



# Guard Dog (Lonesome Garage #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Violet: I'm pulling up roots and taking my little girl to Lonesome to start a new job working for my dead husband's former teammates. We want to leave the past behind, but trouble seems to have followed us. Deacon was always a good friend to the family, but can the hot former SEAL be even more now?

Deacon: When I offered a job to my best friend's widow, I told myself I could handle working next to her every day. I lied. I barely stayed away from Violet when she was married. Now she and her daughter are here, alone, and they need someone to take care of them. Nobody can do that like I can. She just needs to survive the move.

If youre looking for a single mom, best friend's widow, woman in peril romance, youve found it.

**Total Pages (Source):** 10

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

I can't believe this is my life. "We're almost there, sweet pea," I sing over my shoulder to my two-year-old in the back.

I force a smile into my voice and hope it hides the fear threatening to swamp me.

I brush a lock of brown hair which has escaped my ponytail out of my face and check the GPS.

According to the screen, we are two blocks away from the Dobermann Garage, which is on the main street of Lonesome, North Dakota.

It's a Friday. I'll be starting my new office job there on Monday, but since I'm also renting my new house from one of the garage's owners, I need to stop there to pick up my keys and sign my lease. My brand-new life lies straight ahead.

There it is: a rectangular, two-story brick building, with two bay doors left and center, and a small office on the right.

A pair of gas pumps stand out front. Anything more would be out of place in this small town.

The first block we passed has a retro coffee shop-slash-ice-cream parlor-slash-gift store called the Halfway Café, and a feed store on one side of the street, and the town hall and police station on the other.

The second block consists of one large building that looks like it used to be a three-business strip mall.

A huge sign spans the length of it announcing that it is Carol's Convenience and More.

Across from that is a grocery store and drug store.

Block three has the Dobermann Garage facing a veterinary clinic.

Beside the gas station, I see a sign for the Lonesome Bar and Grill.

Beyond that is an unlabeled building and some empty lots before Main Street turns back into a highway.

Those three and a half blocks seem to make up Lonesome's entire business district.

It's not much, but it's more than Peony and I need. New job, new house, new start. It'll be perfect. At least, it will be some much-needed stability with a bunch of people who want to support me and ensure I do well.

I look both ways before I crank the wheel to cross the road. I pull into an empty parking spot in front of the office and turn off the ignition. "We made it, baby girl." Peony babbles happily, waving a small frog stuffie at me.

A fit, sandy-haired man jogs out of one of the open garage doors and heads right to us. "Violet, you made it!"

"The GPS did the job, Deke," I say. I love and hate that Deacon Dobermann worries about me.

He looks good. Much better in person than he did over the video chats we've been having for the past three months.

Hopefully the distance has given him some perspective too.

I've been trying to get him to see me as a competent woman rather than a China doll.

To help with that, I don't mention that I spent the week before we left Virginia practicing with the GPS just so I could nonchalantly brag about it.

Deke would have come out and driven us across the country to save me the stress if I had asked.

I was tempted. But I'm proud that I did it myself.

The last six months have been constant life lessons I am determined to pass.

I can't afford not to, not with Peony depending on me.

I've coasted too long, letting everyone else take care of me.

"Come inside. I'll introduce you to the guys you haven't met yet.

Then we'll grab the keys, and I'll take you to your new place.

I already stocked the fridge and there is a sofa bed you can use until your furniture arrives.

I also have a kitchen table and chairs in my truck.

Oh, and I arranged to have an internet account installed, billed to me as the house

owner. And?—”

“That sounds terrific, Deke. That’s more than enough for us. The moving van is scheduled to arrive tomorrow morning.”

“If you need anything between now and then, call me. More furniture, food, babysitter. Anything.”

He is so intense that I could ask for his kidney and he’d hack it out without anaesthetic for me. “I’m good. You’ve been more than generous. Thank you, Deke.”

Deacon Dobermann has always been a good man, going back to when he served on the same SEAL team as my husband, Keith.

The whole team had been great guys: Keith, Deke—who decided not to re-enlist, JD—who has taken a medical discharge after being hurt in the same training accident that killed my husband, Rick—who is still with the SEALs and had been Keith’s best friend, and Smitty and Joker, who are also still in the navy.

Aside from Rick, who is Keith’s executor and who helped me pack for my move from Virginia, it has been Deke who has stepped up the most since Keith’s death.

Deke is the one who offered me a part-time job doing bookkeeping at his family’s garage and found me a cheap house to rent in the area.

I hate the fact that I’m dependent on charity, but since Keith died, I’ve swallowed my pride.

I’ve always said that I’ll do whatever it takes to take care of Peony.

Thank God my sister kicked my ass while Keith was on his last deployment and had

gotten me started on a road to self-sufficiency or I'd be totally screwed instead of in a place where I only need to accept a little help.

Deke opens my door while I'm grabbing my purse, then takes my hand and helps me out.

His hand is scorching hot against my skin.

Then it's gone, and his well-toned SEAL ass is sticking out of the back seat as he frees Peony from her car seat.

"Hello, sweet pea. Want to check out the coolest garage in the whole world?"

She coos and raises her arms, her little hand gripping her pink plastic purse tightly.

I loved my husband. I did. But he was away on a training exercise for six months before he was killed, and that was six months ago.

It's been a long time since anybody got my heart racing, even unintentionally and fully clothed.

Keith and I always had a physical relationship, but even when we were together, we often weren't.

We had a whirlwind three-month courtship that ended in a Vegas wedding.

Then he was gone for four months. He was home for a while and then gone again, and that was our marriage for the next three years.

I conceived Peony in between deployments and training exercises.

Keith missed her birth but did get to meet her for a few months before he was gone again.

We were apart for longer than we shared a roof, but I don't regret a minute of it.

But Deke is not a crutch. He is a friend. My husband's friend. My boss. That was my one and only pass to look at his ass.

Then his hand is on my lower back, spreading warmth everywhere. "Come on, the guys want to say hi."

Peony reaches for me, and I heft her onto my hip.

When we enter the garage, she plays shy, burrowing her face into my shoulder.

I expect both bays to have cars, but the second has a huge, chrome detailed motorcycle in three pieces on the concrete floor.

I rub her back softly and follow Deke over to a pick-up on a lift.

His first stop is a taller, wider, older version of himself. "Hi, Bishop," I say to his big brother.

"Violet, my bookkeeper in shining armor. Thanks for taking the job. You're doing us a huge favor.

Me especially. Now I'm free from that fucking payroll program.

This week's checks run today, and then it's all yours.

Whatever you need to keep it going, I'll get for you.

Just name it.” He sticks his hand in his pocket, pulls out a keychain, and presses it into my palm.

“Here’s the key to the office. The password is on a Post-it on the computer screen.

Good luck.” Then he chucks Peony under the chin and heads out the door.

“I guess that’s a sign of trust?” I say.

“Definitely trust. And fear. Bish may have been a Ranger, but tax programs scare him stupid. We are all really glad that you’re here, Violet. Come on, kiddo, let’s give Uncle JD a high five. He’s visiting the garage today.”

JD Dobermann is a cousin of some kind. According to Deke, he’s gone loner since he was discharged, but I know that he’ll make the effort for Peony.

His hair is almost black compared to Deke’s and Bishop’s, and his brown eyes are equally as dark.

Unlike the brothers, who have let their hair grow beyond military regulations, JD has his shorn close to his head, revealing a brutal scar that runs over his right ear around to the back of his head.

He doesn’t work at the garage full-time, but he runs a salvage yard associated with it.

JD doesn’t get a high five, but Peony does show him her pink princess keychain, filled with all the leftover keys that I’ve accumulated over the various years and moves.

The fourth person in the garage is Grayson Masak, who I don’t know at all. I don’t get a proper introduction because he’s heading out on a delivery, but he does grin and

wave as he leaves.

Deke is right there again, his hand on my back as he leads me back to my car. “As much as we’d love you to start in the office today, we can wait until Monday because I’m sure you want to rest and explore your new house. Do you want to follow me?”

“Lead the way.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Two

She looks good. Violet Glass had lost the dark rings under her eyes in the three months since I'd last seen her in person.

She's also smiling, a welcome sight after watching her try to deal with Keith's permanent absence.

She's had so much weight on her slender shoulders.

I am so fucking happy that I've been able to take the load from her.

I've known Violet for years. Hell, I was in the restaurant with Keith and the team the night they met. He invited her out to the bar, but she hadn't even been legal yet. They were married a few months later.

I wouldn't have cared either. Her innocent looks were a beacon to anybody looking for a reprieve from the fucked-up stuff that our jobs exposed us to.

She was a peaceful oasis every time we hung out at Keith's and her place; Violet was all soft curves and light blue eyes compared to the hard angles and darkness we ran across daily.

Then they had Peony. Even if Keith never had a chance to see her walk or hear her babble, that baby worms her way into the coldest of hearts.

I always figured Keith was some kind of idiot for volunteering for as many training

opportunities and out of country ops as he did. He had heaven waiting for him at home.

His heaven, not mine. Never mine. I will never go there. I can't. Not with a brother's wife.

But I can make sure that Violet and Peony are happy and safe and secure while Violet finds herself and moves toward whatever future she decides is best for them. That, I can do.

My help starts with a job, which Violet begins on Monday, and a house, where I'm taking them now.

I originally bought it with the intention of flipping it: a tiny, two-bedroom bungalow in the middle of North Dakota was the only thing I could afford at the time.

But the renos took longer and cost more than I thought, and by the time I was done, nobody was going to buy it for what I had put into it.

So I shifted gears and figured I'd finish it as a rental to make some of my money back before I sold it.

Violet won't be paying anything near market value.

She wouldn't pay anything if I had my way, but she insists, and this is the lowest she'd agree to.

It's a fifteen-minute drive from the garage, along the east shore of Lac Lu, just off the Missouri River.

A wide row of trees separates the large front yard from Lake Road.

The back yard is mostly woods until it runs down to the lakeshore.

As soon as I knew Violet and Peony were staying there, Bish and I ran two hundred feet of snow fencing from one side of the house, into the trees, and back up to the other side to keep any curious toddlers away from the water.

Nothing is happening to that precious baby on my property.

Violet parks beside me in front of the double garage. I hand her the keys to the front door, spring Peony from her car seat, and follow her inside.

I did a good job, even if I say so myself.

The living room is long and narrow with a woodburning fireplace at the far end.

It opens into the eat-in kitchen which has a door to the backyard.

Up the short corridor are a single, small bedroom and the primary bedroom.

The family bathroom is impressive. My cousin JD doesn't say much, but that also means he doesn't say no when you ask for help.

He has a frightening ability when it comes to tiling, and the bathroom floor and bath tiles take it to the next level.

Peony toddles off to explore while I show Violet around. "This is the place you bought, what, three years ago?" she asks. "I remember you saying it was a two bedroom. Hey, you were able to save the fireplace. Wasn't there a crow's nest in the chimney?"

I can't believe she remembers that. We'd been unloading groceries for a barbecue at

their place.

Violet had been in the kitchen wearing jean cut-offs and a purple Vikings T-shirt, and she'd asked about the paint splashes on my shorts after I'd come back from some leave.

The whole conversation took less than a minute. "Squirrels, but close."

"It's perfect. You did a great job here." Then she makes another loop through the house, commenting on all the small details that I obsessed over, making each of them worth the extra effort.

In the kitchen, I point out the milk in the fridge and the cereal on the counter. "Fantastic," she says. "That's our favorite."

She isn't the only one who remembers things. "The sofa in the living room folds out to a bed, and there are extra blankets on the shelf in the closet. But if you'd prefer not to share with Peony tonight, we can get you a hotel room in Dickenson."

"We are fine here. We'll have some supper in town, maybe try some ice-cream at that café, come back here and crash. Then the moving truck will be here with all our stuff, won't it, sweet pea?" Violet says as Peony reappears, carrying a small brown teddy bear with a pink ribbon around its neck.

"Ba!"

"Bear. Yes. Isn't that a nice welcome home present from Uncle Deacon?"

"Ba."

Violet laughs, and it punches me right in the gut. "Let's go get some supper, and then

we sleep, and then we will get all the boxes with all of Peony's toys," she says to her daughter. "Where should we go for supper, Deke?"

I can't say my house. Even if Violet took it innocently, I know that isn't how I'd mean it.

She needs time, and then somebody who doesn't remind her of what she's lost. I invited her to Lonesome to give her a springboard into a new life.

She trusts me; I promised I'd be here to catch her if she fell.

I can't trick her into falling...for me.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Three

Supper at the Halfway Café was an experience that I'll have to repeat once my brain has regained full function. I barely remember the meal, aside from the fact it was tasty, and the ice cream bar was cool. I fell onto the sofa bed beside Peony and was asleep in minutes.

Until my little munchkin decided to rise with the dawn.

Now I'm pouring milk into a disposable cereal bowl while Peony claps along to the song being performed by the singing vegetables on my phone.

She gets the first bowlful. Then, after a quick face wash, I send her out to play in the front yard while I watch her from the window and check my phone.

The moving van is outside of Bismarck, less than an hour away. My sister has texted me again after our conversation last night.

TEXT: House handed off to rental company. Have your damage deposit check. Leaving in an hour. See you in a couple days.

MY TEXT: 3 Can't wait. It's a cute house! Just perfect for us.

This morning, she added:

TEXT: Don't overdo it. You'll need your strength for your new job. See you soon. I have a cunning plan. evil grin

My sister always has a plan. Romy's the reason I wasn't a complete mess when Keith died.

I was born twelve months before her, but she's always acted like the older sister and taken the lead.

She was the one who first went against my father's expectations that women should be trained to be homemakers and support their husbands, not go out into the world and take their jobs.

I didn't think fighting his old-fashioned attitude was worth the effort.

The month after I graduated from high school, my dad finally consented for me to get a part-time job at a family friend's restaurant where I might meet a nice man.

I did. I waited tables, met Keith, and married him three months later.

I'd needed somebody to take care of me since I'd never done it for myself, and Keith needed somebody who needed him.

My little sister, on the other hand, swore me to secrecy about her plans for the future. The day after she graduated, she enlisted in the navy. Having just turned eighteen, she didn't need my parents' permission, which was good because she never got it. Even then, she still kept taking care of me.

Romy was the one who had given me my wake-up call.

She'd dragged me to self-defence classes when she realized that I was living alone while Keith was away on assignment.

Then she pushed me to take some online classes, so I had something to do other than

wait for my husband to come home.

I finished my bookkeeping program the month before I delivered Peony.

I'd taken the course to get Romy off my back and, honestly, because I was bored.

I had no idea I'd be using it to support my daughter less than two years later.

Romy fully approves of my move to Lonesome to start my new job.

She says that I'll get more support from Keith's old team than I ever would from our parents, and I know she's right.

I'm considering my own breakfast when I hear tires crunch on the gravel driveway.

Deke is back. Part of me wishes he'd stay away.

I can handle dealing with him at the office, but it would be too easy to get used to seeing him at home.

I don't need to lean on him. I just know that I'd get addicted to being with him.

"No truck yet?" he calls as he walks toward the house.

"Less than an hour away. I was just confirming Romy's arrival this weekend too."

"How is Rosemary?" Deke asks when I join him on the front steps. "Did she re-enlist?"

"Nope. She is out of the navy and on the hunt for a place to start her new career." My sister is a fucking marvel.

Not only did she serve her enlistment period until her honorable discharge, but she also took advantage of every single opportunity available to expand her knowledge and skills through work while taking other evening classes at the same time.

“In the four months she’s been a civilian, Romy has finished enough aesthetician classes to be able to offer her own services.

She just needs to build a client base.” I’m hoping she finds one in a salon near Lonesome.

“Aesthetician? How did she go from logistics to hair and nails?”

“Through night school.” I flash my hand at him to display my French manicure that has survived three days of packing boxes and sixteen hundred miles of literal bad roads. I hope he notices I’m not wearing my wedding ring anymore.

Deke takes my hand to study my fingers. His touch shoots electricity up my arm. He’s dangerous. He’s reminding me of everything I’ve been missing, and everything I want. I know it can’t be with him. But he keeps putting himself right there and the temptation is getting harder to resist.

“I took the day off to help you unload and unpack,” he says. “If we can kick ass as Team Cornhole, Team Unpackers will be twice as good. You will be sleeping in your own bed tonight, and that’s a promise.”

Goddammit, there he is, being all sweet again. The man is a fucking menace to my sanity.

Then the moving truck arrives, and Deke works up a sweat moving boxes.

I nearly swallow my tongue when he takes off his shirt half an hour into the day.

I don't have much time to appreciate the view since the movers want to be gone as soon as possible.

We fill the house with boxes and furniture, and they leave.

Deke and I set up the living room first and get Peony settled on the sofa with the television streaming cartoons to keep her busy.

Then we move to her small bedroom and put it together.

We move her dresser and toy chest against one wall and her little girl bed against the other.

It's one solid frame, so we lay the mattress on top and find her sheets, which I brilliantly separated into three different boxes, so I'd be able to find at least one set right away.

The afternoon is drawing on, and I already feel bad for monopolizing Deke's day, even if he did volunteer.

"How about you help me assemble my bed frame, and then you're free for the day?"

"I suggest after he puts his shirt back on.

I need Deke's help, but I also need him to be gone.

It's too easy for my imagination to run wild while he is here.

I'm not setting up house with him. I can push the rest of the furniture around on my own, and the stuff that I can't move can wait till Romy gets here.

I have plenty that I can unpack alone in the meantime.

“It's no trouble,” he insists.

Having Deke in my bedroom is a special kind of torture. I hold pieces of the metal bedframe while he bolts them together. We wrestle the boxspring on to the frame, then flop the mattress on top of that. He helps me make the bed, then steps back.

“I guess that’s it,” he says.

I shimmy around from the far side of the bed, and my foot gets stuck on a ball of crumpled packing tape.

I pitch forward, only to be caught in Deke’s arms. My momentum pushes me against his chest. I gasp at his warmth and look up into his sparking green eyes and stop breathing when I see his mouth coming toward me.

His lips burn, and I’m starving for the flame. Goddamn, it’s been too long since anybody has kissed me like this, and the fact that it’s Deke is using up all my oxygen.

Then it’s over.

He pushes me away, but I wobble because my feet are still caught in the tape, so he doesn’t let me go. “I am so sorry, Vi,” he says. “That was an accident. It was never supposed to happen. I swear it won’t happen again.”

Is he fucking kidding me? I finally get a hint that months of daydreams might have a sliver of reality to them, and it was an accident?

I want an accident of my own. So, I throw myself forward, grip his T-shirt like he might disappear in a puff of smoke, and slip my other hand over his shoulder around

the back of his neck.

And I kiss him with everything I've got. I barely make contact when he groans. I nibble on his lip. My hands run over his chest, feeling every defined muscle. Deke lays a hand on either side of my face and takes control of the kiss, of me, stealing my breath and giving me life at the same time.

When we finally break apart, I blink once and come back down to earth. "That was not a mistake," I whisper.

"You're vulnerable. Your husband just died."

"My husband's been gone for over a year," I say. "I know what I'm doing."

"He only died six months ago."

"He was gone for six months before that, Deke. I'm ready to move on.

I deserve to. Don't put me on a pedestal because of Keith.

I'll get hurt when I fall off. What's important now is what I want, and what you want.

We're the only two people in the room. This can't work if you invite anyone else in. "

He hesitates and, honestly, it's the best reaction I could hope for. It means he's thinking about it.

"Ba!" Peony shouts from the other room.

The moment is truly over now, but I don't move. Deke puts his hand over mine and presses it into his chest. Then he pulls away and steps out of the bedroom.

“Hey, Russo is here,” he calls from the living room.

I take another step and stumble again since the tape is still sticking my foot to the floor.

Rick Russo was another of Keith’s teammates.

He and Keith had been friends since before Deke joined the team, and long before I was in the picture.

It’s probably the reason Keith chose him as his executor.

I never expected to see him in Lonesome.

He’d insisted on helping me pack back in Virginia, but he wasn’t supposed to come with the moving truck.

I’m hopping on one foot and peeling the tape from my sock when I hear the front door open. “Hey, Rick, what are you doing here?”

“Just checking in. Making sure everything arrived in the proper number of pieces. How are you, Vi?”

“Aside from being viciously attacked by a ball of used packing tape, I’m fine. We’ve already got all the furniture in place. Now it’s just boxes.” I can’t believe how much Deke and I got done today. I’ll empty some more boxes after Peony goes to bed, and we’ll be mostly done.

“Fantastic. I can help with those.”

“That’s sweet, Rick, but no thank you. Peony and I will do it. Deke helped with the

big stuff, which I appreciate, but I will handle the rest of it.” The last thing I need is for Deke to think I need somebody looking after me every minute of every day.

“As you wish, my lady. Can you at least offer me the sofa?”

“No can do,” I state, and Deke’s eyes open wide. “The sofa is Romy’s. Deke, do you know of a place that Rick can stay? Preferably with beer so he can catch up with the boys?”

Anger flashes across Rick’s face so fast I almost miss it. Deke, who is inspecting Peony’s keychain, does miss it. When he looks up, Rick is all smiles again. “What do you say, brother? Got room for me somewhere?” Rick asks.

“I’m sure one of us can squeeze you in.”

Peony tugs on my pantleg and I lift her to my hip. “We’ve worked hard today, haven’t we, sweet pea? I think we should make some spaghetti and have a fancy supper. What do you say?”

“Ba!”

The men take it as the cue it is, and head for the door. “Deke, thanks for everything today. Everything.”

“Good night, Violet.”

It won’t be as long as I’m sleeping alone, but the memory of his kiss will keep me warm for a while.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Four

I am an idiot. What the fuck did I do?

I know exactly what I did. I kissed the woman I've been fantasizing about for the last three years but fuck, what the hell was I thinking?

I only have a few minutes to put it out of my mind on the drive from Violet's place to the garage.

I need to get my head on straight by the time I arrive because Russo is trailing me in his shiny black luxury SUV, and he can't get a whiff of what I'm feeling or what's left of the team will call me the most disloyal brother who ever lived.

But it's going to be real fucking hard if Russo doesn't shut his mouth.

"I think she's faking," Russo says as he sprawls on the picnic table behind the garage. Dobermann's Garage is closed for the day, and we're enjoying the spring weather, with Bishop manning the grill and JD dumping another bag of ice into the beer cooler.

"What?" I ask. Because to my eyes, Violet has been kicking ass across the country.

"I've been looking in on her for the last six months. It's a good thing Keith left me in charge of the paperwork. She leans on everybody way too much. She asked both me and that fucking sister of hers to help her pack. Violet is sweet, no doubt, but she's as needy as she ever was."

“Fucker, she was packing up a house with a toddler. Asking for help was smart. She didn’t ask you to pay for the movers, did she?” JD asks. I’m shocked. I can’t remember the last time JD inserted himself into a conversation.

“Well, no?—”

“And she didn’t ask us to give her the job.

She applied for it like everybody else,” Bishop adds.

“Yeah, her history has weight, but without her skills, it would have been a no. I was impressed that she’d started working towards her bookkeeping diploma before Keith died.

It shows she was looking out for her family before things fell apart. That’s smart too.”

Rick cracks a beer. We’ve been friends long enough for me to know that he’s fuming at the defense.

For some reason, he wants the guys to agree with him that Violet’s floundering.

I know I’m biased, but I don’t think she is either.

“Do you think Violet needs a hand unpacking? I helped her with the furniture today, but left all the boxes,” I say.

“Leave her alone,” JD says shortly. “She doesn’t need reminders of Keith every time she turns around. Let her make the house her own.”

I sit with that for a moment. Violet is starting a brand-new life, and one of the first

memories of her new home is kissing me and telling me that she wants me.

I was the one who brought Keith into it.

I'm starting to think that she is more over his death than I am.

But I'm trying not to mention her too much, so I change the subject.

"Russo, what was with the NCIS investigators all over Little Creek a couple months ago? Did you ever find out?"

Russo shrugs but seizes the change of topic.

"Apparently some equipment went missing. Not a couple months ago, long before that, but somebody finally realized it. No armaments, but other gear. As far as I heard, they didn't arrest anybody.

I guess it happened too long ago. Or, it could have been inventory errors that were recently discovered.

" He pops another beer, then leans back so his chair is balancing on its back legs.

"What I did hear, though, is that Commander Aikenson has put in for early retirement so he can open a fishing charter with his brother just south of Coronado."

Anybody who says men don't gossip is full of shit. This news led to Coronado stories and the group of us demolishing a case of beer, which led to Bishop, the only sober one, driving Russo to his hotel while I crashed on the sofa in the break room and JD slept in his truck.

Until my cell phone rang at o-dark-thirty. Actually rang, with an incoming call. I

groped my pockets with bleary eyes until I pulled it out and saw that it was Violet. Then I was wide awake. “Violet? What’s wrong?” It couldn’t be morning already.

“Somebody is trying to break into the house.” Her voice is low.

Her words, quick. I can hear the panic she’s fighting to suppress.

“I heard them at the window and turned on all the lights. I’m in Peony’s room with Keith’s .

38. I’ve pushed the dresser in front of the door.

9-1-1 said help was at least twenty minutes away. ”

I’m fifteen. Ten if I speed. “I’ll be right there. Don’t move. I’ll clear the house and let you know when it’s safe to come out. Are you okay?”

“Scared shitless but Peony is still asleep. Hurry, Deke. I need you.”

I shave an extra sixty seconds off and pull into the driveway nine minutes later.

JD is about a minute behind me. The only car I see is Violet’s.

I’m going for the “make lots of noise to scare them off” ploy, because I want them to run and not dig in.

I park with the headlights shining on the front door.

My SIG Sauer 226 is in my hand as I circle the building.

The front and back doors look intact. I call Violet.

“I’m here. There’s no sign of anybody. I’m coming in,” I say quietly. Then I leave the phone on so I can hear her as I slide my master key into the lock. I clear the rest of the house and note the front and back doors are both locked. “Okay, you can come out, Violet.”

She looks fierce. She has a wicked case of bed head, and racoon eyes since she apparently didn’t wash her face before she fell asleep.

But her eyes are bright and alert, and her hands aren’t shaking as she holds her pistol pointed at the ground with one hand.

Violet puts a finger to her lips, then pulls Peony’s bedroom door closed and motions to the living room. “Did you find anything?” she asks.

“No. There’s no sign anyone was here. What did you hear?”

“See,” she corrects. “I put Peony to bed and walked the house. Then I fell asleep on the sofa. When I woke up, the television had automatically shut itself off and the room was dark. I saw somebody outside the living room window with something in their hands. I rolled off the sofa, turned on all the lights, ran to my room to get the gun, ran to Peony’s room, barricaded the door, and called 9-1-1 then you. ”

Keeping her head like that in the face of a burglar was some level-headed shit right there. “The front window?” I confirm.

She nods.

“I’ll check it out.”

I step out the front door, and the porch light beside me flashes on. The lights in the living room beam through the window into the darkness. I hear crunching on gravel.

It's JD. I fill him in, and he looks concerned.

"Did she panic? Have a nightmare?" he asks quietly.

New house in the middle of nowhere, alone with a baby. It's a possibility. "We're about to find out."

Fuck me, she did not. New boot prints squish the yellow and orange marigolds I planted two weeks ago in front of the house, and fresh scrape marks on the paint around the windowsill tell the whole story. Somebody had wanted in.

"What the fuck do we tell her?" I ask. I don't want Violet to freak out.

"The truth, unless you want her to be unarmed and unprepared. Stop treating her like she's going to break at any second," JD snaps. "Give her some credit. She protected her daughter and called for help. What the fuck else was she supposed to do? Go off looking for the guy on her own?"

My blood runs cold at the thought of Violet in danger. Goddammit, I have no right to say anything to her as a friend of her dead husband's. Unless I'm willing to step up for her all on my own, I'm her boss and landlord and that's it.

Fuck everything.

"I guess we have to talk to her."

"And find out what she has that would draw a burglar," JD adds.

I stare at him. "What?"

"This place has been empty for months. Then, the day after there is non-stop activity,

somebody tries to break in. I don't think that was random. Do you?"

No, I don't. Fuck everything twice.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Five

My back is a mess after I squished myself into Peony's bed last night.

I didn't want to be too far away. Thankfully, she slept through everything.

On my way to the kitchen, I glance out the window and see a familiar pick-up truck parked behind my car.

It seems that after JD and Deke investigated the property last night, Deke stayed behind as a guard dog.

If I'd known what he was planning, I would have invited him to stay inside. In my bed.

When I open the front door to invite him in for coffee, the truck engine roars to life, and he backs down the driveway out of sight.

"Coward," I mutter. I don't have time to call him on it, though. I have one day off left before starting work on Monday, which will also be Peony's first day at her new daycare. I can't believe they had a spot open, but I'm not about to turn it down.

What I don't expect is another vehicle to arrive right on Deke's heels.

For a second, I think Rick is back yet a-fucking-gain.

I get that Keith's teammates want to help, but Rick has stuck like glue.

I need him to give me space: four states' worth would be fantastic.

Every time I turn around, he's offering to help with Keith's papers or the banking or the packing.

I know he's the executor but it's too much.

It's not like Deke. Rick's being ingratiating and won't take no for an answer.

But fate smiles on me and I recognize the little, bright red compact zipping up the driveway. "Sweet pea, Auntie Romy's here."

"Ba!"

"Exactly! Let's go say hi."

Romy has hugs and kisses for both of us, then proudly pops the trunk to reveal bags of groceries from a twenty-four-hour store in Bismarck. "For your pantry. As for the rest of it, if you aren't unpacked yet, you will be by the end of the day."

"Romy, you're the best sister ever."

"And the most modest. Don't forget to praise my modesty."

I am so glad she's planning to make the move to Lonesome with me.

She was my number one cheerleader after my marriage to Keith, and after I found out I was pregnant with Peony.

Now that she's out of the navy, she deserves a fresh start too.

I can only hope she finds a job quickly, but with her skills it shouldn't take long.

First, we put the food away. Second, I give Romy a tour of the house, which she loves on sight.

Third, she claps her hands together and says, "We'll unpack the bathroom before the bedrooms. We should have those done by lunch.

Sandwiches and chips, then we tackle the kitchen.

Then the sweet pea and I will do the living room and whatever's left while you take the rest of the afternoon to get everything settled before you start work tomorrow. "

"Everything settled?" I parrot.

"I recognized the pick-up as it turned out of the driveway, Violet."

"It's not what you think, Rosemary," I protest.

"Why the H-E-double hockey sticks not?"

I love that she refuses to curse in front of her niece, even though Peony can't talk yet.

"He's caught up in Keith."

"Then straighten the man out. You know that you can't keep holding on to hope that he'll move on."

I hate it when Romy is right. Which is most of the time. But in this case, I know she speaks the truth. It's time for me to grab tight or let go completely. "Are you sure you want to handle Peony on your own this afternoon?"

“Absolutely. We’ll unpack and explore the yard and have an adventure. Sound good, Peony?”

“Ba!”

I want to talk to Deke. I need to. “Where did you say we were starting?”

“Bathroom, then bedrooms.”

It took me some time to find myself, but when I did, I also discovered that I work fast when properly motivated.

We blow through the bathroom, bedrooms and kitchen and finish lunch before noon.

Peony helps by banging her keychain against every cupboard door and “unlocking” it before we’re allowed to put my pots and pans away.

I need to see Deke to settle everything before I start work tomorrow morning. “I’ll be back later.”

“Take as much time as both of you need, Violet. You only have one chance at this conversation. Make it count,” Romy advises.

I’ve never been to Deke’s place, but the directions on my GPS are clear. I hope he doesn’t have company, but it won’t stop me if he does. Luckily, the only vehicle in his driveway is his. I park around the corner; there’s no reason to advertise my presence in case anyone should drive by.

I stride to his front door and ring the doorbell.

Deke answers. His worn jeans are only white threads in patches, and the collar of his

U.S. Navy T-shirt gapes like his collarbones are too hot to touch. I'm in agreement.  
"We need to talk."

"What's wrong? Did they come back? Where's Peony?"

"Everybody's fine. Peony is with Romy. This is about you and me."

He swallows hard, and even watching his throat work is distracting, but I refuse to be sidetracked. "What about us?" he asks.

"Is there going to be one? I think I've made it clear that I'm on board for that idea.

Are you? Coming over when I have a burglar is great as a landlord.

Spending the night outside sends a different message.

Especially when you would have been welcome in the house.

"I'm dying a little with each word when Deke stays silent.

"Come inside. I don't want to have this discussion on the front steps."

He doesn't move over, so I'm forced to brush against him as I enter. I have time to see a large sectional sofa, and an even bigger television mounted to the wall before I hear the door slam and feel two arms wrap around me.

"I have wanted there to be an "us" for longer than you can imagine, Violet. I've been in love with you for years. But I couldn't do anything while Keith was alive, and honor says I shouldn't now."

"We've both honored his memory long enough. I could have let myself fall in love

with you months ago if you'd given me the slightest hint," I confess.

"I'm not hinting anymore, Violet."

"Thank fucking God."

Then, his very hot T-shirt and even hotter chest press against me, pinning me to the wall while he devours my mouth.

I feel his hands groping my back. Deke pulls back, just for a second and, suddenly, my shirt and bra are flying over his shoulder, landing somewhere in the living room.

I don't have time to help him remove his because his T-shirt lands beside them a second later.

He walks me backward down the hall. With my lips on his, I can't see where we're going but my trust is absolute.

When Deke's hands drop to my waist, I brush them away.

I can get my jeans undone faster than he can.

I wonder what's taking him so long, and then I feel latex-covered heat pressing into my stomach.

He lays me on the mattress in his bedroom that I've never laid eyes on.

"You look fucking amazing," Deke whispers.

I don't argue, not wanting to spoil the mood.

If he thinks mom hair and stretch marks are hot, I'm going to let him have his fill.

He traces my cheek and lips. I suck the end of his fingertip into my mouth and almost every part of him freezes.

I don't know how it's possible but his dick twitches and feels even harder on my thigh as he slowly pulls away.

His lips nibble down my neck and I squirm at the delicate sensations zinging both up and down. Deke's hand parts my thighs. He raises his head to smile down on me. "You're already wet."

"I know. Do something about it, will you?"

"I am not rushing this. You're going to enjoy every minute of it." He nudges his knee between my legs, and I happily make room for him. Deke's chest hair tickles my nipples as he raises his hips.

Fuck me, he's not playing around. He fingers me just enough to prime the pump, and then slides inside to do the rest of the job, the very, very hard way. "Yes, Deke," I moan in encouragement, but the man doesn't need it.

"You...are so...fucking...perfect," Deke grunts between thrusts. He angles his hips, and I gasp and tighten around his dick. His mouth captures mine, which is fine as I'm certain I've lost the ability to speak.

The scent of him surrounds me, sweat and oil and something else that is Deke alone.

I move with him and suddenly I'm flying over the edge.

He thrusts twice more, then gives a tremor before he falls on me and immediately

rolls off.

“That was better than I ever imagined,” he says, kissing my mouth fiercely.

“I don’t know. I imagined it going a lot like that,” I say.

I burrow closer to bask in Deke’s warmth.

He’s a good guy and a fantastic lover. I don’t know what would happen if I lost him now.

But just in case, I want another memory.

“Why don’t you tell me what you imagined, and I’ll let you know if I agree. ”

“Give me a minute, woman. Then I’ll show you.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Six

D aylight floods through my open bedroom window, illuminating Violet in all her glory.

She pulls the sheet higher, covering her dusky nipples, and rolls to her side.

“I’ve got to say that it’s going to be really hard to look at you at work and not have a flashback,” she teases, offering me an exuberant smile.

“This doesn’t change anything,” I say quickly.

She tenses. “I sure as fuck hope it does.”

Her venomous tone shocks me, and it a millisecond I realize what I said.

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close until we’re skin to skin again.

“ This is not going anywhere. I’ve dreamed of having you right here for years,” I assure her.

“I mean that this is not going to change anything at work. Because as much as I’m going to look forward to seeing you at the garage every day, and trust me, that’s a lot, I’m not going to let what we have between us affect your job.

Mostly because Bishop would kill me dead if he had to go back to being the bookkeeper. ”

“Bishop won’t have a problem with us being together, will he?” Violet’s voice wavers.

I hate that I put that fear into her head. She’d lost enough already. “He’d tell me that it took me long enough to get my head out of my ass. It’s fine. He likes you.” I don’t think JD will have a problem with it either.

Rick and the rest of the team will be another story, but frankly, with the way Rick’s been acting, I don’t trust his judgment like I used to. He’s been too weird about Vi, especially since he claimed she asked for his help, yet I know that she had no clue that he was coming.

“I always liked your brother,” she says with a smile. “Not as much as I like you, obviously.”

“Thank God. How do you want this”—I squeeze her again— “to play out? You’re the one with the kid.”

“Slow and easy but definitely not glacial. Peony already knows you. We should start with you coming around. Often. I have a babysitter right now. Romy got here this morning which is why I’m not worried about how long I’ve been here.”

I can do that. “What’s next?”

“I’m thinking an official first date.”

It was almost supper. I don’t have enough time to prepare anything close to what she deserves. But I sure as fuck can let it be known that we’re together. “How do you feel about steak?” Taking her to the Lonesome Bar and Grill would make the statement I want.

Violet tells me that she can't stay much longer. The garage is closed on Sunday, leaving me free, so I follow her home. If she wants me to spend time with her and Peony, I'll start this second.

Romy greets us at the door with a finger to her lips. "Peony is napping in her big girl bed. She just went down, so let's enjoy the peace and quiet."

Violet giggles. "A little much for you?"

"She's a little much compared to a tornado, but awesome Auntie Romy did fine, thank you. It looks like you didn't do too badly yourself."

Violet reaches for my hand and pulls me inside. "I straightened him out."

"From your glow, I'd say you straightened all parts of him. Repeatedly," Romy says to her. Then she looks me dead in the eye. "For the record, I approve." She peers past us at the driveway. "You didn't bring Russo back, did you?"

Violet barks out a rough laugh. "Not hardly."

"I thought you liked Rick," I say.

A minute later, we're on the sofa and Romy is handing out beers while she takes a seat in Keith's old recliner. "This is all you, babe."

To my shock, Violet drains a third of the bottle in one go.

"Rick who was Keith's friend was fine. Rick who is Keith's executor is a pain in my ass."

The second Keith died, I suddenly lost fifty I.Q.

points and the ability to do anything for myself.

Rick wouldn't even let me do the banking on my own. ”

That doesn't sound right. “To sign the paperwork? That would be part of his executor duties.”

“No,” she says sharply. “To authorize withdrawals from my own account or Peony's trust fund. He demanded to see every file in the house.”

“To which Violet rightly told him to fuck off,” Romy adds.

“I gave Romy my personal files because I didn't trust him not to snoop.

Then he insisted on double-checking every box I packed for the move like I'm some sort of incompetent.

I am done with him. I don't care how close he and Keith were.

Everything is in my name now. Kat checked and verified that the estate is closed.

I don't need Rick around anymore and I don't want him here.

” She shifts on the sofa, arranging herself so she faces me.

“He's a brother in arms. I get that. I'll be polite when he's visiting.

But he's not welcome in my home after the way he behaved. ”

Something is very, very wrong. She's not describing the Rick I know. But something else has caught my attention. “Who is Kat?”

“Katrina Strong. She’s a lawyer friend. We met her in self-defence class,” Violet says.

“Is Rick going to be a problem?” Romy asks.

“No.” My promise is a guarantee. Nobody else is going to be a problem to Violet, not ever. Especially somebody who should have been on her side. At long last I’m the one she can count on to stand up for her and I am not going to fall down on the job.

“Excellent. I’m going to head into town for a bit while you reorganize what I’ve unpacked. See you later. Payment for tonight’s babysitting will be a medium thin-crust pizza. Pepperoni and mushroom. I’m a fan of the classics.” Romy sashays out the door, leaving me alone with Violet.

Finally. “This sofa looks comfy,” I say. “Why don’t you join me on it?”

“Peony is in the other room,” she protests, but she’s already moving to straddle my lap.

“Then you’d better be quiet.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Seven

God, I haven't been on a date in...years.

Keith took me out for dinner the rare time he was in town and we could find a sitter, but even those nights had been few and far between.

I slicked my hair back into a smooth ponytail, so it looks more elegant than it actually is, and added some chunky silver jewelry that Romy gave me for my last birthday.

I smooth the skirt of my little black dress that feels shorter than I remember.

I haven't looked this fancy in a long time.

Romy approved of me before I left the house but I'm having second thoughts.

Or I am until Deke offers his hand to help me out of his truck.

I've seen him all cleaned up too, but it was always in uniform.

A freshly scrubbed man in a button-down shirt and khakis does something to me.

The way his eyes linger on my legs sets me tingling again.

I brush my thighs together as I step down, and the friction is only a tease.

The Lonesome Bar and Grill gives the first impression of a rundown roadhouse.

A closer, second look reveals that it's better lit than it appears with security cameras on the entrance and facing into the parking lot.

A fiercely-bearded bouncer in a motorcycle cut is at the door.

He gives the two of us an assessing glance and smiles broadly at Deke.

It takes me a minute to realize that Deke is walking us through the bar to the attached dining room, rather than have us use the restaurant doors. Then I understand why. He guides me through the tables, his hand on my ribs, fingers close enough to brush my breast. We pause at the bar.

"Hey, JD," he says.

"Deke. Violet." JD gives me what passes for a smile. "Good to see you. Good to see you both. I told Smitty and Joker that I might run into you tonight. They say hello."

Beside me, Deke exhales at that revelation. "Tell them hi from us the next time you talk to them."

"Will do." JD turns back around. It's more conversation than anyone usually gets, so I'm counting that as my welcome to the family talk.

Bishop is at a table at the other end of the bar.

He rises to greet us. He slaps his little brother on the back, then pulls me in for a hug.

"You look beautiful," he whispers before Deacon reclaims me by encircling my waist with both arms and pulling me against his chest. "Make sure he treats you right."

"There was never a question he wouldn't," I say, and Deke squeezes me a little

tighter. “But there is a question about whether or not he’s going to feed me tonight.”

“Far be it from me to keep you from a Lonesome B-and-G steak. See you at the office tomorrow,” Bishop says. I’m two-for-two on the acceptance streak.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me! You back-stabbing son of a bitch!” I go flying in one direction, and Deke goes the opposite way after being sucker-punched by Rick.

“Stand down, Russo.”

I’d forgotten that Deke had outranked Rick when he left the SEALs. Rick should outrank him by now, but something had happened at the last promotion board.

“You’re cheating with your squad mate’s wife.”

“I’m in a committed relationship with a woman who used to be married to a squad mate. You don’t get a say in this, Russo,” Deke says, rubbing his jaw. I’m surprised he hasn’t taken a swing in retaliation. He seems to be trying to use his words first.

“And you, you disloyal cunt. You have no idea what kind of man your husband was. I’m not going to let all the time I spent in looking after you and your stupid brat be wasted.”

Half a second after his mouth stops moving, Rick is on the floor.

“Never again, Russo. You aren’t speaking for Keith or his memory.

You are showing your ass. Keith loved all of us enough to want us to be happy after he died.

Violet and Rosemary have been trying to tell me how you were acting but I defended you.

Now I wonder if they were understating things. Get gone.”

“He was my brother.”

I feel a body come up behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see that JD has left his stool. “He meant something to all of us. But he’s gone now. You’ve got to move on, or you might as well have died with him.”

I hear both Deke and Bishop take a breath at their cousin’s observation, but now is not the time to get into it. Rick pushes himself to his feet and if looks could kill, I’d be taking his place on the floor with my throat slit. “I tried to be nice after Keith died. I’m done with that.”

He shakes off Bishop’s arm and pushes past the dark-haired biker who has come out from behind the bar. The patrons part to let him leave. When the door finally slams shut, I breathe a sigh of relief.

“You okay, Vi?” Deke asks.

I nod slowly. “Better than okay, I think. That was the worst it’s going to be, and we’re still standing.

Rick was an asshole before he knew about us, so he doesn’t count.

The ones who matter don’t object. That’s all I need.

” Deke has made me believe it. His blood family has accepted us.

His teammates know and, according to JD, are if not supportive then not actively against it.

It feels like the final weight has been lifted.

“Are you ready for an evening of good food, friends, and music?”

“And then a very good night? I am.” After waking from a nightmare months ago, I was finally going to get my day in the sun.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Eight

The bar has a postage-stamp sized dance floor, and after supper Violet insists that we make the most of it.

I've got her hand pressed against my chest, rubbing it gently as she sways to the music.

She looks amazing. I ache to tug on her ponytail.

It's taking all my willpower to stop myself from dragging her out of here to my place and giving her that good night she talked about.

But I'll give her this dance first. We've both walked a long, bloody road to get here. We're going to enjoy the last mile.

The first time my pants vibrate, I think it's because Violet is patting my ass again.

She's a bit of a flirt; I never knew. Then it happens again, and I know both her hands are linked behind my head.

I fish out my phone and see that Romy is calling me.

She wouldn't interrupt our date for anything less than Armageddon.

I can barely hear her over the music, but the words I make out are bad enough. "Need help. Bad shape. Rick took Peony."

A familiar adrenaline surge hits, and then my emotions turn off. Bad situations are what I was trained for. I want to leave Violet here, in the safety of my family, but I have the feeling I'm going to need her for more information than Romy can provide.

"Come on. We're out of here," I whisper in Violet's ear.

Her grin breaks my heart. "Your place?"

"No, yours." She frowns. I have to give her enough to get her out of here without a scene, but not too much or she'll freak out. "Romy just called with a Peony S.O.S. so I think we need to take care of that first."

I playfully push Violet in front of me as we head out. On the way, I whisper to Bishop telling him to follow us to Violet's place, then flash a sign to JD to do the same. They both respond with a nod, and head for the other doors so Violet doesn't see them leave.

Violet twines her fingers in mine as I make the drive.

I raise her hand to my lips and kiss it gently before setting it on the console between us.

I can drive faster with both hands on the wheel.

When we arrive at the house, the front door is wide open, light spilling onto the steps.

Violet frowns. "Why did Romy leave the door open?"

I'm out of the truck first. "Romy, can we come in?"

"Yep." Her voice is so quiet I almost miss it.

The house is trashed. Every drawer in the place is upside-down, the contents strewn across the floor.

Cushions are cut open, tables overturned.

I see Romy sitting on the floor, one elbow on the seat of the sofa.

It looks like it cost her to be that upright.

Rick beat the hell out of her. One eye is swelling shut, her nose is bloody, and her lip is split.

I don't know what bruises she's sporting under her clothes but from the way she's moving, there are plenty. "What the hell, Romy?"

"Where's Peony?" Violet asks.

"Rick took her."

I've heard SEALs take mortal wounds who didn't make the same sound of pain that Violet did at those words.

"Bathroom," Romy continues. She coughs and brings up a little blood.

Rick left a message on the mirror, written in Violet's lipstick. "The kid for the key," I read aloud.

"What key? Why would he take my baby?" Violet's voice cracks. She's barely hanging on, but she's fighting to stay in control.

In between me going to the bathroom and coming back, JD and Bishop have arrived.

Bish has helped Romy to a kitchen chair. JD has gone ice cold. He stares at me, waiting for instructions.

I pull out my cell and call Rick. No texts. I want to hear the fucker's voice.

"What key?" I demand when he answers. No pleasantries. No threats. They aren't needed. We'll give him what he wants and get Peony back. Then that fucker is going to be buried six feet deep with no marker. Nobody here will object.

I have him on speaker. "The safety deposit box key," Rick says.

Violet answers. "You already have the safety deposit key. You used it to access the box to get Keith's will. Where's Peony?"

"The other box. The one in the First National Bank in Baltimore. Keith stole it from me. I want that key, Violet. I gave you time, but you didn't stop fucking around.

I don't know where you hid it, but I need it now.

I want you to bring it to the garage at eleven-thirty.

Don't do anything stupid and it will be an easy trade.

Try anything and, well, gasoline is flammable. So are little girls."

The call goes dead. We have twenty-two minutes to find Rick's key, and eight to get it to the garage.

"There is no other key," Violet whispers.

"We banked at Arlington Trust. All our accounts and our safety deposit box were

there. Rick was the one who emptied the box. He had access to all of Keith's and our joint accounts as executor.

He went through our entire house when he helped me pack. He knows there isn't another key."

This makes no sense. Why would he kidnap Peony for a key? What the hell could be in a safety deposit box that he would be willing to risk jail time over? "He said Keith stole it. If Keith hid something, where would he put it?"

"In his locker on base," she says without hesitation.

"Rick would have looked there. Where else would he have hidden a key?"

"God, I don't know. My baby!"

I can see that she's about to break down. I can't let her. Violet will never survive it if something happens to her daughter. "Did you find any odd keys after Keith died? Any at all?"

"There was a whole drawer full of unlabeled keys. Romy and I had no idea what they belonged to. We put them on...oh my God. Peony's princess keychain!"

JD locates the pink plastic purse in Peony's bedroom, which she has carefully tucked under her pillow. He dumps it onto the kitchen table. Violet snatches the keychain. She fumbles through the keys and holds up an odd, flat one. "That's it."

I take a photo, showing the key with "FNB" stamped into the side, and text it to Rick. "We have fourteen minutes to get to the garage."

"He's had too much time to set things up. We won't be able to rush him," JD says.

After years of working with him, I know his brain works the same as mine.

“I’ll hand over the key, get Peony back, and let him go,” I say. We know where he works and where he lives. And if he doesn’t go to either of those places, we know where he’s heading. If he gets away now, it’s a matter of when, not if, we find him again and make him pay.

“He said he wants me to do it. He knows I won’t try anything.” It’s the first thing Violet’s said since we found the key.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Vi.”

“It’s a terrible idea but she’s my daughter. I’m doing it.”

We don’t have time to argue. I give her instructions on exactly what to do.

“I’ll drive. You hand over the key. You grab Peony and climb into the backseat.

Don’t worry about seatbelts. I love you, Violet.

You can do this. If you do this one last thing, I promise nothing bad will ever touch you and Peony again.

This is the last trouble you’ll have. Lonesome and I will be a complete fresh start. ”

“I’m holding you to that. I didn’t dream that I’d fall in love again, Deacon Dobermann. That Peony and I would have another chance. Rick fucking Russo is not taking it away.”

Violet gets in the passenger seat of her car.

Much to Romy's dismay, Bishop stays behind to make sure she gets medical treatment rather than go with us to help.

JD and his motorcycle have already taken off down a back road that will bring him into town from the other direction so he can approach the garage from the rear.

He'll be able to cover Violet, and Rick will never see him coming.

Ten minutes until my life stops or starts again.

### Chapter Nine

My date with Deke ended an hour ago. How many times can my life be shaken like a snow globe before the hand of fate drops it and shatters it in a way that it can never be pieced back together?

First my husband, then my daughter. If this goes bad, I'll lose Deke too because there will be no stopping him if he goes after Rick.

So, nothing will go wrong. The exchange will go smoothly. I'll manifest it into happening. I'll give Rick this fucking key, get my daughter, leave safely, and then I'll let the police deal with Rick. Hell, I'll even call in NCIS. As soon as Peony is safe.

The security lights on the outside of the garage are dark.

Since Deke told me that Bishop leaves them on all night, I assume Rick is stacking the deck in his favor.

If I pissed off a bunch of former SEALs, I'd do the same thing.

Deke parks in the middle of the parking pad, away from the gas pumps, facing the road.

I get out, opening the back passenger door like Deke told me to do.

He's here to make sure nothing happens to me, and he told me JD and others are out there too, watching out for us. I trust him.

Rick's fancy SUV squeals into the lot. I move in front of the SUV's hood, holding the key in front of me. "Where's Peony?" I ask, praying that he isn't playing games and hasn't left her somewhere by herself.

He reaches across to the passenger seat and his face briefly appears in the moonlight.

Romy got a piece of him according to the scratches on his face and the blood under his nose.

Rick lifts my daughter out of the vehicle by the neck of her unicorn onesie.

I place the key on the far corner of the hood. "Come to mommy, sweet pea."

My little girl is crying but she toddles on the rough pavement. I dart forward two steps, grab her, and then run to the passenger side of the SUV. If Rick wants me, he'll have to chase me all the way around.

He gets as far as the key, grabs it, and jumps back into the driver's seat.

He takes off like a bat out of hell. I throw Peony into the back, baby-seat be damned, and Deke loops onto the road and immediately turns again into the Lonesome Bar and Grill parking lot.

I think I hear a bang as Deke pulls out of the parking lot, but he doesn't take his foot off the gas.

Deke slams the car into park. He's around to the passenger side before I can even open the door.

He scoops Peony into his arms, then pulls me out.

I check her all over as he holds her, but aside from some dirt and a messy diaper, she seems fine.

Deke pulls a blanket out of nowhere and bundles the both of us back into my still-running car.

I don't ask why he's not going after Rick. Mostly because I don't want to know what's going to happen to that asshole. I know I'll be pressing charges, but whether or not the authorities ever catch up to him is another question.

"Are you okay?"

I realize it's not the first time Deke has asked me that. He pulls me close, and the warmth of him warms me to my core. "I'm fine. We're all fine," I say.

"I love you, Violet. I love you both. This will never happen to you again. I swear." His arms tighten around me.

"I love you too, Deke. Take us home."

I expect him to take us back to his place, but he drives back to the house.

A man in a Lost Souls biker vest is treating Romy, who gives me a painfully slow thumbs-up.

Bishop and another man are dumping armfuls of papers and clothes into hastily reformed boxes is a rough effort to clean up Rick's mess.

I give Peony another bath, and she's asleep by the time I tuck her into my bed. I climb into one side, too tired to get undressed. Deacon climbs in the other. He throws his arm across both of us, pulling us closer.

We're finally home.

## Page 10

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Last Monday:

Bare hours after we recovered Peony, I groaned when I heard the alarm clock on Violet's bedside table go off at six o'clock. The woman I'm going to spend the rest of my life with rolled out of bed without a word. I figured she was going to the bathroom, but then I heard the shower running.

I got up and saw Romy in Peony's bed. I heard Bishop snoring on the sofa.

There were too many people in the house for me to join Violet in the shower, so I waited for her.

When she stepped out in a bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her hair, I ushered her back to the bedroom. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I wanted to get clean. I'm pretty sure Rick breathed on me last night even if he didn't touch me."

I couldn't fault her for that.

"I suppose we should call the police. And NCIS. And warn the bank," she continued.

"We'll do that," I agreed. "After you go back to bed and get a few more hours of sleep."

"Ba!" a little voice calls from the bed.

“You are so cute, Deacon Dobermann, thinking there’s going to be any more sleep this morning.

I’m right here, sweet pea,” she replies in a sing-song voice.

She grabs my shirt and pulls me down for a kiss as she walks by.

“I’d grab a shower while there’s still some hot water. It’s going to be a long day.”

Bishop woke up with all the noise and took off, telling Violet not to bother coming in till Wednesday.

Violet delivered a glass of juice and a couple painkillers to Romy, then pulled Peony’s bedroom door closed.

“We need to get Romy in to see a real doctor sometime today too. The police will need a report of what Rick did to her.”

“We’ll get Romy up and moving and take her to a clinic in Minot. Then we’ll call everybody else. Once you give your statement, you are out of this. Completely. Do you understand me?”

Of course it wasn’t that simple. Hours of interviews later, we finally got to go home.

I packed a bag and moved into the rental with Violet. But only until we could move her and Peony into my place in town. Romy said she’d take over the lease and any furniture Violet didn’t want to move. It worked out for everybody.

Today:

Violet calls me into the office a little past noon.

She's in a cute polka-dot dress and low strappy sandals, and she ups the class of the joint by about five hundred percent.

She's so distracting that Bishop has made a rule that I'm only allowed to visit the office twice a day. Everybody laughed at that.

Violet whispers that she has a call from Agent Joplin of NCIS on speaker.

"We're here, Agent Joplin."

"Mrs. Glass, I want to let you know that the Russo case has officially been closed."

"Already? Why? What was in the box?" I ask. At least one man died for it. I figure we deserve an answer.

"A memory stick containing an electronic ledger."

"With all due respect to confidentiality and classified files, I'm going to need more, Agent Joplin. I almost lost my daughter over this. For all I know, Rick Russo could have been the reason I lost my husband. What was in the ledger?"

I blink because I'm still not used to seeing Violet in full mama bear mode. I hadn't realized that she's put two and two together and come up with Rick killing Keith as a potential four.

"The ledger that your husband discovered showed Petty Officer Russo was part of a team responsible for illegally transferring navy supplies to unauthorized resellers. Based on the date that your husband paid for the safety deposit box, we don't believe he had time to report it before he was shipped out for training for an upcoming assignment.

Unfortunately, he was subsequently killed in an accident during that same training.

We haven't identified anyone else who knew about the ledger except Petty Officer Russo. ”

Training accident, my ass. If JD hadn't already taken care of Russo, I'd be hunting him down till the end of his days. Someday we are going to find out who he was working with, and there will be a reckoning. “That was the investigation at Little Creek a couple months ago, wasn't it,” I ask.

“How did you know about that?”

“We still have friends there who mentioned it.”

“I'm going to ask you to not discuss that with anyone,” Agent Joplin says.

“Nobody will find out about the investigation from us,” Violet promises. My eyebrow goes up, and she flaps her hand at me, signalling me to keep quiet.

“Are you sure you don't know what happened to Petty Officer Russo, ma'am?”

“The last time I saw him, he was driving away with the key,” Violet says.

She didn't have to fake her shock when she heard that Rick's SUV veered off the bridge over the Missouri River just up the highway.

I don't know if JD shot out a tire or borrowed a vehicle and ran the fucker off the road.

Of course, I was with Violet the whole time and neither of us actually saw anybody do anything.

That was our story and I'm sticking to it.

“If you do happen to remember anything, please let me know.”

“I will, Agent Joplin.”

Violet ends the call.

“What was that?” I ask. “We won’t tell anybody about the investigation?”

“Deke, darling, everybody we know already knows about it. If we only talk to them, we won’t be spilling any beans, will we?”

“You’ve been spending too much time with your lawyer friend.”

“Be nice. She’s helping Romy with her real estate lease when she finds a place.”

“To be clear, you won’t be talking to anybody about anything. You’re out of this now,” I say. I don’t care if looking after Violet and Peony is another full-time job, I’m not letting the love of my life out of my sight for a minute.

She slips forward and wraps her arms around my waist. “Why, Mr. Dobermann, are you always going to be this bossy when you’re around?”

“That depends on you.”

“I think I could get to like bossy,” she says before she pulls me down for another kiss.

“There’s one way to test it. Tell me you love me, Violet.”

“I love you, Deacon.”

I can’t believe this is my life.

THE END