four of them. One of the drivers was lit up by the light from the machine behind him. He was dressed all in white. White parka with the hood up, white gloves, white boots. But the thing that made Xavier move as fast as he could back to the fuselage was the machine gun that was strapped across his body.

* * *

Allegra woke up disoriented. Why the hell was she so cold? She blinked in the inky darkness. Plane crash. How could she forget? As she pulled the parka closer around her she realized Xavier was gone. Panic clawed at her throat. She was alone in the darkness. Did he leave her here to die? He'd left her his coat, though, so that was a conclusion she shouldn't leap to. Where the hell could he have gone without a coat? The temp had to be below freezing. He wouldn't be lasting long in that cold, but without him, neither would she. Her stomach lurched.

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She sat up and then got to her feet. After flexing her hands, she pulled on her coat and tried to close the buttons with her too-stiff fingers. Cursing she wrapped her coat around herself and moved to the end of the fuselage. Breathe. Focus. Panicking wouldn't help. It was the same lecture she'd given herself time and again when she'd had to go up against some asshole in the board room.

With her mind clearer, she switched to worrying about Xavier. Had he wandered off? Was his head injury worse than they first thought? He could be hypothermic and disoriented out there in the darkness without a coat. She was tempted to yell his name but instinct stopped her. Disturbing the darkness might not be the best idea.

She shivered despite the sweat breaking out between her shoulder blades. What the hell was she supposed to do? Until now her idea of roughing it was going glamping with some friends in California. Nothing could have prepared her to survive in a situation like this. The sound of footfalls coming fast reached her and she froze. She squinted in the darkness. Movement. Flashlight beam bouncing. Xavier was sprinting toward the wreckage.

"What is it?" she rasped.

Xavier arrived inside and brushed by her, pulling on his parka, and then going for the backpack which he slung over his right shoulder. "There are men coming on snowmobiles."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" she asked.

"These men are wearing white camouflage gear and have automatic weapons slung

across their bodies. I don't think that's good."

"I don't...won't the police have guns?" She didn't get what he was saying.

He came back past her and turned. "If they were a rescue team, they would have florescent vests on and uniforms with police or whatever emblazoned on their backs. These guys are dressed to blend in with the scenery, and they're heavily armed. Don't have to be a rocket scientist to recognize they are part of a hit squad. I've seen them before. I've been...I was in the military. Army Ranger. I know what I'm talking about." His voice died out and he cocked his head as if listening. "They're coming. Time to go." He reached back and grabbed her hand tugging her out in the snow.

What the hell is a hit squad? Her knees gave out as the words sunk in. She stumbled but managed to keep going. "H-how are we going to outrun them if they are on snowmobiles?" she yelled at him as they ran down the scarred path the airplane had made.

"We're not going to outrun them. We're going to get away from here and hide." He picked up his pace and she stumbled again but he still held her hand and helped steady her.

"Won't they see our footprints in the snow?"

"Yes," he said over his shoulder but didn't elaborate.

They veered off the debris path and headed through the snow deeper into the woods. "They can't go in here with their machines," he called over his shoulder as he tugged her along, the flashlight beam dancing with every step.

A few minutes later, he stopped and pulled her down on top of a hill looking down at the crash site. She was panting but he was barely breathing at all.

“What are we doing?” she asked, gasping for air.

He held his finger to his lips. If she’d ever wanted to be a bat, now would be that time. It was hard to see through the darkness. The snow wasn’t falling as hard, but the flakes had gotten larger.

“We’re waiting,” he replied in a hushed voice. Keep low. He glanced down at her coat. “Close your coat and then lay down behind the hill. You’re going to get wet but we don’t have a choice.”

She did as she was told, already cold all the way through. Being wet was going to make things so much worse. The sound of the snowmobiles approaching grew noisier. Shit. A minute later lights danced down in the debris field. There were four of them. They rolled to a stop and the people got off, slowly approaching the fuselage. They were lit by the headlights. Two fanned out to the sides with their weapons drawn. The other two entered the wreckage.

Her heart rate was pounding so hard breathing was difficult. She didn’t dare move. How could this be happening? Two days ago, her life was normal, boring even and now someone was trying very hard to kill her. It was ludicrous. She peered at Xavier. He needed to know the truth. She owed him that much. Now wasn’t the time, but soon.

A minute later the pair came back out and conferred with the other two. Someone shouted a curse and then they fanned out over the wreckage. She lost track of them in the darkness but then there was a shout. The person on the far left pulled something out of the pile of wreckage. Another flicked a flashlight beam at the object.

“Shit,” she murmured as she realized they’d found her messenger bag. She felt the weight of Xavier’s gaze but refused to meet it.

The men conferred some more and then one pointed to the ground. Great. He'd spotted their footprints. The foursome fanned out and followed the prints until they hit the tree line. Their flashlights bobbed in the darkness. Please don't come up here. As if they'd heard her, two of the men swung their flashlights into the trees. Allegra ducked behind the hill.

"They can't see you," Xavier whispered. "We're too far up and their beams don't penetrate far enough."

She bit her lip. "Are they going to come after us?"

"Probably, but they can't right now. The storm is getting worse and they won't be able to see. Our prints will be covered in another hour anyway. It's enough that they know we left the crash site. The storm hampers them but it's worse for us. They're prepared for it. We aren't. They'll wait it out and then come searching for our dead bodies."

She emitted a small groan. "Way to think positively."

"They won't find us but they'll look. The darkness and the storm are working in our favor. Buys us a bit of time."

The men walked back to the wreckage. Three of them got on their snowmobiles and went back the way they'd come. The fourth man stood watch, gun cradled in his arms, right outside the fuselage.

"Where are they going? Now what are we going to do?" she whispered.

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“My best guess? There’s no cell reception here. They’ve got to go back down a bit to get phone service. They’re going to need more men to help with the search.”

“They’re coming back?” she asked, her throat closing at the thought.

“Yes. But we won’t be here.”

She frowned. “Where are we going to be? Are we going to hike through the snow?” That was not going to be fun. She was already wet and her legs were frozen. Hiking through the snow would be a nightmare of epic proportions.

“No. We’re not hiking. Stay here until I signal you,” he mumbled. He put the backpack next to her and then went over the hill and down through the trees moving quickly and quietly.

Allegra grabbed the backpack and tucked it down beside her. She tried to watch Xavier but she quickly lost sight of him. What would happen to her if he got hurt or worse? It would be her fault. This was all her fault. The thought of him being hurt or dead because of her was too much. Her body trembled violently. She tried hard to stifle her emotions. It would be easier to find a diamond in a haystack.

She closed her hands into fists and directed her anger at the person who hired Simon and the killer below. This mess was his fault. And it had to be a man since she was the only high-ranking female officer at the company. Movement in the corner of her eye set her heart pounding. A deer walked among the trees.

She stared down the hill at the man with the gun. She could just barely make him out

through the snow. If it wasn't for his flashlight, he'd be totally invisible. He was leaning against the fuselage facing her, but she didn't see Xavier anywhere. Had he left her? No, he wouldn't do that. She put her faith in that. Looking around frantically, she tried to locate him but the search was fruitless. The snow was coming down in clumps now and shivers had set in. Where the hell was Xavier?

Wait...was that movement among the trees? Maybe. She couldn't be sure. It could also be the deer. Or it could be the men who'd ridden in on snowmobiles returning on foot. Allegra held her breath, but the snow obscured everything.

Then suddenly Xavier burst out from the tree line and ran up to the gunman just as the man swung around. They seemed to be fighting. The flashlight landed in the snow and then the man landed beside it. The man was on top of Xavier, pummeling him. Then he appeared to try to swing his gun around but Xavier popped up and flipped the guy, giving Xavier the upper hand on top. He seemed to have trapped the man's hands somehow or the man was still holding onto the gun because Xavier managed to hit the man without his fighting back. He hit him several times and after a moment, Xavier rose.

Hovering over the prone man, Xavier was doing something but she couldn't figure out what. Binoculars or even a cell phone would've been good right about now. Xavier finally stood and pulled the gun off the man. Was he dead? She didn't like to think about that because her first instinct was to go down and help him. That was her oath. Do no harm.

Xavier slung the gun over his shoulder and then walked over to the snowmobile and got on. He started forward. Wait, was he leaving without her? Deserting her here in this white hellscape? She half rose from her crouch but halted before she could cry out to him. No one would blame him for abandoning her. Because of her, he'd gotten into a fight for his life with Simon and then one-upped that with a plane crash. It was all her fault he had to fight with the man with the gun.

Xavier came to a stop directly below her. He stood and flashed the beam of the flashlight in her direction. Her knees went weak. She tried to scramble up the small hill but she tripped and slid back. Taking a couple of steadying breaths, she stood again, grabbed the backpack, made her way up the little hill and then headed down the hill on the other side. Why was the trip steeper going down than it had been coming up? Less adrenaline, I guess. Trying to hurry, she slipped and slid down about ten feet on her butt until she managed to catch a tree. She stood again and picked her way down the last little bit. On flatter ground, she ran the rest of the way through the trees to Xavier.

“Get on,” he said over the sound of the snowmobile as she came out of the trees. She went over and slid on behind him, putting the backpack over both shoulders. He swung the gun so it was in front of him and then turned slightly. “It’s going to be really fucking cold just so you know. Make sure your coat is done up and if you have gloves, now is the time to put them on. I’ll try and find us some help but it might be a while. There’s no path and I want to go in the opposite direction as the men did.”

She wanted to respond but she was already a woman-sized popsicle. Instead, she just nodded as she pulled her gloves and scarf out of her coat pockets. They were a matching set. She wrapped the red cashmere scarf around her neck and pulled it up over her ears, tucking the ends inside her coat. Pulling on the leather gloves, she wasn’t sure how the cashmere on the inside, which was perfect in Vienna, would do now. It didn’t matter; they were all she had and they’d be better than nothing. She adjusted herself to make sure her coat was underneath her and sat down gently. Her butt hurt from her fall. Glancing down at her legs, she cursed her decision to wear a skirt. It was long but still, it would’ve been better if she’d worn pants. Of course, when she’d dressed this morning she was more concerned with tracking down Damon than being in a plane crash.

Xavier had hauled on the man’s gloves. He gave one last check over his shoulder at her and then started forward. She jolted and quickly threw her arms around his waist

then ducked low to hide from the wind. Xavier turned the snowmobile around, whizzing by the fuselage and then out into the meadow beyond it. The wind whipped the snow, lowering her body temperature even more. The collar of her coat was up as high as she could make it but the bitter cold made her ears tingle. Depending on how long they had to be exposed this way, frostbite was a serious concern.

They hit the trees again and Xavier slowed their pace. Without a path to follow, he had to be careful as they wound through the trees. Despite the fact they weren't putting lots of distance between them and the plane crash, Allegra was overjoyed they were in the trees. The canopy blocked some of the snowflakes and the wind. Not that she was warm but she wasn't nearly as cold as she'd been. Hugging Xavier was keeping her chest warm. It was also reassuring. He was so solid and strong. It was lulling her into a false sense of security. She knew they weren't out of the woods. No pun intended. Holding on to Xavier just gave her the sense that she wasn't alone.

She frowned. Was that the whine of an engine? She cocked her head trying to listen. Xavier suddenly came to a stop and killed the engine. The sound of another snowmobile met her ears. Xavier glanced over his shoulder and their gazes locked. Shit. The men with guns were back. Her heart slammed against her ribs. Now what the hell were they going to do?

CHAPTER 7

Xavier cursed his luck. There was no way the guys with guns could've found them already. He would've heard them earlier. Did they go along some other path and were now coming back toward the crash site? It just didn't make sense. Focus. Lean into your training.

It was possible they'd already called in reinforcements and had gone back to the crash site. He was sure they weren't following his tracks because the snow was heavy enough to blot out the evidence of their exit by now, at least before they'd hit the tree

line. But if they were doing some sort of patterned search then they could just stumble on them. Shit.

The buzzing changed pitch. “Hold on,” he said back over his shoulder and then started the snowmobile again. He steered cautiously through the trees. It was a damn good thing there was a lot of snow. There was no way to get the machine through otherwise. He was sure they were riding on top of a lot of small bushes.

He came to a stop and peered through the trees to his left. Jesus...was that... A cabin. He moved forward again but very cautiously, keeping parallel to the cabin. He steered through the line of trees until he was in front of the cabin. Turning off the engine, he listened. The sound of the other snowmobiles was fading. Going away from them.

Definitely some kind of grid or pattern search going on. The noise echoed back to him from various directions, as if they’d all separated to cover more ground. But that strategy also made it easier for Xavier to fight them off. It would be hard with his left arm not working well but it was a possibility. He’d done it twice today already. The guy back at the crash site had gotten off lucky. He’d knocked him out but hadn’t killed him. Too bad they’d fallen on his radio and busted it. He’d love to know what the hell the other gunmen were doing right now.

Turning to face Allegra, his breath clogged in his throat. Her eyes were huge and her teeth were chattering. Her lips were bluish in the beam of the flashlight. He needed to get her warm damn quick or she’d be in serious trouble. Hypothermia was no joke.

It could be a mistake to approach the cabin, but he didn’t really see another option. They could find the driveway and assume it led to a road that would take them down the mountain, but the snowmobile’s gas gauge read about a third of a tank. They wouldn’t make it down before they ran out. Being stuck outside in the storm for the night was the second worst option, first being caught by the men searching for them.

Glancing down at his left hand, he cursed silently. It was numb and he wasn't going to get any feeling back into it anytime soon. He needed to work on it and he wouldn't be doing that in the snow.

“We're going to approach the cabin and ask for help. Our car got stuck in the snow and we got lost. We're tourists. You understand me? Do not mention the crash or anything about it. We're here on holiday from the US. We live in...Where are you from?”

“N-n-new J-Jersey.”

“We're from New Jersey.”

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“O-okay,” she stammered, “B-but what about the guys on the s-snowm-mobiles?”

They were a problem no doubt. “The storm is getting worse. Say a prayer they’ll give up tonight and start again in the morning. With any luck the people who live here can give us a lift into town and we can be on our way.” He didn’t want to tell her that if it was a hit squad, there would be very little downtime, if any, for them and they’d be back out at first light at the latest.

“D-do you think they’ll be okay with helping us? The people in the cabin?” she asked.

“Honestly? I think it’s abandoned.” Her whole face froze and then relaxed. He thought she might actually cry for a moment but then she blinked and her expression went neutral.

“We’re gonna have to walk out of the woods and over to the house just in case I’m wrong. I’m going to go along parallel for a bit and then see if I can get closer to the driveway. I’ll get us as close as I can while still keeping the snowmobile hidden. We might sink in the snow as soon as we get off. It’s not going to be fun.” His words were fair warning. He wanted her to be prepared.

She just nodded but didn’t speak. Her teeth were chattering. Her shoulders slumped. She closed her eyes and the fine lines around them stood out in stark contrast to the pale tone of her skin. Her blond hair had snow in it and the flakes weren’t melting as fast as they should. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He wasn’t going to lose her now.

Xavier restarted the machine and went as fast as he dared. The driveway was on his

right. The snowbanks from where it had been plowed multiple times rose up. He went another fifty yards and then turned off the machine.

“Okay,” he said as he got off. “Be careful and follow in my footsteps. It will be easier that way.” He helped her off the machine and noticed her legs once again as her skirt rode up. Definitely one fine looking woman. He took the backpack from her and started walking toward the snowbank. They were fifty feet into the trees. He went at a slow and steady pace so Allegra could keep up. The way she was shivering was a gigantic clue she was near frozen and reaching the end of her rope. They reached the backside of the snowbank, which was about three feet above the level of snow on this side but he wouldn’t know until he got to the top how tall it was from the driveway.

“Wait here. I need to check something.”

Allegra sagged against a nearby tree.

He slung the gun behind him and climbed quickly but sunk into the snow. He managed to get to the top and jump down on the other side. It was about five feet from the top. Not the best but if she didn’t fall, she’d be fine. “Okay Allegra,” he called keeping his voice fairly soft. There was no buzzing of another snowmobile nearby, but he didn’t want to risk calling attention to them. He had no clue why they were being hunted so until he and his client had a nice long chat, it was better not to do anything to call attention to themselves.

Her head popped over the top of the snowbank. She sort of threw herself onto her belly on the crest and tried to swing her legs over, but lost her balance. She let out a little scream as she started to slip. Xavier dropped the backpack and quickly moved forward to catch her against his chest.

“Are you okay?” he demanded, his heart beating just a little faster.

“Y-yes,” she said.

He frowned as he set her down. Was she injured or just that cold? “Can you walk?”

She clung to him but nodded as she met his gaze. He waited a beat and was about to ask her again if she needed help when she seemed to snap out of whatever state she’d been in and righted herself. She took a tentative step and then another. “I’m fine.”

He let her get a few steps ahead while he fought to regain his own equilibrium. Those eyes of hers were the deepest green he’d ever seen, and they touched something in him, something he’d thought had died in the helicopter crash. The wave of desire took him off guard but the rush of protectiveness toward her shook him to his core.

Xavier let out a breath, grabbed the backpack and started walking, catching up to her in a few strides. He took the gun off his body and carried it perpendicular to the ground. Hopefully, if there was anyone in the cottage, they wouldn’t notice it. And maybe freakin’ pigs will fly.

The new snow was about a foot deep so the walk wasn’t too hard but Allegra was struggling. Her legs. He’d forgotten they were exposed. Fuck. He wanted to scoop her up and carry her but he wasn’t sure how she would like that or if it was a wise thing to do with his arm. The limb was completely numb. Extending it in front of him, he tried to loosen the muscles in his shoulder. Allegra glanced at him but said nothing.

Keeping one eye trained on their surroundings, he led her toward the house. It was similar to the one he rented. Wood construction in a chalet style, a porch off the front door and a balcony above that. If it was like his cabin, the balcony led to the main bedroom. His sense was the place was empty but not abandoned. A snow-covered porch swing moved in the breeze, and the planters had dried plants under a blanket of white. The whole place looked as if the owners had just gone to town for groceries or something. He hoped that was the case and there was food and a heat source inside

the cabin.

He looked around and decided that putting the gun next to the stairs was the best option. He'd have to make the leap if he needed it in a hurry, but he didn't want to scare the hell out of the owners if he didn't have to.

Tentatively he walked up the stairs keeping his head on a swivel, and then knocked on the front door. No answer. He tried again just to be sure, but still no noise came from inside. He examined the lock. It was a heavy-duty variety, which suggested to him that the owners left it empty for long periods of time.

"I'm going to take a quick walk around. I'd rather not break down the front door if I don't have to."

"O-okay. S-should I come with you?" she asked.

Her eyes said she was willing but the rest of her said she was done. The drooping shoulders, the chattering teeth. She should stay within a couple feet of him but he just couldn't make her go around the cabin. Snow drifts would hamper them. "You stay here. Take a seat on the porch swing. I'll see what I can find." He handed her the backpack.

She nodded and trudged up the steps, swiped a layer of snow from a section of the seat and crashed down on it with a loud sigh. Part of him was glad she was sitting down, the other part wished she hadn't cleaned the seat off. A dead giveaway that someone had sat there. He'd try to remember to erase that little trace before they left.

He went down the steps and grabbed the gun. Then he made his way through the snow as quickly as he could, keeping the gun up and ready in case he encountered anything or anyone unexpected. As he rounded the corner of the cabin, he came to an abrupt halt. "Shit." A large evergreen tree had fallen against the house. It had dented the

roof, and the snow was now falling inside what he assumed was the attic. He hadn't seen it from the front because the tree wasn't sticking up over the rooftop.

This changed things. He glanced around. There was a shed they could use but it was tiny and chances were good it wasn't insulated. He looked back at the cabin. It was made of large wooden logs and he didn't think the walls would cave but he wasn't sure about the roof. With the added weight of the tree and the snow, it might collapse. "Fuck."

He scooted around the tree and then continued to the back of the cabin. There was a back deck with a door, and windows similar to the front. He went up and checked the lock, double bolted like the front. He checked the window. It was locked. Going to the other side of the door, he checked that one and it was locked as well, but the window was old and the lock wasn't tight. He dug inside his coat pocket and pulled out his knife. Sliding the blade into the space between the windows by the sill, he flicked the lock with the tip until he had it unlocked.

Tucking his knife back in his pocket, he lifted the window and looked inside to discover it was the window above the counter. He slung the gun around to his back and lifted himself up to slip inside. After a short drop from the counter to the floor, he headed toward the front door, pausing only to leave his flashlight on the table shining upward to illuminate the room. The sooner he got Allegra inside, the sooner she'd be warm again.

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He unlocked the front door and found her half asleep on the porch swing. “Allegra,” he called softly. Her eyes flew open and she started. Then she looked over at him and stood. She swayed and he immediately went over to her and picked her up.

“I-I c-can w-walk,” she murmured.

“Sure you can. But this is better, yeah?” He took her slight squeak as approval.

He carried her over the threshold and kicked the door closed behind them. Looking around, he took her over to a leather couch that was in the living area across from a fireplace. A bunch of quilts were draped over the back of it and some sort of decorative pillows on either end.

Placing her on the couch, he pulled off his gloves and started to unbutton her coat.

She pushed his hands away. “I-I’ve got it.” She pulled off her own gloves and started to undo the buttons but her fingers were stiff. She flexed them and waved him off again when he raised his hands to help. She was so damn stubborn. He bit back a curse as he pulled out the second flashlight. It was the one he’d taken off the gunman. He turned it on and took stock of the cabin.

As he’d thought, the cabin was very much like his. The kitchen was an alcove on the right with older appliances and butcher-block counters. An old rug rested on the floor in front of the stove. The living area was to the left of the door with a couch and matching chairs surrounding a coffee table which was across from the fireplace. There was a new large flat-screen TV above it. The walls were rough-hewn logs and solid.

“C-can you get the fire going?” Allegra asked.

He turned and looked at her. “No.” He felt like a jerk but there was no help for it.

Moisture glistened in her eyes, and she blinked hard, as if to stop any leaks.

He softened his tone. “If I make a fire, there will be smoke. It’s dark but smoke will still show. I’m sorry, I know how cold you are but it’s too risky.” He frowned. There was nothing he could do. It wasn’t worth the risk. “I’m going to check out upstairs. If it all checks out then what we can do if I can find the water heater is have showers and maybe heat up the food I brought.”

“W-well that’s better than nothing.”

Xavier grabbed the backpack from outside, dropped it by the door and then hurried up the stairs to the second floor. There were two bedrooms, the smaller one was on the back of the house and the main bedroom was on the front with the deck off it, as he assumed. And that was where the tree was leaning but he’d been wrong about the attic, it was snowing right into the main bedroom. “Damn.” He went slowly into the room and took a closer look. The good thing was the extra weight on the wall was probably fine. The walls were made of thick logs. No danger it would collapse.

The bad news was that the snow was coming into the room and onto the bed. He thought the floor would hold since the tree was only really through the roof but it was going to be damn hard to warm the place up and worse, a shower, if they could get the water on was going to be frigid the moment someone stepped out of it. The wall of the bathroom didn’t go all the way to the ceiling so cold air would be coming in the top the whole time.

He went across the hall to the smaller room. There was a very small shower stall in there. It would have to do. He needed to find the water heater. He wouldn’t bother if

it was just him but Allegra was cold to the bone. Getting warm in the shower would be better than sitting in wet clothes. He'd have to see if he could find a way to dry hers or find some new ones.

The small dresser in the room was empty. He went back over to the main bedroom and checked that chest of drawers. It had one ancient, forest green sweater. It was better than nothing. He grabbed it and went down the stairs.

"The good news is there is a shower..." his voice died. Allegra was on the couch, wrapped in a quilt with all her clothes laid out over the chairs. As far as he could tell she was naked. "Um...you need...that is, if we need to leave in a hurry—he glanced over at her clothes—"this is not ideal."

She glared at him. "It may not be ideal but it's the only way I will get warm. I can't sit in wet clothes."

"Here," he said and handed her the sweater. "Best I can do. At least put your underwear and boots on. If we have to leave in a hurry you don't really want to be naked."

"If we have to leave in that much of a hurry, we're probably not getting out of here since the snowmobile is so friggin' far away.

She had him there. "Um...why don't you go up and have a quick shower? We need to be ready to move quickly. I'll do what I can to dry your clothes and hunt up some food."

She heaved herself to her feet, blankets still clutched around her body, grabbed the flashlight off the table and then headed up the stairs. "The bedroom on the left," he called after her. "Give me a minute to find the water heater and turn it on." He swore under his breath and headed back to the kitchen. He opened a closet door in the

corner and found the water heater. Same place as his was in his rental. Thankfully it was already on but on the lowest setting. He cranked it up and then closed the door and went in search of food from the backpack.

He put the gun on the counter and dug out two very frozen short-rib dinners. Hopefully she wasn't vegan or vegetarian. Why the hell that mattered to him, he didn't know. Normally in these situations, he'd just be grateful to have food. He tossed the dinners on the counter. Women. They were the devil to deal with. Jamie used to poke fun at him all the time saying he would know right off if Xavier ever found the one because she'd be the only woman Xavier ever asked how she wanted her steak cooked. Everyone else got medium rare.

Allegra would just have to eat her short rib dinner hot. That was the only option for cooking and he was damn sure that she didn't want it cold. Hopefully, the shower was doing its thing and warming her up. He'd been getting concerned about her. She wasn't dealing with the cold well. Hard to do that when wearing a skirt but he had enjoyed seeing her legs. He had no doubts the rest of her was just as fine. She certainly felt that way when she'd been curled against him.

He did a quick circuit of the downstairs checking all the windows. He'd closed all the curtains to block the flashlight beam from being noticed but he still needed to keep watch. What he wouldn't give for a phone to call his pals back in Yellowstone. They'd come get him out even if it took them a few days to get there and get situated. Just knowing they were on the way would make the knots in his gut unfurl a little.

The snow was still falling hard. He didn't think anyone would be coming in this. If it were him leading the hit squad, he'd call it. Too dangerous. They would have the cover from the snow but they couldn't see something unless it was right in front of their face. Made more sense to wait it out a bit.

He heard a thunk from above and froze. Should he run up and check? There was no

scream and the water was still running. Of course, the gunmen could have climbed the tree and entered the main bedroom and then gone across and grabbed Allegra.

His gut rolled as he grabbed the gun and headed for the stairs. Seconds later, he reached the top. The shower was still running and the bedrooms were empty. She was fine. Safe. At least for now.

He quietly opened the bathroom door just a crack to verify her safety. She was in the shower with her back to him. The steam in the bathroom was intense but there was no hiding the fine curve of her ass. He eased out a breath and closed the door again. The helicopter crash had him thinking worst-case scenario all the time now. He had to stop. Constant vigilance was playing with his brain.

Heading back to the kitchen, he put the gun on the counter once again and stuck the two frozen dinners in the oven. Allegra Wagner was responsible at least in part for him being in another crash but that's not what bothered him. He was more worried about the effect she had on his equilibrium than anything else. If he wasn't careful, she'd be the death of him.

CHAPTER8

Allegra reached the top of the stairs and blew out the breath she'd been holding. She glanced into the room on the right and shivered. Freaking par for the course. He might have mentioned a tree had crashed through the roof. Seriously. Was he going to keep shit from her because he thought she'd freak out again? It was one moment. One. Given the circumstances, she was allowed one moment of being overwhelmed. A plane crash, a blinding snowstorm, men with machine guns chasing them. What had Xavier called them? Hit squad? She suppressed a shudder. Certainly, the most stalwart of individuals would understandably freak the hell out.

It didn't help that she knew, knew, Simon had been there to kill her. That was enough stress to do her in on its own.

How the hell had everything gone so friggin' wrong? So many questions, and not an answer to be had. Who knew that she had discovered the bad data? How did they find out that she'd accessed it? It didn't really matter who had orchestrated the plane crash unless it led to learning who was behind the whole thing. She shivered under her blanket as she went into the other bedroom and plopped onto the bed. It was all so surreal. She'd looked down her nose at certain companies in the industry because they didn't have as strict experiment protocols and policies as NoVoGlobal. And now she would be at the bottom of the heap or, at least, the company would be once everything came out. Somehow deadly errors always made the news, didn't they?

She stood and went into the tiny bathroom. Reaching in, she absently turned on the water. Waiting for it to heat up, she tossed the unanswerable question around her brain. Who had the high-level access needed to make those data changes, and who

knew enough about things to create the fake data? That was the hard part. She could do it but only because she'd started at the bottom of the corporate ladder. She'd joined NoVo as a lab tech and then worked her way up to leading a small, twenty-subject study for a cancer drug. Her career progressed and she'd moved up to lead larger studies. She had been promoted to director and then Junior VP.

Oh, how she'd celebrated when she earned Senior VP. Her mentor, Dr. Haywood Adanne, named her his successor as Chief Medical Officer when he retired two years earlier. He and Damon had been friends, but it seemed they'd parted on a sour note. Rumors had flown when Haywood left. Something had happened, but details were quickly swept under the rug.

Allegra had always thought that Haywood must have been the fall guy for something so Damon made her his successor as some form of payment. It made her work all the harder to prove that she deserved her spot at the table.

Graham was an asshole. As head of mergers and acquisitions, he made all the deals for the company. He had engineered the purchase of ApexMed in the first place. She'd just taken over as Chief Medical Officer two years ago when the sale went through. She'd voted against buying it. Haywood had said it was a good buy, but she hadn't been so sure. There were some iffy things in ApexMed's practices and she'd suspected the Cytosine data wasn't the Holy Grail Graham had hyped. Turns out she'd been right. But Graham had no qualms about rubbing in her face that their drug Cytosine promised to be a new lung cancer treatment drug. Did he know the truth about the data and was pushing ahead anyway? Did he have the skill to doctor the numbers?

The water was finally warm enough to brave it. She dropped her blanket and moved into the spray. It stung at first since she was so cold but it was glorious. She made sure to keep her hair out of the spray. Wet hair would only make her colder and the chances of finding a hair dryer seemed slim. She stood under the spray and let the hot

water work its magic. She'd been even colder than she'd thought and this was doing wonders for her. Now if only her clothes were dry. Also, food would be good.

The sound of someone coming jolted her out of her reverie. She whirled around, heart hammering, but it was only Xavier. He kept his gaze on her face. "Here's something to dry yourself." He placed it on the toilet seat lid. Then turned and walked out again.

She stood still and stared after him. She didn't know whether to be impressed or insulted. She was standing naked and he never even tried to look. She should be happy that he was showing her that level of respect but somehow she felt ...disappointed. Xavier was drop-dead gorgeous as far as she was concerned. Those gray eyes of his held all kinds of emotions in check. Who could blame her for wanting him to show just a wee bit of interest?

How could she be thinking of sex at a time like this? The mind was a crazy thing, she reminded herself. Not to mention people who had a brush with death often wanted to do something life-affirming like eat or have sex. And he had kissed her. He'd only done that to shock her out of her hysteria, but still. And then there was that moment on the plane when she was pretty sure he'd had an erection when her ass had been pressed against his junk. Either way, it didn't matter. She needed to finish her shower and get dressed again. Survival came first.

Sex would have to wait.

Allegra got out of the shower and shivered. She grabbed the towel and went back into the stall closing the door. It was warmer than outside but not by much. She took the dishcloth-sized towel and dried herself. Then she stepped back out of the stall and stared at the green sweater. It was scratchy and belonged to a stranger. She didn't want it touching her skin. Her nipples already ached with the thought of how the rough fabric would chafe. With that justification in mind, she ignored the sweater and wrapped herself in the blanket once again.

She moved into the bedroom and sat back down on the bed, taking in her surroundings. Another cozy room. The full-size four-poster log frame bed was tucked into the corner, with an embroidered quilt and thick layers of blankets. More blankets. Yes!

Across from it was a wooden dresser that looked distressed but somehow added to the charm of the room. A round, multicolored rug covered the hardwood floor. Glancing out the window the snow was visible, piling up against the glass. Under any other circumstances, she'd be thrilled to spend the night in a room like this with a man as attractive as Xavier, but she was dreading the conversation they were about to have. She had to tell him the truth.

"You decent?" he asked as his footsteps sounded on the stairs.

"Yeah," she replied.

He entered the bedroom with a tray containing what looked like a short rib dinner and a steaming mug of some other liquid. "I ate mine while you were showering. I'm assuming you want to get under the blankets and try and stay warm. Eat up here and I'll bring your clothes up when they're dry. I have them on the water heater. It might take a while."

"Thanks." She didn't know what else to say. How do you tell a person that you're responsible for someone trying to kill them? She shivered as he put the tray down on the dresser. "Um, I guess we should talk about...everything."

He turned and met her gaze. "Eat first and then we'll talk." With that, he left the room.

She got up slowly from the bed, mostly because in the last hour her ribs had started hurting and her body was protesting each movement. She'd noticed the blooming

bruises on her torso while in the shower. Xavier kept moving his left arm as if to loosen it, so she was pretty sure she wasn't the only one feeling the effects of the accident.

She caught her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Large dark circles marred the skin underneath her eyes, and the normally fine lines around the corners weren't so fine anymore. I guess crashing in a plane and thugs with AR-15s will do that to a girl.

She carried the tray back to the bed and got settled under the thick blankets. The short ribs tasted amazing. She hadn't realized how hungry she'd been. The steaming mug turned out to be tea. She drank that as well and then put the tray back on the dresser. She couldn't carry it and the blanket down the stairs. It had been hard enough to do it the few steps across the room.

Turning, she reached over to pull the quilt off the bed and swore. Her ribs were definitely bruised. Moving gingerly, she gathered the quilt in her arms along with the flashlight and headed down the stairs.

"You okay?" Xavier asked. He was sitting in the chair by the window glancing at her as he spoke but then turned back to check the view. "I heard you swear."

"Warmer at least. My ribs hurt. Just bruised," she assured him.

He glanced back at her, and she once again noticed how damn fine he was. He would be even better looking if he wasn't shooting her daggers with his eyes. Fair enough. "I supposed another cup of tea is out of the question?"

He nodded to the stove. "There's more in the kettle."

"Thank you," she managed before her throat closed off. She tried to swallow the

massive lump but it was going to take a minute. Even pissed at her, he was taking care of her. It wasn't his job and yet he'd done it anyway from the moment the plane crashed. She dumped the quilt on the sofa and shuffled toward the kitchen. Steam wafted from the spout as she poured herself another cup and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Do you want one?"

“No thanks.”

She drew a deep breath. “Thank you for...everything. Helping me. Saving me really. I...the man with the gun. I’m sorry you had to deal...” Her words died as she shuffled back to the sofa and set her tea on the coffee table. Then she covered herself with the quilt. Better.

“It’s my job.”

“I think you’ve gone over and above anything required to be the captain.” She wrapped her cold hands around the mug.

“Not because I’m...I was the captain but because Hank Patterson asked me to. He asked me to take care of you and I owe Hank a lot. Keeping you safe is my job.”

So much for thinking he was just being altruistic. Although she was pretty sure he wouldn’t desert her regardless of his promise to Hank. “I see. Still, thank you.”

Xavier stared at her. “So, you want to tell me what the hell is going on?”

The moment of truth. Now she’d see if her instinct about Xavier’s dedication to his job were accurate. She returned his steely gaze. “I... I’m not entirely sure.”

“What does that mean?” he demanded.

“I don’t know who wants me dead,” she snapped.

He frowned. “Does that mean you’ve made so many enemies that you can’t figure out which one wants you dead, or you have no clue that you even have enemies?”

She heaved an exasperated sigh. “No. I know why they want me dead. I just don’t know who is behind it?”

“Start at the beginning.”

Taking another mouthful of tea to calm her nerves, she swallowed and then started her story. “I was working late on Friday and discovered a file. It contained data for the new drug we’re about to get approval for from the FDA. The thing is...the data was not the same information that had been given to me and to the FDA.”

He waved his hand. “Who are you exactly, and why do you see the data?”

Heat rose in her cheeks. She was so used to the world, or rather, her world, knowing who she was that she’d forgotten to explain. Way to think you’re the center of the universe. “Shit, sorry. I’m the Chief Medical Officer for NoVoGlobal Pharmaceuticals. We’re based in New Jersey. I’m just in Austria to get our European operation up to speed with a few projects. We have offices in Switzerland and Austria, as well as London.”

Xavier said, “Okay, back to the data.” He sank a little deeper into the chair.

Taking his getting settled as her cue, she began again. “I deleted something accidentally and went into the backup server to retrieve it. Normally, the server is rewritten every month with the new data but as I said, I’m here to bring certain things up to speed. Our European branch has been woefully behind on many things including technology. Anyway, I was poking around in the deleted files section and found a file for our new lung cancer drug, Cytoxine. I opened it and it was data from the last study we did. Fifteen hundred and eighty-three participants. The results

were..." her stomach rolled as she gritted out the truth, "alarming. They were not the results that had been presented to me."

Xavier asked, "How were they different?"

She opened her mouth to explain and then realized too much detail wouldn't be helpful here. She needed to streamline her explanation. "During the last phase of the trial, we increased the dosage of the Cytosine given to the patients who were receiving the drug. The numbers I was given showed a two percent death rate. That is considered in the acceptable range."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Acceptable?"

She brought her legs up under the blanket and curled into a ball. "You were in the military right? It's like the percentage of collateral damage for an op. The goal, obviously, is to not have any, but there's a certain amount that is likely to occur no matter how careful everyone is. As long as it's a small number, it's regrettable but understandable."

"I get it," he said. "This happens with every drug?"

"Yes. No drug is developed without some patients dying, even the regular over-the-counter meds everyone uses. Read the fine print sometime. They can all cause death given a certain set of circumstances." She took a breath. "Anyway, the data in the file I found said the death rate was much higher, seventeen-point-two percent. That's way too high. If I had seen those numbers, I would've stopped the study and we would've gone back to the drawing board."

"But you didn't see them until Friday night?" he asked, raising both eyebrows.

"Yes, and I was horrified. Still am. That's just way too many deaths." Her stomach

churned every time she thought of it. All those people. She cleared her throat. “The FDA announcement with approval for Cytoxine to be used to treat lung cancer in the US is coming this Wednesday. Our CEO and board will do all kinds of interviews about the development process and the drug will be touted as the best treatment to win the fight against lung cancer. But it’s all a lie.” She shook her head. It was still so hard to believe. “I was trying to make it to Geneva before Damon, our CEO, flies home for the announcement.”

Xavier stared at her. “What was your plan?”

She shrugged. “Tell Damon what I discovered. I have a copy of the file and I—the file. It’s in my skirt. There’s a pocket on the inside. Is the skirt okay?”

He nodded. “It’s not that hot.” But he got up and disappeared. He came back a moment later and put the flash drive in her hand.

“Thanks,” she said as he sat back down and glanced out the window. “Anyway, where was I? Right. I pulled together a file that shows the timeline of the drug’s development. I can show where the data was falsified. I just don’t know who’s responsible.

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“I thought if I could show it to him, he could stop the FDA announcement and just say we pulled the drug for further study. Not an ideal solution, but it does happen. Our stock would take a slight hit and there would be rumors but we have three other drugs that are in the pipeline and should pass FDA approval this year for other types of cancer. It would be fine.” She frowned. “As long as their data isn’t corrupted, that is. We could’ve quietly killed Cyttoxine and no one would be the wiser. If anyone asked, we could’ve just said it wasn’t as promising as we’d hoped. It happens all the time.”

“But someone found out that you discovered the deception. That’s what you think, right?” Xavier asked. “Someone realized that you’d seen the real data and now they want you dead?” He stared at her. “That’s a little extreme, isn’t it?”

“Extreme? Yes, but Cyttoxine is worth billions of dollars per year. The US is only one market. With FDA approval in place, the drug will pass everywhere, and doctors will start prescribing it across the world. That’s serious money. If someone went to all the trouble of falsifying the data to obtain FDA approval, then killing me would be a small price to pay to keep that secret. People kill for a few thousand dollars. We’re talking billions and billions. It’s worth it to kill me and you and anyone else that might know about it, or about us surviving the crash.”

There she’d said it. Her biggest fear. She would be responsible for Xavier’s death. And that he would hate her for bringing him into this mess. But she was doing what she could. Allegra could not live with herself if other people died because she knew something that could save them. Of course, if Xavier was killed, chances were excellent she wouldn’t be around long enough to feel any guilt. She’d be dead.

CHAPTER9

Xavier couldn't believe what she was telling him. Hank was not wrong when he'd said there was something suspect about this whole thing. Billions of dollars at stake. Jesus. People killed for twenty bucks. No wonder Simon depressurized the plane. The question was now what the hell were they going to do?

"We need a game plan," he said bluntly.

"No shit." Allegra practically rolled her eyes at him. Then her expression morphed into one of contrition. "Sorry, sorry. I'm just tense. I've never had someone try to kill me before. I mean, I'm a doctor for Christ's sake. This situation is way, way beyond the scope of anything I've ever encountered.

"And I am so sorry you got dragged into this. I thought I was doing something right. Something noble. I didn't realize they'd want to kill me. Sounds stupid now when I think about it. I guess I should've taken a commercial flight. They wouldn't bring down a huge jet full of people."

"You would've been dead before you got to the check-in counter," he pointed out bluntly.

Her eyes went wide. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes. If they've gone to all this trouble, then for sure they would've had men at the airport to take you out." He knew it in his bones. It's what he would've done if it was his job to stop her.

She sighed. "The falsification of data...whoever did it...do you realize how many people could die worldwide because of this?"

The number had to be massive. Doctors putting their trust in the marketing hype of a drug that didn't do what it claimed. Yeah, the death toll would be astronomical. His shoulder twinged and he rolled the joint, trying to work sensation into his numb hand. "How can they get away with it?" Xavier asked. "If you say the death rate is high, then how do they hope to sell this drug without all these people dying."

"They don't." Allegra put her mug on the coffee table. "My guess is that they hope no one will notice and to be frank, they're not wrong. These are cancer patients. Some are going to die anyway. Don't get me wrong; Cytosine will help millions of people, people who would have otherwise had a very different prognosis, but it will also kill a much higher number than is considered acceptable by the pharmaceutical industry."

"They are betting on the fact that it will take doctors a long time to notice and then the company can make excuses for a while and then pledge to do some studies, etc..." she drew a breath "...all in all, they'll assure themselves profits for a while before the shit will really hit the fan and that's once it's noticed. I would guess it won't be noticed for at least five years."

Xavier understood her fear and frustration. He'd been down that road with the military on more than one occasion. It took them eons to admit that soldiers had been affected by the burn pits in the Middle East and Asia, and even now it's not like they admit wrongdoing.

"You're saying they can make billions for up to five years and then maybe even a few more before the shit hits the fan."

She nodded. "Exactly. By then everyone responsible is gone and whoever is left is holding the bag."

Xavier got it. The whole thing just fell into place for him. He'd seen it enough times in the military where someone came up with a program or a plan that would take a

while to execute and by the time they finally got around to the implementation, they realized it was wrong or even downright ridiculous but the original driving force behind the idea had long since gotten his promotion and was well beyond any recriminations. The person trying to implement was left to face the consequences.

“None of that helps us now. We need to figure out a plan. A way to get you to Geneva safely.” His mind was whirling trying to assess their current situation and come up with alternatives.

Allegra shrugged. “I guess we go down the mountain until we find a town as soon as the storm breaks.” She captured his gaze. “Do you think they’ll find us tonight?”

He shrugged. He’d been pondering the same question. “I think the storm will slow them down significantly. The snowmobile is low on gas. Theirs must be the same. They’ll have to go back down the mountain. I would guess they’ll wait until dawn, or until the storm breaks, whichever comes first, to start looking again.” He glanced toward the window.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He hesitated for a minute. Did he tell her the truth? She’d been through a lot today and for the most part she’d done a good job of handling everything thrown at her, but would this be her tipping point? Only one way to find out. “Allegra, whatever town we find, they’ll be waiting. They know we’re alive because they’ve already checked the crash site for bodies. We have to come down the mountain. They’ll have planned for this, and they’ll be there. Getting around them will be damned difficult.”

She stared at him. Her chest rose and fell quickly under the blankets.

He waited.

She swallowed. “What you’re saying is we’re going to have to face these people at some point.”

He nodded once.

She lifted her chin. “So then let’s make that point as far away as possible both in time and space.”

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“I like the way you think.” He allowed himself a smile. “We just have to figure out what that will look like.”

“You said you were in the Rangers, so what would you do if you were them?”

Xavier stood and started to pace. It was a good question. “Depending on numbers, I would have guys posted at a choke point in the roads coming into town. There can’t be that many coming off this mountain. At the very least they could follow us if they couldn’t actually...” He didn’t finish the thought.

“It’s okay, you can say it. I promise I won’t freak out. If they can’t actually attack us there, they’d follow us wherever we go.”

Once again, he gave her a quick nod. He studied her features. The stress was obvious since he knew where to look. The fine lines around her eyes and mouth tightened, but other than that, she was remarkably calm. Did she not realize what he was really telling her or was she just this calm under pressure?

“What you’re really telling me is the chance of us getting out of this unscathed is about zero.”

Okay, she did get it. She went up a few steps in his estimation. She was tough. Tougher than the laughing fit had led him to believe. That was good. She was going to need to rely on that toughness.

“No. They’re slim but not zero. I’m hoping we can figure something out. I have some ideas.”

“Care to share?” she asked.

“Not yet,” he said and resumed his pacing. “I need to think about it a bit more.” He rolled his shoulder and tried to loosen the knots. The numbness in his hand was aggravating. He opened and closed his fingers but it was no use. He needed his shoulder and himself to relax if he was going to get the full use of his hand back.

“Come here.” She pointed to the couch next to her.

He stopped and cocked an eyebrow.

“You’re obviously having problems with your shoulder and your left hand. Maybe I can help.”

“I’m good, thanks,” he said, dismissing her.

“No, you’re not and forgive me, but I need you at your best if we’re going to get through this in one piece. My life is literally in your hands, so both of them need to function.”

He bit back an oath. She was right. He needed to be at his best but what the hell could she do. “Look, I know you’re a doctor, but my problem is not something you can fix.”

“Try me.” She lifted her chin once again indicating she was up for the challenge.

“Fine.” He sighed. “I was in...another crash. Helicopter. I have a crush injury to my left shoulder. It’s mostly healed but the nerve was damaged. My arm and hand go numb if there’s downward pressure on my shoulder or if my muscles tense up.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and studied his shoulder. “At the moment, you’re super

tense. I can see how tight and high your shoulders are. We need them to come down from your ears and move back. They're too far forward putting pressure on the nerve. Come here," she said again.

He wanted to say no but she had a point. He needed to be on his best game to give them any chance at all.

"Fine." He went over and sat next to her. She turned him so that his back was to her. "Take off your parka. I know the cold won't help but I can't work through all that fabric."

He shucked his coat and threw it on the chair next to them. Then he sat back down and faced away from her. Her hands on his shoulder made him jump. He didn't know why. He knew she was going to do it, but no one had touched his shoulder except medical professionals since the accident. She is a medical professional, he reminded himself. But this wasn't a hospital setting and she was naked under a bunch of blankets. That thought made another part of his anatomy tense.

Allegra cursed under her breath, and he felt her shift behind him. Then she was leaning over him and coming down harder on his stiff muscles. He gritted his teeth. The knots in his shoulders hurt as she worked on them.

"Try and relax. Deep breaths," she murmured as she dug her fingers into his flesh.

He inhaled a deep breath, let it out, then repeated the process. Closing his eyes, he tried to pretend that he was back at rehab, and Bart, the nurse was working on his shoulder. But her scent engulfed him and the whisper of the blanket rubbing against his back as she moved didn't help. She found a particularly heavy knot and really pressed on it. His eyes smarted with the intense burn, but he gritted his teeth. A moment later he felt the knot let go. His arm went from numb to tingling. Progress, but his cock had gotten harder as well. He wasn't sure he could take her working on

him much longer without becoming hard as rock.

“I think I’m okay. It feels better.” He started to stand but she leaned on his shoulder.

“It’s not better. I got one knot out. Be patient. We need you as relaxed as possible so your arm can heal.”

The only way he was going to be ‘relaxed as possible’ was if he screwed her five ways from Sunday and he didn’t think that was likely to happen.

She worked on his shoulder for another few minutes, but it stayed the same. He started to stand. “Look, it’s better.”

“Sit,” she commanded.

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He turned to face her and she quickly pulled the blanket over her breasts but not before he caught a glimpse of her creamy white skin with dark nipples that were tantalizingly peaked. Jesus. That was not helping. He cleared his throat. “Allegra, it’s not going to work. I can’t relax. I’m worried about the gunmen and the storm. I’ve got to figure out the best way out of here.” Not to mention being totally distracted by her hotness. “There’s just... a lot. You’re not going to be able to get me to relax.”

“Do you think they’ll come for us in the next two or three hours?”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Just answer the question.”

“No. I think the storm is too bad. It’s after midnight. They’ll start up the mountain around dawn if they have enough people, but more likely they’ll stake out any road leading into town and wait for us to come to them.”

“Good. So we have a few hours reprieve.”

He grudgingly nodded.

She stared at him, eyes narrowed. Assessing something. “Let’s have sex.”

His body clenched. “What?” He couldn’t have heard her right.

Allegra cocked her head. “You need to relax and I...I need...something. Something to hold on to. Almost dying has left me feeling...lost somehow. I want to hold on to

you.”

“You’re crazy.” He stood up.

“No, I’m not. This isn’t me freaking out. Do I look like I’m in shock or hysterical?”

He stared into her deep green eyes. Damn it, she looked completely calm. Calculating even. Way to suck the fun out of things. It was like being part of a science experiment. “You don’t look like you’re losing it, but it’s still not a good idea. The gunman could—”

“You said they wouldn’t come for a few hours at least. Besides, can you think of another way to get your shoulder down and relaxed? Is there something else we could do that would keep us warm?”

He let out a long breath. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

She stood and gathered the blankets around herself. “Yes, I do.”

This was a bad, bad idea. He closed the distance between them until he was inches from her. “You don’t want to do this.” His voice was gritty, rough.

He hadn’t been with anyone since the accident. He was afraid once he started, he’d be unable to control himself. It would be rough and demanding.

“I do, actually. I need a release. I’m totally fucking stressed out and you just told me chances are good I’m gonna die in a few hours so fucking a hot guy seems like a great idea.”

“And if we live? Are you going to freak out afterward?” Jesus, why was he trying to talk her out of this?

“Seriously? That’s your worry? If we fucking live I have a company to save and a career to salvage. You’ll be in my rear-view mirror as soon as we’re clear of this mess.”

He stared at her. That should’ve made him feel better but somehow it didn’t. If anything, it pissed him off more. This woman was throwing herself at him, offering him the answer to his shoulder issue and to his blue balls and he was pissed off by it. Maybe the issue wasn’t her. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He grabbed Allegra’s head and buried his fingers in her hair as he dropped his mouth to hers in a punishing kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth. Their tongues slid against one another. She tasted like heaven.

Xavier ran one hand down her back to grip her ass and pull her closer. He wanted her naked against his skin. She’d been right. He needed a release from the stress and pressure of the plane crash but also, he needed to be touched. No one had touched him in this way since before the helicopter crash. He’d had no idea how much he missed the warmth of another’s hand. Losing Jamie had caused him such pain, he’d instinctively held himself back from this type of interaction. They were brothers as far as he was concerned, and the loss of his best friend had been devastating.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding along hers, demanding more. He felt a spark in the pit of his stomach as they explored each other's mouths with their tongues. His cock was hard, he needed her to relieve some of the tension in his body.

He broke the kiss and moved his lips to the side of her neck, licking and nipping at the soft skin there. She moaned and gripped his shoulders as she tilted her head to give him better access.

She captured his gaze and let the blanket fall. She was stunning. Full breasts just begging to be sucked and fondled. The curve of her hip fit his hand perfectly. He ran

his hands over her, exploring her body and then cupping her ass. As he squeezed, she pushed her hips closer to his, her hot center came in contact with his erection. The heat was intense even through his jeans.

He worried he would come quickly if he didn't slow this down. It had been too long and he was too hard to wait, but he wanted to savor this moment, to remember it. It was as if he'd been dead and Allegra was breathing life back into him. The feel of her body touching his accelerated his heart rate. Drawing a breath was becoming hard as his mind played the possibilities of what was to come.

"Xavier," she moaned, "I want to feel you inside me. I don't want to wait."

He wanted that too. So damn much that he knew it would be over too soon. "Turn around, face the fireplace and step up on the hearth." His voice was a growl, and she opened her eyes to see him. She took a step back. His stomach tightened in anticipation. Would she listen to him? Would she let him take total control? She slowly turned, her body shivering in the cold.

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He quickly shed his clothes. Then stepped close to her and pulled her ass back against his cock. He rubbed his engorged shaft between her cheeks as he fondled her breasts from behind. He squeezed her nipples and continued rubbing. She moaned and pushed back against him.

Running a hand down her stomach, he sought her hot center, tapping her clit with one finger, exploring her slick folds with another. She was so damned wet he almost came. He rubbed her clit and squeezed her nipple in tandem.

"Xavier," The groan in her voice as she murmured his name was an aphrodisiac.

He wanted to bend her over and take her right there but he stopped himself. He circled her clit with his fingers and then slipped them lower and entered her. Three fingers thrusting in and out.

He kissed her neck and played with her nipple as he increased the speed of his fingers. Her hips started to move. They increased speed as he did. He squeezed her nipple and nipped her shoulder at the same time he added a fourth finger, and she cried out. Her hips bucked and she reared back.

"Yes, baby come," he said as he held her up.

"Xavier," she said as she steadied herself on the mantel. "That was good. Really fucking good," she said as she turned around. She kissed him pushing her body against his. He was so damn hard, it hurt. She started to lift a leg and put it around his waist but then she drew back.

"What?" he asked.

Her eyes had a deep green wicked gleam.

She turned back around. "Take me like this," she demanded as she held onto the mantel and stuck her ass out toward him.

He moved directly behind her and again rubbed his cock between her ass cheeks as he cupped her breasts. Then he lowered his hands to her hips and hauled them back a bit more. As he entered her, he sucked on her shoulder.

She was so damned tight, he almost came. He tried to slow his strokes but the way her body clung to his cock, and how she moved her hips urged him into a fast rhythm. "You're killing me," he groaned.

She chuckled and increased her speed at the same time as she clenched her inner muscles. Eyes nearly rolling back in his head, he matched her rhythm and pounded into her, burying himself to the hilt. Each long, deep thrust into her heat seared his shaft as if lightning had struck, until she cried out, and her sheath shuddered around him. A few strokes later, he came with her.

"Jesus," he muttered.

She turned to face him with a sly smile. "He had nothing to do with it."

CHAPTER10

"How's your shoulder?" she asked as they were curled together under the blankets. She was lying on his chest and running her fingers down over his ridged abdomen. She'd been right about his six-pack. He had an amazing body, and God, he was a genius about using it.

"Feels pretty good," he said as he held up his arm and rolled his shoulder.

"Is it numb?"

He shrugged "More just tingling. I have more feeling in it but it's not totally normal, if that's what you're asking."

She rested against the rise and fall of his chest. The sex had been insanely good. Maybe because she hadn't had it in so long but she didn't think so. It was good because Xavier was an excellent lover. And because she wanted him so badly. He was sexy as hell but more. He was strong and capable and had amazing hands. She trusted him implicitly. Trust always made sex better.

Allegra knew time was running out, one way or another, and they should be sleeping but she also knew if the shit hit the fan, this might be the last opportunity to have sex again. Have Xavier again was more like it. It wasn't just about sex, it was about sex with this man. There was something about him that just made her feel safe and secure, which was stupid considering their current circumstances, but she didn't care. That's how sex with him made her feel and she wanted that again.

She shifted so she was on top of his chest and started sucking one of his nipples.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She lifted her head and cocked an eyebrow. "Do you really need an explanation?"

"I just meant...we need to get some sleep."

She dropped feather-light kisses on his chest. "You sleep, I'm going to do this." She sucked his nipple.

He growled and suddenly he flipped them until her body was beneath his. She let out a surprised yelp. He lowered himself on top of her. "Sleep is for the weak." He grinned and then dropped a kiss on her mouth.

He worked his way down to her breasts, dropping light kisses one minute and nipping the next. The sensation was killing her. Allegra had never been so aroused. She lifted her hips. "I want you inside me."

He smiled and sucked her nipple. Then he went lower. Her clit tightened in anticipation. Moving down her body, he hovered his mouth over her sex, then nuzzled between her folds. She gasped as he circled the nub with his tongue.

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Arching her back, she threw her head back and moaned. "Oh god." She sank her fingers into his hair as he moved his hands to her ass, pulling her closer to his mouth.

Her legs shook and her hips rocked back and forth as she reached for her orgasm. He sucked her clit and slid three fingers inside her. She whimpered as he pulled his fingers out and reached back in, stretching her tight walls. This was fucking heaven. She arched against his mouth. "Yes," she breathed. "More."

He quickened his pace and she strained against him. God, she wanted this...wanted him.

She tugged his hair. "I want to come with you inside me."

"You sure?" he asked.

She nodded. She wanted to feel his cock inside her and his skin on her skin. She needed the feel of his weight on top of her. It made her feel safe...but it also made her feel alive. She needed to feel alive.

He slid inside her slowly and she wanted to scream. She raised her hips and he inched in a bit more. Then he withdrew. She bit her lip as she lifted her hips once again. This was so exquisitely agonizing.

"You're so wet," he said, "but are you ready?"

She met his gaze and nodded, incapable of speaking. He held her gaze as he slammed into her with a ferocity that took her breath away. She moaned and matched his

rhythm, his strokes taking her higher and higher until she soared and let the orgasm wash over her. He came and then collapsed on top of her. This was what she wanted. What she needed. This. With Xavier.

* * *

After rousing themselves from a sex-induced euphoria, and a quick nap, they'd hurried outside to make their getaway. She cleared her throat as if that would clear her mind. She had to focus.

She'd always been good at hiding her feelings. Her mother always said no one could look as innocent as she managed to do and yet be as guilty as sin. She wasn't in shock or hysterical. She was just completely losing her shit. On the inside. There was no way she'd tell Xavier that. He had to have confidence in her but yeah, she was definitely losing her shit. The problem was she wanted to hide in Xavier's arms not be out here fighting for her life.

Allegra brushed some snow off her hair. She'd felt so good, so safe in Xavier's arms. The sex had been amazing but even more than that, the physical intimacy grounded her. Normal. No, better than normal. Like she could take on Damon and the gunmen. Xavier had made her feel invincible and sexy and loved all at the same time. She'd never had that before. Ever. He'd done that for her, and she wanted more of him, which scared the hell out of her almost as much as the gunmen did.

The scientific side of her brain said that the heightened sense of danger made the sex seem so much better, but the woman in her knew it was that she and Xavier fit together perfectly. He knew what he was doing as a lover. So did she. It made for an intense encounter. One that would be repeated again and again and again if she had her way. It was so fucking good, she wanted him again now. Her nipples were getting hard thinking about it. But the emotional side of things? That was new and she...well she wasn't having it. It just could not exist. She'd promised him that after they'd had

sex, he'd be in her rearview mirror and she meant to keep that promise, even if it broke her somehow to do it.

With every passing mile on the snowmobile, her confidence waned, allowing fear to set in. This plan had to work. It was risky and dangerous but, as Xavier said, they really didn't have a choice.

The snowmobile came to a stop and she looked over Xavier's shoulder. They were at the top of the mountain on a ridge. "Do you see anything?" she asked.

"It's an amazing view."

She had to agree, the scenery was spectacular, but it hadn't been what she meant and he knew it. The valley below them was postcard worthy, with the snow on the roofs of the little town, blanketing open fields as well as the trees going down the mountainside. If there weren't a bunch of gunmen trying to kill them, this would be an incredible moment she would savor. Instead, she squeezed her arms around Xavier's middle just a little bit tighter.

"There," he said and pointed.

She had to stand up to see what he was pointing at.

"A house with smoke coming out of the chimney."

"How far away is it?" she asked. "Do we have enough gas to get there?" "She heard him curse softly and her heart sank.

"I don't know. The going will be tough. We'll have to wind our way through the trees."

She frowned. “Why can’t we go down the meadow in front of us?” She stared at the wide patch of fresh snow directly in front of them. There were no trees, nothing to block their way. They could go down and then turn a bit to the left to get to the cabin. It would save a lot of time.

“We have no idea what’s under the snow or how deep it is. It would be dangerous to go that way. We’d be totally exposed since the snow has stopped. They’d see us immediately if they came up here.”

“But I thought you said they’d be waiting at the bottom on the other side of the mountain. That’s why we went up instead of down.”

“That’s true, but we’ve been moving for an hour. They’ll eventually start up the mountain looking for us when we don’t show. We’ve got another hour tops.”

She touched his cheek as she sat back down. She wanted to say that she trusted his judgment and that she’d follow his lead, but it sounded corny and more, it made her vulnerable. That was the one thing in life she never, ever wanted to be. She’d worked too damn hard to get to the top, not only at work but at everything, and vulnerability had no place at the top.

Xavier twisted to look at her. She smiled. “Then we’d better get going. You know and I know that going through the trees means we run out of gas and we’ll have to walk from there. That’ll slow us down and make us wet and cold. I don’t mind being wet around you, but cold is another story. Going down is better.”

He stared at her for a beat and then laughed at her double-entendres. He gave her a self-satisfied smirk and brushed her lips still wearing that smile. “You’re right. It’s more dangerous but we’re kind of out of options.” He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. “Hold on tight.”

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Her lips tingled where he'd kissed her and she wanted to stop and kiss him deeply but instead, she tightened her arms around his middle and her thighs around his hips once again. He restarted the snowmobile. She'd never been religious but she uttered a prayer now. They needed to get down this mountain as quickly as possible and get to safety. Their time was limited at best.

She gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes. When she found out who was behind this, they'd be lucky if they stayed alive long enough to go to jail. She was liking the idea of meting out justice on her own more and more. Do No Harm. But they were doing harm to her. All bets were off now. Whoever put her in this spot had to pay dearly for this nightmare.

They traveled slowly down the side of the mountain, and Allegra huddled behind his back to minimize the effect of the wind. Xavier zig-zagged to avoid some of the steepest bits and there were a couple of large jolts where they'd hit something, probably a rock or tree trunk. It hadn't been pretty but Xavier had been taking it slowly so it wasn't too bad.

They were more than two-thirds of the way there when they hit something and she flew off the back of the snowmobile and landed in a snowbank. Stunned she laid there trying to figure out what had happened. Finally, the cold seeping into her bones roused her. She tried to sit up. She didn't seem to be injured. Her ribs were still hurting quite a bit as was her ass from where she'd fallen last night, but there didn't seem to be any new injuries.

Rolling on her belly she looked around. "Xavier," she called trying to keep her voice quiet and yet loud enough to be heard.

No response. Her heart pounded as she looked around. The snowmobile was on its side about ten feet away.

“Xavier?” she called again, a little louder this time. She waited.

What if something happened to him? He had to be okay. Her world tilted as a groan reached her. She struggled to get to her feet and then lurched toward the machine. The sound came again. As she approached the snowmobile, she saw Xavier about ten feet away from the machine. He was lying in the snow, spread eagle like a kid making a snow angel.

“Xavier,” she exclaimed as she tried to get to him. The snow was deep and with her skirt and long coat, it was a hard slog. “Please let him be okay”, she mumbled as she fell to her knees next to him. “Xavier,” she said again as she pulled off her glove and felt his neck for a pulse. Relief pulsed through her: his pulse was strong and steady.

“Hey, open your eyes.” She needed to see those gorgeous gray eyes of his more than she needed anything else in the world at the moment. “Please open your eyes.”

His eyelids fluttered and then opened. He focused on her. “Allegra,” he breathed. “Are you okay?”

She laughed out of sheer relief. “Yes, I’m fine. A few more bruises. But what about you? What hurts?”

“My left shoulder. I hit it against something.”

“Is it broken? Can you move your arm?” She unzipped his parka and stuck her hands inside trying to feel around his shoulder.

He let out a growl.

“Are you in pain?”

“Your damn hands are frigid.”

She started to laugh, and he joined in. It was such a relief that he was okay. Xavier was going to be fine. That brought all the joy to her.

“If nothing else hurts, let’s get you up on your feet.” She grabbed his hand and stood up.

“Brauchst du hilfe?” a voice said from behind Allegra. She froze and stared into Xavier’s gray eyes as panic rose in her throat.

He looked past her and she slowly turned to see an elderly gentleman standing about twenty feet away. He was wearing a parka like Xavier’s only in black with a matching hat and gloves. His gray hair peeked out from under his hat. “Brauchst du hilfe?” he asked again.

Xavier stood up slowly. “I’m sorry my German is not great.”

“Ach. English. Do you need help? I saw the accident. Very bad.”

“Thankfully we’re okay,” Xavier replied, “but we could use some help. We’re trying to reach the nearest town.”

Allegra looked around frantically. Where the hell was the gun? She tried to appear nonchalant as she scanned the snow for the weapon, finally locating it slightly behind her on the left. It had sunk into the snow. Could the man see it?

He looked them up and down and then cocked his head. “Where did you come from?”

Xavier took a step forward and shifted so he was partially in front of Allegra but also blocking the man's view of the gun for which she was grateful. She didn't want anything to spook the man.

Xavier grabbed her hand. "We were on the other side of the mountain and got turned around."

The man looked at the snowmobile and then back at them. "Do you wish to go back to the other side?"

"No," Xavier replied. "Just the nearest town where we can rent a car or get a train or airplane."

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The man stared at them thoughtfully. This wasn't making sense to him, and Allegra understood that immediately. It was weird; them turning up like this, her dressed in a skirt, on a snowmobile.

She offered the man a smile. "I'm afraid the airlines lost our luggage and I had rented one of those Airbnb places but with the storm, well there was no heat among other issues. It was just awful really. Anyway, to make matters worse, our rental car broke down but the place had this snowmobile"—she gestured to the overturned machine—"so we took that but got turned around. It's really been the weekend from hell and we just want to go home. Can you help us?"

The man stared at them but eventually smiled slightly. "Yes. Follow me. I take you to town."

"That would be wonderful," she said and made her smile even bigger. The man turned and started toward the cabin. "What do we do about the gun?" she asked in a low voice.

"We leave it there along with the backpack." Xavier kept her hand in his as they trudged through the snow. Who would have thought the small act of him holding her hand would make her feel so safe? It gave her hope that this would all work out.

Twenty minutes later they were standing in front of the man's SUV. "My name is Gunther," he said, offering his hand. Allegra thought he must be near seventy. His warm brown eyes made him seem younger but the gray hair and wrinkles along with a certain stiffness in his gait made her quite sure he was older than he appeared.

“Xavier. And this is Allegra,” he said, pointing to her.

“I will go get the keys.” He nodded toward his cabin and then went up the steps and disappeared inside.

Allegra stood there watching the house. “Do you think he is going to call someone?”

“Possibly,” Xavier said in a hushed voice.

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing? I mean if he calls the cops, we could get some help.”

“Maybe. It would also call attention to us and right now I think it’s better if we fly under the radar. The less attention we attract, the less likely the hit squad will find us.” Xavier winced as he rolled his shoulder. “I need to make some calls to get us some real help. Since I doubt Gunther wants us in his house, we’ll have to find a place in town.”

She bit her lip. She was supposed to meet with Damon today. It didn’t look like that was going to happen. At least not at this point. “I would like to make some calls too.” Her mother. Did someone call from the company and tell them she’d been in an airplane crash? Her mother would be out of her mind with worry. She glanced at the windows. “He’s taking a long time.”

Xavier grunted, “Yeah and I don’t like it.”

Just then the door opened, and Gunther came out. He came toward them and held up the key. He hit a button on the fob and the SUV chirped. Allegra headed for the back passenger door. Getting into the vehicle suddenly seemed scary.

“It’s okay,” Xavier muttered as if he could read her mind.

She nodded once and climbed inside. It wasn't okay but they didn't have a choice and that rankled. She was used to being in charge, to making decisions and to leading the way. For the last twenty-four hours, she'd been taking a backseat, which was smart since Xavier knew what he was doing, even during sex, but the subordinate role was starting to chafe. This needed to be over. She needed to feel strong and in control again. The stress was starting to eat at her in ways she'd never imagined.

A few minutes later as they headed down the mountain, the heat kicked on in the SUV and Allegra could've cried. Warmth. Real warmth for the first time in what seemed like forever. She held her hands over the vents and barely resisted the urge to pull her feet out of her boots and stick them on the vent as well.

Gunther rolled the vehicle to a stop outside what looked like a sporting goods store. "You can buy clothing in here." Gunther pointed to the shop. "There is no car rental or bus or train here, but I have a friend who rents out his car to skiers sometimes. I will ask him if it is available. You can drive it into Bern and get a rental there."

"That's very kind of you," Allegra said as she undid her seat belt.

Gunther glanced at her. "You go shop. I will be back."

They had been dismissed in no uncertain terms. Allegra slid out of the car biting back a curse as her feet hit the ground. Even in the short ride to town, her body had started to seize up. She went up the stairs and into the store with Xavier on her heels. Gunther watched them go and then waved when she opened the door. She waved back but a shiver ran up her spine. Did he believe them? Was he going somewhere to turn them in? Did he know the gunmen?

"Just breathe," Xavier murmured in her ear. "Everything is fine. He's right. We need some clothes, especially you."

“Shit. I don’t have any money. It was all in my purse which was in my bag with my laptop.” She ground her teeth. Her phone was gone too so she couldn't even use that and she hadn't brought her Apple watch on the trip. That would teach her to be more circumspect about what she packed and how she packed it. Fat lot of good any of that did her now.

"I have money," Xavier said. "And yes you can pay me back."

At least he understood that about her. Her need to take care of herself was paramount.

She took a deep breath and glanced around the store. It wasn’t large but it had big plate glass windows out front. Inside the floor was carpeted with an industrial green carpet that had seen better days. Round racks, loaded with all manner of clothing, were scattered haphazardly around the shop. The lack of organization hit her like fingernails on a chalkboard. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to the layout. A middle-aged woman stood behind a cash register on the left of the store. She nodded to them and called out a greeting in German. They nodded back.

Allegra headed to a nearby rack and began rifling through the clothing, soon realizing it was menswear. She went to the next rack and had more luck. Women’s clothing. Sweaters. She pulled out two; one in a deep green and the other in black.

Then she went on to the bottoms rack. She looked through the jeans but decided on leggings instead. She picked up two pairs. They were insulated and soft on the inside. She was tired of being cold. Gathering her finds, she headed into one of the changing rooms. The sweaters fit and she decided to wear the green one. Then she pulled on the leggings. They were soft against her skin. It was bliss having new warm clothes.

She pulled the USB drive out of her skirt pocket and put it in the side pocket of the leggings. Folding up her old clothes, she came out of the dressing room and moved to stand beside Xavier. He was looking out the window.

“What do you think?” she asked.

He turned and gave her a once-over. His eyes turned a stormy shade of gray. She smiled. She recognized that shade. He liked what he saw. Good. Maybe they'd get a chance at a repeat of last night once all this was over. She frowned. WTF was she thinking? Nothing else was going to happen with Xavier. That was the deal they made and that was what she would do if she was going to keep her sanity. Xavier was like an addiction, and she just needed to overcome it.

Underwear over there.” He pointed to the left. “You might want to get some of those as well.”

“Are you going to shop?” she asked. This was more fun than she'd thought it would be.

“I'll grab some stuff in a minute. I'll just keep an eye out while you shop.”

Allegra went over to the underwear section and grabbed a few thongs and a matching bra. She also grabbed Xavier some boxer briefs. That's what he was wearing when they'd had sex and they looked fucking amazing on him.

Twenty minutes later she caught Xavier's eye and went to the cash register. “I got you a couple of sweaters and some underwear and socks.”

“Thanks.”

The woman behind the cash said something else in German but when they didn't

respond, she repeated it in English. "Is there anything else you need?"

"A toothbrush would be nice with toothpaste. And maybe a hairbrush?"

The woman smiled and pointed to a rack around the corner.

"I missed this when we came in. I'll just be a minute," Allegra said as she went around the corner to the rack.

"You can start ringing it up," Xavier said to the woman.

Allegra grabbed the toiletries and came back to the counter. The bell over the door chimed and Gunther walked in. He exchanged a greeting with the woman behind the counter and came to a stop beside Xavier. "My friend is away today but will be back late tonight. You can take his vehicle first thing in the morning."

"Great," Xavier's voice sounded tense to Allegra so she smiled at Gunther.

"This is a small town. We know each other, yes?" Gunther asked.

She bit her lip. What was he trying to say?

"There are some men. Not tourists. They are looking for someone. A man and a woman. People who were in the airplane crash. They say these people need help." Gunther stared at them.

Allegra's shoulders tensed, lifting near her ears. She glanced at Xavier, but his face remained impassive.

Gunther continued. "Perhaps, this is you?"

Xavier frowned. "Look, Gunther, they're right. We did come from the airplane crash but these men, they don't want to help us. They want to hurt us. Do you understand?"

Gunther studied Xavier and then Allegra. He let out a breath. "I do not understand but I will help you. No one sane would go through the snow dressed like she was if it wasn't necessary. These men, they do not show badges or any identification that says they are here to help." The sound he made was part grunt, mostly growl. "They are not here to rescue. They are here to hunt. They have guns."

"Thank you for helping us," Allegra said, as she sagged against the counter. "I am so sorry if we've put you in any danger. If anyone in town is in danger, I feel responsible." She turned to Xavier. "Maybe we should go to the police."

Gunther shook his head. "No. They have someone sitting in the police station. I do not think it would be wise. I have another friend who has a place you can stay tonight and then you leave tomorrow."

Xavier crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe we could leave today. Is there another car we could borrow? I would be happy to pay."

The woman behind the counter piped up. "The road is closed. That's where John Luca is with the truck. He took supplies down to the men working to clear the road. He won't be back until later tonight. It will take them all day."

"Lena is right," Gunther said. "It will be tomorrow at the earliest for you to leave."

"John Luca is the man who is going to lend us the vehicle?" Allegra asked.

Gunther nodded. "The storm caused a small..." he gestured with his hands like something was falling.

“Avalanche?” Xavier supplied.

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“Just so. It will take the day to clear.” Gunther shrugged.

Xavier grunted, “Shit. Okay, so you have a friend we can stay with?”

Allegra’s shoulders bunched tighter. She didn’t want to put anyone else in danger. “Um, maybe that’s not the best idea,” she murmured. “With these men looking for us...”

“She’s right,” Xavier agreed. “As much as we need help, we don’t want to bring trouble to anyone else’s door. We feel bad enough about involving you, Gunther.”

“It is fine. My friend has a guest house.”

“Is very nice.” Lena smiled.

“Okay then. I guess that will work.” Xavier looked at Allegra who nodded and finally put the toiletries on the counter.

Lena rang them up and added them to the bags of clothing. “Here you—”

“Shit,” Xavier said as his body jerked to attention. “Do you have a back way out?”

Allegra glanced toward the door. Two men in white ski jackets were climbing out of an SUV. Her knees buckled and she steadied herself with a hand on the counter.

“No.” Lena shook her head.

“You must hide.” Gunther took the bag. “I will put this in my truck. Meet me at my friend’s place. Lena will tell you the way.”

He turned and made for the door.

Xavier looked at Lena. “Any ideas?”

“The changing rooms?” she suggested. “I will hide your old clothes.” She dropped Allegra's coat, skirt and top into a bag and shoved it under the counter.

“Changing rooms are too obvious,” Xavier said. “There’s got to be somewhere we can hide.”

Allegra looked around the store. Then it hit her. The racks of clothing were round. There was space in the middle. Her mom used to talk about hiding in them when her mother took her shopping. “The clothing racks. The ones with the long coats. Get in the middle.” She ran to the closest one, parted the coats, and then dove inside. Turning she grabbed Xavier’s hand and yanked him inside the circle. Then she adjusted the coats to cover the hole they’d made. She yanked him into a squat just as the bell above the door sounded.

“Hello,” a male voice said.

Lena was silent but she must have done some sort of greeting because then the voice said, “We’re looking for some friends. A man and a woman. We think they might have come in here. Have you seen anyone today?” He had an accent but it wasn’t the same as the people in the town. It sounded more Austrian to her. She’d been living there for the last few months and was starting to recognize it.

“No,” Lena said. “The road is closed. Today is just local people.”

“I see,” the voice said. “Do you mind if my friend and I look around?”

“Of course. There is a rack of sale merchandise at the front of the shop.” Good on Lena. She was directing the men away from where Allegra and Xavier were crunched down.

The sound of their boots on the floor came closer. Allegra’s heart slammed against her ribcage. Guess they weren’t interested in a sale. A fine sheen of sweat broke out on her back. She glanced at Xavier who was nestled in beside her. He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

The men split up as they walked by the rack of coats. She could tell by the thud of their boots on the floor that one man was on either side of them. She held her breath, sure that at any moment they would part the coats and see her and Xavier but the footsteps continued behind them. One set went toward the room that was off the main one and the other went toward the dressing rooms. Doors opened as someone checked each one.

Then the boots came back to the middle of the room. The two men seemed to meet beside their rack once more. They spoke quietly to one another in what sounded like German but it was hard to tell. Then they walked back toward the counter.

“Thanks for letting us check. Here is my number. Please call if they show up. It is very important.”

“I will call,” Lena said.

The bell above the door rang and the sound of more voices reached Allegra. Women’s voices. They were chattering away. Locals probably. They called a greeting to Lena and then kept chattering as they moved closer to the clothing rack.

Allegra stared at Xavier. If the women moved the coats they would be in for a huge surprise. She squeezed his hand hard. He gave a slight nod but she knew there was nothing he could do. The woman stopped at a rack next to theirs and kept chatting.

She heard boots on the floor moving away from them and then the bell above the door tinkled. Allegra let out the breath she'd been holding. At least the men weren't in the store anymore. Now they just had to wait for the women to leave and then they'd be in the clear. For now. That was a chilling thought.

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Her mother was always reminding her to live in the moment. She was right. As a matter of fact, she was right about a lot of things. She'd warned Allegra that getting to the top might not be worth everything she'd had to give up.

She peered at Xavier. Spending time with him was definitely worth missing some meetings. Pushing that thought aside she winced as she shifted her weight. Painful pins and needles fired in her legs from holding a squat as long as she had. She desperately wanted to stand.

The two women were chatting still and moving around the store. Suddenly, the coats on their rack were thrust aside and a woman's face appeared. Allegra froze. Their gazes locked. The woman opened her mouth in a wide Oof surprise.

The bell over the door went off again as the woman started to make a sound.

"Did you forget something?" Lena asked in a loud voice.

"I wanted to show you a picture of the people we're looking for." It was the man from before.

The woman at the coat rack let out a small scream while staring at Allegra.

Allegra didn't know what to do. She started to move but Xavier held her in place. Her stomach had dropped as her heart rate soared. Xavier pressed a finger to his lips, asking for the woman's silence.

"Ah, you saw the mouse? I seem to have a few rodent visitors. It's cold. They come

inside.” Lena’s voice was getting closer. Then her face appeared and she leaned in slightly to the center. “Oh, they are gone.” She closed the coats again and spoke in rapid-fire German in a low voice to the lady standing by the rack.

“Wait,” the man said, “what is the problem?” His boots clomped on the floor as he approached their hiding place.

CHAPTER 11

Fuck my life. Xavier had no weapon and no way of protecting Allegra. If there were only two gunmen in the store, he might have a chance. But the innocent bystanders complicated everything. Seriously, just fuck my life right now.

“A little problem with mice.” Lena’s voice sounded stressed.

“Yes, mice,” said another woman. That voice had to belong to the woman who’d seen them.

“You show me the pictures, yes?” Lena asked.

The booted footsteps stopped their progression.

There was only one set of footsteps. Did that mean there was only one gunman? Better odds. Xavier closed his eyes and pictured the layout of the store. Opening his eyes, he slowly started moving the coats apart. Allegra grabbed his arm, her eyes wide and frantic. He nodded once at her but continued to make a hole.

“Come to the counter. I need my glasses,” Lena’s voice carried over to them.

God, Lena was the closest thing to a guardian angel he’d ever met. Xavier grabbed Allegra’s hand again and then whispered in her ear. “Follow my lead.” Then staying

low, he moved out of the rack and quickly went into the one next to it pushing through the coats rather than moving them. They swung back but left a small hole. He gestured to Allegra. She hesitated. He stared at her. She pointed to her legs.

What the hell? They must be asleep. What else could go wrong in this fucked up scenario? He gestured to her again. Blood thrummed faster in his veins, pulsing in his eardrums. She needed to move now or risk the gunman turning and seeing them both. He stretched out his hands.

“No, no. I don’t... I have not seen them,” Lena said in a clear voice.

“What about you?” the man asked.

Allegra came out of the rack and sprawled onto the floor. Then lay there as if frozen. Xavier looked up to see if the man was coming but the woman’s response had covered the sound.

“No. Not seen them,” the other woman responded.

Xavier reached over and Allegra took his hands, then waddled into the rack with him. He closed the hole as quietly as possible.

The man tried one more time. “What about you?”

“No,” said another female voice.

“Okay, then.” The sound of the boots on the floor grew louder.

Lena’s voice sounded strained as she said, “What are you doing?”

Hangers scraped on the metal bar. The man was checking the rack where they’d been.

He knew it would happen. He'd have done the same thing. The woman's response was too much for a mouse.

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“Are you seeing a mouse?” Lena asked, her voice coming closer. “Is it back?”

“No,” the man said. “No mouse. Call me if you see them.” The footsteps were moving away from them now. The bell over the door jingled and then silence.

Xavier breathed out but stayed still. He glanced at Allegra. She was sitting on the floor with her arms curled around her legs. Her eyes were saucer-sized and her lip was snagged between her teeth. He recognized the look for what it was: terror. She was scared out of her mind. She wasn’t the only one. He rolled his shoulder to stop the tingling in his arm and hand. It had felt nearly normal after last night but with everything that happened this morning, it was right back to the edge of numbness.

The bell sounded again but it was the women leaving. There had been a rush of German between the women but it had subsided and now the door was presumably closing behind them. Footsteps sounded like they were coming closer.

“Hello?” Lena called out.

Xavier pushed the coats apart and stepped out of the rack, still staying low until he moved around the rack to see the front of the store.

“It is safe.” Lena nodded toward the door. “Everyone is gone.”

Xavier straightened and then reached back and helped Allegra stand up.

She straightened with a pained groan, then stumbled. Lena looked alarmed so Allegra held up her hands. “I’m okay. My legs went to sleep.” Lena frowned. Allegra

explained, “Numb.” Then she hit her leg with her fist and Lena nodded.

“We need to figure a way out of here.”

“There is only the front door.” Lena pointed.

Sunlight streamed through the windows. The sky was a clear blue and the sun off the snow was blindingly bright. The street provided no place to hide. Everyone would be out after the storm. How the hell were they going to meet Gunther without getting caught?

Allegra had finally stopped dancing around trying to get feeling back into her legs. “Any ideas?”

“Maybe.” Xavier walked over to a display of hats. “Come here.”

Allegra walked over. He stuck a black beanie over her blond hair. “Tuck all your hair inside and then go pick out some sunglasses. Grab a nice jacket and some new boots. Don’t forget gloves and a scarf. We’ll change your whole look. Then we’re going to leave separately. We’ll meet where Gunther is.”

Lena came over with a pair of sunglasses and handed them to Allegra. “These will suit you.”

Allegra took them and tried them on in front of the full-length mirror near the dressing room. She nodded her approval and then spent the next twenty minutes organizing her entire outfit. Armed with the address written on a piece of paper along with directions and wearing her new clothes, she was set to go.

Xavier’s gut spasmed. The thought of Allegra out there on her own unnerved him. She brought out his protective instincts. He wanted nothing more than to take her to

his rental cabin and away from all this. Hell, he'd like to take her back to Yellowstone where she'd be seriously safe. He could quit worrying if she were there. Between him and the rest of the team, she'd be watched around the clock. The idea of her on her own made him physically ill. He didn't want to leave her unprotected, but there wasn't a choice. The men were looking for a man and a woman together, so they'd have to split up. "We're going to have to leave here separately," he managed to ground out.

She whirled around and took off the sunglasses. "Why?" Her green eyes got wider and she bit her lip.

"They're looking for a couple so we need to separate. Ideally, you could mingle with a group of people on the sidewalk. Maybe Lena could call some people to help?" He looked over at Lena who nodded.

"No. No way." Allegra said shaking her head. "It's bad enough we've involved Lena and Gunther and the poor woman who saw us and probably her friend. That's a lot of ands. I don't want anyone else to get hurt. These men, if they're anything like Simon, they're ruthless. I refuse to let anyone get hurt because of me and that includes you." She jabbed a finger into his chest.

He did his best to bite back a smile. Not because it was funny but because she was so fierce and it was so damn hot. She'd been amazing last night and he wanted more. Not just another night but a lot of nights. He swallowed and tried to loosen his shoulder. The numbness had all but vanished after sex last night. Maybe that was the right prescription. More sex with Allegra and he'd be right as rain.

"Look, I know you don't want anyone else to be at risk but—"

"No Xavier. I won't do it." She walked over to the counter.

“Then you’ll have to go on your own.”

She looked back at him and nodded. “Fine. With Lena’s directions, I know where I’m going. I should be good. No one will recognize me in all this gear. I will get off the main street as soon as possible.”

He wanted to argue with her but he knew trying to change her mind was futile. Her shoulders were rigid and the set of her jaw meant she wasn’t going to relent. Amazing how he’d only known her twenty-four hours and yet he knew her so well already. It was like he’d known her all his life.

He paid for the items and then made sure Allegra understood Lena’s handwriting and knew where she was going.

“Gunther is there waiting,” Lena said. She held up her cell phone with a text on the screen.

Anxiety pinched Xavier’s chest. What if this was all an elaborate set up? What if Gunther was working for the gunmen or worse, what if they found him and they were holding him hostage? Stupid. Neither of those things were happening. He had to stop thinking worst case scenario all the time.

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Allegra pulled on the new clothing, including the boots and jacket. Then she tucked her hair up in the hat. Putting on the sunglasses, she turned to him. “See you shortly.”

He nodded once and she headed for the door. He admired her ass in the leggings the entire way until she was out the door.

“Now, for you,” Lena said and pointed to a new jacket.

This trip was costing him a fortune but he’d spend every single cent he had to keep Allegra safe. He could lie to himself and say it was because of Hank and that he owed the man but the truth was, it was because of Allegra. He wanted—no, needed her to be safe.

Putting those thoughts aside, he brought a new jacket and hat along with sunglasses and boots. He left his old stuff at the store with Lena and asked her to donate it somewhere. “Can I borrow your phone for a second? I’ll pay you for the time.”

She nodded and handed him the phone. He moved over to the window and scanned the street as he waited for Hank to answer.

“Patterson,” the voice said in clipped tones.

“Hank, it’s Xavier.”

“Jesus Christ, are you okay? Where the hell are you? What happened?” The relief and worry in Hank’s voice was palpable. It eased some of the tension in Xavier’s gut.

“All good questions. I don’t have a lot of time. I wanted to call the team but figured you’re the best way to get the information through. I’m okay. The plane was brought down by the co-pilot on purpose. Still trying to figure out what the hell is going on but someone is after Allegra. They want her dead. I’m in some small town in Switzerland. We’re heading to Geneva. We’ve got gunmen after us and no supplies. Any help you can give would be greatly appreciated.”

“I’m already tracking this number. Not sure what I’ve got in your area, but I’ll work on finding resources. I’ll let the guys know you’re okay. I’m on the co-pilot thing. The rescue workers just found the plane a half hour ago and they want to know where the hell you two are. I won’t tell them, but the gunmen aren’t the only ones looking, so I know I don’t need to tell you but stay safe and watch your six.”

“Will do. I have to give this phone back. I’ll get another one and call you on it. Do me one more favor; check on Joey, my usual co-pilot. I got a bad feeling about him.”

“On it. Stay safe.”

Xavier ended the call and gave the phone back to Lena along with a large tip. Then after studying the map, he left the store.

The day was cold but sunny. Merchants were still cleaning snow off the sidewalks, but occasional slick spots made the path treacherous. The guest house was about five blocks down and then he’d head right a few blocks. Allegra was taking a more direct route but off the main street. He had planned on going a more circuitous route. He didn’t want to attract any attention by heading the same way as Allegra.

He got down to the end of the first block and was crossing the street when the smell of roasting meat hit him. His stomach growled like he’d been starving for weeks. He looked around and saw the source of the smell. A small restaurant in the next block. He made a beeline for the place. It was a risk, but he was so damn hungry, he almost

didn't care. Besides Allegra needed food too.

Entering the restaurant, he realized it wasn't just a restaurant but also a hotel. The reception desk was directly in front of him and the restaurant was off to his right. He walked over to the hostess stand and asked the young woman there if he could order takeout. She smiled and handed him a menu.

The place was kind of like a diner with stools by the counter and tables along the wall. He perused the menu. One side was in German but the other side thankfully was in English. He ordered cheeseburgers for both of them with fries and drinks and then sat on a stool at the end of the counter, his back to the wall, giving him a wide view of his surroundings. The place was cute and full of tourists. Skiing was the main attraction for the area since they were in the mountains, and he'd noticed a lot of cars with skis on top of them on the way in. People also seemed to be from all over the world. Lots of languages spoken, including English.

Might as well take a stroll around as sit on a stool and wait. No need to be that visible. Xavier wandered through the lobby of the hotel and checked out the little gift shop. Then he headed for the restrooms. Five minutes later as he was exiting the bathroom, he caught movement in the corner of his eye. A man was standing at the window that overlooked the parking lot. He was on the phone and he was also wearing a white parka with white boots. He'd ditched the white snow pants and had on black cargo pants instead.

Xavier stepped back into the gift shop and pretended to look at the postcard display while he tried to eavesdrop on what the man was saying.

"No. Not yet." There was silence and then, "I'm not convinced they made it off the mountain. Two of my men are still searching for the snowmobile." More silence. Then, "You received the laptop?"

The man directed his gaze through the window of the gift shop as he spoke. “We did search the site before the rescue crews arrived. There was no trace of anything else. No papers. No other computer.” He fell silent again, listening to whoever was on the other end. “If they don’t show up today, what do you want us to do?”

The woman who took Xavier’s order was waving at him from the door of the restaurant. He waited until the man on the phone turned back around before nodding to her and then heading in her direction. He paid for the food and moved swiftly out of the building. The man was no longer at the window when he left but Xavier sure as hell wasn’t going to go searching for him. If only he knew what the answer to that last question was. He had a feeling that whatever the answer, his life just got more difficult.

CHAPTER 12

Allegra smiled her thanks at Gunther and took a sip of tea. Where the hell was Xavier? It shouldn’t have taken this long. She stood in the little kitchen and looked out the window toward the back of the house. He’ll come walking down the driveway any minute, she told herself. She rubbed the back of her neck. Her ribs hurt and so did her ass. Last night’s activities hadn’t helped the bruising but they’d helped her in so many other ways.

“He will be here,” Gunther said as if to reassure her.

Although the man didn’t know either of them, his confidence in Xavier was bolstering. Something she could hold on to. The knots in her stomach were still tied tight and her patience was at an all-time low but she was also thankful for this man’s help.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she replied. “So, have you lived here long?”

“All my life. I grew up here in town but I now live on the mountain. My wife passed on a few years ago. Ingrid liked being in town. I prefer to be up in the mountains.”

“I am so sorry for your loss.” How heartbreaking. Being alone at his age. Being alone at any age was hard but she imagined that it was harder as the years went by. Allegra’s mother kept harping on her that she’d be alone all her life if she didn’t stop working so much. Mom had a point, but Allegra didn’t really care about being alone. She liked her own company. She had friends and a life. Who needed a man to come in and mess with everything? They only got in the way or were upset when they took a backseat to work.

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That had been her party line until now. Until Xavier. Suddenly, her life felt empty. She had a flash of what it would be like to come home to him. To know that she would sleep at night next to him and do life with him. That thought tugged at her even as she tried to brush it aside. Longing for more wasn't her style. The current circumstances were making her act this way. When this shitshow was all over and back to normal, she would feel the way she always did. She ran a hand over her face. But what if she didn't?

"Here he is," Gunther said.

She looked up to spy Xavier hurrying across the snow. Relief flooded through her, weakening her knees. She clutched the windowsill to stay upright. She may not need a man on a regular basis but she sure as hell needed Xavier now. He'd saved her after the airplane crash and then kept her safe from the men chasing them. She doubted she'd make it through all this if it weren't for him. A hollow feeling cratered in her chest at the thought of not seeing him once all this was over. She would miss him tremendously.

Pushing that thought aside, she went to the door to greet him. Seeing his face, she immediately asked. "What's wrong?"

He offered her a quick smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Nothing. I brought lunch."

Gunther grabbed his coat from the back of the chair at the little kitchen table. "You should be fine here for the night. John Luca will drop off the truck in the morning and you can take it to Geneva. He will collect it from there."

“Gunther,” Xavier said, “they will be looking for the snowmobile if they haven’t found it already. I’m a little worried about you going back up there on your own. And I should tell you that there’s also a backpack and a gun.”

Gunther nodded. “I sent my son over earlier with some friends. They found everything and brought it to town. I will dispose of the gun once you are gone, and the snowmobile is being serviced by a friend.”

Allegra’s vision swam from her sudden tears. “You...that’s just so...” Her gratitude for this stranger was immense.

Xavier offered his hand. “I can’t thank you enough.”

The elderly gentleman clasped Xavier’s hand in both of his. “I have lived a long time and seen many things. Trusting my...” he hesitated.

“Gut?” Xavier supplied.

“Instincts?” Allegra said at the same time.

Gunther smiled. “Just so. Trusting my gut and instincts has always been a good thing. I think you are good people. We will deal with everything when you’ve gone. It will be easier for everyone.” He went toward the door. “Be safe.”

“You too,” Allegra said as the door closed behind the man. She turned to Xavier. “When I get my credit cards back I will pay you for this place and the car. I wish I could send Gunther some money as well. Just something to say thank you.”

Xavier grinned. “Gunther is getting a new snowmobile out of the deal but I know what you mean.”

“Maybe I’ll buy a credit to Lena’s store for Gunther and the ladies that were in today. That way everyone wins.” Allegra sniffed the air. “God, I am famished. Let’s eat.” She went to the kitchen which took up one wall and pulled down some plates.

“This place is nice.” Xavier was taking off his outerwear and looking around the room.

“It is idyllic,” she agreed.

It was basically one big room with the kitchen on one wall and the rest of the room designated as living space. There was a sofa, and some chairs were arranged in front of the fireplace, and a TV hung on the wall over the mantel. There were stairs in the corner that led up to a single bedroom. It would do for a night for sure.

She arranged the plates on the little table that was close to the front door. “What did you not want to say in front of Gunther?”

He sat down and reached for the bag, handing her a burger and fries along with her drink. “I overheard one of the gunmen while I was getting the food.”

Her stomach dropped. “Getting food was a big risk. Are you sure you weren’t seen?” She looked out the window. “Do you think they followed you?”

“I wasn’t followed, and he didn’t notice me. And yes, it was a risk but I’m starving and I assume so are you. I didn’t want to keep risking Gunther’s involvement. If he went to the market and bought food for us people would notice. It’s outside of his normal pattern of behavior. The best thing we can do is leave as soon as John Luca arrives with the truck no matter what hour it is.”

That made sense. She needed to get to Geneva ASAP. Missing today’s meeting didn’t leave her much time to catch Damon. “Do you think he’ll mind if we drive it straight

to Geneva instead of Bern?”

Xavier took a sip of soda. “We’ll go to Bern and catch a train to Geneva. They won’t be expecting that.”

That didn’t work. She played with the food on her plate. “But it will take us longer and I’m running out of time.”

He took a bite of his burger, chewed, and swallowed. “The guy said he thought we were still up on the mountain but they’d keep looking. He asked whomever he was speaking to what they wanted him to do and that’s what worries me.”

A fry dangled between her fingers. “How do you mean?”

“If it was me, I would start watching the road as soon as it opens. There’s only one way out at this point until we get to the highway then we have all kinds of options, but the reality is they have to know you’re trying to get to Geneva. They’ll expect us to drive. If we take the train we have more of a chance to elude them.”

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She chewed slowly. “So how are we going to get out of here then?”

“We’re going to have to risk taking the road but once we’re in Bern, it will be a lot easier. We can take the first train out in the morning. You will still get to Geneva in time to speak to your boss.”

She didn’t comment but she didn’t agree. The option he outlined would cut their arrival too close. It was going to be hard as hell to track Damon down once she arrived at the hotel. He was probably in meetings. Graham would be there for sure. Possibly Connie. Damon would want him on hand to deal with the fallout and press about her plane crash. She wished Haywood would be there. He would listen to her, and he would make Damon listen to her. They were good friends. They just didn’t see eye to eye on everything.

She took a bit of her burger and chewed. The place was super cute and in other circumstances...the sound of a phone ringing made her jump. She almost choked on her burger. Coughing she took a sip of soda.

Xavier got up and went over to the counter in the kitchen area. There was a phone in the corner she hadn’t noticed. It was an older one that showed the caller ID on the screen at the top.

“Who is it?” she asked.

He shrugged. “No idea. South African number. Probably spam. But I’m glad someone called. Knowing there’s a phone just made things easier. I don’t have to go out and try and find a store that sells cell phones right away.”

She got up and joined him in the kitchen. The phone had a cord so whoever used it had to stay in the space. She really wanted to make a few calls. “I’d love to call my mom.”

Xavier shook his head “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “I’m sure she knows about the plane crash by now and I want her to know I’m alive.”

Xavier leaned against the counter. “These guys are professionals. They may have tapped your mom’s phone. If you call, you could tell them exactly where we are.”

She closed her eyes and swore. “It’s just not fair.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

Opening her eyes, she frowned. “Can I call my old mentor? Haywood might have some ideas on who could be behind this. Plus, I might need him to run interference for me with Damon.”

Xavier hesitated. “How close are you two? Do you talk every week?”

She shook her head. When was the last time she spoke to Haywood? “I haven’t spoken with him for at least six months.” She sagged against the counter. He’d done so much for her and she’d always promised she’d keep up with him but it hit home that she wasn’t doing a good job of it. And now she was calling because she was in trouble. Very self-centered. She let out a breath. But it didn’t matter now. She needed his help. She would just have to do better by Haywood in the future.

“I guess you can call him but keep it brief.” He walked back over to the table and ate the last bite of his burger. Swallowing, he said, “I’m going up to grab a shower. I’ll

be fast. Keep your eyes peeled in case anyone comes around.”

“You don’t think they’ll find us, do you?” That would be a nightmare.

“No. They can’t go door to door, they’d be kicked out of town. They’re just going to sit here and keep their eyes open and hope they get lucky at least until the road opens. Then they’ll stake that out.”

It was always a good news-bad news thing with him.

She nodded. “Okay, I’ll make a quick call then.” She turned and heard Xavier go up the stairs as she dialed the number she knew by heart. It rang three times and then her former mentor’s voice filled the air.

“Haywood,” she said in a quiet voice.

There was a pause. “Allegra? Is that you? They said you died in a plane crash. Is it really you?”

“It is me.” She could picture her friend standing at his kitchen sink, phone to his ear, his white hair standing up in tufts. The maroon cardigan he always wore filled with cat hair and holes buttoned up against the cold. “How are you?”

“All the better for hearing your voice. How are you? Where are you? Are you injured?”

“I’m fine.” The warmth in his voice made her smile.

“How did you survive the plane crash? All that snow? It was a bad storm. You must have been freezing.”

Her breath hitched for a moment, and she longed to explain everything to him but she didn't really have time. "I'll answer all your questions later but first I need some help. Cytoxine is not the drug we thought it was. The data is wrong. I need you to help me convince Damon. He has to pull the drug before the FDA announces their approval tomorrow."

"What? What's wrong with the data? Graham sent me the trials. They looked great."

She clamped her jaws together. Typical Graham, sending the data to Haywood because he thought buying ApexMed was a good idea. He wanted to gloat to everyone that he'd called it right. Except he hadn't. She'd been right. However, who was right didn't matter now. "Trust me. The data is wrong. Cytoxine is a dud. NoVoGlobal should pull it before the announcement comes out. I need you to run interference for me with Damon. He'll listen to you."

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“Okay, but when do you want me to talk to him? Can you send me the data?”

Haywood sounded a bit strained. She was asking a lot from him. “I will call you when I’m with Damon and we can go over everything then. I’m sorry but I have to go. It’s good to hear your voice, Haywood.”

“Yours, too. I’ll wait for your call.”

She hung up and leaned back on the counter. Was involving Haywood a good idea? She really didn’t want to bring her friend into it. Maybe she wouldn’t have to. Maybe Damon would hear her out and when he saw the data to back up her claim, maybe he’d do the right thing and she would never have to involve Haywood. God, her life had been reduced to randommaybes.

She went to the table and packed up the rest of her lunch. As she put it in the fridge, she noticed a bottle of wine in the door. Oh, my God, she could go for a glass of wine. Something to calm her nerves. She started to pull it out but then thought she’d better ask Xavier if he wanted some first. Or if he had any objections to her having some. Not that she was inclined to listen at this moment. She’d been taking a back seat long enough. Time to take control again.

She went up the stairs and walked into the bedroom. Xavier was in the bathroom toweling off. She stopped in the doorway and admired his naked body. He had a few scars here and there and a nasty looking one on his left shoulder that was still a bit angry looking, but the jagged marks in his flesh just added to the appeal. He was sexy as hell and she wanted him. Now.

“I came up to ask you if you wanted a glass of wine but,” she gave him a slow once-over, “now I’m having other thoughts.”

His gray eyes turned the color of a winter sky. “I’m not sure that’s a great idea.”

She pulled her sweater over her head and dropped it on the bathroom floor and then reached around and unclasped her bra. As she shimmied out of it, she said, “I think it’s a fabulous idea.” She put her hands on his chest and kissed him. He hesitated for only a second and then dropped the towel and pulled her into his arms.

Bliss. The feel of his skin against hers had her wet already. God, she wanted this man. She craved his touch, but more, she craved how good he made her feel. His arms were safe. And she could pretend she was loved. He was all hard planes and angles, and she loved every inch of him. But she liked his smile and his eyes, too. He listened when she spoke and didn’t belittle her ever, no matter how stupid some of her questions must be to him. He treated her like an equal, a partner but still like a woman. She wanted to spend as much time in his arms as she could. It scared her to think about the hole he was going to leave in her life when this was over. She was going to miss him so much more than she’d ever thought possible. She wrapped her legs around his waist. That was a concern for later. For now, she was going to enjoy every inch of him for as long as possible.

CHAPTER 13

Xavier let Allegra sleep and got in another shower. He needed to get rid of her damned distracting scent. God, he needed to focus. When she’d walked into the bathroom and took off her sweater, his cock had swelled immediately. She was the sexiest woman he’d ever laid eyes on, but it was more than that and that’s what scared him.

He’d turned off so many of his emotions after he’d lost Jamie. It had just gutted him

that he hadn't been able to save his best friend. The physical pain of his body trying to heal and the gut-wrenching emotional pain of having to face Jamie's family had just about killed him. He'd been drowning in a world of pain so he'd turned off his emotions. Shut them down. And somehow Allegra had opened them up again.

She made him feel good when he was with her and not just physically. He felt alive again. His protective instincts were on full alert with her. She made him want to get through this so he could enjoy life again. Made him think maybe there was still a life out there for him. And all of that scared the hell out of him. He wasn't sure he had it in him to deal with any more pain. He turned off the shower and toweled off. What he needed to do was get them both through this and then he'd figure out the rest. One thing at a time. Focus on the task at hand.

He dressed in his new clothes, and quietly went down to the kitchen. He called Hank Patterson to update him on the situation.

"Jesus," Hank said, "I am so damn sorry I dragged you into this, but shit am I glad you're okay and you've got shelter for the night."

"Yeah, I'm fine but, Hank, it's touch and go. Gunther says the cops in town are being watched. I don't want to do anything that might get one of them killed. It's just a small town. I can't imagine they have many officers with a whole lot of experience with hit squads." If any, he thought. "These guys know what they're doing. Former Austrian military according to what Simon told me prior to takeoff. They're armed with machine guns and serious snow gear. They know what the fuck they're doing for sure."

"Shit." Hank's chair squeaked. "I've got nothing in the immediate area but I'm working on it. Are you sure you want to go to Bern? Maybe it's better to go directly to Geneva? They'll have a larger police force, and you should be able to get help."

“The train will be a better option. It stops right next to the hotel in Geneva so we should be okay to get to Damon.” He gave Hank the address of the hotel. “It would be better if we knew who the hell is behind this but as it is, it’s all a risk.”

“Okay, let me see what I can do. Stay in touch as you can and good luck, brother.”

He hung up the phone and turned around to find Allegra staring at him. “Who was that?”

“Hank Patterson. He’s working on things on his end.”

She nodded and went to the fridge, pulling out the bottle of wine. “I know you’re thinking this isn’t a good idea but I would really like a glass of wine. Don’t worry, I won’t drink the bottle.”

He smiled. She really did know what he was thinking. “Yes, ma’am.”

She stuck her tongue out at him as she poured herself a large glass of white wine. Then she went over and curled up on the sofa. “What time is it?”

“Just gone six p.m.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You didn’t eat much earlier. Do you want me to heat up the rest of your food?”

She took a sip of her wine and made a face. “Not the best I’ve ever had but it’s cold and wet so I’ll take it. Sure, heat up the food and I’ll split it with you. You worked hard earlier. I bet you’re hungry.” She shot him a wicked grin.

This woman would be the death of him no doubt. He heated the food in the microwave and thought about the next leg of their journey. The drive to Bern would be fine as long as they made it out of town safely. The highway after they got out of the valley could be tricky. The train should be okay as long as no one knew they were

on it. The hotel in Geneva presented a problem. How the hell would they get in to see Damon?

“What are you thinking about?” Allegra asked from her spot on the sofa.

“Just trying to plan our next steps.” He brought the plate over and put it in front of her on the coffee table.

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She took a French fry. “This is going to be the hard part, isn’t it?”

“You mean the rest of this wasn’t hard?” he asked, trying to joke with her but she didn’t even crack a smile. He sighed. “Yes, this is going to be the hard part. I’ve been trying to come up with some other way, but unless you want to involve other people, we’ve got no choice.”

“No. No other people. I feel bad enough about Gunther, Lena and...you.” She met his gaze. “If these guys are the killers you think they are, I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to anyone because of my...situation.”

“I know. We’re going to do everything we can to keep everyone else safe. And for the record, you didn’t involve me in this. Simon did. But that fucker wanted me dead, so you can’t take that on. You are as much a victim as I am in all this. So, we’ll stick together and stick to the plan. Hopefully, luck will stay on our side.”

He tossed a French fry into his mouth and then grabbed the remote, turning on the TV. He didn’t tell her, but he was worried. They’d been extremely lucky so far. At some point their luck had to run out. The odds were not in their favor.

* * *

Xavier got up from the couch and adjusted the blanket on Allegra. She was still fast asleep. Then he walked over to the kitchen area and looked out the window. It was after midnight. He jammed his hands in his pockets. Surely they had the road cleared by now. The faster they got on the road, the more likely they could get through without being seen.

He stared into the darkness. The churn in his gut told him that time was running out. Maybe it was the negative thought patterns that had started since the helicopter crash, but he didn't think so. Jamie used to kid him about his hunches but more often than not, they'd proved to be right. Except the day of the crash. Not one inkling of what was to come. Not one. He swallowed.

Growing up he'd been an only child. He loved his parents and they were amazing in so many ways. They let him do almost anything he wanted. Hell, they'd let him get his pilot's license at sixteen and then they'd let him fly all over the ranch whenever he wanted. He'd had an idyllic childhood. But the one thing he'd never had was a brother. Jamie had filled that void. He hadn't known that he was missing anything until he'd joined the Rangers and met the man.

They had been inseparable. The other guys on the team used to tease them about being attached at the hip, and one even suggested they were more than friends. Xavier had gotten angry but Jamie just smiled and said they were born to be brothers, probably a past life thing and let it go. He was the easygoing one. Losing him was beyond devastating. Xavier had lost part of himself. He was still trying to figure out how to forgive himself for not being able to save Jamie and worse...for surviving when his best friend hadn't.

Allegra made a sound in her sleep. He turned and studied her for a second. She seemed to settle again. She'd been a hell of a surprise. He hadn't been prepared for her at all. His protective instincts were on overdrive all the time when it came to her. Her touch had reawakened something in him. The desire to live, not just survive. She was lessening his guilt and breathing life back into him. He needed that so much more than he'd realized.

A flash of light put him on alert. Headlights bounced off the house and then came down the driveway. John Luca was finally here, or so he hoped. He'd have felt a lot better about things if he had a gun but he'd make do. Pulling on his jacket, he quickly

got situated and grabbed a small knife, tucking it up his sleeve. Then he quietly slid out the door and went over to the truck. It was dark, the moon only a sliver, but Xavier stuck to the shadows.

The man in the driver's seat slid out and then reached back in and pulled on his parka. He closed the door and moved to stand beside the tire. He flicked on a flashlight but the beam was low. He turned it upward and shook it. The beam illuminated his face. He was older, with gray hair and a lined face. Not one of the gunmen.

"John Luca?" Xavier asked from the shadows.

The man swore and whirled the flashlight around until he found Xavier. "You scared me. You are the friend Gunther told me of?"

Xavier came forward, hand extended. "Yes, Xavier. Nice to meet you."

John Luca shook his hand and then stepped back. "The truck is ready. I put diesel in. You can leave it in Bern at the Bellevue Palace Hotel. Tell the concierge there where you parked it, and I will come get it."

"The road is open?"

"Ya, but is very slippery. Are you..." his voice faded as he searched for the right words. "Sorry. My English is not so good."

Xavier smiled. "Your English is much better than my German will ever be. If you're wondering if I can drive in snow, the answer is yes. I grew up on a ranch in Colorado. Spent lots of time driving in the mountains."

"Good. Good." He handed Xavier the keys.

“Can I drop you somewhere?” he offered.

John Luca shook his head. “I live just down the street. You need to pay me now though and for the guest house.”

“Of course.” Xavier produced his credit card and the older man pulled out his phone.

“Technology is amazing, ya?” John Luca said.

Once they’d finished, Xavier extended his hand once more. “I can’t thank you enough. If you could just keep this all to yourself...” He needed the man to stay quiet about their use of his truck.

“Ya, good. I will not say a word. Gunther explained. Good luck.” With that, the older man turned and disappeared down the driveway.

Xavier slipped back into the house and went upstairs throwing everything into the shopping bags they’d gotten from Lena. He woke Allegra and ten minutes later they got in the old truck.

“You ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” she responded and buckled her seat belt.

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The drive out of town would either be smooth sailing because they'd gotten out before the gunmen knew the road was open, or it would be a shit show because they didn't. He turned over the engine and eased the vehicle out of the driveway. Either way, their fate would be decided in the next thirty minutes.

CHAPTER14

Allegra had no idea if her stomach was rumbling due to hunger or terror. Likely both. The road was dark and quiet. They were the only vehicle out at this time of night...morning. Whatever. The fact the motorway was deserted brought her a degree of comfort. Silence weighed heavy in the truck, which was peachy by her. She was too nervous and eager to put this situation behind her to make idle conversation.

She stole a glance at Xavier. Thanks to the muscle popping in his jaw, she knew he was also tense. It worried her to see him shift his shoulder every so often. His hand must be going numb. Nothing she could do about it now. That wasn't really true. She could shock the hell out of him and give him a blow job while he was driving but she was guessing that sort of distraction would be bad. She turned and looked out the side window to hide her grin.

What the hell was wrong with her? She ran a hand over her face. Where did thoughts like that come from? Too much time on her own? More and more she was starting to believe her mother was right, although the admission didn't make her as happy as it would make her mother. Being at the top was not the be-all and end-all it was supposed to be. She might be at the top, but she wasn't happy, and her passion for success certainly wasn't keeping her warm at night. She needed to get a life. There had to be more than just work.

Time spent with Xavier had proven that despite the awful circumstances they'd met under. She wanted to go out and do fun things like hike and go dancing, even go out to dinner. The problem was she wanted to do them with him.

That thought knocked the wind out of her. She and Xavier couldn't be together. He lived in the States and she lived in Vienna at least for the next year. Except...she might not have a job at the end of this, so physical distance didn't really factor into a possible relationship with the sexy man driving her to her fate. The sigh she released fogged the window she'd been staring through.

Regardless of what happened, the next few months were going to be hell for her. She would either be working to rebuild the company or to rebuild her reputation. Neither one of those options included time for a life.

"You warm enough?" Xavier asked.

"Yeah." She was a bit too warm in fact. She wanted to take off her jacket, but Xavier advised her to wait until they hit the highway. Another subtle nod to the fact he wasn't at all sure they were getting out of this.

The road curved up ahead and there were flares along both sides of it. Heavy equipment had been parked off to the side. A front loader and a dump truck. "This must be where the road was closed."

"Yes," Xavier agreed but didn't take his eyes off the road.

If there had been a line of traffic, it was long gone. The place was empty. The mountain rose on the right side and on the left was a drop-off. The steep pitch downward caused Allegra's nerves to jump. "I thought we were in the valley. Why is there a cliff?"

“We were only part way down the mountain. There’s a bit more to go but not much and then we’ll hit the highway to Bern.”

It sounded so easy for him to say but she was freaking out. The road was dark as sin and she couldn’t tell it if it was just wet or there was ice. The temperature was hovering around freezing so it could be either. Whoever was in charge of snow removal had done a great job. There were just a few patches here and there, but the snowbanks were large, blocking the view around them.

They passed the avalanche site and kept going. The tension in the truck was intense. Xavier’s knuckles were white where he gripped the wheel. Five minutes. Then ten. The road behind them was still as clear as the road ahead, no headlights or taillights in either direction.

“Do you think we made it out?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“It’s a possibility.” Xavier did not commit to anything, but the lines on his face seemed more relaxed. His grip on the steering wheel had slacked, which she took as a good sign. The highway was only a few kilometers ahead. She let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding.

They were coming up to a roundabout. The last one before the highway entrance. Allegra needed to use the restroom but she figured she’d wait until they were on the highway to ask. The more distance between the crash site and them, the better. She covered her mouth as she yawned. Nothing a few hours of sleep in a soft bed wouldn’t cure.

“Do you think—”

The impact came out of nowhere. They were struck on the passenger side, which spun the vehicle around in a circle. Allegra’s head whacked against the door frame as

she was tossed around. The truck came to a stop in the middle of the roundabout facing the way they'd come. An SUV with blacked out windows had stopped a few feet away, and armed men were climbing out.

"Xavier," she said but it came out as a mumble. "Xavier," she called in a louder voice.

"I see them." He gave his head a shake and then tried to start the truck. The engine had died from the hit. He tried again but it wouldn't turn over. There were three men, all of whom had handguns aimed at their truck.

"Xavier," she yelled this time.

He tried one more time and the engine caught. He floored the gas and swung them around hitting one of the gunmen with the back of the truck. They lurched forward over the middle of the roundabout and back onto the motorway.

Gunfire hit the truck as they careened toward the highway entrance.

"Get down," Xavier yelled as he weaved the truck back and forth on the roadway.

Allegra hunkered down in her seat. A bullet went between the two seats and through the windshield. She let out a scream. Then they were speeding up the ramp to the autobahnen. They skidded into the turn and Allegra grabbed the dash to stop from sliding in her seat.

"Fuck," Xavier said as he fought with the vehicle. The back started sliding out to the left but Xavier managed to correct and they lurched forward again, merging onto the highway where there were lots of trucks going by.

Allegra glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Did we lose them?"

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“Yes. Their SUV got a flat when they hit us.” He glanced at her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded but winced as she touched her head. She had a large lump over her right ear. “I’ll live. You?”

“Fine,” he growled. “Fucking hell. I didn’t see them coming.”

“That was the whole point,” she surmised. “Can we make it to Bern?”

“Yes, but that’s going to be annoying.” He pointed to the hole in the windshield. The wind made a whistling noise as it came into the truck. The interior temperature had plummeted. No way was she taking off her coat now.

“Do you think they’ll come after us?” she asked running her fingers over the bump on her head.

“No. They don’t know where we’re going.”

She let out a sigh. “I suppose that’s good then.”

He glanced at her. “Not really.”

“What do you mean?” What the hell was he talking about? “Wasn’t the whole point to get away without them killing us? We did that.”

He shook his head. “The whole point was to get away without them noticing us. Now they know for sure we’re alive and on the move. They know where we’re likely to be

headed as well.”

“I thought you just said they didn’t know where we’re going?” Maybe the hit on the head had been harder than she thought. None of this is making any sense.

“They don’t know we’re going to Bern, but my guess is they know you want to meet with Damon. You don’t have to be a genius to know the last chance you’ll have to talk to him is today at the hotel because he’s flying out tonight. You won’t call him because you don’t think he’ll believe you. Even if you did, you’d still have to see him to give him the files. You don’t trust sending it to him in an email. That means they know we’re coming. They’ll be set up at the hotel waiting for us.”

Her heart took off at a gallop. “Y-you’re saying we’re walking into some kind of ambush?”

His lips were a flat, hard seam and he jerked a gaze to her, then back to the road. “Yes, and there’s no way around it as long as you want to see Damon. Killing us on the mountain or in the town was always preferable but it was never their last chance.”

Allegra slumped against the door. So, she either gave up and let the announcement be made which would destroy the company and all she worked for once she managed to get the information out, or she had to face an army determined to kill her. What kind of a choice was that? Save her own skin or save the lives of all those people who would die taking Cytosine. She just didn’t have a choice.

CHAPTER 15

The train ride to Geneva had been quiet. Xavier had kept his eyes peeled for anyone looking remotely like part of a hit squad, but he hadn’t seen a single assassin. Mostly the railcar they were in was filled with commuters and businesspeople. He noted a few students and young people with large rucksacks who appeared to be traveling

around Europe.

He glanced over at Allegra. She was staring out the window next to her seat. When they'd arrived at the train station just down from the hotel in Bern, he'd given her the choice of not going to Geneva. They could go into the police station and tell the local cops everything they knew. She could contact the FDA directly if she wanted and give them the data. There were options. That's what he wanted her to know.

She'd listened and then pointed out the difficulties with his plan. They had no proof of the gunmen other than people asking about them in a small town. They'd never be able to prove they were hit on purpose because the SUV would be gone. There was the bullet hole in the windshield but realistically, it could've been made by a rock. There was no damning proof of anything. It was all circumstantial at best, she'd pointed out.

And she was right.

She sighed in the seat next to him. "I know you want me to call the FDA, but honestly, even if I send them the data, it's not official. It's coming from me but all Graham has to do is say I have a vendetta against him and that would cast doubt on the validity of the data. It might delay approval, but it would only give Graham and whoever he is working with a chance to kill me and then say I had just lost it and was having some kind of mental breakdown." She met his gaze. "You understand that I need to do this, don't you?"

He nodded. "I get it."

"But you don't." She held his gaze.

"I'm sorry?"

She touched his arm. “You don’t have to do this. You’ve got no stake in this. You can just walk away and go back to your normal life. It would be much safer for you. I would like you to be safe. The thought of something happening to you because of me is just...I want you to walk away.”

He stared at her. No stake in this? Someone had tried to kill him. Worse someone had tried to kill her. He had a stake. Allegra was his stake. If anything happened to her, he wouldn’t recover. He would go to the ends of the earth for her because she was beautiful and fun and smart and amazing but mostly because she’d brought him back to life. That was her gift to him. And he meant to repay her tenfold if it took him the rest of that life to do it.

“I won’t leave you to face this on your own, honey. I’m going with you. It’s my own choice and I’m making it.” He held her gaze and waited until he saw her give a slight nod. “Now,” he continued, “we’ll be there soon. The station is only a few blocks from the Jasmine Door Hotel. Once we get there, the clock will be ticking, so we need to move quickly. Where do you think Damon will be?”

“His suite. He gets up at five thirty each morning, works out for an hour, then takes a shower and has breakfast. We’ll arrive around seven a.m., so he’ll be at breakfast.”

“Okay. We’ll head to his suite and you can tell him everything.”

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She looked over at him. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is simple. I didn’t say it would be easy.” He went back to checking out the other train passengers. He knew they were safe for now, but he needed to mentally review all the angles. He couldn’t cover every contingency...but he could cover most.”

The train pulled into the station twenty minutes later and they headed out. It was a short walk to the hotel but he needed a phone. “Stay here,” he said to Allegra and handed her the bags. “I’ll be right back.” He turned and walked down the street for a block until he saw what he needed.

A man walking toward him had just finished his call and had dropped his cell phone into his outer coat pocket. Xavier offered up a silent apology and then bumped shoulders with the guy, mumbled an apology as he lifted the man’s phone from his pocket and kept walking. The man hadn’t noticed Xavier’s sleight of hand and continued on his way. Xavier tapped the screen to keep the device from locking, then pocketed it. He turned and walked back to Allegra, pulling the phone out as soon as the man he stole it from walked into the train station.

He quickly dialed Hank’s number. “It’s Xavier. Sorry to wake you, I need your help. Do you know anyone who can get the head of security at the Jasmine Door in Geneva to meet me on the sidewalk outside the hotel? I’m going to need their help to get up to Damon’s room, I think. Plus, it wouldn’t hurt to have them on hand in case bullets start flying.”

Hank grunted. “I know just the person. I’ll call you back at this number when it’s done.” He hung up.

Allegra cocked an eyebrow at him as they headed toward the hotel. “That was pretty smooth. You looked like a pro.”

Xavier smiled. “Some skills are handier than others.” He glanced at the phone screen. It had only been a couple of minutes since he’d swiped the device, but he had to keep the phone from locking just in case he needed to make another call.

They came to the corner of the street where the hotel was located but Hank hadn’t called back yet. “Hold up,” he said and put his hand out to block Allegra’s path.

“Why? Do you see someone?” She looked around.

“No. I called Hank and asked for some help contacting the head of security at the Jasmine Door Hotel. He hasn’t gotten back to me yet.”

“Oh,” she frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me you needed that? I could’ve called Sunny. She works for Drake. She would’ve done it.”

“Who?” Xavier kept his head on a swivel. He didn’t really care. He just wanted to keep Allegra from getting nervous. Stress had been coming off her in waves since the train.

“Sunny Travers. She knows Hank. That’s how I got to book the jet. She also works for Jameson Drake. He owns the Jasmine Door hotel chain.”

“I see. Well, that’s probably who Hank is calling so hopefully we’ll have an answer soon.” The phone went off in his hand. Xavier glanced at the screen. It was a European number. He killed the call. It rang again from the same number. He declined the call and swore.

“What?” Allegra demanded.

“The guy whose phone I stole knows it’s missing and keeps calling it. I’m going to have to ditch it because he can no doubt track it with an app on his computer or something.” The phone went off another three times. “It’s no good.” Xavier turned the phone off and tossed it in the garbage can.

Allegra stared at the trash can, an absurd look of longing on her face.

He’d have laughed if their situation was less dire. “Okay, we’re going to have to go in blind. Stay close to me.”

She bit her lip. “What do I do with these?” she asked holding out the shopping bags.

“We’ll use them for cover until we get to the suite. You can drop them there.” He paused. “You do know what suite he’s in right?”

She nodded. “The Iris Suite. Eighth floor.”

“Okay. Just follow my lead.” He started to move and then turned back to her. “One more thing...if I tell you to run, fucking drop everything and run as fast as you can to hotel security or the police or any kind of safety you can think of. Do not wait for me. Don’t look back. Just run.” He pulled her close and kissed her hard on the mouth. Then he turned, grabbed her arm, and hustled her down the sidewalk.

CHAPTER 16

Allegra had to half-jog to keep up with Xavier’s strides. Run. What the hell did he think would happen? She couldn’t worry about that now, about him now. He would be fine. They’d be fine. They had to be. She’d asked him not to come but he refused. Said it was his choice and he wanted to be there. The relief she felt at knowing he would be at her side was overshadowed by the guilt she felt that he might get hurt.

She let out a deep breath and pushed those thoughts aside. There was no time for recriminations now. Focus.

They entered the lobby where he took one bag from her with his left hand, and she hooked her right through his arm. Just another couple out for an early morning shopping spree? Shit, she hoped no one noticed the time.

As they made their way to the elevators, Xavier slowed his stride. “What?” she demanded in a hushed voice.

“We need someone to go up in the elevator. A place like this will make guests use their keys to get to their floors.” He was right of course. This was a Jameson Drake hotel. The man’s initials were everywhere. Totally upscale, opulent, and designed for the safety and security of their wealthy guests. She wanted to laugh when she thought about the ego involved in that. Sunny had always maintained that Drake wasn’t an egotistical asshole, but she wasn’t so sure.

They lingered in front of a fireplace that ran along one wall. It was already on despite the early hour, but the heat did little to relax her. Someone better come along soon or they would start to look suspicious. Allegra tried to look like she was just taking in the opulence of the lobby which wasn’t hard to do.

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The white marble on the lobby floors and deep wood tones created an inviting atmosphere. A bar off the lobby had a wide entrance that framed a glass outer wall that overlooked a garden that would be charming in warmer weather. Overstuffed leather chairs with small tables made the transition from the lobby to the bar area look seamless. There was another fireplace along one wall that invited people to sit and rest after their day. Upscale shops that carried high-end clothing and jewelry lined the hallway opposite the reception desk. Yes, Drake knew what he was doing when it came to hotels.

Xavier tugged her arm, and they walked over to the elevator as another couple stepped on. The man dressed in a sweater and jeans asked what floor.

“Eight,” she replied and forced a smile.

“Is it cold out?” the woman asked. She was wearing a thick turtleneck with big gold earrings over a pair of winter leggings like Allegra had purchased. The Ugg boots she wore finished her look. Her dark hair was tied up in a high ponytail.

“Yes, it’s a bit chilly today.”

Xavier stayed silent but when the door opened he exited first. He held Allegra in the elevator until he’d taken a look each way down the hallway. The woman stared at Allegra as if trying to decide if she was famous and needed this security or just simply rich.

Allegra wiggled her fingers at the other passengers. “You can’t be too careful,” she said and then stepped off the elevator. The doors closed behind her.

“I think it’s this way,” Xavier said, pointing to his right. They went down the hall and stopped at the very end. A plaque proclaiming this the Iris Suite in a fancy script font was beside the door.

Allegra raised her hand and knocked hard. Here goes nothing. Xavier grabbed her hand and gave it a quick squeeze before dropping it again.

The door opened. “Allegra!” Connie’s mouth gaped open. “Oh my God, you’re alive.”

She smiled at the disheveled lawyer. “Yes, Connie. It’s good to see you.” And it was. She liked the lawyer immensely. He would make sure Damon listened to her. He was always fair about everything.

“I can’t...how...that is what the hell happened?” he finally managed to get out.

“I’ll explain, but I’d rather not do it in the hall.”

He blinked. “Oh, shit, yeah of course. Come in.” He moved out of the way and Allegra walked down the small hallway with Xavier on her heels. Off to the right was the dining area complete with a table for eight. Allegra walked over and stopped next to her boss who sat eating.

“Hello, Damon.”

The man looked up and his mouth dropped open. “Allegra! Jesus, we’ve all been so worried about you.” He jumped up and came forward to embrace her. Her mouth sagged open, and it took a second for her to respond to his hug. It was the first time the man had ever exuded any warmth toward her. She didn’t know who was more shocked at that moment, him or her.

“I’m fine,” she offered, “but we really need to talk.” Her boss had on a white shirt that was rolled up at the sleeves and a pair of gray dress pants. His graying hair was brushed back, and his blue eyes held nothing but concern for her.

“Of course. Let’s go to the sitting area where it’s more comfortable. Connie, turn on the fireplace. It’s damn cold in here.”

Connie did as he was told but he stared at Allegra as he did it.

Damon glanced at Xavier. “I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.”

“This is Xavier. He was the pilot of the jet that crashed.”

Damon nodded. “I am so sorry. Are you okay? Can I get either of you anything?”

“We’re good,” Xavier said, leaning against the wall between two windows that overlooked the lake. She was going to ask him to sit but suddenly realized why he went to that spot. He had a clear view of the door and most of the room from there. He gave her a small nod. It was the encouragement she needed.

Allegra sat down on the edge of the sofa, clasped her hands in her lap so they wouldn’t shake and turned toward Damon. “There’s a lot to tell you and I will explain but first you need to pull Cytosine before the FDA announces the approval tomorrow.”

Damon reared back as if he’d been slapped. “Pull it? Why on earth would I do that?”

“Because the approval would be based on false data.” There she’d said it out loud. The secret was out. A massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“Allegra, are you sure you’re alright?” Damon’s brow creased with a frown. “We’ve

been over the data. We've had it for months. I even went over it with you. There's nothing wrong with it."

The sound of the door opening and closing startled her. Graham breezed into the room, "Damon I think we should—" he stopped in the middle of the room. "Allegra!" He blinked. "How did you get here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" She glared at him. He looked as he always did. His dark hair was short and styled to the tenth degree. His skin had a tan even now in November and his navy pinstripe suit, no doubt by some well known designer, was neat and crisp. The very picture of an elegant businessman and she wanted to put her fist through his face. Asshole.

He frowned. "Er, yes, sure. I mean—"

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“Save it, Graham. I was just explaining to Damon that the data from the last round of trials for Cytoxine had been altered. The data that was given to me was completely falsified. I found the real data and the death rate of Cytoxine isn’t two percent, it’s seventeen percent.”

Damon stared at her, looked at Graham and Connie and then back to her. His eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I found a file by accident when I was digging around in the backup files for something I’d accidentally deleted. I’m sure you can get the tech guys to dig it out again and find out who put it there but I have a copy of it here.” She pulled out the USB stick from her leggings' pocket. “You have to pull it before the announcement or NoVoGlobal will go down in flames.”

“She’s mad,” Graham said. “Maybe she banged her head in the accident. We need to get her to a doctor.”

She spoke through clenched teeth. “My head is fine. And that plane crash wasn’t an accident. The co-pilot brought the airplane down on purpose. He wanted to kill me so I couldn’t tell Damon about Cytoxine’s false data.”

“That’s quite an allegation.” Damon looked at Connie. “I think we need to discuss this in private, Allegra.”

Connie nodded. “This conversation has legal ramifications.” He turned to Xavier. “I’m sorry, Mr....”

“I’m not leaving,” Xavier said bluntly. “Consider me Allegra’s personal protection.”

Her heart melted slightly at those words. He was sticking with her. She gave him a smile.

“She doesn’t need personal protection,” Damon said. He looked bewildered. “She is among friends.”

Allegra had had enough of the bullshit. “Am I? Why don’t you ask Graham why he didn’t say how shocked he was that I am still alive? He asked how I got here. Different thing all altogether isn’t it, Graham.”

“I- I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he stammered. “Damon, she’s crazy.”

“It’s true,” Damon muttered. “That’s exactly what you said. Did you know she was alive all this time?”

Graham stared. “It was just a slip, I mean... I meant how could she be alive? She’s twisting my words.”

“Ask Graham how much stock he owns in his mother-in-law’s name?” It was just a hunch but on the train ride she’d remembered a conversation she’d overheard with Graham going on about how his mother-in-law was gullible and how she loved him so much she would do anything he asked.

“Graham, is that true?”

His mouth opened and closed like a fish. “Um, no. Yes. It doesn’t matter.”

Damon frowned. “Still,” he said turning back to Allegra, “that’s just insider trading at worst.”

“Not if he knew the data was going to sink the drug and he had it falsified. Then it’s a whole lot more.” She glared at Graham. She wanted him to suffer after what he’d put her through.

“How would he be able to do that?” Connie asked. “Graham doesn’t have a background in medicine. But you do. Maybe you falsified the data.”

She turned. Connie’s expression was bland, but a muscle tweaked in his jaw. Why was he saying this stuff? Was he trying to play devil’s advocate? It was hardly the time.

“Seriously? And I what? Decided to crash my own plane? There’s no logic in that idea, Connie.” She turned back to Damon. “Get your laptop. I’ll show you the real numbers and the timeline of what happened with Cytosine.”

Damon gestured to Connie who brought his laptop. He took the flash drive and inserted it. Then he opened the file. “What am I looking at?”

Allegra highlighted the falsified data and explained her discovery.

Damon remained silent but his face was ashen. “Oh my God,” he mumbled finally. “And you think Graham did this? But how?” Graham started to argue but Damon held up his hand. “Let. Her. Speak.”

“The lead scientist died of a heart attack just after the trial concluded. The second in command died in a car accident within days of her boss dying. Only one person was left, a lab tech who knew what the real data looked like. He was the only person who could’ve altered the records without raising suspicion. He mysteriously disappeared. You’d have to ask Graham where he is.”

Damon stared at Graham. “Is this true? Did you do this?”

Graham stared daggers at her and then his phone went off. He turned and strode toward the door.

Xavier's posture went ramrod stiff.

"Graham!" Damon barked but his VP ignored him. They heard the sound of the door opening and then Graham came back. The door closed again and two men entered. They were wearing white parkas.

Allegra's heart stuttered to a stop.

CHAPTER17

The meneach pulled out semi-automatic weapons and Xavier's pulse ticked up. He hadn't had time to stop Graham from opening the door. By the time he realized the guy wasn't leaving it was too late. Now he was going to have to find a way to get Allegra out of this somehow.

His Ranger training kicked in as he forced his shoulders down and remained motionless against the wall. He'd have a clearer understanding of how this would go if he stayed still and off their radar. A moment would come, a chance, when he could act. He just had to wait for it. Damn hard to do with his desire to protect Allegra drowning out any logic. He wanted to tear the men with guns apart with his bare hands. He took a deep breath and forced himself to stay still. In his ear, it was as though Jamie was speaking to him.Focus, brother.

The guy on the left was the shorter of the two and barrel-chested with blond hair. The one on the right was taller with broader shoulders. He also recognized him as the man he'd knocked out at the crash site.Great.Now they knew he was more than just the pilot for sure. He should've killed the guy when he had the chance.

* * *

Allegra's heartraced after skipping way too many beats. She blinked to clear the lightheaded rush.

“Graham, what’s the meaning of this?” Damon demanded. “Are you working with these men?”

Graham had moved to the side of the room by the fireplace. “I have no choice.”

“What do you mean you have no choice? Call these men off. This is ridiculous.” Damon stood.

“Sit down, Damon,” said a voice she recognized all too well.

Haywood Adanne entered the room. He had a gun in his hand. “I said sit.”

“Haywood,” Allegra murmured. The lightheaded sensation returned as blood drained from her face. Her mentor? The one she’d called and told everything to. Shit.

“I’m sorry, my dear. You really are too smart for your own good. When you called me, I have to say I was shocked you were still alive. It would have been much better if you’d died in the airplane crash.”

Her eyes got big. “You organized the whole thing?” Disbelief coursed through her chest.

He smiled. Gone was the grandfatherly gentleman she’d always known, and in his place was a hard man. One with blackness behind his eyes where she was sure there used to be a heart.

“I told Graham to buy ApexMed in the first place. I knew, knew Cytosine could be the drug of the future. You argued against it,” he snarled and gestured toward her with the gun. “As did you, Damon, being wishy-washy about the purchase. I made Graham force the deal. Told him it would be okay. Just make the deal and he did. It was a good deal.”

“I disagree,” Damon said. “I still think it was a bad deal. One drug that is now useless and a bunch of other smaller drugs for hundreds of millions? It was stupid but you have your word and Graham made the deal so I had to stick by it.”

“That’s why you left?” Allegra directed her question to Haywood.

“Yes, I had to go away like a good little boy. But Damon had to eat his words. Even came to me and apologized when the data came back so strong on Cytosine. You never should have doubted me,” he said to the CEO.

“But wait. How could Graham force the deal. He could only say there was a deal, he would need legal to draw up the contracts...” She turned to Connie. “You were in on it too?”

The lawyer got a hang-dog expression on his face. His complexion had turned a distinct shade of gray. “The divorce. I knew it was coming. She wanted to take me for every penny. I needed some way to make money again.” He shrugged.

“So Graham did the negotiations and you wrote the contracts and presented Damon with a fait accompli.

“Yes.” Connie nodded. “But I swear I didn’t know they planned to kill you on the flight until after it had crashed. I thought you were dead. They didn’t tell me otherwise.”

Graham snickered. “He doesn’t have the strong constitution that was needed for this.”

“So,” Damon said, “Allegra has the real data. Cytosine doesn’t work.”

“Bullshit. It works. It just kills a few more than we’d like. It’s still by far the best lung cancer treatment drug out there. Once we launch it, we’ll keep playing with the

dosage until we get something that works. But we can't wait any longer. We need to get it to market now."

Allegra's stomach rolled. "The other drug. Marxten Medical. They're getting their new lung cancer drug to market in the first quarter next year." Allegra swore. "You rushed everything so you could beat them to market."

Haywood glared at Damon. "I have a lot of money tied up in this one. This deal will make me a very rich man. When Damon forced me out, I lost a lot of shares. This will make it up to me."

"What the hell are you going to do now, Haywood?" Damon demanded. "We all know the whole story. Are you going to kill us all?"

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Oh Jesus. Don't give them any ideas. Her belly churned as she spared a glance at the deadly guns being aimed at them by the two men in parkas.

Haywood smiled. "Sometimes we have to do the hard things."

Allegra couldn't believe her ears. "What happened to do no harm? You're a doctor for Christ's sake."

Haywood shrugged. "Things change." He nodded to the two gunmen. "Now, we're all going down to the parking garage. Please don't try anything. My colleagues won't hesitate to shoot."

"But what will you say?" Allegra asked. "How will you explain this?"

His smile made her blood run cold. "You and your friend will be taken back up the mountain and left to die in the elements. There's another storm coming in. Should work like a charm. Damon will die in a car accident. Icy roads make things so difficult." He smiled again. "Now get up," he snarled. "Time to go."

* * *

Xavier was desperate for any opportunity to cause a disturbance. Some way that might buy Allegra time to get away. He had nothing. The two gunmen waved their guns at Allegra and Damon. They stood and started toward the hallway. "You too," the larger gunman ordered.

Xavier walked over and moved behind Allegra. The gunman he'd hit came up beside

him and sucker punched him in the stomach. He dropped to his knees and tried to suck in oxygen.

"You'll get yours," he gritted out. "I am looking forward to it."

Allegra had let out a little scream and the asshole waved the gun at her. Xavier held up his hand to let her know he was alright. It took him a moment but then he stood up.

"We'll see." He smiled at the guy who punched him while making a silent vow that today was that guy's last day on earth.

They followed the hallway to the elevator. There was no way they'd all fit. European elevators were small. This could be the moment. He, Allegra, and Damon were in front with Graham, and Haywood. The shooters and Connie were behind them.

Connie wasn't looking so good. He shook his left arm and rubbed his chest. The man's color was a shade of gray you normally saw on dead folks, and his lips were compressed in a grimace. He was in serious pain. Their gazes locked and Connie stared at him. Then he blinked and turned away. That's right asshole, you got her into this and you'll pay for it. Xavier wasn't taking any prisoners. He'd survived two crashes and a whole pile of other shit. If saving Allegra was the hill he had to die on, he was all good with that.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Wish me luck, Jamie.

CHAPTER 18

"You, stand back," the shorter gunman said and poked his knuckles into Xavier's shoulder. He had his gun underneath his jacket but pointed in Xavier's direction. "You two," he said turning to Allegra and Damon. "Get on the elevator."

Allegra turned and stared at Xavier. Her green eyes were huge and the color of jade. He gave her a slight nod. There was no point in fighting just yet. He was sure they'd shoot whether Haywood wanted them to or not. The short gunman got on with them as did Haywood.

The doors closed and Xavier stood in the hallway with Graham, Connie, and the other gunman. He looked at Graham. "You are going to die."

Graham stared at him.

"I just thought you should know."

Graham looked away.

Connie leaned on the wall and rubbed his chest. He stared at Xavier.

Xavier smiled evilly. "You're already a dead man."

"Enough talk," the gunman said and glared at Xavier. The elevator dinged and the doors opened. They all trooped in, and Xavier ended up against the back wall with the gunman beside him. Graham and Connie were in front.

The ride to the garage was a short one and no one spoke. Xavier inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. His shoulder was numb earlier, but it was fine now. For the first time in a long time, it felt normal. Deciding life is worth living but being fine with dying seemed to suddenly take away his stress. His fear of living had made him tense all the time and now he wanted to live but might not have the chance. The irony was not lost on him. He grinned. Thanks, Jamie.

The doors opened. Allegra and Damon were standing next to Haywood and the short gunman. Graham got out and then Connie. Xavier moved forward but noticed Connie

was staggering. He pressed his fist to his chest, and appeared to be struggling for breath. Xavier figured the guy was in the midst of a heart attack. He hoped it was fatal.

Xavier moved left as he exited the elevator. Connie staggered right, falling into the other gunman. The bigger gunman came out of the elevator gun drawn, and in a rush, Xavier smashed his elbow into the man's face with a satisfying crunch.

He yelled, "Allegra, run,"

Then as the guy turned toward Xavier, he punched him in the solar plexus and ripped the gun from his hand. The guy charged and without hesitating Xavier shot him between the eyes. He shot the other man as he was trying to get his gun up from underneath Connie. They both fell to the floor.

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He turned to find five large men and one woman in a semi-circle around them, guns drawn. “Hotel security.” He looked over their shoulders to see Allegra and Damon huddled together by a parked car. Standing next to them was Booker Hayes, one of his Team Eagle brothers.

His knees wobbled. Allegra was okay. Better than that, Booker was here. Jesus, he’d never been so happy to see someone in his entire life. He grinned like a fucking loon.

“Drop the gun,” one of the security team yelled.

Xavier gladly complied. He lowered the pistol to the concrete floor. He nodded his head toward Haywood. “He has a gun too. He hired these assassins. And you might want to call an ambulance. That guy”—he pointed to Connie who was on the ground, groaning and blinking slowly—“is having a heart attack.”

Booker shook his head. “Can’t leave you alone for a minute. Vacation means rest and relaxation, not get shot at.” He grinned. “On second thought, your idea of a vacation sounds like more fun.”

Xavier flipped him off, but he knew he could breathe easy now that his teammate was here.

CHAPTER19

A knock on her hotel room door drew Allegra away from the window she’d been staring out. She opened it to find Xavier. “Hey.” She backed up to let him in. “How’s it going?”

“Good.” He sauntered into the room and sat down on the sofa positioned in front of the fireplace. “Nice suite.”

“I think Damon is trying to make things up to me. It’s a start.”

He grinned. “How’s all that going?”

She rocked her head back and forth. “Okay for the moment. We have a lot to do to keep NoVoGlobal out of trouble. It’s going to be a lot of hard work and, honestly”—she shrugged—“I’m not even sure we can do it.” She sank onto the chair across from him. She couldn’t let herself sit next to him or she might crawl into his lap and never leave. “How did your conversation with the cops go?”

“Fine. I think they’re finally finished with me. Security footage from the hallway and the parking garage backed up what I said. Your statement and Damon’s helped. They aren’t thrilled they’re left with three dead bodies but that’s their problem.”

“Three?” She tried to focus on what he was saying.

“Simon. Turns out they were all ex-Austrian military. Not surprisingly, they’d all been dishonorably discharged.”

She laced her fingers together. “Oh.”

“Yeah. And my usual co-pilot for a lot of my international runs...Joey? Simon knocked him unconscious and tried to make it look like he died by suicide. Put him in his garage and turned the car on.”

“Oh my God. Is he okay?” She bit her lip.

“Yeah. His garage has a couple of large holes in it so he eventually came to and got

out. He's going to be fine."

"That's a relief. I am glad it all worked out." Her stomach knotted.

"Me too." Xavier stared at her.

She needed to bite the bullet and just get everything out there. "I really want you to know I appreciate everything you did. I mean, you saved my life more than once. I don't know how to thank you."

A slow smile slid onto Xavier's face. "I can think of a few ways."

She shot to her feet. He was not going to make this easy. But it was for the best she reminded herself. "Um, I'll pay you for the clothing and stuff. Leave me your address and I'll send you a check."

"Allegra—"

"Like I said, I have a lot of work ahead of me and there's really no time for...anything else. I promised you the other night that I wouldn't make a scene when this was all over. That you would be in my rear-view mirror and I want to keep that promise. It's the least I can do."

* * *

The least she could do? Did she really just say that? Xavier's shoulders tensed, triggering a tingle in his arm. He forced himself to relax. She was telling him nicely, but in no uncertain terms, to get lost. He stared at her. Did their time together—their physical and emotional connection—mean so little to her? His brain was short-circuiting. She'd brought him back to life and now she was turfing him like he was just a fuck boy. Oh hell no.

“I see,” he managed to mumble. He stood, surprised his knees could hold him. “You’re right. You were perfectly clear the other night. Sorry if I misread the signals.”

Jamie’s voice shouted in his mind. Aw, brother. Don’t make this mistake. She’s worth fighting for.

“Xavier,” she started but he waved her off.

He ignored the voice in his head. “There’s nothing left to say. You take care of yourself. Good luck with everything.” He turned and made his way out the door.

Two minutes later, he walked back into his hotel room.

“That was fast.” Booker was lying on one of the beds. “You okay?” His friend asked. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m a lot of things right now but okay isn’t one of them.”

Booker got off the bed. “What do you need? What can I do?”

“What I need is something I can’t have.” Or someone. Fuck, this hurt. Deep down in his soul. This pain was worse than when he’d lost Jamie. Allegra’s dismissal of him cut so deep it took his breath away. “You can buy me a drink and just keep them coming.” The only way he was going to get through the next few days, or weeks was by being numb. Not just his arm, but his entire body. He might as well start now.

CHAPTER20

Allegra raised her hand to knock on the door, clenched her fist and then dropped it again. Nerves whispered under her skin. She had no idea why she was so damned anxious, but she was. She’d put on the green sweater she’d bought from Lena’s store because it brought out her eyes. And he’d looked at her with desire when she’d worn it before. She had paired the soft sweater with a short dark-gray pencil skirt which

showed off her legs. She'd even had her hair down around her shoulders. She wanted to look good. So good that Xavier would forgive her.

She raised her hand again and then paused.

A voice came from her left. "Do you want some help knockin' on that door?"

She turned to find Xavier leaning against an SUV in the parking lot, arms folded across his chest, staring at her with a cautious expression on his sexy features.

"Um...I just...That is... You look good."

More than good. Delicious. His hair had grown some and curled over his ears. The cowboy hat on his head made it hard to see, but she knew those waves would be soft under her fingertips, if she got the opportunity to test them out. His gorgeous eyes were the color of steel. A gray sweater outlined his powerful chest, and a pair of jeans hugged his thighs like a second skin.

He looked so damn fine that drawing a breath was difficult.

"Can I help you with something?" His neutral expression was killing her. Was he happy to see her? Who the hell could tell?

"I just wanted to...thank you," she finished lamely. They were standing outside the Yellowstone offices of Team Eagle. The December air was crisp. Her coat was open and she should've done it up to fight the cold but she wanted him to be able to see her legs. She'd thought, perhaps foolishly, it might help.

"You did already. You told me in Geneva and sent me a check for the clothes with yet another thank you note. You don't have to thank me anymore. We're good."

The door opened and Allegra jumped. A tall man with dark hair stood there staring at her. Without taking his eyes off her, he said, “You okay, Xav?”

“Fine, Wyatt. I have it handled.”

Wyatt gave Allegra the once over. “She doesn’t look too scary but you’re a bit of a cream puff, so yell if you need help.” He barked out a laugh, then stepped back and closed the door again,

She nodded. “So, how have you been? How’s the shoulder?” God, she was grasping at straws. Anything to stay here talking to him.

“Shoulder is good. How about you? I read the story in the Times.” He cocked his head. “Not exactly the truth.”

She bit her lip and shrugged. “It was close to the truth, sort of. The end result was the same. Cytosine didn’t make it to market, so all those lives were saved. And NoVoGlobal’s stock didn’t take too much of a hit. We’ve already bounced back.”

“Uh-huh. But a secret joint investigation by the FDA and the FBI? Who came up with that story?”

She smiled. “I did. I pointed out to the FDA that they were about to approve a drug that would kill a large percentage of people, and if that news got out no one would trust them. They’ve taken enough PR hits recently that they were happy to go along with the plan. The FBI was a bit of a harder sell, but Damon has friends in Washington and in the end, it made everyone look good.”

“Including you.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Including me.”

Her stomach fluttered. Was he disappointed in her? “I had to do something to save my career. I’ve worked too hard to let it be blown out of the water because someone else was a corrupt asshole.”

He chuckled a bit, and her heart leapt as she took it as a positive sign.

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“Graham and Haywood made plea deals. You were lucky there.” He crossed one leg over the other.

“Not really. Connie had the goods on them both. For everything he did, he was still the best damn lawyer I’ve ever met. He had the proof that had them both dead to rights. It’s why Connie will get off with such a light sentence, it’s part of his plea deal.”

“Whatever,” Xavier grunted. “Was there something else you wanted?”

Allegra took a deep breath. Her stomach was knotted so tight that bile was burning its way up her throat. “I thought...I hoped maybe we could get a drink.”

Xavier stared at her for a solid minute. He raked her body with his eyes and then met her gaze again. “I don’t think so. I’m about to go home and cook steak for my friends.”

“Ah, I see.” The disappointment was so intense, it rocked her physically. Her mouth went dry.

“If there’s nothing else then, I’ll see you around.” He turned and started to get into his vehicle.

“See you,” she mumbled.

* * *

It took every inch of his resolve for Xavier to get into his truck. She looked so damned fine he wanted to wrap her in his arms and never, ever let her go. In the weeks since he'd last seen her, she'd only gotten better looking. Her eyes would haunt him forever. But, she'd made it clear to him. He was in her rear-view mirror. That was the deal she'd made. There was no point in opening that door again. He needed to get over her and seeing her wasn't going to help that.

"Xavier." She called his name as she tapped on the glass by his head.

He wanted to curse but he ground his teeth and lowered the window. Didn't she know, she was killing him? "Yeah?"

"I just...I wanted to..." she stared at him for a minute. "Oh, for fuck's sake. I'm in love with you. I can't seem to forget you. I can't stop thinking about you and I miss you something wicked. I thought I could put the whole shitshow...and you behind me. I tried, honestly I did but I can't get rid of you. You are always there haunting me, and I can't stand it any longer. I need you in my life. I want you in my life."

He stared straight ahead, heart drumming double-time. He struggled to breathe. Was she saying what he thought she was saying? Was he actually hearing the words he wanted from her?

"Xavier, did you hear me? I said I love you." She rested her hand on the door frame.

He sucked in oxygen and swallowed hard. He grasped the handle and opened the door. Hoping his knees would support him, he climbed from the truck and bought himself time as he closed the door again. He leaned against the back quarter panel for support.

"Say it again," he growled.

She blinked. "I... I love you, Xavier. I'm sorry I was such an ass. Letting you go was

the biggest mistake I ever made.”

He grabbed her by her coat and pulled her to him. He leaned down so his face was inches from her. “Say it again.” He needed to see her eyes when she said it. Her beloved green eyes couldn’t hide things the way her words could.

“I love you.” She was telling the truth. Her eyes were bright emerald green and full of love.

For him.

He kissed her then. Hard. Pulling her closer and wrapping his arms around her. He was never going to let her go.

Finally, she broke off the kiss. “Does this mean you love me too?” she asked with hope in her voice.

“This means we’ll give it a shot,” he said with a grin. She hit him on the arm. “Seriously, that’s all I get?”

“No. How do you like your steak?” he asked and then kissed her again.