



Asher (In the Company of Snipers #27)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Asher Downey: They say no good deed goes unpunished...

On a highly secretive mission, former US Army Ranger Asher Downey comes face-to-face with evil. He was sent into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to rescue several American allies. Those women and children are now aboard the helicopter that will take them to safety. He and his buddies cannot afford to be caught. They have to leave now. There's no time to waste.

Until Asher hears a woman scream...

Marlowe Rich: Born to fight the world...

Marlowe Rich is on a similar mission as Asherr. For months, she has risked her life to rescue the woman and children left behind in Afghanistan, after America's withdrawal. What has that diligence gotten her? Betrayed and captured, nearly beaten to death. Her three captors are brutal. They want to break her. She wants to kill them. And she will.

If she lives long enough...

Total Pages (Source): 39

Chapter One

Asher cocked his head, sure he'd heard something. Someone. Couldn't have been the wind shrieking out of the east, could it? Hard to tell, as fierce as it was scouring the mountaintops.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Beau Villanueva, his companion agent, convinced the scream was human and terrified. Desperate. Not the wind.

But where did it come from? There was nothing up here but the sheer stone face of a cliff to their north. Sure hadn't come from the goat they were chasing. The pesky thing belonged to the eight-year-old shepherd boy they'd startled on their way to the rendezvous point with the rest of their team. After they'd handed off the Afghan women they'd rescued into his team's keeping, along with their children, Beau had insisted he and Asher go back and get that goat for the poor kid. Senior Agent Murphy Finnegan had said make it quick, that the Black Hawks were on their way, and he'd leave without them if they weren't back in time.

So there Asher and Beau were, making it quick and giving that stinky little goat one last chance to stop horsing around. Beau was sure he could wrangle the skittish thing. Asher gave him ten minutes to make it happen. Not one second more. They'd come here to rescue the endangered wives and families of the men who'd aided America before the war ended in a clusterfuck. Not goats.

He and Beau were part of a privately funded, covert Long Range Reconnaissance team the current administration in Washington, D.C., would deny in a heartbeat. Senior Agent Murphy Finnegan was team leader this time. Former Navy SEAL Lee

Hart, USMC scout snipers Renner Graves and Rory Dennison, and former Army black ops Heston Contreras comprised the daredevils who'd already connected with and retrieved the women they'd been sent to rescue. They were all waiting on Beau's ability to wrangle a goat. This marked the fourth covert excursion funded and manned by former USMC scout sniper Alex Stewart, the boss of every man on this mission. He owned The TEAM, the best covert surveillance company in the world.

Thirty miles east of the now demilitarized Bagram Air Base, Asher and Beau were high on the west-facing mountains in the Parian Province of Afghanistan. Kabul Airport lay twenty miles to the south of Bagram, not that either airfield was functional since the Taliban took over. But those bastards were there, hundreds of them, no doubt training for another assault on their own people, for the love of all things holy. Asher could see Bagram's runway from where he stood. The way America had left Afghanistan disgusted him.

"You've got five minutes left," he grouched at Beau.

"Yeah, yeah, there he is, on that boulder over there. See him?"

"Yeah, I see him."

"That little shit's smiling. He thinks he's got us beat. You go that way, and I'll—"

Another scream. Definitely human. A woman, for Christ's sake. Up here? Where?

"What the fuck was that?" Beau growled, his hand on the pistol in his side holster.

Asher's two Glockes were instantly up and ready. Their standard magazines afforded him more than two dozen 40 S&W rounds. His sharp eyes zeroed in on a barely visible, narrow vertical crack in that broad stone face, just beyond the flat rock where that goat danced like a naughty kid. Tapping his tactical headset, he advised his boss,

“We’ve got a problem, Murph. Pretty sure we’ve located another woman. We’re going after her. Don’t leave without us.”

“Where? On this guldarned mountain? It’s still winter up here.”

“Roger that, but I’m not leaving without her. There’s a narrow-assed opening in the granite wall north of our position. Might lead into a cave. Won’t know till we get there.”

“Make it quick.”

Asher ended the connection and signaled Beau his intention to engage. “I’ll go in first. Cover me.”

“Copy that.”

Two clicks was roughly a mile and a quarter away. Even carrying thirty pounds of gear, Asher could run that easy, in less than ten minutes. But this time, he’d make it in five.

“Keep up,” he ordered Beau. That wasn’t just a scream, it was full-blown terror. Asher turned and ran like the wind.

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Chapter Two

More noise. Louder. Nearer. What now? How much pain could she endure? Marlowe screamed, even as fear of what lay ahead slammed her lungs shut, suffocating her. Was the cave collapsing? Was that what the loud cracks and booms were? God, she wished. Was the support timber overhead cracking? Because of her? Was she too heavy for that spindly branch? Please, yes. Let it be me who brings this evil hole in the wall down. I'm ready to die. The sooner, the better.

Freezing wind whistled through the narrow crack she'd been dragged through days, maybe weeks ago, adding a sharp sting to her out-of-control hysteria. "Just kill me now," she hissed, fighting for air. She'd done what she could. She'd done her best. Whatever happened next, she welcomed it. If this was the end... "Let me die, you fucking creeps!"

More shrieking screams. Louder blasts. Wicked echoes vibrated through the air and around her, battering her already bruised body. Were those explosions? Gunfire? Sharper. Closer. It was hard to tell the difference when your skull might be cracked and even the smallest noises echoed. Rough hands grabbed her poor bloody head, twisting her entire body around on those inhumane straps she'd been hung on.

"Shit, it's a woman," the bobble-headed giant with his hands on her yelled. "She's barely alive. Beau!"

So loud. Marlowe winced at the volume bellowing out of his big mouth. "American?" she asked weakly, daring to hope. Or was this a different type of torture? A ruse? A nasty trick? Mental torture to make her believe she was saved when she wasn't?

Marlowe reverted to survival. “Don’t touch me!” She meant to scream but ended up whimpering. Her vocal cords were exhausted. She had no fight left. This tricky bastard’s three friends had already beaten the shit out of her.

Don’t you dare trust him, her instincts screamed. He’s just another asshole, a friend of the jerks who cornered you in the village. Shoved a rag in your mouth. Put a bag over your head. Knocked you out. Stole your beanie. You can’t trust anybody!

How well she knew.

A laser-bright light stabbed her remaining eye. Ouch. She’d lost sight in the other, hours, maybe days ago.

All at once, this new monster trapped her in the circle of his massive arms and pulled her head down to his chest. She wanted to scream. She would’ve punched him, but there was no way to get away from the LED beam shooting out of his forehead. She couldn’t see where to strike. No way to lift a hand to protect herself even if she could. It was impossible to make out this bastard’s evil silhouette beyond the intense glare. But she saw enough to know this new guy wasn’t like the others. He was worse. Bigger. Wider. The others had been brutal. She had no idea where they went, but they’d be back soon. Then what? A threesome?

“No more,” she whined, twisting to get away from this new threat.

He didn’t answer, just wrapped his other ginormous arm around her waist and lifted a gloved hand over her head.

Unholy fear bleated out of her. “Don’t hurt me. Please. No more. Let me go!”

Instead of releasing her, he sliced the leather straps binding her, and Marlowe had no choice but to sag like a helpless child against his chest. Not good. Not good at all.

“What do you assholes want from me?” she whimpered. “I wasn’t hurting anyone. I have w-w-work to d-do.”

There were no more explosions. Why not? Why couldn’t he just lay her down and let her die? She should already be dead. Would’ve been if he hadn’t joined the party. What more could he do to her that his friends hadn’t?

The big guy growled, then made his first mistake. Yes, she was weak, but she wasn’t dead. The instant he settled her bloody, bare feet to the ground, Marlowe summoned what meager strength she had left, brought her knee up as hard and fast as she could, and nailed this son of a bitch where she could do the most damage. Who needed hands when they had two sharp knees?

He dropped like a rock, holding his family jewels with both hands, his ugly face in the dirt.

“Go to hell!” she bellowed down at him. Still hoarse. Still bloodied and shaking, too damned weak to sound as pissed-off as she felt. But angry. So, so angry. And standing—finally. Striking back and dizzy, yes. On her way to the dirt next to him, sure. But kicking someone else’s ass felt good for a change.

“Motherfucker! Don’t ever touch me again!” Would’ve helped if she’d mustered more than a drawn-out squeak when she’d hissed at him. But this bastard was down, and he wasn’t moving. “There,” she whined, shaking hard, but not from fear. Not anymore. She was in control now. “How do you like it, huh?”

The one-eyed monster on his knees tilted his head up at her, and—

Oh, shit. He was wearing a black helmet with the visor down. That was where the light came from. Just over that visor. Not the middle of his flesh-and-bone forehead. Yikes. He couldn’t be Taliban. Must be a soldier. And she’d kicked him. Hard. But

not hard enough. He was still alive.

Her will to fight ebbed as quickly as it surged. Marlowe swallowed hard. He'd brought a friend. She saw him now, the big, burly man in the shadows. He wore the same kind of helmet, his with the visor up, showing his ugly whiskered face. The cave was dark, but the weak light coming through the crack in the stone wall behind him was enough. He was coming for her.

"Bring it on," she hissed, lifting her bloodied hands as high as her worthless arms allowed, ready to fight to the end. Ready to die.

Slowly, the guy she'd kneed removed the helmet that made him look like a giant fly with a glowing spotlight for a brain. He was definitely white unless he was just extra-pale because she'd nailed his cojones. And bearded, like all big, tough bullies in this part of the world.

"Ma'am," he croaked, lifting slowly to one knee, and then rising to his feet. Peeling those despicable, black gloves off, he let them fall, then extended both palms forward. White palms. Clean white palms. Like a peace gesture? Ha! He expected her to go quietly to her death? Guess again.

"We're Americans, ma'am, both former military and by the sounds of it, you're American, too. We'd like to take you home. I've got water in my CamelBak if you need a drink."

Of course, she needed a drink. She'd been in hell for—

Marlowe had no idea how long she'd been hanging here. But he thought she was dumb enough to fall for that lie? There were no American soldiers in Afghanistan. Not anymore. Everyone knew it. They'd all gone home. And like the cowards they were, they'd left Afghan nationals and their families, the brave men and women

who'd sacrificed everything for them and their war, behind.

"Liar!" Man, how she wished she sounded as lethal as she felt. She'd show these two jerks what burning hatred felt like.

"We don't have time for this," his burly friend growled. "Knock her out and be done with it, Ash. We gotta go."

"Then go! Get out of here!" She tried so hard to scream. "Run like the chicken shits you soldiers all are. You left, damn you. You betrayed your friends, and you ran."

Instead of striking back, the bastard she'd kicked extended a hand to her. "I'm Asher Downey, ma'am. This here's Beau Villanueva. It'd sure be nice to know your name."

Man, he was stupid. Didn't he get it? She wasn't going anywhere, not with him or his evil twin.

"Why?" she spat. Cursing took energy Marlowe no longer had. Simply talking was excruciatingly difficult. Screaming was a whole other pain. Just whispering felt like she'd swallowed glass. The last of her energy was fading, along with it the adrenaline that fueled her panic. Dizziness swarmed every last one of her good intentions to fight until she died.

"Because you need our help, honey, and we're not leaving without you."

Honey? Had he just called her honey?

That Beau guy growled.

Marlowe wished she could. What difference would it make if she gave them her name? That Downey guy couldn't keep calling her honey, could he? Not that she

liked him calling her that. She didn't. Didn't like it at all. Not. One. Stinking. Bit.

"Fine. Marlowe Rich," she replied, but just for the hell of moving things along. Not because of anything else. "Now get the fuck out of here and let me die in peace."

Before she could knee him again, the monster Asher Downey was on her. Just like before, he was too fast, and she was too weak. There wasn't time to whisper, "No," before he had her trapped like a mummy inside a big, warm blanket. Carefully, he lifted her across his shoulders in a fireman's hold and said, "Sorry, Marlowe Rich, but we don't leave anyone behind."

"Liar," she mumbled, shocked at the gentle touch of the heavy hand on the backs of her thighs, his other hand just as heavy, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. Arching her poor battered spine for all she was worth, and despite the pain in her skull, Marlowe twisted and bucked, not going down easy. Not giving up. But the blanket didn't allow movement. There was no way to fight back. He'd wrapped her too tightly. She couldn't nail him again. Frustration mounted until Marlowe realized that maybe...

Just maybe...

This Asher Downey guy was telling the truth. Maybe he and his friend were taking her away from this cave of hell and the brutal jerks who'd acted more like deranged pigs than humans. Brutal, ugly, smelly pigs.

"Assholes," she whimpered into the guy's jacket or shirt or—whatever. Blood poured from her nose again, leaking all over this—this man. This gentle man.

Willing her panic to cease long enough to think, Marlowe let go of her rage and reconsidered what was happening now. Right now. Not what she'd lived through, but what was going on here, in this narrow window of time. She was out of the cave and

her new captor was running uphill, into the cold winter wind pouring over the mountain top, with her. Rage and panic hadn't gotten her anywhere. Yes, this guy scared the crap out of her. Most men did. But he hadn't slapped or punched her, not even when his buddy urged him to knock her out. Not even after she'd kicked him. And he hadn't left her behind. Her, an ugly, worthless sinner. A nothing.

Marlowe took a deep, cleansing breath and reconsidered. Yes, she wasn't worth saving, but the rugged male body sweating like a beast beneath her was saving her anyway. Asher Downey was now in full warrior mode, running all out. His heart pounded like a beast beneath her battered head. A fucking beast.

Her tension ebbed. Whoever this guy truly really was, he had strength and endurance she didn't. He was literally doing all the work, and he was doing it for her. With every giant step uphill, his powerful shoulders bunched beneath her. His gentle grip never slipped, and he was warm. Nice and warm. Warmer than she had been for hours, maybe days. The blanket helped, sure, but the heat radiating up from his overworked body was another kind of heat altogether. It was excess heat thrown off by an intense, powerful male who refused to take no for an answer. Whose heart sounded like it might burst, he was running so hard. Who called her 'honey'.

Could he be her savior? Had he been sent for her? That foolish thought felt too good to be true. But whoever Asher Downey really was, he was running hard, and he was doing it for her.

Salty, stinging tears dripped from her good eye, matting her eyelashes, making it hard to see, so Marlowe closed it. Her other eye was swollen shut, and the fluid leaking from it was probably blood. The assholes in that cave had been brutal. Two of them used their fists and the flats of their hands to slap and punch her face, and pretty much everywhere else on her upper body. Anything to hear her cry. The other male, a bigger, darker, older, bearded creep had focused on the small of her back and her butt. He'd used a belt, a wicked three-inch wide piece of thick leather lined with

metal grommets down its center, and a brass buckle on one end. He got off on her screams, and he knew where to hit to get the most satisfaction. He was the one who'd bellowed 'Infidel! Whore! American slut!' over and over again.

Marlowe was sure the warm trickle down the inside of her thigh was more blood, probably from severe kidney damage because of that belt. It was hard to know anything for certain. Every inch of her body hurt, stung, or ached with each harried step her savior ran. Her lower back hurt the worst, even more than the ringing in her skull.

Damn it, she wasn't wearing her beanie. Like looking decent, not gorgeous or beautiful—just decent—mattered? Not anymore. For the first time since this nightmare began, Marlowe worried about brain damage and dying. Yes, she'd prayed for death in that cave, but now? Out here in the wild Afghanistan weather? On the shoulders of the courageous man who was saving her despite her attacking him?

A quiet truth dawned inside her poor cracked skull. The men who'd kidnapped her from that village were dead. She hadn't seen their bodies. Hadn't needed to see them to realize now what those loud booms in the cave were. The guy and his friend had killed them to save her.

Okay then. Sucking in a deep breath, she let most of her angst go. She, Marlowe Rich, was still alive and breathing and, by hell, she would live to fight another day. But the men who'd kidnapped and beaten her, who would've tortured her to death—weren't. The man gently cupping the back of her head, so it didn't bump his shoulder any harder than it was, had killed them to rescue her.

Marlowe sent a silent, heartfelt prayer to the heavens above. Was it wrong to thank God that those creeps were dead? That this man killed for her? She didn't care. God would understand.

But, she'd kicked this brave male in the balls. Ow. For the first time in days, maybe weeks, Marlowe chose to trust him. Just him. Not his buddy. No one else.

She let her body go limp. There was no way to know where he was taking her, but she chose to believe what he'd said. He was American. He was former military. He had come to take her home. But mostly, because of a stranger, Marlowe Rich was going to live.

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Chapter Three

Focused on getting Marlowe up and into a TEAM helo as quickly as possible, Asher ran the steep uphill trek as fast as he could, with Beau covering his ass. Fortunately, the narrow cave opening they'd entered through now faced away from the bastards chasing them, and for the most part, dense brush blocked the view of their retreat. If all went well, this woman would be on her way home by dark. At the least, given the shape she was in, she'd be at the Army hospital in Ramstein, Germany.

Asher was halfway to the Team's previously agreed-upon rendezvous point when he felt a sob jerk out of her. Even silent sobs were hard to miss. Damn those assholes. What he wouldn't give to go back in time and kill them before they'd done whatever they'd done to her. A woman, for heaven's sake.

He didn't know the extent of her injuries. There hadn't been time to thoroughly assess her needs, and she'd been too volatile to allow it once he'd cut her down from that ceiling. But he worried now. Were her shoulders dislocated from being hung like she'd been, or was something worse going on? How many days had she been hanging there? How long had they tortured her? Surely, she had a concussion, but was he causing further harm by jolting her with every step trying to save her? Had he put her neck and spine at more risk when he'd moved her? Were there internal injuries in play? The very real fears plaguing Asher now could only be quieted by the fact that he'd had no choice. Playing it safe hadn't been an option. Only running for her life.

The steady whomp-whomp-whomp of heavy-duty rotor blades cut the air as two Sikorsky UH-60A Black Hawks cleared the nearest peak and descended to the rendezvous point, a flat outcropping without boulders or trees. Relieved to see those

beautiful birds with no logo or lettering stamped anywhere on their muted black bodies, Asher dug into the last of his reserves and kicked into an all-out run to the finish line.

Tracer rounds lit up his peripheral. God bless Agents Renner and Heston, two of Alex Stewart's finest snipers, who were right then laying down suppressive fire at the new group of assholes intent on killing Marlowe. Asher had no idea why so many Taliban soldiers wanted her, but if it was the last thing he did, she would go home to America alive. Not in a pine box.

"Medic!" Asher ordered over his earpiece, alerting every man on his team. "We're coming in hot and we need someone ready to assist when we get there. One female. American. Marlowe Rich. Weighs a buck ten and she's in rough shape. Definite concussion, head trauma, possible dislocated shoulders and internal bleeding, half-frozen, and hell, I don't know what else. She needs a neck and back brace and heated blankets. Make it happen."

"Copy that," Murphy replied evenly, as if he hadn't just taken orders from an underling.

In minutes, Asher was at the nearest helo and handing Marlowe up and into the strong arms of Agent Lee Hart, while making sure he hadn't left Beau behind. These magnificent helos were combat-ready, praise God, and thank you, Alex. Designed to carry twelve fully equipped troops into combat, the birds were capable of extracting every last woman and child they'd just rescued from this stinking country, as well as blowing the adversaries on their rear to dust if push came to shove. Sikorsky Black Hawks were American soldier's guardian angels, and these two birds had been outfitted to Alex's specifications. Complete with Gatling guns at the side-door, a fully armored undercarriage, and an integrated weapon system, these helos allowed a pilot to lay down suppressive fire and launch any number of rockets or missiles from the cockpit.

As quickly as Asher climbed aboard, he dropped to the floor beside Marlowe. Lee had a huge med kit already splayed wide next to the padded gurney he'd laid her on. The helo's door was still open, the wind buffeting everyone inside the hovering aircraft.

Mentally, Asher rolled through the five points of tactical field care, aka MARCH .

Manage Massive hemorrhaging .

Ensure Airways were clear. He knew for certain nothing obstructed her airway.

Monitor patient for Respiratory issues , Circulation impairment , and lastly, the silent killer Hypothermia .

“Hold this,” Lee ordered, handing him a full IV bag, while he swiped a disinfectant towelette over the back of Marlowe's dirty hand and flicked his fingertips against her ghostly white skin, searching for a vein. “She's damned cold. Beau, grab another blanket. Keep her covered and wrap her feet while you're at it. Handle whatever trauma you find, understood?”

“Copy that,” Beau replied easily, then breathed, “Fuck. She's got nothing on but this stupid dress.”

“We've got clean flannel coveralls, if you need one,” Murphy shouted. He was old school and the flannel coveralls were his idea when dealing with injured female agents, to give them the decency they deserved.

“Jesus, look at her feet!” Beau snapped.

As quickly as Lee inserted the IV, Asher hung the bag on an overhead hook in the ceiling and dropped back to the floor to help Beau. Jesus, was right. The bottoms of

her feet were hamburger, speckled with thorns and studded with tiny stones that looked like they'd been pounded in. "There isn't time to clean them. Wrap them up with ice packs for now."

"On it," Beau answered.

Asher turned back to Lee as, together, they assessed the rest of her fragile body.

"Christ, they worked her over," Lee muttered. "One shoulder's dislocated, multiple trauma to the left side of her face and head, possible eye damage. Broken nose. Can't do anything about that right now."

"You already gave her something for pain, right?"

Lee nodded. "As soon as I had her inside, yes. She's got a couple fractured ribs, maybe a fractured skull, and—"

"Crap. And I ran like hell all the way up this damn mountain, with her poor head—"

"Did you have a choice?"

"No, but—" Everything he'd done to save Marlowe had hurt her. Badly.

"Heston, Rory, Renner. You guys smoke the yahoos downhill yet?" Murphy asked through their earpieces.

"Nope," Rory replied. "Only persuaded them to run and hide."

Renner snickered. "Yeah, like chicken shits all over the world."

"You boys aboard the other bird and strapped in?" Leave it to Murphy to refer to his

men as boys.

Rory came back with a respectful, “Copy that, Boss. How’s our fair lady doing?”

“She’s in rough shape but she’ll be okay,” Murphy said.

Asher hoped his boss was right. How Murph maintained a positive outlook on life, after all his time dealing with Army politics, amazed Asher. Asher had served far less time than Murph, but he’d dealt with the same bullshit, from HQ on down to field COs. Dirty politics behind the scenes had finally soured his patriotic zeal. Asher grew up wanting to serve, but these days, it seemed the guys and gals dying in the field were inconsequential to most five-stars. Soldiers, Marines, and Airmen were expendable, and what happened at Abbey Gate proved it.

“Pretty sure her lower back’s badly injured, too,” Asher advised Lee. “We need to stop whatever’s bleeding.”

“She’s bleeding all right. The back of her dress is soaked.”

“It is?” Asher asked, like a dolt. How had he not noticed that?

“Headsets everyone,” Murphy reminded his team. “Take off in three, two...”

The bird’s skids lifted up, the noise of its rotors drowning Murphy’s, “One.”

Tipping against the helo’s inner wall to keep working on Marlowe, Asher paused long enough to trade his earpiece for the noise-canceling earphones Beau tossed his way.

“Help me logroll her,” Lee said. “Toward you, on one, two... shit.”

Asher pulled Marlowe against his thighs. The poor woman's back, mostly her lower back and bare backside, had been whipped raw. "Hemostatic dressing. Everything you've got. Hurry, Lee. Christ!"

"No shit." Lee reached into an open overhead compartment, broke open a full box of field dressings, and tore several foil packets apart. Tossing one to Beau, he ordered, "Glove up. I need something to lay these dressings on. Now, damnit!"

"Already gloved up." Beau broke open a pack of sterile towels and laid one on the floor in time for Lee to dump the compressed bundles of specially formulated, absorbable gauze, consisting of oxidized regenerated cellulose, on the towel. "We should've killed those bastards faster, Ash," Beau muttered as he and Lee pressed squares of expandable hemostatic dressing over and into the open flesh on Marlowe's back.

"I should've checked her better as soon as I had her," Lee growled. "I knew she was bleeding, but I needed to—"

"Stop it. Both of you. Quit! Just quit!" Asher ordered, leaning over Marlowe now and helping staunch the flow of those open wounds. There were so many. "We can only do what we can, when we can. We might still lose her so—" He stopped short of telling his friends to shut the fuck up because he should've known she was bleeding to death. He was the bastard who had fucked up this rescue, and Marlowe was paying the price. If she died—

No! Asher slammed that what-if out of his stupid head, refusing to let the guilt clawing up his spine get even the tiniest toehold. He'd done all he could amidst a shitstorm of very few options. She would live, damn it. She had to.

Little by little, they got the worst of the bleeding slowed, leaving him cowed by his negligence and pissed all over again.

“Thanks, guys,” Lee breathed, swiping the back of his gloved hand across his forehead. “Shit. There was so much blood. I thought we lost her.”

Lee had lived through torture at the hands of a notorious Taliban banker years ago. This had to be hard on him, seeing a woman treated as badly as he’d been back then. But he wasn’t to blame. This death would’ve been on Asher, and he knew it.

As soon as the mighty craft was airborne, it pivoted a quarter circle west, toward the small army of terrorists once again gaining altitude below. The mechanical gears to the door-side Gatling guns clinked loudly as those weapons automatically zeroed downhill on the terrorists, thanks to the proprietary system on every bird in Alex’s fleet.

“Send ’em back to hell, Boss,” Beau growled through the shared comm links via the headsets, spraying hand sanitizer over his palms as he stepped over to the open door, his feet spread wide for balance.

“Negative,” Murphy answered evenly. “Only if they’re dumb enough to fire first. Then they’d have to be damned good shots to hit us all the way up here.”

“I could hit ’em, easy.” Beau gripped the overhead frame with both hands. Was he making himself a target? Sure looked like it.

“Let it go, guys,” Murph ordered. “We’ve got everyone we came for, plus one. Let’s call it a day and put this shithole behind us.”

“Incoming,” Beau bellowed, just as—

W HOOSH! A Hellfire air-to-surface missile screamed past their helo and zipped down the rocky terrain, obliterating the tightly-packed group of terrorists in a cloud of black smoke and orange fire.

“Guldarn it, I said only if they fired first, Deck,” Murphy bellowed.

“Keep your panties on, Murph,” Decker Edison, former Air Force colonel, A-10 pilot, and the man at the stick of the Black Hawk behind them, yelled back. “The moment they stopped climbing, I knew they were up to something. Turns out they were shielding the jackass with the anti-tank missile launcher on his shoulder. I did what I had to do.”

“Get us out of here before we cause an international incident,” Murphy grumped.

“Think we already did,” Beau quipped, shutting the side door on the scene below.

“She won’t make it to Ramstein, Murph,” Asher told his boss.

“Already taken care of, son. You guys get her into that flannel coveralls while we head for the American Embassy in Islamabad. They’ve got a medical emergency team there. Miss Rich is going to be okay.”

“There’s only so much we can do, Asher. Hold her tight while I...” Snap. Lee corrected her dislocated shoulder without waiting for assistance. She didn’t groan or cry out, but Asher winced for her.

“Forget the coveralls. She needs blankets,” he muttered, smoothing out the wrinkles in the layers already covering her and wishing like hell he could comfort her. That he could tell her how sorry he was that he hadn’t rescued her sooner. There was no sense maneuvering her poor battered body into coveralls. She was in shock, plugged into an IV, oxygen, and a heart monitor. All Asher could do now was hope she survived and pray like his life depended on it.

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Chapter Four

Marlowe drifted on a feathery soft cushion of clouds and freedom. No nightmares. No worries. No pain. No lists and no schedules. Just sweet relief from a thousand years of never doing enough or being good enough. Of loneliness and struggle. Of always running but never running fast enough. Never catching up. She saw the miserable little girl she'd been through a kaleidoscope of rainbow colors. Instinctively, she shied away from the dark indigos and the sucking vortex of the ebony blacks surrounding those colors. There was danger in drawing too close to shadows. They lied and pretended to be what they could never be, especially to little girls: Kind. Gentle. Honest. Uh-uh. She turned back around to the bright yellow gold of a thousand sunflowers and—

“Hey, sunshine. It’s time to wake up, honey. You’re safe and you’re on your way home.”

The fantastical world she drifted in vanished with that strangely masculine call from somewhere else. The rainbow was gone. She found herself falling into—

Ugh. The real world. A room she'd never seen or been in before. Unnaturally bright lights overhead. A ceiling with sharp corners. A stiff collar holding her head forward and her left arm in a rigid sling. Those had to go. The bed she'd fallen into wasn't nearly as soft as that narcotic cushion of fake clouds and phony freedom. Her body felt heavy, leaden; her head like someone used it as a basketball. A lot. Must've been a long game. Her brain pulsed with pain, which made her dizzy and nauseous and queasy and... Oh, hell. “I’m going to throw—”

“No worries, I’ve got you,” that same voice said. A plastic barf bag appeared under her chin, and a big, warm hand lifted her head high enough, making sure she hit that tiny target despite the harness restricting her neck. Again and again, she retched, while that guy held her steady.

Yuck. How embarrassing. At last, she was done, but throwing up always made her cry, damn it. She was stronger than this. Enough with the tears already. She couldn’t even sniff through her nose. She was drooling and the damned thing around her neck was in the way.

“Aww, honey, it’s okay to be sick, and it’s okay to cry. Are you done?” Why did this guy have to be so considerate and nice?

She nodded. Yes, she was done making a joke of herself. Her aching head bobbed like a leaf snapping in a stiff wind, and she needed something to wipe her disgusting mouth and nose. A drink wouldn’t hurt.

As if he’d read her mind, the guy smoothed a soft, warm damp cloth over her face and wiped away the mess stinging her eyes, make that, eye. What the heck? She fingered the bandaged area where her left eye should’ve been. Damned thing wasn’t there. Instead, a large patch covered that entire side of her face.

She traced her tender lips next. Tiny stitches lined the full length of her bottom lip. Well, duh. Those creeps had punched her enough. She was genuinely shocked they hadn’t busted her jaw. Wait a second. Did they? She moved her jaw from left to right. Nope. Her front teeth were loose, but they were all there, and her jaw was sore, but intact. This place might be her new reality, but it was only another challenge to overcome. Another test. They couldn’t keep her here against her will. As soon as she could stand on her feet, she was history.

Ever so slowly, Marlowe looked up at the man leaning over her. Something about

him was familiar, but she didn't recognize that firm, square jaw or the five o'clock shadow covering it. Or the perfectly arched brows over eyes the color of pine trees in spring, sparkling with hints of amber. Damn, he was breathtaking. Chiseled, in an alpha-male kind of way. Beautiful, long lashes no man had a right to. Handsome, absolutely. He'd be more at home in Hollywood though, not here in—wherever she was.

The stranger lifted a covered mug and placed its straw on her lip. "Just a sip, okay? When you're feeling better, you can have more."

Something in her chest thumped. Like an obedient little mouse—which she had never, ever been—Marlowe whimpered, "Okay." Whatever his name, this guy's sedate demeanor was soothing, and the hit of ice-cold water sliding down her throat was heaven. She wanted more, so before he got away, she latched onto his wrist. At least, that was the plan. But he was bigger and stronger and—

He looked down at her fingers circling his wrist. It dawned on her then that this very nice man was dressed in black. All black. He looked different in the light. But he was still that guy, the man she'd kicked. Oh, no. Marlowe froze. Was this when he punched her?

Grabbing the blanket with her one good hand, she shielded her face to block the blow. As much as she could, she fisted her other fingers. The best defense was a strong offense. If nothing else, she'd strike first. She could do it.

Until he set the mug quietly on the nightstand and whispered, "Lean back and take it easy. You're safe, and I'm here to protect you for as long as it takes you to heal. I'm not going anywhere, just need to let the doctor know you're awake."

That voice... Not baritone. Lower. Gravelly.

“You’re not going to hit me?” she squeaked. How does a woman apologize for kicking a guy’s privates, the guy who today looked like he’d stepped out of the latest hunky Australian fireman calendar? Who, despite her attack, had still hauled her ungrateful butt up that steep mountainside, on his shoulders, to a giant black helicopter and—

That was all she remembered, other than he’d killed her attackers and he’d saved her life.

“No, honey,” he whispered. “I don’t hit women, babies, dogs, or cats. And I’m a pushover for grandmothers and grandfathers, too. I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, suddenly shy, her heart pounding at the details she couldn’t recall. Afraid to look him in the eyes with her—eye—Marlowe turned away. Or she tried. Not happening with her neck and head caught in that unwieldy contraption like they were.

A toilet flushed nearby. He was probably emptying that disgusting bag. A chair scraped and he was back, sitting with one ankle crossed over his knee. Apparently, he meant what he said. He was staying. Why? Didn’t he have anything else to do besides babysit her?

“Yes, she just woke up,” he said quietly into his cell phone. “He’s not available?” The guy paused. “Okay, then. Sure. No time like the present.”

Oh, yeah. She had a doctor. It didn’t take long before a nurse in bubblegum-pink scrubs rushed in, grinning like a Barbie doll at the handsome man in the chair. Not even glancing at the patient in bed. Not that Marlowe blamed her. This guy was worth dreaming about, and she was Frankenstein’s bride material.

“Well, hello again,” Barbie gushed, shaking her index finger at him. “You didn’t

check in at my desk like you're supposed to, Mr. Downey."

The tone in her voice made him sound like a naughty little boy instead of a thoughtful, very masculine male. Who did she think she was?

"That's a rule around here, you know." She kept up that scolding, sing-songy tone. "Visitors must always check in at the nurses' station before they visit patients, no matter what. No exceptions."

Marlowe would've rolled her eye at that ridiculous dumb-blond routine if her head wasn't already pounding at this woman's too bright, too loud, and way too obnoxious voice. But Mr. Downey, huh? Finally, a name that went with that gorgeous face.

"Why should I check in? I never left," he murmured quietly, his voice deliciously low and lullaby soft.

Marlowe closed her eye, secretly pleased he was not brainless Ken to the nurse's dumb Barbie. But wait a second. He'd been here all night? How many nights? Just last night?

Barbie couldn't believe it, either. "You were here all night? Why didn't I know that? Tsk, tsk, tsk. Staying overnight is not allowed. But, oh well." She actually bounced and batted her eyes. "I guess as long as it's you."

'Here it comes,' Marlowe thought, sneaking a glimpse at the bubblegum flirt. 'Wait for it.'

Sure enough, Barbie dropped her inch-long fake eyelashes, like a well-trained hooker straight out of Hollywood, and whispered, "I'll let it pass this time, but next time—"

"There'll be no next time. I'm not leaving," he declared, his tone quietly firm.

“Where my wife goes, I go.”

Your what? Wife? Me? Since when?

At the same time Marlowe was stroking out over that audacious lie, Barbie shrieked, “This woman’s married to you ?” She made Marlowe sound like she was a lower life form, and Barbie hadn’t yet had the decency to even look her way. How rude.

“Yes, and we have six kids,” Marlowe whispered hoarsely. Hey, if Mr. Downey could dish it out, he could take it. Although six kids might be a stretch, considering he wasn’t old enough and neither was she.

Not that Barbie noticed. There went those fake, too-long-to-even-look-real lashes again, batting a hundred while striking out. “Ah, err, your, umm, wife...” For crying out loud, spit it out . “...isn’t wearing a ring, and I assumed...” Cough. Cough.

“I have her ring. I removed it before surgery.”

I had surgery? On what? Oh yeah, probably my eye.

“Well, okay. I guess that makes sense.” Barbie tapped her index finger on her plump bottom lip, pouting. For the love of God, what is wrong with this woman? “I didn’t mean anything...” Stiffening her spine, she mustered a cheerful, totally fake, “Never mind. Let’s see how she’s feeling today, shall we?”

She. Not Mrs. Downey. Not Marlowe. Not the hag in the bed. Eye contact would’ve been nice, but this woman seemed to have eyes only for Mr. Downey.

“You and the mouse in your pocket?” Marlowe teased, too quietly to be heard.

Which caused her fake-and-totally-unexpected husband to push his chair back, lean

over, and take hold of her good hand. “Now, honey,” he murmured, his voice so soft and sweet, Marlowe wanted to lick him. “Be nice. You know we only have two little ones. Twin girls, Blossom and Buttercup.”

Marlowe wanted to laugh at those outrageous names. But the moment he twined his fingers between hers, she lost the battle for self-control. This man was gorgeous up close. Soft brown hair, trimmed on the sides, but luscious and long enough on top to run her fingers through. If she could. A very strong angular jaw, perfect brows, and a strong, straight nose. A dimple. This big tough man had the most adorable dimple, close to the corner of his mouth. The tender glow in his eyes overrode her plan to get up, get dressed, and leave.

“You... Ah, you are...” Was all she managed to murmur, because it was suddenly, hard to breathe. My heck, he has gorgeous eyes.

The door’s hydraulic hinge whooshed shut. Good. Barbie Doll was gone. Maybe she wouldn’t work the next few days. That’d be nice since she hadn’t once asked how her patient was doing. Was she even a real nurse?

“Hey there, honey.” The sexy gentleness in this guy’s voice was more than she could handle. “It’s sure good to see your bright, smiling face again.”

Honey. He’d called her that in the cave. Before or after she kneed him? Why couldn’t she remember?

“I’m not beautiful, I’m ugly,” she whispered, “but you’re so handsome.” She’d purposefully made herself ugly to avoid being caught or noticed by the Taliban. In that country, the uglier a woman was, the better off and the longer she lived. Ugly women didn’t attract attention like pretty girls did.

“You still think I’m handsome?” he teased, reverently kissing her knuckles and those

gorgeous green eyes intent on her. “You gave us a helluva scare, honey.”

There was that kind, sweet word again. No one had called her anything that nice before, ever. “Who... who’s us?” she asked, glad he hadn’t agreed she was ugly.

“Me and my team. You remember Beau and Murphy, don’t you? And Lee? He’s the big guy who lifted you into the chopper.”

Beau? Murphy? Lee? Chopper? Nope. Didn’t ring a bell. Not at all. Not like it mattered. She’d never see those guys or the chopper again if she’d really met them in the first place. Talk was cheap and lies were cheaper. After all, she was suddenly married and had twin daughters. Who knew what other lies this guy was capable of. “Oh, them, sure.” By then, her energy was gone. “I’m tired, umm, husband.” More like too tired to play this ridiculous game any longer.

“Then go to sleep and rest easy. I’ll be here if you need anything.”

It dawned on Marlowe then. Where’s my beanie?

She freaked. “Crap. Oh no, crap!” slapping what was now her only good hand on her head. No, no, no. But it was too late. He’d already seen her very bare, very bald, totally hairless head. Those creeps in the cave had taken the beanie the moment they’d captured her. They’d known she worn it under her veil. They’d known! They’d claimed she’d broken Allah’s laws. That was why they’d beaten her. Big, brave men like those cowards had to beat her sins out of her. Liars!

“You know. Mr. Downey, you know. Don’t look. Stop, I’m ugly!” Tears rolled out of her one good eye. “I look like Cyclops, but you... you’re...”

Gorgeous and sexy and tall, and you smell so good.

He was instantly in her face. “Name’s Asher, honey, and you do not look like a Cyclops.” He smoothed a gentle hand over her bandaged skull. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“R-really?” she asked like a dolt, blinking through the tears welled up in her eye, wishing he wasn’t lying to make her feel better. But okay if he was. Beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Of course you’re beautiful, and the hair you shaved off is growing back. It looks more like a very close shave, a buzzcut. It’s the latest fad back in the States, so please don’t cry. Until we get you home, you’ll be traveling as my wife, Mrs. Asher Downey. Yes, you lost your beanie, so I picked up another for you.” He pulled a dark green beanie from his rear pocket and asked, “May I?”

He wanted to touch her scalp? Her bald-as-a-cue-ball head? “No.” Heavens, no. “Why?”

“Why what? Why do I want to help you, or why do you have to travel as my wife?”

“Both.” God, yes. Both.

“Because, honey...” Very gently, he slipped the beanie over her skull, cupping the back of her neck when he finished. “What’s important to you is important to me, and it’s possible someone tracked you here. I don’t know why, but if they did, they won’t find your name on the clinic’s records. You’re registered here at the embassy hospital as Mrs. Asher Downey, and the reason you’re here is listed as a mountain climbing fall. Nothing ties you to the Taliban.”

All she heard out of that long explanation was that one very special word: Honey. Man, this guy was something out of a fairytale. He was sincere and honorable. His eyes were green and full of life and that word was doing strange things to her heart.

“Wait. I’m in what embassy?”

“Yes, the American Embassy in Pakistan, and as far as our fake marriage goes...”

Marlowe squeezed her eye shut, embarrassed but at the same time, deeply touched by the gentleness of his touch. Everything Asher Downey had done for her was unbelievably gracious and kind. There were still questions she needed answered. Too many hows, whys, wheres, and whos to the puzzle she was caught in. But him, she liked.

“Who are you?” she asked, her question slurring with exhaustion. Darn, she didn’t want to fall asleep. Not yet. “I mean, really?”

“I’m an American contractor and I work special operations the US military can’t.”

“Ohhhhh,” she breathed, fading faster now.

Mr. Downey—Asher—kept talking, but Marlowe was beyond comprehending. Nothing made sense. Not where she was or why this man was kind to her, an anonymous woman nobody wanted, in a country no one cared about. The last things she felt were his warm lips on her forehead. This man was better than a lullaby.

Chapter Five

Asher holstered his pistol before he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the middle of Marlowe's forehead. "Sleep tight," he whispered. She'd fallen asleep as quickly as she'd come to, and that was best.

There was an undeniable effervescence to this young woman, a brave confidence that defied her weakened condition. Asher guessed her age around thirty, mostly because of how she'd handled herself when she'd attacked him at first sight. How she'd positioned her bloody feet and her weight, as if she'd totally believed she could take him. She'd been angry, true, and hyped-up on adrenaline. But she'd also been prepared to fight—him, an obviously larger, armed male, in tactical armor—to the death. Girls fresh out of college didn't do that unless they were ROTC. Most women at that age were optimistic dreamers who still believed they could change the world, just because they were young and pretty.

Marlowe was the exact opposite. She was no starry-eyed flower child, and only hardened, experienced women, who'd gone through their own version of hell, fought like she had. It took years to develop that depth of rage, so, yeah. She had to be at least 30, maybe 35, to have already had those kinds of life experiences. The hard lines barely visible across her forehead declared it, as did the furrows etched at the corner of her one good eye. Most people had laugh lines. Hers were more like 'touch me and die' lines. Asher wondered what her personal hell had been, what made her so hard. He respected her nerve and her courage. He'd served with enough strong, capable women. He recognized a leader when he saw one. Marlowe was that and more.

The Afghan women and children his team rescued three days ago were already safe in

America. They'd been flown out the same day his team arrived at the American Embassy in Pakistan. But there was something wrong with that nurse, Ms. Veronica Makowski, according to her name tag. Asher placed another call, this one to his boss.

"How's our girl?" Murph asked without preamble.

"Alive and kicking, considering she's got a concussion and a fractured left occipital bone. The surgeon repaired two brain bleeds and called in a local ophthalmologist to repair the retinal hemorrhage. Her kidneys are both badly bruised, but not shattered, which is a miracle given the condition of her lower back. He can't stitch damage like that so, for now, she's bandaged and has a wound pump installed. He put her on a painkiller, I don't know which one. She was alert enough to talk for a few minutes, but she's out again."

"Did you get a chance to discuss the arrangement we came up with?"

"If you mean our fake marriage, I mentioned it, but she's too doped up to understand enough to ask the right questions. Need you to run down everything you can find on the nurse here, though. Veronica Makowski. I got a funny vibe from her. I'm sending the picture I took and I don't believe she's a nurse, Murph. We need to move Marlowe today."

"Let me get that intel for you first. Beau?" Murphy's voice muted as he asked Beau to run facial recognition on the photo. Murphy came back with, "What vibe?"

"For starters, she paid more attention to me than she did Marlowe. Never checked her patient, didn't ask once how she felt, what her pain level was, or if she needed something more for that pain."

"Hang on, Beau found... Are you kidding me?" Murphy exclaimed. "Dagnab it. You aren't going to believe this. Veronica Makowski is actually Veronica Tippetts, the

American teenager who traveled to Syria to marry that ISIS fighter a couple years back. She's been fighting for ISIL since then. Hell, she's recruited vulnerable women, her girlfriends, for those dirtbags."

That was all Asher needed to hear. Tippetts was a threat. It didn't surprise him that Murphy disconnected, or when his cell phone rang and Beau's caller ID showed. "Hey."

"Man, you pissed Murphy off. Never seen him this mad."

Asher shrugged, his eyes on Marlowe, watching her chest rise and fall while taking stock of the equipment he needed to take with her. "He'll get over it. What'd you find on Tippetts?"

"First of all, Veronica Tippetts wasn't a teenager when she traveled to Syria to marry the ISIS fighter she met online. She was twenty-four. She knew exactly what she was doing."

A car horn honked over the connection. "Are you driving?"

"Hell, yeah. Murphy stormed out of here like hell on wheels. He's on his way to you with Renner and Heston, and I'm talking while I drive to you. Anyway, her loser husband was killed shortly afterward, and she's been pregnant twice since then, lost both babies in childbirth. She's not a sweet little thing. There are photos online of her posing with the decapitated heads of the two Americans her second hubby beheaded, while she was holding a fucking Kalashnikov rifle. I can send photos if you don't believe me."

"Nope." Asher had seen enough of that shit during his deployments. "And...?"

"And the State Department has solid evidence she's human trafficking for ISIS."

Asher blew out a breath. “Marlowe’s her target. Get Deck in the air.”

“He’s already in transit. ETA in five.”

“Appreciate it, brother.” Asher stowed his cell and headed to the door with his pistol drawn. There was no lock on the door and no window in the room. Whoever betrayed Marlowe’s current location to the Taliban must’ve known that. Which led him straight back to Tippetts. It didn’t make sense that a woman who’d signed on with ISIS would now be involved with Taliban fighters. The Taliban had been at war with ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, since February 2015. While ISIS now went by ISIL, the Islamic State of the Levant, they’d become mortal enemies after an ISIS fighter killed a senior Taliban commander.

Historically, the Levant that ISIL now claimed had once covered the entire Mediterranean Basin, including what was now modern-day Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and all adjacent regions. Basically the entire Middle East. If Tippetts was involved in human trafficking, and if Marlowe was her target, were the Taliban and ISIS working together again? Wouldn’t surprise Asher if they were. A terrorist was a terrorist was a terrorist. Didn’t matter what names they went by.

He rang the desk in the small embassy clinic to get a feel for where Tippetts was. No answer. He rang the ambassador’s office next. Someone always answered there. Not this time.

Pissed that he was the only one between Marlowe and the shitstorm he suspected was headed his way, Asher jammed his chair under the doorknob, unhooked Marlowe from her monitoring devices, and prepped her for evacuation. He wouldn’t be carrying her this time, not with all the equipment that had to go with her.

But how had the Taliban known where she was? Hell, even Asher hadn’t known his boss had cleared the way for them to land in Pakistan until they were in the air. Last-

minute emergencies still took time to coordinate and authorize. Ambassador Clark would've had to clear any landing with Pakistani authorities after he'd cleared their change of plans with the United States Secretary of State. Director McCormack must've run his ass off to make sure The TEAM helos got that clearance. Jed McCormack was now Secretary of State. It was good to have friends in high places.

Had the Taliban tracked the TEAM helicopters over the Khyber Pass and all the way to Islamabad? Asher wouldn't be surprised if they did. The Taliban had come up in the world since the war began. They were smarter, tech savvy, and used social media to their benefit. But why Tippetts, and where was Ambassador Clark? For that matter, was Marlowe their target or was something else going on? That was possible. Embassies were protected sanctuaries and U.S. ambassadors served at the pleasure of the president. Clark should've been in-house when they arrived, but he hadn't been. Instead, his chief of staff had met them on the rooftop landing pad, and Mr. Dixon hadn't given any explanation as to where Clark was or that there were any problems.

Asher's cell phone vibrated in his hand. "We're almost there," Murphy advised, over the roar of helicopter rotors. "Have our girl ready to go."

"I'll need help getting her to the roof. Are the Marines still guarding the embassy?"

"Yes. Mr. Dixon called and advised me that Ambassador Clark came down with pneumonia yesterday. That's why he's been out of sight. Dixon wasn't at liberty to tell us earlier."

Asher breathed easier at that news, but it made him wonder who Dixon hadn't wanted overhearing that information. "Watch out for Tippetts."

"Already informed Dixon who she is and spoke with Alex, too. He's advised President Adams, and Adams has ordered more Marines into Pakistan to secure the embassy. Also spoke with the USMC commander here. He's put his people on alert."

“It doesn’t feel right leaving them.” Asher remembered Benghazi, how those men had been betrayed by their country, left to fight and die alone on foreign soil.

“Listen to me, guldarn it. They have their job; we have ours, and there’s more of them stationed here than there is us.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

No sooner did Murphy disconnect than someone pounded at the door. Asher’s phone chimed an incoming text. Thank goodness. Renner Graves and Heston Contreras were in the hall, not Tippetts. Okay then. Time to go. He let them in. He’d already strapped Marlowe onto her backboard, making sure her sling was wrapped snug against her body and under her blanket. Between him and Renner, they lifted her and her bed, along with the medical equipment she needed and proceeded into the hall, while Heston guarded their rear. As expected, Tippetts wasn’t at the desk she’d called the nurses’ station. Nobody was. Foreboding edged up Asher’s spine. So where was she?

The stairs were straight forward but going was slow. It took all three men to wrangle Marlowe up the narrow staircase and onto the roof without hurting or waking her. Once at the helo, it didn’t take long to load her, thanks to Decker’s astute preplanning.

“Where’d you find a hydraulic lift?” Asher asked. Hydraulic lift carts easily loaded heavy military equipment from ground level into helos and transports.

“I have friends in low places,” Decker growled. He was one of those older, grumpier, Vietnam vets. “Give me that crap.” Without skipping a beat, he grabbed the monitor and IV from Marlowe’s side, handling the wires and tubes as if he’d had plenty of

experience evacuating injured people. Which he no doubt did. Next, Heston passed him the portable oxygen canister. All Asher and Renner had to do was ride the hydraulic lift up to the level of the helo door and Marlowe was inside.

“This everything?” Murphy asked as he helped Asher transfer Marlowe to the narrow bed attached to the far inside wall.

“Yup,” Asher replied. Decker had already secured her oxygen tank to a nearby bracket and the IV bag overhead. After he covered her with warmed blankets, Asher strapped her in as gently as he could. He’d just fastened the harness over her chest when she woke up and touched his cheek. She said something. He leaned in closer and said, “Say again.”

So she did. But this time, she took a deep breath and belted out, “Dimple. You’ve got a dimple, Asher. It’s cute.”

Well, damn. Now he’d made sure everyone heard and sure enough...

“Step on it, Dimples. You’re so-o-o cute,” Beau announced in an ultra-girly voice.

“Shut it, Villanueva,” Asher snapped.

Murphy clamped protective earphones over her head. “Poor little thing,” he murmured when she didn’t move or speak again. “I meant her, Dimples, not you.”

“Copy that and knock it off,” Asher replied, still watching his back and now wishing his team was deaf and dumb. Renner and Heston hadn’t heard. They’d been busy shoving the lift and hospital bed away from the helo. Climbing back inside, they strapped into the two forward-facing seats without poking fun at Asher, while Murphy strapped into the copilot’s seat. Everyone put headphones on. Asher stayed standing between Marlowe and the still open door. He’d had enough surprises, and

Tippetts was just another one in a long line of ugly.

It wasn't until Decker had the bird hovering over the rooftop that the blonde nurse dashed out of the stairwell. She wasn't armed, but she was obviously angry, yelling and gesturing at the dark-haired man in a suit with her. The moment she pointed up at the helo, Asher harnessed himself into firing position behind the GPMG installed at the doorway. Air-cooled and belt-fed, the general-purpose machine gun was lethal at close range, and Ms. Tippetts needed to see it.

Asher aimed the weapon directly at her, openly declaring his intention to defend the helo. His fingers weren't itching to fire. He wasn't an impulsive sniper or a stone-cold killer. Asher needed facts and evidence, not just suspicions, before he unleashed death. Bonafide-trained snipers weren't assassins. They didn't take life without just cause, and revenge was no reason to take Tippetts out. She might be a traitor and an avowed terrorist, but she posed no threat at the moment. But she did need to understand that he would ensure swift retaliation if she made a move. He would take her out, and he wouldn't blink an eye while he did it.

Heston joined Asher at the door, hanging onto one of many suicide straps attached to the ceiling. "She's a piece of work," he said, disgust in his voice.

Not taking his eyes off the duo on the roof, Asher nodded. The Marines might still be on guard at the gate to this embassy, but something was dead damned wrong in this far-off piece of America.

"Don't shoot, Deck," Murphy growled.

"Don't intend to," Decker replied gruffly. "Not until I see the whites of her lying eyes."

The Black Hawk banked left and, once again, they were on the move.

Chapter Six

By the time Marlowe opened her eye again, she found herself in the great state of Virginia, of all unlikely places. Not Afghanistan or Pakistan, not even in that part of the world. But far, far away from those familiar, yet famously chaotic trouble spots. Which was good, considering how badly she needed to recuperate and recharge. Once she was back on her feet again, though, she was out of there. She had work to do and women to save. Those women in Afghanistan had no one else to rely on, and Marlowe refused to let them down. They were her family. Them. Only them.

Instead of the surgeon she'd never met in Pakistan, she was now attended to by Dr. Libby Houston, a bright, cheerful, blonde who wasn't afraid to pull up a chair beside her bed to chat. Dr. Houston seemed to care. She was open and friendly, and she had five kids. Five. Unheard of in America.

She'd just taken Marlowe for a walk in the hall—with a walker. At first, Marlowe was annoyed that Dr. Houston thought she needed one, but, yeah. Once she was upright and on her feet, the walker came in handy. The last thing she needed to do was fall. The bottoms of her feet were still tender and her left shoulder ached. The sling was another godsend she hadn't expected she'd appreciate as much as she did.

They didn't walk far before Marlowe wore out, and that was embarrassing. She was young; she should've been able to run down that wide hallway. Twice. But nope, she'd toddled along like a decrepit old woman, back to her room, where Dr. Houston helped her into bed, then pulled a chair over and sat down to chat.

Dr. Houston wasn't dressed like that nurse in—wherever. Oh, yeah, Pakistan. She

wore jeans and a white t-shirt, not scrubs like most doctors wore. Mischief glinted in her extraordinary cobalt-blue eyes. “You were surprised when I told you I have five kids. Why’s that?”

Marlowe hated that she was easy to read. “What happened to the American dream, a white picket fence and two-point-five kids, Dr. Houston?”

“Libby. Just Libby, Marlowe.” Dr. Houston, err, Libby, shrugged. “I’m pretty sure that’s a myth. My husband Mark always wanted a big family, so, when I scored as high as I did on the MCAT—”

“What’s MCAT?”

“The Medical College Admissions Test. It’s a prerequisite for students going into the medical field. We didn’t tell anyone. Kept it a secret until I could sign MD after my name. Anyway, after four hectic years juggling time between our three girls, Mark’s job, my clinicals and med school, one night while he was fixing dinner, Mark asked if I’d ever consider adoption. So here we are now, the proud parents of five little girls, two we adopted from Puerto Rico.” Libby leaned into Marlowe, cupped her hand, and whispered, “I’ll tell you a secret. I’m pregnant again.”

“Don’t you know anything about birth control?”

“Yessss, I do!” She squealed like a silly teenager in love. “But Mark always wanted six kids, and I made sure he’s going to get his wish.”

“Six? That’s half a dozen.” Marlowe held back asking, ‘Are you crazy?’

She couldn’t imagine getting a family that size out of Afghanistan. The logistics would be a nightmare. Saving one woman and child was tough enough, sometimes nearly impossible. But six? An adult woman and five kids, assuming her husband was

already safe in the United States. What was Libby thinking? Not that she needed saving, or that she lived in Afghanistan, but six children?

The crazy woman was still grinning like a spoiled, little girl. “Which is why I’m not in private practice anymore. Working here keeps me closer to home. I work fewer hours, and I get to see more of Mark and my kiddoes.”

Marlowe couldn’t help but wonder why American women like Libby got to live lives of wealth and ease, while others in the world were forced into poverty and unbearable savagery. Too many times, she’d witnessed brutality waged openly upon defenseless men, women, and children, all done in the name of Allah. Not that Christians and atheists were any better. They weren’t. The crimes committed under the various names of God and religion were the worst.

But Libby was genuinely pleased to be pregnant? And she loved her husband? She had no idea how lucky she was. Trouble-free lives were not the norm in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over again. Women were considered less than men, unworthy of higher education. They were easy targets, harassed, and publicly beaten by the morality police if they dressed immodestly. Which basically meant without wearing that godawful burqa just so, or if they went out in public without male escorts. Like a dog on a leash, women were no longer respected or needed, other than to provide male children for the Taliban’s insidious plan for the rest of the world. To be used as unwilling suicide bombers. Heaven help the female children. Too many had mysteriously disappeared or were brazenly stolen from their mothers’ arms in broad daylight. That was one way the Taliban funded their activities, by selling virgins. Little boy and girl virgins.

Suddenly, Libby took Marlowe’s hand. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Very carefully, Marlowe extracted her fingers from Libby’s and slipped her hand under the blanket. “You didn’t. I just...” What? Don’t belong in America even

though I was born here? “I was thinking how different things are here. Where I’ve been... In Afghanistan...” How does one explain the vast difference between these two countries to someone like Libby? Marlowe settled for, “Life here isn’t the norm for the rest of the world.”

“How so?”

“Well, like, you’re happily married, you have a big family, and you can support them. You were allowed to go to college, then to medical school. You’re a woman, but you’re also a doctor. You can do whatever you want, even adopt children from another country.”

“Puerto Rico is an American territory, so adoption wasn’t difficult. After the last hurricane, there were so many kids left without parents or grandparents, it was the least we could do. Where were you born? Are you really from Afghanistan?”

“No, Chicago.”

“So your family lives in...?”

“No. I don’t know where my parents are, and I don’t care. I don’t have brothers, sisters, or other relatives, and I don’t need anyone, understand? Haven’t in years. Don’t expect that to change.”

“Why were you in Afghanistan, Marlowe?” Libby’s voice gentled. “You’re not military. Were you working with Doctors Without Borders or an organization like it?”

“Is this an inquisition?” Marlowe snapped, unwilling to explain her choices to someone who had no idea how hard life was for the rest of the world.

Libby's smile grew softer. "Ha, me interrogating anyone. That'd be funny. It just seems like you could use a friend, Marlowe, and I know a few women who are dying to meet you. Are you interested in meeting them?"

"I mean, umm..." Marlowe had no idea how much to share. She never had time for girlfriends. She'd been busy saving unfortunate women with invisible targets on their foreheads. She got whole families out of harm's way, no matter the cost to her. Her getting caught was her only mistake in Afghanistan. Thankfully, none of her women were with her the afternoon she was abducted. Because of her, there were twenty-one families reunited and living in America. They were happy. That was something to be proud of, and she was.

"Marlowe, honey."

Her head jerked up and straightaway, her eye zeroed on the calm, steady man at the door, the only man who called her honey. Asher. She gulped seeing him there, hanging on the overhead door jamb by his fingertips. The uniquely male scent that came with him was overwhelmingly warm and intoxicating, even at this distance. Her nostrils flared. Her heart missed a beat. Or two. A strange, warm tingle hummed between her legs, where nothing had hummed before.

"Well, it's about time," Libby teased, her countenance still bright and cheery. "I was just asking Marlowe if she'd like to meet a couple TEAM wives. They keep asking when they can visit. What do you think, Asher?"

"I think that's up to her."

The way his green eyes seemed to be drinking her in was downright disconcerting, but Marlowe couldn't have looked away if she'd tried. She was drawn to this guy like a rusty nail to a magnet. Suddenly, she had a bad case of restless leg syndrome. She hadn't seen him since Pakistan and now he was here. He came back. For her? Or was

she another assignment? A mission. Unfinished business? That had to be it. She was just a job, and when he was done, he'd leave. That was what people did. They used you up, then threw you away.

He was dressed in black again this morning, and he was so much taller and broader than she remembered. Those muscular shoulders... the same shoulders he'd carried her on while running up that steep hillside. His biceps were magnificent. Not inked, as far as she could tell. But either his short-sleeved, black polo was a size too small or she was seeing things. Incredible, fantastic things. Slim hips. The shiny silver and gold belt buckle was new, but those stovepipe legs were incredibly long and his thighs were as thick as tree trunks.

Every bit of this quiet man was chiseled lean mass, and the way he stood there at her door waiting, like he needed permission to enter, was nice. Unusual, but not spectacular. Except everything about Asher was special to Marlowe. She'd become a silly moth drawn to a flame that could eventually kill her.

She had no idea what to think or say, until Libby put her hands on her knees, lifted up from her chair, and said, "Oh, I see how it is. I'll just leave you two—"

"No. It's not like that. Not at all," Marlowe replied quickly. A little too loudly. "It's just that... Libby, wait. What did you want to know?"

"Nothing I'll let you two get reacquainted. If you need anything, press the call button. See you later. Buh-bye."

Asher stepped aside as she breezed out the door, then asked, "May I?"

That voice. Marlowe loved how it vibrated straight to her soul. "May you what?" she croaked.

“May I come in? A gentleman never assumes. He always asks a lady.”

“Oh, that. Sure. Yeah, come in. We were just talking. Not about you. You know, just about... things.” Why am I rambling?

Asher strolled in, shutting the door behind him. Man, he was tall. He sat on Libby’s chair, crossed an ankle over his opposite knee, and said, “We need to talk.”

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Chapter Seven

He'd frightened Marlowe and Asher didn't understand why. It was obvious, the way she fidgeted with the edge of her blanket, and how her feet bobbed beneath the blanket.

"What do you want to talk about, huh?" she asked defensively.

"About everything. How do you feel, for starters?" His gaze settled on her restless feet. "Can you walk? Feel like getting out of here? Maybe go for a ride?"

"Umm, yes, sure. I'd like to do something besides lay around."

Asher jumped to his feet and hit the call button attached to the railing at her right.

Marlowe inhaled a deep breath. "Hmmm. You smell good," she whispered.

He looked down at her bruised, but healing, face. "Well, thanks, I guess. Never had a woman tell me that before."

The shock on her face was comical. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. He couldn't help grinning. "Why, there you are," he murmured, running the back of his index finger over her cheek. "Nice to see you again, Marlowe."

"Hi," she answered quietly.

Her skin was unexpectedly soft and smooth. The urge to kiss her came out of

nowhere, but just in time, a firm knock at the door brought Asher back to his senses and the reason he was there. He needed answers. Not a relationship.

“Hey, Asher.” Judy Mortimer rolled in the wheelchair he’d requested when he’d greeted her earlier. “Hi, Marlowe, I’m Judy Mortimer, and I’ll be your nurse today. How are you feeling?”

“Hi, Judy. I’m okay, I guess.”

“Just okay? Then we must be doing something wrong. Let me check your stats before you leave. How’s your head?” Judy whipped the stethoscope from her neck and clipped an oximeter on Marlowe’s finger. “This won’t take long. Hmmm... heart sounds good. No temp. Your oxygen sat is excellent. Can’t get better than ninety-nine percent, can we?”

“A hundred would be nice,” Marlowe murmured.

“Yes, and you’re close to that, aren’t you? I still need to know how your head feels. You have a serious concussion, and you absolutely have to take things easy until you’re okayed for PT. Especially with that repaired retina. No strenuous activity, get plenty of rest, and for Pete’s sake, no falling. Any pain, dizziness, or feeling like you’re going to faint or need to throw up?”

Marlowe shook her head slightly. “Not today. Libby took me for a walk earlier, in a walker. Made me feel like an old lady. Does that count?”

“Ah, ah, ah, none of that now. You aren’t old, but you are recovering from getting too close to Death’s door. How’s your shoulder pain. Bearable?”

Marlowe nodded. “Yes, can I take the sling off now?”

“Nope, not until Libby says you can. Same goes for the eye patch. But don’t worry, you’re a fast healer and you’ll be out of here in no time.” Judy looked sternly at Asher. “You are taking her to the barn, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, relieved to hear how normal Marlowe’s stats were.

“Well, pick a good one.”

“Does Harley raise any bad ones?”

Judy looped the stethoscope back around her neck. “No, he doesn’t, but compatibility is key. Ah, why am I telling you that? You’ll know the moment you see the right one. Now let’s get WW here on her feet and on her way. Time’s a wasting.” She tugged the oximeter off Marlowe’s finger.

“WW?” Marlowe asked.

“Yup, the staff nicknamed you Wonder Woman , so don’t be surprised if their kids ask for your autograph.”

“Why?”

“Because you survived the Taliban, honey. Ready?”

“I’m pretty sure Marlowe was born ready, right?” Asher asked, as Judy unhooked the IV from Marlowe’s arm and helped her up and into a thick, long, blue robe that covered her from her neck to toes. Marlowe tugged her beanie farther down over her ears. A spiffy pair of gray socks with bright yellow rubber dots on the soles went on her feet next.

Once Asher had Marlowe settled in the wheelchair, he told Judy, “We won’t be

long.”

“Good, but don’t wear her out. Recuperation requires energy she still doesn’t have. If she’s not back here by noon, I’ll come looking for you.” Judy pretty much treated all agents like she did her twin boys. She was bossy, and she meant what she said, but she was also a devoted caregiver.

“Yes, ma’am,” Asher said, saluting smartly. He wheeled Marlowe down the hallway to the elevator, giving her a quick tour of this portion of TEAM Headquarters as they went.

“You have an ICU here? Why?”

He leaned over her shoulder as they rolled past the two vacant ICU rooms into the waiting elevator. “Those are fairly new. We didn’t need that level of care until someone tried to kill Kelsey last fall. After that, the on-site medical unit and the multiple-level basement made sense. My boss is your typical Type A personality, so he went overboard and added an intensive care unit. But I’ve got to hand it to him, the man’s got foresight.”

“Hmmm, I’d like to meet him someday.”

“I can arrange that, especially if you’re planning to meet his wife. Kelsey’s one of the women Libby was talking about. I think you’ll like them, but Kelsey’s special. You just wait. She’s going to love you.” Asher hit the up button for the ground level. In seconds he was pushing Marlowe into TEAM HQ’s lobby. “Hey Paige,” he called to the receptionist at the customer service desk opposite the floor-to-ceiling glass entrance doors.

“Oh, my goodness, is that our very own Wonder Woman ? Wait up.” Like a woman on a mission, Paige Royal scooted around her twenty-foot-long desk and ran to greet

Marlowe.

Asher hadn't thought to warn Marlowe that Paige was a hugger. The poor thing went statue-stiff when Paige's arms wrapped around her, sling and all. Paige didn't seem to notice she was smothering Marlowe, or that Marlowe wasn't responding in kind. Not until Asher coughed politely and whispered, "Back off, Paige. Sometimes less is more."

"Oh, well, sure. So how are you doing WW? Do you need anything? A big-screen TV? Your own personal refrigerator? Your bracelets?" Paige giggled. She was overly enthusiastic, and Marlowe probably didn't even know or care what a big screen was, not the way she arched away from Paige.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see your sling. Did I hug you too hard?" Paige asked, still set on hyper-friendly, while Marlowe radiated a definite get-the-hell-away-from-me vibe.

"Geez, Paige, she's still healing. Give her a little room," Asher teased. He knew then he needed to get the word out to all TEAM personnel to give Marlowe space when they met her. To respect her comfort zone, no matter how large it might end up being. In Paige's case, a few feet would've worked better than this effusive, too-close-for-comfort welcome.

"No, I'm... I'm fine," Marlowe finally answered, her voice rough and unfriendly. "Just overwhelmed being back in America, when just a couple days ago, I was on the other side of the gawddamned world!"

Ouch. Make that rough, unfriendly, and hostile.

"Three days ago, honey," Asher gently advised the stressed-out woman in the wheelchair, before Paige jumped in with a correction and got her head bitten off again.

Chastised, she took a half-step back, then did what she should've done in the first place. Paige took a knee beside Marlowe's wheelchair, which put them on the same level, and instead of touching without asking, she simply said, "Welcome home, Ms. Rich, and if I can help in any way, please let me know."

Marlowe sat there trembling, so Asher intervened. "Sorry, Paige, but we need to get moving."

"Sure. No problem." She lifted to her feet. "Have your phone with you?"

"Yes. Always."

"Good, because we're on high alert until we know where your friendly nurse in Pakistan went. She disappeared after Ambassador Clark was flown back to the States yesterday. He's in the ICU at Walter Reed. Seems he inhaled a lethal dose of anthrax."

"Anthrax? Shit, is he going to be okay?"

Page nodded. "Yes, the embassy doctor recognized the symptoms and quarantined Clark until he could get him home. A team of State Department investigators are at the embassy now. Hopefully, they'll find who tried to kill him and drag that person back home with them when they return."

"How'd they get anthrax? Was it in the clinic, too?" Asher hoped not, for Marlowe's sake.

"No. They haven't found anthrax anywhere but in the ductwork at the ambassador's residence. The investigators believe it was delivered through the air vents via aerosol spray, but that's just a theory. Until they run DNA tests, they can't pin down the exact version they're dealing with. They need genomes and plasmids and" —Paige

waved her fingers at Asher— “you know, all the technical DNA stuff I know nothing about.” She looked down at Marlowe. “I’m serious, Ms. Rich. I can get anything you want or need, all you have to do is ask. Even if it’s just a box of chocolates.”

“Thank you,” Marlowe answered politely. “A chocolate bar would be nice.”

“Any specific brand?”

The slightest smile poked at the corners of Marlowe’s lips. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had any. Surprise me?”

“You bet. I’ll stop by your room later, and if you’re not back, I’ll leave it where you can see it. Deal?”

“Deal. And, umm, thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Rich.”

“You can, umm, call me Marlowe.”

“And you can call me Paige. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Asher breathed a sigh of relief. No girl fight today.

“Keep me informed,” he told Paige, as he wheeled Marlowe out the door and into the sunny, spring day, before they ran into anyone else. Most agents were on assignment. Those who weren’t, were probably in their offices working on after-action reports. Murphy and Mark, the two senior agents, were sticklers for details. They never accepted the first draft.

“Do you think that weird nurse poisoned the ambassador?” Marlowe asked as he took

a sharp left, headed for the first of two barns on TEAM HQ property.

Immediately, several dogs in the outside kennels spotted him and started barking. “I think she had something to do with it.”

“She was creepy. I didn’t like her. She never looked at me, and she talked down to you like you were a three-year old.”

A smile sparked Asher’s lips as he headed down the gradual incline to the barn. Marlowe was protective of him? That was new. “Well, she’ll get hers, so don’t let her spoil our day. Are you warm enough?”

What was wrong with him? Our day ? This wasn’t our day . It was just another day . Nothing special about it. Our day made it sound like there was something going on between him and Marlowe when there wasn’t.

“Yes, this robe is warm. I like it, but the dots on these socks hurt when I stand on them.”

“How did you walk with Libby?” She’d sounded proud of her progress earlier.

Marlowe shrugged. “My feet weren’t as sore then, and I had slippers on, not socks.”

That those tiny rubber dots hurt told Asher how stubborn she was and how badly damaged her feet were. The doctor at the Pakistan Embassy had meticulously dug thorns, rock chips, and debris out of her soles, but he’d had to stitch the deepest wounds, and those would take time to heal. Mental note to self: tell Libby Marlowe’s feet needed more attention.

She’d been dragged barefoot up that mountain, and only heaven knew how many miles she’d been fast-marched before those bastards got her into the cave. Asher’s gut

clenched at what else they could've done to her, but the embassy doctor had assured him that she hadn't been violated. Didn't keep Asher from wanting to kill those three again. Three against one tiny woman? Chicken shits.

"It's good you won't be walking then." Asher slowed the chair to a stop at the open barn door. Harley's barn was divided into three walled-off sections: one for his veterinary practice, another for boarding and breeding kennels, and the last, for a training arena where he taught owners how to handle their comfort dogs. The dogs in the outside kennels quieted now that they realized they weren't getting visitors today.

"That's a lot of big dogs," Marlowe murmured.

"Are you afraid of them?"

"No, I've seen bigger, but they all had handlers, and that was before—" Her jaw snapped shut.

Asher knew what she hadn't said. Most dogs born in Afghanistan were flea-infested, mangy, underfed mutts of no significant breeds. But bigger dogs with handlers could only be US military working dogs, and those handlers were American soldiers, Marines, or Navy SEALs. He carried on as if she hadn't given a tiny piece of her backstory away. "This is the best kennel this side of the Mississippi. Harley Mortimer runs it, and you're here to help me select one of his service dogs, so..." He clapped his hands. "Hop to it."

"Is he Judy's husband?"

"Yes, and he's also one helluva dog breeder, but be prepared. His boys might be working today. Little A is the quiet one and Georgie is... Oh, forget it. They're in school. Never mind."

“Who’s the service dog for?”

“Me,” Asher admitted, not worried what Marlowe might think of him for needing a comfort animal. It was what it was.

She looked up at him, concern stamped on her poor battered face. “Oh?” she asked, speaking over the excited canines inside. “Do you, umm, have nightmares or something?”

For the first time since he’d met her, Asher noticed Marlowe’s one visible eye was blue. Not dark indigo-blue like Libby’s, but sky-blue. Bright blue. Like falling-star-in-the-middle-of-the-day blue. He blinked at the electricity crackling between them. His mouth went dry. He’d had these same disjointed feelings for Marlowe in Afghanistan. He could’ve sworn he’d heard his Grandma Downey whisper, ‘She’s the one for you, Asher. Take good care of her.’ It had honestly felt like he’d been introduced—until Marlowe nailed his balls and he’d dropped like a sack of shit at her feet.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, forget I asked. It’s none of my business.”

He jolted back to the present at the snark in her apology. “No, it’s not that. I’m just...” Shocked that you’re brave enough to ask. Brave or tactless, he liked both qualities in a woman. Better than acting like she cared when she didn’t. “Yes, I have nightmares, and sometimes, when I wake up in the morning, my house is torn to hell because of them.”

“I’m sorry.”

The scary thing about Marlowe was how fast she changed from wicked-mean to gentle as a lamb. Like now. She placed a soft hand over his on the chair handle. That simple gesture had him noticing how slender her fingers were. How feminine

compared to his thicker, callused fingers. “I have bad dreams, too, Asher. They keep me up at night sometimes, but I... but I...” She chewed her bottom lip. “I’ve never had a house to wreck, so you’re one up on me there.”

That revelation hit Asher like a punch to his gut. He dropped to a knee at her side, and, like an overprotective fool, asked, “May I give you a hug? I’ll be gentle. I promise I won’t hurt you. I just...” Really want to hold you.

Marlowe jerked away as if he’d asked if he could slap her.

Asher opened his big mouth to recall his asinine request. What kind of guy asks permission to hug a woman? Something as simple as that usually happened on its own. But no. He had to go and make it a big deal. Like it meant something. Which it didn’t. He’d meant it as a way to get closer to her. To gain her confidence. Nothing more. Nothing, really. Just a friendly hug between a guy and a gal who didn’t know each other. Not one thing more.

“Well-l-l-l-l...” Marlowe drew that word out. “I guess. If you have to.”

I guess. If you have to. Total rejection. Another big clue. Despite being put in his place, Asher stretched one arm carefully across Marlowe’s tense shoulders and delivered the shortest, most awkward, platonic hug in history. He got no response. No attempt to hug back. Hugging her was like hugging a statue. Not as cold, but she might as well’ve been made of stone.

After mere seconds, he cleared his throat, drew in a deep breath of get-the-hell-over-yourself, and withdrew from the strangest contact in history. He’d forgotten. Marlowe wasn’t like most women. She didn’t want physical contact, and the tender vibe he’d thought he’d felt before was his imagination. Well, shit. He was right. She still planned on returning to Afghanistan. What had she said back in that cave? “I wasn’t hurting anyone. I have work to do.”

Okay, then. Lesson learned. Moving on. Asher wheeled her into the barn and prepared to be let down again.

Chapter Eight

The noise that greeted Marlowe inside the barn was not what she expected. Not a single dog barked or whined, not inside or outside. It was uncanny how silent they all were. Well, except for the little yellow fellow in the nearest kennel. He yapped and slapped the ground with both paws, his tail wagging and his butt wiggling like he wanted to play. The cutie was smiling. He looked like he was happy to see her. She was sure of it, he was smiling.

“Look, Asher.” She nearly squealed, pointing out the brazen pup who was now, literally, climbing the chain-link wall of his kennel. He yelped at her. Right at her. Not at anyone else. He was smiling, his whole body wiggling so hard that he fell off the fence and landed on his fluffy butt. But then he bounced to his feet and started climbing again. “Look. He’s smiling.”

“I see him,” Asher replied calmly, then yelled, “Hey, Harley. We’re here.”

A tall, sandy-haired man on a phone leaned backward out of the big wooden stall at Marlowe’s right and waved. “Howdy, ma’am. Asher. I’ll be a minute, so make yourselves comfortable. The MWDs are in the rear corner, but they’re all spoken for. Everyone else is fair game.”

“Copy that. Thanks,” Asher answered.

“What are MWDs?”

“Military working dog. Harley trains dogs for veterans, select military operations, and

police forces across the country.”

“No wonder he works in a barn.”

“Yup.”

Marlowe inhaled the delicious scents inside Harley’s barn. There was no stink in the air, just the sweet smells of alfalfa, cedar, the rough wooden walls, and the spring breeze filtering in behind her. The entire floor was one wide expanse of smoothly finished timbers that looked like they’d been polished. Or sanded, maybe that was what gave them their soft sheen.

Four rows of kennels lined the area to her left. Harley’s stall, or whatever it was, stood nearest the door. Her feet itched to get up and walk from one end of this wonderful, mammoth building to the other, but cooing overhead sent her gaze up to the rafters. “Pigeons. Look, Asher! There’s a white one. See him? Right there, in the middle.” Oh, to be as free as that pretty bird.

When Asher didn’t respond, Marlowe looked over her shoulder to see what had his attention. She didn’t blame him for being distracted. She was. There was so much to see, and the openness of this building felt almost as good as being outside. She was free and able to breathe. Life was good. Not for long, but today, she had dogs to meet. Maybe hold. She could hardly wait.

Marlowe had never owned a dog or cat. Not that she was getting one today. She wasn’t even sure she had the capacity to take care of anything besides the women who came and went in her life. They were temporary. Pets weren’t, and her life at home had never been like other girls’ lives. From little on up, she’d had to be the adult in her family, and that usually meant spending days, sometimes weeks, home alone. Scrounging for food in a house bare of normal furniture, like a table and chairs, a nice sofa, not the sagging, smelly thing that took up what should’ve been her living

room. When she wasn't home, Marlowe didn't have time for pets. She'd been out, roaming the streets and back alleys, looking for her mom. Dragging her home from the bars, when she'd allow it. Sometimes she'd already hooked up with some sleazy guy and insisted he come along, too. Those men always thought they had rights to whatever her mom owned, even her daughter. Marlowe hit the streets when that happened. She had no choice, and she hated her mom for doing that to her, for not caring enough to protect her only kid.

She had no idea where her mom was today, didn't care if she ever saw her again. She'd had to grow up fast back then. Had to babysit her mother, make sure she ate, slept, bathed, and didn't drink herself to death. Well, no more. Her mom had her chance to be decent, but she'd wasted Marlowe's childhood on freaking booze and creepy men. Marlowe was the mom now, and she was everything her mother should've been, a woman who'd die to save poor Afghan women and their kids. It was up to her to search them out and get them out of Afghanistan. She owed it to them. No one else was dedicated or brave enough.

Shrugging off the memory of the chaotic US military desertion, Marlow refused to go back and relive one second of her pitiful childhood. Period. End of that damn trip down memory lane.

Asher still hadn't answered her question, though, and that bugged her. Didn't he hear what she asked? His head was tilted up and in the right direction, but he wasn't looking at the pigeons. They'd all flown away. He was just standing there, staring at nothing.

Of course. He needed a dog, and here she was, going on about birds. Since Asher wasn't in control of the wheelchair, Marlowe reached her one good hand to the top of one wheel and started the chair rolling. She wanted to talk to that yellow puppy. Touch his fur and see if it was as soft and fluffy as it looked. It was cute and friendly. It'd be perfect for Asher.

“Whoa, there, ma’am, where do you think you’re going?” he said, stopping her forward momentum.

“Ma’am? You called me ma’am?” She turned on him, daring him to call her that again. “What do you think I am, an old woman? I’m just twenty-six, smartass.”

He cocked his head. “You’re only twenty-six? Really? That’s all?”

Now he was being mean. “Yes, that’s all. Are you deaf or just plain stupid?”

“No, no, I... I just thought... I mean, you—”

“Ha! You do think I’m old, don’t you? You think I’m an old hag. What an asshole. Who the fuck cares what you think?” In a fit of temper, she tore the stupid sling off and tossed it aside. Not smart. The instant it went flying, her arm ached, but she didn’t care. It was past time to leave this place. “Thanks for the fresh air, but I’ve had enough fun for one gawddamned day. Take me back to my room. Right now.”

Asher dropped to one knee beside the chair. “Marlowe, stop. Please. I had no idea how old you were, and I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“I don’t need your help. I don’t need anybody’s help.”

“It’s just that, honey—”

“Stop calling me that! You don’t get to call me that. Get away. I can make it back to my room on my own.”

“No, I’ll take you, but I need you to know—”

“Fuck you!” Marlowe pushed on that wheel, but nothing happened, not with his big

hand holding her in place. “Let go before I—”

“Really?” he asked, as calm as ever. “That’s how you’re going to play this? I save your life, and you get pissed because I call you ma’am? You seem determined to take everything wrong. Ma’am is a simple sign of respect where I come from. There are a lot of other things I could’ve called you, but I didn’t and I wouldn’t. I respect the hell out of you, and I will most certainly call you ma’am and honey anytime I want. Because you mean something to me. You have the heart of a lioness, honey .”

He’d said that last word to underscore how stupid she was acting, but damn. That word, honey, meant a lot to Marlowe. It was a nice word, a kind word. It was his word. Her gaze hit the polished floor. She couldn’t believe how easily she’d gone ballistic and nasty. Over nothing. What was wrong with her? She had no idea what to say next or how to apologize, because—

Marlowe had never apologized before, not to anyone, not if she wanted to live. Life on Chicago’s streets was hard, harder for girls, and harder yet for girls who didn’t know how to stand up for themselves and fight back. But life in Afghanistan was murder, literally, for unescorted American women. Over there, she’d had to charge hard every single day and fight for every little scrap of food and—

Maybe that was a good place to start, admitting she’d lost her temper. Still looking at the floor but not seeing it, she begrudgingly muttered, “I overreacted. You’re right and I’m sorry. I just...” Shit, this was hard. “I just—”

“You’re just used to doing everything alone, and no one having your back, I get it. What I don’t get is why you were in Afghanistan by yourself. You had no support team to fall back on, did you?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, no. But I’m okay with that. I work better alone.”

“What work?” The disbelief in his tone was palpable. “What kind of boss gives you a job in the most dangerous country in the world and then leaves you there by yourself? How long were you in Afghanistan, anyway?”

Marlowe stared, not yet sure of this whole trusting thing yet, and not meeting Asher’s eyes. He had ESP or something. Those emerald green babies were looking through her; she could feel them. She told the truth, just not all of it. “As long as I needed to be.”

“Jesus. How many times have you been in and out of there?”

“I do what I have to do.”

“And that is?”

She pursed her lips, breathing short, shallow breaths to keep from falling apart. Could she trust Asher? Part of her wanted to. It’d be the best thing ever to not have to carry her self-appointed burden all by herself, all the time. But if she told him, he might put an end to her work, and there were still more women who needed out of Afghanistan.

Asher leaned sideways until he was peering up at her. “Honey, it’s okay if you don’t answer. I get it. But let me tell you what I know about you, just having been around you these past few days. You want that puppy over there.” He glanced at the yellow dog. “Right?”

She huffed. “No. Maybe.”

He kept going. “You’re an extraordinarily strong young woman. You’re vibrant, and you have more stamina than most older, well-seasoned guys. When you’re angry, your instant go-to words are asshole and fuck. Beau overuses fuck, too. Lots of us guys do, but honey, you put a helluva lot more venom into it than we do. You’re thin,

but you're not anorexic. You're a hundred percent lean muscle, and somehow, you find time to work out because, I gotta tell you, those muscles of yours are hard as diamonds. And, oh yeah." He massaged his jaw. "You pack a wallop."

She nodded, guilty as charged. If running for her life and the lives of her women counted as workouts.

"And..." Asher waited until she finally raised her chin and met his eyes. "You know how to bring a man to his knees. You're fast and you're lethal, and I know damned well you could hit the long-distance gong at our TEAM range if I took you shooting. But I also know you had to be mean to survive, and maybe, you've had to be mean for a long time. Too long. Maybe your entire life. Which leads me to the mystery of how a little girl from AnyTown, USA, grew into the stunning warrior you are today."

Damn it. He did have ESP. She wasn't close to stunning, she'd never shot anything in her life, and she didn't plan to. But fast, lethal, and mean? Yup. Guilty as charged.

"Make no mistake," he murmured, "I know capable warriors when I see one. But honey, the crap you must've suffered to become who and what you are today, is etched all over your pretty face, and like it or not, it's aged you." Asher ran his big, warm hand over her beanie. "I see you, Marlowe Rich, but I see the pain bottled up inside of you, too. I'd sure like to know that little girl from AnyTown, USA better, but it's up to you. I'm not the bad guy here. Talk to me. Let me help if I can. If I can't" —he shrugged those magnificent shoulders— "nothing ventured, nothing gained."

She swallowed hard, tears leaking out of her good eye, giving her away, and making everything blurry. "Your go-to word is honey," she told the floor, needing to say something that wasn't mean or defensive for a change.

"It is," Asher whispered. "My dad calls my mom honey. It's the first word that

popped into my head when I saw you in that cave, well, after I crawled off the floor and could finally stand up. You're one tough cookie."

Marlowe heard the tease in his tone. Looking deeper into Asher's green eyes gave her the courage to risk everything she was and all she'd accomplished in her pathetic life. She'd only seen the same glow transforming his rugged face now, once before, on the face of the first woman she'd rescued. When that poor woman was finally inside the rescue helicopter with her two tiny baby girls and had to turn and tell her homeland goodbye. When she'd fully realized she was on a one-way trip and would never see her mother and father again. She'd cried and Marlowe had cried with her, but that woman had then looked down at her babies. She'd blown out a deep breath and her face had glowed, like the freaking sun. That was when she had known that her babies would only live if she turned her back on her past and left. Asher had that same glow.

"I don't trust easy," she whispered. "It'll get you dead and people are stupid. They suck. They always let you down. But you—" Her throat clamped shut on the words she was trying to say. Asher hadn't let her down. Just the opposite. He'd charged into hell, took out the bastards torturing her, and... and...

And she'd kneed him in the balls. She'd hurt the only man who'd ever killed for her, who would've died for her. The first and only man who'd ever risked his life for her.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you in that cave," she whispered, then cleared her throat, upped the volume, and repeated in a voice he could actually hear, "I was scared, and it was dark, and you had a beard, and I thought you had a light in the middle of your forehead, and...I'm sorry, Asher. I don't know why I got so mad. I just" —she lifted both shoulders— "do."

He leaned in close and whispered, "I hear you, honey, and I trust you. When you're ready to talk again, I'll listen. And, ahem." He cleared his throat. "I believe you just said you want a comfort dog too, right?"

“Me? No, I—”

“Sure you do. That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but the dog’s for you, not me. I’m just” —she meant to say dead-weight, but changed it to— “your advisor.”

“My trusted advisor,” Asher corrected, a gleam in his stunning eyes. “I trust you to help me choose the right companion, Marlowe. Do you trust me to do the same for you?” He cocked his head, waiting and teasing and, okay, trusting her when he shouldn’t.

Marlowe swallowed her pride—for now. “I guess I trust you. Yeah, I think I can do that.”

Unexpectedly, she found herself whisked out of the chair and into his arms. Again. She swallowed hard at the strength and warmth of the gentle giant holding her, as if she were breakable. Which she was. If only he knew how badly. Embarrassed that he might see her tears, she leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m so dumb.”

The biggest sigh rumbled beneath her ear. “You’re the farthest thing from dumb, honey. You just get ahead of yourself sometimes. You think you’re alone, and when you feel threatened, you lash out at whoever’s closest. But you’re not alone anymore. I’ve got you.”

“I... I...” She couldn’t believe she was going to admit this, but she did. “I’ve never had anyone I could rely on before.” She turned her face into his shirt, ashamed of her pathetic childhood and her loser parents. What was wrong with her? She was stronger and meaner than this weepy, sniveling thing she turned into whenever Asher was around. What was in the IV she’d been hooked up to? Crybaby juice?

“You’ve got me,” he said, stuffing a tissue into her clenched fingers. “Now wipe your face, and by the end of the day, we’re going to be the owners of two comfort dogs. Are you ready?”

She wiped her eye and dabbed her nose. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Chapter Nine

Standing there and holding Marlowe changed Asher's plans. He couldn't bring himself to let go of her. They'd just had the strangest fight, and Harley had seen and heard the whole thing. He stood at the door to his veterinary office, his arms crossed and the bottom of one boot planted against the door jam. His cell phone was up to his ear, but Asher couldn't hear the other end of the conversation. The knowing smile on Harley's face was worrisome. What did he know and how much had he heard? Couldn't be much. Asher still didn't have a clue why Marlowe had been in Afghanistan, how she'd gotten there, or what she'd done there, and he'd spent the most time with her.

For sure, she wasn't military spec ops; he'd checked with a friend at the Defense Department about that possibility. She might be a deep undercover CIA operative. That would explain her reticence to trust or share. But it didn't make sense. The Agency would've spirited her away from TEAM HQ the moment she hit American soil if she were. Asher knew there were darker ops than black ops, but again, if she belonged to any clandestine alphabet agency, they would've removed all trace of her as soon as she hit town. Possibly before.

Interestingly, the moment he had Marlowe in his arms, the toxic anxiety in his gut vanished. Just, poof—disappeared. He avoided negative energy, simply because it exacerbated the uncontrollable terror he'd experienced that day in Somalia. When PTSD hit, the earthen walls closed in again. His lungs shut down as he fought for air, and once again, he was buried and suffocating, panicked out of his mind. Calmness was key. He knew that, and earnestly worked to control his emotions and thoughts, his breathing and the fucking memories. It worked during the day, most of the time.

But nights were another shit show, and last night's episode still lingered like a bad hangover. Until now. Holding this headstrong little woman, feeling her much smaller body pressing against his like she needed him, backed those bone-gnawing demons off.

He'd felt this same connection the day he'd found her. Ironically, he'd been looking for a goat but found an innocent lamb. In Marlowe's screams and anger, in the ugly vitriol spewing out of her bloodied mouth and swollen lips, he'd recognized the same unholy terror he'd experienced in Somalia. Hanging there like she'd been, she'd nearly choked on her need to strike back at someone. At anyone. He'd just been her closest target.

Asher knew that kind of fear. It came from being powerless, not able to escape, rescue yourself, fight back, or move. The reasons that fueled Marlowe's panic were different than his, sure, but the aftermath they both lived with wasn't. The need for control explained why she threw up roadblocks when asked too many questions. Marlowe desperately needed to be in control. She still felt threatened, and sadly, that was also why she'd leave. That she had escape on her mind was easy to read, because—whenever she'd meet his eyes, Asher saw a reflection of the same panic that still dogged him.

But for now, with her smaller frame snug against his, with his bigger arms wrapped securely around her, and most of all, with Marlowe allowing him to be there for her, it was enough. It had to be. Like it or not, she would run again, and he'd never find her when she did. It killed that she might, somehow, return to Afghanistan by herself. That she'd choose living in Taliban-ruled hell over staying in America.

But he had her now, and in this present fleeting moment, Asher breathed in the soft, sweet scent of the strongest woman he'd ever known, and he wished she'd choose to stay. Surely there was something in America she wanted. It wasn't him, he got that message loud and clear. He just wanted the best for her, safety being his highest

priority. If only it was hers.

“Let’s go check out that pup of yours,” he murmured, against her beanie-clad skull.

“For you, not me.” See? Ever defensive. Always deflecting. Always saying one thing but meaning another.

He settled her in the wheelchair and rearranged her lap blanket, preparing a cushion for the wriggling ball of fur he was about to dump on her. The goofy little lab in the first kennel was as stubborn as she was. Asher rolled the chair alongside the chain link, then crouched beside it and wiggled his fingers through the wires. It never even looked his way.

“Aw, look at you, you’re beautiful,” Marlowe crooned, her fingers between the wires and that crazy dog was halfway up the chain link again to get to her level.

“This the one, darlin’?” Harley asked, from behind Marlowe. Asher caught the tease in his friend’s tone. Harley knew dogs but he also knew people.

She glanced over her shoulder. “I’m not your darling.”

“She’s not anybody’s darling,” Asher added. “Watch out.”

“She’s this little gal’s darlin’,” Harley insisted. “Never seen Herman focused on anyone before like she is now. You want to hold her, darlin’, or should I show you something better?”

“There isn’t a better dog and stop calling me darling,” Marlowe bit out. “And Herman? What kind of name is that for a sweet little girl puppy, huh? What do you want to do, Asher? We’re here for you, not me.”

“Might as well let her out, Harley,” Asher said, going along with Harley’s tease that there were smarter, better dogs than Herman.

Harley lifted the latch on the gate, but the pup stayed where she was, whining at Marlowe through the wire. When she wouldn’t come when Harley ordered, he ducked inside, scooped her under his arm, and dumped her on Marlowe’s lap. “Don’t drop her. She’s a big baby.”

“Aww, I would never drop her. She’s adorable, and aren’t you the cutest little girl?” Marlowe crooned as the fur baby tipped back in her arms like a human baby would.

Still crouched beside the chair, Asher stuck his chin up at Harley. “Got any others?”

“Sure, I—”

“No, wait. Stop it,” Marlowe interrupted. “You haven’t even held her, Asher. Look how sleepy she is. I think she’s tired.”

He stifled a smile. No sense pissing off Marlowe again. “Of course, she’s tired. She’s been climbing this fence to get to you this whole time.”

“Uh-uh, not me. It’s just that—”

“It’s just that this little lady already picked you to be her mama, darlin’,” Harley cut in. “You can’t fight it. If you don’t want to give her a home, it’ll break her heart. Think about it. You get to give her a better name if you keep her.”

“Why do you keep calling me that? I’m not anybody’s darling,” Marlowe snapped, cradling Herman and gazing down at her as if she were the best dog ever. “You’re just a baby, aren’t you? I’m calling you Darling. That’s a good name for you, not me.”

Motherhood looks good on her.

Where the hell did that insane thought come from? Lifting to his feet, Asher shook it out of his head. The heart might want what it wanted, but he knew better. Yes, he liked this woman, but the feeling wasn't mutual. Just because Marlowe semi-trusted him didn't mean squat.

So, while Harley gave them a tour of the other available dogs, most of them pups, Darling snored in Marlowe's arm. The damnedest domestic sensation kept creeping up on Asher, and every time it did, he chuckled it aside. Yes, he was pushing the chair with Marlowe and her dog. Yes, this scenario resembled a husband with his wife and child. But no. Just no. This was not that.

Harley paused at the end of the second aisle, where a pure white boxer pup stood nervously peering out of the crate in the far corner of its kennel. Harley crouched and wiggled his fingers through the wire. "This is Walter. He's the only boxer left from his litter, and he's deaf. Most white boxers are. Breeders usually euthanize them to protect breed standards, but I don't have the heart for that, so he's available. He's a little older than most other pups, but he's smart, Asher. He's loving and he's trainable. It'll take time and effort, but he'll be a good companion for the right person."

Asher took a knee beside Harley and put his fingers through the wires, too. There was no sense whistling or calling to the pup. Walter didn't venture one step from his crate, just trembled at its opening, his blue eyes wide and fearful. The little guy didn't have the curiosity or boundless energy Darling had. He looked terrified and that resonated with Asher. Walter was alone in a world without sound. How well Asher understood.

Harley continued. "If you ask me, you'll have your hands full with the lab pup. You might want a more mature—"

Asher opened his mouth to tell Harley he wanted Walter just as, “We’ll take him,” burst out of Marlowe. That wheelchair of hers was beginning to resemble a throne the way she tossed out edicts and commands.

Asher turned to play devil’s advocate. “Don’t forget you’re still in the clinic, and you’ve already got Darling. How are you going to take care of her and help me train Walter? Yes, he’s adorable but—”

“I’ll room with you. You’ll let me, won’t you?”

Another edict, but this one didn’t sound too bad. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Her head was nodding before he finished asking.

“Well, okay, then. Harley, looks like Darling and Walter are coming with us. Tell me what else I’m going to need.” And God bless me because I have definitely lost my freaking mind.

Over the course of the next hour, Harley supplied Asher with two portable dog crates and everything he needed to feed, water, and care for his ‘kids’, as Marlowe kept calling Darling and Walter. For the moment, Harley had put both pups in Darling’s kennel, and Walter wasn’t the frightened little guy he’d been before. He knew how to play and that was good. But even if he didn’t, Asher was taking that little man home. Dogs deserved second chances, too.

“How about I keep these two and all the supplies until you leave today?” Harley asked.

“I don’t know how long I’ll have to stay,” Marlowe replied, always one step ahead of Asher.

He set his hand on her shoulder while answering Harley “That might be best. My place is a disaster and we ”—he made direct eye-contact with Marlowe at that telling word—“still need to puppy-proof my place. Also, need to make sure you move in first, so they know who’s in charge.” Asher had a feeling he wasn’t.

“Sure,” Harley said. “They’re fine here. Take as long as you two need—”

“Where is she?” Alex barked from the barn doorway, where he stood like the Devil incarnate. The sun was behind him, making him darker and larger than life. Didn’t help that he was smoking mad. He paused for less than a minute, then headed straight to Marlowe.

“Are you he who will not leave?” he asked, his tone razor-sharp and his eyes crystal-ice.

She stared up at him from her wheelchair, gulped, and answered, “Actually...” Her voice trailed away before she finished with, “I am she who will not leave.”

Asher looked from Marlowe to Alex and back to Marlowe. They were talking code? They knew each other?

“Son of a bitch!” Alex hissed before he crouched to her level. “What happened?”

“You’re Alex Stewart?”

“Of course, I’m Alex Stewart. Why are you here instead of where you’re supposed to be? You haven’t answered my latest texts.”

“I lost my phone. They... they took it and I—”

“Boss, what’s going on?” Asher interrupted.

Marlowe gasped. “He’s your boss? Why didn’t you tell me you worked for Alex Stewart?”

“I thought you knew. He owns The TEAM. Would someone please tell me what’s going on?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a woman?” Alex snapped.

“Why didn’t you ask?” Marlowe yelled. “What are you? As big a pig as those Taliban guys?”

“Enough,” Alex growled, lifting to his feet. “My office. All of you. Now.”

The next minutes wheeling Marlowe back inside TEAM HQ were a blur. How the hell did she know Alex and what was that secret code about? CIA operators talked in riddles and codes. That was how they identified each other in the field. Who the hell was Alex? Another spy?

At the door to his office, Alex snapped, “No phones.”

Like Harley, Asher took his out of his pants pocket and dropped it to the carpeted floor in the hall. By the time he had Marlowe situated in Alex’s office, he was pissed at everyone. He parked her wheelchair alongside the window, facing Alex, and took the chair beside her and closest to his boss’s desk. He ached to comfort Marlowe. She was pale and trembling, out of her element. They’d gone from playing with puppies to Force Protection Condition DELTA, and Asher didn’t know why.

He put a hand on her forearm to calm her. “Are you okay?”

She turned to face him. “I thought I was safe here.”

Asher's hold tightened. "You are safe. Like I said, Alex owns The TEAM, and it's the most elite, sought after covert surveillance company in the world. I work for him. You couldn't be safer. Nothing and no one can get to you here." Because I will fucking kill anyone who tries.

Scooting to the edge of his chair, he closed the distance between them, pressing his hip against the wheel of her chair. She reached for his hand, and he gave her what she needed. Which apparently was twining her fingers with his. Damn, they were ice-cold. Asher needed to calm down. He was angry, but not at Marlowe. Alex? That was something else again.

Judy sat beside Harley at the other end of the desk, both looking as flummoxed as Asher felt. Marlowe was in shock, trembling down to her bandaged toes. Alex charged in behind them, slammed his door, then locked it and took his place behind the desk, his stern focus on Marlowe. He lifted the receiver of his secure line to Murphy and Mark, his senior agents, to his ear, and ordered, "My office." He didn't speak another word until Murphy and Mark knocked.

Harley jumped up and let them in, then relocked the door and asked, "Now, Boss?"

"Do it," Alex bit out.

While Murphy and Mark dragged chairs from the conference table located behind everyone else and sat, Harley flipped the red switch behind the door and activated SCIF, Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility protocol. Which meant Alex definitely had top-secret intel to reveal. His heretofore clear windows went frosty, blurring everything and everyone inside to outside eyes. The low hum in the room ensured no listening devices were on-site or capable of breaching security.

As usual, Alex was dressed to kill. His charcoal gray suit was pressed, his black tie was straight as an arrow, and his white shirt immaculate. The vibe radiating off this

man was a powerful deterrent to friendly banter. He stuck his elbows on his desk and centered his steepled fingers under his chin, almost—not quite—casually. His way of toning it down? Didn't work. Not the way he stared at Marlowe, which was pissing off Asher.

He leaned forward, drawing his boss's attention from her. "What's going on, Boss?"

Alex held up his index finger, shutting Asher down, still focused on Marlowe. "How did you get here? No, forget that. Who betrayed you?"

"Boss," Asher warned. "This is the woman we rescued on our last mission into—"

The son of a bitch shut him down again with that same pointed finger. "Afghanistan, I know. Do you realize who she is? How much she's done for the women and children left behind? Do you know what you've done?"

"Ah..." Until that second, Asher thought he knew what he'd done. He'd simply rescued another woman, not just the ones on their list, but one who'd been tortured. One who wouldn't have survived if he and Beau hadn't found her.

"I didn't know you worked for him," Marlowe murmured apologetically at his side. "Honest, or I would've told you. Mr. Stewart was, err, is my point of contact. He sends me names of endangered women. I contact the ones I can find. I hide them and their kids, and I take care of them until you guys show up and get them out of the country."

"You're shitting me?" Asher growled. "You? Just you? You're his sole in-country source? The person who's been helping us rescue all those women left behind is—you?"

She nodded, that one sky-blue eye brimming with tears. Asher couldn't believe it.

Marlowe was a tiny woman, not some big jock who could fend off a bar fight. But she was the only one responsible for covertly getting scores of the wives of endangered Afghan nationals, friends, interpreters, guides, and others who'd aided the American military during the war, out of their Taliban-polluted country? Just her? He wanted to rip Alex to shreds.

"How could you do that to her?" he bellowed, on his feet now, still holding tight to the hand of the frightened woman he'd personally saved from shitting hell. "You nearly got her killed. You son of a bitch, I oughta—"

"Sit. Down." Alex snarled.

Which did not help. "Go to hell!" Asher roared at the man who could fire him. Like he cared? Not anymore. Marlowe was his first priority, like she should've been Alex's, the bastard. "They hung her up and whipped her like a dog! Or did you know that, too?"

Marlowe tugged his hand. "Shush. It's not his fault."

"Like hell, it's not. He's been there. He knows what those... those..."

"Assholes," she provided the descriptor Asher couldn't come up with.

Her favorite word got through to him. Asher sank into his chair and pulled the woman who'd come to mean everything to him, within mere days, onto his lap where he could protect her from his boss. From Alex, Christ! That a man like him had assigned a single woman the chore of accomplishing miracles in the ugliest part of the world was the worst of this mess.

"As you heard, he didn't know I was a woman," Marlowe explained. "We've never spoken. Only texted. He'd text me a list of women who needed rescue. I'd send him a

list of the ones I found. Sometimes I found them all. Some I still can't find. Once I found them, I'd keep them and their kids hidden until he sent dates, times, and how many he could get out at a time. We coordinated everything by text." She shrugged. "It worked until I got, umm, caught."

"How on earth did you connect with each other in the first place?" Harley asked, his forearms on his knees and looking every bit as bewildered as Asher.

"Through a mutual friend, Arzad," Marlowe answered.

"Ah, that makes sense," Harley muttered. "I know Arzad. He's a good man."

Marlowe nodded. "He is. When Mr. Stewart came for Arzad and his wife, Arzad mentioned it to me. Everything in Afghanistan was unraveling by then, so I told him if other Afghans wanted to leave, I'd help them if he'd help me find a way to do it. He said he knew a guy." She turned to Alex. "Arzad gave me your number, and in a couple months, you texted with my first assignment. I'd made up that silly code by then because I knew you'd never hire someone like me. But I also knew most of the women at risk. I knew who you'd be looking for."

Alex growled. "You told me you had support."

"Would you have used me if you knew I was a lone woman doing the impossible? Just me? Not some big tough guy with tats on his face and big bulging biceps?"

He bared his teeth. "I don't send my agents on foolhardy missions, and I never send anyone alone. You should've been honest."

The tension on Asher's shoulders eased off at that sharply spoken truth. Alex had once burned the CIA for sending their agents out alone and them ending up dead.

“That’s why I lied. I had to.” Marlowe shrugged as if being in mortal danger was no big deal.

That ego of hers was going to get her killed if she returned to Afghanistan.

“Tomatoes. Tomah-toes. I saved lives, Mr. Stewart. Women, children, and babies. What would you have had me do, sit around and watch the news on TV while the Taliban murdered them? Sorry if I offend you, but I don’t care what you think. I did what I could, and I’ll do it again the first chance I get!”

Damn it. She was planning on going back. Asher winced at her false bravado. Either she was the bravest woman he’d ever known, she was borderline crazy, or... Marlowe had a death wish. He’d known the false bravado that got servicemen killed. They thought they were invincible until they found out they weren’t. Like he’d learned in Somalia, the hard way.

“How did you get into Afghanistan the first time? I mean, if you don’t mind telling us,” Harley asked politely.

Her cheeks puffed with a long full breath before she exhaled and replied, “Through India, then Pakistan. I had a little money of my own after I, ahh, left home. It wasn’t much, but I wanted to see the world, so I got a passport and... Ahh, sorry, that’s a lie. I did get a passport, but I mostly wanted to see the Middle East, and then I fell in love with Afghanistan, so I stayed. What can I say? It’s an acquired taste, and there’s no place on earth like it.”

Alex nodded as if he agreed. “How long ago was that?”

“About three years. I was there when you guys pulled out two months ago. I was at Abbey Gate, in the middle of all the friends you left behind. You deserted. You betrayed!” The tone in her voice spiked from calmly informational to downright

accusatory. By the time she was done, Marlowe was pointing a stern finger at Alex. She was livid and the muscles in her neck were taut.

“You’ve got to knock that shit off,” Asher snapped, his anger with Alex mollified now that he had more details. “None of this is Alex’s fault. We’ve all been over there, but none of us betrayed anybody. You think we haven’t done anything since then to help our friends? You think we made that decision to bail on them in the first place? News flash. That decision was made behind our backs, too. I lost buddies over there, but for what? So some asshole can buy votes by ending an unpopular war, without giving one damned shit for the American men and women who died over there? Why did we pull out? You seem to have all the answers, so you tell me. Because I still, to this day, fucking don’t know!”

“You borrowed both my favorite words,” she said quietly, reaching for his hand until she locked fingers with his again. “It’s okay, this one time. I know you guys aren’t directly responsible. I’m sorry. I just...” Her shoulders lifted. “I’m just so angry that I didn’t save more people. I’m the only one those women trusted. I have to go back. If I don’t save them, who will?”

Asher shook his head and said, loud and clear, “No.”

Alex overrode Marlowe with a loud and clear, “Like hell you will! We’ll save them, me and my TEAM. We’ll carry on like we’ve been doing since Abbey Gate. You weren’t my only inside man, Marlowe.” He rolled his eyes at that dead-wrong descriptive. “I’ve got others helping me get our friendlies out of Afghanistan, but you’re done. You’ve been made, and if you go back now, you won’t accomplish anything because the Taliban will kill you, publicly, and in the most gruesome way. You made them look bad and you’re a woman. They don’t forget or forgive things like that.”

“But how many women can I save by the time they catch me, Mr. Stewart? Huh?”

Man, this woman was insolent.

Alex shook his head. “Stop calling me Mr. Stewart. It’s Alex or—”

“Or Boss,” Asher supplied.

“Fine, Alex.” She sneered, her answer full of sarcasm and disgust.

Alex rolled his shoulders, obviously irked. “I want you to think about something for a minute.” He held up his index finger to shush her because, as usual, Marlowe was itching for a fight and already had her mouth open. “Just listen, will you? I want you to think about the Afghan women here in America, the ones you already saved. The ones who need you now, your sisters-in-arms, so to speak. They haven’t assimilated yet. They miss their families, friends, and their country, and they don’t speak the language. They’re scared, and they need to see you again, to put their hands on you, to know you’re okay, too. That you survived. You saved them once; they need you to save them again. Let us do the dirty work, while you reach out and comfort your survivors. They’re your sisters now, and you have a responsibility to them and their little ones. They need the chance to thank you, their way. In their language. In person.” Alex paused and then added a word Asher had never heard his boss utter before. “Please?”

Damn. He’d make one helluva used car salesman the way he’d just asked Marlowe for a commitment, not to him, but to the Afghan women she obviously felt passionately about.

Dead silence. Marlowe was struggling, and Asher understood her battle. There was a high to combat, an adrenaline kick to fighting the good fight, to winning. To being in the right place at the right time. To putting your life on the line and being victorious. Men and women on the front were hyper-focused twenty-four-seven. Even when they slept, they were hyper-alert, ever ready to jump up and march into hell for the sake of

each other. They had to be. War wasn't about flags or country or patriotism. It was about the men and women beside you. Your buddies. Your squad. The soldiers who had your back when you were in a kill zone. When you were caught helpless in a crossfire. When you truly believed all hope was gone and you were going home in a box. That was truly all a guy cared about in the chaotic heat of battle. His thoughts might fly to home and family, but over there, with death so close you could smell it, the men and women with you quickly became your whole world, and you'd do anything for them.

Alex had basically asked Marlowe to stand down and accept a lesser role, that of comforter as opposed to savior. That of friend instead of warrior. A tough transition.

"I never thought about afterward," she finally breathed. "I would like to see them again. All of them. I mean, we didn't spend much time together, and over there, every minute we were together, we were afraid we'd be found out and killed and... Hmmm. Yes, Alex. I'll think about what you asked me to do. I really will."

Whew, one crisis averted, hopefully. Asher turned to his boss. "Do you know why the president ordered an immediate withdrawal?" Alex and President Adams were close, and that chicken-shit withdrawal from Afghanistan was uncharacteristic of the man.

Alex sucked in a breath through gritted teeth. "Adams didn't order it. He recently had a stroke. Dalton, his newly named VP, did. The White House kept it quiet, I suspect because that son of a bitch plans on being elected this November, if Adams dies."

"Christ, he's worthless," Harley muttered.

Dalton being behind America's hasty retreat from the country they'd mentored for years made sense. Corporate CEOs owned Dalton. Always had. The guy ought to wear a jacket like NASCAR drivers did, with brightly embroidered patches that displayed the names and logos of the CEOs he actually supported. Sure wasn't

American taxpayers.

“I wish you’d told me this before now,” Asher murmured to Marlowe. “I don’t understand why you didn’t trust me.”

She dropped her gaze, and Asher knew it then. Alex hadn’t convinced her of anything. She was still going back.

Chapter Ten

“Because I left women behind who still need my help,” Marlowe explained to her clenched fingers, “and you would’ve stopped me once you knew I was going back. I know you would, Asher. You want to keep me safe, but safety doesn’t matter when people you love are marked for death. No one else can do what I can. They don’t trust US soldiers anymore. Why should they? Even the Afghans who fled to Pakistan, the people you guys promised you’d come back for, are now being sent back to Afghanistan by the Pakistanis. See what you did? You guys deserted all of them. But I didn’t. I stayed!”

Asher groaned when she shot that truth like a bullet straight at Alex. Well, too bad. She’d told Alex she’d think about meeting with those Afghan survivors, and she would. But not today and not anytime soon. He and Asher needed to understand she was not the important one here, and neither were they. None of them were. Only the women and children who America had failed were important. They were all that mattered, and Marlowe refused to let them down. She would save as many as she could, or she’d die trying. Then, and only then, would she go party with the still living. Ha, that was a laugh. She had never partied in her pitiful past, and having a cold beer with the noisy crowd that had pestered her every time she’d sat outside her crummy room in Afghanistan didn’t count.

“Who betrayed you, sweetheart?” Alex asked, his tone softer.

And now he wants to be nice? Marlowe faced the man who’d had the guts to help her do the impossible, even though he’d outed her. The asshole. “I suspect one of my women in hiding did. Not sure which, but maybe Sariah. She argued when I told her

the date she needed to be ready. She kept making excuses. None of the others did. They were eager to leave the moment I told them I had a date and a way to get them out of the country. They would've gone right then if they could have, anything to save their kids. But Sariah..." Suddenly everything made sense. "Yes. It had to be Sariah. The morning I told her the good news, that she was next on my list, she complained and said she couldn't go because her baby was sick. But now that I think about it, the smiling little one in her arms didn't look feverish or sick. But I figured, I'm not a mother. What did I know?"

"Always trust your gut," Alex murmured, his hands flat on the desk now, his fingers fluttering like he couldn't hold still.

"So why the SCIF?" Asher asked. "Why the secrecy? None of this intel is classified."

Marlowe had no idea what SCIF was.

"Because eyes and ears are everywhere, and no one beyond this room needs to know what I'm about to say." Alex tipped back in his chair far enough to open his pencil drawer and pull out a black and white photograph. He slid it across the desk and everyone else leaned forward. "Look familiar?"

Marlowe's heart fell. Not for the smug woman in that shot, but for the smiling little girl in that woman's arms. "That's Sariah. Where's her baby girl now? Is she still alive?"

Alex grimaced. "This photo was taken a month ago in Syria. Don't ask how I know. It's technical, something about digital date stamping." He waved his hand dismissively. "Right now, my people on the ground don't believe she is that baby's mother. She's an agent for ISIL, working inside the Taliban to recruit vulnerable, disillusioned Afghan women, specifically targeting our allies' wives and daughters. And..."

He paused and Marlowe's heart stalled. Something truly wicked was coming out of his mouth next. She could sense it.

“She's smuggling Afghan orphans out of the country and straight into the sex trade, right under the Taliban's nose. Not that they aren't doing it, too. It's a power struggle over there, ISIS against the Taliban, and both are guilty of human trafficking. They're all sons of bitches.”

“Assholes,” Marlowe whispered.

Asher leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs. “How does any of this connect with Tippetts and the anthrax found in the ambassador's residence?”

Alex's shoulders lifted, as he sucked in a deep breath, and then said, “We're still investigating the anthrax, but plain and simple, Tippetts underestimated you, Asher. You refused her advances. You made her look stupid, and yes, I saw the security footage from the embassy roof. It came with audio and she was accusing you of lying to her. She told the man with her you jilted her.” He refocused on Marlowe. “And you. Did you know there's a million-dollar bounty in US dollars on your head?”

Marlowe blinked at the ridiculous amount. “Me? No. I knew I had a bounty, but, wow. A million? That's a lot of dollars. Is that why Tippetts—?”

“The bounty's only the tip of this iceberg, and yes, Tippetts and Sariah probably want the bounty, but their chances of living long enough to spend it are zero. The person behind this scheme is Caliph Ibrahim al-Jamah, and he'll cut their throats the moment they turn you over.” Alex cocked an eyebrow at Harley. “That name ring a bell?”

“No shit? Your nemesis, that Jamah?” Harley breathed, groaning as he stretched his long legs. “I thought you killed the old goat.”

“Apparently not.”

“The butcher of Syria?” Asher asked, his tone incredulous.

Marlowe felt like she was watching a tennis match, trying to keep up with the conversation and everything she didn’t know that these guys did.

“You have got to be kidding,” Mark groused from behind her. “Are you positive? Harley and I were there when they buried him. There’s a shrine to him in the mountains, for hell’s sakes.”

“CIA confirmed he’s still alive, going on fifty, but because he’s a paraplegic, thanks to me, he’s continually on the move. If you remember, he likes little boys.”

“Oh, him,” Marlowe breathed. Her women had whispered about the notorious pedophile, only they’d called him the Toad of Syria. Not Caliph. “So, Tippetts was never after me for the money. She wants to please her boss, and he wants me because...?”

“If he has you, he can get to me,” Alex answered tiredly. “He wants revenge, and once he has you, he believes you’ll give me up. I would if I were you.”

“I would never.”

“Why not? Torture is the most humiliating test of willpower a person can endure. I couldn’t handle it, not knowing my family was watching.”

“But he’d still kill me,” Marlowe surmised thoughtfully.

“Yes, after he tortured you for days. Think about it. Ibrahim al-Jamah gets off on inflicting pain, not murder. He’s a sadist. He’s ten times worse than Baghdadi, and he

knew you weren't working alone, that someone with money was behind the helos flying illegally into and out of his kingdom. It wouldn't take long to do an internet search and find me. Even I could. I don't hide."

"How do you know all this?" Murphy asked.

"Because..." Alex turned to the whited-out windows, but his eyes weren't seeing anything. It was as if he'd tuned out. Until at last, he said, "The son of a bitch sent a package to my house three weeks ago. Inside was a USB flash drive that contained explicit clips of two young women, stripped and hanging in the dark, mutilated beyond recognition, whimpering, but not yet dead. He included a note with that flash drive. Said he can't wait to meet my 'two sweet, little children,' his son of a bitching words, not mine." Still facing the window, Alex tapped his fingers on his desk. "Which is why I'm going back."

Harley jumped to his feet. "Boss, no."

"Not without me, you're not," Mark said firmly.

"Like hell, you are," Murphy hissed, on his feet and shaking a stern, gnarled finger at Alex. "Guldarn it, every man and woman on my side of the house will be on that C-130 with you, so don't go sneaking out of the country without us." For an older gentleman, he had quite an ugly sneer on his whiskered face.

Asher's arm circled tighter around Marlowe's waist. "Don't you dare," he growled.

She turned to look into his eyes. "But I have to go with him, don't you see? I'm the bait. Once Ibrahim What's-His-Fucking-Name knows I'm back in—"

"Ibrahim al-Jamah."

“Yeah, okay, if you say so. Him. Once he knows I’m back in Afghanistan, that I’m still helping women escape from his—”

“I said no.”

“Asher, honey.” This time Marlowe used his word against him when she cupped his jaw, while everyone else was busy arguing with Alex. “I’m sorry, but you are not the boss of me. I know it sounds trite, but I’m not a little girl who needs to be told what to do or how to think. I make my own decisions. I’ve been doing it for years. I made promises to those women, and I intend to keep them. Surely you understand that.”

“You still have women in hiding, waiting for you? Even now?” He ran an exasperated hand over his hair.

“No. I meant that in a philosophical, theoretical way.”

“So there are no women stashed in a cave somewhere waiting for your return? You made promises, but only in a general sense?”

“Well, yes. No specific women are waiting. I didn’t mean it that way. But trust me, plenty of women are still trapped over there. They very much want their children to grow up in America, and I’m going to help them achieve that dream.”

“You can’t even see out of both eyes yet,” he reminded her quietly.

She appreciated that calm, quiet quality about Asher. Yes, she’d felt and looked like a Cyclops for days now. She was glad he hadn’t drawn attention to her current disfigurement in front of everyone. “One-eyed or not, it’s time for me to get back to work.”

“If you go, I go,” Asher murmured against the side of her head, his breath warm

through the beanie.

“No,” Alex roared. He was on his feet now, furious, and his fists clenched. “Me. Just me. I started this and I’ll finish it. Alone.”

“Except me. I’m going with you,” Marlowe replied sweetly, risking his wrath and getting glared at for her audacity. Alex’s blue eyes were laser-sharp and extra nasty now.

“And me,” Asher added just as calmly. “Where Marlowe goes, I go.”

“And me, damn it.” That came from Harley, forcing Alex to pivot that nasty glare to his right.

“If Harley goes, I go, Alex,” Judy said firmly. “We’re a team, and you might need someone with trauma experience, so get over yourself.”

The moment Alex opened his mouth to snarl, Marlowe wasn’t sure at who, Mark cut in with, “I don’t need to check with Libby. My schedule’s open.”

Alex looked down at the floor, and between gritted teeth, he snarled, “You’re all fired. Get the hell out of my office!”

Chapter Eleven

Asher didn't go home that night. Instead, he took Marlowe to her room and made sure she was comfortable and asleep. He suspected whatever Dr. Houston injected into her IV helped him make a clean getaway. He was in the hall outside her room when his cell phone rang.

"Asher," he answered.

"The mission is a go. Be in the lobby in thirty," Murphy ordered. "We'll pick up CamelBaks in Incirlik, so don't bring yours."

The USAF maintained a complement of several thousand airmen at the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. They provided F-16 combat training to Turkish pilots, humanitarian aid as needed, as well as maintaining a show of NATO forces in the region.

"Copy that." The phone went dead. Asher stuck it in the duffel he'd brought with him when he'd come to the clinic that morning, then pulled out a change of clothes and headed for the showers in the gym down the hall. Everyone was on high alert at the very real possibility that Jamah might be smart enough to outfox his boss. He'd already proven that by still being alive and capable of leading ISIL, when Alex, Mark, and Harley had all believed he was dead. But he'd made a fatal mistake threatening Alex's children.

Asher dropped his duffel on the floor outside the nearest shower, undressed, stuffed his dirty clothes into one of the many plastic bags in his duffel, and stepped into the stall. As he hurriedly scrubbed, he recalled how Alex had recently taken on the Irish

mafia. Asher still didn't know all the particulars of that showdown, only knew one minute the Mafia was nosing around, creating mayhem, and had nearly killed Kelsey, Alex's wife. But the next, they were gone—or had been disappeared was more like it.

Asher hoped this showdown ended as quickly. He turned a full circle and rinsed. Nobody talked about what happened the day Heston 'found' London, his girlfriend, battered and bleeding in the forest near Turkey Run, Virginia. Not even Heston shared what happened. It was an interesting end to an off-the-books mission, since several Irish mafia thugs also vanished.

Turning the shower spigot off, he towel-dried and dressed in the TEAM uniform for extreme black ops—black cotton briefs and t-shirt under midnight-dark cammies. His dirty clothes went into his locker. On the run now, he paused at Marlowe's door for one last quick look on his way upstairs. Her oxygen cannula and IV were still in place, the room was dark, and he could hear her breathing. That she'd stood up to Alex had been a rare sight, and Asher was proud of her. The one quality this stubborn woman had in spades was nerve. She'd all but spit in Alex's face when he'd bullied her. She'd be furious when she woke up tomorrow morning, but it was better this way.

Asher ran for the elevator. Like it or not, Marlowe needed time to heal. She wouldn't get that by traveling the globe, in the middle of the night, on whatever military aircraft Alex had procured for the flight over the Atlantic. Marlowe could barely walk. Parachuting, even a tandem jump, was out of the question.

Mother, The TEAM's fierce and extremely short-tempered technical expert had already provided Jamah's location late last night. She had overheard footage that could only have come from one of many privately-owned geosynchronous satellites in Earth's orbit. The clarity of those images was stellar. No doubt about it, The TEAM's latest HVT was holed up inside an old mansion east of Damascus. How Jamah built a terrorist network the size of ISIL mystified the Western World, but why

any intelligent person followed him was mind-boggling.

Asher was up top and in the lobby in record time. Tension mixed with excitement tinged the air. Each agent had a duffel, complete with their choice of handguns, ammo, knives, earpieces, NVG, good luck charm, whatever they needed to come back alive, stowed at their feet. They'd been told to forgo bringing any rifles, which was odd. Standard protocol for eliminating a high-value target like Jamah required one or two snipers perched far from and above the HVT to control the area. A good sniper could take out any number of assassins without being seen or heard. Good snipers saved lives. There was no sign of Harley or Judy, though. Another interesting development. They'd both vehemently declared they were going. Where were they?

"About time," Heston called out, waving Asher over to where he, Mark Houston, and Cord Shepherd huddled over one of many high-top tables scattered alongside the plate-glass windows. "Last minute change. We're flying into al-Tanf, then infiltrating north to Damascus."

"No rest for the wicked," Asher murmured.

"And the righteous don't need it," Murphy cut in. "You boys fly safe, got it?"

"Always," Asher answered. "Why aren't you in midnight black like the rest of us, Boss?"

"Because I'm too damned old for that shit."

"And Doc Fitz wouldn't clear him for the flight," Heston added with a wink.

"Or jumping out of a perfectly good plane," Cord stage-whispered.

"Knock it off, you ill-mannered bozos, talking about me like I'm already dead and

buried,” Murphy grumbled. “I’ve got high blood pressure, that’s why, and that’s all there is to it, so keep your traps shut. If you whippersnappers are lucky enough to live as long as me, you’ll get it, too. Just you wait.”

“Hold the fort while we’re gone,” Mark said.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Murphy chuffed.

Flying into al-Tanf made good sense. The controversial US military base, located just inside Syria’s southern border, provided training for local Syrian opposition forces, as well as conducted counter-ISIS operations throughout the fifty-five-kilometer de-confliction zone. Flying there would mask their ultimate mission. By then, they’d look like just another supply drop in the desert, not the deadly operators they were.

“Where’s Harley?” Asher asked after Murphy stepped away.

“Not going with us,” Mark replied. “Alex gave him a last-minute assignment.”

Asher would have asked what assignment if Alex hadn’t ordered, “Listen up,” as he exited the hall leading from his office with long determined strides. Also geared up in midnight-dark cammies, he was accompanied by two more TEAM agents: Tripp McClane and a new hire, the youngest guy on Murphy’s team, Wyatt Browning. Asher hadn’t worked with Wyatt yet, but word was he was a Marine and a damned good EOD expert. Blond-haired and dark-eyed, he carried himself with the arrogance of men who’d regularly defied death and lived to talk about it.

“We’ve got State Department approval. This infil is now classified. We’re to execute with extreme prejudice. Any questions?” Alex barked.

He had the rare skillset most leaders, military or civilian, seldom achieved. He didn’t sit behind a big comfy desk while ordering his men and women into harm’s way. He

led from the front, not from the rear. Alex knew when to get out of his TEAM's way and let the experts he'd hired do their jobs. There was no one better at flying cover and defending his men and women. Most five stars threw their military members under the bus when higher-ups came calling with baseless accusations and slanderous lies. Alex fended them off like a bear, which was why The TEAM was the number one security company on the Eastern Seaboard. He took the jobs others refused.

Asher lifted a finger. "No rifles?"

"We'll get them when we need them. Next?"

"Air support?" Mark asked. "I assume you've got people on stand-by if things go sideways."

"Always." Alex lifted three fingers. "Two teams within a hundred miles of Al Tanf if needed. Another on standby in Damascus."

"Damascus? Really? Who the hell's crazy enough to be deep inside Syria?" Cord asked.

"My business, my call. Anything else?"

Had to be Decker Edison, Asher guessed.

"Copy that's" all around answered.

"Good. We're late. Move out."

The mood was somber as Alex led the way to the helicopter pad, where Decker Edison, also sporting midnight TEAM cammies, sat behind the stick in one of three sleek, black birds. He shot Alex a two-fingered salute from the open cockpit window.

Alex gave him a thumbs-up. The window closed and the rotors started spinning.

Asher boarded the other helicopter. Alex literally had friends in every corner of the world, and a few others who were invaluable when it came to acquiring this type of specialized equipment. Much like the stealth technology behind the USAF F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning II combat jets, these custom-made helos were designed to reduce thermal infra-red emissions and prevent radar detection. Which was probably why Secretary of State Jed McCormack authorized the mission. Like Alex, he was banking on no one being seen or caught.

Unfortunately, tonight this helo was only taking them to Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, where a USAF Globemaster loaded with equipment headed for Incirlik, Turkey, waited. Overall it would be a thirty-six-hour flight, counting the refueling pitstop in Germany. Either TEAM agents would grab whatever combat naps they could, while they could, in the transport's cold, noisy, and uncomfortable cargo hold, or they'd be dead on their feet by the time they deplaned, and that'd make them worthless.

Asher worried. Alex was known for his one-hundred percent kill rate as a USMC sniper, but that was years ago. He was older now, and the man wore readers, for hell's sake. There was no way he could be as accurate a shot today as he'd been back then. So why was he coming along? Why not get out of his agents' way, let them do the dirty work, and wait on them to report back, like he usually did? Was this a revenge mission because of Jamah's threat, or was something else going on? Mark Houston was another hold-over from the previous generation of USMC scout snipers' record holders. Sure, those guys' kill shots were impressive, but they were yesterday's news. They'd both been bested, more than once, by long-shot records achieved during the last war.

Damn it. Asher needed this mission to end with Jamah's head on a spike, and to do that, he didn't need to worry about anyone, especially his boss, slowing him down. At

Andrews, he was the last to climb into the Globemaster. Strapping into the nearest webbed seat, he clamped a pair of noise-cancelling earphones on, leaned back, and enjoyed the comfort of what would be a less than smooth ride across the Atlantic.

Closing his eyes, Asher ordered his stubborn brain to shut up and let sleep come. This was Alex's TEAM, not his, and like it or not, he had to trust his boss. If only that foreboding sense of doom would shut up.

Chapter Twelve

Today was the day. Marlowe opened her eye, anxious to get out of bed, get showered, and plead with Libby to remove her eye patch. Freedom was so close she could taste it. Her sling was gone, and she had a mission again. A real mission. Not even the chocolate bar that Paige left on her nightstand would stop her.

Removing her cannula, she tossed it carelessly to the bed, eased both feet to the floor, and stood without assistance. At last, she was independent. Her head was clear, and her lower back felt, well, okay. Not perfect, but good enough. Her taped nose and bandaged feet still hurt, but she refused to acknowledge those minor twinges. Nothing would hold her back. As soon as she showered, she was going to the Mideast with Asher and Alex, and whoever else was brave enough to go with her.

But, ouch. After two steps, she knew her feet were going to be trouble. Painfully inching her way to the bathroom, she was nearly there when the door behind her opened.

“Whoa there, girlfriend,” Judy exclaimed. “Where do you think you’re going?” In an instant, her very capable hands were on Marlowe, supporting her as if she were an invalid. Which she was, in a very small, inconsequential way. Not that she’d admit it. Judy was in jeans, a pink t-shirt, and bright pink running shoes this morning. Something was up.

“Back to work,” Marlowe answered, politely shrugging Judy off and away. “Where else? But why aren’t you in desert camo, huh?”

Before Judy answered, Libby burst into the room with a bright, “Good morning, sunshine. Are you ready to give up that devil-may-care look you’ve got going?” She was dressed to go running, too. Also in jeans, her blue polo matched her eyes. So did her sparkly tennis shoes.

“If you mean this stupid eye patch, yes,” Marlowe replied. “You can have the darn thing.”

“Well, good, because today’s your lucky day. Back to bed, though. I need to check your feet, then your nose, eye, and your stats. Your oxygen levels have been getting better, so no more cannula at night, and if I like what I see beneath that patch, off it goes.”

“If?” Marlowe bit out, worried as Judy steered her back to bed. “What’s that mean? No cannula forever is more like it, right? And no more sling. No more eye patch.”

“Yes, if,” Libby continued as she settled Marlowe onto the mattress, then lifted her legs, one at a time, and swiveled her butt until she was flat against her pillows again. “The sling you can do without, but we need to protect that eye.”

Marlowe studied Libby’s professional mask, hoping she’d like what she saw once she peeled those darn bandages off.

Right foot wrapping went first. “Frankly, when I first assessed your injuries, I thought you’d been hit by a car,” Libby commented.

“Oh, my,” Judy murmured from Libby’s elbow, looking at the newly unwrapped flesh. “This one looks much better. No infection and that’s saying something, as torn up as your feet were when you arrived.”

“And that was after the embassy doctor in Pakistan cleaned and treated them,” Libby

added matter-of-factly. “He did a good job. You have very little swelling on this foot. Overall, I’d say it’s healed. You’ll have to take it easy a few more days, but I’m leaving the bandage off.”

Left foot wrapping went next. Ahh, cool air on her soles was a luxury Marlowe hadn’t realized she’d missed. “Well?” she asked, anxious to be gone. “How’s it look? I can walk, can’t I? You saw me. You were there. I did walk. I can do it.”

Libby pulled a pair of wire-framed reading glasses from her scrubs and peered closer. “Considering your other issues, you’ve recuperated quickly, but wiggle these toes for me. All of them.”

Marlowe wiggled all ten, just to prove both feet were in working order. But z-z-zing, zap, and darn. The muscles in her left foot didn’t like being stretched or curled. Ouch. She bit her tongue, determined to get her life back even if she had to lie, but wiggling those five little traitors was agony.

“That hurts, doesn’t it?” Libby asked, her eyes sharp and stern.

“Nope,” Marlowe replied breezily, blinking her one good eye before it teared up and betrayed her, too. “Next question.”

“Honey...” Libby said that soothingly, like a mother with a grumpy child. “You have a laceration that runs the width of this poor foot, from your big toe to your pinky toe, right below each of your medial phalanges.” She took hold of Marlowe’s hand and traced the area of her palm below her fingers to show where she meant. “I’m sorry, but I need to give you something to deaden the pain and re-suture this wound. It won’t take long. Lean back for me. Let’s check that eye while we’re at it.”

“No.” Marlowe could be stern, too. “My feet are okay. I’ve wasted enough time. Just bandage or put a sock on them, something that’ll keep them clean. I have to go.”

“Marlowe, get serious,” Judy cut in gently.

“And that’s another thing. Why’s everyone being so nice to me today? And why are you two dressed like you’re on vacation? Where’s Asher?”

Knock, knock, knock.

“May I come in?” A brown-haired, dark-eyed woman peered through the still partially opened door. She wasn’t much taller than a school-girl, but she had the deepest, darkest brown eyes. Darned if she wasn’t dressed as casually as Libby and Judy. Were they all going to their country club?

Marlowe didn’t want to offend this visitor for some reason she couldn’t come up with. She almost yelled, ‘Hell, no.’ But Libby called out, “Come in, Kelsey, and meet the woman everyone’s talking about. Marlowe Rich, do you mind if Kelsey Stewart visits for a minute?”

Well, damn. ‘ Yes, I mind,’ seemed a rather cruel comeback, so Marlowe offered a polite, “No, sure, come on in.” Everybody else has. “But I’m being released today. This morning,” she emphasized, glaring at Libby, who smiled like she was dealing with a spoiled brat. Which Marlowe was not. She’d never, ever been spoiled. “So I won’t be here long. What do you want?”

Kelsey stayed at the doorway. She had one of those gentle smiles that made Marlowe feel extra-mean. “I won’t stay if you’re busy. I just wanted to meet the miracle worker who saved my friend.”

“Your friend?” Marlowe cocked her head. The Wonder Woman and miracle worker bullshit was getting old. “Who would that be?”

“She’s right here with me, but she’s shy and...” Kelsey leaned back and asked

someone in the hall, “Are you sure? She’s sitting right here, and she’s going to be released this morning. This might be your only chance to tell her.”

“Tell me what?” Marlowe asked loudly enough for shy whoever-she-was to hear. “Come on in. Might as well.”

The dark-eyed woman she thought she’d never see again peered timidly around the corner, and the instant she saw her, Marlowe’s eye filled with tears. Kelsey’s friend was Farrah, one of many women the Taliban had hunted after her husband had refused to betray the American Marine who’d saved his life. Farrah, one of Marlowe’s precious sisters.

Kelsey was not a large woman, but beside her, Farrah was tiny, even swathed in her lovely, deep purple robes and hiding behind a corner of her veil. Not a black, heavily masked veil anymore. Instead, a pretty, sheer violet veil with a gold-striped edge. Farrah’s long, thick hair gleamed beneath it. She looked so much better.

“Farrah,” Marlowe cried, her arms extended, needing her friend to get her butt inside the room. “Come here. Let me see you. All of you. You’re beautiful.” And such a sight for sore eyes. Make that eye, damn it. “Libby, get this eye patch off. I need a good look at my friend.”

Farrah hurried to Marlowe’s bedside. The moment Marlowe had her arms around one of the women she thought she’d never see again, she buried her face in her veil and broke down. “You’re safe. My God, you’re safe, and you look so, so good. And your little ones, Layla and Hanna? Are they as happy and as pretty as you?” Please tell me they’re still alive.

“They are quite happy, and they are at home with their father,” Farrah replied, her voice choked with emotion as she clasped Marlowe tightly. “Because of you, my little ones are fat. They are not afraid at night anymore, and they eat like little pigs.

They tease their father and— Shukran. I can never, ever thank you enough, my lovely grouchy sister. You gave me my life back. How can I repay you?”

Marlowe couldn't help the tender feelings rushing through her. “It was my privilege. Trust me, you don't owe me anything.” She choked back another darned sob, striving to be the grouchy sister she'd had to be during Farrah's harried run to Alex's helicopter instead of the bawl baby she'd turned into. Unbeknownst to Marlowe, until the second Farrah broke cover that day and ran to the helicopter, the Taliban had been hard on her trail. They'd nearly caught her, and if they had, there wouldn't have been a thing Marlowe could've done to save her.

“It's been what? Ten months?” she asked, her voice cracking at the near disaster she'd witnessed. If not for Alex Stewart's helicopter lifting up and charging those assholes, poor Farrah would've been publicly whipped and possibly beheaded. Along with her babies.

Still holding onto Marlowe, Farrah tipped back enough to swipe at her own cheeks. “Yes, yes, it seems like forever, but then” —she shrugged— “it also seems like yesterday.”

“Those were scary times.” Marlowe turned to Libby, who had pulled the blanket over her feet, probably to not offend some law of the prophet. There were so many rules concerning what Muslim women needed to keep covered in public, which under the current regime, seemed to be every part of her body, even her toes. “Libby Houston and Judy Mortimer, this is my good friend, Farrah al-Rabbani.”

“Hi, Farrah,” Judy answered. “It's good to see you again. But Marlowe, we've known Farrah and her family since they arrived in America. Because of everything you did over there, you have many, many friends living close by. Arzad and his wife. Their daughter, her husband, and their kids. It's too bad you're leaving. All of them are here because of you. I wish you'd stay long enough to get reacquainted.”

Marlowe nodded, torn between her mission to save every last endangered woman still in Afghanistan and getting to know Farrah better. It would be so good to just sit and talk. “Yes, but I have work to do. Important work. There are others.”

“My girls will be sad they didn’t get to see you,” Farrah whispered, “but they will understand. They are tough little ones.”

Yes, but darn. Those little sweethearts were only tough because of all they’d seen and lived through. The fear. The hiding and running for their lives. Going without enough food, clean water, and even fresh air. Believing in monsters, because in their country, monsters were very real. Marlowe ached to see those girls. They’d been so small. So very vulnerable.

“Let’s get that bandage off,” Libby said, quietly changing the subject. “You can see Farrah better then.”

“Yes, please,” Farrah said. “I have been praying for this day.” She squeezed Marlowe’s arms and stepped back beside Kelsey, who put an arm around her shoulders because Farrah was crying.

Darn it. Marlowe wanted to be the one hugging her friend. She needed to be on her feet and capable, not simpering helplessly in bed. But woman to woman. Instead, she leaned into her pillows and let Libby peel the tape away from her face, carefully not upsetting her beanie. The darn thing had to go. But Marlowe didn’t want to shock Farrah.

Libby was up close and personal, her focus on Marlowe’s injured eye. The perfume she’d spritzed on that t-shirt was flowery and light, and it dawned on Marlowe then, that her poor nose was working. She could smell again. She sniffed as more subtle fragrances came to her. The slightest sting of antiseptic cleansers. The absence of rank sweat and body odors. Just sweet clean American air.

This country was so different from Afghanistan. Common sense ruled here—most of the time. Logical laws were enacted and enforced. Order, cleanliness, and kindness ruled. People were free to live as they chose. Freedom was everything.

“Hey, no tears,” Libby whispered. “This will be a good day for you, I promise. Your ophthalmologist asked me to remove these bandages because he’s that confident in you. He’ll have the final say, so have faith a little longer. You’re going to be fine, honey.”

Honey. That word was her undoing. Unable to speak and afraid she’d fall apart if she did, Marlowe simply nodded while Kelsey and Judy chatted with Farrah. They sounded like old friends, talking about their children and husbands and.... all the things Marlowe wanted but would never have. A family. Friends you could count on. Girlfriends who actually liked you. Maybe even loved you a little. Was that asking too much?

“You’re trembling,” Libby whispered again. Tugging the last strip of tape away, she set it on the rolling table that was now beside the bed. Marlowe hadn’t noticed that until now, when her room was filled with the soft sweet spirits of these special women. “Are you okay? Can I get you anything?”

Finally able to see out of both eyes, Marlowe reached up and clutched Libby’s wrist. “Yes, I’m...” I’m what? Scared to leave? Scared to finish what I’ve started? Am I a coward? A quitter? Or just scared you won’t like me if you really knew me? Her vision blurred. She blinked to get Libby back into focus. Something was wrong.

“Trust me, sweetheart, this won’t hurt,” Libby whispered, as she poured something cool and refreshing into Marlowe’s eye, then blotted the excess with a soft cloth. “I’m flushing your eye, and then I’ll take pictures of the structures inside your eye.” She repeated the cleansing process. Gently. Kindly.

“Structures?”

“Yes, the mechanics of your eyeball. The cornea, iris, and retina, which was torn when you arrived. That’s what Dr. Burr repaired. Did you know that?”

“No,” Marlowe breathed. “I never asked.” I should have.

“Tip your head back. There you go.” In went a couple drops of something else. Ahh, instant relief. “Now blink for me. Look up at the ceiling.”

Marlowe did as she was told, and Libby peered through what looked like a magnifying lens at the end of a black handle.

“Very good. Doctor Burr was right. Your eye is healed. You’ll have to stay out of direct sunlight for a couple days, but no more bandage.”

Marlowe’s chest lifted with a sigh of gratitude when, with a delicate touch, Libby set a pair of dark glasses on Marlowe’s nose and whispered, “I’ve lived through some awful days, too. Days when I couldn’t see the sun and believed I was dying, that I’d never see Mark again. Days when there was no hope, and I truly wanted to die. So have Kelsey and Judy. We’ve all been where you are right now. We’re here for you, girlfriend.”

“But I... I’m...” Marlowe had no idea what she wanted or needed. Her fingers seemed frozen. She couldn’t let go of Libby. Because if she did, this beautiful morning would crumble into dust like so many others, and she’d be alone again.

“You’re safe,” Libby said quietly. “When you saved Farrah and her girls, you were saving yourself, too. We all want you to stay. Please don’t leave.”

Marlowe jerked back even farther then, needing to look Libby in the eye. To see the

truth she hadn't realized she'd missed until then. "Where's Asher?"

Libby's lips thinned. She blinked, and Marlowe knew. "He's gone, isn't he? He left without me. He and Alex and... and Harley and M-Murphy and..." She couldn't remember who else pissed Alex off yesterday. "Asher left me behind, didn't he?" The ass.

The ugly thing that lay dormant in her heart writhed with pent-up anger, so, so ready to strike. To demand compliance and honesty and obedience. That was the only thing that saved all of those Afghan women. They'd obeyed every last word she'd said because they'd had to. They'd followed directions explicitly, without asking stupid questions. They'd been open and honest because that was what real friends did. They'd trusted her to know what was best for them. But these women... But Asher... Damn him.

"Marlowe." That was Kelsey, and oh yes, Marlowe remembered now. Kelsey was Alex's wife, and Asher said someone tried to kill her last fall. That was when Alex built the intensive care unit down the hall. Asher thought Kelsey was special. He said she'd love Marlowe. How did a person destroy that impossible possibility just because she was pissed off?

"Did Asher plan this?" Marlowe asked the room, because, come on now. It wasn't a coincidence that these women showed up the same morning Asher had snuck out of the country.

"Do you seriously believe you're capable of traveling halfway across the world in your condition?" Judy asked sharply. Apparently, she wasn't afraid to take the bull by the horns and deliver blunt-force trauma, just like she had yesterday with Alex.

"No, but..." Marlowe's eyes, both of them, filled with tears she couldn't hold back. "There are more women waiting for me to save them."

“See, Kelsey?” Libby said. “She’s as bad as Alex, Mark, Harley, and—”

“And us,” Kelsey replied kindly. “Marlowe doesn’t know it yet, but I think she’s found her tribe, and we’re not going to leave her.”

“Stop. Please, just stop. Everyone, shut up,” Marlowe cried. “I don’t know what tribe you’re talking about.”

Libby’s arms were around her before she finished. “The silent, unseen tribe of military wives and girlfriends. The women who stand by their men and keep the home fires burning while they’re off saving the world. The women who make sure those warriors have a soft place to land when they come home.”

“The tribe of the desperate sisters you saved,” Farrah murmured timidly. “No matter where you go, I will always love you, my lovely grouchy sister.”

Out of nowhere, Marlowe hiccupped. “Darn it. That nickname’s going to stick with me forever, isn’t it?”

Libby kissed the top of her beanie. She kissed her. On the head. Like no woman had ever done before. “I sure hope so. We don’t mean to gang up on you, but with the men leaving as quickly as they did, we knew you’d be upset when you woke and Asher wasn’t here.”

“So we’re here instead,” Judy added. “Now, stop feeling sorry for yourself, and let’s get you ready for the first day of the rest of your life.”

“Okay. Sure. It’s not like I have a choice, do I?”

“Nope,” Kelsey offered quietly. “We take care of our own, sweetheart. Get used to it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Darn that Asher. He did this. He sicced Libby and Judy on me. I'll kill him. But how could Marlowe not go with these ladies to see Kelsey at her home? Especially since she'd brought Farrah to visit? Kelsey had left earlier with Farrah. Said she had to get back before Alex's father's caregiver left for the day.

Marlowe didn't ask who or why, just knuckled down to get through another day. She'd never been out with any girlfriends, much less gone to one of their homes. It was strange, riding shotgun, while Libby maneuvered down country roads lined by oaks with branches so high and wide, they created lush green tunnels that made Marlowe feel like an uncivilized hobbit. Compared to her early years in miserable Chicago, then in harsh, dirty Afghanistan, these women lived in paradise. She could only imagine how glamorous their homes were.

Anxiously, Marlowe straightened her borrowed sunglasses and tugged at her beanie, making sure it covered her Dumbo-sized ears and every bit of her bare, scabby scalp. Which was just beginning to prickle with new growth, darn it. She didn't want these cheerful kind women to think less of her. She didn't want them to know why she'd shaved her head, either. Lice and high society didn't mix. They were polar opposites, and these women were all super-model perfect. Even Farrah had long shiny hair, like ladies in high-priced shampoo commercials. But Marlowe's? Patchy and shaved close. Not sleek or pretty enough to turn a guy's head. Nope, not going there. Asher was not on her radar. She did not want to turn his head. Didn't care if he ever looked her way again. The traitor.

'Listen up, kid,' she scolded her stupid inner child. 'Men want arm candy, not a

bedraggled piece of alley trash who fits better in Afghanistan than America.’ She’d been a social pariah all her life, and these gorgeous women would wash their hands of her the moment they knew what she really was. A big fat nothing. ‘Nothing to see here, folks. Keep walking.’

Fidgeting and feeling more trapped with every mile, Marlowe kept her attention on the scenery. Libby and Judy bantered back and forth about their other girlfriends, Persia and China, who were both pregnant. Who were on their way to Kelsey’s house to meet Wonder Woman . Ugh. Talk about a fish out of water, Marlowe was an ugly moray eel in a tank full of elegant Japanese koi.

Too soon, Libby turned her SUV into a gated community and Marlowe’s jaw dropped. Mansions everywhere. Huge, well-kept lawns and magnificent, tall trees between them. Holy cow! That house, err, mansion had a waterfall in the front yard. But the beautiful gray stone house, building, mansion—whatever, that Libby had just pulled up to, after driving a mile-long, red brick driveway—Marlowe didn’t want to set foot in. The driveway alone was so, so pretty, but if this was Kelsey’s home, it wasn’t a house. It was a castle, with an enclosed, glassed-in widow’s walk on the roof and its crisp, black, shingled top looked like a pointed witch’s hat. A six, maybe eight-sided railing with turned spindles, all painted bright white, surrounded the charming attraction. Why, oh why, would anyone build such an elegant thing on their roof? Was there a circular staircase leading to it, or did Kelsey keep one of those clever ladders hidden in the ceiling below? The Stewarts couldn’t possibly see the ocean from there, could they?

Marlowe’s view of the rooftop masterpiece disappeared when Libby parked closer to two expansive, double-wide, steel garage doors. How many cars did these people own? “You’re not in Kabul anymore, Dorothy,” she muttered under her breath.

And there she was, a clown dressed in flannel pajamas that Libby had brought or bought for her, Marlowe wasn’t sure which. But the jeans and t-shirt, which Libby

had also bought or brought, had been too rough on her still-healing and very tender back. At least, the PJs were navy blue with white trim, not covered with cartoon characters, and the sunglasses gave her something to hide behind.

“We’re here,” Libby said brightly. “Everybody out.”

Getting out of the Houston family’s glamorous silver SUV took some doing, but at last, Marlowe was on her feet, both hands firmly on her borrowed walker’s handles. Looking across the manicured lawn. Feeling like a poor relative. A total misfit.

With Judy on one side and Libby on the other, she made her way to the enormous, carved wooden front door. It opened before Libby knocked, and the sweetest little girl yelled, “Hi, Aunt Libby. Hi, Aunt Judy. Come on in. I was watching for you.”

The moment Libby crouched to greet her, that adorable angel climbed into her arms and snuggled. Had to be Kelsey’s daughter. Same dark chocolate hair. Same deep brown eyes. Also in jeans and a pink t-shirt.

“How’s your mama today, Lexie?” Libby asked, lifting upright with mini-Kelsey on her hip.

“Oh, she’s really good, Aunt Libby, and so’s Baby Bradley, but Grandpa’s feeling poorly, so he can’t play with us. He might wanna read a story, though. That’d be nice, huh?” Lexie stopped talking just long enough to suck in a deep breath and ask, “Wanna see my new puppies? I got two!”

Judy whispered, “Alex’s dogs have both gotten old. That’s why the puppies. He’s all about security. You’ll see.”

Marlowe nodded, not sure what she was agreeing with.

Kelsey called from somewhere inside, “I’m in the kitchen. Don’t forget to set the alarm.”

“I know the drill,” Libby replied. She set Lexie on the floor and did something with the alarm box behind the door, while Judy led the way to where Kelsey sat at the kitchen table, feeding an older, gray-haired man in a wheelchair. A kitchen towel lay draped over his chest, and was tied loosely behind his neck. He held a wooden spoon in one hand, but it was still clean.

“Hi, Marlowe. It’s so good to see you again. Please, have a seat. We’re just finishing lunch.”

“Okay, thanks.” Marlowe peeled the sunglasses off and handed them to Judy, who tucked them into her pocket.

Kelsey tipped her head to the older guy. “Grandpa. Libby, Judy, and Marlowe came to see you. Isn’t that sweet of them?”

He didn’t look up and didn’t seem to hear what Kelsey said. Her father-in-law must have Alzheimer’s or dementia. Most people would’ve put him in a nursing home. Why hadn’t she?

“This is Alex’s father, Mel Stewart. He’s going to read with Lexie after lunch, aren’t you, Grandpa?” Kelsey asked, carefully wiping his chin with the damp towel.

“Yay!” Lexie shouted as enthusiastically as she said everything else. “Only don’t turn the pages till I get done reading them, okay? Twenty thousand Leagues Under the Sea again?”

Grandpa didn’t grunt or look at his granddaughter. He was totally not present, probably didn’t know where he was. Which was sad because he was missing a lot.

“You read Twenty Leagues Under the Sea ? Really?” Marlowe asked. Unbelievable. Or maybe it was just a kid’s picture book. That made sense.

Lexie turned her bright eyes and replied, “Sure. Wanna read with me? You can hold Baby Bradley, but don’t let him touch the book, cuz he likes to rip pages out.”

“Well, err...” Marlowe had no choice. Lexie had a grip on her walker and was steering her away from the table, toward the hall.

“Lexie, Marlowe just got here, and she’s probably tired, so don’t drag her away. She just got out of the hospital today.”

“You been sick?” Lexie stopped steering, her eyes wide with wonder. “What’d you have? Tonsillitis? Pneumonia? De-men-cha?”

Marlowe couldn’t suppress a smile. “My goodness, you know a lot of big words.” Maybe that book wasn’t a child’s version. “I hurt my nose, back, and feet, that’s all. And it’s very nice to meet you, Lexie.”

“Who hit you in your eye?”

Marlowe brushed the question off. “Don’t worry about me. Maybe I’ll read with you later, would that be okay?”

“Sure! I love to read!”

“Sweetheart, why don’t you help Grandpa into the playroom? Go very slow, and I’ll get Bradley,” Kelsey said, as she deftly cleared the table and put the few dishes in the sink. Which was a modern marvel of hammered bronze metal that looked more like an antique than a modern sink. The matching gooseneck faucet gracing the counter had a handle like an old-fashioned pump. Everywhere Marlowe looked, she saw

wealth. Every appliance looked brand new. Not a ragged thing in sight. Nothing worn out, battered, or broken.

She bowed her head, needing to leave. She would've if Kelsey hadn't touched her shoulder and said, "You need to sit down. Here. Let me hold this chair and—"

"No," snapped out of Marlowe's mouth, as Lexie rolled another walker, this one with bright pink tennis balls instead of wheels, over to her grandfather. "I'm not a cripple."

Lexie stopped and cocked her head.

"Good, because I never said you were," Kelsey answered just as kindly as ever. "But I know a woman at the end of her rope when I see one. Now sit down before you fall down." She pulled a chair out from the table and pointed a stern finger at the seat.

"Oh, oh. Mama's mad at you," Lexie whispered. "You're gonna have to stand in the corner."

Marlowe wasn't expecting that firm command from this delicate woman or the warning from her adorable daughter, so she did as she was told. She sat.

"She's just tired, Mama," Lexie explained. "Maybe she needs a nap like Bradley and Grandpa always do."

Great, just great. Now she'd made Lexie feel bad. Sucking in a bellyful of regret, Marlowe nodded at the little girl. "I think you're right. I am tired. But I promise I'll come read with you after I talk with your mom a while."

"Well, okay, but you don't have to if you don't want to. I promise I'll read very softly if you do, and maybe you'll fall asleep like Bradley does."

Could there be a sweeter child than this one? Chastised, Marlowe said, “Thank you.”

Kelsey kissed her daughter’s head as Lexie led her grandfather down the hall.

“You should be proud,” Marlowe whispered. “You’ve raised a very mature little girl.”

“She takes after her mom,” Judy said. Setting Marlowe’s walker out of the way, she took the chair beside her. Libby sat next to Kelsey, and weren’t they just like four busybody housewives about to gossip over coffee?

Right on cue, Kelsey asked. “Would anyone like coffee? I made a cinnamon crunch coffee cake to go with it this morning. Any takers?”

Marlowe’s eyes were still on Lexie and her grandfather. The little girl jabbered with every halting step he took down the hallway. The scene was almost otherworldly. A tiny elf of a child taking care of a grumpy, stooped, older man, who did nothing but groan and growl in response to everything she said. He didn’t look anything like Alex.

Judy held up a finger. “Just coffee for me. No, you stay seated. I’ll serve. You go get Bradley. Marlowe? Libby? Coffee, cake, or something else?”

“Coffee’s fine, thanks,” Marlowe replied, as Kelsey followed Lexie and Grandpa down the same hallway.

“Nothing for me,” Libby answered. “Already had a cup and one’s my limit. That’s the playroom Lexie is steering her grandpa into, Marlowe. It’s childproof.”

“And grandfather proof,” Judy added. “Kelsey’s just making sure he gets settled into his chair, instead of beside it. Lexie can usually handle him, but he’s a cantankerous

old fart on his best days. Sometimes he hurts her feelings. Alzheimer's is a challenge to live with."

"And yet he lives here? With Alex and his family?" Marlowe asked.

Judy nodded. "Kelsey wouldn't have it any other way, now that she's back on her feet."

"Asher said someone shot her last fall?"

"Yes, and for a while, we were afraid we'd lose her."

"But as usual, Kelsey's stronger than any of us expected," Libby added. "But that's her story to tell. Judy, why don't you tell Marlowe about you and Harley?"

Kelsey returned with an adorable, blue-eyed, toddler-sized little boy snuggled under her chin. Could only be Alex's son. The boy was a miniature, sweeter version of him, and it was easy to see how much this little guy loved his mom. Kelsey had it all, a handsome, rich husband, a beautiful mansion, and two perfect children.

She shifted the boy to her hip and opened the slider off the kitchen. "Whisper. Smoke. Come." In through the door bounded two huge, slobbering dogs, a black German Shepherd and a silvery Malinois.

Kelsey told the dogs, "Playroom, boys. Guard." Not sternly, though. Kindly.

Straightaway, both dogs did as she ordered.

"Boys?" Marlowe asked. "You call them boys, and you're sending them in with your little girl?"

“Trust me,” Judy cut in, “Lexie bosses them as much as she does her grandpa. They’ll be okay. They’re big marshmallows when it comes to her and Bradley.”

“But they’re so big. Are they military working dogs?”

“Retired explosive ordnance dogs, yes,” Libby answered.

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll hurt her?” Lexie might be bossy, but those dogs were trained, military muscle. The American soldiers in Afghanistan didn’t let anyone pet their working dogs, much less read to them. What was Kelsey thinking?

“Those boys would never hurt my kids,” Kelsey said as she plopped her son on Marlowe’s lap. “They’re bigger, older, furrier brothers, and they’re quite defensive of their little sister and brother. I’d let the puppies in, but they’re still in training.”

Marlowe forgot about dogs now that she had a baby in her hands. A cute little boy with wide, curious blue eyes that weren’t full of fear. Alex’s son. Oh, my. She tightened her hold on his waist, not going to let anything happen to this perfect clone. Interestingly, he wasn’t afraid of her, a total stranger. How perfectly American. What did kids here in the land of the forever free and the incredibly wealthy have to be afraid of?

“And they’re walking vacuum cleaners,” Judy teased. “I’ve got at least three dogs in the house on most days, between Harley’s, Little A’s, and whichever fur baby Georgie is training at the moment. Did I tell you I had him tested and he’s been diagnosed with ADHD?”

Kelsey washed her hands at her beautiful kitchen sink, then brought a plate full of perfect little squares of coffee cake to the table and helped herself to a mug of coffee. She set the cake in the center of the table and took the chair beside Marlowe. “I’m not surprised. Will he have to take something for it?”

“He already is, and I’m seeing a big difference in him. Poor kid told me it’s easier to think, and stuff that boggled his mind before, makes sense now. He said it’s easier to concentrate, and he doesn’t feel like he’s falling down a rabbit hole, like Alice in Wonderland whenever he opens a book. I had no idea how badly he felt.”

“I’m glad you had him tested. Children with ADHD don’t realize how differently their brains process information,” Kelsey said. “I often think that Nick—”

“Don’t. Just don’t,” Libby snapped, the sting in her voice surprising Marlowe. “Don’t you dare make excuses for that man. Nick made his choices. He deserved what he got.”

“And I’m proud Harley put him down,” Judy added fiercely. “When I think what you went through that night, and everything Alex suffered” —she shuddered— “I thank God for every bullet Harley put into those bastards’ brains. I wish he could kill them again. Hell, I wish—”

“Judy, shush,” Libby whispered. “Lexie has radar ears, and Bradley doesn’t need to hear this.” She turned to Marlowe. “Well, look at Wonder Woman . Guess you’ve got maternal instincts after all.”

“What?” Marlowe looked down at the little boy on her lap, the grinning toddler, whose cute little ears her hands now rested over. He was looking up at her, his eyes sparkling, as if she was playing a game with him. Darn. She did have maternal instincts, and apparently, they’d reacted automatically when Judy cussed. Tears flooded her eyes again. Had to be something in the air.

Bowing her head to the top of this little guy’s downy head, Marlowe strived for distraction. “Who’s Nick?”

Chapter Fourteen

By late afternoon, Marlowe not only felt completely comfortable with Kelsey, Libby, and Judy, but she now knew who Nick was and all that Alex and Kelsey had lived through during that horror-filled night in the Pacific Northwest years ago. She also knew Libby'd survived being buried alive, and that Mark Houston was the man who'd found her. Even Judy had lived through a nightmare, after a horrendous freeway accident left Harley missing for days, with a traumatic brain injury that made him forget her. They hadn't had their boys then, but Marlowe could relate to being forgotten. That was the story of her life, and knowing these women better gave her a new perspective.

Persia and China were running late, and Marlowe realized her new friends weren't the shallow divas she'd thought. If anything, they were like her, each lucky to be alive. Only they didn't feel sorry for themselves. They were each resilient and strong. That was what she had in common with these ladies. They might look like they'd just stepped off high-fashion runways in Paris or New York, but they were scarred and battered, too. They were brave. Well then, Marlowe could be brave and stop whining, too.

“And then I find out that Sergeant Knicks ” —Judy made exaggerated air quotes— “who I thought was a female soldier, was actually a big, black lab. Do you believe that? Her name's spelled N-Y-X, not K-N-I-C-K-S like the basketball team. Darn him. Alex tricked me, the jerk, and then he laughed in my face when he drove me to the airport to pick up a... a dog crate.” Judy leaned into Marlowe when she said that.

Marlowe laughed.

“Yes, but Nyx was Harley’s military working dog,” Kelsey added. “He needed her back in his life and you made that happen. How is Nyx anyway?”

Judy crossed her arms and humphed. “Oh, she’s fine, but until that day, I didn’t think Alex knew how to tease. He made me look stupid, but” —she shrugged— “now I know he loves Harley as much as I do.”

“He does,” Kelsey murmured. “He loves all his agents, their families, and even their dogs.”

Despite Judy’s sarcastic, over-exaggerated delivery, it was easy to see how each of these women loved their men, and no wonder. Alex, Mark, and Harley had each saved their wives’ lives in one way or another. Kelsey had two men to thank for her being there today. Alex for finding her after her ex-husband tried to kill her—after he’d already murdered her tiny baby boys, the asshole. Then Harley, when a year later, Alex and Kelsey were nearly killed by her ex—again—and his survivalist buddies from Montana. Harley’d rescued Alex first that time. He’d been near death’s door, beaten so bad. Then Harley went into the woods after Kelsey, who’d been dragged off by her ex and his buddies. By the time Harley caught up with them and put them in the ground, she’d been in rough shape. She’d lived through one nightmare after another that year. Alex hadn’t helped matters when he’d thought he was dying and yelled at her to leave him. To just go. But once again, Harley brought the lovers back together.

As far as the Stewarts being rich, snooty, and full of themselves, this house was just a stone house that Kelsey and Alex had turned it into a home. Looks were deceiving, and Marlowe was feeling pleasantly mellow, especially with Bradley asleep on her lap. She tipped forward and breathed a kiss into his hair. For the first time in her life, she felt like she belonged. These pretty women, the ones she’d tried so hard to alienate, kept being kind and thoughtful, most of all, honest.

Yes, they'd all been through their own versions of hell, and Marlowe couldn't begin to imagine how terrifying it must've been for Libby to have been buried alive. In a concrete planter. In Wisconsin. In autumn. Winters there were brutal, and early fall couldn't've been much warmer. Marlowe shivered at the thought of being trapped in that dark, cold cave again.

"So..." Kelsey murmured. "It's late, girls, and I have an extra guest room that's just down the hall. Marlowe, would you mind staying with me until Alex gets back?"

"You know?" Marlowe asked, surprised he'd told his wife about the mission. "I mean, err, he told you where he was going?"

Kelsey leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "Not exactly. My husband has a tendency to run toward trouble while others run from it, so I suspect he's doing something dangerous."

"As do his men," Libby confirmed. "You sound like you know more than we do, Marlowe. Do you?"

"Yeah, what's up, girlfriend?" Judy asked.

"No, err, yes. Okay, yes. But it's... it's classified." Marlowe had no idea if the mission was classified or not, but no way would she break Asher's confidence. He'd had the nerve to stand up to his boss. She couldn't let him down. "I was supposed to go with them," she offered lamely, "but here I am, sitting around doing nothing while they're off saving the world—"

"You aren't doing nothing," Judy snapped. "We all signed up for this when we married our guys, and maybe that's why you don't get it. You don't have a vested interest in these guys coming back safely, or maybe you just don't care about them as much as we do. You don't have anyone to lose. But understand this" —Judy gestured

angrily toward the other women— “this is what us wives do when our men leave. We sit with each other, we stand by each other, and we keep watch together, in the darkest nights when waiting alone gets too hard, Marlowe. While they’re off saving the world, as you put it, we save each other here at home. That’s every bit as important to them as their missions are to the world. We can’t do what they do, and God knows, I wouldn’t want to. But someone has to, and those someones are the men we love.”

Marlowe’s mouth was dry by the end of Judy’s rant. She felt like she’d been slapped. Sure, she wished Asher hadn’t left like he did, and yes, okay, she missed him not being with her when she woke up this morning. But he hadn’t even said goodbye. He’d just snuck away with his friends.

Only now...

It wasn’t like he was out joyriding with his buddies. He’d left her behind, true, but he’d done that to protect her. Maybe because of that hug in Harley’s barn? The hug she’d turned into an awkward joke, when all he’d wanted was to get closer to her?

Man, she was a troll. He’d just revealed his secret, that he had nightmares. That he needed a service dog. Big, brave Asher Downey, the courageous warrior who’d gone into hell to save her worthless life, had confided his deepest, darkest secret to her. But she’d shut him down, and somehow, Judy knew.

Marlowe had no idea what to say, or how to feel about Judy’s uncomfortable accusations. As usual, Kelsey saved the day. Resting a hand on Marlowe’s kneecap, she stage-whispered, “And as you can tell, some of us are still recovering from a bit of our own PTSD.”

“And one of us,” Libby added slyly, “might not be married, but she masks her fear for the guy she cares about by acting offended because he left without her. She’s

really afraid for him, because she knows how bad things can be in that part of the world. She knows she might never see him again. That's a frightening thought, huh, Marlowe?"

Judy's eyes turned into two thin slits of intense emerald green scrutiny, reminding Marlowe how Asher seemed to see right through her, too. Darn it, Libby might be right.

Marlowe bowed her head, hiding from Judy's fierce gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

But she did know, and Libby was right. Marlowe did care for Asher. She liked being with him, and she especially liked how he smelled, and the way his sexy green eyes lit up when he'd first seen her that morning in Germany. She liked the funny way her body hummed when he came into view, and she was dying to run her fingers through his hair. And that stupid hug? That was her being mean and pushing him away because... Well, because if the two people who should've loved her the most shoved her away like she was nothing, why would Asher be any different? People were mean and thoughtless and selfish. Only...

Right then, Asher was far from home, risking his life in a hostile country, doing what she wanted to be doing. Fighting for the helpless and the vulnerable, instead of sitting around complaining, whining, and talking about how someone else ought to do something about it. Asher was the reason she was alive today, but she'd spurned him. Why?

"I bet you didn't know Asher nearly died in Somalia when he was still Army," Kelsey whispered.

Marlowe turned to study Alex's wife. There were tiny scars along her jaw, and she'd shown Marlowe the wicked, red scar along the side of her head where a sniper's

bullet had nearly killed her last fall. These women were tougher than she'd thought. They weren't wealthy talkers; they were earnest doers. And most of that doing was done out of the goodness of their hearts. They weren't getting rich off their sacrifices. Kelsey ran a safe place for homeless teenagers in Washington, D.C., Judy was a registered nurse, and Libby was a doctor. They were hardworking mothers, as well as businesswomen and faithful wives.

"I didn't know he was in Somalia," Marlowe replied softly.

"It's his story to tell, and I shouldn't have said anything. One of these days, he'll share it with you, but..." Kelsey shrugged. "Sometimes the truth is hard to see because we're too close to it, sweetheart. I never knew how strong I was until Alex showed me how to be brave."

"I'm not brave. I'm just mean," Judy declared proudly.

Libby leaned into Judy, nearly pushing her over. "You're just like Marlowe. You're only mean because you have to be. I'll bet Harley has never once said you're mean."

Judy hmphed. "He'd better not if he knows what's good for him."

Everyone laughed.

"I am worried about those guys. All of them," Marlowe admitted.

"But she only has eyes for Asher. Marlowe and Asher, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G," Libby sing-songed.

Marlowe nodded, meeting Libby's sparkling blue. "I do like him."

"We know," Judy quipped. "Now give me that beanie."

Marlowe slapped her free hand firmly over the beanie Asher gave her. “Why?”

“Judy,” Kelsey warned.

“Nope. It goes,” Judy declared, holding her hand out as if she totally expected Marlowe to obey. “It’s part of the mask. It has to go. Hand it over, sister.”

“When she’s ready to let it go, she will,” Kelsey said firmly.

Judy shook her head. “That’s the thing.” She looked right into Marlowe’s soul. “You’re ready, aren’t you?”

Marlowe bit her bottom lip, unsure and afraid; trembling for nothing, darn it. She was brave. She didn’t need a beanie to prove it, because she didn’t care what anyone thought of her. Not anyone. Except Asher. “Asher gave it to me.”

Kelsey’s brown eyes brimmed with what Marlowe recognized now as, not love, but understanding. And if Kelsey believed in her... Marlowe closed her eyes, clenched her teeth, and dragged the beanie off.

“There,” she snapped at Judy. “Are you happy now? I’m bald. Ugly. I had lice, damn it, so I shaved my head. I did what I had to do. I’m not rich and I’ll never be as beautiful as any of you.” She hadn’t intended to sound vindictive, but what was so wrong about a woman wearing a beanie? What was beauty anyway? Skin deep, that was all. Some of the world’s prettiest people were pigs at heart and some Taliban soldiers were handsome. But none had a problem punching a woman in the face.

“I’m sorry,” Judy said. There were tears in her eyes, and Libby was sniffing, but it was Kelsey who whispered, “We’ve got your six, little girl. You’re not alone now, and you’ll never be alone again.”

Something cracked open in her chest. It hurt. “It’s too hard. I can’t do this.”

“You already did, sweetheart,” Kelsey told her firmly. “The TEAM is a family, and you belong to us now. You are finally home. Let it out. We’re here, and we already love you.”

“I second the motion,” Judy whispered hoarsely.

Marlowe looked at them through tears. Libby was hugging Judy. Everyone was crying. Well, except for Grandpa Stewart. He was still in his wheelchair, sound asleep, and snoring.

“Here, here,” Libby murmured. “Motion approved. You’re stuck with us, Marlowe.”

Chapter Fifteen

On the flight from Germany to Incirlik Air Base, Asher used whatever time he wasn't napping to study the files he'd saved on his tablet. He purposely avoided thinking of Marlowe. She'd be pissed when he got back, if she was still in America. He couldn't blame her. He'd be pissed if he'd been left behind, too. But it'd sure be nice if she was happy to see him for a change. If she'd run to him and throw her arms around him like she cared.

He liked the feel of her in his arms, and he was dying to kiss her. Yes, his feelings for her were most likely leftover trauma from the horrific scene of finding her in that cave. Transference, that was all it was. The instantaneous emotional connection between female victims and male rescuers, and vice versa. Between female nurses and male patients, too. Some called it rescue romance. Sometimes it led to short-term relationships and one-night stands.

Asher ran a hand over his face. He didn't do one-night stands, but if that was all Marlowe wanted, he might consider it. Just this once. She was a mixed-up mess, one minute pushing him away, then sending signals she was drawn to him. Would shacking up for one night be enough? He hoped not. One-night stands were dead-ends. They went nowhere, and he'd already been there. Was still there. Guess there was always Walter, the deaf pup that was afraid of his shadow. Maybe Walter would be the distraction Asher needed to stay sane when he went home and discovered Marlowe'd left him.

Asher turned toward the dark window across the way. He'd had a few girlfriends in high school, a couple more in college. None of them amounted to anything, but

Marlowe was different. She was driven, and she stood for something. She should be proud of what she'd singlehandedly accomplished. And she was. Hell, he was proud of her. She'd rescued a total of twenty-one women in a matter of months. That equated to twenty-one happy families and dozens of rescued children who would never witness another bloody Taliban execution.

But could Marlowe ever give that up to be with him? Was he a big enough asshole to ask her to? Hell, no. Marlowe was perfect just the way she was, and maybe it was time he got used to the idea of letting her go. Of not wishing for things he had no right to want. Like the most beautiful woman in the world...

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Maps. He needed to study maps. Okay then. Tapping his tablet screen to wake it up, Asher got back to work. Sucking in a deep breath of forgetfulness, the first thing he noticed was the hostile, rugged terrain between al-Tanf and Ibrahim al-Jamah's mansion east of Damascus. Mostly desert with little arable land, it would've made better sense if he'd chosen a spot along the Mediterranean coast to lie low. He could afford it. Why hadn't he?

Only a hundred and ten miles long, Syria's coastline lay between Turkey to the north and Lebanon to the south. Surely Jamah was powerful enough and feared enough to access a more defensible position than a century-old mansion in the desert. Unless that mansion had strategic value. Did he know something Alex didn't? As much as Asher studied his future trek through the desert, he couldn't come up with a logical reason for Jamah's suspected current location. There was no sense worrying. Eventually, time would tell.

Asher stowed his tablet and slept the rest of the way to Incirlik. There, they boarded an equally uncomfortable C-130 and flew onto Al-Asad Air Base in Iraq. Due to weather, the thirty-six-hour flight was now a forty-eight-hour endurance test. By the time they arrived in al-Tanf, Asher was sick of C-rations, bottled water, sitting on his ass, and still wondering about Marlowe. Was she healing? Was she staying? Would

she leave without that little golden pup, the one she'd named Darling? Cute name. Beautiful owner. Better question: Would she leave without saying goodbye? He deserved it if she did. He'd done that to her and she was a titch vindictive.

Damn, he was screwed. Asher couldn't do it. Forgetting Marlowe wasn't in the cards. If he did nothing else when he got back to Virginia, he'd find her and he'd kiss her. Then, he'd know. He was sure of it. There was chemistry between them. He'd felt it and so had she. He had to try. God, he hoped she was waiting for him.

Once on the ground, the current commander of al-Tanf, USMC Sergeant Rodney Calhoun, met Alex as he deplaned. Words were exchanged, and of all things, Calhoun saluted Alex and Alex returned the salute. What was that about?

Alex waved for them to follow, and they spent the rest of the day showering, eating actual food, and just plain recovering. Asher made sure everyone, including his boss, took a pair of the sunglasses he'd brought with him. "Keep them with you. They'll come in handy later," he warned.

The good times ended at twenty-three hundred hours, when Alex sent a terse group text. "Gear up. Meet me in the mess tent. We depart at zero-dark-thirty."

"Finally," Tripp McClane grouched as he ran to catch up with Asher on their way to the meeting. They were both wearing midnight black jumpsuits, not the extensive gear HALO jumps required, which was fine by Asher. He preferred low altitude, low opening insertions. There was still a significant risk factor, but tethered to a slow dropping chute over any LZ made him an easier target. He wasn't here to view the scenery midnight drops offered. The less time a man spent hanging helpless overhead, the better.

The mess tent was a plywood, two-by-four, canvas structure, with mess tables in rows down the center and a self-serve buffet area of now empty warming trays along one

side. Alex sat at a corner table with Sergeant Calhoun, his back to the wall and watching. Asher and Tripp stowed their bags under the same table and took the opposite seats.

One by one the others arrived. When at last Cord sank into the last empty chair, late as usual, Alex lifted to his feet and made quick introductions. “TEAM, this is Sergeant Calhoun, 3 rd Battalion, 7 th Marine Regiment. The rifles he procured for this mission are already aboard the plane that’ll take us into the desert. Once we drop, we’ll head to these coordinates.” He stabbed a finger at a black X on the map, southwest of Damascus. “This is Jamah’s last known location. We don’t know if he’s still there. If he is, we will end him with extreme prejudice. If not, we’ll burn whatever’s there to the ground and regroup.”

“How far? How long?” Mark asked.

“Approximately one-hundred-fifty miles northeast of this station,” Calhoun replied. “Less than an hour by air.”

“What kind of rifles?” That was Cord.

“Nothing but the best,” Calhoun answered caustically. Yup. Marine.

“M27-IARs then?” Cord, also a Marine, shot back. The M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle was a gas-operated, short-stroke piston, rotating bolt action, select-fire assault rifle, designed by Heckler the net was that low. Wyatt took the rear, protecting their rearward as they followed the yellow dots that led to the mansion wall straight ahead. Once there, they ducked under the net and stopped, their backs to the cool stone.

“How do you want to do this, Boss?” Wyatt asked. “Sneak in the back door like servants or march in the front like the conquering heroes we are?”

Alex grunted. “Waiting on Mark to—”

No sooner said when rapid fire sounded from the silencer attached to an M27 in the distance. Quiet shots, not silent, but loud enough to sound an alarm. At nearly the same time, Tripp reported, “Rear entrance secure.” So much for those guards sounding alarms.

Mark followed with, “Heston located movement upstairs in the room with a view. Be careful. If it’s Jamah, there are shadows moving up there with him. Smells like a trap to me.”

“Copy that,” Alex answered, shifting his rifle strap to his left shoulder, freeing both hands for his SIG pistols. Both military issue and both sporting high-capacity, double-stack magazines, he nodded toward the front of the mansion. “Follow me.”

Like Asher would do anything else? With Wyatt at his side, he activated his helmet cam and light and followed his boss. Proficiently and without hesitation, Alex kicked in the front door and immediately shot the armed guard running at him. The guard behind the first screamed something about dying for Allah, so Asher obliged him, and sent him straight into the land of milk and honey. Or, in that bastard’s case, back into hell. Satan’s accomplices, all of them.

Alex roared into the massive entryway, where the first guard he’d killed was now sprawled on the floor. Wyatt took the hall to their right. Asher took the left. Only two doors, both on the same side of the hall. With extreme caution, he kicked in the first and encountered two armed guards looking up in surprise. The place stunk of foul body odor and something rank he didn’t want to identify. They hesitated. He didn’t. When they fell, their weapons went wild and lead sprayed the ceiling.

Onto door number two. When it yielded nothing and no one, he advised the sniper buddies covering his ass from somewhere outside, “Exiting right hall on the south

side. Please don't shoot me." Friendly fire was real. He needed Heston and Mark to know precisely where he was.

"Yup, gotcha in my sights," Heston replied. "Wyatt's in deep shit though. Four against one. You might want to—"

Gunshots roared from the opposite hallway. Asher rammed a new magazine home and ran to assist. Wyatt was on his back behind a heavy metal desk in the second open doorway, taking some serious heat from four assailants in the crowded room. Asher took two out without blinking, giving Wyatt breathing room to finish the last two.

He swiped the back of his hand over his forehead as he climbed to his feet. "Thanks for the assist."

Asher shrugged it off. "Thank Heston. I just go where I'm sent."

"Nothing like having snipers on overwatch in a firefight," Wyatt huffed, obviously stressed.

"Later," Asher answered, nodding toward the barrage of gunfire coming from Alex's last known position.

Together they caught up with their boss, but what a sight. Asher lifted his pistol to intercede, but Alex didn't need help. He'd danced these steps before. Swiftly and without missing a step. Direct hit every time. It was uncanny how easily and quickly he switched from firing with his right hand, to firing with his left, sometimes firing both SIGs at the same time. The man seemed to know where his targets were without looking for them or at them. His reaction time was incredible—for an older guy.

Asher took out the lone shooter who dashed out of a closet, firing wildly. Then nailed

the robed behemoth who came out of nowhere with a freaking sword. Honestly, what kind of idiot brought a knife to a gunfight? Wyatt wasted two morons who charged through the open front door, guns blazing. The noise was horrendous, making Asher wish he'd worn ear protection. An oxygen mask would've been nice, too. The air inside was damned rank.

There was no longer any need to worry whether Alex could keep up or see clearly. He proved himself with every shot fired. Asher had never seen such finesse in battle before. Alex was a master craftsman in the delicate but brutal art of war, a whirling devil. Asher was nothing but a clumsy first-year student by comparison. Cautiously, he moved closer, in case his boss might need him. It could happen. When the last guard fell, he tapped Alex's shoulder to let him know he had his back. Which felt a lot like Sponge Bob asking Gandalf the Gray if he needed a hand fighting that army of Orcs.

"Tripp and Cord, you've got seven coming your way," Mark advised through their shared link.

Gunfire erupted from the direction of the kitchen exit as Tripp and Cord engaged the enemy. It was a long two minutes until Cord came back with, "Thanks for the intel, brother. All seven down and we're still up." He sounded winded. "Both of us. Tripp's a damned quick draw."

"Boss," Asher growled, "that was a coordinated attack. Jamah's got to have hidden cameras in this place." Not that those cameras were keeping Jamah's men alive, but Asher had no doubt the rat bastard had been watching the whole time. The question was—from where?

Alex backtracked to the staircase. Stretching a hand to Wyatt, he ordered, "You're up."

Wyatt tugged two palm-sized devices from his padded bag and removed the protective strips covering their backsides. “You do realize these’ll kill everyone in their line of sight.”

Impatiently, Alex growled. “The only innocents in this hellhole are chained in the cellar, and we’ll take care of them later. Asher, start climbing. I’m right behind you.”

Along with Alex, Asher stopped several steps above Wyatt. They watched while he placed one device in the center of the second riser up from the floor. The other device went on the riser two steps up from the first. Stepping over the second device, he jerked his chin for Alex and Asher to continue ahead of him. Cautiously they climbed the elegant, curved staircase.

Jamah’s mansion was a bizarre mix of the most inhospitable hospitality Asher had ever seen. Thick, plush, scarlet Persian rugs covered cold, black marble floors. Magnificently arranged bouquets of dead flowers in gold vases accented the lacquered tables under each shuttered window. Even the carved sandstone shutters were works of gory art, each depicting ancient battles. Robed Arabic warriors on small horses battling armored knights. Helmeted European skulls mounted on spikes. Mounds of bodies burning. Mosques and churches on fire. Dragons with human body parts—legs, arms, and torsos—dangling between their teeth.

At last, the stairway ended at a wide landing showcasing the carved, closed wooden door ahead. There they stopped.

“You guys have anything in those bags that’ll let us see inside?” Alex asked quietly.

Asher pulled a miniature under-door camera stick out of the side pocket of his bag and extended it to its maximum length. “This’ll work.”

Crouching to the floor, he slipped the stick under the door and activated the cell-

phone-sized screen on the opposite end. Things got a little dicey when what sounded like an army of Jamah's men stormed the stairs behind them, cursing all infidels. Flexing his jaw to alleviate the pressure of the upcoming explosion, Asher held his position until—

BOOM! BOOM! The building shook like a son of a bitch when the two laser-activated explosive charges below took care of the incoming problem. By then, Asher knew the layout of the room behind the door and precisely who was in there.

“Boss,” was all he had to say to get Alex's attention.

Alex dropped to his knees alongside Asher as debris rattled below. With an impatient flick, he pulled his readers out of his chest pocket. Leaning into the screen, he finally saw what Asher needed him to see. “Son of a gawddamned bitch.”

Asher sat back on his haunches. “Yeah. That.”

Chapter Sixteen

China and Persia finally arrived around dinner time, and with them came two gorgeous men, both polite enough, but as stiff and unsmiling as a couple gargoyles. China and Persia could've passed for sisters. Both were obviously pregnant. China wasn't far along, but poor Persia looked ready to pop. They were both in what seemed to be the official uniform of most Americans: jeans and t-shirts. Persia's shirt was baby blue. China's was bright yellow with 'Save your horses. Ride a Cowboy!' emblazoned in dark red across her voluptuous chest.

The moment Marlowe saw their long, thick, dark hair and radiant complexions, she ran her fingers over her bare head, embarrassed and worried her new friends would tell on her. That she'd had lice. That she'd shaved her head. Fortunately, Judy had dolled up her baldness with a light-blue headband that looked like a mini-turban. Kelsey said it enhanced the color of her eyes. Libby had dabbed a smoky eye shadow around her eyes, and for once, Marlowe looked almost pretty. Not as beautiful as these women, but Libby doing that helped her appear, well, more American.

"Uncle Maverick! Uncle Walker!" Lexie yelled.

"Excuse me," China groused, one hand on her hip "You're excited to see Uncle Maverick, but not me? Am I invisible, little girl?"

Lexie's eyes widened. "No, I can see you, but you can turn invisible? Really? Can you show me how to do it?"

Persia elbowed China as she headed for the sofa. "You walked right into that one.

Ignore grouchy Auntie China and come sit with me, Lexie.”

“Carefully,” one of the men growled.

Lexie ran pell-mell into Persia’s open arms and snuggled beside her. “Aw, Uncle Walker, I always careful of Aunt Persia,” she scolded, blatantly patting Persia’s baby bump. “She’s got a tiny baby in this here tummy, and Mama told me how her baby got in there and how she’s gonna get it out. Want me to tell you how?”

That got a chuckle out of everyone, and now Marlowe knew who belonged to who. Walker, with Persia. Maverick, with China.

“No, munchkin. I already know how, but thanks.”

Walker was edgy, lean with piercing blue eyes that looked through Marlowe. Maverick was just as tense. Wearing a dusty cowboy hat, dark-blue western shirt with a black yoke, and jeans, he stood a titch taller than Walker. They both walked like bow-legged gunslingers from those old Western movies. Without asking, he hung his hat on a hook behind Kelsey’s front door and turned to survey the room.

Walker crouched at Lexie’s feet. “You’ve got a smart Mama, don’t you?” he asked kindly, which surprised Marlowe, considering how irritable he seemed before. Her previous assessment of him changed. He wasn’t the hardass she’d thought he was.

“Ah-huh. Mama’s the smartest lady in the whole world” —Lexie spread her arms wide— “cuz Daddy says so.”

Walker tipped his head to the little cherub. “Well, you tell your daddy he’s right. Mommies are the smartest people in the world. You listen to her, don’t you?”

Lexie’s chocolate curls bobbed. “Ah-huh. I always listen cuz if I don’t, I have to sit in

the corner. And think about my ak-shuns.”

“Rules have consequences, don’t they?” Walker asked as he stood.

“Ah-huh, and if I say a bad word, she puts soap in my mouth.” Lexie looked up at him, her lips pinched in a pout. “That’s mean, huh? She shouldn’t do stuff like that, should she?”

Walker’s belly muscles twitched with a suppressed laugh. “Nope. Not mean, at all, munchkin. Your mom wants what’s best for you. She loves you, and you shouldn’t be saying naughty words, should you?”

“No,” Lexie huffed. “Daddy says that, too.”

“So be a good girl.”

“I am.” Again with a dramatic sigh.

After a curt, “Nice to meet you, ma’am,” which Marlowe knew not to be offended by, Walker’s sharp eyes returned to canvassing the place, like he and Maverick were looking for something or someone. Which was ludicrous. The only people here were the ones who’d been here all day.

These guys were hunting, that was what they were doing. Opening doors, as if someone was going to jump out at them. Cocking their heads, as if they heard something they didn’t like. Being extra aware, like hungry predators on the hunt. That made Marlowe hyper-alert and nervous again, darn them. She hadn’t worried since she realized Kelsey, Libby, and Judy all carried pistols tucked into hidden holsters at the small of their backs. Very smart.

After all she’d seen and lived through in Afghanistan, Marlowe firmly believed

women should be armed and capable of defending themselves. Females were the most assaulted, most often raped, and most likely to be murdered of the genders. Self-defense was a common-sense solution, especially in this world gone batshit crazy. Females absolutely needed to protect themselves from stronger, larger, meaner males. If not armed, they needed martial arts training, and they should be taught that when they were little kids.

Oh, crap. She was doing it again. Wincing, Marlowe mentally climbed down from her opinionated high horse. After what happened in that stinking cave, she was a great one to talk. Self-defense training was now her number one priority, and she knew just the man for the job—if Asher was still talking to her when he got back. Marlowe couldn't blame him if he wasn't. She had been harsh with him, while he'd only ever been considerate, calm, and kind with her. Somehow, she'd turned into a bully, yet Asher remained cool, calm, and gracious. Self-effacing, that was Asher.

Darn. She'd been a raging bitch to a man plagued by nightmares, enough that he needed a comfort dog. What did that say about her? That she was mean, quick to take offense, and quicker to judge. She didn't understand why she couldn't be nice to him. He'd rescued her. What more did she want from a guy?

Marlowe bowed her head. She was still going back to Afghanistan, somehow, but she needed to see Asher first. She needed to know he was okay. But mostly, she needed to apologize and give him the hug he deserved.

"Mama," an angel-soft voice interrupted her internal conversation.

Marlowe glanced up as Bradley slapped his tiny hands on her knees to get her attention. He was leaning to one side, his head cocked.

"Hi, sweetheart," she whispered, looking down into his gentle blue eyes.

“Up,” he ordered, smacking her knees again. “Me want up.”

Well, okay then. Smiling, because Kelsey’s kids weren’t shy, Marlowe scooped Bradley onto her lap. The little guy was a handful of little boy jeans, a yellow t-shirt with a bright, red Elmo on his chest, and the tiniest black cowboy boots she’d ever seen. The scent of baby powder freshness slammed into her heart. Oh, damn. She closed her eyes. Babies were her greatest, hardest weakness. Children without parents didn’t stand a chance in Afghanistan. Husbandless women and fatherless children were fair game to the Taliban.

But now, there in Kelsey’s immaculate home, with her nose in this perfect little boy’s baby-fine hair, Marlowe found it easier to believe that life wasn’t always hard. It could be good. Even hers, as tough as it’d been. Parts of it had been good. Like when her mom was sober, and they’d scraped together enough loose change to go down to the local Dairy Queen and get root beer floats or vanilla ice cream cones. Those were good times. Not good days or weeks or months maybe, but it was funny how one good time had made the hard days easier to bear.

While the women talked about who else was pregnant, someone named Tuesday, Marlowe blinked to keep her tears at bay. Tears were weakness, and she was not weak. But sitting there, in a clean house with kind people and this perfect little boy on her lap, she was incredibly happy. Like it or not, those tears were on the verge of falling, all because of the charming child leaning against her heart. Bradley was safe, and he’d have all the opportunities America offered to everyone, not just to the rich, powerful, and brutal. But to everyone. Even her. She’d been dirt poor all her life, but she’d still gone to school, and those schools had free breakfasts and lunches, and sometimes—

She shook her head at the contrast between her life and Bradley’s. He’d have it easier than she did. Kelsey and Alex would see to it because they were good parents, and that was why she kept blinking. A tiny part of her was jealous that she’d had to grow

up fast and mean, pretty much motherless and fatherless, while Lexie and Bradley would never suffer one-tenth of what she'd lived through. Which was good for them. Dashing a quick hand over her eyes, Marlowe slammed the door on her stupid pity party. There wasn't a thing she could do to change her past. Time didn't work like that. There. End of that crappy story.

"Hey, darlin'," a deep familiar voice said, as some guy—

Oh, Harley. Marlowe shrugged away when he settled beside her and stretched his arm along the sofa behind her. "I'm not your darling," she reminded him curtly.

"Good luck with that, sweetheart," Judy called from where she sat with Libby and Lexie. "He calls all us girls darling. He's a big flirt."

"Marlowe likes me, Judy, she just doesn't know it yet." Harley winked at his wife. Turning back, he asked, "Come outside with me? I've got something to show you."

"I'm busy," she replied haughtily. Couldn't he see the precious boy in her arms? What made him think she'd trade Bradley for him? "Go away, you're bothering me. Us. I mean us." She drew Bradley tighter against her.

"Oh, girlfriend, you are so right for Asher." Harley's hazel eyes were bright with mischief. "But seriously, bring Bradley with you. It'll just take a minute."

"No," Marlowe growled. Didn't he know she could barely stand, much less walk without a darned walker that made her look like someone's grandmother? Surely Judy told him. Marlowe wasn't going anywhere. Not with Harley, not with herself, not with anyone. If she did, she'd have to use that walker and then, everyone would think she was helpless when she wasn't. Temporarily incapacitated was not helpless, but it was embarrassing.

“Well, if you won’t go out with me...” Harley turned to Kelsey. “Mind if I let the dogs in, Kels?”

She laughed. “Do I ever say no to my boys joining us? Sure. Let them all in.”

“Brutus and Hercules, too?” Harley was already at the kitchen sliders. “You sure, darlin’?”

Okay, so maybe he does call every woman darlin’.

“Sure. The more, the merrier.”

Harley opened the door, whistled, and in seconds, a pack of wild dogs and puppies galloped in. Marlowe recognized Walter and Darling, but darn. There were now six, rambunctious, tail-whipping dogs and puppies in Kelsey’s house.

“Puppies,” Bradley squealed, clapping his hands as the biggest dog, the black German shepherd with a gray snout, headed toward Marlowe. She’d seen how ferocious military working dogs could be. She pulled Bradley back, protecting him. Instead of climbing over Bradley and her, the big dog sat at her feet with its head cocked, its tail beating the floor like a drum.

“Whipper,” Bradley cooed, leaning forward, his arms stretched too close to that big dog’s sharp, white teeth. My heck, he was a big thing.

Harley plopped down beside her again, but before Marlowe could tell him to beat it, he settled her adorable golden puppy on Bradley’s lap. “Surprise, Bradley. You’re the first to hold Marlowe’s new baby.”

“Awww, Darling.” Marlowe couldn’t believe she’d just squealed like a kid.

“Him, Whipper,” Bradley said, pointing at the black beast sitting patiently at his cowboy boots. “You, Darwing.” He meant the chubby puppy on his lap.

“This big boy is Whis-per,” Harley enunciated as he pulled the black dog between his knees and roughed up its ears. “He and that other big fellow over there” —he nodded to the silver dog on the couch, lying across Kelsey’s lap— “are EOD dogs that retired from service shortly after they deployed. Turned out they’re lovers, not fighters. A guy Alex knew left them to him when he died. Cancer, I think. Alex didn’t much want a dog back then, but here they are. Plus his two new pups.”

Two adorable German Shepherd puppies. They were almost as cute as Darling and Walter. Both had long, fluffy hair and floppy ears.

“Whisper’s the one I told you about, Marlowe. The one who found me that day,” Kelsey interrupted.

Marlowe nodded, secretly thrilled that Kelsey trusted her with such a heartbreaking part of her life.

“You told her?” Harley asked as Maverick and Walker came to stand behind the sofa where Marlowe sat with Bradley.

“Of course,” Kelsey replied easily. “Girls talk.”

A sudden niggling, sticky awareness crept up Marlowe’s spine. What was really going on? Why were all these men here? Did everyone know something she didn’t?

“Relax, girlfriend,” China said with a friendly smile. “These guys were special forces. It’s what they do. They clear every house when they first arrive. They’ll settle down once they’re satisfied no boogeymen sneaked in when we weren’t looking.”

Oh. Okay. That made sense. Until Whisper and Smoke were suddenly on their feet, their ears perked up, and their dark eyes wide. Whisper's nose lifted into the air. What now?

Chapter Seventeen

Asher walked into what was essentially Jamah's torture chamber. The shadows Mark reported seeing were bodies dangling from meat hooks in the wooden rafters overhead. Men, women, and children. All deceased. All in various stages of decomp. They'd obviously been there for days. Black pools of body fluids had long ago congealed beneath each body. The odor was rank. Asher suppressed his gag reflex.

Alex was speechless. So was Wyatt. Asher couldn't blame them. The alarm banging inside his brain for immediate attention posed a slew of questions that needed answering. If Jamah wasn't there, where was he? Was this horrendous scene what he'd planned all along, just a grisly distraction? Had he played on Alex's compulsive protective instincts when he'd threatened his family? Had he beaten Alex by escaping this death, too? Was that rat bastard in Virginia?

The more questions that bubbled up, the more Asher realized he wasn't where he should be. Marlowe wasn't protected. Was she alone? She should still be in the TEAM clinic. She'd be safe there, but was she? Had she bullied Libby and Judy into releasing her? Asher wouldn't be surprised. That was her MO. His heart kicked into overdrive, screaming, 'Go, go, go. Run to her. Now.'

Until Wyatt bellowed, "Everyone out!"

Asher didn't ask questions. He was having trouble keeping his cool, but when an EOD expert said move it, you moved. Alex hung back, no doubt making sure his men were clear first. Too bad. Asher jerked his boss from behind him and shoved Alex out the door, toward the stairs. Protocol be damned. Alex was going first this time.

By then, Wyatt was leaping over the bodies sprawled at the bottom of the stairs. Alex braced his hands on the railings and swung over the same carnage. It wasn't until he landed on black marble that Asher saw the real trap, and it wasn't coming from the room behind him. He pushed off the top step and threw all of his weight down the stairs. The only things he could see were Kelsey's pretty face, her doe-like eyes, her tears, and the shit-ton of pain headed her way if he missed. Poor Lexie. Innocent little Bradley. No way could he let it happen.

Asher's shoulder landed square in his boss's back, sending Alex halfway across the spacious entry on his hands and knees. Just as he glared indignantly over his shoulder, a flurry of spears whizzed the length of the spacious entry with enough force they embed themselves in the opposite walls.

Opening that door upstairs must've set off a timer or something. Wyatt ducked and narrowly avoided two of the lethal projectiles. Asher wasn't so lucky. The one meant for Alex caught the back of his right shoulder, and down he went, no way of stopping his forward momentum or preventing the spear from doing its worst. It hit with frightening clarity. Tore through skin and muscle like it was nothing. Bones shattered as the metal shaft arrowed through his shoulder blade, ribs, and out his right pec.

On the heels of that shock came the not-so-quiet sucking sounds that torn flesh and ripped muscle made when the spear lost momentum and settled where it stuck. As metal came to rest, the sinister tone of a diabolical tuning fork vibrated through his pectoral muscle, making it twitch and lighting up every last nerve. Shit, he'd been skewered. Make that butchered.

Thank God, the impact sent him across the room, not into Alex. Dazed and reeling from the impact, Asher came to a stop on his opposite side and shoulder. He, Alex, and Wyatt had been caught in an intentional booby trap, a crossfire of spears hidden in the walls, all carefully camouflaged within the shadowy carved sandstone. All were positioned four feet up from the floor, a height meant to kill most men. Blood

from somewhere, Asher hoped wasn't him, splattered the floor in a circle around him. There was so much of it. Too much. Couldn't all be his. From this single wound? No way. The hole that spear inflicted couldn't be this bad, could it? Not enough that he'd bleed out. Not from just one spear, right?

Asher stayed prone, not believing he was down and bleeding out, but still intent on protecting his boss and his boss's family. Alex counted. He was the one who mattered. Asher was expendable, just an agent doing a damned hard job. He arched his spine, intent on finishing the task at hand, but damn it. That small movement made everything hurt.

"What the fuck?" Wyatt bellowed, on his knees beside Asher now, frantically scanning his face, chest, and shoulder, only to do it all over again. Poor guy was shaking. His jumpy hands and fingers were everywhere. On Asher's chest, then his shoulder, then the spear. Testing. Probing and testing and—

"Stop touching me," Asher hissed, instinctively jerking away from those damned inquisitive fingers, banging his head on the floor when he did. Pain shrieked through his body at that sudden, stupid move. Every touch and every little movement sent hellacious vibrations tearing through him. All of him, damn it. Enough. "Don't pull it out."

"Wasn't going to, but brother..." Wyatt's voice cracked. Tears fell in salty drips down his face, off his eyelashes, and the end of his nose.

Shit. If the EOD expert was tearing up, this was bad. Really bad.

Time slowed even as Wyatt's efforts to stop the bleeding intensified. He didn't seem to know what to do, besides packing the entrance and exit wounds around the spear with Quik Clot, carefully not touching the son of a bitchin' spear.

Asher glanced over his shoulder to find Alex on his knees behind him. It was surreal, watching these two fierce warriors snapping, cursing, growling at each other. Telling him, over and over, that he was going to be okay, when he knew damned well that he wasn't.

He wasn't blind. A good foot of the spear extended out the front of his chest. He could only imagine how much of it lay behind. That portion not only kept him propped on his side but held him firmly in place. It'd take a hoist or a crane to get him out of this shithole, and he'd have to be drugged with something damned strong when it happened. If it happened. Slim chance of that. Alex and Wyatt were as helpless as he was. They couldn't save him. Not this time.

Hardened metal couldn't simply be snapped off like wooden arrows. Alex and Wyatt needed a cutting torch, and they needed it now. That or they'd have to pull this wicked piece of shit all the way through his body, another mistake that would hurt like hell, and, in the end, would still kill him. The spear was long and filthy. He'd bleed out faster if they removed it, and they hadn't brought enough blood-clotting powder, gauze, or foam to end this day on a hopeful note.

This was it, the end.

Exhausted, Asher let his head sink to the floor. The marble was cool against his temple. He was in shock. The initial pain had dulled. That was something to be grateful for. Interestingly, there was no plush Turkish carpet beneath him. Just a slick pool of red. His blood. Details, details...

Blowing out a shallow breath, he accepted the inevitable. No medivac chopper was coming this time. No PJ. No miracle. He'd done the right thing, and he'd do it again if given the choice. Alex would go home to hug his wife and kids, and that mattered. Alex built empires. All Asher did was survive that one really bad day in Somalia. A man could only be lucky once.

He blinked, fighting his approaching death. Pushing back at the darkness hovering at his peripheral like a lecherous, greedy ghoul. Trying to focus, to see Alex and Wyatt, to know for certain they were okay, but not succeeding. Everything went black. Okay then. He would die like a man, not a whimpering coward. Sluggishly, because his brain wasn't sending clear signals anymore, he reached out for Wyatt or Alex, before they slipped away, too. He couldn't see them, but he knew what kind of men they were. They'd stick with him until he passed. They'd notify his mom and dad.

One of the two grabbed his hand with the force of King Kong. Had to be Alex.

“‘S’okay,” he told whoever it was. “Nothing hurts. Got no pain, so don’t move me. Let me go.” Man, it was hard to talk.

Asher knew how hard losing a brother-in-arms was. He didn’t want Alex or Wyatt feeling guilty that he was down. “But Marlowe,” he grunted, fear for her settling in. She wouldn’t understand. Like everything else, she’d fight the poor soul who notified her. She’d curse them, might even knee them like she did him. “I... I shoulda been there, not here,” he rasped, his voice too quiet in his own ears. “T-tell her she’s... she’s beautiful. She’s ... she’s gonna...” Deep breath. Damn, that hurt. “...be okay.”

Someone, Asher couldn’t tell who, told him to shut up and slapped a mask over his nose and mouth. He dragged the mask off, his one last feat of strength. “T-tell her I love her,” he whispered to whoever was out there. There was so much more he wanted Marlowe to know. But time? There was never enough of it when you wanted it most.

His fingers uncurled without Asher willing them to. There was no need to fight what was happening. He couldn’t win this battle. His strength was already poured out on the marble floor. There was no calling it back. His role in this mission—in this short, special operation called life—was over. He could do no more forever.

His last thoughts should've been for his mom and his dad, but the only person in his mind was the backtalking firebrand he'd saved in Afghanistan. Asher breathed his last for the woman he'd loved since he'd first set eyes on her. "I shoulda kissed you, honey."

The last thing he heard was Alex bellowing, "Son of a gawddamned bitch! I said right gawddamned now!"

Chapter Eighteen

Marlowe felt whatever the dogs felt. A chill. A ripple. A disturbance in the air. In time or space or... somewhere. Instinctively, she pulled Bradley under her chin. She wasn't blind. Maverick and Walker hadn't any children with them, only their two vulnerable, pregnant wives. Judy and Harley's boys were probably still in school or they'd be here. Grandpa Stewart sat oblivious in his wheelchair. He never responded to anything anyone did or said. Didn't seem to notice his grandchildren, either.

Given her previous calling, Marlowe had already noticed the massive picture windows in Kelsey's front room. The glass in those sturdy metal frames was thick and darkly tinted. Had to be bulletproof. A sniper wouldn't settle for simple glass when it came to protecting his family. Then there was the security control box at the front door. The massive gun safe behind that door. The tiny blinking lights along the baseboards. This place had been designed to withstand an attack. These people were her friends, but they hadn't come here just to meet Wonder Woman . No way. Marlowe wasn't that interesting.

Whisper and Smoke had also felt that indefinable tremor of danger in the air. She looked to the man beside her for confirmation of her sixth sense. Like the dogs, Harley had gone stock-still, his head cocked as if he'd heard something, too.

"You felt it, didn't you?" she asked. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

Instead of answering, he nodded at Kelsey. She nodded back. Everyone stopped talking and Marlowe knew. This whole come and meet WW was a lie, and she'd fallen for it. Harley lifted to his feet and said, "Ladies, it's time."

Kelsey was the first on her feet. “This way, everyone,” she said, pointing in the direction of the playroom.

Libby grabbed Marlowe’s walker and helped her to her feet.

“I’ll take Bradley,” Judy said, lifting him up and away from Marlowe.

“I’ll bring Grandpa,” Harley added.

By the time Marlowe made it down the hall in that darned walker, Kelsey stood at the door to the playroom, acting like a flight attendant on a plane, pointing at who should sit where. Nodding encouragingly. Smiling as if nothing was wrong. Basically, cool as a cucumber, as if she’d be bringing a snack cart and drinks around once everyone was seated.

Lexie was busy picking up toys from the floor, not flustered at all. The moment Marlowe settled into the corner of one of the several sofas in the playroom, Judy put Bradley on her lap. She lost track of who did what after that. She was too preoccupied with the warm weight of the little guy in her arms. An incredible sense of wonder crept over her. Bradley was small and perfect, a miniature adult in every way, down to his eyelashes, lips, and fingernails.

By the time she looked up again, the playroom door was closed and the men were gone. If that wasn’t proof something big was going down, nothing was. Sucking in a deep breath, she asked, very calmly. There was no need to frighten Lexie. “What just happened, ladies?”

She couldn’t help that her tone turned accusatory and a titch acerbic. That happened when people were lied to. This was not a coincidence. This whole excursion had been planned ahead, and the Stewart playroom was a safe room. Probably had steel-reinforced walls, ceiling, and floor like she suspected the entire house did. Designed

for comfort, obviously, but Marlowe had no doubt this place was fireproof, atom bomb proof, and built to withstand hurricane-force winds. Possibly Armageddon, knowing Alex. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. She'd been tricked.

"Stop," Kelsey ordered, her tone brooking nothing less than compliance. "I heard from Alex, and we're simply taking precautions, so stop that pissed-off attitude right now."

Not what Marlowe expected from Alex Stewart's meek, timid wife. "When? Why? What'd he say?" she asked as politely as she could, fighting to keep her shit together.

Kelsey pursed her lips, breathed in and out, then replied, "While you were hugging my son, Alex sent me a private call. He and his team ran into trouble. There's been an injury. He ordered us to take cover. That's all."

Marlowe grunted, not buying it.

"You know we all carry," China murmured. "Well, Marlowe, we're all wearing earpieces, too. Us wives don't have to wait for a government official to knock on our door and tell us when something goes wrong. Trust me, this isn't a drill. Alex wouldn't have contacted Kelsey if it were. He'll update us as soon as he can. We'll be okay."

"Trust you?" Marlowe asked, still keeping her cool. Acting, like Kelsey, Libby, Judy, Persia, and China. She glanced at Lexie, wondering if that smart little girl was in on the charade, too. Wouldn't put it past these women if she were. "Why should I trust any of you?"

Lexie shut the toy closet door with a snap that cracked like thunder in the suddenly silent room. Bradley sniffed in his sleep. Thankfully, Kelsey broke the icy silence.

“Marlowe, enough. You can fight and argue all you want, but not in my house. Yes, we didn’t tell you everything because we hoped we wouldn’t have to. But no mission goes as planned, there is always a risk, and, sweetheart...”

The moment Kelsey paused for a breath, the second she said sweetheart, Marlowe’s heart stopped. She’d never been on the receiving end of bad news. Was that what this sinking sensation was?

As if she read her mind, Kelsey sat beside Marlowe and put a hand on her arm, the arm holding Alex’s son. If Alex wasn’t hurt, who was? Mark? Marlowe glanced at Libby. Not Mark or Libby’d be upset. The only other agent Marlowe could recall being in that tense meeting with Alex was... Asher. She couldn’t imagine him being hurt. Couldn’t picture it in her mind. Didn’t dare. Didn’t want Kelsey to say another word.

“No,” she whispered. Just no.

Kelsey’s mouth moved but nothing came out. She cleared her throat and finally whispered, “Sweetheart, Asher was injured when they breached Jamah’s hideout. They’re flying him to Ramstein. There are excellent surgeons there and...”

Kelsey’s lips kept moving but Marlowe was past hearing. Her brain couldn’t connect. It was stuck in playback. Asher’s been hurt... Ramstein... Excellent surgeons... Asher’s been hurt... Ramstein... Excellent surgeons...

Asher’s been hurt...

Asher’s been hurt...

Asher’s been hurt!

“H-How bad?”

“Alex didn’t say.”

“I mean, did he slip and fall?” Is he still alive? “Did he break his leg?” Or his neck?
“Wh-What should I do?”

Marlowe found herself smothered by pregnant women, each of them holding her as close as they could and crying with her. There was no use resisting Libby, China, or Persia. They had a hold of her and the sensation of all those arms wrapped around her was good. Swallowing her usual need to push back, she let go. She needed this. She didn’t want to be alone. With her whole soul, she accepted what these... these friends had done on her behalf and what they offered now, parts and pieces of themselves and lots of salty tears.

“I should’ve hugged him,” she cried, the hollow in her soul aching for that one lost chance, “but I don’t do hugs.” Why don’t I? What’s wrong with me?

“You do now,” Libby whispered tenderly. “Soak it up, girlfriend.”

Marlowe managed a full breath before she leaned out of the tremendously warm huddle. Turning back to Kelsey and Judy, she asked, “Are you pregnant, too?”

Judy outright laughed but Kelsey replied, “Maybe. I never know.”

Marlowe had no idea what that meant, but she didn’t ask for clarification, and she didn’t know why she’d asked. The pregnant wives finally released her and went back to the other sofa, while she peered down at the sleeping child in her arms. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on Bradley’s forehead. He hadn’t suffocated from all that affection, and neither had she. Inhaling a deep, shuddering breath, she told these women, “I want an earpiece.”

Kelsey said, "I'll see what I can do to make that happen."

Marlowe nodded, her mind spinning. She was used to being on the other end of heartache, worrying about the women she'd saved, but never knowing if they'd made it safely to America. She hadn't heard back from any of them, had come to accept that, once they were gone, they were okay. They'd had to be. There'd been no other choice. It was the only way she'd been able to move on. She had to believe they were safe, and that somehow, she would've known if they weren't. She could've reached out to Alex for that information. She could've followed up. She should've texted. It would've been easy, but she hadn't. Not once. Why not?

Marlowe told herself it was better not asking or knowing. Simpler. Easier. Less chance of heartbreak. Besides, there'd always been another "Can you find her?" text. Another woman in danger. Another woman to save. Another mission. She'd grown accustomed to charging forward. Never looking backward. Always putting the past in the rearview as quickly as possible, to keep one step ahead of the Taliban. Scurrying for needed supplies. Staying under the radar. Sweating in one-hundred-degree summers. Freezing through wicked winters. But always, always charging hard, charging forward. Keeping on and on and on. There'd been no other choice. She'd been the only one there to help those women.

Marlowe looked down at the perfect boy in her lap. Alex's son. Asher was somebody's son, too. His parents loved him as much as Alex loved this boy. His dad called his mom honey. She looked at the women she'd misjudged. They loved their sons and daughters. Most mothers did.

"Umm," she murmured, not sure of her way forward, but as always, charging nonetheless. "What makes a mom stop loving her, umm, only daughter?"

She should've known they'd all come to her rescue because these women were good mothers. There were tears in their eyes, and Marlowe was sure it wasn't due to the

overload of hormones in the room. Nope. True, their instincts were on hyperdrive and all that feminine energy was now aimed at her. Bowing her head to protect Bradley from being smooshed again, Marlowe let it happen again. The neglected little girl inside of her needed this hug. Craved it. Had been dying for years without it.

The moment she was back inside the TEAM wives' huddle, Marlowe's resolve shattered. There was no holding back. She cried for the lost little girl inside of her, and she cried for Asher. She should've hugged him better. Next time she saw him, she would. She surely would.

Chapter Nineteen

Asher came to in a panic, fighting for his life and suffocating. Trapped in the dark, a snake in his throat. Dying alone. Jesus. Not again . Pressure from that collapsed support beam clamped down hard on his chest. His arms were pinned. There was no way to move or fight back. No room to twist or turn. He was trapped.

“Easy,” a familiar voice rumbled close to his ear.

Alex? Thank God. No, that can’t be right. How’d he get to Somalia?

“Didn’t expect you’d wake so soon. Hold still. He’s removing the ventilator as fast as he can. Give him a minute.”

Whoever ‘he’ was. But ventilator? They didn’t use ventilators on just anyone. He must’ve died. Asher stilled, willing to trust his boss and shaking like an addict in withdrawal, but calmer now that he knew he wasn’t in Somalia. The tug in his lungs intensified until, shit, he choked. Coughed. Spit. Couldn’t fucking breathe.

“I’ve got you, Asher. Hold on. Almost done.”

At last. That damned someone else pulled the snake all the way up and out of his throat.

“There you go. Steady breaths. Easy, Asher. You’ve got this.”

“I do?” he meant to ask, but his throat was so raw, his words got lost in a coughing

jag. Holy shit. He couldn't stop panting like a frigging racehorse. Finally, he was breathing. Kind of. He sucked in as much air as he could, sweating like a damned horse, too. Cool air had never felt or tasted so good. He needed more, but his throat was sore. As much as he wanted to fill his lungs to the max, they didn't seem to have the capacity.

Alex still braced an arm across his chest. Asher had no idea why until he felt the snakes around his wrists loosen. Snakes, ha. He'd been restrained, wherever he was. That meant he'd struggled. Also explained why he hadn't been able to move or fight back. Okay then. Problem solved. Alex still had a good hold on him and Asher didn't mind. He needed answers. But first...

He welcomed the oxygen mask some guy placed carefully over his nose and mouth. A blonde nurse. Name tag: Ted. Not Veronica Tippetts. Thank you, God.

Alex finally stepped back when the blood pressure cuff on Asher's left biceps kicked in and inflated. He closed his eyes and focused on slowing his heartbeat. Breathing in. Breathing out. Hot damn. He was alive. Not sure how that happened, but he was definitely breathing and his blood was pumping and... The gift of a second chance at life overwhelmed Asher. He brushed a hand over his face, thankful for the scruff on his chin, even for the sudden tears in his blurry eyes. He was not going to break down in front of Alex. Uh-uh.

Time to redirect his emotions. He ran his tongue over his chapped lips and thought about Marlowe. Yup. First order of the day, as soon as he was back in the States, he was kissing the stuffing out of that woman. A pleasant sensation purred through his mangled body at the thought. He felt better just thinking of her.

"On a scale of one to ten, what's your pain level?" Ted asked kindly. The guy was efficient and concerned and built like a wrestler.

“No pain, but why the restraints?” Asher croaked, lifting his right arm. Big mistake. The spear was gone, but the slightest movement in his chest hurt like a bitch.

“Because spec ops guys like you come up swinging when they first come to, even if they’re badly injured. Feel better now?”

“I’ll live.”

“Are you sure no pain? Doctor’s orders. I’ve got OxyContin and Percocet. Your choice.”

Asher shook his head, weakly, but enough to get the message across. “I don’t do drugs,” he rasped.

“I’ll take it from here, Ted. Thanks,” Alex cut in. “Is Doc Hardy still on shift?”

“Not sure what his schedule is today, but I’ll check for you. Anything I can get for you before I go off shift? A beer? A keg? A dozen hot chicks and I don’t mean chicken wings?” he asked with a devilish grin. “I can get anything you want, so now’s your chance. Ask.” Spoken like a true US Army supply guy.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” Asher whispered.

“You’re damned lucky, is what you are, brother. You must have one helluva guardian angel watching over you.”

Asher looked up at the fierce guardian angel responsible for him being in a hospital instead of a morgue. Damned if the office scuttlebutt wasn’t true. Alex could work miracles.

He lay there, content to listen and breathe, wondering how Alex got him out of

Jamah's rathole and how he'd survived. He now knew precisely where that spear had implanted itself. He wanted details about the exfil, who got him to safety, and how the hell they'd dealt with that long-damned spear. The moment Ted finished and closed the door behind him, Asher turned to his boss. "Where am I?"

"Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Ramstein Air Base, Germany."

"How'd I get here?" It was getting harder to talk.

"Decker Edison was in the vicinity. He flew us all here."

That was damned vague. Asher stared Alex down. "Seriously? Didn't we leave him at Andrew's?"

Alex cleared his throat. "He flew into Syria by private jet."

"Not buying that. Americans are non-grata in Syria."

"Doesn't mean we're not there."

"Why would Decker do that?"

"Simple. I have connections in the Middle East, and I own more than one company. I needed him to get a couple things done for me, while we hit Jamah."

Looked like he also had connections in Germany. That didn't surprise Asher. Alex was a leader like no other. Of course he owned more than just The TEAM. He had the money and he knew people, exceptional people. Shakers and movers like him branched out. They diversified. They made things happen. Or maybe they were movers and shakers... Ah, who the hell cared?

One more question then Asher had to shut up. “How’d you guys move me?”

“Wyatt blasted a hole in the ceiling and roof. Deck dropped an acetylene torch through the hole. While I shortened that spear, he lowered a gurney, and then flew us here.”

Okay, maybe two more questions. “Where’s everybody?”

Alex looked at his watch. “They should all be home by now.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Forty-eight hours, give or take a few hair-raising hours in surgery. Anything else you want to know?”

Yes, Asher had questions, but just waking up had taken a lot out of him and he could hardly speak. “Just one more,” he hissed, tapping his fingers against his blanket. “How’s my girl?”

The corners of Alex’s mouth twitched with a barely suppressed smile. “If you mean Marlowe, she’s staying with Kelsey until we get you home. Even then, she’s welcome to stay with us as long as she wants. Last I checked, the wives were fixing her hair, and Lexie was reading to her, don’t ask me what.”

“She’s touchy about her hair.” Or lack of it.

Alex nodded. “She’s touchy about a lot of things. Marlowe’s been through plenty, Asher. That’s why she lashes out. Your challenge is to be there for her no matter what she throws at you.”

It took Asher everything he had left to nod and whisper, “Harley gave her a dog. A p-

puppy. She said she didn't want it but... he gave it to her anyway." He was slurring his words by then. Probably a good time to shut up. He gave up the fight and closed his eyes.

Alex wasn't finished. "Harley has a way with broken dogs and damaged people. Don't give up on Marlowe. The only tool in her relationship toolbox right now is a hammer, and she thinks every problem's a nail, including you. You're going to have to stand up to her."

"Ah-huh," Asher replied groggily, his voice thicker by the second. There were more questions to ask. Important questions, like where the hell was Jamah? How many stitches did it take to close all the damage that spear caused? Most importantly, how was he still alive?

Alex wasn't snarling death threats or orders; which Asher took to mean he'd dealt with Jamah. Sleep beckoned like a heavy drug, and Asher felt himself going down a little too quickly, but, yeah. Marlowe. Kissing her was the last thought on his mind. That and something about hammers.

Chapter Twenty

Marlowe knew why the Stewarts had so many sofas. Those benign-looking pieces of sedate furniture in the saferoom all opened into comfy beds. Every one of them. Guess they really were having a sleepover. Talk about awkward. Lexie and Bradley loved the idea. Marlowe didn't. Sure, these women were her friends but sleeping in the same room with them? Not her cup of chai. Everything she wore was already borrowed or bought by Libby. Her self-esteem didn't need another hit. She needed space, and the longer they were stuck together in this room, the more she wanted to leave.

Kelsey and Lexie had just finished feeding Grandpa Stewart. Kelsey put the dishes in the kitchenette sink while Lexie gently wiped her grandfather's whiskered face and chattered at him like a little magpie. A green-and-white-checkered blanket covered his lap and most of his chair, hiding the pee bag and tubes beneath it. He looked drugged, but Marlowe now knew for sure that he had Alzheimer's and was lost in his own world. She also knew he'd deserted Alex and his mother when Alex was just a little boy. Something about the Irish mafia in America. Hearing that Alex had been abandoned too, changed what Marlowe thought of him. Their stories weren't exactly the same. He'd still had his grandparents and his mom while she hadn't had anyone. But growing up knowing your father didn't love you enough to stay was a hard thing to live with for any child left behind.

Marlowe now wore a foam-tipped, noise-canceling earpiece in her right ear and had a mic clipped to her collar, courtesy of Kelsey. But Alex hadn't called back. Nobody did. Harley, Walker, and Maverick hadn't checked in since the last time they let the dogs out to pee. What was going on?

“I need to talk with you.” Kelsey jerked her head toward the bathroom.

Yes, this playroom was large enough that it had its own bathroom, complete with shower and tub. There was also a kitchenette opposite the bathroom. A big screen television and an entertainment center occupied the wall between. Four large dog crates sat beside the entertainment center, two on each side. Closets full of canned food, breakfast cereals, treats for kids, bottled water, towels, blankets, bedding, and who knew what else, lined the remaining wall space. Alex Stewart was one surprise after another. How wealthy was he that he could afford to build a bunker this spacious? Marlowe hadn’t seen any servants yet, but he could certainly afford them.

“What now?” she asked politely.

Kelsey closed the bathroom door and sat on the edge of the tub. “I know you’re not staying in Virginia as long as we’d like, but you’re welcome to stay with us while you’re here.”

Marlowe settled onto the padded vanity bench, because every saferoom had a vanity, right? “I was going to move in with Asher, you know, because I have a lot of healing to do and I have a dog and...” She scratched the back of her head. The lice were gone, but the compulsion to scratch lingered. Asher said he’d watch Darling when Marlowe went back to Afghanistan, but he was injured now and—

“Alex called.”

“And?”

“Asher pulled through surgery. He’s doing pretty good, considering what happened.”

Marlowe held her breath, waiting for Kelsey to elaborate.

Kelsey looked down at the floor. “He saved Alex’s life, Marlowe.”

Oh, crap. Marlowe’s heart stopped. She couldn’t imagine Alex ever needing help.

“Their target laid a trap, and Asher took the hit meant for my husband. That’s why he was hurt. The walls in the mansion were boobytrapped with metal spears. Somehow the guys triggered them, Alex doesn’t know how. When Asher tackled him, the spear meant for Alex went through Asher’s upper right shoulder. He was in surgery for ten hours. The doctors said it’s a miracle he lived.”

“When is he...? I mean, when can I...?” Shaken, Marlowe sucked in a deep breath and started again. “Was anyone else hurt? When can he come home?”

“I’m not sure. No one else was hurt, and he’s stable but his injuries were severe. Alex didn’t think he’d make it. His heart stopped during the flight to Germany. He lost a lot of blood. They used the defibrillator on him.”

“But he’s going to be okay? Right?” Please say yes.

Kelsey’s gaze was still on the floor. “The surgeon who worked on Asher said he’ll live.”

She was hiding something.

“Okay,” Marlowe breathed. “So why the long face? Is he paralyzed? Is that what you’re afraid to tell me? Is he blind? Talk to me. I can’t help if I don’t know what I’m up against.”

“I know. You’re as bad as Alex, always running to help others, even if it gets you killed. That’s what I’m afraid of, that you’ll think you have to save us instead of letting us save you. Asher isn’t paralyzed or blind, but he will need to be hospitalized

for a while once he comes home.”

Marlowe waited. This conversation felt like one of those binding moments she’d read about in a romance paperback she’d come across once. A love story, where a man met a woman, and her life changed when he introduced her to his friends and family. Because they became her friends and family. Talk about impossible dreams, yet Marlowe was living it. Here, in this room, surrounded by Asher’s friends, women who worried for her. Who genuinely cared what happened to her.

“He saved Alex,” Kelsey semi-repeated, her voice hollow, as if she was only half there. “I’d be a widow if Asher hadn’t gone with Alex. If he hadn’t... I’d be...”

Marlowe froze when Kelsey stopped talking. The harsh reality of what Alex’s near-death would’ve meant slapped Marlowe’s hard head. Without Alex, Kelsey’s heart would’ve been forever broken. She’d never recover from the loss. She’d have to raise Lexie and Bradley by herself. She’d be alone. So alone. Yet there she sat on the edge of the tub, trying to console Marlowe, while Marlowe had focused only on herself and her loss. Which was significant, but Asher’s sacrifice was not just about her.

He was a hero. A very lucky hero—if he was truly coming home. She shook her head at the magnitude of all that his actions meant, then latched onto her walker and shuffled over to sit beside Kelsey. She put an arm around Alex’s diminutive wife, who was trembling like a tiny moth caught in a trap. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. All I worried about was Asher and me, but you—”

“I could’ve lost him,” Kelsey cried. “I could’ve lost Alex. How would I ever tell Lexie and Bradley that their dad... That he wasn’t coming...”

Tears jerked out of her as Marlowe held on. There was nothing to be said. No platitudes. No Hallmark card sappy sentiments. Sometimes the most you could do for a friend in need was shut your mouth and just be there.

Kelsey's breakdown didn't last long. Too quickly, she shook it off and eased out of Marlowe's hold. "Thank you. I don't usually fall apart, but—"

"But you're entitled to when the man you love is in harm's way." If that had been Marlowe breaking down, she would've cussed and kicked and whined a lot longer. She might have hit something—or someone. Ripping a long string of toilet paper off its roll, she folded it into a soft, cushiony handkerchief and handed it to Kelsey. "The men we love are not ordinary men. They're heroes, aren't they?"

Oops. Did that really come out of her mouth? Had she just told Kelsey she loved Asher?

Kelsey nodded, but didn't respond to Marlowe's profession of love, just kept dabbing her eyes and nose. "Alex only hires the best, and they become family. Them. Their wives and kids. Even their dogs, cats, and horses."

"Alex told you who he went after, didn't he?"

Kelsey tapped her earpiece. "Yes, we have a private channel, that's why you didn't hear him." Her tummy lifted with another deep inhale. "Asher's safe where he is. Wyatt's with him, but that's not the problem."

"What is?"

"Alex believes Jamah is coming after us. That's why we're holed-up here in our safe room."

"When did he tell you that?"

Another sigh escaped Kelsey. "Before he left. Alex suspected he was playing into Jamah's hands, but there was no way to be sure. He couldn't send anyone else to take

him out. He had to go.”

“So he let Jamah believe he’d left you unguarded?”

“Yes, and Alex was right. Late last night, Jamah was spotted at Heathrow, boarding a private jet to Washington, D.C.”

“That’s why Harley, Walker, and Maverick are here, isn’t it? Jamah set a trap for Alex, and Alex set a trap for Jamah. We’re bait.”

“No, not bait. Not exactly. Our men wouldn’t do that to us. But we are Jamah’s targets, and Harley, Maverick, and Walker are our strong line of defense. That’s why they’re here. So while they fight for us, we’ll wait for them to do what they need to do. Alex says that’s what men were made for. Doing the heavy lifting. Taking care of us women and children. Fighting for their families.” She scrubbed her hands up and down her biceps. “I hate just sitting and waiting.”

“Listen, girlfriend.” Marlowe never thought she’d be using that word, but there she was, doing what she was made for, comforting another woman in need. “Jamah’s a despicable piece of shit. Excuse my language, but he’s no better than what Alex cleans out of Whipper and Smoke’s kennel.”

Kelsey smiled at Bradley’s adorable name for that big, bad German shepherd.

Marlowe continued. “Trust me, I’ve been there. I’ve never seen braver, fiercer men than those who are fighting for their families, and that’s precisely what Alex planned. Jamah is a frigging narcissist. He thinks he’s smarter than everyone, but this time he’s made the biggest mistake of his life.”

“But—”

“No buts, Kelsey. You and Judy, Libby, Persia, and China are right. We’ll keep the home fires burning so our men can end Jamah once and for all.” Our men. Man, that sounded good.

“There’s a secret panel—”

“Oh, my gosh! There is? Really?” Marlowe smacked her forehead trying to be funny but immediately regretted it. Her poor skull wasn’t ready for slapstick comedy. “What haven’t you and Alex built into that playroom?”

Kelsey blushed. “It was his idea. It looks like a closet, but it’s a locked gun safe. More like an arsenal. What do you know how to shoot?”

“Nothing. I’ve never fired a gun in my life.”

“How’d you protect yourself over there, use your magic bracelets?”

“Oh, you mean like Wonder Woman? The only way I could do what I needed to do was by staying out of the Taliban’s line of sight. According to them, all Afghan civilians are safe now and there’s no need for personal protection. They’ll protect everyone.” Marlowe coughed at that outrageous lie. “Even if I’d had a weapon, Kelsey, they carry Kalashnikovs, and they travel in packs. I wouldn’t’ve stood a chance.”

“Ah yes, the first rule in conquering your enemy: disarm them, get them to distrust each other. To rat on each other. To publicly shame each other, then—”

“Public executions,” Marlowe whispered, “where people are forced to watch, and the ones who close their eyes are murdered next. Even if you just witnessed them murdering your husband and son, you must keep your eyes open because they’re watching. Always watching.”

“Alex believes some people need to die, Marlowe, and I agree with him. But to stop them, to stop Jamah, he had to take the chance. Either way, we’re in good hands. I’m not worried. Well, I am, but I always worry when he marches off to war.”

The doorbell rang.

“Oh, dear,” Kelsey murmured, making Marlowe’s vehement, “Fuck!” sound extra-vulgar.

Before either of them could ask, a distinctly male voice whispered in their earpieces, “His royal highness Caliph Ibrahim al-Jamah is here, ladies. He’s playing coy, ringing the doorbell. Guess he thinks you’re dumb enough to let him in, Kels. Stay with the kids. Keep quiet and this will be over soon.”

Marlowe’s stomach dropped. Every drop of saliva was gone from her mouth. She was back in the cave, hanging from that tree limb, stretched out and struggling for air, her battered body too weak to withstand one more punch, one more hit.

Until Kelsey’s pretty face came into view. Very firmly, she directed Marlowe to look down at the tablet in her hands. “Marlowe, sweetheart, don’t panic. They can’t get to us, I promise. Here. Let’s watch.”

Watch? It took a second to register what she was seeing, but the moment Marlowe knew, rage exploded from her soul. “It’s him! It’s really—”

Kelsey slapped a hand over her mouth. “Yes, honey. It’s Jamah, but look at the woman with him. Do you recognize her?”

Forcing herself to breathe slowly, Marlowe peered closer. “Yeah, that’s Barbie, the nurse in Germany who flirted with Asher. I don’t know her real name.”

Barbie set a small charge in the center of Kelsey's beautifully carved wooden front door and— BOOM —blew it off its hinges. The vibration from the explosion rattled the safe room's ceiling and floor, and— There he was, the self-proclaimed royal highness, the Toad of Syria. Jamah rolled through the smoky doorway and into Kelsey's immaculate home like he owned the place. He had no arms or legs, just a head and a plump body stuffed into what looked like a black bag. His head and body were held in place by straps stemming from the chair's back and under the seat. Jamah looked freakishly like something out of a science fiction horror movie, which made Marlowe wonder how anyone who followed the revered teachings of Muhammad could believe Jamah was a prophet. Yet there he sat, the self-proclaimed caliph of all Muslims, strapped onto his high-tech throne, still as proud, ugly, and evil as when he'd had all his limbs.

A high-tech yoke stretched from the rear of the chair's heavy-duty frame, over his shoulders, and around his neck. With lips and teeth, he worked several toggles on the yoke to control the chair's movement, as well as the various claws and pinchers extending from the four mechanical arms, also stretching from the chair's back. Jamah was more of a robotic spider than a man. Someone had tied his long gray hair into a sloppy bun.

His black brows looked plucked and his winkled face was clean-shaven, not bearded like most men from that part of the world. Unlike the Muslim women Marlowe knew, who were punished for not covering every bit of their bodies, Tippetts wore a black, skintight bodysuit. A sword scabbard was strapped to her back. Two hefty pistols in holsters hung off her full hips. The bandoliers crisscrossing her chest made her too-big-to-be-real boobs stand out.

These two had obviously never read the Quran. They weren't faithful Muslims in any sense of the word. They were nothing more than deviants spawned from the bowels of Hell.

“Who does he think he is?” Kelsey whispered. “A villain straight out of a James Bond movie?”

“And she looks like Catwoman. Shouldn’t we warn the others?”

“No need. They’re on their tablets the same as we are.” Kelsey jumped to her feet and palmed the bathroom door open. “See for yourself.”

Persia fluttered her fingers at Marlowe from the other room where she sat beside China, both sharing a tablet.

“Yes, thanks. That helps,” Marlowe breathed. Seeing really was believing.

“Let’s go join them,” Kelsey said.

“Good idea.”

They had just settled onto the same couch in the safe room and were watching from the same tablet, when Jamah bellowed from the kitchen, “Find Stewart’s brats! Find them both. I want his little girl on this table. Now!”

“Yes, your highness,” Tippetts replied like the weak-kneed follower she was. “I will find them and bring them to you as soon as I finish setting up the cameras and audio you req—”

A long metallic arm with a finger that resembled a pliers at the end elevated out of the back of the chair and stabbed the center of the table. “I said here! Now! She dies first, but only after she screams so loud and long that Stewart finally understands what revenge is. Let her brother bleed and watch. Stewart will die a thousand deaths for what he did to me. When I’m finished, it’ll be—”

The feed went black. Thank God. Marlowe couldn't bear to hear another word out of that bastard's foul mouth. Her throat had already gone parchment dry, and her eyes were glued to precious little Lexie. That sweet little girl had wrapped herself in a pink slumber bag and was snoring quietly beside one of the couches. She was oblivious to the threat and she was safe. Bradley lay on his back in the center of the room, both arms spread wide, sound asleep beside protective Whipper .

Once again, Marlowe was thankful for Alex's foresight in building this room.

"Steady ladies," that same male voice whispered through their earpieces. "I'll return you to your previously scheduled programming as soon as we take out the trash. Sit tight."

"Like hell," Marlowe growled, taking possession of Kelsey's tablet like she owned it. "I have to know they're dead. I need to see them die. Kill them both, Harley! Make it hurt!"

"Yes, ma'am," the voice replied, like she was in charge.

"Harley?"

"Yes, darlin', it's me. Now go hug my wife because I know Judy's worried. Would you do that for me?" He wasn't the tease she'd met in the barn, not tonight.

"Yes, of course."

"Good, cuz I'm a little busy. Bye, darlin'. Bye, Kels. Love you gals."

"Be careful!" Marlowe ordered, but too late. Harley was already gone.

She was on her feet without the walker and on her way to do what Harley asked. But

by the time Marlowe made it to the couch where Judy and Libby were sitting, her feet felt like she'd walked miles over flaming coals. Too bad. So sad. Plopping down between them, she shook off the ache and pulled her sisters in for one-armed hugs.

"I'm here, and I'm not letting go until everything's over. Don't even argue with me. Harley's orders," she snapped. Gulp. I have sisters. Five of them. Maybe more.

China and Persia flashed smiles and thumbs-ups at her. As if they sensed her emotions, both Darling and Walter climbed up on the same couch and sat on Marlowe.

"Oh, my gosh. It's either us or the dogs, girlfriend," Libby grumbled. "You have to choose."

"Pick the dogs. You're suffocating me," Judy growled.

"Oops, sorry," Marlowe answered, trading her girlfriends for the couch opposite them. Of course, the puppies followed. Darling promptly fell asleep on her lap. Walter stretched alongside her thigh and put his chin on his paws. He might be deaf, but he snored just like Lexie.

BOOM! Another explosion rattled the house, and Marlowe's world narrowed down to the confines of the safe room and the people in it. No one spoke. It seemed as if everyone was holding their breath. Marlowe surely was. She couldn't wrap her head around how Alex could've let a brutal murderer enter Kelsey's beautiful house, though. The toad of Syria was just feet away from Alex's wife and children, breathing the very same air. What was Alex thinking?

"What'll we do if Tippetts shoots the doorknob off and finds us?" Marlowe asked quietly.

“There is no doorknob,” Libby replied. “Right, Kelsey? This room is just like ours, isn’t it?”

“Right. Alex installed what amounts to bank vault doors on every TEAM agent’s safe room, then secured those doors behind wooden panels that slide into place in case of emergencies like this one. The panel outside this room looks like ordinary walls. Ours has a family portrait hung in the middle of it. I activated vault and panel protocol after Alex called, Marlowe. There’s no way anyone can get into this room. They don’t even know it’s here. And if, by some bizarre miracle, that witch does find us...” Kelsey’s fingertips fluttered over the pistol at her side. “I’ll kill her.”

“We’ll all kill her,” Persia added, her tone as cold as ice. “Trust us. We take care of our own, Marlowe.”

“But I don’t see a bank vault door, just a regular, ordinary wooden door,” Marlowe murmured.

“That’s what you see from this side,” Kelsey explained. “If you’d looked closer when you entered this room, you would’ve seen the mechanics of the vault door hidden within the doorjamb. It almost works like a pocket door, except it’s a thousand times more secure and the jamb is quite a bit thicker. Make sense now?”

Marlowe looked over her shoulder at the ordinary looking door. “What if Jamah brought enough explosives to level the whole house? What if—?”

The lights flickered, then went out. The room turned dark. Marlowe’s throat closed. This was it. The end.

“Relax,” China ordered, as she activated the flashlight feature on her cell phone and focused its beam downward. Kelsey, Libby, Judy, and Persia did the same. “We’ve got you covered. We’re safe. So are you.”

“I’m not worried about me,” Marlowe insisted.

“We just have to sit tight and—“

BOOM!

“He’s destroying your beautiful house, Kelsey,” Marlowe whined.

“He can have the house,” she whispered. “It’s not what’s important, is it?”

“No, but—”

“There are no buts. I know what it’s like to lose everything, remember? Trust me. That creep out there can have the house. Everything that’s important to me is in this room. Well, almost everything. I do wish the guys were here with us.”

“Oh,” was all Marlowe said.

The deadly quiet in the safe room was rife with undercurrents of worry and fear. These women weren’t fooling anyone. Kelsey might act tough and in charge, but Marlowe knew better. Women in love can’t disguise the feelings for their husbands.

Her heart flew to Asher. Where was he now? Right now. Was he safe? In hands as good as the hands that had cared for Marlowe when she’d woken up and found herself in Virginia? Or was he alone with no one to speak gently to him and comfort him?

BANG! Another loud noise and the walls shook. Then another! What was happening outside of this room? Were Harley, Walker, and Maverick still safe? Were those noises their weapons or were they Tippetts’ guns? Did Jamah have superior weaponry built into that weird wheelchair?

The suspense was too much. Marlowe bowed her head and prayed. Please don't let us die here tonight, Lord. Keep us and our men safe. Guide them as they rid this world of the despicable evil that has come for these tiny children.

Her gaze settled on Alex and Kelsey's perfect little boy. Bradley was still asleep. His arms were spread wide, like only a child who had never known fear or death could be. He trusted his mother and his father. Be the great protector of women and children that I know You are. Only You, through the capable hands of our men, can win this battle against evil. Inspire Harley and Walker and Maverick. Guide them. Watch over them. Please help them win.

Another loud boom and a crash and this time tiny dust particles sifted down from the ceiling. The house still stood firm on its foundation, but Marlowe felt the vibrations down to her soul. Please Father, bless Harley and Maverick and Walker to end the murderers who dared breach this home. Bless their aims to be true.

Tiny cracks spider-webbed the white painted wall alongside one window casement. The windows weren't cracked or shattered. Neither was the ceiling. She didn't smell smoke or fire. The safe room, maybe the entire house, was still standing.

"Breathe, ladies," Kelsey whispered. "All of us, take a good long breath and trust in our men. They're highly-trained professionals, and they've each overcome worse devils than this one."

Marlowe saw the guns then. These women were armed, their weapons in hand or beside them, at the ready. Just as Marlowe imagined their husband's weapons were.

A terrific boom rattled the walls, then another. Then nothing. The tension in the safe room ramped higher. It was so thick, Marlowe could taste it. Kelsey's pistol was now in her hand. Her knuckles were white. She was prepared to fight. For the first time in her life, Marlowe wished she owned a gun and knew how to use it. Of all these

women, she was the ultimate protector. The one with experience. Why had she ever traveled without protection?

Harley came back online with a terse, "It's done, ladies, and Jamah's on his way to the morgue along with Tippetts."

"You're safe? All of you are safe?" Judy asked, her voice tight with concern.

"Yes, ma'am, and I'll be dropping by in a bit to take my best girl home. Sorry about the damage to your home, Kels. He didn't go down easy. The cleaners will be here shortly to put everything back the way it was. Stay in the safe room until they're finished, okay?"

"Yes, okay," Kelsey breathed. "Thanks, Harley. Thank Walker and Maverick for me, too."

"Sure thing."

"I'd better be your only girl." Judy grumped as she wiped her teary eyes.

"Thanks for keeping us safe, guys," Libby murmured, her voice trembling.

"My pleasure," Harley responded.

"God bless America," Marlowe whispered. It seemed right, ending this battle with a prayer.

"Damned straight," Alex declared from somewhere else. "We're coming home early, sweetheart. Keep the porch light on."

"Always, sweetheart," Kelsey breathed. "Oh, my God, it is so good to hear your

voice. Fly safe.”

“Is Asher coming with you?” Marlowe had to know.

“He is, but he’s going to need extra-special care. Can you handle that?” Alex sounded as tense as Marlowe felt.

“Yes, please,” she replied softly. “I can handle anything now. I have sisters.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The trip home was a blur. Caught between heaven and earth, Asher drifted in a haze of whatever feel-good drug his medical attendant had injected into his pre-flight IV. He woke briefly when they transferred his gurney from the airliner to an ambulance. From there? His guess was as good as anyone's.

At last, motion ceased. Low quiet voices faded beyond his ability to listen, focus, or care. They could've been doctors, lawyers, or Indian chiefs, he couldn't tell. The bed he ended up in was clean and firm. The sheets soft. Another blood pressure cuff strangled his biceps. Tubing of a cannula slithered across his cheek. The lights went out and machines beeped steadily and quietly. He didn't bother opening his eyes. Alex had accompanied him home, and home was no doubt the medical unit at TEAM HQ. Not home as much as a good enough place to land. He wanted to call his folks. Should've already done that. Maybe Alex had.

"Hey, man."

Asher blinked up at the shadowy guy leaning over him with his hand on the headboard. "Wyatt?"

"Yeah, Asher, it's me. You're at TEAM HQ and Doc Fitz will be in again shortly. Thought I'd check on you before I head home."

"Thought you were already home."

"I had something to do first."

“W-what?”

“I contacted Joshua, you know who I mean.”

“Yeah, sure.” Asher was coherent enough to recall that Joshua ben David was Mossad and a good friend. He and his men were lethal Nazi hunters. Nazi, Hamas, Houthi, ISIL, didn’t matter the breed of mad dog, Joshua and his team hunted them all and put them down when they found them.

“Joshua rescued three Afghan boys from Jamah’s stinking dungeon. They’re in pretty bad shape, but he took them to an Israeli hospital. They’ll be okay now. I thought you should know.”

Asher nodded so Wyatt knew he was earnestly listening. Sort of. Trying to.

“Tell your girlfriend those little guys were Sariah’s real children. The bitch gave them to Jamah. Don’t know why. Don’t care. Oh, and Harley, Walker, and Maverick ended Jamah and Tippetts tonight. Thought you should know that, too.”

“Three little boys?” Asher asked dazedly. He vaguely remembered the name Sariah. Couldn’t place her with certainty. It’d come to him... someday. “B-but three boys?” That was the unbelievable part of this conversation. Not that Harley, Walker, and Maverick ended Jamah and Tippetts, but—three little boys? Handed over to a known murderer and pedophile. By their mother. “I honestly hate some people,” he mumbled.

Wyatt pressed the flat of his fist against Asher’s good shoulder. “Cool your jets, brother. They’re better off where they are now. You done good, saving the boss like you did.”

“Yeah, well,” Asher breathed heavily. “Good bosses are hard to train.”

Asher closed his eyes, but just for a minute. Or two...

It came to him slowly, the question he should've asked. His eyes popped open. "Where's Marlowe? She okay?"

Wyatt didn't answer. The room was dark, the bed was soft, and... "Marlowe," Asher whispered into the night. "I love you, baby girl."

There. He'd told her. Kinda. Tomorrow? He'd tell her again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Marlowe needed to see Asher, needed to know he was alive and breathing. That he was okay and hadn't forgotten her. The reunions taking place in Kelsey's playroom were emotional, overwhelming, and exclusive. Harley, Walker, and Maverick came first. After Kelsey let them in, they'd quickly grabbed their wives and held them, just held them like they'd never let them go. There were tears and quiet 'I love yous.' The women and guys all hugged Kelsey on their way out.

That left Libby, Kelsey, and Marlowe, the odd duck. The one no one was coming for. Old habits died hard. A dizzy spell hit and she was back in Chicago, reliving a life of rejection, of being the only kid in class without parents who cared enough to buy her decent clothes and shoes. Pitied and teased. Made to feel different and less than. Until the day she walked out and didn't return.

Alex hadn't come home yet. His kids were both still sound asleep. Would he wake them when he got there? Of course, Lexie and Bradley would hug him and call him Daddy. Kelsey would cry. It was more than Marlowe could take.

Blinking to keep her tears to herself, she looked up at the ceiling, needing to leave before he arrived. She'd already studied the way out but knew Kelsey and Libby would stop her.

Mark hadn't come for Libby yet, either, but he most certainly would. Any minute now, and maybe then, she'd tell him about the new Houston baby in her belly. He'd be happy because he actually wanted six kids. Six. Maybe more, Marlowe couldn't recall how many Libby had said. Bet he'd carry her away like a handsome prince, and

they'd run back to their home and live happily ever af—

Marlowe was digging herself into a pit of depression, and she knew it. That crap had to stop. She forced her mind back to all the women and children she'd gotten safely out of Afghanistan. She was the only one she'd failed. Her getting caught was her mistake, but she'd always known it was bound to happen. She'd rolled the dice and lucked out so many times, but success and failure relied on chance and circumstance. The only good side to that nearly fatal day was that no one else was caught with her. All the women she'd rescued had gotten out of Afghanistan. Their children would grow up free. Marlowe had Alex to thank for that, and Arzad to thank for connecting her with him.

She'd do it again. All of it. Even after what had happened in that cave. Libby was right. Marlowe did have feelings for Asher, and he was right, too. She couldn't go back to Afghanistan. The Taliban were wise to her now. They'd make a public example of her in the most humiliating way. She would surely die. Maybe by fire. She'd seen that, once. A man. She had no clue what his crime was. Only knew he'd died slowly and horribly.

Okay, this wasn't working. She'd just dug herself in deeper. Blinking, she shook her head to redirect her stubborn brain and—

Libby sat down beside her. "Mark and Alex are on their way. Mark wants to know if you'd like to visit Asher tonight. He's in the medical wing at TEAM headquarters now. We could stop by on our way home."

"He's not in ICU, is he?"

Libby put a hand on Marlowe's. Marlowe looked down at the friendly gesture. Her knuckles were white. She was clenching Kelsey's tablet like a lifeline. So much for redirecting negativity.

“No, he’s next door to the room you were in. Alex is sure the danger is over, but he’s got agents on guard there and here, too.”

“Why does he do that?”

Libby cocked her head. “Do what?”

“Post guards if he doesn’t have to?”

“I guess” —Libby shrugged— “because sometimes it’s hard to move on after trauma. It takes time for our brains to accept that we’re safe again. Once we all settle down, I’m sure he’ll reduce what he calls overwatch.” She squeezed Marlowe’s hand. “You’re okay, girlfriend. And tomorrow—”

“Tonight. I want to see Asher tonight.”

“Of course, you do. I was just going to say that tomorrow we should all get together for lunch. The pressure’s off and we’ll feel more like ourselves, you’ll see. But if that’s what you want to do tonight, then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll take you to Asher.”

Marlowe sucked in a full breath. “Yes. Please. That’s what I want.”

“Okay then, as soon as—”

The playroom door opened.

Damn.

Alex was home. Without acknowledging Marlowe or Libby, he went straight to Kelsey and pulled her into his arms. She melted against him with a soft cry. Her arms

circled his neck and she pressed her face into his chest. She was openly crying and he was comforting her. His arms slid around her waist. His eyes closed and he dipped his nose to the top of her head.

Marlowe couldn't make herself stop watching. The tortured expression on this big, tough man's tanned face proved how much he adored his wife. They didn't speak, just held each other, standing there as if they were the only ones in the world. It was the tenderest, most beautiful sight she'd ever witnessed.

So that's what true love looks like .

Her gut ached at the painful contrast between her life and theirs. She hadn't witnessed a full-body hug before, not ever. The single constant in her childhood was the complete and utter lack of affection. Her parents had never hugged each other, much less her. Hugs were foreign, and when they had happened, impersonal, something your teacher did because she had to. Leaving Marlowe to believe that she was the problem; that something was wrong with her. That she wasn't worth loving.

In the end, it was easier to believe love only happened in fairy tales and reality shows. It was fiction. In her house, booze, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs ruled. They were real. The only time her parents touched each other was to fight. After their last screaming, slapping match, her dad had walked out, and her mom had yelled, "Good riddance."

Marlowe had just stood there, torn between two people who'd never loved or hugged her, yearning to be wanted by at least one of them. By someone. Anyone.

But here, in this house, love was everywhere. The Stewarts were rich in ways that mattered, in ways Marlowe had never known. Even Lexie treated her baby brother like he was her best friend.

A sense of rightness settled over Marlowe. She wanted what Kelsey had, what Marlowe had foolishly thrown away in Harley's barn. That hug. Asher's hug. She'd made him feel stupid like her mother always did with her dad. He'd usually been strung out on something, sure, but maybe he'd just wanted a hug—

Err, no. If her dad ever wanted anything, it wasn't a hug.

Seconds later, Mark arrived and the scene replayed. Only this time, Libby flew across the room, jumped into his arms, and wrapped her legs around his waist. He tugged her into the hall, and the door closed behind them. Marlowe didn't need to see to know Libby was being ravished by tall, dark, and handsome Mark, on the other side of that very secure door. Or maybe she was doing the ravishing.

It was awkward and lonesome, this girlfriend thing. Marlowe was happy for Kelsey and Libby, she truly was. Their men were home. They were treasured women again, and all was good. But no one was coming for her.

Mustering her courage—again—Marlowe refocused on the view of Kelsey's kitchen in the tablet. The lights were off and the cleaners were gone. A huge flower arrangement now sat in the center of the table. White flowers. It'd be nice if they were Easter lilies. Lilies looked like tiny delicate trumpets, made by angels to herald in spring. Baby animals and birds. Butterflies and longer days. Beauty. Sunsets. Stars—

Oh, what a load of rubbish. Marlowe ran a hard hand over her stupid head and prepared to be disappointed again. Once Libby left with Mark, her chance of seeing Asher tonight went with them. She was stuck in limbo. Dependent and useless and—

“You waiting for an invitation?” Alex asked, still standing there, proud and strong, a true warrior, one arm around his woman. He was not the same tough guy she'd met in the barn. Surely not the stern, pissed-off boss he'd been in his office. This Alex was

soft around the edges. He looked content. His sharp blue eyes were mellow as they darted to Lexie, then to his baby son, then back to Marlowe. “Well?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

He jerked his head toward the door. “Mark and Libby are in the hall waiting for you. Can I help with that walker? Need a jacket? It’s chilly tonight.”

“I’m not leaving my dogs. I can’t—”

“We’ll take care of Walter and Darling for you, no worries.” Alex released Kelsey and helped Marlowe to her feet and into her walker. He was certainly in a rush for her to leave.

While he hurried Marlowe out of the playroom, Libby stood in the hallway, waiting. Flushed and breathing hard, but smiling, like Mark had just made her dreams come true. Of course he had. Loving a man like him was easy for Libby. She was princess material. Blonde and blue-eyed. She was a doctor. She was smart, smart enough to know how to live.

I’ll bet she never refused a hug from Mark .

Stop. Just stop. Marlowe ordered her ornery inner-child. You had your chance and you blew it. You’re the one who pushed Asher away. Suck it up and move on.

Alex brought her to a dead stop instead of pushing her into the hall, like she half-expected.

Marlowe glared up at him, daring him to tell her good riddance.

“Thanks for staying with Kelsey,” he said gruffly. “For keeping her company while I

was gone. I wasn't there when I lost my Sara, and I'll never forgive myself for letting her down. But you, Marlowe? You gave my wife your friendship, and you kept her mind occupied while I was gone." Alex lifted her hand from the walker but didn't shake it. Just held onto it and squeezed, like he was pressing his gratitude into her through his fingertips.

"It was my pleasure," Marlowe whispered, instead of yelling, "Don't touch me. "

Not this time and not with this guy. Unbeknownst to Alex, he'd given her a gift when he'd answered her text from Afghanistan, then followed that with a job offer that had become a passion. "Thanks for believing in me, Mr. Stewart. I couldn't have done my job without you in my corner."

"Yeah, well, if I'd known you were a woman—"

She squeezed back. "You would've done the same thing. You trusted me to deliver and I did."

Alex leaned down to her level, his eyes sparking with anger. "And they caught you, and they hurt you, and that's my fault. I didn't ask enough questions. I was in a hurry to get those families out of Afghanistan, and I jumped to conclusions that nearly got you killed. Sweetheart, that's on me. I never send agents out alone, but I did, and I thank God that Asher prevailed where I failed."

The fervor pouring out of this big man was so intimidating, Marlowe wilted. "Don't," she whispered. "Don't diminish what I did just because I'm not a guy."

Unexpectedly, she found herself crushed against his broad chest. "I'm damned proud of you, but no one, man or woman, dies because of me."

"Umm, okay then." She pulled back because... hugs. She didn't do hugs. Did she? Or

maybe it was just hugs from certain people. Certain other women's husbands. Hmm... "I've got to go. Bye, Mr. Stewart. Bye, Kelsey. I'll be back for my dogs."

The hug with Kelsey was as unexpected as the one from Alex, but somehow warmer and gentler. "You tell that man of yours to bring you by anytime."

"He's not my—"

Kelsey cut her off. "Any. Time. You're always welcome here, Marlowe."

Well, okay then. By the time Marlowe made it back to TEAM headquarters, she was emotionally hammered. Especially after riding with Mark and Libby. There was a reason they had all those kids.

They accompanied her into the darkened building, but as they approached the front door, Marlowe turned her walker around and stared across the parking lot to the barns. "Someone's out there. I can feel them watching us."

"You're right," Mark answered. "TEAM overwatch has our backs. They'll be with us until Alex confirms all clear."

"How long will that be?"

"When he's sure all loose ends are tied up. Don't worry. You're safe here. Nobody can get into TEAM HQ."

They chatted while the elevator dropped to the medical level, which was more like a warm, cozy dungeon. No windows, but lots more light than any prison. At Asher's room, Mark held the door and gestured Marlowe and Libby inside. Straightaway, Libby went to Asher and checked the monitors stacked on the pole beside him. There were two IV bags hanging off that same pole, one clear, the other dark red, most

likely blood. All Marlowe had eyes for was the man in the bed, Asher, on his back, pale and still. She would've thought he was dead but for the machine tracking his heart rate, oxygen level, and plenty of other stuff, what she didn't know.

"Oh, honey," she breathed, walking slowly to his side. There she stopped. He didn't open his eyes, had no idea she was there. His right shoulder and arm were swathed in bandages. Without thinking, she leaned forward and took hold of his left hand. It was warm, not cold. She needed that small comfort. "I'm staying."

Libby shook her head, but before she shut Marlowe down, Mark intervened. He was a big, bull of a man. Everything about The TEAM agents was bigger and stronger. His brown eyes were fastened on her, but all Marlowe read there was kindness and concern. She readied herself for the upcoming argument. He'd side with Libby. Husbands always sided with their wives.

"Good idea, Marlowe," he said. "I agree. Your face is the first thing Asher wants to see when he comes to. Libby? Remember when you woke up after that close call with the Russian mob?"

"This is different, Mark. Asher is—" She looked at Marlowe. "I'm sorry, but he's still very weak."

"So were you, babe," Mark murmured, "and you were in shock. You thought you were still in that coffin."

Marlowe watched the back-and-forth between this husband and wife. Didn't matter if they agreed or not, she wasn't leaving. To make her point, she dropped the bed's side rail and climbed up beside Asher. It took her a minute. He had no idea she was there, but just being with him settled her nerves. Smoothing a hand over his forehead she whispered, "I'm here. I know you can't hear me, but I'm here and I'm staying."

“Mark, would you please bring a recliner in for Marlowe?” Libby asked.

No sooner said than done. Mark wheeled in an extra-large recliner. Libby covered it with bedding, then left bottled water and snacks on the table beside it. Along with the remote and a phone and other stuff Marlowe didn’t need, because she wasn’t moving one inch away from Asher.

Before they left, she asked, “Who takes care of your kids when you’re both gone? I mean, you’re both so busy.”

Mark grinned. “TEAM wives cover for each other.”

“It’s none of my business.” Marlowe paused. “But do you all have playrooms like Kelsey and Alex?”

“You bet,” Mark answered. “In our line of work, it’s a given.”

“That’s the first thing Alex did for us when we moved farther inland. He insisted. He takes care of his people,” Libby added.

“Time to go.” Mark handed Marlowe another cell phone. “My number’s already programmed. You need anything, hit one. Someone will come running.”

She set it on the nightstand. “I will. Thanks.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

His nose twitched. An exquisitely fresh scent, one Asher remembered, filtered through the air around him, filling him with peace. With comfort. Tension he hadn't realized he harbored evaporated. The muscles in his neck and shoulders went slack against the pillow. His lungs expanded as his sniper instincts flared outward, into the universe, searching for the woman who owned that scent. Wanting her more than she wanted him, possibly, but searching nonetheless. And hoping.

"Marlowe," he whispered to the dark.

No response. Asher tugged the cannula out of his nose and inhaled with purpose, breathing in that telltale scent again. Marlowe was there. His soul knew it. His heart declared it. Please don't be a ghost or a dream. Be real this time. Most of all, be here because you want to be here.

He faded in and out of consciousness, fighting the drugs in his system. Pain meds. Powerful antibiotics. Muscle relaxers. Sleep aids. They all took a toll on a body and they weakened his drive.

He felt it then. The slightest touch, a timid feminine hand slipping beneath his gown, coming to rest on his belly, just below his ribcage. Had to be Marlowe. Afraid he'd frighten her if he moved too fast, he held his breath and prayed this was real. That she wasn't a dream. Asher didn't understand why or how and he didn't try to. Only knew she was the one. Somehow, they'd connected in the chaos of that despicable cave, and he wasn't letting her go.

That little hand settled, her fingers splayed and trembling. Desperation swept away his resolve to go slow. Asher clapped his good hand over hers, desperately needing this contact.

As if Marlowe heard his deepest desire, she moved closer and closer until, at last, he lifted his uninjured arm high enough to clear her head and draw her against his side, where she belonged. At last, thank you God, he had her. His eyes watered at the intense emotions storming him. She was real and she was there. She had come for him.

“I had to see you for myself,” she whispered. “You’re so hurt.”

Asher pressed his mouth to her forehead. “You should see the other guy,” he murmured, striving to be funny. Mostly to keep from crying out loud. This was a huge step from where they’d been just days ago.

When hot tears trickled between them, he knew he had to acknowledge her worry. “Hey, don’t cry, honey. I’m a little dinged up, but I’ll heal. I always do. You’ll see.”

“You’re darned right I’ll see. I’m not leaving until you can leave with me.”

How well he understood that feeling. The need to comfort and protect had never been stronger than on that flight out of Afghanistan with Marlowe, then again on the flight from Germany. They’d been running for their lives, but Asher had only been running for Marlowe’s life. Not his. Each desperate leg of that journey back to America had been fraught with danger and fear. Danger from Jamah’s ruthless machinations. Paralyzing fear that Marlowe might die in transit. That Asher would lose her before he’d actually, truly saved her.

“You’re shaking,” she told him. Like he didn’t know? Pressing the full length of her warm body against him, she carefully slipped an arm across his chest. “I’m not

hurting you, am I?” she asked, as she snuggled—Marlowe actually snuggled—closer.

Satisfaction? No. Pure, sweet contentment. That was the sensation swarming Asher’s storehouse of masculine resolve. Melting it away like butter. Making him weak and needy and—hers. It was humbling to be on the receiving end, but with Marlowe, Asher let his defenses down and slowly captured the woman of his dreams.

The effort sapped what little energy he had, but at last, he had what he needed. Turning his head to bury his nose in her beanie, he felt prickly hair instead of cotton. “You lost your beanie?” he asked, fading fast.

Marlowe shook her head. “No, I’ve been staying at Kelsey’s with Judy, Libby, China, and Persia, and they, umm, helped me fix my hair, and Judy gave me a headband, and umm...”

Asher faded blissfully away on the lullaby of Marlowe’s soft storytelling of girlfriends and hugs, of giving and receiving. Mostly of being safe—afraid for him, but safe. Of Alex, Harley, Maverick, and Walker. Something about pregnancy. Walter and Darling. Whisper and that scallywag Smoke. Asher got lost wondering who was pregnant and which darling? The little gold pup or Harley’s favorite tease—Marlowe.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Marlowe knew the moment Asher fell back asleep. A deep sigh breathed out of him and his entire body went slack. He stopped talking. His voice was so hoarse, she'd had trouble understanding him, so she didn't mind.

She smoothed her palm over his warm belly, loving the brush of crisp curly hairs against her skin. Spreading her fingers, she wondered what he'd taste like. He smelled of soap and clean sheets. Of course, he'd probably been bathed after surgery and maybe earlier today too. Would he taste like that elusive male scent that was uniquely Asher Downey?

Just because she could, she pressed her lips to his neck and planted a kiss there. Then another. Then a lick. Her nostrils flared at the intimate flavor bursting over her tongue. She'd never kissed a man before, certainly not his neck. She hadn't kissed anyone, and she wouldn't take advantage of Asher now. Wouldn't think of going farther. Not while he was asleep. If only he'd open his eyes and then maybe—

Nope. Absolutely not.

Content with the scant mischief she'd accomplished, Marlowe settled her cheek against his chest. Oh, to be brave enough to kiss his lips. To wake him with a kiss. Maybe someday. Not tonight. He needed rest more than her foolish wanderings. Rest and healing.

Her hand was still caught beneath his. Oddly, it felt good there, not caught as much as... connected. That was a better word. She and Asher were inexplicably connected

in ways she didn't understand. It was a frightening, wonderfully new feeling, to be wanted.

Not only wanted but—dare she think it?—treasured? Like Kelsey and Libby were treasured. Marlowe was a fool standing at the edge of the life she'd always wanted, but had never been worthy of. Her toes were curled over the edge of that steep cliff. If she was wrong, if she'd misread Asher, she'd never recover. She would fall straight into despair and sink out of sight.

Somehow, she'd have to find the strength to go back to the only life that had given her a reason to get up each morning. Namely, rescuing vulnerable women. Getting them on helicopters and far away from the Taliban. She certainly couldn't work with Alex anymore, not if Asher cast her aside. She wasn't fit for nine-to-five jobs. Society had scraped her off its uppity boot heel and cast her aside a long time ago. She was born trash and, if Asher rejected her, she'd die trash. The only place where she'd ever fit was the last place on earth intelligent people wanted to go. Afghanistan. Maybe she could work for the FBI or CIA, or someone in the same business as Alex. There were other organizations out there that rescued women at risk, weren't there? The TEAM couldn't be the only one.

But what if she didn't fall? What if she flew, if she soared high, like an eagle? What if this uplifting feeling for Asher was real, not her imagination, then...?

Marlowe honestly didn't know what came next.

She'd never entertained these jumbled-up feelings before. Just thinking about that fairy tale myth called true love made her question herself. What Kelsey had with Alex was real. He adored her. Sure, she was beautiful and Marlowe wasn't. Looks mattered, but the gentle way that he'd held his wife...

The warm feelings inside the Stewarts' home...

The way Kelsey melted into Alex when he arrived home...

Those qualities were rare, close to unbelievable. Yet they existed. Marlowe had seen them in action. She knew, she just knew that, even if Kelsey grew warts and had bad breath, Alex would still love her.

Lexie and little Bradley weren't traumatized. They'd probably never been beaten a day in their lives. Probably never went to bed or to school hungry. Of course, they hadn't. The man who'd made it his business to end a wicked creature like Jamah wouldn't mistreat his children. Marlowe hadn't exactly seen how Alex treated his kids, but she couldn't imagine him hurting them or not wanting them. He was a good man, and good men took care of everyone. What he had with Kelsey was real. It just might be time to fly. Marlowe had witnessed true love and of Kelsey, Libby, and Judy could find it, so could she.

Asher groaned in his sleep. His fingers tightened around hers, squeezing them. He arched his back. Marlowe let him hold on as tightly as he needed. Lifting up onto one elbow, she blew gently over his face, hoping to distract him from whatever nightmare was troubling him.

Curiously, he turned his head towards her and drew in a full breath. His eyes were still closed. She blew over his face again, pleased that he seemed to enjoy it, despite the cannula in his nose. He inhaled deeper that time. His belly expanded. Still gripping her fingers, his body went limp again. He hadn't awakened, but he knew she was there.

"I think I might be in love with you," she whispered into his ear. "I've had feelings for you since that day you found me. It's got to be love, right?" She still wasn't sure. Was this feeling what happened when you stepped off the edge? Either you fell or you flew? Was this flying?

She eased back under the blanket alongside Asher. Her fingers were still cradled in his palm. She closed her eyes, intending on dreaming about him. After all, she was in bed with him and—

OOOMPH! She was suddenly pressed beneath the full weight of—

Oh my. Her naughty fingertips danced over a very bare and firm, definitely male, butt. Instinctively, her palms flattened on that backside and her mouth went dry. Was he asleep? Awake? Did she care? She had his ass where she wanted it and—

“C-can’t breathe,” he huffed into her neck. “Can’t reach... her. Too far away. Help me. Help her!”

Her? Her who?

His back arched. His body was strung so tight that his spine bowed. She moved her hands from his backside and cupped his rough, sweaty jaw. “Asher, what’s wrong? You need to lay back down. Your shoulder. You shouldn’t lean—”

“You don’t get it. I can’t reach her. Can you? Help her!” He was on his hands and knees, now, nearly straddling Marlowe. The blanket was gone. He’d shoved it aside. Sweat dripped off his nose. He reached his good arm over her head, straining for something she couldn’t see. “She’s too far away. God, she’s dying. I can’t save her!”

“Honey, I’m here. I’m right here. Look at me,” Marlowe ordered.

“She’s dying, gawddamn it. The bomb... We’re buried. No time! Save yourself!”

“Asher, no. She didn’t die and neither did you. I’ve got you, honey. You’re safe. You’re with me and—”

He collapsed on Marlowe, breathing hard, his heartbeat pounding through his body and hers. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. Couldn't stop panting.

"No, God no," he rasped. "Not you, too."

And enough.

Marlowe pushed Asher over, carefully not manhandling his injured arm and shoulder. Mounting him as quickly as she could, she pressed his back flat to the mattress. He didn't need more pain, and panic was killing him. Licking her lips, she did what any red-blooded American woman would do when faced with a suffering war hero.

He believed he was suffocating? Well, Marlowe had a cure for that. Tossing caution and her fear of rejection to the wind, she sank carefully down onto his heaving chest, tilted his chin upward, and she kissed him. Open-mouthed. Her lips covering his, as tightly as she could, given his sweaty condition. When he struggled to inhale again, she forced her breath into him, filling his lungs with air until his chest lifted.

She did it again and again. She knew rescue breathing. She'd learned it during that free Red Cross class she'd taken way back when. There were no obstructions in his throat, and he wasn't choking. He was trapped somewhere in his past. This was a panic attack, and this time, she was going to save him.

As she forced another breath down his throat, she reached for the call button and rang the nurse. With every breath Asher accepted, his body relaxed. Her technique might be risqué, but she didn't give a damn. She'd keep doing what worked until it stopped working, but somebody had better show up to help by then.

All at once, bright light flooded the room. Someone had opened the door. About time. A woman in scrubs came to Asher's side. She didn't say anything to Marlowe, just adjusted one of the machines and leaned over him with a small flashlight.

“Asher,” she said with authority, shining that light in his eyes “Snap out of it. You’re scaring Marlowe.”

Marlowe tipped back on her haunches. “You know who I am?” she huffed.

“Sweetheart, everyone knows who you are, now stop. Take a breath. Relax. He’s breathing on his own now. You did good. He’s okay.”

Marlowe did as she was told. “He was asleep one minute, but the next, he couldn’t breathe. He was panicking. I didn’t know what else to do.”

The nurse or whoever she was, cocked her head, and Marlowe became acutely aware of where she was sitting, and that Asher’s hands were still on her hips. He had a good strong grip. His fingertips were dug into her backside. His thumbs were planted inside the crease between her thighs and her belly. Thank heavens, she was dressed. His eyes opened. Oh, my.

Still shaken and sweating now too, she told him. “You scared me.”

“Sorry about that.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Then swallowed again. “Panic... attack.”

“Yes, and a vicious one,” the woman in scrubs said. “I wish you’d take that drug we talked about.”

“No drugs, Doc Fitz. Got what I need...” He squeezed Marlowe’s hips. “Right here.”

Aww, that made her want to smile. Instead, Marlowe tipped forward, taking her weight mostly off of him. “You were trying to reach a woman, but you couldn’t. You were buried with her, weren’t you?”

He nodded, blowing out a breath between pursed lips. “Not a woman... A ten-year-old girl, I think... Alissa... my interpreter... Abdul’s daughter...” He huffed between each hoarse explanation. “Bomb... whole building... collapsed... Basement... couldn’t breathe... dust... dirt... in my lungs... mouth... nose...” He coughed. “Walls weren’t concrete... earthen... just dirt... Lots of dirt.”

Dr. Fitz unclipped the oximeter from his finger. “Your stats are close to normal again. Do you know what brought this one on?”

“Never get... warnings... Just hits when... I least expect it.”

Marlowe settled back onto his hips. If he wanted her there, then there she’d stay. Dr. Fitz didn’t seem to mind.

Asher’s eyes welled with tears. “Couldn’t reach her, Marlowe. Couldn’t move. We were both buried up to our necks. Shit, she was on Abdul’s shoulders when the bomb went off. He never stood a chance and neither did she.” His tears spilled over. “God, I yelled and yelled but... every little noise only brought more dirt down on us.”

Marlowe tipped onto Asher and laid her ear against his chest. “You thought you were going to die.”

“Yeah.” He coughed. “But Heston... He’s a jarhead. I’m Army. He shouldn’t’ve been there. Don’t know why he was, but he... but he...”

“He saved you, Asher,” Doc Fitz murmured. “Oh, honey, he saved you, didn’t he?”

“But not her.” Asher choked. “He should’ve saved her first, but by then... by then... God. He should’ve saved her and her dad, not me.”

Marlowe pushed herself up into Asher’s arms and under his chin. She clung to him.

Words were useless in the face of tragedy. There weren't enough 'I'm sorrys' in the universe to change what happened. How well she knew.

The door whooshed shut and she knew Doc Fitz had stepped out, either for something to put in Asher's IV or to give them privacy. Taking a deep breath, Marlowe said, "Life is hard, and it isn't fair. I'm sorry that happened to you and Alissa. Where was it?"

He wiped his face. "Somalia. Three years ago. April seventh. We were hunting the warlord, Ali Akbar."

Marlowe could tell by the taut stretch of muscles in his neck that he was looking at the ceiling. "Ah, the butcher of Kabul. I'd heard he fled to Somalia."

Asher nodded. "Yeah, him. Can't tell you anything else. Sorry. Classified."

She took a deep breath. "It's the same story the whole world over. Evil destroys everything it touches."

"Don't I know it."

Lifting her head, Marlowe crossed her arms over his chest and rested her chin on her arms. "I don't know who sang it, but there was a song with a line in it about one hand reaching out. About saving just one person, and how hopeless we feel because we can't save everyone."

"Garth Brooks. The Change. Yeah, I know it."

"That song changed my life, Asher. I was on my own then, getting by. I worked at a McDonald's and only made minimum wage. But this old guy was a regular. He used to come in real late, just before we locked up. All he ever ordered was two plain

hamburgers. Anyway...”

She stopped, the rest of the story harder to tell. Deep breath. Okay then. “I followed him one night after he left. He didn’t buy those two plain hamburgers for himself. They were for his dog, a pretty yellow lab mix. It had gotten hit by a car, and he couldn’t afford to take it to a vet. He scrounged trash cans just to buy two hamburgers every day. Two cheap, plain hamburgers for his dog.”

Asher’s hand drifted down her jaw. She liked that. “So the next night, after I cashed my paycheck, I went to where his tent was, and I gave him the money, plus a couple hundred I had saved.” She shrugged remembering. “He got mad, said he didn’t need charity, but when I told him where I lived, he settled down, and you know what? I didn’t see him for a couple weeks, but when he finally showed up, his dog was with him and it was walking just fine.”

“Back up a second. Where were you living?”

She winced but admitted, “Two tents from his.”

“Marlowe. No.”

She nodded. “Yes, and the next day when I went into work, the kids I worked with called me out, said I was stupid for helping an old bum. Guess one of them followed me the night I gave him my paycheck. Shows you I’m not cut out to be a spy, huh?”

Asher took her into his arms and against his heart. He was shaking.

“You’re tired. I should go—”

“No. Stay. I mean, please stay.”

Marlowe lifted up high enough to look him in the eyes. “You want me to sleep here? With you?”

A tired smile graced his ruggedly handsome face. “It’s not how I imagined our first time sleeping together, but yes. I want you to stay. Right here. With me.”

Marlowe had no clue how to answer, so she let her heart speak for her. “Okay, Asher. I’d... I’d like to stay with you. Tonight.”

He was still pale. His hair was wet with sweat, and the longish ends curled at his nape. One particular curl lay in the middle of his forehead. Out of nowhere, his dimple showed up and—

Marlowe flew.

Chapter Twenty-Five

He slept. All night long. No dreams. No more nightmares. Not that the one he'd had wasn't freakishly powerful, but it was only a matter of time before it happened. The crap in Somalia always lay close to the surface. Marlowe handled it better than he expected, but she'd lived in a tent? In Chicago? That was wrong on so many levels. No wonder she was a tough cookie. Holding her like he was, with her curled into his side, her head on his shoulder and one leg over his thigh? Best way to wake up ever.

Doc Fitz would be back soon. She'd peeked in a couple times during the night, just checking, she'd said. Which was gracious of her. Most doctors were strict about visitors just sitting on beds, but this wasn't your regular HMO hospital and Doc Fitz understood TEAM agents better than most.

Asher was still on way too many drugs. Between them, the massive surgery to repair his shoulder, and his blood loss, he knew he was lucky to be alive.

Marlowe stirred in his arms. Up close and personal, she was more kitten than pit bull. Coming out of that panic attack last night, to find her spread over him, her knees locked on his sides, giving him mouth-to-mouth, was one helluva wet dream come true. What man didn't appreciate a woman taking charge like she did? Better yet, one as fired up as Marlowe and in the perfect position. Legs spread wide over his cock. Her mouth a luscious temptation he needed more time to explore. Working him until she got what she wanted, which was him breathing and alive. It was too bad he'd been in the grips of a freaking attack. Hell, he'd had her in the best state of mind: hot, sweaty, willing, and ready. She'd been thrilled when he snapped out of it. Probably would've jumped him out of sheer excitement if Doc Fitz hadn't interrupted.

He smoothed his good hand down her biceps and pressed his lips to her forehead, wishing Marlowe hadn't witnessed his meltdown. Whatever preceded his attack must've scared her. He couldn't remember much, but afterward, talking about Somalia, telling that ugly truth had released something burrowed deep into his psyche that had been stuck there for three years. Until that moment, when he'd told Marlowe and Doc Fitz about Alissa, the only one who'd known the details of that awful day was his best buddy, Heston Contreras. He was a locked vault of secret missions and covert operations. He'd never tell.

Maybe it was time to talk with Heston, though. Really talk about Somalia. Find out which dirtbag bombed that women's shelter and what happened afterward. Lance the damned infection of a lifetime, and be done with it. Couldn't hurt to ask. If Heston refused to answer, so be it. All he could do was say no. Asher could accept that. Some ops were off the books.

He pressed his mouth against Marlowe's forehead again and whispered, "Good morning."

"It's about time," she grumbled, sleepily stretching against him. Damned if every nerve in his all-male body didn't stand up and take notice of her supple warmth. Marlowe in the morning was an innocent, fluffy kitten who wanted to be petted, and Asher wanted to pet her until she purred and mewed and... Yeah. That.

Marlowe's fierce I'll-kill-you-and-bury-your-body attitude made her seem larger and meaner than life, especially when she was in full-on attack mode. She could definitely reduce a full-grown, highly trained, armed male to tears. Been there, done that. But she couldn't weigh much more than a buck ten, and she was short, not nowhere near as tall as those robotic, unsmiling super models on magazine covers. Except for her lean, muscled physique, she was dainty.

"What's a girl got to do around here to get a decent cup of coffee?"

“I can buzz Doc Fitz if you’d like. I’m sure she’d bring us breakfast.”

“Don’t you dare. Oh, my gosh, am I...?” Marlowe pulled the blanket up and peered down at herself.

“No, you’re not naked. Yet,” he breathed into the top of her head. “So talk to me. Where’s your beanie?”

A beautiful blush splashed up her neck and over her cheeks, Asher hoped because of his naked comment. “Yeah, about that” —she lifted her arm and ran a hand over her head— “Judy gave me, umm, a more feminine thing to wear. A headband, only I don’t know where it is right now and” —she shrugged both shoulders— “turns out I don’t need it.”

She leaned in, her lips wet and ready, and Asher was a goner. He closed the inches between them and finally, at last, he.... Kissed. Marlowe. Softly at first, but the instant the tip of her tongue swept timidly over his lips, he took control. She was a novice. Tentative. Inexperienced. But willing.

Asher turned on his uninjured side to face her, instantly pressured by his damaged shoulder to knock off any and all moving. Not yet. No way. Not with this woman as close as she was. He swept his good hand down her arm to her hip. She responded in kind, her fingers sliding up his neck into his hair. The feel of those ten little digits on his scalp sent shivers over his belly. Every fiber in his body screamed more, more, more. This was not the place or the time. When he took her to bed, it would not be in a hospital. If he could even do what he wanted when the opportunity arose.

After a thorough, wet kiss that left her breathless, Asher pulled Marlowe in close and just held her. She’d changed, didn’t fight back, didn’t turn him down, or shove away. She seemed to be enjoying the moment. Had they turned a corner in their on-and-off again relationship? He was shaking. She was trembling. But what a relief to finally

kiss the woman of his dreams.

“We need to slow down,” he breathed. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’ve never been with a man before, have you?”

She shook her head. “Not till now. But I’m with you, aren’t I?”

Asher beamed at her total lack of experience. “Yes, but I meant intimate, you know, with a guy.”

“Oh, you mean sex. Yeah” —she shook her head— “that. No. I’ve been busy. You know, saving the world, keeping my cover, trying not to get dead.”

Asher leaned in and took her mouth hungrily. Desperately. He’d suspected she was inexperienced, but hearing it and knowing it was all the confirmation he needed.

“Wow,” she breathed when he eased up.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

“Me, too. But you’re handsome, and I’ve been ugly for so—”

“You’re not ugly.” He reared back far enough to glare down at her. And damn, that tweaked his injured shoulder. But shit if he cared. “You’re beautiful, Marlowe. Yeah, you hide behind one helluva right hook, and you can cuss like a sailor, but you” —he leaned in and kissed her full on her obstinate little mouth— “are beautiful, inside and out. Trust me. I know.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re just saying that.”

How could she doubt him? Asher was fully into proving just how much he adored her

when, damn it, Doc Fitz knocked, and he had to play nice. While Marlowe scrambled to sit up, he rolled to his back and ran a hand over his head. Frazzled, like some frat boy who'd just scored first base. No doubt about it, he needed to take this woman home with him.

"Good morning," Doc Fitz said cheerfully. She walked straight to his bedside and looked down at him. "Feeling better this morning?"

Asher couldn't hold back his smile. She knew what he was feeling. "Yes, ma'am. When can I check out?"

"Not happening anytime soon. Not until you can walk down the hall and finish the safe room at your place. Ready for breakfast?" she had the nerve to ask while injecting a hypo of something into his IV.

Oh, yeah, the safe room Alex had ordered every agent to add to their homes. Alex was paying for it, but Asher's was a work in progress. Slow progress.

"More pain meds?" He hoped not. That crap put him to sleep.

"No, it's the last dose of your antibiotic. I'd like to get you up on your feet this morning. Last time we tried you didn't handle it very well. You up for another try?"

"I'll help," Marlowe piped up.

"If you can. This man's stubborn. Reminds me of Beau."

"Beau?"

Uh-oh. Asher locked eyes with Marlowe. He'd heard the what-the-hell tone in her question. Might as well meet this one head on. "Yes, Beau. He's Doc Fitz's husband.

He was with me the day we saved you.”

“We?” Heavy sarcasm laced that single syllable.

Here we go . “Yes, we, honey. Beau covered our backs when we exfilled. If not for him, we wouldn’t have made it to the helo.”

“Yeah, but he—”

“But nothing. We had to get you out of there. We did the best we could.”

The fire in her eyes simmered down even as her upper lip curled into a sneer. “He told you to punch me.” Emphasis on me .

Asher shook his head. “He was reactive, that’s all. The clock was ticking, and we had a ride we couldn’t miss. We had to get you and the women you saved out of there.”

Her nose twitched like she wanted to fight. At last, she muttered, “Oh, yeah. We did. Have to save them, the women, I mean. But he did tell you to knock me out, didn’t he?” Her right hand curled into a fist.

Asher had to agree to keep this from elevating. “But I didn’t, did I?”

“No,” Marlowe answered, her eyes glistening. “You’ve only ever h-helped me.”

Man, this woman could change moods in a heartbeat. He reached for her hand, needing her to understand. There was a time just days ago when she would’ve slapped him for touching her. But this time, she reached for him and interlocked their fingers. Ducking down, Asher kissed her knuckles. “Damned straight, woman. It’s my job to help you every step of the way. You okay with that?”

Blushing, Marlowe nodded. He kissed her knuckles again, just to watch the reaction. Was his firebrand suddenly shy? Was she thinking about what he said about taking her to bed? A man could dream.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Marlowe wanted Asher more than she'd ever wanted anything or anyone in her whole life. He was everything she wasn't, polite, calm, and reasonable. He wasn't reactive, like that Beau jerk. She still wanted to smack him for what he'd told Asher to do. What kind of man even thinks of punching an already traumatized, beaten, tortured, and bloodied woman? An asshole, that was who. Beau had a smackdown coming. Her hands fisted thinking about the day she came face to face with him again. She should've kneed him instead of Asher.

While Doc Fitz attended to Asher, she asked Marlowe to return to her previous hospital room and rest. Good thing that room was next door. Piping hot coffee, bacon, eggs, and cinnamon toast were waiting on her nightstand when she opened the door. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until those tantalizing aromas tickled her nose. She made short work of breakfast, then decided to shower.

Marlowe was standing under the steaming hot spray when she realized what she was doing. Standing. Without a walker. A silly smile broke over her face. She was healed!

The last time she worried about her injuries was—what? Two days ago? When Libby changed the bandages. That felt right. Gingerly, Marlowe leaned into the tiled wall and peeled the tape off her feet. Ouch. Still tender and prickly with stitches, but so much better. She did the same with her lower back. Lots more stitches, yikes. But also less pain than before. With every piece of tape and soiled gauze she tossed in the wastebasket, her spirit lifted.

Like a silly duck, as soon as she exited the shower stall, she looked at her reflection

in the mirror over the sink. Well, darn. Her face was a disappointment, but that was nothing new. Beggars couldn't be choosers. She'd never be gorgeous, how often had she heard that? But it was kind of Asher to say she was.

Peeling the butterfly tapes off the cuts above her orbital bone, she was pleased with how quickly her body was healing. Generally speaking. Doc Fritz hadn't seemed worried about those tiny bandages, so neither was Marlowe. Tossing them away, she studied her reflection again. Tiny bloody speckles dotted the white at the inside corner of her left eye, but her vision was clear. Rotating her shoulder was easy, well, easier. Sometimes dislocated joints remained weak and unpredictable. She'd have to work on that.

Slapping both hands on the edge of the sink, she told that scrawny, bald woman in the mirror, "They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Well, girlfriend, if that's true, you are gonna rule the world."

Grabbing the towel, she dried herself, then put the same clothes back on. No more hospital gowns for her. When she exited the steamy bathroom, Doc Fitz was sitting on the foot of the bed. She patted the spot beside her. "Come sit with me. We need to talk."

So Marlowe sat and prepared to act interested.

"I know you've got a couple dogs now and that's good," Doc Fitz said. "You and Asher can both use a little fur-baby in your lives, but he's going to be here longer than you. He's got a long road ahead of him. If you're up to it, and I believe you are, I was wondering if you'd help me keep him here until he heals?"

That was easy. "Okay, sure. What else?"

Doc Fitz was too serious. Something else was going on. "Honestly? I'm going to go

against my rules and let you keep those dogs in your room. Your room, Marlowe. Not Asher's. They can visit him, and he can help you train them, but they can't get up on his bed, stay in his room, and he may not sleep with them."

"Walter. His dog's name is Walter."

"And yours?"

"Darling. It was Herman, but I changed it."

That got a smile from Doc Fitz. "I see Harley's boys are still in charge of naming the puppies. Little A is a thinker, but Georgie is a stinker. He's the rambunctious twin and he always does the opposite of Little A, who chooses gender-appropriate names."

"I like Harley," Marlowe said defensively, feeling the need to protect him since he wasn't there.

"Everyone likes Harley. These guys..." Doc Fitz shook her head. "Each of them is a hero and they're all as smart as whips."

"Except the guy you married."

"Beau can be brash, yes, but you'll never find a greater defender of children and women."

Marlowe doubted that claim to fame, but she wasn't going to argue the point with his wife. "Why Little A?"

"Harley named him after Alex. Couldn't have Big Alex and Little Alex, so it got shortened to Little A."

“Really? Harley named one of his sons after his boss?” That was weird, but Marlowe recalled Kelsey’s story about how Harley rescued Alex and her. That made Harley their hero. Like Asher was her hero.

“So, what do you think? Stay here until—?”

“What’s really going on, Doc Fitz? Asher’s no weakling. I can take care of him at his place as well as I can here, and you know it.”

“What’s going on...”

Uh-oh. Marlowe cringed at the stern male voice behind her. Yikes. Alex. In her doorway. She looked over her shoulder. “Yes,” she declared loudly. “I’m not stupid. I know when I’m being strung along, so tell me what’s up.”

He walked in and closed the door behind him. “Thanks, McKenna. I’ll take it from here. You’re welcome to stay if you’re not too busy.”

“I’m never too busy for you. Fire away.”

When Alex crossed his arms over his chest, Marlowe couldn’t help the sneer that tweaked her upper lip. He was dressed to kill this morning, in a crisply pressed charcoal-gray business suit and white shirt. An American flag tie tack adorned the black and silver striped tie at his neck. This man was twice as big, maybe even twice as tall, as Marlowe.

She stiffened her spine to add a couple inches to her height, but in no way was she as intimidating as he was. She hated feeling like she always needed to be ready for a fight, but his height and breadth and width—“Fuck off,” she snarled, automatically lashing out, declaring her boundaries. He could respect them or leave, she wasn’t backing down. Not to him. Not to anyone.

Alex had the nerve to look up at the ceiling and laugh. “Son of a bitch, you are the one, aren’t you?”

“The one what? Wonder Woman ? Bitch? What the—?”

“Enough cussing,” he whispered, crouching down to the floor to look her in the eyes, one hand on the bed to keep his balance. “You’ve never been safer, Ms. Rich, and—”

“Marlowe. My name’s Marlowe. At least get that right.”

“Yes, ma’am—”

“Boss, please don’t call her ma’am,” Asher said from the doorway.

Doc Fitz threw up her hands. “Get your butt in here and sit down, right now, Asher. You know darned well you shouldn’t be on your feet. Doesn’t anyone listen to me?”

Marlowe smiled at the pale knight at her door. Asher came to rescue her again. Man, how she wanted to kiss him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Asher limped over to Marlowe's bed and sat as quickly as he could. Alex jumped out of his way. Good thing. On the verge of blacking out, Asher put an arm around Marlowe's taut shoulders and focused on the floor, fighting waves of black spots at his periphery. He refused to faint. Not in front of his boss. Certainly not in front of Marlowe. She was stressed enough.

He'd heard Alex walk past his room. Which meant he was headed for Marlowe's. Why, Asher didn't know, just knew Alex and Marlowe together were gasoline and a lit match. So he'd staggered in here like a drunk, to defend her. But shit. The short jaunt took everything. He should've used the walker like Doc Fitz told him to. Hell, he should've stayed in bed. But noooo... He had to play hero, and he was paying for it.

"Marlowe doesn't like being called ma'am," he quietly told the floor. No sense looking up. Alex had ears and Asher was dizzy enough. Wasn't going anywhere until the floor stopped dancing. Crap. This might not have been his brightest idea.

"Understood," Alex replied. "But now that she's here, she might as well earn her keep."

Asher had no idea what Alex meant. He was more focused on breathing and not passing out. He flat out wasn't strong or smart enough to argue with his boss right then. It'd take too much energy. Why was he out of bed? Oh, yeah. To defend the woman who'd single-handedly brought him to his knees? Definitely not smart.

“Doing what?” Marlowe asked, interrupting his slow-witted brain. Like that was difficult. There was nothing but attitude in her question. This could get ugly.

“I need someone to work with the women you helped bring to America,” Alex replied evenly. “You speak their language. You know what they’ve been through. Hell, you know them personally and the pay’s good.”

Not what Asher was expecting, but it seemed to work. Marlowe’s shoulders relaxed. So did those tiny, fisted hands. She was a ball-buster, no doubt about that, but she needed to learn her limits.

“Okay. Yeah. I can do that,” she said, her tone not nice, but less nasty than before.

“Boss, you need to teach her to shoot. She needs a weapon. Shit” —now that Asher said that— “and I need mine. Where are they? And where’s Scorpion? Gizmo?” Lifting his heavy head, he made bleary eye contact with his boss. “You got my pistols or did I leave them in Syria?” A man without his sidearms wasn’t a man at all.

“Relax. The drones are back at McCormack Research and your weapons are upstairs in my office. You bet I’ll teach Marlowe to shoot.” Alex looked at her. “You up for target practice? This afternoon?”

“I, ah, well, err... me?”

Asher looked down at the flustered woman at his side. A smile curled his lips. Marlowe intimidated could be a good thing. But it could also be bad.

“Yes, you,” Alex replied. “Indoor range. I’ll be back with a pistol at fifteen hundred hours. Be ready.”

“Ah, ah...”

Marlowe speechless was another amusing sight to behold.

“Relax. Fifteen hundred is three o’clock. He’ll bring everything you’ll need, ear protection, too,” Asher murmured.

“Ear protection? Oh, like earplugs?”

“Like a noise dampening headset so you can hear his instructions.”

“Well...” Her eyes shot to Alex.

Asher had now seen Marlowe angry, vengeful, poised to fight, speechless, and glaring down at him with vicious triumph in her eyes, make that, eye. That time in the cave. But seeing her rattled and unsure of herself, maybe even teachable, was a first. He smoothed his hand down her arm and settled it on her hip. “I wish I could go with you but—”

“But you are going back to your room, right now. Don’t argue with me,” Doc Fitz ordered.

She was on her feet, aiming for him. Marlowe looked up at Asher. He ducked his head and kissed her full on her mouth while he could. He’d heard Alex laugh at her before. Heard what he’d said, “Son of a bitch, you are the one, aren’t you?” This kiss was Asher’s answer. Marlowe was the one. And now, he was going to limp out of there and stagger back to his room. Made him feel like a disobedient teenager being confined to quarters, but it was what it was.

He’d no sooner lifted to his feet when Alex had a firm grip on his left arm and the tiny woman he’d rescued just weeks ago had his right. Together, Marlowe and Alex escorted Asher around the corner and back to his bed. Talk about embarrassing. But they worked well together—this time. Neither bossed the other during the entire five-

minute walk.

Asher sank into bed, grateful to be on his back. He listened while Doc Fitz thanked Alex for visiting, then while Marlowe thanked him for the job offer and made sure he'd meant three o'clock today for practice. Today? Yes, today.

The overhead lights finally went off. Good thing because Asher was already struggling to stay awake. No sense in it. The last thing he felt was Marlowe climbing into his bed and snuggling under his left arm. "Soon. Very soon," he murmured.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Marlowe hadn't hit that bullseye. Couldn't, not even once. Was lucky she'd hit the outermost circle on the stupid target way... down... there. At the opposite end of this lane, or whatever Alex called this narrow stretch of mission impossible.

They were at the TEAM's indoor range, one floor up from the medical floor, in this humongous TEAM complex. She was starting to think Alex was only teaching her how to shoot to make her look stupid. She was doing a bang-up job of it. The pistol he gave her was heavy, and her arm shook holding it straight out in front. The military men and women she'd seen in Afghanistan all had bigger, heavier guns and they'd been wearing plenty of other gear. Why couldn't she manage the weight of one gun? Plus, they'd probably worn some kind of protective armor. That must've been heavy. Were they all bulked up under those dusty uniforms, fatigues? She didn't even know what they called those camouflaged get-ups they all wore, and she was tired of pretending to care. But Asher wanted her to learn how to shoot, and she wanted to please him, so...

Shit. She fired again and, just as quickly, missed the bullseye.

"Don't forget to cradle your right hand with your left," Alex reminded her, for like, the hundredth time. "It'll stabilize your grip. Keep your hand from shaking."

Blinking the sweat out of her eyes, Marlowe held back another F-bomb and did as instructed. That was another thing. Having this big brute of a man's voice in her ear was waaaaay too intimate. Felt like he was breathing over her shoulder. Watching her every move. Like a vulture.

She lowered her quivering shooting arm, kept the pistol pointing down range, thumbed the button to release the magazine, but damn. It stuck. Either that, or she was a weakling. She thumbed that release button harder, needing to prove herself.

“Excuse me, Boss, but maybe this pistol will fit her hand better.”

Marlowe knew that male voice from somewhere, couldn't place it as irritated as she was. This was Alex's fault. He was making her nervous on purpose.

“I think you may be right, Beau,” Alex drawled. “Give it a try.”

Beau?

Instantly furious, Marlowe pivoted on the balls of her feet, now in stylish low-cut boots that fit perfectly but did nothing for her temper. Alex had brought her a complete TEAM outfit to wear for this indoor range debacle. Shit! She looked just like a miniature version of Doc Fitz's husband. The man who'd wanted Asher to punch her. That voice was his and he was wearing the same outfit, only bigger. A lot bigger.

“Down range!” Alex snapped, pointing to the alley she'd just stepped away from.

“What?” she snapped back at him. What now?

“Point your piece down range,” he bellowed, still pointing like she was an idiot, “and do it now! Never face away from your stand with a weapon in your hand.”

Oh, yeah. Crap. Rule number one. Marlowe deflated. Chastened, she set her gun on the shooting stand, its barrel aimed down-range, like it should've been all along.

The rules weren't hard:

Always assume every gun is loaded.

Never point the muzzle at something you're not willing to kill.

Keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to kill.

Be sure of your target and exactly what's behind it. Backdrop is part of your target. We don't kill innocent people, animals, or destroy property.

And lastly, this isn't Hollywood, and you are not Dirty Harry . Whoever he was. We don't show off.

But learning how to shoot, while remembering the rules took more time and practice than she had. Marlowe bowed her head and pressed her shaking palms flat on the stand and beside the gun. She was a failure and now, Beau had seen everything. Swallowing hard, she shook her head and told Alex through the fancy high-tech protective earphones clamped to her head, "I can't do this."

"Sure you can," the creep said, butting into her business.

Guess Beau was on the same channel of these earphones as Alex. Marlowe wanted to hit Beau. Why was he coming to her rescue? Tired and exhausted, she barely glanced over her shoulder when he put his arms around her. She stiffened, not sure how to react. He had a lot of nerve.

"Here, hold this one instead," he said, calmly placing a small black gun in her hand. "It's a midsize Glock23. It's lighter and, look. It fits your palm like it was made for you. It's a semi-automatic widely used by LEOs. Shoots .40 Smith & Wesson rounds, so it has sufficient knock down power. Magazine holds thirteen rounds. Best conceal carry pistol in the world."

Like she cared about conceal carry. But Beau was right, this gun did feel better. Lighter. It did fit her palm. Marlowe held her tongue. And her boot. He was too close to kick, and there was no sense kicking anyone. Yet.

“Now steady...” His muscled body was all around her, but he wasn’t holding her tight. He wasn’t breathing in her ear and his big hands were only guiding her aim. “You’ve got a white-dot front sight and a white-bracket rear sight. They make target acquisition easier for beginners like you, even in stressful situations. I think you’ll find this piece easier to handle. Relax. Take a deep breath. That’s my girl. You’ve got this.”

Oddly, that last comment helped. Alex had said something about snipers and breathing and becoming one with the universe before firing. She liked that symbolism, being one with something. But hearing Beau’s declaration of confidence in her? Made Marlowe believe she could do anything.

She kept both eyes open like Alex taught. Determined to excel this time, she suppressed her breath on her next exhale. Zeroed down range. Aimed dead center of that target and—

Hit. The. Bullseye.

“I did it!” she yelled, turning just her shoulders, not her hands, her new favorite pistol still pointed down range like it should be. “Did you see that? I hit the center of my target!”

Beau stood a step behind and to her side, smiling. Shit, this handsome guy was Doc Fitz’s husband? This tanned, dark-haired behemoth, grinning at her like she’d just won a marathon? Like he was proud of her? Her heart swelled with feelings she couldn’t identify.

“Good job!” He slapped her back playfully. Not even hard. Didn’t sting. Beau wasn’t just smiling at her, he was grinning. So was Alex. These two big tough guys looked pleased with her.

Marlowe turned back around, thumbed the magazine release, and this time, with this gun, the magazine slid easily into her palm. Whew. Feeling like she wasn’t a dummy after all, and—while keeping the pistol aimed down range like she was supposed to, she set the magazine—Alex called it a mag—beside the gun on the stand. Err, pistol. The proper name was pistol. Alex told her that too, but he wouldn’t explain why. Told her she’d have to ask Asher about the difference between guns and pistols.

Beau clapped his hand to her shoulder and said, again, “You go, girl!”

Marlowe swallowed hard. Taking a deep breath, she turned and faced the men. She hadn’t been thinking kindly about either of these guys. Was pretty sure she’d hated Beau back in that cave, but here he was, helping her. Setting her up with a much better pistol. Going out of his way. Being kind and gracious. What was wrong with her that she always attacked first?

She meant to just say thanks, instead she blurted, “No one’s ever told me that before.”

Beau cocked his head. His black brows slammed together like he’d heard something he didn’t like. He stepped in closer. “What’d you say?”

Marlowe wilted. “No, I...I didn’t mean... My parents weren’t...” She bowed her head, ashamed of her life and nothing more to say.

Two gloved fingers forced her chin up to face the man she’d wanted to kick earlier.

“What’d you say?” Beau asked again. “No one’s ever told you ‘good job’? No one’s ever praised you for shining? What the fuck!” He used her favorite word, only when

he said it, it hissed out of his mouth like a very sharp knife.

Marlowe winced. Is that what I sounded like when that word blasts out of my mouth? Do I come across that nasty? Oh, my.

“You’re just like me, aren’t you?” he accused. “Just like I used to be. I was an asshole until I found my real parents.”

I’m an asshole? Marlowe didn’t understand. “You ran away?” she asked, her heart pounding at Beau’s vicious tone. She was pretty sure he wasn’t angry with her, but all that venom was certainly aimed at her. “W-were they like m-mine?”

He blinked a couple times, then swallowed and took a full step back. His palms came up and forward. “Shit, I’m sorry, Marlowe girl. I’m not mad at you. Jesus. I still have triggers.” He shrugged those big shoulders. “I didn’t mean to cuss at you. You didn’t do anything wrong. I just can’t believe no one’s ever told you how great you are. Forgive me?”

Running a finger under her nose, she nodded quickly. Triggers, she understood. She just hadn’t realized what she’d looked like when she went off at people like Beau just did.

“Don’t know what your folks were like, sweetheart,” he continued calmly, “but no, I never would’ve run away from my real parents. Ever. I was kidnapped. Stolen by a pimp and his whore out of my dad’s truck at some rest stop, in Nevada, I think. I was just a kid.”

She shook her head at the connection sizzling between Doc Fitz’s husband and her, needing to run back to Asher where she knew she’d be safe. Beau was angry because he’d been kidnapped. Scary angry. So angry she was afraid to look at him.

“You need me to kill somebody for you, sweetheart?” he asked, his head cocked quizzically and his dark brown eyes glowing with tenderness she didn’t deserve.

Gah! She lifted her chin to the ceiling to get away from his gentle gaze. “No. I... I shouldn’t have said anything. Never mind.” She sniffed, refusing to cry. She was not a weakling.

But she was a drama queen. How ironic was that? Yet there Marlowe stood, about to fall apart just because she’d hit a target—once. And because the man she’d thought she hated was kind, and he knew her. Beau not only saw her, he saw through her. He knew precisely what she’d lived through. That she’d been made to feel like nothing all her life. Like trash.

Until Asher... The TEAM... Alex... Beau...

Her world was spinning. Nothing in America was what she’d expected. People here were kind. Everyone she’d met here went out of their way to help her. They’d all been nice. They had money, sure, but only because they’d worked their butts off to earn it. They weren’t all assholes. The TEAM wives cared, and they helped vulnerable women and children and—

“Deep breath,” Alex murmured, his hand suddenly on her shoulder. “I located your parents. I know what they did to you. You’re safe now.”

She shook her head, her eyes still closed. That was not why this particular panic attack was attacking.

“I hate to break this to you,” Alex continued, “but your father passed away seven years ago. I’m so sorry.”

Talk about a thunderclap of useless information. Marlowe had no idea what to do or

say. Her dad was dead? So what? Was she supposed to cry? Be sad? Why? Because he was an addict, and addicts were just sick, and couldn't help themselves, and needed rehab, and encouragement and food and a clean place to sleep at night? What about the little kid they left behind? She didn't know how to feel. Relief? Grief? Good riddance?

Marlowe ran for the elevator. It was dinner time. Asher should be awake. Fumbling with the lighted buttons inside the car, she didn't escape in time. A big hand kept the elevator door from closing and—

“Fuck!” she yelled as Alex and Beau stepped in beside her. “Leave me alone!”

Alex was on his phone, but Beau grabbed her hand before she could slap him or Alex, or both of them. Anyone. Beau held her hand against his chest as he pressed the correct buttons with his other hand. Sure enough, the door closed like it was supposed to. He made it look easy. Why couldn't she do that?

“Hold on, Marlowe girl. Just hold on tight and trust me. I'll get you back to Ash in no time.”

“I'd rather hate you,” she squeaked, going for honesty and trying to pull away from him. Marlowe needed distance. Her world made sense when she hated everyone. It was black and white then, no shades of gray. But now? The elevator was too small, the short ride was too long, and by the time the elevator stopped, she was hyperventilating. On the verge of screaming. Just in time, the door slid open and Beau escorted her down the hall. He rapped on Asher's door once, then opened it and gestured her inside. At last.

“Hey,” sleepy Asher muttered from where he lay, propped against his pillows. “I was just... What's wrong? What'd you do to her, Beau?”

Marlowe ran to the bed and climbed in beside Asher. Sweating and shaking, with stupid tears in her eyes. She buried her face in his neck. Darn it. She was stronger than this. What was happening to her?

“She just found out her dad died,” Beau explained sadly.

“My fault,” Alex announced from somewhere near the door.

“No,” Marlowe rasped. “It’s not that. It’s because...” She didn’t want to admit it but away her big mouth went. “He was an addict. Never held a decent job. Was always gone, and my mom’s a drunk. There. Are you happy now? My parents hated me. We lived in a dump because low-income housing still needs to be kept clean. Dirty dishes need to be washed. Clothes, toilets... Shit! Who gets to do all of that when moms and dads don’t care? Their kid. Me! And who gets to drag her mom home when she’s too drunk to walk? When she forgets where she lives? When she forgets... me?” Marlowe sucked in one long, painful hiccup as that last truth squeaked out between her lips.

“Aw, honey,” Asher crooned, pressing her closer, letting her hide. “Sweetheart, I had no idea.”

“Why’s everyone always being so nice to me?” Marlowe didn’t mean to yell that question into him, but the dam she hadn’t realized she’d been holding back her whole life broke. There was no stopping the flood pouring out of her. She tried, but ended up hiccupping like a hysterical nut. Her. Hysterical? Ha. Marlowe and hysteria were polar opposites—until now. Tears literally poured down her face and soaked into Asher’s warm shoulder. His good shoulder.

She had no idea she could cry that hard for so long, but by the time her crying jag ended, she was sweaty and alone with Asher. The door was closed. Alex and Beau were gone. Peering out from beneath Asher’s scruffy chin, with her arm still wrapped

around his neck, she sucked in a quavering breath and huffed out the last of her weakness.

There. All done. All gone. I'm strong again.

She tried to roll away. Her parents didn't want her. Why would Asher? But he didn't let her go. Marlowe was caught and this time she didn't mind. He hadn't yet asked anything, just kept smoothing his good hand over her shoulders, up and down her spine. Holding her close. He was there for her. Him. The right man. Not Kelsey's husband. Not Doc Fitz's husband. Just Asher. Just him.

Trembling like a ninny, she focused on his heartbeat. For a man who'd recently died, his heart was amazingly strong. Ker-thumping like it hadn't been shocked back to life just days ago. Swallowing hard, Marlowe tapped her fingers lightly on his chest. He kissed her forehead. She loved when he did that. It wasn't passionate or lustful or pushy. Just endearing. He did that because he was there for her. Had been since he'd first seen her in that cave.

Gradually, the complete story of her miserable childhood came out. She told him everything. More than the slice of life she'd shared with Alex and Beau, or Kelsey, Libby, and Judy. Marlowe's heart finally stopped pounding. She stopped panting. Settled down. Asher was nice and warm, and she was exhausted. There was nothing more to tell. No more lies to hide. No more secrets and no more pretending she was stronger and meaner than everyone else. With Asher, she didn't have to be anything or anyone but herself.

For the first time in—Marlowe couldn't remember how long—calmness filtered into her soul and settled over the ragged scars of her childhood. The snarky insults she'd endured for so long stopped whispering their reminders of pain long gone. She couldn't keep her eyes open, so she didn't. She didn't have to sleep with one eye open anymore. In Asher's arms, she was safe. He was holding her. He was keeping

her. She belonged there with him. Beside him. His steady heartbeat was the best lullaby in the world.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Okay, so he was bawling like a baby. But God in heaven—Asher blinked the tears out of his tired eyes, struggling to regain his composure—what kind of parents throw a beautiful, amazingly strong, compassionate woman-child, like Marlowe Rich away? For drugs and booze? Good Lord, he'd never understand how some people were born saints, while others were nothing but low-life bloodsuckers from the get-go.

The lights were off. No doubt Doc Fitz had gone home with Beau by now. Libby was on night duty. For the moment, Asher had everything he wanted. He was on his good side, with Marlowe's warm relaxed body against his, which wasn't entirely comfortable. But doable.

She'd fallen asleep after her breakdown. Poor thing was exhausted and still healing, too. They were a matching pair of cripples. Not by their current injuries, though. Her, by her parents. Him, by the tragedy in Somalia. The land of treacherous, thieving warlords and people so poor, their children went hungry almost every night. Oddly, Somalia didn't sound much different from some parts of America.

"Love you," Marlowe murmured, her voice barely a hoarse whisper.

Asher stilled. Did he hear right? Had she said what he thought she said? Pressing his nose into the side of her head, he said, "I told you once when you were asleep. So I'm telling you now, even though you're sleeping again. This isn't the last time you'll hear me say it." He kissed her temple. "I. Love. You."

He blinked to keep from drowning her with his tears. "I loved you first, and I'll love

you last,” he croaked like a lovesick frog. “You’re mine, Marlowe, and you’ll never—ever—live another day without me in it. Promise.”

Unexpectedly, her hand came up in the dark and she ran her fingertips over his cheek. “I love you back,” she murmured thickly.

Great. Now he woke her and made her sad.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “I’m not going anywhere without you, Asher. You, Walter, and Darling. I can’t...” Her voice cracked. “I don’t want to be alone again. I’m not that strong. It was hard being in Afghanistan. I know I make it sound easy, but...” She dissolved into tears.

He buried his face in her neck. “Jesus,” was all he could manage. Marlowe was the strongest person he knew, and it had nothing to do with physique. It was inner strength. Grit. And, okay, a mile-wide streak of nasty disposition. But that nasty streak had helped her stand up to the Taliban. All by herself. She’d single-handedly, albeit deceitfully, taken on a monumental task that had nearly gotten her killed. A task very few others were capable of completing or would have considered. Yet she’d attacked each and every assignment Alex sent like a pit bull, and she’d completed them—alone.

She didn’t think she was strong? Bullshit. When it came to courage, Marlowe put many highly-trained military members he’d worked with over the years—men and women—to shame. She didn’t whine or make excuses. She sure as hell didn’t duck responsibility. She just sucked up the challenges and did the impossible.

Asher ran his free hand over her prickly head. The good Lord made it extra-hard for a reason. That head and the brain in it saved lives, and now she was saving his. Just by being there, in of all places, his hospital bed. Her short hair teased his palm. It was coming in black and it was beautiful. He didn’t care if it grew in purple. He fell in

love with her heart, not her hair.

Marlowe snuggled her nose under his chin. “Beau’s childhood was like mine. I think I like him.”

“His might’ve been worse, honey. Bass Jennings, the man who stole him from his parents, beat the shit out of him on a daily basis. The asshat gave him to his common-law addict wife, who openly claimed Beau was hers, a little Mexican boy, the son of a couple pasty-white losers.”

Asher shook his head at the stupidity of those two. “One day she came home with a sickly newborn, Beau’s baby sister, and he fell in love for the first time in his life. Unfortunately, AJ died from an overdose at her mother’s hand. Beau figures Fidget got confused and put her heroin in AJ’s baby bottle instead of formula. To protect Fidget, Jennings told the police Beau did it, that he killed AJ. Beau was only seven, Marlowe. He was just a little beat-up kid, trapped in a living hell. Bass Jennings beat the shit out of him and threw him into the street. The son of a bitch sicced the local gangs on the poor kid. How Beau survived in Las Vegas is beyond me.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Marlowe whispered. “Now I feel horrible for wanting to kick him. That poor little boy.”

“Yeah, but he’s a fighter. Eventually, he found someone who mentored him. He joined the Army and became a Ranger. Alex located his parents in Mexico a while back. They live with him and McKenna now, who you know as Doc Fitz. They have two kids, and Beau works IT for Mother. He’s nothing like the man he was when Alex first hired him. Back then, he was volatile as shit.” Just like you are.

“Mother?”

“Her real name’s Sasha Kennedy, but everyone calls her Mother or Mom. She’s over

TEAM Information Technology. I'll introduce you someday. She's a smart lady."

"I'd like that. You're right. Beau's childhood was worse. My dad never hit me, but that's because he wasn't around much. One of Mom's boyfriends did, but I was older and he was drunk. Wasn't hard to knock him on his ass. I stayed away for a while, but when I went home, Mom and he were pretty tight, so..." She let that brief insight trail away.

Asher had to know. "You left? How old were you?"

"Yeah, I left for good that time. I was twelve. What's the saying, old enough to know better, dumb enough to do it again? Not me. Kick me, hit me, or lie to me once, and I'm outta there."

She was breaking Asher's heart. Twelve-year-old little girls on the street weren't any safer than seven-year-old little boys. Jesus, she and Beau had some shitty breaks. "I don't lie. Fools lie. The minute they do, walk away. Liars never change."

With a relaxed sigh, Marlowe ran her fingers through his hair. Asher closed his eyes, thrilled at her touch on his scalp. Pretty much thrilled with her touching him anywhere. If only they were at his place. It wasn't much, but they'd have privacy there, and he was dying to have her all to himself.

The medically imposed restrictions had to end. Tomorrow morning. First thing. But for tonight, Asher gathered his future in his one good arm and shifted to his back. Ahhh. Instant relief.

Chapter Thirty

It took three days for Asher to convince Doc Fitz, Libby, Judy, and Alex that he'd recuperated enough to be discharged. They agreed, but only if Marlowe stayed with him. Would she? She couldn't agree fast enough.

It took another full day before Beau and Maverick transported them and their dogs, in a full-size van no less, to the nondescript brick house he called home—just three miles from TEAM HQ. Three miles. Marlowe could've walked that on a good day. Maybe not now. Her feet were still a little sore, but three miles?

By then, she knew how to read the heart monitor she'd have to place on his chest every morning, who to notify if he seized (which she hadn't realized he'd been doing), and courtesy of Judy, how to give a massage. Marlowe had already practiced on Asher. She couldn't wait to do it again.

But her primary role was caregiver, and she really, really liked that title. It fit her like a big, golden, diamond-studded crown. When Judy had first called Marlowe that, it hit her heart. Judy couldn't have called her anything better. And Marlowe's first, most important mission—she liked that word too—was Asher. Made her heart sing at how far she'd come since she'd met him.

At last, Maverick wheeled Asher up the walk to his front door. It took a bit of juggling to get the wheelchair up those three concrete steps, but Maverick knew what he was doing. He turned the chair around, tipped Asher back, and pulled, while Beau lifted and pushed. They made it look easy, but they were big sturdy men. There was no way Marlowe could've gotten Asher inside without them. Which was why their

cell numbers were now programmed into her phone, along with Mark Houston's. His number was one. They were two and three. She had only to activate the phone and press a number.

Once inside, Maverick steered Asher to the enormous bed/recliner thingy in the front room, while she closed the door behind them. When she turned around, Marlowe found herself in a large open room with a monster television screen on the wall to her left. At her right, a wall of plastic sheeting hung from the ceiling. Had to be where his safe room construction was still in progress. In the sunlit room ahead, copper pans hung from a ceiling rack, over a black marble free-standing counter. The entire back wall of Asher's kitchen was glass windows, and beyond them, a gorgeous tree covered with pink blossoms grew just off a redwood deck with a built-in fireplace.

She dropped Asher's bag of medical supplies on that marble counter and ran to look outside. His backyard was completely fenced. The dogs could run free through all that lush green grass. A pebbled path connected the deck to a gazebo in the far corner. But that beautiful, awesome tree was breathtaking. Its black branches stretched over most of the yard and were weighed down with hundreds of pink blossoms. Marlowe had never seen anything so beautiful. And birds. Oh, my gosh, dozens of tiny brown birds flittered from branch to branch of that tree, like they were chasing each other. Like they were playing. Asher's home was paradise.

"Hey Marlowe girl," Beau called from behind her.

She spun on her heels. "Yes, Beau?"

He leaned his elbows onto the counter, which, now that she could see more of the kitchen, wasn't the only masterpiece in the room. The lower cabinets all had black marble countertops, too. The floor was a smoky gray, and the stainless-steel appliances looked brand new. Was Asher wealthy like Alex?

“Shut your mouth, princess. You’re drooling,” Beau teased.

“Oh, my! Am I?” She wiped the back of her hand across her lips. “Am not.”

He was grinning like a lunatic. “Gotcha, Marlowe girl.”

She blushed at his pet names for her, princess and Marlowe girl. Damn it. Beau had sneaked under her radar and become a friend.

“Thought I’d warn you. McKenna’s on her way over with a meal for tonight, so don’t fix dinner.”

“Ha, me? I wouldn’t know how to work anything in here. Well, maybe the faucet.” But it had no spigots. That might be trouble.

“You’ll do fine. A couple things. There’s a security panel behind the front door. Let me show you how the system works.”

For the next half hour, Beau walked her through the alarm system, showed her how to use the fancy stove, oven, microwave, washer, dryer, even the ceiling shower in the bathroom off the master bedroom. She’d never seen such luxury. Ten people could sleep in Asher’s bed.

“You got a minute, Beau?” Maverick interrupted the tour.

While he and Beau ducked outside to the deck, Marlowe headed back down the hall to the main room. Maverick had settled Asher into that double-wide thingy. All by itself, it was large enough for two, maybe four, once Harley brought Darling and Walter over. For now, they were still at Kelsey’s. Bradley and Walter had bonded, no doubt because that little cutie pie kept crawling into Walter’s crate and sleeping with the nervous pup.

Asher looked pale but relaxed. Mostly tired. He had a remote in his good hand, three bottled waters on the table beside him, as well as his cell phone and a charging station.

“Are you hungry?” Marlowe asked as she sat beside him.

“Yes, for you. Get your butt up here.”

“Yes, sir,” Very carefully, she eased onto the lounge beside him. “This is comfortable.”

He lifted his good arm and she snuggled in closer. “It’s a double-wide, indoor chaise lounge. It was on clearance, so I got it for a song. Don’t ask me why. Damn, I’m beat.”

“I can see that.” Marlowe fluttered her fingers on his chest. “Can I get anything for you? I’m a caregiver now, you know.” She had two jobs and they were both very important. As soon as Asher was back on his feet, Alex wanted her to start the first ever, in the world, TEAM Outreach Center for the Afghan women she’d helped rescue. Made Marlowe feel important. But not as important as being a caregiver to Asher. That job she loved.

“Do you want a drink? I can get a straw. Are you warm enough? I’ll go find a blanket if—

“Shhhhh,” Asher ordered groggily. “I’ve got what I want. Now kiss me before I drift off to sleep. Hurry, woman. I’m fading fast.”

“We can’t have that.” Very gently, she cupped his scruffy jaw and pressed her lips to his. This was her primary mission, caregiver and lover.

“Remember what I told you?” he whispered against her mouth.

Bobbing her head, she licked his lips with the tip of her tongue. “I’ll never forget. You said you love me.”

“I do.” He kissed her again, the flat of his palm on her back, holding her tight against his side. “I love you like a desert loves rain. Like the Amazon rainforest loves sunshine and monkeys.”

“Aww, that’s beautiful. You should write it down.”

His eyes closed. “Nah. I only wax poetic when my soul’s at peace. Like now. With you.”

She couldn’t believe it. “Me? You’re at peace because of me?” How sweet was that? She ran a finger under her eyes, wiping silly tears away before they got away from her.

“Yes. This, right here” —he squeezed her— “is everything I’ve ever wanted. Are the guys gone yet?”

“Not yet. They’re outside in your backyard talking, and Doc Fitz will be here soon. She’s bringing dinner.”

“Damn.” He leaned back and the moment he did, Marlowe missed him. Which was crazy. He hadn’t gone anywhere.

Asher had been quiet on the ride to his house, and she knew it didn’t take much to wear him out. But she also knew she’d be the one helping him out of those workout pants later and into pajamas. He couldn’t sleep in his clothes. It wouldn’t be comfortable. She’d also be the one to help him walk to the restroom and anywhere

else he wanted to go. Into the kitchen. Outside onto the deck. Maybe for a short walk.

His breathing evened out. Asher was asleep, and Marlowe drew in a deep breath of contentment. Every particle of her being revolved around him now. He needed rest and sleep in order to heal. She was there to make sure he did.

It seemed ironic that only days ago, he'd been the one helping her. Pushing her wheelchair. Dealing with her ornery butt. Hugging her even when she'd been rude, mean, and mad. Which had been most of the time. But now? Her life had changed. They hugged more. Explored stolen kisses, too. She felt like a teenager with a river of fired-up hormones racing through her veins. All Asher had to do was look at her, and she wanted to lay him flat and resuscitate him again.

Marlowe beamed with pride in herself. The more she could do for Asher, the quicker she seemed to heal. Her feet didn't hurt anymore, neither did her other injuries. What was not to love about that? She was at her best when she was taking care of someone else, and Asher was going to get the best care in the world.

Chapter Thirty-One

He dreamed he was home. The soft body beside him was warm. Toasty warm, like embers-in-a-fireplace warm. And sweet, like a shot of whiskey, if handled gently. But a killer bee that would kill you, if not. And willing, with the same qualifiers. His woman was tantalizingly addictive. Her taste. Her smell. All a man needed. Everything he wanted. A little bit of golden sunshine with a splash of red-hot cayenne pepper. Asher's nose automatically sought Marlowe's unique scent.

He buried his face in the fragrant cleft of her neck. He'd found it, the secret place where no other man's nose had ever been before. Caught between Marlowe's shoulder and skull, her neck was the most vulnerable part of her body. If a woman wasn't careful, it could easily be snapped, twisted, and broken. Life could be ended in a second, intentionally or accidentally. Once a neck broke, there was no putting it back together. Life didn't work like that, and Mother Nature wasn't kind. Yet there he was, trusted and welcomed to the one place on earth where he was king.

Screech. Squeak. Oomph.

Warning! Discord! Error! Error!

Hold the damned phone. Not king. God, no. Never king or boss. Not team leader or lord or any sort of superior being. Certainly not Big Brother. Just...

Panicked, Asher opened his eyes, needing to see. To know.

Ah-h-h-h. There she is. The best thing in his world. Marlowe. Curled under his arm

like a kitten, her back to his side, and her hands fisted below her chin. Sound asleep and purring. True and faithful. Fierce but willing. A little too brave, too courageous sometimes. But...

“Mine,” he whispered, his good hand instinctively wandering beneath her shirt. Around her ribs to there. Right there. His chest heaved with male satisfaction the instant his fingers slid over her breast. His mouth watered at the extra-warm gift in his hand. Not large. Just right. A handful of tender heaven come to earth.

My honey. A smile stretched his face at the notion that maybe this was why his dad called his mom honey. Coincidence? Probably not. More like an awakening. A connection of sorts, to all the men throughout time who had ever treasured a woman the way Asher treasured this one.

He’d dated in high school. Ran with a pack of wild ones before enlisting. Hadn’t bonded with a woman, though. Hadn’t wanted to. Army Rangers had higher priorities than marriage and family. He was driven by ego and pride then. Full of himself. An invincible idiot. One of the few, a proud warrior, and a dead-eye sniper, who got things done.

Then along came Somalia...

Asher closed his mind against the internal damnation that came with that piece of his past. In less than a few hours in Somalia, he’d been reduced from mighty hero to mere mortal. A frail creature who hadn’t been able to save himself. Who should’ve saved Alissa. But didn’t. Couldn’t.

They’d been within feet of each other in those long final hours. So close. Not close enough. She was around ten; Asher didn’t know for certain, he’d never asked. Shy, dark eyes, and always a smile for him because he gave her peppermint candy.

When the building above them blew up, he'd been caught in a triangle of crossed beams and dirt. The supporting timbers of that shabby basement room had sheltered him from the full weight of its collapsed walls. Not Alissa. She was caught, engulfed. No timbers lessened the weight suffocating her. No timbers to shield the bones in her tiny body to keep them from breaking. Alissa and her father. Both buried. Him beneath her. Her possibly still sitting on his shoulder when she breathed her last.

Crushing syndrome. The effects of a ton of dirt on a trapped human body. Lungs, heart, bones, kidneys, and every other organ are crushed and squeezed until the body's organs burst in upon themselves. Capillaries. Veins. Nerves. Kidneys. Lungs. Nothing could withstand that final hug from Mother Earth.

Like Asher, Alissa had been buried up to her chin. The difference between their situations was those lifesaving beams and the volume and density of the dirt where they'd landed. And the fact that he was an adult American male in his prime, sustained by a lifetime of good nutrition that made his bones and musculature stronger.

Alissa hadn't had those same opportunities. Hunger had stalked her short life and ISIL ensured she'd never be free to choose for herself. During her last panicked moments, she hadn't been able to draw enough air into her poor compressed lungs. Her teary brown eyes had relayed her panic and desperation. She'd wanted him to save her. The image of her suffocating never faded. There'd been pleading and terror in her eyes. Guilt in Asher's. His most relentless, most awful, rebounding nightmares.

He faced the truth for the first time since Heston's grimy face had peered down at him through the dusty rubble shortly after that collapse. He'd jokingly asked if Asher wanted a hand up or if he was going to lay around all day, a hero's way of greeting an injured comrade. Heston hadn't known that Alissa and her father were there. Couldn't see her from his vantage point. But facts were facts. She was already gone by then, and Asher wasn't. Heston couldn't have saved them anyway.

Heaving a shuddering breath, he closed his hand around Marlowe's breast. It wasn't the easiest thing to do, since his good arm was around and partially beneath her shoulder. But he managed. Her body was soft, made for better things than war and tragedy. But then, weren't most women made for better things?

With a sigh, she rolled onto her back. Determined to let the past finally rest, to let go and move on, he ducked under the blanket and sucked the tip of her breast into his mouth. Marlowe was his new life. He needed this.

She stirred. He suckled harder, drawing the now rigid nub deeper into his mouth. Breathing in the vanilla cookie scent on her skin. Inhaling every intoxicating pheromone. Everything Marlowe. Wanting to eat her up and swallow her whole. Two working hands were all he needed. Two hands to better love this woman. One for each breast. Was that asking too much?

Awake now, her fingers slid into his hair and over his scalp. A full-body shiver whispered through him. Goosebumps prickled his skin. The race to get her out of her clothes was on. And him without ten fingers. Damn, he was fumbling this first. Their first. There'd never be another and he was all thumbs.

Until Marlowe, his fierce but willing partner, pushed her weight carefully against him, and left him no option but to ease flat to his back and protect his injured shoulder. She didn't stop there. Straddling him like a horse, Marlowe pulled her gown up and over her head.

Sweet Jesus. Asher stopped breathing. He needed to see. To touch. Clothed, she was gorgeous. But naked? There was enough ambient light to see she was dazzling. Trim. Fit. Muscled. Yet feminine. Small-breasted, yes. But a mouthful and a handful, what man needed more?

He reached for her, but she reached first. Down between their bodies. Damn, she was

quick and her fingers were strong. Asher closed his eyes and let the drumbeat roll.

Marlowe didn't quite know what to do with him, now that she had him. But getting a man's attention wasn't rocket science. If she kept working him—and she was a fast learner—that stiff, smug thing in her grip would go off like a rocket. It was primed. Ready to blow. Asher was wondering how the hell he'd explain the mess when—

She slipped him into her tender folds, and he gasped at the warm tightness of her sheath. If she didn't back off and slow down, it would be over before she knew it. Not good.

“Marlowe. H-Honey. I...” That was as far as he got.

She loved like she lived. Headstrong and charging. Always charging.

Asher had no choice but to take firm hold, albeit one-handed hold of her hip, and work with her. She was breathing hard. Her palms were now planted on his pecs. Her nails were dug in. When she slammed down, grinding against him, he thrust up, filling her to the hilt. Seemed like he only thrust a couple times when...

God, yes. Her body squeezed around him. All of him. Her thighs, her core, her legs. Her nails bit deep. He thrust harder and—

Marlowe threw her head back and exploded in what he hoped was her first orgasm. Sure felt like it was his. Exquisite release poured out of him as quivering micro-orgasms danced out of her dripping core. He held on with one hand to that sweaty hip. Not ready to let her go. Not yet. It'd been a long time since he'd come that strong. Holy shit. He'd never orgasmed so hard before. Talk about a wet dream come true.

Blowing out a full breath, she face-planted against his chest. They were both

sweating and sticky. Both panting and still very much connected. In his living room. Without protection, damn it. But what a ride.

Her heart was racing. Like his. He smiled, wondering what signals the monitor she'd stuck to his chest was sending back to TEAM HQ.

Smoothing his hand over Marlowe's bare ass, like some stone-age Neanderthal, tapping his fingers to a drumbeat he'd never heard or felt before, Asher told her, "This is mine."

Hmmm. Maybe he was part caveman. As long as Marlowe was Wilma to his Fred Flintstone, he could live with that.

It was time to face the music. "My fault. I didn't use protection. I should have."

"I have an implant. It's good for years."

"When did you get it?"

She fluttered her lashes at him. "Before I went overseas."

"And that would be...?"

Her lips pinched and her eyes widened. "Three years ago. Shit. I might not be protected any more. What will I do?"

Taking hold of her shoulders, Asher said, "First of all, there is no 'I might not be protected.' Only 'we might be pregnant.' Understand what I'm saying?"

She shook her head and romance was over.

“Honey, what I’m trying to tell you is that I’m in this with you.”

“But babies are inconvenient and noisy and messy. Men don’t like that stuff.”

“All men are not like your father, honey. Would Harley leave Judy and his boys? Would Alex leave Kelsey, Lexie, and Bradley?”

“No, but...” Marlowe’s gaze focused on something behind him.

“Honey, most men are hardworking, regular guys. They love their kids, and they adore their wives.”

She ran her fingers over her lips, still not looking at him.

“Sweetheart, I’m not your enemy.” He tugged her hands back down on his chest. “Feel that? It’s me, Marlowe. Just me. I’m here with you. Talk with me. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I...” She swallowed hard, then swallowed again. “It’s not that I don’t want a baby. It’s just that...” Her fingers fluttered on his biceps. “Do you really want them? Kids, I mean. We’re not even married, and we really just met, and you’re a guy, and guys always leave, and...”

Asher kept quiet, giving her time. Didn’t rush her. Wouldn’t put words in her mouth. Her pulse was already beating hard. Poor thing was panicked. She didn’t need to be bullied or shamed. She was doing a bang-up job of that all by herself. He offered a smile, hoping that was enough of a hint.

“Aren’t you mad at me? I mean, shouldn’t you be mad if I’m pregnant? If my implant doesn’t work and, umm...” There went her fingers again. “Would you, would you want it?”

“It ? You mean our baby ?” His mouth widened into a smile all by itself. What he wouldn’t give to have both hands and all ten fingers. “First.” He raised his only working index finger. “It’s ‘if we’re pregnant’, not ‘if I’m pregnant.’ Got that? You’re not the only naked one here. I’m as responsible as you are for what we just did together.”

Another finger joined the first. “Second, only losers turn their backs on their woman and children, and I’m not a loser. Your dad was, Marlowe. He left you and he let you down. I’m guessing every other man in your life did the same, right?”

She shrugged, too stubborn to admit it.

“And third...” Asher waited until he had her complete attention. “I love you with all my heart. If we’re pregnant, we’re in this together, and we’re going to be spectacular parents. If we’re not...” He tugged her face down to his and all-out assaulted her mouth, kissing the ever-loving heck out of her. Nipping her lips. Licking her fear away. Kissing his love and devotion into her. By the time he pulled back, her lips were glossy-wet. She was dewy-eyed and breathless. “If we’re not pregnant, we’ll practice till we get it right.”

She nodded again, her blue eyes wide and too big for her face.

“Pregnant or not, I’m the luckiest son of a bitch ever. I want to howl at the moon and celebrate with you. Only you. Now tell me, do you want this baby that we still don’t know you might be carrying or not?”

“I want it,” breathed out of her mouth. She looked down at his chest and damned if his cock didn’t spring into action. “But I don’t know how to be a mom. I don’t want to hurt her. I mean it. I mean... him.”

“Aww, honey, look how you mothered the women you rescued. You put your life on

the line to save them, right?”

“Sure, but that’s different.”

“It’s not. That’s what good mothers do, Marlowe. They fight to protect the people they love, like I know you’ll protect our baby.” The more Asher tried to persuade Marlowe, the more he liked the idea of her being pregnant with his child. “Motherhood and fatherhood is what happens when you’re carrying your heart outside your body. Like you might be.”

She looked down at where their bodies were connected. “Are you...?” Her brows furrowed. “Do you feel that?”

Ah, he loved the wonder shining in her eyes. Proudly, Asher thrust upward. “Yes, I are, and yes, I do. Sorry, but I’m a guy and that’s how we roll. Practice makes perfect.” He gave her a way out. “Unless you’re not ready. No stress, honey. If you’d rather—”

She reached down and circled what she could reach of him with two fingers. “Shut up and kiss me.”

Yup. Bossy. His kind of girl.

Chapter Thirty-Two

She couldn't believe where she was, what she'd done, and who she'd done it with. Asher Downey had just rocked her world. What a way to wake up. Marlowe wanted to do it again.

It was her turn to watch Asher unravel. He wasn't finished, yet. Well, neither was she. Making love wasn't the turn-off she'd expected. She didn't feel dirty or used. Her body was humming, truly vibrating. All over. She'd never felt so alive or loved. Connected, not just physically, but emotionally. Spiritually. Suddenly, she was a three-dimensional being, not an invisible nobody. She had wings, and she wanted to fly again and again.

He was glowing again, and that sleepy smile on his face was turning her on. All he had to do was lie there, keep smiling with those simmering green eyes, and let her do the work.

She'd finally undressed him. His clothes were on the floor, and he was as naked as she was. She pulled back to view her very own nude man. Asher's body was as hard as it looked. Running her palms up the sides of his ribcage and over his chest, she discovered that where she was soft and round, he was more like living granite and rock-hard muscle. Not chiseled as much as crafted by his career choice. Honed to perfection by the gear he'd carried when on duty. No tattoos as far as she could see, but this was just his front side. She couldn't wait to see his flip side.

Marlowe ran her hands over the crisp hairs sprinkled across his chest. Tiny sparks of electricity radiated from him to her fingertips. Touching him was electrifying. Asher

was broad-shouldered and long-legged, but that chest. Made a girl want to lick every inch of her masterpiece.

Slowly gliding down over that startlingly hard cock, she closed her eyes at the intense pleasure of sliding him inside of her. He was so big. So long. And he came with ridges. Nice ridges she was learning how to use to her benefit, and where they felt best if she rubbed just right... “There,” she hissed, wriggling him into the tremendously sensitive erogenous zone of hers. “Yes, Asher. Ah-h-h-h... right... there.”

“You like that?” he asked gruffly, working his hips, too. Letting her ride to her heart’s content. He was incredibly handsome. His eyes had grown big and black. His focus entirely on her. His fingers clutching her rump like he’d never let her go.

Marlowe nodded. “It hurt last time, but I kinda lost my mind and got caught up in making love with you.” Of being loved. Every bit of her body and soul had turned desperate and greedy. She couldn’t have stopped if she’d tried. Like now. Her heart was throbbing through her body. Her toes curled. She dug her fingertips into Asher’s magnificent chest and—

Asher was everywhere. Pounding into her. Holding her tight. Shifting that hand to her breast. Sucking her nipples. The effervescent firestorm in her blood commenced again. Her overheated body clenched down on Asher. Clamped tight. All by itself. “Whoa. Yes. Asher, yes!”

With one last furious thrust, his body bowed, and he growled, “Marlowe. Damn, yes!”

She could feel him explode inside of her. His hand was hot and heavy on her breast. Possessive. Pulsating. Squeezing and almost letting go. Then squeezing again. Marlowe liked his hand on her. Her man was banked coals, and she was the breath

who'd set him on fire. Her. With just her body and her hands. That was why he glowed. She'd made him happy.

Asher curled his torso up into hers and pulled her down against him. "God, I love you, Marlowe. Don't go back to Afghanistan. Stay with me. Please, just stay."

Her body went lax, melted against the delicious wall of steaming muscle beneath her. Breathing in a deep breath of sheer contentment, she nuzzled her nose into all she held dear. Marlowe hadn't ever felt binding emotions like these before.

"I love you," she murmured, inhaling the earthy scent of her lover into her heart. Absorbing his sweaty goodness. Wishing she could climb inside of Asher and live there the rest of her life. "I've made up my mind and I'm staying."

His arm tightened around her. He kissed her head. That made her smile. She met him halfway. Their mouths locked, their tongues licked and tasted. His chest heaved a magnificent sigh, lifting her. Asher was happy, and Marlowe had found what she'd been searching for all of her life. This man. This battered warrior. She wasn't letting him go.

Until someone with a death wish knocked on his front door. Grumpily, Marlowe eased away from her lover. Squee! She had a lover! Running to the bathroom, she took quick care of business and pulled on a fresh tank top and yoga pants, courtesy of Kelsey. By then Asher had elevated that awesome chaise lounge and was sitting up.

Hmmm. Marlowe needed to know how to do that.

He looked pleased with himself. Her heart stalled. Why was she answering the door instead of running back to bed and snuggling Asher for the rest of the day? Oh, yeah. The door.

He blew her a kiss and a sexy, “Hurry back, honey.”

“If this is Beau, I’m gonna kill him.”

Jerking the door open, she was prepared to blast whoever was on Asher’s front step to smithereens. She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Marlowe stepped out and closed the door behind her. “Mom?”

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Don’t forget to disable the security system,” Asher called out just as Marlowe closed the door. He reached for his cell to notify TEAM HQ of an incoming false alarm when his phone vibrated. Asher hit ACCEPT, put the phone to his ear, and—

“What the fuck’s going on?” Beau bellowed. “Who’s that bitch? Why’s Marlowe getting into that creepy hippie van with her?”

Asher straightened. “What do you mean?”

“The bitch who was just at your door, dumbass. The one who’s driving away with Marlowe girl.”

“Where are you?”

“Parked down the street, watching your place.”

Asher jumped to his feet. Not a smart move. His shoulder screamed to sit back down, but fuck it. He hurried to the door and jerked it open in time to watch an old Volkswagen bus pull away from his curb. With Marlowe nowhere in sight.

“She’s in that ugly V-dub?”

“She is now. I’m right behind them. You ever seen that woman before?”

“No. Gotta go.” Asher shouldn’t have let Marlowe answer his door. Panicking, he

stuffed the phone in his pants and headed through the kitchen to his garage, tearing the thick bandages off his shoulder, chest, and arm as he walked. He stopped long enough to unlock his gun safe and strap on his double holster, loaded pistols already loose in the cups.

Grabbing the keys off the hook by the door, he walked as quickly to his car as he could. Whoever the bitch in that relic from the seventies was, she was going down.

Activating the automatic garage door opener with a snap of his key fob, he forced his weaker right hand and arm to comply, damn them. Asher climbed gingerly into the sixth-generation 2017 ZL1 Camaro in the third stall over and fired her up. One-handed driving was no handicap when a man was hunting for his woman.

Once on the asphalt, he put his boot in it. In three point five seconds, the supercharged LT4 V-8 under the Camaro's hood ate up the miles between him and Beau. The hippie bus was only a few car lengths ahead.

Asher gunned the engine and hit the hands-free option on his steering wheel. "Where is she?" he barked when Beau answered. "Have you caught sight of her yet?"

"Negative. Heston's coming up quick on your tail. I'm in sight of the target. Don't worry. She's inside that van, I gawddamned watched her get into it. I won't let—"

BOOM!

A silver monster truck came out of nowhere, broadsiding Beau's much smaller, climate-friendly truck. Pushed it across both lanes and onto the opposite shoulder.

"Beau! Talk to me. Are you hurt? Say something."

"Bastard r-r-rammed me. On purpose," he rasped. "Don't worry about me. Go! Save

Marlowe girl!”

“Copy that,” Asher answered, assessing the crash scene ahead. The Ford truck backed away from Beau, its tires screaming as it executed a sharp K-turn and roared after the bus. Asher didn’t slow down to help Beau. Couldn’t risk losing Marlowe. Tapping the handsfree option on his steering wheel, he ordered Siri to, “Dial TEAM HQ’s hot-line.”

When Ember picked up, he told her, “Agent Villanueva needs emergency assistance at highway marker seventeen. He’s been broadsided and is trapped inside his POV. No known injuries, but he was hit hard. I’m pursuing the perp. Ford super-duty truck, silver, no plates.”

“Heston’s with Beau now,” Ember replied. “Sheriff Prince and EMTs are on their way. ETA in six minutes.”

“Copy that.” Asher disconnected and punched the accelerator, closing in on his target.

The Ford jerked into his lane, attempting to ram him. Asher braked, then roared around the rear of the truck to the opposite side. Again, the Ford attempted a ramming procedure. And again, Asher worked his accelerator and brakes, toying with the jerk behind that wheel. Needing him to make a mistake, so he could get a clear shot.

After another fake attempt to pass, Asher figured if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em. While his front bumper was still a couple feet ahead of the Ford’s rear bumper, he jerked the Camaro to the left and hit the Ford’s rear quarter panel. Solid pit maneuver. He disengaged the moment the Ford lost traction and started to spin.

The driver over-corrected, jerked too hard to the left, then to the right. Asher backed

off and let gravity take over. The truck tipped onto two wheels at the edge of asphalt and gravel. It was in the process of rolling when Asher left it behind.

His phone rang an incoming. “Get off at the next exit. The van’s two miles ahead,” Heston barked.

“Copy that.” Asher had no idea where Heston was or how he knew where the van went, but figured he’d left Beau in Sheriff Prince’s capable hands and was again close by. Once again, Asher floored the accelerator. He lost sight of the V-dub when it hit the exit. Too many trees in the way, but there was no way that piece-of-shit bus could outrun him.

His mind was spinning. This kidnapping had been planned, but who’d do that? Tippetts and Jamah were dead. Marlowe had been out of the country for a while. She didn’t have family or friends stateside. Who could have lured her away so quickly? So easily? Had to be someone she trusted. Maybe one of the women Marlowe rescued? Could they be behind this? Marlowe wouldn’t just walk away from him, not after this morning. She loved him. Who besides his team even knew where he lived?

The bus roared into an open field where—

“No!” Asher bellowed as the small, commercial helicopter parked in the field came into view, its rotors spinning. A tall, dark-haired, and elegantly dressed woman raced from that helo to the bus. Definitely Mideastern. Olive skinned. Long, jet-black hair. Ugly sneer. Things were starting to add up.

Asher floored the accelerator. An older woman exited the driver’s side of the van, waving her hands over her head and yelling at the Mideastern chick. At the same time, the passenger door burst open and Marlowe tumbled out. Yellow tank top over yoga pants. No shoes. Mad as a hornet. Yup, that’s my girl.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Marlowe was out the van's door before its wheels stopped rolling. Slapping her chest, she screamed at the liar pointing the gun at her. "You want a piece of me, Sariah? Well, here I am. Come get me, you bitch!"

Her mother, Mona, thought she'd tricked Marlowe, and because Mona seemed to know where Marlowe had been the last three years, Marlowe let her talk. But the only things out of her mouth were lies. All lies. She and Marlowe's dad weren't back together. Mona and C huck —whoever he was—hadn't cleaned up their acts like Mona kept saying. They didn't have jobs, and they hadn't been looking for her for months, or hired a private-eye to find her. Because—oh, by the way—Marlowe's deceased father's name was Mike. Not Chuck!

She never should've given Mona the time of day. Should've slammed the door in her face as soon as she saw who was on Asher's porch. The only reason Marlowe didn't was the shock of seeing her.

Mona had nearly pulled her off Asher's porch in her hurry to get away. "You don't understand. We have to go now. Your father's hurt. He needs you." In essence, she'd tried to use the oldest mothering ploy in the book. She thought she'd given Marlowe what every abused, neglected, little girl yearned to hear—that her father needed her. Would've worked if Marlowe didn't already know Mike was dead.

Because Asher didn't need more drama in his life, Marlowe had left with Mona. He needed to trust Marlowe to take care of this. If she could. But there was more going on than just her mother's incessant lies. Because there stood Sariah, a smug smile on

her ugly face and looking like the cat who'd just eaten a canary. Alive. The liar who'd betrayed Marlowe to the Taliban and who was somehow connected to Jamah and Tippetts. Who was keeping Chuck—whoever he was—until she got what she wanted from Mona. Which must be me...

"You came," sneered the lying witch.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Marlowe snapped, pushing any hope of rescue out of her mind. She'd really fucked up this time. Asher wasn't coming. He couldn't get out of bed, and he didn't know where she was. What she wouldn't give to have one of those fancy high-tech earpieces in her ear. She'd tell him she loved him one last time. She'd tell him she was sorry for leaving him behind. She'd tell him she was a fool for leaving with her mother without talking to him first.

Damn. She'd never learn.

Sariah jerked her gun at the helo. "Get in."

"What about my mom? I can't leave her. I won't!" Because something was wrong with Mona if she couldn't remember Mike, and deep down, Marlowe still loved her mom.

"You won't?" The gun turned on Mona. "Fine, then I'll just—"

"No! Okay, okay. I'm going." Marlowe looked back at her mom.

The tears and anguish on her face almost looked real. "You were always the strong one. I can't save your dad, but you can, I know you can."

Yup, more bullshit. Marlowe wasn't saving her dad. She was saving some loser named Chuck. She'd been used. Had been brought here to die by the woman who

should've loved her, at least a little. But obviously never did.

Blue, red, and yellow lights flashed at the scene of two accidents across the field. Looked like other people were having a bad day, too. A helicopter hovered like a big black mosquito over the accident. It looked like the ones that had whisked her women to safety and freedom. Them. Not her. Not today.

Was she really going to do this? Did it matter if Chuck Whoever-He-Was died? He was nothing to her. Did she have a choice?

How many more creeps were in Sariah's helicopter? Marlowe couldn't tell. Only knew she'd never see Asher again once she climbed aboard, and her heart was breaking. She'd finally found her reason to live, and she was losing him. Worse, she could be pregnant, with a little baby boy who would look just like his daddy.

Marlowe was caught again. No choice and no way out. Should she sacrifice herself and her child to save a man she'd never met, or protect the perfect child who might be growing in her belly and let that stranger die? Almost sounded like she had a choice, but she knew better.

Was she strong? Truly strong? Marlowe clenched her fists and prepared to find out.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Still going ninety miles per, Asher locked his brakes, cranked the wheel hard to the left, and let the Camaro drift across the bumpy, dormant field until it parallel parked itself beside the helo in a cloud of dust. Climbing out and into the shit storm as steadily as he could, he palmed both pistols and headed for the woman holding a pistol on Marlowe. Damn, his right hand was weaker than shit, but he bucked up. He would not lose Marlowe!

“Drop the weapon or I drop you,” he ordered, fully aware that her pilot was momentarily unaccounted for. Heston had better show up in the next few minutes. Where the hell was he?

The woman shook her arrogant head. “Not happening, Agent Downey. It is you who must drop your weapon.” She shrugged. “Or not. This woman dies for her crimes either way. I will be happy to kill her now and let you watch.”

“What crime?” Asher barked, sweat rolling down his body.

“She spat on the mighty Caliph. She betrayed my king.”

“You lied,” Marlowe yelled. “I tried to help you escape Afghanistan, Sariah. You’re the one who betrayed me. You told those assholes where I’d be that morning, I know you did.”

“You betrayed the great Caliph!” Sariah screamed back. “He wanted your head but you killed my brothers. You butchered them.”

Marlowe snorted. “Those creeps in that cave were your brothers? I wish I did butcher them. Wasn’t that what they were going to do to me? Torture me to death before they lopped off my head and stuck it on a pike?”

“I killed those rat bastards,” Asher declared proudly, “and I’d do it again. Now drop your weapon. Drop it, now!”

“Sariah, no!” the gray-haired woman screamed. “You can’t kill her until I get Chuck back. We had a deal.”

‘And that must be Mommy Dearest,’ Asher thought. Jesus. She’d sold her daughter to Marlowe’s betrayer. What a lousy excuse of a mother.

“Which you have been well paid for,” Sariah replied haughtily.

Standing near the helo, Marlowe had gone silent, her mouth hanging open at the ugly revelation that her mother had also betrayed her. Sariah was going to die, and Asher didn’t mind if Marlowe’s egg-donor mother did, too. But his injured arm had grown heavier and was on its way to being useless. He dropped to one knee and rested it on his thigh. That adjustment was the distraction he needed.

Jumpy, Sariah whirled and fired on him.

“Asher! No, no, no!” Marlowe screamed.

But yes. Hell, yes. Asher returned fire.

Sariah’s shot went wild.

His didn’t. Full-on body shot. Sariah crumbled to the dirt at the same moment he became aware of the asshole creeping behind him. On his weak side. Because of

recoil, his injured right arm was now throbbing and worthless. Asher turned, knowing he'd never make the shot in time. Across-body shots were always less accurate. He fired anyway.

Sariah's pilot went down before Asher's round struck. He tapped his ear to call for verification of the unknown shooter, but damn, no earpiece. Lifting his poor right arm as high as he could to shield his eyes, he searched for Marlowe.

A heavy hand clapped his left shoulder, startling him. "It's over," Heston said, as he took a knee beside Asher and wrapped a brotherly arm around him for support. "Sure wish you'd stayed home and in bed. Beau and I had this covered until you broke loose. Sit tight. Cavalry's coming."

Dressed in battle gear: tactical armor, helmet, boots, and enough weaponry to start a small war, Heston was a godsend. The rifle in the sling over his shoulder told Asher he was the one who had taken out Sariah's pilot. Thank God for honorable men and heroes.

The fight went out of Asher. He sagged against his friend. "Where's Marlowe? You see her?"

Heston nodded toward the bus. There she was, running toward him and yelling. He couldn't hear a thing. His ears were still ringing. Not until Marlowe dropped to one hip, sliding like a runner into home base and screamed, "Bomb! There's a bomb in that van!"

The crazy woman threw herself over Asher, knocking Heston out of her way and Asher onto his back. She meant to die for him? No way. He rolled her over and covered her face with his arms and head. Shielding her. Loving her. Willing to die for her.

Within seconds, the bomb blew, but its energy exploded upward, not outward. Must've been another improvised explosive. The walls of that ugly-as-sin hippie van contained most of the blast. Windows blew, sure. Asher held tight to Marlowe as the heatwave and shattered glass roared over them. She clung to him sobbing and careful of his injury. God, he loved this woman.

But it was Heston crouching over them both. His back was to the van, shielding them like the armor-plated guardian angel he was. Asher was beginning to wonder if Heston wasn't just that.

At last, crap stopped falling out of the sky and it was safe to get up, but Asher stayed where he was. Marlowe's shaking hands were cradling his weary head. She was crying and talking to him. Carefully, Asher kissed the woman he adored, breathing in her fear and relief, a heady cocktail after nearly losing her. Collapsing against her soft, sweet body, he buried his face in the secret cleft between her shoulder and neck, and he let go.

The bad guys were dead.

Marlowe was finally safe.

About damned time.

Chapter Thirty-Six

She closed her eyes and held Asher. Afraid Heston would pry him out of her arms if she relaxed her grip. Just as afraid when Asher came to, he'd leave her. Would blame her. Cast her off like the fool she was. This was her fault. All of it. She'd wanted to believe her mom. The stupid little girl in her that craved Mona's attention and love just wanted to believe she was lovable. That she wasn't worthless. Marlowe hadn't known how bad things were until she'd climbed back into the van after Mona and saw her mother pull a burner phone out of the glove compartment.

"Mom, no. Don't touch that phone. Put it down."

"I can't. Sariah programmed a number for Chuck in this phone. She's dead, so I can finally call—"

"It's a trap, Mom. No!"

But Mona kept thumbing that keypad, and Marlowe knew there was no use. Mona wasn't calling Chuck. She was calling the bomb Sariah had hidden somewhere inside or under the van.

There was no sense arguing or staying. Marlowe bolted out of the van and ran to safety and freedom. She ran to Asher.

Holding him now, feeling his heart beating against hers, she knew his love was real. She didn't have to earn it. It just was. She didn't have to figure out how to be more lovable or how to do more. He'd loved her when she'd been a beast, when she'd

kicked him, cursed him, and all the times she'd overreacted—over nothing. He hadn't betrayed her. Hadn't cursed her. Hadn't once let her down. Asher believed her and he believed in her. Talk about coming to Jesus. She didn't deserve Asher. He was too good for her. He shouldn't have come to her rescue today. She had to let him go.

Panic shivered up her spine. Where would she go if she did? What would she do? Running her fingers up his sweaty neck into his hair, she breathed in the earthy essence of her savior. Her hero. Her lover.

"I love you so much," she whispered in his ear. "I'm so sorry, but this is all my fault. It's best if I leave."

"You're not going anywhere, woman," he growled, his good hand behind her neck, pulling her into his mouth. "Shut up and kiss me."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Three days later...

Marlowe wasn't herself anymore. She was nicer. At least, she was earnestly trying to be nicer. Slower to anger, too. More thoughtful before she spoke. And she'd turned into a clean freak.

Asher had changed, too. He slept longer and more soundly. He seemed somehow calmer for the reasonable, calm man he already was. Guess that was what ending a couple vicious terrorists did to a man.

Occasionally, Marlowe still panicked for no good reason. Like now. After dashing naked down the hall and hurriedly putting on the clean clothes she'd set out last night, she grabbed a set of sheets from the linen closet and ran back to Asher's front room and the disaster their lovemaking had turned his too-big-to-hide chaise lounge into. Hurriedly, she helped him settle on the couch while she scrambled to make the chaise lounge presentable. Off went the sheets and mattress pad they'd made love on last night. On went the new.

By then she was sweating and needed another shower.

They really needed to move their amorous activities out of his front room and into his bedroom. Only there was no resisting Asher. All he had to do was look in Marlowe's direction, and she turned into a smitten ninny. First thing in the morning and last thing at night, he was all she wanted to do. She was making him happy, and he loved her. Despite everything that had happened, he still loved her.

It turned out Asher hadn't reinjured his shoulder when he'd come to her rescue three days ago, thank heavens. The pins and screws holding his shoulder blade together were still in place. His stitches were, too. Heston took him to The TEAM hospital just to be safe, but after X-rays, Doc Fitz sent Asher home. She'd restricted him to bed rest for the next week, like that was a hardship? Hardly.

Marlowe was good at following rules. She had to be because, officially, she was a caretaker now. So when Asher gave her that sly come-hither glance of his, she went willingly to his side every time. As his caretaker, she took it upon herself to make love to him, carefully and gently and always on top. He was her patient and she was in charge, and making him smile? Best medicine ever.

But right now, her heart thumped like it wanted out of her body. She was that kind of frazzled. What if Maverick and Beau stopped by again? Doc Fitz had a key. Any minute now, any TEAM agent or wife could decide to drop in like they did yesterday and—

"Stop worrying," Asher teased. He thought this was funny?

"I'm not worried," she snapped, tucking the final sheet corner in and panting like a runaway horse. Yup. Definitely worried. What would people think if they saw that the chaise lounge was messed up again? She had to make everything look presentable, and she had to do it quickly. Before anyone popped in.

Talk about an unexpected surprise. Make that shock. Early yesterday morning, some TEAM agents had come alone, some with their wives, but some came with their entire families. At the end of the day, Marlowe had been emotionally exhausted. While she wouldn't trade it for anything, she was going to make a better impression today.

Frazzled, she dashed a hand across her sweaty forehead. Seeing all of those happy,

healthy kids yesterday should have made her happy, but it had also broken her heart a little bit. Because she'd been so, so wrong about how most Americans lived. Maybe because of her crappy childhood. Maybe because of what she'd witnessed in Afghanistan. But most likely because her only role models had been two careless addicts who never should've had a child.

In general, people all over the world weren't bad. Everyone she'd met since she'd arrived back in America had gone out of their way to make her feel welcome and wanted. Not only that, but needed. Alex and Doc Fitz had both given her jobs. Harley gave her an adorable puppy. The TEAM wives gave her hugs every time they visited.

Not that Asher's hugs were second best. They weren't. But his hugs were intimate and incredibly intoxicating. His were in an entirely different, wonderful universe. The wives' hugs, on the other hand, were... hmmm, sisterly. Marlowe smiled at herself. That was the perfect word. She, an only child, the neglected, unwanted, and betrayed daughter of a very sick woman and a man who had never once looked back after he'd deserted her, now had sisters. Lots of sisters. Real sisters. Sisters by other mothers. The agents' kids all called her Aunt Marlowe or Marley or WW. How great was that? They weren't the least bit shy, and they'd hugged her, some jabbering words she'd never understand because they were just babies.

Marlowe wiped her face again, this time because her eyes were watering. She'd never been happier than she'd been yesterday, at that impromptu all-afternoon picnic. She'd never been to a picnic before, and hurriedly eating a slice of goat cheese on the side of a dusty Afghanistan road didn't count. No. TEAM picnics were now one of her favorite things.

Once he and Kelsey had arrived, Alex had ordered pizza and root beer. Everyone stayed until the sun went down. He made some kind of signal in the air with his index finger then. To Marlowe, it looked like he was telling everyone they were crazy. But they'd quickly cleaned up the picnic debris in the backyard, packed up their families,

and began leaving.

The very best part? When sweet little Bradley cried, “No, Daddy. I stayin’. Wet me go. I want down,” after Alex hoisted him up on his shoulder.

So Alex did, and the second his son’s feet touched down, Bradley ran to Marlowe. She’d crouched to intercept him and—darn, another tear got away. He’d crashed into her, wrapped his arms around her neck, and whispered, “I wub you, Auntie Marrow. More than pizza!”

So yeah, she was sappy today, and she didn’t want anything to spoil that extraordinary, very special feeling. Somehow, she’d gone from being worthless to being loved by the entire TEAM family and treasured by Asher and Bradley. Could life get any better? No way.

“Yikes! Did a car just pull into your driveway?”

“Relax, honey. Everyone knows what we’ve been doing.”

“They do? No, they don’t! How could they?” She’d showered every morning. She’d been meticulous about making that lounge clean and neat. Like now. It was back to looking like a bed. Only the pile of dirty sheets was left on the floor. She didn’t have time to argue.

“Because you’re glowing, your eyes are bright, your entire body is flushed, and... Yup. Whoever’s in the driveway is going to know what we’ve been up to the minute they walk through that door.”

“What?” she shrieked. That just could not happen.

“Take the old bedding to the laundry room and come sit down. Hurry.”

“Okay, sure. Good idea.” Not like that wasn’t her plan, too. By the time she was back, Marlowe hoped he was wrong about those visitors knowing what she and Asher had done after they all left yesterday. She wasn’t glowing. She was sweating. Big difference.

Heck, she didn’t even know if anyone was in the driveway. Why was she worried? Might be the UPS guy with a delivery for someone across the street.

Relieved, she went easily under his arm, his good arm. After seeing him come to her rescue three days ago, Marlowe didn’t think Doc Fitz would ever let this crazy, foolish, ruggedly handsome man out of her sight again. Not while Marlowe was there, and not since it was Doc Fitz’s husband who’d been speeding to her rescue when he’d been T-boned.

“What can I do for you?” Marlowe asked, her mind pinging, her fingers tapping, and her eyes darting, making sure she’d snagged every unmentionable off the floor and stashed it in with the sheets.

“Relax. Kelsey called while you were in the bathroom. She’s bringing our dogs over. Alex will probably be with her.”

“Seriously? I’m supposed to relax? Now you tell me?” She was on her feet, frantic to make sure this house was in tip-top shape.

Until Asher pulled her back against him and stuck his nose in her neck. “Sit. Stay,” he breathed, in that husky, I-want-you-now tone that never failed to send shivers up her spine. “You’re among friends, Marlowe. Loyal friends who’ll have your back, and their just as loyal wives. You’re mine and that makes you theirs.”

One touch, that was all it took and Marlowe’s priorities changed. Everything became clearer. Gulping, she let her self-induced OCD attack go. Asher was right. She liked

his friends, even Beau. The concept of family, though, was a total shift of paradigm. Letting go of her wretched, solitary childhood was hard. Years of neglect and being responsible for her parents, and the hard-learned lessons that went with it, were indelibly scrawled in her psyche and on her soul. They'd made her mean, defensive, and unreasonably stubborn. Add to that her insatiable compulsion to rescue helpless women, and, well...

Marlowe took another deep breath and forced her heart back to the very real fact, the one absolute in her life—Asher. She loved him with every beat of her heart. He was utterly irresistible, a god among men, and hands down, too kind for his own good. He loved her, didn't he? Yup. Too kind, too handsome, too much. She'd never deserve him, but if he was crazy enough to love her...

She shrugged again, engrossed in her self-talk. Who cared what anyone else thought? She hadn't before, and she was trying hard not to now. Stifling her need to clean house, she whispered, "Yes. You found me. You saved me. I am yours, and I'm never letting you go."

"I loved you the first time I saw you, honey," he murmured into her short hair. She'd stopped covering it up. "You're mine for keeps."

Leaning into him, pressing closer to that pleasant wall of solid pectoral muscles, Marlowe inhaled the most powerful medicine in her world, the masculine scent of her man. The panic vanished and she relaxed, listening to her favorite song—Asher's heartbeat.

"Where'd Harley put the dogs' crates?" he asked, his good hand smoothing circles on her lower back and over the itchy patchwork quilt of her still-healing scars.

"In your bedroom."

“You mean our bedroom.”

She ran her fingers through his hair, mussing it up and making herself damp. Good grief, she had no control when it came to this man. “Yes, okay, our bedroom. Although, I’ve only been in our bedroom once when Beau showed me how to work the shower in your man-size bathroom.”

“Which reminds me.” Asher slipped his hand under her shirt and cupped her breast. “Tonight, we sleep in our bedroom, in our bed.”

The need to tell him no, that she’d just changed the bedding on this massive chaise lounge and he should’ve told her sooner, was a hard beast to suppress. But sleeping with him in that huge bed of his, err, theirs ? Silly man. Did he seriously think they’d just sleep?

The doorbell rang. Darn it, Alex and Kelsey had arrived. Marlowe growled.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Asher grinned at Marlowe's grumpy growl, fingering the diamond ring in his workout pants pocket. No doubt about it. Today was the day. After she checked the peephole and deactivated the alarm like they'd agreed they'd do from now on, she opened the door and politely said, "Good morning. It's so nice to see you again." The little liar. She wasn't happy to see anyone. Especially after yesterday, when the entire TEAM family had shown up on their front doorstep.

In came Alex with two puppies on leashes, Darling, excited to see Marlowe, and Walter, as anxious as ever. Kelsey came in with another pup on leash, an alert, bright-eyed, long-haired GSD. Asher recognized the little guy. He was one of the new additions to Alex's family. Hmmmm. Why was he there?

"Hey, Boss." Lifting to his feet from the couch, Asher stuck his chin at the little guy. "What's up?"

"I know this is asking a lot, but—" Alex crouched down and unleashed Darling, who headed straight for Marlowe. Of course. "I've got a little boy at home who's—"

"Fallen in love with your Walter," Kelsey interrupted, her eyes glimmering. "And, umm..." She looked at Alex.

Asher smiled to see these two hemming and hawing. "You want to keep Walter, is that what you're asking? For Bradley? Sure. Love at first sight conquers all." His gaze strayed to Marlowe. "That okay with you, honey?"

With her hands on the wiggling puppy on her lap, she nodded from the floor where she was sitting. “Sure. Walter isn’t nervous with Bradley like he is with us.”

“You do know Walter’s deaf, right?” Asher asked the Stewarts.

Alex nodded. “We can deal with that. What I can’t deal with is my son’s broken heart.”

Damn it. Now Asher’s eyes were watering. Totally non-threatening, puppy-sized Bradley was the perfect companion for that skittish pup. He brushed a quick hand over his face, just as Kelsey leaned into him and gave him a very cautious, one-armed hug. “I can never, ever, thank you enough for what you did, Asher,” she whispered. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you yesterday, but you saved my life when you saved Alex. You saved Lexie’s and Bradley’s lives, too. You made sure Alex came home to me and—” Her voice cracked.

Blinking furiously, Asher squeezed her as tightly as his injured shoulder allowed. Man, she was a tiny thing. Just like Marlowe. “I just did what anyone else would’ve done, ma’am. I did my job and—”

“Like hell,” Alex growled, his blue eyes as bleary as Asher’s. “I owe you a debt I can never repay, Ash. And now I’m here, asking for one more son of a bitching thing.”

“Walter,” Asher answered, needing a diversion from the drama. He hadn’t saved his boss for praise or glory. Only did what any decent man or woman would’ve done in the same circumstances. He’d put his teammates first, above the mission and above himself. That was all. Brotherhood was what launched him down the stairs that day. Nothing more. Nothing less.

With a deep breath, Kelsey stepped back. “Yes, Walter. We hated to ask, especially after what happened in Syria, but—”

“But Bradley’s crying because we took Walter and left him behind, damn it,” Alex continued gruffly. It was uncanny, watching the way these two finished each other’s sentences. “He and that puppy have been inseparable. He’s been sleeping in Walter’s crate with him when he can get away with it, and I—”

Asher held his palm up. Alex didn’t have to say more. “No problem, Boss. I know you’ll take care of Walter. He’s yours.”

Kelsey ran a slender finger under her eyes. “We brought one of our new boys if you’re interested.” She dropped the newcomer’s leash. “This little boy is Hercules, Herk with a ‘k’ for short.”

“Awww,” Marlowe murmured from where she sat cross-legged on the floor, snuggling Darling. “I’ve never seen a German Shepherd with long fur before. He’s fluffy.”

Herk was a long-haired, extra-fluffy, tan and black GSD. Intelligence shone in his bright, brown eyes. Then the little guy cocked his head, those big, furry ears flopped to one side, making him adorably hard to resist.

Asher snapped his fingers and commanded, “Come.”

Herk trotted straight to Asher and sat, looking quizzically up, his head cocked again and those ears way too big for the little guy.

“You can’t go wrong with any of Harley’s dogs,” Alex said.

“Did we hear anything back on Ambassador Clark?” Asher asked, still watching Herk and falling in love with him.

“Yes, he’s fully recovered and back on the job. Turned out Jamah had a harem. Six

women.” Alex counted off on his fingers and thumb. “Veronica Tippetts, Sariah Sayeed, Khadija Bashir, Aziza Marabi, Zorah Hanan, and Kamisha Ramani. You already know what happened to Tippetts. As for Sariah, she was an American citizen, the granddaughter of a Lebanese couple who migrated to America in the 1950s. When she was in her early twenties, she embraced ISIL and personally sought out Jamah after he proclaimed himself to be caliph.”

Asher motioned for Herk to lie down. The pup dropped to his belly, his eyes still on Asher.

“Khadija is the driver who broadsided Beau. She’s now in FBI custody, pending DOJ’s final determination. Aziza Marabi was intercepted by Scotland Yard at Heathrow, with three metal cylinders of anthrax in her checked baggage. Among other things, she’s been charged with transportation of a Category A bioterrorism agent. Scotland Yard has her in custody at an undisclosed location outside of London. And the last two...”

Alex took a deep breath. “Zorah and Kamisha were in Jamah’s bedroom, if that’s what you want to call that shithole.”

“I’d call it a torture chamber,” Asher said.

“Yeah, well...” Alex ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m damned thankful we took him out before he hurt my family. Bastard. Just sorry it happened in Kelsey’s kitchen.”

“I’m glad it did, Alex,” she murmured. “Wasn’t too long ago Beau flatlined on my kitchen floor, after he nearly bled out, remember? Your people took care of everything that time, too. Trust me, I’m not squeamish. I’m proud. Your agents brought down a brutal terrorist.” She waved her hand over her head. “I might just have a plaque mounted over my stove that says: Don’t Mess With Mom. ”

A real smile finally tweaked the corners of Alex's stern mouth. "I'm building you a new house, woman. We're moving."

Asher signaled Herk to rollover. No sooner given than done. Flicking his fingers, he then signaled Herk to go to Marlowe. The little guy went straight to her and Darling, sat beside her, but kept his eyes on Asher.

Kelsey laughed in Alex's face. "We are not moving. You proved it, sweetheart. Our home is our castle, and your men defended the keep. We won, so shush."

Watching Kelsey stand up to her badass husband was comical. Alex was as whipped as Asher. He took a seat on the couch nearest Marlowe. "So, Boss, who did you think you were texting if Marlowe never revealed her true identity?"

Alex glared at the woman in question.

Man, if looks could kill, he would've been dead on the spot, as lethally as she glared back at him. "I told him I was John Wayne Smithson," Marlowe muttered. "Don't laugh, Asher. It was the first name that popped into my mind."

Asher didn't dare laugh, but he did grin like a lunatic. "And you fell for that, Boss?"

"Even set up a holding account for her, in my name, at my bank." Alex turned to Marlowe. "Plus a bonus. You went above and beyond every son of a bitching order I sent, and you saved scores of endangered women and children in just two months. I'm damned proud of you. No one could've done better. That money is all yours. Let me know when you're ready to collect it and I'll sign it over."

The glow suffusing her pretty face was telling. Alex's praise meant a lot.

"And another thing—"

“What do you want to know now, Asher?” she snapped, her head bobbing like she was ready to fight.

Man, he loved this feisty woman. Marlowe met everything she did head-on with a do-or-die intensity that might be off-putting to others. Not Asher. Her defensive streak was part of her charm. “Just asking questions, that’s all. Why didn’t you leave on one of the helicopters Alex sent? You could have, you know.”

“Already told you. Those women needed me.” She turned on Alex next. “And what about the ones I didn’t save? Who’s doing my job now, huh?”

Ah, that great big attitude of this tiny woman was impressive. She was the female version of a cocky, bantam rooster, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. Just as ready to attack when a guy least expected. Marlowe was small but she led with her spurs, every time. A featherweight in comparison, yet she’d taken him down swiftly and without remorse at their first meeting. He was pretty sure she’d f-bombed the hell out of him then, too, but his ears had been ringing and he hadn’t heard much after that lethal kick.

“My senior agents are handling those retrievals now, Marlowe. Thanks for asking.” Alex was enjoying her spunk. Wasn’t often he smiled like he was. “Agents Mark Houston and Murphy Finnegan are in charge, as well as two private companies I contract with. Would you like their names and numbers?”

She shook her head, biting her bottom lip, cowed for the moment. “No, I just... I want to make sure we don’t forget. They trusted me and...” Her shoulders lifted. “I want to do the right thing.”

Alex beamed with pride. “You should’ve been a Marine. With fighters like you, that son of a bitching war would’ve been over long ago.”

“Uh-uh. I don’t like guns, and I’m not a good shot.”

“Practice,” Alex bit out.

“Here, Marlowe, this is for you.” Kelsey interrupted, handing over a small paper bag. “A little something in case, well, you know. Don’t open it until we’re gone.”

“I brought more puppy chow if you need it,” Alex offered.

“We’re stocked up,” Asher replied, “but thanks.”

“Time to go,” Alex said. “Say goodbye, Kelsey.”

Marlowe obeyed. “Goodbye, Kelsey.”

Damned if Alex didn’t grin. Jerking his head at his wife, he said, “Not you. Her.”

Clamping a hand over her mouth, Marlowe cringed. “Oops, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Kelsey chuckled. “Judy and Harley are with the kids, but Bradley’s pretty upset so we have to get back. Thanks again for understanding. Good luck with Hercules. Bye!”

And off they went with timid Walter trotting behind them.

Asher lifted to his feet and walked to his open front door where Marlowe was watching them go. “What’s in the bag? Is it chocolate?” What else could it be?

She shrugged, then looked at the note stapled to the folded top. “Hmmm. ‘For a rainy day.’ Wonder what that means.”

Yup, it's chocolate. Marlowe likes chocolate. Paige must've told Kelsey.

"Open it and find out."

"You're sure bossy this morning."

"Noted. Now open the bag."

Marlowe did, then, peering into it, her eyes widened. "Oh, my. It's..."

"Chocolate! I knew it!"

"Nope." She stuck a box of pregnancy test strips in his face.

Asher tipped his head back and laughed. "Oh, my hell? This is so much better than chocolate. I told you. Everyone knows what we've been up to, but most especially Kelsey would know."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

He snagged his good arm around her waist. The other would be in a protective sling for weeks to come. "Eventually. Women are intuitive. Us guys aren't. Come on. Let's go to the bathroom and—"

"You are not going in there with me."

"Nope, not unless you want me to. But be ready to howl at the moon if we're pregnant."

Marlowe shook her head all the way down the hallway until she closed the bathroom door behind her. No matter which way that test went, he was a lucky son of a bitch,

and the ring in his pocket wasn't going anywhere. It wasn't time, not now, not with a possible pregnancy between them. He'd know when the time was right. Or would he?

Oh, hell. What was he thinking? Now was the perfect time. Before, not after. Hurrying down the hall, Asher waited for the toilet to flush before he knocked. Excited to know what that test strip revealed, he didn't wait for an answer, just burst in like the overbearing ass he usually wasn't.

Pulling his grandmother's ring out of his pocket, he dropped very carefully to one knee and extended the ring between two fingers on his left hand. "Marlowe Rich, will you please marry me? I don't need to know if we're pregnant to know I love you. A baby will only make the frosting on our wedding cake sweeter."

His eyes filled with tears. Asher hadn't realized proposing to the woman he adored would be so emotional or mean so much. He could feel Grandma Downey's spirit there, in his bathroom, with him and Marlowe. He could smell her lilac cologne, and he knew, he just knew Gram was smiling down at him.

Marlowe stood at the sink, obviously shell-shocked by his question, the test strip in her trembling hand, and her eyes bright with emotions he couldn't interpret. "Umm, what?"

The warning lights in his all-male brain started flashing. This might not have been the smartest move or the right time, damn it. Asher licked his lips, his arm still extended, waiting. Hoping he hadn't screwed up what should have been a momentous occasion. What kind of man proposes to the woman he loves in a bathroom?

Apparently, an idiot, that's who.

"Umm, sure," she whispered, mostly to herself. "Okay. I guess. If you want to."

Not the response he wanted. Yup, he'd scared her, and Marlowe was doing what she did best, retreating before she attacked.

Lowering his arm, Asher regrouped, swallowed his pride, and tried again. "I know this might be too soon and too fast, but, honey, I'm—" Stupid . He went with that. "I messed this up. Guess because I'm stupidly, hopelessly, in love with you." The ring went back into his pocket. "Never mind. When you're ready, you'll know."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“I’m ready now,” Marlowe whispered, setting the test stick on the counter beside the sink as she turned to face Asher. “You startled me, that’s all. Of course I’ll marry you. I used one strip and I got two stripes, but it’s early. It might mean we’re pregnant, but the instructions say I should take another test tomorrow. Maybe more after that. You know, just to be sure.”

He shook his head. “Nope. No way. You’re pregnant, I can tell, and that makes me the luckiest man alive. And the dumbest. I hope you know I didn’t ask you to marry me just because we might be pregnant. I asked because” —Asher dug the ring back out of his pocket and held it out for her to see— “when Gram passed away, she left this, along with a handwritten note that said, ‘For you, Asher. You’ll know who to give it to the moment you see her.’ ” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he struggled to swallow. “And honey—”

Time stopped, there on the edge of eternity. Marlowe froze, her poor pounding heart so full it felt like it might shatter into a million pieces. Asher wanted to marry her? Was this a dream? A fairytale come true? Did he really want to spend the rest of his life with someone like her?

“I knew the instant I saw you in that cave,” he whispered, his voice thick and hoarse. “I know it sounds crazy, but from that second, I knew you were already mine. I’ll understand if you’d rather wait—”

“Me? Wait?” She fluttered her fingers in his face. It was either that or burst into tears and shriek like a hysterical idiot. “You know me better than that. If this ring belonged

to your grandmother, then...”

Marlowe tried. She truly did, but she couldn't stop the tidal wave of emotions crashing over her. “Then she's mine, too,” she squeaked nervously. “I... I never had a grandma. What was she like? What's her name? Tell me... tell me everything about her.” She dashed a hand over her face, but it wasn't quick enough. Her nose was running. There was no way to stop the flood pouring out of her now, and no use speaking.

Sinking to the edge of the tub, Asher tugged her onto his lap. “I love you so damned much,” he murmured, cupping the back of her head and letting her hide her face in the corner of his neck. “Is it too soon? Should we wait?”

Sniffing like a ninny, she croaked, “No.”

He pressed a handful of tissues into her fingers, but it was too little, too late. The shoulder of his t-shirt was already soggy. Tipping back, Marlowe gathered her wits and blew her nose into that clump of tissues, while Asher's hand in the middle of her back held her steady. Wasn't that the story of their lives? Him, holding her together while she fell apart or threw temper tantrums or lashed out at him or—

“I don't get it,” she sobbed, dabbing at her eyes and hoping the flood stopped soon. “What is wrong with me?”

She'd never bawled this hard in her life. Not during all those long days alone when her parents had better things to do than spend time with their only kid. Not in Afghanistan after the American soldiers had all left. Certainly not after Alex told her that her dad died seven freaking years ago. Not even when her mom blew herself up because she chose not to trust or believe her daughter. But there Marlowe was, on what should've been the very best day of her life, falling apart like a...

Hell! No Disney princess had ever cried so hard. This bullshit had to stop.

Try telling that to her heart.

“Marlowe, honey,” Asher whispered contritely. “It’s okay, honest. Cry all you want. I’ve got you and I’m not going anywhere.”

Clutching the wad of now shredded and utterly worthless tissues, she ran her hand around his neck and collapsed with her ear against his chest. There it was, the sound she remembered from every incredibly close and extremely personal encounter she’d had with this man. Asher’s heartbeat. Closing her teary eyes, Marlowe let the steady rhythm of that marvelous organ work its magic. His heart was her first bedtime lullaby and her most favorite song. Comprised of majestic chords and heavenly notes she’d never heard or known until she’d met him, it was more than just the beginning of a love story. It was her first real home. Her first safe place and the first beat of her forever.

“I will always love you,” she told him quietly. “And yes, I’ll marry you. Anytime and anywhere. Tell me about your grandmother.”

His chest heaved with a sigh. Hearts tended to recognize each other. That was how Marlowe knew Asher was content, because finally, she was, too.

The End