



Final Sins (Redemption Creek #7)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Sometimes, the greatest leap of faith is toward love.

Former Delta Force operative Jason Reilly hunts conspiracies. Ex-CIA operative Alex Mendoza helps desperate people disappear. When their worlds collide, they're thrust into a high-stakes game where trust is a luxury neither can afford. As allies become enemies, they discover that faith might be their strongest weapon. Can they find redemption—and love—before time runs out?

Redemption Creek: Where ranches run forever, granite peaks touch the sky, and wounded hearts seek home. Betrayed by their superiors, the former soldiers of Black-out Squadron are determined to carve out new lives. Their plan? Seek justice for folks who can't fight their own battles.

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Jason Reilly ran a polishing cloth over the gleaming silver fuselage of the P51 Mustang, his muscles flexing with each stroke. The late afternoon sun baked the historic hangar, turning it into a sweltering oven. Sweat trickled down his back, soaking his thin t-shirt as he worked.

August had hit hard in the high desert. Not that he minded. He'd gladly take the heat, the bone-cracking winter cold, even the dust-storms whipping the fine sand off the dried lakebeds to the south, over any time he spent on the run hunting his enemies.

Plus, High Sierra heat had nothing on the sweatbox that was a summer in Kandahar. Or Beirut. Nothing like being stuck in yet another blasted-out cement apartment complex, lying on his belly for hours, waiting for a chance to take the one shot his team counted on him to make.

He paused, surveying the restored fighter plane with a mix of pride and restlessness. The aircraft looked ready to take on the world. Unlike its owner. He scanned the horizon, searching for threats that existed only in his mind and ran a calloused hand along the Mustang's wing, his eyes tracing the iconic silhouette. "Ready for action," he muttered. "I just wish there was some."

The faint rumble of an approaching vehicle caught his attention. He cocked his head, listening. The purr of a high-performance engine. Definitely not his sister Jane's minivan. The vehicle pulled onto the refurbished taxiway, the bright red of the Jeep contrasting with the deep black asphalt.

Sunday dinner.

He had forgotten. Bridger and Jane confirmed the plans at church just a few hours ago. Man, he was losing it.

His friend, and now brother-in-law, Bridger North pulled his Jeep to a stop just inside the hangar and rolled down his window. “Yo, Reilly. You planning on broiling yourself in here all day?”

Jason tossed the cloth aside. “It’s a dry heat.”

Bridger laughed. “Whatever that means. Jane sent me to drag your sorry butt back to the house. Said if you don’t show up for dinner, she’ll come get you herself.”

Jason grimaced. “Not gonna happen.”

Bridger’s eyebrows shot up. “You really want to test that theory? Remember the ice bucket incident of ‘22?”

“Point taken.” He grabbed his water bottle, downing half of it in one long gulp. He and Bridger and their six special forces teammates might be tough, but his sister Jane was not one to be crossed. Even by men used to facing down enemy fire. “Give me five to close up shop.”

Bridger nodded. “I’ve got the AC blasting.” He rolled up the window and eased back in the driver’s seat.

Jason screwed the top back on the can of car polish and did a final walk-around of the hangar. Everything in its place. Neat. Orderly. Under control.

Just the way he rolled.

He joined Bridger in the Jeep, relishing the rush of cool air. “Nothing new, I’m guessing.”

They hadn’t heard so much as a word about the Consortium’s newest iteration since they stopped the international terrorist group from unleashing a global economy-killing software virus. That had been over six months ago.

Bridger shook his head. “Radio silence across the board. It’s like the entire Consortium network just ... vanished.”

But they knew differently. The enemy might have gone to ground temporarily, but there were already signs that the cabal of highly networked government officials and their billionaire funders known as the Consortium had splintered, leaving a new threat.

Jason swiped a forearm across his forehead, brushing away the cooling sweat. “You know those billionaire boys didn’t blow apart the Consortium just for kicks. They’ve got something big in the works.”

“For sure. World domination or annihilation of the human race. The usual.” Bridger’s attempt at levity fell flat.

Jason stared out the window, watching the parched landscape pass by. Waves of heat rolled up from the valley floor, distorting the horizon. Six months of inaction weighed on him like a physical burden. But with no active targets, there was no one to chase. “I hate this waiting game.”

Bridger shot him a sympathetic look. “You and me both. But for now, all we can do is stay ready. And try not to drive the fam insane in the meantime.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m a joy to be around.”

“Sure you are, sunshine. Just remember that when Jane threatens to sic Kellen on you.”

“Bring it on.” He loved his nine-year old nephew. His only regret was missing out on the past few years with the boy.

Jason eyed his buddy. He’d never seen his friend looking so tired. “I’m not the only one running hot. You look like you’ve gone ten rounds with a grizzly.”

Bridger ran a hand through his messy hair. “Thanks. I needed that ego boost.”

“The twins aren’t even here yet, dude. You should be getting some sleep.”

Bridger laughed as he navigated the baking highway. “Tell that to your nieces. Between their wrestling matches and the heartburn, they’re keeping Jane up at all hours.”

“Which means you’re up, too,” Jason realized.

“Copy that,” Bridger agreed, his knuckles whitening on the steering wheel. “Seriously. Those girls are training for the Olympics in there.”

The Jeep fell silent for a moment, broken only by the whine of the engine.

Bridger slid him a glance. “It’s good to have you home.”

“Roger that. Good to be back.” Jason slid down in his seat.

It was good to be home. Back with his team. His family. It would be better if they’d finished destroying whatever the Consortium had morphed into. Then he could really relax. They all could.

After he and his friends were “retired” against their will from the deeply-secret special ops team the military trained them for, Jason had gone out on his own, hoping to destroy the cabal of billionaires and high government officials who’d been ordering his team’s missions, basically using Jason and his team as their own private special ops force. It turned out, instead of carrying out missions for the good of their country, he and his team had been doing the dirty work for a group of international criminals.

Once the Consortium realized the squad had an inkling of their true bosses, he and the team were shoved straight into retirement. He and Jason and the others would have to find a way to live with the guilt.

They’d been on their own mission to destroy the cabal ever since. Once he and his friends busted up the Consortium’s last big mission, blowing it up before it could start, the international group had fractured, leaving a smaller, leaner, meaner group in charge. Seven-Five.

Stupid name for an evil organization. But no one asked him.

Whatever they called themselves, it was the same old snake oil in a new bottle. And just as dangerous. Maybe even more so. Once the billionaire heads got their acts together and secured their power, they’d be coming after Jason and the team again.

He planned to take them down first.

“I don’t like it,” Bridger muttered.

“Me, either.” A sniper and demolitions expert by both training and temperament, he needed a purpose. Action. A target.

Bridger’s gaze softened. “I remember how it felt when we got our discharge papers.

Tai and I were climbing the walls, itching for new missions. Anywhere. Any time.”

Jason snorted. “Look how that turned out. You ended up married to my sister.”

“Best mission of my life.” Bridger grinned, then sobered. “We’ll get a break. And when we do, we’ll hit Seven-Five with everything we’ve got.”

Jason nodded, but inside, his resolve hardened. No way he’d let Bridger—his sister’s husband, Kellen’s dad, and the soon-to-be father of his nieces—anywhere near the front lines.

Whether Bridger liked it or not.

Bridger pulled the Jeep into the driveway now full of high-end 4X4s belonging to their teammates.

Jason cracked the door. Just imagining the thick, cheesy scent of Jane’s lasagna, making his stomach growl.

“Hungry much?” Bridger quipped.

Jason grinned. “All those nights stuck in those caves outside Kandahar? I used to dream about Jane’s lasagna, bro.”

“Copy that. I woulda dreamt about it, too, if I’d known about it back then.”

Jason picked up the pace. Judging from the vehicles choking the driveway, the rest of the team was already inside. They better not have started on that lasagna ...

He hadn’t yet made it to the front steps when his phone vibrated against his thigh. He fished the device from his pocket, eyebrows shooting up in surprise at the text.

“Who is it?” Bridger asked, curiosity piqued.

Jason squinted at the screen. “Robbie ‘Gravy’ Munsinger.” A definite blast from the past.

Call me. The text said. 9-1-1.

Bridger’s brow furrowed. “Officer’s son, right? The recruit who?”

“Yep, the one and only human gravy boat,” Jason confirmed, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. The kid was so nervous his first day in Delta Force training he’d dumped his entire dinner tray, gravy included, right in Jason’s lap.

“Go on in,” he said, jerking his chin toward the house. “I need to take this. I’ll be there in a sec. Save me a piece of lasagna. Hold on. Better make that two.”

Gravy was a kind kid, but a huge bubblehead. Whatever Gravy considered an emergency would take a minute to sort out.

Bridger hesitated, his hand on the door handle. “You sure? What if it’s a case or something?”

The team might not be actively running down Seven-Five, but they were plenty busy helping regular folks with big problems.

Jason waved him off. “The kid had his struggles with drugs after he washed out of The Unit, but far as I know, he’s been on a straight path for the last couple years. He probably just wants to reminisce about the good old days when he was baptizing COs in brown sauce. I’ll fill you in later.”

Bridger raised an eyebrow but nodded, leaving Jason alone with the glowing screen.

Jason braced himself for whatever drama Gravy was about to dump in his lap. With his luck, it would be less “reminiscing about the good old days” and more “help me hide a body.”

Either way, he had a sinking feeling his lasagna was going to get cold.

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“Gravy,” Jason said, bracing himself for whatever chaos was about to unfold. “What’s up? Please tell me you haven’t doused anybody lately.”

As he listened, Jason regarded the familiar landscape. He stood in the shade of a towering pine, the majestic Sierra Nevada rising like a jagged wall in the background. Below, the small town of Lone Pine nestled in the valley, surrounded by scattered ranches. This was the place he’d called home his entire life, the place that would be his nieces and nephew’s home. His friends’ home. Maybe even a place for a family of his own someday ...

He pushed the thought aside.

Hard, sharp breaths assaulted his ears. “Major? I didn’t know who else to call. It’s my dad—he’s missing. He told me to call you. And there’s this number, and coordinates, and I’m supposed to go alone, but I’m scared, man. I’m really scared.”

The panicked voice on the other end sent Jason’s senses into high alert. Gone was the stammering, clumsy kid he remembered. This Robbie sounded like a man on the edge.

“Whoa, whoa, slow down,” Jason interrupted, his mind racing to keep up. “Start from the beginning. Your dad’s missing?”

“M-major, man, it’s crazy. Like, two weeks ago, my dad gives me this phone, right? One of those cheapo burners you see on TV shows. And he’s all serious, which, you

know, is pretty normal for the old man, but this was different.”

Jason could practically hear Robbie fidgeting on the other end of the line. “Go on, Gravy. What happened next?”

“So he says, ‘Son,’” Robbie’s voice dropped in a poor imitation of his father’s, “‘if I ever text you ‘Never bet an inside straight,’ you call the number in this phone and you do what they say. No questions asked. Your life could depend on it.’ And I’m like, whatever, Dad. I don’t even play poker!”

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose. “Focus, Gravy. What happened today?”

“Right, sorry. So, um, this morning, I get that text. ‘Never bet an inside straight.’ And I’m thinking, is this some weird dad joke? I mean, my old man’s not exactly a jokey dude, but you know, people change. Anyway, then I remembered the phone. Took me forever to find it, by the way. Did you know socks can, like, eat things?”

“Gravy,” Jason said, his patience wearing thin. “The phone call. What happened when you called the number?”

“Oh! Yeah, so I called, and this voice answers. All gruff and stuff. Kind of like a machine voice. Tells me to be at these coordinates in four hours. Bring nothing. No phone, no luggage, nada. Just show up if I wanna live.” Robbie’s voice cracked. “Who even says that? Oh, and my dad also told me to contact you. Said you’d help me get to these folks or whatever. I forgot that part.”

Robbie’s father, Robert Munsinger II, was a brigadier general. Last Jason heard, he was assigned to the National Military Command Center. One-stars didn’t go missing. Especially not high-up Pentagon appointees.

And they didn’t warn their kids to expect danger ... unless they were dead serious.

“So, let me get this straight,” Jason said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Your dad vanished, left instructions to call me and some cryptic number, and now you’re supposed to meet some strangers in the middle of nowhere?”

“Yup, that’s about it,” Robbie replied, his voice small. “Will you help me, Major? Please? I’ve got to be there in four hours. That’s two hours flight time from my place in Boise. You’re still a pilot and everything, right? If you flew up, we could make the deadline.”

Jason groaned, already knowing he was going to regret this. But the fear in Robbie’s voice was real. Despite the kid’s penchant for disaster, Jason couldn’t ignore a cry for help. Especially if it was backed up by a one-star’s recommendation.

And, he had to admit, he was bored out of his mind anyway.

He didn’t really know Gravy’s father, had only met him once during the struggle to get Gravy into rehab, but if the general thought well enough of him to tell Gravy to count on him, he was all in.

“Alright, Gravy. Sit tight. I’m on my way.”

As he ended the call, Jason caught sight of Bridger and Tai emerging from the house, their expressions a mix of concern and curiosity. He sighed, knowing the next conversation wasn’t going to be any easier than the last.

Time to face the music and explain why he was about to dash off on another solo mission. At least this time he had a valid excuse.

“Everything okay?” Bridger asked, his eyes narrowing as he took in Jason’s tense posture.

Jason ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve got to go. I’m taking the Pilatus.” Depending on where Gravy needed to go, his beloved P51 wouldn’t have the range, plus the sleek new turbo prop was way speedier.

“Alone?” Tai’s deep voice held a note of disapproval.

“It’s just a quick pickup and delivery. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Bridger crossed his arms, his jaw set in a stubborn line. “Jane needs you here. So do I. So does the rest of the team.”

“We’re just getting used to having you back,” Tai added, his usually stoic expression softening. He gestured at Jason’s wrinkled tee. “Your fashion choices take a while to sink in. Know what I mean?”

Jason’s shoulders sagged. They were right, of course. After years of running solo, being part of a family again was an adjustment. For all of them.

But some habits die hard.

“I know. And I promise, I’m not disappearing again. This is just a small favor for an old friend. How hard could it be to ferry one clumsy oaf to safety?”

Tai nodded. “Copy that. I mean, come on. The guy’s call sign is a condiment.”

Bridger snorted, clearly unconvinced. “With your luck? I’d say the odds are pretty high for an international incident.”

Jason grinned, already heading for the house. “Then it’s a good thing I’ve got you guys to bail me out. Now, let me grab some of that lasagna before I go. Can’t save the day on an empty stomach.”

As he jogged up the steps, Jason couldn't shake the feeling that this "small favor" was about to become anything but simple. Still, compared to taking on Seven-Five, how bad could it be? At least this time, he had a team to come back to. A family.

He paused at the door, the familiar tightness creeping up his neck. In his world, "simple" was just another word for "buckle up, it's going to be a wild ride."

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Two hours later, with his stomach full of the best lasagna east of the Sierra, Jason eased the sleek turbo prop to a stop on the cracked tarmac of the abandoned airfield outside Boise. The setting sun painted the sky in hues of orange and pink, casting long shadows across the desolate landscape. He powered down the engine, letting the propeller spin down. Muscles tense with anticipation, he scanned the area. The deserted airfield stretched before him—a ghostly remnant of better days.

His heart quickened at the sight of Robbie “Gravy” Munsinger’s form emerging from behind a rusted fuel truck, moving with all the grace of a newborn calf. The guy was built like a tank—pure muscle and raw power. At medium height, he wasn’t the tallest operator Jason had worked with, but what he lacked in stature, he made up for in sheer strength. His fresh face and that ridiculous stand-up hair belied the deadly skillset Jason knew he possessed. Not the fastest mover, but Gravy could hold his own in any firefight.

Gravy’s familiar, goofy grin was visible even from this distance, his duffle bag bouncing against his leg as he trotted toward the plane.

Jason climbed out of the cockpit and headed for the door, unlatching it.

The sharp crack of gunfire split the air. Gravy’s eyes widened in comical surprise before he dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

No way. No. Way.

Jason's hand flew to his holster. He leapt from the plane, drawing his Glock. More shots rang out, bullets pinging off the Pilatus's fuselage. His gaze snapped to the row of hangars, catching a glimpse of muzzle flashes in the fading light.

His mind raced, cataloging threats and escape routes. The plane wouldn't protect them for long—especially if the fuel ignited.

“Gravy! Nine o'clock! The hangar!” he bellowed, returning fire. “Move your rear!”

Jason zigzagged across the tarmac, pulse thundering in his ears. Another volley of shots kicked up rocks at his feet. He dove; the rough concrete scraped his arms. He rolled and came up firing.

A pained yelp sounded from the far hangar. One down. At least two more shooters remained, based on the gunfire pattern.

He hauled Munsinger to his feet. “Can you run?”

Gravy nodded grimly. “Think so.”

They sprinted for the nearest shelter—a smaller hangar with peeling paint and rusted doors. Jason fired at the ancient padlock, splintering it open.

They stumbled inside, gasping. The musty air reeked of old oil and rodent droppings, coating Jason's tongue with a foul taste.

“Not good,” Gravy panted. “So not good.”

A searing pain lanced through Jason's side. He hissed, glancing down to see his shirt darkening with blood. “Definitely not good.”

Munsinger's eyes widened. "You're hit!"

Jason probed the wound with his fingers, feeling the shallow furrow in his flesh. The bullet had grazed him, tearing through skin and muscle but missing anything vital. It was deeper than he'd like, but not life-threatening.

He tugged his shirt back down, assessing their options. They needed cover and mobility. His eyes darted around the hangar, searching for anything useful. Just an old oil drum and a 1950s desk with one broken drawer. Old rags and cleaning supplies spilled out onto the ground.

Taking shallow breaths, he fought to ignore the throbbing pain in his side. "Where's your vehicle?"

"Other side of the hangars. About three units down—not close enough."

"What's in your duffle?"

Gravy's face scrunched up in concentration. "Uh, clothes, toothbrush, couple of protein bars ..." He rummaged through the bag. "Oh! And my camping gear. Got a small propane tank for my portable stove."

A plan began to form in Jason's mind. He glanced at the old oil drum, then back at Gravy's duffle. "Perfect. Here's what we're going to do. I can rig that oil drum with the propane tank and some of the chemicals from that old desk drawer. It won't be pretty, but it should create enough of a distraction."

Jason quickly assessed the contents of the desk, finding some old cleaning supplies and a few rusty cans of paint thinner. His explosives expertise kicked in, mind calculating ratios and reactions. He hadn't actually created an IED in years, but the makeshift device came together in record time.

“Give me your keys,” he ordered.

Gravy backed away. “I’m the one who should go.”

“Nah. I got this.”

“Nope.” Gravy pointed at the line of blood trickling down Jason’s side. “Gonna have to bench you, Major. Sorry, dude. I’ll fire her up and meet you at the door. You take care of the flashbang stuff.”

Fair enough. Much as Jason hated to admit it, he wasn’t sure how fast he’d be. He couldn’t risk blowing their escape.

“Okay. I’ll lay down some cover fire. You take off. Get the truck started and head my way. The second I see you, I’ll light the fuse. The explosion and smoke should give us enough cover to get out of here.”

Gravy nodded, his usual goofy demeanor replaced by focused determination. “You got it, sir. Just like old times, huh?”

Jason allowed himself a grim smile. “Let’s hope our luck holds better than last time. And Gravy? Remind me to talk to you about proper bug-out bag packing when this is over.”

Gravy grinned sheepishly. “Hey, at least I brought snacks.”

Jason took a deep breath, steeling himself for action. He gave Gravy a quick nod, then moved to the edge of the hangar door. In one fluid motion, he swung out and dropped to one knee, squeezing off a rapid series of shots toward the far hangar. The sharp report of his Glock echoed across the airfield.

“Go!” he shouted.

Gravy sprinted toward his pickup. Jason continued firing, his eyes scanning for any movement. The silence from their attackers was unnerving, but he couldn’t dwell on it.

With his free hand, he reached for the makeshift device. The second the hood of Gravy’s truck came into view, he struck the improvised fuse, his heart pounding as it sputtered to life. He hurled it toward the oil drum and broke into a run.

The world exploded into chaos.

The concussive force of the blast hit him like a physical blow, nearly knocking him off his feet. A wall of heat washed over him while he sprinted through billowing clouds of acrid smoke. His ears rang, transforming the world into a muffled, surreal landscape.

Through watering eyes, he saw the truck fishtail to a stop in front of the door, engine running, passenger door flung open. He dove inside, barely getting his legs clear before Gravy stomped on the accelerator.

The truck peeled away from the relative cover of the hangars, tires kicking up gravel. Jason twisted in his seat, straining to see through the smoke for any signs of pursuit. The ringing in his ears made it impossible to discern if they were under fire.

“You see anything?” he yelled, not even sure if Gravy could hear him.

Gravy shook his head, eyes wide and fixed on the road ahead. They bounced and jolted their way to freedom.

As the adrenaline began to ebb, the throbbing in his injured side intensified. He

pressed a hand against the wound, grimacing. They weren't out of danger yet, but for now, they were alive and moving. It would have to be enough.

They fishtailed onto the access road, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. Jason allowed himself a small sigh of relief. Round one to the good guys. Now, if they could just make it to the mysterious extraction point in one piece ...

They'd need to ditch this truck soon, find a way to patch up his injury, and somehow contact his team without leading their pursuers straight to the extraction point.

Just another day at the office.

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Jason winced as the pickup hit another pothole, sending a fresh wave of pain through his side. He pressed his hand harder against the wound, feeling the warm stickiness of blood seeping between his fingers. The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in deepening shades of purple and indigo.

Gravy's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. "We're not gonna make it, are we?"

Jason's lips thinned as he did the mental math. "Not by 1700, no." He reached for his pocket, intending to check the time on his phone. His hand met empty fabric, and a cold realization washed over him. "I can't believe it."

"What?" Gravy's voice pitched higher.

"My phone. It's still in the plane." Which meant his team had no way to track him.

Gravy whistled. "That stinks. Bet it was a nice one. They always give special ops dudes the best equipment."

Jason decided against explaining that he hadn't actually been employed by the military for years. And yeah, it was a nice phone. Totally hand-designed. Paige, their cybersecurity expert was going to kill him.

If he didn't die first.

He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. “You got your phone, right?”

Eyes on the road, Gravy patted his pocket. “I got the burner my dad gave me. I figured I should leave my real phone at the house.”

“Smart thinking.” At least one thing was going their way. For now, he’d have to believe the burner was untraceable. “How’s our fuel situation?”

Gravy glanced at the gauge. “Half a tank. Maybe.”

“Terrific.”

The truck lurched as Gravy swerved to avoid a chunk of fallen rock. Jason bit back a groan, tasting copper on his tongue.

“You okay over there?” Gravy’s eyes darted between Jason and the winding mountain road.

“All good.” He managed a tight smile. “Keep your eyes on the road, Dale Earnhardt.”

Gravy snorted, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. “So what’s the plan? You have a plan, right? You’ve always got a plan.”

Jason gazed out at the darkening landscape, considering their options. His side ached, but he’d live, assuming they didn’t end up at the bottom of a ravine or in the crosshairs of whoever had ambushed them. He could contact his team, but by the time they got there, he’d either have Gravy to safety, or they’d already be dead.

“We push on,” he said finally. “With luck, we’ll make the rendezvous by 2100.”

“They said 1700. What if they won’t wait?”

“Then we get creative.” He had to assume Gravy’s father had bought some kind of escape plan for his son. The extraction team wouldn’t get their final payment until Gravy was safely tucked away. They’d wait.

Gravy made a sound. “Creative. Right. ‘Cause that always works out so well for me.”

Despite the pain and the gravity of their situation, Jason forced a grin. Keeping Gravy calm was priority one. Or two. Whatever. A high priority. “Hey, we’re still breathing, aren’t we?”

“Barely,” Gravy muttered.

“Better than not at all.”

“I guess.”

He leaned his head back, allowing himself a moment of rest. They had a long night ahead, and he needed to conserve his strength, but his mind raced, replaying the attack at the airfield. Something didn’t add up.

“Hey, Grav.” He broke the tense silence. “Don’t you think it’s weird we haven’t seen any pursuit?”

Gravy’s brow furrowed. “Sure. Totally. Those punks had us pinned down pretty good back there.”

“Exactly.” He scanned the darkening road ahead. “So why not give chase?”

“Maybe we lost ‘em?” Gravy’s tone was hopeful, but unconvincing.

He shook his head. “Not likely. If they’ve got even half the tech we had in the army

...

“We’re toast,” Gravy finished, his knuckles whitening on the steering wheel.

“You know these roads pretty well, right?” Jason asked, an idea forming.

“Like the back of my hand. Used to go hunting up here with my grandpa. Dad was always on deployment, or whatever.”

“Good. Take the next logging road you see. We need to get off this highway.”

“But the meet up spot?—”

“We’ll figure that out later,” Jason cut him off. “Right now, we need to disappear.”

Gravy nodded grimly, his eyes searching the roadside. A few minutes later, he jerked the wheel, sending them bumping onto a narrow dirt track barely visible in the gloom.

The immediate danger might be less than he’d feared, but that only raised more questions. Whatever game their attackers were playing, he had a sinking feeling they were several moves behind.

He squinted through the encroaching darkness at the looming canyon ahead. The massive peaks on either side were barely visible, ominous silhouettes against the indigo sky. They’d lose cell service soon.

He held out his hand to Gravy. “Give me your burner phone.”

Gravy fumbled in his pocket, nearly swerving off the narrow logging road before extracting the device. “Here. But we’re only supposed to use it if we have an emergency.”

“This counts.”

Jason’s fingers flew over the keypad, composing a terse message.

On route to extraction pt. Running late. Will be on scene by 2100.

The response came swiftly, each word dripping with irritation.

Not okay. U were only to contact this number once. Bye. Bye.

Seriously? Jason fisted his free hand, picturing himself squeezing the life out of the unfeeling desk jockey on the other end of the line. He typed faster now.

Situation urgent. Ran into hostiles. Losing them now.

Will be at extraction pt. at 2100.

The silence that followed stretched for an eternity, broken only by the crunch of gravel under their tires and Gravy’s nervous humming.

Finally, the phone buzzed:

2100. Not one second later.

“Everything okay?” Gravy’s voice cracked on the last word.

Jason forced a smile, though inwardly he seethed at the brusque responses. “Copy that. Our new friends are real charmers.”

They emerged onto a highway, the smooth asphalt a welcome relief after the jarring logging roads. He scanned their surroundings. Still no sign of pursuit. The absence of

danger was almost more unsettling than being chased.

A chill crept through him, his wound throbbing in time with his heartbeat. The edges of his vision began to blur, and he shook his head, trying to stay alert.

Gravy glanced over, his face pale in the dim dashboard light. “You’re not looking so hot, Major.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted, his teeth chattering slightly.

Gravy snorted. “No offense, sir, but you are one seriously bad liar. I’m gonna pull over up ahead. Gotta make sure we’re clear, and we need to do something about that bleeding.”

Jason wanted to argue, but the words wouldn’t come. He nodded weakly as Gravy guided the truck off the road, coming to a stop just below a ridge top.

As Gravy worked to bandage his wound, Jason’s mind drifted. Why hadn’t their attackers finished the job? They’d had every opportunity. It didn’t make sense.

“There,” Gravy said, taping down the last of the gauze. “That should hold you till we get to the extraction point.”

Jason mumbled his thanks, his eyelids growing heavier by the second. As consciousness slipped away, one thought echoed in his mind: Why leave us alive?

The gentle rocking of the truck resumed, carrying Jason into an uneasy sleep filled with shadowy figures and unanswered questions.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:35 am

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The night air hung thick and heavy, a velvet cloak draped over the sprawling property. Crickets serenaded the darkness, their chirps a soothing counterpoint to the man's racing thoughts. He sat motionless on the porch, savoring the solitude that had come at such a steep price.

A price he was still paying. But not for much longer.

The man's lips curved into a smile as he contemplated the future stretching out before him. Freedom. Real freedom, this time. The kind only obscene wealth and ruthless intelligence could buy.

And a willingness to act. That was his strongest skill. Act, and live with the consequences.

One serious injury, this time, but no fatalities. He absolutely could live with that. He'd expected worse. Going up against Jason Reilly was never going to be easy. The ends, after all, would justify the means.

He closed his eyes and lifted the crystal tumbler to his lips. The smoky flavor of century-old scotch rolled across his tongue, igniting his senses. Another perk for a man unafraid to bet it all.

But tempting as it was to savor the evening, he had one last chore to complete first.

He set down his glass, then reached for his cell phone, but his fingers hovered over

the device. He despised working with outsiders. Too much was out of his control.

The risks multiplied exponentially.

But so did the rewards.

Too many to count. Money, certainly. Lots of it. And the place he'd secure for himself in this new iteration of the Consortium. The biggest prize of all.

Once the bloodbath began, he had scrambled to show loyalty and demonstrate usefulness to Seven-Five. You either joined the winning team, or you died.

The slow and the unimaginative had already been culled. Thankfully, the outsider had appeared with an offer at exactly the right moment.

Judging when to take a leap was another of his strengths. He'd recognized the upside of the outsider's plan immediately. Now all he had to do was close the deal. With a barely audible sigh, he tapped the screen, initiating the connection he'd been dreading.

One ring. Two. Then?—

“Hello?” The voice on the other end was reedy. Nervous. A weakness he'd exploit, then eliminate.

“The package is en route,” he said, voice carefully modulated. “Contact me upon arrival.”

“And then you'll handle it, right? The whole thing. Just like we agreed.”

Fury rose in his throat, acrid as bile. He squeezed the phone. “I already told you. We

have a deal. Question me again, and I'm out. Are we clear?"

"Sure. Yes. Right. Sorry." The words tumbled out, a desperate litany.

He took a steadying breath. "Once you can confirm that Jason Reilly is there, contact me through the usual channel."

"Dead drop A."

The man closed his eyes, counting to ten. When he spoke, his voice was pure ice. "Why don't you just broadcast the entire plan on social media? Yes. The agreed upon drop."

"What then?"

"You're not in the loop on that. The rest will unfold at my discretion. Leave the signal then stay out of the way."

"I can do that."

Possibly . If not, he'd have a contingency plan on hand. The Outsider could be eliminated earlier than planned.

"I'll be invisible. I've already got plans to?—"

He hung up, tossing the phone onto the table beside him. The chirping crickets seemed louder now, their song a mocking reminder of all the variables still in play.

But he'd come too far to falter now. The pieces were in motion. All that remained was to see the game through to its bloody, inevitable conclusion.

He reached for his scotch, allowing himself a small smile. By this time tomorrow, it would all be over. His bank account would get a huge bump. And the highest levels of Seven-Five would know he was a man they could trust.

He held his glass up to the rising moon, enjoying the play of light through the cut crystal.

To the victor belong the spoils .

Alex Mendoza stared out the rental RV's tinted window, her reflection a study in barely contained fury. Jaw clenched, eyes narrowed, she radiated the kind of tension that could snap a lesser person in two.

Her client was hours late.

In her line of work, tardiness spelled disaster.

She drummed her fingers against the windowsill, each tap a silent count of the seconds ticking by. Absently, her other hand stroked the long, thin scar on her forearm. A reminder not to trust quickly. Or deeply.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding," she whispered, the familiar verse from Proverbs 3:5 a balm to her frayed nerves.

The vast, moonlit expanse of Craters of the Moon National Monument stretched before her, its eerie landscape a fitting backdrop for her darkening mood. She'd built her reputation on meticulous planning and flawless execution. Now, watching the empty road that snaked through the valley below, control slipped through her fingers like sand.

And if there was one thing she despised more than tardiness, it was losing control.

The last vestiges of sunlight had long since faded from the horizon, leaving the volcanic landscape bathed in an eerie, otherworldly glow. The rising moon cast long

shadows across the jagged terrain, transforming the lava fields into a monochromatic sea of black and silver. From their vantage point on a ridge two miles from the rendezvous coordinates, Alex and her team had an unobstructed view of the solitary road.

Their vehicle, a generic rental RV her cyber security specialist, Mac MacCallister had acquired the minute they hit Boise, was anything but generic inside. Its innocuous exterior belied the tens of thousands of dollars of equipment they'd schlepped from their plane, creating a mobile command center on steroids. With Mac's equipment up and running, they could monitor anything they wanted within a fifty-mile radius. Minimum.

She uncurled her legs and paced the length of the RV, her irritation palpable. Every minute that ticked by ratcheted up the tension inside their rolling fortress.

"Munsinger's just outside the park entrance. But he's not alone." Mac's voice cut through the tense silence.

"What?" Alex was at his shoulder in an instant, peering at the monitor. Liv Hartley, their security specialist, joined her.

"Close in with one of the drones," Alex directed. "Is the hostile armed? What about facial recognition?"

Mac's broad shoulders flexed as he typed. "No can do in the dark, sweets. Facial recon camera needs more light for accuracy. But I can confirm one firearm. The client's got it."

Liv leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "So much for an easy pickup."

Alex burned through likely scenarios, each one worse than the last. "We should abort.

This reeks of a setup.”

“Hold up,” Mac interjected. “We’ve got the home field advantage here. Two of them, one gun, versus the three of us and this rolling tank? I like those odds.”

Liv nodded. “Mac’s right. Plus, if someone’s compromised Munsinger, don’t you want to know who? And why?”

Alex kicked a nearby cabinet, frustration boiling over. The hollow thunk echoed in the confined space. She took a deep breath, then another. “Point taken. But I’m going on the record. This could get complicated.”

Liv smiled grimly. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Alex’s voice hardened, all business now. “Mission is a go. But we do this smart. Mac, keep those drones in the air. If it looks like there’s more company arriving, we bolt. Liv, let’s concentrate on the stranger. He so much as twitches, tranq him. Clear?”

Two nods answered her.

“Let’s go meet our surprise guest.”

Alex gripped the dash, her knuckles white as Mac fired up the RV and nosed it down the road toward the meet up. The headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating a path through the lunar-like landscape. Her eyes darted between the road and the blinking dots on the dashboard that represented Mac’s drones.

As they approached the coordinates, she saw the truck, a dark silhouette against the starlit sky. Her stomach tightened. The moment of truth.

Mac killed the engine. The sudden silence was deafening. With a nod to Liv, who

took up a defensive position, Alex and Mac approached the truck. Two figures spilled out, one babbling incessantly, the other eerily silent.

She recognized the Chatty Cathy. Their client, Robert Munsinger III. Or a reasonable facsimile. She'd confirm his ID momentarily.

Mac stalked toward Munsinger. Bathed in the harsh light from the RV's headlights, she had to admit, Mac presented a daunting figure. Six foot six and carrying a weight lifter's muscles, the large dark-skinned man could be mistaken for a street thug. A thug with several PhDs and enough special ops training to kill a man with his bare hands.

"I'll take that handgun," Mac insisted.

Eyes wide, Munsinger shot a look at his companion. The other man nodded immediately.

Not an idiot then. Good. The dumber people were, the more unpredictable.

Munsinger handed the weapon to Mac without a word.

Tucking the handgun away, Mac stepped back, out of range. Alex's gaze locked onto the silent one—injured, from the looks of it.

Her anger flared hotter. "Our contract was for one client. Not two."

The injured man's voice was low, steady. "I'm not a client. Just here to make sure my man gets the services his dad ordered up." A pause. "I'm Jason Reilly."

"We'll see," Alex responded, her tone clipped. "Hold out your finger," she ordered the client.

While Mac stood ready to intervene, if needed, she approached Munsinger and pressed the lancet to the tip of his finger.

“Ouch!” he pulled back as if she’d bitten him.

The device took only seconds to indicate a match to the sample RAVEN had received when Munsinger’s father arranged for his possible extraction.

As she moved around the hood of the truck, the other man quipped, “There’s a hole in my side big enough to drive a truck through. Do you really have to poke another one?”

“Can’t use a contaminated sample,” she retorted, her face a mask of professionalism. “Let’s see the finger.”

She may or may not have jabbed him harder than necessary. “Full name,” she asked.

“Jason William Reilly.”

She turned away. The results, as expected, were inconclusive. Whoever this Jason Reilly was, his DNA wasn’t in her normal database. No matter. By the time they got him to headquarters, she’d know who he really was.

She considered the man. Tall, almost as tall as Mac. And almost as big. His tech clothes could have come straight from RAVEN’s employee stash. Only his clothes were far more well-worn. Former military for sure. Most people would have flinched when Mac approached.

“SEAL?” she guessed.

He shook his head. “The Unit. Delta Force.”

Great. Not that she and Liv and Mac couldn't manage one dinged-up special forces type, but a man with his kind of training would require special handling.

Another complication.

They'd already planned to bring Munsinger to headquarters until they had a clear path for his disappearance completed. No reason they couldn't bring along his sidekick. For now.

She grabbed the palm-sized flashlight from her utility belt and clicked it on, sweeping the beam over the man's side. Blood. Enough to worry about. "Need pain meds?"

"Doing great. Thanks," he gritted out.

He swayed side to side. Nothing obvious, but the small movements told her just how much pain he was in. "Your sour mood suggests otherwise."

"Fine. I'm hurting."

"Too bad. I'm fresh out of meds."

His jaw dropped. "You are one hard woman."

"Thanks."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"Maybe not to you." Alex started prepping for departure. "Hard people are the only ones who make it in my business."

She swept the two men for bugs, confiscating and destroying the burner Munsinger

used to contact them. Her eyes narrowed at the army-trained stowaway. “My sensor’s not picking up your phone. Is it powered off?”

“Don’t have it,” he replied.

“Right. Sure.”

He mumbled something about forgetting it in his plane.

Alex rolled her eyes so hard it was almost audible. “Wow. Quite the operative there. Did you leave your common sense in the plane too, or is that just permanently misplaced?”

Army’s jaw clenched, his temper visibly rising. “Listen, lady. I’ve been a little preoccupied keeping your ‘client’ alive.”

“He’s right!” Munsinger chimed in, his voice high and excited. “The major’s been amazing! He’s like ... like Jason Bourne, but with a better haircut and?—”

“Gravy,” Army cut him off, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Not helping.”

Alex bit back a laugh. Genuine this time. “My sincerest apologies. I didn’t realize I was in the presence of such a legendary secret agent. Tell me, double-oh-seven, does forgetting basic operational security come standard with your hero package, or is that an upgrade?”

That bit of snark earned her a serious glare.

A headache was building behind her eyes. This was not how things were supposed to go. Disappearing someone required meticulous planning, exquisite attention to detail, and a client who followed instructions.

Not exactly the current situation.

Liv poked her head out of the RV, two black sacks in hand. “We still doing this, boss?”

The flicker of understanding on Army’s face lifted her spirits. She stared him down. “Absolutely. Gentlemen. Hoods on.”

Munsinger backed away, shaking his head. “Not cool. Seriously not cool.”

Army stood his ground, though clearly he was attempting to burn her down with his laser-like stare.

“Suit yourself.” She headed for the RV.

“Wait!” Munsinger shuffled after her. “You’re supposed to get me out of here. You can’t just leave.”

Reaching the RV, she grabbed the hoods from Liv, holding them out as she whirled back to face the two men. “My game. My rules. Are you in, or out?”

Mouth open, Munsinger eyed his companion.

The man reached her in two strides, yanking the hoods from her hands.

The sheer power of him made her long to back away, but she stood her ground.

He tossed one of the hoods to her client. “Suit up, Gravy.”

Sparring gloves laced tight at her wrists, Alex circled Mac in RAVEN's state-of-the-art gym the next morning. Her breath came in short bursts, muscles burning with exertion. Her fists connected with Mac's chest, each strike echoing through the cavernous space. The rhythmic thud of her punches formed a symphony of effort, punctuated by the soft whir of high-tech equipment surrounding them.

The more she sweated, the clearer her mind grew.

Screens flickered in the periphery of her vision, bathing the room in a cool, blue glow, totally the opposite of the heat radiating from her body as she pushed herself to the limit. She ducked Mac's swing, the rush of air tickling her sweat-dampened hair. Her nostrils flared, catching the faint scent of leather from the training mats and the sharper tang of their shared perspiration. As she pivoted, her sneakers squeaked against the polished floor, the sound crisp in the climate-controlled air.

Mac pulled his hands back up to his jawline, readying for another punch. He was breathing almost as hard as she was. A huge victory in her book.

He caught her gaze. "You were pretty hard on Mr. Special Forces last night, girl."

Alex's roundhouse kick betrayed her frustration. "Not as hard as I'm gonna be."

Mac's eyebrows shot up. "You're not thinking about using the Castle Protocol?"

"Absolutely. The man needs to be erased."

“But Alex?—”

She jabbed at his midsection. “Munsinger was supposed to come alone.”

“Things happen. You know that.” Mac sidestepped, then froze. “Hold up,” he whispered.

Alex whirled to find Reilly in the doorway, sleep-tousled and curious. His borrowed tech tee rode up slightly, revealing a peek of white gauze beneath the hem. Despite the ordeal he’d been through, he looked annoyingly fit and alert. The pallor that had clung to him the night before had mostly faded, leaving behind a healthy glow that had no business being on the face of a recently injured man. His eyes, sharp and inquisitive, took in the room with a practiced sweep that spoke of years of training. Alex felt a twinge of irritation at how quickly he seemed to be bouncing back.

She’d seen seasoned operatives laid low by less severe wounds, yet here he stood, looking like he’d just stepped out of a mildly inconvenient fist fight rather than a bullet-riddled escape. She strode over, ignoring the sweat trickling down her back and the unbidden thought that his resilience was, grudgingly, impressive.

Yet another reason to get the man away from RAVEN headquarters without him being able to divulge their location.

Mac untied his boxing gloves and retreated, towel in hand. “Gonna check on our client’s ID papers.”

Jason surveyed the high-tech room. “You’re not FBI. They’re not trained to fight like that. Ex-CIA?”

“... ish.” Alex slid off her gloves, tossing them on the weight bench behind her. “You’re Delta Force, with a splash of something extra on top. Black Ops. Deep black,

I'm thinking."

Surprise flitted across his face. "You got all that from one look? You do realize these aren't my clothes."

"They're ours."

"Then how—" He slapped his forehead. "The blood draw. You IDed me. What if I hadn't passed?"

"You'd be in the LA river."

"Isn't it like a foot deep?"

"Let me rephrase. Your body would be in the river."

Or so she'd like him to believe. In reality, she'd never sanction murder. Still, she needed him gone, without compromising their location. The Castle Protocol it would be: drug him and drop him off with friendlies. For now, play nice.

"Look," she said, forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace. "Munsinger's safe. He wants our help disappearing. We're the good guys here."

Jason's eyes narrowed, and Alex fought the urge to roll hers. This was going to be a long day.

Alex led him to the kitchen area. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries filled the air, masking the sterile scent of antiseptic that clung to him.

"Help yourself," she gestured to the spread. "How's the wound?"

Jason lifted his shirt, revealing a neatly dressed injury. “Nicely cleaned up. My compliments to the chef.”

“Thank Mac. Guy’s amazing.”

“Will do.” Jason piled his plate high, his movements precise despite his injury.

He was big, strong—typical special forces type, with that confidence highly trained men wore like a second skin. But there was more. A vulnerability in his eyes, and intelligence. Definitely that. Handsome in a wind-beaten, knocked-around way.

Not that she cared. At all.

He scanned the facility.

Alex found herself seeing it through a stranger’s eyes—the huge, open room with its high-tech corner of humming computers, the state-of-the-art workout area, and the gourmet kitchen they stood in. Above them sat the ivy-covered Beverly Hills mansion, all faux Italianate charm and eight bedrooms. The pool big enough for a hockey team. Her private suite with its walk-in closet stuffed with designer clothes she only wore under extreme duress.

None of which he’d see.

“Nice setup.” He nodded appreciatively.

Alex hummed noncommittally, focusing on selecting a perfectly ripe peach.

He leaned against the counter, pressing his uninjured side into the granite edge. “So, how does this disappearing thing work?”

She debated ignoring him, but her cousin, Gabriel, sauntered in, his black hair tousled, slim form draped in baggy chinos and a concert tee that should have been tossed years ago. Dark circles underlined his eyes.

He nodded at Jason and beelined for the coffee pot. “Morning.”

“You going to introduce me?” Jason asked her.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

Gabe shot her a look. “Don’t mind Lexie. She’s not a morning person.”

“Like you are,” she retorted.

He smiled. “I haven’t been to bed yet, so for me, it’s not technically morning yet.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, willing Gabe to disappear.

But her cousin plowed on. “You meet the team?” he asked Jason.

“I think so,” Jason said. “Big guy, super smart. Pretty blonde lady. Super scary. And Lexie, here.”

She winced at his use of her nickname. Too soft. Too ... powerless. In her world, people didn’t cede you power. You had to take it.

Gabe slurped from his mug. “How’d we end up with two clients?”

“Long story,” she responded tersely. “Tell you later.”

But Jason butted in, explaining about Munsinger’s call, the airport shooting, insisting

they were all in danger.

“Clients get attacked all the time,” she responded. “It’s not ideal, but it’s the price of doing business. People don’t arrange to be disappeared for no reason. If Mr. Munsinger had followed protocol and come alone?—”

“He’d be dead,” Jason interrupted.

“Possibly.” The word tasted bitter on her tongue. He wasn’t wrong.

“How can you say that so lightly?” His incredulous tone set her teeth on edge.

Fury rose in her chest. “Do you have any idea how many bounties my team and I have on our heads?”

“I can guess.” His voice softened. “My crew and I have earned a few, too.”

No doubt. Her research hadn’t told the whole story, but she could read between the lines. The man had tangled with the Consortium and lived.

“Speaking of my peeps, I need to contact them,” he said.

“No.”

The rising tension drove Gabe off. Utterly conflict-averse, he retreated to his lab, leaving them alone. Though technically a part of RAVEN, her cousin had his own venture cooking. A world-expert in holographic and VR technology, his latest invention, the NeuroVerse, planned to be a groundbreaking leap in the field. His cutting-edge VR company wasn’t just about disappearing into virtual worlds; it was about revolutionizing how humans interacted with technology.

Or so he continually explained. She was more rooted in the actual universe.

Once perfected, his tech would allow users to experience virtual environments with all five senses, creating immersive experiences indistinguishable from reality. The potential applications were staggering—from advanced medical training to therapeutic treatments for PTSD, from revolutionary educational tools to entirely new forms of entertainment.

Alex shook her head, refocusing on the immediate situation. Groundbreaking technology or not, she had a job to do.

She eyed Jason, sensing his determination. It would take another day before he'd be content leaving Munsinger. Might as well let him make his call. She handed him a phone.

He held it up. "Any place I can talk without you overhearing?"

She bit into the peach. "Nope."

He muttered something under his breath and headed for the farthest couch, leaving her to ponder the complications he brought to her carefully ordered world.

She could practically see the wheels turning in his head, no doubt formulating plans and contingencies. It was what she would do in his position.

"Let your team know we'll get you home as soon as you're ready to leave," she called out, her voice carefully neutral.

Jason glanced back, a hint of surprise flickering across his face. "Appreciate it," he replied, before turning his attention to the phone.

No. Probably not .

A wry smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. He'd be a lot less appreciative if he knew about the complimentary drug-induced nap that came with the return trip package. But then again, the best exits were always the ones you didn't see coming.

As she turned back to her peach, Alex couldn't help but feel a twinge of ... something. Regret? Respect?

It didn't matter. Jason Reilly, with his stubborn determination and inconvenient competence, was a liability she couldn't afford.

Jason sank into the plush couch, the leather cool against his skin. The phone felt heavy in his hand as he dialed Bridger's number. His side ached, a constant reminder of last night's chaos.

Bridger's gruff voice filled the air, quickly replaced by the chatter of multiple voices as the call switched to video. The familiar sight of the ranch house kitchen filled the screen, a welcome slice of normality.

"Whoa, Reilly," Graham's eyes widened. "You look awful."

Pretty face drawn in concern, Paige elbowed the much bigger man aside. "What happened?"

Jason ran a hand through his hair. "Long story short: ambushed at the airport, got shot, ended up with some organization called RAVEN."

"RAVEN?" Paige's voice hit a pitch that made Jason wince. "You're with RAVEN?"

"You've heard of them?"

"They're legends. And ghosts. Global experts in disappearing high-value targets. No one's ever found a RAVEN client. Do you know how hard it is to earn that kind of track record?"

Tai leaned in, his usual happy expression tinged with concern. "What's up with you

going all solo again? I thought you were going to keep us in the loop.”

The unspoken worry hung in the air like smoke.

Guilt stabbed him. “I swear, this was an accident. No plans to vanish. Scout’s honor. This whole deal caught me by surprise.”

Bridger’s scowl softened slightly. “Good to hear. Now, what’s the plan?”

Jason outlined the situation, his team peppering him with questions. As the call wound down, he braced himself to break the last bit of news. “Oh, and about the Pilatus ... it’s in Boise. And, uh, it might need some work.”

Bridger’s eyebrows shot up. “Define ‘some work.’”

Jason winced. “Beyond the bullet holes? I’m not sure.”

A collective groan echoed through the phone.

“We’ll retrieve it,” Bridger sighed. “And start digging into who’s behind this attack. Paige?”

“On it,” she nodded. “I’ll see what I can find about General Munsinger’s disappearance too.”

As the call ended, Jason leaned back, the weight of the situation settling on his shoulders. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this was just the beginning of something much bigger.

He didn’t want to get ahead of himself, but it smelled like Seven-Five. Of course, after years chasing them—and being chased—he might be guilty of being a tad

paranoid.

Phone still in hand, he studied Alex from his perch on the couch. Her back was to him as she worked at her laptop, the sleek lines of the high-tech headquarters a fitting backdrop for her equally streamlined presence. The place screamed modern efficiency, much like its leader.

His gaze lingered on her lithe form. Beautiful. Tough. Brilliant. Hard as diamonds. And beautiful—a fact his brain seemed intent on repeating. The woman was going to be a major pain in his rear end. He could feel it in his bones. Or maybe that was just the gunshot wound talking.

Gabriel shuffled back into the room, making a beeline for the coffee pot. “Has my cousin found her manners yet?”

Jason made a noncommittal hand gesture. “... ish,” he answered, echoing Alex’s earlier brevity. Curiosity got the better of him. “You run this operation with just four of you?”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up. “For sure, no. We’ve got some other operatives—” He caught Alex’s razor-sharp glare and stumbled to a halt. “I mean, uh ...” His gaze dropped to his feet. “Never mind.”

The silence that followed was thick enough to cut with a knife. Jason could practically hear the unspoken reprimand: loose lips sink ships—or in this case, highly secretive organizations. Gabriel’s naiveté was at odds with the slick operation around them. He filed that tidbit of intel away for later consideration.

He leaned back, the leather couch creaking softly under his weight. There was more to RAVEN than met the eye, and he was determined to unravel its mysteries—preferably before they decided to “disappear” him too.

Alex abruptly changed the subject, her voice cutting through the tension. “As soon as you’re comfortable that Munsinger is in good hands, we’ll get you back to your team.”

Jason felt a surge of impatience. “I’m gonna need a lot more info on your plans for him first.”

She shrugged. A tiny motion that created an outsized surge of anger in him. “Then we’ll be leaving you very disappointed.”

Her expression remained impassive, her lack of sympathy palpable.

Gabriel, however, jumped in with a conciliatory tone. “Lexie’s protective of our clients. And RAVEN.”

Despite his frustration, Jason couldn’t help but be impressed by what he’d seen of their operation.

Before he could probe more, he noticed her posture change subtly, her interest poorly concealed as she leaned forward slightly. “So, Redemption Creek. That’s quite an operation you’ve got going. Heard you guys used to be BlackOut Squadron.”

He tensed, memories threatening to surface. “You’ve done your homework.”

“Always,” she replied, a hint of pride in her voice. “But what I can’t figure out is what happened. One day BlackOut Squadron’s the government’s go-to team, the next ... poof.”

“Ancient history.”

“Oh come on,” she pressed, her eyes sharp. “A team like that doesn’t just disappear

without a reason.”

“Maybe we got tired of following orders without question.”

“Or maybe you questioned the wrong orders?”

“You always this nosy with your guests?” he deflected, forcing a wry smile.

“Only the interesting ones. So what was it? Corruption? Cover-up?”

Jason felt his patience wearing thin. “Look, what happened then ... it’s in the past. We’re different now.”

“Are you?” she challenged. “Because from where I’m sitting, you’re still charging into danger. Still trying to save the world.”

He met her gaze, unflinching. “And you’re not? Hiding people, giving them new lives ... sounds pretty heroic to me.”

Alex scoffed. “I’m a realist. I just know how the game is played.”

“And what game is that?”

“The one where everyone has a price,” she stated flatly.

Jason shook his head. “Not everyone. Some things are worth more than money.”

“Like honor? Duty?” Alex’s tone was skeptical.

“Like doing the right thing,” he countered. “Even when it costs you everything.”

A moment of silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken histories and ideological divides.

He closed his mouth, the specter of Seven-Five looming in his mind. But he wasn't ready to bare those scars, maybe never would be.

What did it matter anyway? Once Gravy was settled, he'd be gone.

If Seven-Five was involved in that attack, they'd find RAVEN.

If Alex Mendoza wanted to live in her little high-tech bubble and ignore the coming threat, nothing he could do about that.

But he wanted to. And that right there was a problem.

The LED clock on the wall blinked 3:17 p.m. Each digital flash mocked Alex's mounting frustration. Two more hours had passed, and they were no closer to settling on a new identity for their client. A task that should have been straightforward—pick a location, create a backstory, forge the documents—had devolved into a circus of indecision and increasingly outlandish suggestions.

Alex's fingers hovered over her keyboard, poised to input whatever choice the group finally landed on. The sooner they decided, the sooner she could start weaving the intricate web of digital breadcrumbs that would support the man's new life. And more importantly, the sooner she could get Jason Reilly out of her underground sanctuary, and out of her life.

She breathed deep, trying to center herself amidst the cacophony of voices. "Alright, let's try this again. Mr. Munsinger?—"

"Gravy," the guy interrupted, right on cue.

Alex bit back a sigh. It was going to be a long afternoon.

She rubbed her temples, the tension kindling a dull ache behind her eyes. "Mr. Munsinger, what about?—"

"Gravy," the man insisted for the umpteenth time. "Call me Gravy."

Alex shot a look at Jason, who merely shrugged, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

The computer blinked, offering its latest suggestion: “Retired lighthouse keeper in Nova Scotia.”

Gravy’s face scrunched up. “Do I look like a lighthouse kind of guy?”

“You could learn,” Mac offered helpfully.

“How about somewhere warm?” Jason chimed in. “Gravy’s always talking about beaches.”

“What about a surf instructor in Bali?” Gabriel suggested.

Gravy perked up. “Now we’re talking!”

“Can you even surf?” Liv asked skeptically.

“I can learn,” Gravy replied, undeterred.

Alex pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is why we let the computer do this.” The program she’d created was a masterpiece that she tweaked after every new client. Input aptitudes, personality traits, likes and dislikes and let the software come up with ideas. Her program was tuned to finding workable—and enjoyable—new lives that clients could actually maintain for as long as necessary.

Jason’s brow furrowed. “I’m surprised you didn’t have all this ready to go.”

“The people we work with don’t plan their disappearances. Typically, people deny they’re in danger until the very last second. Then it’s all ‘help me disappear NOW.’” She waved a hand dismissively. “It’s fine. This is what we do. Our usual procedure is to get the client out of danger and drop them on one of the off-grid luxury resorts we’ve vetted while we take a couple weeks to work our magic.”

“So we’re stuck here for weeks?” Jason’s tone held a hint of challenge.

“Not here. And not you. Mr. Mun—I mean Gravy, will need to vacation while we attend to all the details, but you’re free to go. Now would be good.”

She turned back to the screens, determined to find a solution that would satisfy everyone—and more importantly, get Jason Reilly out of her hair.

Bali was not happening. The last place she’d put a guy with Gravy’s apparent lack of sense was a mega-popular tourist area. He liked beaches. And mountains. She keyed the info into the program and waited.

Jason’s voice, low and intense, caught her attention. She glanced over her shoulder, watching as he paced, phone pressed to his ear.

“What do you mean, Seven-Five?” The edge in his voice chilled her.

She tried to focus on her work, but found herself straining to hear every word.

“How can you be sure?” he asked, his free hand clenching into a fist. “So they could have been after Gravy. Or me.”

He paused, clearly listening. “Copy that. I agree. It doesn’t much matter which of us they’re after. They’ll take both.”

Alex swiveled in her chair, abandoning all pretense of not listening. Her eyes narrowed as Jason continued.

“No, absolutely not. You’re not coming here,” he ordered, his voice sharp. “I want Jane and Kellen, Tenaya and Avery, all of you, as far away from this as possible.”

The protective streak in his voice was unmistakable, and despite her growing anger, Alex felt a twinge of something she couldn't name. Respect? Admiration? She quickly squashed the feeling.

"This is my mess," Jason continued. "I'll handle it alone. One last mission." He ended the call.

Her temper boiled over. One last mission? Alone? Not anywhere near RAVEN headquarters.

She stood, chair scraping loudly against the floor, and stalked toward him. This cowboy was about to learn that in her world, no one rode solo. Especially not when they were putting her team and her client and her operation at risk.

The room fell silent, all eyes turning to watch the impending confrontation.

Fury radiated off her in waves, making her throat tight. "Who, or what, is this Seven-Five?"

He pressed a hand to his injured side. "The highlights? Rich bad guys. Secret cabal. Highly lethal."

The weariness in his tone made Alex falter for a moment, but she quickly steeled herself. "And you led them to us? You just wore out your welcome, Army."

"You can't take on Seven-Five without help," Jason argued.

Her laugh was sharp, cutting. "I'm not taking on anyone. I disappear people. Period. This Seven-Five crowd is your problem, not mine."

Gabriel, ever the peacemaker, stepped in. "She's just trying to protect us. It's what

she does.”

Alex’s glare silenced her cousin. She turned back to her screens, forcing the conversation back to the task at hand. “You flew your plane out of Redemption Creek to meet Gravy, right?”

Jason nodded, suspicion clear in his eyes. “So?”

“We’re sending you home, Army.”

His stance widened as if preparing for a fight. “Not until I know where Gravy’s heading.”

Ignoring him, Alex addressed Liv. “Can you arrange a turboprop ASAP?”

Liv jumped up, energized. “I’ll connect with Mondo right now.”

“He’ll have one passenger to Redemption Creek.” Alex stared Jason down.

The tension in the room rose a couple more degrees. Jason opened his mouth to protest, but she held up a hand, silencing him.

“Listen closely. You’re going back to your team. Gravy’s getting a new life. And I’m getting you both out of my hair.”

She turned to her team, a plan forming. “Mac, set up a decoy trail leading away from the Idaho house. Gabriel, I need you to create a digital footprint for our friend here.” She nodded towards Gravy. “Make it look like he’s heading to ... Bali.”

Gravy perked up. “Really?”

“Not even close,” Alex shot back. “But that’s what anyone who finds the digital trail will think.”

She faced Jason one last time, her expression unreadable. “You wanted to protect your team? This is how. You go back. Play bait. We’ll make sure Gravy disappears so thoroughly, even you won’t be able to find him.”

The challenge in her voice was clear. Jason held her gaze for a long moment before nodding slowly. “Fine. But this isn’t over.”

As he turned to leave, Alex felt a mix of relief and ... something else. Something she wasn’t ready to examine too closely. She shook it off, focusing on the task at hand.

“Alright, people,” she called out. “Let’s make a man disappear and a soldier reappear. We’ve got work to do.”

The room burst into action, screens flickering with data, voices overlapping as plans were made. And if Alex’s eyes lingered on Jason’s retreating form for a moment too long, well, that was nobody’s business but her own.

Jason eyed the weight rack with a mix of determination and trepidation.

Mac had informed him it would take a couple hours to arrange a flight back to Redemption Creek, and Jason had too much adrenaline flowing to sit around. His muscles ached for action, but the dull throb in his side warned of limitations. He reached for a light dumbbell, his movements slow and deliberate. As he did so, he couldn't help but marvel at the state-of-the-art equipment surrounding him. RAVEN's headquarters was a far cry from the makeshift gyms he was used to in the field.

"Easy there, Army," Alex called out, her eyes flicking up from her computer screen. "We're not equipped for a relapse."

Her voice sent an unexpected jolt through him. Despite her prickly exterior, Jason found himself increasingly drawn to the woman's strength and intelligence. He admired how she ran her team with precision and care, even if she tried to hide it behind a tough facade.

Mac chimed in, his fingers never pausing on his keyboard. "Yeah, my sewing days are over. You rip out those stitches, you're on your own."

Jason grinned, a bead of sweat already forming on his brow. "What, no Florence Nightingale act? I'm crushed." He appreciated the easy camaraderie of Alex's team, the way they balanced professionalism with genuine concern for each other. It reminded him of his own unit, a thought that brought both comfort and a twinge of

homesickness.

He lifted the weight, feeling the familiar burn in his bicep, accompanied by an unfamiliar tightness in his side. The pain was there, a constant reminder of his brush with death, but he pushed through it. No more meds, he'd decided. He needed a clear head, especially in this high-tech environment where every decision could have far-reaching consequences.

As he exercised, he found his gaze continually drawn to Alex. Her focused determination, the way she commanded her cutting-edge setup—it all impressed him more than he cared to admit. He couldn't shake the feeling that they made a formidable team. One he wasn't quite ready to leave behind.

Gravy wandered toward him, slice of toast in hand, eyeing the weights with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. He reached for one of Jason's dumbbells, his skinny arm shaking under the strain.

"Whoa there, champ." Jason grabbed the weight before Gravy dropped it on his foot. "Let's start you off with something a little more your speed. Like a feather. Or maybe a marshmallow."

Gravy's face flushed red. "I'm stronger than I look!"

He used to be. Physically, the guy had been special forces material back in the day. But mentally ... he couldn't hack the discipline. Or kick his drug habit without serious rehab.

"Grab those twenty pounders and join in," Jason urged him.

As they settled into a rhythm, Jason casually steered the conversation where he needed it to go. "So, Gravy, your old man. He must be worried sick about you."

Gravy snorted, nearly dropping his weight. “Yeah, right. He’s probably more worried about his golf score. Plus, he disappeared, remember?”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Not exactly Father of the Year material, huh? What’s he into these days? Besides golf, I mean.”

“Dunno,” Gravy shrugged, wincing as he completed another rep. “It’s not like I see him ever. Politics, I guess. He’s all about climbing the career ladder. Boring stuff.”

Jason’s ears perked up, but he kept his tone casual. “Something must be up if he gave you that phone and the instructions to contact RAVEN. Guys into power don’t just drop out of sight.”

Gravy rolled his eyes. “I guess. He’s been checking up on me more lately. He’s got this idea that somebody’s kinda after him.” He paused. “Maybe so, since he ran off and everything.”

“But he never said who?”

Gravy made a noise. “Like he’d tell me? Mr. Super Top Secret Security?”

“Fair enough.” Jason set down his weight. “But him planning your disappearance is pretty extreme, don’t you think?”

Gravy scratched his chin. “For sure. And not ideal. My winter bowling league is red hot this season. I’m letting them down. All I can say is he’d better have a good reason for all this.”

Jason didn’t bother pointing out that the attack on them at the airport would be an excellent reason. Except Jason wasn’t at all certain the attackers had been sent for Gravy.

The blonde, Liv, hurried back into the main room, car keys in hand. “I’m going to run supplies over to the airfield. I’ll be back in an hour,” she announced.

Alex’s cousin, the pale nerd-guy looked up from his tablet. “I’ll join you,” he announced and bounded to his feet with an energy Jason would have doubted the skinny kid possessed.

The blonde shrugged. “Sure. You can help me load the Rover.”

But Alex’s reaction was far less cool or sanguine or something. She was hiding something.

“What?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head, a sharp denying motion. “My cousin’s radar for women is completely defective.”

“He likes her.” Why wouldn’t he? The woman was stunning. And seriously talented. Dangerous, too. Another highly attractive trait.

And far out of Gabriel’s league.

Alex stared at the door they’d left through. “Gabe’s been following Liv around like a puppy ever since we started RAVEN. I’m not sure he’s ever going to get the message.”

“Maybe she’ll let him down easy.”

“Maybe.” Alex seemed to shake off her concerns and get back to work.

She turned to Gravy. “You’re an outdoor guy, right?”

Gravy puffed up his chest. “Yeah, I am.”

“You can run a kayak rental shop on a beach in Kauai, or a guide service in Alaska that specializes in Northern Lights tours. No pressure, but you’ve got to decide now.”

“Right now?” Jason interjected, aghast. “You’re talking about his future here.”

“We’re talking about saving his life,” Alex countered, then softened slightly. “Whichever choice you make, you’ll have to live with for a year. Maybe two. Then if you want something different, RAVEN will accommodate you.”

Gravy scratched his head. “Well, on one hand, beaches are awesome. Chicks in bikinis, you know? But then again, the Northern Lights are like, cosmic. And Alaska’s got bears. That’s pretty cool. But then again?—”

Mac’s sharp whistle cut through Gravy’s rambling. “Boss. We got activity on the upper decks.”

The room fell silent, tension crackling in the air like static electricity. Jason’s eyes locked with Alex’s, both of them poised for whatever came next.

Jason followed Alex to the bank of monitors, his eyes widening as he took in the sprawling mansion above them. Manicured lawns stretched out in every direction, dotted with ornate fountains and what looked like a private tennis court. A sleek sports car gleamed in the circular driveway.

“Wow,” he whistled low. “The disappearance business must be pretty lucrative.”

Alex ignored him, her focus locked on a lumbering phone company truck parked just beyond her neighbor’s driveway.

Mac's short laugh broke the tension. "It's not the business, dude, it's the background." He jerked a thick thumb at Alex. "Genuine trust fund baby through and through, this one."

"At least I put my silver spoon to good use, you overgrown cabbage patch kid," Alex shot back, her tone laced with affection.

Their banter died as two men exited the truck in crisp, blue uniforms.

"That's weird," she muttered.

Jason tore his gaze from the opulent grounds. "What's weird?"

She tapped the closest screen. "This whole street has underground fiber optic lines. The phone company doesn't service this area."

Mac glared at the footage. "Nice try, jerks."

Jason moved closer to Alex. The scent of her citrusy shampoo momentarily distracted him. He scrutinized the men's uniforms. They looked legit at first glance, but ... He tapped the screen. "Their shoes are all wrong. Running shoes, not steel-toed work boots."

"They're dressed for speed and stealth," Alex agreed, her voice tightening. She pointed at one technician's arm as he shifted a utility tote. "That's interesting."

The man's sleeve rode up, revealing a tattoo—seven tally marks in a distinctive pattern. The hairs on the back of Jason's neck stood up. They'd just run out of time.

"Seven-Five," he breathed.

His body tensed, instincts kicking into high gear as he reached for a sidearm that wasn't there. "How did they find us?"

"They haven't. Not yet. But they're close." Alex activated an intercom. "Mac, stall them. Tell them you need to verify their work order. And get ready for lockdown procedures. Then contact Liv and Gabe. Tell them to stay on their toes and stay away until they hear differently."

She turned to Jason, her eyes hard with determination. "Let's get you a weapon."

"Copy that."

His heart raced, a mix of adrenaline and something else—excitement, maybe even anticipation. As they moved swiftly through the high-tech lair, he realized that despite the danger, there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Game on.

Alex's fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes darting between multiple screens as she tracked the movements of the two men outside. Their casual setup at the corner of her property wasn't fooling her.

The lights flickered and died, leaving the glow of computer screens to illuminate the space. Every penny they'd spent on backup batteries was worth it.

"They cut the power," Jason said.

"Wait for it," Mac said in a singsong voice.

She held her breath as the emergency generator hummed to life, restoring the lights. She allowed herself a small smirk. "Nice try, boys."

Jason stood behind her, his presence solid and reassuring. Despite her irritation with him, she couldn't deny the comfort of having a seasoned warrior at her side. His hands moved over the Glock she'd given him with practiced ease, checking and double-checking.

"Mac and I could take them," he suggested, his voice low and determined.

Mac perked up. "Seriously. Let's do this!"

Alex shook her head, tamping down the urge to let them loose. Jason was trying to hide it, but his side had to be killing him. "We don't have enough intel. For all we

know that van's packed with more hostiles."

She turned to Mac. "Send out the drones. Let's see what we're really dealing with."

As Mac complied, Gravy's voice piped up from the corner. "So, uh, are we winning?"

Alex bit back a sigh. "We're gathering information, Gravy. It's not capture the flag."

"But if it was, we'd totally be winning, right?"

The tension in the room was palpable as they waited for the drone feedback. Alex could feel her heart pounding, the taste of adrenaline sharp on her tongue.

Mac's voice cut through the silence. "Boss, I'm not picking up any other heat signatures in the van?—"

"Wait," Jason interrupted, leaning closer to the screen. "What's that?"

Alex squinted, watching as one of the men swept what looked like a metal detector over the edge of her lawn. The second man moved closer to the mansion and began to dig.

"No way," Jason muttered. "Look at the utility bag."

Alex's stomach dropped as she spotted the muzzle of a rifle peeking out.

"AR15," Jason identified, his voice grim.

The room fell silent as the gravity of their situation sank in. These weren't just intruders; they were hunters. And RAVEN was the prey.

“They’re digging near the junction box I added to keep the security wiring separate from the house supply. There’s no way that junction would show up on blueprints. How did they know where to look?”

Alex’s breath caught as Mac’s words registered.

Jason tensed. “We need to move. Now. I can take these two down, but if Mac’s got the skills ...”

Mac cracked his knuckles. “Oh, I’ve got skills.”

Alex was about to agree when two more phone company vans rolled into view. Her stomach clenched as Mac’s voice cut through the sudden silence.

“Hold up. We’ve got multiple heat signatures in each vehicle. It’s ... it’s a small army.”

The words had barely left his mouth when the drone feed flickered and died. Alex’s fingers flew across the keyboard trying to reconnect, but it was futile. One by one, the screens went dark.

The sudden loss of their flying tech cocoon felt like a physical blow.

“So they know we’re down here,” Alex said, her voice tight. The realization sent a chill down her spine. This wasn’t just an attack; it was a well-planned siege.

Her mind flipped through scenarios, each one worse than the last.

“What’s the play, boss?” Mac’s voice was steady, but she could hear the underlying tension.

She stared at the dead feeds. “We’re outgunned and outmanned. Time to beat a retreat. Live to fight another day.”

She moved swiftly to a hidden panel, her fingers finding the latch by memory. It slid open, revealing four packed bags.

“Go bags,” she explained, tossing one to each of them. “Clothes, cash, burner phones. Everything we need to disappear.”

As she shouldered her own pack, Alex caught Jason’s eye. His expression was a mix of admiration and something she couldn’t quite name.

“Always prepared, huh?” he said softly.

“No different from your business, I’m sure,” she replied, trying to ignore the warmth in his gaze.

The sound of metal grinding against concrete echoed from above, driving home the urgency of their situation.

Time to run.

She led the way through a narrow corridor, her footsteps silent on the concrete floor. The emergency lights cast eerie shadows, transforming familiar surroundings into an alien landscape. She could hear Jason’s measured breathing behind her, feel the warmth radiating from his body in the confined space.

“Watch your step,” she whispered as they approached a hidden trapdoor. Her fingers found the concealed latch, muscle memory taking over. “I’ll take the lead. Mac will bring up the rear.”

The scent of damp earth filled her nostrils as they emerged into a drainage tunnel. Gravy stumbled, his sneakers squelching in the shallow water.

“Dude, this is like, totally spy movie stuff,” he stage-whispered.

Alex bit back a retort. They were close.

The tunnel opened onto a deserted service road. Alex’s eyes darted left and right, scanning for threats. “Clear,” she breathed.

Alex led the way up the weed-choked embankment. She scanned the area before landing on a nondescript sedan parked a quarter-mile down.

“There’s our ride.” She set a brisk pace towards the vehicle.

Jason’s eyebrows shot up. “You’ve got a getaway car just waiting here?”

Alex allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. “One of many. There’s something to be said for being a trust fund baby.”

When they reached the car, Jason let out a low whistle. His eyes met hers, a mix of surprise and admiration flickering across his face. “No doubt,” he responded, his voice appreciative. “This level of contingency planning is ... impressive.”

She felt a warmth in her chest that had nothing to do with their narrow escape. “What? You thought I was just a pretty face with a fat bank account?”

“Not for long,” Jason said, his gaze intensifying. “But now you’ve removed all doubt.”

“Story of my life,” she quipped, but there was no bitterness in her tone. For once, she

was grateful for the assumptions people made about her. It had allowed her to build this safety net right under everyone's noses.

"Mac?" she turned to her friend.

"On it," he answered before she could voice her request. "I'll grab the Subaru on the next block and find out where Liv and Gabe are hanging."

He took off at a jog.

"My cousin doesn't have any self-defense training. I don't want Liv having to watch him on her own."

Jason nodded. "I hear you. Smart plan. You and I can handle this end."

They piled into the car, the musty scent of aging leather enveloping them. They were alive, they were free, and they had resources.

She fired up the engine and met Jason's intense gaze. "Let's get Gravy somewhere safe and regroup."

Her hand brushed Jason's as she reached for the gear shift. The brief contact sent a jolt through her system, a reminder of the charged energy between them.

"Where to?" he asked, his voice low and steady.

Alex allowed herself a small smile. "I know a place. Hope you boys like the smell of hay."

Not that she'd care much if they didn't.

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Jason's knuckles turned white as he gripped the grab bar on the passenger door, his stomach lurching with each swerve of the sedan. Alex's driving was insane, more like a Hollywood car chase than a discreet escape. The blur of passing cars and honking horns created a cacophony that set his teeth on edge.

In the rearview mirror, he caught sight of Gravy's ashen face. The guy's fingers dug into the armrest like it was a life preserver. At least he was quiet for once.

"Maybe ease up on the gas there, Dale Earnhardt," Jason suggested, wincing as they narrowly missed clipping a minivan.

Alex frowned. "I don't recall asking for a driving instructor. How many cars do you even have in Redemption Creek? Rush hour must be a complete stress-zone, what with all those stray cattle and tractors."

Her sarcasm was as sharp as her turns. Jason bit back a retort as she whipped around another blind corner, nearly rear-ending a delivery truck.

"How about we don't draw so much attention to ourselves?" he managed through gritted teeth.

Alex's shoulders slumped slightly, her speed decreasing. The man was not wrong.

The momentary relief was short-lived as her voice turned icy. "I'm just SO angry that you led this Seven-Five group straight to my door."

Jason's eyebrows shot up. "How could you know that? Maybe they were after Gravy."

"Hey!" Gravy's indignant squawk from the back seat was the first sound he'd made since they'd peeled out of the safe house parking lot. "Maybe they were already onto RAVEN."

The car fell silent, save for the hum of the engine. He glanced at Alex, seeing his own concern mirrored in her eyes.

Gravy might be onto something. The thought was more unsettling than Alex's driving.

As they merged onto the freeway, Jason's eyes darted between his phone and the road, his mind working overtime to plot the safest route. "Take the next right," he instructed, feeling the car swerve in response. "These side streets should keep us off most of the traffic cams."

Alex nodded, her earlier bravado replaced by laser-focused concentration. The quiet residential areas they navigated were a stark contrast to the chaotic freeway they'd left behind. The soft purr of the engine was almost soothing in the relative silence.

He spotted a secluded alley. "Pull over here. We should switch drivers."

"I know these streets," Alex protested.

"Exactly." He waited for his logic to sink in. They'd do far better with her navigating.

She turned the corner and braked, shoving the vehicle into Park. Once they switched seats, Gravy leaned over the seat back. "What now?"

Alex didn't take her eyes off her phone. "I'm finding us a place to hunker down."

"Sweet!" Gravy's excitement was palpable. "Got a spare mansion around here somewhere?"

"Not exactly," Alex replied, her tone cryptic. "We're going more old school."

Jason drove, following Alex's directions through a maze of back roads and industrial areas. The scent of exhaust and city gradually gave way to something ... earthier.

He wrinkled his nose. "Is that ... hay?"

Her lips quirked in a small smile. "Can't say I didn't warn you. Welcome to our five-star accommodations."

As they pulled into the parking lot of a decidedly un-five-star motel, Jason caught sight of the nearby racetrack. Santa Anita. Of course.

"A cheesy motel by the racetrack," he said, shaking his head. "I've got to hand it to you, Mendoza. When you say 'old school,' you don't mess around."

The smell of hay and horses permeated the air as they stepped out of the car. It was about as far from Alex's high-tech world as they could get. And that, Jason realized, was exactly the point.

While Alex headed into the office to check in, Jason stood watch outside the vehicle, ordering Gravy to stay inside. Once Alex emerged with a keycard, Jason herded them into the motel room, his eyes darting to every corner. The door shut with a dull thud, and he inhaled sharply, wrinkling his nose at the overpowering scent of cheap air freshener barely masking a musty undertone.

Alex wasted no time pulling out her tablet and setting up her tech with practiced efficiency. “Alright, let’s get to work. We need to process Gravy through the disappearance protocol ASAP. New identity, new life, clean slate.”

Jason shook his head, his jaw tightening. “Hold on, Alex. That needs to wait.”

“Wait?” Alex’s fingers stilled on the tablet. “Why?”

“Seven-Five ... they’re not your average bad guys. We can’t rush this.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “What exactly are we dealing with here?”

He ran a hand through his hair, feeling the weight of his past pressing down on him. “They’re ruthless, with resources that would make most governments jealous. We need to be smart about this.”

“So what, they’re after you specifically?”

“Probably. But at this point, anything connected to me is now?—”

“Compromised,” she finished, her voice flat. “Great. Just great.”

Jason leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. “Look, I know you want to act quickly, but we need to be cautious.”

Alex set her tablet down with more force than necessary. “Cautious? We’re sitting ducks here. Every minute we wait is a minute they could be closing in on us.”

“And every hasty move we make could lead them right to us,” he countered. “We need a solid plan.”

“I have a solid plan. It’s called getting Gravy off the grid and out of danger.”

“It’s not that simple.”

She crossed her arms. “Enlighten me.”

“Let’s say I head off on my own, draw them out. What’s the first thing they’re going to do to ensure I cooperate once they find me?”

He could literally see her mind working. Her shoulders slumped. “Copy that.”

Gravy scratched his chin. “I don’t.”

Alex shot him a steady look. “They come after you and me. Use us as bait to trap Army.”

Gravy’s jaw dropped. Message received.

“There’s got to be another way,” she argued.

“We’re safer together,” he insisted.

Their voices rose as they argued back and forth, the tension in the room ratcheting up with each passing minute. Gravy’s eyes bounced between them like he was watching a particularly intense tennis match.

Finally, Jason held up his hands. “Okay, okay. We’re both exhausted and on edge. Let’s table this for now and revisit it in the morning with clear heads.”

Alex glared at him for a long moment before deflating slightly. “Fine. But first thing tomorrow, we figure this out.”

As an uneasy truce settled over the room, the air still crackled with unresolved tension. Jason knew this was far from over, but for now, they had a momentary respite. He just hoped it would be enough to get them through the night.

Alex retreated to a corner, phone in hand. “Gabriel? You okay? Are Liv and Mac with you?”

Jason watched as her expression softened, the furrow between her brows smoothing out. It was like watching a different person emerge.

“No, I need you to follow protocol. Disappear. All of you ... I know, I know. But your VR breakthrough can wait ... Fine, the alternate facility, but you promise me ... Okay. I’ll contact you when it’s safe. Love you, be careful.”

As she hung up, Jason couldn’t help but comment. “You two seem close.”

Alex’s smile was tired but genuine. “We’re more like siblings than cousins. My parents took Gabe in after his folks died. We grew up together, fought together, hacked together.”

The affection in her voice was palpable, and Jason felt a twinge of envy. Or maybe it was just a reminder of what he’d left behind in Redemption Creek.

He eyed the cramped room, taking in the two king-sized beds with their faded floral spreads.

Gravy’s voice cut through the tension. “So, uh, sleeping arrangements?” The kid’s eyes darted between the beds and the three of them. “Because I gotta say, I’m not really a cuddler.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Relax, Gravy. You get your own bed. Jason and I can share.”

Jason's eyebrows shot up, a retort on the tip of his tongue, but Gravy barreled on.

"Cool, cool. But, uh, more pressing question ..." His stomach let out an audible growl. "Any chance of room service in this five-star establishment? 'Cause I'm starving."

"I think we passed a vending machine by the ice maker," Jason offered, already dreading the thought of stale chips and ancient candy bars.

"Ooh, gourmet," Gravy quipped. "Living the high life now."

Jason caught Alex's eye. The mix of exasperation and amusement in her expression mirrored his own feelings.

"It's going to be a long night," he muttered.

Alex's lips quirked in a half-smile. "Welcome to life on the run, country boy. Hope you like the sound of horse races and Gravy's snoring."

As if on cue, the distant neigh of a horse drifted through the thin walls. Jason sighed, settling onto the edge of the bed. The pulsing ache in his side echoed his heartbeat.

A long night for sure.

Alex stirred as the first rays of sunlight seeped around the edges of the thick blackout curtains, painting the worn furniture in depressing shades of gray. The faint sounds of horses nickering and equipment clanging drifted from the racetrack across the road. She slid quietly out of bed, careful not to disturb Jason, who was curled on his side at the far edge of the mattress.

Sleep had eluded her all night, her mind a whirlwind of worry about Gravy's safety and the future of RAVEN. Now that they were on this Seven-Five's radar, everything she'd built was at risk.

She slipped into the bathroom, wincing as she flicked on the garish fluorescent light. Her reflection confirmed what she already knew—she looked awful. Her usually sleek black hair hung in limp hanks, and dark circles shadowed her eyes. Tossing and turning all night in her clothes hadn't helped, though thankfully, her tech gear didn't wrinkle. Much.

Not that she should care how she looked. It's just ... it had been a while since she'd had anything resembling a conversation with a handsome guy. And irritating and bossy as he might be, Jason Reilly was exceedingly handsome. His obvious faith made him even more so.

Alex shook her head, disgusted with herself. "Get your head back in the game, Mendoza," she muttered. But it was hard. RAVEN had consumed her life these past five years, leaving little room for anything else. When was the last time she'd spoken to someone for purely social reasons?

She couldn't recall.

Impatient with herself, she slipped on a clean tech tee and grabbed her toothbrush. That would have to suffice for now.

Midway through brushing her teeth, a muffled exclamation startled her. She yanked open the door to find Jason bolt upright, rifling through their pile of clothes and equipment.

"He's gone," he said, meeting her eyes.

She pulled the toothbrush from her mouth. "Gravy?"

"Yup. He took his go bag and left this." Jason thrust out a note scrawled on motel stationery.

This is all my fault. I'll handle things from here. Stay chill, my friends. G ? —

Alex blinked in surprise. When had he slipped out? She hadn't heard a thing.

Jason ran a hand through his tousled hair. "That little sneak," he added, a mix of annoyance and grudging admiration in his voice.

Alex felt a headache brewing behind her eyes. This day was already off to a fantastic start.

She scanned the bustling track area. Men in work clothes swarmed around the stables, but there was no sign of Gravy. The guy's misplaced guilt twisted her stomach into knots.

Expression stony, Jason grabbed a jacket out of his go bag and put it on. Concealing

his Sig Sauer in the right pocket, he then swiped one of the key cards to the room off the dresser and headed for the door. “I’ll track him down.”

“Not without me.” She hurried to grab her own jacket and weapon. “We’ll have better luck together.”

For once, he didn’t argue.

The stable area directly across the street was under heavy guard. Understandably. No way Gravy had walked in. The track sprawled north and south, butting up against the interstate for almost a mile in each direction.

“He’d try to find transportation,” Jason guessed. “We need to head toward the main drag.” He pointed east.

Side by side, they hurried down the narrow back street, checking every window they passed.

They were almost to the main street when Jason spotted him in a nearby diner.

Alex shook her head. Window seat. Not the smartest move.

“We might as well join him.” Jason held the door for her.

The place was packed with tiny men in sweatsuits—jockeys, obviously— and others in sweat-stained shirts and muck-covered boots. The smell of bacon and coffee hung thick in the air.

Alex slid into the booth on Gravy’s side, trapping him in. The man’s eyes darted between them, wariness evident in the hunched shoulders beneath his tangled mop of hair.

“Morning,” he mumbled, clearly anticipating their anger. “Before you say anything, I was hungry. I didn’t want to wake you guys up.”

Jason gave him a hard look. “Right. Why the note, then?”

Gravy hung his head. “I feel bad putting you guys to all this trouble.”

“We have no evidence those attacks had anything to do with you,” Alex was quick to insist. “My money’s on Army here. He’s our troublemaker.”

Gravy pushed a fried egg around his plate. “Maybe. Sure. I can buy that. I’m nobody. Who’d come after me?”

“Not what I meant.”

He smiled sadly. “I know. You’re way too nice to say it. Anyways, I’m glad you guys found me. I already decided I’d head on back to the motel after I ate. I don’t really have much of an escape plan.”

“We’re leaving. Now,” Jason said, his voice low but firm.

Gravy’s fork clattered against his plate. “Can’t we finish breakfast? You haven’t even ordered. Can’t start the day without java, dude.”

Alex sighed, the aroma of pancakes weakening her resolve. “He’s right.”

Jason looked pained. “Fine. But eat fast.”

As they ate, Gravy steered the conversation to lighter topics, drawing out childhood stories and favorite foods. Alex found herself relaxing despite the circumstances. Intentional or not, Gravy had a natural way of bridging the gap between her and

Jason.

Her eyes caught on the intricate cross tattoo on Gravy's forearm. "That's beautiful work."

Gravy beamed. "Thanks! Jason actually got me into church. My family wasn't into that stuff, so I had no idea what I was missing."

He turned to Alex, curiosity bright in his eyes. "What about you? Are you a believer?"

Alex paused, memories of her childhood flooding back. "For sure," she nodded. "Both my parents and my yaya—my grandmother—they instilled faith and prayer in me from a young age."

"Same here," Jason chimed in.

"What about your parents?" Alex asked, surprising herself with her interest.

"Dead," Jason replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "Kind of like your cousin. But my sister and I had our grandparents. We had a good childhood. Better than it could have been."

A pang of sadness hit Alex as she imagined a young Jason, robbed of his parents too soon. It reminded her of Gabe, and of her own losses—her father to a heart attack five years ago, her mother to diabetes just last year. She'd been an adult, but the pain was still fresh.

Uncomfortable with the growing sense of connection, she fidgeted in her seat. "We should go."

Jason nodded, already reaching for the bill.

As they exited the diner, Alex noticed Jason's subtle shift in posture. His shoulders tensed, eyes scanning their surroundings.

"What?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Two potential hostiles," he murmured, barely moving his lips. "Two o'clock. Behind that black SUV. About 300 yards."

Alex's gaze darted to the spot Jason indicated. Two men in nondescript jeans and dark jackets stood beside the vehicle. Too bland to be owners. Too clean to be stable hands.

Her heart rate quickened. "I see them. What's the play?"

Jason's voice was calm, belying the tension in his frame. "We act natural. I'll take point, you bring up the rear. Keep Gravy between us."

They set off, their pace measured and unhurried. Alex fought the urge to look over her shoulder, focusing instead on the steady rhythm of Gravy's footsteps in front of her. The morning air, tinged with the scent of hay and horse, felt electric with potential danger.

As they rounded the corner to their motel, Jason's stride lengthened. "I think we're clear," he said, relief evident in his voice.

Alex released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "False alarm?"

"Looks like it. But better safe than sorry."

They entered the motel room, the musty air a welcome reprieve from the tension outside. As Alex began gathering their belongings, her phone buzzed. A text from Gabriel flashed across the screen:

Big disaster. Call me ASAP.

Her stomach dropped. Just when they thought they were in the clear, another crisis loomed. She looked up at Jason and Gravy, their faces expectant.

“We’ve got a bigger problem,” she said, her voice tight.

Or at least she did.

Jason eased the motel room door shut, his eyes still scanning the quiet street beyond. The rhythmic thud of horses being led to morning workouts mingled with the low rumble of diesel trucks from the nearby interstate, creating an oddly soothing backdrop to their tense situation.

Alex made a beeline for the bed, her phone clutched like a lifeline. “Give me a minute,” she said, her voice tight with worry.

Gravy disappeared into the bathroom, the sound of running water quickly filling the air. Jason sprawled across the other bed. He couldn’t help but watch as Alex initiated the video call, curiosity getting the better of him.

The moment Gabriel’s battered face appeared on the screen, Jason sat bolt upright. Even from his vantage point, he could see the bandage wrapped around Gabriel’s head, his eyes blackened and swollen. The young genius was propped up in a hospital bed, his left arm encased in a splint.

“Gabe? What happened?” Alex’s voice was tight with concern.

“I was attacked,” Gabe said, his words slightly slurred. “But I’m okay.”

No. He wasn’t. Jason bit back his natural response. No need to argue about what was a minor detail at this point.

“Attacked?” Alex’s pitch rose. “Where?”

“At the alternate lab site. I was working late and?—”

“An all-nighter? Again? Gabe, we’ve talked about this ...” Alex’s exasperated tone barely masked her fear.

“I know, I know,” Gabe sighed. “But I’m so close to a breakthrough with the NeuroVerse?—”

Alex pinched the bridge of her nose, a gesture Jason was becoming all too familiar with. “And you took off without Mac or Liv. How did they get to you?”

“Well, I got hungry and ordered some food online ...”

She bit her lip. Hard. “Gabe, for a genius, that was spectacularly stupid.”

Jason could practically feel the tension radiating off Alex. Her knuckles were white where she gripped the phone, and he found himself wishing he could ease some of that stress from her shoulders.

“I know, I know,” Gabe’s voice crackled through the speaker. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“Surveillance tapes,” Alex said, her voice taking on a sharp, professional edge. “Have you checked them?”

“Mac and Liv are handling that,” Gabe replied. His face wobbled in and out of the frame as he tried to shift position in the bed, clearly with great effort. And pain.

Jason leaned in closer as Mac and Liv appeared on the screen, flanking Alex’s cousin. The tension in the room ratcheted up another notch, making the air feel thick and heavy.

“Nothing obvious on the surveillance tapes,” Mac reported, his face grim. “Just two guys in black ball caps, faces carefully hidden from the cameras.”

“So pros,” Jason cut in, his military instincts kicking into high gear.

Liv nodded. “That’s my guess.”

As Mac detailed the intruders’ movements, Jason watched Alex. She vibrated with fury and nervous energy, her fingers drumming an incessant rhythm on her knee.

“And?” Alex blurted out, her voice strained.

“And nothing,” Liv responded. “They didn’t take anything, didn’t disable the interior cameras. Just looked around and left.”

“Because Gravy and I weren’t there,” Jason guessed, a cold feeling settling in his gut.

“Looks like,” Mac agreed.

The debate that followed was heated but hushed on Jason and Alex’s side, as they were both all too aware of Gravy’s presence in the next room. The fact that they had the tech to intercept Gabe’s late night food order, and they took nothing from the high-tech lab made the implications clear. The attackers knew where to find Gabe’s alternate lab. And they had the resources to pull together a quick attack. Resources few organizations outside of his teams, or Seven-Five’s, would have.

The coincidence was too great to ignore.

The sudden silence as the shower shut off cut through their side of the discussion like a knife. Jason tensed, acutely aware of their dwindling privacy.

“We should wrap this up,” he murmured to Alex. “Gravy will only stress out. Besides, the fewer people who know what’s going on, the better.”

Alex nodded reluctantly, ending the call just as Gravy emerged from the bathroom, hair still dripping.

“What’s up?” Gravy asked, his eyes darting between them. “You guys look stressed.”

Jason forced a neutral expression. “Nothing major. Alex, can I talk to you outside for a sec?”

Horses whinnied in the background as they stepped out into the crisp, morning air. He led Alex to a secluded corner of the motel’s exterior, the scent of old cigarettes and stale beer clinging to the peeling paint. The distant rumble of trucks on the interstate provided a constant backdrop to their hushed conversation.

The game had changed, and he wasn’t sure if they were ready for what came next.

“We need to park Gravy somewhere safe,” he insisted, his voice low and urgent. “His disappearance has to take a backseat until we end this ... whatever it is.”

Alex nodded quickly, her eyes darting around as if expecting danger to materialize at any moment. “Agreed. What’s your plan?”

“My team could pick him up?—”

“No.” She cut him off, her tone brooking no argument. “Gravy is RAVEN’s client. My personnel will handle this.”

Jason bit back a sigh, frustration simmering just beneath the surface. “Fine. Whatever you want.”

He waited while she contacted Mac again, arranging the drop-off. “Once you and Liv get Gravy to safety, Army and I are going to shut this down,” she told Mac firmly.

Jason could hear the man’s protests through the phone. “He and Liv want to help,” Alex relayed to Jason. “They can call in contractors to babysit Gravy.”

“Bad idea.” Jason stepped closer to the phone so Mac could hear him. “We can’t know who to trust. The fewer people involved, the better. Alex and I are going it alone. No Redemption Creek team. No RAVEN personnel.”

Alex nodded, though concern flickered across her face. “Just the two of us,” she confirmed.

Great. Just great. Alone with Alex, chasing down unknown assailants with unknown motives. This was either going to be the start of something incredible or the biggest mistake of his life.

Either way, there was no turning back now.

Getting out of the LA area had taken far longer than Alex expected, though she couldn't argue with Jason's methodical approach. After Mac and Liv arrived at the motel to get Gravy, Jason insisted the two of them ride countless city busses, and two different subway lines before agreeing that he'd find them transportation to the safe house his teammate, Mason, had arranged.

Now, ten hours later, and three hundred miles north, she was starving, and deep-fried exhausted.

As the sun dipped low over the Pacific, Alex fiddled with the frayed edges of her new, garishly bright "I Big Sur" t-shirt. The cotton blend scratched at her skin, a far cry from the silk blouses hanging in her closet back home. She glanced at Jason, his steady hands gripping the wheel of the '67 Mustang he'd spied collecting dust in the back corner of a used car lot.

She shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat. "A muscle car? Seriously?"

Jason's lips quirked upward. "Nothing says we can't make the drive fun."

The car's engine purred as they wound along Highway 1, towering redwoods flanking one side, the ocean stretching endlessly on the other. Alex's stomach grumbled, reminding her of the gas station feast nestled in a plastic bag at her feet.

"I can't believe this is dinner," she grumbled, fishing out a package of beef jerky.

“Sorry, that gas station was all out of caviar.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “I’d settle for a salad that hasn’t been sitting in a cooler for a week.”

Jason chuckled, his eyes never leaving the road. “Well, princess, our five-star accommodations await. Mason hooked us up with a real gem.”

As midnight approached, the Mustang’s headlights cut through the fog rolling in from the Pacific. Alex stifled another yawn, her eyelids heavy after hours on the road. She shifted in her seat, the tacky tourist shirt still itching against her skin.

“Please tell me we’re almost there,” she murmured, peering into the darkness.

Jason nodded, guiding the car around a sharp bend. “Just up ahead.”

Suddenly, a sleek silhouette materialized through the mist. Alex’s jaw dropped as they pulled up to a stunning modernist structure, all glass and sustainable wood, perched dramatically on the cliff’s edge.

“This is the safe house?” she asked, unable to mask her surprise.

Jason killed the engine, a hint of amusement in his voice. “My man Mason generally goes big.”

As they stepped out of the car, the sound of crashing waves filled the air. A cool, salty breeze caressed Alex’s face, providing welcome relief after hours in the stuffy vehicle.

“This is not terrible,” Alex admitted, drinking in the view. Moonlight danced on the water far below, and the house seemed to float above it all, a perfect blend of luxury

and seclusion.

Jason chuckled, retrieving their meager belongings from the trunk. “Don’t get too comfortable. We’re still on the run, remember?”

Alex sighed, following him up the path to the front door. “A girl can dream, can’t she? In another life, this would make one hell of a romantic getaway.”

She caught the raised eyebrow Jason shot her way and quickly added, “You know, if I wasn’t stuck here with G.I. Joe.”

As Jason worked the high-tech lock, Alex couldn’t help but marvel at the house’s eco-friendly design. Solar panels gleamed in the moonlight, and she spotted a sophisticated rainwater collection system.

The door swung open, revealing an interior that was just as impressive. Her tired eyes widened at the sight of plush furniture, state-of-the-art appliances, and floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the breathtaking ocean view.

“Okay,” she breathed, a smile tugging at her lips despite her exhaustion. “I officially forgive you for the shirt.”

She sank into the plush sofa, letting the rhythmic crash of waves wash over her. The house smelled of cedar and sea salt, a soothing combination that eased some of the tension from her shoulders. Jason moved efficiently around the space, gathering firewood and arranging logs in the massive stone fireplace. Soon, a warm glow filled the room, chasing away the lingering chill. Alex found herself studying the play of firelight across Jason’s features, the way it softened the hard lines of his face.

Shaking herself, she stood abruptly. “I’ll check the security system.”

As her fingers flew over the touchscreen panel, bringing up camera feeds and perimeter sensors, her mind wandered. What would it be like to have a normal life? To come to a place like this for a romantic weekend, instead of as a fugitive?

She snorted softly. As if she'd ever been a "real girl."

"Everything secure?" Jason's voice startled her from her reverie.

She turned to find him in the kitchen, deftly cracking eggs into a bowl. "Since when do Army guys cook?"

He flashed a grin that made her heart skip a beat. "We're full of surprises. Hope you like omelets."

As Jason worked his culinary magic, Alex perched on a barstool, inhaling the mouthwatering aroma of cheese and herbs. "I'm worried about Gabriel," she admitted softly.

Jason's movements slowed for a moment. "I know the feeling. Gravy's tough, but ..." He trailed off, focusing intently on folding the omelet.

"But he's family," Alex finished. Their eyes met in silent understanding.

When Jason slid the plates onto the counter, Alex was surprised to see him bow his head slightly. "Mind if we say grace?"

A warmth that had nothing to do with the fire spread through her chest. "I'd like that."

Their quiet "amen" seemed to linger in the air, a moment of peace before reality crashed back in.

As they ate—the omelet was annoyingly delicious—she leaned forward. “So, what’s our next move?”

Jason’s expression turned serious. “We need to figure out who Seven-Five is after. Is it Gravy? Me and my team? Yours?”

“Or all of the above,” Alex nodded, her mind already racing. “We should start by cross-referencing our missions from the past year. Look for any overlaps, shared targets, or common locations. There might be a pattern we’ve missed.”

Jason frowned, shaking his head. “That could take weeks. We don’t have that kind of time. I say we track down one of Seven-Five’s low-level operatives and squeeze them for information.”

She jumped to her feet. “And how exactly do you propose we do that without tipping our hand? We can’t just grab someone off the street and hope they know something useful.”

So much for feeling all warm and cozy. She paced the length of the living room, her bare feet silent on the polished hardwood. The moonlight streaming through the windows cast long shadows, mirroring the twisting paths of her thoughts.

Jason leaned against the fireplace, his face etched with frustration. “We need to lure their hunters into the open. Hit them back,” he suggested, for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Sure. How about we just blow something up?” Alex cut in, exasperation clear in her voice. “What we need is intel.”

He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it further. “Sitting around playing mind games isn’t exactly my style.”

“No, your style is more ‘boom first, ask questions later.’” She took a deep breath, forcing herself to soften her tone. “Psychological warfare might take longer, but it’s safer and more effective in the long run.”

Jason’s jaw clenched.

She spread her hands wide. “Look, I don’t like sharing airspace with you any more than you like sharing with me, but how about we act like grown-ups and go with the best plan?”

He muttered something under his breath, then sighed heavily. “Okay. That’s not a bad point.”

A tense silence stretched between them, broken only by the soft lapping of waves against the cliffs below. Finally, Jason straightened.

“I’m turning in,” he announced, heading for the stairs. “Try not to overthink us into oblivion while I’m gone.”

Alex watched him disappear into the darkness of the upper level, then sank onto the oversized couch with a groan. “Smart move, Mendoza,” she chided herself. “Running off your only companion.”

But as annoying as Jason could be, she had to admit he wasn’t entirely wrong.

And then, with a jolt of clarity that left her both amused and dismayed, Alex realized: neither was she.

She leaned back, letting her head rest against the soft cushions. The realization settled over her like a heavy blanket—what they had here were two confirmed loners, each wrestling for control.

As her eyelids grew heavy, Alex's last coherent thought was that this partnership might prove to be her greatest challenge yet.

Jason stood at the window, his reflection a ghost in the fog-shrouded glass. He'd slept surprisingly well, lulled by the high-tech security features and the rhythmic crash of waves. But this morning, unease coiled in his gut.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, wincing as the movement pulled at his side. Lifting his shirt, he examined the neat row of stitches along his ribs. He'd have to be careful not to tear them open. The bullet graze was healing well after three days, but the area was still tender and bruised.

Lowering his shirt, he sighed. Bridger and the rest of the team would be chomping at the bit to jump in, guns blazing. But with Jane on the verge of delivering twins, Jason needed them to stay put, to keep her safe. Which left him here, squaring off against a shadowy organization with more resources than the GDP of numerous countries.

"One hand tied behind my back," he muttered, tension knotting his shoulders.

The soft pad of bare feet on hardwood pulled him from his brooding. Alex shuffled into the living room, dark hair tousled from sleep, clutching a steaming mug of coffee like a lifeline.

"Morning, sunshine," he quipped, forcing a lightness he didn't feel.

Her mock glare didn't quite hide the amusement in her eyes, and he felt a surprising twinge of ... something. Comfort? Camaraderie?

“So, what’s our game plan?” she asked, curling up on the couch.

Keep people safe. That was about all he had. He was a protector, always had been, but this ... this felt like trying to hold back the tide with his bare hands.

“First things first,” he said, pushing aside his doubts. He pointed at the kitchen. “I need a refill. Back in a sec.”

Jason returned from the kitchen, fresh coffee in hand, and settled into an armchair across from Alex. He took a thoughtful sip before speaking.

“Before we dive into planning a potentially dangerous op, I think we should get to know each other’s backgrounds a bit better. It’ll help us work together more effectively.”

Alex nodded, her fingers tapping against her mug. “Makes sense. What do you want to know about RAVEN?”

Jason shook his head. “Actually, I’m more interested in your time with the Agency. That’s where you honed your field skills, right?”

Surprise flickered across her face before she composed herself. “Fair point. Well, I spent five years with the CIA, mostly in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. My specialty was deep cover operations—infiltration, asset recruitment, intel gathering.”

She paused, taking a sip of coffee. “I’ve got experience in surveillance, counter-surveillance, and covert communications. Decent hand-to-hand combat skills, though I prefer to avoid direct confrontation when possible. I’m proficient with most small arms, but my real strength is in improvisation and adaptability.”

Jason listened intently, mentally cataloging her skills. His gaze drifted to the scar on

her inner arm, visible where her sleeve had ridden up.

“And you left with a souvenir,” he observed, nodding towards the mark.

“Yup,” Alex replied, her tone clipped.

There was clearly a lot of baggage behind that wound, but now wasn’t the time to pry.

Alex set down her mug. “Your turn. Tell me about BlackOut Squadron.”

Jason’s jaw tightened involuntarily, but as he met her gaze, he was surprised to find genuine curiosity there. No judgment. No ulterior motive. Just ... interest.

“It was supposed to be the elite of the elite,” he began, sinking deeper into the armchair. “Ten years ago, they recruited us—told us we’d be answering only to a deep, secret-level NSA sub-group.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, as he delved into BlackOut Squadron’s sordid history. “Turns out, after the first couple years, we were nothing but glorified hitmen for the Consortium,” he said, bitterness seeping into his voice.

Alex’s eyebrows shot up, her body unconsciously mirroring his posture. “The Consortium? I thought this Seven-Five group was the one after you.”

“Same evil billionaire overlords. New branding. Seven-Five’s the next evolution of the Consortium. Or should I say devolution?”

That drew a snort of laughter.

He nodded, noticing how she hung on his every word, her green eyes wide with a mix

of shock and sympathy. “Once we started questioning the chain of command, they ‘retired’ the entire team. Forcibly.”

Alex’s hand twitched, as if she wanted to reach out to him. The gesture, small as it was, didn’t go unnoticed. Jason felt an unexpected warmth bloom in his chest.

“That’s awful. To believe you were serving our country when ... I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her voice soft and sincere.

He shrugged, trying to play it off, but her genuine concern was disarming. “It is what it is. We’ve moved on, started Redemption Inc. Trying to balance the scales, I guess.”

“And blow Seven-Five apart,” she added.

He took a long sip of java, eyeing her over the top of his mug. “And that.”

Jason swallowed, acutely aware of the diminishing space between them. He could smell her shampoo, a light, citrusy scent that was unexpectedly intoxicating. “This new Seven-Five iteration is deeper in talent, and way more ruthless.”

As he finished speaking, he realized he’d been so caught up in Alex’s reactions—the furrow of her brow, the way she bit her lower lip in concentration—that he’d shared more than he’d intended. He felt exposed, vulnerable. But strangely, he didn’t mind as much as he would have thought. There was something about Alex that made him want to let his guard down, just a little.

He liked her.

The realization hit him like a punch to the gut. And judging by the way she was looking at him, all soft eyes and understanding smile, the feeling might be mutual.

The air between them suddenly felt charged, crackling with an intensity that made his skin prickle. He cleared his throat, leaning back in his chair to put some distance between them.

Alex seemed to sense the shift, her posture stiffening as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve, uh, heard of the Consortium before,” she said, her voice losing its earlier warmth. “Helped disappear a few people running from them. But I never had a personal stake in the fight.”

Jason nodded, grateful for the return to more familiar territory. “And now?”

Alex’s eyes flashed, a steely determination replacing the earlier softness. “Highly personal. Whether this Consortium or Seven-Five or whatever came after me originally or not, they’ve messed with my family. And RAVEN. They’re going down.”

The vehemence in her voice matched his own. He found himself admiring her strength of will, the fiery spirit that burned beneath her cool exterior. She’d be a dangerous opponent.

Like him.

Their eyes met, a silent understanding passing between them. They were two predators circling each other, wary but intrigued.

He broke the tension, standing abruptly. “So, we stay put and dig deeper?”

Alex nodded, visibly relieved to be back on solid ground. “Starting with Gravy’s father. If there’s a connection to Seven-Five, we’ll find it.”

As they moved to their respective workstations, Jason couldn’t help but steal glances

at Alex. Her face was a mask of concentration. All business now. But he couldn't shake the memory of her earlier warmth, the way she'd looked at him with understanding and something more.

He turned to his own laptop, pushing those thoughts aside. They had work to do. But a small part of him, a part he wasn't quite ready to acknowledge, hoped that once this was all over, they might have a chance to explore these resonating frequencies.

Alex's stomach growled, a reminder of the soggy sandwich that sat half-eaten and wholly unappetizing at her elbow. She wrinkled her nose, the musty smell of her "I Big Sur" shirt competing with the sandwich for Most Offensive Odor. Not exactly the glamorous spy life she'd imagined.

Her gaze drifted to Jason, perched at the sleek mid-century modern desk. The stunning view of cliffs and endless Pacific beyond was wasted on him; his focus was laser-tight on the computer screen. He looked like he was born to do this. The jerk.

"Having fun over there, Encyclopedia Brown?" she quipped, stretching muscles stiff from hours of inactivity.

Jason grunted, not bothering to look up. "For sure. Data mining is my passion. Right up there with root canals and mandatory office parties."

She snorted, grateful for his sarcasm. At least she wasn't the only one going stir-crazy. She glanced at her phone, rereading Liv's message for the hundredth time.

Gabriel discharged, the team enroute to Belize. Safe, but out of contact for the next six hours.

"Everything okay?" he asked, finally tearing his eyes away from the screen.

"Yeah," Alex sighed. "Just wishing I was with my team."

His expression softened for a moment before he schooled it back to neutral. “I get it. But we’ve got work to do here. Paige thinks she might have found something in the general’s recent activities.”

Alex perked up, ignoring the protesting creak in her spine as she stood. “Spill it, Army. What’s the good word?”

As she moved to peer over his shoulder, she caught a whiff of cedar soap—a pleasant contrast to her own eau de mildew. She pushed that thought aside, focusing on the screen. If they could just find a connection between Gravy’s father and Seven-Five, maybe they could finally start making sense of this mess.

And maybe, just maybe, she could get out of this shirt before it grew sentient and tried to strangle her in her sleep.

Unable to sit still another second, she headed for the kitchen. “Coffee?” she offered.

“Please.” Jason responded without looking up.

She took a moment to admire the overbuilt stainless steel coffee maker. Could have a place in the Museum of Modern Art, for sure. She sniffed appreciatively. And it made a fine cup of joe.

Mugs filled in seconds, she set Jason’s cup beside him, the rich aroma momentarily overpowering her own questionable scent. She leaned in, squinting at the screen filled with classified documents that would make most intelligence agencies weep with envy.

“Impressive,” she murmured, more to herself than him.

But as the minutes ticked by, the endless stream of bureaucratic jargon began to blur

before her eyes. Alex straightened, stretching her arms overhead as she glanced out the window. The fog had lifted, revealing a bright, windy day that made the cliffs and churning ocean below look like something out of a travel magazine.

“That’s it,” she announced, her voice cutting through the oppressive silence. “I’m going for a walk.”

Jason’s head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. “Not alone, you’re not.”

Alex bristled, hands on her hips. “What, you think I can’t handle myself?”

“You really want me to answer that?”

“So come with me.”

He threaded his fingers together behind his neck and arched his back, stretching carefully. “Give me ten more minutes.”

They glared at each other. But as much as Alex hated to admit it, she was no match for Jason in a physical confrontation. And right now, his jaw was set in a way that suggested trying to leave without him wouldn’t go well.

“Fine,” she huffed, turning on her heel.

She stomped back to her laptop. The video surveillance footage from the attack on Gabe was still open on her screen. She hit play, watching the scene unfold for what felt like the hundredth time.

The grainy images flickered before her eyes: her cousin’s tired face as he opened the door, the sudden chaos as the attackers burst in. She blinked hard, scrutinizing every detail, every movement. There had to be something she was missing, some clue that

would make all of this make sense.

She hit play yet again, vaguely aware of Jason's concerned glance in her direction. But she ignored him, focusing instead on the video, rolling it again.

That's when she caught it. A tiny detail, with huge implications.

How had she missed it the first twenty times?

She jostled her coffee, the dark liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim of her mug as her eyes widened in sudden realization.

"No way," she breathed.

The grainy video played out again, but this time, Alex saw it with new eyes. The fake delivery driver, emerging from his dented subcompact, white food bag in one hand, and in the other, an oversized iced coffee.

When he and his accomplice left with Gabriel in tow, there was no white bag. And no iced coffee.

"Jason!" she called out, unable to keep the excitement from her voice. "I think I've got something!"

He was at her side in an instant, his earlier irritation seemingly forgotten. "What is it?"

"DNA," Alex said, pointing to the screen. "That idiot left his drink in Gabe's lab. If we can get to it before they go deep underground ..."

Jason's eyes lit up with understanding. "We could ID our mystery man."

Alex was already reaching for her phone. “I’m contacting Liv. If they divert to Gabe’s secondary lab, they might be able to snag it before going off-grid.”

As Alex relayed the information to Liv, she could feel Jason’s energy rise to match her own. This was their first real break, a tangible lead in a sea of confusion and dead ends.

She ended the call, giving Jason a thumb’s up. “Liv is on it.”

He clapped his big hands and let out a whoop of triumph. Alex found herself pulled into a bone-crushing hug. For a brief moment, she was acutely aware of his solid warmth.

Then, as if suddenly realizing what they were doing, they sprang apart. Heat rose in her cheeks, her skin tingling where they’d made contact.

Jason cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck. “So, uh, about that walk ...”

“Right. Absolutely.”

They stood there for a moment, awkwardly avoiding eye contact, before simultaneously turning to prepare for their outing. As she headed to her room to grab her jacket, she couldn’t help but smile. They had a lead, a plan, and maybe, just maybe, something else brewing beneath the surface.

Seven-Five wouldn’t know what hit them.

Jason's boots crunched on the gravel path as he and Alex made their way along the windswept Big Sur coastline toward the tiny town nestled in the elbow of one of the millions of hairpin turns along the highway. He winced slightly, the stitches in his side pulling with each step. Still, the discomfort was worth it for this view—and not just of the landscape. The afternoon sun cast a golden glow on Alex's shoulder-length, black hair, making it shimmer like silk in the breeze.

He subtly pressed a hand to his injured side, grateful that Alex seemed too lost in thought to notice his occasional grimace.

"So," he said, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between them, "trust fund baby turned CIA operative. That's quite a career pivot. What made you join?"

Alex's lips quirked into a wry smile. "Would you believe it was my parents' fault? They were always trying to save the world, one charity gala at a time. When the CIA approached me in college, it felt like destiny."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "And how did that work out for you?"

"Oh, it was thrilling," Alex deadpanned. "I got to attend fancy parties, sip champagne, and giggle at powerful men's jokes. Turns out, when you're young, female, and seemingly vapid, people tend to forget you have ears."

They started down a steep trail leading to the ocean below. "You were gathering intel while playing arm candy?"

Alex nodded, her dark eyes flashing with a mixture of pride and frustration. “You’d be amazed what secrets men will discuss when they think you’re more interested in your manicure than national security.”

“But let me guess,” Jason said, offering his hand to help her over a particularly treacherous part of the path, “it got old fast.”

“Bingo,” Alex confirmed, her hand lingering in his for a moment longer than necessary. “I saw too much. Human trafficking, wealthy people trapped in dangerous relationships, superiors playing roulette with valuable asset’s lives. I couldn’t just stand by and giggle anymore.”

They paused at a viewpoint, the vast expanse of the Pacific stretching out before them. Jason turned to look at her, truly look at her, and felt a swell of admiration. “So you decided to help targeted people disappear.”

Alex met his gaze, a fierce determination in her eyes. “Someone had to.”

As they resumed their hike, Jason found himself in awe of the woman beside him. She could have lived a life of luxury and ease, but instead, she’d chosen to fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. It was impressive, inspiring, and if he was being honest with himself, more than a little attractive.

He cleared his throat, shoving that last thought aside. “Well, I’d say you made the right choice. Though I bet your parents weren’t thrilled about you ditching the champagne circuit.”

Alex’s laughter, carried on the salty breeze, was the only answer he needed. “What about you?”

“Never was much of a choice for me. I was born and bred in Redemption Creek. I’m

lucky. Small town life always suited me, I guess.”

It sounds like you love it there. What made you give up ranching life for army green?”

He hesitated, caught off guard by the question. The wind whipped around them as he considered his response.

“The great lure of adventure, I guess. I joined up thinking I’d do one tour, then head home. Help my sister run the family hardware store.”

Alex’s eyebrow arched. “Well, clearly that plan didn’t pan out.”

Jason shook his head, surprised at how easily the words flowed. “My CO talked me into applying for Delta Force. Then came BlackOut Squadron. Before I knew it, ten years had flown by.”

They paused at a rocky outcropping, the shimmering Pacific stretching endlessly before them. Jason leaned against a boulder, grateful for the respite it offered his aching side.

“And then?” Alex prompted softly.

“Then it all went wrong,” Jason said, his voice tight. “Forcibly retired. The Consortium—Seven-Five now—gunning for us. I went off the grid, tried to take them on alone.”

He fell silent, the weight of those lost years pressing down on him. “These past six months back in Redemption Creek ...” He trailed off, emotion suddenly thick in his throat. “Being back with my family. My team ... it’s been good. Really good.”

Jason swallowed hard, surprised by the surge of feelings. “Leaving to help Gravy was a lot harder than I expected. I want to be there for Jane and her kids, and for my team.”

He shook his head, as if trying to dislodge the unexpected vulnerability. Where had all this come from? He glanced at Alex, realizing with a start just how much he’d shared.

“I, uh ... I’ve never really told anyone all that before,” he admitted, running a hand through his wind-tousled hair.

Alex’s smile was soft, understanding. “Sounds like you found something worth hanging around for. Or maybe someone?”

“No one special. I mean, unless you count family. And my team.” He turned back to the ocean, using the vast expanse to ground himself. But even as he struggled to regain his composure, a part of him marveled at how easy it had been to open up to her. In the span of one walk, she’d managed to slip past defenses he’d spent years building.

And the strangest part? He wasn’t sure he minded.

The climb back up the cliff trail was steep, and Jason felt every step in his injured side. But the pain was a distant concern compared to the thrill of strategizing with Alex.

“We need to flip the script,” he insisted. “Be the hunters instead of the hunted.”

Alex scampered up over a small boulder and turned back to wait for him to clear it. “Agreed. But how do we—” She broke off, her gaze zeroing in on his side. “You’re bleeding.”

He glanced down. A dime-sized blot of red seeped through his shirt. “It’s nothing.”

“We shouldn’t have hiked so far,” Alex chided, her brow furrowed with concern.

He met her eyes. “Trust me, it was worth it.”

Something flickered in Alex’s expression, a warmth that made his heart skip a beat. He cleared his throat, steering them back to safer ground. “We need to figure out how to hurt Seven-Five ...”

As they continued their ascent, ideas flew back and forth between them. The need for more intelligence, the frustration of waiting for news about General Munsinger’s connections.

“I feel like we should be doing more,” Alex insisted as they crested the hill, the safe house coming into view. “We could set a trap. I could be bait.”

Jason lurched toward the house. “Not happening.”

“Excuse me? I was an active CIA operative for years, not to mention my private work. I have tradecraft.”

“It’s not about your skills,” he explained quickly, recognizing the storm brewing in her expression. “I’m just not sure you’re their primary target. It’s more likely they’re after me, or possibly just Gravy.”

Alex’s anger deflated slightly, replaced by curiosity. “What do you propose?”

Jason hefted himself up the stairs and paused on the porch, turning to face her. “Paige and our new Seven-Five expert, Cody, think we should set up a fake safe house. Something convincing enough to draw out a Seven-Five operative.”

Alex's eyes lit up with interest. "Go on."

"We'd make it look like Gravy and I are holed up there, then leak information about the location. Wait for the rats to show up, then close the trap."

"That's good," Alex nodded. "But how do we make it convincing enough?"

Jason shrugged. "That's where we're stuck. Any ideas?"

Alex's lips curved into a sly smile. "As a matter of fact, yes. What if we use Gabriel's tech against them?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know enough about his VR and holographic research to cobble together a display," she explained. "We could project holograms of you and Gravy inside the safe house. It would be convincing enough to make the attackers believe you're really there."

"That's brilliant. How long could you keep the illusion going?"

"Long enough to lure them in and spring the trap. Once they're inside, thinking they've hit the jackpot?—"

"We've got them."

Their strategizing was interrupted by the chime of Alex's phone. She quickly scanned the message, her grin widening.

"It's Liv," she announced triumphantly. "She got the cup to a trusted lab. We should have DNA results sometime tonight."

Despite his aching side, Jason felt a surge of optimism. For the first time in days, it felt like they were making real progress.

“Looks like it’s gonna be a good day,” he said, realizing as the words left his mouth that he wasn’t just talking about the case.

Alex’s answering smile confirmed that maybe, just maybe, she felt it too. As they headed inside to finalize their plans, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between them. And for once, he wasn’t in any hurry to analyze it or push it away.

Let Seven-Five come. With Alex by his side, he was ready for anything.

Two long days later, Alex's muscles ached from hours of stillness as she crouched behind a weathered Ford pickup, her eyes fixed on the ramshackle house across the quiet residential street. The previous day's mad dash back down the coast and the nerve-wracking infiltration of her own headquarters to gather as much of Gabriel's equipment as they could, felt like a lifetime ago.

Now, she and Jason crouched in a sliver of shade, sweat pouring down their backs, watching lifelike holograms of him and Gravy moving about inside the decoy safe house, visible through grimy windows.

She allowed herself a moment of pride. The AI-generated traffic cam footage of Jason and Gravy driving through the San Fernando Valley would have set Seven-Five's facial recognition software ablaze. Now, all that remained was to spring the trap.

A hot breeze ruffled her hair, carrying the scent of nearby ocean mixed with urban decay. This neighborhood had seen better days, all peeling paint and chain-link fences. Perfect camouflage for their operation, but it made her skin crawl with unease. Bright and sunny this place was not.

She glanced at Jason. Jaw tight, he scanned the street. His earlier words echoed in her mind: "I'll handle the retrieval. You stay back, no matter what."

She had nodded, agreeing outwardly while knowing full well she'd intervene if things went south. He might have years of black ops experience, but she wasn't a helpless

civilian. The weight of her weapon against her hip was a reassuring presence.

Movement at the end of the block caught her attention. Two men in scuffed work boots and faded mechanics' coveralls ambled toward the house, tool belts slung low on their hips. To any casual observer, they'd pass for local handymen. But Alex noted the too-careful way they moved, the constant scanning of their surroundings.

"Showtime," she breathed.

Jason's hand brushed her arm—a silent command to stay put—before he melted into the shadows. Alex's pulse leapt as she watched him slink closer to the unsuspecting operatives, his movements fluid and predatory as he utilized the ample cover the cluttered neighborhood provided.

She watched him in the truck's side mirror and lifted a prayer for his safety.

Suddenly, Jason burst into action. The first operative barely had time to widen his eyes before Jason's Sig Sauer appeared, aimed squarely at the man's chest.

"Don't move," Jason growled.

The operative's hand plunged into his pocket. Jason didn't hesitate. He fired, the shot echoing through the quiet street. The man cried out as the bullet tore through his shoulder, the handgun he'd grabbed clattering to the ground as he fell.

"One down," Alex whispered, her eyes darting to the second target.

Jason spun, his voice low but carrying to Alex's ears. "Your turn, dude. Easy way or hard way?"

Weapon now in hand, the second operative raised his arm.

Jason sited in on him. “Hard way it is.”

But instead of standing his ground, or firing, the man bolted.

Jason snatched up a fist-sized chunk of the cracked sidewalk.

“Nice try.” He hurled the makeshift projectile.

The rock caught the fleeing man square between the shoulder blades. He stumbled, arms pinwheeling, before crashing face-first onto the pavement with a sickening thud.

“Nice throw,” Alex breathed, a fleeting moment of relief washing over her.

But that relief evaporated instantly as movement caught her eye. A third figure emerged from between two parked cars a hundred yards up the street. “Jason, three o’clock!”

Her warning rang out sharply. He didn’t hesitate, diving to the side as a shot cracked through the air, missing him by inches. He rolled, coming up in a crouch behind a parked car.

Alex watched with her heart in her throat as the third operative swung his weapon towards Jason’s position. His face was a mask of cold determination beneath a black ball cap, finger tightening on the trigger. Jason might be black ops trained, but his opponent had the advantage of superior positioning.

In a contest between equals, that could be deadly.

For a split second, she hesitated, torn between following orders and protecting Jason. But as she saw the man’s finger start to squeeze, something snapped inside her.

She bolted to her feet. The operative caught sight of her, backing into the shadows. But not before Alex noted the slim figure and delicate features. A woman. Not that it mattered.

In one fluid motion, Alex raised her weapon and fired.

The shot rang out, cutting through the tense silence. The woman flinched and ducked, her own shot at Jason going wide.

Alex dropped back down, her heart pounding. She'd given away her position, but Jason was safe. Hopefully, she'd distracted the other woman long enough for Jason to gain the advantage.

More gunfire. Two shots in rapid succession. Alex watched in horror as both operatives—the one Jason had shot in the shoulder and the one he'd just downed with the rock—jerked violently, then went still. Blood began to pool beneath their motionless forms.

“No!” Her mind reeled at the sudden, brutal turn of events.

The shooter melted away into the maze of alleyways before either she or Jason could react. The acrid scent of gunpowder hung in the air, mixing with the metallic tang of blood.

Distant sirens wailed, growing louder by the second. The neighborhood, moments ago silent and still, now buzzed with the sound of slamming doors and curious voices.

Jason ran toward her from the far side of the street. “We need to bail. Now!”

Her training kicked back in, pushing shock aside as they fled. Her eyes darted everywhere, cataloging potential cameras or witnesses. She spotted a traffic cam at

the upcoming intersection and made a mental note to hack into it later, if possible.

“This way.” She pulled Jason down a narrow alley strewn with overflowing garbage bins. The stench was overwhelming, but it provided cover from prying eyes.

As they ran, the bitter taste of failure mixed with adrenaline. They’d come for intel and instead were fleeing a double homicide.

Not ideal.

She sucked air into her burning lungs as they paused to catch their breath behind a boarded-up store. “The third shooter was a woman.”

She hadn’t meant to say that out loud. It shouldn’t matter, but somehow the thought of another woman killing in cold blood ...

Okay, it mattered.

“Good to know,” Jason responded, releasing the catch on his pistol to check the magazine.

She forced herself to focus on the important issues. “What if they knew we were coming? Either our communications with our teams are compromised, or?—”

Jason shoved the magazine back into the gun’s grip. “If we were compromised, we’d be dead already. Why let me take out those men before firing on us? That was Seven-Five cleaning house. That third operative must have fallen behind the other two for some reason. Once she came upon the scene, she realized she couldn’t take me down, so she did the next best thing: don’t leave possible captives. Seven-Five doesn’t tolerate failure, and they won’t leave us any more loose ends.”

Her knees wobbled. If he was right, and Seven-Five was this ruthless with their own operatives, what hope did she and Jason have?

They were in deeper trouble than ever before, caught between a shadowy organization and the full force of law enforcement. But as the gravity of their situation settled over her, she felt something else beneath the fear—a cold, hard knot of rage.

Her voice was barely above a whisper, but laced with steel. “We almost died back there. Those men—they were executed. By their own teammate.”

Jason nodded, his face grim. “Welcome to the big leagues, Mendoza. This is what we’re up against.”

“No. This is what they’re up against now. Us.” She looked up at him, her eyes hard. “They just started a war.”

The man gazed out the window of his opulent study. Yard upon yard of prime Kentucky Bluegrass shimmered in the late summer heat. The grounds made his mansion—every imported inch of it—worth everything he'd spent.

His fingers itched to grip a nine-iron.

Beyond the manicured lawn, oaks and birches swayed in the late afternoon breeze, their leaves a symphony of greens soon to burst into autumn's fiery palette. He inhaled deeply, savoring the heavy air that wafted through the open window.

"I'll schedule a weekend here during peak color," he mused, his voice echoing in the cavernous room. "Assuming Seven-Five allows department heads such frivolities."

The crystal decanter of scotch caught his eye, promising liquid warmth and momentary escape. As he reached for it, the shrill ring of the secure line shattered the silence. He snatched up the device, its weight oddly comforting in his hand.

"Dragonfly reporting in, sir." The woman's rich contralto sent an involuntary shiver down his spine.

He stared into the middle distance, pushing away thoughts of Dragonfly's lethal grace. "Tell me you have Jason Reilly," he ordered, anticipation building.

A pause stretched between them, heavy with unspoken tension. "That's a negative, sir. There were complications."

He slammed a fist on the polished mahogany desk, rattling the scotch decanter. A muscle twitched in his jaw as he fought to control his rising frustration. "Walk me through it."

Dragonfly's voice crackled through the line, crisp and cool as autumn frost. "Reilly got the drop on Thetford and Caine. I had to terminate them both."

Idiots .

His fingers tightened around the device, knuckles white with suppressed rage, but he forced his voice into a semblance of calm. "An excellent call. Good thing I sent you along at the last minute."

"Yes." A pause, pregnant with expectation. "Probably well worth my emergency fee."

"No question." He bit back a sardonic chuckle, knowing the true depth of his desperation remained his own dark secret.

Inhaling deeply, he continued, each word measured and controlled.

"You cleaned up the site, yes?"

"Of course."

He ended the call with curt thanks, slamming the receiver down with a satisfying crack. Finally alone, he unleashed his fury. The crystal decanter sailed across the room, exploding against the far wall in a shower of glass and amber liquid. The acrid scent of spilled alcohol filled the air, mingling with his frustration.

Footsteps approached rapidly. His young assistant burst through the door, eyes wide

with concern. “Sir? I heard?—”

“Get me a scotch,” he snapped, cutting him off. “Three fingers.”

“Sir.” The assistant scurried to the sideboard, carefully avoiding the glittering shards on the floor.

He turned back to the window, unseeing eyes fixed on the deepening shadows outside. His mind raced, conjuring and discarding plans with brutal efficiency. Failure was no longer an option. The sands of opportunity were running out, his chance to prove himself to Seven-Five’s upper echelons slipping away with each passing moment.

The squeak of the cork coming out of a fresh bottle eased his heartbeat.

Now or never.

Destroy, or be destroyed.

Chase, or trap.

Trap. Yes.

A triumphant sound rose in his throat. He could still have Reilly.

His assistant handed him the tumbler, amber liquid sloshing gently. “You’ve got a plan,” the younger man observed, curiosity glinting in his eyes.

He took a long sip, savoring the smoky notes on his tongue. He shouldn’t divulge his plans, but what did it matter? Either the kid would rise through the ranks, in which case this serves as a valuable learning experience, or he’d die.

Either way, no harm. No foul. He took another sip. “I have a way to lure Reilly and the Mendoza woman into the open.”

“How?”

“I’m going to get them to turn on each other.”

“But what if Mendoza kills Reilly? You want him alive.”

He waved his hand, dismissing the protest. “Mendoza’s not that talented. Reilly will put her down in a heartbeat.”

“Still, people get lucky,” his assistant persisted, worry etching lines around his mouth.

He shrugged, ice clinking in his glass. “Maybe.”

Another sip of scotch, another moment of contemplation. “Reilly’s not the only BlackOut specialist with intel on us. There are others. If he dies, he dies.”

As his assistant melted into the shadows, he turned back to the window, watching as the last rays of sunlight painted the trees burnished gold.

Either way, handling Reilly would impress his new bosses. An imperative, if he wanted to end up richer.

Instead of dead.

Alex leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the passenger window, watching the shadowy outlines of cliffs and crashing waves blur past. The Pacific Coast Highway stretched before them, a ribbon of darkness punctuated by the occasional flare of headlights. The events of the day replayed in her mind, a grim montage of gunfire and blood.

Jason gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white in the dim glow of the dashboard. His jaw clenched, a telltale sign of the pain he was trying to hide. Alex's gaze drifted to the bandage peeking out from under his tee.

"How many times have you been shot?" The question slipped out before she could stop it.

Jason's eyebrows shot up, a moment of surprise breaking through his stoic facade.

"Sorry." She winced. "Social skills aren't my superpower. Obviously."

His laugh, deep and unexpectedly warm, filled the car. "I don't mind the question at all. Just takes me a sec to do the counting." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "If you don't count scratches and near misses, three."

Scars crisscrossed his hands and forearms, a roadmap of close calls and narrow escapes. His hair, thick and short, somehow managed to look rakishly disheveled despite its military cut. She imagined those piercing eyes, now focused intently on the road, softening as they gazed at someone he loved.

Who would have guessed she'd fall for him? From the minute they met, he'd rubbed her the wrong way. Too much alike, she realized with a start. They were both headstrong control freaks—excellent traits in their lines of work. In love? Not so much.

The thought settled like a weight in her chest, adding to the melancholy that had dogged her since the shootout. Alex sighed, her breath fogging the window. "I didn't think it would affect me like this," she murmured.

Jason glanced over, concern etching lines around his eyes. "The violence?"

She nodded, grateful for his perceptiveness. "It's not like I haven't seen people die, but this ..." She trailed off, struggling to find the words.

"Was up close and personal," Jason finished for her, his voice gentle. "It's different when you're in the thick of it."

Alex nodded, feeling a lump in her throat. "Yeah, it is. I just ... I keep seeing their faces. Hearing the shots."

"That's normal," Jason assured her. "It doesn't make you weak. If anything, it makes you human."

She turned to look at him, studying his profile in the dim light. "Does it get easier?"

Jason was quiet for a moment, his eyes fixed on the road. "Not easier," he finally said. "But you learn to carry it. To use it as a reminder of why we do what we do."

Alex leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. Despite the darkness surrounding them, she found herself grateful for this unexpected connection.

The Mustang's headlights cut through the darkness as he eased the car into the safe house's gravel driveway. The engine's rumble faded to silence, leaving only the distant crash of waves and the soft rustle of wind through the trees.

Jason turned toward her, his face half-shadowed in the dim starlight. "Wait here while I check the perimeter. Lock the doors."

Alex nodded, watching as he slipped out of the car, his movements fluid despite his injury. The car door closed with a soft thunk, then she heard the distinctive snick as she engaged the automatic locks.

Jason melted into the shadows, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

The night enveloped the safe house, a velvet blanket studded with a million pinpricks of starlight. Alex leaned back in the Mustang's leather seat, the familiar scent of the car wrapping around her like a comfortable old sweater. Her eyes drifted closed as she sent up a silent prayer for her team's safety, for Gravy, for Jason. A wistful smile tugged at her lips as she added a cheeky request for a man like Jason when this was all over. A real life, without the constant shadow of death and destruction, suddenly seemed within reach.

The buzz of her phone shattered the moment of peace. Alex's heartrate spiked as she saw the message on her secure line. No one outside her inner circle should have this number. Her fingers trembled slightly as she opened the text:

Reilly is not who he claims. He's a Seven-Five operative.

The words hit her like a physical blow. Shock, disbelief, and then a creeping dread washed over her in waves. She stared at the screen, mind racing. Jason, a Seven-Five plant? Impossible, and yet ...

Her finger hovered over the encrypted link attached to the message, but she knew better than to activate it from her phone. Especially coming from a number she didn't recognize. Deeper research would have to wait.

"All clear," Jason said, returning quickly.

She tensed, forcing a weak smile as she climbed out of the car. "I'm beat. Think I'll grab a shower and hit the sack."

In her room, she locked the door with exaggerated care, wincing at even the faintest click. The TV came to life, a mindless sitcom providing cover for the soft tapping of her keyboard. With practiced efficiency, she erected a digital fortress around her laptop before following the mysterious link.

As the page loaded, her heart pounded in her ears. She told herself it was ridiculous, that Jason couldn't possibly be a traitor. But a small, ever-vigilant part of her whispered: What if?

The last time she ignored a warning like this, she'd almost died.

Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the evidence before her, the blue glow of the laptop screen casting eerie shadows across her face. Her pulse quickened, adrenaline flooding her system, sharpening every sense. The distant crash of waves against the cliffs seemed to grow louder, punctuated by the creaks and groans of the old safe house settling around her.

First, she opened the file of audio recordings. Jason's voice, low and conspiratorial, slithered through her earbuds. From the dialogue, it was clear he was discussing mission details with an alleged Seven-Five handler.

She forced herself to breathe deeply. Deepfakes were child's play these days. She

couldn't trust audio alone.

Next came a file of intercepted text messages. Her stomach churned as she read through them, Jason's supposed words laying out plans to manipulate her and the team. The casual cruelty stung like salt in an open wound, even as her logical mind insisted they could easily be fabricated. Still, a seed of doubt took root, its tendrils creeping through her thoughts.

Again, easy to ignore.

Then came the final piece of evidence, the one that made her blood run cold. A series of high-resolution surveillance photos filled her screen, each more damning than the last. Alex's breath caught in her throat, her fingers trembling slightly as she scrolled through the images.

There was Jason, his face clear and unmistakable, shaking hands with a known Seven-Five operative outside a nondescript warehouse. Another showed him accepting a thick envelope, his expression grim and focused. The timestamp on the final image made Alex's stomach lurch—it was dated just two days before he'd shown up at her safe house.

She leaned in closer, the heat from the laptop warming her face as she zoomed in, searching desperately for any sign of manipulation or fakery. But the details were too crisp, too consistent. The play of light on Jason's face, the familiar scar on his left hand, even the way he stood—it all screamed authenticity. Alex could almost smell the salt air and feel the gritty texture of the concrete in the photos.

What hit her hardest was the location. She recognized the background—a stretch of industrial coastline she'd used for her own covert meetings in the past. It was a place known only to a select few in their world. If this was a setup, it was an incredibly sophisticated one.

Alex's fingers hovered over the keyboard, her mind racing. She could explain away voice recordings and text messages, but these photos? They were harder to dismiss. The seed of doubt blossomed into full-blown suspicion, leaving her feeling hollow and betrayed.

Every sound in the house seemed amplified—the hum of the air conditioning, the tick of a distant clock, the soft rustle of leaves outside her window. Her own heartbeat thundered in her ears, drowning out everything else.

A sharp knock at the door made her jump, her heart leaping into her throat. The sudden noise shattered the tense silence, sending a jolt of electricity through her already frayed nerves.

"I just wanted to see if you showered," Jason commented. "I'm gonna jump in myself and I didn't want to hog all the hot water."

Alex's mind raced, her voice coming out higher than usual. "Totally. I mean fine. I mean. Yes. Go ahead and shower. I'm good. 'Night."

She heard his footsteps retreat, followed by the distant sound of the shower starting. Alex shut her laptop with trembling hands, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. She crawled into bed, pulling the covers tight around her as if they could shield her from the doubts now plaguing her.

Sleep eluded her, each creak of the old house making her tense. The man she'd begun to trust suddenly felt like a stranger. As the night wore on, she stared at the ceiling, her heart heavy with the weight of suspicion and the fear of betrayal.

The evidence on her screen mocked her, a digital Pandora's box she couldn't close. She ran a hand through her hair, her mind whirling with implications and possibilities.

One thing was clear: she needed answers, and she couldn't get them with Jason just a few feet away. The walls of the gorgeous house closed in around her.

Her training kicked in, pushing aside the emotional turmoil. She needed space and time to investigate without Jason's watchful eye. To follow up on these accusations, she'd have to create some distance between them.

She needed to get away.

It was a risky move, but the alternative—blindly trusting a potential enemy—was unthinkable.

Jaw set, she began to formulate a plan. She'd need to be careful. Jason was no amateur; if he really was Seven-Five, he'd be watching her every move. She'd have to find a way to slip away without raising suspicion.

Tomorrow, she'd make her move and get the space she needed to uncover the truth, whatever it might be.

The first rays of sunlight filtered through the curtains as Jason's eyes snapped open. Old habits died hard. Years of covert ops had him trained to wake at first light. He lay still for a moment, listening intently to the quiet safe house before slipping out of bed.

As he moved silently through the rooms, his thoughts drifted to Alex. He'd been wary of working with a partner at first, especially one as headstrong as her. But over the past few days, he'd found himself appreciating her quick wit and analytical mind. She brought a different perspective to their operations, one that complemented his more tactical approach.

He paused by her closed door. A small smile tugged at his lips. Despite her initial bravado, Alex had proven herself capable and adaptable in the field. More than that, he was surprised to find he enjoyed her company. Their banter kept him on his toes, and her determination matched his own.

He shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts. Getting too attached was dangerous in their line of work. Still, as he made his way to the kitchen to start the coffee, he couldn't deny the growing sense of trust and camaraderie between them. It had been a long time since he'd had a partner he could rely on this way.

"Focus on the mission," he muttered to himself, but even as he said it, he knew something had shifted. Working with Alex was becoming more than just a necessity—it was becoming a partnership he valued.

Coffee going, he headed back to his room, reaching for his secure phone to check for

updates from his contacts. A notification caught his eye—a new message from an unknown number. His brow furrowed as he read the cryptic text:

There's a snake in your garden. Open your eyes. Link expires in 10 minutes.

Below was a URL, leading to an encrypted file share. Jason's thumb hovered over the link. It could be a trap, a virus, any number of things. But if it wasn't ... if it contained vital intel ...

Curiosity and training warred within him. Finally, he tapped the link.

His blood ran cold as images filled the screen. Alex—unmistakably Alex—shaking hands with a man he recognized as a high-ranking Seven-Five operative. Another photo: Alex accepting an envelope, her expression grim and businesslike. The timestamp made his stomach lurch. Just days before he and Gravy met up with her in the desert.

He scrolled quickly, accessing file after damning file. Financial records showed large deposits into offshore accounts linked to Alex. Transcripts of intercepted communications discussed “the asset” and “maintaining cover.”

Jason set the phone down, his mind reeling. He paced the small room, trying to process what he'd seen. Every instinct screamed that this had to be a setup, a clever ploy to drive a wedge between them. Alex had risked her life for their mission multiple times. She'd saved him in that shootout. How could she be a double agent?

But doubt gnawed at him. In his line of work, he'd seen the unthinkable happen too many times. Good agents turned. Loyalties shifted like sand. The evidence was compelling—professional-grade, not some amateur photoshop job.

He ran a hand through his hair, frustration building. He needed more information, but

how to get it without tipping his hand? If Alex was compromised, alerting her to his suspicions could be disastrous.

The sound of movement from Alex's room snapped him back to the present.

Showtime.

He schooled his features into a mask of normalcy. Whatever the truth was, he'd get to the bottom of it. Too much was at stake to take anything at face value.

He headed back to the kitchen, prepared to face her. He couldn't help watching her every move as she poured them both coffee. She looked tense. Guarded, even.

"Sleep okay?" he asked.

"Absolutely. You?" She gulped her coffee.

"Middling." He stared into his cup while he watched her with his peripheral vision. If she was tense when he walked in, she vibrated now.

Something was definitely up.

She sucked down the last of her coffee. "I need to head into town," she announced abruptly, not quite meeting his gaze. "We're low on supplies."

"Give me a sec and I'll come with you."

"No," she protested, too quickly. "I mean, it's a simple run. No need for both of us to go."

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, his instincts screaming that something

was off. Alex's body language, her rushed words, the way she avoided eye contact—it all pointed to deception.

Keeping his voice casual, he said, "Great. I want to do some more research anyway."

He tossed her the car keys. That tracker he'd installed after he drove off the used car lot had seemed like a prudent precaution at the time, not a tool to spy on his partner.

Good thing the Unit had pounded paranoia into him early.

As Alex caught the keys, their eyes met for a brief moment. Jason searched her gaze, looking for any sign of the woman he'd come to trust. Was there a flicker of remorse there? Or was he just seeing what he wanted to see?

"Thanks," she murmured, grabbing her jacket. "I'll ... I'll be back soon."

As the door closed behind her, Jason let out a long breath. He moved to the window, watching as Alex drove the car down the driveway. His hand reached for his phone, pulling up the tracking app that would let him follow her every move.

The guilt hit him like a physical blow. He'd just betrayed her trust, all based on evidence that could be fabricated. But if she was innocent, why was she acting so strangely?

Jason stared at the blinking dot on his screen, representing Alex's location. He'd crossed a line, and he knew it. But as he settled in to monitor her movements, he couldn't shake the feeling that in this dangerous game they were playing, trust might be a luxury he couldn't afford.

The beefy car roared down the long drive, its engine a throaty growl that matched Alex's turbulent emotions. She pulled onto the highway, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. The morning fog was burning off in fluffy clumps, revealing stunning seascapes and sheer cliffs that spoke of both beauty and danger.

She reached for the stereo, then remembered with a groan that this relic had an 8-track player. No Bluetooth here. Once she was sure the safe house was out of sight, she pulled off onto a scenic overlook, the tires crunching on gravel.

Her fingers hovered over her phone. Normally, she shared everything with Liv and Gabe and Mac, but this.... For some reason, the thought of sharing this foul information—of having to admit out loud that she might even believe it—kicked her straight in the gut. It would be yet another horrific example of her broken judgement-meter when it came to handsome men.

Maybe she was actually wrong this time. Maybe this was nothing. Better to keep it to herself until she was certain.

But how to explain this to Liv without revealing her suspicions about Jason? She settled for a half-truth, tapping out a quick message.

Can't explain, but I need a new safe house. Now.

Liv's response was immediate, bringing a ghost of a smile to Alex's face. At least some things were constant.

On it.

The drive into town was a blur of conflicting thoughts. Alex found herself in a quaint coffee house, the aroma of freshly ground beans doing little to settle her nerves as she waited for Liv's update. She doubted the place would be as sumptuous as the Redemption Creek choice, but she didn't plan to be there long. Just enough time to dive into some serious research into the allegations against Jason. Her heart said she'd made a huge mistake not telling him about the strange info, but she'd learned long ago never to trust her heart.

But her instincts had been wrong before, hadn't they? Like in Marrakesh, where her poor judgment had cost lives. The memory sent a chill down her spine, despite the warmth of the coffee cup in her hands.

She had to play this smart. Conservative. If the info was tainted, she'd owe Jason a huge apology.

She closed her eyes, praying for clarity, but found only more doubt.

"No biggie," she said aloud, trying to convince herself. "He'd do the same thing, right?"

The lack of response from the universe was not reassuring.

While she waited for Liv to get back to her, she pretended to be absorbed in her phone, thumb scrolling aimlessly as she sipped her latte. The rich, bitter taste of espresso mixed with creamy foam coated her tongue. In reality, her gaze flicked from patron to patron, assessing potential threats.

The exhausted new mom in the corner, dark circles prominent under her eyes, nursed a steaming cup of herbal tea. The faint scent of chamomile wafted over, mingling

with the café's ever-present aroma of coffee beans. A bearded man with paint-splattered jeans lounged by the window, pencil flying across a sketchpad. The soft scratching sound barely audible over the low hum of conversation and the gentle clinking of ceramic mugs. At the counter, a sun-weathered older woman in hiking gear studied a trail map, her boots leaving small clumps of dried mud on the worn wooden floor.

Alex shook her head, chiding herself for the paranoia. Not everyone was out to get her. Though if they were, Jason would be a formidable adversary. The man moved like a panther, all coiled strength and deadly grace. She'd seen him in action, knew the damage those hands could inflict.

The quaint café, with its mismatched mugs and local art, seemed at odds with the harsh beauty just beyond the windows. Jagged cliffs plummeted to a roiling sea, a reminder that danger lurked beneath even the most picturesque surfaces. The muted crash of distant waves provided a constant backdrop to the café's cozy atmosphere.

Her phone buzzed, the vibration startling against the smooth tabletop.

Arranged for a small cabin. Approx. 1 hour drive from your location. Directions to follow. Stay as long as you need.

Liv's message, short and to the point, ended with an uncharacteristic, Love you. Good luck.

Alex's nose wrinkled. For Liv, that was practically a tearful, rib-cracking hug. She must have inadvertently communicated more fear than she'd intended.

"Still," she murmured, allowing herself a small smile, "it's nice to be loved."

The warmth of that thought lasted approximately three seconds before her paranoia

kicked back in, her fingers tightening around the smooth ceramic of her mug.

Her gaze drifted to the window, watching a seagull ride the wind currents above the cliffs. Her thoughts, however, were firmly fixed on Jason.

He was a force of nature, as wild and unpredictable as the churning sea below. In a physical confrontation, she knew she'd be outmatched. She'd seen him take down men twice his size with a fluid grace that was almost beautiful in its brutality. His hands, capable of such gentle touches, could just as easily snap bones.

And yet ...

The idea of him turning those skills against her seemed as impossible as the sun deciding to rise in the west.

She'd trusted him. Implicitly. Completely.

Which was not in any way reassuring. Her trust meter had been smashed a long time ago. If she ever had one.

Her fingers absently traced the thin, silvery scar that ran from her elbow to her wrist. A permanent reminder of the last time she'd been so blind. Marrakesh. The name alone brought a bitter taste to her mouth, overpowering even the lingering notes of her latte.

"You've been wrong before," she whispered to her reflection in the window. "Spectacularly, disastrously wrong."

She closed her eyes, inhaling the rich scent of coffee and pastries. When she opened them, her reflection stared back, eyes hard with resolve. She couldn't afford to let her heart overrule her head. Not again. Not with so much on the line.

“Trust,” she muttered, “but verify.”

The seagull outside gave a mocking cry, as if laughing at her indecision.

She strode out of the café and into the tiny market next door. The bell above the door jingled cheerfully. She grabbed a basket, her mind already cataloging essentials. This new safe house was unlikely to rival Redemption Inc.’s cushy setups.

“Peanut butter, crackers, bottled water,” she muttered, navigating narrow aisles. And frozen dinners. Lots of them. Her free hand tapped a restless rhythm against her thigh as she planned her next move.

“Get to the safe house, then authenticate the intel,” she reminded herself, tossing a can of beans into the basket with more force than necessary. The elderly cashier raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

An hour later, she found herself on a winding mountain pass. The old muscle car groaned as it climbed, leaving behind the cool embrace of the redwoods. Chaparral took over, hot and dusty, the air shimmering above the blacktop.

She navigated another hairpin turn, knuckles white on the steering wheel. Sweat beaded on her forehead, the car’s ancient AC wheezing feebly against the oppressive heat. The scenery blurred past, a monotonous tapestry of sunbaked scrub and rocky outcroppings, each bend in the road offering a new potential ambush point.

Jason would know something was wrong by now. He’d have found a way to get to town and ask questions. He’d know where she’d been, but not where she was going.

Her eyes flicked constantly between the road ahead and her rearview mirror. Each passing car sent a jolt of adrenaline through her system. A black SUV appeared in her mirror, gaining ground rapidly.

The SUV drew closer. Foot hovering over the accelerator, Alex tried to think of evasive tactics. Then the vehicle turned off, revealing a family of tourists. She exhaled sharply, forcing her grip to loosen on the wheel.

“Get it together,” she muttered, shaking her head.

She chided herself for the reaction. This was exactly why she needed to maintain distance, to verify the intel objectively. Yet a small part of her longed to see his face in her rearview mirror, a sign that he cared enough to follow.

The miles ticked by, each one ratcheting up her inner conflict. Her shoulders ached from being hunched over the wheel. The heavy air inside the car seemed to press down on her, making each breath a conscious effort, laden with doubt and second-guesses.

Then, just as the constant vigilance began to wear her down, a flash of movement in her rearview mirror jolted her back to full alertness. Another black SUV roared up behind her, bigger than the last one, eating up the distance with terrifying speed. Her heart leapt into her throat as the behemoth of a vehicle drew close enough for her to make out the driver.

Jason.

His face was a mask of grim determination, eyes locked on her car with laser-like focus. Her breath caught, her mind reeling as conflicting emotions warred within her. Relief and terror danced a frantic tango in her chest.

Was he here to save her? Or to silence her?

The muscles in Jason's forearms corded as he gripped the steering wheel, his eyes locked on the Mustang's taillights snaking up the mountain ahead. Alex's erratic driving only fueled his suspicions. Was she running to the enemy? Or from them?

He pressed the accelerator. The sudden surge pushed him back into his seat, adrenaline coursing through his veins. Alex's smaller car weaved dangerously close to the edge, tires kicking up dust and pebbles that pinged against his windshield.

"Alex, slow down," he growled, forced to recalculate his approach. He couldn't risk sending her over a cliff in his attempt to stop her, no matter how furious he was.

The mountain air whipped through his open window, carrying the scent of sunbaked earth and pine. His training screamed that this was a trap, but his gut twisted with the hope that there was an explanation, any explanation, for her sudden flight.

Seizing the upcoming straightaway, he gunned the engine and angled into the oncoming lane, pulling alongside her. The vehicles were so close he could hear the whine of her straining engine over the rush of wind. He gestured emphatically, shouting himself hoarse. "Pull over! Now, Alex!"

For a split second, their eyes met. Jason caught a glimpse of fear and determination in Alex's wide-eyed glance before she shook her head, her car lurching forward as she accelerated.

Jason bit off a curse. He edged closer, using the SUV's bulk to force her toward the

shoulder. It was a risky move, one that sent his heart racing, but he was out of options.

Gravel crunched and pinged against both vehicles as they skidded to a stop on the narrow shoulder. He killed the engine and threw open the door, exiting in one fluid motion. The sudden silence was oppressive, broken only by the low rumble of engines and the distant cry of a hawk.

Alex mirrored his movements, her stance wary as she emerged from her car, inching between the two vehicles. The mountain wind whipped her hair around her face, but couldn't disguise the mix of defiance and apprehension in her eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Jason snarled, taking a step forward. “Are you trying to get us both killed?”

Her chin jutted out stubbornly. “You’re the one playing demolition derby on a mountain road!”

“Why are you running? What’s going on, Mendoza? What aren’t you telling me?”

“I don’t owe you any explanations,” she insisted, but beneath the bravado, he caught a flicker of something else. Fear? Uncertainty?

She stared up at him. “How did you find me?”

“The car’s bugged. I added a tracker before we left the car lot.”

“You what?” Fury blazed in her eyes, followed by a cold fear.

“If I planned to kill you,” he cut in, careful to keep his tone even, “you’d already be dead.”

He watched the words sink in, saw the moment her anger deflated, replaced by confusion.

“Fine,” she said. “Then why are you here?”

Jason’s eyes narrowed. “I could ask you the same thing. Running to the enemy? Or from them?”

“Me? You’re the one who?—”

He stepped closer, using his height to his advantage. He could pin her down, force the answers out of her in seconds. But the thought left a bitter taste in his mouth. “Who what? Followed you? Because from where I’m standing, you’re the one with some explaining to do. You’re the one who ran.”

Alex hugged herself. “You bugged the car.”

“And you’ve been acting suspicious all morning. Plus, I did that before. Good thing.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then make me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

She shook her head hard enough to make her dark hair swirl around her face. “Not until I know who to trust.”

“Are you saying you don’t trust me?”

The way she clamped her lips together was answer enough.

An odd silence fell. They stood there, chests heaving, eyes locked in a battle of wills.

And then, almost imperceptibly, something shifted. The air between them changed, charged with a different kind of tension. Jason found himself acutely aware of Alex's proximity, the fire in her eyes.

In that moment, he realized that getting answers might be the least of his problems.

The tension between them shattered as the whirl of helicopter blades cut through the air. His training kicked in, his body moving before his mind fully processed the threat.

"Down!" He tackled her, shielding her body with his own as bullets peppered the ground around them.

Gravel bit into his palms as he army-crawled toward the meager cover of his SUV, dragging Alex with him.

"Friends of yours?" Alex shouted over the deafening roar.

Jason's response was drowned out by another burst of gunfire. He risked a glance upward, assessing their options. The helicopter hovered menacingly, its occupants taking aim again.

He reached for his sidearm. "We need a diversion."

Alex's eyes lit up with a dangerous glint. "I've got an idea. Cover me!"

Before he could protest, she sprinted toward the Mustang. His heart leapt into his

throat as he provided covering fire, forcing the helicopter to veer away momentarily.

She emerged clutching what looked like a flare. “Ready?”

Jason nodded, understanding dawning. She’d never be able to throw it high enough to do any damage, but as a distraction, she’d hit gold.

As the helicopter turned sharply, readying for another attack run, Alex struck the fuse and heaved the flare skyward. The bright red flare arced through the air, momentarily distracting the helo’s crew.

In that split second of confusion, Jason took his shot. The crack of his gun was lost in the chaos, but the effect was immediate. Dark liquid poured from the helicopter’s underbelly.

The damaged helicopter lurched drunkenly, trailing oil as it retreated over the mountain ridge.

Alex’s quick thinking had saved them both. She met his gaze, a mix of relief and lingering wariness in her eyes.

“Nice shot,” she offered, a tentative olive branch.

“Nice distraction,” he countered, holstering his weapon.

Questions still hung between them, but something fundamental had shifted. They’d just saved each other’s lives, forming a bond that transcended their earlier mistrust.

Someone had clearly set her up to reach out and then run. Which meant the poisonous info he’d received was equally tainted. No reason to even bother confirming it.

“So,” Alex broke the loaded silence, “I guess we should talk.”

He scanned the horizon, muscles still taut with lingering adrenaline, the wound in his side pulsing dully. The distant whine of the retreating helicopter had faded, leaving behind an eerie silence broken only by their ragged breathing.

He toed the dirt, turning to face Alex. “I’m guessing you received some scary info about me this morning. I got texts about you, too,” he said, seeing her puzzled look.

He could almost see the gears turning in Alex’s head as she pieced things together.

“Seven-Five,” she said suddenly. “This is exactly what they’d want. Us, divided. Easier to pick off.” She smacked her forehead. “I’m such an idiot.”

“You and me both.” He shook his head. “I could have told you about my text at coffee, but I didn’t.”

“Divide and conquer. And we nearly fell for it,” Alex shook her head, disgust evident in her voice.

“Speaking of which, who knew you were heading up the mountain?” he asked as he shifted closer.

Her face was a storm of emotions. “Liv. But it wasn’t her. No way. I texted her, asked her to find me a safe place to hide while I?—”

“Hold on,” he interrupted, his mind racing. “How do you know you were communicating with Liv?”

Alex froze, her eyes widening. “Wait ... she did text something odd. She added, ‘I love you’ at the end. She’s never done that before. Maybe our comms were

compromised. I didn't even consider ... Wow. I'm slipping."

"Hey," Jason's voice softened. He leaned against his SUV, choosing his words carefully. "You're not slipping. You're human. In our line of work, nothing's certain. We can't afford to jump to conclusions. Especially when it comes to people we care about. Sometimes we need an outside perspective. And listen, whether they've compromised RAVEN's comms, or just yours, at least now we know it's not safe to contact anyone through your phone."

The tension in Alex's shoulders eased slightly. "You're right." A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "Is that your way of saying you're useful to have around?"

"Maybe," Jason chuckled, feeling some of the earlier hostility dissipate. "Just like having someone who can pull a flare out of thin air is pretty handy in a pinch."

Their eyes met, a new understanding passing between them.

"We could've fully turned on each other."

"But we didn't," Jason countered. He took a deep breath, knowing his next words could change everything. "So, what do you say? Partners?"

The moment stretched, taut as a wire. His heart hammered in his chest as he waited for her response. He was getting her off this mountain now, whether she agreed or not.

But he'd much rather have a partner than a prisoner.

Finally, Alex extended her hand. "Okay, Army, partners. No more secrets, no more doubts."

As Jason clasped her hand, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Whatever came next, they'd face it together.

"Now," he said, a mischievous glint in his eye, "how about we figure out how to give these jerks a taste of their own medicine?"

Alex's answering grin was all the response he needed. The tide had finally turned in their favor.

25

Time to move.

Jason eyed the mountainside, assessing their precarious position. The narrow turnout barely accommodated both vehicles, leaving them exposed.

“We need to leave the SUV. I sort of borrowed it,” he confessed, holding out his hand. “Gimme the keys to the Mustang. It’s more maneuverable on these roads anyway.”

Alex hesitated for a moment, then dropped the keys into his palm. Her earlier fury had simmered into a wary cooperation. He knew because he felt the same.

He transferred his go bag to the Mustang, running through a mental sitrep. Assets: one speedy vehicle, two operatives, limited supplies, a handful of weapons, and no immediate backup. Liabilities: an unknown number of hostiles, his wound, which left him less than a hundred percent physically, and a severe lack of intel. Objectives: find secure location, establish contact with home base, and formulate a counter-strategy against Seven-Five.

The Mustang’s engine roared to life, a sound both comforting and dangerous in the mountain quiet. Jason guided the car down the winding road, hyperaware of every bend and potential ambush point.

“Where to now?” Alex broke the tense silence.

He considered their limited options. “There’s a small town about twenty miles south. We can hole up there and regroup. At the very least, we need to ditch the Mustang.”

As they descended the far side of the mountain, the SUV grew smaller in the distance, a metallic marker of the first battle. He prayed that by the time the attackers returned, he and Alex would be so far away they’d be impossible to track down.

The rumble of the engine and the occasional crackle of gravel under the tires punctuated the silence between them. His hands were steady on the wheel, but his mind whirled with calculations and contingencies.

He glanced at Alex, noting the tension in her jaw, the way she scanned their surroundings with the same intensity as his own. Despite their earlier conflict, he felt a grudging respect. Whatever else she might be, the woman was a professional.

As the mountain road gave way to more level terrain, Jason allowed himself a small breath of relief. They weren’t safe, not by a long shot, but they’d bought themselves some time.

Now, they needed to make it count.

She cleared her throat. “Jason, I ... I’m sorry,” she said, her voice barely audible over the engine. “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions about you.”

Her admission surprised him. “I’m just as guilty. We both got played.”

She nodded, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly.

Rounding yet another bend, he spotted a rustic roadside hamburger joint half a click up the road. The parking lot was half-full of cars. He pulled the Mustang off the road, carefully maneuvering it under the cover of thick coastal oaks.

Alex froze. “Why are we stopping?”

“We need to eat.” He killed the engine. “Plus, I need to check in with my team. They know I came after you. I wanted them aware in case things went sideways.”

Her face flushed red. “They’re going to think I’m an idiot.”

“They won’t,” he assured her, his voice softening. “We’ve all been in your shoes. More than once. They understand how this game works. Come on, let’s grab some food.”

They settled into a secluded booth with a view of the front door. A weary-looking waitress took their orders, returning quickly with two ice-filled sodas. The minute she disappeared, Jason pulled out his phone, but before he could begin the text, the device chimed. Bridger’s name flashed on the screen.

“It’s Bridger,” he told Alex and answered the video call.

“Wait!” She held up her hand. “If my phone’s compromised, yours could be, too.”

He bit back a laugh. The woman was sharp, but she didn’t know the depth of talent and experience on his team. “Hang on,” he said to Bridger and turned toward her. “Normally, I’d agree with you, but my people are seriously good at this stuff. And my phone hasn’t left my possession.”

“I second that.” Bridger’s face filled the screen, concern etched in his features. “Jason, we need a sitrep.”

“Copy that. I’m here with Alex.” Jason angled the phone so Alex and Bridger could see each other. “It’s complicated, Bridge. We’re okay, but?—”

“But nothing.” His friend cut him off. “You two need to get your hind ends to Redemption Creek. Now.”

And Bridger didn’t even know about the helo attack yet.

In the background, Jason saw teammates nodding in agreement. Tai leaned into the frame, his usually jovial face serious. “Your rear end’s hanging way out there, my man.”

“Guys, I appreciate the concern, but I’m not bringing this fight to your doorstep.”

Graham’s voice carried from off-screen. “And we can’t risk losing you two out there on your own. We’re stronger together. You know that.”

Jason looked at Alex, seeing the conflict in her eyes. They were at a crossroads. Whatever decision they made now would shape everything that followed.

Kate appeared next to Bridger, her eyes blazing. “Jason Reilly, if you and Alex don’t get yourselves down here right now, I swear I’ll?—”

Her threat was cut short as Jane waddled into view, her pregnant belly leading the way. Jason’s heart clenched at the sight of his sister. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her eyes, but there was a determined set to her jaw.

“Jase, please,” Jane said, her voice soft but firm. “We need you here. Safe.”

His sister’s words hit him like a physical blow, piercing straight through his carefully constructed defenses. In that moment, he saw not just his pregnant sister, but the girl he’d left behind years ago. The one who’d waved goodbye as he set off for basic training, who’d sent care packages during his deployments, who’d waited anxiously for his rare phone calls.

He remembered the worry in her eyes every time he came home, the relief mixed with fear that this visit might be the last. And now, here she was, about to bring new lives into the world, and he was still causing her grief.

The weight of all those years, all those missed moments, crashed down on him. He'd told himself he was protecting her by staying away, by keeping his dangerous life separate. But looking at Jane now, he realized that his absence had been its own kind of harm.

"We need you," Jane repeated.

Not just for protection, not just because of the current crisis, but because they were family. Because despite everything, they still wanted him there, still considered him a part of their lives.

He swallowed hard, fighting back a sudden surge of emotion. He opened his mouth to respond, to apologize, to promise he'd be there, but before he could find the words, Jane's expression changed, her hand flying to her belly.

She winced slightly, a fleeting expression of discomfort crossing her face, then she took a deep breath, seeming to steady herself.

"The girls are getting restless." She attempted a smile. "I think they're eager to meet their uncle."

Suddenly, Jane's face contorted. A small gasp escaped her lips, more surprised than pained. "Oh!"

Bridger's face drained of color. The usually unflappable SEAL looked utterly terrified. "Jane? Honey?"

Jane's eyes widened, a mix of surprise and uncertainty flashing across her face. She gripped Bridger's arm, her knuckles white. "I ... I think ..." she trailed off, her brow furrowing in concentration. After a moment, she took a deep breath and met Bridger's anxious gaze. "That felt different. We might need to call Dr. Reeves."

Bridger turned back to the camera. "I gotta go. Hospital. Now." His eyes locked with Jason's through the screen. "Jason, get here. That's an order."

The call ended abruptly, leaving Jason and Alex staring at the blank screen.

"Well," Alex said after a moment, a hint of a smile playing on her lips, "I guess we're going to Redemption Creek."

Jason nodded, a mix of worry for his sister and relief at having a destination washing over him. The thought of becoming an uncle, especially now, amidst all this chaos, felt surreal. "Looks like it. You okay with that?"

She met his gaze, the earlier hostility replaced by determination. There was something else there too—understanding, perhaps even a touch of empathy. "Lead the way, Army."

He hurriedly paid for their barely-touched meals and headed for the Mustang, Alex on his heels. He slid behind the wheel, his mind already mapping out the fastest route to Redemption Creek. A little less than five hours.

Totally doable.

"What happened to ditching the Mustang?" Alex asked.

"I re-evaluated." He thrust the key into the ignition. "Seven-Five knows where Redemption Creek is. My guess is they don't expect us to head there, but if they try

to stop us, having a different car will only buy us so much time. Finding another vehicle will take a while. I say we take the chance.”

And he needed to get home ASAP to check on Jane.

Alex appeared to give that some thought before nodding. “I agree. Let’s hit the road.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” He sketched her a salute and started the car.

As the engine roared to life, he allowed himself a small, determined smile. Seven-Five had no idea what they were in for now.

But beneath the determination, worry gnawed at him. Jane’s face, etched with a mix of pain and uncertainty, flashed in his mind.

Please, Lord, keep Jane and the twins safe.

“We’ll get there,” Alex said, her voice softer than he’d ever heard it. “Your sister looks plenty tough. And those babies? They’ve got Reilly blood. They’ll be fighters.”

Jason shot her a grateful look.

He’d finish this fight with Seven-Five, make the world a little safer, and then be the best uncle Jane’s kids could ask for. Resolve renewed, he pressed the accelerator, heading the muscle car toward Redemption Creek.

Toward home.

Four butt-numbing hours later, Alex's jaw dropped as they crested the hill, revealing the picturesque valley that cradled Redemption Creek. The vibrant ranch town nestled against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, its main street lined with charming storefronts that looked like they'd been plucked from a Western movie set.

"Wow," she breathed, her eyes wide as saucers.

Jason's lips twitched. "Not what you expected?"

"I thought it'd be more ... I don't know, secret lair-ish?"

He chuckled, a warm sound that sent an unexpected flutter through her stomach. "Just wait till you see headquarters, but first, I want to stop and see Jane. Her place is on the way."

Two hours into the drive, Bridger had called back to announce that the labor was a false alarm. Jane was back home, resting comfortably. The news had made Jason visibly brighten, and he'd spent the rest of the drive regaling her with stories of his idyllic-sounding childhood. A world-away from her own. Literally. He learned how to hunt and camp and raise livestock. A life full of rough and tumble play that had obviously instilled a strong faith, and serious self-sufficiency.

She'd been paraded around golf courses, galas and charity balls. Until she got out on her own, her sole set of skills included walking safely in stilettos and knowing the best make up strategies for daytime vs evening events.

Envy might be a sin, but she couldn't help a tinge of jealousy at the differences in their situations.

As they drove down the main street, Alex's head swiveled left and right, trying to take in every detail. The smell of fresh-baked bread wafted from a corner bakery, making her mouth water. A group of men seated outside a barn-shaped burger stand tipped their hats as the Mustang rolled by, and she found herself waving back before she could stop herself.

"And there," Jason pointed, "just past the bakery, that's the family hardware store."

Alex blinked in surprise. "I didn't know you ran a store."

His expression turned serious. "I don't. Even since our grandparents aged out, it's been all Jane. My sister's kept everything together." He paused, his voice softening. "I owe her, big time. Probably like what you did for your cousin," he added, in a surprisingly insightful comment.

Alex nodded, privately thinking that Jane had far more on her shoulders than she ever did. She and Gabe had a set of parents to raise them. Thinking about the weight Jane must have carried added a new layer to her understanding of Jason's family dynamics.

After winding up into the hills outside of town, they pulled up to a beautiful, big-windowed home. Her nerves jangled. This was it—she was about to meet Jason's family.

Alex was just climbing out of the vehicle when a very pregnant woman waddled out the front door, her face a mix of joy and exasperation. Behind her, a tall, broad-shouldered man with thick, dark hair followed, his hand protectively at her back. She recognized the team's defacto leader, Bridger North, from their video conference

calls.

Jane waved them toward the door. “Jason Michael Reilly, get your butt over here!”

Jason’s face softened in a way Alex had never seen before. He jogged up to his sister, enveloping her in a gentle hug. “Hey, Janie. How’re my nieces doing?”

Jane swatted his arm. “Kicking up a storm, no thanks to their troublemaker uncle.”

Her gaze shifted to Alex, curiosity sparking in her eyes. “Welcome. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Alex felt her cheeks heat. “All good, I hope?”

Jane’s laugh was warm and genuine. “Let’s just say I’m glad you’re here. Maybe now my idiot brother will stop trying to save the world single-handedly.”

The sincerity in Jane’s voice caught Alex off guard. She’d been prepared for suspicion, maybe even hostility. But this ... this felt like being welcomed home.

Bridger stepped forward, extending his hand. “Nice to finally put a face to the name, Alex.”

Once inside, they settled in the cozy living room. Jane eased herself onto the couch with a grateful sigh, while Bridger perched on the armrest next to her, leaving Alex and Jason the love seat across from them.

“So, Alex,” Jane began, her eyes twinkling, “has my brother been behaving himself?”

Before Alex could respond, the patter of small feet announced a new arrival. A young boy, no more than eight or nine, burst into the room.

“Uncle Jason!” he exclaimed, launching himself at Jason.

Jason caught him with practiced ease, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Hey, squirt! Alex, this is my nephew, Kellen.”

Kellen turned curious eyes to Alex. “Are you Uncle Jason’s girlfriend?”

Alex felt her face flush as Jason sputtered, “No, buddy, she’s my partner. We work together.”

Alex bit her lip, trying hard not to pay any attention to the sharp twinge of wishfulness that hit just below her ribs.

Jane caught Alex’s eye and smiled softly. “Speaking of work, Kellen, why don’t you tell Alex about that time Uncle Jason tried to help out at the hardware store?”

Jason groaned. “Oh, come on, not that story.”

Kellen’s face lit up. “It was so funny! Uncle Jason tried to organize all the nails and screws, but he mixed them all up instead. Grandpa was so mad!”

Bridger joined in, clearly enjoying Jason’s discomfort. “Didn’t he also try to rewire the store’s lighting and ended up shorting out half the block?”

Jason’s ears turned red. “In my defense, I was trying to help.”

“Help?” Jane snorted. “You caused more chaos in one afternoon than we’d had all year!”

Alex couldn’t help but laugh at the image of a young Jason, probably thinking he knew better than everyone else, wreaking havoc in the family store.

“I bet you were a handful as a kid,” she said, nudging Jason with her elbow.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Jane replied. “There was this one time he decided to ‘upgrade’ Dad’s truck ...”

As Jane launched into another embarrassing tale, Alex watched Jason’s face. Despite his obvious embarrassment, there was a warmth in his eyes, a contentment she’d never seen before. This was a side of him she never expected—the goofy uncle, the sometimes-hapless brother, so far removed from the skilled operative she knew.

As laughter filled the room, Alex felt a strange mix of emotions. There was joy at being included in this family moment, but also a twinge of something else. Envy? Longing? She pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on the story Jane was telling.

For now, she’d enjoy this glimpse into Jason’s world, storing away these moments to examine later. They still had a mission to complete, after all. But as she caught Jason’s eye and saw his sheepish grin, she couldn’t help but feel that something had shifted between them, adding yet another layer to their complicated partnership.

A few minutes later, it became obvious that Jane was tiring quickly. Jason and Alex said quick goodbyes, and following a round of rib-cracking hugs, headed out for his headquarters.

Less than twenty minutes later, they’d climbed the other, steeper side of the valley. The electronic gates were already open. Jason gunned the engine, heading straight for a cluster of newly-painted buildings.

He bypassed the main house. “I’ll show you the barn, then we’ll head to the main house.”

The massive, converted barn loomed before them, its weathered wood exterior

belying the cutting-edge technology she knew it housed.

“Welcome to the nerve center,” Jason said, a hint of pride in his voice.

They stepped inside, and Alex’s senses went into overdrive. The scent of polished wood mixed with the faint odor of gun oil. To her left, a state-of-the-art gym buzzed with activity. Through an open door, she glimpsed an armory that would make any special ops team drool.

“Impressive,” she murmured, trying to keep her voice neutral.

Jason’s lips quirked. “Wait till you see the house.”

The well-weathered farmhouse couldn’t have been more different than the high-tech barn. Warm and inviting, it exuded a sense of home that made Alex’s chest tighten unexpectedly.

As they entered, a cacophony of voices washed over them.

“Look what the cat dragged in!”

“Reilly! Thought you’d gone AWOL on us.”

Jason’s team descended upon them like a friendly whirlwind. Alex found herself caught up in introductions, trying to match names to faces. Tai, with his easy grin. Mason, quiet but watchful. Kate, her eyes sharp and assessing. Paige, who’s pink-highlighted hair and sweet smile clearly camouflaged a brilliant mind. Graham, built like a linebacker but with a gentle handshake. Quiet, watchful, Cody. And Fenn, whose smirk reminded her eerily of Jason.

They settled into the living room, the banter flying fast and furious. Alex watched as

they teased Jason mercilessly, their words barbed but underlined with genuine affection.

“So, Alex,” Paige leaned in, her eyes sparkling, “I have to tell you, your cousin, Gabriel’s work ... I’m a huge fan. His holographic imaging is revolutionary! His idea to combine a spatial light modulator with a diffuser to reduce the separation between multiple image planes without being constrained by the properties of the light modulator is amazing. Seriously.”

Alex grinned. “I’m glad someone besides Gabe understands this stuff. All I know is the projections he’s creating now are truly life-like.” She’d always known her cousin was a genius, but it was nice to hear his name was getting out in serious circles.

“He’ll be getting offers from every multi-national and every government on the planet,” Paige said.

As the cyber genius launched into a detailed discussion of Gabe’s tech, Alex found her attention drifting. She watched the team interact, the easy camaraderie, the inside jokes, the way they anticipated each other’s needs without a word.

A lump formed in her throat. This was more than a team. It was a family. The kind of family she’d never had, never even dared to dream of. Her tiny team back home was close, sure, but this ... this was something else entirely.

Her mind drifted back to Jane, radiant despite her exhaustion. Bridger’s hand never far from her back. The love between them was palpable, their excitement for their upcoming arrivals infectious. Alex couldn’t even imagine that kind of connection, that sense of creating a future together.

A sharp pang of longing hit her, catching her off guard. She’d always prided herself on her independence, her ability to stand alone. But watching this ... she couldn’t help

but wonder what it would be like to truly belong.

“Earth to Alex,” Jason’s voice cut through her reverie. “You okay there?”

She blinked, realizing the room had gone quiet. All eyes were on her, concern evident in their faces. Even after knowing her for mere minutes, they were ready to rally around her.

Alex swallowed hard, pasting on a smile. “All good. Paige was telling me about Gabe’s latest project. It’s fascinating stuff.”

As the conversation picked back up, Alex forced herself to engage. But a small part of her couldn’t help but wonder—would she ever find a place where she fit like this? Or was she destined to always be on the outside, looking in?

Shoving aside the morose thoughts, she followed Paige down the hallway to a cozy guest room. Paige hung in the doorway while Alex looked around. “There are extra clothes in the closet, every size imaginable, and a full set of toiletries in the bathroom. Let me know if there’s anything else you need,” Paige said and left her to freshen up.

Dinner was amazing, literally gourmet-quality, thanks to Mason. She ate and laughed way too much. As the evening wound down, Alex found herself genuinely enjoying the company of Jason’s team. Their easy banter and shared camaraderie reminded her of nights spent with Mac, Liv, and Gabe, huddled around takeout containers, dissecting their latest case.

The pang of longing hit her again, sharper this time. She itched to reach for her phone, to send a quick text or make a call. Just to hear their voices, to know they were okay. But she knew better. Radio silence was the protocol until the threat was neutralized or an emergency arose. No sense in risking interception.

As the team began to disperse, heading to their respective quarters, Jason hung back. He studied her face, his brow furrowing slightly.

“You okay there, Mendoza? You’ve got that thousand-yard stare going on.”

Alex blinked, realizing she’d been lost in thought. “Yeah, I’m good. Just ... missing my team, I guess.”

Jason’s expression softened, understanding dawning in his eyes. “It’s tough being cut off like this. But hey, we’ll wrap this up quick, and you’ll be back to annoying them in no time.”

His attempt at levity drew a small smile from her. “Thanks, Army. Your optimism is almost endearing.”

He chuckled, the sound warm and rich. “Don’t go spreading that around. I’ve got a reputation to maintain.”

As they walked towards the guest quarters, Jason paused. “You sure you’ll be okay here? I know it’s not exactly what you signed up for.”

Alex nodded, surprising herself with her sincerity. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. Your team ... they’re something special.”

“They do grow on you,” he agreed, a hint of pride in his voice.

Looking at him, surrounded by the warmth and strength of his chosen family, Alex felt a shift inside her. She had no doubt now that they could take down Seven-Five. This team, with their mix of skills and unwavering loyalty, was a force to be reckoned with.

But as she bid Jason goodnight and closed the door to her temporary room, Alex realized something else. This mission might not leave her with physical scars, but what about her heart?

She was in danger of caring far more than she'd ever intended, about this place, these people, and especially one former Delta Force Major.

Jason woke at dawn, his body clock stubbornly adhering to years of military routine. He dressed quickly, throwing on workout clothes and a hoodie, then fixed himself a cup of coffee in the small kitchen of his private cabin and headed straight for the barn. The gym was quiet, the early morning light filtering through the high windows. He breathed in the familiar scent of leather and sweat, relishing the moment of peace before the day began.

Settling onto a weight bench, Jason set his coffee aside and reached for a pair of dumbbells. He was just about to start his first set when the door creaked open. Alex shuffled in, her hair a messy halo around her face. She paused, blinking as she took in the impressive array of equipment.

Jason watched her curiously, dumbbells forgotten in his hands. He'd never seen her like this—sleep-rumpled and unguarded. It was oddly endearing.

“Wow, you guys don’t mess around,” Alex said, running her hand along a sleek rowing machine.

Jason shrugged, setting the weights down. “Can’t afford to in our line of work.”

He observed silently as Alex moved around the gym, her initial grogginess giving way to growing interest. She nodded appreciatively, moving to inspect a rack of free weights. “Nice. Very nice.”

Her gaze landed on a pair of boxing gloves hanging nearby. She picked them up,

testing their weight. “These yours?”

“Yep,” Jason replied, standing up from the bench. “You box?”

Alex’s expression shifted, a hint of vulnerability flickering across her features. “Not really. I mean, I’ve thrown a few punches, but nothing formal.” She hesitated, then added softly, “Actually, I was wondering if ... maybe you could show me a few moves?”

Jason blinked, surprised by the request. Alex didn’t seem the type to ask for help easily. The fact that she was asking him, trusting him to teach her, felt significant somehow.

“Of course,” he said, trying to keep his tone casual. “I’d be happy to show you some basics.”

“Thanks. I figure in our line of work, it can’t hurt to know a bit more about hand-to-hand combat.”

It took guts to admit a weakness, especially for someone as fiercely independent as Alex.

“Alright,” he said, stepping onto the mat. “Let’s start with your stance. It’s the foundation for everything else.”

He demonstrated, then watched as Alex mirrored his position. “Good. Now, let’s work on a basic jab.”

For the next hour, Jason guided Alex through various punches and defensive moves. He was impressed by her focus and determination. She absorbed each lesson quickly, adapting her technique with each repetition.

“You’re a natural,” he commented as she executed a perfect cross-punch.

Alex grinned, a bead of sweat trickling down her temple. “I’ve got a good teacher.”

The compliment warmed him more than he cared to admit. There was something satisfying about sharing his knowledge, about watching Alex grow more confident with each new skill.

By the time they collapsed onto a bench, both were breathing hard.

“Thanks, Army. This was really helpful.”

He nodded, feeling a strange mix of pride and humility. “Anytime, Mendoza. Anything for the team.”

Alex’s smile was softer than he’d ever seen it. “Right. Team.”

For a moment, they sat in companionable silence, the air between them charged with a new understanding.

Then Alex’s eyes lit up with a familiar mischievous glint. “My turn to teach. Grab that tablet.”

Jason complied, curiosity piqued. “What, gonna show me how to Google better?”

She rolled her eyes. “Cute. No, I’m going to show you how to access secure databases without leaving a trace. Pay attention, this could save your life someday.”

As she delved into the intricacies of digital infiltration, Jason found himself genuinely impressed. Her fingers flew across the screen, explaining complex concepts in ways that even his tech-challenged brain could grasp. Though quickly his mind filled up.

The steps started to blend together. Not that he'd admit it.

Luckily, Mason texted.

Strategy session in the main house. Now .

"The team's up and ready to roll," he told her, leading her toward the house.

As the group settled into the ranch house's cozy living room, the atmosphere shifted from playful to focused. Tai leaned against the fireplace, watching his friends interact. The scent of coffee mingled with the faint aroma of pine from the crackling fire.

"Alright, folks," he began, "we need a solid plan to take down Seven-Five. Any thoughts on our next move?"

Jason sank down in the closest chair, totally tapped out. They'd been up against this group for years now, ever since its first incarnation as the Consortium. The never-ending whack-a-mole was getting seriously stale.

Tai rubbed the back of his neck. "Going after another low-level player is too risky. We need to aim higher."

"What about Gravy's father?" Fenn suggested. "The general might be our ticket to unraveling this whole mess."

Kate frowned, her fingers drumming against her thigh. "That could take too long. Whether he disappeared on his own, or Seven-Five grabbed him, we'll be lucky to get a bead on him quickly. Assuming he's even still alive."

Jason nodded, trying to ignore the dull ache in his side. "Agreed. We need a more

immediate target. Someone we can squeeze for serious intel. Someone the organization might even want back.”

“I’ve got something,” Cody called from his position at the computer. With a few swift keystrokes, the wall-mounted monitors flickered to life.

Three faces appeared on the screens, each exuding a chilling sense of wealth and arrogance. Or maybe that was just his take.

“Meet our potential targets,” Cody announced. “All former higher-ups in the Consortium who’ve managed to hold onto their positions during the transition to Seven-Five.”

Jason stepped closer, examining each face in turn. Cody would know. He’d spent years trapped into working as a Consortium operative. He’d managed to work as an effective undercover agent, sending out valuable intel on the organization, until he was able to break free a few months ago.

“First up, Yuki Tanaka,” Cody began. “Japanese tech mogul, rumored to be a significant Seven-Five’s financial backer. Currently in Tokyo.”

Jason’s gaze shifted to the next image. “And this sketchy dude?”

“Aleksandr Volkov. Russian oil tycoon with ties to several government officials. Last known location: Moscow.”

“Not exactly in our backyard,” Jason muttered. “Who’s our third option?”

Paige took over, her lips curved into a small smile. “That would be Charles Ellison Winthrop III. Old money, new corruption. And currently ...”

“In San Francisco,” Alex finished, her eyes lighting up with recognition.

The entire room stared at her. Jason, too. He couldn’t help it. “And you know this, how?”

She rolled her eyes. Hard. “Much as I hate to admit it. He’s my people.”

Jason’s jaw dropped. “You’re related ?”

Paige snorted. “No. Duh. Alex means he’s high society. Right?” The pink highlights in her hair caught the light as she turned to Alex.

“Bingo.” Alex caught his eye. “I do venture out of the bat cave on occasion to keep up appearances. Which means I have to pretend I have some idea what other trust-fund baby socialites are up to.” Her sheepish grin could have melted butter. “The price of doing business.”

No doubt. He grinned back and scrutinized the doughy-faced rich dude. Adrenaline surged. “That’s doable. What’s his story?”

As Paige and Cody told them about Winthrop’s background, Jason found his attention split between the information and Alex’s reactions. She clearly had no idea Winthrop Three was involved with Seven-Five.

Why would she? She’d clearly crossed the organization’s path in her work, but they weren’t her focus. Her mind was clearly racing, connecting dots he couldn’t even see yet. It was ... impressive, if he was being honest.

“So,” he said, drawing everyone’s focus back to him, “looks like we’re headed to San Francisco. Any objections?”

The team exchanged glances, a mix of excitement and determination on their faces. This was what they lived for. The chase. The challenge. The chance to make a difference.

But as his eyes met Alex's, he felt an unfamiliar flutter in his chest. This mission was different. She was different.

For the first time in a long while, he wasn't entirely sure what the outcome would be—for the mission, or for his heart.

After a hurried breakfast, the team dove deep into planning mode.

Freshly printed maps and blueprints sprawled across the dining table, mingling with half-empty coffee mugs and discarded snack wrappers.

Jason leaned in, his finger tracing a path on the San Francisco map. "So, we infiltrate Winthrop's charity gala here, while Tai and Fenn set up surveillance on the perimeter."

Paige nodded, her brow furrowed in concentration. "I can hack into their security feed, give us eyes inside and out."

"And I can get us in," Alex added.

"Not. Gonna. Happen." Jason cringed. He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"She's perfect," Tai said.

Mason and Graham echoed the thought.

Alex simply turned away from him and lifted her phone, texting quickly. She'd

barely hit send when it dinged. She smiled straight at him. “We’re in. Five tickets. You all have formal wear, I hope.”

Tai and Fenn did a high five. “Everybody but Cave Man here,” Tai jerked a thumb at Jason. “But I can hook him up.”

“In your dreams, dude. No way your old tux would fit me. I’d shred the shoulders.”

Tai laughed. “Don’t worry, little man. I still have the suit from my high school prom. I was way smaller then. Plus, the powder blue’ll go with your eyes.” He batted his own thick lashes Jason’s way.

The fear lodged tight in his belly eased a centimeter or two. Alex would be fine. She’d be surrounded by his team. Safer with them than back in LA.

The plan took shape, each team member contributing their expertise. As they ironed out the details, Jason couldn’t help but admire the seamless way Alex integrated with his team. It was like she’d always been there, filling a gap he hadn’t realized existed.

“Graham will stay back with Bridger,” he added. “They’ll guard Jane and the families.”

A chorus of agreement rippled through the room. Family always came first.

“Oh!” Alex’s exclamation cut through the chatter. “I almost forgot. We got DNA results from Gabe’s attacker. Nothing came up on our databases, but I’m thinking you’ve got more resources.”

Paige’s eyes lit up. “Send it over. I’ll run it through my channels, have an ID ASAP.”

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder. Mason, the team’s resident strong, silent type,

stood beside him, his eyes knowing.

“Worried about your girl going into battle?” Mason’s voice was low, meant only for Jason’s ears.

Jason bristled. “She’s not my—I mean, we’re not?—”

Mason chuckled. “I get it. I’m engaged to Avery, remember? Frontline Federal Agent. It’s not easy, watching them walk into danger.”

“How do you handle it?” The question slipped out before Jason could stop it.

“Prayer,” Mason replied solemnly. “Lots and lots of prayer.”

Jason snorted. “Right. Well, Alex and I aren’t ... we’re not anything.”

Mason’s eyes twinkled. “Yet,” he said, before sauntering away.

Jason stood there, stunned. He and Alex weren’t ... they couldn’t be ... could they?

The thought sent a jolt through him, equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

Gilded cages come in many forms, Alex mused, and Charles Winthrop's Pacific Heights mansion was perhaps the most beautiful prison she'd ever infiltrated. As she swept into the opulent foyer, her designer gown whispering against marble floors, she couldn't help but admire the irony. Here, amidst crystal chandeliers and the city's glitterati, lurked a monster with a taste for both fine art and insider trading.

The air was thick with perfume, pretension, and secrets—a heady cocktail that set Alex's senses on high alert. Somewhere in this sea of silk and diamonds was her quarry, a man whose Midas touch left a trail of broken laws and shattered lives in its wake. As the string quartet's melody wove through the low hum of socialite chatter, Alex allowed herself a small, predatory smile.

Tonight, Winthrop's carefully curated world would begin to crumble, one champagne flute at a time.

This world of wealth and privilege was achingly familiar, a ghost from her past life before her parents' untimely death. She remembered countless galas just like this one, where she'd stood awkwardly in corners, feeling like a misfit in her own skin. But now, years later, she felt a surge of gratitude for never truly belonging. That disconnect had led her to a life of purpose, of making a real difference in the world.

She smoothed down her midnight blue gown, the silky fabric cool against her skin. But it wasn't the breathtaking view of the bay or the elaborate floral arrangements that caught her eye. No, it was Jason in his perfectly tailored tuxedo that made her breath catch.

For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine reaching out, stroking his clean-shaven cheek. The thought sent a shiver down her spine, and she quickly pushed it aside. Focus, Mendoza, she chided herself. You're here on a mission, not a date.

He squinted at her. "What? Do I have spinach in my teeth?"

She laughed. "Relax, Army. You clean up nice."

Jason's lips quirked in that infuriating half-smile. "You sound surprised."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't quite suppress her own smile. "Just don't let it go to your head. We've got a job to do."

Once they got their hands on Winthrop—or "The Winster," as his ultra-wealthy friends so charmingly called him—it would all be over. He'd crack under interrogation, giving them the pieces they needed to dismantle Seven-Five's operations.

And possibly save Gravy's father. If it wasn't too late.

The thought should have filled her with relief, but instead, a knot of tension formed in her stomach. What would happen after? Would she go back to her team, leaving Jason and Redemption Creek behind?

Alex glanced around, noting the positions of their team members. Tai, Fenn, and Kate were strategically spaced throughout the room, blending seamlessly with the high-society crowd while maintaining a vigilant watch. Their presence reassured her, knowing they had skilled backup if things went sideways.

Meanwhile, outside in the nondescript van parked a block away, Cody sat hunched over an array of monitors, his fingers flying across multiple keyboards. Beside him,

Paige's eyes darted between screens, her voice a constant, soothing presence in their earpieces as she relayed information.

Alex knew Cody's role was crucial, yet he couldn't risk being seen. As a former deep cover agent within the Consortium, his knowledge of the organization's history and its evolution into Seven-Five was unparalleled. But that same expertise made him a prime target—his face was likely burned into the memory of every Seven-Five operative.

"There's our target," Jason's low voice interrupted her thoughts. "Two o'clock, by the ice sculpture."

Alex followed his gaze, spotting Winthrop holding court with a group of adoring socialites. The man exuded confidence, clearly reveling in his status as the evening's host.

She wondered how many of the smiling guests were Seven-Five agents.

"Ready to make his acquaintance?" Jason asked, offering his arm.

She took it, ignoring the spark that shot through her at his touch. "I guess we don't have a choice."

Alex marveled at the seamless communication flowing through their earpieces. The tech was impressive, leagues beyond what she was used to working with. Gratitude washed over her—for this team, for the circumstances that had brought her here. Even if those circumstances had initially made her want to throttle Jason for derailing her carefully laid plans with Gravy.

"Everyone in position?" Paige's voice crackled in her ear.

A chorus of affirmatives followed. Fenn effortlessly charmed a group of silver-haired socialites near Winthrop, his easy smile masking his true intentions. Kate, resplendent in a curve-hugging gown, sauntered up to their target. Winthrop's eyes locked onto her, completely captivated.

Alex tugged Jason towards a cluster of familiar faces, plastering on her best society smile. "Jason, darling, you simply must meet the Vandermeres. They throw the best summer soirees in the Hamptons. Seriously outstanding."

As she made introductions, she maneuvered them into position, blocking Winthrop's path to the nearest exit.

"Ready for some fireworks?" Paige's voice held a hint of mischief.

Suddenly, the shrill wail of the fire alarm pierced the air.

The reaction was immediate and chaotic. Champagne flutes shattered on the marble floor as startled guests jumped. The string quartet's melody devolved into a cacophony of screeching strings. Then silence. Women in designer gowns clutched at their Tiffany necklaces, while men in bespoke suits looked around in bewilderment.

"What is going on?" a portly gentleman sputtered.

A botoxed woman glared at their target. "Is this one of Winnie's idiotic pranks?"

"We should leave," Kate shouted, grabbing onto Winthrop's arm, her voice shrill.

The crowd surged towards the exits, a sea of silk and taffeta churning in panic.

Paige started the countdown. "Lights out in three ... two ... one ..."

Darkness engulfed the room. Screams of alarm rose above the din of the fire alarm.

“Move, now!” Jason’s voice was low and urgent in her ear.

Alex’s heart pounded as they pushed through the crowd towards Winthrop’s last known position. Her fingers brushed against Jason’s arm, an anchor in the chaos.

“Ten seconds,” Paige reminded them.

Alex’s eyes, adjusting to the darkness, caught a glimpse of Winthrop’s portly silhouette. No agents surrounded him. So far.

She and Jason converged on their target, ready to snatch him.

Her fingers closed around Winthrop’s arm, her grip firm as Jason moved to flank him. The plan was working perfectly—until it wasn’t.

An ear-destroying bang echoed through the darkened room, followed by a blinding flash. Alex ducked, pressing her palms to her ears. She couldn’t hear. Couldn’t see.

A flashbang grenade.

That wasn’t part of the plan. Seven-Five was here, too.

The lights flickered back on, revealing a scene of utter pandemonium. Guests stumbled about in confusion, temporarily deaf, blind and off-balance from the sheer power of the sound wave.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to fight the white flash burned into her retinas. The flash slowly faded, leaving her with limited peripheral vision.

An elderly woman sprawled on the floor halfway across the ballroom halfway between Alex and Winthrop, her pearl necklace scattered across the marble. In the confusion, someone had knocked her down.

The woman reached out a frail arm. “Help.”

Though Alex couldn’t hear beyond the painful ringing in her ears, the woman’s intent was clear.

She started toward the woman. She couldn’t leave an innocent person injured. But as she moved, a burly man in a too-tight tuxedo blocked her path. His eyes were cold. Predatory.

He stared her down and shook his head. No one was getting between him and Winthrop.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alex saw Winthrop being hustled away by two more men. Their carefully laid plan was unraveling.

“Jason!” she called out, ducking as the burly man lunged for her.

A blur of motion, and suddenly Jason was there, his fist connecting with the man’s jaw. “Go!” he shouted loud enough for her to hear over the ringing. “Help her. I’ve got this.”

Alex didn’t hesitate. She rushed to the fallen woman’s side, her mind racing. How had Seven-Five known? Who had tipped them off?

As she helped the elderly woman to her feet, supporting her weight, Alex’s eyes locked with Jason’s across the room. In that moment, she knew—their mission had failed.

The big man dropped at Jason's feet.

Jason stepped out of arm's reach, just in case, and shook his hand. It had been a long time since he'd landed an uppercut with a bare fist.

The ballroom had erupted into chaos, a sea of panicked socialites and confused wait staff swirling past as they bolted for the exits. Luckily, he and Alex were on the far side of the room when the flashbang exploded. The auditory and visual effects of the blast diminished quickly with every foot from the blast. And he'd been fortunate to be facing away from the grenade, so his vision was barely impacted.

Alex was still blinking hard. She had that dulled look, as if she were having trouble deciphering communications.

A quick glance told him they'd lost their target. Sandwiched between two burly dudes, Winthrop was already halfway out the exit.

He tapped his comlink, voice low and urgent. "Heads up, team. We've got a situation. Target escaped. Primary objective now is retreat. Expect to spot two types of hostiles: hired muscle posing as private security, and Seven-Five operatives. Stay sharp."

Cody's voice crackled in his ear, calm and focused. "Copy that. I'll keep an eye out for Seven-Five operatives. They tend to stand out in a crowd like this. Plus, the man'll have regular, civilian security around, too."

Jason scanned the room again, noting exits, potential weapons, and the ebb and flow of the panicked crowd. His hand instinctively reached for where his sidearm would usually be, finding only the smooth fabric of his tuxedo. He grimaced. This was going to get complicated.

Alex had helped the fallen woman to her feet just as Kate arrived to take the woman's other arm.

Pride swelled in his chest at Alex's quick decision to aid the innocent bystander, even as worry gnawed at him.

"Time to leave," he barked into his comm. "Cody, bring the van around. We're aborting."

Jason's muscles tensed at Cody's urgent update crackling through the comlink.

"Heads up, we've got company. Two Seven-Five operatives closing in fast. Asian woman in emerald silk, coming in from your three o'clock. Gray-haired guy with a ponytail in a black tux, approaching from nine o'clock. Both converging on your position."

"Copy that," Jason muttered, his eyes scanning the crowd. He spotted the woman first, her emerald dress a vibrant splash against the sea of panicked partygoers. Her movements were too controlled, too purposeful to be a civilian caught in the chaos.

"Alex, we need to move." He repeated Jason's order. "Now."

He saw the recognition flash in her eyes as she caught sight of the approaching threat. "Go," Kate ordered. "I got this."

Alex fell into step beside him as they weaved through the crowd. "Winthrop's gone.

What's the play?"

Jason's mind raced, formulating and discarding plans in rapid succession. "We split up. I'll draw their attention. You get to the extraction point."

Her eyes narrowed. "Nope. We're in this together."

A ghost of a smile tugged at Jason's lips despite the gravity of the situation. "Yeah. I didn't figure that would fly. Fine. Then let's give them a show they won't forget."

The gray-haired man headed their way, ponytail swinging. The woman closed in from the opposite direction.

"Cody," Jason spoke into his comm. "We're going to need another distraction. Something big."

"On it," came the swift reply. "Give me thirty seconds."

Jason found Alex's hand, squeezing it briefly. "Ready?"

Her answering grin was fierce and beautiful. "Born ready."

They faced off against the approaching operatives. Cody's voice crackled through their earpieces, relaying real-time intel from the van.

"Female operative will reach you first." Paige chimed in, her voice taut with concentration.

"They won't fire weapons," Cody added. "But be ready for tranq darts or stun guns."

Jason prepared to spring into action.

The woman lunged straight at him. Big mistake. He feigned right, then swayed left, redirecting her momentum, using her own weight against her. She stumbled, off-balance. In the next breath, he had her arms behind her back.

“Sorry about this,” he muttered, genuine regret coloring his tone. “I really hate fighting women.”

One swift, carefully measured strike of his forearm to the pressure point at the top of her neck, just below the ear, and the woman slumped into his arms, unconscious. Jason lowered her gently to the ground.

He’d just bought them about ten seconds. “Go!” he ordered Alex. “Go. Go. Go.”

“Alex, watch your six!” Paige warned.

Jason’s heart leapt into his throat. The ponytailed man had her plastered against his chest, arm wrenched behind her back. The operative was shoving her roughly through the panicked crowd.

Jason launched himself into the last of the retreating guests. But the sea of bodies between them slowed his progress.

Suddenly, like a mountain materializing from the mist, Tai appeared behind Ponytail. “Someone order a distraction?” he asked over comms before reaching for the other man.

His massive hand engulfed the back of the man’s neck, applying precise pressure. The operative’s eyes rolled back, and he crumpled to the ground, releasing Alex.

Jason caught up with them half a second later. “Nice move,” he complimented Tai before focusing on Alex. “You okay?”

She nodded, rubbing her arm. “Nothing bruised but my ego. Let’s get out of here.”

They pushed through the chaos, making their way to the exit where Kate and Fenn waited, eyes alert for any further threats.

“Any sign of Winthrop?” Jason asked, already knowing the answer from the grim set of their faces.

Fenn shook his head. “Slipped away in the confusion. We lost him.”

The mission was a bust, their primary objective lost. But as he helped Alex into the vehicle, feeling the warmth of her hand in his, he rallied.

Seven-Five might have won this round, but the war was far from over.

The flickering blue light from the television cast eerie shadows across the darkened bedroom. The man's eyes, dry and gritty from lack of sleep, were fixed on the screen with an intensity that bordered on mania. His silk pajamas, normally pristine, were rumpled and damp with sweat.

“We’re bringing you live coverage from the scene of a bizarre attack at a society gala in San Francisco about four hours ago now,” the news anchor’s voice intoned, her perfect hair and makeup in no way affected by the chaos behind her.

The camera panned across the scene: smoke billowing from ornate windows, disheveled party-goers stumbling out of the mansion, their designer gowns and tuxedos in disarray. And there, in the midst of it all, was Charles Winthrop—one of his bosses, for all intents and purposes—looking utterly terrified.

With a shout he hurled the remote at the wall. It shattered into a spray of plastic and batteries. The destruction did nothing to quell his rage.

His divide and conquer tactic had failed spectacularly. If only he’d known Reilly and that infuriating woman were planning a move. He could have been the one to send in operatives and save Winthrop. The thought of how close he’d come to proving himself indispensable to Seven-Five made his teeth ache.

He ran a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. Reilly was out-thinking him. That couldn’t continue.

The images set his gut on fire, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the unfolding story. The news was spinning it as a terrorist attack. A brilliant maneuver from the Seven-Five leadership to use the unanticipated assault to their advantage.

Sowing seeds of fear and distrust in the populace. Masterful.

A bead of sweat trickled down his spine. He shivered despite the warmth of the room. Either he proved his worth. Soon. Or he died.

The sound of his ragged breathing filled the room, punctuated by the incessant drone of the television. Just as he was about to spiral further into panic, his phone buzzed with an incoming message. The screen's harsh glow illuminated his sweat-slicked face as he read the terse summons from Seven-Five leadership.

Chicago. In five days .

He let out a strangled laugh, equal parts relief and terror. "Well, isn't that just peachy?"

Five days to sweat. Five days for his imagination to conjure up increasingly horrific scenarios. Another move in their cruel, brilliant game. Time would soften him up, his own mind becoming his worst enemy.

He flipped back the covers and got up, pacing the length of the bedroom, bare feet sinking into plush carpet with each agitated step.

He couldn't run. Where would he go? No. The only option was to deliver the goods. If he couldn't capture Reilly, he'd make sure the man was dead.

But he couldn't do it alone. This time, he needed the best of the best.

His fingers hovered over his phone, trembling slightly as he weighed his options. The risk was immense, but the alternative was unthinkable. With a deep breath that did little to calm his racing heart, he dialed the number he'd long ago memorized, but so rarely used.

One ring. Two. Then, a voice like warm honey poured through the speaker.

"This is unexpected," the woman purred.

He swallowed hard, throat suddenly dry. "I need a favor."

A pause, pregnant with unspoken costs. "I'm listening."

"I have targets that need to be eliminated. Immediately. Four days, tops."

Another pause, this one calculating. "Unrelated casualties?"

His response came without hesitation, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. "Absolutely. Preferred, even."

That would tidy up the annoying little loose ends. Might as well. The woman charged by the job. The cost would be the same either way.

"I understand."

The line went dead, leaving him alone with the weight of what he'd just set in motion.

A fresh sheen of sweat broke out across his forehead.

He sank back down onto his sweat-soaked sheets. He'd crossed a line, one there was

no coming back from. The television droned on, forgotten, as he stared unseeing at the ceiling.

In five days, he'd be on top of the world.

Or six feet under it.

Which outcome did he truly fear more?

Alex paced the length of the safe house's living room, raking her fingers through her hair for the hundredth time. The adrenaline from their failed mission had long since faded, leaving a potent cocktail of frustration and self-recrimination.

"We were so close," she muttered, more to herself than the others.

Jason, slumped in an armchair, looked up. The defeat in his eyes mirrored her own. "We underestimated their resources. We won't make that mistake again."

Tai stood by the window, his massive frame tense. "We adapt. We overcome."

Fenn nodded in agreement, but the worry lines creasing his forehead betrayed his concern. Kate paced opposite Alex, her nervous energy palpable.

The oppressive silence was shattered by Paige's excited voice from the computer station. "Guys, I've got something!"

They converged around her, hope flaring anew. "Remember the DNA sample from Gabriel's lab? It's a match to a known Seven-Five operative."

The air left Alex's lungs in a rush. "Seven-Five went after my cousin?" The words felt wrong, impossible. Yet the evidence was right there on the screen. "Why?"

Cody leaned forward, his brow furrowed in concentration. "They probably know about his research, and they want it."

“But they didn’t take anything,” Paige protested.

“Because they need Gabriel,” Jason said.

“Or they want us to think that. What if the attack on Alex’s cousin was another distraction and they’re going after anybody they can to get to Jason? That would be a classic Consortium move,” Cody pointed out.

From what she knew of the former Consortium agent’s background, he would know.

Tai groaned. “They’re playing chess while we’re still setting up the board,” he commented, his normally stoic expression tinged with frustration.

Kate nodded, her fingers drumming an anxious rhythm on the table. “Either way, it’s a win for them. They’ve got us scrambling to protect multiple fronts. Gabriel, Liv, Mac, Gravy, Jason, and our team here.”

Their points made a terrible sort of sense. Alex watched Jason. His arms were crossed, his jaw set in a hard line. This wasn’t the same man who had stood beside her at the gala, all easy smiles and playful banter.

This Jason was all hard angles and simmering fury. It unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

“So what’s our play?” she asked, directing the question to the room at large but unable to tear her eyes away from Jason.

He met her gaze, his expression unreadable. “We need to assume they’re after both Gabriel and the general. That means doubling down on protection and intel gathering.”

“Agreed,” Paige chimed in from her station. “I can start digging deeper into Seven-Five’s recent activities, see if we can spot any patterns.”

“Sounds good.” Alex squared her shoulders. “Let’s break this down. We need surveillance on Gabriel, Liv, Mac and Gravy. Then we need to figure out what Seven-Five might want from the general.”

As the team began to divvy up tasks, Alex couldn’t help but steal another glance at Jason. His standoffish attitude only served to remind her of the complexities of their situation. They were partners in this fight against Seven-Five, but beyond that?

Who knew?

Pushing aside her personal turmoil, she threw herself into the mission planning. Seven-Five had made their move, and now it was time to counterstrike.

As the team strategized, Jason’s phone buzzed. He stepped away, his brow furrowing as he read the message. When he turned back to the group, his face was ashen.

“We’ve got a problem,” he announced, his voice tight. “One of my most trusted sources just sent intel. Gravy’s father is alive.”

The room fell silent, all eyes on Jason.

Fenn screwed up his handsome face. “And you sound upset why?”

“He’s working with Seven-Five,” Jason continued, his eyes locking with Alex’s. “Under duress.”

The scenario had always been highly probable, obviously, but to have it confirmed ... The implications of a high-ranking Pentagon official, with all his classified

knowledge at Seven-Five's mercy hit her like a tidal wave.

"Not good. So not good," Fenn muttered, voicing what everyone was thinking.

"We're not just trying to protect Gravy now," she said. "We need to extract his father too."

Jason nodded, his earlier standoffishness melting away in the face of this new crisis. "It's past time to play offensive."

"But how?" Kate asked, her voice laced with frustration. "We're already stretched thin."

Tai's deep voice cut through the tension. "We combine forces. Use every talent at our disposal."

A spark of inspiration hit, clearing Alex's mind. "Tai's right. We've been thinking of ourselves as separate teams—Redemption Creek and RAVEN. But sometimes, one and one equals more than two."

"Copy that. Together, we might have a shot," Jason finished, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

"Exactly. We've got hackers, fighters, strategists, and more between us. If we pool our resources ..."

"We multiply our strengths," Paige chimed in, her fingers already flying over her keyboard. "Synergy."

The energy in the room shifted, desperation giving way to determination.

Jason grunted. “We’ll need to move fast. Seven-Five won’t give us much time to regroup.”

Alex met his gaze, feeling that familiar spark between them reignite. “Liv and the others are at least twelve hours away by plane. How fast can we be in the air?”

Jason grinned. “I like your style, Mendoza.”

“Right back atcha, Army.”

Kate cleared her throat. “Hello? Jason? Firefight in Boise? The Pilatus is grounded.”

Jason winced. “Ri-i-ght.” He tapped his chin, thinking.

Mason waved his hand. “My buddy runs the airport in Mammoth. He’ll hook us up, no problem. Flight time in the helo to Mammoth’s less than half an hour. I suggest Jason and Kate and Alex fly up to the airport, then Kate can bring the helo back here. I’ll tell my guy we’ll be bringing the plane here temporarily. He won’t mind. I’ve saved his bacon more than once.”

Jason clapped his hands together. “Excellent plan. Copy that.” He grinned, but the expression didn’t reach his eyes. “It’s been a minute since I did a run to the tropics.”

The prospect of reuniting with her team sent a thrill through Alex. Liv, Mac, Gabe—she’d missed them more than she cared to admit.

But a nagging worry gnawed at the edges of her determination. She was about to drag her team back into the fire.

She tried to shake off the guilt. They were professionals, just like her. They knew the risks. But was it fair to ask them to risk everything for Jason’s crusade?

As if sensing her inner turmoil, Jason caught her eye. Without a word, he nodded slightly, as if to say, “We’ve got this.”

But did they?

The tarmac of Redemption Creek's small airport shimmered in the evening heat as Alex stumbled off the plane into the warm night air. Jason had gotten them to the private airstrip on the atoll in ten hours, not twelve, but the one-stop-round-trip had meant almost twenty-four hours in the air. She was cooked.

Gabe, Liv, Mac and Gravy followed her down the plane's stairs, all looking equally travel-worn, though Gabe, at least, had regained his normal energy.

Despite the fading bruises on his face and arms—clear reminders of the recent attack—his eyes sparkled with his usual mischievous energy. Good to see he was bouncing back.

“You're looking better, cuz,” she said, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

Gabe flashed her a lopsided grin. “What can I say? I'm resilient. Plus, I had some ideas during the flight. Can't wait to get back to my lab and test them out.”

The teasing retort died on her lips as her attention was drawn to Jason. He loped down the jet's stairs looking like he'd gone ten rounds with a grizzly bear and lost.

Gravy, who had just stepped off the plane, took one look at Jason and blurted out, “Dude, you look...” He paused, shaking his head so hard his unruly hair swished in the wind. “I don't even know.”

Alex stifled a snort, silently agreeing with the assessment. Then she realized she

couldn't look much better.

Paige, Cody, Fenn and Kate exited the main house, heading out to greet them. Tension filled the air as the two teams eyed each other warily.

Alex got it. Meeting in the middle of an already tangled op was less than ideal.

Liv's fingers twitched near her hip, where she holstered her sidearm. "Nice place you've got here," she observed, her tone carefully neutral.

Mac scanned the fenced compound. "Very ... secure."

Fenn grinned. "We like to think so. Welcome to Fort Knox, Redemption Creek style."

"Come on in," Paige urged. "Dinner's on."

Jason and his team led them across the airstrip toward the main house.

The minute they entered, Gabe let out a low whistle, and headed straight for the gigantic computer monitor that took up half of one wall, his eyes wide with childlike wonder. "Is that the new Iris Prime? Those aren't supposed to be released into Beta for another six months."

Paige practically bounced on her toes, her face lighting up. "I know some folks. It's way better than I expected. Full eye movement and gesture control. Want to see?"

"Uh, yeah!" Gabriel exclaimed, already halfway across the room.

Cody's brow furrowed as he watched them go, his mouth set in a thin line. Alex bit back a smile, wondering if she should warn Gabriel he was accidentally moving in on

Cody's girl.

Meanwhile, Gravy was making his rounds, shaking hands and doling out compliments like they were party favors. "Man, this place is awesome! And you guys are so cool. It's like being in a spy movie!"

It was like having a golden retriever around, all wagging tail and unbridled enthusiasm. But as she caught Jason's eye across the room, his expression mirrored her own thoughts. What they really needed was a pit bull.

The savory aroma of Mason's cooking wafted through the air, making her realize she hadn't eaten anything but a couple power bars and a papaya since this time yesterday.

The teams settled around the large dining table. She couldn't help but notice the contrast between them—her RAVEN operatives sun-kissed and relaxed beneath the strain of travel, Jason's crew looking like they'd been through a war.

Bridger stumbled in the door, his usual crisp appearance replaced by rumpled clothes and a five o'clock shadow.

Tai eyed his friend. "Rough night?"

Bridger collapsed into a chair, running a hand over his face. "Jane's having contractions. False alarm, but ..."

"Bridger's about to be a dad," Alex explained to the group. "Twins. Any day now."

A chorus of congratulations and sympathetic murmurs filled the air. Gravy, ever the enthusiast, leaned forward. "Dude, that's awesome! You're gonna be like, a cool dad times two!"

Bridger managed a tired smile. “More like a zombie times two, I’m thinking.” He introduced himself to Liv and Mac and Gabe. “Thanks for coming.”

Her guys nodded politely. Probably she was the only one who spotted the wariness in Mac and Liv’s eyes.

The tantalizing scents of Mason’s creation, a heavenly blend of garlic, butter and oregano-scented tomato sauce lightened the mood like a burst of sunshine.

Jason cleared his throat. “Before we dig in, let’s say grace.”

A hush fell over the group. They bowed their heads. Jason’s deep voice resonated through the room, expressing gratitude for the food, and the team’s safety, and a special prayer for Jane and the twins.

Amens were still echoing around the table while Mason set out massive serving dishes piled high with spaghetti and meatballs along with perfectly-broiled garlic bread and an impossibly fresh-looking salad. Plates full, the conversation shifted to mission planning, ideas bouncing around the table like a pinball machine on overdrive.

Paige paused, fork halfway to her mouth. “What if we infiltrated their communications network?”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up. “I might have some tech that could help with that. If we could just?—”

“Whoa there, Einstein,” Mac interrupted, his gruff voice softening the words. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We need to consider the physical security too.”

Liv nodded, her earlier wariness melting as she engaged with the group. “Mac’s right.

We need a multi-pronged approach.”

“Absolutely.” Mason jabbed a serving fork in Liv’s direction. “The lady is spot on.”

The gruff man’s praise earned him a sliver of a smile. The tiny expression was the equivalent of a bear hug from most people.

The meal progressed, plates growing emptier while the figurative pile of ideas grew higher. Tai and Mac compared notes on hand-to-hand combat techniques, their earlier suspicion replaced by mutual respect. Paige and Gabriel were lost in their own world of tech-speak, while Cody looked on, a mix of admiration and jealousy playing across his features.

Even Kate, the least talkative in Alex’s opinion, engaged in an animated discussion with her fiancé, Fenn, about the finer points of explosives. Alex caught Jason’s eye across the table, a silent understanding passing between them.

This could work.

“You know,” Gravy piped up, his mouth full of mashed potatoes, “my dad always said the best way to beat a bully was to make ‘em look stupid.”

Jason eyed his protege. “You might be onto something there, my man.”

Fenn nodded. “No joke.”

“Seriously.” Mason shot Gravy an approving look.

As the laughter died down and the planning resumed with renewed vigor, Alex felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the hearty meal. Looking around at these people—some old friends, some new allies—she realized they’d already won a

crucial battle.

Seven-Five might have resources and ruthlessness on their side, but this joint team? They had heart.

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Despite Mason's chef-quality meal, dinner was not going well.

Correction. Jason stopped himself. The few minutes of the meal where the famished crews actually ate had gone fine. But now that they had to actually concoct a joint plan?

Not so great.

Jason felt the tension in the room ratchet up another notch as he locked eyes with Alex across the table. The remnants of Mason's hearty meal lay forgotten between them, the earlier camaraderie gone.

Too bad Bridger headed home after the meal, though Jason couldn't blame the man. Any minute away from Jane at this stage was too much. Still, Bridger had a knack for helping people join forces.

Alex's team wasn't well-versed in Seven-Five's tactics. Their high-tech suggestions fell flat with his crowd. But his guys could be overconfident, putting too much reliance on the element of surprise, or sheer strength.

Basically, no one liked anyone else's idea, which pretty much cut off the flow of discussion.

Gravy's voice cut through the tension like a knife through butter. He waved his hands around, nearly knocking over his water glass. "Why don't you SEAL types break into

one of these Richie Rich's mega mansions and just grab them? I mean, I know it didn't go so well in Frisco, but hey, things happen. We could make it look like one of the other Seven-Five dudes kidnapped them. That's a good way to start a fight."

Jason blinked, momentarily thrown by the abrupt change in topic. Before he could respond, Cody shot the idea down.

"You don't just bust into these dudes' homes. They've got security teams—and resources—as good, or better than we are." He shook his head, frustration evident in every line of his body. "Plus, we already tried that with Winthrop. And look how that turned out? This time, Seven-Five's top execs will be expecting us."

Liv glared at Cody. "So what's your idea?"

The headache building behind Jason's eyes ramped up in intensity from a suggestion of pain to a pulsing beacon. "At this point? No idea."

He breathed deep, trying to center himself. They needed to find a way past this impasse, or Seven-Five would destroy them. But as he met Alex's challenging gaze across the table, he wondered if some battles were simply unwinnable.

Mason hovered over Jason's shoulder, scooping up used dishes. "You RAVEN guys are good at hiding people. We're good at kicking down doors and taking names. Neither skillset's going to help much here. This'll never work."

The defeated tone grated on Jason's nerves. He opened his mouth to argue, but Alex spoke up. "I disagree, Mace. That's exactly why this will work. We need to think like a team. Combine our resources instead of trying to one-up each other."

Exactly. "What do you have in mind?"

Alex shrugged, a hint of uncertainty creeping into her voice. “I don’t have the details worked out yet, but I do know we should start with our strengths. The RAVEN team disappears people. Your group hunts people down. Or takes them out of play. Or rescues them.”

The energy in the room shifted.

He met Alex’s eyes across the table. For once, there was no challenge in her gaze, only a growing excitement that mirrored his own.

Paige’s eyes widened. “So we hunt down General Munsinger, and hide him. Then he’ll help us take Seven-Five down.”

The room erupted in a chorus of agreement.

As the teams began to brainstorm in earnest, their voices overlapping in a cacophony of ideas, Jason allowed himself a moment of quiet optimism. They were far from out of the woods, but for the first time since this whole mess started, he felt like they had a fighting chance.

And if that chance meant working side by side with Alex ... well, maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

As the excitement of their newfound direction began to wane, Jason noticed the fatigue settling over the group. Yawns were stifled, eyelids drooped, and even Gravy’s endless energy seemed to have finally run out.

“Alright, team,” he said, pushing back from the table. “We’ve made good progress. Let’s call it a night and pick this up in the morning. Fresh eyes might give us the edge we need.”

A chorus of tired agreements followed as chairs scraped against the floor. Jason watched as the two teams, no longer divided by suspicion, filed out of the room in a jumble of friendly chatter and shared exhaustion.

He was about to follow when Alex's voice, softer than before, stopped him. "Jason, wait."

He turned, finding her still seated, fingers tracing abstract patterns on the tabletop. The room suddenly felt too small, too intimate.

"I wanted to apologize," she said, meeting his eyes. "For being so harsh earlier. I was out of line."

Jason leaned against the doorframe, careful to maintain some distance. "It's good to have dissent. Keeps us all sharp. No problem."

Alex nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Still, I shouldn't have?—"

"Really, Alex. It's fine," he interrupted, his tone gentle but firm.

A moment of silence stretched between them, filled with unspoken words and lingering tension. Jason felt the urge to reach out, to bridge the gap that had formed. But he held back, painfully aware that soon, they'd be going their separate ways again.

For the first time, the thought of watching Alex walk away left an ache in his chest he wasn't quite ready to examine.

"We should get some rest," he said finally, straightening up. "Big day tomorrow."

Alex stood, smoothing down her shirt in a gesture that seemed more nervous than necessary. “Right. Of course. Goodnight, Jason.”

As she brushed past him, the faint scent of her perfume teasing his senses, Jason allowed himself one moment of weakness. He watched her retreating form, the graceful curve of her neck, the confident set of her shoulders.

“Goodnight, Alex,” he murmured, long after she’d disappeared down the hallway.

Shaking his head to clear the lingering thoughts, Jason turned off the lights and headed to his own room. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, new dangers. But for now, in the quiet of the night, he allowed himself to admit one simple truth.

This time, he was really going to be sorry to see her walk away.

The next morning, the sun streamed through the ranch house's large windows, casting long shadows across the worn wooden floor. Alex leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching as the two teams straggled back into the main room. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, mingling with the scents of bacon and maple syrup from their recent breakfast.

Her gaze settled on Gabriel. A good night's sleep had worked miracles. The dark circles under his eyes had faded, and there was a hint of color in his cheeks. He still moved with caution, but the improvement was undeniable.

Mac's booming laugh drew Alex's attention. He and Liv were chatting with Mason, their easy camaraderie evident in their relaxed postures and bright smiles. Nearby, Tai and Fenn had cornered Kate, their heads bent close as they discussed something in hushed tones.

Alex pushed away from the wall, her boots scuffing against the hardwood. "Alright people," she called out, her voice cutting through the low murmur of conversation. "Let's get this show on the road."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Jason's deep voice rumbled from across the room. "I think we should start by mapping out General Munsinger's known associates."

A muscle ticked in her cheek, but she resolved not to jump down his throat. She was the one who suggested they work together.

She turned to face him, noting the stubborn set of his broad shoulders beneath his form-fitting tech tee. “Not a bad idea,” she conceded, forcing her voice to remain even, “but I was thinking we’d focus on his last known locations first.”

Jason’s eyebrow quirked, a glint of challenge in his eyes. “What, you can’t multitask? I thought you were supposed to be some kind of super spy.”

“Fine.” She fought back a smile. “Let’s do both. I’ll even let you use the big computer.”

The next hour passed in a blur of ideas. Unfortunately, none of them panned out when they were dissected.

She glanced at Jason, catching his eye across the room. For a moment, she saw her own frustration mirrored there, a silent understanding passing between them. Despite their differences, they were both feeling the weight of their stalled progress.

A movement caught Alex’s eye. Gabriel was fidgeting in his chair, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Gabriel?” she prompted, her voice gentler than usual. “You look like you’re sitting on a cactus. Spit it out.”

Jason chimed in, “Whatever it is, it can’t be worse than our current options.”

Gabriel cleared his throat, his eyes darting nervously around the room. “Well, um, the general ... he was quite interested in my holographic technology.”

The room fell silent. Alex’s mind raced, a plan forming. She opened her mouth to speak?—

“We could use the tech as bait,” Jason said, stealing the words right out of her mouth.

Alex whipped her head around to stare at him. He stared back, looking as surprised as she felt.

“Great minds,” she said dryly.

“Or fools’,” he shot back with a grin.

Suddenly, the energy in the room shifted. Alex and Jason locked eyes, a spark of understanding passing between them.

“If we create a believable breakthrough—” Alex started.

“Seven-Five won’t be able to resist,” Jason finished.

“And my dad’s their contact. Sweet.” Gravy rubbed his hands together. “You guys are thinking they’ll have to let the old man contact Gabe here.”

Jason cocked a finger at Gravy. “Bingo.”

Their rapid-fire exchange continued, ideas bouncing back and forth. Alex found herself leaning in, caught up in the excitement of a plan coming together.

Jason tapped a finger on the table. “We’ll need to leak the information strategically.”

Alex nodded. “Mac, you still have those Stanford Lab contacts?”

“You know it, boss,” Mac replied. “Anything we need to leak will go out to the biggest players in tech. They’ll get the info to their press contacts in minutes.”

As they continued to flesh out the details, Alex became acutely aware of the speculative looks her teammates were giving her. Mac's eyebrows were raised so high they were in danger of disappearing into his hairline, while Liv wore a knowing smirk that made Alex want to squirm.

Even Gravy had a curious gleam in his dark eyes.

Realizing how close she was standing to Jason, their shoulders almost touching, Alex took a deliberate step back. The loss of his warmth was immediate, and she stubbornly ignored the pang of regret that followed.

"Right," she said, clearing her throat. "So we have the bones of a plan. Let's break it down step by step and identify any potential weak spots."

As the teams dove into the nitty-gritty details, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd just revealed more than she intended. And judging by the amused glances being exchanged around the room, she wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

"Paige should help Gabriel with the 'breakthrough'," Tai suggested.

From the corner of her eye, Alex caught sight of Cody's face darkening. He straightened up, his jaw set in a hard line. "I think I should join them," he said, his voice tight. "Three heads are better than two, right?"

Interesting. Alex filed that information away for later. "Makes sense, Cody. You're the resident Seven-Five expert."

Jason squinted up at the ceiling. "Assuming Seven-Five takes the bait, where do we set up the meet?"

"It needs to be somewhere contained, with limited ingress and egress and some

overhead cover for me and Graham to set up shop,” Mason, the team’s best sniper, chimed in.

Mac nodded in agreement. “But not so controlled that it raises suspicion.”

“What about a university lab?” Tai suggested. “It would lend credibility to Gabriel’s ‘breakthrough’.”

Alex shook her head. “Too many innocent bystanders.”

Gravy cleared his throat. He’d been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meeting, but now all eyes turned to him. “What about the old Seaside Palace? We’re within helo range of the Coast, right?”

The room fell silent. Alex blinked, certain she’d misheard. Could he really be talking about the abandoned amusement park just north of San Diego? “Come again?”

Gravy leaned forward, his eyes bright with excitement. “Think about it. It’s isolated, and fenced off, so no civies to worry about. Lots of open space for surveillance, but also plenty of cover. And the best part? We can totally use Gabe’s hologram stuff to blow their minds.” He spread his hands, getting into full storyteller mode. “Picture his holographic tech mixed with funhouse mirrors and structures from the old rides. Super creepy, right? It’ll weird them completely out.”

The silence stretched on as everyone processed Gravy’s suggestion. Alex glanced at Jason, seeing her own surprise mirrored in his expression.

Finally, Mason let out a low whistle. “That’s ... actually brilliant. I could see a genius like Gabriel setting up his lab in some super weird place like that.”

“It’s insane,” Alex said, but she couldn’t keep the grudging admiration out of her

voice. “It’s completely, utterly insane. I love it.”

The room erupted into excited chatter, the energy shifting from frustration to anticipation. As the teams began to flesh out the details of Gravy’s wild idea, Alex caught his eye and gave him a nod of approval. He grinned back, clearly pleased with himself.

The tightness in her chest eased. They had a plan. It was crazy, risky, and borderline ridiculous—but it was a plan.

As the meeting wrapped up, Alex suddenly realized how close she was standing to Jason. Again. His cologne, a mix of sandalwood and something uniquely him, filled her nostrils. Heat radiated from his body, and for a moment, she found herself swaying toward him.

Catching herself, she took a deliberate step back, her heart pounding traitorously in her chest.

Get it together , she scolded herself.

“See you all at lunch,” Tai announced. “Feel free to use the gym, or the shooting range or whatever else we’ve got. See me if you need anything. Nuestra casa es su casa .”

While Mac and Liv converged on Tai, Alex headed straight out the door toward her room. She was hyper-aware of Jason’s presence behind her, like a magnetic pull she couldn’t escape. What was wrong with her? She’d worked with attractive men before without turning into a lovesick teenager.

She quickened her pace, desperate to put some distance between them. This ... whatever it was ... needed to stop. Now. She couldn’t afford distractions, especially

not in the form of a man who pushed all her buttons—both good and bad.

Changing her mind, she hung a left and headed out the front door. The pine-scented breeze helped clear her head, grounding her. She'd outsmarted terrorists, drug lords, and international assassins. She could certainly handle one annoyingly attractive man.

Not that she was doing a bang-up job so far.

The gravel crunched under Jason's tires as he pulled into the driveway of his sister's ranch house. The August heat hit him like a wall as he stepped out of the air-conditioned truck, the scent of sunbaked earth and lavender filling his nostrils.

Before he could reach the porch, the front door swung open. Bridger stood there, his usual easy smile replaced by a look of concern.

"Jason," Bridger nodded, clasping his hand in a firm shake. "Glad you could make it."

Jason's brow furrowed. "Everything okay?"

Bridger's eyes darted to the side. "Jane's been kinda on edge. Bed rest isn't her style. The walls are starting to close in on her. She could use the company. Come on in."

He led Jason through the entryway and into the living room. The coolness of the house was a welcome contrast to the blistering heat outside. Jane lay on the couch, her pregnant belly prominent under a light blanket.

Her face lit up when she saw Jason. "There's my favorite brother!"

"I'm your only brother," Jason retorted, bending to kiss her cheek.

Jane grabbed his hand, pressing his palm to her belly. "Feel that? Your nieces are doing somersaults in there."

The flutter beneath his fingers made Jason's breath catch. Truly a miracle.

"Uncle Jay!" Kellen's voice rang out as the boy thundered down the stairs. "Come see the fort I built for the twins."

Jason crouched down to Kellen's eye level, giving him a gentle smile. "Hey, buddy, I'd love to see your fort, but I need to talk to your mom for a minute first. Okay?"

Kellen's face fell slightly, but he nodded. "Okay, Uncle Jason."

Bridger stepped in smoothly, placing a hand on Kellen's shoulder. "Come on, dude. Let's go toss the ball around while Uncle Jason and Mom chat."

As Bridger steered Kellen outside, Jason turned back to Jane, settling on the edge of the couch. The worry lines around her eyes were impossible to miss.

Her voice was thin. "I know something big is coming. Bridger won't say, but I can feel it."

Jason's gut clenched. He couldn't risk her worrying more than she already was. "It's just a regular old op. We got this."

That earned him a sour look. "I'm pregnant, not stupid. You're going after Seven-Five. You've been after them since you retired. And you're getting to the end."

For half a second, he thought about lying, but it went against everything he believed in. Plus, Jane was way too smart for him. She'd see straight through him.

"We got this, Sis. I'm serious. And we've got help. Alex Mendoza and her RAVEN team are seriously good at what they do. It's not just us this time."

She grabbed his arm, her grip surprisingly strong. “Promise me you’ll come home safe.”

The fear in her eyes about knocked him flat. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me from meeting those little nuggets.”

“So I’m chopped liver now?”

He grinned, rubbing his chin. “You and Bridger. Pretty much. Law of the jungle, sweetie.”

That drew a heartfelt laugh that lifted his soul.

Jane grinned, seemingly satisfied for the moment. But Jason could still see the lingering concern in her eyes, mirroring the unease in his own heart.

She waved at the door. “Get on out there. Kellen’s about to bust a gut.”

He headed out the door. The August heat blasted him in the face, but it hadn’t slowed his nephew any. The kid was running full-tilt after an errant baseball.

Ball safely in his glove, Kellen looked up, face flushed. He flew past Jason. “Come on inside and see my fort.”

With a nod at Bridger, Jason ambled back into the house, the respite from the August heat immediate and welcome.

Kellen’s voice piped up from down the hall. “Uncle Jason! Look what I made!”

The ‘fort’ was an impressive structure of blankets and PVC pipes, decorated with twinkling fairy lights.

Jason whistled. “Wow, buddy. That’s something else.”

The boy beamed. “I wanted the babies to have a special place to play. Mom says they’re gifts from God.”

“That they are.”

“I do kinda wish they were a boy gift still. But I’ll get over it.” Kellen’s face grew serious. “Do you think God knew they’d need a fort?”

Jason blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected depth of the question. “I, uh ... I’m sure He did, buddy.”

Kellen nodded sagely. “That’s good. ‘Cause I think everyone needs a safe place sometimes.”

Jason’s throat tightened as he looked at his nephew, marveling at the wisdom that could come from such a young soul. “You’re right about that, Little Man.”

A shadow crossed the doorway. Bridger. He jerked a thumb at the back door. “Meet you out on the porch?”

Jason rose to his feet. “If you bring lemonade.”

“That I can arrange.” Bridger headed for the fridge.

“For me, too?” Kellen piped up. “Building’s thirsty work.”

Bridger exchanged an amused look with Jason over the boy’s head. “Lemonade we can do, son, but your uncle and I need to talk business. How about you keep your mom company? She’s kinda bored these days.”

Kellen nodded without a word. Great kid. Great family.

The realization made the hole in Jason's chest both larger and smaller somehow.

He followed Bridger out onto the shaded porch, leaned against the railing, and took in the view of the High Sierra foothills. The landscape looked parched and lifeless, a far cry from the lush greenery of spring.

"How you holding up?" Jason asked.

Ice clinked in Bridger's glass as he sucked down half his lemonade. "I'm fine. It's Jane I'm worried about." He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture betraying his fatigue. "This pregnancy is killing me. Who knew a couple of peanut-sized humans could cause so much stress?"

Jason chuckled. "Yeah, because an instant seven-year-old son and a bunch of armed goons after your girl were a walk in the park."

Bridger's tired laugh joined Jason's. "Point taken."

A comfortable silence settled between them, broken only by the distant sound of Kellen's laughter.

Bridger cleared his throat. "So, how's the mission shaping up?"

Jason straightened, his expression turning serious. "We're setting the bait. Gabriel's 'leaking' info about his holographic breakthrough. We'll stage a demo, hope Seven-Five takes the bait. Paige and Cody are working with Mac and Liv, handling the cyber end, creating a legit digital trail that leads straight to Gabriel's fake lab. Our team'll handle security and extraction, so we're good there. Then we'll see how it goes."

Bridger nodded, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of pride and longing. “Wish I could be there with you guys.”

Jason clapped him on the shoulder. “I know, brother. But we’ve got this. Your job is here, keeping Jane and those little ninjas safe.”

The corners of Bridger’s mouth twitched upward. “Little ninjas, huh? I like that.”

Jason grinned, glad to see some of the tension leave his brother-in-law’s face. Despite his reassurances to Bridger, he couldn’t shake the feeling that this mission was going to be anything but routine.

Bridger’s sharp intake of breath drew Jason’s attention. Following his gaze, Jason spotted a thin plume of smoke rising beyond the Sierra crest.

“Wildfire,” Bridger said, his voice tight.

Jason nodded grimly. “It’s that time of year. Depending on the wind, we might be smelling smoke soon.” He scanned the parched landscape stretching before them. “Fire will never get over the Sierra. No way it can climb above the treeline, but this valley’s a tinderbox waiting for a spark.”

“I don’t like it, Jason. Too many variables.”

No kidding. He cleared his throat, needing to bring up one last thing. “I told Graham and Mason to stay in town. Help you keep an eye on Jane and Kellen.”

It would mean foregoing sniper cover, but he’d rather Bridger have the extra help. Seven-Five could strike anywhere.

Bridger’s lack of protest spoke volumes. The gravity of the situation settled over

them like a heavy blanket.

“We’ll keep the team safe,” Jason promised, his voice low and determined.

Bridger met his gaze, matching his intensity. “You better.”

They clasped hands, the gesture sealing their pact. “See you on the flip side, brother,” Jason said and made his way down the steps toward his truck.

Bridger called after him. “I gotta say, Alex isn’t like the others. She sees right through you.”

Jason’s steps faltered, but he kept moving. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he called over his shoulder, his tone deliberately light.

“Nice try.” Bridger’s knowing chuckle followed him to his truck.

As Jason drove away, the dust billowing behind him, he couldn’t shake Bridger’s words. Alex did see through him, and that terrified him more than any mission ever could.

The plume of smoke on the horizon caught his eye again, a reminder of the dangers ahead. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, steeling himself for whatever was to come.

Fighting Seven-Five would be like fighting a wildfire. Unpredictable. Clearly dangerous. And no matter the outcome, they were bound to get dirty.

Twenty-four hours later, the merciless sun beat down on the abandoned amusement park, its unforgiving rays baking the already parched earth to a crisp, dusty brown. The derelict Ferris wheel loomed overhead, its rusted skeleton creaking ominously in the oppressive heat. Faded, peeling paint clung desperately to dilapidated ticket booths, while tattered remnants of once-cheerful banners fluttered weakly in the stifling breeze.

The eerie silence of the deserted park was punctuated only by the incessant drone of cicadas, their grating chorus a discordant soundtrack to the team's covert operation. Broken mirrors from a fallen fun house lay scattered across the cracked pavement, reflecting fractured images of the cloudless sky and adding to the unsettling atmosphere.

Alex wiped a bead of sweat from her brow, the salt stinging her eyes as she surveyed the ghostly remains of what was once a place of joy and laughter. The garish colors of a nearby carousel had faded to sickly pastels, its horses frozen mid-gallop, their painted eyes seeming to follow her every move. A decrepit clown statue grinned maniacally from its perch atop a defunct shooting gallery, its chipped face a nightmarish parody of mirth.

"Remind me again why we couldn't set this up in a nice, air-conditioned mall?" she muttered, adjusting her ill-fitting construction worker's vest and trying to shake off the feeling of being watched by the park's spectral inhabitants.

Jason's low chuckle carried across the desolate landscape, echoing strangely off the

hollow shells of abandoned concession stands. “What’s the matter, city girl? Can’t handle a little heat?”

Alex shot him a glare that could have melted steel, even as she suppressed a shudder at the sight of a sun-bleached stuffed animal trapped beneath the splintered remains of a game booth. “I can handle the heat just fine. It’s the bugs I have issues with.”

As if on cue, a mosquito landed on her arm. She swatted it with more force than necessary, her nerves already on edge from the oppressive, almost supernatural atmosphere of decay and forgotten dreams that permeated the park.

Around her, the team buzzed with activity. Gabriel, looking as wilted as she felt, fiddled with hologram emitters near a collapsed bumper car arena. Tai’s drones whirred overhead, their persistent hum adding to the cacophony of insects and the occasional groan of settling metal from the decaying structures. Mac crouched beside her, fumbling with a hidden camera, his usually steady hands betraying a hint of unease in this forsaken place.

The stage was set for their confrontation with Seven-Five, but as Alex took in the haunting remnants of past merriment, she couldn’t shake the feeling that they were actors in some twisted, sinister play, with the ghosts of the abandoned park as their silent, watchful audience.

She scanned the perimeter. “How’s it coming?”

Mac grunted. “If my hands would stop sweating, we’d be golden.”

Across the way, Jason’s team worked with military precision, setting up physical traps that looked innocuous to the untrained eye. Alex couldn’t help but admire their efficiency, even as a twinge of competitive spirit flared within her.

“Liv, how’s our network?” she asked over the comlink.

Liv’s voice crackled through the earpiece. “Up and running. We’re more connected out here than most of San Diego.”

Alex nodded, a small sense of satisfaction cutting through the oppressive heat. They were as ready as they’d ever be. Now, all they needed was for Seven-Five to take the bait.

Her gaze drifted to Gabriel, who was slumped against a rusted support beam, his face flushed and glistening with sweat. She frowned, concern etching lines across her forehead. Her cousin had never been one for the great outdoors, but this heat seemed to be taking a particularly heavy toll.

“Gabe, here.” She tossed him a water bottle. “Hydrate or die, remember?”

He caught the bottle with fumbling hands, offering a weak smile. “Thanks, Alex. I’m fine, really.”

But she knew better. The pressure was getting to him, just like always. Even as kids, he’d been the one to take things harder. Have a tougher time rebounding. The thought suffused her with a familiar guilt. Losing her parents so close together as an adult had been devastating. Gabe had been eight when he was orphaned.

Her people moved with the confidence of those who trusted in their tech, each motion precise and calculated. Jason’s team, on the other hand, seemed to be in a constant state of hyper-vigilance, their eyes constantly scanning for threats.

“You’d think we were in enemy territory,” Mac muttered, following her gaze.

“In their minds, we always are.”

She hated to admit it, but a part of her envied their battle-hardened caution. Memories of past missions gone awry due to tech failures flashed through her mind: the Beijing op where their comms went dark at the worst possible moment, the fiasco in Cairo when their state-of-the-art facial recognition software mistook a civilian for their target.

As if reading her thoughts, Jason appeared at her side. “Everything good over here?”

“All systems go. Your team ready to play catch if our toys fail?”

A ghost of a smile played on Jason’s lips. “Absolutely. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

The unspoken tension hung between them, thick as the humid air. For all their preparation, for all their tech and training, they both knew how quickly things could go sideways. And out here, under the merciless sun with danger potentially lurking behind every decrepit carnival ride, the stakes had never felt higher.

Tai’s urgent voice crackled through the comms. “Heads up, we’ve got company. Vehicle approaching from the south. Hold up. It’s a county car. Seriously? Could they be here for an inspection?”

Alex’s heart rate spiked. She locked eyes with Jason, seeing her own alarm mirrored there.

“That’s impossible,” Paige insisted. “I backdated all the permits. We should be clear.”

“Well, someone didn’t get the memo,” Graham muttered, his hand inching towards his concealed weapon.

In a flurry of controlled chaos, the team scrambled to their positions. They'd planned to appear like a construction crew if any civilians came close, but they'd never expected an official government visit. Alex grabbed a hardhat, shoving it on her head as she snatched up a clipboard. The sound of gravel crunching under tires grew louder.

A dusty sedan pulled up, and two figures emerged. An older woman with steel-gray hair pinned in a severe bun, and a fresh-faced young man who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

The woman's voice cut through the air like a whip. "What's going on here? We have no record of permitted work at this site."

Jason stepped forward, all easy charm and disarming smile. "Ma'am, there must be some mistake. We filed all the necessary paperwork months ago. I've got a copy of the permits right here saying we're good to go."

Alex sidled up beside him, praying her racing pulse wasn't visible. "That's right. I have the copies, too, if you'd like to see them."

The woman's eyes narrowed, suspicion radiating off her in waves. "Let's see them, then."

As Alex fumbled with the clipboard, her mind raced. Were these really county employees, or Seven-Five operatives? The young man's nervous fidgeting seemed genuine, but the woman's steely gaze could hide any number of secrets.

After what felt like an eternity of scrutiny, the woman huffed. "Well, it seems to be in order. But I don't appreciate these last-minute filings. And that support beam over there needs to be properly secured before you continue."

Alex nearly sagged with relief. “Of course, ma’am. We’ll take care of it right away.”

As the county employees drove away, the tension in the air slowly dissipated. Alex let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding.

Jason’s hand on her shoulder made her jump. “Nice work,” he murmured.

She managed a shaky smile. “You too. But let’s not do that again, okay?”

A chuckle rippled through the team, but Alex noticed everyone’s hands were still hovering near their weapons. One wrong move, one unexpected variable, and their entire operation could come crashing down around them.

A couple hours later, the preparations were in place. Both teams taking a break from the heat, pounding cold water.

Gravy stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the cracked screen of a defunct shooting gallery. The painted targets, faded and chipped, seemed to mock him with their eerie grins.

“Yo, Gravy, you still with us?” Worried, Alex called out to him.

He turned, forcing a laid-back grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yeah, just, like, vibing with the old man’s energy, you know?”

“Having second thoughts?”

Gravy shook his head, running a hand through his sun-bleached hair. “Nah, man. It’s just ... I keep picturing the old dude’s face when he sees me. Like, is he gonna be totally aggro that I didn’t ghost like he wanted? Or worse, you know, all disappointed and stuff. This whole thing started because he paid you to help me disappear, and you know, now here I am. Not ideal from his POV.”

Jason approached, his face etched with concern. “Remember, we’ve got your back. You don’t have to face this alone.”

“Thanks, bro,” Gravy nodded, still looking uneasy. “It’s just ... seeing him again? It’s like I’m back in boot camp, waiting for him to rip me a new one, you know?”

Alex frowned, her tone becoming more matter-of-fact. Gravy was a minor player here, but they needed him to keep it together. “Gravy, you need to focus. We can’t afford any distractions when we’re this close.”

Jason shot her a disapproving look. “Ease up, Mendoza. The guy’s about to confront his father. A little empathy wouldn’t hurt.”

“We don’t have time for a therapy session,” she retorted. “He needs to get his head in the game.”

“Whoa, chill, dudes,” Gravy interjected, holding up his hands. “No need to harsh the vibe. I’m good, seriously.”

As if echoing the tension, a sudden gust of wind sent a rusty swing set into motion, its chains groaning like restless ghosts.

Jason placed a hand on Gravy’s shoulder. “Just remember, you’re not that kid anymore. You’re a valuable member of this team.”

Alex sighed, softening slightly. “Jason’s right. Whatever happens with your father, we’ve got your back. But right now, we need you focused.”

Gravy nodded, straightening up. “Right on. Time to catch this gnarly wave, yeah?” He wandered off to look over Tai’s shoulder.

Jason and Alex stood in silence for a beat, the endless drone of cicadas filling the air between them.

“Look,” he said finally, his voice softer, “your tech is incredible. But out here, we need both. Your brains and our brawn.”

A reluctant smile tugged at Alex's lips. "Did you just admit we're smarter than you?"

"Don't push it, brainiac."

As their eyes met, Alex felt a jolt of connection that both thrilled and terrified her. She quickly looked away, busying herself with the camera again.

Don't go there.

Attachments in this line of work were a liability, a weakness that could be exploited. And yet, as Jason's warmth lingered beside her, she couldn't help but wonder what it might be like to let those walls down, just a little.

She kept one eye on Gabriel, who still looked like he might melt into a puddle at any moment, while barking orders to her team through the comms. And if her gaze happened to linger on Jason's muscular forearms as he secured a tripwire ... well, that was purely professional interest.

The shrill ring of Gabriel's phone cut through the humid air like a knife. Blocked number. Her heart leapt into her throat. Showtime.

She snatched the phone, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "Gabriel Reyes' office."

"Cut the act, Alexandra." General Munsinger's gravelly voice sent a chill down her spine. "Put your cousin on the phone."

Alex's grip tightened on the device. "I'm afraid that's not possible. If you have a message, I'd be happy to relay it."

"Listen here, you little?—"

“No, you listen,” Alex cut him off, her voice sharp. “Miramar. Tomorrow. 2100 hours. You’ll get further instructions there.”

“I give the orders here, Girlie.” The man practically yelled.

Alex took a moment to formulate a perfect response, but Gabe, his face contorted with anger, had other plans.

He grabbed the device out of her hand, his words tumbling out in a frenzied rush. “I’ve been attacked. Trust no one. Mitscher Field, 2100 hours. Take it or leave it. I’ve got other clients who’ll deliver.”

A tense silence followed, broken only by the incessant buzzing of insects. Then, a grudging agreement from the other end of the line.

Gravy’s cheerful “Hey, old man!” came a beat too late, the call already disconnected.

Alex whirled on her cousin, ready to chew him out for his impulsive action, but the fight had already drained from his face.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” he mumbled, running a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. “I shouldn’t have grabbed the phone like that. I just ... lost it for a second there.”

Her fury melted away, replaced by a mix of concern and understanding. She placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tension coiled beneath his skin.

“It’s okay. We’re all on edge here. This isn’t exactly a walk in the park ... well, technically it is, but you know what I mean.”

He managed a weak chuckle at her attempt at humor.

Gravy appeared beside them, clapping her cousin on the back with enough force to make him stumble. “Dude. This is some bad stuff going down. It’s gonna play with your head.”

Gabriel nodded, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “Thanks, guys. I just hope I didn’t mess anything up.”

Alex squeezed his shoulder. “Actually, I think you helped.”

“No doubt.” Gravy’s expression grew solemn. “Dad’s got serious warrior energy. He respects pushback.”

Much as she appreciated Gravy’s attempt to make her cousin feel better, she gritted her teeth. She’d had it up to her eyeballs with “warrior energy.”

She turned to Paige and Cody, hope and dread warring in her chest. “Tell me you got something.”

Their grim expressions said it all. Paige shook her head, frustration evident in every line of her body. “Nada. It’s like he was calling from a black hole.”

Once the general, and his keepers, landed at the military field in San Diego, she’d direct them out to the amusement park. Her side controlled the battleground, but that was only one of many deciding factors in the war.

She caught Jason’s eye across the debris-strewn ground. His expression mirrored her own mix of determination and apprehension. Tomorrow would bring either their greatest victory or their worst nightmare. No way to know which until they were in too deep to turn back.

With less than ten minutes until the general's arrival, Jason wiped the sweat from his forehead. His tech tee was soaked through, quick-drying cloth and all. Whoever coined the term, Hot August Nights, wasn't kidding.

Almost 2200 hours, and the thermometer on his watch still read ninety degrees. Yowzah.

The hot night wind blasted his face as he eyed the deserted grounds. Emergency floodlights cast eerie shadows, transforming once-cheerful rides into looming specters. The Ferris wheel creaked softly in the stillness, a ghostly reminder of happier times.

"T-minus three minutes," he murmured over comms, his heart rate picking up as adrenaline began to course through his veins. "Time to rev this thing up."

Paige, Cody, and Liv were stationed in the vast underground parking and maintenance area that sprawled beneath the park while he and Alex and the rest of the crew waited in their assigned hiding places topside. He wished he had Mason and Graham there providing sniper cover, but knowing Bridger had extra protection at home was worth the loss.

"On it," Gabriel announced from his workstation tucked behind the old shooting gallery.

Suddenly the park was alive with movement. Holographic versions of the team

members popped out from behind rusted ticket booths and decrepit carnival games, weapons at the ready.

“Wow,” Fenn breathed, staring at one of his doppelgangers. “I had no idea I was that stunningly handsome.”

Kate’s hand connected with her fiancé’s midsection. “Really?”

The real Fenn grinned, pulling her close. “What? I can’t say that about you, my love, because I am well aware of how stunning you are.”

Tai circled one of his holograms, whistling low. “Man, Gabe, you even got my good side. Didn’t know I had one.”

Gravy snorted, poking at his own image. “Dude, you made me look way cooler than I actually am. After this, can I have like a makeover?”

The team’s laughter eased the tension some.

Jason glanced at Alex, catching her eye. The confident quirk of her lips sent a jolt through him that had nothing to do with pre-mission jitters.

“This tech is incredible,” Mac said, his usual gruffness tinged with awe. “We’ve got this in the bag.”

Everyone but Gabriel seemed more relaxed. Alex’s cousin still had a white-knuckled grip on his tablet. Sweat beaded on his forehead, glistening under the harsh floodlights.

Jason’s chest tightened with empathy, remembering his own first op jitters.

“You’ve got this, Gabe,” he murmured, squeezing the tech wizard’s shoulder.

Tai eyed one of his monitors. “Heads up, folks. We’ve got incoming. Three black SUVs, approaching fast.”

Jason’s pulse quickened. “Shut it down,” he ordered Gabe.

The holographic images disappeared.

He strode to the main gates, the old hinges groaning in protest as he swung them open.

The convoy rolled in, tires crunching on gravel. Four oversized men built like identical bricks emerged first, scanning for threats. Then, the general stepped out of the center vehicle.

“I count four security goons,” Alex said. “No sign of additional Seven-Five operatives.”

Jason barely heard her. His attention was locked on General Munsinger, the man he hadn’t seen since that grim day at the rehab center five years ago. The change was stark. The once-imposing figure now seemed hollowed out, his ramrod straight posture a poor disguise for the weariness etched into every line of his face.

He wanted to blame the man’s civilian attire for his less-than-imposing figure, but it wasn’t the clothes. The man had grown ... old. And sour.

The general approached, his eyes as flat and cold as a shark’s.

Munsinger probably intended to intimidate Jason, but all Jason felt was sadness. The man had locked away every emotion, every connection, until there was nothing left

but duty and secrets. The cost was written in the deep furrows of his brow and the gray pallor of his skin.

Jason squared his shoulders. He'd chosen a different path—embracing the messiness of emotions, the complications of relationships, the strength found in faith and family. Looking at the human husk before him, it was obvious he'd made the right choice.

“General,” he called out, his voice steady despite the tension thrumming through his body. “Welcome to our little circus. Shall we get this show on the road?”

A blur of motion came from his left. Gravy darted forward, arms outstretched. Tai moved to intercept Gravy, but Jason shot out his arm, stopping Tai.

“Let him go,” he murmured, heart clenching as Gravy threw his arms around his father.

“Dad! Good to see you, man!” Gravy’s voice cracked with emotion.

The general stood stiffly, his arms at his sides, clearly just enduring his son’s hug. “Robert? You shouldn’t be here.”

Gravy’s smile faltered, but he pressed on. “I’m doing great, Dad. Really great. I?”

“That’s enough,” his father shook him off, stepping back. “I’ve got business with these people.”

Gravy’s shoulders slumped. Jason shared a look with Alex, her eyes mirroring his own mix of anger and sympathy.

“Right,” Alex said, her voice cool and professional. “How about we talk state-of-the-

art holographic tech?”

Munsinger seemed nervous, his fingers tapping an erratic rhythm against his thigh. “Yes, let’s get this over with. I don’t have much time.”

“In a rush, General?” Jason asked. “Hot date waiting?”

“This isn’t a joke, Reilly,” the man snapped. “Just show me what you’ve got so I can make the Joint Chiefs happy and get out of here.”

Or Seven-Five. Jason itched to call the man out. Whether willingly or not, they all knew he was there to negotiate on behalf of Seven-Five, not the US government.

While Alex launched into her prepared spiel about the holographic technology, Jason watched the general closely, ready to move the instant he got the signal.

Cody came over the comlink from his position in the basement. “Okay, folks. I’m calling the ball. Three. Two. One. Go!”

Four soft pops echoed through the night as Kate and Fenn’s tranquilizer darts found their marks. The security team crumpled to the ground. Jason and Alex moved in perfect tandem, securing the shocked general.

Alex trained her handgun on him while Jason zip tied his hands behind his back.

“Let go!” the man ordered, struggling against Jason’s hold.

Jason tightened his grip on the man’s shoulder. “Sorry, sir. Orders.”

That earned him a reptilian glare. “You’re dead, Reilly. All of you. Dead.”

“Dad!” Gravy protested. “These are my friends. They’re here to help. Chill out.”

His father turned away, disgust warring with fury.

Jason didn’t bother responding. Either the bluster was a show for any possible Seven-Five operatives listening in, or Munsinger was one of them. He was seriously starting to bet on the latter.

The rest of the team emerged from hiding, sweeping Munsinger and his unconscious bodyguards for bugs before securing the four men and pulling them into the shadows, out of sight of any enemy drones that might get through Tai’s defenses.

Jason pressed his hand into the older man’s back, urging him toward the heart of the abandoned park. The crunch of gravel underfoot gave way to the hollow echo of their footsteps on weathered wooden planks as they approached a nondescript maintenance door.

“Watch your step, sir,” Jason said, his voice tight with suppressed tension. “It’s a maze down here.”

He didn’t expect the general to cave quickly, but the man’s stony silence, and his cold-hearted treatment of his only child, surprised him.

Definitely Seven-Five.

The air grew cooler as they descended into the bowels of the amusement park, the musty scent of disuse mingling with the faint ozone tang of old electrical equipment. Shadows danced on grimy walls as their flashlights cut through the gloom, revealing a vast underground labyrinth of machinery and utility systems.

His feet hit the flat surface of the basement parking area. They were almost home

free. Just a little farther to their waiting van, and they would have their valuable bargaining chip secured.

Whichever side he was on, the general would be Seven-Five's downfall.

The rest of the team filed into the parking garage, forming a semi-circle around Jason and their prisoner.

"We're taking a little ride," he told the general, pushing him gently toward the waiting van.

The general straightened, rolling his shoulders back, his demeanor shifting from defeated to commanding in the blink of an eye. Gone was the haggard, coerced man they'd captured above ground. In his place stood a figure of authority, radiating confidence and control.

"No," the man said, "we're not." He raised his chin, fixing Jason with a cold stare. "You people have made a huge mistake. Now it's time to pay." He held Jason's gaze. "Nox Aeterna," he shouted.

Darkness crashed over them like a tidal wave.

Jason blinked furiously, his night vision worthless against the inky blackness. The hum of electricity died, leaving only the sound of ragged breathing and the rustle of clothing.

"Anybody copy?" He checked the comms.

His earbuds echoed with a deadly silence.

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Alex couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. She froze, ears straining for any sign of an attack.

"Jason?" Alex reached out, finding nothing but empty air.

What just happened?

Before she could formulate a plan, the lights blazed back to life.

All of them.

Her retinas burned. She squinted, blinking rapidly as her vision swam with afterimages. As the world came back into focus, her jaw dropped.

Seven-Five operatives materialized like ghosts. Where there had been darkness, now stood an army.

Not ghosts. Clones. Four and five and six replicas of each man. All indistinguishable from the real agents.

They were using Gabe's holographic imagery against them.

At least eight different operatives, each replicated multiple times, filled the space around them. Some crouched behind illusory cover, others trained assault rifles on their team, their expressions a mix of determination and cold efficiency. The effect

was dizzying, like being trapped in a hall of murderous mirrors.

Where had they come from?

Tai looked like he was going to throw up. “You hijacked my drone feeds. That’s impossible.”

Munsinger eyed Tai as if the big man were an underperforming student. “Clearly not, Mr. Kaholo.” His face hardened again. “Weapons on the ground. All of them,” he ordered.

Everyone instantly complied. Munsinger gestured at his men, who quickly scooped up the weapons before roughly patting down the entire team one by one.

Gaze fixed on Tai again, Munsinger pointed at his closest operative. “You. Get that controller.”

One of the original security men lunged forward, his meaty hands closing around Tai’s drone controller. Tai yanked back, but the operative to Tai’s left slammed the butt of his rifle into Tai’s midsection.

Jason started to leap forward, but before Alex could even put a hand on his arm, he stopped himself, watching stoically, his eyes blazing with fury.

Tai doubled over, gasping for air.

“Sir,” the guard presented the stolen tech to Munsinger like a trophy.

The general snatched the controller away and let it drop. The corner of the device shattered, sending shards of black plastic skittering across the concrete. Munsinger raised his foot, stomping hard across the center of the console. The crunch of plastic

and circuitry under his boot echoed in the sudden silence.

The man's transformation was as swift as it was chilling. His voice, when he spoke, dripped with satisfaction. "For once, the squints in the lab were right. Our electronic tech beats yours."

Now it all made sense. Tai's drones showed no one in the vicinity, only they'd been seeing exactly what their opponents wanted them to see.

Jason caught Alex's eye. "Sorry," he mouthed silently.

She shook her head. He had nothing to apologize for. He couldn't have known about this new tech.

The general grinned. "I was hoping you'd fall for the set up, but I had my doubts. Shouldn't have. You jumped in with both feet, in your usual style."

"You wanted me to call the major." Gravy was clearly putting a few things together. "You practically ordered me to ask for his help. Did you even care about me getting somewhere safe?"

His father flicked him a look, barely acknowledging his own son. The lack of response rang more loudly than a slap to the face.

And suddenly, it all fell into place for Alex. "You're here for Jason." Her gaze flicked to Cody, standing rigid nearby. "And Cody."

Munsinger's smile was shark-like. "An extra prize."

Gravy's voice cracked as he addressed his father. "What about the rest of us?"

The temperature dropped ten degrees as the old soldier studied them, his eyes devoid of warmth or mercy. “Collateral damage.”

They’d walked right into it, step by careful step.

The general’s voice cut through the air like the crack of a whip. “Move out. Into the far corner. Now.”

Alex was herded along with the others, the muzzles of rifles, both real and holographic, prodding them forward. Gabe moved slowly, as if in a dream-state. She eyed her teammates, and Jason’s, searching for any sign of hope. Mac and Liv stared straight ahead, but she caught Tai, Fenn, and Kate exchanging looks with Jason, their expressions hard as granite, igniting a small flame of hope.

These people were steel wrapped in skin. If anyone could turn this nightmare around, they’d do it.

As they stumbled down the darkened path towards the far corner of the space, she drifted closer to Jason. Their hands brushed, sending an electric current up her arm despite the dire circumstances.

Their eyes met, and for a heartbeat, the world around them faded away. The fear, the danger, all of it receded in the face of the connection crackling between them. Alex felt a surge of longing, of possibilities left unexplored. But as quickly as it came, reality crashed back in, cold and unforgiving.

The general’s mocking voice cut through the air. “Keep moving.”

As they were roughly pushed forward, Alex’s stomach twisted with a grim realization. The weight of their predicament settled on her shoulders like a lead blanket. She glanced at Jason, her throat tight with unspoken words.

Would they even have a future to explore?

The stench of damp concrete and rusted metal assaulted Alex's nostrils as they were herded deeper into the bowels of the abandoned amusement park. Their footsteps echoed ominously off the crumbling walls, each step bringing them deeper into what felt like their own personal descent into hell.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she checked on the others. Despite their current predicament, everyone appeared unharmed. Gabriel, in particular, caught her attention. The shock seemed to be wearing off. Much to her relief, he looked more alert, studying the underground space.

The details weren't pretty. There were eight real enemies, at most. But each one had multiple doppelgangers.

No way Jason and his team—or hers—could disarm that many highly-trained men unarmed. When they had no idea who was real and who wasn't ... the odds of success went from astronomical to laughably impossible.

Apparently satisfied that they'd been herded far enough into the corner, the general nodded at the man at his side.

"Sit down and shut up," the assistant ordered them.

The other guards, and their replicas, formed a ring around them, careful to stay well out of reach, assault rifles at the ready.

Taking a seat on the floor between Jason and her cousin, she studied the perimeter—or at least as much of it as she could see from the shadows—cataloging exits, potential weapons, anything that might give them an edge.

That's when she saw it—nestled in a darkened corner, its green light blinking lazily, sat one of Gabriel's holographic emitter boxes.

If they could take out that box, it might disrupt the entire network. It wasn't much, but in their current situation, even a few seconds of chaos could mean the difference between life and death.

Because the end game was more than clear. The general would spirit Jason, Cody and probably Gabriel off to a dark interrogation cell somewhere, but the rest of them would become, as Munsinger said, collateral damage.

She stretched out her legs, hoping the movement would catch Jason's attention. When he eyed her, she flicked her gaze meaningfully towards the emitter. He followed the direction of her gaze so stealthily he literally didn't move his head. Then understanding dawned. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Leaning into his shoulder, she waited until the closest guards looked away. Then she whispered, "If I destroy that, I can shut down the holograms."

"For how long?"

Careful to keep her eyes on their captors, she responded through tight lips. "Twenty seconds. Thirty, tops."

"That'll do." Jason's response was equally hushed, his breath warm against her ear. "You'll need help."

Jason's eyes flicked to Paige, then back to the emitter box. In a fluid motion, he tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. Alex watched as Paige mirrored the gesture, her face betraying nothing, but her meaning clear. She understood.

The silent acknowledgement made Alex's heart crash into her ribs. They weren't beaten yet.

Jason picked at the hem of his cargo pants, seemingly miles away in thought. "I'll create a distraction," he murmured.

A rustle of movement to their left caught Alex's attention. Gravy had inched closer to Jason, his face set in grim determination. "Not you. I got this," he whispered.

"Negative," Jason insisted. "Stand down, soldier."

"I know the man," Gravy insisted.

Alex's gaze darted between the two men, weighing their options in a split second. "Let Gravy do it," she breathed.

Before Jason could object further, Gravy shot to his feet.

Rifles zeroed in on him from all directions. Gravy raised his hands, fingers spread. His voice rang out, sharp and accusatory. "Was any of it real, Dad? Or was I just another moving part in your whole world-dominating-villain scheme?"

Shock flashed across Munsinger's face before a mask of cold indifference settled back in. "You were always too soft, son. Too easily led by your emotions."

Gravy laughed, a bitter sound edged with pain. "Dude. You wouldn't know a feeling if it bit you in the?—"

“Enough!” The general’s roar echoed off the concrete walls.

Father and son squared off, their voices rising in a crescendo of accusation and denial. The attention in the room shifted. The guards’ eyes were drawn to the unfolding drama, their grips on their weapons loosening ever so slightly.

Alex caught Jason’s eye, a silent question passing between them. Now or never.

She rose, ready to pivot and dive behind the cardboard boxes stacked in front of the emitter.

But a blur of motion caught her off guard. Paige lunged at her, eyes blazing with fury. “This is all your fault!” She shrieked, her voice echoing off the concrete walls. “You and your stupid team led Seven-Five straight to us!”

Before Alex could react, Paige shoved her backwards. Alex stumbled, her back slamming into the boxes. They toppled to the floor in a tangle of cardboard and limbs.

“You think you’re so smart,” Paige snarled. She slammed her palm into the floor half an inch from Alex’s face.

Alex caught on quickly, returning Paige’s mock blows with convincing force. “At least we’re doing something,” she spat back, her elbow ‘accidentally’ ramming into the box holding the device, which crashed to the floor.

They continued fighting, a whirlwind of flailing limbs and angry shouts. Each movement was calculated, every blow strategic as they systematically beat the emitter box.

“Make them stop!” someone, probably the general, yelled.

Rough voices shouted orders as their captors moved to intervene.

But the box was still blinking.

Alex strained to land one last blow. The plastic case gave way. But the holographic enemies were still there.

Rough hands hauled her to her feet. Paige, too.

The green light on the emitter blinked out, but the holographic army still stood. Had she been mistaken? She thought Gabriel had told her this was the one weak link in his tech. Any disruption to the system required a reboot that lasted up to half a minute. A lifetime if you were trying to convince a buyer the holograms appeared real.

The bitter taste of defeat hit her tongue, until something distracted her. Did the images just waver? Panting hard from the exertion, she blinked, barely willing to believe what she was seeing. The holographic replicas of the Seven-Five operatives flickered and distorted, their forms stretching and twisting like images in a funhouse mirror. Ghostly figures blinked in and out of existence, their movements jerky and unnatural. The basement filled with an eerie, strobing light as the holograms malfunctioned, one by one.

Shouts of alarm mingled with the harsh crack of gunfire as some of the fritzing holograms discharged their weapons, adding to the mayhem.

The air crackled with tension and possibility, a moment suspended between order and chaos.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

Her cousin's program would reboot any second.

As the holographic chaos swirled around them, a familiar silhouette emerged from the pulsing shadows.

Jason.

He had Munsinger up against him, one beefy arm locked around the older man's throat. The cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against the general's temple, glinting in the erratic light of the malfunctioning holograms.

His voice cut through the din, steady and commanding. "Nobody move."

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Jason's grip tightened on his M18. Munsinger refused to flinch, despite the barrel pressed against his temple.

"It's over," Jason growled, his voice low and dangerous. "Tell your men to stand down."

Munsinger replied without moving. "Look around you, son. My men are armed. Yours? Not so much."

A fair point. The pile of weapons was clearly untouched. The team had scattered for cover, but without time to re-arm themselves.

He spotted Alex crouched behind an old arcade machine. She was okay. Relief flooded through him, quickly followed by renewed focus.

Gabriel and Paige were positioned near the stairs, tense but ready. Tai had managed to edge closer to a group of three Seven-Five operatives, his stance casual but alert. But where was Cody? The realization that his teammate had slipped away in the chaos shot a surge of hope through him.

"You really think you've won something here?" The general's tone was almost conversational, as if they were discussing the weather over coffee. Only the acrid scent of sweat told Jason the man was on edge. "There's always another play, another advantage you haven't considered."

Fury bubbled up inside Jason, threatening to overflow. This man, this organization—the Consortium, Seven-Five, whatever they wanted to call themselves—had taken too much from him. Years of his life spent in the shadows, pursuing a justice that always seemed just out of reach. The taint they'd left on his team's work, on their belief in serving their country, burned like acid in his veins.

He dug the gun into the man's temple. "No more games. It ends here."

"It never ends. You of all people should know that by now."

The man was flat wrong. With the Lord on his side, all things were possible.

He just had to let his Savior's voice guide him. Jason blanked his mind, feeling for a spark of inspiration. He planned to use the man as a shield, to force the others to back off. As long as they'd still follow Munsinger's commands ...

Tai swayed in the shadows, just enough movement to draw Jason's attention. When Jason eyed him, he gazed down at his hand, half hidden behind his leg.

Tai had a gun. Excellent.

That would be more than enough to?—

His thoughts screeched to a halt as Gravy lunged forward, his face a mask of pain and rage.

"Dad," Gravy's voice cracked, heavy with years of unspoken hurt. "How could you?"

The older man sagged against Jason's chest. "You were always a means to an end, boy. Calling in RAVEN, getting Alex's team involved—it was all to lure in the real prize. Like I said. You were bait."

The pointed admission punched Jason straight in the gut. He couldn't imagine the pain Gravy must be feeling. But as he glanced at the younger man, he saw something unexpected—a glint of determination in Gravy's eyes.

Suddenly, he understood. This confrontation wasn't about family drama at all. Gravy was creating another distraction, giving them an opening.

The tension in the room ratcheted up another notch. Jason could practically taste the electric charge of emotions in the air. He caught Gabriel's eye, then Paige's, then Tai's. Each gave him a subtle nod. His team was ready.

A soft crackle in his ear nearly made him jump. Cody's voice came through, low and urgent. "I've got eyes on the situation. Alex and the others are in position. On your signal."

Jason's heart leapt. Comms were back. If they could just use them without tipping off the armed operatives ...

A deafening screech pierced the air, causing everyone to flinch. The ancient park's PA system had inexplicably come to life, blaring a distorted carnival tune that echoed eerily through the abandoned structure. In that moment of confusion, several things happened at once:

Gravy tackled his father, catching both Jason and Munsinger off guard. Father and son tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs as Jason leapt clear.

Tai whipped out his concealed weapon and took out the two nearest Seven-Five operatives with precision shots to their shoulders, sending their own rifles flying.

Gabriel's hologram emitters re-activated, projecting lifelike images of Jason's team, and the RAVEN operatives storming into the room from multiple entry points.

Cody's voice crackled through the comms again. "Drones deployed. Creating cover now!"

On cue, several small drones zoomed into the space, releasing thick clouds of smoke, further disorienting the last few Seven-Five operatives.

The room erupted into chaos. The cacophony of shouts, gunfire, and the still-blaring carnival music creating a surreal battlefield.

Jason sprinted for cover, using the confusion to his advantage. Kate and Fenn took out an agent each. Paige dropped the last one before Tai could fire, much to the big man's disappointment.

The air stank of gunpowder and sweat. "Alex!" he shouted, his eyes scanning frantically for a glimpse of her in the melee.

A hand clasped his shoulder. Tai's steady voice cut through his panic. "She's fine, dude. Focus. I saw Gravy chase his dad back up the stairs. He'll need help."

Jason nodded, forcing himself to breathe. They knew this park, every creaky ride and overgrown path. Even if Munsinger had given his son the slip, Jason would track him down.

With pleasure.

Alex crouched behind the rusted hulk of an ancient bumper car, her heart pounding in the sudden silence. She hadn't yet caught sight of Gravy or his father.

"I'm on my way," Jason told her over the restored comlink. "Hang tight."

No more than a few seconds later, he emerged from the entrance to the underground facilities. The smell of damp earth and decaying metal filled her nostrils as she locked eyes with Jason across the dilapidated fairground.

He jerked his head towards the looming silhouette of the old roller coaster.

"That's the last of them," he announced, triumph clear in his voice. "All hostiles neutralized, both teams safe and accounted for." Weapon in hand, he eyed the area. "Gravy took off after his dad. We just need to round them up and we're outta here."

Relief washed over her, making her knees wobble. She looked at Jason, saw the same mix of exhaustion and elation mirrored in his eyes.

It was over. They'd won.

The rest was just mop up. They could leave a couple team members to watch over the four unconscious operatives by the entry gate and the eight men in the basement while the rest of them escorted Munsinger to the authorities. But first, they had to find him.

“A little help here, Cody?” Jason asked over the comlink.

“Affirmative. Targets are due east, dude. Looks like Gravy’s got his old man under guard.”

“Excellent.” Jason grinned grimly. “Let’s do this,” he ordered Alex and took off at a run.

Alex jogged after him, her boots crunching on gravel and broken glass as they made their way to Gravy and the general. The eerie silence of the abandoned park settled around them, broken only by their labored breathing and the occasional creak of rusted metal.

As they rounded the corner of a derelict funhouse, its mirrors cracked and clouded with age, Alex caught sight of Gravy standing guard over his father, weapon in hand. The younger man’s face was a mask of conflicting emotions, pain and determination warring in his eyes.

“Good work, dude,” Jason called out, his voice cutting through the tension.

Alex couldn’t imagine the pain Gravy must be feeling. There’d be time enough to debrief later, though.

But as she and Jason approached, the general’s face contorted. He clutched at his chest, stumbling backward with a pained gasp.

“Dad?” Gravy’s voice cracked with concern.

Jason rushed forward, Alex hot on his heels. “Easy now,” Jason said, holstering his weapon and reaching for the older man.

He and Gravy attempted to lower the general to the ground, but the man struggled to stay on his feet.

Alex's instincts screamed a warning. Something wasn't right.

The general's pained expression morphed into a snarl. With surprising speed, he lashed out, his fist connecting solidly with Gravy's jaw. The sharp crack echoed in the night air.

Gravy crumpled, out cold before he hit the ground.

"Jason!" Alex cried out, lunging forward. But it was too late.

The general, spry for a man who moments ago seemed on the verge of a heart attack, plowed into Jason, knocking him aside and taking off running. His figure quickly disappeared into the shadows of the park, swallowed by the maze of abandoned rides and overgrown paths.

Alex helped Jason to his feet, her hand lingering on his arm. "You okay?"

Jaw clenched in frustration, Jason nodded. "Fine. Check on Gravy."

As Alex knelt beside the unconscious man, Jason's voice crackled over the comms. "Cody, we've got a situation. The general's loose in the park. I need eyes, now."

Reassured by Gravy's strong heartbeat, Alex slumped against the funhouse wall. The cool, damp surface seeped through her shirt. She ran a hand through her sweat-dampened hair, a humorless laugh bubbling up from her throat.

"You've got to be kidding me," she muttered, her gaze meeting Jason's equally incredulous one. "We just took down an entire secret organization, and we lose the

big bad to what? A game of granddaddy hide-and-seek?”

Jason seemed equally shocked. “No kidding.”

The absurdity of it all hit her then, and Alex found herself caught between the urge to laugh hysterically or scream into the void of the abandoned park. Instead, she pushed herself off the wall, squaring her shoulders. Round two.

Jason held out a hand, helping her up. “Cody? I need visuals on Munsinger. He’s trying to make a run for it.”

“Copy that.” The reply came swiftly. “He’s headed south. Making for the SUVs.”

“On it.” Jason whipped out his handgun and tore off.

Alex’s muscles screamed in protest as she followed him through the labyrinth of rusted rides and overgrown paths. The sound of their pounding footsteps echoed in the eerie silence of the abandoned park.

“There!” Jason hissed, pointing to a shadow darting between two dilapidated food stalls.

They cornered the general near the defunct Tunnel of Love, its once-cheerful cherubs now leering grotesquely in the moonlight. Alex stalked forward, her tranq gun steady despite her exhaustion.

“It’s over,” she growled, finger tightening on the trigger.

Munsinger turned to face them, right hand in his pants pocket. “You sure about that?”

“It’s not a gun,” he assured them, but Jason drew down on the man.

“Freeze,” he commanded.

“You need to see this,” the general insisted. “I’ll move slowly.”

Eyes locked on Jason, he inched his hand out of his pocket, revealing a small device with a blinking red light. His thumb depressed a button on the top.

Alex’s breath caught in her throat.

“Smart girl.” The general sneered. “You recognize a dead man’s switch when you see one. I die; you die.”

Weapon still pointed at the man’s chest, Jason paled. “What have you done?”

“Bought myself some insurance, son. While you were in the basement, my men rigged this park with enough explosives to make the Fourth of July look like a sparkler.” His cold eyes met Alex’s. “You two might survive, given your current position. But your team down below? Well, let’s just say they’ll be in for quite a finale.”

Horror and disbelief warred within her. “Your own men are down there.”

“Collateral damage. I’m aware.” The general’s shrug was so casual, so devoid of humanity, that Alex felt physically ill. “In my line of work, there are always sacrifices.”

The moonlight caught the cruel twist of his lips. A chill slithered down Alex’s spine. She’d rescued people from terrorists, assassins, and criminal masterminds, but never had she encountered such cold, calculating evil wrapped in the guise of patriotism.

“Lord, give me strength,” Jason whispered, his words carried away by the hot night wind. “Guide my actions and protect my team.”

Hot night wind in his face, he squared off against the general, the weight of the moment pressing down on him like a physical force. The decrepit Tunnel of Love loomed behind them, its peeling cherubs a mockery of the situation. The trigger switch in the man’s hand glinted menacingly in the moonlight.

Barely above a whisper, Cody’s voice crackled in his ear. “The team’s located three IEDs in the underground area. It’ll take time to disarm them, and we can’t be sure we’ve found them all. Munsinger’s got the trigger, but Tai says it’ll be programmed to signal a main detonator capable of activating multiple explosives. It’s probably in a central location. If we can locate it, the trigger will be useless.”

Jason’s eyes flickered to Alex, a minuscule nod passing between them. Keep the old man talking. Buy time. It was the only plan they had.

“So, sir,” Jason drawled, injecting a casualness he didn’t feel into his voice. “Why don’t you tell us what this is really all about? The lies, Seven-Five, all of it.”

“You wouldn’t understand, boy.”

“Try me.”

Munsinger’s eyes narrowed. “It’s about having the power to reshape the world as it

should be.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Alex slide a hand into her pocket. Her voice, barely audible in his ear, confirmed she was recording. Smart woman.

“Oh, I think we understand plenty,” she chimed in, her tone deceptively light. “Why don’t you enlighten us? After all, we’re a captive audience.”

The man’s eyes gleamed with a terrifying intensity. As he launched into a diatribe about shadowy government conspiracies and Seven-Five’s grand vision, Jason fought to keep his expression neutral. Each revelation was more shocking than the last, painting a picture of corruption that went deeper than he’d ever imagined.

Jason nodded, pretending to listen to the man’s deranged ranting. Inside, he was frantic to come up with a way out of this. Where was that detonator? And how long could they keep this dangerous dance going before Munsinger realized he was being played?

In his earpiece, Cody and Tai were reasoning through the detonator’s likely locations, their logic a lifeline in this tense standoff.

“... can’t be anywhere that blocks radio waves,” Cody murmured. “And it’s gotta be hardwired.”

“The old control room,” Tai insisted. “By the Ferris wheel. It’s the only spot that makes sense.”

Jason fought to keep his expression neutral, even as relief washed over him. He locked eyes with Munsinger, whose monologue had taken a sharp turn into paranoid territory.

“So you’re saying,” Jason interjected, careful to keep his tone curious rather than accusatory, “that Seven-Five has been manipulating global events for decades?”

The general’s eyes glinted with fanatical pride. “Manipulating? No. Guiding. Shaping the world as it should be.”

A shadow flitted past. Tai, sneaking out of the basement. Crouched low, with the general’s back to him, he slipped into the shadows.

Alex must have seen him, too. She gestured at Munsinger. “And how exactly does one go about shaping the world, General?”

“It’s all about money,” the man insisted. “We bolster regimes friendly to our philosophies and starve the others.”

As the old man launched into another tirade, Jason caught her eye. A subtle nod passed between them. They were on the same page—keep him talking, keep him distracted.

Tai’s breathing quickened over the comms. “Found it,” Tai’s whisper sent a jolt through Jason’s system. “In the control room. Just like we thought.”

Cody’s voice, steady and reassuring, guided Tai through the disarming process. Jason’s heart pounded, each second stretching into eternity as he maintained his facade of rapt attention to the general’s ravings.

Suddenly, Munsinger’s eyes narrowed. He glanced between Jason and Alex, suspicion dawning on his weathered face.

“You’re stalling,” he growled, his finger pressing harder on the dead man’s switch. “This has a three-mile range. I’ll take the woman with me just to make sure you don’t

try to interrupt my get away.”

Jason’s muscles tensed, ready to spring into action. The comms remained agonizingly silent. Had Tai succeeded?

Time slowed, each second stretching into eternity.

“Detonator neutralized,” Cody’s voice crackled in his ear, a lifeline in the chaos.

With one last silent prayer, Jason lunged, fist cocked. The general’s eyes widened in surprise as Jason’s fist connected with his jaw, sending the man staggering backwards. The useless switch clattered to the ground.

Hands up ready to fight, Munsinger came straight at him. They grappled, a deadly dance of fists and feet. Jason dodged a vicious right hook, countering with a swift kick to the general’s midsection. But the man blocked him. The old man was good. And shockingly fit. Every move Jason made was met with equal force and skill.

A groan from nearby caught Jason’s attention for a split second. Gravy staggered toward them. The distraction cost him as the general’s elbow slammed into his injured side, sending a stab of pain straight down his leg and driving the air from his lungs.

Jason stumbled back, gasping. The older man advanced, a predatory gleam in his eye. But before he could press his advantage, a blur of motion erupted from the shadows.

Gravy, his face a mask of anguish and determination, barreled into his father. They went down in a tangle of limbs, rolling across the dusty ground of the abandoned park.

A glint of metal caught the moonlight. The general had pulled a concealed weapon.

The crack of a gunshot split the night air.

For a heartbeat, the world stood still. Then the general slumped forward, collapsing at Gravy's side, his face a mix of shock and something almost like pride.

"Son ..." he wheezed, his voice barely audible.

Gravy cradled his father, conflicting emotions warring across his face. Anger, grief, and a terrible, aching loss.

Jason approached cautiously, Alex at his side.

Gravy laid his father gently on the ground. A dark stain spread across the man's chest. Way too much blood.

Jason kicked the gun away, though it was clear the threat had passed. Munsinger's eyes were already growing dim, fixed on his son's face in his final moments.

Even ten minutes later, Jason's ears still rang in the aftermath of the gunshot, the acrid smell of gunpowder mingling with the weird, musty scent of the abandoned amusement park. His heart pounded, adrenaline still surging through his veins as he surveyed the chaos around him. Unconscious Seven-Five operatives lay scattered like discarded action figures, while his team moved with practiced efficiency.

Kate and Fenn wrestled with a sun-faded tarp, reverently covering the general's body, then bowing their heads in prayer. Liv and Mac stepped around the unconscious agents, zip tying wrists and ankles while Paige and Cody and Tai did what they could to resecure the perimeter, patching together the battered fleet of drones.

Jason's gaze landed on Gravy. The younger man stood motionless, staring at the tarp. The usual mischievous glint in his eyes was replaced by a haunted look that made Jason's chest tighten.

He waved to get Gravy's attention. "I could use your help securing the area."

Gravy threw back his shoulders, standing stiffly at attention. He raised a hand. "I'll handle the explosives, Major. Make sure they're all accounted for and disabled."

Jason nodded, a mix of pride and concern washing over him. "Affirmative, Soldier. Look, about your father?—"

"Baggage for another time, sir," Gravy cut him off. "We're not done here."

Across the fairground, Alex huddled with her team. Jason caught snatches of their conversation, his pulse quickening as he heard Mac confirm the integrity of Alex's recording.

"We've got them," Liv's excited whisper carried on the night air. "Seven-Five's entire operation, laid bare."

Jason lifted a quick prayer of gratitude.

Alex shot him a stunning smile. Whatever came next, they'd changed the course of history tonight.

His boots crunched over broken glass as he joined the huddle of operatives. The air crackled with excitement.

"We can't just waltz into FBI headquarters and hand this over," Cody argued, his fingers drumming an anxious rhythm on his thigh.

Liv shook her head, her ponytail swishing. "CIA's out too. You gotta know they're compromised."

Fair points. Who could they trust with information this explosive?

Tai's voice cut through the debate, steady and sure. "Pegasus."

Absolutely. Jason held out a closed hand for a fist bump. "Spot on, brother."

"Bridger's old mentor?" Alex asked, her eyebrow arched.

Tai nodded. "She's been out of the game for years. If anyone's clean, it's her."

A ripple of agreement passed through the group. The knot in Jason's chest loosened. They had a plan.

As the team dispersed to make preparations, Jason found himself alone with Alex. The distant hum of generators filled the silence between them.

"Some night, huh?" he said, aiming for levity but landing somewhere near exhaustion.

Alex's laugh was soft, tinged with disbelief. "That's one way to put it."

Their eyes met, and Jason felt a surge of emotions he couldn't quite name. There was so much to say. So much to figure out.

Alex seemed to read his mind. "We should probably?—"

"Yeah," he agreed quickly. "Mission first."

They shared a nod, an unspoken promise to revisit this moment when the dust settled. For now, there was work to be done.

Tai rejoined the group, sat phone in hand. "Bridger's on board with our plan. Pegasus is on her way to Redemption Creek. ETA around seven a.m. tomorrow. And she's sending a local cleanup crew out here to relieve us. They'll finish deactivating any ordinance and make sure Munsinger's crew gets where they need to go."

A collective sigh of relief rippled through the team. Jason nodded, processing the information.

"Oh, and Jane's doing fine," Tai added, a smile tugging at his lips. "Doc's scheduled a C-section for the day after tomorrow."

Jason's eyebrows shot up. "Twins wait for no mission, huh?"

With the area secured and Pegasus's team en route, Jason finally allowed himself a moment of reflection. He leaned against a graffitied wall, the warm night air a balm on his skin.

His gaze drifted to Alex, who was deep in conversation with Mac. Even disheveled and exhausted, she was breathtaking. The events of the night flashed through his mind—the danger, the revelations, the victory. And through it all, Alex had been there, a steady presence at his side.

What did the future hold for them? He couldn't begin to guess, but he knew one thing—whatever came next, he wanted to face it with her.

The distant whir of helicopter blades pulled him from his reverie. He straightened, squaring his shoulders. Time for the next phase of their mission. Whatever debriefings and decisions lay ahead, he was ready.

With a final glance at Alex, Jason strode forward to meet the incoming chopper. The night wasn't over yet.

The gentle High Sierra sun filtered through the curtains the next morning, coaxing Alex from her fitful slumber. She blinked groggily at the bedside clock: 9:03 a.m. Normally, she'd have been up hours ago, but they hadn't even touched down in Redemption Creek until after three a.m.

With a groan, she dragged herself out of bed, her muscles protesting every movement. The few hours of sleep had done little to ease the bone-deep exhaustion. Her malaise was more mental than physical, but that didn't make it any less real.

The smell of coffee beckoned her out to the great room. Both teams were already gathered, looking as worn and shell-shocked as she felt.

Jason nursed a steaming mug at the kitchen island, his usual sharp gaze dulled by fatigue. Tai sat cross-legged on the floor, his eyes closed in what appeared to be meditation, though the tension in his shoulders betrayed his calm exterior.

Liv and Mac sat across from each other on one of the couches, looking calm as usual, if maybe a touch more subdued.

Alex's gaze lingered on Gravy, slumped in an armchair. His usual carefree demeanor was replaced by a haunted look, his eyes fixed on some distant point only he could see.

Gabriel stood by the window, staring out at the sunbaked landscape. The morning light cast shadows across his face, accentuating the new lines of worry etched there.

“Gabe,” Alex said softly, approaching him. “I’m proud of you. The way you handled things last night ... you were incredible.”

Her cousin turned, offering a wan smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Thanks.” There was a numbness to his expression that Alex recognized all too well.

She understood his state of mind perfectly. The violence they’d witnessed was a far cry from the losses they’d experienced before. Losing their parents had been traumatic, but watching a man die—being an active participant in such intense conflict—that was a different kind of trauma altogether, one she’d had to handle during her time in the CIA. But Gabe had never faced it before.

Beside her, Gravy whistled low. “Home sweet heavily fortified home.”

Alex couldn’t help but smile, even as her stomach tightened with anticipation of the debriefing to come. Relief at being back warred with the weight of what they’d uncovered.

Bridger strode towards them, his usual stoic demeanor tinged with an undercurrent of excitement. “Welcome back. Glad to see you all in one piece.”

“Mostly,” Cody quipped, rubbing his bruised jaw.

Bridger’s lips twitched. “I feel you. Jane’s C-section is scheduled for tomorrow. Looks like I’ll be trading one kind of sleep deprivation for another.”

Alex felt a pang in her chest. New life. New beginnings. While they grappled with the darkness they’d uncovered, the juxtaposition was almost poetic.

The sound of footsteps drew her attention to the doorway. A slender, silver-haired woman entered the room, her presence immediately commanding attention. Despite

her age, which Alex estimated to be in her late sixties or early seventies, the woman moved with the grace and poise of someone much younger. Her slim-fitting tech tee and cargo pants and perfectly coiffed hair spoke of meticulous attention to detail.

Alex found herself instinctively standing straighter as the woman studied the room. There was an aura of quiet authority about her that was impossible to ignore.

Bridger stepped forward, a hint of respect in his voice as he addressed the group. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Pegasus. She’s here to assist with the debriefing and help coordinate our next steps.”

The woman—Pegasus—nodded in acknowledgment. Her gaze settled on Alex, and a small smile played at the corners of her mouth. “Ms. Mendoza. I’ve heard a great deal about you. I look forward to hearing your report.”

“Likewise, ma’am,” Alex replied, a mix of respect and wariness coloring her tone. According to the Redemption Creek team, the woman was a legend in their world. Alex couldn’t shake the feeling that the evil cabal’s fate now rested in her elegant, manicured hands.

As Pegasus glided farther into the room to greet the others, Alex caught Bridger’s eye. He gave her a subtle nod, as if to say, “Yes, she’s as formidable as you think.” Alex squared her shoulders, steeling herself for what promised to be an intense debriefing.

While Pegasus conferred in the kitchen with Bridger and Tai, Gabe stretched, his joints popping audibly. “As impressive as this place is, I can’t wait to get back to L.A. It’s too quiet out here. I miss the city buzz.”

Liv nodded emphatically. “Agreed. And where am I supposed to find a decent Krav Maga dojo out here in the boonies?”

Alex blinked, momentarily thrown. “Krav Maga? Since when?”

Liv shrugged, a mischievous glint in her eye. “A girl’s gotta have hobbies.”

Mac, however, seemed lost in thought. “I don’t know. I could see myself out here. Maybe get a ranch. Some cows ...”

Gabe snorted. “You? Mr. Tech-Wizard with pet cows? I’d pay to see that.”

Their banter faded as Bridger and Pegasus came back into the dining area, taking the spots at the head of the table.

“Captain North has given me the broad strokes of your encounter with Seven-Five,” the woman said. “I’d like to debrief you all individually at some point, but first I think we need to turn our attention to figuring out how to stomp these people out. Thanks to Ms. Mendoza’s quick thinking, we’ve got new leverage. I think we should all hear it. Then I’d like your takes on the matter of how to proceed.”

The conversation shifted, words like “extraction” and “reintegration” floating through the air. Alex listened as Pegasus outlined plans to fly Alex and her team back to LA, her heart performing an odd little dance of relief and regret.

Conversation dimmed as Bridger played the tape of Munsinger’s confession.

“This is just the break the good guys have been waiting for,” Pegasus announced once it finished. “Now that we’re aware of just how deep Seven-Five may have infiltrated Western espionage services, the process of rooting them out can begin.” She trained her piercing gaze on Alex. “But progress will be slow. Especially at first. We’ll need your team to maintain a low profile for the time being.”

Alex nodded, her mind already racing ahead. Back to LA, back to normalcy—or

whatever passed for it in their line of work. But leaving Jason ...

As the meeting wound down, Alex found her gaze drawn to him. The set of his jaw, the intensity in his eyes—everything about him called to her. But the complications loomed large, too. Their careers. The changeable nature of their work: here one minute, in Tahiti the next. It all added up to the sheer impossibility of either of them being able to maintain a normal relationship.

Whatever that was.

Lost in her own thoughts, she barely noticed the others filing out. It wasn't until Jason touched her elbow that she realized they were alone.

"It's been a rough couple days," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

"Feels more like months."

He tipped his head to the side. "You mean that in a good way, right?"

"Mostly." She couldn't lie. "Remember when we first met? I wanted to knock your head off."

"And I thought you were the most arrogant, willful woman ..."

"Me? Arrogant?" She gasped in mock offense. "Okay, maybe a little."

They shared a moment of laughter, the tension easing slightly.

"We make a pretty good team, though," Jason insisted.

Her heart thudded against her ribs. "Yeah, we do."

She waited, hoping he might say something more, suggest a coffee, a date, anything. But he remained silent, his expression unreadable.

When they first met, she'd seen only the hard edges—the stubborn set of his jaw, the stern furrow of his brow, the rigid posture of a career soldier. Now, she noticed so much more.

His eyes, a warm hazel that could flash with intensity or soften with concern. The laugh lines at their corners, hinting at a sense of humor he kept carefully tucked away. His hands, strong and capable, yet gentle when tending to an injured teammate. Even his stance had changed in her eyes—no longer just rigid discipline, but a quiet strength that made her feel inexplicably safe.

She wondered about the small scar above his left eyebrow, sure there was a story there. Then she studied his face, drawn by the way his five o'clock shadow accentuated his strong jawline and the slight quirk of his lips when he was amused but trying not to show it.

It wasn't just his physical appearance. She'd seen his leadership, his unwavering loyalty to his team, his quick thinking under pressure. The glimpses of vulnerability he'd allowed her to see had touched something deep within her.

As the silence stretched on, she realized with a pang that she wanted to know more. To uncover every layer of Jason Reilly.

But he remained silent, his expression giving nothing away. The moment slipped away like sand through her fingers.

"Well," Alex said finally, her voice unnaturally bright. "I should go pack. Kate says we can take off in an hour or so."

Jason nodded, taking a step back. “Right. Of course.”

They walked to the door together, their steps slightly out of sync. At the threshold, they paused, facing each other awkwardly.

“So ...” Alex began, trailing off.

“Take care of yourself, Mendoza,” Jason said, his voice gruff.

Alex swallowed hard, forcing a smile. “You too, Army.”

He walked away.

Jason clearly wasn’t ready or willing to even discuss the possibility of more. But then again, was she? Their lives were complicated enough without adding a long-distance relationship to the mix.

Maybe it was for the best to put a few hundred miles between them. Give them both some space to figure things out. But as she rounded the corner of the hallway, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was walking away from her future.

Alex's footsteps retreated down the hallway, leaving Jason alone with the echoes of unsaid words. He sank down in the closest chair and ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. Some Special Forces operative he was. He could face down armed insurgents without breaking a sweat, but asking a woman on a date?

Apparently, that was a bridge too far.

Filled with nervous energy, he stood abruptly and paced the empty great room, his boots scuffing against the hardwood floor. Maybe it was for the best. What did he have to offer Alex, really? A man who spent more time in war zones than in his own home, who wouldn't know how to maintain a relationship if his life depended on it. She deserved better. Someone stable, someone who could promise her more than sporadic phone calls and the constant threat of danger.

The front door swung open, interrupting his self-flagellation. Tai and Fenn sauntered in, matching grins on their faces.

"So," Tai drawled, "when's the first trip to LA planned? Gonna sweep our girl Alex off her feet?"

Jason's jaw clenched. "Not now, guys."

Fenn raised an eyebrow. "Whoa, touchy. Did someone forget to have his Wheaties this morning?"

“I said, not now.”

Tai and Fenn exchanged glances. Jason immediately regretted his tone.

Fenn flashed Tai a knowing look. “He’s got it bad.”

“Copy that,” Tai agreed.

He stopped pacing. “Look, guys, I’m not the best company right now. I’m gonna head to the gym.”

But the two men folded their arms across their chests and blocked his way.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Tai sounded uncharacteristically serious. “You’re gonna sit your butt down and listen.”

“What he said,” Fenn agreed. “Consider this an intervention.”

Jason looked from one determined face to the other, realizing he was outmaneuvered. He sat in the chair again, resigned to whatever lecture was coming his way.

“She’s brilliant.”

“Driven.”

“Way smarter than you.”

“Better looking, too.”

“And for some weird reason, she obviously likes you. As in likes , likes.” Tai emphasized that last part.

Jason shifted in his seat. This was so not helping. He was perfectly aware of Alex's amazing qualities. "Guys, you're not telling me anything I don't already know. I appreciate the concern, but?—"

"But nothing," Tai interrupted, his voice sharp. "You keep telling yourself that, dude, and you're going to be one lonely old man."

He opened his mouth to argue, but Fenn stepped forward, his usual joking demeanor absent. "I told myself the same thing. And then I wised up. Just in time, too. I'll never admit this publicly, but you're way smarter than I am. Figure it out, bro. Fast."

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the distant sound of birds in the pines. Jason's resolve crumbled under the weight of their sincerity.

"Fine. All right. I'll talk to her," he conceded, his voice gruff. Not that he expected it to do any good.

But doubt quickly crept back in. "How can you even know she's interested in me?"

Tai and Fenn exchanged exasperated looks.

"For a bright guy," Tai said, shaking his head, "you're really dumb sometimes."

With that parting shot, the two men headed out the door, leaving Jason alone with his thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, he heaved himself out of the chair and made his way down the hallway. The guest room door was ajar, and he could hear Alex moving around inside. He hesitated, then rapped his knuckles against the doorframe.

Alex looked up, surprise flitting across her face. "What's up?"

He fidgeted in the doorway, suddenly at a loss for words. “Hey, I, uh ... Redemption Creek is a great place, you know. Not that LA isn’t. And your huge house. Mansion. It’s nice ...”

“Oh, yeah, it’s ...” Alex started, then paused, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I mean, Redemption Creek is really beautiful. The mountains and all ...”

“Right, the mountains,” Jason nodded too enthusiastically. “They’re very ... mountainous.”

They both spoke at once: “So, LA traffic must be?—”

“The ranch is really?—”

They stopped, chuckling awkwardly.

“You go ahead,” he offered, rubbing the back of his neck.

Alex fiddled with the zipper on her bag. “No, no, you were saying?”

“Just, uh, wondering about LA traffic. Heard it’s pretty bad.”

“Oh, yeah, it can be ... but you get used to it, I guess.” She shrugged. “The ranch though. It’s so peaceful here.”

“Peaceful, yeah,” Jason agreed, tapping his fingers against the doorframe. “Except when we’re chasing bad guys or, you know, waiting for babies.”

They shared a nervous laugh that quickly faded into another stretch of uncomfortable silence.

The sharp thwack of helo blades spinning up took care of the quiet.

Alex hefted her go bag. “Well, Army, that’s my cue.”

He reached for it. “Here, let me.” He took the bag, their fingers brushing for a brief moment.

They walked out together, joining Liv and Mac who were sheltered on the far side of the huge metal hangar. The wind whipped around them, carrying the scent of dust and sage.

“Try not to miss us too much, Reilly,” Liv called out, a teasing glint in her eye.

Mac grinned. “Yeah, we know how attached you’ve gotten.”

Jason felt a smile tugging at his lips despite the ache in his chest. “I’ll try to soldier on somehow.”

Mac and Liv and Gabriel headed around the corner and ducked their way onto the helo.

The helicopter’s blades cut through the air, their rhythmic thwack-thwack-thwack growing louder by the second as Kate spun up the engine. Jason raised his voice to be heard over the din.

“Hey, maybe I’ll come visit LA sometime. You know, if I’m in the area.”

Alex’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “That would be great.”

His chest tightened as Alex headed around the corner. She didn’t look back.

For a moment, his feet were rooted to the spot. His heart raced, urging him to follow, to say something—anything—to keep her from leaving. He took one halting step forward.

“Major!”

Gravy’s voice cut through his indecision. “It’s on!” He shouted, grinning from ear to ear. “Bridger just called. Jane’s water broke. Those little angels are coming early.”

Jason’s gaze darted between Gravy and the helo on the far side of the building. The choice stretched before him like a chasm.

With a resigned sigh, Jason turned away. “My truck’s by my cabin,” he said to Gravy, falling into step beside him.

As they jogged back toward the living quarters, he cast one last look over his shoulder. The helicopter was lifting off.

A bittersweet ache settled in his chest. “Goodbye, Mendoza,” he whispered beneath his breath. “Be well.”

A leaden weight settled in his gut, growing heavier with each step that took him farther from her.

He hadn’t asked her out.

No doubt about it—he’d just made the worst mistake of his life.

Jason paced the hospital waiting room, his boots scuffing against the linoleum floor. The antiseptic smell burned his nostrils. He checked his watch for the hundredth time, willing the minutes to move faster.

The entire team was there, scattered across the uncomfortable plastic chairs. Tai, Fenn, Gravy, and the others formed a protective circle around young Kellen, who was doing his best to stay brave for his mom and soon-to-be sisters.

Jason squatted down next to him. “Hey, buddy, you doing okay?”

Kellen nodded, his eyes wide. “Yeah, Uncle Jason. Is Mom gonna be alright?”

He squeezed the boy’s thin shoulder reassuringly. “Your mom’s the toughest person I know. She’s got this.”

Fenn cleared his throat. “Why don’t we say a prayer for Jane and the babies?”

The team nodded in agreement, forming a tight circle and joining hands.

“Dear Lord,” Fenn began, his deep voice steady and calming. “We come before you today to ask for your blessing and protection over Jane, Bridger, and their babies. Guide the doctors’ hands and give Jane strength for the journey ahead.”

As the prayer continued, peace washed over him, sweet and bright and strong. The team had faced countless dangers together, but this moment—waiting for new life to

enter the world—felt profoundly sacred.

Gravy spoke up, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “Oh, and maybe help the Major figure things out, you know?”

Jason’s eyes snapped open. “What does that mean?”

Gravy just shook his head sadly. “And I thought I was the dumb one,” he muttered.

Before Jason could press further, a commotion at the end of the hall snapped him back to the present. Bridger burst through the double doors, his face a mix of exhaustion and pure joy.

“They’re here!” he exclaimed, his voice cracking with emotion. “Both of them. They’re perfect.” He headed straight for his son, lifting the boy off the ground. “Mom’s doing fine. She asked me to get you first thing.”

Jason was on his feet in an instant, engulfing his nephew and brother-in-law in a bear hug. “Congratulations, man,” he said, his own voice thick with unshed tears.

The team broke out into a collective roar that brought the nursing staff to the doorway. “Sorry,” Tai waved at them. “We’ll keep it down.”

While Bridger led Kellen into the delivery room, Jason and the team traded hugs and high fives. It didn’t take long for Bridger to return, crooking a finger at Jason. “Mama wants her big bro,” he said.

“Copy that.” He hurried down the hall after his friend. A surge of love and protectiveness washed over him. His family was growing, changing in ways he never could have imagined. And for the first time in a long time, he allowed himself to dream of a future beyond missions and danger.

Jane lay propped up in bed, looking exhausted but radiant. In her arms, two tiny bundles with impossibly tiny white wrist bands on their impossibly tiny wrists squirmed and fussed. Kellen stood beside the bed, face glowing with wonder. “They’re so tiny, Uncle Jay. Look at their teeny fingers.”

Jane looked up. “Hey, big brother. Come meet your nieces.”

Jason approached the bed, his heart pounding. As he gazed down at the two perfect little faces, emotions choked him. Love, fear, hope, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility.

“They’re beautiful,” he whispered, gently touching one tiny hand. “What are their names?”

Jane and Bridger exchanged a look, their smiles widening. “We’d like you to meet Faith and Grace,” Bridger announced.

Jason felt his throat tighten. “Faith and Grace,” he repeated, the words laden with meaning. After everything Bridger and Jane had been through, after all the darkness they’d faced, here was a reminder of God’s enduring love and mercy.

As he held Faith in his arms, her tiny fingers wrapping around his calloused thumb, something shifted deep within his soul. This was what it was all about. This was why they fought. Why they risked everything. For moments like these.

For the promise of a better future.

“Welcome to the world, little ones,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to Faith’s forehead. “Your uncle Jason’s got your back. Always.”

The room filled with quiet chatter, but Jason barely noticed. His focus was entirely on

the precious bundle in his arms. For the first time, he truly understood what he was fighting for. And for the first time, he allowed himself to imagine a future beyond the next mission. A future that, despite his best efforts to deny it, had to include Alex.

As Faith yawned and nestled closer to his chest, Jason sent up a silent prayer. For protection, for guidance, and maybe, just maybe, for a second chance at love.

Here he was, holding new life in his arms, finally understanding the true meaning of family and love, and he had let Alex walk away.

“I have to go,” he blurted out, startling Jane and Bridger.

“What? Now?” Jane asked, confusion etched on her tired face.

Jason carefully handed Faith back to Bridger, his movements urgent but gentle. “I’m sorry, I just ... I need to fix something.”

Understanding dawned in Bridger’s eyes. “Go get her, man.”

With a quick kiss to Jane’s forehead and a final glance at his nieces, Jason ran out of the room. He had to get to Alex. Now. Before he lost his chance at the future he suddenly realized he desperately wanted.

He blasted straight past the team, ignoring their curious looks. No time to explain.

As he hurried out of the building, he went through a mental pre-flight. He’d find the closest airstrip to Alex’s place large enough to handle his P51 and head out ASAP.

It was time to take the biggest leap of faith of his life.

The sun dipped low on the horizon, painting the West LA skyline in hues of orange and pink. Almost exactly twenty-four hours had passed since the helicopter had lifted off from Redemption Creek, whisking Alex and her RAVEN team back to reality.

Twenty-four hours since she'd watched Jason's figure grow smaller in the distance, their connection left frustratingly unresolved.

She descended the sweeping staircase of her family's mansion, each step echoing in the empty two-story foyer. She'd ordered Mac, Liv, and Gabe to take a few days off, leaving her alone with her thoughts in the sprawling estate perched above RAVEN headquarters.

The iced tea in her hand clinked softly, condensation beading on the glass and cooling her palm. Instead of lingering in the opulent living room, she made her way to the hidden elevator that would take her down to RAVEN's subterranean command center.

Seconds later, she stepped into the cavernous space, the usual hum of computers and chatter of operatives eerily absent. Her footsteps echoed off the polished concrete floors, the sound only amplifying the emptiness.

She paused at the workstation Jason had commandeered, her fingers trailing along the edge of his desk.

"Lord, give me strength," she murmured, her voice barely audible over the soft whir

of idling servers.

The thought of never seeing him again hurt more than she would have imagined, given that she'd been ready to deck him when they met. How had he wormed his way into her heart so quickly? And more importantly, how was she supposed to go on without him now?

Alex snorted, shaking her head. "Get it together, girl. You can't exactly call him up and say 'Oops, changed my mind!'"

She sank into the office chair, wincing as the cool leather touched her bare legs, and closed her eyes. His face, all hard planes and equally-fierce emotions, swam behind her eyelids.

The sound of the elevator doors opening made her look up. Gabriel sauntered in, face pale, jaw clenched, hands buried in the pocket of his rumpled hoody, his usual grace tempered by an odd, jittery energy. The bruises on his face were healing quickly, but still, something was off.

"You okay?" she asked, jumping up.

"We need to talk."

She mentally prepared herself for a long conversation. Gabe was a gifted inventor, but he had never handled roadblocks well. Temperamental was the word that came to mind. "What's up? Something wrong with the NeuroVerse research?"

"The research is great." His clipped tone sliced through the air. "Perfect. It's you that's the problem."

She blinked, struggling to process this sudden shift. Gabe could be difficult when he

worked too hard—lack of sleep and proper nutrition for weeks on end would affect anybody—but he'd never been so short with her.

She tried another tack, forcing a gentle tone. "What can I do to help?"

Gabe's dark eyes glittered, his face growing taut. Harsh. Mean.

It was a look she'd never seen on him before, transforming his familiar features into those of a stranger.

He jerked a hand out of the pocket of his hoodie. Alex's world tilted on its axis as she found herself staring down the barrel of a handgun.

"You can die," he said, in a stranger's voice.

She flinched back instinctively before her training kicked in, overriding her shock. Was her cousin on drugs? She searched for a way to safely disarm him, but he was careful to stay out of range.

"Stay back," he warned. "I know you're way better at hand-to-hand fighting than I am. I'm not stupid."

Alex raised her hands slowly, palms out, trying to project a calm she didn't feel. Her heart thundered in her chest, blood rushing in her ears. What had happened to her gentle, brilliant cousin?

"Okay, Gabe," she said, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. "Whatever's going on, we can figure it out together."

His gaze fixed on a point over Alex's shoulder, his voice eerily detached. "Munsinger was supposed to have you killed. That was the agreement. I'd allow him to take the

credit for licensing my tech to the military in exchange for getting rid of you.”

Bile rose in her throat. Keep him talking . It was all she could think to do while she sorted this out.

She swallowed hard, fighting to keep her voice steady. “You had no idea the general was involved with the Seven-Five group, did you?”

“Not that it matters,” Gabriel shrugged, the gun unwavering. “Now that the Seven-Five people know about my tech, they’ll offer me even more money. Either way, I win.” His lip curled in disgust. “Except the general failed. Badly. All three times.”

The pieces clicked into place, a sickening realization dawning. “That’s why you went to your alternate lab,” Alex said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Duh.” Gabriel rolled his eyes. “The whole point was for me to have an alibi while his people took care of you.” He pointed at his face with his free hand. “I even let them do this. I wanted to really sell it, you know? But then you ruined that, too. They beat me up for nothing.”

“But why?” The question burst from her, raw and desperate. “How could you?”

“You don’t know?” His handsome face twisted with rage. “How could you not know?”

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Dear Jesus, make this stop .

She forced herself to breathe, to think. “I loved you like a brother. We all did. Mom and Dad treated us as siblings. Always.”

“Right. The poor, orphaned nephew. I never really belonged.”

The accusation stung, anger flaring hot in Alex’s chest. “That’s not true! We?—”

“It should have been your parents on that plane,” Gabriel snarled. “But no, your mother had just suffered a miscarriage, so your father talked my parents into representing the family business at that conference in Italy.”

The revelation hit Alex like a physical blow. She staggered back, her world tilting on its axis. “I ... I had no idea you felt this way. If you’d told me sooner— If you’d told my parents?—”

Gabriel scoffed, cutting her off. “Right. Then your parents would have forced me to keep seeing that stupid shrink. No thanks.”

The gun glinted in the overhead light, a cold reminder of how quickly everything had unraveled.

Gabriel’s face twisted into a cruel smile. “There’s still a way to make it right. I know what the trust says.”

The trust. Oh. No .

If either of them died without offspring, the other inherited everything.

He could see she understood. “Cool, huh? So you’re going to go to sleep ... and die. No worries. You won’t feel the explosions.”

He took aim at her, center mass. She tensed, ready to dive for cover, but there was nowhere to go.

He pulled the trigger.

She anticipated the sharp sting of the tranq dart needle. The instant brain fog, followed by blackness. The dart hit her abdomen, but the sting was hardly noticeable, much less obvious than the soft clatter that followed. A small dart rolled across the floor. It had barely pierced her skin before falling away.

Gabriel's face contorted with fury. "No!" he snarled, his composure cracking. He raised the gun again, finger squeezing the trigger.

Click.

The hollow sound echoed in the room. Gabriel's eyes widened in panic as he frantically tried to clear the jam.

Alex's instincts screamed at her to run, to tackle him while he was distracted, but the room tilted and swayed. Even that small dose of tranquilizer was taking effect, stealing her strength and blurring her vision.

"No, no, no," Gabriel moaned, his movements growing more frenzied.

She stumbled forward on leaden legs. She had to do something, had to stop him before?—

The world tilted sharply, and she found herself on her knees, struggling to stay conscious. Through the haze, a face crystallized in her mind.

Jason .

She wished it had worked out. Wished she'd taken the chance. As darkness crept in at the edges, her last coherent thought was of his smile, warm and full of promise.

Then, nothing but darkness.

Jason pulled up to imposing entry of Alex's mansion, taken aback, again, by the magnificent home. Palm trees swayed lazily in the warm breeze, perfectly-cut lawns, a green that practically glowed, stretched out in front of every home on the street. The air itself felt different here—heavy with the scent of jasmine and car exhaust rather than pine and safe and snow-tinged mountain air.

Their worlds were so different. No way he'd ever feel at home in this concrete canyon. What if Alex, with her sleek, high-tech life, never wanted to leave?

Was he an idiot for even trying to kindle something with her?

He almost drove away, but her security cameras swiveled toward him. He'd come too far to let his faith wane now. Before he could talk himself out of it, he sprinted for the door and tapped the doorbell.

He drummed his fingers on his thighs, scanning the perimeter. Nothing but stunning grounds and high-priced vehicles rolling down the street. Just like the high-priced sportscar in her driveway. So she was home.

"Come on, Alex. I know you see me."

Silence greeted him, broken only by the soft coo of doves. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention.

Something was off.

Alex's security was tighter than Fort Knox on lockdown. Even if she wasn't home, her security system would be pinging her phone.

Maybe she just didn't want to see him.

His heart gave a painful twist before logic kicked in. No, that wasn't her style. If she wanted him gone, she'd tell him straight, with a sharp quip and a door slam, not a cold shoulder.

He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over Paige's number. He could ask her to dig up contact info for Mac or Liv or Gabriel. But even as he made the call, a nagging voice in his head screamed that time was of the essence.

"Paige, I need you to—" he started, then cut himself off. "Actually, scratch that. I'll check in later."

He ended the call, ignoring Paige's squawk of protest. His instincts were rarely wrong, and right now, they were blaring like a five-alarm fire. Whatever was happening inside, he needed to be there.

Yesterday.

He circled the front of the property, his eyes scanning for any potential entry points. He tested every ground-level window, hoping for a stroke of luck.

No dice.

"Alright, Plan B it is," he muttered, eyeing the side fence that blocked entry to the back of the home. Eight feet high and thick, plaster-covered concrete. Easily doable.

He backed away, taking a running leap. His fingers clamped down on the top, making

it easy for him to hoist himself up and over. That ought to set off every one of her security alarms. Good. If Alex was around, this would definitely get her attention.

Landing with a soft thud on more manicured grass, he checked the backyard. No sign of Alex—or anyone else—lounging by the crystal-blue pool.

Alarms blared from speakers mounted in the eaves. He raced to the French doors.

Still, no signs of anyone. Something was very wrong.

He snagged a patio chair on his way past, intent on smashing his way inside. But just as he was about to slam it into the glass, the alarms ceased. A soft click echoed in the silence. The doors swung open.

Somehow, that didn't ease his mind.

He drew his handgun, the cool metal a comforting weight in his hand. He stepped inside, every sense on high alert. The house was quiet. Too quiet.

The hidden door built into the wall that concealed a staircase leading down to RAVEN's HQ stood ajar. Alex prided herself on attention to detail. And security. No way she would have left it ajar.

Heart pounding, he flew down the stairs. The sight that greeted him knocked the breath from his lungs. Alex lay sprawled on the floor, her hand resting on the security console.

"Alex!" He knelt beside her, checking for a pulse. A strong, steady rhythm beat beneath his fingertips.

He closed his eyes for an instant. Thank you, Lord .

Alex's eyelids fluttered open, her dark eyes unfocused and cloudy. "Jason? How ... you're here?"

"I'm here. What happened?" He helped her sit up, supporting her weight.

Her words came out slurred, fragmented. "Gabriel ... betrayed ... knocked me out ..."

"Your cousin?" Jason frowned, pieces of the puzzle not quite fitting.

Alex's next words sent a chill down his spine. "Wants me ... dead. Bombs ... Run. Just ... run."

His eyes darted around the room, landing on unfamiliar wires snaking near the computer stations.

"Explosives. This place is rigged to blow."

Jason's relief at finding Alex alive lasted precisely two seconds. Then reality hit like a slug to the chest.

Explosives. Everywhere.

Crude wiring snaked across the floor. Gabriel's inexperience with IEDs was evident in the sloppy construction, but that only made them more dangerous.

How many more were hidden? Could he disarm them all in time?

Time slowed as he shifted into professional mode, weighing his options. Stay and attempt to neutralize the bombs, risking both their lives if he failed? Or flee, potentially exposing themselves to Gabriel if he was lying in wait outside? He hadn't seen the slightest sign of anyone, but then again, he hadn't really been looking.

In her semi-conscious state, Alex absently traced the scar on her forearm, mumbling, "At least ... this time ... I finally trusted the right man."

Her words hit Jason like a lightning bolt. His gut instinct, honed by years of high-stakes operations, screamed at him to get her out. But it was more than that. It was faith—faith that they'd been brought together for a reason.

Faith that their story wasn't meant to end here in a fiery explosion.

Decision made, he pulled Alex to her feet, ignoring the sharp tug of the sutures in his

side. Getting patched up again would be a luxury—if they survived.

He propped her up against him, one arm supporting her weight while the other held his Sig Sauer at the ready. Every shadow could hide Gabriel, every second meant possible detonation.

The stairs seemed endless as they staggered upward, Jason's senses on high alert for any sign of danger.

He pulled her through the living room and straight out the front door, free arm pinwheeling as he hauled both of them down the front stairs. Finally, they emerged into the sunlight, but he ran on, heart pounding as he half-carried, half-dragged Alex across the lawn, to the sidewalk.

He gently lowered her to the ground. Tension slammed through him with every beat of his heart. Her cousin wouldn't have set a long countdown. Most amateurs overestimated their own escape speed, often ending up victims of their own blasts.

The bombs would blow any second. It was a miracle they hadn't detonated already. And a miracle the street was empty. For the moment.

"Stay here," he ordered, his eyes already darting back to the building.

Alex grabbed his arm, her grip surprisingly strong despite her wooziness. "Jason, no. It's too dangerous. We need to call the bomb squad."

She was right. Absolutely. Only, he had no idea how many explosives Gabriel planted. Or how strong the blasts would be. They'd probably be safe this far away, but he couldn't be certain.

He surveyed the area, assessing it with the practiced eye of a tactical expert. The

neighboring hedges cast long shadows, creating perfect hiding spots for a potential assailant. To their left, a narrow alley offered a possible escape route, but it could just as easily be a death trap. The street at their backs left them exposed, easy targets for anyone with a long-range weapon.

His gaze settled on his rental SUV, parked about twenty yards away. Not ideal cover, but the best option available. “Come on.” He pulled her to her feet again. They made their way to the vehicle and crouched down behind it, its bulk shielding them from the house.

He glanced at his watch, then back at the building, calculating possible blast radii. Obtaining large quantities of low-tech explosive material wasn’t as easy as Hollywood made it look. He figured there’d be enough load to destroy the basement headquarters, which would decimate Alex’s home above as well. But the outer walls would contain much of the energy. Better to stay where they were than risk exposing themselves to whoever could be waiting in the shadows.

He set down his weapon and pulled out his phone, crouching closer to her. “I’m calling this in.”

He dialed 911, sketching in the situation as quickly and efficiently as possible. “Devices visible onsite,” he was careful to add. That single piece of info would heighten response times.

The dispatcher requested that he stay on the line, but Jason ignored him. He hung up, suddenly aware that Alex was studying him with clearer eyes.

She sat up straighter. “Hey, Army. Why’d you show up anyway?”

He tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. Now was not the time. He hadn’t exactly planned what he’d say, but he knew this wasn’t the venue. He brushed a hank

of dark hair out of her eyes. “Long story. No time.”

“We’ve got time.”

The distant wail of sirens proved his point. He shrugged helplessly. “Later.”

It took less than two minutes for the first patrol car to roll into her driveway. But this would be a generic patrol unit. The bomb squad would take far longer. Too long, most certainly.

Another squad car squealed to a halt behind the first, followed closely by a fire engine that blocked the drive.

The bomb squad would be at least half an hour away. Most likely more.

Car doors slammed. Jason slid his handgun under the rental and prepared to rise to face the first responders. He didn’t want to risk any of the officers trying to head inside. Or shoot him.

“Mendoza,” he said gently, meeting her eyes. “Your cousin wouldn’t have let the timer go too long. Those IEDs are going to go off any second.”

She nodded, her face pale but composed. Before she could respond, the first explosion rocked the ground beneath them.

Jason instantly pulled Alex into his arms, covering her head and shielding her body with his. He held her tight as five more explosions followed in quick succession. The blasts were muffled, contained within the basement headquarters, but their power was undeniable.

The ground shook with each detonation. Windows shattered, blowing glass out onto

the grounds. Muted concussive waves rippled through the air. Thick, acrid smoke billowed out of the open front door and the now-broken windows, carrying debris and ash into the bright sky.

As the last echoes faded, Jason released his protective hold on Alex. She looked up, her eyes wide with shock as she took in the devastation.

“I’m so sorry about your house,” he said softly, his heart aching for her loss.

For the betrayal.

Alex swallowed hard, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll ... I’ll worry about that later. At least no one was hurt.”

Before Jason could respond, officers emerged from around the back of the vehicle with guns drawn.

“On the ground! Now!” an officer shouted, his weapon trained on them.

“Do it,” Jason told Alex calmly, already lowering himself to the pavement.

They lay flat on the ground, hands spread wide, as the chaos of the aftermath swirled around them. The air filled with shouted orders, radio chatter, and the continued wail of approaching emergency vehicles. Through it all, Jason kept his eyes on Alex, silently promising that somehow, they’d get through this together.

And then, he’d say what he’d come to say.

Six hours later, Alex stumbled out of the police interrogation room. The harsh fluorescent lights of the corridor made her wince, a dull throb pulsing behind her eyes. The relentless questioning had left her wrung out.

Gabriel's face, distorted in fury, flashed in her mind. Her stomach twisted. How had she missed the hatred simmering beneath his sweet facade all these years?

The betrayal hurt worse than the lingering effects of whatever drug he'd used on her.

She patted her empty pockets, reality sinking in. No purse. No phone. No way home. "Fantastic."

Just as despair threatened to overwhelm her, two familiar figures rounded the corner.

"Alex!" Liv and Mac cried in unison, rushing forward to envelope her in a tangle of arms and worried exclamations.

Liv pulled back, her mascara smudged. "We were so worried!"

"Are you okay?" Mac studied her from head to toe.

Alex managed a weak smile, deeply thankful for their concern. "I've been better. Where's Jason? Is he still being questioned?"

Liv's eyes sparkled. "Oh honey, he's waiting outside. Once Paige and Cody showed

up and explained Jason's background ... or at least the fit-for-civilians version, the cops were falling over themselves to shake his hand."

"Come on." Mac linked his arm through hers. "Let's get you out of here."

The night air hit her like a slap to the face as they exited the station. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees since she'd been marched inside. Her eyes immediately found Jason, standing beneath a streetlight like some noir film hero. He was deep in conversation with his teammates, but the moment he spotted her, he left them and bounded up the stairs two at a time, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close before she could utter a word.

She melted into his embrace, inhaling his comforting scent of soap and pure, honest male.

He murmured against her hair. "You okay?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. As if by silent agreement, their friends faded into the shadows, leaving them alone in their little pool of light. She shivered.

The summer evening was cooler than usual. Or was she simply wiped out? Jason pushed her gently away, whipping off his jacket and settling it over her shoulders.

Nothing could have felt so good.

"Let's get you somewhere warm," he said, his voice a soothing rumble. "Are you hungry? Because I'm starving."

The mundane question grounded her instantly, pulling her back from the edge of emotional freefall.

“I could eat,” she lied. Her stomach was so full of knots there was no room for food. But Jason wouldn’t eat if she didn’t. And the man had to be running on fumes.

They walked arm in arm down the street, the silence between them comfortable rather than oppressive for a change. The neon sign of a diner winked at them from the corner.

“The detectives said this is the place for burgers and pie,” Jason informed her as he held the door open.

The diner’s interior was a time capsule of 1950s Americana, populated by a handful of bleary-eyed swing shift workers. The aroma of coffee and grilled onions wafted through the air. Her stomach growled traitorously.

When the waitress appeared, notepad at the ready, Alex found herself struck mute. Even making this small decision seemed overwhelming.

Jason smoothly stepped in, ordering burgers and apple pie for both of them.

As they waited for their food, he turned serious. “About your house ... It’s not good. Totaled. Sorry.”

She fiddled with a sugar packet, surprised to find she wasn’t as devastated as she’d expected. “I’ve been wanting to upgrade the mainframe anyway,” she said, attempting a lighthearted tone.

His hand covered hers, stilling her fidgeting fingers. “Mendoza, I like your style.”

She layered her other hand atop his, savoring the contact. His touch was an anchor in the storm of her emotions. “Back atcha, Army.”

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the world faded away.

A bittersweet ache spread through her chest, knowing their time together was limited. But she pushed the thought aside, determined to live in this moment, surrounded by the comforting buzz of the diner and the warmth of Jason's gaze.

The waitress slid their plates onto the table, the aroma of sizzling beef and crisp fries momentarily distracting her. She picked at her food, her appetite waning again as her mind circled back to Gabriel's betrayal.

"I'm really batting a thousand when it comes to picking trustworthy men," she said, her attempt at humor falling flat even to her own ears.

Jason's eyes flickered to the scar on her forearm. "What's the story there?"

She traced the raised line with her fingertip, other bitter memories flooding back. "Happened a long time ago. I trusted a fellow agent based on nothing but a set of gorgeous eyes and a warm smile. Bad move."

Horrible move, actually. While she'd been wondering if the charming Moroccan agent liked her back, Karim had been waiting to kill her. She'd been lucky to walk away with just a knife wound.

To her surprise, Jason nodded, understanding etched in the lines of his face. "Been there. Done that."

His admission settled something inside her, a small comfort in the midst of chaos. She took a deep breath, the aromas of coffee and hot fry grease grounding her in the present.

"So what about Gabe?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "He's out there,

somewhere. He'll want to finish this."

Jason's eyes hardened, his jaw clenching. "He's never gonna get the chance. Mac and Liv are already working with my team to hunt him down. He might be a tech genius, but you and Mac and Liv are the experts at disappearances. Between you three and Paige and Cody, there's literally nowhere for him to hide."

A fair point. Relief—and a healthy dose of grief—sloshed over her. The booth's vinyl seat creaked as she shifted, trying to process her conflicting emotions. Coming to terms with her cousin's betrayal would take time ... and lots of prayer.

She poked at her burger. "So, Army, how did you happen to show up in time to save the day?"

Jason squirmed in his seat. "Let's just say, I'm an idiot."

"A given. Go on." She leaned back, crossing her arms.

He ran a hand through his hair. "You leaving Redemption Creek didn't sit right. So I followed my gut. Came to find you. And, well ... here we are."

"Here we are indeed."

"I've never met a woman like you. You do funny things to me. In a good way," he hurried to add. "I like being around you, Mendoza. I like it a lot."

She bit back a grin, warmth blooming in her heart. "Go on."

"Look, I know our lives are complicated. We've both got our own teams, our own missions. But I think we could make it work."

“How?” Because she wasn’t so sure.

He paused as a waiter passed by their table. The clink of cutlery from nearby diners punctuated the silence. “Maybe we could start slow. You know, take it one step at a time.”

“What did you have in mind?”

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. “How about we go on a date? A real date. No mission briefing. No objectives. No bad guys. Just you and me.”

Alex leaned forward, her elbows on the table. “A date, huh? And where exactly would Army Boy take me on this hypothetical date?”

“I’ve got a few ideas. But I’d rather keep you guessing. What do you say, Mendoza? Willing to give it a shot?”

“Yes.”

He blinked, clearly surprised. “Yes?”

“Yes, we should see where this leads.”

He sat back, looking slightly dazed. “Okay.”

“All right.”

He forked up a huge bite of apple pie and chowed down. “This is amazing.”

“I prefer cherry.”

He grinned, forking up another bite. “Good to know.”

“What about Gravy?” Alex asked, suddenly remembering her ragtag client. “He doesn’t need to disappear now, right?”

Jason’s eyes sparkled. “Turns out, Gravy’s mom was a wealthy woman in her own right. The government will seize his father’s assets, but he’s going to be rich.”

“Which doesn’t mean he won’t need friends. And a purpose.”

“No worries there. It’s looking like Redemption Inc. has a new mascot.”

Alex smiled, genuinely happy for Gravy and the team. “He’s good for you. You could use more laughter in your life.”

“Fair enough.” He lifted a bite of pie. “But you’re what’s good for me, Mendoza. I just wasn’t smart enough to see it.”

He was good for her too, literally a heaven-sent blessing.

““Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,”” she quoted softly the words of 1 Corinthians 13:7.

“Amen,” he murmured, reaching across the table to take her hand.

In that moment, surrounded by the comforting sounds and smells of the diner, Alex realized that sometimes the greatest adventures begin not with a bang, but with a quiet promise and a slice of pie.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:36 am

Six months later

Bridger fumbled with his bow tie, the silky fabric slipping through his fingers like a trout determined to escape. Through the cabin's frost-etched window, he caught a glimpse of the snow-dusted Sierras, their granite peaks a majestic backdrop to the day's festivities.

"You sure you don't want to elope?" he quipped, eyeing Tai's nervous pacing. "I hear Reno's great this time of year."

Tai shot him a look that could have melted the snow outside. "And face the wrath of one Tenaya Washington? I'd rather take on a dozen hostiles with a pack of chewing gum and a laser pointer."

Bridger chuckled, finally conquering the bow tie. "Can't blame you there. You lucked out with that woman, brother."

"Copy that," Tai agreed, a dopey grin spreading across his face. "More lucky than I have a right to expect."

Their conversation drifted to the rest of the Redemption Creek family. The twins, now six months old, had him and Jane running from sun-up to sun-down. The only person who consistently had them wrapped around his little finger was their adoring big bro. Mason and Avery's upcoming destination wedding was in the works, location still classified.

"Ten bucks says it's another of Mason's ridiculously luxurious safe houses," Bridger

wagered.

Tai snorted. “Sucker bet. Though I wouldn’t put it past him to rent out a private island.”

“Rent one? I think he already owns a couple.”

“Yeah, but who wants to get married on a secret Arctic archipelago?”

They peered out the window, catching sight of Graham helping their neighbor, Mrs. Tandy, carry a heavy load towards the farmhouse.

“He likes her.” Tai grinned, nodding towards the pair.

Bridger’s eyebrows shot up. “Ellen? Really?”

“Yup. I’m telling you. I see a future there.”

A warmth spread through Bridger’s chest that had nothing to do with the cabin’s crackling fire. Graham had been a father figure to them all, quietly supporting them through thick and thin. The hard-fighting Marine who had struggled so hard to rebuild his relationship with his daughter, Tenaya, deserved his own slice of happiness.

Bridger clapped the groom on the shoulder. “Looks like love is in the air for everyone in Redemption Creek. Even the old timers are getting in on the action.”

Tai’s grin widened. “Just wait till Fenn and Kate’s wedding. Ten bucks says he talks her into a full-blown circus theme.”

“Make it twenty,” Bridger countered. “And throw in a trapeze act for the first dance.”

Bridger adjusted his cufflinks, a gift from Tai for being his best man. “Speaking of weddings, what’s your take on Paige and Cody?”

Tai’s eyebrows shot up. “We’ll be hearing something soon for sure, but man, those two are more secretive than a classified op.”

“True,” Bridger chuckled. “But have you seen the way Cody looks at her when he thinks no one’s watching? Dude’s got it bad.”

Bridger’s eyes glinted with mischief. “Care to make it interesting? I bet Paige and Cody tie the knot before Kate and Fenn.”

Tai considered for a moment, stroking his chin. “No. No. No. You are so wrong, Amigo. Fifty bucks says Kate drags Fenn down the aisle first.”

“Deal,” Bridger grinned, extending his hand. They shook on it, sealing the bet.

“You know,” Tai mused, “for a bunch of hardened operatives, we’ve sure gone soft.”

Bridger laughed, the sound echoing off the cabin’s wooden walls. “Don’t let the bad guys hear that. We’d lose our street cred.”

As they finished getting ready, Bridger couldn’t help but marvel at how far they’d all come. From lone wolves to a tight-knit family, each finding their own bit of happiness in Redemption Creek. And if Paige and Cody were next ... well, he had fifty bucks riding on it.

His gaze drifted outside again. Jason was helping Alex out of his huge SUV. “And then there’s Reilly. The man that started it all.”

Tai grinned. “Who’d have thought the lone-est of the lone wolves would end up being such a softie?”

“Alex brings out a different side of him, for sure,” Bridger agreed. “He used to scowl at everything.”

“Now he’s all dopey grins and heart eyes,” Tai chuckled. “It’s almost disgusting.”

Bridger leaned against the window frame, his breath fogging the glass. “Remember when we first rolled into town? I was ready to bolt after the first week.”

Tai snorted. “You and me both. Now look at us, all domesticated.”

“Domesticated?” Bridger raised an eyebrow. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

“What would you call it?”

“Evolution, maybe? From lone wolves to ... I don’t know, a pack?”

“Bingo. A pack of overprotective, paranoid ex-operatives, still jumping at shadows, but now ...”

“Now we’re jumping for the right reasons,” Bridger finished. He glanced out the window again, watching their makeshift family bustling about. “Funny how that works.”

Tai nodded, a smile playing on his lips. “Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit, but I’m happier than a pig in mud.”

Bridger could only laugh. The man played tired, old-fashioned sayings like a concert pianist.

The door burst open, revealing Kellen in a perfectly pressed tuxedo. “Mom says we need to get a move on,” he ordered. “The girls just went down for their naps. She says we better get this party started before they wake up.”

Bridger grinned. “Tell her we’ll be there faster than she can say ‘diaper duty.’”

As Kellen sprinted off, a wave of emotion blindsided Bridger. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear the sudden moisture from his eyes.

Tai gave him a sidelong glance. “What?”

“What?” he echoed. “I’m not crying. You’re crying.”

Tai tilted his head back, blinking fast. “Well duh. I’m definitely crying, dude.”

Kellen’s voice floated back to them from the hallway. “Adults. Yuck.”

“Kid’s got a point.” Bridger swiped his eyes and grinned at his friend.

“Copy that, Amigo. Copy that.”

As they prepared to leave the cabin, Bridger paused, overwhelmed by the moment. He could never have anticipated the challenges and sorrows that had marked his life, but the sweet blessings vastly outnumbered the troubles.

Before finding Redemption Creek and Jane and Kellen, he wasn’t certain he’d ever be whole. Now, surrounded by the family he’d found and the love he’d never expected, he couldn’t imagine his life being any fuller.

Or more blessed.

With a deep breath, he stepped into the frigid sunlight, ready to celebrate not just Tai and Tenaya’s love, but the incredible journey that had brought them all together.

The future stretched out before them, bright and full and shining.

He couldn't wait to see what came next.

And just like that, we're at the end of Redemption Creek.... For now. These characters have burrowed so far into my heart, I'm not sure I'm ready to say good bye. But for now, I've got something new on the horizon....