



Caleb (Special Forces: Operation Alpha) (Nemesis Inc. Bravo Team #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She's being stalked by her ex.

Rose North carries many secrets, and none of them are good. When the crazy ex she's been running from ups the ante, she's determined to disappear to keep everyone she knows safe. But how can she walk away from the only man willing to put everything on the line to keep her safe?

He'll break his own rules to protect her.

Former Navy SEAL and Black Ops Operative for Nemesis Inc. Caleb Hunt has never given his heart to any woman, but there is something about Rose North that calls to him on every level possible. For her, he'll break every rule he has when it comes to women, and maybe if he's lucky enough, she might just love him back.

She loves him enough to leave him. He loves her enough to follow her.

From sunny Riverton, California, to the snow-filled blizzards of Crazy Mountains, to the stunning Villa del Vesuvio on the windswept coast of Italy's Castellammare di Stabia, Caleb and Rose are going to need the combined efforts of Nemesis Inc. and the SEALs if they want their shot at their happy ever after.

Escape into a steamy action-packed romance series with swoon-worthy characters, Alpha Hero/Strong Heroine relationships, Susan Stoker's Seals, found family, and more.

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Riverton CA

“What do you mean you can’t do it?”

Rose North exchanged glances with Lizz Kilkenny when Lizz’s best friend’s voice rose in panic.

“That better not be my brother,” Lizz muttered, “because I swear to God, if it is, I’ll murder him myself and shove his balls down his throat for good measure.”

“I’ll help,” Rose agreed. “Just tell me where and when.”

“It’s three days to my wedding.” Indy was clearly a hairsbreadth from losing her shit. “Where am I going to find another photographer at this short notice?” she demanded. “We paid you already...”

Rose and Lizz crossed the store to surround their friend, offering silent comfort.

“What do you mean you returned the payment?” Indy pressed one hand to her forehead as if she was trying to keep her brain from exploding. “You knew this two days ago and didn’t think to tell me? How could you—” She pulled the phone away from her ear and glanced at it. “He hung up on me.”

“What happened?” Lizz wrapped her arm around her best friend. “Talk to me, Indy.”

“Our freaking photographer just canceled.” Indy dropped her phone on the counter. “He got offered a job for a modeling agency, and his prior commitments don’t matter a damn.”

Tell her you’ll do it.

She’s your friend.

“How am I going to find a photographer with three days’ notice? Three days.” She rested her shoulder on Lizz’s. “This wedding is doomed.”

“No, it’s not.” Lizz cut off Indy’s rant. “You love my brother, and my brother loves you,” she reminded her. “This time next week, you will be sunning yourself on a cruise with a brand new name and a wedding band on your ring finger. Plus, the best part, in my opinion, is that you’ll finally be my sister for real.”

You have the skills and equipment.

Tell her.

God, Rose wanted to so freaking badly. But it was against the rules. Rule number four, to be exact. Avoid everything and anything connected to your old life . She chewed on the corner of her lip as she regarded her friend—you could call someone you’d known for less than six months a friend, right? Especially when they’d already invited you to their wedding.

“We’ll find someone. I’m going to Google some names.” Indy reached for her phone. “Or one of the guys can take them.”

“If the guys take photos, then we’ll end up with stills from drone footage taken with some military-grade equipment. I don’t want grainy wedding photos. I’m only doing

this one time,” Indy wailed.

Rose could see her point. Taking wedding photos was a skill that took years to perfect. Was fate or something testing her resolve to follow the rules she’d been given when she’d moved here to Riverton? Or had someone at Witness Protection decided they wanted to see what she would do if an opportunity to return to a job she’d always loved, even if for just one day, landed in her lap?

Rose highly doubted that was happening right now. They wouldn’t screw with someone else’s wedding plans, right? They weren’t that bad. They better not be, or she was going to rant, rave, and bitch like nobody they’d ever seen before. She chewed on the corner of her lip, trying to decide what she should do. She even opened her mouth to offer to do it twice, then changed her mind.

Nobody will ever know.

But what if they find out?

They won’t.

Look at her. She’s devastated.

She watched her friends, one on the phone with the man she was to walk down the aisle to in a couple of days and the other calling every local photographer she could find listed on Google.

Rose cleared her throat. “I don’t know if my skills are wedding album worthy...”

What could it hurt?

There isn’t going to be anything online.

It's wedding photos for Indy and her man, not for a Vogue shoot...

Rose smiled at Indy's confusion. "I mean, I took some for my cousin's wedding back east, so I can do it if you can't find anyone."

"Do you mean it?"

The second the offer was out of her mouth, she wanted to pull it back and say she was just being a bitch and was pulling the rug she'd just offered right out from under Indy's feet again.

"I'll call you back, Dray." Indy lowered her phone again. "Seriously?" The hope in Indy's voice touched Rose deep inside and settled the unease that threatened to overwhelm her. "You'll do it?"

"Yeah, I can take photos of the ceremony, at least. I'm sorry that jerk let you down." She lifted one shoulder. "At least they won't be drone footage stills."

"I'll pay you whatever you want," Indy said earnestly.

"You will not," Rose insisted. "Let's just call it a wedding gift." She was grateful for having the presence of mind to put it this way, as there was no way she'd have been able to afford a wedding gift. Not with the minimum wage job she worked. Aces Bar and Grill was far from the catwalks of Paris, Rome, and Milan, but it was a job that kept a roof over her head, and she was grateful to have it.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Indy hugged her so tight Rose panicked for a second before she could remind herself that this was her friend, and she'd just made her ridiculously happy by fixing a problem for her.

Rose lightly pulled away from Indy and glanced up at the clock behind the counter.

“Shit, I’ve gotta run, or Jessyka is going to kill me if I’m late. She has something on with her boyfriend this afternoon, and I promised I’d cover for her so she could leave a couple of minutes early.”

“Are you sure?” Indy almost stepped on her heels on the way to the door. “I can keep lookin?—”

“No.” Rose shook her head. “It’s three days to your big day. You don’t have time for stress. I’ll do it. I promise.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

She glanced at the clock again. She had to leave now, or she’d miss the bus to the bar. “It’s a gift.”

“I’ll drive you over to work.” Lizz appeared with her keys in her hand. “Indy, drink some coffee and settle your nerves. You don’t want wrinkles on Saturday.” She urged Rose out the door of the shop ahead of her.

“Bye, Rose,” Indy called after them. “Thank you.”

What have you done?

This is totally against the rules.

Rose shook off her internal voice, mustered up a smile for Lizz, and they left the mall where the lingerie store Lizz and Indy owned was located. She’d made the offer. There was no way she was going to pull out now.

Lizz hit the key fob to unlock her car from halfway across the parking lot. “Thank you, Rose. You saved the day.”

“It’s nothing?—”

“Don’t,” Lizz warned. “Indy is my best friend, and you saved her using her honeymoon money as bail money for me because I was about to go down the street to the photographer’s place and show him what not keeping his commitments means.”

“You are the maid of honor.” Rose wrapped her fingers around the seatbelt as Lizz’s car took off like she was gunning for first in a street race. She squeezed her eyes shut when they barely missed the nose of a bus as Lizz swung them into traffic. “Please don’t kill us before next week. We both have to be there on Saturday, or Indy will bring us back to life and murder both of us.”

“Wuss,” Lizz teased, but thankfully, she eased up on the gas. “I’m just trying to make sure you aren’t late for work.”

“Jessyka won’t mind if I’m a couple of minutes late, but if I don’t show up at all, she’ll be upset, and I don’t want to do that to her.”

“Are you sure you can do it?” Lizz asked. “Because if not, now is the time to say it. I’d rather you tell me now than on Saturday morning.”

“I swear I can,” Rose promised as they pulled into Ace’s parking lot. “I’ve taken some for my family before.” She’d taken wedding photos for her cousin. There was no need to mention the celebratory weddings she had in her portfolio. “But if you want to look for a professional, keep my offer as a backup. I’m not going to be upset. I promise.”

Lizz pulled to a stop in front of the door. “Thank you, Rose. I won’t forget what you are doing for Indy.”

Rose didn’t know what she was supposed to say to that, so she nodded, smiled, and

unclipped her seatbelt. “Thank you so much for the ride. Knock on my door tomorrow, and I’ll show you my cousin’s photos. I still have them on a hard drive.”

“Okay.” Lizz blew her a kiss. “I’ll bring wine. We can watch *Mama Mia* and get sloshed, too.” She didn’t wait for a response but took off with her wheels spinning. Rose groaned. Her boss was so going to be thrilled at the burning rubber in his parking lot. She fished into her tote and pulled out an apron, tying it around her waist as she elbowed the door open. “Hey, Jess. Sorry, I’m a couple of minutes late.”

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How long after the first dance is it acceptable for a photographer to leave the wedding?

Rose schooled her face as she watched Indy and Draven circle the floor, surrounded by their friends and family. The last thing she wanted was for all the military types who'd come out in their dress uniforms to celebrate with the happy couple to figure out she shouldn't be here. She didn't exist. At least she didn't think she did anymore.

Agreeing to do this was stupid.

What were you thinking?

You weren't thinking.

She huffed silently in her head. When she'd offered to be the official photographer at Indy's wedding, she'd known she was breaking the rules, but she hadn't been able to resist the chance to do something she loved and had missed every single day for months. For just one day, she wanted to be freaking normal. When she'd shown Indy and Lizz the photos she'd taken at her cousin's wedding, they'd insisted she wasn't an amateur and that she'd rock at photographing the biggest day of Indy's life. Rose was sure that confidence was misplaced, but she did need the money she'd save on a wedding gift, and she also wanted to help her friend who'd been let down by the fancy photographer she'd initially hired.

Normal, my butt. There isn't one single thing normal about you.

“You are looking mighty pensive there...” The voice just behind her nearly took ten years off her life, and even though she did her best not to jump, she suspected Caleb Hunt, one of the groomsmen, knew she wasn’t as relaxed as she tried to appear. He’d been eyeing her weirdly all day as she’d directed the wedding party into poses for the photos Indy had requested. “This is a happy day,” he told her. “That frown,” he reached one finger toward her, and she stepped back to avoid contact, “will make everyone think you aren’t happy for them.”

Rose quirked up an eyebrow. “I am happy for them. Indy deserves the best, and for her, that’s Draven.”

“Hm.” As if he didn’t quite believe her, he quirked up an eyebrow, then leaned over the bar, grabbed a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket, and nodded to her glass. “Want a top-up?”

“No, thank you.” She nudged her glass away from him. “I don’t really drink very often, so it’s better I stick with what I have. Plus, I think I’m still on duty for another hour or so, at least.” She lifted her camera from where it rested on the bar next to her elbow. That sounded plausible, right?

“Want me to grab you a juice or a soda?”

Thank God he wasn’t going to push it. Some people didn’t know when to accept no for an answer and kept insisting someone who would rather not drink could just have one for the road or similar.

Don’t be a bitch, and don’t make him think you are weird.

I am weird.

She knew to most people she probably did appear weird, but that didn’t mean she

wanted everyone to know it for sure. She smoothed a hand down her dress and forced a smile. “I’d love water, please.”

“You got it.” Instead of topping up his own glass first, he put the champagne back in the ice bucket and went around further down the bar to the coolers and grabbed two bottles before coming back to her. “Want me to open it, or would you prefer to do it yourself?”

It’s as if he knows I won’t drink it if someone else opens it.

“I got it.” She reached for the bottle. “Thank you.”

“I like that you’re cautious when you are out with people you don’t know well.”

His praise shouldn’t make a swarm of butterflies show up in her belly, but it did. “Why do you say that?”

“I noticed all day.” He lounged against the bar next to her seat. “Every time you sipped from your water, you put the top back on again. That’s a smart thing to do, especially if you don’t know everyone you are with.”

“I’m a klutz. If I didn’t, I’d hit it with my elbow and send water flying everywhere.” Her go-to explanation should be enough. “The last place I want to spill a drink is at the top table at my friend’s wedding while I’m taking the photographs. Her ivory dress wouldn’t look as awesome with my drink all down the front of it.”

“I was kinda worried I’d drop some of the soup or something.” He grinned. “It made me nervous to be on display and facing everyone as we ate.”

She was sure he was just saying that to make her feel better because she couldn’t picture Caleb Hunt being nervous about anything, never mind something as mundane

as eating dinner. She didn't know what to say in response, though, so she made a non-committal noise and hoped he heard it over the sound of the band.

"Tell me about you, Rose." Caleb sipped his champagne and met her gaze over the rim of the glass. "How do you know Indy?"

How does he know I'm not just some random photographer she picked from the Yellow Pages when the other guy let her down?

Don't freak out.

Act normal.

Who was she kidding? Normal wasn't in her wheelhouse—not anymore. "We met at Aces Bar and Grill a few months ago. I work with Jessyka." She still didn't know why on earth she'd opened her mouth and offered to be Indy and Draven's wedding photographer when she knew it was against the rules. Desperation, maybe. The need to feel normal for once. The need to lift some stress from Indy's shoulder was definitely a factor. Once she'd seen evidence of her skills, Indy had insisted she wanted nobody else to take the images, which would remind her of the biggest day of her life when she married Draven, and the original photographer canceling must have been fate. "I guess we hit it off and became friends. When the photographer let her down, I offered to do it."

Rose would never admit she was also relieved, as she wouldn't have been able to attend the wedding if she wasn't here for work. Being part of the wedding in this capacity meant she didn't need to fork out a load of money she didn't have for a new dress. She had been about to send her RSVP saying she couldn't attend when the photographer called Indy and canceled.

"Mysterious, I like that."

No, no, he wasn't supposed to like it or supposed to have that intrigued look on his face. She wasn't a puzzle Caleb Hunt should get tangled up in, and she definitely wasn't a puzzle he should want to solve. She put the top on her bottle of water and curved her lips up into a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, but hopefully, he wouldn't notice that either. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

She didn't wait for his reply. She turned away and made a beeline for the restroom. She needed a minute to regroup. Being in a crowd was getting overwhelming. Most women might think she was nuts from walking away from Caleb's flirting, but she wasn't here to hook up, and one-night stands weren't her jam. Nope, if he was looking for a notch on his bedpost, then there were plenty of people at this wedding who could fill that space for him. She was supposed to stay under the radar. That was another one of the rules she lived by. Getting involved with someone so well-known in the community was not something she could or should do. Period.

I wonder what her story really is.

Former Navy SEAL and black ops operator for Nemesis Inc., Caleb Hunt, watched Rose as she walked away from him. Disappointment he hadn't been able to engage her in conversation warred with the desire to follow her. But he could tell she was uncomfortable around him, and he refused to be a dick.

From the second she'd shown up at Draven's mom's place this morning to take photographs of Draven, his groomsmen, and his family as they got ready for the wedding, Caleb had been fighting himself and the semi-hard-on he had going on in his pants.

This is ridiculous; she's clearly not interested. Go ask someone else to dance.

But he didn't want to ask anyone else to dance. The bridesmaids, while lovely, didn't make his chest do that weird flip-flop thing inside it. Besides, most of them were either related to the happy couple or attached to his teammates. While his brothers-in-arms wouldn't mind him dancing with their wives and partners, they would definitely not be happy if he danced with them the way he wanted to dance with the pretty photographer named Rose.

"You strike out?"

He dragged his eyes away from the door Rose had disappeared through and glared at his brother, Kacey. "Fuck you."

“Hah, I knew it.”

Who knew Delta Force would produce a Michelin-grade chef, and wasn't it a hoot that it was his brother? Who also knew that all the time Kacey spent making sure they all ate when they were kids while their parents worked five jobs between them to keep them afloat would turn into him being Nemesis Inc.'s resident chef? “Shut it, Kacey, before I put your face through that damn cake you spent all week baking.”

“If you do, I swear to fuck I'll plant you somewhere even Google can't find you,” Kacey warned. “I think it's my best one yet.”

“Of what? Three? Four?”

“A blast charge is less fiddly than piping frosting designs.” Kacey grabbed himself a beer and twisted off the top. “If Willow hadn't helped me there at the end, we'd have no cake at all.”

“Aww—” Caleb cut himself off and turned back to the door, some kind of second sense alerting him, and he watched as Rose came back into the ballroom.

“You have it bad, bro,” Kacey said. “Don't tell me the great Casanova Caleb Hunt has finally found a shy bone in his body. Go ask her to dance or something; maybe get her number.”

“She's working.”

“That's never stopped you before,” Kacey reminded him. He drained his beer and placed the bottle back on the bar. “Know what? I'll go ask her for you.”

Caleb grabbed the back of his brother's shirt and hauled him back. “No, no, you won't.” He somehow knew Rose would hate it if Kacey was a jerk. His brother

wasn't exactly known for his tact at the best of times. "Leave her alone." He'd figure out another way to get to know her. Hell, he'd ask Indy or Draven's sister Lizz for her number if he had to or start dropping into Aces every time he was in town. But for now, she was working. He wouldn't hit on her until she was off the clock. What he was watching finally made sense, and he nodded toward where she followed Draven and Indy toward the stage where the cake was still waiting to be cut. "I think they are gonna cut the cake."

"I should get over there." Kacey pulled free of his grasp and took off in their direction.

Shit, I didn't think that one through.

If his brother said anything to Rose, he would kick his ass, he decided. He could drag him outside the hotel and do it with Draven and Indy, none the wiser, just like when they were kids and trying to keep their squabbles from their folks.

He stayed at the bar and watched as Rose directed Indy and Draven in cutting the cake, taking pictures of every single second.

He replaced the champagne with a bottle of beer and took a swig as he watched Draven make a move as if he were going to rub the cake all over Indy's face.

"If you do that, Draven, I swear I'll Photoshop every single photo of today to show you with a tiny dick."

Caleb choked on the drink he'd just taken from the bottle and spewed it onto the floor. He hadn't expected that to come out of Rose's mouth.

Oh, she's going to keep me on my toes .

He didn't understand why he was sure of it—he just knew he was.

Now, he just had to persuade her to take a chance on a washed-up operator who lived states away from here and was almost at the end of his career.

Easy day. Easy fucking day.

But he knew easy wouldn't be part of the equation when it came to winning the trust of this wary woman. He reached for another beer when an idea popped into his head, and he put it back without opening it and reached for water instead. He glanced at his watch and calculated the amount he'd had to drink in his head and when the photographer would finish for the night. If he stopped now, then he should still be okay to drive.

Keeping an eye on Rose as she went about her duties became a lesson in self-restraint. When was the last time someone had captivated him so much or so fast? He was pretty sure the answer to that was never. There was just something about her that drew him like a flame pulls in the moth. If he didn't find some brain cells fast, he was pretty sure that, just like the moth, he was going to get burned big time.

Did it stop him watching her or wandering around the room just to stay in her orbit, though? No. No, it did not.

He hooted and hollered along with all the guests when Draven scooped his bride up, tossed her over his shoulder, and strode toward the ballroom door.

"It's so romantic," Matthew "Wolf" Steel's wife Caroline remarked as she hurried along next to her husband while they followed the bride and groom through the hotel lobby and out into the parking lot.

"Yep," Wolf agreed. "I'll toss you over my shoulder and carry you upstairs when

they've left."

Caleb grinned at Wolf and winked before his attention was once again drawn to the photographer. Damn, if only she'd give him a hint that she'd enjoy it, he'd scoop her up and run off with his prize too. But Rose's attention and camera lens were focused on the vintage Ford decorated with tin cans and balloons, which Draven placed his bride into. He stood as close to her as he could without getting in the way of her shot. His big frame kept Draven's aunt and her camera out of the way, ensuring Rose's lens wasn't hindered as she got the money shot.

"Thanks," Rose whispered. "I've been sidestepping around her all day."

He peered over her shoulder at the photo she'd just taken. "Awesome job. Well done."

"Thanks," Rose replied. "It's a good one." She turned her attention back to the camera, focusing on her job as Indy and Draven's getaway car took off down the curved driveway.

Caleb hooted and hollered with the rest of them. When the car disappeared from view, he turned to ask Rose if she'd consider having a drink with him now that the happy couple had left for the night and frowned when he found she'd disappeared. "Damn."

He followed the crowd back into the hotel function room, keeping his eyes peeled for her. His heart sank when he didn't find her.

Damn it. She must have slipped out when I wasn't looking.

Fuck .

He scanned the room of couples who had gone back to dancing and decided there was no point in staying any longer. He wasn't in the mood for dancing. At least if he went back to the apartment his boss kept for his team here in Riverton, then he could drink himself into a coma and wake up in his own bed tomorrow.

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Rose glanced over her shoulder. Her shoulders itched in warning; she just didn't know where the trouble was going to come from.

There's nothing there.

Has he found me?

Crap.

This cannot be happening right now.

She tramped down the unease that she knew from experience would make her freeze. She scanned the street behind her, peering into the shadows between the lights, but couldn't see anything.

Maybe I should have taken a cab or allowed Indy and Draven to pay for the hotel room they'd offered.

It wasn't in her nature to accept anything that smelled remotely of charity. Her family had drilled it into her head for way too long. Handouts or help are charity, and if you can't do it yourself, then you are worthless, which was why she was walking to the bus stop less than two blocks from the hotel. Of course, the closest stop didn't go her route. She'd checked and double-checked and decided that rather than changing buses by taking the one closest to the hotel, she'd walk an extra block and take the bus closest to where she wanted to get off instead.

I'm regretting all my life choices right now.

Stupid. Stupid. You know better than to be out in the open. He has spies everywhere.

Not in California.

He's got no foothold here.

That you know of.

God, she really hoped he didn't. It was annoying that she had to work harder than she wanted to to convince herself that she was imagining things. Even harder was believing that there was no point in second-guessing herself. She already knew she'd go over and over the decisions she'd made every single time she closed her eyes for freaking months. It sucked so bad to be this—ugh, what was the word—insecure, stupid, crazy, all the above?

Her instincts said to get to where there were other people, and to do it fast. She'd be all of those words if she didn't listen to it. Rose turned in the direction she was meant to be going and prayed it wasn't deserted when she got there.

Just make it to the bus stop.

There will be people at the bus stop.

I hope.

Please let there be people at the bus stop.

He's not going to do a damn thing if you are around people.

She glanced at her watch and picked up speed. If those footsteps she could hear behind her were from a regular person rather than one of his goons, then hopefully, they would think she was just sprinting for the bus and not because she was a weirdo. If it was his goons, then hopefully they too could see the lights of the bus stop and would leave her alone. She recognized how futile it was to wish he'd leave her alone. He'd never stop hunting her. She snorted in her head at herself for wishing for things that would never come true.

It's time to move on.

When you get home, pack your stuff and leave.

You can email the photos to Indy. She'll understand.

The footsteps behind her sounded as if they had moved from a fast walk to a jog, and in response, she also increased her speed. If she could just make it to the bus stop, she may be safe.

Please let there be people there.

Please.

She glimpsed someone's outline in the bus stop shelter and thanked any god who might be up there for looking after her. "Did the number fifty come yet?" she asked breathlessly as she skidded to a stop.

Act normal, for heaven's sake. Act fricking normal.

Yeah, I checked the receipt for you. You didn't take the 'act normal' upgrade.

Shut up.

Her hands closed into fists, and she made an attempt at not making herself stand out by acting twitchy, which was difficult for her at the best of times. Twitchy should have been her middle name.

“Not yet.” The older gentleman glanced at his watch. “It should be here in about five minutes, though.”

Five minutes. She could hopefully keep her collective crap together for five minutes, right? “Thank you.” She sidestepped away from a man in a dark hoodie who joined them from the direction she’d come from.

Were you following me?

She shifted her feet, getting ready to bolt just in case he had been chasing her, and made a move toward her. If this was one of her nemesis’s goons, then the man waiting for the bus with her was in danger. She’d never forgive herself if he got hurt because of her because one old man would never be strong enough to take on killers like the ones who hunted her.

You should have thought of that before you bolted down here.

Idiot.

The man in the hoodie stepped closer to her. Every step she took, he took one too, until she stood on the edge of the sidewalk. Any minute now, she’d have to step onto the street. Was that what he wanted? To have her step into traffic? She didn’t want her life to end under the wheels of that dark gray pickup truck driving past. As if the driver heard her talking to herself in her head, the driver hit the brakes, and the reversing lights came on a split second before the truck returned to the bus stop. Rose eyed it warily as the window on the passenger side came down.

“Can I give you a ride, Rose?”

Huh?

What?

Is he talking to me?

It took a couple of seconds to realize the driver was talking to her, and a couple more before she did a double-take and recognized the man behind the wheel.

What is he doing here?

Thank God he is!

“Rose?” he called again. “Can I give you a ride?”

“Ca—” She glanced nervously over her shoulder at the man she was sure had been following her, reluctant to give Caleb’s name when she just wasn’t sure if she was in trouble or not. “Why?” she asked instead.

“Because I’ve called it a night and decided to go home,” he answered. “I’ve only had two beers, the champagne I shared with you, and I took a sobriety test before I got in the truck.”

It was almost as if he was trying to persuade her that he was safe to drive. As the man in the hoodie growled something under his breath, she was grateful Caleb had shown up when he did and even more relieved he’d given her that information as it made her decision easier to make.

“Rose—”

Hoodie dude stepped closer to her, still muttering. His move made her decision for her. She barely knew who Caleb was, but there was no way he could be as bad as the alternative... she hoped. If she was jumping from the frying pan into the freaking dumpster fire which was her past, then she was going to be so pissed with herself. The bus stopping behind Caleb's truck and hooting at him to move was the final deciding factor. "Thank you." She stepped off the sidewalk and caught the door as he pushed it open. He tossed his jacket into the back, and she stepped up onto the truck step and slid into the passenger seat next to him. "I appreciate you stopping."

He waited for her to shut the door and put on her seatbelt before he smoothly pulled away from the bus stop. "You're welcome. Where am I going?"

She placed her camera bag onto the floor at her feet. "Oak Tree Apartments, if that's okay." She immediately gave herself a mental kick for being an idiot and telling him where she lived. No wonder her asshole ex kept finding her. She made it freaking easy by telling almost complete strangers where she lived.

"You got it."

She glanced at him and caught him watching her out of the corner of his eye as if he were trying to decipher the most important code on the planet. She immediately turned away.

Crap.

Heat built up in her face. She refused to acknowledge it, shifting her camera bag with her toe and fiddling with the strap she still held in her hands. The next time she looked at him, his focus was on the rearview mirror. But it was the frown on his face that made the breath catch in her throat. "Is something wrong?" Damn it, there went her hope that she'd been overreacting. She regretted taking the ride from Caleb. Dragging him into her mess had never been her intention.

“It’s probably nothing.” He shifted gears and eased into the other lane, then checked the rearview again and narrowed his eyes.

She looked over her shoulder, but all she could see was what looked like normal downtown traffic at night. “But you think it is something, don’t you?”

He did the lane change thing again and growled low in his chest before admitting, “Maybe...”

You should tell him.

God, no. He’ll think I’m crazy.

Maybe he wouldn’t, but she wasn’t sure what to do. But telling him was admitting it out loud for the first time since she’d bolted in the middle of the night and gone off-grid using witness protection rules she’d found on Google in an attempt to escape.

“Um, what do we do?” That sounded like a reasonable question, right? At least, she thought it was.

“You don’t seem surprised that there may be a problem,” he said softly. “Why?”

Shit.

“Too many action movies?” The quip was out of her mouth before she could stop it. But as far as she was concerned, it was something a logical person would say. Although calling herself logical was a stretch of the imagination, even for her, but hopefully Caleb would believe it—hopefully.

“Hmm.”

His non-committal response told her he didn't believe her in the slightest.

Tell him. Maybe he can help.

No. Do you not remember what happened to Joey? He tried to help. How can you forget what happened to him?

Telling Caleb that she thought it was her crazy, scary ex would no doubt not end well. Now was not the time to screw up more than she already had. She wrapped her fingers around the handle on the door, bracing herself as Caleb hit the gas and the truck shot forward. This wasn't the movies or some book she'd been reading.

It's a coincidence.

She snorted in her head. She knew better than most that a coincidence was a red flag she should pay attention to. All she could do now was wait until Caleb stopped at a traffic light; maybe then she could run and disappear into the city before the people chasing them figured out she'd left his truck.

He'd always considered himself pretty damn good at multitasking. But keeping an eye on his rearview mirror, on his passenger, and on the street in front of him was proving to be more challenging than it should have been. He chewed on the corner of his bottom lip and made yet another lane change, then swung off at the exit with no flicker. The lights he'd been tracking behind him did the same thing. The asshole obviously hadn't been expecting the move and came close enough to side-swiping a car whose driver blew him the hell out of it with the hooter.

"Wha—?"

"Fuck," he cursed quietly and reached for his phone, but couldn't get it out of his pocket without unclipping his belt, and there wasn't a hope in hell he was doing that while he had someone tailing his ass. That would teach him not to put his freaking phone in the holder on the dash. "Can you grab my phone out of my pocket? I need to stay concentrated on the road."

"Um—okay."

It was a damn shame he didn't have time to focus on how her fingers felt sliding into his pocket as he lifted his butt off the seat, but he hoped he might get the pleasure of feeling it sometime in the future.

"Got it. Here." She offered it to him.

"Hit speed dial one," he instructed, and hit the gas. "Tell the man who answers, it's

my phone, and I've got a tail." If he was on his own, he'd have been tempted to stop the truck and ask what the hell the fucker's problem was, but he wasn't alone, so it was a moot point.

"Dude, you're meant to be drunk or fucking some bird right about this point." Trev's voice filled the cab of his truck. "Why the hell are you calling me? Do you need directions for where your dick goes?"

He winced at the crudeness of Trev's words when Rose inhaled sharply. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting the kind of greeting Trev was famous for when she hit the speaker as the call was answered.

"Cut the shit, Trev, I think I got a problem."

"You know you don't get participation trophies from the condom factory when you wrap it up?—"

What the ever-loving hell?

"Dude, are you fucking on drugs or some shit? Listen to me," Caleb snapped, cutting Trev off. "I think we have a problem. There is someone on my ass, and I don't know who or why."

The sound of feet hitting the floor preceded wheels rolling, telling him Trev probably had been sitting at the war-table rather than his desk and was now scooting across to his computers. "Where are you?"

"Fifth and ninth," Rose supplied.

"Who's that?"

“Need to know.” Trev didn’t need to know everything unless it turned out this person was after Rose and not him.

“I got you.” Trev didn’t push the issue. “There’s a left coming up. Swing down there, and let’s see what your tag-a-long does.”

“I don’t understand,” Rose whispered so quietly. He wasn’t even sure Trev would have picked it up on speaker.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. It pissed him off to see fear on her face. She should not have to be afraid of a damn thing. The second he had the opportunity, he was going to pound the asshole tailing them into the ground, just for shits and giggles. “Trev’s got us on street cameras,” he explained to Rose. “I work with him.”

“Turnoff is coming up in three…” Trev gave him the countdown.

Caleb sped up, trying to give himself a little clearance from the car behind them, and mentally crossed his fingers that the driver wouldn’t figure out what he was up to in time to follow them.

“Two.”

When the vehicle following them sped up too and shifted into the outside lane. Caleb checked the review mirror and said a silent prayer that the vehicle right on his bumper wasn’t with his tail.

“One.” Trev gave the final number just as the nose of the truck was level with the exit. “Go, go, go.”

Caleb slammed on the brakes, then whipped into the street Trev had mentioned. Rose leaned hard to the side; only the seatbelt kept her in place. “Okay, where to?” he

asked Trev.

“Go straight, then take the second left, then right again to get back on the freeway, and go back the way you came unless I see something better before then. I’m still looking,” Trev instructed. “Plates come back to a rental paid for one Janek Nawrocki out of DC.”

Rose’s harsh inhale sounded louder than she’d probably intended to, and Caleb narrowed his eyebrows. “What does that mean?” He glanced in the rearview mirror, and thankfully, all he saw behind them was an empty road, at least back to the last turn.

“I don’t?—”

“Not you, Trev.” He cut him off. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “Rose, what does that name mean to you?”

“No—nothing.”

She was lying through her teeth. He didn’t think she realized she was now as paler than Casper after a flour bath. “Liar.” He called her out softly and hit the locks with his elbow when her hand reached for the door. What the heck was she going to do, jump out while he was speeding through the streets of Riverton? Hell no, he liked her pretty neck too much to allow her to break it by pulling a stupid stunt like that.

“I can’t find any connections to Nawrocki and the name Rose,” Trev supplied helpfully over the phone, dragging a distressed noise from Caleb’s passenger. “I’ve cross-referenced all the usual channels.” The sound of furious typing filtered through the phone. Clearly, Trev was still searching for intel.

“Shit.”

“Bro, there’s an underground parking lot coming up on your right,” Trev said. “Take it; code is one seven zero four.”

Harsh breathing next to him told him Rose was panicking. He didn’t bother responding to Trev. Their comms tech could see his truck on the street cameras and knew what he was doing. He hit the button for the window and tapped the code into the device. “Come on, come on,” he told the barrier. “Lift, damn it.” He barely waited for it to rise high enough before he was through and flipped off his lights to make it less obvious where he’d gone from the street outside.

“I’ll keep an eye on the dude,” Trev said helpfully. “You figure that out.”

His unspoken instructions were clear. It was up to Caleb to figure out who Nawrocki was and why he was following the wedding photographer. He drove to the back of the parking lot and reversed the truck into a spot in case they needed to make a fast getaway. Fallujah style when parking was always best.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:49 am

6

He found me.

Shit.

Run.

Hide.

How did he find me?

“Breathe.”

A hand wrapped around the back of her neck, and Rose fought against it. She’d never be trapped again. She dug her fingers into the hand.

“Hey, easy baby. It’s me, Caleb.”

I must get free.

She whimpered and kept struggling as the fingers stroked the side of her neck. Her chest hurt with the need for air, but she couldn’t seem to draw any into her lungs. Panic engulfed her, sweeping past all the training she’d forced herself to do in the previous months and overriding what she’d hoped would have become second nature so much for all the self-help books she’d bought, which were supposed to build confidence. When the crap hit the fan, a person would fall back into what they’d

always done—in her case, fall apart at the drop of a hat.

“You’re safe. I got you. Easy. You’re safe,” the voice crooned close to her ear. “I promise I’ll keep you safe. It’s Caleb. Look at me, baby. Look at me.”

Why does he sound so calm and not angry? He never ever sounds calm or nice.

She blew out a shaky breath, striving for calm.

“Breathe, baby,” the voice crooned. “Look at me.”

The words finally sank in. She couldn’t resist the order and did as the voice asked. She lifted her eyelids, then reared back when she met hazel eyes instead of the brown she’d been expecting.

Who—?

“It’s Caleb. You’re safe.”

Fudge freaking buckets. I screwed up.

“Ca—Caleb?”

“Yes, Caleb,” that soothing deep voice confirmed. “I’ll help you figure it out and get safe from whoever that fucker is and whatever he plans to do to you.”

She inhaled a shaky breath. It was sweet that he wanted to help. But it was safer for everyone, including him, if he stayed out of it. “You can’t. He keeps finding me.”

“Okay, it sounds like there is something you are doing which is helping him?—”

She shrank back from Caleb's hand as it smoothed her hair back from her face. "This isn't my fault. It's not?—"

Caleb put one finger to her lips. "I know it's not your fault. What I mean is he must have some way of tracking you, which you haven't figured out yet." He stroked his finger down her cheek. "I'll help you find out what it is and make sure it stops happening."

She decided right then that Caleb was going to find someone to love and make her feel coddled, protected, loved, and safe at some point in the future. It was a crying shame that that woman wouldn't be her. "Why? Why do you want to help me?"

"Because a pretty woman shouldn't have to run from everything and everyone she knows just to be safe."

Is he for real?

He can't be.

Knights in shining armor are for fairytales, and we all know my story is filled with a beast and not a dashing knight.

"Hold tight for a minute." Trev interrupted any words she might have been able to scramble together. "They're circling around. I'm gonna call in backup."

"Just Kace, Trev," Caleb ordered and pulled a face. "Let the others keep on partying."

"Not on your life, asshole. I'm not having Nem pissed at me because I didn't follow protocol." Trev's annoyance was more than obvious in his tone. "You'll just have to deal."

“Shit,” Caleb whispered softly.

She didn’t want to be the reason he was upset or angry; she couldn’t figure out which he was. “What’s wrong?” she asked softly enough that she hoped Trev wouldn’t hear.

“I don’t normally ask for assistance outside of work.” He leaned forward and peered out the window. “I don’t normally need it.”

Ugh, now she felt like she was putting him out. She didn’t want to do that. Remembering he’d said to only reach out to one, her curiosity got the better of her, and she asked, “So why Kace?”

“He’s my brother.” He scratched the side of his head, then scrubbed his palm over his scalp. “He doesn’t count.”

“And the rest of us are your brothers in arms.” Trev was back on the phone again. “We all fucking count, asshole.”

She didn’t understand what exactly was going on between the two men, but she nodded as if she did. “I can walk from here.” She put her hand on the door handle.

“No,” both Caleb and Trev barked.

“Stay put, and let us help you.” Caleb reached for her hand, intertwining their fingers. Funny how it didn’t feel like she was trapped when it was him and not Janek or John, as he preferred to be called on this side of the Atlantic, holding her hand.

“Backup is on route, ETA ten minutes,” Trev supplied. “Stay in place until then.”

Ten minutes. She could do ten minutes, right? She swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut tight. “O—okay.”

“We’re going to help you figure this out,” Caleb promised again. “We’ll make sure it’s safe for you to live without looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life.”

Oh, how she wished she could believe him. But she knew better. Her stupidity would get them all killed. She could not allow that to happen. She would disappear again before she’d allow that to happen.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Caleb shifted in the driver’s seat, turning toward her. “You don’t want to get us involved because you don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Damn straight, mister.

“Yes.”

“You don’t know who we are, do you?”

“Friends of Draven?”

“Teammates,” he corrected. “All of us are former military. If there is one thing we do and do well, it’s getting out of shit when the bullets start flying.” He lifted one shoulder and shrugged. “We’re pretty damn good at dodging bullets, too. I promise.”

“What Caleb isn’t, and never has been,” Trev said dryly, “is modest.”

“I’m a Hunt,” Caleb tossed the words back. “We don’t go down unless it’s fighting, and don’t you forget it.”

He doesn’t go down unless it’s fighting!

Well, that’s a shame!

Get your mind out of the gutter, sister. That's not what he meant, and you know it.

This is not the time to be thinking THAT.

"What?" Caleb peered at her and quirked up one eyebrow. "Tell me what put that pretty blush on your face?"

She brought her hands up to cover her flaming-hot cheeks. There was no way she could talk herself out of this one. "Nothing."

"Hmm."

Mortified at where her internal slut went, she could tell he didn't believe her. Hell, she wouldn't believe someone who squeaked like she just had, either. She closed her eyes to block out the heat she was imagining in his eyes. Not that it helped much, as her imagination took over, and she could still see him behind her eyelids.

"You have incoming," Trev warned before she could make a bigger fool out of herself. She had no idea who or what was incoming, but as long as it wasn't Janek, she'd take it.

"Good."

He could think it was good that the people she assumed were his friends were arriving. To her, it just meant more people she'd have to avoid as she left as soon as their backs were turned. No matter what they said, there wasn't a hope in hell she was putting them in Janek's path. Not any more than she already had. These people didn't deserve that.

A large, jacked-up black pickup, the sister of the one she and Caleb were sitting in, came to a stop in front of them, blocking their way out of the parking spot, and her

heart almost stopped.

“It’s okay, baby. It’s the guys.” He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. She didn’t think he realized their fingers were still interlinked. She tugged, and he growled low in his throat. “Don’t...”

Movement through the window drew her attention back to the truck, the men climbing out of it, and the one behind it. Her eyes widened. She’d thought two, maybe three of his friends would come—not eight of them. She sighed.

“It will be okay,” Caleb promised. “Stay here.” He released her hand and got out of the truck, closing her in behind him.

For a minute, a full sixty seconds, she counted in her head and watched him talking to the others. She decided she didn’t want to hide in the car when they were talking about a problem that was of her making. Well, Janek’s making, which was basically the same thing. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and got out of the truck.

At the sound of the closing door, they all spun around, and Rose stepped back from the menace she could feel pouring off them.

Caleb shook himself, scowled at his friends, and gestured to her. “Come here, baby.”

There he went again, calling her baby. What was all that about, and why the heck did she actually like it?

He must be one of those people who calls everyone baby.

That had to be it, she thought as she took one look at all the muscles between her and Caleb and went around the back of the vehicle, squeezing between the wall and the end of the truck and walking to him. She tramped down the uneasy feeling that urged

her to run now that she was free of the truck, but she reminded herself that fit and her didn't belong in the same sentence, and there was no way she could outrun one of them, never mind all of them.

“What’s going on?” the man she recognized as Draven’s boss, Dalton, barked. “Who is following you?”

“I—I...” Why was he angry with her? It was her fault Janek’s man was following Caleb, but she hadn’t asked Caleb to stop and pick her up.

“Nem.” Caleb tucked her into his side. “Ease up, man. Don’t scare her.”

“I thought he was Dalton,” she whispered to Caleb.

“He is,” Caleb answered. “He’s also Nemesis.”

I’m so confused. She thought nicknames only happened in the movies. Apparently, she was wrong, and Top Gun was right. “Um...”

Dalton opened his mouth as if he was going to ask another question, but the man standing next to him hit him with his elbow and said, “If our exfil is clear, why don’t we go back to the hotel or to my place? At least there we aren’t out in the open.”

One man went to the second truck and grabbed something out of it, which he handed to Caleb. She couldn’t see what he did with it as his hand moved to the side of his head opposite to where she stood. It would have been rude to lean around him to check.

“Okay.” Caleb nodded. “Let’s go.” The men parted around them as he guided her around the truck again and opened the door for her. She climbed in and turned as the rear door was also opened, and a large man climbed into the back behind Caleb’s

seat.

“I’m numb-nuts’s brother.”

“Shut up, asshole,” Caleb snarled at the man as he leaned in to strap her into the seat. “You good?” he whispered to her.

She nodded. “Numb-nuts?”

He winced and tossed a scowl at the man behind them. “I’m gonna kick your ass, Kace.” He winked at her. “Don’t mind my brother. He’s a jerk at the best of times.”

Ah, that’s his brother.

“You and whose army?” Kacey muttered under his breath as Caleb closed the door and went back to the driver’s side before climbing in and starting the engine.

She looked at Kace curiously before his piercing gaze sent shivers down her spine. She turned forward again and smiled weakly at Caleb as he patted her knee, then released the handbrake to follow the first truck, with the second one falling into line behind them. She didn’t know where they were going—either the hotel or someone’s house. “If you all turn out to be axe murders, I’m going to be so freaking pissed.”

They are friends of Indy’s and Lizz, so they have to be safe.

She was so tired of trying to stay ahead of Janek and his goons. So fucking tired of it. At this point, if Caleb turned out to be a creep, maybe she should just sit her ass down and say have at it. Anything he could do to her had to be better than the hell she was trying to stay one step ahead of. It had to be!

7

“Clear.”

Thank fuck he now had the earpiece Dalton had brought for him. He hated relying on his phone, even with Trev on the line when he was driving. It was much safer to have comms. Although, he didn't know where Nem had gotten them from, as they hadn't expected to be working this weekend. He hit the gas and followed Dalton out of the underground parking lot.

“Where are we going?”

“I'm not sure.” He hoped Rose didn't think he was crazy for not finding out. When the chips were down, there were few men he trusted. Almost all of them were either in the truck in front of them or behind. “But the boss and the guys won't put us in danger.”

Kacey snorted behind him. “Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

“Shut up.” Killing your brother was allowed under extreme circumstances, right? If it wasn't, it should be. “Don't scare her more than she already is.”

“She needs to be,” his brother growled. “Only a stupid woman wouldn't be scared with an asshole chasing her. Are you a stupid woman, Rose?”

“Um—no. I don't think so.”

When they got to where they were going, there was going to be a come-to-Jesus meeting between him and Kacey. His big brother could just take his asswipe attitude and shove it where the sun didn't shine. Although, knowing Kacey, the sun probably did fucking shine up his ass.

"Keep it that way," Kacey ordered Rose in his typical no-nonsense manner. "Don't be too fucking stupid to live, and we're good."

"Jeez, you're rude."

Caleb grinned at Rose's comment under her breath and started silently counting in his head because he was sure his bat-eared brother probably heard it anyway. He smirked at Kacey in the rearview mirror when his brother grunted.

Yup. He heard that. Serves him right.

He knew Kacey would respect her more for having some spunk to her. He still hadn't figured out why that was important right now, but he'd worry about it later.

Dalton bypassed the turn-off for the hotel and kept going. "Boss, Bravo Five, can I have confirmation on our target location?"

"Bravo Five, Nemesis, the wolf's den."

"Copy that." He checked his rearview mirrors, but all he could see was the team truck behind him and what appeared to be normal traffic. Wolf's house worked for him. He chewed on the corner of his lip. As long as the trouble Rose was running from didn't follow him to Wolf's house and put his wife in danger, that is.

"I don't understand," Rose said. "Where are we going?"

“Some of the men who came with my boss are local. We’re going to one of their houses.”

“Boss, Charlie Five,” Kacey said behind him. “Going where we have innocents may not be a good idea until we figure out what the hell is going on. We don’t want to lead?—”

“Charlie Five,” Dalton interrupted with a growl, “While I appreciate the fact you seem to have received some brains in the damn post, do you think I’m stupid enough not to make a pitstop first?”

Caleb bit back a grin and winked at Rose when his brother got an earful for questioning their boss. Dalton had way too many years of Special Forces and running multiple mercenary teams not to be on the ball when it came to safety.

“Sorry, Boss.” Kacey winced. “Just making sure. The woman seems important to my brother. Just making sure we’re covering all angles.”

“Fuck you, Hunt. Just fuck you.”

“I’m totally lost,” Rose told him.

“We’re,” he glanced at a street sign, “umm...”

“No. I mean, I have no idea what’s going on. Charlies, Bravos, or who is talking to who.”

“I’ll make sure to introduce them all to you when we get to where we are going.” He hit the flicker when Dalton did and followed him into the parking lot of Aces Bar and Grill, then parked up in the spot next to him as the other truck did the same.

She peered up at him. He fucking hated the wariness in her eyes. “What happens now? Why are we at work?”

“Wait a sec before you get out, baby.” He made a mental note that she worked here. That was information he’d need later when he wanted to bring her on a date when all this shit was cleared up. He jerked his chin toward his brother, who nodded, got out of the truck, and slammed the door after him, making her jump. Caleb made a mental note to add that to the list he had running in his head for shit to beat his brother up for the next time they sparred. He pressed the button to release her seatbelt and tugged her toward him, brushing the wisps of hair that had fallen out of her messy bun back from her face. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know.” She shuddered. “I’m not even sure where to start.” She looked over his shoulder, and her eyes widened. “Um, I think they are waiting for us.” She gestured toward the outside.

“Let them wait,” he murmured. “A couple of minutes either way isn’t going to kill them. It might actually teach them that not everyone asks ‘how high’ when they bark ‘jump.’ They are impatient at the best of times.”

“I feel bad?—”

“Don’t.” He grinned at her. “Blame me if it makes you feel better.” If it made him a sap to think he could get lost in the pools which were her eyes, then sign him up. He’d wear that label proudly. He curled one hand around the back of her neck and leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll keep you safe,” he promised her. It was important that she believed that. He wanted her to believe it. Craved it. Because her feeling safe was suddenly at the top of his ‘most important shit on the planet’ list.

Rose jerked in his arms when someone knocked on the glass behind him. He scowled over his shoulder at the fucker who turned out to be his boss.

Yeah, I get it. We are on a time crunch if she's being tracked. But give her a second to fucking breathe. Not every woman is a Lina.

He silently admitted to himself that he was kind of relieved that Rose wasn't a kick ass and take names kind of woman like Dalton's wife was, because that hint of vulnerability Rose had going on was driving his inner caveman insane with the need to fix all that was wrong in her world. "Ready?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll come around and get your door," he told her as he opened his door.

"I can get it."

He paused half in and half out of the truck. "I know. But I want to." He waited for her to nod in agreement before he got all the way out. Thankfully, the guys knew what he was up to and didn't ask questions as he jogged around the front of his truck and opened the door to help Rose out.

"Thank you."

He interlinked their fingers and led her to where the guys waited. He didn't know how else to make it clear to them without actually giving voice to the words that she was important to him. But he figured they were all smart enough to figure it out. "You're welcome."

"Arms out like this," Dalton ordered as soon as they were within a foot of him.

"Um, what?" Rose looked all kinds of confused and stepped back. Caleb did an inner fist pump when she moved slightly behind him as if she trusted him to be the buffer between her and the others.

“What my boss means,” Caleb glared at Dalton, silently warning him to tone it down, “is we need to scan you to see if you have a tracker on you somewhere.”

“Have I somehow ended up in the movies and nobody told me?” Rose muttered.

“It won’t hurt,” he reassured her. “He won’t even touch you, just run the wand a couple of inches off your body. I can do it if you prefer.” He kind of hoped she’d ask him to be the one to scan for bugs. But even though she had no idea of how things often worked in his world, the woman he was rapidly coming to think of as his once more slapped on a brave face, sucked it up, and did what needed to be done. He had the impression she was used to sucking it up because things went sideways when she least expected it.

Not anymore, baby. Not on my watch.

“It’s okay.” She clenched the fingers of the hand behind his back into his shirt for a split second, then released it again and stepped up next to him. “I’m ready.” She held her arms straight out from the shoulder.

“I’ll be fast.” Dalton slightly redeemed himself to Caleb by promising to work quickly. “I won’t even touch you. Ready?”

Rose nodded. Caleb kept one eye on the device and one on Rose as Dalton ran the scanner wand around her.

Damn.

He cursed silently in his head when the device stayed the same color, and it didn’t beep. The best-case scenario would have been for the tracker to be on her clothes or something because he had a feeling she would lose her mind at what was to come next.

“Clear,” Dalton confirmed.

“What does that mean?” Rose asked the question, then immediately huffed. “What am I saying? I know what it means. But how is he tracking me if it’s not on me?”

“Then it’s on something you own,” Dalton said before Caleb could.

Caleb winced as he figured out where that tracker might be. Thankfully, Dalton wasn’t a complete asshole and gave her a couple of seconds to figure it out. His boss opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut again when Rose’s eyes widened.

“My camera?”

“If that’s the only other thing you had with you today.” He fucking hated the stricken look on her face. Some asshole was going to pay for being the reason it was there. He just had to figure out how to find him before he found Rose. “Or if it’s something you brought from your old life.” He didn’t even care that they had an audience and tugged her in for a hug. “We’ll be careful. I promise,” he whispered against her hair.

“It’s all I have left,” she hiccupped, “from before.”

“Bingo, that’s how he’s finding you,” Kacey informed her.

His brother really was a prick. “Kace...”

Rose surprised the crap out of him by laying her hand on his arm and shaking her head. “It makes sense,” she said. “I hate it, but it makes sense.” She turned to the guys. “It’s on the floor where I was sitting.”

Kacey dipped his chin and went around to the passenger seat of his truck to grab her camera case.

Caleb sighed. Every instinct he had told him whoever had planted that tracker was going to be so fucking pissed that it was found and disposed of. It would be disposed of because there wasn't a hope in hell he'd allow it to keep running—especially not if Rose wanted to keep her camera, and he knew she would. The only question which remained was if the asshole had some other means of tracking her too.

Kacey placed the unopened camera bag on the hood of Dalton's truck, stepped back, and nodded to Caleb.

Good, his brother had figured out Rose was important to him. Caleb glanced at Rose. "You want to open it for us?" He had a feeling the camera would need to be disassembled, and if he did it, he might break it.

"Just let me take out the sim card, and you can have it." She lifted her chin. "I won't risk Indy's wedding photos, even to avoid him. "

She didn't need to say who 'him' was. Caleb had to admire the grit she'd found some time in the space of twenty minutes between the two parking lots. He nudged her toward the hood. "Open it and grab the sim card. The guys can take it from here." She nodded and unzipped the camera bag.

"How do we know the tracker isn't in the sim card?" one of his teammates, Bryan *BB* Boyer, asked.

"That's a question for Trev," Dalton said, then glanced at Wolf, "or Tex."

"Tex is coming in tomorrow for a visit," Wolf replied. "He'll know what to do to check it."

"No," Rose said softly. "Not until I have every single one of these photos downloaded and know they are safe."

“I will not risk bringing a tracker into my home,” Wolf said mildly. “But we’ll figure it out. I’ll call Tex. He might have an idea of where it could be.”

“Go ahead,” Dalton agreed.

“We will protect her,” Caleb said as a statement rather than a question. Dalton and the guys better not disagree with him. “I don’t care who is following her or why. We do not leave any woman with her ass swinging in the breeze with a fucker like that asshole after her. Especially not her. Period.”

“I’m not sure what gave you the impression that we were going to do that,” Dalton said. “When the fuck have any of us ever not helped when someone is in the shit?”

Caleb scrubbed his hand down his face. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s just...” He trailed off.

“She’s yours to protect?” Wolf punched in numbers on his phone.

“Yeah.”

“We get it, man.”

“You’re talking about me as if I’m not standing right next to you,” Rose said bitterly. “You’re all just like every other man in my life.” Rose pulled the sim card out of the camera. “Why did I hope for something different? Stupid. I’m so freaking stupid to allow hope—” She cut herself off as if she was swallowing a scream which built up inside her. “I will not allow you all to put yourselves and your families in danger because of me.” She lowered her eyes to where his fingers plucked at a loose thread on her sweater. “I’ll just leave, and you all will be safe.”

Caleb growled under his breath. He couldn’t believe this woman. From what little

they knew, she was in more than a little trouble, and she was trying to protect them. He reached for her, but she sidestepped him. He matched her move for move until he could snag her wrist and tug her into his chest. “You don’t have to do it all alone.” He tucked one finger under her chin and tipped it up. He needed to see her eyes because everything inside him screamed that if she walked away now, then she’d disappear. He didn’t want that to happen. “Please don’t leave. Let us—let me help you.”

“Why should I trust you?” She pulled out of his arms and stepped back. His heart sank as she stubbornly reminded them, “You all have families. It’s safer for everyone if I go.”

Admirable as your intentions are, that’s not gonna fly, sweetheart.

Fuck . He balanced himself lightly on his feet, ready to pounce if she tried to flee, and glared at her. “You act like we,” his gesture took in all of the guys, “are a bunch of pussies who can’t handle some shit or have no idea what’s coming.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She tried to cut him off, but he spoke right over her.

“Don’t be one of those too stupid to live people like in the fucking movies,” he growled. “You are better than that.” She had to understand he could freaking help her if she’d let him.

She must be thinking she was getting freaking nowhere or maybe trying to figure out how he didn’t understand her point of view, but Caleb figured if she’d just given him a second, he could make her understand. He narrowed his eyes when she slipped the sim card into her pocket, and then her hands opened and closed into fists. She’d made a decision; hopefully, it was to thump him and knock some sense into him. But as she sidestepped to go around him, he knew she was going to run. “It’s bett?—”

He caught her by the wrist. “No, it’s not. Please don’t run from me, Rosey-Posey. Let

me help you.”

“I can’t. I won’t risk you all.”

“Damn it.” That caveman he’d been resisting for the last hour decided, fuck it, he’d make her see sense. It took over, short-circuiting his brain. He scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Anyone would think I can’t keep you safe.” He strode toward his truck. “You’re coming home with me until we figure this shit out. Because if you think I’m leaving you out here on the streets to do it alone, you’ve lost your damn mind.”

She’ll think you are a caveman .

I am a fucking caveman.

I don’t care if she knows it.

She lifted her head. Her fists raised to thump on his back, then huffed in annoyance when she made eye contact with Wolf, Dalton, and their men. These people were going out of their way to help her. She'd be an idiot to refuse them, but everything she was deep inside cautioned and reminded her that aid from anyone, especially a man, usually came with a price. More shocking was the realization that she trusted Caleb not to hurt her, physically at least. Emotionally—she already knew in her soul he had the capacity to destroy her. “Put me down.”

“No.” Caleb paused on the other side of his truck. “Not until you promise me you won’t run.”

“Why would you believe me even if I did?” she retorted.

“I can feel your need to run,” he muttered. “Don’t ask me how because I can’t explain it. But everything I can see tells me you want to bolt.”

He wasn’t wrong. “I won’t run.”

“And I’m the pope.”

“I didn’t say I don’t want to run. I just said I won’t do it.”

“Caleb, put her down,” Dalton ordered.

“Bo—”

“Don’t make me make it an order,” Dalton growled. “We are not in the business of kidnapping women, even if it’s to keep them safe.”

“Liar.”

At least that’s what she thought Caleb said. Her anxiousness ramped up. She wiped her sweaty palms on the back of his shirt.

“I have one word for you, Boss.” Caleb spun back toward his boss, meaning she could no longer see anything but his parked truck. “Lina.”

“That’s different,” his boss grumbled. “She’s my wife.” He cleared his throat. “She was my wife then, too. So, it doesn’t count.”

Rose snorted and felt more than heard Caleb huff.

“You kidnapped your wife?” The words came out squeakier than she would have wanted, but at least they were steady. “And she didn’t beat you with a skillet or stab you in your sleep?” She’d met Lina earlier at the wedding.

“Not for lack of trying,” Dalton replied. “But that’s not the issue here. The issue is your safety, not my wife’s.”

“If you take me with you,” it was weird as all get out to be talking to Caleb’s back while she was face down over his shoulder, “it will be your wife’s safety.” She remembered the little boy taking his first wobbly steps from earlier. “And your son’s.”

“Then your Janak will have signed his death warrant,” Dalton growled. “My family are mine to protect. I—we—all of us will fuck up anyone who puts them in danger.”

Rose swallowed hard. Her, it would be her putting them in danger. Not because she wanted to, but because the side effect of helping her would be a danger to the families of everyone who came to her aid. “Then you shouldn’t help me. Because I will be the person who puts them in danger. I don’t want that to happen?—”

“Bullshit. It wouldn’t be your fault,” Caleb growled. “We can help you...”

He wasn’t listening. Maybe he had some kind of hero complex, but she didn’t. She wouldn’t allow their families to get caught in the crossfire like?—

Don’t go there... nothing good comes of seeing it in your head as a walking nightmare.

She shook off the memory or, rather, the nightmare. Those early days when she’d first run had caused so much damage to too many good people. “It’s too dangerous?—”

“Ma’am,” Wolf interrupted, “dangerous is kinda our jam. Just ask any of our women?—”

It was so sweet of him to try and assure her that they would get involved in her crappy situation. “That’s different. Helping them didn’t put everyone else you love in danger.” She ignored all the snorts and mutters from the men behind them. It was embarrassing to be ass over boobs on Caleb’s shoulder as they discussed the situation. “I can’t and won’t ask that of you.”

“Why are you running from him?” Caleb finally put her on her feet. He caged her in the circle of his arms against the side of the truck. “Who’s Janek to you?”

“My worst nightmare.” The words were out before she could stop them. “He’ll never stop looking for me.” Her eyes pleaded with them to listen to her. “He won’t care

who gets in his way.”

“Why?”

She wasn't sure which of the men asked and let out a frustrated breath as she realized they were going to keep pushing for answers. “Because I'm the one who got away.” The acknowledgment was ripped from her throat in a painful cry. “I'm the one who refused to...”

“Refused to what?”

God, she wanted to lean into him. He looked strong enough to take the weight of the shitshow which had become her life. But she didn't dare. These people deserved better than her. She squeezed her eyes shut against Caleb's penetrating gaze and swallowed hard, forcing the words out, “...be his whore.” She shuddered. “I just wanted to be free.”

“You will be free,” Caleb promised. “I'll help you get free of him. We all will. You just have to trust us, firefly. Please trust me.”

Why was he doing this? Did he not know how tempted she was to agree? Maybe he did. “Do you have some kind of god complex?” She watched them over his shoulder. “You can't stop him. Nobody can.”

Wolf pulled out his phone, dialed a number, and put it to his ear. “We're no gods. We're just good men who do bad things to protect the innocent. Tex, it's me. I need you to find everything you can on an a-hole who's sent an innocent running like a scared rabbit. Except he's also stacked the deck against her...”

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9

At the first buzz of his phone vibrating, John *Tex* Keegan hit pause on his game and reached for it.

How the heck did they find trouble at a wedding?

They need adult supervision.

Letting them go to a Nemesis wedding was a mistake.

“What happened?” He switched computers as he listened to Wolf’s explanation. “Name?”

“Nawrocki, Janek,” Wolf said. “Get with Trev at Nemesis HQ. He’s already running a search,” Wolf suggested. “Rose has run long enough.”

“Anything you put online, he’ll find,” a woman’s voice in the background said. “Please don’t do this. You all don’t need to be involved.”

“Baby, we are already involved.” He thought that sounded like one of the Hunt brothers, but as they both sounded quite similar, he wasn’t sure which of the two it was. “Let us help. Tex is even better than Trav. Between them, your ex-asshole is toast, and you’ll be free.”

“It’s too dangerous...”

Men preying on women was a trigger for him. He hated them with a vengeance. “Put me on speaker,” he growled to Wolf.

“Done.”

“Ma’am.” Tex softened the rage out of his voice. “Rose, right? Your name is Rose?”

“Yes.”

“Rose.” The Texas of his birth rumbled through in his voice. “Rose, the men you have in front of you are the ones the US Government calls to save all the badasses they trust to do everything else.” He hoped he would get through to her, but his guts told him she would bolt at the first opportunity. The thoughts of any woman running scared on her own ate at his soul. He drummed his fingers on the desk, sending a medallion skimming away from them. Inspiration struck as he picked it up. “If I have them give you something, will you carry it with you?”

“Why, what is it?”

Good, she sounded wary. That meant she wouldn’t take stupid risks... he hoped.

“It’s a tracker,” Tex admitted. “All my friends’ women are tracked by me. They’ve been in your shoes.” Despite hearing her breathing loudly as if on the verge of panic, he pushed on with the explanation. “Wearing it means I can find you if the worst happens. Call it a backup, at least.”

“Do it,” one of the Hunt brothers said. “For me, for yourself. Even if you don’t want me to know or be involved, let Tex track and help you...”

“Janek will find out... he’ll use it.”

“Rose, it’s tracked with a device I built. Nobody has the frequencies,” Tex jumped in to reassure her. “Not even the guys have it. I’m the only person with access.” If he could protect every woman on the planet, he’d do it. Unfortunately, some would consider it stalking. But the women his friends loved trusted him— that’s it — “Wolf, bring her to Ice and Fee if it’s safe to do so. Let them tell her about the trackers.” If anyone could convince Rose of the benefits, it was Ice and the other wives. Every one of them knew the merits. The trackers had saved each and every one of them at some point or other.

“That’s the plan,” Wolf said. “If Rose will listen and allow it.”

“Who is Ice?”

“My wife?—”

She cut Wolf off. “I already told you I’m not putting your family in danger.”

“Then come home with me,” Hunt coaxed softly. “I live by myself. There will be nobody else there but you and me. You’ll be safe. I swear it on my SEAL pin.”

“That’s a promise you can take to the bank.” Tex liked that idea. He didn’t want to put Caroline or the other women in danger either. “I’ll hold him to it and will personally come out there and kick his ass if he steps out of line.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Keegan.”

He snorted at the annoyance in Hunt’s tone. He could like it or not; Tex didn’t care because the woman was always going to be his priority, period. “Anytime, Hunt. Rose?”

“Yes?”

“Will you go with him, at least for a few days?” He hoped she was sensible enough to say yes. “Long enough to talk to the wives and to get the medallion sent to Wolf tonight. I’ll overnight it, so you’ll have it by—” He glanced at his watch. If he called his delivery guy in the next ten minutes and paid double, it would make it there as fast as possible. “—tomorrow evening, your time. The man chasing you will expect you to go back to your place. You can’t go there, not now... just in case.”

“You’re scaring her, Tex.”

“I intend to, dumbass,” he grunted. “She needs to know the seriousness of the situation. There is protecting her, and there is withholding intel, so she feels safe but isn’t. If you are going to be an idiot and do the second, then she is better off staying with Wolf or one of the guys.” That jackass could be as possessive as he wanted to be, but he would not allow him to cause more problems by being a caveman and not using the brain cells the good lord had gifted him with.

“No,” Hunt growled. “She stays with me?—”

“Okay. I’ll stay with Caleb.”

Caleb Hunt.

Tex scribbled the name onto his notepad. He knew enough about him to know he was a solid operator. Dalton didn’t hire stupid people either, so that was a second vote in his favor. “Good,” he praised her. “I know it’s hard to do, but trust him. Trust the men in front of you. We will help you figure it out. If we can’t...” He probably would piss off a lot of people by saying it, but she took priority, “I’ll help you disappear.” Caleb could just stop growling, that shit wasn’t going to get him anywhere with him. “Even if it’s not what anyone else wants you to do.”

“Can you do it better than witness protection?” Rose asked. “Because that’s my next

port of call, but they didn't do a very good job last time."

Her name isn't Rose.

He added witness protection to the list he had running on his notepad. "I'm way better than those guys," he reassured her. The guys could snort and huff all they wanted, and maybe it was his ego that put the pride in his voice, but facts were facts. He was better than witness protection or law enforcement.

"Okay. I'll go with Caleb."

He did a fist pump as she agreed to do as he'd asked.

"But two days." Her tone was firm. "I won't stay longer."

"Four." He bargained for more. "Today is almost done for me, and it's the middle of the night in California. Give me four full days..."

"Three. Final offer."

He liked her. She had strength and more balls than a lot of men. Going toe-to-toe with him when it came to intel wasn't something many people did. "Deal. Now let me go. I have a deadline to save a pretty damsel in distress. Don't make stupid moves. Listen to Caleb. Do. Not. Run."

"I won't run."

"Good enough, I'll take it. Thank you, Rose." He noted she didn't agree to listen to Caleb or to not make stupid moves. But he'd take not running for now. "Later." He hit end on the call and got to work.

Caleb offered up a silent prayer of thanks that Rose had listened to Tex. He ignored the twinge of jealousy that came with it. Jealousy had no place here right now. He'd spent enough time over the years working with traumatized victims of human trafficking and rescuing women out of some of the worst hellholes on earth to know if he allowed the rage he felt building inside him to show, Rose would run from him. That could not happen. He could not protect her if she ran from him. Protecting her had become his most important role ever. Even if he had to do it from the shadows, he'd make it happen. But it would be a hell of a lot easier if she would allow him to help. "Thank you, Rose." He lowered his voice to keep it just between them.

"Huh?"

"Thank you for agreeing to let me help." He ignored the guys. Every single one of those nosey men was gathering intel for their wives like it was going out of style. He knew it, and he didn't care. "I won't let you down. I swear."

"I'm scared."

He could tell how much it had cost her to admit it. "I know." He tugged her into his chest, wishing with everything that he was that he knew what words to say. Being what the others called the silent type sucked right now.

"Can we wrap this shit up now?" Dalton grumbled. He probably wanted to get back to Lina and their son. "We still need to get you guys out of here and to Caleb's. Preferably without picking up a tail."

“I’ll take Caleb’s truck,” Kacey offered. “Who wants to disguise themselves as Rose?”

“We have multiple trucks,” Wolf said slowly. “If all of us duck down, and only the driver is visible as we leave, he won’t know which truck Rose is in and might follow Caleb’s.” He snapped his fingers. “Divide up. Caleb, you come in my truck. Rose, you go with Nem?—”

“No. She stays with me.” He stepped between Rose and the guys as if one of them would pull her away from him. “That’s the deal.”

Wolf and Dalton rolled their eyes in sync like a freaking slot machine but, thankfully, nodded in agreement.

Relieved they weren’t going to fight him on this, Caleb led Rose to Dalton’s truck. “We’re going to get cozy, Rosey-Posey.”

“Keep your hands to yourself, and I won’t have to break your fingers.”

Strong as hell.

“Someday—”

Don’t finish that.

“Someday what?”

Making himself small enough to fit into the back seat and keep his body from showing above the level of the seats wasn’t as easy as it sounded. He contorted himself like a pretzel to make room for her. He pressed his butt to the seat behind him as she wriggled against him. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel his dick

harden against her butt. If she hadn't run from him yet, she would if she realized how attracted he was to her. "Someday, you'll beg for my touch," he rasped softly in her ear.

She sucked in a breath, and he felt her swallow against his chest as she muttered, "You wish."

Challenge accepted.

"Ready?"

He snapped his focus to Dalton. He made a mental note to make him pay for the amusement in his tone at some point. He lifted his head to check that the door was closed and nodded. "Ready."

"Stay down." Dalton fired up the engine. "Until I tell you it's safe, assume the Fuckwad who's chasing Rose is right on our six and can see through the blackouts."

"Roger that." He knew Jeep would travel with them. Even though Dalton had just told him to stay down, he lifted his head to peer around the seats. The boss rarely traveled without his second in command. This time was no exception, and Jeep climbed into the passenger seat, smacked his hand on the dash, and muttered the command that typically sent them into the line of fire.

"Go, go, go."

"I thought that saying," Rose nudged his stomach with her elbow, "was something they only said in the movies."

Caleb wasn't sure if she meant 'roger that' or 'go, go, go,' but he figured it didn't matter. He clamped his arm around her, flattening his palm on her stomach under her

breasts. “Nope, Rosey-Posey. Those are all real, and you’ll hear a lot more sh—stuff like it over the next few days.”

“Then I’m going to need a dictionary,” she quipped, “because I wasn’t born with a built-in translation service.”

“The only voice I want you to hear in your head is mine.” He buried his nose into her hair, taking shameless advantage to soak in the closeness between them. If that made him a jerk, then whoever objected could see him in court. Just because he tried to stay on the good side of the line didn’t mean he’d become a saint. He bit back a snort. Considering the direction of his thoughts, sainthood wasn’t in his near future either. “You see any sign of our tango, Jeep?”

“Nope. I’ll tell you if I do.”

He figured that Jeep knew he was asking the question for Rose’s benefit rather than for his own. “Thanks.”

“Go that way, Nem.” Jeep gave Dalton directions. “We’ll take the long way round. Head as if we’re going to the highway.”

“We should head straight for the airport,” Dalton grumbled as the truck made a hard right, “and get as far away from this fucker as possible.”

“He’ll just follow,” Rose whispered so softly to Caleb. He wasn’t sure she’d be heard in the front of the truck. “Please don’t let them put others in danger.”

“They won’t.” He kept his tone as soft as hers. “We promised you three days. We’ll stick to it. If at the end of that we want to adjust, then I promise I’ll make sure you have a say.” It didn’t mean he wouldn’t override her if needed. But he knew he’d said the right thing when she relaxed slightly against him. He smiled against the back of

her head as one of her fingers moved under his, and he linked it with his baby finger. That small gesture told him that even if her head wasn't quite on board yet, Rose trusted him on some level. He would work with it. Yes, he could definitely work with her trusting him a little.

"ETA five mikes." Jeep gave him a heads-up.

It was disconcerting to know where they were going, but to not quite be able to make out where they were on the streets he should know like the back of his hand. "When we get back to my place, we're going to cover you as much as possible to keep you out of camera view." He figured it was better to give her time to get used to the idea now before they had to get even more up close and personal than they already were.

"O—okay."

"How are we looking, Cookie?"

Without looking, Caleb knew they were closer to his place than the five minutes Jeep had warned them about a couple of seconds before.

"Watch for cops if you're on Copper and Fifth. They hide with the speed gun behind to the north side of the garage."

"Shit." The truck slowed as Dalton slammed on the brakes. "You could have warned me, asshole."

"I did."

"Too fucking late," Dalton grumbled as blue swirling lights filtered in through the rear windows. "Jeep, get Wolf on that shit, stat," he ordered. "I'm diverting," he tossed over his shoulder. "I don't want to lead them right to your damn house."

“I think he’s mad.”

He nodded. “Lina swears he’s really a softy.” He didn’t feel bad about giving her hints about the man who would take point position after Tex on her safety. “Personally, I think she’s delusional. But what can you do? She married the man; she’s supposed to think he’s nice.”

“I am fucking nice.” The truck stuttered, and the engine whined as Dalton dropped a gear before swinging a hard right. “When I’m not running from the cops like a damn criminal.”

“Take the next exit, hit the gas, and flip the lights off,” Jeep ordered. “There’s an industrial complex coming up. Spin in there and see if we lose the PoPo. Give Wolf time to call ‘em off. We have to lose them before they call in the street chopper.”

“Copy.”

“Well, this is exciting,” Rose muttered. “Do all your family weddings come with police chases?”

He chuckled softly, relieved she wasn’t freaking out. “Stick with us, baby. We’ll keep you on your toes.”

“I’d give anything for a boring life in the middle of nowhere right about now.”

She didn’t even know how perfect she was for him. That statement alone... damn. If she was willing to move to... “Would you like to do a turn in Montana?”

“I don’t understand.”

He ignored both Dalton and Jeep’s curses and focused on her. “I might be able to

arrange a week or so in Montana. Can you extend your deadline so we can figure out what's going on?"

"Hunt." There was warning all over Dalton's growl. "Watch your damn mouth?—"

"Maybe he has a point." Jeep interrupted their boss before he could rant. "If a stranger comes to our town, everyone and their mother will know about it before they stop at the traffic light; never mind make it all the way past the store."

"Shit."

He knew Dalton thought it was a good idea, too. The only person who could make the decision, though, was Rose. From how she stiffened against his chest, he didn't think she agreed. "Just think about it, okay?"

The blue lights faded. "Did the cops stop chasing us?"

"Yeah," Jeep answered. "Wolf called in a favor."

That made things a little easier. He'd take it. "Good." He didn't even care that it was probably not the most legal move they could have made, but for Rose's safety, he'd do the same again. They all would.

It didn't take long before Jeep was once again giving the five-minute ETA to his place. Caleb braced himself for the process of moving Rose out of the car and getting her inside without anyone catching a glimpse of her. "Get ready, Rosey-Posey, as we're getting out in a second, and there isn't going to be much room because I need to get out first. You're gonna have to squish against the front seats, k?"

"Not sure how much squishing is gonna happen," she muttered drily. "I'm not the skinniest on the planet."

“Don’t,” he warned. “You are fucking beautiful. Do not put down your curves. A man could get lost for days worshipping them.”

“It would take him that long to reach every one of them.”

Oh, hell no. Rage at the asshole who’d made her feel less about herself slammed into him. He tipped up her chin and peered over her shoulder to make eye contact with her as much as he could in the dark. “Don’t piss me off.” She would figure out pretty quick that he wouldn’t tolerate anyone telling her she wasn’t perfect just as she was... even herself. “You are a goddess, woman, and don’t you forget it.”

“Jeez, you are good for a girl’s ego.”

“I mean it, Rosey-Posey.” The growl rumbled out of his chest. “I always say what I mean.” The truck slowed to a stop, and he braced his hand off the back of Jeep’s seat to prevent them from rolling off. “Wait a second. They’ll open the door when we are ready to get out.”

She nodded but didn’t reply. If he’d upset or annoyed her by being mad that she was poking fun at herself, then too bad. On this issue, he wouldn’t give. She was stunning, and besides keeping her safe, his mission was to make her freaking believe it before their time was up.

The door opened at his feet. He raised his head and met Jeep’s gaze. His second in command nodded. “Move forward as much as you can, Rose. Because when I pull on Caleb’s legs, we don’t want you to come with him.”

She rolled out of his arms, one hand gripping the back of the seat in front of them, and she edged forward. “If I get stuck, it’s on you guys to get me out.”

“That better not be a wisecrack about your size?—”

“It’s not.” Her voice was muffled against the seats. “But move, please.”

Jeep took her words as permission. He gripped his legs, and Caleb felt himself sliding along the seat. He landed hard, with his ass hitting the metal edge of the door frame.

“Fucker.” He scrambled to his feet and twisted to help her out. Dalton and Jeep flanked him, covering any view of Rose as he took her out of the Jeep. “Keep your head down,” he told her. “Keep your gaze on your feet. I won’t let you walk into anything.”

Rose did as he asked, and the three men surrounded her, keeping her out of view as they entered the lobby and made their way to the elevator. Normally, he’d take the stairs, but he didn’t want to risk her falling and hurting herself.

“What floor?”

“Three.” He crowded Rose into the corner, knowing Jeep would hit the floor button and Dalton would make sure nobody approached until the doors were shut. When the elevator shuddered and began to move, he gave her a little breathing room while keeping his body between her and the security camera. “When we get out, Nem, take the left. There’s a camera pointed at the door.” He dug into his pocket and fished out his house key. Thankfully, he kept it separate from his car keys because he’d given them to Kacey, and who knew what time he’d be back with them?

“On it.”

Once they were inside his apartment, Jeep closed the door behind them, shutting out the rest of the world. “Wait here with me a sec, Rose. The guys will check and make sure we are safe.” Before he’d finished speaking, she gasped as both his boss and teammate pulled weapons and took off to sweep his place. “It will be fine.” He tried to reassure her, more than aware he’d been a little overbearing during the ride here.

A little?

He snorted in his head.

That was way more than a little, buddy.

Okay, a lot overbearing. But for her protection. Even if he didn't understand the reasons behind it, he'd be overbearing as all get out for the next sixty or so years.

"Clear."

"Clear."

The guys' voices sent a wave of relief through him. "We're safe." He stepped away from her. "There's nobody here but us."

"Thank God," she whispered softly. "I don't know how much more I can run tonight."

Call him a caveman all you want, but he loved that she stepped back into his side again when Dalton and Jeep appeared out of his bedroom and strode down the hallway toward them. "No more running," he reminded her.

"For three days," she countered.

"You can deal with that," Dalton grumbled. "I'm going back to my family."

"Um, Nemesis, right?" Her voice was hesitant.

"Yeah. Or Dalton, if you prefer." His boss stopped right in front of them. He'd have to remember to thank him for softening his typical resting bitch face when he looked

at her.

“Thank you. I appreciate all you did for me tonight.”

Dalton tucked his hands into his pockets. His boss didn't like to touch any woman but his wife. “You're welcome.” He actually looked almost human when the corners of his lips curled upward. “I'll call you when I get back to the hotel.” There was an unspoken order for Caleb to answer that call as his boss turned away.

“Yes, Sir.” Caleb understood the order even if Rose looked confused. “I appreciate the help.”

“Someday, you'll figure out that we are stronger together.” Jeep tossed the words over his shoulder as he followed Dalton out the door. “At least this time you pulled your head outta your ass and asked for us to come back you up.”

He shrugged. There wasn't much he could say to that. Jeep was correct. He preferred to work alone. But with Rose's safety on the line, that wasn't so important. He made sure the door was closed and locked behind them. “Are you hungry?” He didn't remember her stopping to eat at the wedding.

“I'll be okay.”

“Not what I asked,” he chided. “Are you hungry?”

Who are these people, and how is this my life?

Caleb was offering her food, but she wasn't sure if she'd be able to eat. It would be just her luck to puke all over his floors if she tried.

"I'll make a snack." There he went, deciding for her again. It had to be at least three or four in the morning, and he was going to cook for her. Was he insane? She covered a yawn and hovered, unsure if she should sit or stay standing as she watched him decide what they should do. She was used to feeling awkward, but she didn't think he was.

"You're tired." Of course, he'd noticed her yawning. "Come on, I'll show you to the bedroom and grab you something to sleep in." He didn't give her time to answer but walked away.

She hesitated a second but figured he expected her to follow him. "I'd love a shower."

"Bathroom is the door to your right," he called over his shoulder. "Towels are under the sink."

She checked the back of the door and breathed out a sigh of relief when she found a key in the lock. "Are you sure you don't mind? You must have had a long day, too..."

“I don’t mind at all?—”

She yelped and jumped when he spoke right behind her.

“Sorry. I’m used to moving quietly.” He handed her a stack of clothes. “It’s only a T-shirt and sweats, but they’re clean.” He eased past her into the bathroom and rummaged under the sink. “Towels.”

Her body must be on strike or something because she could only stand there and watch as he turned on the shower and stuck his hand under the flow of water to test the temperature.

“Are you a hell-level hot girl, or do you prefer human temperatures?”

“Umm.” She shook herself out of her stupor. “Fires of hell aren’t hot enough.” She was never going to find water hot enough to erase the cold in her bones.

He laughed and turned the dial, then jerked his hand back. “Use whatever shampoo and stuff you want. It’s not girly stuff, but it’s better than nothing. I’ll ask the guys’ wives to bring you girly stuff tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” She appreciated everything he was doing. She was just kind of numb; it had been a long day, and she needed to process that she had to run again. Maybe, being here with him, she’d have a slight reprieve to make a plan.

His phone rang from somewhere on his body, and he pulled it out. “That’s Nem. I have to take this. You okay here?” He barely waited for her to nod in response before he left her by herself. “Hey, Boss....”

His voice cut off when she shut the door and turned the key. Only then did she allow her guard down. She slumped against the door and covered her face with her hands.

Janek would never stop coming for her. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? She didn't want to run for the rest of her life.

Taking deep breaths so she wouldn't lose her mind completely, she strove for the resilience she hadn't known she had until she'd had to run for her life. She couldn't lose that now and slowly stripped off her clothes. If she could resist the tears that burned her eyes until she was under the shower, maybe Caleb wouldn't hear her cry. She didn't think she'd be able to cope with any more sympathy tonight.

Rose stepped into the shower and stuck the tips of her fingers under the water until she could bear the heat. Then, she stood fully under it, her head tipped back. The water running down her face washed away the tears.

She almost felt human by the time she'd finished with the shower. Caleb's t-shirt came down to her knees, and she had to roll the waistband of the sweatpants three times to keep away from her armpits—short girl problems—but she finally felt ready to face reality again.

“Here goes nothing.” She took a breath, unlocked the bathroom, and hesitated, unsure of where she should go. “Caleb?”

“Here.” He appeared from the direction she'd been in before. “I—uh—made some grilled cheese and soup.”

He was still looking after her. Her emotions see-sawed from being grateful and not wanting him to totally take over. “I?—”

“Even if you don't eat,” he looked a little sheepish as if he knew he was threading a fine line, “will you sit with me while I do?”

How was she supposed to say no to that? “Sure.” She followed him into a small but

cozy kitchen.

“I’ve got coffee, tea, soda, or water.” He paused. “Unless you want something stronger.”

“There isn’t a drink on the planet strong enough to deal with life right now.” She sat at the counter next to the stool he’d clearly been using. Sometime while she was in the shower, he’d changed out of his tux and into jeans and a tee. “I’ll have water, please.” If she had coffee, whatever minuscule chance she might be able to sleep would disappear.

“Fresh or sparkling?”

He slid a plate with a grilled sandwich in front of her. Clearly, he had an issue with listening. She wrinkled her nose, unsure if that made him like Janek or not. “Fresh, please.”

“Why the frown?” He twisted the top on a bottle of water and placed it next to her plate. “Talking about it might help you feel better.”

“It’s nothing.” Now that she could smell the cheesy goodness, her belly rumbled, and she decided she was hungry after all. Plus, if she was eating, maybe he wouldn’t ask her fifty questions she wasn’t sure how to answer. She nibbled on a piece of sandwich as he took a seat next to her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him watching her. He wasn’t even being covert about it. He’d turned on the stool and was facing her. “You’re safe here, Rosey-Posey.”

It was sweet of him to try and reassure her. “Why do you call me that?”

“Rosey-Posey?” He swallowed a spoonful of soup, and she braced herself when she recognized the wariness in his eyes. “Umm—I’m not sure if I should say it; you might shove the sandwich down my throat.”

“Violence isn’t something I’m prone to.” She raised an eyebrow, silently daring him to tell her. “Go on, tell me why?”

“When me an’ Kace were kids, we had a raccoon called Rosey, but we mostly called her Posey?—”

“Posey? You nicknamed me after a trash panda?”

He winced. “Yeah, Rosey-Posey.” He munched on his sandwich. “She was lethal if you had any food left out and raided the pantry like she’d never been fed. It drove our folks nuts. But it’s the look in your eye that reminds me of her.”

“What look in my eye?”

Maybe he was right about me chucking food at him.

“The wariness. A wildness that never quite left. Don’t get me wrong, she was tame for us. Well, for Kace,” he amended. “Maybe Rosey-Posey isn’t a good name for you after all.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Is anyone else confused?

She silently asked in her head as if someone who didn’t exist would answer her.

Because I’m confused. Totally confused.

There should be a manual for figuring out and troubleshooting men, especially for this model; the Caleb Hunt version of men was different, rare, and oh-so confusing. “Hmm.” She made a non-committal sound and waited for him to continue.

“I don’t want you to prefer my brother to me like the raccoon did when we were kids.”

Darn it, he freaking blushed when he said that. It was almost enough to make her rethink her stance on men. Not quite—but almost. “Umm.”

“I’ve embarrassed you. I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intention.” The heat rising up her face told her he wasn’t the only one blushing. She lowered her head to focus on her food. If she ignored the elephant in the room, maybe it would stomp on out, and they could move on. “I met Janek during my last year at community college.”

What are you doing?

She yelped in her head. She wasn’t supposed to say anything, but now she’d started, she found she wasn’t able to stop, and the words poured out of her. “He was every girl’s dream man. Attentive, possessive, charming, money to burn.” She’d been an idiot not to have seen beyond the mask that Janek wore like a second skin.

“Some men are good at reeling you in.”

“Reeling suckers in, you mean.”

He shook his head. “No. Narcissists see people, especially strong women, as challenges. They live to break them.”

“Oh, he tried.” No longer hungry, she pushed the plate away and reached for the water. “I didn’t see it for so long. A ‘the blue dress looked better’ or ‘why don’t you

wear the green, it matches your eyes,' type of thing.” She took a sip of her water.

“That’s how it usually starts.”

Logically, she’d known that, but having someone else, a man at that, confirm what she already knew... that helped. She wasn’t sure how it helped, but it did. The more she talked, the easier it got to tell him everything. “Before I knew it, he was telling me what to eat, who to see...” She lifted one shoulder. “You know, the usual shit.”

“Baby girl, let me tell you,” his focus was entirely on her, “a real man, fuck, never mind man, a real person, doesn’t treat someone they are supposed to care about like that.”

She knew that, or at least she had known it, before chip by chip, piece by piece, and day by day, Janek had picked away at her self-confidence and everything which made her, her.

“How did you get away?”

“I always swore I’d never stay if a man hit me. You know?” Caleb nodded, and she stuttered when his jaw clenched, but she kept going. “But the first time he did it, he was so sorry. He begged me to forgive him. I thought I had, and I stayed. I was stupid, huh?”

“No,” he answered softly. “You aren’t stupid. I’m guessing you were stunned, blindsided, in shock... most likely all three, and a whole host of other shit.”

He wasn’t supposed to be so kind, damn it. He was supposed to agree she’d been stupid to stay.

“What happened to make you leave?”

“I became his punch bag.” She hated herself for allowing that to happen almost as much as she hated Janek for doing it to her. “I thought if it was just me, then everyone else was safe.”

“You were wrong?”

“Oh yeah. So wrong.” She picked at the label on the water bottle to give her nervous fingers something to do. “I came home from the grocery store early. I’d forgotten to bring my purse and walked in just as he strangled the butler.”

“Butler?”

That’s what he got from that? Not that Janek had murdered a man with his bare hands, but that the man was the butler? “Um, yes, butler. Janek’s family has money. He’s a dick, but he’s a loaded dick.” God, she hoped he didn’t think she was a gold digger after that remark.

“What happened?” Caleb asked. “Did he see you?”

“Yeah, he saw me.” She shuddered. The echoes of the fear and confusion of that day almost stole her voice. “I grabbed my purse off the table and ran.”

“I’m assuming he went after you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, he sent his goons. But chasing a woman down the middle of Manhattan is not a good look for anyone. I went to the cops.” They’d been only too delighted to listen to her. “What I hadn’t known was Janek was on their radar. They had enough of a hard-on for him to call in the FBI, and they offered me a place in witness protection. I took it for all the good it did.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t last?”

Her instincts told her he'd paid someone off to be able to find that information, but she couldn't prove it. "Not because of anything the cops did. Or maybe it was, I don't know."

"He found you?"

Damn, he is good at reading between the lines.

She nodded. "Yes, and they killed the agents who'd been assigned to protect me, and I was running again. I found a library and looked up how to live off-grid so nobody can find you."

"Tell me."

"I use cash for everything. I take the bus and not the train. Or I walk if possible. I work cash in hand..." She trailed off. She probably shouldn't tell him that. Although it probably didn't matter now that she had to leave again. She wouldn't be going back to Aces again. She refused to bring trouble to their door. "I don't use a phone. I also have no internet and never go online anymore. I printed out the list of what I needed to do from that library, and that's the last time I was on the internet."

"How did he find you this time?"

"I don't know." She'd been trying to figure it out and had come up blank. "It doesn't make sense."

"What changed in the last week or so?"

"I agreed to take photos for the wedding when Indy and Draven's photographer canceled on them at the last minute." For a second, panic engulfed her as she tried to figure out if someone close to the couple knew Janek.

Caleb covered her closed fists with his hand, his thumb stroking along her wrist. “I’ve known Draven Kilkenny and most of the people involved or who were at the wedding for years. They aren’t involved. I’d stake my trident pin on it.”

“Then I don’t know how he found me. There has to be a connection.”

“Can I send all this information to Tex? If there’s a connection, he’ll find it.”

She wanted so badly to hand it over to him. For once, she just wanted what every woman on the planet craved. Safety. Protection—love. “Will...”

“Aside from my team and maybe Wolf, Tex won’t tell a soul,” Caleb promised as if he knew what she was going to ask.

She was rapidly running out of options, and she hated it. She made a snap decision. “Do it.” Instant relief sent exhaustion through her, and she slumped forward. “I’m just so tired of everything.”

“Come on.” Caleb got to his feet. “Let me show you the spare room. I changed the sheets while you were in the shower. You get a head start on sleeping, and I’ll call Tex.”

“Okay.” He steadied her when she stumbled as her klutzy self climbed off the stool and followed him to the room. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, baby girl. We’ll figure out how to make everything safe for you.” He reached above the door jam with his fingers. “Here.” He pressed something into her hand. “The key for the door. Lock it if it makes you feel safer.”

She offered him a small smile, then shut and locked herself into the bedroom. The four steps to the bed looked like a million miles, but she made it and flopped onto it.

Curling onto her side, she drew her knees up. Tomorrow, or rather today, had to be a better day, because while yesterday had started out awesome, it had ended in a craptastic storm of yuckiness that ate at her soul.

Caleb lay on his back, one arm stuffed under his head and the other resting on his stomach. He should be sleeping. He was three missions back-to-back tired. But after talking to Tex and hearing what he'd found, he wasn't able to sleep without envisioning how she'd been doing her best to keep herself safe.

Rose!

Even though he guessed Rose wasn't her real name, it was the name she'd given him, and he wouldn't be lying to anyone, including himself, for thinking it suited her.

He hadn't asked Tex for her real name, and Tex hadn't provided him with it. Although he guessed Tex knew it. That man knew freaking everything.

Thank God he's on our side because the odds would be forever against us if he played for the other team.

He rolled over onto his stomach. Staring at the ceiling was getting him nowhere. Maybe if he buried his nose in the pillow, he'd be able to stop his mind from racing with possibilities, and sleep would catch up to him. He closed his eyes and forced everything out of his mind.

He was just at that point, right before he was about to drop into a deep sleep, where he wasn't sure if he was awake or dreaming, when a soft sound on the opposite side of the wall ripped his cold, dead heart open and provided it with a freaking emotion. Not just any emotion, hell no, it gave him the desire to comfort. To fix what was

wrong in her world.

I'm so screwed.

And I don't even care.

He threw back the covers and pulled on a pair of shorts. As attracted as he was to her, his need to comfort her was stronger. Knocking on her locked door with his raging hard-on waving under her nose wasn't what she needed right now.

Down, boy.

He paused outside her door to thump his dick with his fist.

This isn't the time or the place for you.

He cocked his head to one side and listened for more of the screams which had filtered through to his room.

She's crying, damn it.

The soft sounds tugged at his heartstrings. He raised his hand, knocked, and waited, listening for a response. "Rose?"

Instead of answering as he'd expected her to do, she cried out again in her sleep. He hovered for a second, unsure of what he should do.

Shit, I told her to lock the door.

Her cries would rip the soul out of the devil himself if he possessed one. He went to the living room in search of his go-bag and the lock-picking kit from the front pocket.

She could be mad at him if she needed to be. But sue him if he didn't want to allow her to suffer alone through the nightmare.

It took him less than a minute to retrieve the tools and unlock her bedroom door. After hearing the click, she quieted. "Rose?" When, once again, his only response was the now soft sounds of weeping, he opened the door and slipped into the room.

"Rose?" He crouched on his haunches next to the bed, his hand hovering near hers. Would he scare her if he touched her? Probably. It broke what was left of his heart to see the big fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "Baby girl, wake up. It's only a nightmare." Damn it, his words made her cry harder. He gave into temptation and swore he'd allow her to kick his own ass or ask Kace to do it for him in the morning, because someone would have to forgive him for wanting her to have someone to hold onto. He tugged back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing back her hair from her face. "Baby girl, I swear I'm not looking for a damn thing..."

Liar.

"I just want to hug you if you want one."

She rolled toward him and nuzzled into his elbow before jerking awake. "Wha—" She lifted her eyes to meet his, fear on her face, but she didn't pull away from him. If anything, she pulled him toward her.

"It was just a dream. It's okay. You're at my house. It's okay." He'd give anything for her to believe his reassurance. "I'm here. You aren't alone. I promise. You aren't wherever your dreams have taken you. I'm not him." He held his breath, waiting for her to tell him what she wanted him to do.

"Ca—Caleb?"

“Yes, I’m right here. You are not alone.”

She started crying again, and he did the only thing he could think to do: he gathered her into his arms and settled into the bed, holding her close to him. “It’s okay. You aren’t there. It’s just a bad dream.”

“It was horrible.”

Someday, he and Janek were going to have a face-to-face meeting, and he’d kick his fucking ass. Show him what it was like to be the one living in fear. “It’s over. It was just a nightmare.”

“You don’t understand.”

He whispered against her hair as tears soaked his chest. “You are safe here.”

“It’s—” she hiccupped. “It’s not just a nightmare,” she whispered, “it’s part memory, but it changed. Now it’s worse than before.”

“You’re safe here with me.” He’s going to find fucker and rip him limb from limb. He’d enjoy every damn second of it too. He shifted them on the bed so he could reach the bottle of water he placed on the bedside table while she was in the shower and poured some from the bottle into a glass. “Sip this, baby girl. You sound hoarse.” There was no way he was telling her he suspected she was hoarse from screaming. It was enough that he knew it. She sat up, and he adjusted the pillows behind them. She sipped the water when he put it to her lips.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Her eyes filled with something he couldn’t describe.

She settled against him again, and he didn’t care if it was wrong or if he had crossed some line or other that he didn’t know about. He hugged her close to him, smoothing

his hand down her back. "I'm here. I'm here." Every time she sniffled, it clawed at him. He was a protector to his soul, damn it, he wanted to fix this for her if she'd let him. "Do you want me to stay with you?"

"I don't know."

He didn't blame her for being unsure. She'd been through so much, that she wasn't freaking out every time he touched her was a freaking miracle he was grateful to have.

"I don't want to dream and be afraid of you."

Is she worried about me?

Damn woman.

He grumbled to himself in his head. "I promise I'll know it's not me you are afraid of. Maybe if I stay in your dreams, you'll know you don't have to fight alone."

She thought about it for a moment and nodded, her cheek rubbing just over his heart. "Okay."

"Baby girl, I'll be right here." If only he could do as he'd offered and fight the demons in her dreams for her. "I'll hold you until you wake. If you need me, I'll be right here."

Distracted by her fingers playing with the hairs on his chest, she murmured something he didn't quite make out. But as he closed his eyes, he figured it didn't matter quite so much. "Sleep, baby girl, I got you."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

He woke with his heart almost pounding out of his chest. Who the fuck was hammering on his front door like they were a freaking cop with a warrant? He growled in annoyance when Rose jerked away and scrambled to the other side of the bed, as far away from him as she could get.

“What’s happening?”

“Somebody’s gonna get their ass kicked, that’s what’s happening.” He managed to keep the rage out of his voice. She was already freaked out enough. “Stay here. I’ll see who it is.”

Bang. Bang. Bang.

He could barely make out the sound of his phone ringing in the other room. “It’s probably one of the guys. I’ll be right back; don’t move.”

“Okay.”

He double-timed it out of her room and into the living room. Stopping long enough to grab a weapon from the case behind the couch, he double-checked it was loaded before going to the window. He pulled back the curtain and scanned the parking lot. Three blacked-out trucks and one dark gray pickup he recognized as his own told him he was probably safe to check the peephole on the door without exposing himself to the potential danger of a bullet through the door.

He put his eye to the glass and sighed, then slid back the deadbolts and the chains on the door. “What the hell, Kace?” He allowed his brother in and was nearly trampled by the rest of Alpha and Bravo teams, except for Draven, who was on his honeymoon by now, as they followed hot on his heels. “Stay here, and don’t break shit,” he ordered. “I’m going to let Rose know it’s only you guys.”

“You better have coffee,” Tate muttered. “My head is killing me.”

“Make it yourself. You know where everything is.” He stopped halfway down to the room and went back to them. “Do not fucking scare her. She’s had nightmares.” He ignored the narrowed eyes and confused looks.

“Casanova has fallen.”

“Someone mentioned that shit last night,” he tossed over his shoulder in a harsh whisper. They could think what they liked. Protecting Rose and making sure she was safe and comfortable took priority over any discomfort he might feel as the butt of any of their jokes. He remembered to knock on her door and to pause outside it rather than just walking right in. “Rose?”

“Come in.”

“It’s the guys. I don’t know what they want yet, but you can go back to sleep.” He already knew she wouldn’t sleep again as she was shaking her head before he was finished speaking.

“I—” She tugged at her t-shirt. “Umm, I’ll just stay here.”

“You are perfect just as you are.” She looked like she needed a hug, and he gave it to her. She rubbed his chin on the top of her head, and she snuggled into his chest. He freaking loved how she did that. “Not one of them will say a word about you wearing my clothes.” They wouldn’t if they knew what was good for them. But he was totally loving that she was covered by something which belonged to him.

“What do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know. But they’ll tell me what they think should happen when I go out

there.”

“When we go out there,” she corrected him softly. “Don’t decide for me. I need you not to do that.”

He nodded. He understood her reasons. Sometime over the last twenty-four hours, she’d become important to him. “I promise we won’t do anything without discussing it with you first.”

She eyed him warily as if she didn’t quite believe him, but the best he could do right now was give her his word. As long as she wasn’t in danger, he’d keep it. The second she was, all bets and promises were off.

“Okay.” She blew out a slow breath, then nodded. “I’m ready to hear what they have to say.”

As they walked to the living room, it stunned him to realize that she might be ready to face his team. He wasn’t so sure he wanted other unattached men around her yet. But keeping her to himself wasn’t possible. Her safety took priority over this possessiveness he was struggling to control.

“Morning,” Kacey said, pointing to some suitcases on the floor near the front door. “I brought your stuff. The girls figured you’d feel better if you had your own things.”

Caleb bit back the growl that rumbled almost silently in his chest when Rose gave his brother a warm smile. He should have noticed those cases and brought them with him to the bedroom. That he hadn’t seen them, never mind brought them to her, only reinforced for him that this was not a mission where he could afford to work alone. Rose’s safety needed more than him because, somehow, she was a distraction who’d stolen his focus.

Are you mad about it?

Hell no. No, I'm not.

He snagged two mugs from the mug tree on the counter. "Rose, do you want coffee, tea, or something different?"

"Coffee, please."

He filled her mug and jerked his chin toward the sugar and milk. "Help yourself." Turning back to the bread box, he removed the loaf to get to the pecan and maple syrup pasties he'd hidden behind it. After putting them on a plate, he put them on the table in front of her.

"Thank you."

Caleb winked and slapped at Kacey's hand as he reached for a pastry. "If you want some, make them yourself. You're the damn chef."

"I'm on vaycay," Kacey whined. "Cooking isn't happening until my butt goes home to the ranch."

"Umm, ranch?"

"Yeah." He figured now was as good a time as any to mention the only plan he'd been able to come up with in the hours he'd stayed awake watching her sleep. "Remember your wish for the middle of nowhere?"

"Maybe." She spoke around a mouthful of pastry. "Last night is kind of a blur."

"I can grant that wish if you want to go." Crap, he'd made it sound like it was a done

deal. “Well, I can talk to Nemesis about granting your wish to disappear into the middle of nowhere. It just so happens that’s where his ranch is.

“But if Janek finds me...”

He didn’t want her to talk herself out of it before he’d had time to lay it out for his boss. “It’s a domestic flight.” That was worth mentioning. “There’s no need for IDs or passports.” It might not exactly be legal, but he’d smuggle her onto the damn plane if he had to.

“Having me there might put everyone in danger.”

“Bullshit.” Well, maybe not total bullshit, but minimal bullshit. “We’re operators, baby girl. If Jackwad Janek wants to bring war to our front door, then we’ll be fucking waiting, and if he wants to take you from us, then he better bring his damn a-game, because you are mine to protect.”

“Possessive much there, brother?”

The asshole didn’t have to look so damn smug when he was teasing him. Caleb made a mental note to mess with something in his kitchen later, just for shits and giggles. “Shut it, Kace.”

Kacey held up his hands and nodded. “I’ll back your play.” He leaned against the counter and crossed his legs at the ankles. “I don’t see how Janek or whatever the hell his name is could find her. Especially if we can sneak her onto the plane without anyone seeing her.”

Caleb squatted next to Rose’s chair. “What do you think, Rosey-Posey? Want to come to the wilds of Montana with me?”

She chewed on the corner of her lip for a second before she nodded. “But I’ll only go if your boss says it’s okay.”

Dalton would say it was okay, or he’d be looking for two new operators because he’d walk straight out of Nemesis Inc. if he had to, and he knew his brother would be stepping on his heels all the way.

“And,” Rose continued, “you promise me that the second my being there puts even a cow in danger, that you let me leave without a fight.”

He glanced down so she wouldn’t see the lie in his gaze. There wasn’t a hope in hell he was letting her leave. If danger stalked her all the way to the ranch, then he’d be there to meet it head-on. “Deal.”

13

How is this my life?

She was more than a little sure she'd asked herself that question more than once over the last hours. She still didn't understand it, yet here she was in what Caleb had called a weapons crate.

Weapons. Crate. OMG. I've lost my mind. Or at least lost the plot.

This had to be what being a character in a sadist author's book was like. She was in a weapons crate, which was currently being loaded onto a plane. She bit back a cry when it thumped down hard. If being a human pretzel had been her goal in life, she was killing it so hard right now. If only the guys carrying the crate didn't have to drop it, bump it, and bang it so much, it would be freaking awesome.

That's going to leave a bruise.

Bruises are better than Janek finding you, or you know, being dead.

Closed in a box.

You can't get out.

Stuck.

Trapped.

She was trying so hard to remain calm, but her brain was fighting her every step of the way. She bit down on her lip until she tasted blood. The pain at this point was the only thing keeping her from freaking out completely. She should probably have told Caleb she was claustrophobic before she climbed into the box and allowed him to close the lid.

Breathe.

In and out.

Don't panic.

Don't freak out.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to recapture the feeling from last night when Caleb had wrapped around her when the nightmares called.

It's not working.

Shh. It will work.

Remember how he held you.

His arms tight but not too tight.

I am in a box —

Nope—not that—his chest hair under your fingertips, that was awesome, right?

The bands around her chest tightened, making every inhale painful.

How much longer?

She linked her fingers together, moving them in a wave motion, and concentrated on how her knuckles shifted under her skin. She counted in her head backward, skipping two numbers at a time, just to ensure she had to think as she did it.

She strained her ears, trying to make out the sound of voices, searching for his voice. Caleb's voice. It was ridiculous how fast he'd become the touchstone she searched for in the dark. Had she not learned her lessons with Janek? If there was one thing her ex had taught her, it was that she had terrible taste in men.

That thought sent her spiraling in another direction, and her brain imagined Caleb as a serial killer and his team as his cohorts. She unlinked her hands and stuffed her fist into her mouth, afraid if she didn't, she'd scream, and someone would notice the weapons box contained weapons that walked and talked instead of ones that went boom.

The darkness gave way to light, and she blinked, covering her eyes with one hand. It took a couple of seconds for her to realize the box was open. She scrambled to stand up, smacking at his hand when he reached for her.

"Baby girl?"

She shouldn't love that he called her that, but she freaking did. It made her feel like she was something important to someone. Even if she wasn't important to him, it was enough to pretend she mattered. He was certainly making her feel like she did. But right now, she'd cheerfully smack him silly for being the asshole who'd had the oh-so-fabulous idea to smuggle her onto a plane in a freaking weapons box.

"What's wrong?"

He reached for her again, and she bumped her lower back as she retreated from him.
“Let me out. Can’t breathe.”

“Fuck.”

His growl sounded angry. Why the frick frack was he angry? He wasn’t the one locked in a box that got smaller by the second.

“You’re claustrophobic. Why didn’t you tell me?” He ignored her struggles and lifted her out of the box.

“Let me go.” It was probably bitchy to yell at him, but she didn’t have the spoons to stop herself from doing it right now.

“Easy.” He steadied her until she got her bearings, then released her.

She stumbled forward to the closest seat and sank into it.

Oh God. Never again. I’d rather meet Janek in the dark every freaking night.

“I’m not going back in that box.” She rubbed her nose with her sleeve. Disgusting or not, she hated the sniffing and dripping.

“Here.”

She snatched the paper puke bag from his hand and put it to her mouth, sucking air through it like she’d never have another chance to breathe.

“Just breathe for me, baby girl.”

What had been sweet before now sounded patronizing. “Don’t.” She smacked at his

hands. “Just don’t.” She was so embarrassed. How could she ever look any of these people in the eye again? She was making an idiot out of herself, but there was little she could do but concentrate on breathing.

Caleb, the ass, made soothing noises as his hand rubbed up and down her back as she hunched over the puke bag. He switched from those noises to crooning words close to her ear. It was just as damn shame they sounded like gibberish to her. It could be English, French, Arabic, or maybe Martian. Because, like Dorothy, she was no longer in freaking Kansas. The only difference between her situation and Dorothy was her tornado had a name—Caleb Freaking Hunt.

She could hear a baby babbling, which told her Dalton’s family was on board the flight, too. That little nugget of information helped ease some of the disquiet inside her. What serial killer took their baby along for the ride? None that she’d ever heard of.

“Is she okay?”

“She will be in a couple of minutes, Boss.” Caleb reached across her stomach, ignoring her, smacking at his fingers. “I need to fasten your seatbelt.”

Seatbelt.

Plane.

“O-okay.”

He managed to snag one side of the seatbelt and bring it across her stomach. Then, he clipped the ends together and secured them by tugging on the strap. “Go sit down, Boss. She’ll be good in a minute.”

“Okay. Let me know if I can do anything.”

“Thanks, Boss.”

Dalton must think she was a ninny. “I’m sorry?—”

“Shh.” Caleb’s hand smoothed over her hair. “You should have told me. We’d have figured out another way.”

“You went round and round looking for another way for two hours,” she reminded him. “You all agreed this was the only way. I survived.”

“But you’re upset.”

He sounded angry. She didn’t want him to be angry with her. She didn’t know him well enough to know what angry Caleb was like. She didn’t want to find out while she was secured in a chair beside him with no escape. “It’s not the first time I’ve been upset, and it won’t be the last. It’s okay.”

“It’s the first time I’ve upset you,” he grumbled, “and that pisses me off.”

Wait, was he angry with himself and not with her? She wasn’t sure how to handle that. “It’s okay. I swear, I’m okay.”

“Hah.” He snorted. “You’re only trying to make me feel better.”

“How did you guess?” She still felt shaky, but it was easier now that she was focused on talking to him.

“Because you, baby girl. You are a fixer. You see a problem, and you want to make it easier by fixing it.” He kept his voice low. “Indy told me how you jumped in to fix

the lack of photographer problem. You knew it could bring you trouble, but you did it anyway because it would ease your friends' troubles."

He wasn't wrong, but that he'd figured her out in such a short space of time was weird, right?

She relaxed her grasp on the paper bag and straightened on her seat. At the whoosh of the plane as it accelerated down the runway and lifted into the air, she wrapped one hand around the arm of the seat next to the window. The higher the plane climbed, the safer she felt. By the time the plane leveled off, elation swept through her; once again, she'd outwitted Janek. This time, she'd had a lot of help, but she'd done it. She was safe... she hoped... for now at least.

The seatbelt light clicked off, and a buzzer sounded. Caleb opened his seatbelt. "I'll grab you some water."

"Thanks." When he stood, he moved toward the back of the plane, and she leaned over to look around, trying to figure out what kind of plane they were on. Her eyes widened when she took in the leather seats, what looked like a mini-sized conference table, and a kitchen. A. Kitchen.

Holy crap, is this a private jet?

The last time she was on a private jet was... never. She'd flown first class with Janek a few times, but never on a whole-ass private plane.

Wow. Holy cow, but wow.

This must be how the other half lives.

She shifted back into her seat when Caleb approached from the kitchen area and took

the water bottle he offered her. “You aren’t just a soldier, are you?” She found he had loosened the cap but once again not fully opened it for her.

“What gave it away?” He grinned and sat next to her. “The boss’s swanky plane?”

Or the company logo, Nemesis Inc., stitched into the back of the headrests.

I know, maybe it was the freaking chef’s kitchen back there.

Or maybe the couches...

“Yeah.”

He sipped on his own bottle of water. “We’re contractors, baby girl.” Closing his bottle, he stuffed it into the net on the seat in front of him. “That means we’re no longer employed by the US military. We still work for the government, though, or at least the boss’s company does. This plane, that’s just one of the perks.”

Seemed like one hell of a perk to her. But she decided when it came down to it, having money meant very little. She’d take being safe over having buckets of money any day of the week. “Nice perks.”

“Eh, it’s not me. I didn’t grow up with this kind of stuff. Nem did. But he couldn’t care less about money. He uses it to ensure his people have the best access to what they need to get their jobs done and make it home alive.”

Caleb clearly thinks a lot of his boss.

Noted.

“Want to watch a movie?” Caleb pulled up the embroidered flap, revealing an

entertainment center. “It will help pass the time.”

“Um, sure.”

He stood up and reached into an overhead locker, then handed her a set of Bluetooth headphones. “You get to pick. I’m probably not going to have seen many of what’s on there, as usually I’m so tired by the time I sit down here, I’m asleep before we’re in the air.”

Reading between the lines, she figured he meant they’d been working before getting on the plane. But as she had nothing but movies to reference what he did, she could be totally wrong. “What kind of movies do you like?” Maybe she should put on a chick flick and make him suffer as she had by being carried onboard in a freaking crate, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“As long as it’s not a war one, we’re good.”

She glanced at him curiously, her fingers pausing over the list of movies on the screen. She thought all men liked action movies. “Why not a war movie?”

“Because you’ll spend the whole flight with the guys yelling, ‘That’s not how it works.’ Or, ‘take your finger off the trigger, ya dumb fuck. Are you asking to shoot yourself in the foot?’” He grinned at her. “When you know how it works, the movies take on a whole new aspect.”

That made sense to her. “Chick flick? How about Barbie... you all look like you could use a little pink glitter in your lives.”

“Hell no,” Dalton, who was passing, grumbled. “We were in Italy for a wedding before Draven’s, and we got glitterfied during glitter-wars by that rat-bastard Marks. Pink and glitter are the last things I want on my damn plane.”

“What’s a glitter war when it’s at home?” she whispered to Caleb.

“Paintball, but with glitter.” He leaned his head in toward her. “The boss is only cranky because he got pinned down and his wife, Lina, kicked ass.” He jerked. “Ow. Fuck you, Nem.”

“Asshole,” Dalton grumbled as he passed them, going back to his seat with a baby’s bottle in his hand.

“Pick Barbie,” Caleb whispered. “The boss will just have to get over his aversion to pink and glitter.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, trying to figure out if he was serious or not.

“Do it,” a woman’s voice from behind them urged. “I dare you.”

“Eep.” She spun around at the unexpected voice.

“Sorry.” The woman’s eyes twinkled between the seats. “I’m Becky. The lug next to me is Kentucky. He’s Caleb’s team leader,” she explained. “Most of the guys on this plane are on their team. Most of Draven’s team is here, except for Rexar. He doesn’t do family functions, but you’ll meet him when we get home.”

She wasn’t quite sure what to do with all the information coming at her. “So, Barbie movie?”

“Please.” Becky nodded. “I’ve been trying to get Tuck to watch it for ages. He can’t escape while we’re on a plane.”

“We have parachutes, and I know how to use ‘em.” Kentucky wrapped his arm

around Becky. “If you’re going to insist I watch it, then you get to sit here and deal with me.”

“Oh.” Becky disappeared from between the seats. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Umm.”

Caleb chuckled softly. “Want me to grab some popcorn?”

His offer sounded so out of place that her mouth dropped open. “You have popcorn?”

“After everything you’ve seen, it’s the popcorn that gets you?”

“Um... yeah.” She knew it was weird, but she couldn’t help it. “Yeah, it does.”

“I’ll grab some.” He stood. “Becky, do you want pops too?”

“Yes, I’d love some. Thank you, Caleb. See, Tuck, why can’t you be more like Caleb, grabbing me popcorn and insisting Barbie movies are okay?”

She listened to the couple bickering and tried to wrap her mind around how or where her life had taken a wrong turn and ended up in the twilight zone. Because there was no place else this could be but the freaking twilight zone.

The Barbie movie was made a hell of a lot better by Dalton's grumbling and Lina putting him in his place when their kid clapped his hands, bouncing on their knees in time with the songs. The kid clearly loved it. His dad... not so much.

He glanced down at Rose's head. About half an hour ago, her eyes had drooped closed, and she'd snuggled up next to him as if she'd always belonged tucked into his side and drifted off to sleep. He'd ignored the raised eyebrows from Tate and the low teasing from Kentucky. He'd pay them back eventually. Now, he had a bigger problem: figuring out if he should wake her or if he could get his seatbelt around them both for landing. She shifted against him, her fingers on one hand bunching into his shirt, the other on his thigh, dangerously close to finding out how attracted he was to her.

You're killing me, baby girl.

"Strap her in," Kacey advised from his position on the couch across the way from them. His brother was clearly getting way too good at reading his mind. "It's safer, and we've got those cross winds as we land."

He nodded and stroked his hand down her back. It sucked when his brother was right. Thankfully, he wasn't the kind to gloat about it... much. "Baby girl. It's time to wake up. We're gonna be landing in a few minutes."

"Mm."

Over their heads, the seatbelt notification chimed, and the light came on. “Hey,” he whispered softly, “it’s time to wake up.”

“Wha—I’m up.” She jerked away from him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“You didn’t get much last night.” She didn’t know what that blush did to him. He was supposed to only be helping her out of a sticky situation. He wasn’t supposed to be bewitched by whatever spell the woman was casting over him. She was drawing him in with every passing moment he spent with her, and she didn’t even know it. “Let me help you with your belt.”

“I got it.” She moved back into her own seat, and he bit down on the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from demanding that she return to his side immediately.

Get a fucking grip, man.

But despite the stern talking to he was giving himself in his head, he didn’t want to get a grip. He wanted to explore and find out if she was feeling what he was—attraction like he’d never felt before.

Once the plane touched down, they waited until almost everyone was up and moving ahead of them. He knew there wasn’t a hope in hell Dalton would allow Lina and their son off the plane if there was so much as a sniff of danger, never mind if it was actually present. When the boss and his family were through the doors, he got to his feet and offered his hand to Rose. “Come see the ranch you wanted to spend some time on.”

He was grateful to see excitement was more evident than apprehension on her face. He never wanted her to be scared of anything again. He led her to the door and stepped out in front of her, keeping his body between hers and the outside until he’d scanned the airstrip, much as Dalton had done a couple of moments before. He caught

her fingers in his. “Ready?”

“Yes.” She paused outside the plane, and he could hear the surprise in her voice. “Am I the only one who finds it weird that there are trucks just sitting alongside the plane, waiting with nobody to watch them?”

“City girl,” a woman’s voice that she didn’t recognize teased. “I’m Willow, Cormack’s wife, and you are Rose.”

All of them adored Willow. She might be the youngest of the wives, but she had a good head on her shoulders. Trust the military brat to bring her into the fold.

“I’m not sure who Cormack is.”

“That one.” Willow pointed to her husband. “They all called him Jeep, didn’t they?”

Rose nodded. “Yes, I thought it was a weird name. I should have figured out it was a nickname.”

“My man is good with his hands...”

“Eww, Willow.” Kacey carried a suitcase under each arm and one in each hand toward the trucks. “It’s bad enough that you and the old bastard you hooked up with desecrate my kitchen. I don’t need to know what the hell he does to you with his hands.”

“Jerk.” Willow smacked him. “Just you wait and see. I’ll salt every single one of your pies for that wisecrack.” She pouted, then glanced over her shoulder with a smile as Jeep hauled her against his chest. “Hey, love.”

“Are you pissing off my woman, Kace?” Jeep growled. “Because I’d have to punch

you in the balls if you are. I might even ban her from being in your kitchen, too.”

“If she salts my pies, I’ll ban her myself.”

Caleb shook his head at their grumbling and teasing. These people were the closest thing he had to family. They were wild, crazy, and they drove each other batshit most of the time. But there wasn’t a single one in the bunch he wouldn’t have on his six in a firefight. If one of them scared Rose off, he would make their lives miserable. As the person who supervised the training schedules, he could make payback freaking hurt.

He led her to his truck and helped her into the seat. Feeling under the wheel arch, he found the magnetic box that housed his keys and climbed into the driver’s seat. Before he put on his own belt, he reached across her, pausing to smile when she jerked from watching the guys hustling to get gear locked down to look at him. “Safety first.”

“I can do it.”

“I know.” He clipped it into the lock. “I like knowing you’re safe.”

“Why?”

“Damned if I know.” He fired the engine. “I just do.”

“Okay.” She was like an excited kid, her eyes wide as she stared at cows and horses in the pastures they drove past. “The boss’s house.” He nodded to where Lina and Dalton’s dog Buddha wooed his head off as they climbed out of their truck.

“Is that a wolf?”

He chuckled. “Nah, it’s an Alaskan Malamute.” He thought it was almost the same damn thing, but he refrained from mentioning it. No matter how many times that dog went through training, he still was a jackass with selective hearing. “Don’t leave anything you don’t want to chase after lying around,” he warned as they pulled to a stop at the team house behind Dalton’s. “Buddha will take off with it, and it might be six months before you find it again if you don’t catch him in time.”

“Noted.”

He tried to see the ranch from her point of view. Their team house looked almost like an apartment block, which wouldn’t be out of place in a European country. Except it had a massive porch, which was awesome for watching the sun rising or setting, depending on which side of the house you were on. “All us unmarried guys have a condo here. We’re separated by team. This is Bravo House. Alpha is that one.” He pointed it out to her. “That’s where the mess—uh—canteen is, too. There’s food on there at all times of the day. But we can ask Kace if there is something you fancy.”

“You don’t have a kitchen in your condo?”

“I do. But unless it’s grilled cheese or canned soup, it’s not gonna be edible. My brother got all the cooking genes in our family.”

“It’s weird to see an apartment building on a ranch.”

“Yup. But it works for us.”

“I mean, I know it’s a ranch as I can see all the animals...” She trailed off, and he glanced in the direction she was looking. A massive black horse gave a loud whinny and galloped up the field to the railing closest to Alpha house with what looked like a tiny, small baby horse, but he knew it wasn’t, hot on its heels.

“Is that a mama and her foal?”

He hated to burst her bubble, but he couldn't resist the snort. “That's Logan's stallion, Baby Girl, and the smaller one is Bison. He's a mini horse and belongs to Logan's wife.”

It warmed something deep inside him to see her standing, relaxed, soaking in the views. They didn't need to rush inside. He settled against the porch railing, happy to allow her as long as she wanted. She leaned against him and sighed. “What are you thinking?”

“I wish I had my camera,” she said wistfully. “The pictures I could take here. It wouldn't even matter if nobody ever got to see them. They would speak to my soul, and knowing I had captured them would be enough.”

“We'll make that happen.” He would make it happen. In fact, he'd make it a priority to see that it happened fast. “Once your camera is cleared, I'll have it shipped here, or I'll go buy you one to replace it.”

“It can't be replaced. It was from my grandmother. Her last gift to me. It's the one thing I have never left behind.”

Now he knew for sure why the asshole had tagged it. He knew she'd never leave it behind. “We'll figure it out, I promise.”

“I'd love that, thank you.”

After a few more minutes, he could see the guys' trucks coming up the ranch road. “Shall we go in? We can come back out later.”

“I'd like that.” She followed him into the house and up the stairs. He came to a stop

in front of his place. After scanning his palm, he punched in the code to unlock it. “I’ll ask Trev, our tech guy, about getting your hand scanned,” he said. He didn’t want her trapped in the house if—when he had to do stuff—she wouldn’t have access to it. “That way, you can come and go as you like without getting locked out.”

“Not being locked in would be awesome.”

He shut the door behind them and watched her wander around his living room. It was weird for him to have her here in his space. He’d rarely brought anyone to his place in Riverton, and he’d certainly never brought anyone here, especially not a woman. He wasn’t sure if Dalton had assumed he’d balk when he’d insisted if Caleb was bringing Rose to the ranch; he was responsible for her, and she had to stay with him.

As if that was a hardship .

The corners of his lips curved; Dalton must be losing his touch. He’d underestimated what Rose was coming to mean to him. “Come on. Let me show you around.” He gestured with his arm. “As you can see, this is the living room, and that,” he spun around, “is the kitchen. Small, but it does the job.”

“It’s homey. I like it.”

He did, too. He wasn’t built for fancy. He preferred his leather recliner couch and his battered poof, which doubled as a coffee table when he needed one. That damn box held everything from a spare weapon to the remote. If he didn’t have a place to put them, he’d lose everything. “Main bath.” He pointed it out to her. “This room will be yours.” He pushed open to the spare room. “Unless you’d prefer to sleep on the couch or sleep in my room if you’re worried about nightmares.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “Umm.”

“Just sleeping.” He wanted to do so much more, but there was no way he’d step over that line without an invitation. “If you are worried about having nightmares, then the offer is there.”

He kicked his go-bag into his room and pulled the door almost shut. She had plenty of time to decide what she wanted to do. His doorbell chimed, and he went to answer it. “Hey, Kace.”

“You forgot to bring her stuff,” Kacey grumbled. “It’s been checked.” As fast as he arrived, his brother disappeared again. He was probably going to check that his kitchen hadn’t been destroyed while he and Willow were gone. He winced, because if the kitchen was a mess, Rexar would have his ass handed to him, no matter what Lily said. Now that it was finally just the two of them, and he’d shown her the place, there was an awkwardness between them as if neither knew what to do. Inspiration struck... baby animals. She seemed to like baby animals. “Do you want to go for a walk around? We might be able to go to the barn and meet some of the animals.”

“Yes. Please. I’d love that.”

From their conversation outside, he knew she’d regret not having a camera again. He couldn’t do anything about that yet, but maybe he could do something. He went to rummage in the poof box and pulled out a spare throwaway phone. She sat on the edge of the couch, watching him curiously as he set it up. He held it out to her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s not a camera, but at least the camera function works on it.” Maybe this was a mistake. He was stupid for offering the photographer a camera phone. “I figured with it, at least you could save some kind of photos...” He trailed off lamely.

“Are you serious?” Her eyes widened. “For me?”

He was a fucking idiot, but he had no choice but to reply. “Yes.” He barely had time to brace himself to catch her as she launched herself at his chest and took a step back to keep them both from ending up on the floor. He froze when she smushed her lips to his.

“Thank you,” she whispered against his mouth. “I love that you thought of it.”

She leaned back and smiled at him.

His breathing hitched. Did she know what she’d done? He figured yes, she was a grown-ass woman and not stupid. She definitely knew she’d kissed him. He tilted his head slightly and brushed his mouth across hers. It took her a second; he almost pulled away, but then she sighed, a sound that went straight to his balls, and kissed him back.

Heaven.

Hell.

Somewhere in between.

His hand cupped the back of her head, and hers fisted into the shirt on his back. The kiss deepened, and the wall around his heart cracked just a little bit more, allowing her room to wriggle inside and claim a corner of it for herself.

I’m fucked. So fucked.

He knew it by the time he broke the kiss and stepped back. His whole world had tipped on its axis; north was now south, and east was now west.

“I—ugh?—”

He held up his hand. "If you apologize, I'm telling you right now, baby girl, I'm gonna be pissed."

"I kinda attacked you..."

"You can attack me like that any damn time you please," he reassured her. "But in the interest of both of our peace of minds and before we launch into something neither of us is ready for, we should make tracks for the barn."

"Okay."

"Most of the animals are around the barn." He knew he was babbling, and he just couldn't bring himself to care. When had a kiss ever knocked him on his ass before? Never that he could remember, at least not since he was about fifteen. "I think there might be an early foal, too." He regretted mentioning the foal as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and he saw her eyes sparkle because what if he was wrong? He knew for sure there were kittens as he heard Rory bitching that Dalton refused to allow him to give one to his son. The boss didn't want cats in the house as Buddha might have his prey drive turned on and chase it, or at least he thought that was the explanation given. He grabbed some coats from the hall closet and handed her his sheep-lined denim one. "It's cold out there at this time of night."

"Thanks." She put it on and stuffed the phone into a pocket. "Ready when you are. Lead the way, kind sir."

What was I thinking?

Her grandmother would have called her 'one of them harlots' for sure. Not only was she staying in a strange man's house for the second night in a row, but after kissing him, she was more than a little considering spending the night in his bed for the second night, too. Except this time, she wouldn't object to it being for more than the

nightmare protection services he'd offered. Yes, her grandmother would have been correct; harlot was an apt description.

She'd meant to thank him for the phone. It wasn't supposed to be a melt-your-panties-off kiss... but it had certainly turned into one, and was she upset about it? No. No, she wasn't. She'd even have cheerfully stood in front of her grandmother, confessed her sins, and asked for a name badge with the title of harlot on it, but she still wouldn't have been able to bring herself to regret it.

Caleb shut the front door of the building behind them and gave her time to just soak up the view from the front porch.

“How could anyone not be happy to see this every single day?”

He hummed in agreement. The view of the mountains, like those spread out in front of them, was epic. He loved it. This was the view that told him he was home. There was something about it that called to his soul.

“Which mountains are those?”

“Foothills of the Crazies.” It looked to him at least like she was enjoying the view. It remained to be seen if her love of that view would last or if it would turn into something she came to hate. He knew so many people who moved out of the city into the mountains and couldn’t handle it for more than a year or two.

It would suck if she hated it here after a while.

The other women don’t... yet.

He heard the sound of an engine just as she was about to step out into the path that led to the barn, and he tugged her back. The four-wheeler barely missed her toes.

“Shit.”

“This is a ranch, baby girl. You have to be aware of your surroundings. There are way too many things that can hurt you here, like a four-wheeler driven by a six-year-old. RJ, where’s your dad?”

The tow-haired boy climbed off the four-wheeler, which was bigger than him. “He’s coming. He stopped to close the gate from Uncle D’s.” His eyes widened when he spotted Rose, and just like Rexar had taught him, he shucked his hat and twisted it in his hands. “Ma’am.”

Caleb bit back a laugh. He recognized the move as belonging to another member of Nemesis Ranch. The kid had been hanging around the barn with Jack way too much.

“He’s adorable.”

“Mr. Adorable nearly rolled over your toes.”

“I did?” RJ’s eyes filled with tears. “I—I’m sorry…”

Of course, Rexar Mitchell chose that moment to roar up on his own four-wheeler. Why wouldn’t he? The man had a freaking nose for something being wrong in his word, especially when it came to the son he hadn’t known for the first four years of his life. “Why the fuck is my kid crying?”

“I almost rolled over the lady’s toes.”

Caleb winced. He understood why Rexar was a touch overprotective of the boy. But sometimes, that over-protection went a little far. He tugged Rose closer to him, not that he thought Rexar would take it out on her, but there was a saying: better safe than sorry for a reason, and in his opinion, Rexar and Drax Mitchell were the reason that saying existed at all. “No harm done. Almost, but not quite.”

Rexar scowled in his and Rose's direction and dropped to his knees in front of his son, talking softly to him.

"Should we go?"

"Nope," he whispered back. "Just wait here a second." He knew better than to draw the attention of a predator who was protecting its young. "Just give them a sec." What she didn't know, but he did, was that while Rexar was protective of his kid, he was also brought up with more than a little southern charm. "Just watch."

Rexar got to his feet and moved behind his son. He kept his hand on RJ's shoulder as the boy stepped forward.

"I'm sorry for almost running you over, Ma'am." RJ looked directly at them. "Caleb, you should have stood in front of your lady. Your job is to protect her like Daddy does Momma." He glanced up at his father. "Did I do it right?"

"You sure did," Rexar smirked at Caleb, winked at Rose, and hugged his kid into his side. "Your mom will be back in about fifteen minutes; we better get cleaned up before she turns the hose on us both."

RJ shuddered. "Yeah. I don't want to be sparkly green."

"Rex."

"Don't use the hose on the training ground," Rexar advised as he followed his son around the side of Bravo block. He tipped his hat. "Ma'am, don't touch any hose, especially if anyone tells you to. You never know what's going to come out of it."

"Umm, does he mean a snake or something? I don't understand."

Caleb scrubbed his hand down his face. “Remember us mentioning glitter war on the plane?”

“Yes.” She linked her hand to his arm and fell into step with him. “Is that what they’ve done?”

“Sounds like it.” He was going to need eyes in the back of his head. “Rex’s brother Drax and his team are known for being the queens of Glitter Wars. Looks like Rexar has picked up a few things.”

“He wasn’t on the plane, was he? Because I don’t remember him being there.”

“Nah. Rexar’s mostly turned cowboy and doesn’t leave the ranch often. When he does, you know shit’s really hit the fan. If he and the boss are gone at the same time, then the person who’s in shit is someone important. If Lina goes too... then the whole world is fucked.” They walked into the barn, and he stopped when she did. “Never been in a barn before?”

“Nope, first time.”

“Then welcome.” Jack, the ranch foreman, strode out of his office. “Let me introduce you to the other new residents.” The older man nodded to him, then ignored him in favor of Rose.

Old charming bastard.

Jack loved women, all women. It didn’t matter what shape, size, or form they came in. The only woman Caleb had ever seen him have a problem with was Lina, and that was because of their dogs. Namely, Lina’s pup wanted to mate with Jack’s collie, but Jack was having none of it and banned Buddha from the barn for the duration of his girl’s season. He trailed down the center aisle of the barn as Jack introduced Rose to

the horses inside.

“They have access to the dry lot through the back doors in each stall, see?” Jack pointed them out to Rose when she asked if they had to stay in their stalls all day. “It’s almost their dinner time, so they’re in here to remind me, just in case I forget.”

“You wouldn’t,” she asked, “would you?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t yet.”

The old bastard was enjoying this, and Caleb was enjoying the excitement and pleasure on Rose’s face as she petted and stroked muzzles. She even dared to smack a kiss onto a nose or two, and he was a fool for being jealous of the damn horses.

“Can you ride, Ms. Rose?” Jack asked. “Because if not, we can teach you, and if you do, then we have some trail horses. Your Caleb knows a good picnic spot. He can take you there.”

He tensed. Shit, how did Jack know where he went when he needed to breathe or to settle something in his head? “Sure. We can do that.” He immediately felt like a heel when Rose’s excited expression fell. Jack scowled at him, silently telling him he’d screwed up.

He pulled his head out of his ass, scowled at Jack behind her back while she was stroking the nose of a pretty pinto mare, and took her hand. “Did you say you have new residents, Jack?”

“I do. Come on down to the big stalls with me.”

They followed him toward the back of the barn and down the ramp into a newer part of the building.

“Did I screw up?” Rose whispered.

He shook his head. “No, not at all. Jack just surprised me, is all.” He should have known she’d take it that way. He bit down the frustration at himself. He considered himself pretty confident most of the time; hell, the US Government had trusted him with million-dollar weapons from the time he was eighteen. They’d neglected to teach him how to be a normal freaking human.

“Y’all coming, or are you gonna stand there staring at each other all day?”

He jumped back from her, aware of Jack’s snickers. He was winding him up on purpose. Maybe those hoses Rexar and RJ had mentioned would be useful for more than fucking with his team as they trained tomorrow. “Uh—yeah, we’re coming.” He gestured for Rose to go ahead of him and discretely adjusted his pants to give himself more room for the semi he had going on.

This is freaking ridiculous.

Acting like a fool is going to backfire on me. I just know it.

“Oh, aren’t you the cutest thing?” Rose stared over a stall door. “Look, Caleb, a baby.”

“I’m thinking this one might be a true black,” Jack told them. “But we’ll know more when he sheds out his foal coat.”

“Is he out of Logan’s stallion?”

“Yep.” Jack brushed his hand down the mare’s neck. “Do you want to come see the foal, Miss Rose? Her mama is a good girl. Aren’t you, Breezer? You’ll let the pretty lady in to see your baby, woncha?”

“Are you sure?” Rose’s question was whispered as if she was afraid to disturb the mama and baby.

Despite her soft voice, Caleb could feel her excitement. He took out his own phone as she slipped into the foal stall with Jack. Flipping through the app, he snapped some photos. He probably wasn’t anywhere near as good as she was, but he didn’t think she’d complain about him capturing the memory for her. If he kept some on his phone, and they happened to back up to his hard drive, then nobody needed to know.

Rose petted and loved on the foal with one hand and took so many photos with the other that Caleb lost count. He figured it didn’t matter how much time they spent here or how many photos she took; she was happy and enjoying herself, and that counted.

“Bye, baby.” She got to her feet when the mama’s fussing told them she’d had enough of sharing her baby for one day.

He opened the stall door for them to exit and closed it behind them. “You liked the foal?”

“She’s beautiful.” She took a handful of animal crackers from Jack and opened her hand flat like he had shown her, offering the cookies to the mama. “Oh, that tickles.” She giggled as the horse lipped them from her palm and crunched through her treats. Rose wiped her hand on the back of her jeans and flipped through the photos she’d taken. “Look.” She turned the phone toward him. “These are so awesome.”

“They are fab.”

Rose surprised the crap out of him when she spun on her heel, threw her arms around Jack, and hugged the stuffing out of him. “Thank you for letting me see her.”

Jack patted her back awkwardly. “You come on back anytime you want to love on

my babies. The more they are handled, the better. Just make sure you close every door behind you and double-check them twice. We don't want anyone to escape and hurt themselves."

"I promise," she replied seriously.

He decided he much preferred to see her like this, happy, laughing, showing him photos, and chattering up a storm with Jack. It was so much better than the unease that he saw trying to push in around her eyes more times than he'd like.

The dinner bell clanged loudly in the distance. "That's our cue to go to the mess for dinner." He reluctantly pulled her toward the barn sink to wash her hands. "You coming, Jack?"

"Nope, I'm going into town tonight." Jack handed them a towel and caught the bar of soap as it tried to escape. "I have to meet up with Jasper."

"Sheriff Jasper?" He stilled when Jack nodded. "Is there a problem?"

Jack shook his head. "Nope, I just gotta kick his ass about something."

Caleb winced. He had no idea what the sheriff had done to piss off Jack, but as someone who'd been on the receiving end of one of an ass-kicking from him, he didn't envy the sheriff at all. "Have fun," he called over his shoulder as he tugged Rose from the barn.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting from a place called a mess, but it wasn't organized chaos. It looked like a canteen or an all-you-can-eat restaurant, with a food counter running down one side. The tables were spread out and filled with people. She followed Caleb to the food counter, and her eyes widened. "That's a lot of food."

"There's a lot of us, and most of us are growing boys who eat a heck of a lot." He grinned at her. "Pick what you want. It's all free. Part of the perks I told you about earlier."

"I prefer this to the plane." She took the tray he offered and picked up a plate. "Imagine never having to worry about cooking again."

"Are you telling me you can't cook?"

Was he teasing her? Well, two could play that game. "Says Mr. Grilled Cheese."

"Hah." He started loading his plate and hers with food when she'd only grabbed a portion of some kind of savory pie. How many people did he think she was eating for? Ten, maybe a dozen, apparently, because he wasn't done with adding potatoes, vegetables, or even what looked like stuffing balls. But he also grabbed dessert and put half the plates on her tray and the other half on his. "Umm, are we stocking up for a famine?"

"Nah, but if you want seconds, there might not be any left." He led her across the floor to a table with some free chairs.

She returned Becky's smile, placed her laden tray on the table, and slid into a chair next to her, breathing out a sigh of relief when Caleb took the spot next to her.

"Girl, thank Gawd you are here," Becky whispered. "Because there is so much hawt testosterone in this room, I need some queens to help balance it out."

She never thought she'd say there could be too many hot men in one place, but kudos to Becky for calling it. There were way too many of them. She scanned the room. "Is smokin' hot a requirement to work here?"

Becky snickered. "Right? Because there isn't an ugly one in the bunch." She munched on a French fry. "Now, if you're talkin' messed up ones, those we've got a whole bunch of, starting with the one next to you."

I knew it. He was too perfect.

She side-eyed Caleb. "What's wrong with him?" She couldn't wait to hear Becky's answer. "Do I need to run?"

"No more running." Caleb glared at Kentucky. "Control your woman, Smith."

"Hah." Kentucky rested his hand on Becky's back. "Not a chance. She rules me, not the other way around."

"Pussy."

"Shut it, Tate," Kentucky smirked across the table at the man seated opposite Caleb. "Your turn will come, and we," he gestured to Caleb, and then himself, "will make sure to remind you of the stupid shit which comes out of your mouth."

"Never gonna happen."

Someone had sealed their fate. Never tempt that bitch, because she'll bite you in the ass every single time.

"Now he's done it," Becky quipped. "We're gonna need a bigger table like Alpha team to accommodate Tate's future wife."

Rose giggled as the rest of them laughed and teased Tate. She should have been eating—she was hungry, but she was fascinated by the dynamics of the room. She'd expected for it to be mostly men, and it was; however, the number of women also at the tables surprised her. "Are all the women wives, girlfriends, or...?" she whispered to Becky.

"Some, not all." Becky reached for a bottle of wine in the center of the table, but Kentucky beat her to it and topped up her glass.

"Would you like some wine, Rose?"

She shook her head and smiled. "No, thank you." How come she hadn't met men like these before? Ones who'd obviously taken a Susan Stoker Alpha Hero and Manners class. Men across the country should be lining up for that class, or at least to read Susan's books to get an idea of how a woman should be treated and looked after. There would be far fewer assholes like Janek if A Susan Stoker Special became a standard class for boys and men everywhere. "I appreciate the offer, though."

"You're welcome." Kentucky settled back in his seat next to Becky, clearly content to let her chatter and do her thing.

"Aria is our sniper." Becky pointed out a woman seated at a table alongside Dalton's wife, Lina. Becky lowered her voice and whispered, "She's as badass as Lina but a bit prickly. If she's a bitch to you, bite back, and soon you'll be besties."

Umm, not sure about that. I'll just stay away from her and see what happens.

She hated confrontation and tried to avoid it at all costs.

"Are you okay?" Caleb whispered in her ear, and she shivered for a different reason. "Do you want to leave? Because we can bring our food back to my place. Kace will give us a go-box."

"No, no." She turned toward him and paused. She hadn't expected his mouth to be right there. She licked her suddenly dry lips and raised her eyes to meet his. "I'm okay," she whispered. "I promise. Becky is fun. She's just telling me who's who, and it's a lot."

"Okay." The corners of his eyes crinkled. "If it's too much, tell me, and we'll leave."

She nodded and turned back to her new friend. "Sorry..."

"Girl, I'm never gonna bitch about you having a moment with your man?—"

"He's not?—"

"Maybe not yet." Becky winked, mischief all over her face. "But he will be. Because I'd hit that." Kentucky growled, and Becky patted his cheek. "Shh, I'm fishing."

"You mean you'd hit it with a skillet? Or maybe a bus?" The snark she'd buried for way too long decided now would be an awesome time to be reborn, and the quip escaped through her lips before she even had time to think the words in her head. "Do bullets count as 'hitting that,' too?"

"I'm offended." Humor laced throughout Caleb's voice was the only thing that kept her from covering her face with her hands or sliding under the table to hide. "Should I

be offended?" he asked nobody in particular.

"I would be, man," the fourth man at the table told him seriously. "Maybe your lady would prefer to stay at my house instead."

"Eww, no. Not a chance."

Shit.

I said that.

Out freaking loud.

Oh my God.

She could never come here for food again. Caleb would have to hit up his brother to organize a delivery system. They were all laughing at her.

"I knew it." Becky chortled. "I freaking like you." She nudged her with her elbow. "While the boys are ribbing each other, let me fill you in on the others here. You met Lina at the wedding, right? Dalton's wife?"

"Yes."

"I pointed out Snow—Aria," she corrected. "On the other side of her is Lily. Lily's Rexar's wife. Did you meet her?"

She shook her head. "I've met Rexar and RJ, though."

"Awesome. And I know you know Willow because she was on the plane with us, too. Then there's Eedana and Adalyn." She pointed out the other two men. "Eedana is

Logan's?—”

“She owns Bison?”

“Yes, that’s her. Adalyn belongs with Rory, and they have a little boy, Sam, who’s probably out causing chaos with RJ.”

“I’m never going to remember everyone.” She didn’t understand why, if she was only going to be here for a few days, she needed to know everyone. But she didn’t want to be mean to Becky. In a different world, she could easily see them becoming friends. But long-term friends weren’t going to be possible for her.

Maybe Caleb and these people can figure out a way to help me escape Janek without me losing everything again.

For the first time in a long time, a spark became a flame, and the flame warmed her from the inside out... hope. She really hoped it wasn’t like fate, and if you tempted it, it wouldn’t betray you as fate would.

“Are you listening?” Becky nudged her.

“Sorry, my mind wandered.” She stuffed a mouthful of food into her mouth and chewed. “It does that sometimes. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Eh, girlfriend, all this hawtness around, it short circuits the brain at times. You’ll get used to it.” She grinned when her husband growled at her again, and Becky’s cheeks reddened. She elbowed him hard, then cleared her throat and pointed out someone else. “The dark-haired woman at the back of the room is in training. The bosses haven’t decided what team she’s on yet, but possibly Delta team.” She obviously recognized the confusion on her face and tagged on, “Alpha Team is where Lina and the others are. This is Bravo, that’s Charlie, and Delta is all about girl power.”

She was so confused.

“Delta team is mostly women who have a unique skill set,” Caleb supplied in her other ear.

How curious.

“What skillset?”

He chuckled softly, his breath warm against her ear. “I can’t tell you that without clearance.”

That’s a movie reference, right? Or maybe that’s, ‘if I tell you I’ll have to kill you.’

“Okay.”

“Dalton,” he explained, “isn’t like most contractors in this business. He doesn’t care if the operator is male or female. If they can do the job he needs filling, then he’ll hire the best there is. This job can be hella sexist at times. But here, he’ll kick a man to the curb just as fast as he would a female. Mission first. The only exception to that is family. He’ll put family first and go balls to the wall to keep our wives, partners, and kids safe.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“In this industry, it’s the good men willing to do bad things in any hell hole on earth to survive.”

There was a warning in his words. She thought he was telling her he was a good man, but not everything he’d done was something she or any civilian would typically approve of. She nodded and went back to her food, using it to cover her thoughts

while she tried to figure out if that was what he meant. She could ask him about it later, she decided, or she could ask Becky. She might tell her.

From under her eyelashes, she could see the people at what Becky had called the Alpha table getting to their feet, and one of the women was making a beeline to their table.

“Hi.” She stopped right next to Rose. “I’m Lily, RJ’s mom. I just wanted to say I’m so sorry he nearly ran you over on the four-wheeler...”

“It’s okay, he missed.” It was nice of her to come over. “His dad handled it. I’m Rose.”

“Rexar is still figuring out the dad thing.” Lily’s smile was sad, as if it hurt to admit that. “And RJ that he has to answer to someone who isn’t me. But they are getting there.”

There was a story behind that comment, but she didn’t want Lily worrying that she was upset or angry at her son.

“Serious, no harm done.” She nudged Caleb. “Tell her, Caleb.”

“It’s good, Lil’, he came close, but to be fair, we stepped off the porch. He couldn’t have known we’d do that.”

Her cheeks heated. Caleb hadn’t stepped off the porch. She had.

She opened her mouth to apologize but snapped it shut when Lily’s face brightened.

“Thank you.” Lily smiled. “I’ll tell Rexar to reduce the number of stalls he has to clean. It won’t hurt him to know actions have consequences, especially when there’s

a vehicle involved.” She turned her head when Rexar called her name from the door. “I gotta go. I’ll come over tomorrow evening, and we can get to know each other better.”

Rose watched as she hurried across the room, and her husband tugged her against his side, pressing a kiss to her temple.

Caleb pulled me close like that.

It doesn’t mean anything.

Don’t even think it.

We are not them.

“What are you thinking so hard about?”

“Um—nothing.”

She was saved from answering further by Kacey coming out of the kitchen carrying a plate of food. He waved to the men on Charlie team’s table and jerked his chin toward the one they sat at. She realized he must be telling them he was going to sit with them. He sat in an empty seat between the two men across from them. She realized he and Caleb looked very similar, but one was dark and the other light.

They are brothers, so it makes sense.

“Thank you. Kacey, right?”

He nodded. “Thanks for what?”

“The food, dinner.” Crap, did she screw up again? But she’d started, so she might as well finish. “As someone who doesn’t like to cook, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” He jabbed his fork around the table. “I like her. Nobody else thinks of thanking me for feeding them. She does.” He glared at Caleb. “Keep her, and don’t fuck it up.”

“Bastard.”

“I might not be very good in the cooking department...” It was nice to offer, right? “But I can wash a plate like a boss.” Thank you, cash-in-hand jobs at way too many restaurants to count. “If you need help in the kitchen, I can do that.” At least if she had something to do, she wouldn’t feel like she was taking advantage of Nemesis Inc.’s kindness.

Kacey chewed on a forkful of food and studied her as if trying to decide if she was serious or not. “Not tonight, but feel free to run into the kitchen if you need something or you get bored. For now. Just chill, and if my brother pisses you off, come find me, and I’ll straighten him out.”

She made a mental note to come over when she knew she was allowed to and offer to help again. “Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Caleb wasn't sure if he wanted to kick Kacey's ass or thank him for not being his typical jerkish self to Rose. It was a close call, but by the time he helped her to her feet, he was leaning more toward thanking him. He'd have to come back over later and ask Kacey if he'd allow her to help in the kitchen. Maybe if she had something to do, she'd want to stay...

He knew it was purely selfish that he wanted her here for longer than the few days she'd promised. But he didn't care. Nobody had ever had this effect on him before. Sue him for wanting to explore it. "Did you have enough to eat?"

"If I ate another bite, I'll explode."

He'd much prefer to have her exploding for another reason.

Jeez, you are as bad as a stud dog panting after a bitch in heat. Dial it down, boy.

Yet, as they walked back to the house, he found himself catching her hand and interlinking their fingers. "Look." He pointed out a shooting star. "Make a wish."

"What?"

"I wish, I wish upon a star..." He repeated the rhyme he'd heard since he was a child. "When you see a shooting star, you make a wish."

"Is it like birthday candles, and you don't tell anyone, because if you do, it doesn't

come true?”

“Now you’ve got it.” He brought her to the pasture fence and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “There must be a meteor shower, as there are loads of them.”

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “You’d never see these in the city. There’s too many lights.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“Blame me for what?”

“For wanting to live out here,” she replied. “There’s something about this place. It speaks to your soul. It wants you... no, it invites you to stay.”

“You can stay.”

“For two more days,” she reminded him. “That’s what we agreed on.”

“Can we renegotiate for longer? I don’t mind if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t tempt me. It’s not safe.”

He spun her in his arms. “Did you not notice all that weaponry in the dining room? Your Janek?”

“He’s not my Janek—he never really was—he just made me believe he was.”

“Then he was a fool,” he told her solemnly. “He’s realized his mistake, and now he

won't stop coming. Janek knows he fucked up."

"You sound like you almost agree with what he's doing to me."

"Hell no." He reared back. "I would never hurt a woman. And I definitely wouldn't hurt you. I was only saying I understand that he doesn't want to let you go. I've known you for a couple of days, and I know I'd like to keep you longer."

"Keep me? I don't belong to you. I don't belong to anyone but myself."

He'd done it again. Stuffed his shoe into his freaking mouth and screwed up the words which came out around them. She was hot, raging mad, with her hands propped on her hips, glaring at him. She looked like an enraged goddess about to go to war. "Sorry, sorry." He held his hands up in front of him. "That came out wrong. I don't want to own you..." Word thinking on his feet was not his best skill. "I want to be owned by you, not the other way around."

"You can't own people."

"You can own their heart."

"You've lost your mind."

"Hah, I lost that long ago." He lifted one shoulder. "It's why I work for Nemesis. All of us who work here have lost our damn minds; it's why we do what we do."

"You cannot own people," she repeated as if she was stuck on that point.

"So, what do you call what happens when you give your heart to someone? That's kinda the same thing."

“Doing a stupid. That’s what I called it: giving your heart to someone is doing a freaking stupid.”

“I want to know why you think that.” He reached for her again, trying to keep his voice smooth and inviting, but he didn’t think he succeeded as if he could hear the rasp; she certainly could, too.

She blinked at him but came easily back into his arms when he tugged lightly on her hand. Maybe he was as drunk as a skunk or dreaming. He had to be, because feelings like this didn’t happen to him, standing here on the front porch with the Crazies a smudge in the distance as they watched one of nature’s masterpieces glitter against the night sky. To him, it was almost surreal. How many times had he watched the falling stars from the sky in a distant land, far from the comfort of this place? Probably too many times to count. He was sure he’d been awed by their splendor each and every time, but he was sure they paled in comparison to watching a meteor shower with Rose. “Tell me who you are, Rose. I want to get to you know and for you to get to know me.”

A tinge of wariness sounded in her voice. “I don’t understand why you want to know everything about me.”

“Saying it out loud will probably make me sound like an idiot.”

“Tell me anyway.”

He chuckled, trying to shake off nerves that he hadn’t expected. “Being here with you is, I don’t know, something I never expected. It feels like this is where I’m supposed to be, right here, right now.” He leaned in closer to her as he tried to put what was inside him into words. “With you.”

She laughed, a rich, melodic sound that made his heart skip a beat. “I never figured

you as poetic.”

He took a deep breath, tramping down on the twinge of pain. He was sure she hadn’t meant to hurt him with her words. He was a warfighter, a soldier to the core. He looked like one, acted like one, and probably smelled like one most of the time, too. It wasn’t a surprise for her to peg him as strong or tough. But was it so wrong of him to want her to see past the warrior’s mask he wore like a second skin? “Sometimes, what you didn’t see on the surface was what matters most.”

She leaned back against the porch railing, giving him a thoughtful look. “Do you think I don’t see the kind heart under all the gruffness, Caleb?”

His eyes flashed with surprise. “Do you?” he asked quietly, glancing down at her. “Because I’m not sure you do.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “If not for kindness, then why do all of this?” She waved her hand toward the landscape. “Why bring me here? Why help me?”

“Because it was the right thing to do.” From how her shoulders tensed, he figured she could tell he was leaving something out.

“Uh-huh, and is that the only reason?”

“No.” He leaned in slightly, his gaze intense. “I don’t do this, but with you, I find I can’t help myself.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do what? You are talking in riddles. I do not understand what you are trying to tell me. Please explain?”

“Bring women home, and especially not here to the ranch.” He didn’t want to make her run from him, but she’d find out at some point anyway, “Don’t get me wrong, I

love women, all sizes, all shapes. But while the guys think that means I spend time in their beds..." He snorted. "I don't. I just love spending time with them. Dinner, talking, movies. Kissing, sometimes more, but not often. They call me Casanova, but I'm really kinda—not."

She peered up at him as if he was a puzzle she needed to resolve. "And you say I'm different. I'm not sure if I understand what that means."

He nodded. He was making a mess of explaining how much he was drawn to her. Anyone who may have been in his past no longer existed for him. "I'm screwing up explaining it. But right now, I'm not sure it matters. What does, is I'm happy you're here," he paused and waited for her to lift her gaze to his, "with me."

She took a deep breath and studied him for so long he shifted his feet, about to walk away. "I'm happy to be here with you too..."

By the way she trailed off on her words, he had a feeling she wasn't quite finished. It took more effort than it should have for him to stay silent and allow her to continue.

"I should be figuring out what my next steps are," she whispered softly. "I should be running and trying to hide from him."

He leaned on the porch railing next to her, his expression thoughtful. "Is that what you want to do?" It might kill him, but if she didn't feel safe here, then he'd find her somewhere she did feel safe.

She shook her head. "No, and I don't understand why," she admitted. "I shouldn't trust anyone..."

Holding his breath, waiting for her to give him a sign, any sign, was becoming dangerous. If he kept it up, his face would be purple like one of those cartoon

characters on TV.

“I shouldn’t trust you, but I do.”

He reached for her, brushing the backs of his fingers down her face. “Thank you for trusting me.” Her eyes watched him curiously and with a touch of anticipation. His heart hammered against his ribs, and his balls tightened in eagerness.

She reached up and pressed her lips against his. There was a second where he didn’t move, then he let loose a groan that rumbled his chest.

A sigh escaped her when his hand cupped the back of her head. She tilted it to the side as the kiss deepened. He struggled with the need to push for more and held himself in check. He could feel the fear underneath her desire, and he didn’t blame her for it. But if they were going to do this, then he wanted it to mean more than just scratching an itch.

Caleb ended the kiss and straightened. Confusion filled her gaze. He smiled and wrapped her into a hug. There was a millisecond where she stiffened, and he thought she’d pull away, then a sigh huffed against his throat, and she relaxed, hugging him back.

He rested his chin on the top of her head and closed his eyes, blocking out the world to focus and enjoy the peace this moment brought. He understood now why Dalton sought out Lina. It made sense why Logan smiled for Eedana or why Wolf Steel’s eyes lit up the second his woman walked into the room. There was peace to be found in the arms of someone who settled the beasts of regret caused by decades of fighting for justice and right. Sometimes, the warfighter in a man’s soul craved the softness of his woman’s trust to remind him why, after all these years, he stayed in the fight.

But he wished she was. He wanted her to be his and his alone.

“Caleb?”

“Hi,” he whispered softly.

“Kiss me again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t need a second invitation and dipped down to claim her lips, pausing to search her eyes before he made contact. “If I do this, I might not want to stop.”

“If you stop, I may punch you in the balls.”

He barked a laugh at her directness. “It might be better that we go inside because when you bring me to my knees, I don’t want any witnesses.”

He took advantage of the few moments it took them from the porch to get to his place to remind himself that rushing wasn’t something he wanted. She deserved better than a fast, dirty tumble against a wall, and he craved spending the entire night exploring, tasting, and loving her.

Her gaze heated his skin as she gradually looked him up and down. He locked the door behind them.

He slowly turned and reached for her. Her hands stroked up his shoulders as he pulled her toward him. Then she jumped, her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms around his neck. Their gazes clashed. His stomach quivered with excitement when he saw the desire she didn’t try to hide.

He held her easily as he made his way to his room. He stopped in the middle of the room and set her down, groaning as she slid down his body to stand in front of him. He didn't want to release her. He loved having her in his arms, and he wanted to keep her there. Reluctantly, he let go and stripped off his T-shirt.

Her lips parted as she skimmed her gaze from his chest to his stomach. Her fingers followed her gaze as if she was counting each and every one of his abs.

His eyes locked on her fingers as she stripped off her shoes and pants, making his breath catch and his balls ache. When she straightened, he bit back a groan at the absolute perfection that stood before him. Her desire blazed in her eyes—and he loved it.

In the next heartbeat, he snatched her to him, his mouth plundering hers. He kissed her hungrily, greedily, deeply, ravenously, as if she were the first meal after a month of starvation.

She moaned, her hands clutching him as she pressed closer. It wasn't until he felt the back of his knuckles brush something behind her that he realized he'd moved them against the wall.

Her kisses stole his sanity.

They gave him clarity.

They offered him something—everything he'd ever desired, and as if he had been fumbling in the dark or with compromised vision for most of his life, somewhere deep inside him, everything became crystal clear. The more they kissed, the more he understood she was ruining him for anyone else—and he was here for it.

He tugged on her hair, exposing her neck. She gasped in pleasure as he kissed down

the column of her throat to lick her pulse point. Every taste, every sigh, every moan was more erotic and sensual than the last, ramping up the desire swirling between them.

Her fingers slid into his hair as he trailed kisses to her breasts. She moaned when his teeth grazed over one nipple and then the other before going back to the first. His lips wrapped around the peak and sucked before his tongue lapped and teased it.

Rose gasped in pleasure as he devoured, savored, ravished. All the while, her hands stroked over his skin, learning every inch of him and leaving a trail of desire in their wake. “Caleb,” she whispered when he moved to her other breast and began to flick his tongue over the nipple. It wasn’t long before she was rocking her hips against him.

Caleb loved the thought of being so thoroughly wanted and needed by her. He was helpless to resist giving her what she craved because she was better than any fantasy he’d ever had—or ever would have. He watched her from under desire-filled, hooded eyelids and whispered, “You’re beautiful.”

His lips trailed down her stomach and lower; she moaned as he lifted one of her legs and placed it on his shoulder, exposing her sex. He’d meant to dive in with his fingers or tongue or both, but he paused to savor the moment. He peered up at her. The hunger and need in her gaze made his heart skip a beat and his cock jerk. “Tell me you’re sure,” he demanded.

She nodded.

“Words, Rosey-Posey, I’m going to need words.” His voice scratchy and hoarse. “Tell me you need this as much as I do.”

“I’m sure. Please, Caleb. I need you.”

Still holding her gaze, he stroked one finger over her sex. Her head dropped back, breaking the connection as he lowered his mouth to her clit to lick and suck over her sensitive bundle of nerves until her knee buckled as he brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure, only to stop right before she climaxed. “So hot. The taste of you makes me want to take you right here, right now.”

“Do it,” she urged. “Take me right here. Now.” She scraped her nails over his shoulders. “Stop making me wait.”

“Bossy.” He slid one thick finger inside her, thrusting slowly and going deep before using short movements that barely entered her. “And I love it.”

“Caleb.”

He grinned against her stomach at the warning in her voice. Every sigh and moan sent the desire between them higher and higher until he was shaking with need. Once more, he brought her right to the edge of release, only to pause, petting and stroking, calming her body as he whispered words even he couldn’t make out.

His only thought was Rose. Her touch, her taste, bringing pleasure to her body. He loved that she trembled when he lowered her foot. He steadied her as he got to his feet. He ground his teeth, refusing to rush these magical moments between them. Prolonging it was killing him, but he craved the payoff almost as much as he craved her cries of desire.

He took a moment to kiss her deep, wet, and slow before he picked her up, raising her until her head was above his. He turned his face into the hand that cupped his cheek to press a kiss to the palm and lowered her so she could wrap her legs around his waist. Her lips parted when he felt the head of his cock press against the opening of her pussy.

Caleb squeezed his eyes shut as he filled her inch by inch. Her body stretched around him; he reveled in the heat of her enclosing him in her core. Once he was balls deep, he breathed harshly against her ear. “Rose,” he whispered.

“My name has never sounded so sexy.”

Did she not realize she was the sexy one?

Time stood still in their bubble of desire as he slowly withdrew and thrust forward, filling her again and again. Harder, deeper, until both were helpless to do anything but hold onto each other as they found a rhythm as old as time itself.

Using the wall at her back as leverage, he shifted her in his grasp, widening her hips, giving himself more room. His senses filled with everything that was Rose. Her cries, her smell, her desire. He wanted to give her everything and fulfill every need, every craving. His entire existence centered on her, and even though he knew his time with her could be cut short at any second, he couldn’t prevent long-locked emotions from spilling over the flood barriers in his heart, which kept them contained safely away from pain.

The connection between them should be terrifying. It wasn’t. It should have reminded him to keep his dick in his pants. It hadn’t. It did urge caution. He silenced and ignored it. He didn’t want to stop what was developing between them—even if it brought pain in the future. The only thing he was certain of was that this felt right; she felt perfect for him.

“Ca—Caleb.”

“I’m here.”

“M—more, please.”

He didn't try to resist her plea. He locked his gaze on hers. He could get lost in the depths of desire, but his need to ensure her pleasure kept him grounded. He gave and took. Slid and thrust. Kissed and nipped, and she matched him move for move until he knew she claimed him—body, heart, and soul—as hers. He was defenseless against the knowledge that flooded him and the satisfaction it offered.

She clenched around his cock in a viselike grip, her fingers tightening on his hair, and her lips parted; a scream was locked in her throat as her orgasm wrapped him in wonder. Caleb was caught off guard by its force as he gave her all she begged for. Pushing, stroking, filling—the only thing that mattered was fulfilling her needs and her desires.

Defenseless against the onslaught of such emotions any longer, he barely made it to where she was coming down from her orgasm when he growled, thrust balls deep, and held still, fighting for composure.

Not yet.

Soon.

Shit.

So close.

He adjusted his grip on her body, gathering her safely into his arms, and walked to the bed. He carefully lowered her onto the sheets and followed her down. Her legs widened around him, cradling him. Caleb leaned over her, his hands on either side of her head. “Okay?”

“Mmmh.”

He smirked at the satisfied sound that whispered from her lips. He flexed his hips slowly, pulling his cock from her body, and slid back in again with as much strength as he could muster. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she whined a low, keening sound.

If that sound was a drug, I'd be addicted for sure.

She arched her back every time he filled her deeply. His breathing became faster and more ragged as his cock pounded her relentlessly. Desire gave way to pure, unadulterated pleasure as he buried himself deep inside her one last time. His arms shook, and their gazes locked together as his cock pulsed and he filled her with all he had to give.

He lowered himself to his elbows and kissed her, this one soft, gentle, and reverent, before gathering her in his arms and rolling onto his back.

She was gazing at him with a soft smile when he opened his eyes. "Wow," she whispered.

Caleb ran his hand up and down her back, smiled, and gave her a quick kiss. "I didn't know it could be like this."

Her eyes drifted sleepily closed. "Hmm?"

Mind-blowing.

Epic.

"Hot."

"Yes. Yes, it was."

He reached for the covers and somehow untangled them. By the time he'd covered them, she slept on his chest. He leaned over for the remote to flick off the lights, then wrapped himself around her and followed her into sleep.

Caleb gathered the gear he'd placed on the security belt at the entrance to the main headquarters and the working hub, Nemesis Inc. He understood the need for all the heightened security, but he would not lie to himself—it was annoying as hell. He stuffed his knife back into the sheath at his ankle and his weapon into the holster under his arm.

Rose had been asleep when he left the house. Would seeing him armed to the teeth in what was supposed to be the safe place where he was asking her to stay freak her out? Possibly, he admitted. He nodded to the operator, who had just started divesting himself of his weapons, and turned away.

“Hold the elevator for ya?”

“Sorry, bro, no can do.” He could see the operator emptying the bullets out of his gun and putting them in separate boxes to go through the scanner, but he didn't know him well enough to hold the damn elevator. “You might be a while, and I'm on a time crunch.”

“Okay, sorry.”

“Hah.” He stepped into the elevator and punched the button for the war-room floor. As the doors slid shut, he winced when the security guard picked up his phone. His hinky radar was moving. The dude was up to something for sure. He almost sent the elevator back to the main floor, but he had an important call to take. Tex wouldn't be pleased if he kept him waiting too long. “Move it, elevator, because if I'm not in the

war-room before the call comes in, I'm gonna be pissed."

He pushed the door and ran down the hallway just as the red bulb over the door leading into Trev's private quarters started flashing. Putting on a burst of speed, his hand landed on the war-room door, opening it just enough to prevent it from locking as the deadbolt clicked.

"Shit." Trev spun on his chair with the muzzle of his Sig Saur pointed directly at him. "What's happening?"

"New dude coming through security."

"I'm gonna kill him." Trev lowered his weapon and got to his feet. He turned the key in the door, released the deadbolt, shut it, and locked it behind him again, as protocol dictated. "Dalton is going to lose his fucking mind."

"I won't be far behind him." Holy hell, he'd even help Dalton beat the fucker. Every operator was briefed on protocols for entering the building. They didn't deserve to be here if they couldn't manage that simple task. If FNG, aka Fucking New Guy, wasn't paying attention, that was on him. "Did you and Tex find anything?"

"Oh boy, did we ever?" Trev rolled his chair back under his desk. "Let me ping Tex. Because of that, it looks like it's just gonna be you and me for this call."

Caleb winced. Thank fuck he'd managed to make it in here. Because if he missed this call...

Fucking New Guy's ass is mine when we are done here.

"Boss, yeah, nope." Trev answered his phone. He scratched his jaw and winced. "I can't override it, them's the rules. Sorry. Yeah, still not doing it. You gotta wait until

the lockdown is lifted.” He punched end on the call. “Nem is thrilled, as you can imagine.”

“I’ll bet. Where did he get stuck?”

“His house.” He wriggled the mouse and hit call on the secure app they used for conference calls.

House, shit .

“Rose is on her own at mine; she won’t know what’s going on.”

“Crap...”

“What happened?” Tex’s face filled the screen. “Do you need to go?”

“Can’t, we’re locked down because one of our FNG’s tried to test the security at the front door,” Trev told him. “Until that’s cleared, then all doors on the premises are locked. The windows are, too.”

“That’s—um?—”

“Over the top?” Trev asked wryly. “This is Dalton Knight we are talking about, and he has a family to protect these days. You know that, right?”

“She was asleep when I left.” He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself or them. Hopefully, Rose was still sleeping. If she wasn’t, then any progress they’d made last night was toast. “As soon as lockdown is lifted, I’ll go over and make sure she’s okay.”

“Okay, because I can hack into...”

“Do not hack my damn microwave.” He still hadn’t recovered from the last time. “I threw that damn Bluetooth fucker out and got an old school one and only plug it in when I want to use it.” He regretted his decision not to have a phone installed in his apartment.

Stupid move, Hunt. Stupid move.

“Spoilsport,” Tex muttered.

“You almost gave me a damn heart attack, asshole.” If he wasn’t so grateful for Tex and his mad skills, he’d hate the man for the prank he’d pulled last April Fool’s Day. “As soon as the red lights stop swirling, I’ll run over and make sure she’s okay. Until then, let’s get down to business.” He was aware that, normally, Trev or Dalton would run the call, but Dalton was trapped in his house, and Trev could just back off for once. Rose was his to protect, which gave him point position on this one. “What did you find on Janek?”

“He’s a real charmer.”

By Tex’s tone, Caleb figured charming was the last thing Janek Nawrocki was. “Hit me with it.”

“He’s got a rap sheet as long as the Taliban’s reach. If you can think of it, it’s on it. Domestic abuse, assault, attempted murder, tax evasion, insider trading, drug running, weapons...”

“Everything but the kitchen sink, then?”

“Oh, there’s one of those mentioned in there, too,” Tex said. “It’s lumped in with the illegal disposal of a household item.”

“Why is he chasing Rose?”

“Rose North.” Tex flipped through a notebook in front of him. “AKA June Pezzullo...”

June, her name is June.

Rose fits her better.

“Hey, dumbass, snap out of it.” Trav snapped his fingers in front of his face. “What did we miss?”

“Uh—umm—” Some operator he was; he’d zoned out completely. No wonder Tex and Trev were looking at him like he had two heads. “Rose just suits her better, is all.”

“You seriously have it bad,” Trev muttered. “Focus or leave.”

“Focusing. So, June Pezzullo...”

“She walked into a Manhattan police station two years ago.” Trev eyed him curiously but said nothing. “And made a domestic violence complaint against Nawrocki.”

She’s been running for two fucking years.

Damn.

She’d told him that. But he kept his mouth shut and listened to the report. Keeping his rage at bay was a whole different thing. The more he heard, the worse it bubbled inside him.

“They’d be looking for a reason to haul him into the station. Even a traffic ticket would have done it. But Nawrocki’s a careful bastard, and he has a driver...”

“Negating the option of blaming him for speed or tags.”

“Exactly.”

“Locals in New York jumped all over the opportunity Rose’s visit gave them and called in the FBI as requested. The FBI offered her immunity?—”

“Immunity from what? It wasn’t her fault her ex was a fucker who beat the shit out of her.”

“Agreed. But she knew nothing of the legal system. I managed to sneak a peek at the interview recordings.” Tex blew out an annoyed breath. “I’m sending them over. But I’m telling you right now,” he warned, “they’re rough, man.”

Caleb nodded. “Noted.” He’d watch them regardless because they involved Rose.

Sorry, I just can’t think of her as June.

To me, she’ll always be Rose.

My Rose. Even if she disagrees with me about owning people.

“June,” Tex made inverted commas with his fingers, “or Rose, as we know her, went into witness protection...”

“That’s a little heavy for tax evasion and domestic violence charges, isn’t it?”

Tex’s expression was perplexed. “Yep. I’m still looking for the why.” If it didn’t

make sense to Tex Keegan, then there was a problem somewhere. “They stashed her in upstate New York, but just before he was meant to go to trial, she disappeared. The agents guarding her were killed. She’s suspected of their murders.”

“The fuck? Not a fucking chance in hell did she kill anyone, especially not trained agents, no matter how green they are.”

“Agreed.”

“No shit.”

That both men immediately agreed with him soothed his anger. If they didn’t think she was responsible, then they’d help him fix it for her. “She doesn’t deserve this.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Tex agreed. “We’ll make it right for her, somehow.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate that.”

Rose jerked awake at the obnoxious blaring noise that blasted through Caleb's house. "Shit, fire." She scrambled to get off the bed, twisting her legs in the covers, and fell in a heap next to it instead. "Caleb?"

He didn't answer, and the noise paused, but somewhere else in the house, the reflection of a swirling red light hit the open bedroom door. She got to her feet and almost tripped again. "Get off." She tugged at the blankets. "Fire, Caleb!" she yelled.

Where the heck is he?

Sniffing, trying to catch any smell of smoke, she realized she was naked when the coolness of the door hit her left boob on her way into the hall. "Shit." Did she have time to get dressed? Would stopping to put on clothes mean the difference between surviving and dying?

She took one step into the hallway and then whirled around, racing back into the bedroom to grab something to wear because she already knew there was no way she could avoid nightmares if everyone in the place saw her naked. Her fingers made contact with what felt like a t-shirt, and she pulled it on over her head. The label rubbing against her throat told her she had it on backward, but that didn't matter. Speed did.

"Caleb?" She raced down the hallway to the front door. He must have gone out. He wouldn't have left her here alone with the fire alarm going off—she was sure of it. She tugged on the door handle, but it didn't open.

The fancy lock.

She flipped up the plastic cover that protected the lock and slapped her palm against it, pushing buttons with her other hand. The little light stayed red. It had flashed to green yesterday when he'd opened it. She tried again.

I don't know what I'm doing.

Please open.

Open, damn it.

"Caleb! Help me!"

Oh my God, did he lock me in here and leave me to die alone?

Rose closed her fists and hammered on the door. Someone had to hear her. She screamed at the top of her lungs, frantically looking around for the flames and smoke, brushing angrily at the snot running from her nose with the back of her arm. This could not be how she died. She shot across the room to the window, but all of them were now shuttered. Wedging the tips of her fingers in under the rum, she pulled with all her strength. They moved, but not enough. "Pull up, damn it." Pain sliced through her fingers as she broke two fingernails down to the quick. "Ouch. Please open. God. Let me out."

She searched for something that might help her escape, but she couldn't find anything. He was a soldier; he was meant to have guns and knives in the house. She'd even take a sword or a hammer. Balling up her fists, she hammered and kicked at the door, ignoring the pain, and screamed as loud as she could.

Just as suddenly as the chaos started, it stopped, as if someone had cut the power and

the lights went off. Her breathing hitched, and she sucked in a painful breath as the shutters opened and a mechanism on the door clicked.

Did it open?

Please be open.

This time, when she twisted the handle, the door opened, and she ran into the hallway. Pausing for a second, unsure where to go, she looked both ways.

“Ma’am? Miss Rose, are you okay?”

“Oh my God, there’s a fire.” She grabbed the child by the wrist. “How do we get out? Tell me.”

The boy dug his heels in, trying to pull his hand free. “Miss Rose, there’s no fire. It was someone being stupid at my daddy’s work.”

In her confusion, she froze, dropped his hand, and blinked stupidly at him. “What do you mean? The fire alarm was going off.”

He shook his head and backed away from her. “I’m gonna go get my mom.” RJ spun on his heels and took off running. He disappeared through a door further down the hall.

Rose sagged against the wall.

What is this place?

Are they all crazy?

“Oh crap, are you okay?”

She blinked at Lily. “Um—ah—” Her hands went to her throat, and she rubbed, trying to remind herself how to breathe.

Lily wrapped an arm around her and half carried her down to her place. She nudged open the door with her elbow and got them inside. “Rexar, call Caleb. Now.”

Her husband’s eyes widened. He pulled out his phone, stabbed at the screen with his index finger, and put it to his ear. “Get your ass here, now. Your woman is in my house and scared out of her fucking mind.” He stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

“Come sit down.” Lily guided her to the couch and pushed her into it. “You don’t want to fall over. Can I get you water? RJ, please bring me a glass of water.”

Rose flinched when Rexar came closer. He stopped in his tracks and squatted on his haunches, bringing his face to her eye level. “Is it easier for you if I leave? I can stand outside the door and wait for Caleb, so you know you are safe?”

Oh God, now she was throwing the man out of his own home. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. Nothing made sense in her hysterical state.

“She’s scared. I think you should go.” Lily softened her words with a stroke down his arm. “Take RJ with you. Maybe he can go to the barn and see the foals or something.”

“You got it.” Rexar straightened and took RJ’s hand. “I’ll be just outside the door. Let me know if you need help, ‘k?” Lily nodded, and the boys left, shutting the door behind them.

Lily sank carefully onto the couch beside her. “What do you need?”

“Cold.” Why couldn’t she string two words together? This was ridiculous. She was competent, dang it. She just needed to figure out how to act like it.

“I think you’re in shock.” The sympathy in her voice brought a fresh wave of tears that Rose couldn’t have stopped if she’d tried. Lily stood and pulled her to her feet. “Come on, jump in my shower and warm up. A hot shower always makes me feel better.”

She followed her through their house and into the bathroom. Lily flipped on the shower. “I’ll grab you some towels and some comfy clothes.”

“Th—thank you.” The words garbled between her chattering teeth, but she figured Lily understood her when she answered with a smile over her shoulder as she disappeared out of the room, closing the door behind her.

It took a few moments before the heat of the water started to penetrate the ice on her skin. Rose huddled under the water, struggling to figure out how on earth her morning had gone to hell so fast. Was this what these people went through day in, day out? Thinking they were finally in a safe spot, only for life to yank the rug out from under them?

I knew better than to let my guard down.

I knew it, and I did it anyway.

Stupid. I was stupid to think I could have a normal week, never mind a normal life.

Stupid.

Stupid.

Stupid.

These people must think I've lost my mind.

Mortified, she dashed at the tears rolling down her cheeks angrily. She had no business crying. Crying would fix nothing. Nothing. She knew that. She'd learned that lesson well. Her mistake had been allowing herself to dream of more.

Never again.

No more wishes.

No more dreams.

Rely on nobody but yourself.

She took a shaky breath and coughed when she sucked some water into her lungs. Shoring up her defenses would be difficult, but she could do it. She'd done it before, and she'd do it again. Now, she just had to figure out how to protect her heart in the process.

"Baby girl, Rose?"

"Ca—Caleb?" So much for her resolve. Even the sound of his voice made her want to beg him to help her fix the mess that was her life. She reached for the shower curtain, but she didn't look around it. She needed every available second to compose herself before she had to look him in the eye and lie her ass off.

He moved closer and stroked one finger over hers. "Are you okay?"

"No. No, I'm not." Admitting she was not okay hadn't been the plan at all.

One more day.

Just one more day, then I can be strong again.

Her seesawing emotions could not be allowed to make her make stupid choices, but the woman inside her craved comfort from him, and she just wasn't strong enough to resist.

Caleb leaned over Trev's shoulder and peered at the screen. He knew Trev wasn't a fan of people leaning over him while he worked, but with Tex's face taking up most of the screen on the wall, there wasn't much choice.

Jesus, Rose was lucky to have escaped him.

His jaw clenched as Trev flipped through the images of two exes, both battered and bruised. "How was he not arrested?"

"They refused to press charges," Tex confirmed. "I don't know why the investigations were dropped. They could have pushed on anyway as they have those photos as evidence—" He stopped talking when a phone rang in the war-room. "I think that's you, Hunt."

He dug into his pocket for his phone and glanced at the screen. "One sec." He almost didn't answer, but every instinct he had demanded that he not ignore this call. If the alarms hadn't gone off, he'd most likely have ignored Rexar's call, but he just knew this was important. "Hunt."

"Get your ass here, now. Your woman is in my house and scared out of her fucking mind."

"On my way." Caleb was already moving. "I gotta go. Rose needs me." He didn't wait for them to answer and took off for the elevator. Thankfully, the war-room door had unlocked when the alarms had shut down. "Come on. Come on." Not having

access to a staircase unless the power went out freaking sucked right now. He jabbed his thumb onto the button. Once he was in the elevator, and it was moving, he texted Dalton.

Bravo 5: Ugt. Clr. FD. HQ. Stat. B5.

Nemesis: Roger.

When you send your boss a text requesting urgent clearance at the front door of your headquarters, and he responds with ‘roger,’ He either knows what’s going on, or he trusts your ass. Probably a little of both.

Grateful that the disturbance from earlier wouldn’t slow him down, Caleb squeezed through the half-open elevator and ran for the security desks. “Incoming.” He yelled the warning, and the two guards stepped aside, one opening their half door for him, allowing him through. “Thanks.” He was already through the front door before he’d finished speaking.

I shouldn’t have left her without telling her where I was going.

Damn it.

He took the stairs in Bravo House two at a time. From the top, he could see Rexar standing sentinel at his front door. Caleb decided he was going to take great pleasure in kicking the shit out of the asshole who’d caused all this crap. He skidded to a stop in front of Rexar. “What happened? Is Rose okay?”

Rexar looked uncomfortable at the best of times. Right now, he looked like he’d prefer to be anywhere but here. “She’s bad, man. I’ve not seen anything like it since we pulled Willow out of that fucking box. Becky, too.”

“Shit. I should have stayed.”

“Or at least you probably should have told her where you were going,” Rexar agreed. “RJ found her. He came and got Lily.” He stepped to one side and opened the door. “Go on in. I sent RJ to the barn. Tell Lily I’ll take her to breakfast if she wants to get her sexy ass out here.”

RJ was getting an awesome freaking gift for Christmas or his birthday, whichever came first. Lily too. “I’m not telling your wife she has a sexy ass while she has access to the arsenal you keep in there. I’m stupid at times, but not braindead.” He slipped past Rexar but stopped before he was fully through the door to look over his shoulder. “Thanks, Rexar. I appreciate what you and your family did for her.”

“No worries.” These had to be the most words he’d heard Rexar say in years in a non-mission setting. “Family first, always.”

“Roger that.” He scanned the living space and spotted Lily coming out of the master bedroom. “Lily, your man wants to take you to breakfast.”

“Rose is in the shower.” Lily pushed the bundle of clothes she carried into his hands. “She’s about my size. Let her wear these.” She poked him on the arm. “Be careful. She was terrified.”

“I’m talking to Nemesis about that fucker who caused this shit.” He knew Lily probably knew even less about him than he did. But still, he wanted her to know this would not be allowed to happen here again.

“Rexar will, too.”

“Good.”

“Go on.” Lily shooed him toward the bathroom door. “Go fix your girl.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Lily.” He paused outside the door and took a deep breath before knocking. “Baby girl?” He cocked his head to one side, straining his ears. He was almost sure he could hear sobbing over the running water, which meant she was crying hard.

Fuck it, I’m not waiting.

“Baby girl?” He pushed open the door. “Rose?”

“Ca—Caleb?” Her fingers reached around the shower curtain, but she didn’t look.

He moved closer and stroked one finger over hers. “Are you okay?”

“No. No, I’m not.”

She hadn’t been scared of Janek. Or at least she’d kept it inside and been so strong. Maybe it was the shock of the alarms going off and waking her out of a deep sleep that snapped the chains on her strength. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would happen.” Even though it wasn’t his fault exactly, he regretted it more than she would ever know.

“I don’t even understand what happened.”

“Someone was stupid and tried to come through our security without clearance for all the weapons they carried.” How did one explain the precautions Nemesis Inc. took to protect its people? “It sent us into lockdown, which was what the alarms and lights were.”

“I thought there was a fire.” Her breathing hitched, and her voice broke. “I couldn’t

find you. I thought you would die.” The last part was wailed, and it clenched something deep in his heart. He rubbed the back of his knuckles over his chest, trying to ease the ache.

Wait... she lost it because she thought I'd burn and die?

In a fucking fire which didn't exist?

“Fuck it,” he muttered softly. He could not and would not leave her to deal with this trauma alone. He refused to do anything that might freak her out again today. “Can I come in there?”

She hesitated a second, which chipped away at the walls that surrounded his heart. “Yeah.”

Thank God.

He stepped over the side of the bath and into the shower, fully clothed, and gathered her into his arms. “I'm sorry.”

“I know.” She buried her face into his chest and cried.

All he could do was hold her, as it sounded like she was letting everything she'd been through free. He wasn't going to give her platitudes or say words that she wasn't in any position to accept at face value. He stroked her back, rocking slightly back and forth as she soaked his chest more than the water did.

“I'm so?—”

“Don't be.” He glanced down at her and realized she was wearing his t-shirt, which was soaking wet. “Let's get this off you.” His fingers reached for the hem. “I'm not

looking for anything but to get you more comfortable.”

“I—leave it, please.” She ducked her head under the flow of water and reached for the shampoo bottle.

“Let me.” If she wanted to wear the T-shirt, then he wasn’t going to try to change her mind. He took the bottle and poured some into his hands. “Just lean against me, and I’ll take care of you.” She nodded, and he massaged the shampoo into her hair, taking the time to give her a head massage as he washed her hair. After rinsing it and applying the conditioner she handed him, she finally took a breath, which wasn’t preceded or followed by a sob. “How are you doing, baby girl?”

“Better.”

There was still a sniffle in her tone, but she sounded good enough that the vice around his chest loosened a little, and he could breathe without feeling panic knocking at the edges of his physic. “Want me to leave while you get dressed?”

“No.” She shook her head, patting his chest. “You’re still wearing all your clothes...”

So was she, in case she hadn’t noticed. “I was in a hurry to make sure you were okay. They’ll dry, or I’ll borrow some of Rexar’s.”

“Oh. Guys do that?”

“I don’t know about other guys, but we usually only carry so much stuff with us when we deploy or go to work.” He helped her finish rinsing off. “We tend to share what we’ve got.” He flipped off the shower and got out.

She followed his lead and grabbed a towel to wrap around herself. “That makes sense.”

He could feel her eyes on him as he fished in the laundry basket and came up with a pair of shorts he recognized as Rexar's. "I'm just gonna pull these on and get out of your way." He turned his back, allowing her as much privacy as the two of them in the small bathroom would allow, and made the fastest change of clothes in history while she dressed in the clothes Lily had provided for her. He grabbed a towel and dropped his wet clothes onto it. "I don't want to drip water all over Lily's floors if I can help it."

"Take this, too." She tossed him the wet t-shirt she'd been wearing, and he added them to the pile.

Keeping an eye on her in the mirror, he gathered the edges of the towel into a makeshift bag. "Ready when you are, baby girl."

She took a deep breath, then nodded and took his hand. Caleb wasn't sure which of them was more relieved when they found Rexar's house empty. He paused and ushered her through the front door into the corridor. He winked at her when she gave him a watery smile as he ensured the door locked shut behind them.

Somewhere in the building, a door slammed, and Rose jerked as if that door had hit her in the face. She stepped close to him, and he squeezed her fingers gently. "We'll be home in a minute. I promise."

Home?

Yes, damn it. Home.

He realized that somewhere between leaving his bed this morning and right this second, he wanted Rose to see his home as hers. He wanted to be the one who fixed all that was wrong in her world. Now, he just had to figure out how to make that happen.

21

Mortified didn't even come close to this. Rose sank into the couch. She'd lost her freaking mind and had a complete meltdown over a freaking alarm.

An alarm.

What the hell was I thinking?

They'll all think I'm insane.

She huddled on the sofa, her hands covering her face. Caleb was doing something in the kitchen. She could hear drawers and stuff opening and closing. But she wasn't sure if she wanted to look and see what he was doing.

"Hey."

She jerked away from his voice and lowered her hands. He squatted directly in front of her with a wary look on his face. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Don't worry, like I said, I tend to move kinda quietly at the best of times." He pushed something cold into her hand.

Her hands gripped the bowl. "Umm..."

"Women need ice cream in times of crisis, right?" he asked sheepishly. "I'll admit, I'm out of my depth here. If you want me to fix a crisis in war, then I'm your guy."

I'm not really up to date on how to fix things when they go wrong for the woman in your life."

He was so adorably flustered as he admitted that, and she blinked at him as he placed a spoon on the lid of the ice cream tub in her hands. "It's eight in the morning. Um..."

He looked uncertain and totally out of his comfort zone as he'd told her he was. "I Googled, and Dr. Google says provide females with ice cream or wine in times of distress. I figured with the morning you've had, you deserve one or the other. I don't have wine here, and I've never seen you drink... which makes this a job for ice cream."

Wow.

"Thank you." She wasn't entirely sure if that was appropriate here, but his sweetness blindsided her.

He looked it up on Google.

On freaking Google.

That's so fricking cute.

She'd probably always blush anytime she thought about this mortifying start to the day. But hopefully, the mortification of overreacting like an idiot, losing her mind, freaking out, and everything in between would be tempered with the memory of Caleb Hunt on his knees in front of her, offering ice cream to make it better because Dr. Google told him it was the right thing to do. Heat climbed up the back of her neck, and if she looked in the mirror, she was sure her face was flame-red. She tucked her chin down, lowering her gaze. He must think she was a complete and utter wuss.

He tipped her chin up, his fingers warm on her skin. “Don’t hide. You did nothing wrong. I promise. You reacted like anyone who has never been in this life would have.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Do you want to change into your own clothes? And I’ll grab blankets, and we can chill on the couch for a while. If we run out of ice cream, I’ll have Kace bring us more.”

“Yeah, that sounds awesome.” She might feel better if she was wearing her own clothes. She’d left her bags in the spare room when Kacey had brought them to her yesterday.

Someone else went through your stuff.

She pushed the errant thought out of her head as she shut the door behind her. She unzipped her case and fished inside for her favorite yoga pants and her Kris Michaels slogan hoodie. It had been a crappy morning, and she needed every bit of comfort she could get. After adding a pair of fluffy socks, she padded back into the living room to find Caleb waiting for her.

“Hey.”

Her eyes widened as she caught a glimpse of the couch. “You went all out.” Fluffy blanket, check. Ice cream, check. He’d even produced a bunch of paperback books. A plate of cookies and candy... so much candy. “Have you been asking Dr. Google again?”

“Does it show?”

She nodded and climbed under the blanket. “Just a little.” She scanned the titles on the books as he sat on the other end of the couch and pulled her feet onto his lap.

“It’s mostly thrillers, but I have some other options coming.”

Did he order stuff from Amazon?

“You don’t have to buy me stuff.”

“I didn’t.” He shook his head and stood up when the doorbell sounded. “That’s your books now.”

Books don’t freaking knock on the door.

Confused, she watched him padding across the room. While she’d been changing into her comfy clothes, he’d swapped out Rexar’s shorts for a pair of faded blue jeans and a t-shirt that showcased his massive shoulders.

“Thanks for coming.”

Rose wasn’t sure what to think when Caleb stepped aside to allow the women into his house. They came loaded down with bags, baby gear, and a baby.

“We brought wine,” Lily chirped. She turned and glared at Caleb. “And if you say it’s too early in the morning for wine, then tough luck. Your girl is having a bad day, and we’re going to help you fix it.”

“Damn, Google was correct for once.”

Lina and another of the women started moving armchairs, bringing them closer to the couch. Rose winced when one of them produced a staple gun, but it made sense when another produced a blanket, which they stapled to the back of the chair.

“That’s my chair, Eedana,” Caleb growled. “What the hel—” he glanced at the baby, “—heck are you doing?”

“What does it look like we’re doing? We’re making a blanket fort for girl time.” Eedana made a shooing motion in Caleb’s direction. “Now go get me a couple of brooms or something so I can prop this up in the middle.”

“But my chairs. You get to fix any freaking holes when you are done.”

Rose noticed that despite his grumbling, Caleb left the room and reappeared a moment later with a broom and a mop.

“I don’t have two brooms, so a mop will have to do.” He handed them to the girls. “Are you serious about the wine?”

“Damn straight we are,” Lina replied. “It doesn’t matter that it’s ten am. Wine is needed when it comes to discussing the shit show that was this morning.” She made a shooing motion toward the door. “Now shoo. Leave us to look after your girl. Nem wants you in the war-room, stat. There’s a disciplinary meeting you need to attend.”

Rose froze. “You got in trouble for me acting like a fool this morning?”

“It’s not for me. I promise.” He shook his head. “We need to figure out if the new guy was sent by the organization or someone else.”

“The organization?” Was it not Janek who was behind the alarms and problems earlier? She got to her feet and followed him to the coat rack inside the door. “Caleb?”

“The organization is a bunch of assholes we’ve been dealing with for a while.” He strapped on his holster and shoved a handgun into it before shrugging into a hoodie. “Do you want me to stay? I can call Nemesis; he’ll understand.”

She shook her head. She’d caused enough problems for him. “No, it’s okay.” She still

wasn't entirely sure what she felt about the invasion of the wives and partners of the men. But she figured she'd figure it out as she went. She peered up at him and read the uncertainty in his gaze. She wasn't exactly giving off 'I got this' vibes. "I'll have someone call you if that changes."

He sighed as if it came from the depths of his soul. When he reached for her, she went easily into his arms. Rose laid her cheek against his chest and soaked in the comfort being in his arms offered. After a moment, he pressed a kiss on the top of her head and released her.

"I won't be long."

She caught the door when he opened it. "I'll be fine. It's wine, ice cream, and books," she reassured him. "Those are some of my favorite things."

"Okay, let me fix the lock so you can get in and out of here." He took her hand, placed it on the scanner, and pushed some buttons. When the light flashed green, he nodded. "Now, you can open the door if you need to."

"Thank you." She felt so much better knowing she wasn't trapped in the house anymore.

He gave her one of his trademark sexy winks and left. Determined not to make an idiot out of herself more than she already had in front of these women, she started to go back to the living room when a knock at the door stopped her. She placed her hand on the scanner, and when it flashed green, she opened the door.

"Hi." Becky practically bounced past her into the house. "I brought the fairy lights, Chica." She held up a string of battery-powered lights. "Every blanket fort needs pretty lights."

Rose's eyes widened as Becky swept into the living room like a hurricane. Before Rose got there, the fairy lights were being pinned to the edges of the blanket fort with clothes pins someone had produced.

Becky crawled under the blankets, sat cross-legged on the floor with her back against the couch, and emptied her tote. "I've got Riley, Olivia, Kris, Susan, Caitlyn, Abbie, Maryann, Elizabella, Saffron..." For every author she named, she produced a book. "Each one a first in series. Your Caleb said you love to read; tell us what you need, sister." She fanned the books out on the floor in front of her like a drug dealer with a new stash of heroin. "This is your 'fix what's wrong with the world,' tent. You get to pick first."

Was this what she'd been missing out on by not having female friends in her life? She didn't know. But if it was, she'd definitely been missing out. "I'll have Nightstalker, please." She took the book, her eyes widening when she turned it over to the front cover. "How did you get the OG cover with the heroine on the front? I've been searching for years to find it. Years, I tell you."

"I'm an OG Rebel, Girlfriend. I have every cover ever printed." Becky stroked her fingers over the covers of the books in front of her. "You couldn't pry this out of my cold, dead hands, not even if Tuck's life was on the line. But I'll lend it to a fellow Rebel."

"And you'll watch to make sure I don't dog ear it."

"If you do," Becky muttered, "you and me will have problems. Big, big problems."

She nodded in agreement. "I promise I'll look after it like it was my own." A comfort read that she could almost recite in her sleep was just what she needed. "Let me check the freezer to see if Caleb has more ice cream."

“Lina’s putting Jamie down for his nap,” Eedana said. “She can grab it. Your only job is to get swept away by the words and to get lost in a story where good men who sometimes have to do bad things figure out which way the sun shines when they figure out love always wins between the pages of a Riley Edwards classic.”

If only it worked that way in real life.

“He’s sleeping.” Lina placed a couple of tubs of ice cream on the floor in the center of their circle. “I swear if some jerk sets off the alarms and wakes him again, I’m going to cry at Dalton and insist he shoots whoever is responsible.”

That sounds a bit harsh.

“Jamie’s teething. We’re lucky if he sleeps a couple of hours at a time before either Dalton or I have to find the teething gel or contemplate running away from home to avoid the screams because it makes us nuts that we can’t take the pain for him.”

Rose inwardly groaned. She hadn’t meant for her face to supply the subtitles to what she was thinking. “Sorry, I didn’t mean?—”

“Girlfriend, I’m one of the least maternal people I know.” Lina jabbed a spoon into one of the ice cream tubs. “Even the week before I had Jamie, I’d have had that exact same look on my face. Now I’m wondering how I can teach myself to take good enough photos to use for a damn Christmas card.” All the women erupted in laughter as if Lina’s grouching was the funniest thing on the planet.

“When I get my camera back,” she’d started offering before she thought about it, “then I can take photos for you to use for your card.”

“I’m not really the Christmas card type.” Lina snorted. “But I would love some to send to Dalton’s mom. She’d lose her mind.”

“When I get my camera back, we’ll do some,” Rose promised.

“Hell, girl, I’ll have the business order one if you’d like to have one before the guys are done doing their thing with yours.” Lina searched through the books. “Love me some Callaghan Brothers. Thank you, Abbie Zanders.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“It will belong to us.” Lina waved her off as if she knew what she was thinking. “But you can use it while you are here. You’ll have to tell me what to buy before I order it, though.”

Who were these people, and why were they being so dang nice to her? They didn’t know her from Adam, yet they were bending over backward not only to help her but to make her feel as comfortable as possible while they did it. “You’d do that for me?”

“It’s no big deal,” Becky jumped in. “She can sign it off as a business expense.”

“But won’t your husband be mad?”

They all laughed, but it was Lina who answered. “Umm, no. Not a chance in hell. He says I don’t spend enough money as it is. Dalton will be thrilled I’m buying anything that isn’t a weapon.” She smirked. “He also dragged a promise out of me that I’d try and be better about buying stuff for me. Consider this helping a girl out.”

Rose hesitated. As much as she’d love to tell her yes, she’d only promised Caleb that she’d stay a couple of days. She stuffed a spoonful of Rocky Road into her mouth to give herself a couple of seconds to figure out how to answer without sounding ungrateful. “I?—”

Becky, damn her, knew exactly which buttons to push. “If you don’t say yes, then

Lina will order one off Amazon, and her in-laws will cry for the wrong reasons when they get those photos.”

She wanted so badly to agree. She almost said yes, but two more spoons of ice cream kept her from doing it while she tried to figure out if she dared take a couple of more days before she left. The others left her to her thoughts and peered over Becky and Lina’s phones as they looked at cameras on Amazon.

“If you’re doing some shots for Lina, will you do some for us too?” Lily asked. “RJ is growing up so fast. He’ll be taller than me soon. Someday, I’ll tell you mine and Rexar’s story, but I have no special photos of him and RJ. Please, will you do it?”

In this day and age, with all the cameras on phones and the internet, these mommas wanting to have special photos of their kids and their families called to something in her soul. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

The next thing she knew, she was showing them options on a website. She had no business visiting, but Lina picked one and then bought it. She even paid for overnight shipping. “Operation Spec Ops Kiddo Photoshoot is a go.”

“Yay.”

“Yippee.”

“Wonderful.”

“Shh, don’t wake the baby until we at least get some book time.” Lina put her phone down and picked up her book.

Rose took the wine glass that Adalyn handed her and sipped. She hoped to God that she’d done the right thing. “Caleb won’t mind me staying a few more days, right?”

“Nope, from the way he came into my house earlier,” Lily reassured her, “he’ll be thrilled.”

Hearing someone else say it made her feel better. “I hope so.”

As he made his way into HQ, he decided that being booted out of his own house was worth it when he heard Rose's voice in the midst of the chattering women as he'd listened outside the door. It had reassured him that she'd be okay without him. Plus, with Lina and Lily there, not to mention Snow, Rose had some of the deadliest operators on the property at her side. He knew almost nothing about comforting upset women. Especially not when that woman was his...

Mine.

He stepped out of the elevator into the bowels of Nemesis headquarters and allowed the rage he'd banked while comforting Rose to rise from deep within him. He strode forward at a swift pace. He could even hear his footsteps sound furious as he made a beeline for the interrogation room.

"In here, Caleb," Dalton called to him from a different room as he approached the door. "Logan and Jeep are in there. You and me are watching." He gestured to the observation room.

Tempted to ignore his boss and go into the other room, Caleb bit back a growl of annoyance. He wanted to be part of the interrogation, not to watch it from the sidelines. That asshole deserved to have his teeth sent straight down his throat, and he'd give almost anything to be the one to do it.

"Door's locked." As if Dalton could read his thoughts, he pointed into the observation room. "Get your ass in here with me."

Caleb admitted to himself that he understood his boss's rage back when he'd found Lina and figured out what had been going on to keep her from him more now than he ever had before. Dalton deserved a damn medal for being able to keep his head mostly on straight while they'd figured that crap out. But now Dalton had two people to fight for and not one. It irked him that Dalton was keeping him from losing his shit on the person who deserved it.

In an effort to get himself under control, he scrubbed his hand down over his face and took a breath. He resolved to at least try to follow orders for now. That way, when he took matters into his own hands later, Dalton couldn't bitch at him. He followed him into the observation room. He glanced through the glass to where the dumbass sat on one side of the table. "Why Jeep and Logan?"

"Because one will use finesse and the other brute force." Dalton stood with one arm across his chest while the other stroked the scruff on his chin. "I have clearance to class this as a hostile invasion. And we are treating it as such, but we have to follow protocol so our hands come out clean."

Orders from the top, then. He could deal with that. He should have known Dalton would go straight up the chain of command and get clearance to investigate the issue thoroughly. Dalton always preferred when I's were dotted and T's crossed. He dipped his chin toward his boss. His agreement to do things his way for now didn't mean he didn't want to punch the asshole in the nose a time or two, just that he could wait until Dalton was satisfied they'd found out everything they could before he showed the asshole what coming for someone he cared about resulted in.

"They're starting." Dalton cut into his musing. "Pay attention if you don't want to miss anything."

That was something he didn't want to happen. Caleb gave himself a mental shake and forced his fingers to unclench. Dalton probably knew how close he was to snapping,

but there was no reason for him to confirm it for him with his body language.

Jeep walked back and forth in front of the table the asshole was sitting at, then he paused directly in front of him and pinned him with a glare. “Why didn’t you declare all your weapons as you came through security?”

“I was in a hurry,” the fucking new guy replied. “I didn’t think. It was stupid.”

“Yeah, it was stupid,” Jeep agreed. “You read the contract, signed it, and agreed to our rules and regs,” he informed him. “Then you broke them in the first week.”

The dude winced but only nodded in response, waiting for Jeep to continue, just as training would have taught him to do.

“Why did you bring extra weapons to HQ?”

“I’d just come from the range,” he said. “You can check the cameras and my login times. I should have dropped them at the cage, but I was in a rush, and I forgot.”

“‘I forgot’ gets people killed,” Logan added. “Nemesis doesn’t hire people who get people killed. Tell me why the fuck we shouldn’t fire your ass right now?”

“I made a fuck up.” The guy’s face said he was finally realizing the error of his ways. He straightened in the chair. “It won’t happen again.”

“Who do you work for?” Jeep asked.

The FNG looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “I work for Nemesis the same way you do. You know that.”

Jeep just quirked up one eyebrow and asked, “Does the name June Pezzullo mean

anything to you?”

Caleb stiffened and exchanged a glance with Dalton when FNG’s shoulders tensed. Clearly, he did know that name. Caleb leaned a little toward the glass, eager to know how he knew it.

“How did you hear that name?” Jeep pressed.

For a second, Caleb thought the operator wasn’t going to answer, but his cheeks inflated as he blew out a breath. “Her family wants her back?—”

Jeep cut him off with a slash of his hand and growled, “Don’t bullshit me. She doesn’t have any family.”

He looks confused. Interesting.

“Her husband wants her back.”

Husband? My ass.

Both Tex and Trev had done a deep dive into Rose’s background. She’d never married the jerk. Was he lying in an attempt at sympathy?

Jeep changed the track of his questioning. “So, how did you know she was here?”

Again, it looked as if FNG was reluctant to answer; this time, it was Logan who pushed the issue. “Answer the question.”

“There’s a job on the dark web,” FNG said slowly. “You know my persona. We discussed it during the interview process.” He waited for Jeep to give him a short nod. “It got tagged for it. I was about to turn it down and stepped away to think about

it.” His hands moved as he talked. “Then I saw her walk into the mess last night. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I thought I was in for some easy bucks.”

Both Logan and Jeep snorted, and Caleb understood why. In their world, easy usually came with a side of ‘fuck me,’ and ‘why the hell didn’t I see that one coming?’

“Did you happen to notice who she walked into the mess with?”

Caleb smirked at Logan’s question, because if the asshole hadn’t known before, he was about to find out exactly who he’d pissed off by even contemplating going after a job that involved Rose.

“The guy who went into HQ before me this morning. I just wanted to ask him where to find her.”

“That is her man,” Jeep said mildly. “She doesn’t have a husband...”

“Two million dollars says otherwise?—”

Jeep kept talking as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “...like the job description you looked at said. But do you know what she does have? She’s got Caleb Hunt, that’s who.”

FNG’s fingers, which had been rubbing at the corner of the table, stilled, and his eyes dropped closed briefly. “Hunt? Are you shitting me?”

“Nope.” Logan popped the end on the word. “Just in case you think he’s about to let this go,” he pointed to the one-way glass almost directly to Caleb’s chest as if he could see him. “he is behind the glass right now, watching your every move.”

“He’s probably sizing you up for a hole in the ground, too,” Jeep added for good

measure.

“He can’t do anything to me from behind the glass.” FNG had either found his balls or lost his sanity. “I’m still tempted; two million is a lot of money.”

Both Dalton and Caleb growled. It pissed them off that FNG could be so blasé about the whole situation. Caleb decided if Dalton wasn’t going to fire him after this, then there would be problems between them, because there wasn’t a hope in hell he was having a wanker like that on his six. Caleb silently promised Jeep as much beer as he could drink and the most expensive bottle of whiskey he could find when Jeep kicked the jerk’s chair and he landed on his ass.

“That’s police brutality.”

Logan snickered. “We aren’t the police, dumbass.”

Jeep hauled him back to his feet and pushed him into the chair again. He leaned in until he was almost nose to nose with him. “June is off limits. She belongs to Hunt, which means she is ours. We protect what is ours. You know what that means, right?”

FNG swallowed hard, but he nodded to indicate that he understood.

“Will we cross the line?” Caleb wondered how far Dalton would be willing to go for Rose. He watched Jeep and Logan pressing their target for more information on the people who chased Rose.

“We will if we have to.” Dalton kept his eyes on the interrogation room. “But she’s your woman; that makes it your call. You can decide what happens this time.”

“And if there’s a next time?” Dalton arched up an eyebrow, making Caleb fidget under his penetrating gaze. His boss never did a damn thing without considering all

the options first. Blowback on his business and his people was something he'd mitigate whenever possible. He'd trust his call on this, no matter how much he craved the opportunity to smash the asshole in the interrogation room's nose out the back of his head.

"If he's stupid enough to come for her here again," Dalton said slowly, "then we take care of business ourselves. Even if it means we have to take him overseas to do it."

"Understood." He could live with that. "As long as that motherfucker leaves today, and he doesn't give Rose up to the jackwad searching for her."

Dalton nodded. He leaned over and hit the button to communicate with Jeep, relaying the decision.

Caleb's mouth twisted into a satisfied smirk when the FNG stiffened as Logan and Jeep told him the decision. "Okay." He hoped like hell this was the right thing to do. "Call Jasper. Have him come get him."

"If I call Jasper, Snow will lose her shit." Dalton winced. "I was going to have the boys drop him off."

"Huh?"

Dalton scrubbed his hand down his face and huffed in annoyance. "There was an incident at the Honkytonk the other night. Jack said he'd take care of it, but Snow is madder than a cornered rattlesnake, so I'm guessing that didn't work."

"Snow is just gonna have to deal." Caleb knew she would. She'd be all kinds of mad about it, but there was nobody better at compartmentalizing when needed than Aria Keane.

“Okay, it’s your funeral.” Dalton reached for the phone.

This right here was why he liked working for Dalton. He let them have some autonomy when he could. Their opinions were taken into account when possible. It mattered. “Thanks, Boss.”

The hour it took for Jasper to arrive was spent gathering the FNG’s gear and belongings and dropping them onto the steps in front of HQ. They wanted no reason for him to have to come back here once Jasper was done with him.

Caleb didn’t dare get too close to the prisoner. His need to kick his ass was enough to warn him that crossing the line between his moral code and his desires was too fine to risk it.

Movement coming down the ranch road caught his eye, and the tension eased in his shoulders. Jeep and Rexar were going with Jasper and the prisoner to ensure there were no issues on the way to town. “Thanks for doing this.” He nodded toward the approaching vehicle as he spoke to Aria.

“I’m only going because I owe you,” she called over her shoulder as she jogged toward her truck. “I’d much prefer to be baking and drinking wine with the girls.”

“I appreciate it.” He grabbed the fucker’s gear and stomped to the cruiser. “Thanks for coming, Jasper.”

“Dalton filled me in.” Jasper may have been talking to him, but his eyes were fully on Aria.

Caleb was about to ask what happened between them, but Jeep and Rexar picked just that moment to arrive with the prisoner, and the chance was lost as they put him in the cruiser and slammed the door behind him.

Five minutes later, Caleb stood next to Dalton as they watched the convoy heading back toward the ranch gates and glanced at him. “Do you get the feeling we fucked up by not dealing with him ourselves?”

“Yeah,” Dalton admitted softly. “If it was anyone else but Jasper, I’d be chasing him down and telling him we made a mistake.”

Shit.

That’s not what he’d wanted to hear.

“Go on.” Dalton jerked his chin toward Bravo house. “Send my wife and son home and spend some time with Rose. If we need to, then I have a damn army to call on to protect her.”

“You got it.” He had a feeling Dalton was hoping he could find out more about Rose’s situation if he had some time alone with her. He wasn’t so sure there was anything else to tell. But he’d take the opportunity to spend more time with her. Every second they were together were seconds he could use to try and persuade her; a small town in the middle of nowhere Montana was as good as any to take a stand against her ex.

If she was ever lucky enough to be able to stop running and to have friends again, then Rose wanted them to be these women. Today, along with the time she'd spent with Indy and Lizz, was blowing her mind. These women included her and made her feel like she wasn't a guest but a member of their tribe. The difference between the people she'd called friends before and these women was stark. These women were bound by something she didn't understand, yet after spending hours reading under a blanket fort in the living room with her, they now gathered in Caleb's kitchen, laughing, teasing, and singing along with the playlist, making a mess as they whipped together goodies. Because, as Willow had insisted, 'icky days needed goodies to feed the soul.'

Why couldn't I have found people like these before? They are friend goals. I want friends like this when I figure out a way to get my life back. No, I don't just want friends like them; I want to do the friendship thing like they do.

Baking cookies and muffins wasn't really her forte, but they hadn't excluded her. She'd been invited to stir bowls and lick spoons. Baking and her didn't belong in the same town, never mind the same street. But in this kitchen with these women, it didn't matter.

Rose didn't know what she'd expected after the morning she'd had, but she fully anticipated something different. Yet, books, wine, ice cream, and baking had been just what she needed. If only all her troubles were as easily fixed. She closed the dishwasher, unable to fit any more bowls in it, and leaned against the counter, unsure of what to do next. The music on Becky's playlist stopped as the phone chimed.

Becky picked it up. She read the message and rolled her eyes, talking out loud as she tapped a response. “No, Tuck. I’m not causing trouble or making a mess.”

The others teased Becky, reminding her that messes and causing them were her jam.

“But my Tuck loves it.” Becky flicked some flour at Lina. “You should try it sometime. Keep Dalton on his toes.”

“Sister, if my husband gets any more on his toes, he’ll qualify as lead in the Nutcracker ballet.”

Willow choked on her wine, sending it spewing across the counter. “Uncle D in a tutu. Promise me if that happens, you’ll take pictures.”

“I’ll send it in the monthly newsletter, because if that happens, it’s leverage.” Lina clinked her glass against Willow’s. “I’m not passing up leverage to raise his blood pressure, ya know.”

“One of these days, you are going to give your man a heart attack.” Eedana slid a cookie tray out of the oven.

“He’s a big boy. He can handle it.” Lina stole a cookie, flipping it over and back in her hands as she tried not to burn herself. “If he can’t, then life insurance is there for a reason.”

“Hah,” Willow replied. “You’d burn the world to the ground for him, and you know it.”

“Truth,” Lina allowed. “But my wedding vows promised I’d keep him on his toes. His part of the bargain is to be there to catch me when I fall.” She arched up an eyebrow. “Nobody said anything about not giving him a heart attack every now and

again. It's good for him to untwist his panties at least once every year or two."

As she listened to the women teasing each other, she decided to stir the batter in the bowl a little more. She grabbed a clean spoon from the drawer as Becky put on her playlist again. The first track was "It's Raining Men" by The Weather Girls. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she grabbed some more spoons from the drawer and tossed them to the others. It took about two seconds of her dancing around the kitchen, singing into the spoon, and pretending her life wasn't a complete and utter mess before the others joined her.

Using the spoon as a microphone, she sang at the top of her lungs, getting lost in the words and allowing the music to thump through her soul. Rose leaned her head in next to Becky's, and they both screeched the final line as the song came to an end.

Laughing hysterically, she turned around, only to freeze as her gaze landed on Caleb. Rose couldn't think of another time in her life when she'd been more mortified.

"Ho boy," Becky whispered as Rose stood there, staring at the man before her.

There wasn't a man on the planet who should have been able to make her all hot and bothered just by watching her make a fool out of herself. "Um—hi."

"Having fun?"

Embarrassment forgotten, she bit back the laughter that bubbled up and nodded. She had no idea what was wrong with her, and she didn't even try to figure it out. She realized she had had fun. "Yeah, I did."

"Good." His smile made the corners of his eyes crinkle. "What're you making?"

"I'm not." She followed him to the counter so she didn't do something stupid like tell

him how she loved when his eyes heated like they did just now.

“We’re gonna go. Thanks for letting us destroy his kitchen.”

Rose jerked her gaze away from Caleb’s and blinked at Becky. This was ridiculous. She hadn’t even noticed them disappearing from the kitchen, gathering their things, or Lina going to fetch the baby from the bedroom.

Get a grip.

Seriously.

Get. A. Grip.

“Thank you.” She followed the girls to the door. “Thank you all. I didn’t know how much I needed this. I’ll never forget what you’ve given me today.”

“You’re welcome.” Becky was the last one out the door. She paused and gave Rose a swift hug, taking the time to whisper in her ear, “If you don’t drag that stud muffin into bed and burn some sheets, sister, then let me tell you, you’ll regret it.” With that whirlwind, Becky and her tribe were gone, closing the door softly behind them.

Rose exhaled slowly as she went back to the kitchen. “Want some muffin batter?” she asked, pointing to the almost full bowl on the counter. “Because I’m not sure you’re going to want to try the muffins if I bake them.”

Caleb chuckled and walked to her. He stopped close to her and looked pointedly from the spoon to the bowl and back again. Her mouth went dry as she grasped that he wanted her to feed him.

Holy shit. Could anything be hotter?

Well, it probably could, but this was stealing the air from her lungs, and her breathing hitched. She scooped some batter onto the spoon, cupped her hands under it to catch the drips, and brought it to his lips. Her gaze fastened onto his mouth as he opened it, and those full lips wrapped around the spoon.

Damn, that's hot.

So Hot.

Reluctantly, she withdrew the spoon, dipped it in the bowl, and offered him some more.

"It's good," he said after he'd swallowed.

"Won't be after I cook it."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah." The oven dinged, breaking the moment between them. She reached for the oven gloves and went to rescue the muffins the girls had put in a few minutes before.

"Do you know what baking calls for?"

He moved out of her way, and she placed the tray on the sink. She glanced over her shoulder. "Tell me."

"A picnic. Baking calls for a picnic." It was freaking adorable how out of his depth he sounded. "Will you come on a picnic with me, Rose?"

A picnic in the snow could be fun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gone on a picnic, and she'd never been on one when there was snow on the ground. "I'd like

that.” She nodded to the hot tray. “Can you put those on the cooling rack? I’ll put the bowl in the fridge.”

“Sure.” Together, they went about cleaning up the kitchen. When everything was either waiting in the sink for the dishwasher to finish or was in the fridge, he gripped her hips and tugged her toward him. “Do you want to go on horseback, or take a four-wheeler as far as possible and then hike a bit?”

“Hiking isn’t really my thing.” Not unless he wanted to piggyback her all the way there and back. Not that she’d be opposed to it, mind you.

He smiled that crooked smile which made her almost forget that she was leaving. Almost, but not quite. “Then we’ll go on horseback.”

“Can we?” She didn’t know how to ride a horse either. But she was so much more willing to do that than she was to hike in the snow.

“Sure, if Jack agrees.” He fished in his pocket for his phone.

She had no idea who Jack was, but as she listened to Caleb calling him, excitement built. Today, it seemed, was all for firsts, and she was here for it.

“He agreed.” Caleb ended the call. “He’ll have them ready just as soon as we get to the barn.” They put some of the fresh baked goodies into a box, and Caleb grabbed some soda and water from the pantry to add to a rucksack he produced from somewhere. “Dress warmly.” He nudged her toward the bedroom. “It’s going to be cold out there.”

Caleb shifted the treat-filled ruck to his other hand and unlatched the gate, which gave them access to the barnyard from the residential area of the compound. He waved Rose ahead of him and made sure to close the gate behind them.

“There’s so many horses.” Rose paused near a corral to watch the yearlings as they rolled and romped in the sand. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many in one place except on TV.”

“City girl,” he teased.

“Yeah, I am.” She took his hand and fell into step with him as he led her into the barn.

Caleb stopped them just inside the huge doors and called, “Jack?” He knew better than to just wander around in here.

“Down here.” Jack’s voice came from the back of the barn. “Come on back.”

They took him at his word and walked down the aisle, then down the ramp to where Jack’s voice talked softly. Caleb grinned when he spotted the ranch foreman muttering to a blue roan horse as he clenched up the saddle. “Hey.”

“I saddled Trudy for you.” Jack nodded to where the horse he’d used a couple of times before was cross-tied outside a stall. “I didn’t know how well your lady could ride, so I figured Bluey was a safe bet.” He smiled at Rose. “Bluey is almost as old as

me, but she'll look after you as long as you treat her right."

"I know enough to stay on," Rose replied. "As long as she isn't going to think she's a rodeo bronc, I think I'll be okay." She reached out her hand but paused before she touched her. "Can I pet her?"

"Sure, you can." Jack stuck his hand in his pocket and handed Rose something. "If you give ol' Bluey treats, she'll be your best friend."

Caleb watched for a few minutes as Rose made friends with the horse. Once he was sure she wasn't afraid and was comfortable, he touched her arm. "I'm just going to check on Trudy; then, as soon as you're ready, we'll head out."

Rose's answering smile hit him right in the chest, and he had to drag his attention away from her when Jack spoke to him.

"Where are you headed?"

Caleb started toward Trudy. "I was thinking we might head up to the spring if you think it's not too rough for the horses at this time of year." He knew Trudy could make it; he'd been up there with her before they'd left for Draven's wedding in California.

"It should be okay. I had the boys drop some hay up there yesterday, so there's fodder for the horses while you have your picnic."

"Awesome." He went through the motions of checking his saddle and Trudy's feet, just like Jack had taught him to.

"I'll make a cowboy out of you yet." Jack's approval told him he'd come a long way since the green horseperson but weary soldier who'd arrived here after Dalton had

recruited him. “Might even poach you from the other side, given half a chance.”

“Don’t say that too loud, or Dalton will fire you without a second thought.” He didn’t think that would ever happen. Dalton and Jack had a mutual respect for each other, and the ranch foreman was damn good at his job.

“He could try.” Jack snorted. “But then he’d have to shovel the shit and deal with the vets and foaling in the middle of the night.”

Caleb knew doing those things would not bother their boss at all, but still, it was fun to picture it in his mind’s eye. “What do you think the weather is going to do?”

“It’s been weird,” Jack admitted. “But I think you should be okay as long as you’re back before dark.” He entered the arena and went to the gates, keeping it separate from another corral, to look at the sky. “Yeah, it smells like snow, but I think it’s a bit off yet.”

Caleb trusted Jack’s opinion on the weather more than he did all the apps online or the weatherman. There was something about an old man who spent most of his days outdoors to be able to give an accurate prediction of what Mother Nature was going to throw at them.

Jack lifted his hat off his head and resettled it. “The weather can change on a dime at this time of year, though, so if you need it, there’s a line shack about half a mile from the springs.” Jack said. “If something changes for the worse, go there.”

He didn’t remember seeing a line shack up there. “Where is it?”

“Go around the rocks at the head of the spring and head straight for the trees. It’s just inside the tree line,” Jack said. “It’s stocked, but just in case you need more wood, it’s then the shed at the back has a bunch of it. Just refill what you use. You’ll find a

chainsaw and an axe inside the door on the wall. The generator should have fuel in the red jerry cans, too. If you use any, let me know so I can send more out there in case the boys need it later in the year.”

“I can do that. Thanks, Jack.” He fixed his ruck onto his back, unclipped Trudy, and led her to Rose. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

He gave her a boost into the saddle and reached for a spare lead rope, just in case Rose needed some help. “Make sure you duck as we go out the door,” he warned and headed for the yard. While he got in the saddle, Jack adjusted Rose’s stirrups, and they were on their way. “Happy?”

“It’s like riding in a rocking chair.” Rose grinned at him. “I’m not really sure what to do with all the parts of the saddle, but it’s comfy.”

“Yeah.” Caleb watched her carefully to make sure she was handling being on a horse okay before he started pointing out things. “See the eagle?”

“Wow.” Rose tilted her head up to the sky. They paused to watch the bird in flight before clicking to the horses and moving on again. Mule deer, a fox, cows, everything drew Rose’s attention, and he loved listening to her chatter as they moved along at a slow pace.

It was odd seeing the ranch through fresh eyes—her eyes. Caleb could admit to himself that he’d lived here long enough he was taking everything for granted. How long had it been since he’d stopped and just looked at the view? Or how long since he’d just taken a day to ride just for the fun of it and not to escape the demons that often haunted his sleep? Way too long, he decided; it had been way too long.

“Caleb?”

He glanced at her. “Yeah?”

“Are you going to tell me what happened when you left earlier?”

Damn, he’d hoped for a reprieve. “Do you want to know now, or would you prefer to wait until we get back?”

“Now,” she replied. “Or I’ll spend all day freaking out that I could have done something different.” She nudged Bluey to fall into step next to him as the track they were on widened. “I don’t want to ruin the day because my brain is on overdrive as I try to figure out what I should have done differently.”

“It wasn’t you as such.” What she asked for made sense, and he figured he might as well get it over with. He wanted her to enjoy today. “It did involve you, though.” He watched her as she made a sound of distress. But she had to know the details. “Janek has put a bounty on you, and he wants you back.”

“I don’t know why.” Rose heaved a sigh. “There are so many more beautiful women in the world besides me. He can have any one of them he wants.”

Calen pulled up his horse, and she did the same next to him. “Stop it.” It drove him nuts that she didn’t see how beautiful she was. “You are stunning. To me, you are the most beautiful person on the planet. Everyone sees it but you.” It was one of the many things that drew him to her. She didn’t see the person she was. He did, and he decided he would make it his mission to ensure she believed it, too, before the end of the day.

“You need your eyes tested.”

He snorted a laugh. So that's what she was going to do, try and persuade him he was wrong. "I had that done last month."

"If you think I'm beautiful, then you need a better eye doctor."

"Don't listen to his voice in your head." Give him five minutes with Janek for making her believe the shit falling out of her mouth. "Listen to mine. You are a knockout. Period."

"If you say so." Clearly she was done with this part of the conversation. "So what happens now?"

"The fucking asshole who set off the alarms is down at the sheriff's office getting read the riot act."

"Do you think it means he'll leave me alone?"

Not a fucking chance.

"I don't know." He didn't want to lie to her, but he also didn't want to give her a false sense of security. It was a tough position to be in. "I think your best bet is to allow us to figure out a way to keep you safe. If witness protection failed, we're better. We won't fail."

"I can't stay here," she said slowly. "You have kids here. People who matter. I cannot bring Janek and his goons here."

There had to be somewhere she could go. He resolved to find her a safe place to regroup. "I know." He forced the words out of his mouth, because what she said was true. If Janek knew to look for her at Nemesis, then they needed somewhere not attached to them for her to hide. "We'll figure it out."

She nodded and gave him a small smile that didn't reach her eyes, but he figured that was the best he could hope for right now. Her whole world was shattered; she needed a safe place until they figured out how to get the asshole off her back.

"Janek would be stupid to come here," Caleb said. "But everything we've seen and found out about him tells us he's arrogant enough to try it."

"Yeah. He is."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear, but he'd take her at her word. If today was all they had, then he wanted to make the most of it. "We start to climb soon." He pointed ahead to where the trail rose in front of them. "Do you want me to lead Bluey, or are you good?"

"I think I'm okay," she decided. "But I'll tell you if that changes."

"Good girl. Just give Bluey her head, and she'll follow Trudy. She knows this place better than either of us."

"Sounds like a plan."

Caleb split his attention between the trail and Rose. This bit of the track was a trick, but she was doing better than okay, and before he knew it, they were close enough to smell the sulfur from the springs.

"Wow."

He pulled Trudy to a stop just a little bit past the opening to the plateau. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Rose gripped the pommel on the saddle and stood in the stirrups to see better. Steam rose from behind the rocks in front of them. Trees surrounded them in a semi-circle, and when she glanced back at where they'd come from, her breath caught in her throat. "Wow. Just wow."

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

She nodded, too busy taking in the view of the ranch laid out before them. She could barely make out the cows standing in a circle around feeders. If they hadn't passed them on the way here, she might have mistaken them for blobs on the otherwise pristine snow. She cocked her head to one side and listened. Instead of the sound of the human population, cars, and phones, the day was filled with birds, trickling streams, and nature. "It's so quiet."

"Yeah." He nudged Trudy forward and headed for the rocks and the spring hidden behind them. "Someday, I'll bring you back here when the weather is warmer, and we can swim in the springs."

She instantly regretted that she hadn't known that was a possibility before they'd left the house. Although, with it being cold enough that she could see her breath freezing in front of her as they rode, it was probably silly to regret swimming or soaking in the hot spring was off the table. But she wouldn't have objected to seeing Caleb in a swimsuit. Not even a little bit.

You won't be here for someday, so make the most of today.

As she followed Caleb's horse, she shook off the reminder. Leaving and dealing with it was a tomorrow problem.

"Woah, boy." She tugged gently on the reins and the well-trained horse stopped. She patted his neck to give herself a few seconds before she had to figure out how to get down. "Good boy."

"Want some help getting down?" Caleb grinned up at her.

Saved once again.

"Please."

He steadied Bluey. "Swing your leg over and slide down. I'll make sure you don't fall."

Swing my leg over, as if it's an easy feat when it's not something you are used to.

But they couldn't picnic if she stayed on the horse. It took a couple of movements, but she managed it, and slid free of the saddle. Caleb caught her in his arms, and she slid down his front. Rose's hands grabbed his waist, and she peered up at him. "Thank you." Her gaze locked onto his, and she swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. This need to suck in air must be what authors wrote about in the books she enjoyed so much. She'd never known this feeling was a thing. She'd never side-eye those scenes again.

Caleb's fingers flexed on her arms before he cleared his throat, released her, and stepped back. "Can you lay out the blanket while I take care of the horses?"

"Sure." She took the rucksack from him and followed his finger to where a firepit sat close to the steaming pool. The snow on the ground wasn't as deep as she feared, but

she still had to lift her feet higher than normal to reach the firepit.

By the time she'd fished out the blanket and spread it on the ground, wax side down, Caleb was finished with the horses. She watched him curiously as he walked to the rocks and toed something on the ground. Thankfully, he was turned away from her when he bent down, because damn, that man could fill out a pair of jeans like nobody's business. He caught something in his fingers and tugged. Snow flew as the tarp rose to reveal some chopped wood.

Rose huddled into her coat as she watched him do his thing. "Smart."

He gathered some logs. "I like to come here, but I don't always want to go in the water to warm up." He dumped the logs into the firepit and fished into the rucksack for matches. "I built the pit because it's easier to light the fire with the blocks as a wind break." It didn't take long for a spiral of smoke to rise from the center of the firepit.

Being here with him, surrounded by the quietness of the mountains, she couldn't help but feel like they were the only people on the planet. "This must be what it was like years ago, before the west was settled."

"Yeah." He settled onto his haunches as he babied the fire. "I wouldn't be lighting a fire right here though or some wild warrior would carry you off to his teepee."

"They'd send me back pretty quick. I can be rather annoying if I want to be."

"Nah, Rosey-Posey, you're too much of a prize. A smart warrior would make sure you fell in love with him and never wanted to leave." He fed another piece of wood into the fire. "I know I would."

She blinked at him for a second, trying to figure out if there was double meaning in

his words. Because she wasn't able to figure out if she wanted his words to mean something, she reached for the ruck. "I—um—food?"

"Yeah, I've been smelling those cookies all the way up the trail."

They worked together to put the food in the center of the blanket, then settled in to have their picnic. There was something about the simplicity of the silence between them that brought a peacefulness she hadn't known she craved. For every moment, every cookie and muffin she and Caleb shared, tension drained out of her.

After filling their mugs with hot chocolate, Caleb produced a pack of cards and held them up. "You game?"

"As long as it's not strip poker or strip anything, I am."

"We don't want anything important to freeze off." Caleb leaned close to her and whispered into her ear, "I could always keep you warm."

"Nope. Back up, cowboy," she teased. "You have more dangly parts that can fall off than I do."

"Hah. If strip poker is off the table," he grinned as he sat across from her and shuffled the cards, "what are we playing for?"

She cocked her head to one side, and inspiration struck. "Information."

"I'm game." He nodded. "What are we playing?"

Crap, she didn't play cards much. "Um." She hadn't played cards since she was a kid at her grandma's house for Sunday lunch. "I can play snap."

“Snap it is.” He dealt the deck into two. “Pick a side.”

She reached for the furthest one. “This one. I picked, so you play first.”

He nodded, and turned over his first card and dropped it between them. She followed suit with the next card. Over and back they went, both keeping their eyes peeled for matching cards. Rose dropped the next card and realized it was a six of spades sitting on a six of hearts. She slammed her hand down on the pile of cards between them, her hand hitting the cards a split second before his landed on her skin. “Snap.”

“You’re fast.”

She grinned at him. “You’re just a slow coach,” she teased back.

“Ask your question.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Tell me a secret you don’t like to admit.”

“Woah, girl, straight for the throat,” he grumbled. “I’m a geek. I love tech, games, and all that stuff.” He wrinkled his nose. “Just don’t tell Dalton or Trev that, or I’ll be roped into working in the war-room.”

“You don’t like to be in the war-room?”

He narrowed his eyes at her and waved to the cards she gathered up. “I see what you’re doing. Play your card, Rosey-Posey. You have to win another round to get an answer to that one.”

She wrinkled her nose and put the new cards under the ones in her hand, then dealt the next card. “Spoilsport.”

“Them’s the rules of the game.”

This time, it only took three rounds before he made the snap before she did.

“What’s your favorite song?”

“Goo Goo Dolls, Iris.”

“Nice.”

Over the next five rounds he learned that she preferred jam to honey, and when it came to scones, cream went on after the jam. Rose learned that he was from Mississippi, dogs before cats, and no pineapple on pizza for him.

Rose slapped her hand onto the cards. “Snap.” She’d forgotten how much fun this was. The entertainment was ramped up by getting to know him. “How did you end up in Montana?”

He refilled her hot chocolate from the flask, stretched his feet out in front of him, and crossed them at the ankles. “It’s a long way from Mississippi, huh?”

“Yep.”

“I knew of Dalton from the Navy. When my time was done and I was too busted up for SEALs anymore, he gave me a place to land. This place belonged to his mother’s family. It was sold after she married his dad, but Dalton bought it back.”

It was awesome that he had friends like the people here. She played a card and leaned over, trying to see around his fingers, hoping to catch a glimpse of the card he was about to play.

“Hey, no cheating.”

“I’m not.” She huffed and played another card. “I didn’t see anything.” Her hand flashed out when he dropped the next card. “What are you most proud of?”

“Being a SEAL.”

He won the next round. “What’s your biggest dream?”

“To own my own business again.”

“You will.”

She lifted one shoulder, keeping her eyes on the game. The next round was hers and she asked, “Why SEALs? How does a nerdy geek from the wrong side of the tracks in small town Mississippi go on to become a hero like you did?”

Rose swallowed down disappointment when he hesitated, as if his answer was off limits. She wanted to know more about him. He knew everything there was to know about her.

“I don’t normally talk about that part of my past.” He took a sip from his mug. “If you were any other woman, it would be off limits.” He pinned her with his eyes. “But for you—I’ll spill the beans.”

Wow, talk about making a girl feel special.

“You don’t have t—” He started talking and she clamped her mouth shut.

“A family secret ripped through our tiny ass town like a rabid Mississippi squirrel. Our name was mud after that.” That must have sucked for them; people could be so

cruel. “Us kids were more or less pariahs, never mind my folks. Those damn Christian ladies would come out of church and cross the street to avoid us like we’d caught the plague or something. Our folks got fired from every single job they had. They lost the house, and the younger kids were taken away by the state.”

Her heart ached for the kid he’d been. Rose reached for his hand and intertwined their fingers.

“The only way to fix it was to leave, earn money, and help get them into a house so they could get the kids back.” He shrugged as if he and his brother hadn’t managed to do something epic. “The school principal told me and Kace that we’d never amount to nothin’. He taunted us with it for months, and finally we had enough.”

“And you both said, ‘watch this, Mofo?’”

“Pretty much.” He nodded. “When the recruiters came through, Kace went Army, I went Navy. The rest was pure stubbornness—no give, all grit, and there wasn’t much the military could say or do to make us back down. We learned from the best of them that doing so wasn’t worth it.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and snorted. “Want to know what irony is?”

The game was forgotten, and she gave him her full attention. “Go on.”

“That bumfuck town in the ass end of Mississippi has a sign outside the school these days, boasting of having produced two heroes.” He snorted. “They wouldn’t have spit on us if we were on fire, never mind brought a hose, but memories are selective there, and now they try to claim they shaped us into the men we are.”

“I suppose they did in a way—by being jerks,” Rose muttered behind her mug. “I’d like to give them a piece of my mind for five minutes straight.”

He snorted. “I don’t think I’ve seen you talk for five minutes straight with anyone besides me all week.”

“I said give them a piece of my mind,” she muttered. “That’s not talking—that’s giving them what for. Big difference.”

A fat snowflake landed on her cheek, and he brushed it away. “I don’t think about them so much anymore. Neither me nor Kace go back there, so they don’t get to parade us around like zoo animals.”

Rage for the child he’d been and the horrible situation his family had been in tugged at her heartstrings. She dropped her cards, and before she could think too much about it, she hugged him. “They don’t deserve to ride on the coattails of your sacrifices for this country.”

“I know.”

Despite the serious direction their game had gone, the child inside her that she’d suppressed for way too long was delighted at the snowflakes which now fell steadily around them. “Dance in the snow with me, Caleb.” She scrambled to her feet and tugged on his hand. “Please.”

“We really should go back.” He looked at the sky. “It’s getting dark, and with the snow...”

“Just a few minutes. Please.”

“Come here.” He wrapped her into his arms and they swayed to a tune only they could hear in their heads. “Five minutes, then we have to go.”

Rose snuggled into his chest. “Deal.”

For the first time in his life, Caleb threw caution to the wind. He took time for something he craved. Dancing with Rose in the snow wasn't something he'd known he needed until right this second when it happened. Lost in watching the expressions on her face as they danced, he ignored the weather, ignored the darkening sky, and how the wind speed picked up.

When she shivered, common sense slammed into him, and he mentally kicked himself. He was a fucking idiot; he knew better than to leave his guard down. But with Jack's reassurances about the weather being clear and knowing the line shack was close enough to run to, even when the snow had started to fall, he'd allowed himself to keep his attention on Rose and not on what Mother Nature was doing. Ten minutes. They'd been dancing for ten freaking minutes and instead of giving them a dusting, the snowflakes grew bigger and bigger. A gust of wind cut through his jacket and Rose shivered in his arms. "We gotta go."

Rose sucked in a breath as if she'd just realized what was happening around them. "Is it safe?" She looked dubiously at the way they'd come. "What if the horses slip?"

He heard the concern in her voice, and maybe if she'd been a more experienced rider or he'd been alone, he'd have made a run for the house. He made a snap decision and turned toward the horses. "We'll go to a line shack. It's about half a mile that way. Jack told me about it before we left."

"Okay. I'll gather our stuff if you do the horses."

He nodded and as he crossed to where the horses stood under the shelter of a couple of spruce trees. He saw her gathering what was left of their picnic. She gathered up the cards, shook the snow off the blanket, and rolled it up to stuff it in the rucksack.

Caleb took a second to shoot off a text to Dalton.

Caleb: headed to the LS by the hot springs.

Dalton: report when you are there.

Caleb: Roger.

He was grateful Dalton didn't want to have a full-on conversation or give him shit about situational awareness and went about readying the horses. By the time he had the saddle clench tightened and had gathered the reins, Rose was walking toward him with the ruck. "Do you want to ride with me, or on your own?" He took the ruck and slung it on his back.

"I can manage."

"You sure?"

"Yes. You'll have to help me up though."

As if that's a hardship.

He bent over and cupped his hands. When she put her boot in them, he gave her a boost into the saddle. "We only have about half a mile before we get to the cabin, 'k? At least there we can have warmth while we wait for the snow to stop."

He patted her hands as her fingers clenched around the reins. "I'm ready when you

are.”

Caleb searched her face briefly, then nodded. “I’m gonna clip on the lead rope, just in case.” He grabbed it from the saddle bags and attached it to Bluey’s halter, then climbed into the saddle.

Trudy wasn’t too happy to leave the cover provided by the spruces for the wind, but a couple of clicks and a nudge from his heels got her moving. He directed her around the rocks and cursed softly when the wind which they’d been sheltered from at the springs hit him full force in the face.

Situational awareness, Hunt, situational a-fucking-warness.

In his head he heard Jack’s instructions and pointed Trudy’s nose across the meadow which opened up in front of them, directly toward the wooded area he couldn’t see. He judged they were about halfway there when Trudy lowered her head, and a gust of wind almost knocked him off the saddle. “You okay back there?” he yelled to be heard over the howling of the wind.

“I’m o?—”

The end of her sentence was whipped away by the wind and Caleb glanced over his shoulder. He sighed in relief when he could make out her shape through the whiteness. “Come on, Trude, there’s hay and a warm place out of the wind for you and Bluey. I promise.”

A few minutes later, he ducked as Trudy plunged through the tree line and breathed a sigh of relief as the wind diminished with the buffer between them and the open meadow. He pulled up on the rein and scanned the area. With how the snow had been blowing, he wasn’t entirely sure they’d taken a straight line from the rocks to their destination. Relief slammed into him when he spotted the dark shape of a log cabin

nestled between the trees, just a little to the right. “Just a few minutes more.” He pointed toward the line shack.

“I see it.”

His teeth chattered by the time Trudy stepped into the small clearing in front of their refuge.

“Little House on the Prairie, eat your heart out.”

He swung off the horse and helped her down. “Go on in the house and get warm. I’ll take care of the horses.”

“It will be faster if we both do it.” She took the lead rope from him. “You’ll have to tell me what to do.”

He figured it would be quicker to help than to argue about it and led them toward the small shed to the side of the cabin. They worked swiftly to unsaddle the two horses. Caleb pulled a knife from his pocket to cut the cords on a bale of hay, then divided it between them while Rose dipped water from the tank just inside the door into buckets.

He fished in his pocket for his phone. While he didn’t have time to call HQ as he wanted Rose out of the cold as fast as possible, he figured it was a good idea to let someone know they’d reached the line shack.

Caleb: Safe. LS next 2 spring. Ask Jack for coords.

He stuffed the phone back in his pocket. Trev would get the message, at least as long as the signal held. He didn’t want Dalton organizing a search party in this weather; once they were in the cabin which doubled as a line shack for Jack’s cowboys during

roundup season, they'd be fine. He hoped.

The horses stomped and huffed as they made sure they had everything. Trudy let him know she wasn't entirely happy at the turn in the weather. It was his fault it was so cold and she wasn't at home in her nice warm stall at the barn. "Sorry, girl. This will have to do. I promise you a whole bunch of carrots when we get back." He wrapped a blanket over her back and buckled it under her neck, before doing the same to Bluey. "They're as warm as they're going to get." He turned to where Rose blew into her cupped hands. "Let's go in."

"Should we bring some wood?"

He followed her gaze to where a pile of chopped wood was stacked neatly against the wall. "Good thinking." He piled some logs into her arms before filling his own. "Be careful. I don't know if there's ice under the snow." He silently cursed the weather forecast that had neglected to mention a blizzard was due today. He could barely make out the shape of the cabin; the last thing they needed was to miss it in the almost whiteout conditions. He urged Rose in front of him. "You go first. I'll try and make sure we don't get lost."

At first he didn't think she heard him over the wind, but she ducked her head low and headed toward the dark square shape ahead of them.

What was I thinking? Coming up here was a stupid risk to take.

If Rose got sick or hurt, he'd never forgive himself.

27

Rose had never been so cold in her life, not even when she'd had to sleep in her car on the streets of New York that first night when she'd run from Janek. She was the bowling pin, and the wind was the ball rolling down the lane to sweep her off her feet.

One more step .

She leaned to one side and lifted her foot out of the snow before putting it in front of her.

Another step.

Take another one.

Every step is one closer to shelter.

She was starting to think they should have stayed in the shed with the horses. Like a penguin, she slowly made progress, getting closer and closer to where safety beckoned. "Shit," she screeched and jerked away, dropping the wood she carried when someone pulled on her coat from behind. She shot a look over her shoulder as she scrambled away from the touch. It took a couple of heartbeats for recognition to push past the panic.

Caleb. It's Caleb.

His mouth moved as if he was talking. She couldn't make out his words but followed his arm as he pointed.

Crap, was I going the wrong way?

She nodded; he wanted her to go that way. She'd go that way. But first she had to get the wood she'd dropped. She bent down and picked up one log, crawling on her knees to the next one. Before she reached it, she was hauled back to her feet and pushed forward. Too cold to argue, she did as he wanted and trudged toward the cabin.

His hand on her hip kept her from faceplanting on the stoop. Caleb reached around her for the latch on the door, opened it, and pushed her through it in front of him.

Rose's teeth chattered. Darkness enclosed them when he slammed the door shut. The quietness now that the wind had been shut outside was loud.

"One sec." Caleb's mutter was followed swiftly by the flashlight on his phone. He reached around her, and a few seconds later a battery-powered lantern lit the room. "I'll light the stove."

She stood where she was, shellshocked at how they'd gone from a picnic at the hot spring to the midst of a snowstorm in the space of an hour. Caleb crouched in front of a potbellied stove in the corner of the small one-room cabin. Two sets of bunks lined the walls, and a small table and four chairs filled the center of the room.

Caleb opened the door of the stove, showing a fire laid in place, just waiting to be lit. "Thank God." It took him three tries to light a match. He cupped one hand around it, and finally, the kindling caught. "Come over here and stand in front of the stove. I'll check what supplies we have."

She nodded, her teeth chattering with each movement as she did as he asked. “It’s cold.”

“Welcome to Montana.” He brushed the back of his knuckles down her cheek. “This place is small enough to warm up fast.” He took her hands in his and held them toward the fire. “Take all the heat you can get.”

“Thank you.”

He gave her a lopsided smile and turned toward the bunks. Confused, she watched him kneel on the floor and reach under the bottom bed. He tugged one plastic storage bin from under the bed, and then another.

Boxes make sense. They wouldn’t want to have mice get into everything.

She flexed her fingers, ignoring the ache as they thawed out. “Can I help?” He shouldn’t have to do everything for her. City girl or not, she had big girl panties, and she knew how to wear them if necessary.

“There’s some sweats and stuff.” Caleb gathered an armful of clothing from the boxes. “They’re probably too big, but they are dry.”

She didn’t care how big they were. Anything was better than being soaked to the bone. Her fingers fumbled as she worked the button on the collar of her coat free. “I can roll them up.” She moved back from the fire, unzipped her coat, and dropped it on the floor behind her. She made fast work of stripping, and pulled on the sweatshirt before reaching for the pants. Any other time, she’d have been tempted to watch Caleb as he stripped off his jeans and boxersshorts. Instead, she focused on shaking out the sweats and stepping into them without falling and landing on her butt.

Because he had to dig through the tote to search for a sweatshirt which would fit his

large shoulders, she was faster at getting dressed than Caleb was.

“Catch.”

She fumbled the socks he tossed her way, but managed to catch them before they landed on the stove. Burnt socks wouldn't be helpful.

Wait, burnt means warm.

“Throw me your socks too.”

“What?”

“I'm going to warm them on top of the stove for a second.” She unfolded her pair and laid them on the blacktop. “Just for a few minutes, to take the cold off them.” If their feet were warm, maybe it would fool their bodies into thinking the rest of them were warm too. She snagged the second pair he tossed her way and laid them next to hers.

“Damn, Rosey-Posey. I'm sorr?—”

Rose whirled around and pointed a finger at him. “Don't you dare apologize. You didn't know this would happen.”

He pulled out one of the chairs from under the table and draped his wet clothes over it. “I should have double-checked.”

“You did. You asked Jack.” She turned the socks over to warm the other side. “If this had been the forecast, would he have forgotten to tell you?”

“He would have.”

She pulled the socks off the stove top and handed a set to him. “Then it’s not your fault.” She sank onto the edge of a bunk and pulled the toasty socks over her cold feet and sighed as the warmth wrapped around her skin. “That’s so much better.” She looked down at her feet and wriggled her toes. “It doesn’t matter that we put hot socks on cold feet, right?”

“Nope, baby girl,” he reassured her. “We weren’t out in it long enough to get frostbite. I think we’re good.”

“Awesome, because not gonna lie, even if it meant my toes were gonna fall off, I wouldn’t want to take these socks off.” She got to her feet and gathered her clothes. “How did you know there would be spare clothes here? Did Jack tell you?”

“Nope.” He scooted his wet clothes laden chair next to hers in front of the fire. “This place is laid out like one of the CHUs we have in our FOB in the Middle East. I hoped there’d be spares here like we have there.”

She blinked at him as she tried to figure out what he meant. Most of it, she did, but what the heck was a CHU or a FOB? She hadn’t done a very good job of hiding her confusion as he chuckled, and she wrinkled her nose at him.

“A CHU is a containerized housing unit,” Caleb explained. “Most military bases use them as housing overseas in warzones. Dalton bought a bunch of them from the military when they decommissioned a base.”

“Like a shipping container?”

“Pretty much.” He pulled tins and boxes from the top bunks. “FOB’s are forward operating bases. Usually, it’s where we stage out from for missions.”

“It’s all a foreign language to me.” She took the boxes he handed her and peered

inside. “Coffee and tea.”

“Yup.” He shook another tub. “This one has MREs, ready to eat meals, military style.”

“Are they good?”

He barked a laugh. “Hell no, but they’ll fill a hole in your belly and warm you up.”

Together, they figured out the camping coffee pot and put it on the stove along with a pan of water to warm. Caleb’s phone pinged just as the water began to bubble.

He glanced at the screen. “It’s Dalton.” He put the phone to his ear. “Boss, can you hear me? Dalton? Damn, the signal must be in and out.”

“Probably from the storm.”

“Yeah, I’ll send a text; it might go through at some point.” Caleb’s face was filled with concentration as he tapped the phone’s screen. “I sent one from the shed while we were taking care of the horses. If he could call, that must have gotten through, so he knows where we are.”

Rose pulled the two chairs without clothes hanging on the backs closer to the stove. “As long as they don’t come out in that.” She jerked her chin toward the door. “I’d be worried someone would get hurt.”

“Me too. I mean, they know what they’re doing. We’ve been here in Montana for years. It’s not the first time we’ve dealt with snow.”

She didn’t think he’d meant to admit his worry. “I know.” Guilt rode her hard. “If I hadn’t wanted to dance in it, we’d have been home.”

“Nope, don’t go there, because we’d have been halfway down the trail with no shelter.” Caleb turned the free chair around and straddled it backward. “We’d have been in deep shit if we’d left when I wanted to.” Caleb straightened in the chair as if he was annoyed with himself. “Shit, I forgot Jack said there was a generator in the shed.”

Rose followed him to the door. She peered under his arm at the swirling whiteness. “Umm. As long as we have enough wood and the lanterns work, I don’t think you should go out there.”

“We’d have power if we start the generator.”

Rose scanned the cabin. “Other than the light, I don’t see anything that runs on electricity. Don’t go out there. There’s no need. Please, don’t risk yourself. We have the fire. It can’t get much worse than it already?—”

“Shh.” His hand covered her mouth, cutting off the rest of the sentence. “Don’t tempt fate.”

He’s superstitious.

Um, I didn’t see that coming.

It was wild to her that this man was in any way superstitious. He didn’t strike her as the type at all. “Do you avoid walking under ladders too?”

“Damn straight I do.” Caleb shrugged. “With the things we see and the jobs we do, the last thing any of us ever want to do is to tempt fate, just in case.”

She wasn’t sure if fate existed or not, but she figured him believing in it didn’t hurt anyone. She was, however, curious. As she lowered herself into one of the chairs, she

asked, “Have you got a lucky coin or something, too?”

“I don’t have a coin.” He fished inside the neck of his sweater and pulled out a chain. “I do have this.” He moved and turned over his dog tags, showing her the medallion hidden behind them.

She reached for the medallion, turned it over, and peered at the inscription. “Easy Day.” She lifted her gaze and realized her hold on the chain had brought them almost nose to nose. Nervously, she licked at her lips when her gaze locked with his and she shuddered as awareness slid through her veins.

“You’re cold.” His hand wrapped around hers. “We should get under the covers and keep warm.”

Under the covers with Caleb was the last place she should be, but yet it was exactly where she wanted to be. She was supposed to be leaving tomorrow, not falling for a man of honor who made her pulse race and dreams she’d long buried rise from the grave. “I’m okay.” Her chattering teeth called her out as the liar she was.

Caleb gently tugged his chain free of her hands and urged her to her feet. “It’s been long, cold day.” His hand on her lower back guided her toward the bunks. “A nap will help pass the time.” She sank onto the bed. “I’ll see to the fire.”

She watched as he squatted in front of the stove, adding logs from the box next to it to the flames. If she was going to nap, then there was something she had to do first, or she’d need to get back up again in half an hour. Sometimes having a bladder the size of a pea was a pain in the butt. “Um...?”

Caleb stopped poking at the fire and glanced over his shoulder. “Tell me.”

“Is there a bathroom?”

“Crap.”

Embarrassment flooded through her, heating her cheeks. She ducked her head. “Um, no, the other.”

His eyes widened and he sucked in an audible breath before he laughed—a deep, rich sound which seemed to come from deep inside him. He shook his head. “I meant, crap, because there’s an outhouse, but it’s outside. Give me five minutes and I’ll figure something out, ‘kay?”

She nodded, and as soon as he turned back to the fire, she dropped her head into her hands.

How mortifying.

Jeez.

Rustling in the corner of the room drew her attention and she lowered her hands to see Caleb stringing a blanket on a rope.

What on earth is he doing?

Once the blanket was up, Caleb grabbed a bucket and put it behind the blanket. “Think it will work?”

“Umm.”

He shrugged at her confusion. “Unless you want to pee on the stoop with your butt bared to the blizzard, it’s the best I can do.”

It’s a toilet.

“I—um—thank you.”

He stood aside so she could get around him. “Want me to hum or something while you go?”

The jerk was having way too much fun at her expense because her city girl was showing. But if she didn’t get to pee soon, she’d have an accident on the floor like a new puppy. That so wasn’t what she wanted Caleb to remember of her. She nodded. “Sure.” She studied the bucket for a second before deciding there wasn’t really a choice here. “I don’t hear you.”

Caleb chuckled before he started singing. “Doo, doo, doo...”

“What the heck, Caleb? Why would you do that to me?” She balanced herself with one hand on the wall to hover over the bucket. “Now I’m going to have that stuck in my head for the rest of the day.”

“It’s the only one I could think of.”

“Jerk.”

“Doo, doo, doo...”

What an ass.

“Stop it.” She finished what she had to do and swished back the curtain. “You.” She pointed at him. “You are an asshole. That song drives me nuts.”

“Come on, Rosey-Posey. Don’t be mad.” He grabbed a pot from the stove and poured it into a bowl which was half-filled with snow. “I figured you’d want to wash your hands.”

“Doo, do—” She stopped herself mid-hum. How could she stay mad with him when he was thinking of everything? “Thank you.” She washed up in the lukewarm water, and by the time she was done, he was sitting on the bottom bunk.

“You climb in, and I’ll curl around you.” Caleb tugged back the blankets. “That way, I can tend to the fire throughout the night without waking you.”

She couldn’t allow him to do everything. She’d like to think she wasn’t entirely helpless. “I don’t mind taking turns.”

Caleb climbed into bed and curled his arm around her stomach, fitting himself against her back before covering them with the blankets. “You stay warm. I’ll have to check in with HQ a couple of times.”

It didn’t take long for the air beneath the blankets to warm up from their combined body heat. “I’ll take a turn,” she insisted.

His nose buried against the back of her neck. “Mmh, sure.”

The silence when he opened his eyes told Caleb the storm had blown itself out. Sometime since he'd checked on the fire last, they'd swapped places, and she now slept against his chest. He eased his arm out from under Rose's head and slipped out of bed. Shivering, he stepped to the stove and added some more logs. He'd often used the phrase 'colder than a witch's tit,' but he now knew when he'd used it before, he'd been wrong, because this cold was one which burrowed into your bones, and shaking it loose was a problem. Even with the stove burning, he could see his breath in the air.

He checked that there was enough water in the pot and put it back on the stove before reaching for his phone.

At least there will be coffee.

Shit coffee.

But still coffee.

I'll take it.

He hit the button on his phone to light up the screen.

Dalton: Check in when you wake.

He checked the time on the notification, thankful it had only come in within the last twenty minutes.

Caleb: All good. Gonna check the horses.

Dalton: (Thumbs up)

The emoji response told him it was probably Lina sending the messages from Dalton's phone, because he didn't think Dalton even knew what an emoji was, never mind how to send one. He tried to be as quiet as possible and not wake Rose as he pulled on his boots. He needed to check the horses; they'd been out in the lean-to shed all night. While they were well used to the weather here in Montana, only a stupid man didn't take care of his mount first.

He shrugged into his coat, pulled on a woolly hat he'd found in one of the tote boxes, and tugged it down over his ears. He considered if Rose would be freaked out to wake up and find him missing and decided she might be. Being from the city, she might not think of the horses. He went back to the bed and crouched next to it. "Rose?"

"Mmh-umm?" Her eyes blinked open. "Huh?"

"It's morning, and the storm's stopped," he explained. "I need to go check the horses. I won't be long."

Rose shuffled to sitting. She rubbed one eye with the heel of her hand and yawned. "I'll get dressed and help?—"

He shook his head. "There's no need. Stay in here where it is a little warmer. We'll have a long trek back; there's no point in both of us getting wet and cold. Please." He could see she was about to protest. "I won't be long."

"Okay."

“Keep an eye on the pot and push it to the back of the stove when it boils. There’s some instant coffee if you want to brave it.”

She stretched her arms over her head, curling her fingers into the lats on the bunk above her as she stretched. “Is there tea?”

It hadn’t occurred to him that she might want something other than coffee, and he made a mental note to thank Jack or whoever restocked the cabin for providing a mixed box of different flavored teabags along with the coffee. “There’s a box in the tote on the table.”

“Yay.” He moved back to allow her to swing her legs out. “Shoo, then. If we’re going to attempt to leave, I’ll clean up in here a little too.”

Call him an idiot. It would be fitting for sure, because he shouldn’t be all kinds of comfortable with her, but he was. He lowered to press a kiss to her forehead. “See you in a bit.” He hurried from the cabin, pulling the door shut behind him.

His eyes widened as the snow piled high, level with the stoop. He gripped the railing and carefully pushed and stepped off, sinking almost to knees, the next step to the snow higher.

Well crap, we may not be leaving at all today.

Trying to get down the trail would be too dangerous, especially with a novice rider like Rose in toe. Making his way carefully to the shed made the decision for him. Risking their lives and the horses wasn’t an option. “Morning,” he called to Trudy and Bluey.

The wind cut off as he rounded the side of the shed where the horses huddled together. Caleb cupped his hands and blew on them. “It’s positively tropical in here,

isn't it?"

Trudy nickered and stomped her feet as if telling him to hurry his ass up and fetch their grain.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." He scooped up the feed and dropped it into the buckets hanging inside the stall. "I'm just gonna send a text, then I'll scoop out your shit and figure out the water situation." The horses ignored him as they munched on their breakfast. He fished for his phone. "You guys could have replied, you know. I'm the minion who's making sure your bellies are full."

Caleb: No way we can get back. Snow is too deep. Will try it tomorrow.

With the text sent, he placed his phone on top of a barrel and searched for the axe Jack had mentioned. If breaking the ice in the water feeders didn't work, then he was either going to have to lead the horses to the springs or melt snow for them. They needed water, period.

"Don't you go kicking me now, girl." He laid a hand on Trudy's rump as he eased himself into the stall. "I'm just here to get you a drink." Keeping one eye on the horses, he studied the automatic waterer. He decided the business end of the axe was too big and might damage the waterer, so he flipped it over and used the end of the handle to smack the ice. It didn't shatter on the first try, but spider vein cracks spread from side to side, so he did it twice more before the ice broke.

He bit back a curse as he fished the ice out with his hands, and sighed in relief when the water dribbled into the feeder. "Your body heat must have kept it from freezing completely." Trudy shoved him aside and stuck her nose into the waterer, sucking and slurping up water as Bluey jostled for position next to her. "You, Ma'am, are a hog." He left them to it and went to restock their hay after replacing the axe on its hook on the wall next to the door.

He cut the cords on a haybale and brought double the amount he thought the horses would need, filling both nets and piling the rest on the floor of the stall. He paused to scratch under chins and give nose pets. “Stay cuddled up, you two. I’ll be back later to check on you.”

The last thing he wanted to do was go back into the snow, and he braced himself for the wind as he tugged the door shut behind him. “Damn, it’s fucking cold. I’m not built for this shit. No wonder I preferred working in the desert.”

Halfway back to the cabin, a distant sound that seemed to grow closer by the second registered, and he tilted his head toward it. There were some sounds that he’d recognize in his sleep, and a Blackhawk was one of them. He hurried across the yard, and instead of messing with the snow-buried steps, he hauled himself over the railing and onto the stoop. “Hey, I think rescue is on its way. I hear an incoming helo.” He braced against the door to get it to close and stomped the snow off his boots.

“You really think they came out in this?” Rose placed her mug on the table and got to her feet. She picked up a towel and used it to lift the saucepan from the stove.

“Yeah.” He gratefully took the mug from her. “Thanks.”

She nodded to the mug and replaced the pot on the stove. “I only put one spoon of coffee in there.”

He wrapped his hands around the mug. His cold fingers ached as heat warmed them. “It’s fine; I’ll survive on instant.”

“Coffee snob.”

“Damn straight.” Was it bad that he didn’t want this interlude they had to end? He didn’t care if it was. He knew reality would be waiting for them once they made it

back to the compound.

“I wish we had a little more time.”

“Me too.” It cost him nothing to admit it. Silence fell between them as they waited for whoever was on the helo to arrive. Both of them were lost in their own thoughts.

All too quickly, he could hear the sound of voices filtering in from the outside before Dalton’s voice yelled, “Hello, the cabin.”

Rose gave him a weak smile as he got to his feet and opened the door. “Hey, Boss.”

Dalton stepped into the room, and just as he always did, he swept his gaze around. He paused briefly on the bed they had slept in before continuing until they landed on Rose. “Did he take care of you, Rose?”

“Absolutely.” Her chin lifted. “He was the perfect gentleman.”

Dalton snorted. “Sure.” He moved into the cabin, allowing a man Caleb had seen around the barnyard to enter. “This is Joe Storm. He’s going to look after the horses while I get you back to HQ. We have a teleconference with Tex in a couple of hours.”

“Hey, man.” Caleb nodded to the hand. “I’ve just fed and watered them a little while ago. They should be okay for a few hours.”

Joe nodded and unzipped his coat. “Did you turn on the heater for the waterers?”

“Heater?”

Joe rezipped his coat. “I’ll be back. I’m just gonna flip that on and make sure the damn water doesn’t freeze. I don’t want to be melting snow for the next couple of

days.” The door closed behind him almost before he’d finished speaking.

“Want some coffee while we put this place back in order, Boss?”

Dalton shook his head. “Nope, no need,” he replied. “Steve is keeping the helo running. We gotta make tracks before the rotors ice over.”

“Okay.” He drained the horrible coffee and placed the mug into the dish box next to the stove. “Then let’s roll.”

As they walked down the path to the building Caleb called HQ, Rose pushed down the unease that swept through her. Yesterday was an unexpected gift, she reminded herself. It wasn't real life, no matter how much she wanted it to be. Her life involved running, hiding, and not making connections like this place, these people—Caleb, she corrected herself, like Caleb made her crave. But those hours in at the spring and in the cabin were a memory she could pull out and savor when the world closed around her. She shivered in her coat and decided it'd been worth the storm and the cold.

“Just like going through airport security,” Caleb reassured her when she glanced apprehensively at the security desk in the foyer of HQ. “Nothing bad is going to happen.”

Didn't he tell her not to tempt fate just last night? “You don't know that.”

“Despite the dumbass fucking around,” he placed his holstered sidearm in the box and dropped his keys next to it, “shit like that doesn't normally happen here.”

Unlike going through airport security, she didn't get pulled over for a random extra security check, and she entered the elevator ahead of Caleb. She'd expected them to go up. It took a moment for her to realize they were going down. “Are you bringing me to a dungeon?”

“Nope.” He flashed her a lopsided grin. “Our war-room is underground.”

“Like the bat cave?”

He snorted a laugh. “I dare you to say that in front of Trev.” He led her down a long corridor and paused outside a door. “Ready?”

No.

I don’t want this to end.

But I know it must.

She took a breath and let it out slowly. “Yes.” He pushed open the door before she had time to change her mind and tell him to wait. Rose paused, taking in the computers, maps, screens, and so much more techie stuff than she knew the names of. “You lied,” she whispered.

“Huh?”

“This is the bat cave,” she explained. “Or maybe it’s Bat Cave 2.0.”

A bark of laughter from her left drew her attention, and she looked up at the screen over the row of computers. “Hi.”

“Hi, Rose.” The soft sound of Texas was evident in the man’s voice. “I’m Tex. We spoke the other day, but it’s nice to see you.”

“H—hi.” She winced internally at the nervousness in her voice. Tex wasn’t the problem. She had a feeling he was going to be a huge part of the solution.

“Caleb, give her the box.”

“Sure.”

Caleb sounded disgruntled at the request, almost as if he didn't want to carry it out. It ramped up the uncertainty inside her to the point where she wrapped one arm across her chest and placed the other on her throat until Caleb offered her a jewelry box.

"It's a Trident," Tex explained. "Caleb's Trident."

Rose stroked the tip of her finger over it . "It's beautiful." When he'd said he was going to give her a tracker, she hadn't been sure what she'd expected, but it hadn't been pretty. She made a mental note to ask Caleb about the underlying tone she heard in Tex's voice later.

"If you're going to run, then," Tex said softly, "please wear it at all times. The only person who will know where you go or where you are is me." He met her gaze through the screen. "I won't tell anyone a damn thing unless you ask me to."

What he asked sounded simple enough. "How do I know Janek can't hack it?"

"If he tries, then I'll have him just where we want him." Tex's expression hardened. "If he can hack my systems, then he's better than anything I've found on him."

"Or he hires someone to do it," Caleb inserted.

"There are about seven people tops who can hack my systems," Tex replied. "One is me, but I'm not going to hack when I can just log in. One is in Mexico. Two are in Italy. Another is in Texas. Besides the one in that war-room with you, the other is on the East Coast. All those people are warfighters and justice seekers. They fight as if the lives of the people they love depend on it, because more often than not, they do. I'd trust each and every one of those people with my life. If you don't, too, then you are an idiot." He glared at Caleb. "Are you an idiot Hunt?"

"Yes, yes, he is," Trev muttered.

“No. I just like to look at everything from all the angles,” Caleb replied. “Even the most infallible of people and the best teams in the world get caught off guard every now and again.”

Tex leaned back in his chair on-screen and steeped his fingers together. “And you don’t want Rose to be one of those times.”

It wasn’t a question, but Caleb answered it as if it was. “Damn straight, I don’t.”

Tex nodded as if he’d expected that answer, then once again turned to her. “Do you want to leave and go where nobody will find you?”

No. I don’t want to leave Caleb.

But there are children here.

Janek knows I’m here. It’s not safe for anyone if I stay here.

“Yes.” She glanced at Caleb out of the corner of her eye when he growled.

“No worries,” Tex said. “If you can hold on until tomorrow, then I will have people there to pick you up. You understand you can’t have any contact with anyone—not from your old life. Not from Montana, not even Caleb?”

Her heart ached. To never see Caleb again wasn’t something she wanted to agree to, but she had to do this for everyone’s safety. She knew better than most that Janek wouldn’t stop looking for her. She nodded. “I know.” Even though she was breaking her own heart and from the look on his face, Caleb’s too, this had to happen. She had to leave.

“Okay.” Tex sighed. “Wolf and his guys will be there tomorrow at noon to pick you

up.” The screen went black, ending the call.

“I’ll be back in a sec.” Trev left the room. Rose had a feeling he was giving them some privacy, and she was grateful for it as tears burned at the back of her eyes.

Caleb plucked the chain from her fingers. “Turn around. I’ll put it on you.” She did as he asked. He swept her braid to one side and closed the clasp on the chain. His fingers flexed on her shoulders. “There, all set,” he whispered and pressed a kiss to the back of her neck.

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

God, if he kept asking her that, she might change her mind. But that would be selfish. It took everything in her to force the words through her lips. “Yes. Because it’s not safe for anyone with a bounty on my head. People will keep coming and there won’t be anything anyone can do to stop them.” She prayed her uncertainty didn’t show on her face as she peered up at him. “Could you live with yourself if something happened to one of the children?” She didn’t wait for him to answer but continued on, “Because I know I couldn’t. I can’t go back to California either, because he’s already found me in Riverton, plus there were kids there, too. I just can’t allow something to happen to any of you, but especially to the kids.”

He nodded. “Okay.” Was it her imagination, or did he suck in a deep breath?

He linked their fingers together. “Come on, baby girl. If we only have today, then today has to last a lifetime.”

“I wish there was another way.”

“Me too Rosey-Posey, me too.”

Back at his house, Caleb heard the shower come on and crossed to the cupboard. He fished inside for the whiskey he rarely drank and filled himself a measure. He tossed it back before pouring a second.

How the hell am I supposed to just let her walk away?

He closed the bottle, left it on the counter, and went to sit in his favorite chair. From here, he could see straight down the hallway. He mulled over his options as he sipped his drink and kept an eye on the bathroom door.

Over the last few years, he'd watched his teammates find the loves of their lives, and they had a happiness that filled the darkness of the shadows that haunted them in the night. Caleb refused to be jealous. He loved that the guys had that. He just wanted it, too. It was just his luck to find the one woman in the world who made him consider forever, and for everyone's safety, he had to let her go.

I must be cursed, or I pissed off a witch in a past life or something.

How the hell can I let her go?

Repeating the question, even in his mind, didn't give him any answers. He owed his allegiance to Dalton. He had a contract; breaking it would mean breaking a vow, the promise he'd given to both Dalton and to the men he served with. Around and around his brain went, trying to figure out an angle, any way that meant he might be able to have both the woman who was coming to mean the world to him and his job.

It's not possible.

You made a deal. An unbreakable promise, and Rose needs to be safe.

Everyone needs to be safe.

He knew it wasn't possible, but knowing it didn't ease the ache in his heart. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his hand over his chest. His eyelids flew up at the sound of the bathroom door opening. He held his breath as Rose walked out with a towel wrapped around her. As if she felt his gaze, she turned toward him.

It will kill me to let her leave.

As if Rose heard his internal thought, she offered him a sad smile, then straightened her shoulders and dropped her towel.

Holy shit.

He dropped the glass. Spilled drinks didn't matter; nothing mattered anymore but her. He strode toward her. "Are you sure?" The question was more of a demand. His hands clenched into fists to keep from reaching for her.

Rose moved closer and stood on her tippy toes to reach his mouth. She brushed her lips over his. "Yes. I want this. Please, Caleb."

He scooped her into his arms and headed for the one place he wanted to be—his bed with her. She squealed when he tossed her onto it, and sighed when he claimed her mouth.

In seconds, the kiss turned into a raging inferno as each of them desperately tried to get closer to the other. It burned, scorched, and sizzled until both were breathing hard,

but neither wanted it to stop.

Rose tugged on his t-shirt, rolled him over his back, and straddled him. She held his gaze and cupped her hands outside his as he grasped her wonderful breasts. Her head fell back, and she rolled her hips with a sigh.

It would be so easy to let her lead, but Caleb didn't want for this to be over too soon. He needed to savor every last second they had together. He flipped her over and stood, promising himself it would only take a moment before he was buried deep inside her.

Words were impossible as he unbuttoned his pants. Her smile as she watched him push them down his hips and step out of them felt like a caress over his skin, and his dick filled painfully full.

Control.

He had to figure out a way not to lose it too soon.

He grasped her ankles, and Rose let out a gasp as he tugged her, stopping when her butt reached the edge of the bed. Calen held her gaze and dropped down onto his knees. Rose's smile faded, replaced by heat and desire. It wrapped around them, palpable and intense, making his breath hitch and his balls ache.

He lifted one slender ankle to his lips and kissed it. Nuzzling, nipping, and kissing, he made his way up her legs, until he reached her hip. Then, he gently placed that leg down and reached for the other. Her sighs fed his soul, and her moans made him shudder with need. He moved her legs apart so he could see her sex.

Rose was breathless, waiting for Caleb to lower his head. When he did, his tongue swiped a lick over her clit. She fisted her fingers in the covers and moaned. He

feasted on her as if he were a starved man.

Pleasure swarmed him with warmth and need as Rose arched up to meet his mouth. Worries, cares, tomorrows, and what happened next all evaporated into nothing as his entire being was focused upon Rose. On her sighs, her moans, her—just her.

He licked, sucked, nibbled, and worshipped, every stroke and touch bringing her to climax quickly and effortlessly. He hummed in satisfaction as he both saw and felt it roll over her like a wave, and he coaxed it longer, giving her more until she sobbed his name.

“Ca—Caleb.”

He rose over her. She opened her eyes and cupped his cheek. How was he supposed to live without her and the way she made him feel?

“Don’t think,” she whispered. “No thinking. Just love me.”

I do.

God, forgive me. I do.

He gathered her in his arms and lay over her, her legs widening to make room for him before she lifted them and wrapped them around his waist. Her smile was soft as she clutched at his neck.

There was so much he wanted to say, but he couldn’t find the right words. Caleb kissed her, slow, deep, and soft as he flexed his hips, his cock pushing into her opening. Rose gasped as she stretched around him. The deeper he sank, the more he knew letting her leave was a mistake. “So damn tight,” he murmured while winding her hair around his hand. “I don’t think I can be gentle.”

She squeezed his waist with her thighs, lifting to take him deeper. “I don’t want gentle.”

Her words whispered against his lips ripped a growl from his chest. He pulled out of her and began to thrust, hard, fast, and deep. He reached for her hips, holding her to him as he filled her again and again. Caleb closed his eyes, savoring every moment and every touch as Rose sank her fingers into his hair. His lips found hers again, their tongues dancing in time with their bodies.

It was erotic, all-consuming, and devastating.

“I need you,” she begged.

He nuzzled her neck below her ear and then asked, “How?”

“Just please.”

He growled, then he shifted to catch her knees. He lifted them and moved them back and a little apart, opening her up more for him. Only then did he begin to thrust inside her again. This angle brought him deeper, and she cried out with every thrust as he sank balls deep.

Caleb knew tonight would never be enough. He didn’t just want tonight. He wanted forever. She felt amazing, her tight walls wrapped around him, clenching and squeezing as she built to another climax. He watched her; the ecstasy, heat, need, and desire on her face were reminders of what they could have if he could figure out a way to make her world a safe place again.

He gripped her legs tighter. He kissed her a little deeper. His own orgasm was racing toward his balls, pulling his sac up.

“Yes,” she moaned.

His hips slammed against her a little faster. His breath sawed in and out of his lungs as her moans grew louder. He wanted her quivering with pleasure, begging him for more, promising him that she’d stay. But now he knew, if he wasn’t careful, he’d be the one begging her to stay and never to leave him.

A strangled cry ripped from her lips as she peaked for the second time. The feel of her silky walls tightening around him was too much. Caleb drove into her twice more before he plunged deep and fell over her, catching himself with his hands as he filled her with all he had to give.

He would figure out a way to make her world safe, because there was no way he could rest until she was back in his arms. Forever.

Noon the following day.

“The guys will keep you safe.” He reached for the seatbelt and tugged it loose. Reaching across Rose, he clipped it into the holder. “Trust them.”

“I will,” Rose promised softly.

Please don’t go .

Don’t leave me.

Everything he should have said and wanted to say refused to form anywhere but inside his head. All the hours he’d spent loving her weren’t enough. He wanted more. He needed more.

“Sorry, man.” Wolf’s voice behind him made him swallow hard. “We’ve gotta hit the

road.”

“I know.” He paused half in, half out of the truck, and gently cupped her face, stoking his thumbs over her cheek. “Be safe.” The need to promise that he’d see her soon rode him hard, and he fought it back.

“You too.” Her smile was watery as she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tightly. “Have a good life, Caleb. Find someone to love.”

You.

I love you.

He steeled himself against the pain, but it shattered his defenses anyway. “Be happy.” He would be forever grateful to whoever cleared their throat behind them, and he forced himself fully out of the car. Behind the shield of the door, he clenched his hands into fists before forcing them open again long enough to close it. “Keep her safe.”

“I swear it,” Wolf immediately replied. “Where she’s going is one of the safest places I know aside from here.”

Caleb nodded in thanks and stepped away, allowing Wolf Steel and his men to load up. He kept himself on his feet through sheer force of will until the car disappeared around the curve in the drive. Once he could no longer see it, he dropped onto the snow.

Come back.

I’ll go with you.

“You gotta say it.”

He kept his eyes on the road, hoping, waiting. “I don’t understand.”

“You have to say it,” Dalton repeated. “I can’t do a damn thing unless you say it out loud.”

He must be stupid, or maybe his brain had left with Rose, because he stared at his boss for way longer than he should have before understanding slammed into him. “I should have gone with her.”

“Yup.” Dalton gripped his elbow and hauled him to his feet. “You should have.”

“I owe you?—”

“You owe me nothing.” Dalton dragged him into HQ, bypassed the security, and went into the elevator. “Any debt you owed me is long paid. The only person you owe now is Rose.” He paused and tilted his head to one side. “And yourself.”

Once again he found himself without the words to convey his thoughts, and all Dalton did was freaking snort that sardonic laugh of his.

“Do you love her?”

He nodded. Saying the words to anyone but Rose seemed wrong somehow; she should hear them first.

“Then,” Dalton strode out of the elevator, “let’s get Tex on the phone and figure out how to get you your girl.” He paused outside the war-room door. “It may take a hot minute; we need to plan this carefully. Putting her in danger again is not the object here. It won’t hurt to have you seen around here for a few days at least. Just in case

Nawrocki is watching the place.”

“I know.” He hated it, but he understood Dalton’s logic.

I’m coming, Rosey-Posey.

I’m coming for you.

31

1 month later - Castellammare di Stabia, Italy

Caleb walked down the street, checking the numbers on the doors as he went. If he had to pick any place to retire, it would be here. Sun, sea, and Rose. What else could a man need? He couldn't think of a damn thing right now.

Dodging around a woman carrying a basket nearly bigger than himself, he ducked his head to avoid the hanging flower basket, then took a giant step to one side to avoid stepping on another plant pot. The very things that made the old town street quaint would land him on his ass if he didn't pay attention.

Forty-eight hours, crossing the globe. He'd bounced from one country to another and back again, including some he'd snuck in and out of, just to ensure he didn't lead Nawrocki to Italy and Rose. Keeping her location a secret was top priority.

Weariness fell away when a small sign on the gate of a villa caught his eye. His breathing sped up, and his heart pounded, just as it did in the few moments before a firefight started. He locked his gaze onto that sign as if his life depended on it. In a way, it did. His future depended on what happened. Now, he'd finally found it. Number one hundred and forty-seven, Villa del Vesuvio.

Was she waiting for him?

Did she know he was here?

Did she even know he was coming?

Tex had promised she would. But still, he was more nervous today than he had been on his first day at boot camp. Because if she wasn't expecting him and he turned up, would she freak out? What if she didn't want him as much as he needed her?

Maybe I shouldn't have come.

Is my coming here considered stalking, too?

Does that make me as bad as the jerk?

What if she doesn't want to see me?

Being uncertain, off balance, and nervous wasn't something he was used to feeling. He balled his hands into fists and stuffed them into his pockets. He had to trust in what was between them. Behind that door, in a villa soaked in the Mediterranean sun, was Rose. The woman he'd been stupid enough to send away from him.

I was a first-class fool.

Everything ceased to exist as he stared at the blue door, willing it to open. As if on command, it swung inward, and Rose appeared. She reached for the column next to the door with one hand as if to steady herself, and a smile which hit him right in the solar plexus brightened her face.

Relief slammed into Caleb. His whole world narrowed to one single focus point. Her. His lips curved upward as he returned her smile and opened his arms.

Please let her come to me.

He couldn't stand being apart anymore. Not being able to talk to her, touch her, or rest beside her as they curled together to sleep was pain he never wanted to endure again. They'd figure out a way to make it work between them. But this needed to be her choice. He just prayed she'd choose him. He just knew his whole world was a little dimmer without her in it.

"Caleb."

Lip-reading his name from her mouth almost brought him to his knees. Every nonna on the street paused to watch as his smile broadened when she crossed the street to stand in front of him. "Hi." He cupped her face and drew her to him, resting his forehead against hers. "I missed you. Rosey-Posey," he whispered.

For long, torturous moments, she stared at him, saying nothing, as if she couldn't believe he was standing in front of her. "I missed you, too. I didn't believe Tex when he said you would come." She reached up and pressed a kiss to his lips, wrapping her arms around his neck, tugging him closer. "I thought I'd never see you again."

His whole body shuddered from the joy in her gentle laughter as he dipped down and scooped her into his arms to carry her into the house. So much for keeping a low profile—no doubt the whole street would be talking about the crazy, romantic foreigner who swept Rose, or rather Rosa as she was known here, off her feet. He figured Italy was a passionate romantic nation; they would understand.

To the sound of whistles and cat calls from the nonnas, he crossed the threshold of the villa and closed out the whole world to where nothing existed for him but her. He lowered her to her feet and asked the question he feared the answer to most: "Can I stay?"

Her hands bunched into his shirt at his waist, and she leaned her cheek on his chest with a deep, heartfelt sigh. "I'm scared."

He froze. “Of me?—?”

“No. Never.” She shook her head. “That you’ll resent me because you staying means you stop being who you are. You are giving up everything to run away with me.” She pulled out of his hold and wrapped her arms around herself.

Caleb followed her down the marble-floored hallway, under a terracotta-faced archway, and into a bright, warm, sun-filled kitchen.

Rose busied herself, opening cupboards and searching through boxes. “I don’t have coffee. I do have a mint chocolate tea that tastes like After-Eights...”

“I don’t care about coffee.” He’d drink a million cups of tea in any flavor, as long as she didn’t make him leave.

As she filled the kettle, she glanced over her shoulder at him in disbelief. “Liar. You survive on coffee. You need it to breathe.”

“I need you to breathe,” he corrected. “I can walk away from everything and anyone and know I’ll be okay. Everything and anyone but you.” He crossed the kitchen and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her back against his chest. “Forgive me,” he whispered against her ear. “Forgive me for not figuring it out sooner. I should never have let you leave without me. You shouldn’t have had to do it alone.”

“It’s not your fault.”

He turned her in his arms. “It was my fault. I knew it then, and I know it now.” Admitting it was painful. He’d fucked up, and she had to figure out how to run again after he’d promised her he had her six. “I knew it the second you disappeared down the ranch road. But at that point, we had to wait and ensure you were safely away and that nobody followed you.” He caressed her face. “I’m so fucking sorry, I didn’t pull

my head out of my ass in time to come with you.” The tears in her eyes gutted him. He resolved to keep his head where it belonged from now on—on his shoulders, not up his butt, avoiding the emotional stuff. Never again would he be the reason she cried. “I love you, Rosey-Posey. I promise I won’t let you down again.”

Rose blinked back the tears burning in her eyes. She wasn't afraid to admit to herself that she was an emotional mess. The roller-coaster devastating low of leaving him was now tempered by the high of seeing him again.

Having his arms wrapped around her as he swore he loved her, reassuring her she'd never have to survive alone again, was a temptation her cautious side warned her not to trust. She'd learned her lessons the hard way too many times to risk putting everything in his hands now. While Janek hunted for her, she would never be safe. If Caleb was with her, he wouldn't be either. She wanted to grab onto what he offered with both hands and never let go. However, doing so could doom them both.

The whistle of the kettle boiling snapped her out of her daze, and she stepped back to remove it from the stovetop. She could use the electric kettle which came with the villa, but she preferred the tea-making ritual she'd perfected over the years. It soothed something deep inside her when everything else failed—everything but being wrapped in Caleb's arms.

It was hard to focus when being near him made her chest quake and her lungs shrink to where she struggled to take a deep breath. It was a confounding mystery how both those things also made her feel as if her whole being was refreshed at the same time. Maybe they needed to take a moment. "Come with me to the store." As soon as she said it, she knew it was the right thing, even as disappointment dimmed the hope in his eyes. Unable to resist his pain, she stroked her fingers along his jaw. "We can grab coffee and something for dinner, so we don't have to leave the house to get supplies for the next few days."

He stepped away from her, and she felt the loss of his touch. Caleb scrubbed his hand over his head from front to back. He nodded and waved in the direction of the door. “Lead the way.”

Rose paused a moment in front of him. Regret for putting a pause on their reunion almost shattered her resolve, but she was determined to ignore it. Words were easy to say. He said he loved her. She thought maybe he did. But how could she ask him to leave his brother, his job, and his whole world, just for her? “I—I’ll—um—get my keys.”

“Okay.”

She hurried through the living room and out onto the covered terrace where she’d left her Kindle and her purse earlier. Away from his overwhelming presence, she blew out a slow breath, struggling for composure.

Caleb is here.

Here.

Now, what do I do?

Everything she knew she’d ever wanted was just at her fingertips. So close to being her in grasp, it tantalized and tempted. But how could she live with herself if Janek found them and hurt him or worse? Life knowing Caleb died because of her was something she couldn’t fathom. She never wanted to know what that was like.

The views of Mount Vesuvius, which had captivated her every single day since Gunnar from the Four X’s Group and his wife, Jorja, had driven her here under a cloak of darkness just over a month ago, no longer held any allure, because the man standing in her kitchen was more powerful than any volcano, iconic or not.

“Rose?”

She snatched up her purse and whirled toward his voice. “Coming.” She checked to make sure her keys were in it before walking toward him and lied through her teeth. “Sorry, I keep getting distracted by the view.”

“It’s stunning.”

There was an undercurrent between them now—one she should have expected but hadn’t. One she should keep firmly in place, but she didn’t want to. She made sure the terrace door was locked and let him out of the house to the street. “It’s this one here.”

“Where?”

“This one.” She pointed to the tiny two-seater electric car and pointed the remote at it, unlocking the doors, then glanced at him and changed her mind about driving to the store. “Um, maybe we should walk, because I don’t think you’re going to fit in it.” She snickered at the incredulous look that flickered across his face when he realized she didn’t have a monster truck like he was used to driving. “It’s not far...”

“I’ll fit.” Caleb opened the passenger door. “I forgot about the tiny streets over here for a second. I’ll drive.”

It didn’t bother her which one of them drove, so she nodded and sat in to the car. He closed the door and went around to the driver’s side. Rose watched in amusement as he shifted the seat back as far as it would go before he almost folded himself in half to fit his long legs into the seat and his body behind the steering wheel. “Maybe I should drive?—”

“I won’t breathe until we get there,” he grumbled. “It will be fine.” He started the

engine and glanced at her. His knees hit the steering wheel when he lifted his foot off the gas. “You need to belt up.”

So enthralled by his efforts to get comfortable in the tiny car, she’d forgotten all about it. “I was busy figuring out where I’m going to get a crane to pull you out of the car when we get to the store.” She tugged on the seatbelt and threw it a dirty look when it got stuck and refused to come out. “Seriously?—”

“Let me.” He awkwardly used the hand closest to her. It skimmed across her chest as he reached for the seatbelt. “Sometimes a gentle touch is better than brute force.” Her breathing hitched as he freed the belt and drew it across her body, clipping it closed. “Comfy?”

“Y—yes.” She had to learn to ignore his answering smile. If she didn’t, then she’d fall under his spell again, and before she knew it, they’d be back where they were a month ago, with nothing settled between them.

A month ago was hot.

A month ago was fun.

A month ago was...

Mind-blowing...

Eye-opening...

Shut up.

She didn’t need her internal voice to tell her how much the time spent in Montana with Caleb had been everything she craved, needed, and wanted her life to be.

Because a month ago in Montana, she'd had the chance to learn what it meant to be worshipped and, yes, no matter how much she didn't want to admit it to herself, to be both loved and to love with an intensity which made her soul sing.

As Caleb took the turn into the grocery store parking lot, she gave herself a brief moment to pretend this could be her life forever.

"I can run in and grab it." Rose could already tell parking was going to be a problem. "It's only coffee, so I'll be five minutes tops as long as the queue at the checkout isn't ten miles long."

Caleb circled the parking lot again and growled softly under his breath. "This is freaking ridiculous, is every tourist in Italy at the grocery store today?" As soon as he tapped the brakes and eased the car to a stop, Rose unclipped her seatbelt and put her hand on the door. "I'll be waiting, okay?"

"For me to get out?" She grinned over her shoulder. "Or for me to come back?"

"No, neither of those things." He brushed his fingers down her arm. "For you to admit..." He snapped his mouth shut, cutting off what he'd been about to say.

"Admit what?"

"That you love me."

Arrogant jerk .

"Say it." He tried to twist in the seat, but the steering wheel prevented him from turning fully toward her. "Please, just say it, Say it. 'I love you.' If you feel it, it's not that difficult. If you don't, then tell me now, because I can't—I need—damn it." He thumped the palm of his hand on the wheel. "I need to hear you say it."

I love you.

Last night the anticipation of seeing him again had kept her from sleeping. Those words had resounded inside her head. Today, awareness that if he knew how much she did love him meant he'd never walk away, even for his own safety, kept her from giving them a voice. She stared at him, unsure of what was the best thing to do. Both sides of herself warred. Did she love him enough to let him go? Yes, to keep him safely out of Janek's grasp, she did. Her fingers went to the chain around her neck, and she took the comfort of knowing it was his, stealing a brief moment and buying herself time. "I can't say it yet. I need time to think."

"Time, you say?" Disappointment laced his voice. Caleb's mouth pressed together. He made a nodding motion with his head as if he understood what she didn't fully understand herself. "Why?"

"Because..."

Every moment he's with me is dangerous for him. It costs him everything. He shouldn't have to give up everything for me.

"I'm not sure yet." She lied through her teeth, causing a sharp, breath-stealing ache in her chest. "I'm not sure how I feel yet." She prayed he didn't know she was lying. But given how he watched her, she thought he might.

"You're thinking I've lost my mind? You are trying to protect me." It was ridiculous and exhilarating that he could read her mind. His hand reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Do I understand you correctly?"

"No, it's not that." She wasn't quite ready to admit he was correct yet. "I just want to consider it carefully, Caleb." As much as she wanted to protect him from making a mistake, she hated the hurt in his voice and needed to soften it. The admission was

ripped from deep inside her, from a place she'd locked away and refused to acknowledge for years. "For me, this time, there is no going back once I say it." She wrapped her hand around his and squeezed lightly. "Let me think about it. I'm scared of my feelings—and yours."

"Okay." He leaned as close as he could within the confines of the seat and the steering wheel, peering into her eyes. "So tell me a bit later." She saw the exact moment he flipped a switch in his head when his eyes softened. "Will you communicate it in writing, or will you tell me yourself?"

The relief that he was teasing her was almost overwhelming, and the pressure to make a decision immediately faded away. "Carrier pigeon." She winked at him. "They're two aisles over from the coffee. I better get moving. They only have two a day, and if they're sold out, then you'll have to wait until next week for your answer." She didn't give him time to respond but fumbled with the seatbelt when she got stuck in it, then the door, and escaped for the safety of the store.

Rose knew she'd been unfair. She could have answered him. She grabbed a basket and stepped onto the escalator. As it moved upward, the flash of a reflection in the window at the top made her pause.

Who is that?

But before she could fully make out the distorted figure, he moved to one side to allow a woman who was clearly in a hurry to pass him, and she lost the chance to figure it out. She took a giant step at the top. Someone had told her once that you could die by getting caught in the mechanism of an escalator. No matter how irrational it was, every single time she had to use one, she made sure her laces didn't have an opportunity to slide between the grooves and capture her.

She turned left past the phone shop, and through the food court.

Maybe I'll grab us a snack on the way out.

She was immediately annoyed with herself at the thought. If she was thinking 'us' instead of herself, then she'd already lost the battle to do the right thing. God would have to forgive her, because she didn't want to do this thing called life without Caleb. Someone bumped into her when she stopped in her tracks.

"Scusa, Senora."

She waved off the woman's apologies. It wasn't her fault that she caused a traffic

jam. She forced one foot in front of the other. There had to be a way for them to be together safely.

Talk to Caleb.

That's why he's here.

If anyone knew more about figuring out how to stay alive and out of the clutches of a mad man, it has to be him... right?

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of a stuffed toy, and changed direction to check it out.

"I did say carrier pigeon." She fished in her purse for her phone and opened the camera app to snap a picture of the bird stuffy. She opened a message box and pulled up the number Tex had given her when he'd called to tell her Caleb was coming to Italy, to her, and attached the photo to it. Her fingers hovered for a moment before she started to type.

Rose: I lo ? —

The hairs stood on the back of her neck, and her fingers paused. Suddenly, she knew without turning around that he was behind her. Janek had found her. Her time had run out. The future she'd just started to believe was hers for the taking was snatched from her grasp. Slowly, she turned and faced the creature of her nightmares. Her gaze flicked from the gun in his hand to his eyes and back again.

Shit.

To her amazement, she didn't burst into tears. The fear that had driven her for so long receded and was replaced by a rage she'd never experienced before. There were too

many innocent people here—she couldn't allow him to hurt them. She just couldn't.

“Well, well, well. What have we here?” the asshole said as he moved closer. A gel-greased lock of his hair spilled across his forehead as he bent towards her.

Rose was short, and Janek used every inch of his six feet to loom over her. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, preventing her from demanding he back off. She froze as past conditioning kept her in place as he reached for her.

Rose closed her eyes as she took a deep breath, picturing Caleb in her mind, calling to every ounce of love she felt for him in an effort to break free of the past and the hold of Janek's training which kept her in place.

I love you, Rosey-Posey. I promise I won't let you down again.

Her eyes flew open and narrowed on Janek. “Leave me alone.” She had little hope that he'd listen or even do as she asked. “I won't tell anyone you were here if you leave now.”

His evil chuckle slithered down her spine like a snake of ice. “I think not. I keep what's mine.”

“I was never yours.” Her hands trembled as she tried to think how she would escape him. She thought to run, but with the two men she could just about make out standing a few steps behind him, she didn't there was any way she could outrun them. She pulled out the only weapon she had in her arsenal, opened her mouth, and screamed.

Caleb blew out a shaky breath as he watched Rose disappear into the store. He'd expected her to jump in his arms, to cry all over him. To demand he never left her again. He could confirm that all the books and movies lied. They fibbed so hard that their noses were longer than Pinocchio's.

In the rearview mirror, he saw a car between the cart bay and the door reverse out and drive away. He fumbled with the gears of Rose's dinky car but managed to reverse it into the free space before another driver claimed it. He touched the button to lower the window. Then he heard the scream. He knew that voice.

He contorted his body, forcing it out of the car until he popped free of its grip and it spat him out to land on his knees on the pavement. He scrambled to his feet and raced into the store, towards the sound. "Rose," he yelled, only to be jerked back against a wall of solid muscle.

"Easy. It's Cookie," a voice whispered harshly in his ear.

He shot a glance over his shoulder and confirmed it was Wolf Steel's teammate who held him. "Rose..."

"I know. Wolf and Mozart are tracking her." Cookie handed him a Glock. "You might need this."

Having a weapon in his hand snapped his focus back where it should have been. It pushed back the panic wrought by Rose's scream to a level where he could channel the fury it caused to become the warrior the US Navy and Dalton had trained him to be.

He and Cookie had to stand aside as customers streamed from the store, blocking them from moving. Mothers hurried their children while old men ushered their wives ahead of them as they raced for freedom.

Caleb silently cursed the screams, sobs, and crying that kept him from hearing the one voice he needed above all others.

"Hurry up. Hurry up," Caleb beseeched to someone, anyone who'd listen. He needed

to get to her. Knowing one of the finest SEALs he'd ever known was there close to her should have eased his fears. Instead, it fueled his fury, because he figured out what was happening and why. Rose was bait. His woman, his heart, was bait to catch the fucker who hunted her, and nobody had warned him. "You knew," he accused Cookie.

"I'm so fucking sorry," Cookie admitted. "Orders came from the top; we had no choice."

It galled him to nod in response, but he did it anyway when he saw the remorse on Cookie's face. He understood orders better than most. But acknowledging it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"If it makes you feel any better," Cookie motioned him forward and slotted into place on his left shoulder, "she's never been alone since she left your place. Not for one moment. Despite encouragement to do differently, we've made sure she was safe."

Someday, he'd be able to appreciate that. Today was not that day. He ruthlessly pushed everything aside and started to progress up the escalator into the grocery store while offering up a silent prayer.

I'll give you anything you want; just don't let her die.

With more courage than she felt, Rose moved to the left and glanced over his shoulder to check where his goons were. She noticed two men creeping behind them and silently cursed when she recognized them as Matthew 'Wolf' Steel and Sam 'Mozart' Reed.

Trying to distract Janek from noticing, she hoped her feet kept up with her heart as she whirled around and raced away from him. She hadn't taken three steps before another goon stepped into her path, his hands taking hold of her wrists painfully.

“Going somewhere?”

“I—le—” She blinked as Caleb appeared in her peripheral vision and launched himself at the asshole holding her. A lethal smile ghosted across his face as his shoulder slammed into him, sending all three of them to their knees.

“Run,” Caleb yelled at her with a jerk of his chin as he rolled up, keeping his knees in the center of the asshole’s back.

Rose didn’t need to be told twice. Despite having no idea who was out there or what awaited her, she bolted in the direction of his chin jerk.

Rose heard the sound of footsteps behind her and knew Caleb couldn’t have gotten the goon under control that fast. She raced down the aisle as fast as her legs would carry her, but it wasn’t fast enough.

A jerk on her hair brought her to a sudden and painful halt.

“Why run when you know I will catch you?” Janek snarled. He wrapped his hands around her throat and squeezed, cutting off her air. “I told you. If I can’t have you, nobody can.”

She struggled for breath, her hands flailing. With the sounds of fighting all around them, she knew there was little chance of rescue. It would be so easy to give up. So easy to admit defeat and allow him to kill her, but her heart which beat for Caleb refused to allow her to stop fighting.

She beat at Janek with her fists, growing weaker by the second.

He laughed evilly. “Too bad you ran from me and showed how unworthy you are. You would make an excellent wife.”

“Never.” Unable to speak, she mouthed the word. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caleb, Wolf, Mozart—and was that Cookie?—fighting with the goons.

She had to somehow get away from Janek without help from the guys. She just had to. She had a man to tell she loved, and a life to live. She wanted her fairytale happily ever after, damn it. She’d more than earned it.

Black spots danced in her vision. Her hands pulled weakly at his fingers, trying to give herself just a tiny inch of room for air.

“Enough.” His voice boomed around her as he shook her hard.

Her arms flailed, hitting something sharp that she couldn’t see on a shelf. She ignored the pain, her instincts taking over. God, she hoped whatever it was she’d managed to pick up wasn’t something too small. Rose put every ounce of the minimal strength she had left into her swing and slammed her arm forward.

Janek screamed, released her, and put his hands to his face. She watched in horror as he dropped to his knees and sank sideways to the floor with a knitting needle sticking out of his eye.

Her legs refused to hold her any longer and she fell to the floor, scooting her butt back until she hit a shelf. She brought her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and squeezed her eyes closed to shut out the horrific sight in front of her. “Oh my God. I killed him.”

“Rose. Rosey-Posey?”

When she opened her eyes, Caleb knelt in front of her.

“Hey, baby girl.”

“I—I killed him.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

She threw herself at his chest, and his arms closed around her as police swarmed the store. “Oh God.”

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” Caleb whispered against her head.

“On the ground. On the ground,” a policeman ordered in Italian, then repeated it in English. “On the ground.”

Caleb eased her out of his arms and nodded. He lay down and spoke in halting Italian over his shoulder as the policeman cuffed him. “My woman is hurt; he tried to kill her.”

“I will see she is looked after.”

“Grazie.” Caleb lay passive and let what needed to happen, happen. “It will be okay, Rosey-Posey. I promise.” He climbed to his feet as the policeman half lifted him. “Sir, can you call the base commander at NSA Naples? Our commander in chief will need to know what happened here today.”

“You are military?”

He eyed the Italian, as if unsure how to answer. “Sometimes.”

The Italian cop barked a laugh. “My cousin, Midas, is sometimes too.” He paused to check Janek’s pulse, then turned to her. “Come with us, miss.”

Rose scrambled to her feet and trailed after them as they were led to the other aisle

where Wolf, his two men, and four of Janek's goons sat handcuffed on the floor.

What a mess.

I'm alive.

We are all alive.

I'll take it.

Caleb sat in the chair he'd been placed in as soon as they'd arrived at the police station. The only thing keeping him from losing his ever-loving mind was Rose sitting next to him while a paramedic checked her over.

Keeping a careful eye on Rose in case she needed him, he glanced at the man who'd cuffed him as he talked to the officer sitting behind the desk.

He said his cousin, Midas, was the same. It can't be the same Midas. Can it?

There was only one way to find out if his cousin Midas was Marco Guerriero, a former COMSUBIN who now worked for Gunnar McKinley and The Four X's Group in La Spezia. When the cop left the desk and headed toward the interrogation rooms, he seized his chance and called in Italian, "Excuse me, Officer?"

"Si."

He had no idea where to even start with Italian. "Do you speak English?"

The cop eyed him with suspicion, then lifted one shoulder. "Better than you do Italian."

Thank fuck.

"Good." Caleb winced at the derision in the cop's voice. He knew he butchered Italian when he spoke it. "You mentioned Midas." The cop's body language

stiffened, but Caleb forged on anyway. “Is his name Marco? Marco Guerriero?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know Gunnar, too?”

“The bear?”

“If you mean a grizzly bear.” He was being cryptic; they both were, he realized, but thankfully, they also seemed to be on the same wavelength.

“No.” The cop shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

Damn, did I fuck up?

All he could do was watch as the other man retreated from the room and disappeared down a corridor.

“I do not see any damage aside from bruising.”

The paramedic’s words pulled his full attention back to Rose. Grateful they had uncuffed him and the guys as soon as they’d placed them in this room, Caleb reached for her hand and linked their fingers together. He listened to the instructions.

“Drink plenty of cold drinks, and rest as much as possible for the next few days, and you will be as good as the rain again.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Her voice sounded raw, and her throat sore.

Caleb bit back the rage at the discoloration which darkened the skin of her throat, a necklace of fingerprints to remind him of how close he’d come to losing her. He

lifted his arm, and Rose curled against him. “I got you, baby girl.”

The door to the interrogation room opened to reveal Wolf. He strode toward them and squatted in front of Rose. “How are you doing, Rose?”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry.” Wolf’s solemn gaze took them both in. “I’d have warned you both if I could have.”

“You were watching me all the time?” Rose rasped.

Wolf nodded. “Me or one of my men.” He gestured to Cookie and Mozart. “Except when you were in your house, you were never alone. I’m so damn sorry I didn’t get to you on time to stop him.”

“You did.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” His question was filled with confusion.

She reached for him, resting her hand gently on his arm. “You were behind the goons. Knowing you were there gave me the courage to fight harder. To fight with everything I had for the future I wanted.” She smiled up at him. “Like your Ice did when she needed to.”

“You are just as strong as my wife is.” Wolf leaned in and pressed a brotherly kiss to her forehead.

Caleb had to strain his ears, but he barely made out what Wolf whispered.

“Ice and the women would tell you to fight like a girl for the love you deserve.” He

climbed to his feet and went to sit next to Mozart and Cookie.

“What happened?”

“I was filling them in when Midas and Grizzly called,” Wolf said. “Based on the side of the conversation I heard, I’m guessing we’ll be out of here shortly. If not, then the commander at Naples is my phone call.”

Relief slammed into Caleb. It must have been the same Midas, after all. He made a mental note to thank the cop for calling his cousin. He also wasn’t too proud to admit to himself that having Wolf Steel taking charge eased the burden on him. He didn’t have the spoons for anything more than concentrating on Rose. He loosened his hold on her when she reached for her purse and searched through it. “What are you looking for?”

“My phone.”

“I have it.” Mozart leaned around Wolf. “I picked it up after you ran.” He held it out to her. “I hope it’s not broken.”

She fiddled with the phone and the screen light up. “It’s not,” Rose turned it to show Mozart. “Thank you for saving it.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rose muttered something as she played with the phone. “Look at this.”

Caleb blinked, his eyes crossing as he tried to see what was under his nose. He nearly sighed out loud when she lowered it so he could make out the photo of the stuffed bird. “Is that...” His heart sped up, and he prayed he hadn’t misunderstood the meaning of the photo. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

A soft smile pulled at Rose's full lips. "You didn't read the words, did you?"

There were words?

He took the phone from her hands to get a closer look.

"I was typing when I felt him behind me," Rose whispered. "That's why you got half a text message."

He blinked at her in confusion. Even as his heart leaped with hope, his brain refused to connect the dots. "Um."

"Check your phone, dumbass," Cookie whisper-shouted. "Check your damn phone."

Phone. Check my phone. Got it.

He fished it out of his pocket and stared at the notification when the screen lit up. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes," Rose answered. "I may not deserve you, but I refuse to let walk away without knowing it. I've kept my heart guarded, but somehow you broke through and made me feel again."

He stared at her, almost unable to believe what his ears told him was truth. "Say the words, Rosey-Posey. I need the words."

She smiled and snuggled into his arms, lifting her face to brush a kiss over his lips. "I love you, Caleb Hunt. So much, I can hardly stand it."

"And I love you."

A whoop sounded behind them. “If you two are finished, can we now leave Villa Del Vesuvio?”

Caleb turned and found Wolf and his men watching them with big smiles on their faces.

“You missed them telling us we’re free to go and to come back tomorrow with our lawyers to sign our statements.”

“Are you ready?” he asked Rose as he helped her to her feet.

“With you by my side?” She slipped her hand into his and kept pace with him as they headed toward the door. “Always.”

“Then let us go. I’m ready to go home.” He leaned down and whispered the rest in her ear. “Not to mention a nice big bed to curl up in for a lifetime with you.”

“Happily ever after is a freaking awesome house to live in,” Wolf said sagely. “Don’t fuck it up, Hunt.”

“Never,” Caleb vowed. “I finally persuaded her to take a chance on me. She mine, and I’m hers. Forever.”

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“Which one is your favorite?” Rose carefully placed the fourth brush on the lid of the paint tin and stepped back to see the area she’d painted in better light. The little town of Garnet Peak, close to Nemesis Ranch, at the foothills of the Crazy Mountains, wasn’t exactly Paris or Rome. But it was, she could admit to herself, rapidly becoming home. She bit back the bark of laughter when Caleb squinted at the paint samples with a perplexed expression on his face.

He wrapped his arms around her and stooped to rest his chin on her shoulder. “They’re all white.”

She sighed softly, leaning into his touch. Damn, the man was spoiling her sinfully with a new life, a new studio. Her camera was back, and all the love she’d ever wanted. What more could a girl need?

His mouth kissed the sensitive skin under her ear. A full-body shiver overtook her despite the warmth of the afternoon sun beating in the windows.

“You’ll have to pick,” he murmured against her ear. “Because the only white I’d have a preference for is if you were wearing it walking down the aisle to promise me forever. Otherwise, they are all just a color. Pick your favorite one.”

She rolled her eyes and turned in his arms, loving how his eyes darkened when she smiled up at him. “We might want to give the big white wedding as miss and do a fast hop to Vegas before I’m too big to fit into that white dress you mentioned,” she teased.

“Huh?”

Confusion made his eyes narrow. “Have I finally managed to be the one in this relationship who can keep a secret?” she asked.

His fingers stroked her sides. “Well, that’s a first. Because usually your girl posse tell their men, who tell me what to do so I don’t fuck up.”

“True.” But they’d all somehow kept that he’d bought the studio for her as a surprise secret from her last month. She wasn’t even mad about it, even if she got teary-eyed every single time she remembered how nervous he’d been as he’d unlocked the door for her. “You didn’t understand what I said, did you?”

He shook his head. “Nope. You lost me the second your boobs distracted me in that top, when I looked at them instead of confusing myself with four types of white paint that all look the same.”

She grinned up at him. “So tell me something, babe?—”

“Something,” he interjected quickly before she could continue.

She gave him a light smack on the chest, loving this playful side of him which was slowly emerging from under the grumpy exterior he showed almost everyone else but her.

He smirked and tapped her nose with one finger. “Okay, okay, I’m listening.”

She debated on if she should repeat what she’d said before, but decided a different tactic might be better. “You know how you mentioned that you’d like a family someday?”

“Yeah.” He eyed her carefully as if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Why did you change your mind?”

She let out her breath, not sure if she wanted to throttle him for being dense or kiss the stuffing out of him for being so freaking adorable. “No, no, nothing like that. But you remember that conversation, right?”

“Yeah, of course.” He leered at her. “I remember you had three orgasms by the time you let me sleep. You wore me right out.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining at the time,” she muttered and stepped back so she could see his face. “So, how does July sound?”

“For more orgasms?” He was being deliberately dense. She was sure of it. “I’m game. But, baby girl, there’d better be more before that. It’s a hell of a long way to July. Just saying.”

“No, you idiot.” Exasperated, she planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. “For the starting the family thing.”

His eyes widened, and he stared at her, clearing his throat twice before he could speak. “Whoa, wait a minute, baby girl. Are you telling me you are pregnant?”

“Well, I’ve been dropping hints for the last ten minutes,” she grumbled, “but you’re kinda slow on the uptake.”

His throat worked, and she smiled up at the stunned look on his face, a sheen of tears obscuring her vision. He gave himself a full body shake and whooped loud enough to draw attention from a passerby on the street. He picked her up, whirled her around, kissed her soundly, then dropped to his knees to kiss the skin that showed between her shirt and her yoga pants. “Our baby.”

“Yes, ours.”

“I love you. You know that, right?” He climbed to his feet before hugging her close.
“So, Vegas, you said?”

“I know you love me; I love you too.” She snuggled against him. “And yes, Vegas.”

He stepped back, caught her hand, and pulled her along with him. “Come on, let’s go.”

He’s lost his mind. Maybe I should have waited until tonight.

“What, where?”

“Vegas,” he told her seriously. “I’m not risking you escaping me with our baby on board.”

He wanted to go right now? “Are you crazy?”

“Probably. But it only matters that I’m crazy in love with you, right?”

Yes, she decided, that was all that mattered. If someone had told her when she’d stepped in to take Indy and Draven’s wedding photos that she’d find the love of her life that very night, she’d have laughed in their faces and run for the hills.

“It was worth the risk.”

He stopped next to his truck and looked at her quizzically. “What was, baby girl?”

“Doing the wedding photos. I almost backed out.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t.” He ran his hand over her still flat tummy. “Because our happily ever after is getting happier every damn minute we spend together.”

Yes!

Yes, it is!

She hitched up her yoga pant leg as if it were a skirt and winked at him. “Wanna ride off into the sunset with me, Cowboy?”

“Damn straight, I do.” He kissed her soundly before opening the door and settling her safely into the seat.

She waited for him to get in and start the engine. “I love you, Caleb.”

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I love you, too.”

Thank you for reading Caleb and Rose’s story.

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NEMESIS INC

#0.5 LINA.

Will their surprise wedding be their downfall, or will it bring them a love that lasts a lifetime?

Navy SEAL Dalton Knight only wanted a night of drinking with his team brothers. The last thing he expected was to meet the other half of his soul.

Lina Maxwell knew she should have stayed at home. Drinking and dancing is so not her jam. When her drink is spiked, a knight in shining Kevlar insists he marries her to protect her from the demons who haunt her nightmares. Will their surprise wedding be their downfall, or will it bring them a love that lasts a lifetime?

#1 DALTON

The war on terror tore them apart. Will a terrorist bring them back together?

Former Navy SEAL, Dalton *Nemesis* Knight thought he had it all. A Navy career he loved. His SEAL Team brothers, and her... his Lina. The war on terror proved him wrong. It cost him everything, including his wife. With his trust broken, he'd had to find a new way forward and a new system he could believe in. Eventually, he picked the shattered pieces of his broken heart up off the floor and built . from the ground up. Now he makes the rules, he signs the checks, and his heart is off the table for good. Nobody is ever going to get close enough to destroy him again.

For years, Lina Maxwell has watched him from the shadows. Cheering his successes and mourning his losses. He's always been hers; she's always been his. Neither anger nor distance can change that. The time has come to gather her courage and fix the wrongs of the past. In leaving him, she protected him the only way she could, Lina needs Nemesis to see that she did not betray him, that she still loves him with everything that she is. Her bosses and her mission will not allow her to make contact. Her whole life is an illusion. She no longer has an identity, no longer has a name. As far as anyone, including her husband, is concerned, she never existed at all.

Just when Lina is ready to ignore her orders and step silently out of the dark, a terrorist wages war on Eastern Europe. With Nemesis running headfirst into danger, she will use every contact and source in her network to protect him. Will showing him she's still alive destroy not only their memories but any chance they might have had of a future?

Will this mission be the bandage to fix two broken hearts, or will it finally destroy them both?

#2 CORMACK

His happy sunshine girl didn't deserve to be pulled into his world of fire and brimstone. All he could do was hope like hell he found her in time.

As a Black Ops Contractor for . Cormack *Jeep* Ford, has seen the worst humans can inflict on their fellow man—in some of the shittiest hellholes on earth. With a twenty-year military career under his belt, he's not one bit sorry when . relocates from Kabul to Montana. Maybe now his boots are firmly on US soil, he can peruse a happy ever after with woman who calls to his soul.

To Willow Black it feels like she's waited a lifetime for her soldier to come home. Who'd have thought a connection made over emails and letters would lead her to the man who makes her heart and body sing. With Cormack moving back to the US full

time, she can't wait to see if the connection between them can withstand the test of time spent in the same freaking time zone. Just when she's starting to believe he may be her happy ever after, a terrorist destroys everything she trusts in— dragging her into the terrifying reality of the world's underbelly.

A man forged in fire and brimstone—a woman made for sunshine and roses—and a terrorist determined to make them pay. Can Cormack convince Willow her life's not over? Can she convince him to let her go? Or will their hearts have the final say?

#3 LOGAN

They say opposites attract, but can two such different people really find an everlasting love?

Losing his parents in the south tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11 changed the trajectory of Logan Sensei Winters' life. Once an up-and-coming MMA fighter, the rancher's kid from the Midwest crossed over the line of right and wrong in a haze of grief-fueled fury. A second twist of fate changed his world again. . gave him a soft place to land and taught him how to direct the rage living in his soul toward targets who deserve it—tangos and terrorists across the globe became his focus... until fate threw him yet another twist and cast his meticulously organized life into chaos.

Eedana Crawford is tired of the rules. She's over the 'show the world a happy family in their Sunday best' facade her family demands. There is no way on earth she's giving up the freedom she's worked so hard to earn—spending the rest of her days in her art studio, teaching classes and painting pretty pictures—following her dreams. When a request for a commissioned piece turns those dreams into a nightmare, the freedom she loves becomes impossible to keep. But trusting Mr. Tall, Dark, and Deadly who appears when she needs him would be a bad, bad idea. Right?

Eedana is his to protect—even if she doesn't know it or agree with it. But Logan will make sure she survives The Organization's attempt at a power grab. There is no way

in hell he's losing another person he cares passionately about. Not on his watch.

She is his to protect. End. Of. Discussion.

#4 RORY

They say love is a losing game. But what if the only thing you lose is your heart?

Taking his mandated leave was supposed to be a fun trip for .'s Alpha Team, recon expert Rory *Mokaccino* Costa. Leave which lasts all of five minutes when a phone call from a teammate sends him to Paris to rescue Adalyn Cassidy and her son, Sam. Changing things up on the fly and living life at a hundred miles an hour is typically his jam. He'll rescue the divorced author and her kid, send them home, and get back to his vacation. A couple of days in the French capital could be fun... right?

It was supposed to be a first author signing for Adalyn's alter ego, Saffron R. Cassidy. She doesn't do people and isn't overly thrilled about crowds, but she'll figure it out as she goes, and hope she doesn't screw up too much. Passing up the opportunity to be the headline signing author in Paris, a signing which could skyrocket her publishing career, would be a stupid move... right? So how did it all go so wrong? She's been beaten, her son is missing, and she has to rely on a complete stranger to save them. A stranger who could have stepped right out of the pages of one of her books. Big, bad, and oh so very swoony, Rory Costa.

He shouldn't touch her.

She shouldn't want him.

Falling in love should not be an option... right?

But what happens when love sneaks in quietly and fills your soul when you least expect it?