



# Blade and Arrow Origins (Blade and Arrow Security)

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**Description:** Ever wondered how Blade and Arrow Security actually started? In this prequel, we'll check in with each member of the team during the months building up to the launch of Blade and Arrow.

Find out how Cole, Leo, Zane, Rylan, Finn, and Nora adjusted to civilian life, the breakup of their team, and how they came back together as a family in Sleepy Hollow.

This story can be read at any time during the Blade and Arrow Security or Bravo Team series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 7

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

COLE

This never should have happened.

When I took this job, it was because I thought I could make a difference.

Just because I wasn't helping people as a Green Beret anymore, it didn't mean I couldn't protect them another way.

Newly separated from the Army, the transition to police officer made sense.

It was like the recruiter said, "We actively look for former military to join the force. With your experience and skills, you'd be a huge asset to us.

And we can provide great benefits—four day workweeks, competitive pay, opportunities for promotion...

you can see your family more often. Have a life outside your job. "

My family is gone, but I do have friends around the country that I want to visit.

And the appeal of using my skills to still help people was too great to ignore.

Plus, I liked the idea of moving someplace new.

Maybe building a new life here in San Antonio, finding a house, and if the stars align, maybe even a relationship one day.

So I packed up my stuff and left the only life I'd known for over a decade. Left my teammates. Left the security of a career I was good at to try something completely new.

Was I nervous about it? Of course. How could I not be?

But after everything that happened in Afghanistan, it was clear my time in the Army was over.

Without the teammates who'd become like family, it would have been too hard.

Without Finn, and Rylan, and Nora... How could I go on when half my team couldn't?

After we got back to Fort Campbell following that terrible mission, it wasn't a surprise that Leo and Zane left, too. Their hearts weren't in it any more than mine.

So my team fractured, my six closest friends scattering around the country, all trying to deal with the repercussions of that mission the best they could.

Leo went to New York City, Zane to Virginia, Rylan continued his rehab in upstate New York, Finn took off to Colorado, and Nora retreated to her mother's place in California.

I miss them.

But when I came here, I had hopes that keeping busy with my new job would help dull the pain.

And in the beginning, it did, a little. I met my new partner, who's become a close friend, and I got to know the city.

I explored Texas, taking solo trips to Austin and Dallas and Houston, and during one long stretch of days off, I even headed all the way up to Amarillo.

I hoped this would be enough to fill the gaping hole left behind.

I didn't expect the new friends I made—other first responders working in San Antonio—to replace my teammates, but I hoped to build a life I could enjoy.

Some of it came true. I've grown to like it here—the warm winters, the people, the apartment with a bit of yard just big enough to sit out and grill, and the feeling of accomplishment when I help a victim in need.

But I worry it's never going to be enough. Not when the people I love like my own family are so far away, still trying to cope with their own struggles.

And today.

I don't know how to process the emotions running through me.

I haven't been this upset—

Shit.

Since I got home, I haven't stopped pacing. My body is vibrating with tension, but there's nowhere for it to go. There's nothing that's going to take away the frustration, the anger, and the sorrow about what just happened.

About what could have been stopped, if not for those damn rules.

The fucking red tape.

The bureaucratic bullshit that kept me and my partner from helping a woman in terrible danger.

As I keep circling my living room, the walls feel like they're closing in on me.

Impotent rage bubbles up in my chest. Pain shoots through my jaw and down my neck. I nearly crack a molar trying to keep everything in.

This never should have happened.

Dana should still be alive.

Her body shouldn't be at the coroner's, awaiting an autopsy to determine her exact cause of death.

It's not really necessary, anyway. We all know how she died. Her asshole ex-boyfriend killed her.

When she came into the station last month, her eye a mess of violent purples and blues, she was hesitant to file charges against her ex. Even though he hit her, had many times before, she was worried a restraining order would only make things worse.

"What if this makes him angrier?" she asked worriedly, her gaze skittering around the station like she expected him to come storming in any second. "I want to keep him away from me, but I'm scared. Maybe I should move out of state. But... what if he comes after me? He said he would."

My partner and I couldn't give her the answer she wanted, which was that we could guarantee her ex would leave her alone. We couldn't. But we could help her file the restraining order, guaranteeing if he did come near her again, he'd be arrested.

We made suggestions, too—that Dana should stay with a friend, not go places on her own, keep meticulous records of any contact with her ex—but it didn't feel like enough. Not when I know from experience how toxic relationships can become deadly.

When I talked to Dana, she reminded me of Clara. Kind-hearted, smart, quietly funny, and she was a nurse, just like my sister wanted to be.

Did her case become personal to me? Yes.

Every time she'd call to report something new happening—her car vandalized while she was at work, anonymous letters with threatening messages—I worried we weren't doing enough. That over time, her ex would escalate, and the restraining order wouldn't keep her safe.

So I went to my lieutenant and asked for permission to put Dana under police protection. A safe house or having an officer on her apartment, even volunteering to take unpaid shifts, if necessary. But he told me no. It wasn't in the budget. There wasn't enough evidence.

"I feel your frustration," he told me, frowning as he said it. "But my hands are tied. And I can't have officers working without pay. The union would have my head."

I still made sure Dana had my number. Not because I had any romantic feelings for her—far from it, she reminded me of my sister—but just in case she needed help.

It didn't matter.

She never had a chance to call.

Her ex broke into her apartment and killed her before she could get to her phone.

And I'm so fucking furious.

It shouldn't have happened. Why did I become a police officer if I can't protect someone when they really need it?

With an aggravated sigh, I head into the kitchen to grab a beer, popping it open and taking a healthy swig. I know drinking isn't going to make me feel better, far from it, but one beer might help tamp down some of my anger.

Once I get back to the living room—it's not far, not in this tiny apartment—I flop down on the couch and turn on the TV, searching for something mindless to watch.

Maybe a ridiculous alien movie or one of those home improvement shows where the homeowners say unrealistic things like, we'll just knock down that wall over there, no problem, or I want a brand new kitchen but my budget is five thousand dollars.

Kicking my shoes off, I put my feet up on the coffee table, thinking of how Zane would call me out on it immediately. I've always been the one of our team who wants things neat, would never dream of putting my feet on the furniture, a holdover from my mom's rules when I was a kid.

I should call Zane. He would understand why I'm so upset. My entire team would.

Maybe we can have a group call with whoever's available.

Have some beers and talk about anything that isn't depressing.

Leo's job in Manhattan. How many women Zane's hooked up with lately.

Finn's new interest in hiking. Anything that will make me feel like I'm back at the bar off-base, shooting the shit with my teammates, before all our lives were turned

upside down.

Or maybe I can get online and look for flights.

I've got some vacation time coming up. I won't be able to visit everyone, but if I head out to New York, fly into the city, I could see Leo, and then take the train upstate to Salem, where Rylan lives.

If Leo has any time off, he could head up there with me, and the three of us could spend the weekend together.

We could grill, reminisce about the good times we had—there were a lot—and I can ask them for advice.

Try to figure out if it's time for me to look for a new job.

Do I want to start over again? Search for another job? Another place to live? Can I find a career that's going to bring me the same satisfaction as serving in the Army?

I'm just picking up my phone to check airline prices when it buzzes with an incoming text.

Hey. How's it going? Just got home from work, thought I'd check in.

Leo.

My lips lift as I read my friend's text. My shoulders relax a fraction. The band wrapped tightly around my chest loosens a little.

Man. I really miss my teammates.



Setting down my beer, I type out a reply.

Honestly? Not great. I had a pretty shit day.

There's no pretense with Leo or any of my teammates. We may not come right out and talk about our emotions, but if something is bothering one of us, we know the rest have our six.

Leo responds immediately.

What's going on?

It takes me a minute to answer his question.

A woman came to us looking for protection from her ex. We helped her with the restraining order, but we weren't allowed to do anything else. No protection, safe house, nothing. The guy killed her last night. It's just so... Fuck. It's so messed up.

I pause, then start typing again.

It's so frustrating. Why be a cop if I can't protect the people who need it? There's so much red tape, so many rules... I get some of them, but when people are dying. It's wrong.

Grabbing my beer, I take a sip as I wait for Leo to reply. The three dots blink on and off several times before his text comes through.

That's messed up. I'm sorry. You know it's not your fault, right?

Do I?

Logically, yes. But in my heart, I'm not so sure.

I stand up and walk over to the window, staring at the buzz of activity outside. When I picked this apartment, I thought the busy location would be good—close to restaurants and stores and a park just a half mile away—but right now, I wish I were anywhere but here.

My finger poised above the screen, I debate just how much to reveal.

It makes me think about Clara. And I think about how there should be a better way to help people.

I respect the police, but sometimes, it's not enough.

If we'd been able to put protection on this woman, she'd still be alive.

It just feels so wrong. I thought coming here I'd be able to make a difference. But it doesn't feel like that.

Leo doesn't mess around with platitudes but gets right to the point.

Do you want to quit? Find a new job?

Do I?

After a moment's thought, I reply.

Maybe. If I could find the right one. But I'm not sure it's out there.

Leo's message comes back right away.

Do you regret leaving?

There's a pause, and then another text appears.

Sometimes I do. Not leaving the Army, exactly. But leaving you guys. And I miss that feeling. Like I was really helping. Now I'm hacking security systems for Fortune 500 companies. It's not the same.

No, it's not.

And it gets me thinking.

I know Rylan's not happy working in his father's shop.

Finn hates his warehouse job. Nora's at loose ends, doing some part-time work as a translator.

Zane loves his martial arts, but he admitted during our last phone call that he doesn't like spending all his time teaching. And given what Leo just said...

Maybe there isn't something out there yet. But could there be?

What if there is a way to help people who have nowhere else to turn?

Between me and my team, we have the skills. We could protect people like Dana and Clara.

Could I?

Could we?

Maybe.

A smile touching my lips, I reply to Leo.

It's not the same. But I might have an idea. I have to do some research, but if it's solid, I'll let you know.

Leo's text comes in right away.

Definitely. You know I'm with you.

The weight on my shoulders lifts. Hope blooms in my chest.

Maybe there's another way.

And I open the browser on my phone, not to look at flights, but real estate.

Maybe I can bring my team together again.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

LEO

I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the city.

It's not that I haven't spent time in cities before, but actually living in one?

Taking the subway from my apartment in Queens each day, surrounded by thousands of people I've never met?

Living in a tiny studio that seems to get smaller by the day?

The constant buzz of activity never allowing for a moment of peace?

I don't know if it's for me.

When I got the job offer to work for a cybersecurity firm in Manhattan, it seemed like a great opportunity. Good pay, benefits, four weeks vacation, moving expenses covered, and I'd get to do something I'm good at.

Back in the Army, I didn't really use my skills as a hacker—they weren't necessary when we were in the Middle East, working clandestine ops and training foreign allies—but I always made sure to keep them up to date.

During my off-time, I scoured message boards for new techniques and programs and strategies, practiced breaking into secure systems without getting caught, and made sure to keep my certifications current.

Up until that last mission, I hadn't planned to leave the service until I retired.

I thought I'd stay with my Green Beret team for another five years at least, then transition into some sort of training role.

Or I'd shift into the intelligence side of things.

But I always imagined growing old in the Army, alongside my team, all of us retiring together.

Of course, I knew things could always go wrong. I just hoped they wouldn't.

But when everything fell apart, including my team, I was desperate for something to distract me from the guilt and devastation and anger.

I thought this move might help.

I thought the city that never sleeps would drown out the terrible memories.

I thought this job as a white-hat hacker, or ethical hacker, as my company calls it, would keep my mind busy.

But it hasn't. I still miss my team. I worry about them all the time. And while I've made some new friends here, it's not the same.

My job doesn't bring the same satisfaction as it did when I was in the Army. It doesn't account for the hours I spend alone in my apartment, wondering how things went so wrong and wishing I could go back and fix them.

I don't like getting on the subway and seeing people shy away from me, assuming that just because I'm big, I must be a threat.

And I long for the stars. As a kid growing up in Vermont, I used to love trying to count them. I enjoyed sitting with my dad on the porch, looking up at the sky and picking out all the constellations.

Even when I was overseas, I still had the stars to remind me of home. Of the people I loved. Of the reason I was out there to begin with.

Now, when I look to the sky, the stars are masked by the light from the city.

I was talking to Nora about it the other day, and she asked why I didn't move. Head back to Vermont or upstate or go out west to live near Finn in Colorado.

Maybe I will. But it'll never be the same as it was, with my best friends together, spending weeks on end as a team, trying to make the world a better place.

Still. I have a vacation coming up soon. I should head out to California to see Nora, and maybe we can take a road trip from California to Colorado to visit Finn. We could take one of those long hikes he's always talking about. I can make sure my two friends are really doing okay.

Or as okay as they can be, considering.

Just thinking about what they've been through makes me sad and angry all over again.

If only I'd seen a sign. If only I'd noticed something was off.

How did we miss it? Six skilled operators and somehow this piece of garbage tricked us all.

I know he's dead. One of the guys on the other split team killed him. But I wish I

could have done it myself. I wish I could have tracked down the man who tore my team apart and made him suffer for what he did.

“Hey, Leo, you alright?” My coworker, Ben, flashes a concerned glance at me.

Dragging myself back to the present, I force my mouth into something approximating a smile. “Yeah. I’m good. Why?”

“No reason,” he replies quickly. But his expression gives a different answer.

The train stops and the doors slide open, inviting a rush of people to exit the car. The controlled chaos gives me a moment to decide how to respond. Ben’s a friend, and he knows I was in the Army, but I’ve never talked about why I left or the lingering memories I can’t seem to shake.

Once the doors shut again, and the rumble of noise subsides to a dull hum, I say, “Just remembering some things from my last weeks in the Army. They’re not very good memories.”

Ben turns towards me, sympathy softening his gaze. “Sorry, man. That sucks.” He pauses. “I know I never served, so I can’t fully understand, but if you ever want to talk...”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Amanda’s out of town for work, but my mom’s coming for the weekend to spend some time with Laila, so if you want to grab a beer or something...”

Damn. I’m reminded that I’m not the only one struggling.

Ben has a little girl, Laila, who he’s basically trying to raise on his own.



He's with the mother, Amanda, but she's a flight attendant who's away more often than not.

And from things Ben's let slip, I get the feeling things between him and Amanda aren't going well.

"How's Laila doing?" I ask, and his face brightens.

"Oh, she's great. I know I'm biased, but she's just the smartest kid. Talking in complete sentences, reading some of the words in her books..." He smiles affectionately. "She's obsessed with books. Going to the library is her favorite thing."

As I listen to Ben talk about his daughter, an unexpected chord twangs in my chest. The idea of having kids of my own was never something I gave much thought to—not with the danger my job brought.

That's why I never had serious relationships, sticking with casual dating instead.

It wouldn't have been fair to put a woman through that, never knowing when I'd have to go out on a mission or if I'd come back.

Now that everything's different, a committed relationship wouldn't be off the table. But I'm not sure I have the emotional energy to put into it. Not with all the other crap I'm still trying to work through.

The train jerks to a stop again, and this time I rise from my seat. As I wait for the doors to open, Ben says, "So. What about that beer? I could do Saturday."

"Can I take a rain check? One of my old teammates is visiting for the weekend. I think we're just going to hang at the apartment and catch up."

Ben lifts his chin at me. “No problem. Maybe sometime next week, then.”

“Definitely.” I clap him on the shoulder and give a quick chin lift in return. “Enjoy your weekend. See you Monday.”

He smiles. “You too.”

As I make the trip from the subway to my apartment, optimism chases some of the clinging memories away.

I should have a good weekend. Cole is coming to visit from Texas, and I’m really looking forward to seeing my friend for the first time in months.

We’ll probably order a ton of takeout, drink some beer, watch some games on TV, and maybe we can convince Rylan to drive down for a day.

Have at least half the team together again.

And I can hopefully hear about this mysterious idea Cole keeps alluding to. Since he told me about his domestic violence case last month, he’s made a few mentions about a plan he’s trying to make work. And how, if he does, he’d want the rest of the team to join him.

Honestly, if I could work with my teammates again, I think I’d agree to just about anything.

I’m a block from my apartment building when a woman plows right into me, her gaze locked on her phone, clearly not paying attention. She bounces off my chest, and I lightly touch her arm to steady her, letting go as soon as I’m sure she won’t fall.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Her gaze travels up my body, widening in alarm as she takes in my size. “I’m fine.” She takes a few quick steps back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to run into you. I’ll just—” Two more steps back, and her words come faster. “I’ll just go. Sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s fine,” I reply gently. “Are you—”

But she’s already gone.

Dammit.

I’d never hurt a woman. Ever. Aside from the requirements of my job—my former job—I’ve never hurt anyone. But all people see when they look at me is this six-foot-six guy topping two-fifty, and they just assume I’m dangerous.

I hate it. And I wish I could walk around someplace where people know me. Where they know I’m a good guy. Where they see me as a protector and not a threat.

My mood dips again as I close the distance to my apartment.

But hopefully, by the time Cole gets in—his flight is supposed to arrive at six, and he’s taking the train from the airport—I’ll be in a better mood again.

While I know he wouldn’t care, I’d rather not be all grumpy when my friend gets here.

But the moment my apartment building comes into view, I hear, “Leo! ‘Bout time you got here!”

Cole.

He’s leaning on the wall beside the front doors, his luggage on the sidewalk beside

him, and he looks so familiar my chest squeezes a little.

I give him one of those shoulder clap slash one-armed hugs and say, “I thought your flight didn’t get in until six?”

“I was able to get on an earlier one.” Cole flashes me a grin. “So I’ve just been hanging here, checking out the neighborhood. Looks pretty nice. Lots to do.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Punching in the access code to open the door, I grumble, “This system isn’t very secure. An amateur could bypass it.”

Cole chuckles. “Why am I not surprised to hear you complaining about security?”

“Because it’s something to be taken seriously.” We head inside and over to the elevator. “I’m not worried about myself, but there are families who live here. Single women. Seniors. They can’t protect themselves like I can.”

“I’m just joking, Leo.” Cole’s expression sobers. “It is important. And that’s one of the reasons—” His mouth snaps shut. “We can talk about that later. First, I’m starving. They don’t do meals on most of the flights anymore. All I got was a tiny package of pretzels.”

“Well, we can do something about that.” As the elevator deposits us on my floor, I continue, “There’s a great pizza place two blocks away, and a Chinese place around the corner. Or we can get subs from the deli across the street. Or if you’re in the mood for Thai or Indian—”

“Pizza sounds great.” Cole smiles. “Throw in some wings and beer, and I’ll be set for the night.”

We stop in front of my door, and I unlock the two complicated locks I modified after

moving in—my landlord doesn't know, but I'll replace them before I leave—and I reply, "I've got you covered on the beer. I picked up a case of your favorite."

"Sam Adams?"

"Of course." I raise my eyebrows at him. "Do you think I forgot?"

"Not a chance." Cole smirks at me as we walk inside the apartment. "Just thought you might try to push one of your fancy craft beers on me."

"They're good," I retort. "And innovative. Small craft breweries owned by individuals instead of huge companies, local distribution, small batches—"

"I know, I know." He laughs. "But I still like my Sam Adams."

So do I, even though I do prefer beer from small breweries in Vermont, like Hill Farmstead and Lawson's. But kicking back with a frosty Sam Adams while I chow down on wings and authentic New York-style pizza? I've got no complaints.

While we eat, we chat about easy things like sports and movies and news about our friends who are still active duty. Cole asks about my parents, who he's met many times, and I tell him all about my mom's recent mission to put my dad on a diet.

"She tried packing healthy lunches for him to take to the store," I explain, shaking my head ruefully.

"And he never said he wasn't eating them."

It was only after a month that she stopped in and caught him eating McDonald's.

Then it came out that he's been giving his healthy meals to the other employees and

getting fast food every day instead.”

“I can only imagine how your mom reacted. I bet she wasn’t happy.”

“Not really.” With a smile, I add, “But she got over it. She and my dad never stay upset at each other for long.”

“Your parents are great,” Cole says. “It’s too bad I won’t have time to get to Vermont to see them.”

“Maybe for Christmas, if you have time,” I suggest. “Traveling from Texas... it might be tough. But you’re always invited.”

There’s a long pause before he responds. “Well. Maybe I won’t be in Texas by then.”

Setting my plate down on the coffee table, I turn to him. “Have you decided to leave the department? Find a different job?”

Cole’s expression goes serious. “I’m thinking about it. This idea I have...”

“The one you’ve been thinking about since that case.”

“Yeah. It’s really stuck with me. And after we talked that day... I’ve been thinking a lot about it. It feels so wrong that a woman could be in clear danger, but the police can’t do what they need to help her.”

“It is wrong,” I agree. “So... how would you fix it?”

A corner of his mouth pulls up. “So... that’s actually one of the reasons I came to New York. I wanted to see you, of course, but also—” He pulls out his phone and taps the screen a few times, then turns it towards me, displaying a real estate listing

for a large, rundown office building.

“I was hoping you might head there tomorrow to look at it with me,” Cole says. “It’s in Sleepy Hollow, just about thirty miles from here.”

I look at him in confusion. “Why do you want to look at an office building?”

“Because I think it could be the perfect location for a new venture. Close to the city, so travel would be easy, but the property is nice and private.” Cole gives me a knowing look. “Not as crowded as here. Much quieter.”

A flicker of hope kindles in my chest.

“What do you want to do with the building?”

He gives me an almost nervous smile. “I have an idea for a business. A company. One that we could all be a part of. You. Me. Rylan. Zane. Finn. Nora. If it works... we could be a team again.”

Oh.

If we could...

The small flame of hope grows bigger. Brighter.

“What are you thinking?”

Cole meets my gaze, his expression filled with the same hope I’m feeling. “It’s a gamble, Leo. But if it works, the reward could be incredible.”

There’s no question of my answer. “Let’s go see it. Tomorrow. And I want to hear

everything .”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

ZANE

“Great class, everyone.”

Forcing a cheer I’m not feeling, I flash a bright smile at the fifteen women in front of me. “Keep practicing the skills I taught you. Next week I’m going to have you partner up, so you can get some experience sparring.”

I catch a few nervous expressions on my students’ faces, so I add encouragingly, “Don’t worry. I’ll walk you through everything. And I won’t ask you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with. But I think you’ll find it helpful to practice some of our more basic moves with a partner.”

The eldest of the women, a retired teacher who confided to me on the first day of class that it’s always been her dream to be a black belt one day, gives me a bright smile. “I think it sounds great, Sensei.”

“Master Zane.” A hand shoots into the air. It’s Wendy, a tall brunette with very large breasts, who bounces up and down with enough enthusiasm I worry she may knock herself out with them. “Master Zane. I have a question.”

“You’re not supposed to call him master,” a petite woman with glasses—Aeris, I think—says, pinning Wendy with an annoyed glare. “It’s Sensei or Zane. He’s reminded us at least ten times.”

I have. Since this is an introductory karate class, I said they didn’t need to address me using the more formal title and that Zane would be fine. Some of the women, like

Annette, the retired teacher, like the idea of standing with tradition, so they use Sensei. But the majority just call me Zane.

Not Wendy, though. She always calls me master using this sultry tone that makes me think she's imagining the two of us someplace much more intimate. And it's always said with pouting lips and a seductive, half-lidded gaze, promising more if I'm willing.

The first time she did it, I'll admit, I was tempted. That first class, when she stopped to talk to me afterwards, asking if I'd like to meet for a drink—eyelashes fluttering and her breasts on full display—I considered it.

After all, there aren't rules against dating gym members, just that all activity takes place off the premises. And I'm extremely single, have been for years, so there was nothing keeping me from accepting.

Except.

I know damn well I'm not willing to commit to anything serious. A casual hookup after a night at the bar, when we both know the score and agree to it? No problem. But to get involved with a student I'm supposed to see every Tuesday evening for the next ten weeks?

Not a great idea.

So I gently let Wendy down, making up a story about how I was fresh out of a relationship and not ready for a new one. And while she looked a little disappointed, she said she understood.

Does that mean she's stopped flirting? No. But she hasn't asked me out again, so I'll call that a win.

When I think about it, my story wasn't a complete lie. I am fresh out of a relationship, just not the kind I let her assume.

At least, it feels fresh, even though it's been over a year since my team split up.

When my Green Beret team broke apart last year, it hurt. My teammates are my best friends—my brothers and sister—and knowing I wouldn't be seeing them all the time anymore sucked. A lot.

It was inevitable—with Nora, Rylan, and Finn medically discharged, half my split team was gone.

And I couldn't bear the thought of starting over with three new teammates, always comparing them to the ones I lost. So I separated from the Army as soon as my contract was up, and Cole and Leo did the same.

Now we're all over the country—New York, Colorado, Texas, California, and me in Virginia—trying to come to terms with a new life we didn't want, but couldn't avoid.

I can't think about my teammates without feeling that familiar ache in my chest, missing them so much it hurts. And I can't stop the cloak of guilt from settling over me, reminding me of how badly I let them down.

They all insist it wasn't my fault, but I know better. Whose fault was it if not the captain of the team?

I should have noticed. I should have been more observant. I should have protected my teammates better.

And now they have to live with my mistake.

“Master Zane?” Wendy’s voice pitches up and she widens her eyes at me. “Is it okay if I ask a question?”

“Of course.” Giving myself a mental shaking, I turn my attention to Wendy. “And remember,” I add with a small smile, “it’s Sensei. Or just Zane.”

“Right.” She beams at me. “I forgot.” Flipping her long ponytail over her shoulder, she says, “Well. Since there are fifteen of us in the class, that leaves one person out from partnering next week. So... I wanted to offer to partner with you. So everyone else can partner with a woman.”

Almost at the door, Aeris snorts loudly.

Another student walks past me, muttering just loud enough for me to hear it, “She’s a real hero, sacrificing herself like that.”

Biting the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, I tell Wendy patiently, “That won’t be necessary. If everyone is here next week, I have Candace coming in to help. She teaches the women’s advanced classes, and she’s excellent. That way, I can step back and watch everyone’s techniques.”

“Oh.” Wendy deflates for a moment before perking up again. “Well. If you ever need someone to demonstrate moves on...” She walks over to me and puts her hand on my arm. “You can count on me... Zane .”

“Thanks.” I take a few steps back. “I’ll... keep that in mind.”

Or not.

Even if I were looking to actually date, which I’m not, it wouldn’t be with someone like her. Not that Wendy isn’t attractive, but I like a more natural look, not a woman

with a full face of makeup and breasts I'm pretty certain are fake.

There's nothing wrong with that. It's just not for me.

As Wendy walks away, I turn to collect my own things, stuffing my water bottle and sweatshirt into my workout bag. I glance at my watch, mentally calculating how much time I have to shower, pick up some beer at the store, and get to the airport to pick up Cole.

He's flying in for the weekend, partly to catch up after not seeing each other for almost six months, but also there's some mysterious thing he's been working on that he wants to tell me about in person.

I'd be happy just to see him, but after weeks of cryptic texts and his impromptu trip to a little town north of New York City, the curiosity is driving me crazy.

But I should find out this weekend. I'll pick up Cole in Richmond at six, be back at my apartment by seven, we can order some delivery and have a few beers, and hopefully he'll finally reveal this mysterious secret he's been keeping.

It has to be something big. Maybe he's finally decided to quit his job.

Or maybe he's relocating. Could he be moving to Virginia, and that's why he wants to talk?

I'd be happy to have him stay with me until he gets settled, or we could find a bigger apartment...

Maybe we could even convince Nora to move here instead of staying at her mom's—

“Looks like you're finding fans again.”

Spinning around, I spot Cole leaning in the doorway, a shit-eating grin on his face. “Just like always,” he chuckles. “Everywhere you go, you’ve got women hitting on you.”

“It’s not like that.” Swinging my bag over my shoulder, I cross the room and give Cole a quick hug. Lifting my chin at him, I say, “Good to see you, man. But I thought you were coming in at six?”

“I’ve been having crazy good luck at airports lately. Second time I’ve been able to get on an earlier flight. And if that gives me more time to watch women throwing themselves at you...” He smirks. “It’s good entertainment.”

“She wasn’t throwing herself at me,” I retort. At his raised eyebrows, I amend, “Well. Not much. She knows I’m not interested in dating.”

He gives me a skeptical look. “You’re not?”

“Not like that.” My smile sobers. “I’m not looking for anything serious. Not now. I might go out sometimes, but that’s it. It’s just... not a good time.”

Cole nods, his expression sliding into something more serious. Concern darkens his gaze. “Are you—” He stops. “You know, this isn’t the time. But I’m dying for a beer. Some food, too. You think we could stop on the way to your place?”

“Sure. If you don’t mind me taking a quick shower first.”

“Course not. I’ve got a few phone calls to make. I can wait in the lobby if that works.”

“Sounds good.” I gesture for Cole to go ahead of me, and we head into the hallway. “Give me five and I’ll be right out.”

On the way to the restaurant, I press Cole for clues about his big secret, but he's not giving anything up.

"Come on," I wheedle, feeling like a kid before Christmas begging my parents to tell me what's under the tree. "You're here. Why not tell me now?"

"Because I want to show you something," he replies. "And it's a little hard for you to look while you're driving."

"You could just tell me. And we could look at whatever this thing is once we get to the restaurant."

"Or you could be patient," Cole retorts, smirking.

He's lucky I'm driving or I'd show him what I think of his patience crap. "I am patient. Just not when my friend has been dropping hints for weeks and I know damn well you talked to Leo about it already."

"As soon as we get to the restaurant and I get some food," Cole promises. "Then I'll tell you everything."

I hold him to his word. As soon as the server leaves after dropping off our wings, I pin Cole with a glare. "Now. Before you start eating and claim you can't show me whatever this is on your phone because your hands are all messy."

"I'm going to show you." Cole unlocks his phone and taps the screen a few times, then slides it across the table to me. "This is what I went to New York to see."

As I look at the real estate listing for an office building in Sleepy Hollow, a small town I've heard of but never visited, my brow creases in confusion. "This place looks pretty rough, Cole. Why are you interested in it? Are you starting a business?"

“Well.” He drags out the word. “I am looking into starting a business, actually.”

I’ve known Cole isn’t happy with his job at the police department, but starting a business... “What kind?”

He leans forward, resting his arms on the table. With a solemn expression, he asks, “You know how I had that domestic violence case a couple of months ago, right?”

“Yeah. I know I said it before, but I’m really sorry about it.”

Frowning, his voice dips. “Me too.” There’s a long pause before he continues. “I was angry. Frustrated. It didn’t seem right. This woman needed help and we just—”

My jaw clenches as I think about it. “It’s fucked up.”

“It is. And I got thinking about all the ways it could have been different. If Dana had protection, better security at her apartment, surveillance... Her ex wouldn’t have been able to get to her.

And if he tried, he’d be caught. Charged with violating the restraining order.

Possibly breaking and entering, if it came to it.

He’d go to jail and she’d still be alive. ”

I can see the pain in Cole’s eyes, the guilt, the desperate wish that somehow he could go back and fix things.

I know how he’s feeling, because I feel the same every day.

Meeting his gaze, I ask, “So... What’s your idea?”



Cole takes a deep breath and exhales slowly before responding.

“What if I started a company that would protect people like Dana? A team of people who could step in when the police won’t, or can’t?

For all the people in trouble who don’t have the money to pay for private security?

The people who are scared and feel like they have nowhere else to turn? ”

The emptiness in my chest starts to fill with a cautious hope.

“And where would this team come from?”

Cole looks at me. “Us. Me. You. Leo. Rylan. Finn. Nora. We could protect people. We have the skills. And we’ve worked together for years. I can’t think of a better group to do it.”

For the last year, I’ve felt adrift. But now... I can see a glimpse of the shore.

But I’m afraid to let myself hope. So I sound a bit doubtful as I say, “But that costs money. I mean, I’d contribute, I have some savings, but I’m not sure—”

“That’s what I’ve been working on. How to make it work.” Cole’s expression brightens. “And I think I’ve figured it out—a way to provide protection for free to the people who need it, but still keep the company afloat.”

“How?”

His words come faster as his enthusiasm builds.

“So, this office building. It’s really rundown, been on the market for months, so I

could get it for much lower than asking.

And I have money my parents left me. I didn't need it before, so it's just been collecting interest. If I use all of it, I could buy the building and pay for the renovations. ”

“What kind of renovations are you thinking?”

Cole smiles. “A gym. A shooting range, so we can keep up our skills. A small clinic. Plenty of secure storage. And—” He pauses.

“Apartments. The place is big enough that I could have six apartments put in. So we'd all have a place to live.

Then we wouldn't have to worry about finding housing nearby. ”

A breathless hope sweeps through me. “So we'd work together again? The six of us?”

“Yes. And I've been thinking about how to finance things after. We could allot half our time to the free protection—pro-bono, if you will—and the other half to paid security work. Six former Special Forces operators offering top-notch security services, and being so close to the city...”

“We could work events,” I offer. “Conferences. Maybe... train security teams.”

“Exactly. I think we could make enough money to cover everything. Our salaries wouldn't be huge, but housing would be included, and—” All at once, he looks more vulnerable than I've ever seen him.

“We'd be a team again. I miss it. I miss you guys.

I thought I could be happy in Texas, but I'm not. Leo's not happy, and I don't—"

"Neither am I." A lump rises in my throat. "I miss you guys. And this job at the gym. It's not the same."

My friend of almost a decade meets my gaze. "I think this could work, Zane. I really do. What do you think? Are you willing to take this gamble with me?"

Work with my best friends again? Be part of a team? Make a difference, protecting people, like I used to?

There's only one answer. "Of course. Whatever you need, I've got your six."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

NORA

I can't remember the last time I felt this optimistic.

No. That's not true.

The last time was the day before we left on that mission, the one that shattered my life into pieces.

Jack was over, and we were in our favorite post-sex position—me cuddled against him, my head resting on his chest, while his fingers trailed lazily through my hair.

He used to love it when I wore my hair down. Jack would say, “Your hair is so gorgeous like this, all wild and fiery, and I love that you only wear it this way for me.”

I did. At work, around the guys, I wanted to maintain the image I'd cultivated ever since I joined the Army.

Capable. Unvarnished. Just another member of the team.

I didn't want to be seen as a woman—not after fighting so hard to break the stereotypes, proving almost everyone wrong when I finally became one of the very first female Green Berets.

But with Jack... I wanted to be feminine. After months of him breaking down my prickly defenses, I was okay with letting him take care of me sometimes.

Not all the time. I was too independent for that. But with Jack, I learned it was alright to not be the strong one all the time. That we could take turns being strong for each other.

If only I hadn't forgotten.

That night when everything seemed so perfect—a cozy dinner and movie at my apartment, then making love until we were both exhausted—I actually thought Jack was going to ask about moving in together.

I would have said yes.

As we lay there in bed, Jack turned to me with this serious expression, banked hope in his gaze. But then whatever he was about to say was interrupted by Zane calling to report that our departure time had been moved up and we were being sent to Afghanistan first thing next morning.

Maybe I should have pressed Jack on it. But I didn't. I thought there'd be time when we got back to talk.

I still remember that night so vividly, wrapped in Jack's arms, feeling so secure and hopeful and utterly in love.

All the things I'd dreamed of as a kid—a real home instead of just a house of people who rarely spoke to each other, a loving husband, holiday memories, pets or maybe even children—seemed so close I could reach out and touch them.

And then everything fell apart.

I fell apart.

The tiny bubble of optimism deflates and heavy, clinging depression tries to drag me down again. Back to the hole I'd let myself languish in until Cole and Finn came to pull me out.

No.

I jump off the couch and hurry to the front door, flinging it open to let the sunlight in.

Standing in the doorway, the warm California sun kissing my skin, I concentrate on the strategies my counselor taught me. Go outside. Practice mindful breathing. Do a quick body scan. Find five things around me to focus on. Visualize my happy place.

And finally, think of the things I'm grateful for.

I'm still alive. I'm still bruised, but not irrevocably broken. I have a place to live, albeit my mother's gloomy basement apartment. By some miracle, my teammates haven't given up on me. And one of my best friends in the world—he's like a brother, really—is coming to visit me.

Shutting the door behind me, I walk over to a patch of lawn and flop down on it, inhaling the scent of earth and freshly-cut grass.

I lean my head back and close my eyes, letting the sun heat my skin as I try not to think about the inevitable freckles I'm earning just from sitting out here for a few minutes.

Jack always liked my freckles. He'd trace his finger between them, creating little constellations and giving them silly names like Nora's Belt and Norandromeda and Nora's Dipper .

Tears I haven't allowed myself to shed in months burn behind my eyes, so I try that

box-breathing technique I learned about in New Mexico. And after a few minutes, it works. I'm back in control and no longer at the risk of losing it out on my mother's front lawn.

Not that it would matter. Her neighbors probably think I'm crazy already, given the way I've acted in the months I've been here. Hiding inside for days on end, finally emerging like a person trapped in a cave for months, scrawny and pale and blinking against the light .

But—I check my watch—Cole's due to arrive any time, and I don't want to give him another reason to worry about me. He's had enough of that already.

This time, when I see Cole, I want him to see the stronger Nora I've worked to become.

Nowhere near where I used to be, but at least I have some color and muscle tone again.

I've been jogging every day, forcing myself to spend at least an hour outside unless it's raining, and I'm even getting a few hours of sleep a night.

Interrupted by nightmares, maybe, but at least it's something.

Not how I used to be, though. Frowning, I remember my old self—kickass Nora who wasn't afraid of anything, the strong Green Beret all my teammates saw as an equal, and never a liability.

Not like now.

I fight to keep myself from spiraling back into self-recrimination, repeating in my head, think of what I'm grateful for. The sun on my face. That my teammates are all

still alive. That I'm not in that terrible dark place of six months ago. Cole is about to get here.

Cole. Arriving to talk about some mysterious venture he's only hinted about so far.

But whenever we've talked, he's sounded the most hopeful I've heard in months.

And when he called to say he was coming to visit after stopping in Colorado to see Zane, he said, "I don't want to explain over the phone, but... it could help all of us, I think."

So that's why I'm still hanging on to that bubble of optimism. Cole wouldn't exaggerate about something like that. If he has an idea—I know it's something to do with leaving his police job, at least—there's reason to think it's good.

Almost as if I summoned him, a rental car pulls up in front of the house, and I could recognize Cole's profile anywhere. He turns off the engine and turns to give me a quick wave before pushing open the door and getting out.

As he heads across the lawn towards me, he grins and breaks into a jog. "Nor!"

I jump to my feet and move to meet him, stopping a few feet away. My own lips tug up in response, one of the few smiles I've managed in ages. "You made it."

His hand twitches towards me, like he wants to clap me on the shoulder—our standard team greeting—but he hesitates and lets it fall to his side instead.

Sorrow slashes through me. There's a part of me that wants the contact, but another that fears the memories it could trigger.

Trying to cover the momentary awkwardness, I shove my hands in my pockets and



work my smile into something broader. More convincing. “How was the drive?”

“Not too bad.” Cole shrugs. “Long, but I listened to some audiobooks, made some calls, plus it gave me plenty of time to think.”

“And the visit with Zane? It was good?”

“Yeah.” He smirks. “I get there, and of course, a woman’s hitting on Zane.”

My muscles relax and my smile becomes genuine. “Why am I not surprised?”

“It’s that martial arts thing.” Shaking his head, Cole chuckles. “I guess there’s just something about it women like.”

“I guess,” I reply. “I’d rather learn to do it than watch, though.”

Then I glance at Cole’s duffel on the grass by his feet and exclaim, “Sorry! You’ve been driving for hours and I’m making you stand out here. Let’s go inside, I can make something to eat—”

Cole coughs. “Um...”

I make a face at him. “I can cook.”

“Are you sure about that?” His brows jump up to his hairline and his lips twitch. “I seem to recall a lot of burned meals whenever you’d offer to cook.”

“Well,” I amend. “I can make some things. Grilled cheese, pasta, soup...”

“Or we could order takeout?”

I laugh, a foreign sound. But it feels good. “Takeout is fine. And I have some Sam Adams...”

“That sounds great. But—” Cole pauses. “First, I was thinking... do you want to take a walk? There’s a park just a few blocks away, isn’t there?”

“Sure.” Honestly, I don’t blame him for not wanting to spend a lot of time in my apartment. With its tiny windows and claustrophobic feel, I don’t love being there either. “We can swing by the deli on the way home, grab some subs, and they have those cookies you like.”

He lifts his chin. “Sounds great, Nor. Let me just throw my bag inside and we can go.”

Less than a minute later, we’re walking down the sidewalk towards the pocket park, which has become one of my favorite places to visit.

It’s cute and cozy, with lush hedges enclosing it on three sides, filled with vibrant flowers and winding stone paths and benches tucked into little shaded nooks.

Even though it’s public, I never feel crowded here.

I can find a quiet spot and just let my mind go blessedly blank for a while.

As we approach the entrance to the park, Cole glances over at me and says, “You look good. I’m not saying that to be weird. But since that last time I saw you...”

“I know.” My cheeks heat. “Even after New Mexico, I was still embarrassingly weak. Just walking around made me tired. But I’ve been jogging every day, and I have a weight set in the apartment, plus I started going to pool at the Y a couple times a week. So I’m feeling a lot stronger now.”

“Good.” His expression sobers. “Not that you need to do anything on a timeline. But I’m glad. That you’re feeling—”

“More like myself,” I provide. “I know how I looked when you saw me all those months ago with Finn.” Stopping just inside the entrance, I step off the the path and look at him, my voice throbbing with sincerity.

“I know how bad I was. I didn’t realize then, but I do now.

And I hate that you had to see me like that—”

“Nor. Don’t apologize.” His eyes darken in empathy. “We were worried. But never apologize. Ever. We’re a team. That’s what we do. When one person is down, we have their six.”

I grit my teeth. I never wanted to be the one needing help. But there I was, wasting away through my own depression and apathy, and it took Finn and Cole to snap me out of it.

More firmly, I tell him, “Thank you for doing that. Making me go. And I’m better now. Truly. Not one-hundred percent, but I’m getting there.”

“Good.” Cole angles his head towards a bench nestled between a small cluster of oaks. “Do you want to sit here?”

“Sure.” As I sit down, he follows my lead. “So, are you going to tell me about this mysterious surprise you’ve been hinting about?”

“Yes. But.” A deep inhale. After he blows it out slowly, he says, “I just have to ask, Nor. Have you considered talking to Jackson?”

“No.” It’s immediate. Adamant. I can feel my walls clinking back into place. “I’m not going to. Please don’t push me on this.”

Cole’s features pinch. “I won’t. I just... I wish you’d think about it.”

“I can’t, Cole. After what I did, I can’t.” The band that’s permanently wrapped around my chest starts tightening. “It’s too late. I can’t. Please don’t—”

“Okay.” Placating now, Cole backpedals. “I won’t bring it up again. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” I give him an apologetic smile. “I didn’t mean to jump down your throat.”

Then, before I can stop myself, I whisper, “Is he okay? Do you know?”

“He’s okay. We’re friends on social media, so I know he’s alright.”

“Okay.” My heart unclenches a bit. “Okay.”

Changing topics, Cole says brightly. “So. Moving on. My idea.”

“Yes.” Interest sizzles through me. “Some kind of company? And you want to quit your job in Texas?”

“Yeah.” His lips lift. “I’ve been trying to work things out. Trying to figure out if I can swing it financially. But now... I think I can make it work. If...”

“If what? What idea?”

Cole turns on the bench to face me. “You know I had that domestic violence case a few months ago...”

And from there, he tells me everything.

About wanting to protect the people who slip through the cracks. People who can't afford private protection, or don't have enough evidence for the police to do anything. People in desperate need of something else.

Cole explains his idea for the business—half paid security work, half pro-bono. He tells me about the office building in Sleepy Hollow, and how he thinks it's the perfect place to start this business.

"My offer has been accepted," he said with a pleased smile. "But I have a clause in the contract, I can back out before closing if I need to."

"Why would you need to?" Interest has me leaning forward.

After a long pause, Cole says slowly, "Because... I want all of you guys to do this with me. For us to be a real team again. I don't want to go ahead with this without everyone."

"Who's in so far?"

"Leo and Zane, and I'm going to talk to Finn and Rylan next. After you, of course."

Instinct is shouting at me to say yes right away. To be a part of this amazing opportunity. To work with the people I miss so much it hurts. To protect people again instead feeling like a failure.

"They'll say yes," I reply through a narrowing throat. Emotion wells up. My nose prickles. "But me... Why? I wouldn't be..."

Crap. Now tears are threatening. Ducking my eyes, I mutter, "I'm not sure I'm the

person you want for this. Protecting people? Dealing with stressful situations? I'm just..."

"What, Nor?"

Dragging my gaze up to meet his, moisture blurring my vision, I whisper, "Why would you want someone who fell apart? I couldn't handle... you saw what I let myself become."

"Nora." Sincerity strengthens his voice. "I have always believed in you. Everyone goes through bad times. But it can make us stronger. It's made you stronger. I have no doubts about you being on the team."

He stops and swallows hard. "I don't want to do this without you. Not without one of my best friends. Not without"—emotion washes over his features—"my sister. I need you, Nor. Will you take this chance with me? With us?"

Oh.

My heart aches, but it's the best kind of pain.

And the bubble of optimism expands so quickly I'm breathless.

I could be with my team. Do something important instead of hiding away like a coward. Have a chance to become that independent, strong Nora again.

"Yes." Holding Cole's gaze, I lift my chin at him. Then I smile. "I'm in."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

RYLAN

Please let this be the right decision.

Let this be the change I so desperately need.

It seemed so obvious when Cole asked me weeks ago.

Stay in my hometown, surrounded by memories of a life I'd left in the past? Work a job I never wanted, each day in the shop a stinging reminder of everything I lost? See the pitying expressions on people's faces, the surreptitious glances as they tried to figure out just how badly I'd been injured?

To be seen as the wounded warrior, no longer able to protect his country.

To miss my friends so badly sometimes it hurt to breathe.

Or.

I could join my teammates on this new venture. A new company. Something that could bring me back to life again.

I wouldn't have to give up on my dreams of helping people.

I could be more than the man whose leg and back are too damaged to serve in the Army anymore.

Or can I?

As my car idles in the driveway of the future company headquarters, I look through the window at the large office building and the nerves I've been battling for days come back with a vengeance.

What if I can't do this?

What if my knee doesn't hold up?

What if end up a liability instead of an asset?

The words of my doctor keep haunting me.

Even after multiple surgeries and months of physical therapy, he couldn't give me the answer I wanted.

At my last appointment, I asked him how much longer until I could expect to be one-hundred percent again.

New therapies. Exercises. Even herbal supplements—which I've always scoffed at—if there was a chance they'd work.

But Dr. Davis just looked at me, his apologetic gaze telling giving me the answer before he ever said a thing.

And then he said the words I'll never forget.

"I'm sorry, Rylan. But you're never going to get back to where you were before.

Not completely. The damage to your knee was too great.



But if you keep up what you've been doing, you should reach seventy, maybe even eighty percent mobility.

You should be able to participate in all the activities you want. ”

But that's not true.

I can't be a Green Beret anymore. I can't run for miles anymore. If I land on my leg wrong, my knee threatens to crumple.

What if we're on a job and my knee goes out? What if I get a spasm in my back and lose my focus?

What if I let down my team?

I can't. I couldn't bear it.

And that's why I'm still in my car instead of going inside to greet my friends. It's why my car is still running, so I can turn around and make a quick getaway.

Before now, I never doubted myself.

Before that awful day when everything blew up in our faces, I never would have considered backing down from a challenge.

I wouldn't be afraid of something like this.

A light rapping on the passenger-side window nearly gives me a heart attack, and I jump in my seat in spite of myself.

I look over to find Cole peering into the car. He's smiling, but it's not enough to fully

hide his concern.

Concern for me.

Great. What a way to start things out. I'm supposed to be here as a member of Cole's new, elite security team, not someone who startles at small noises.

Forcing a small smile in return, I lower the window and lift my chin at him. In a carefully casual tone, I say, "Hey. I was just about to head in."

He studies me for a moment, and his eyes darken with understanding. "It took me a minute, too. When I first got here. I know it doesn't look like much..."

Then I see it.

The emotion he's trying to hide.

Uncertainty. Worry. Hope.

In a flash of clarity, I know I'm not the only one struggling.

I should have known. But I was so wrapped up in my own tangle of feelings, I didn't think. Of course, Cole is worried. This is a huge thing for him. He left his job in Texas. Invested all his money. Spent months trying to pull this together.

And he's trusting me—our team—to have his six.

The Special Forces creed I learned when I joined the Green Berets comes back to me.

I will not fail those with whom I serve.

Maybe we're not in the Army anymore, but we're still a team. And whatever it takes, I will not fail them.

Determination chases away my hesitation.

"It looks great," I reply. "I can't wait to look around. Let me just park the car."

His expression brightens. "Unlock the door. We'll park in the garage and I'll show you the secret passageway I had installed."

"A secret passage?"

"Yeah." Cole grins at me as I put the car in drive and continue down the driveway. "It's great. I got the idea from an article I read about old bomb shelters. Not that I'm expecting a bomb to go off or anything, but still. I thought it would be good to have an additional egress from the house."

Once I park my car, I get out and eyeball the shiny new Bilco doors in the corner of the garage. "So this is it?"

"It is." Like a little kid showing off a new toy, Cole hurries over to them.

With a flourish, he pulls the doors open.

"They're made from reinforced steel, fireproof and blast-resistant.

"He gestures to the stairs leading down.

"The passage leads to the basement. Why don't we head in that way?"

Zane and Nora are putting together the last pieces of equipment in the gym.

Then we can check out the shooting range.

I'm sure you'll want to spend some time in there later, figuring out what else we need. ”

“So you decided to put it in after all?” We head down the short set of stairs and into a long, concrete hallway. LED lights are set along the ceiling at regular intervals, keeping the enclosed space from being too dark.

Cole nods. “I did. The closest range to here is ten miles away. We don't want to have to drive out there every time we practice. And the basement has room, so it just made sense.”

“Nice.” A flutter of excitement moves through me. I haven't been on the range in months, and I miss it. Having a space here to keep up my skills... Even if I'm not the fastest or strongest of the team, as a trained sniper, I can still pull my weight.

“I thought you'd like it.” He flicks a quick glance at me. “I didn't order anything yet, so the room is basically a blank canvas. Once you decide what it needs, let me know, and I'll order it.”

As we come up to another door—a single one, this time—Cole opens it, explaining, “This is a safe room, essentially. So if there's a breach, not that there will be, we can come in here. There's another one upstairs, as well.”

I look around at the shelves of supplies, food and guns and ammunition all neatly organized on them.

A small sink and toilet are tucked into a half-hidden nook in the corner.

One wall is covered with screens, showing different vantage points of the property,

and I spot Leo on one of them, his large body hunched over a desk as he types away on a computer.

“Leo’s upstairs in the computer room.” Cole nods at the screen.

“He’s been working on the security system since he got here.

” As we exit the small room, Cole continues, “He’s almost done.

We have cameras and alarms all along the perimeter fence, plus the exterior of the building.

There are another fifty or so inside, but we won’t monitor those as often. ”

“Fifty?” My brows lift. “That seems like a lot for the inside.”

“I know.” He chuckles. “But as Leo says, we don’t want to chance leaving a hole in our security. If someone does get into the building... this way, we can find them anywhere.”

We walk down the basement hallway to another door, but this one is wide open. Beyond it, Nora and Zane are trying to maneuver a giant treadmill that looks to weigh at least five hundred pounds.

As we walk into the gym, Zane grumbles good-naturedly, “Do we have to move it again ? I thought the last spot was fine.”

Nora puffs at a strand of hair hanging loose from her braid, ineffectually trying to get it out of her face. “ Yes , Zane. The other spot would have been too close to the elliptical. I showed you the diagram I made. This way, everything is perfectly symmetrical.”

Rather than greet them right away, I hang by the doorway to watch for a few seconds.

There's a lightness in Zane's posture that wasn't there the last time I saw him; several months ago when he flew out for a visit. His features aren't shadowed like they were before, and there's a sparkle in his eyes that's been missing since that fateful day in Afghanistan.

He looks happy.

And Nora.

She almost looks like her old self again. Not frail like she was when she got back from New Mexico, but toned, with her muscles nearly back to our Army days. Her cheeks are pink and dusted with freckles, a welcome contrast to her pallor the last time I saw her.

Nora's the one I've been most worried about, and to see her healthy, smiling, bantering with Zane...

My throat goes thick for a moment.

This could be a good thing. For all of us.

Cole glances at me, then his eyes jump to Nora. In a low tone, so only I can hear him, he says, "She's been good. Happy. Being here... I think it's what she needs."

"I think it's what we all need," I reply, gritting my jaw against the wave of emotion sweeping over me. "It's good to be here."

Cole claps my shoulder as he meets my gaze. "It's good to have you here, Ry."

“Rylan!” Zane nearly shouts my name, and he drops his end of the rowing machine with a heavy clunk.

Bounding over to me, he gives me a quick hug.

“Glad you made it. Maybe you can tell Nora to stop making me move each piece of equipment at least ten times?” He smirks as he throws Nora a mock-glare. “I think she’s doing it on purpose.”

Nora smiles as she comes towards me. “Ry. I’ve been waiting for you to get here.” She glances at Zane, and her lips twitch. “Zane. Would I do something like that on purpose?”

I almost hug her, but stop myself at the last second. Instead I grin as I say, “Yes. I could see you doing that, if it meant messing with Zane.”

Nora laughs, a light, happy sound, and my heart lifts along with it. “Fine. Maybe I’ve been messing with him a little bit. But it’s good conditioning.”

Zane shakes his head, but he’s still smiling. “Do you see what I’ve had to put up with?”

Cole chuckles. “Nora’s right. It’s good exercise. But since the four of us are here, we can all help move this gigantic thing.”

As we gather around the very large rowing machine, I ask, “When is Finn getting here?”

“Two more days,” Nora replies. “He had to finish out his two weeks at his old job. But he’s really excited to get here.”

A warm feeling fills my chest. “Then it’ll be the six of us again.”

“It’ll be nice,” Zane adds. “Being a team again.”

While we maneuver the machine into the perfect spot, I find myself admitting, “I almost chickened out. Even in the driveway. I was—I am —worried I won’t be able to hack it anymore.”

Nora looks at me and says softly, “I almost did, too.”

“But you’re here.” Cole’s gaze moves from Zane, then Nora, and finally to me. “Maybe we’re not the same as before. But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“Right.” Nora lifts her chin at Cole. “Sometimes, going through something hard just makes us stronger.”

Maybe it does.

Once we’re done moving the machine, I step back to glance around the gym. It’s not complete, but there are weight machines and punching bags and benches and plenty of mats for stretching. There’s cross-training equipment like tires and ropes, and even a pilates machine set up in one corner.

And like a video fast-forwarding, I see my life here. Working with the best friends I’ve ever had. Helping people. Realizing that just because one dream is over doesn’t mean I can’t have a new one.

I can get stronger here.

I can be happy.



Turning to Cole, my voice is rough with emotion. “I think this is really going to work.”

“Me too,” Nora says, smiling.

“Me too,” Zane echoes.

“I think...” Cole pauses. “With the six of us, I know it will.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

FINN

It's still hard to believe I'm here.

Not at my lonely apartment just outside Fort Collins, surrounded by blank walls and second-hand furniture, spending my nights watching reruns of Survivor until I'm tired enough to catch a few hours of sleep.

I'm not scrolling through old photos of my team, torturing myself with what-ifs and wishing I could go back and do things differently.

I'm not getting up before dawn to go to a job I hate, my alarm blaring extra loud so my damaged hearing won't miss it—another daily reminder of everything I lost.

When I'd wake from a nightmare on a strangled scream, my heart jackhammering as adrenaline flooded my body, I'd wonder if things could ever get better.

I would wonder if I deserved them to.

Until Cole came to me with his idea for this company, I was beginning to accept my life in Colorado as penance for the terrible mistake I made.

And when he asked me to join him, as much as I wanted to say yes, I hesitated.

“What about my hearing?” I asked, tapping my left ear as if he somehow forgot what happened. “I could be a liability to you. If the Army doesn't think I'm fit for active duty, then—”

“That’s ridiculous,” Cole scoffed. “You’re more than fit to be on this team.

” Then his expression sobered as he held my gaze.

“I can’t begin to imagine the kind of adjustment you’ve had to make.

But you’re one of the best soldiers and teammates I have had the honor of knowing.

And I wouldn’t consider moving forward with this if you’re not with me. ”

How could I say no after that?

Especially when I was desperate to say yes?

So I took a chance. I gave notice at my job. I asked my audiologist for a referral to someone close to Sleepy Hollow. I loaded up my car and drove to Arizona to see my dad, then started working my way east across the country.

And now I’m here. No longer alone, but living in the same building as my teammates. Working on getting this company ready to open. Still not fully believing I was lucky enough to be given a second chance.

I won’t fuck it up this time.

Draining the last dredges of my coffee, I cross the living room to look out the window.

Patches of green are popping up across the expansive lawn and the trees are covered with buds just starting to unfurl.

The sun is breaking through the clouds left behind after last night’s rain, its heat

drying the damp spots on the patio.

Zane and Leo are outside the garage; Zane on a ladder adjusting a security camera, while Leo peers at his laptop and calls out instructions.

I crack the window, letting a cool breeze waft in, and hear Leo saying faintly, “Just a bit more to the left. No. That’s too far. Now turn it to the right a little.”

Then Zane replies with a hint of irritation, “Do you want to get up here and do this?”

My lips lift as I watch the two of them go back and forth, bickering like brothers. Leo’s trying to hide his laughter as he directs Zane to move the camera just one more time, and I know Zane’s just pretending to be annoyed.

Once the camera position is set, Zane leaps off the ladder and tackles Leo, grinning as he takes him to the ground.

They start wrestling, an even match, with Leo’s massive size a balance to Zane’s martial arts skills.

After a minute or so, Zane emerges victorious, jumping to his feet and extending his hand to Leo to help him up.

As they head back to the house, both of them smiling, Leo’s rumble voice carries across the lawn. “Just so you know, I let you win.”

Warmth fills my chest.

I missed this.

I missed my team.

I won't let them down again.

A quick series of knocks sound at the door and I turn away from the window, then head across the room to open it.

From the lightness of the sound, I can tell it's Nora, no doubt checking to see if I'm up and ready for our meeting.

No matter how many times I tell her I have my morning routine down to a science—a minute to get up and into the shower, two minutes max to wash up, another thirty seconds to pour my already waiting coffee—she still gives me a hard time about it.

This morning is no different. I open the door to Nora, who mimes shock as she sees me fully dressed and holding an empty cup of coffee. Clapping her hand to her chest, she asks, “Am I seeing things? Is this a doppelgänger of the real Finn? Are you actually ready early?”

“Funny,” I grumble, but I can't hide my smile.

It's such a relief to see Nora this way—lighthearted and joking—instead of fragile and wounded like she was months ago.

When Cole and I went to see her in California, I knew it wasn't going to be good, but nothing prepared me to find my teammate—my best friend—wasting away, her hold on life weakening by the day.

Now, she's almost like the Nora I remember from before. Back to her punishing workout routine, joking with the team, calling me out on my shit, smiling again...

But she's quieter now. There are shadows in her eyes that weren't there before. There's a slump to her shoulders when she thinks no one's looking. And sometimes

her gaze goes distant and sad, like she's caught in her memories but wishes she wasn't.

I know that feeling all too well.

Pushing the negative thoughts to the side, I grin at Nora and say, "I'm insulted. Are you implying I'm usually late?"

She shakes her head, sending her braid swinging. "Not late. Just... barely on time." Then she adds more solemnly, "I know you wouldn't be late. But I was just sitting around my apartment, and the quiet... it just..."

"I know." My tone gentles. I give her braid a little tug, the only place I'll touch Nora now. "Why don't we go down to the conference room? Surprise everyone when I'm not the last to arrive."

"Sounds good." Nora flashes me a thankful look. Then her gaze moves beyond me, scanning the apartment. "Finn. You barely have any furniture. Or decorations."

"I've been busy," I retort. "Decorating my apartment is last on the list."

As I set my empty mug on the table by the door, she says, "Still. We should get some pictures up. Photos. It can help, having things around to look at."

I don't really care about having a bunch of stuff on my walls, but if it makes Nora happy... "Okay. If you come over tonight, we can order some stuff online."

"Or we could head into Sleepy Hollow," Nora suggests as we head down the hallway.

"The downtown is really nice. I was checking it out the other day with Leo. He wanted to buy something for his mother's birthday."

We went to this store with these gorgeous pictures of Rockefeller Park and the Catskills.

Plus, there were some cool Headless Horseman sculptures. You could get one of those.”

“A guy without a head riding a horse? I’m not sure that’s very relaxing.”

“Maybe not. But it’s part of the town’s history. So that’s interesting.”

“True.” I’m still not sold on having a weird headless guy in my apartment. “We can go look. And you can help me pick out something. Maybe after, we can check out that new brewpub. The Hop-less Horseman, I think.”

“Definitely.” Nora smiles at me. “It would be nice to find a place we can all hang out. Play pool and darts and stuff.”

“Who’s playing darts?” Rylan jogs up from behind us and falls in beside Nora. “Are you leaving me out because you know I’ll win?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “There’s no guarantee you’ll win. Maybe I’ve been practicing.”

Nora laughs. “Have you?”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

Rylan shakes his head at me. “Even if you have been practicing darts, which I highly doubt, I’ll still beat you. Even with my back still messed up.”

Shit. How could I have forgotten? Ry had surgery on his back, and he’s

mentioned—reluctantly—how his upper back still hurts and stiffens up sometimes.

“Sorry,” I start, “We don’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” He claps me on the shoulder. “I’m more than ready to kick your ass at darts.” Just as we enter the conference room, he adds with a cocky grin, “Maybe we should put a wager on it.”

“Who’s placing bets?” Zane asks from his seat at the long wooden table. “Whatever it is, I want in.”

Leo looks up from his laptop. “You don’t even know what they’re betting on.” After a beat, he says with a smile, “But count me in.”

“Back to old habits, huh?” Cole’s already at the head of the table, a folder and pen in front of him. “What are we betting on this time?”

As we all find a seat, Nora glances at me and tilts her head at the empty one to the left of Cole. She takes the one beside it and says lightly, “Come sit here, Finn. I want to talk to you about ideas for your apartment.”

A surge of emotion makes my throat go thick.

Without making a big deal about it, Nora made sure I could sit where I’d be able to hear Cole the best. “Thanks,” I murmur as I slide into the seat next to her.

She gives me a quick, understanding smile and then says to Cole, “We’re talking about checking out that pub in town. The Hop-less Horseman. And maybe playing darts, if they have it.”

“And someone—” Rylan emphasizes the word as he looks at me. “Thinks they can



beat me at darts. Even knowing my record.”

“Sounds good,” Cole replies. “We should go there tonight, if everyone’s up for it. Take a break after all the work we’ve been doing.” He pauses. “And one of these days, someone’s going to beat you, Ry. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Ha.” Rylan lifts his chin. “I doubt it.”

Leo studies his laptop. “The website for the Hop-less Horseman says they have pool and darts. Their beer selection looks pretty decent—” Cole coughs, and Leo shakes his head at him. “Plus they serve pizza and wings. I’m down for going tonight if everyone else is.”

After a chorus of me toos and sounds goods , Cole opens his folder and straightens in his chair. “Okay. Now that we have that settled, are we ready to start the meeting?”

Following his lead, we all go quiet, sitting at attention. It’s like we’re right back at our old meetings back in the Army, totally focused and ready to discuss tactics and strategy.

Cole’s gaze sweeps the table before moving back to the thin pile of papers in the folder. Glancing down at it, he says, “First, I just want to make sure we’re on track for the opening.” He looks down the table at Leo. “Are we all set with the website?”

“Yes.” Leo lifts his chin at Cole. “It’s all ready. I have the encrypted application form for the pro-bono cases, plus the regular one for our business clients. As soon as you give me the okay, I can have it go live.”

“Great.” Cole replies. “Since our official opening date is next Monday, I think we’re good for it to go live now. We already have some referrals for paid jobs, but I’d like to see what kind of initial interest we have in the pro-bono side of things.”

“Absolutely.” Leo nods. “I’ll get it up and running as soon as the meeting is over.”

“Perfect.” Cole skims the paper in front of him again. “As for headquarters, I know we’re set on security. How about the shooting range and our supply room? Are we all set?”

“We’re good to go,” Rylan replies. “Plenty of weapons and ammo, and I tested out the range yesterday. It’s great, and the soundproofing works perfectly.”

“Nice.” Cole gives Rylan a little chin lift, then shifts his gaze to Zane. “The gym looking good? Do we need anything else?”

“Nope.” Zane grins. “It’s all good. Thanks to Nora here.” He looks at her with admiration. “Your diagram was perfect.”

Nora smiles back at him. “I knew it would be.” To Cole, she adds, “The electrician is coming to inspect the elevator tomorrow. After that, we can start using it.”

“After we moved all the furniture in,” I add, laughing. “Talk about a good workout.”

Cole turns to me. “Have you heard if the SUV is going to be ready in time? It’s not critical, but it would be nice.”

“Yeah, I spoke with the customization company yesterday. They were just installing the bulletproof glass, apparently it had been out of stock. But they promised to have it ready by Friday.”

“Excellent.” He smiles. “Not that I’m anticipating anyone shooting at us, but better safe than sorry.”

” After a beat, he adds, “Oh. I got the business cards. They turned out great. I’ll get a

box to each of you.

” Reaching into the folder, he pulls out a small card and passes it to me. “What do you think?”

I look down at the card, cream with a little black blade and two arrows intercrossing over it. Printed above it are the words, Blade and Arrow Security , in a simple, modern font.

It’s perfect. A simplified version of the Green Beret insignia, a symbol we’ll carry with us forever.

The reality of what we’re doing slams into me.

This is happening.

We’re starting a company.

Against all odds, I got a second chance.

“It looks amazing,” I say. “Perfect, really.”

As we pass the card around the table, everyone says some variation of the same thing. And I don’t miss the emotion in my teammates’ eyes, probably having the same thought as me.

Once the card makes it back to Cole, he stares at it for a second, his throat working.

Then he takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly.

His voice dips as he says, “I know I said it before, but I’m so thankful you’re all here

with me.

And this company—Blade and Arrow—I don't think of it as mine. It's ours."

Shit. I am not tearing up at the conference table.

With a cough, Cole continues, "Well. I think we can wrap up the meeting. Work on getting the finishing touches in place. And tonight, we'll check out this new pub." He pauses. "Unless there's anything else?"

My stomach picks this moment to make a loud rumble. Nora glances at me with her eyebrows raised. "Was that you?"

"Yeah." I grin at Cole. "Since the meeting's over, how about ordering breakfast? Your treat?"

He smirks. "What, you can't make your own breakfast?"

"I can. But I really want a breakfast sandwich and I don't have the stuff to make one. Come on." With a hopeful look, I wheedle, "Come on. Just this once?"

Cole shakes his head, but he's already pulling out his phone. "Fine. But just this once."

Nora laughs. "Make sure to order extra or Finn will eat all of it."

As my teammates take bets on how many breakfast sandwiches I'll eat, I sit back and listen, feeling happier than I've been in nearly a year.

I thought I lost everything. But I was wrong.

It just took my teammates to remind me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:53 am*

COLE

We did it.

Blade and Arrow Security is officially open.

From a flicker of an idea to reality.

It's hard to believe how much has changed in only a few months.

The office building that languished on the market for years has been turned into the headquarters of our new company.

Our company. Because I meant what I said at that meeting last week.

Just because I came up with the idea of starting a security company doesn't mean I consider it mine.

Blade and Arrow wouldn't exist without each one of us.

Rylan's expertise with weapons, Zane's martial arts skills, Finn's skill with explosives, Leo's experience with computers, Nora's fluency in half-a-dozen languages, and my training as a medic—together we make one heck of a team.

And that's not even taking into account the bond we have. The absolute trust. I'd put my life in any of their hands, and I'd guard theirs with my own.

We're going to make a difference. I know it.

Looking up at the front of the building, seeing the small sign by the door that proudly proclaims it as Blade and Arrow Security, knowing everything that's gone into making this happen...

I think my parents would be so proud to see what I did with their money.

I never spent it before, because nothing seemed important enough. A new car? A vacation? A boat? None of those could come close to honoring their memory.

But this? A company that will hopefully save lives? That will protect people so they don't end up like Clara or Dana? I can't think of a better thing to spend the money on.

And as I'm learning, Blade and Arrow isn't just going to help other people.

It's helped me. It's helped my friends. After that terrible day in Afghanistan, we were all broken in different ways.

I thought that part—the best part—of my life was gone.

But this new adventure has brought hope back to all of us.

I walk up the path to the entrance of Blade and Arrow, pausing in front of the gleaming metal sign. The name of the company is in bold letters, but it's something much smaller that my eyes are drawn to. Something tiny, that most people would never notice.

Down in the very bottom-right corner, two sets of initials. AM and JM .

Amy Mitchell and James Mitchell. My parents.

Not for the first time since this idea took flight, my eyes burn with unshed tears.

But not now. Not when there's so much to celebrate.

Pushing through the double doors, I smile as I take in our newly refinished reception area, the walls painted a blue-ish gray color Nora said is supposed to be soothing.

"If we have someone waiting out here, a potential client, they might be nervous," she explained while we were standing in Home Depot, picking out paint samples.

"If it's one of our pro-bono clients, they might even be scared.

So a welcoming reception space might help. "

Looking at it now, with the comfortable armchairs for clients to rest in, end tables with books and magazines to browse, the large cherry desk with a brand new computer sitting on it—it does look welcoming. It looks like the people who run this place know what they're doing.

We don't actually have a receptionist yet, but that's okay. For now, if we have any clients come in, one of us can greet them.

The subject of hiring a receptionist came up a few weeks ago, but I hesitated.

The idea of bringing someone new into our close-knit group didn't sit well with me.

After everything, my trust in other people has been bruised, and I know I'm not the only one of the team who feels that way.

So there was no complaint when I suggested holding off on hiring office staff, and everyone was happy to volunteer to help with administrative tasks in the meantime.



Maybe one day, I'll feel differently. Maybe I'll find someone I trust enough to let into our circle. But not now.

Now, I'm happy to just be with my team.

As I move through the reception area and into the hallway, I almost run smack into Leo, who's walking with his head down, gaze intent on his phone. I take a quick sidestep to avoid him, and he jerks his head up, an apologetic expression moving across his face.

"Sorry!" he says quickly. "I was checking our email. We have two more requests for security training—one from a CEO who lives in Scarsdale, and the other from an investor out in the Hamptons."

"That's great." My initial concern that we wouldn't find enough paid work to fund our pro-bono cases is turning out to be the complete opposite.

Thanks to referrals and an impressive website outlining our credentials—six former Green Berets with over sixty years of combined experience—we're already getting more than enough requests.

"I forwarded them to you," Leo says. "And I'm sending you two pro-bono applications as well. A blackmail case in New Hampshire and a stalking situation in Connecticut."

"Okay." I lift my chin. "I'll take a look, and we can discuss them at our next meeting." After a beat, I add, "Thanks for handling all the email and website stuff. I know it's extra work, and if you're getting bogged down—"

"It's fine. I don't mind. I like doing that kind of thing." He slides the phone in his pocket. "Are you heading out to the patio? I think Finn's already out there, making some kind of special drink."

“I am.” Clapping Leo on the shoulder, I urge him along with me. “Come on. I know you were going to just get back on the computer again. Take a break. Have some burgers.”

Leo shoots me a sheepish look. “I was just going to check a few things with the security. But—” His eyes light up. “I have some beer I was going to bring out. My dad sent some IPA from this great brewery in Waterbury. You’ll love it.”

Inwardly, I grimace at the thought of drinking more beer that tastes like a pine tree, but I try to sound enthusiastic as I say, “Oh. I can’t wait to try it.”

Leo chuckles. “I know what you’re thinking. But this is a Northeastern IPA. It’s fruitier. Less piney.”

“If you say so.”

We walk through the building, passing office doors and the elevator that finally got the green light after some last minute electrical work.

I thought about not fixing it at all—we’re all more than capable of taking the stairs—but then I thought about how Rylan might want to rest his knee after a long workout and how the elevator could help.

Not that I said that to him. I just said something about ADA compliance and making it easier to move appliances if we need to get new ones. Which is true. Lugging all those refrigerators up to the second and third-floor apartments isn’t something I want to repeat.

Before we even open the back door, I can hear the rest of my friends outside, talking and laughing. And that prickly feeling hits my eyes again.

Leo glances at me and says quietly, “It’s nice, isn’t it? Being together again.”

“Yeah.” It’s said through a tightening throat. “It is.”

Then we step outside, and the first thing I hear is, “Cole! Leo! Come try this new drink I made!”

Finn’s standing by a makeshift bar on the patio, which is really just a folding table covered with glasses and liquor bottles and mixers. On the ground beside him is a giant cooler with a stack of plastic cups in a sleeve on top of it.

He raises a glass filled with a bright green liquid, and calls over, “Ignore the color. It tastes great. I’m calling it the Blade and Arrow. I even found little blade cocktail picks online to use with them.”

Nora tosses a beanbag at the cornhole board she’s facing and it drops through the hole without touching the edge. Then she turns and makes a little face. “Be careful if you try one, Cole. They’re really strong.”

“Is that your excuse for losing?” Zane asks her with a grin as he takes her place in front of the board. “That Finn’s drink made you lose focus?”

“No,” she shoots back. “I missed that shot—the only one, by the way—because you distracted me.”

Zane shrugs, his face a picture of innocence. “I thought I saw a blimp flying by. It must have just been a shadow.”

From the grill, Rylan laughs. Then he tosses a hot dog roll at Zane, hitting him in the back of his head. “A blimp? Really? Do those even exist anymore?”

Leo whips out his phone and taps the screen. After a second, he reports, “There are about twenty-five of them left in the world. Half used for advertising. So it’s possible Zane could have seen one.”

“Ha!” Zane picks up the bun and whips it at back at Rylan. “So I could have seen one.”

“But you didn’t,” grumbles Nora. “And I can’t believe I fell for it.”

Once I get to the patio, I take a quick look around, noticing all the additions since the last time I was out here.

Instead of a bare square of concrete, there’s now a grill, a wooden picnic table, three plastic Adirondack chairs, the corn hole board, the table slash bar, and a tiki torch stuck into the ground at each corner.

“It’s not much,” Rylan says, following my gaze. “But for a place to hang out and grill, it’s not a bad start.”

“Later, I can bring out Cards Against Humanity,” Leo offers. “And I can hook up some outdoor lights.”

“That sounds great,” Nora tells him. “But we definitely need to have some drinks first. It’s more fun that way.”

“Did you say drinks?” Finn bounds over and hands Nora a fresh glass of his speciality drink. “Here you go.”

Nora grimaces as she looks at it. Then she holds it out to me with a grin. “I think Cole should try it. Since he is the founder of Blade and Arrow, and all.”

I take the glass from her and take a tentative sip. It’s not bad, but as Nora said, extremely strong. Throat burning, I say to Finn, “It’s good. But maybe a little less alcohol on the next one?”

“Actually.” Finn grabs a bottle from the table and holds it up for display. “Now that

we're all out here, I thought we should have a toast. This is my dad's favorite whiskey, and he sent it to us to celebrate the occasion."

While we wait for Finn to pour the whiskey into six shot glasses, I take a moment to look around at my friends. And a feeling of rightness comes over me, like everything I've done in my life was leading up to this.

Maybe being a Green Beret wasn't the ultimate goal, like I thought it was.

Maybe it was just preparation for something else.

Maybe here, in Sleepy Hollow, I've found my future.

Finn hands out the shot glasses, then raises his in the air.

His smile slides into some more serious as he says, "I'll be honest with you guys.

I didn't think I'd get a second chance. I thought my life in Colorado was going to be it.

But thanks to Cole's idea, his hard work, all of us coming together... I've never felt more hopeful."

Nora blinks a few times, but her eyes remain dry. Lifting her glass, she says, "You all know I wasn't in a good place before. I was... lost. But I'm not anymore. Here, with my best friends, I feel like I'm home."

Zane tugs her braid, his gaze softening as he looks at her. "I'm damn glad you're here. I'm glad we all are."

"I felt like a failure," Rylan says quietly. "But now I don't." He smiles as he adds, "Thank you, Cole. For bringing us together again."

Leo lifts his chin as he looks at me. “I think Clara would be so happy to see this, Cole. And Dana. To know their memories live on.”

Shit.

I take several deep breaths before I trust myself to speak.

Lifting my glass, I look around at my friends. My team. My brothers and sister. “Thank you for trusting me. For taking a chance. I know it’s a risk, but being here, working with the people I love most in the world... I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

“Thank you, Cole.” Nora swallows hard before continuing. As she meets my gaze, everything she’s feeling is right there, on display. “I know it’s selfish to say, but I needed this.” A pause, and then she glances around our small circle. “I missed you guys.”

“Ah, Nor.” Finn’s expression softens. “I missed you. I missed everyone.”

For a moment, we all go quiet, lost in our thoughts.

Then Zane breaks the silence, raising his glass again. Brightly, he says, “Okay. We’re all amazing. And I’m so fucking happy to see all of you every day. So let’s toast. To Blade and Arrow.”

We all lift our glasses.

In unison, we echo, “To Blade and Arrow.”

And I add at the end, emotion swelling in my chest, “To a new beginning.”