



How Much For A Broken Heart? (Shadow Team Book 2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When the game turns deadly for a SEAL and his Ranger, they navigate a labyrinth of danger and betrayal. But as bullets fly and alliances shift, it's not just the mission that's at stake—it's their hearts.

In a single devastating morning, August's life crumbles. His covert assignment derails disastrously as the family he's meant to safeguard falls prey to the ruthless Cooper River Cartel. The tragedy deepens when a little girl vanishes without a trace, leaving behind nothing but her favorite teddy bear—a silent witness to a kidnapping that makes no sense. As a former SEAL, August grapples with his failure and imagines killing those who broke everything he was supposed to protect. Each clue and every whisper in the criminal underworld could lead him to Annie. But with each step into darkness, August risks losing himself to the same violence that claimed her father.

Enter Shadow Team, and Ryder, a former Army Ranger tasked with rescuing Annie from a compound in the middle of the forest. He's supposed to leave, but when he finds August tied up and bleeding, he risks everything to bring the broken SEAL home.

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Page 1

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The clatter of utensils and the sweet scent of maple syrup filled the cozy kitchen. For the third morning in a row, I stood awkwardly by the counter watching James at the stove, flipping pancakes that sizzled as they hit the hot griddle. His daughter, Annie, was in her high chair, her face alight with glee every time a new pancake was added to the stack. I felt like a spare part. Despite me just being here undercover, I knew James saw me as part of his little family; hell, if anyone looked deep enough, they'd see a marriage certificate saying we were married, but it was all pretend, and I still felt awkward.

Adrift.

Maybe I wanted the apple-pie homemaker thing. Maybe I didn't want gigs like this, which were all I had now that I was no longer a SEAL.

"With skills like mine, I should open a diner," James joked and sent me a wink. I loved his smile. I loved his wink. I just wished this was real so that, maybe, I could try to love the whole of him. Battered, exhausted, and searching for someone to ground me, I had become part of his world. Despite my fucked-up state, he treated me as if I deserved to be here, rather than someone infiltrating his workplace and home.

"That would mean giving up the law," I murmured, kind of deadpan, kind of joking, although joking wasn't my strong suit.

He shot me a wry smile. "Could I give up the courtroom drama? Never." He slid past me to deposit a pancake on Annie's plastic plate, blowing on it and adding a small amount of syrup. His expression grew soft as he watched Annie attempt to use her spoon, a dollop of syrup dripping down her chin. I felt a tug of something inside,

affection, normality... I wasn't sure what it was, but it was unnerving and felt wrong sometimes.

I pulled out my phone, pretending to check messages, but in reality, I was taking a moment to etch this ordinary scene into my memory—the safety, the love, the simple pleasure of family, and wondering if, one day, I could make sense of everything so I could have this for real.

“You know, yesterday, Annie said ‘pancake’ clear as day,” James said, a note of pride in his voice as he transferred the last pancake onto the plate.

“Is that so?” I turned to Annie, who was now more syrup than toddler. There it was—my own flash of pride for the little girl who'd wormed her way into my heart. “Annie, can you say ‘pancake’?”

She beamed, syrupy spoon in hand, and declared, “Cake!”

“Close enough,” James laughed.

I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the summer sun streaming through the window. James and his daughter were a family, and this is what I'd fought so hard to protect, and why I'd agreed to this undercover gig in the first place.

Not that I had many options aside from mercenary work, which sucked big time.

“I meant to say,” James began, and I steeled myself for the usual demand he made when I left the house to work. “I know we're not...” he lowered his voice as if Annie would understand. “...y'know, married for real, but if you can, just...send a message when you're about to, y'know...”

“Work my cover to infiltrate the bad guy's lair?” I deadpanned.

He flushed. “I know it’s not always possible, but?—”

“I will if I can, promise,” I reassured him, because we might not be in love or really married, but I liked the guy, and Annie, a whole lot. I glanced at my watch and then, at Annie, who was now trying to feed her pancake to Buzzy-Bear, her beloved teddy bear.

James nodded, a smile flickering over his lips, but his eyes betrayed the worry that never quite left them these days. “Annie, sweetheart, Buzzy-Bear doesn’t eat pancakes. Remember?” he chided and petted her hair.

“Buzzy!” Annie’s protest was obvious, her tiny fingers trying to push a piece of pancake into the teddy’s stitched mouth.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Maybe Buzzy-Bear would prefer to dance over here?” I suggested, taking the teddy, and making it dance in front of her, earning a giggle from Annie and a grateful look from James. This wasn’t me—I didn’t plan on kids in my life; hell, I didn’t plan on family.

“Only a few days now,” James whispered as he passed back to the stove.

I nodded; I think I even smiled. A few more days and the intel he’d collected, and the research I’d done, would finally come to where we could take down the first piece of the sprawling cartel with its payoffs and inside deals, and watch as each domino toppled.

“I’m outside,” a voice echoed in my earpiece. Max, the other cover on this op—standing in as James’s driver—was parked out front of the house in the limo. No one lifted an eyebrow that someone from a family as rich as James’s, with all their influence, would have a car and driver.

“Roger that. They’ll be out in five.”

“Got it.”

James sent me a cautious smile. He’d asked me last night if, one day, I might stop all of this. After all, I’d done my time as a SEAL, and this private work would end one day. I couldn’t answer him, then, and I certainly hadn’t woken up with any resolution to the question. The prospect of transitioning to something outside this kind of life—action, drama, guns—made me a hundred times more than just anxious, and I couldn’t help but question whether I could be anything other than a warrior. For years, I’d dedicated myself to the mission, embracing the hardships and honing my skills, and it was my identity. Faced with the possibility of having a family and a different kind of life, I wondered if I could ever leave the mindset of a soldier behind. It was a delusion thinking I could be someone I wasn’t.

Annie babbled, her little legs kicking with excitement in the high chair as James cleaned up.

“Help yourself,” James encouraged, then moved the pancakes out of the way as I reached for one. “Oh, I ordered the unicorn cake for the P-A-R-T-Y,” he murmured, more to himself than to me, as if he were checking off a mental list, spelling it out as if Annie would understand. “That’s still okay, right? To have a party here if you vet everyone?”

“Sure.”

He glanced at me, dipping his gaze when he caught me staring, then smiling wide before whispering. “It’s in the shape of a two, and it has these...” he waved his hands expansively, “... sparklers. Special order.”

Annie would turn two in a couple of months, and I got the feeling it was a milestone

for him as well. He'd talked about us, and every time he did, I winced internally. Our fake wedding had been hard enough; hell, we even had a photo of the three of us that we'd printed and kept up on the refrigerator. We had it as a cover, but I found him staring at it frequently.

"Okay?" he prompted.

"Sorry." It startled me out of my thoughts. "Sure, just thinking today through."

"What's on your agenda?" he asked, as if I was a fellow prosecutor.

"Same sh—stuff, different day," I evaded.

"Stay safe, August," he said, then reached to touch my face. For a moment, I thought he might kiss me, but instead, he sighed and turned back to Annie—awkward shit avoided. "Okay, team, let's get ready to roll out." He wiped Annie's hands and face with a damp cloth.

Annie was babbling in her high chair, batting away James's hands, which made him grin. He booped her nose, and my heart hurt with affection that lived way out of reach for someone like me.

James caught me by the arm as he headed towards the door to leave, pulling me into a brief hug. "Be safe, Aug. I mean it," he murmured into my ear, his breath warm on my skin. His fingers tightened enough to convey the fear he harbored every time he or I walked out of that door. He shouldn't have to live in fear just because he was trying to do the right thing by revealing the things he'd found.

I turned within his embrace, edged back, and patted his shoulder. "I will."

Annie grinned at me. Her blonde hair was in bunches. I gave her a wink and a playful

tug on the left one, earning a giggle that lifted the heaviness in the room. She was hella cute and, maybe, if I wasn't a closed-off homicidal asshole with hero issues, maybe I could feel more.

James coaxed Annie into her day clothes. "You're going to have so much fun with your friends today." Then he was bustling around, a wriggling Annie perched on his hip as he multi-tasked with a skill that always left me in awe.

James nodded, balancing Annie as he slipped her tiny feet into her shoes. "Say bye-bye to Daddy," he said with a smile that didn't quite chase the worries from his expression. I hated he was teaching her to say that, but the cover had to stay intact—it was the only way I could be with him all the time and still work.

"Buh-buh!" she shouted up at me and waved.

I grasped her tiny hand. "Bye-bye, little Annie," I whispered. "See you tonight."

James nodded. "Okay, team of two, let's move out. We have a big day ahead of us." He ushered Annie towards the door, and scooped up a container of cookies Annie took from his hands. Today was potluck cookie day at the nursery, and she had six perfect chocolate circles ready to share with her friends.

Max would message me when he dropped Annie at daycare, handing her off to another undercover operative, this time a cop called Molly, who was working the day shift.

It wasn't until after my final coffee that I noticed Buzzy-Bear, Annie's inseparable companion, lying on the living room carpet, discarded in the morning rush.

I picked it up with a chuckle and squeezed its soft belly. "Were you trying to escape the duty of more daycare?" I asked the inanimate furry thing with the big bugged-out

eyes. Then, panic edged into my thoughts as I recalled a few nights back when Buzzy had become wedged down the side of the sofa—Annie had gotten so upset she couldn't find him, and she'd hate it at childcare without Buzzy. I grabbed my phone, but the call went straight to James's voicemail. I knew how he behaved when he buried his head in case files.

“Hey, you guys left Buzzy-Bear behind. Call me back if you want me to drop by the daycare and hand him off.”

I tried his cell again after I shrugged on my shoulder holster and covered it with my jacket, and again when I reached my SUV, but nothing, so I decided to connect with Max.

“Everything okay?”

“Sure is,” Max murmured.

“James isn't answering messages.”

“He's reading to Annie, stop worrying,” Max laughed.

“Okay. Annie left something behind.”

“You want me to come back?”

“Nah, I'll drop it at daycare.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

I drove to the daycare with a sense of unease growing with every mile that passed. It wasn't like James not to at least acknowledge my calls, especially when he knew I

would be worrying.

When I arrived at the daycare, I was greeted by the chatter of children playing and colorful, chaotic artwork adorning the walls.

“Hi, can you get Molly for me?” I asked reception, and Molly was straight out.

“Will you make sure Annie gets this?” I said, but Molly’s expression changed from puzzled to wide-eyed, and her stare sent a shiver down my spine.

“Annie isn’t here yet,” she blurted, pressing her ear piece. “Max?”

An icy dread settled in my stomach. Aware that she was still asking for Max, I pulled out my cell, instead, to check for missed calls or messages. Nothing. The tracker was stationary.

I walked out, my fingers already connecting James’s number for the umpteenth time. Again, it went straight to voicemail. “James, it’s me. Call me back immediately. Annie isn’t at daycare.” My voice was steady, but the tightness in my throat betrayed my rising panic.

“No contact,” Molly announced.

“Call 911,” I snapped at her, then ran for my car, shoving my phone into the carrier and connecting the map to the tracker, scanning the streets for any sign of them walking away from the car, or his phone, even as I headed straight there. Why wasn’t Max on comm? Why was James not answering? My skin prickled and my head ached with fear.

The drive was a blur of houses and storefronts, each moment stretching out with the terrifying possibilities of what might have happened. It had been over an hour since

they'd left, but the tracker was blinking, and I was five minutes away.

I saw the smoke before the car.

I rounded the corner at full speed, nearly slamming into a group of onlookers, then got out and scrambled toward the fully engulfed vehicle.

Cops were there already, and an officer took one look at me, then noticed the gun at my hip. "Hands where I can see them!" he shouted, pulling his gun, and ordering backup, his partner reaching his side.

Instinctively, I reached for my weapon as he barked at me to keep my hands where he could see them, but I took the gun out with two fingers and dropped it to the ground.

"I'm looking for my family!" I shouted in his face. "I'm unarmed! August Fox. My family was in that car." My heart raced as I complied with the cops who were reacting as if I'd threatened them. Where were James and Max?

Shit, where was Annie?

I stumbled to a halt, my heart hammering at the horror unfolding before me. The car was now a monstrous inferno, and I saw Max and James lying motionless on the ground. Panic surged within me, a tidal wave threatening to drown all reason. I ran to the car, trying to reach the back seat.

If Annie was in there, she'd be gone already, but I might have a chance.

Strong arms grabbed me back.

"There's a child in there!" I shouted... screamed... but no one let me go.

A firefighter shoved past me, a hose in his hands. He attacked the flames, water hissing and steam rising in billowing clouds. And I could do nothing but watch, not even able to reach James and Max as fire crawled toward them.

The heat was oppressive, pushing against us, and sweat beaded on my forehead, the heat baking my skin, but the physical discomfort was nothing compared to the fear clawing at my insides. When the flames had died enough, and the cops were swarming, I shook off the hold and, kneeling beside James, checked for any sign of life. Nothing. Two bullet holes—one in his temple, the other in his chest. A similar check on Max yielded the same result. They were gone. James had scrapes on him as if someone had dragged him from the car, but Max had his hand curled around a gun, showing that he had been trying to protect James.

And Annie too.

She had to have been in the car.

She couldn't have survived this.

I'm going to be sick.

Then, amid the chaos and the noise of the fire being quenched, the firefighter found me. His face, obscured by his mask, turned towards mine, and I braced myself for the words I feared most.

“No sign of anyone else in the car.”

“What?”

“There's a car seat, but it's empty, and we don't see human remains inside.”

As the cops asked questions, and Molly arrived, a new panic took root. My mind raced, thoughts tumbling over each other. Where was Annie? Had someone taken her? The heat, the flames, the lifeless bodies of her father and Max—all of it paled in comparison to the cold dread that settled in my stomach.

Annie was gone.

Ran for her life? Wandered away?

Or taken by whoever had killed her dad.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Two years later

I wasn't surprised to see that my fellow cartel lieutenants Eli Brennan and Colter Diaz had gotten here first, which made me the final member of the unholy triad left to run this ship, just as I'd planned, but not without a shit-ton of collateral damage.

I heard the shouting before I saw them, rounded the corner expecting them to be killing each other, but it was Eli doing all the shouting, and Diaz sprawled in his chair as if he didn't give a shit. One day, those two would take each other out, and I was going to be there to watch it.

The final two.

And then, whatever shadowy figure running all of this would be mine alone to kill.

In the dimly lit back room of an abandoned warehouse, where the cartel often held its impromptu meetings, I found Eli pacing like a caged animal. The news of the arrests had reached him, and his usual easygoing demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

"Three gone!" Eli's voice was a strained whisper, his hands running through his curly hair in agitation. The air was thick with tension and his temper.

I leaned against the cold wall; arms folded. "It's a big hit," I acknowledged, keeping my voice level. In this line of work, staying calm under pressure was crucial, but inside, I felt a pinch of satisfaction that my intel had gotten three of the cartel's lieutenants off the street, along with a significant number of lower-level assholes.

Three arrested. One dead. Two more to go.

And the boss. Whoever that was.

Eli stopped pacing and turned to face me; his eyes wild. He was always the one who panicked, and how the hell he'd lasted this long in the organization, I didn't know. He was far too quick to put a bullet between someone's eyes when his back was against the wall. He'd take himself down one day by not thinking rationally, and it would be me who did the killing.

"Someone's ratting us out," he snapped. "It's gotta be. There's no other way the feds could've gotten to the others."

The possibility that he'd think there was a rat had crossed my mind, too—a mole in the organization would spell disaster and have fingers pointing at me, and I'd had to consider all angles before jeopardizing my mission by giving Sanctuary the names and the authorities the means to get to them. "Then, we need to be fucking careful," I snarled the rehearsed words, then pointed at him. "You're all friendly with Charleston PD, was it you?"

Eli bristled, confronting me, shoving at my chest. I stumbled back as if I'd lost balance—best to let him think he could get the better of me.

"I'm not a narc," Eli growled.

"Well, one of us is responsible."

Eli's frustration was palpable. He slammed his fist against the wall to the side of my head, and I fake-flinched. "If there was a plant, and it comes back that it was one of ours, then it's us who's gonna pay."

He wasn't wrong. Each lieutenant in this organization—the three of us who were left—had a group of foot soldiers, and yeah, some of them had the potential to be turned.

Ask me how I know.

“They even got Mason,” Eli added. “He’s not just another grunt; he’s been part of this the longest, and he knows more than any of us. If they break him, fuck, we’re dead. All of us.”

Mason was the lieutenant of the Cooper River Cartel with the most seniority and for the longest time, I considered he might be the boss, but I disproved that after fucking him like his closeted ass begged, then, digging out information before adding him to the list I gave to Sanctuary. He wasn't the boss—he might have been the longest-serving lieutenant, used that to control some of the others, but he was lowly, like the rest of us.

The implication that Mason might talk hung in the air.

Diaz shook his head, about the only thing he added to the conversation, his ever-present Sig cradled in his lap and his cruel eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Diaz was the most dangerous lieutenant. He planned and killed with military precision and strategic thinking, cruel and vicious, he ran the gun side of the business.

If I didn't know him better, I'd have thought his stillness implied he didn't care that everything was crumbling around him, leaving the cartel vulnerable and bleeding and ripe for the picking. I'd seen the aftereffects of what he'd done to people who crossed him, or his boss, and it was ugly and evil, worse, he enjoyed it, and his smiles covered the actions of a sadist.

I stepped closer to Eli, lowering my voice. “We trust no one new, Eli, keep our heads

down and stay off the radar. We need to reassess our vulnerabilities.” In other words, let me see deeper inside what drives the crimes here.

“Mitchell, this is really fucking bad,” Eli sighed, running a hand down his face. His usual confidence was shaken, a rare sight, and one I was going to use to my advantage.

“We’ll get through this,” I said. “We always do. All we need is some guidance from above.” I stopped short of showing I cared who pulled the strings, still a frustrating shadow I wasn’t able to connect to.

I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d done the right thing handing names and evidence to Ethan and his Sanctuary organization. I’d weighed up the pros and cons, but taking the lieutenants off the board meant there was less hierarchy and maybe—just maybe—the one running all of this shit would make themselves known.

Then, I could take everything down and die a happy man—the walls were closing in, and in this game of cat and mouse, it was just a matter of time before the next move was made.

“What next, Mitchell?” Eli asked.

“Like he fucking knows,” Diaz drawled, then stood, hooked his thumbs into his belt, and stared right at me.

I wondered what part of me he saw. It wasn’t the old August, nope, he saw Aubrey Mitchell, who amidst the relentless cycle of human trafficking, arms deals, and narcotics, had become someone else. Every day I was undercover, a small part of August Fox was destroyed. I was in a calculated story of survival, a balancing act on the edge of a knife. I was no longer Lieutenant Fox, active SEAL; I was dead to the real world, and now, I was Aubrey, just another player in their dark game.

Diaz inclined his head toward me. “Still, Mitchell, it seems to me you pretend to have all the answers.”

Diaz’s murmured words echoed in my head, stirring a whirlpool of paranoia that was becoming all too familiar. “Pretend”? Did he stress that word or was my mind playing tricks on me? Undercover work had a way of seeping into your psyche, twisting every word, every glance into a potential threat. I found myself analyzing, second-guessing every interaction for hidden meanings and signs of suspicion.

I was getting tired of this shit.

Make sure Annie is safe. Then kill them all.

Diaz took the safety off the gun and pressing it to my temple. “What are the answers, Mitchell?” There was evil in his eyes, the same evil that’d killed entire families, put guns on the streets, murdered in cold blood.

No different to me.

“If you’re going to kill me, then get on with it.”

We stared at each other, any stray ounce of humanity left in me slipped away, and then, he holstered his gun.

“Fuck you, Mitchell. I have my side; you stick to yours. After all your fuckups, there’s a target on your back.”

The fuckups, as the cartel called them—the kids in the trucks not getting to delivery—Danvers had taken the fall for that, the twisted FBI man I’d shot dead. Partly personal, and partly to maintain cover. Actually, no, it’d all been personal. But it’d gotten me noticed, elevating me from useful as shit, willing to kill on order to

support the trafficking, to lieutenant with my own portfolio and small army of soldiers who just wanted money.

I confronted Diaz, who met my gaze.

“Says the man who lost an entire shipment of AK47s,” I deadpanned and braced myself for him to throw himself at me. We’d fought before—he was way too quick with his fists—volatile, out of control—but this time, the only sign I’d gotten from him was the tic of his jaw and the tension thinning his lips.

Our cell phones vibrated in unison, and it distracted Diaz enough that, if I’d wanted to, I could’ve snapped his neck.

Eli pushed between us, wagging his phone. “Amos says we’re needed at the big house.”

Adrenalin shot through me—the big house was a fenced-in part of a sprawling compound set deep in the forest, and I’d been inside on just two occasions—once the day I was hired into the cartel, the next, after I’d executed Danvers and was promoted. Was it possible my gamble on decimating the organization at my level had paid off, and I’d finally get to see the shadow behind this?

I knew Annie was there—a reminder of my failure to protect her and James. I’d seen her from a distance, a young woman with her, but I had to stay cold. She was collateral that needed to be moved from all of this.

From me and the killing spree I’d start as soon as she was away.

We took separate vehicles, a couple of my guys leaning against the SUV, armed to the teeth, staring with intent at the guys who were under Eli and Diaz. That’s how this group operated, with each team hating each other and each group trained to work

independently.

It made the whole cartel as fragile as a bag of blood.

Easy to cut open and drain.

From the warehouse to the compound, it was a couple of hours' drive, and we arrived and parked in a row. There was space for more than the three vehicles, and the empty spaces made me happy, knowing it was on me that the other lieutenants were all under arrest and detained.

Well, the ones I hadn't taken out, anyway.

"Stay here," I ordered the soldiers in my vehicle.

Not a single one argued—there was no loyalty in any of them.

My boots crunched on the gravel path leading through the heart of the compound. I did my usual checks, but nothing had changed since the last time. High-security fencing enclosed the site, topped with barbed wire—a reminder of the nature of the operations run here. At the top end stood a two-story building, utilitarian in design, but the epicenter of the cartel's illicit activities. As I approached, I could feel the weight of surveillance on me, cameras covering every angle. The place was more than a hub; it was where the brains of the operation were focused, and orders were given.

The atmosphere inside buzzed with quiet intensity. Screens lined one wall, glowing with feeds from various cameras and data streams. The air was thick with the hum of computers and the low murmur of voices. Rooms branched off from the main hall, each with locked doors I wished I could get past.

And then there was Amos, the comm for the faceless authority running this entire operation. A small, wiry, nervous man, he was always on edge, as if he expected the walls to crash down on him at any moment. Diaz had a way of getting under his skin, using his intimidating presence to make Amos even more jittery. But despite his nervous disposition, Amos was the linchpin in the distribution of assignments, and given he was the link between us and whoever ran this, no one touched him.

Diaz toyed with him, stepped up in his space, intimidated him, and if Amos wasn't as much a part of this as the rest of them, I could almost feel sorry for him. Still, give him his due, Amos stood his ground, and finally, with a huff, Diaz took a seat.

I watched as he handed out orders, his gaze never settling, flicking to Diaz, then Eli, then always to me for the longest time. Maybe he thought I respected him, but every interaction with him was a calculated dance, a game of me giving him enough respect to get what I needed without arousing suspicion. Amos kept secrets and had knowledge about the workings of this criminal enterprise, and when everyone else had been dealt with, I would shake the information out of him. It wouldn't take much to break a man afraid of his own shadow.

At one point, I'd managed to plant a bug in one of the key areas of this place, but it was long past viable, not feeding any intel at all, and for all I knew, it'd been destroyed or was lost. Putting it out there had been a risk, but one that had paid off, providing Sanctuary with valuable insights and more, for them to pass on and cut away at most of the hierarchy of the cartel. Eli, Diaz, and me left standing.

The way I wanted.

Brennan the worrier, who covered any deal with stress.

Diaz the loose cannon, who made me look good.

“And you, Mitchell.” Amos cleared his throat. “How do you plan to fix things?” Amos asked me, glancing up from a tablet holding all kinds of statistics.

“How about we talk to the head of this organization and strategize?”

Amos’s eyes widened. “He’d hate that,” he said.

Well, that was more than I’d had before. Head person was male.

“Seems like there isn’t much left here,” Diaz snapped. “Might be nice to know what the fuck is being done to protect us.”

Amos blinked at Diaz, took a slow step back, glanced at me, and then down to his notebook. “Um, Mitchell, back to you. We had buyers, and the twenty-one kids you lost was a big hit.”

Twenty-one children, rescued by Sanctuary with my help.

Children.

“I’ve got a couple of ideas,” I said, keeping my voice even. Inside, my mind raced, calculating the safest bet that wouldn’t blow my cover or jeopardize the mission.

“First,” I continued, “we reroute the next shipment through a different channel. I’ve got contacts in Chicago who can get us through without the heat we’ve been seeing here.” It was a risky play, suggesting a change in operations, but it was also the kind of bold move they expected from someone in my position.

Amos’s eyes widened, and he threw me a considering frown. “He’ll ask me how you can guarantee this new route won’t end the same way?”

I met his gaze, unflinching, and then, threw him a smile, which he almost returned. I caught something in his expression. Was it interest? I could work with that.

“Because the security for this won’t be down to some asshole like Danvers. I’ll personally oversee the operation. I’ll make sure it gets to where it needs to go.” It was a bold statement, but it showed initiative and willingness to take responsibility, traits this fucking nest of vipers valued.

“And the second idea?” he asked and cleared his throat.

This one was going to be harder to sell, but it sounded as if I knew my shit. “We expand our local operations,” I said. “Diversify. If we spread out our activities, it reduces the risk of another major loss. It’s about diversifying our options instead of relying on just one.” This was a more strategic play, appealing to any sense of business acumen.

Amos was silent for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, he nodded. “‘Diversify’.”

“If you want, I can explain it to him direct,” I pushed, with a shrug, as if the answer didn’t matter.

“I—I’ll tell him,” Amos muttered, and scribbled something in his notebook. Only, I saw his tell—when Amos said he’d pass on the information, he’d inclined his head slightly, as if he was suggesting that person was somewhere in this huge, sprawling, protected place. Finally, I was close.

I was right.

Whoever ran this shit was here.

With Annie.

With James's daughter.

I'd tracked the killers. I'd taken them out. I'd infiltrated the Cooper River Cartel. I'd taken down most of it, and now it was only the last head of the hydra to remove.

Get Annie somewhere safe.

Then, I could rest.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

When I stepped off the sleek, private jet emblazoned with the Callahan family crest, my anticipation mixed with a fuck-ton of unease. Chicago's skyline loomed ahead, and in among its towering structures stood Sanctuary's Chicago office.

Someone had reliably informed me that it was distinct from Albany Ops, the new hub in Maine, and the hundred or so safe houses around the U.S. and up into Canada. A car was waiting to whisk me away and parked outside an imposing building full of normal offices with the top three floors labeled as Callahan Imports and Exports. I had to stifle a snort, because if that didn't sound like a cover company, I don't know what did.

A man approached me and extended a hand, which I shook.

"Simon Grant."

"Ryder West," I replied, and we did that whole nod thing where we acknowledged what we were here to do. I followed him to the elevator, and when the door closed, he placed his hand against a screen that scanned his palm and fingers. The elevator came to life, whisking us upward.

"Do I get some of that?" I asked as I poked at the screen.

Simon chuckled. "You don't want it. Hell, we operate under so many levels of security and secrecy that sometimes I wonder if, one day, I won't be able to get in. First day I came up here, I got shut into this glass prison thing, although to be fair, I was armed and covered in blood..." His smile widened, as if that was a fond memory. "Those were the days," he added as the elevator stopped and the doors slid

open.

I didn't ask.

"Okay, if you can wait here," he indicated a round mark in the tiled floor, "and stand still while it scans."

I did as I was told—couldn't see a scanner or anything like lasers or whatever they had going on here—then Simon tapped his ear and gestured me forward. "Follow me."

I noted he didn't ask me to remove my weapon, or the knife in the sheath at my waist.

He opened a door to reveal a vast expanse segmented into various low-walled spaces, like cubicles, but not. There was a general hum of activity, with people moving about briskly, focus unwavering, some acknowledging Simon, others talking into phones or earpieces.

"We have a thing happening right now in New Mexico," Simon said with a wave around the hive of what I assumed was strategic planning and intelligence-gathering, each person likely a cog in a well-oiled machine.

A bank of computers, more advanced and expansive than anything I had seen at the ranch safe house, dominated the central area. Screens flickered with maps, data streams, and surveillance footage, painting a picture of global operations in real time, and sitting on a chair in the middle of it all was another man who stood and crossed to me.

"Welcome. I'm Cain Brodie, resident IT nerd," he said, and we shook hands.

"And our boss," Simon added with a hint of pride, which earned him a quirky smile

from Cain.

“Ryder West, former Army Ranger and fellow IT nerd,” I said with a smile.

“Oh cool.” Cain grinned at me. “I was just researching quantum encryption.” He sounded cautious, as if he were expecting me to laugh at him.

“The uncrackable code?” I said, and Cain nodded. “It’s like something out of a sci-fi movie, but I can’t help but think about how it could revolutionize field operations.”

“I know, oh my god, imagine having comm and data that are virtually impenetrable to hacking.”

His enthusiasm was infectious. “Imagine having something that could mean the difference between a mission’s success and catastrophic failure. The ability to operate without the fear of our communications being intercepted or compromised could give us an edge we never had before.”

“Any new tech has to be foolproof and user-friendly,” I warned.

“Absolutely—”

“Guys!” Simon interrupted and rolled his eyes as both Cain and I turned to him. “Coffee?” he asked me.

“Black, please.”

Then, Simon focused on Cain. “You get the coffee, babe.” He shot me a glance. “Cain, I mean.”

Cain grumbled about boyfriends who didn’t care about the information process, but

he did wander off to wherever they had coffee.

“You’re partners then?” I asked because I needed to know the people I worked with.

“Work and life,” Simon said, then tilted his chin and my gaze fell to the ring on his hand. His expression asked if I had a problem with that, and of course, I freaking didn’t.

“Hashtag rainbow army,” I deadpanned, then offered Simon a fist bump. “So, show me what I’m facing here.”

He crossed to a table and flicked a switch, and I realized the large top was actually a set of large, embedded screens.

Simon traced the sinuous path of a river on a map. “This is the operational zone of the Cooper River Cartel,” he said, his voice all business as Cain came back with coffees and handed us ours.

“No coffees on the twenty-million-dollar table please,” he muttered, and Simon ducked his head—I sensed a story there.

“It was once,” he grumbled.

“Once was enough.”

They exchanged glances, and Cain’s serious expression slipped into a smile.

“Okay then,” Simon began. “This is the Francis Marion National Forest, South Carolina, northeast of Charleston and part of the low-country region.” The digital map on the screen showed the forest, a sprawling green mass across the state that was about to become my hunting ground.

I leaned forward, scanning the dense forest. “And this Cooper River Cartel?” I asked, a name I hadn’t come across before. “What’s their main game?”

“Narcotics, guns, trafficking, primarily,” Simon replied. “Cocaine, meth, and some marijuana cultivation.”

I frowned, processing this. The variety in their criminal portfolio meant they were adaptable. Dangerous. All of that made what they needed me to do that bit harder.

But not impossible.

Army Rangers didn’t know the meaning of the word impossible.

“And the leadership?” I probed further. “Who are we looking at here?”

“That’s the tricky part,” Simon said, shaking his head. “Their leader is a ghost. No concrete identity. We have a couple of the lieutenants who handle the day-to-day, thanks to the file that August gave us, but none of them will give up who is running this. Could be one person, but our intel suggests it could be more than one person.”

I understood the challenge we faced. A faceless enemy was always harder to combat.

“Any ideas at all?”

Cain shook his head. “Maybe it’s unique and run at lieutenant level, but no, nothing.”

“And they have terrain advantage over law enforcement, I assume?” I asked, already knowing part of the answer.

“Exactly,” Simon confirmed. “The forest itself is their fortress. The terrain is tough, full of swamps and dense woods. Makes it hard for law enforcement to make any

headway, even the park rangers are holding off engaging even though there is a task force set up for the wildlife issues.”

Navigating that kind of terrain wouldn’t be easy.

“I’m more used to the desert,” I said, because they needed to know my limitations as well as my expertise.

“Afghanistan, Syria, and Africa,” Cain murmured.

“You know all that?”

Cain shrugged. “Not the redacted stuff, but the main thrust of it, yes.”

“Tell me how they haven’t worked out that Aubrey Mitchell is actually August Fox, and why they haven’t connected him to the murder of his husband?”

“There were a few key pieces of background information and deception. It wasn’t common knowledge outside of August’s black ops leader. No one knew he and James weren’t really married, it was part of his cover. A change of identity was a given, a new name and an elaborate backstory with falsified records to match.” Simon glanced at me, and from his expression, I got the feeling there was something else happening here, and I didn’t question it. He cleared his throat. “The Cooper River Cartel would have no reason to suspect August.”

“I understand that.” I gathered as much patience as I could, given my expertise with technology. I might not be on the same level as Sanctuary, but I was good enough to know not everyone could hide. “But, Cain, back me up here, no one is completely untraceable, so what are we walking into?”

Cain let Simon answer, but he shot me a look that spoke volumes, and I knew for

sure, it had been him who'd created a backstory and audit trail that would stand any test.

"Don't forget there's been a significant time gap between the incident involving his pretend family and August's infiltration into the cartel. The cartel targeted James Lerner as a message to the DA on a case against Colter Diaz, one of their remaining lieutenants." Simon paused and glanced at me, because that was exactly what he'd said. "The cartel is structured into cells, and four of the seven lieutenants are gone. Three arrested on August's intel, and one dead, throat slit, and his body dumped outside a nightclub."

"So, the cartel is responsible for killing the girl's father, August goes undercover to get closer, I get that, but why did the cartel take the girl in the first place?"

"We have a working idea," Cain said, and exchanged glances with Simon.

"Go on."

"James Lerner had intel on the Cooper River Cartel, documentation that tied the incumbent DA to some shady dealings. He was only days away from presenting a completed case to those who could deal with it."

"Which is why he was taken out, but again, this doesn't explain taking his daughter."

"Whoever killed James, might have seen his daughter as nothing more than collateral, maybe not significant in their line of work. After all, it appears they targeted James as a warning to anyone digging around the DA's office. Why the cartel is still keeping her is a mystery, but maybe she's being groomed because she's too young for trafficking."

"Jesus Christ." I felt sick.

All three of us were silent, then Simon continued. “How she ended up in this compound, at this time, we don’t know, but that is where August is, and we are now in over our heads backing him up. The intel he gave us on the cartel so far included detailed instructions about leaving him the fuck alone, his words not ours, to concentrate on getting his daughter out. End of story.”

“Then, let’s get it done.” I was ready to get into the thick of it.

“We’re coordinating with local and federal agencies,” Simon began, “but this is the location we have from August’s intel,” Simon said, his voice a mix of determination and concern as he pointed to the screen. It showed a house embedded in the thick foliage of the Francis Marion National Forest.

I leaned over, studying the image, watching as Simon spread his fingers apart to zoom in, until the images pixelated.

The main building, a sprawling structure of stone, seemed to emerge from the forest itself. The fences that surveillance had picked up under the canopy were imposing, tall, shadowed by towering trees cut back to keep this space clear, giving the impression of a fortress hidden away from the world. The roof was steep and angular, and heavy blinds and bars shrouded the house’s occasional windows.

It was clear this was no ordinary residence; it had the air of a stronghold, designed for privacy and defense. I could make out the faint outlines of what appeared to be guard posts. The dense canopy of the forest provided camouflage, shielding the house from prying eyes, making it almost a part of the landscape.

“How does a place like this even exist?” I muttered, more to myself than Simon.

“Money,” he deadpanned.

“And no trail on the money to anyone bankrolling this.”

“Nothing.”

The surrounding terrain was rugged and untamed. Thick underbrush and clusters of trees created a natural barrier, while the uneven ground hinted at hidden pitfalls and treacherous footpaths. It was easy to see how approaching this place undetected would be a challenge.

But I could handle this.

Despite its isolation, there was something deliberate about its placement. Every aspect of the house and its surroundings seemed calculated for maximum security and strategic advantage. It went beyond being just a hideout; it was a command center from which operations could be overseen with an iron grip. The spider sitting at the center of the web.

And whoever it was, August told us this was where the child was.

As I studied the image, I couldn't help but feel a grudging respect for the mind that had chosen this location. They knew what they were doing, and they'd done it well. But that only bolstered my determination. No matter how well-fortified, no stronghold was impregnable. We would find a way in. We had to. For the little girl called Annie.

“They picked this location for tactical advantage,” I muttered, my mind racing through various tactical approaches.

“Exactly.” Simon nodded, zooming out to show the surrounding terrain. “Difficult to approach without being seen. Thick underbrush, uneven ground, and a few creeks running close by.” He traced his fingers over two, one wider than the other.

I absorbed every detail, already envisioning a path through the dense forest. “This is all the aerial surveillance we have?” I asked, knowing the dense canopy would be a challenge.

“Drones can’t go through the tree cover, and we’re not sure what they have in there for surveillance,” Simon replied, confirming my thoughts. “We’ll need ground recon for this one.”

My attention remained fixed on the screen as I noted the natural barriers and plotting potential paths. “Security setup? Cameras, guards?” I asked, anticipating the resistance we might face.

“I wish we knew, darkness is our best bet, you and maybe one or two others, keep it small, and you’ll get her.” Simon explained with confidence despite the lack of a plan.

I nodded, already thinking about the potential risks and ways to exit the situation. “Evac if things go south?” I asked, knowing full well that in operations like these, anything could happen.

“Two routes.” Simon pointed them out on the map. “One back to the main road, another to a clearing for emergency extraction. We’ll have exfil on standby.”

I felt the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders. Getting Annie out safely was paramount. “And August?” I inquired, thinking about the man whose undercover life had been torn apart. I couldn’t imagine what he was going through, a client dead on his watch, a child missing, but also, how close to the ragged edge he must be.

My former captain, Ethan, had witnessed August shooting our old boss, without a blink of remorse, and while I didn’t mourn Danvers, I wondered at how ingrained into this evil system August was. He’d been under just short of two years, how much

humanity did he have left?

“Once Annie’s out, he’s taking it down.” Unspoken was how he would be doing that.

“And it’s sanctioned?” I asked even though I didn’t need to because I could read Simon’s expression, underscored by the sigh he gave. This was August off-mission, loose, wanting revenge. Simon didn’t say that this was going to be stopped, but, maybe, I wasn’t cleared for that information.

I stood straighter, adrenaline surging, my fingertips tingling. “I’ll get the team ready; I want Ethan leading this, and Luca with me. We’ll do this quick, quiet, and efficient,” I stated, the resolve in my voice unwavering. I couldn’t fathom any mission without Cap at my side.

“Ethan’s locked down in Maine, no can do.”

“Then, I’ll do this with Luca alone.”

Simon was troubled. “Ryder, Sanctuary can give you an entire team?—”

“We don’t need anyone else. Luca and I will get the girl out, no one will know we’re there. Surgical.”

Simon nodded after a pause, his concern still there. “I’ll coordinate with the other units. Of course, backup will be ready if you need it.”

“I’ll contact Luca, give him the option, it’s his choice, okay? Otherwise, I go in alone.”

Simon didn’t look convinced, but Cain sighed.

“Okay,” Cain said after a pause.

As I turned to leave the room, the mission loomed large in my mind, but there was no room for doubt. “We’ll get her,” I said. “We’ll bring her home.”

The screen’s glow faded, but the image of the house in the forest stayed etched in my mind. We were going to bring Annie home. No matter what it took.

* * *

Luca took the call and was heading our way within the hour, and it wasn’t that long until he arrived, a smirk on his face as he headed straight for me.

“You made it here in one piece. I’m surprised,” I said with a grin, standing to greet one of my closest friends. Through training, then war, we’d become more than just friends—more like brothers.

He chuckled, clapping me on the shoulder. “Please, you know my driving is half the reason we always got out of those hot zones.”

“Yeah, and the other half, the reason we got into them in the first place,” I shot back, the familiar banter like slipping into an old, comfortable jacket.

Luca’s laugh filled the room, easing some of the tension that had built up as Simon and I strategized, and he handed out tech as if he was offering candy. “You said a retrieval, catch me up?” He turned serious as he checked out the maps and photos spread across the table.

“There’s a kid in there we need to get out.” I tapped the map, my voice firm, leaving no room for ambiguity about our primary objective—the presence of a child in danger added a layer of urgency and gravity to the mission. “Just the two of us, in,

out, done, exfil two clicks out, guards, guns, high fences electrified, cartel, danger, blah, blah.”

Luca paused his flicking through paperwork, and his expression hardened as he leaned in closer, determined. I knew what he’d focused in on, and it wasn’t all the bullshit about danger.

“A kid, huh?” Luca said, his voice low. “I’m in.” Then, he glanced at me, and we exchanged nods. “I’m in.”

Simon redirected the focus of the briefing. “Our asset is on site, August Fox, undercover as Aubrey Mitchell, responsible for the intel we have so far, responsible for getting us the info to get the kids out from the trafficking. His extraction is not on the list, okay? Rescuing the child is our top priority.”

I could see the resolve in Luca’s eyes. “Okay. We get the kid out safe,” he stated, a sentiment I echoed with a nod. There was an unspoken understanding between us. We’d faced tough situations before, but the involvement of a child made this mission different, more personal.

“We’ll need to get in and out fast,” Simon continued, pointing to the satellite image. “The compound is heavily guarded, and the terrain is challenging. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

Luca was already studying the map. “Easy,” he muttered. “Cut the power. You can do that I assume?”

Simon looked to Cain, who nodded.

“Then, you just make sure we’re ready for a quick extraction,” he said, his tone all business now. “Always up for a challenge,” he added, leaning in to study the intel.

“Although Cap’s gonna be missed.” We fist bumped, a gesture that mourned Ethan wouldn’t be on this one with us.

“Yeah,” I replied, the weight of his absence hanging in the air. “But he’s safe, and that’s what matters.”

“I just miss having the old team together,” Luca said, a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

“We all do,” I agreed, feeling the gap Ethan’s absence left in our trio.

“But hey, we’ve got a job to do,” Luca said, shaking off the somber mood. “Let’s make sure we do it so well that Ethan’s kicking himself for missing out.”

I grinned, nodding. “Just don’t get us killed with your ‘expert’ driving,” I teased.

Luca pretended to be offended. “I’ll have you know; my driving has only improved. You’re in safe hands, buddy.”

Simon cleared his throat, bringing our focus back to the task at hand. “Let’s get down to the details. We have a tight window.”

Luca rolled his neck. “So, what is the kid doing in there?”

I could answer that one. “Annie Lerner. She was kidnapped the same day that her dad, James Lerner was killed. She would have been nearly two when she was taken, so that puts her at four now. She has a permanent nanny in the compound—Clara—and that’s all we have, just the name of the woman, no facial rec matches.”

Simon threw up photos of others, in a kind of hierarchy. “People you need to know. This is Amos, and again there’s no facial rec that we can match him to, and nothing

August can get to us about him. What we do know is that he's responsible for communicating between lieutenants on the ground and whoever is running the cartel."

"Is Amos a target?" Luca asked.

Simon shook his head. "No targets. The deal is you get in, get the kid, get out. August is staying under, feeding us intel, but he won't make any moves until his daughter is safe. Do not burn him."

"Just the kid. Got it."

Simon and Luca chatted, but my thoughts were already inside that compound, with the child who needed our help. The stakes were high, and failure was not an option.

* * *

Two days later, Luca and I were in position, hunkered down in a concealed spot with a clear view of the compound. Getting to this point involved a day's hike in from the only road into this area, and we'd been dropped a good five miles outside that on the highway. The terrain was rocky, then scrubby, then there was climbing, but we were both in good shape, and we managed to get to the compound a couple of hours before dusk. For the night and through the next day, we took turns observing and noting every detail—when everyone ate, when the compound was busiest, and when it was quiet. We had our binoculars trained on the building, scanning for any sign of the child, and we'd fallen into the quiet no-conversation we'd used when we served. I knew him so well he could glance at me, and I understood what he was trying to say.

I spotted movement in one of the windows. A young woman with long dark hair appeared, and right beside her was a child, no more than four years old, chatting animatedly and jumping on the spot. Relief washed over me—the kid was here, and

from the looks of it, in good spirits.

Luca shifted beside me, staring through his binoculars, then held up five fingers, four times. Young, maybe early twenties.

He meant the woman with the girl. I shrugged. No intel.

We watched as the woman led the child across a room, her demeanor gentle, protective, and she smiled a lot. The child clung to a small toy, oblivious that she shouldn't even be there. At her age, what would she have remembered of a previous life?

Luca glanced at me. A kid in a situation like this was a dangerous thing— more chance of panic during extraction, and he raised an eyebrow. Do we take the nanny too?

Boots on the ground decision.

He nodded. Maybe taking someone the kid trusted would keep the situation calm.

A sharp nod from me in return, then I kept my gaze fixed on the scene. It seemed the kid and the woman spent most of their time in that suite of rooms and the fenced-in yard. Easier to keep tabs on them. Our plan was to enter a little before dawn, when everyone was at their quietest. We'd already discussed getting the kid out and not returning if either of us was compromised, in order to ensure a safe rescue.

Armed guards patrolled outside the building. We noted arrivals and departures of others, the latest, arriving just before three p.m., was a Humvee, with a short, dark-haired man in jeans and a leather jacket—fuck—this was August Fox aka Aubrey Mitchell, the undercover guy. I felt Luca tense next to me—he wasn't supposed to be here. We had no intel that he was going back into the compound.

“We have eyes on,” Simon said in my ear, and Luca’s. “No intel on this.”

Through the lenses, I watched August across the expanse separating us, and I could see him staring at something, not quite in our direction, but close. Then, his head tilted downward, a contemplative gaze suggesting he was lost in thought, maybe even carrying the weight of the world on his broad shoulders. It was a rare moment, capturing a man who, at first glance, was unaware and unguarded. I knew he was a Navy SEAL, aware he had medals, distinguished service, the whole enchilada, but what I’d seen then was a broken man, and I adjusted the focus, sharpening the image as I took in the details. There was a rawness to him, a silent intensity that made me pause. He was playing the part of a ruthless killer and a player in human trafficking, but for a moment, I swore I saw vulnerability.

I lowered the binoculars, considering the man before me. I knew men like him, had served with SEALs before, had been in the trenches with them. Like us, or anyone in the military, they were the kind of men who carried their scars on the outside with pride, but hid the internal scars well, facing demons in the silence of their own minds.

August knew James’s daughter was a short distance away in that building—it must’ve killed him to be that close to a child in danger. I continued to observe—watching, waiting, gathering intel—and I made a mental note of everything I saw of him and around him.

Luca tapped my hand, and we had a silent conversation.

He shouldn’t be here at the compound. That wasn’t the plan.

I know.

Bad timing, and comm only went one way with him, plus Simon said August’s last contact with Sanctuary had been over a week ago. We couldn’t give August a heads-

up on what we were doing, but we'd deal with that when we got there.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, we buried deeper into the undergrowth, waiting until dawn came calling. We'd use the early hours to our advantage, less activity and better cover. As night fell and the compound grew quiet, the goals of our mission were right there—we were here to bring a child to safety, and nothing was going to stop us.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I leaned against the cold wall of the compound, cursing under my breath. The fact I was here, under the watchful eye of my fellow lieutenants, their foot soldiers facing off against mine, and with Amos outside the concrete building, meant something was wrong.

“The reason we’re here?” Eli asked.

“Called me off a fucking job,” Diaz spat.

“This had better be good,” I added my part, and the three of us, our people ranged behind us now, faced off with Amos.

“I didn’t want to do this,” Amos said, shivering in a thin T-shirt and wringing his hands. He was flanked by two of the cartel’s meanest bodyguards, aka Dumb and Dumber, all brawn and little brains. “I don’t want to...” He backed away, but one of the guards gripped his arm and shoved him forward, letting him fall to his knees without stopping the momentum.

“The fuck?” Eli snapped. Next to me, Diaz was silent, as if he scented change in the air. What was Amos doing in the dirt, crying, scrambling to stand? I had nothing on him, other than he ran comm for the cartel and was the mouthpiece, that he was easily spooked and didn’t belong here.

Amos stood upright and clenched his fists at his side as he threw an accusing glance back at Dumb, who’d been the one to push him. Both Dumb and Dumber had their weapons drawn, loose at their sides, but they had an advantage on the rest of us, who had their guns holstered. Behind me, there was whispering, confusion in the ranks,

nine men and one woman ranged around the three lieutenants.

“He said...” Amos began in a trembling voice. “He has evidence...”

“Evidence of what?” Eli asked, a touch of fear in his tone.

I didn’t know why he was scared, unless he thought the man at the top had found out he’d been skimming from the deliveries. Diaz still hadn’t shifted position, but he was rigid. Waiting. And the thinly veiled assertion of control from the unknown person behind the cartel grated on my nerves.

“One of you is our mole; one of you is leaking locations.” Amos pointed at the three of us, then scurried behind Dumber who rolled his eyes.

Diaz rested his hand on his weapon. Eli let out a choked laugh.

“We’re the ones left,” Eli said and cleared his throat.

I stayed silent, but behind the three of us, the crews were restless. A bullet to the brain was the usual result of confrontations, and tensions between the three crews were already high, the fear of the arrests trickling down, and now Amos was delivering messages. All it would take was for one of us to fall, and the crews would turn on each other. Each crew knew if their lieutenant was killed, they wouldn’t be far behind.

I pushed my thumbs into my belt, relaxed.

“Who!” Eli demanded, and this time, the fear was obvious. “I didn’t say a fucking thing.”

Diaz chuckled, dark and low, he was a true servant of the cartel—evil and

twisted—and there was no evidence he was anything but loyal, and he knew it. I waited, loose and ready to move, because if I'd been compromised, I was going to take down as many of these fuckers as I could. By this time, Amos had backed right up and vanished into the building as fast as his stumbling cowardice could take him, hands over his ears.

“Shoot him in the leg; we want him alive!” he cried as he disappeared, and Dumb and Dumber lifted their weapons, pointing them at me.

“Me?” I asked as if I didn't have a care in the world, all the time, my brain turning over what the fuck was happening here. Dumb flicked a glance to my left and then my right, and I saw him focus back on me, even as his finger tensed on the trigger. I had the unmistakable sensation of being outnumbered and outmaneuvered. The voices behind me were harsh, a cacophony of threats and malice, but my training kicked in.

With a deep breath, I dropped into a crouch and spun away, a move so practiced, so ingrained in my muscle memory that it required no thought. My hand went to my weapon, drawing it in one fluid, seamless motion.

Time seemed to slow down as I turned. I could see the surprised faces of my assailants, their reactions just a beat too slow. I didn't hesitate. I squeezed the trigger, my gun roaring to life, each shot a precise, calculated decision, kill shots between the eyes.

The chamber rattled as I fired, my aim deadly accurate. Years of training guided each decision. The gun in my hand was an extension of myself, a tool I wielded with lethal efficiency, even as the others tried to swarm me.

I got Diaz in my sights, he had his weapon drawn, but he grabbed one of his own crew, yanking the unsuspecting man in front of him as my bullet met the wrong

person.

One by one, some of the assholes fell—one bullet, one man. I was methodical, each shot bringing down another threat, until the chamber clicked empty.

And I couldn't avoid the swarm any more.

I struggled and cursed, and kicked, and used my head to batter at least one person who had me in their hold, but with the clarity of what I'd done, I knew there were still people standing. I fought my hardest, but even I couldn't fight back against this many, and all too soon, I was in a room, my wrists tied, suspended from the ceiling, my toes barely touching the floor. Diaz was in front of me, and for the first time since I'd started this journey, fear coursed through me, the cold reality of my situation setting in with Annie in this complex. My mind raced with questions, the most pressing one being whether they had discovered my connection to Annie. Was this why I was here, bound, and helpless?

The thought of them using Annie against me was unbearable, a nightmare scenario I had always dreaded. I'd been trained to handle torture, to withstand physical and mental strain, but the idea of my enemies using James's daughter as leverage was a different kind of torture altogether.

I struggled against my restraints as Diaz considered me with narrowed eyes. The ropes bit into my wrists, a reminder of my powerlessness. My gaze fixed on him, looking for any clue, any indication of what he knew and what the cartel's plans might be. Why wasn't I dead already? He pulled a knife from his belt, and I stared at him, impassive.

"Who do you work for?" Diaz asked.

"He sent you to do his dirty work, then?" I said, referring to whomever the fuck was

in charge.

He ignored the question, “I always knew there was something wrong about you,” he said, as if we were sitting there with beers and chatting.

“Pot, kettle, black,” I murmured and got a fist to the gut. The action swung my body back, I hit the wall, and I tensed the right muscles to soften the impact. He’d have to try a lot harder than that to take me down.

He crossed to me, placed the blade at my throat. “FBI?”

I snorted a laugh, and he ran the blade up my cheek, deep enough to draw blood.

“CIA?”

This time, I rolled my eyes and got a matching cut on the other side, along with a couple more gut punches. He’d worked up a sweat from this alone, so what he thought his lazy ass could achieve here, I didn’t know.

“ATF?” He ripped at my shirt, then poked the blade into my side, shoved it deep enough for me to know it was there. Two more punches, this time to the center of my chest.

“ABC? XYZ? Is this a game of letters?” I smirked back in his face. Rule one of being tortured, don’t antagonize the enemy, and boy was he on a short leash. Still, I needed him distracted, my back pressed against the wall.

He shoved the blade through my shoulder, as if he were pinning me to the concrete like a bug—I didn’t feel a thing when it went in, but I sure felt it as the blade twisted and he yanked it back out.

“Who do you work for?” he asked, and when I just stared at him, he punched me again, and again, until every molecule of my skin burned.

“Fuck you.” I grinned and spat blood at him, hitting him dead in the face. He growled and cursed, hit me twice more as I swung into him, and then, he took a step too far. As I swung back, I lifted my legs and caught him square in the face with my feet. He flew back into the opposite wall, stunned—trying to get up, but disoriented, blood pouring from his broken nose. Score one for the good guy.

“Enough,” Dumber said from the doorway, holding Diaz back even as Diaz tried to dive for me. “Boss is coming down.”

Diaz stood, shaking with anger, wiping blood with the back of his sleeve, darting around Dumber and getting in one last swipe of the knife, but it was done from a distance and did nothing more than carve a line across my chin. Dumber hustled him out, yanking the door shut, and I took the opportunity to rest where I could, not slumping, otherwise my shoulders would take too much of the strain. The room felt smaller with each passing second, the walls closing in on me, and I breathed through every throb of pain, cataloging what I had.

An empty room.

Rope.

No purchase on the floor.

But the wall was close behind me.

I’d get out and kill them all, given my cover was blown already and I didn’t care who knew what I was.

They'd all learn that no one keeps a former SEAL confined.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

We saw the moment everything went to shit.

So did Sanctuary.

“He’s been made; we’re moving this up,” Cain advised in our ear. “If it’s clear, you need to go now, before they connect August to Annie.” Luca and I exchanged glances—I doubted August would give anything away, if he was even alive, but we had to go now.

I settled my breathing and pulled my focus to the front. We were moments away from making our entry, the tension between us taut and Cain’s voice crackling in our earpieces, a subtle reminder of the ticking clock.

“You’ve got five minutes with the fence, max, crews could be on edge,” Cain confirmed, an edge of urgency in his tone. “Northeast corner is your entry point. Eyes on the guards.”

I could feel my heartbeat in my throat.

The situation had escalated quickly, and it was just Luca and me.

As we approached the location to get in, every sense was heightened. We had to be ghosts, shadows flitting on the edge of perception. I caught Luca’s eye, giving a slight nod towards the building where Annie was being held. He returned the nod, his expression grim, but determined. We split up, always aware of each other’s position.

“In three,” Cain counted down, and I tightened my grip on my weapon.

“Two.”

Luca’s breath was controlled, and we exchanged brief glances.

“One,” and that was our signal.

Like ghosts, we surged forward, moving quickly and silently towards the breach point. The guards were shifting, lulled into complacency by the monotony of their rounds. We used that to our advantage, slipping through the shadows.

The compound loomed before us, an imposing structure of concrete and steel inside the open spaces with flimsy outbuildings. This was where Annie was, and Cain had cut power to the alarms and to a small part of the fence, but only long enough to get us in. We breached the perimeter, the faint hum of electricity in the surrounding fencing whispering of danger.

The hand signals we used were subtle, but clear. A closed fist to signal stop; two fingers pointing to my eyes, then to a window, to indicate I’ll keep watch; a hand slicing across the throat for no go.

I scanned for any sign we’d been spotted. Luca was a step ahead, and he held up a fist, stopping me in my tracks, indicating one guard and vanishing around the corner. I heard a scuffle, and then, he was back, his fingers in an O. We separated, me to the wall around the yard where the back entrance was, Luca to the side, boosting himself over the wall and vanishing.

Cain’s voice was a constant in our ears, guiding us. “Four-fifty.”

I ducked under a window, pressed against the cold wall. The muffled sounds of the waking compound filtered through the glass, a reminder of the lives inside unaware of our presence.

“Four-thirty,” Cain urged, the seconds falling away like sand through an hourglass.

Our target was close now, the rooms where they held the child. I could picture her in there, unaware that her world was about to change again.

“Four.” Cain’s voice was steady, but the underlying tension was palpable, a static-filled voice that kept us focused as we reached the door, and with a skill borne of countless practice, with Cain backing us up on the tech side, we breached. The room beyond was just as we’d studied—two doors led from it, and in one of those was Annie. I wished we’d been able to get a better idea of which was which, but we took a door each.

“Three-thirty.”

I held up three fingers. Two. One.

We each went into a door, heading straight for the bed. I’d gotten the one with the young woman, Clara, which meant Luca had Annie. I backed away to the door, saw Luca tucking the small child into his arms, a strap across her as we’d planned, as she woke and whimpered. He placed a hand over her mouth, shushed her, and with one heated look, I told him to leave, that I’d be right behind him. We needed to take the nanny, too.

He gestured for me to leave, but I shook my head.

He knew me.

I was going after the nanny, and hell, I would try to retrieve August.

Frustration made him stop, but then, he spun and, holding the wriggling girl still, he left.

“Three, get out,” Cain urged in our ears. I spun to follow Luca but my foot snagged, pain radiating out from my thigh, yanking at a knife there, and spinning to face whatever had caused me to half fall into the doorjamb. Clara. Eyes wide, lips pulled back in a snarl, a gun in her hand. She lunged at me, startling ferocity in her actions. She was no trained fighter, but desperation lent her strength. She could be an innocent, and I dodged, trying to avoid harm, to both her and me. “We’re not going to hurt you,” I tried to explain, but the words were lost in the scuffle.

“You’re not taking my daughter! She’s mine!”

“Stay back,” I ordered.

“He got her for me!” she screamed.

I tried to cover her mouth, but she was a wildcat, all flailing limbs and raw panic. She clawed at my face, her screams piercing the early morning quiet. I caught her wrists, pinning them with one hand while my other went to her neck, applying enough pressure to send her into unconsciousness without causing lasting harm. “I’m sorry,” I murmured, even as her body went limp. I’d come back for her because the damage was done. The noise had broken the heavy hush, and I could hear the compound stirring to life. I watched Luca vanish over the wall as boots hit gravel, and I heard shouting.

Cain was in my ear, his voice tense. “You’ve been made, Ryder. Move!”

“August,” I snapped.

“No. That’s a no, Ryder.”

Fuck that. I was finding August. Then, we were getting the nanny out. I headed outside, keeping to the wall, hiding in the dark, trying to find a way into the main

building, watching as three men burst out of the door, heading left for the wall.

Run, Luca. Run.

Alone now, I pushed through the door that was swinging shut, gun high, moving deeper into the hostile territory. At least Luca had gotten away with Annie.

The corridors were a labyrinth, lit by soft light, but I headed down them with purpose, guided by instinct and training. Each corner turned, every door checked, was a step closer to finding August. I avoided the guards whenever possible, sticking to the shadows, a ghost shifting unseen through their ranks.

When avoidance wasn't an option, I resorted to swift, silent takedowns. Three crew members I encountered were subdued, rendered unconscious with precise strikes before being secured with zip ties.

My heart pounded, adrenaline pumping as I searched for any sign of where August might be. Every room I cleared, every empty room I checked, ratcheted up the tension. Time was of the essence, and with every passing minute, the risk of discovery grew.

Despite the odds, I couldn't allow doubt to creep in. If August was alive, then we needed to get him out of here. No man left behind.

At last, I opened the right door, finding August strung up in a dim, bare room, his wrists bound above his head, his body bearing the marks of brutal treatment. Blood seeped from multiple wounds, staining his clothes. Despite his obvious pain and exhaustion, he was snarling, struggling against the ropes with a fierce determination.

I rushed to his side, drawing my knife to cut him down. The ropes were thick, but my blade was sharp, and soon they fell away, releasing him. As August's weight shifted,

I caught him, holding him upright. His legs were unsteady, weakened from the ordeal and the loss of blood.

“Easy, August,” I said, steadying him. “I’ve got you.”

He leaned against me, his breathing ragged, then he straightened, and with the unmistakable fire of a soldier not yet defeated, he rallied. Even in this state, he was ready to go as he shook his hands.

“Annie?”

“Safe.”

“Why did you?—”

“I’m Sanctuary.”

As he processed the information, I could see a flicker of recognition, then a nod. Despite the pain, there was determination in his eyes. But we weren’t safe yet; we still needed to get out of there. He stumbled for a moment, then took a breath.

“I need to talk to the nanny,” I whispered and gestured the way to go. He frowned but followed. I wanted to ask her what she meant by how he’d got Annie for her, about why she thought Annie was her daughter. This was insane. Maybe this had been a kidnap to order?

We found Clara sprawled in the dirt. A bullet in her head, the gun at her side.

“Not me,” August confirmed, as if I’d asked.

“Suicide? Friendly fire?”

“Do I look like I fucking care?” August snapped.

I shook myself out of the shock of seeing the woman with half her head missing. “This way,” I ordered.

He followed me as we retraced my steps. We came upon two guards, and I went into a fighting stance, but August was there, too, tackling the nearest one, relieving him of his gun and placing two bullets in his head, then two more in the one I was trying to subdue. Blood splattered on me, but I didn’t have time to worry as we made it out into the night air.

I sprinted for the wall, he kept up with me, the muscles in my legs burning with the sudden exertion, my arms pumping for added momentum. Reaching the wall, I didn’t hesitate. With adrenaline fueling my movements, I clambered up, my fingers finding holds others might miss, my boots kicking for purchase on the rough surface.

“Keeping the electric off for egress,” Cain advised. “We’re fucked at covert anyway.”

At the top, I swung my legs over and held out a hand, helping August climb as he left a trail of blood on the gray blocks, what was left of his shirt ripping on barbed wire when he couldn’t heave himself enough. Then, we dropped to the other side, rolling to absorb the impact. I was up in an instant, the promise of freedom a heartbeat away, but I’d landed right in the middle of a group of men. That was when the cold, unmistakable click of a gun’s hammer being pulled back froze me in my tracks.

“Hands where I can see them.” A cold voice broke the silence. “And will someone just do what Amos asked and get that fucking kid,” the man snarled, leveling a gun at my head. His expression was steely, unflinching. The crew around him headed out, all apart from him and one other.

“I’ve got them,” August muttered next to me, “run.” In that split second, the air

crackled with tension, a silent standoff, and then, he pushed me to the ground, spun on his feet and with a crack that shattered the dawn's fragile peace, he took down the nearest crew member, got his gun, and shot him between the eyes.

Fuck.

The man dropped, and I felt the hard knot of shock twist in my gut as August double-tapped to take the other crew guy down as well.

"Which way did they take her?" August asked, already turning to leave.

I took a moment to get my bearings, then gestured west. There was no time to think, to question. only to run.

The compound erupted into a cacophony of shouts and gunfire, bullets thumping into the ground around us.

Cain's voice came through one last time, a curse that summed up the situation.

"Fuck," he spat out in my ear.

And I knew that we were out of time.

August and I ran, our feet pounding on the ground, our breaths sharp in the cool morning air. The space between the chaos of the compound and the promise of the forest blurred past us. We were close to cover—just a few more strides, a few more seconds to catch the guys going after Luca—and we flanked them.

Agonizing pain ripped into my back, stealing my breath, my legs buckling beneath me. The ground rushed up to meet me, but I never felt the impact.

August's face swam into view above me, his expression tight with concern. I could see his mouth moving, calling something, but the sound was distant, muffled by the ringing in my ears. His hands were on me, dragging me towards the shelter of nearby bushes.

The world dimmed at the edges, the vibrant colors of dawn fading to monochrome. I wanted to tell him to run, to leave me, to find Luca. But my lips wouldn't form the words, my voice lost in the void rapidly claiming me.

August gripped me and pulled me into the cover of shadows, and his smoky gray eyes were the last thing I saw before everything went dark.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I recognized the unmistakable grunt of pain and the thud of a body hitting the ground—sounds that were all too familiar. I spun around to see the guy who had been part of the rescue team crumpling to the dirt. “Shit,” I hissed under my breath, scanning for immediate threats.

My instincts screamed for me to keep moving, to find Annie and shield her with my life. But as I looked down at the fallen man, I couldn’t just leave him there. Not when he’d come to rescue Annie, and then me. I saw the telltale bulge of a vest under his clothes, a stroke of luck amidst the chaos, but he’d fallen badly, his face a mask of blood from a nasty gash, and he was out cold.

I crouched beside him, dragging him by the shoulders to a denser patch of underbrush. “Come on, buddy,” I muttered, trying to wake him. His pulse was there, strong under my fingers, a relief amidst the pounding of my own heart. I checked his gun, a standard-issue SIG Sauer, and patted him down for spare ammo. I was armed, but in this place, you could never have too much firepower.

He was heavy, and every second I spent here was a second when Diaz and his men could be closing in on Annie. But I couldn’t leave him. Not now. I felt for other injuries, making sure he wasn’t bleeding out. But as I worked, another part of my brain was ticking over the real problem: how to get us both out of this mess.

With a grunt, I heaved him up into a fireman’s carry. “You better thank me for this later,” I grumbled, the strain in my muscles a testament to the urgency and desperation of the situation.

I gave him a light shake, trying to rouse him, to get some help or at least a response.

But he was a dead weight in my arms, a liability.

That was when I heard the crunch of boots on gravel, the slight rustling of armed men walking in formation. My head snapped up, eyes darting to the source of the sound. Diaz was ahead, and he and his crew were staring right at me. The son of a bitch was grinning, flanked by five assholes, weapons ready. I stumble-dragged myself and the unconscious man down behind the thickest tree I could find, pressing my back against the trunk, gripping my gun with a familiar resolve. I had no illusions about what was coming next. It was a standoff, and I was outnumbered and outgunned.

But I had something worth fighting for, something they couldn't understand. I had a reason to survive this, to protect the stranger who had risked everything for Annie and to give whoever had taken her time to get away.

The air was thick with the scent of gunpowder and pine. I steadied myself, readying for the fight to come. For Annie getting away to a new life, for the guy at my feet, for all the things worth protecting in this godforsaken place.

Diaz stood there, his face twisted into a sarcastic sneer, the kind that made my blood boil. He clicked his tongue in a mocking tut. "Come on, man, get out here," he said, his voice dripping with glee.

I tightened my grip on my gun, hidden behind the tree, weighing my options. My mind raced, trying to find a way out of this mess, a way to keep both myself and the unconscious rescuer safe.

"Come on, Mitchell, or whatever your real name is, don't make this harder than it needs to be," Diaz continued, his tone almost conversational, as if we were discussing the weather instead of a life-or-death situation.

I knew arguing was useless. Diaz wouldn't care about any excuses or explanations.

He was someone who saw the world in black and white, and in his eyes, I'd crossed a line and betrayed the crews.

As I knelt beside the unconscious man, my mind was racing, piecing together a plan.

Diaz and his goons were expecting me to cave, to give up and come back with them. That was my in. I needed to play into their expectations, to make them think they had the upper hand until the very last second.

Hold them up. Delay.

I glanced at the guy's gun and spare ammo. I could use that. If I could create a distraction, maybe a small commotion or noise in the distance, it could give me enough time to use both guns and fight our way out. It was risky, sure, but sitting ducks we were not.

Then, there was the terrain. I knew this area better than they thought. A few yards to the west, the ground dipped into a shallow gully, filled with thick underbrush—perfect for cover. If I could drag the guy there, under the cover of the distraction, we could disappear before Diaz's men realized what was happening.

But what about the distraction? I had to get creative. I remembered the small mirror in my pocket, part of my standard kit. If I could angle it right, catch the first rays of the rising sun, it might flash bright enough to catch their attention. It was a long shot, but it was all I had.

I positioned the mirror, aiming the reflected light towards a spot far from us. Then, I waited for the right moment, the sun peeking above the horizon. I flicked the mirror, sending a brief, bright flash into the distance.

As expected, Diaz's men turned towards the light, their attention diverted. That was

my moment. I grabbed the unconscious man's gun and ammo, hoisted him up, and started dragging him further toward the gully.

My heart pounded as we stumbled into the underbrush, the sounds of Diaz's men shouting and scrambling echoing behind us. But we were already disappearing into the green, the foliage swallowing us whole.

It was a desperate plan, but it was working. I could get the man undercover at least, and for now, that was all that mattered.

Only, it wasn't enough—the stranger slowed me down, I wasn't fast enough, and all too fast I was surrounded. I let my burden down with as much care as I had time for, nudging his gun under his chest, then straightened.

“Diaz.”

“The fuck?” Diaz asked a hundred questions in one.

I took a slow, calculated step forward, my eyes locked on Diaz who stared at me.

“Toss your gun,” he ordered.

I threw my Sig to the ground at Diaz's feet. Part of me wanted him to flinch—I could take down the five men and him if I had a distraction. How many bullets were in the stranger's Glock 19? I hadn't heard shooting, so I guessed at the minimum fifteen. Still, I would have an even better advantage if Mr. Unconscious was awake. Which was when I saw a subtle movement, the hand hidden from everyone else twitched, two fingers held up. He could take two from his angle. That left four for me.

Easy.

“Knives as well,” Diaz added, and I unbuckled the knife at my side, and the one at my ankle. This idiot would never be able to comprehend that I didn’t need a weapon to take any of them out. “Move out. And don’t even think about trying anything funny.”

I snorted a laugh. “Gangster,” I chuckled.

He stiffened and took a step closer. “Fuck you, Mitchell.”

I tipped my chin. “Fuck you first.” My mind was already racing through a dozen different plans. Then, I rolled my eyes, as if I didn’t care about Diaz at all, and he bristled as I gestured at the guy on the ground. He hesitated, which was a good sign.

One of his crew pointed at him. “You shouldn’t leave him alive, boss. Right?”

“Yeah, sure,” he gestured to a guard, “weapons on Mitchell, I’ll do it.”

Something like excitement lit up Diaz’s eyes, and he took one of my knives and turned it in his hand, taking that fatal move toward the stranger, and bending.

Instinct took over. I twisted under Diaz’s arm, using his momentum against him, and grabbed his wrist, forcing the knife towards his throat. There was a brief moment of resistance, a struggle for power before the knife found its mark, piercing his throat and sideways to sever the artery. Diaz gagged, his eyes wide with shock, and then, he crumpled to the ground, blood spurting over me.

I didn’t have time to pause. Three of Diaz’s foot soldiers were already on me, their guns waving, and way too close as I met them head-on. The first came at me with a wild swing. I ducked, feeling the air whoosh above my head, and drove my fist into his midsection. He doubled over, and I finished him with an elbow to the back of his head.

The second was more cautious, circling me, searching for an opening. I didn't give him one. I feinted left, then struck right, catching him off guard. A quick jab to the throat left him gasping for air, and a solid punch to the temple sent him sprawling.

I grabbed his gun, put a bullet in his head, rolled to shoot the one already down, and the third came at me from behind, but I sensed him before I saw him. I spun, grabbing his arm, and used his forward motion to throw him over my shoulder. He hit the ground hard and didn't get up after a bullet through his temple.

Panting, I turned to face the others, ready for more. But there was no need. They lay on the ground, motionless, and the stranger was already on his feet, wiping a knife on the grass. He stared up at me, a grim set to his jaw, and nodded.

I nodded, acknowledging the help. I didn't know who he was, but he'd helped get Annie away, and he was an ally, and that was enough. Then, for good measure, I shot each of the crew he'd rendered unconscious. If he thought that was overkill, he didn't say.

Together, we scanned the area, alert for any more threats. But it was over. Diaz and his men were down.

I glanced at the stranger. "Shit," I muttered. My cover was blown. Was Annie safe? "Annie?" I asked again.

He pressed a hand to his ear, then nodded. "Exfil left, package on board. Next exfil, ten out," he confirmed and extended a hand, which I took. His grip was firm, and when he released the hold, he nodded. "Ryder. Ranger."

"August. SEAL."

We stared at each other, like knowing like, as he wiped blood from around his eye. A

cut that ran from his temple to past his nose had to hurt like a bitch, but it didn't seem to faze him as he rolled his neck and stretched out his arms. "And now?" he asked after a moment.

Commonsense dictated we went the way we were heading—exfil was only ten out, and I knew the woods, but I wasn't thinking about getting away. Annie was safe.

She didn't need me.

And I needed to take this nest down.

Headcount this morning was sixteen, that included Amos and Clara, Annie's companion, nanny, whatever. Of course, I didn't know who was in the top rooms, he or she could have their own private army for all I knew, but I was observant, and I'd seen no sign of forces beyond my capability. Six dead here, at least five when they first tried to take me down, that didn't mean many were left here.

"She'll be safe? She doesn't have any family to take her. James's parents wanted nothing to do with him, or her. So, you'll find someone?" I asked, maybe a little desperately.

He tensed at my words, but he knew I was staying right here—understood I needed to make things right.

"You're going back." It wasn't a question.

Of course I was going back. If I could take this cartel down, find the top dog, finish it, then James's death would mean something. It was the ultimate revenge.

The absolute ending of what I'd seen and done.

“I’m going back.”

“Fuck—”

I waited. This wasn’t on him, and he was thoughtful, his dark gaze assessing me as he smoothed away more blood trickling down from his temple. He was a good-looking hunk of military bad ass, blood, muscles, dead focused, and throwing a feral smile at me. He checked the bullets in the chamber of his gun and gave his face one final wipe.

“You lead,” he said, giving up control to me given I knew the terrain and had knowledge of at least some of the people inside. “I’m coming with you.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Back at the compound, the adrenaline still pumping through my veins, I followed August's lead. The compound, once a hub of illicit activities, now looked like a ghost town in the wake of the chaos we'd unleashed.

"Cargo is clear and safe. Reinforcements are on the way." Cain's voice was firm, insistent as we navigated through the maze of buildings. "Tell me you can hear this."

I wished I could tell him. Hell, I was lucky the ear piece hadn't dislodged when my face had hit the dirt. August was alert, constantly scanning, same as me.

"Jesus," Cain continued. "I'm assuming you can hear me. Okay, no sign of anyone leaving, so... guessing everyone is holed up. Blueprints—Simon, pass me the... shit... okay, yeah... there's a panic room, top floor of the main building."

I relayed the important information. "Annie's safe. No one has vacated or run. Also, panic room, top floor, main building."

"That's where he'll be," he murmured.

"Who?" I asked.

"The asshole at the top of this cartel. He's here."

"You know that for sure?" I glanced at him.

"Instinct." He didn't even pause, not even a hint of hesitation in his gray eyes.

A panic room made sense. These guys always had an escape plan, a last resort when things went south, and if there was no sign of anyone leaving... "Let's move," I said, my voice steady despite the pounding of my heart. The thought that I could get everyone and shut this down, was a fire in my gut.

We approached the main building, aware that every corner could be an ambush, every shadow a potential threat. The silence was eerie. Where were the remaining crew members?

Protecting the head of this organization?

We moved in formation to the base of the stairs, removing two guards who were staring outside and not watching their backs. They realized we were there too late, but their cries were muffled as we took them down. I reached into a pocket for zip ties, but August was there, killing them on the spot, a knife to each throat. No mercy given.

We did the same on the next floor, three this time, and we shared taking down goon number three, but it was August who finished the job even though all three were unconscious.

He was a killing machine, and I couldn't even argue with him because he knew them, and I didn't. Back at Sanctuary, they'd worried about his humanity, and fuck if I could see much humanity in him right now.

As we made our way to the top floor, every step was measured, calculated. We were a team functioning with a singular purpose as we entered a large room, a bank of computers and desks, not unlike the office back at Sanctuary Chicago.

As soon as we entered the room, it was clear we'd found the remaining crew, armed and ready, with their weapons trained on us. But it was the sixth man, thin and

quivering, who caught my attention. His weapon wobbled in his unsteady hands; his eyes wide with fear. He was no soldier; he was terrified, out of his depth.

“Don’t shoot!” he cried. Before I could process further, the thin man’s weapon clattered to the floor. He crouched, covering his ears, his whole body shaking. August and I didn’t hesitate with the rest. We didn’t have the luxury of a standoff.

In one fluid motion, I dropped to a crouch, and the room erupted into chaos. The first armed man didn’t have time to register surprise before I squeezed the trigger, the bullet hitting him center mass. He fell backward, his weapon clattering to the floor.

August crouched, then took down the second man with the precision of a seasoned warrior.

I pivoted, my sights settling on the third assailant. He was quicker, firing off a shot that whizzed past my ear. Adrenaline surged, and I returned fire, two shots that hit their mark, sending him sprawling to the ground.

The fourth and fifth men were recovering from their initial shock, trying for cover, firing wide. But August and I were a step ahead. My next bullet caught the fourth man in the shoulder, spinning him around. At the same time, August’s shot took down the fifth, a clean hit to the center mass, and then, he finished off my guy with a kill shot.

In mere seconds, the room fell silent, the only sound the ragged breathing of the small, thin man still crouched on the floor, his hands over his ears.

August and I exchanged a quick glance. The threat was neutralized, but we couldn’t lower our guard, not yet. With our weapons still raised, we cleared the rest of the room, alert for more danger.

“Amos,” August said under his breath.

But there was none. We were alone with the cowering man—Amos—the aftermath of our swift action surrounding us. It was over, at least for now. As I holstered my weapon, August stepped towards Amos, his voice carrying a command that brooked no argument. “Stand up, Amos,” he ordered as he kicked away the fallen weapon. It skittered under a table, and the man uncurled himself, rising, but avoiding August’s gaze, hands above his head.

“Fuck. Mitchell. Don’t shoot me; please don’t kill me. I just do what I’m told.”

August thumbed at him. “Amos, comm, mouthpiece of whoever is in the panic room, runs all the ops, human trafficking, drugs, guns. Knows all the shit here.” August confirmed to me in a dead tone. He pressed a gun under the man’s chin, tilting it, so he could look him in the eyes. “Issuing contracts on the lives of innocents.” Just as much evil in that man, then, as in any others in the cartel.

“He could be useful to keep for intel,” I murmured.

Amos grabbed onto that big time. “Yes! Yes! I can be useful. I’ll tell you everything.”

“After you get us into the panic room,” August snapped.

Amos, was a bundle of nerves, his voice only a whisper as he stammered, “I-I can’t... He’ll kill me.” His eyes were wide, haunted by a terror that spoke volumes of the person behind the panic room door. “I’ll go; you can take me, but please don’t make me—” August pressed the gun harder, and the thin man was almost up on his toes.

“Open the fucking room.”

But Amos shook his head, lost in his fear. “You don’t understand. He’s not like the others. He’s evil. There’s nothing good left in him. Clara saw that. She wanted the girl, and she made it worse. He’ll kill me.” I wasn’t sure what in hell he was talking about, but then, Amos stopped, leaving an ominous silence.

I exchanged a glance with August. We both understood the stakes, the delicate balance of fear and necessity that we were using—good cop, bad cop. My approach softened, my voice becoming more reassuring. “Listen, Amos,” I said. “We can work out a deal for you, but you have to help us.”

There was a moment where everything seemed to hang in the balance, when Amos’s decision was a thread that could unravel at any moment. Then, he nodded. “Okay,” he whispered, a resignation in his voice that was almost pitiful. “Okay, I’ll do it. But please, you have to protect me. Go in there and kill him. Take him out.”

As we prepared to confront whatever lay behind the panic room door, I felt a surge of adrenaline. This was it. The culmination of everything August had worked for, fought for—the reason James had died, why Annie had been taken—was beyond that door. The person at the center of all the pain and suffering. The door to the panic room loomed before us, a formidable barrier between us and the architect of all this madness.

August inclined his head. I was taking the rear, and I did one final check on ammunition. I assumed whoever was in there could see us, and I scooped up a semi in my left hand. If they came out shooting, they weren’t getting past me. Solid and fixed, I watched August grab Amos by the scruff of his neck, near dragging him to the door. Amos floundered, pulled August off-balance and, for a second time, stopped. Was this a ploy? I aimed my weapon at Amos, but he wasn’t trying anything, he was unable to stand. August thrust him at the wall, Amos letting out a winded noise as he used his handprint to open a master switch.

August stilled his hand and glanced back at me.

I've got this.

"Do it," August demanded.

Amos whimpered, bashing at numbers on the keypad, a red light indicating an error. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he shouted and cleared the numbers as August growled at him. "You're making me nervous!"

August shoved him again, but this time, Amos keyed numbers in with care. There was a hiss of something hydraulic, and the wall began to move. Amos squeaked, a fearful terrified sound, then fainted dead away, smacking his face on the floor, sprawled out, almost dragging August down with him. August released his hold, going to a crouch—him low, me high—and we waited as the door opened and slid into a recess.

It was dark beyond, and no one came out firing.

"Come out, and we won't kill you," August demanded, but there was nothing.

We both listened for any breath, but there was a sense of nothing in there. Silence. August stepped over Amos, and peeked cautiously around the corner, indicating no sign of anyone, then, that he was going in. I took point, waited at the side, ready to shoot anyone that came diving out, and August, chin tipped, eyes focused, stepped inside. He kept to the wall of the space, which I couldn't make out properly as it was complete darkness against the bright light of the office space.

"Clear," he announced in the gloom. Empty.

I took a step forward, peering into the room as if my gaze could somehow unveil new

secrets or answers. “Fuck,” I muttered under my breath, frustration and tension knotting together inside me.

A bullet hit me from behind, jarring my balance and sending a shockwave through my body. I staggered forward, disoriented for a moment, my knee bending under me, the sharp pain of something snapping made me cry out. Then, the unmistakable sound of two more gunshots burst through the air. I twisted instinctively as I fell, bringing up my gun and firing wildly, missing anything and everyone as I slumped to the ground, my breath gone.

Amos grinned, no longer the cowering, terrified figure we had confronted moments ago. Instead, he stood tall, imposing, his entire demeanor transformed into one of confidence and control. The assault rifle in his hand was steady, trained on me.

For a split second, I froze, my mind grappling with the sudden shift. The impact of the bullet in my back had been absorbed by my vest, saving me from a fatal wound, but the force of the shots had me reeling, and the pain radiating from my leg meant it was a sure bet I wouldn’t be walking out of here. Amos hadn’t aimed to kill; this was a message, a warning.

But then, with a chilling calm, Amos slammed his hand on the wall next to him and the door began to close.

“Bye, you crazy kids,” he said, and in those few, stretched seconds, a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. Where was August? What was our next move? Why didn’t he fire? Could I reach my own weapon in time?

The door slammed shut even as I threw myself at it, scrabbling at the metal, not finding a purchase.

“August! Help me get us out of here!” I shouted, but there was nothing.

No sound at all.

Disoriented and still grappling with the sudden betrayal from Amos, I turned around, my vision blurry and unsteady. The room was plunged into an unsettling darkness, the kind that plays tricks on your eyes and mind. I fumbled for the small torch I always carried, my fingers wrapping around it with a sense of urgency.

A narrow beam of light cut through the darkness, casting eerie shadows dancing along the walls. My heart pounded, a rapid beat that seemed to echo in the quiet of the room. I swept the torch around, the light trembling with the unsteadiness of my hand, and my leg throbbing.

The room appeared empty, nothing. But it was the glint of something in the corner that caught my eye. I steadied the beam, and my breath hitched in my throat.

August. Crumpled in a heap, his body still. The pool of blood surrounding him seemed to grow as I watched, a darkness across the concrete floor. My mind reeled, a mix of fear, anger, and disbelief swirling together.

“August!” I called out, my voice sounding hollow in the enclosed space. There was no response, just the oppressive silence that seemed to thicken with each passing second.

My movements frantic, the torchlight bobbing wildly, I hobbled to him and went to one knee, my other one too fucked to bend, and placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking him roughly. “August, come on, man. Stay with me,” I urged, but he was unresponsive, his body limp under my touch.

I fumbled for his pulse, my fingers pressing against his neck, searching for any sign of life, relief flooding me when I felt a faint flutter strengthening under my touch. The torch slipped from my grasp, clattering to the floor, its light casting a haunting

illumination over the scene.

August was down.

We were locked in a panic room.

We'd been played.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Pain exploded in my gut, hot and searing, and for a moment, the world spun out of control as I blinked my eyes open. Darkness closed around me, but a bobbing torch showed me glimpses of just how fucked we were. The door was shut, locking us in, the walls were blank. Nothing. Blood seeped through my clothes, fire burned in my belly, and I shoved my hands over the wound, pressing so hard I yelled out in pain. Ryder was beside me, his hands hovering, unsure where to touch without causing more pain. His gaze was fixed on the wound, his face illuminated by the small narrow beam of light, the grim reality of the situation written all over his face. Then, he was supporting me, holding me up, keeping me from collapsing.

“Talk to me, Navy. How bad is it?” His voice was tense, his gaze scanning me, assessing the situation, attempting to lift my hands.

Ryder’s focus was laser-sharp. “We need to stop this bleeding, Navy,” he instructed, tearing off his shirt and bunching it against the wound. “Push hard.”

I pressed the fabric against the wound, the pain incredible. Each touch was like a jolt of fire, but I knew it was vital to stem the flow of blood. I had to do this.

“Harder,” he snapped, his hand covered mine to ensure I applied enough pressure.

“Fuck you, Army!” I yelled.

“Fuck you back, Navy,” he yelled at me.

I bristled and snapped like a trapped dog, and god, I tried to move—anything to get his hand off me, but he wasn’t leaving me alone. He used his other hand to rummage

through his camo pockets and pulled out his IFAK. The individual first aid kit might have something, but not enough to reverse this damage. He shoved something into my mouth, a nylon knife sheath. “Bite down.”

Lying there, the pain engulfing me, I could feel Ryder’s hands on me, frantic, but skilled, as he tried to stem the flow of blood. His touch was firm, packing the wound. I wanted to tell him it was no use, that a gut shot was a slow, inevitable death, and wasn’t something you just patched up, especially not in a place like this, but my voice was lost amidst the waves of pain.

“Stay with me, August.” Ryder’s voice was a distant anchor in the haze clouding my mind. I felt him ease me to the floor, his movements careful, deliberate. Heard him cursing, his weight heavy—was he injured as well?

The coldness of the floor seeped through my clothes, an icy contrast to the burning agony in my abdomen. I wanted to fight, to cling to consciousness, but it was like trying to hold onto smoke. Everything was slipping away, the edges of my world blurring and fading.

“Hemostatic dressing,” he said, as I screamed around the sheath. He covered my mouth, pushed me down, and I fought and scrabbled, and then—thank fuck—I blacked out.

When I came back, he was talking, my head cradled in his lap.

“Hey, you’re back,” Ryder repeated, his tone almost light, as if it wasn’t him that shook me awake. “You’re tough, Navy; you frogs can handle this shit in your sleep. Come on. Stay with me. Help’s on the way. We just need to keep the bleeding under control until we can get you back.”

His reassurance was a small comfort, but in that dimly lit confined space, his

presence was the one thing keeping me anchored to reality. The pain was a constant companion, but so was Ryder. I tried to grip his hand, both of us slippery with blood.

“Annie,” I managed.

“She’s okay. Luca got her away.”

“He left... left you...”

“What? You mean Luca left me? Oh yeah, that was absolutely the plan; that’s how it goes. Annie was our priority. One of us was always staying behind to cover the six. That was always going to be the one who didn’t have Annie.”

Pain coursed through me with unrelenting ferocity, like acid dripping through every vein, and blood loss was making it difficult to stay focused, only there was one thing that remained clear amidst the haze of agony: Annie.

Make sure she’s safe.

With each labored breath, I fought against the encroaching darkness, the urge to succumb to the pain and let go. Ryder was there, his presence a steady force in the chaos, and I needed him to live.

“Are you shot?” I managed.

“Fucked knee, dislocated shoulder, avoided all the bullets actually leaving holes in me,” he listed.

“You’ll live,” I rasped, my voice a whisper, strained with agony, each word punctuated by a sharp stab of fire. “You have to... get... Annie... to her new family. Promise me.”

Ryder leaned in closer, ensuring he caught every word I said, but his reaction was immediate and intense, his voice laced with a blend of anger and determination. “Listen to me,” he snapped back, his eyes burning with resolve. “You’re not giving up, Navy. You’re getting out of here.”

I could see the fierce commitment in his expression, refusing to accept the resignation in my voice. Despite my overwhelming pain and fading strength, Ryder’s words ignited a flicker of fight within me. Then, he shook me a little, harder, and the blackness around me eased for a moment.

“Make sure... Annie... I’m dying...”

“Fuck. You’re not dying!” He leaned closer, his grip on my arm firm. “You hear me? You’re a fighter, Navy. You’ve made it this far, and you’re not done yet.”

His words cut through the fog of pain and despair, reaching the soldier still alive within me. Ryder was so wrong. I couldn’t surrender to death, but it would come for me soon.

“Promise me!” I cursed my failing voice and closed my eyes, my head spinning.

“I’m promising nothing, you hear me. We’re going home.”

He didn’t see; he couldn’t understand. I’d killed because I could. I’d sold my soul to the devil for revenge. “Not going... home,” I managed to force out.

“Stay awake, feel the pain, tell me where it hurts, Navy.”

I could barely manage a response, pain clouding my thoughts, but I tried to offer him something, anything to go on. “Gut. It’s... bad,” I gasped out, the effort to speak sending a fresh wave of agony through me.

“Keep talking. I’m gonna check the room. I wanna hear you talking. You got me, Navy?”

“I... I can’t...”

He shifted away from me, propped my head against something, his jacket? I could hear Ryder, clumsy, loud, his hands patting along the walls, searching for any sign of a hidden exit or a weakness we could exploit. I listened to him talk.

“Nothing. Why build a panic room without a light, and no food, or water, or a way to contact the outside world. You with me, Navy? Come on... talk to me. Tell me.”

I tried to talk, blood in my mouth tasting like iron—was I bleeding there? Was it a scent more than a taste? Why was there a room with nothing in it?

“Not... panic...” I managed.

He went to a crouch next to me. “Yeah, I get the same feeling. Not a panic room, a lockup, a safety for that Amos fucker.” He pressed on the packing and hissed, and my eyesight blurred. “Bleeding has slowed; shit’s doing its stuff.”

“Too... late...” I forced.

He sat back down to cradle my head. “Talk to me.” He shook me hard, and I cursed him. “Come on! Why the SEALs, Navy? You one of these kids who liked paddling pools?”

I wanted to tell him to stop. I didn’t want to talk or listen to his shit. I wanted to die.

Why wouldn’t he let me die? I could just close my eyes and?—

“Water, am I right? Okay then,” he continued, as if we were having a reasonable discussion over coffee and donuts. “So here we are, Navy and Army, in a box, a messed-up situation, and yet again, Army is on top.”

I clenched my fist, wanted to thump him, weak as a newborn, I had to lie there.

“That fucker knew what he was doing when he pulled the trigger,” he rambled. “Don’t you think? Gut shots are slow killers, gives you time to contemplate dying. What a fucking asshole.” He shook me. “Come on, Navy, answer me. He knew, right?”

“Mmph.”

“He could have gone for a clean shot, right between the eyes, an instant end. But he knew the pain it would cause, and he relished in it. I saw his face, he celebrated shooting you, loved it, reveled in your pain and you dying. So, you gonna lie here and let him win?”

“No... fuck, no,” I managed to gasp out, each word punctuated by a jolt of pain. The darkness in my vision was oppressive, making every breath a struggle.

Ryder’s voice was a low rumble in the dark. “Then pull yourself the fuck together, Navy, because you need to finish this. We need to finish this. Fucker locked me in a room, and I’ll get out, and then, gut him like a fish. You with me, Navy?”

Yes, I wanted that. I wanted to know why he’d kept Annie, why he’d taken James from me, how had I not seen through him, why hadn’t I seen the small man was pulling the strings? Was I that committed to getting Annie out that I hadn’t seen Amos as a danger?

“Navy? Talk to me.”

I tried to move, to help in any way I could, but the white-hot blaze of agony consumed all other thoughts. I reached out for something to hold, something to pull myself up, and he gripped my hand tight, held it so I might never be able to let go. The room was a tomb, a dark, enclosed space that threatened to be our end. But I wasn't ready to give up, not yet. There had to be a way out, a chance for escape.

In my fading consciousness, thoughts of Annie swirled. James's sweet girl, whose life had been turned upside down, whose innocence had been stolen. I'd fought so hard to bring the whole thing down, wanting revenge, wanting to free her.

Finally, I'd found her.

And now, as I was dying, the bitter realization was made real—it was best I was gone. Annie wouldn't have a broken, murdering ghost of a man haunting her steps. A desperate urgency surged within me—one last thing I had to say.

"Find... where they... " I coughed, and there was blood again. "... took Annie," I managed to gasp out, each word a battle against the pain that raged through my body.

"Stop talking," Ryder snapped, pressing down on my belly, the pain so sharp I think I screamed.

"No... tell her... James loved her." Saying it was excruciating, not only because of the physical agony, but because of the weight of those words, the finality they carried.

"You can tell her yourself. Help's on the way. You hear me?"

"S'okay," I slurred. "Annie's okay... tell her."

"Shut your mouth," Ryder snarled, then cursed and thumped the wall.

No. Please. It was important, more than anything, that Annie knew about her dad.

The effort of speaking was monumental, leaving me drained and hollow. I tried to focus, to cling to the fading edges of life, but each breath was a battle, each minute a war I was losing. In the dim light of the room, with the cold grip of death inching closer, I found a twisted comfort that I wasn't dying alone, and I regretted it.

As darkness edged my vision, I heard someone in the distance, calling my name, telling me to fight and stay with him. It sounded like Ryder, but it was so far away, a lifeline just out of reach. I wanted to respond, to tell him to stop. But the words wouldn't come, my voice lost in the void that was claiming me.

So, I lay there, in the cold embrace of the floor, and I could feel the last tendrils of consciousness slipping away, and my grip on Ryder's hand weakening. I'd done what I could, fought as hard as I could. Now, it was up to Ryder to tell her how much James had loved her.

It had to be enough.

Something thumped on the door, loud clanging.

"They're here, Navy. We're gonna be okay."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Outside August's room at Kingscliff, where he lay unconscious, I leaned against the wall lost in thought. When Cain had broken into the program holding us inside, we'd both been taken to local critical care, but Sanctuary had soon transported us to the Maine safe house; the one the new Shadow Team called home. The weight of everything that had happened pushed me down, a mix of relief and unresolved tension and pain, and I rearranged the crutch that was all that was keeping me up.

"Hey, Ryder," a familiar voice called—Josh, Ethan's boyfriend, and the reason our team had become involved with Sanctuary—trailing behind a small girl. It took me a moment to register—this was Annie, the girl from the compound, and this was the first time I'd met her since the helo had landed yesterday. I straightened, watching them approach, wobbling on my crutch, but trying not to wince in pain.

Annie had the look of her dad, James Lerner, with fluffy blonde hair and the biggest blue eyes. She moved with a caution and quiet that seemed wrong, scanning the surroundings with an intensity that spoke of things no four-year-old should understand. Josh was a teacher here, in charge of admin for all the kids, and right now, he was in charge of one small and very confused girl.

As they drew nearer, I heard her small voice, "Is Clara here?" Her words were soft, almost hesitant. Clara? Shit. All I could think of was Clara's lifeless body sprawled in the dirt. Amos had said the man in charge had killed her—well that was him, so it must have been Amos who'd shot her? Why would he have done that? Was it anger at losing Annie? Hell, was it my fault? Maybe I should have calmed Clara down, told her to run while she had the chance? Should I say something inane, like Clara was in heaven, or... Josh met my gaze, and I shook my head.

He knelt beside her, answering in a gentle tone. “How about we go bake some cookies?”

“I want Mr. Amos,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “Where’s Clara and Mr. Amos?”

My heart broke for her, and Josh was fighting back tears.

“How about those cookies, and we can talk to Lizzie.”

“I don’t like Lizzie!” Annie snapped, and stomped, and cried some more.

I stood there helpless. Dr. Lizzie Malone, an experienced counselor, was one of the team caring for the kids who passed through here, victims of trafficking, and I couldn’t help but think she had her work cut out with Annie. Too much time spent with Amos in that compound.

“No questions!” She put her hands over her ears, rocking on her feet, and then, she darted away, and I exchanged a quick glance with Josh, who jogged after her.

I watched them leave, a mix of emotions swirling within me. She’d been through more than most could fathom, yet she was healthy and didn’t seem traumatized—it seemed like what was here and now was hurting her more. There was a temper in her, and confidence that no one would stop her from what she wanted to do, but she wanted Clara and Amos. Wasn’t that a good thing because it implied she hadn’t been hurt at the compound? She called Amos by name, and I got the sense there was affection for him.

For the man who’d gut-shot August and left us to die.

Would Annie remember August? He’d lived with James and Annie for six months

undercover. And here she was, in the midst of strangers, searching for a familiar face in a world turned upside down, and finding nothing.

“Josh says she doesn’t know August, says she doesn’t have a daddy at all,” Ethan murmured.

I stiffened—I hadn’t heard him walk up behind me, so lost in the story of one small child and her wrecked world.

“Cap,” I acknowledged, and tried to straighten as best I could with the whole crutches thing. He wasn’t my captain anymore, not now that we were civilians, but he’d earned that honorific, and I would never call him anything else.

“How’s our patient doing?”

I glanced at the closed door. “They’re worried about infection, peritonitis. Doc’s in with him now, so I stepped out.” He’d want to know why I was hanging around August’s room, and maybe, he’d suggest I should leave the man alone, and I stiffened. He threw me a concerned glance... here it comes.

Only, he didn’t say a thing about why I was hanging around or sitting by Navy’s bed. Instead, he leaned against the opposite wall and nodded.

“Stay with him, yeah? He’ll need to see a friendly face when he wakes up.”

“Not sure he’ll see it that way, pretty sure me packing his wound and making him scream gets me on his shit list.”

Ethan huffed a laugh, then sobered. “Can we talk?”

I glanced left and right at the empty corridor, not wanting to move from the spot, but

unsure why I felt so torn by the thought of leaving August when he was so close to waking.

“We can talk here,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “You feeling responsible for him?” he asked, but he wasn’t accusing me of anything, it was an observation.

At first, I’d sat by August’s side—a sense of duty and an unspoken bond kept me rooted to that chair. We might not have known each other outside this single combat situation, but in those intense moments, in the midst of life and death decisions, we’d worked as a team, connected in a fighting sense, that meant he was more than a fellow soldier—sailor, whatever—I was his lifeline.

August and I might have been strangers before, but it didn’t feel right to walk away. Keeping him alive, hearing his desperate need for me to tell Annie that she’d been loved, had changed something in me. Now, watching him fight for his life in a sterile hospital bed, I felt a responsibility for him. He was a tough guy, a SEAL, but even the toughest need someone in their corner when they’re down. And right now, August was down.

So, did I feel responsible? Yeah I did.

“He was my team,” I said in my defense. “And teams look out for each other, in and out of combat, Cap,” I began.

He held up a hand. “I didn’t mean anything by it.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I have a proposition for you.”

“You do?”

“Sanctuary took you, put you on this mission, but I want you with me as soon as you’re healed, in the Shadow Team, as my second.”

“Of course. And Luca?”

“He already said yes,” Ethan said, and extended a fist, which I bumped.

“The team’s back again,” I said.

Ethan grinned. “Plus a few extras—couple of US Special Ops, another SEAL—and yeah, you’ll meet them all soon.” Then he cracked his knuckles. “For now, though, I have a situation in Seattle we’re working, so I’m out of here.”

I straightened. “You want me to help?—”

“Not you, not this time; torn ligaments in your knee, remember?” He must have seen me tense. “Also, I need your eyes on August. I need any intel he can give us, and you know how slippery these damn SEALs can get. He doesn’t leave this building without talking to Shadow Team first.”

“Got it, Cap.”

He grasped my shoulder, squeezed it, then left, probably heading to the complex where he was setting up an impressive control center in an old swimming pool. He’d called it Swim Central once, a play on its origins I assume, and I couldn’t believe they were still running ops out of there, but seemed like they were?

Sanctuary funded this, and they were a mystery to me.

The door opened and Doc Jen came out, long white hair tied back in a ponytail. Dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt, Jen was our resident medical expert apparently,

and a kick-ass surgeon who Sanctuary had called in to be part of the team that had saved August's life.

Yep, Sanctuary really had deep pockets.

"You can go in," she said, staring at a tablet and making a note. "He's still sleeping, press the button when he wakes up."

"Yes, ma'am."

She glanced up from her tablet, her blue eyes twinkling. "That 'ma'am' you have going on is very growly," she said, smiled, then headed down the same corridor Ethan had taken, and I was just happy she didn't see me blush.

I headed back into the room and took a moment to lean against the door, August was so small and still in the bed.

The room had all the trappings of a hospital room, with the steady beeps of the monitors and the occasional hum of medical equipment providing a constant backdrop. Wires snaked from the machines to where August lay, evidence of how serious his condition was.

Only beyond the immediate vicinity of his bed, the room transformed from hospital room to something else. There was a secondary area resembling a small, well-equipped apartment. It had a three-cupboard kitchen, complete with a microwave and a kickass coffee machine, a refrigerator filled with bottled water plus some disgusting protein drinks, not to mention a cupboard full of healthy snacks. There was also a simple cot and a plush sofa, inviting enough for a brief respite or a night's sleep, even if I did stay next to the bed on a chair and slept the night there.

I'd slept in worse situations.

One of the room's most striking features was the large windows framing a breathtaking view of the ocean and small open vents that let in the fresh, salty breeze. The blinds were drawn to shield the room from the sun, yet they were tilted, ensuring the magnificent view remained unobstructed. The vast expanse of gray stretched to the horizon, its surface shimmering under the sunlight, and I bet anything that Navy would love that when he opened his eyes.

Without the hospital bed and the array of medical paraphernalia, the room could pass for a luxurious seafront apartment, and it wasn't that much smaller than the place I rented in a shared house. Hell, the coffee machine was definitely better. Talking of which, I made use of it, then headed back to the chair next to the bed—angling it for the view and for watching August—sipped the Colombian brew and carried on with what I'd been doing when the doc had evicted me from the room.

Talking to the man in case that helped him wake up.

“Where were we? I'd done the ass over face on my bike thing... so... okay, I was thirteen, and there was this boy, Nathan; he was a year older than me, and that was when I knew I was gay. In hindsight, finding him playing tonsil hockey with my sister might have clued me in that he wasn't at all gay in any goddamn way, but I did all this reading up on it, and I convinced myself that he could be bi. So, I went about throwing myself into his life at every given moment. Ryder persistent West—that's me. So, he and I did this...”

I talked for an hour or so, catching August up on my life, for something to talk about. Then, I called up the first Jack Reacher book on my phone and started to read out loud, chuckling at some of the shit the big man got up to, and wondering at some of the most improbable bits.

“There again,” I explained. “Who am I to judge Reacher, when we have the shadowy Shadow Team and the even shadowier—is that even a word—Sanctuary backing that,

so maybe we can blur the lines. What do you think? Not you maybe, I don't know what you're up to next, but Cap asked me to join that Shadow Team, and I jumped at it." I laughed. "I get bored easily, and hell, a soldier's not a fat lot of good without wars to fight. Am I right?"

The beeps changed, becoming rapid, but he was still unconscious, and I placed the book down and leaned over him, grasping his hand.

When it came down to it, nightmares were probably chasing this unnatural sleep and maybe knowing there was someone who got it, might make things settle. I shouldn't have mentioned war. Also, maybe I should find a different book to read aloud?

I watched the monitor, waited until the beeps smoothed out, until his breathing settled, and I shuffled the chair closer without letting go of him.

"I got you, Navy. I got you."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Emerging from a dense fog of unconsciousness, I became aware of my surroundings with each painful breath. Light pushed against my eyelids, and the scent of the ocean, salty and fresh, filled my nostrils. Everything around me seemed to be bathed in white, an ethereal haze that made it hard to focus.

The world rushed in with an intensity that felt overwhelming, and I squinted, trying to shield my eyes from the assault, but it was relentless. Pain, sharp and unyielding, coursed through my body, and I tried to shift, but the pain intensified, anchoring me in place. Something was holding my hand down, and I tensed and yanked until it slipped free.

Voices drifted towards me, muffled at first, but becoming clearer. I reached for my gun, the ingrained reflex of a man who had lived too long in the shadows. But my hand found nothing, my weapon gone.

“Easy, Navy,” a voice said, calm and steady.

I managed to crack open my eyes, squinting against the harsh light. A figure loomed over me, features blurred. “Wha’ppen?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, cracked and dry from disuse.

Someone slipped into my field of vision, offering a small piece of ice. The coolness a small respite from the dryness.

As the ice melted, I closed my eyes again, the effort of staying awake too much. My mind was a whirlpool of questions and confusion, but I was too exhausted, too worn down to pursue them. The weight was back on my hand—fingers, I thought, lacing

with mine, holding me tight.

James?

Was James here? Had I dreamed he died? He'd hate me for all the terrors I'd inflicted in his name. Tears burned, but for now, all I could do was succumb to the darkness, letting it pull me back into its embrace.

* * *

The next time consciousness tugged at me, the sensation was different—a gentle warmth, like being cradled in cotton smelling of the sea. My senses were coming back to life, each one bringing a piece of my environment into sharper focus. The scent of the ocean was stronger now, mingled with the crisp, sterile smells of medical supplies, and something else... citrus maybe. I was alive, that much was clear, but how I'd gotten here was shrouded in fog.

I tried to piece together the events leading to this moment. Had I been hurt? The pain coursing through my body answered that question. But what had happened? My last clear memory was of the mission, the compound... Annie. Was I here with my team? Were we on a mission?

“Save... James... Save him...” Why couldn't I hear my words?

Why did everything hurt?

My thoughts were a jumbled mess, each colliding with the next, creating a cacophony of confusion and uncertainty. I strained to listen, hoping to catch a snippet of conversation that would offer some clarity.

Voices drifted in and out of my awareness. “He's confused... delirious...” someone

said, their tone laced with concern.

“... temperature is too high...” another voice chimed in, a note of urgency cutting through their words.

The fragments of conversation only added to my disorientation. I tried to speak, to ask where I was, what was happening, but my throat was a barren desert, and no words would form.

“... someone get Doc Jen...” The urgency in the voice was unmistakable now. I felt hands on me, checking my vitals, their touch clinical and hard.

The pain, the confusion, the disjointed snippets of conversation—it was all too much. I felt myself slipping away again, the effort to stay conscious too great a battle. As I shut my eyes, succumbing once more to the darkness, I wished the world would make sense. But for now, all I could do was drift in the sea of unconsciousness, letting the waves of pain and confusion wash over me.

* * *

As I drifted awake, the fog in my mind seemed to have lifted somewhat. My thoughts were clearer, more focused, and first and foremost among them was Annie.

I managed to call her name, and I felt a firm grip on my hand, grounding and real.

“We have her,” a familiar voice assured me.

The voice... I knew that voice. With considerable effort, I turned my head, trying to focus. My vision was blurred, the features swimming before my eyes in a haze. But bit by bit, the image began to make sense, the lines and contours forming a picture I recognized.

The Army Ranger. Ryder. He was here, next to me. Relief washed over me, followed by a surge of questions and confusion.

Holding my hand? His fingers laced with mine.

“We got out?” I rasped, my voice barely audible, my throat parched and sore.

Ryder’s face was a mask of concern and relief, and he nodded. “Yeah, we got out. You’ve been here under, for five days, but we’re back, and they got the bullet out and repaired the damage.”

“Amos?”

Ryder sighed. “Still in the wind right now.”

I tried to process this information; each word Ryder spoke helping to piece together the fragmented memories. Bullet. Damage. Wind. None of it made sense, and the words swirled in my head, but one thing anchored them all—Annie was safe.

The relief flooding me was overwhelming, a tide of emotion that threatened to pull me under once again, and my body was still weak, uncooperative, refusing to do more than lie there, half-awake, and half-alive.

“Annie...” I repeated, managed to whisper, a plea and a prayer in one.

Ryder squeezed my hand, a silent message of understanding and reassurance. “She’s fine, August. She’s safe, and she’s with us. You did it. You saved her.”

The weight of those words was immense, and as they sunk in, a sense of peace began to settle over me. I had done what I set out to do. I had saved Annie.

“We’ll organize her visiting you, and?—”

“No.” Bringing Annie back into my life meant exposing her to my world, even indirectly, and what was the point in that?

“Doc Simmonds, you don’t know him, we call him Psycho, ‘cause he’s a psychologist, anyway that doesn’t matter. He said it might trigger a memory of her dad if she saw you,” he said and smiled, and a knife pierced my heart.

“She doesn’t even know me; I was barely there.” I was lying to myself. Every part of me wanted to see her, to hold her and tell her everything would be okay, tell her about her dad and how special he was, and how he’d loved her.

“August—”

“Promise me you’ll keep her away, tell her how James was the best dad, but don’t tell her about me. She doesn’t have to know me. Ryder, fuck’s sake, promise me.”

There was the longest pause as exhaustion tugged at me, pulling me back towards sleep.

His grip tightened enough for me to feel the extra pressure. “Okay,” he said, sounding confused. “I guess it can wait. Makes sense to wait. Yeah.”

“No waiting. I don’t want her to see me.”

I was so tired, and this time, I welcomed sleep. Annie was safe, and that was all that mattered, and the Ranger would keep her away from me.

I would never be in a position to see her hurt again.

Because Ryder promised.

* * *

I next woke to the soft voice, a confusion of words that didn't make any sense, but sounded nice. Deep and grumbly and sexy. Was I in bed with someone? Was the man reading a book to me? Some action adventure thriller with a lot of gun sounds?

"... and the one in the corner with the mask held his gun, and I could see he was wavering, and that was something I could work with." There was a soft laugh. "Do you think that is what we do, Navy? Do we slow everything down and assess our opponents like this? I wonder if we do, but it's just instinct, looking for those tells. I've never really thought about it. Anyway, that's enough Reacher today, we'll see what he does tomorrow. I need coffee."

Navy? He called me Navy, and it all flooded back in horrifying detail. My body ached.

I heard a chair scrape, humming, could sense the subtle shifts in the room, the faint sound of someone's footsteps, a soft, squeaky shoe on a tiled floor. Diffused light filled the space as I stared at the stark white ceiling, counting tiles as far as I could turn my head either way.

Fuck, my neck hurt.

I wriggled my toes, my fingers, I could feel them, so that was okay. At least, I imagined they were moving, so my limbs were okay, my spine as well, and my neck might ache, but I could turn my head, although it felt heavy as hell.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, a small reminder of normalcy, a hint of the world beyond the grip of pain and what I assumed was my

recovery room. I blinked, trying to find my bearings, to piece together the fragments of everything. Pain was there, but it was a dull reminder of my injuries, manageable, a shadow of the searing agony I remembered. I was thirsty, and I was still cocooned in cotton, and there was humming, and coffee, and the ocean.

Awake, but still ensnared in the clutches of discomfort and irritation, I was not prepared for the overly cheerful intrusion.

“Well, hey there, Navy,” came a voice, so chirpy and bright it felt like an assault on my senses. I winced, closing my eyes against the sound. I wanted a moment more of peace, a brief respite from the pain, floating in cotton. But the owner of that voice seemed to have other ideas.

To my disbelief, he poked me. Actually, poked me. In my current state, it felt like an unforgivable transgression. “Nope, no playing possum on us now, nap time is over,” he continued, his tone so jovial it grated on me.

I snapped my eyes open, fixing the owner of the voice with a glare I hoped conveyed the full extent of my annoyance.

Ryder, the man who’d saved my life, who’d followed me back into the compound, the one who’d shoved at and packed my wound and told me to man the fuck up. In stark contrast to that miserable pushy fucker, this Ryder was all smiles and encouragement—the exact opposite of what I needed.

“Okay, Navy, good news-bad news time. You lived, but they had to amputate your cock. Joke! Don’t go rooting around your junk checking, it’s still there. Not that I was looking.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

Too much.

He was too much.

I closed my eyes again.

“Come on, August; it’s good to see you awake,” he said, still with the jarring cheerfulness. “You’re making progress. That’s something to be happy about, right? And you still have your cock.”

I grunted.

“Jesus, Ryder, leave the kid alone.”

“Hey, Doc Jen.”

A figure leaned over me, little more than a silhouette against the light. I could feel hands on me, clinical and probing, pressing my abdomen, sending jolts of discomfort through my already aching body, all alongside a soft female voice. The touch was necessary, I knew, one of the checks to assess my condition, but knowing that didn’t make it any less invasive or painful.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked, cutting through the fog in my head. I knew the doc was performing the standard cognitive checks, but grappled with the question as if I were working out complex chemistry.

Where was I?

“Hospital?” I managed to croak the word out as a question, my throat dry and my voice barely a whisper.

“Good. Can you tell me your name?” the doctor continued; her tone professional with more than a hint of empathy.

What did she ask again?

My name?

Aubrey? August? Which one was I today?

Was this real life? Or was this the mirror world I'd dug so deep into?

I'm out. I'm safe. Ryder is here.

"August," I replied, the effort to speak making my head spin.

The doctor proceeded with her examination, shining a light into my eyes, checking their reaction to the stimulus. The light felt like needles piercing my pupils, and I recoiled. Everything was too much—the lights, the poking, the incessant questions, and I was exposed and vulnerable to any asshole coming in and killing me where I lay.

Although dying was my main objective, because then, the images and sounds in my head would stop. Dying could be a blessing.

I could hear the doctor speaking, her voice a steady stream of medical jargon and instructions to other people I couldn't see. Words like vitals, recovery, and observation floated through the air, and I heard another voice, male, but not Ryder's, someone medical from the comments they made.

As the doctor continued her checks, I hated the pain, the helplessness, the dependency on others, but most important of all, I didn't have my gun.

Where the hell is my gun?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

After Doc left, I watched August. He was restless and his movements became increasingly frantic. He was reaching out for something, grasping at the air, his brow furrowed. I hooked my hand under his, trying to provide some comfort, but it was clear that wasn't what he was seeking.

In that moment, it struck me just how vulnerable August was. Stripped of his usual defenses, lying in a hospital bed, he was a shadow of the formidable Navy SEAL I knew him to be. His weapon, which had been a constant companion and a source of security for him, was locked away, leaving him exposed in a way that went beyond the physical.

The realization hit me—what August needed in his agitated state was a semblance of protection, something to anchor him to the sense of safety that had been an integral part of his identity. I pulled out my HK45, emptied the chamber and removed the cartridge, ensuring it was safe.

I, then, placed the weapon in August's searching hand, curling his fingers around it. The effect was almost immediate. His restlessness eased, the lines of tension in his face smoothed, and his breathing became more regular. It was as if the mere presence of the weapon, even in its neutralized state, provided the comfort and security he was seeking.

August had a warrior's spirit.

The door opened, and I glanced up, catching Doc Jen's eye, both of us focusing on the gun, but she nodded as she came in—as a former combat veteran, she would know the same as I had.

“Ethan wants you to head over to Swim Central,” she said and crossed to August’s side, picking up the tablet with his file. “You know where that is?”

“Southeast, I got it.”

“Just keep walking, you can’t miss it.” Then, she gestured to my leg. “And?”

“Sore, but it’s all good.” I’d refused the good pain killers, keeping the pain at bay with low-strength meds, but again, there was no argument from Doc Jen, although she insisted on the anti-inflammatory pills, threatening me with amputation if I didn’t listen.

She was scary as shit, and there was no way I was arguing with her.

Something niggled at me—if I was heading over to Swim Central, then August would be alone, and I don’t know why, but I didn’t like that one little bit.

“I’ll stay with your man,” she said, as if she could read my mind. “Go.”

“He’s not my man... he’s... whatever.” I grumbled as I picked up the second crutch, took one last look at August’s pale face, and headed out. I made it down the stairs as best I could, through the kitchen, and out of the back door, heading southeast from the main property to Swim Central.

The new home of Ethan and his Shadow Team.

Stepping into the office in the separate building was like walking into another world. Despite the fact that I’d seen it from outside a few times since we’d arrived at Kingscliff—the structure covered in scaffolding—the uniqueness of the new office space, along with the use of the name Shadow Team and all it implied., still struck me with the same intensity. Ethan had been asked to set up a team to work in the

shadows by another somewhat shadowy organization; it was as simple as that, and now, I was part of that team. We were the good guys, and that was all I needed to know.

My work for Sanctuary had been done for them. I was back with an injured August in tow, and Luca had gotten Annie out safe, and I wondered what was next for me.

I hoped with every molecule of myself that it was tracking Amos down and taking him out, or that they'd found him, and Amos was no more.

With Amos still alive, even with his cartel decimated, he'd be scrambling not to leave a power vacuum, and he wanted Annie.

That much I was certain of.

Ethan had started the lengthy process of transforming what was once a grand indoor swimming complex into a functional, high-tech command center, and the office itself was in the deep end of the former pool, which gave it an unusual layout. Two walls were tiled, a reminder of its aquatic past.

I couldn't help the shudder running through me at the thought of the water pouring in to cover us. Yeah, that was a freaky fear, but it followed me whenever I was near an empty space that had been filled with water. Some people hated spiders, or cockroaches, turns out, I didn't much like empty pools.

I noticed Luca first. Having not seen him since we'd gotten back to Kingscliff, he hurried to my side where we bro-hugged before he stepped away to examine me from head to toe, his worried gaze settling on my lumpy, bandaged knee.

"Shit, Ry," he muttered.

“It’s a scratch.”

“They said torn ligaments, dude,” he said with a frown.

I huffed. “It was a big scratch.”

“You’re good?” he asked. I wish I hadn’t had to leave you behind.

“All good,” I replied. That’s the job, Luca, those were your orders.

We had this whole unspoken conversation, and that was all we needed, just a recognition of everything that had gone down—our own personal debrief.

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“Following leads, we’re?—”

“Gentlemen,” Ethan called from further down Swim Central, his presence as commanding as ever, as he gestured me over with a broad grin. I limped next to Luca to the big table. It wasn’t round, this wasn’t King Arthur’s court, but it was like a squashed oval, which meant that, even though Ethan was in the big chair, we were all more equal than I’d imagined we’d be. Was I reading more than was necessary into an oval table? Probably, but sue me, this whole Shadow Team thing was a trip.

“Take a seat, Ryder, and welcome to Swim Central.” He waved at the space around him, and I smiled, because yeah, it was a cool-ass name. “Everyone, this is Ryder, Army Ranger, part of the extraction team along with Luca, of Annie Lerner and August Fox. Comm, computers, you name it, he knows it.”

“Hi,” I said with a generic wave.

Ethan pressed on. “Ryder, this is Zach, former SEAL,” I reached over and shook hands with Zach, his grip as firm as mine. “Next to him, Kai, 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron. Specialist in electrics.”

“Helicopters, cool,” I said, for something to say. Kai was smaller than Zach, but his grip was as hard, and his flinty eyes narrowed on me. 427 wasn’t only helicopters, and I’d dumbbed that down way too much, but sue me, I liked helicopters. “And other shit, also,” I added with a smile.

Kai rolled his eyes. “Lots of shit, saving shit, fucking shit up, looking sexy while I do shit. The usual awesome stuff,” he deadpanned.

“Bullshit,” Zach coughed into his hand, and Kai offered him a finger.

I noticed Ethan wasn’t calling anyone in here former anything even though I guessed they were all free agents working for Shadow Team. All of us had spec-ops blood in our veins.

“Aria, Special Operations.”

She offered me a fist to bump, which of course I tapped. “Also fucking shit up, but in a less obvious way than a former 427 flyboy,” she offered.

“Whatever,” Kai sighed, which again earned him a scowl from Zach. Kai smirked, but if anything Zach’s scowl deepened. No love lost there, then.

“And last, but by no means least, Yazmin, also SpecOps. Strategy.”

“Yaz,” she said and shook my hand. She seemed to be taking the measure of me. I exchanged a nod with her.

“Coffee?” Kai asked, and I almost said yes, when I realized he was pointing at me and then, over at the machine. “Last one in makes the coffee, mine’s black with two sugars.”

I sat back in the chair, my leg aching, needing to assert something like confidence. “Same,” I said, and we entered into an epic stare-off, which ended with us grinning at each other.

I think I’m gonna get on with Kai.

“Jesus, I’ll get the fucking coffee for the children,” Zach muttered, and headed over to the coffee station.

“That’s my boy,” Kai said.

“Fuck you,” Zach muttered.

Ethan ignored them both. “Ryder will be joining our team, post-recovery, as the newest Shadow Team recruit,” Ethan announced, and I caught his gaze on me.

“Welcome aboard,” Aria said and took a coffee from Zach, who then made sure we were all supplied with caffeine and cookies. Then, Ethan started the meeting, his voice echoing in the tiled space. His leadership style hadn’t changed—direct, no-nonsense, yet underpinned with a deep sense of care for his team. It was a far cry from the battlefields and covert operations I was accustomed to, yet here I was, part of something just as important, just as impactful.

“Now, business,” Ethan said, and passed over a folder of photos. “Thin file, but we need to talk to August. Anyway, intel so far on Amos.”

“You know where he is?” I asked quickly.

He shook his head. “But we will.”

* * *

I opened August’s door, exchanging fist bumps with Doc Jen on her way out, and when I entered, the first thing I noticed was that the chair I’d used had shifted from his side. It was a subtle change, but in a room where I had spent so many hours, every detail was familiar. I glanced at August, who appeared to be sleeping, his breathing even and deep.

Doc Jen had moved the chair—probably didn’t want to be quite so close to August as I had been when I was holding his hand and getting him to settle.

Deciding to make my presence known, I dragged the chair back to its original position. The sound was jarring in the quiet room, and almost immediately, August cracked open an eye, his expression one of annoyance.

“You’re fucking noisy, Army,” he muttered, his voice hoarse, but carrying an edge.

“I know,” I replied with a grin. I pulled the chair closer to the bed and settled into it. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Like I got shot in the gut,” August replied, his dark gray gaze meeting mine before he closed his eyes again. There was a hint of dark humor in his tone, a coping mechanism a lot of us military types wrapped ourselves in.

“How are you feeling?” he asked after a pause, his eyes still closed.

I couldn’t help but smile at his question. “Like I broke my leg, and also got shot in the vest at least three times, and breathing is hard,” I confessed. It was the truth; the vest had absorbed the force of the bullets, but the impacts had still left their mark.

August responded with a simple, “Whatever,” but the faintest hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was progress, however small.

I wondered if I should tell August about the search for Amos. Not that there was much to tell him given there was no trace of the fucker. Still, an update might be good.

But then he’d kind of smiled, and I didn’t want to rock the boat.

I opened the Reacher book on my phone and cleared my throat, then began to read aloud, filling the room with the sound of my voice. It was a routine I’d fallen into, and he could tell me to stop any time.

As I read, I couldn’t help but glance at August from time to time. He kept his eyes closed, but I knew he was listening. In that room, with the steady beep of the monitors, there was a sense of peace, a brief respite from the chase for Amos and for just surviving. And for now, that had to be enough.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I stared out of the window, the vents open so I could hear the crashing of the waves on the stony shore. I felt better today, my mind sharper, the meds eased off, the pain honest and there, but not crippling, and the surgery site looking good. I was still weak and couldn't get out of bed, but I had a long time to think about things.

Amos.

How had I allowed myself to be deceived by Amos for so long? I'd thought he was a pawn in a larger game, just this insignificant and fearful man, yet it turned out it had been him pulling the strings all along.

I couldn't shake the vivid memory of that moment when Amos had shot me, the agony searing through my gut, and the ice-cold expression as he'd pulled the trigger.

He'd abducted Annie, or somehow inherited her, or bought her—I didn't know—he'd masterminded orders to eliminate targets, manipulating events from behind the scenes. Though I lacked real evidence, I was convinced he was the one responsible for James's death, and that Annie had been nothing but a lucky mistake for him. The pieces of the puzzle weren't falling into place fast enough for me, and I was frustrated beyond belief.

The knock was enough of a surprise to shake me out of my mood, and I snapped upright. Fuck.

"Come in," I said and tried to shift in the bed to sit upright. Whoever was coming through that door, they weren't going to see pathetic August; they would be seeing a Navy SEAL who was capable of anything.

Fuck it hurts.

“Hi, August.”

Ethan—the one who knew more about how much of a killer I was than the others. He’d been right there when I’d put a bullet through the brain of his old FBI boss. Former Army Ranger, then FBI, quick with a gun, he crossed to the bed, another man close behind him frowning at me.

“Maybe you should wait some more,” the other man said. I recognized him—he’d been in my room before, fussing around me, making sure I was okay—Josh.

“We can’t wait,” Ethan said to Josh, as we gripped hands. “August.”

Josh huffed behind him, “Come on Ethan?—”

“What can’t wait?” I asked Ethan, even as Josh huffed at being interrupted. “Is this something about Amos? I’m ready to get out there,” I said and cursed when my body still wouldn’t freaking move.

“Worse than kids,” Josh muttered.

Josh didn’t have a military look to him. Yes, he was determined, and he’d come barreling in after Ethan, but he seemed more concerned than anything else.

Ethan gripped the other man’s arms, then tugged him in for a soft kiss and a longer hug. “I promise, we won’t hurt him.”

Ah, so Josh and Ethan were a thing. A very sexy kissing thing.

Josh disentangled himself. “Don’t think that kissing me will stop me worrying,” he

snapped, although there was a hint of a smile on the part of his face I could see. “You have a call button, these idiots make you worse, you use it, okay?”

I blinked at the man. “Sure.” I still wasn’t sure who Josh meant by these idiots when it was him and Ethan.

Then, someone else knocked on the doorjamb, and when I inclined my head that he could come in, he was only one of six other people headed into the room, the last of whom—Ryder—shut the door.

Ethan cleared his throat as I took in the sheer amount of badass in this room with me.

“So, short introduction. Zach, SEAL.” I glanced at him, didn’t know him, but just because we’d both been Navy, both SEALs, didn’t mean we were buddies. He looked kind of familiar, but he didn’t give any indication he recognized me. We just exchanged nods because in the heart of us, we might not know each other, but we were brothers by the teams we’d been on.

“Yaz, Aria, Special Operations.” I wasn’t close enough to anyone to shake hands, but we exchanged nods. “Kai, 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron. You know Ryder, and this is Luca, he’s the one who got Annie out.”

I wanted to shake Luca’s hand, and he seemed to get the message, leaning toward me. I gripped his hand hard. Ryder might well have gone back inside with me to clear the compound, but Luca had saved Annie.

“I owe you. Same as I owe Ryder.”

“It was nothing,” Luca said with a nod, his blond hair falling over his left eye, and offered me a wide grin.

“So, introductions over, August,” Ethan said in a calm, but businesslike, tone. “I’ve got some updates on the case. You feeling up to it?” He didn’t add that if I wasn’t up to it, they’d all leave. It was a moot point—I wanted to talk about this case, and this crew of Ethan’s were the team that would take me to Amos. I was sure of it. Everyone settled in—Zach and Kai leaned against the wall; Ryder dragged over the chair, and when he sat, Aria perched on the arm. Yaz sat at the end of my bed, and Ethan paced.

Only, my gaze kept landing on Aria who was, for sure, leaning on Ryder.

What the hell is that churning in my gut?

Jealousy? At what? The woman’s familiarity? Fuck’s sake.

I tried not to look at Ryder, but when I cast a quick glance at him, still with Aria leaning on him, I found his unwavering gaze locking with mine.

“Go for it,” I replied, trying to sound more confident than I felt, determined not to let my injuries sideline me from whatever was happening here.

“How long were you undercover with the Cooper River crews?” Ethan asked.

That confused me—surely they already know all this shit? “Isn’t that in your file on me?”

Ethan glanced at his team. “They don’t because it was a need-to-know basis,” he explained, and I guess I was grateful not everyone in this room knew everything I’d done.

“Eighteen months, give or take.” Stick to the facts. “Got a solid persona, called in some favors, started with the supply side, but things escalated fast. Ended up having a

whole portfolio with the trafficking operation, reporting to Amos who, at the time, I believed was reporting higher. Then, you showed up with your Sanctuary Foundation.” I pointed at Ethan. “Really put a fox among the chickens. I took my chance, we managed to divert the kids from harm’s way, and I could pass on everything I knew to you and to Sanctuary which is where I guess you all work?”

“Not exactly. We’re Shadow Team; autonomous but funded by Sanctuary.” He tipped his chin at that, as if he was daring me to comment. I didn’t give a shit what they called themselves, if they were like Ryder and Luca, and brave like Ethan when he’d faced down my gun, then I was in their hands and happy for it.

Ethan handed over the tablet. “For you.”

I tipped the screen toward me, balancing it on one knee I drew up, the cannula in the back of my hand pinching. Ryder was at my side in an instant, untwisting the IV and sitting down again before I could even register what he’d done.

The screen had a photo of Amos front and center, and I had to breathe through the immediate anger spiking inside me. He’d played me for a fool, and worse, I’d fallen for his act.

“What do you know about him?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “Absolutely nothing. As far as I was concerned, he was the go-between, the one filtering the orders, scared of his own freaking shadow. Jesus, this is some Kaiser S?ze shit...”

“We’re still working on ID, but even to the best of us, he’s a ghost.”

“I know he had...” I blinked, then shut my eyes again, picturing Amos even as bile rose inside me. “A cap, a sports logo, I want to say a snarling wolf. I never paid much

attention, and it wasn't one I recognized. The logo was shield shaped with pointed edges, gray, black, and red. There was lettering, but it was faded. He hid behind the brim sometimes; fuck, that was part of the act."

Ethan nodded to Aria who was tapping away at her own tablet.

"On it, boss," she muttered, and even though I expected some miracle where she instantly found the word, she frowned, and Ethan continued to talk.

Ethan leaned forward; his eyes focused on me. "What connected you to the Cooper River crews? Why them? Did you know they had Annie?"

"I had help, followed rumors. My team had my back, until they couldn't anymore. James was working a Cooper River case, found links back to the acting DA; that was why we were called in."

"Your SEAL team?" Ethan asked.

"No, I was private by then, but yeah, my SEAL team had my back if I needed them. They were sent overseas, last I heard, two were dead, the rest disbanded and scattered, but not before they helped me when they could."

"So, you found out they'd taken Annie and infiltrated the cartel to track her down?"

"Sure, let's go with that," I hedged. Getting me into the cartel had been way more convoluted, and I owed my former team everything, but yeah, I'd become a trusted crew member for the Cooper River Cartel to track Annie down, imagining a rescue, and instead realizing she was nowhere to be found, and I was deep in a nest of vipers.

"How did you manage to gain the trust of the traffickers and cartel members? That's no easy feat."

I took a deep breath before responding. “I played the long game, slowly proving my loyalty and dedication. I took on riskier roles within the organization, which earned me their trust over time. They saw me as one of their own.”

“What kind of information were you able to gather about operations? Anything else that can help us? Any allies or contacts within the criminal organization that helped you along the way.”

“No. I was on my own. Did what I had to do, kept my head down. Until you decided to turn up.”

Ethan nodded. “Okay.”

“What about tying Amos to James Lerner’s death?” I asked, my heart heavy as stone. Ethan’s expression shifted enough for me to know he had intel. Grief was a tight knot in my chest, making it hard to breathe. My throat felt constricted, and my body tensed, as if bracing for an impact. “Tell me.”

“He ordered the hit, or at least, the hit was handed out by him as ordered from above.”

“And there was no above,” Ryder summarized.

I was numb, detached, staring at this as if I was an observer, as if that wasn’t my charge who Amos had killed.

“I will kill him,” I said, no emotion in my tone; it was a simple promise.

“If that is your intention, then you won’t play a part in his capture. The target will be handed to VCRS,” Ethan replied in the same tone.

“What? No, he doesn’t deserve any more time on this fucking earth,” I yelled. Pain knifed through my chest and belly, and I realized I’d moved too much, too fast. I knew the Violent Crime and Racketeering Section at the Justice Department was the official team of prosecutors who should be responsible for Amos and whatever dregs of Cooper River were out there.

But Amos was dying for what he’d done to people in my charge. To James and Max, and for taking Annie away.

Ryder came over and fussed around my pillow, as if he were trying to help, but when I met his level gaze, his brown eyes were filled with warning.

I opened my mouth to tell Ethan and his team that I didn’t give a shit about what they wanted, because when I had Amos, I’d kill him slowly for every hurt I’d seen.

For James.

For taking Annie.

For killing Max.

For the hundreds who’d died because of his trafficking, or weapons, or the drugs he distributed.

Ryder had seen me kill the crew members, and he hadn’t judged me for it, and hell, I assumed he understood the need to stop what I’d seen, but maybe he saw value in the law having their time with Amos?

Did I respect that?

I didn’t even know him. So, I said nothing.

“All intel we gather will end up on that screen for you, there’s financial records, photos, whatever we have, within reason. Our aim is to find Amos, and your insight is valuable. Consider yourself conscripted to Shadow Team as a resource.”

I could work with that—wanted to be kept in the loop.

“Daily briefings, hourly if you have more,” I insisted.

Ryder shot me a scowl, and I responded with my best nonchalant expression, making it clear I didn’t care what he thought about me being kept in the loop.

One by one, the team left, following Ethan out, until it was just Ryder, and it was clear he had something to say, given how he was hovering by the door. Even more obvious when he shut it and sat back down in the chair.

“What?” I snapped, belligerent, and so damn exhausted I couldn’t handle a lecture.

“We should talk?”

“No,” I said, then closed my eyes, then added, “fuck. “Fuck off, I’m tired.”

I couldn’t fight sleep, and the next time I woke, it was dark, and I assumed he’d left, but either he hadn’t left, or he’d come back.

Because he was in that damn chair, head tilted, his breathing deep and even as he slept.

Why wouldn’t the asshole leave me alone?

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

“Can I talk to you?” Josh asked from beside me, catching me by surprise as I was in the midst of going over some intel on the screen that had come in overnight.

“Of course, what’s up? Is it the team?”

“No, August.”

Fear gripped me. “What’s wrong?” I had a million scenarios clamoring for superiority—he needed another op; he was dying; he was?—

“He needs a shower.”

I blinked at Josh. “He needs a what now?”

Josh shrugged. “A shower.”

“Okay, and...”

“Doc Jen got a face full of protein drink, and Dr. Simmons backed out of August’s room after he was threatened with physical violence.”

“But he’s weak as a kitten.”

Josh huffed. “Try telling that to the wall with a food tray embedded in it.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Anyway, the rest of the team is out, and you’re the only one who...” He waved a hand at me.

“Who what?”

He wagged his hand. “The only one not out on a job, who can duck fast enough when a tray is heading your way?”

I rolled my eyes at that. “Bum knee, remember?” I reminded him, but he scrunched his nose, then thrust something at me.

“Cover for the bandages, and there are waterproof dressings in August’s bathroom for him.”

“But—”

“So, you’ll handle it?”

“I guess so, I?—”

“Cool,” he said, then backed away. “And if anything happens to you, I’ll make sure it’s a huge funeral.” Then, he jogged around the corner, and I was left clutching plastic wrap and knowing my morning wasn’t going to be about coffee, muffins, and intelligence-gathering, but about getting one pissed-as-hell SEAL into a shower.

I headed to my room first, changing out of combats and into loose sweats and a tee, then headed out, only stopping to pick up a deck of cards with some nebulous idea that I could con him into letting me help him. Poker was my thing.

I knocked, but didn’t wait for a polite anything from inside, before strolling in as if I was supposed to be there.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Surely, the Geneva convention stops torture?”

“I’m reading.”

“Exactly.”

He was in bed, and it was clear he was less than pleased with his current situation. I couldn’t blame him; being stuck in a hospital room wasn’t anyone’s idea of a good time. I pointed at the dent in the wall, traced the shape of it.

“Tray frisbee, eh?”

I saw a brief flash of shame, and then, he stiffened and ignored me, so I decided to shake things up a bit.

“Poker,” I announced, then pulled his medical table over him and climbed up to sit cross-legged on his bed, awkward with my bandaged knee, nudging his leg until he shifted, wincing with each wriggle. I was done with him sitting there in misery, and if a shower was what he wanted, and if being on his own was what he wanted, then we’d play for that.

“You need to get your head out of your ass,” I muttered, then slapped the cards onto the table, picking up various meds and the nasty thick drink he was supposed to be downing. Grumpy August didn’t seem too thrilled with the idea—it was clear he wasn’t in the mood for a game of cards. Nevertheless, I was determined to coax him out of his funk, and maybe even get a smile out of him.

He shot me a pointed stare. “Fuck off.” His voice was laced with discomfort as he shifted in bed and stared out of the window.

“Come on, Navy, don’t be a wimp,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “A friendly

game of poker can do wonders for the soul. And besides, it'll take your mind off things and stop me reading to you all at the same time."

August winced again as he moved. I leaned over him and the table and fussed with his pillow before raising the bed.

"You know, I could kill you with one hand," he grouched, but I could see the shakiness in said hand, and there was no way he had more strength than me.

"Then, I'd have to kill you back."

He sighed in annoyance. "But you'd already be dead."

"I'd manage."

I dealt the cards and glanced at August, who stared down at them as if I'd offered him a hand grenade. "Texas Hold'em. Two hole cards for each of us, five community cards on the table. Standard rules apply, folks. No wild cards, and when I win, I get to help you to the shower."

His gaze sharpened. "What?"

"You want a shower. I win I help you; you win, you help yourself with me sitting here in case. Take it or leave it."

I couldn't help but notice the slight tremor in August's hand as he picked up the cards and held them close to his chest, frowning at his hands, then at me, with stubborn determination that I shouldn't witness any sign of weakness. It was a trait we both shared, but right now, it was working against him. He peeked at the cards, and his expression gave nothing away, even as I studied his face for any hints. He had more color today, and I checked the calendar on the wall, day seventeen, and the gaunt

post-op style he'd had going on was more like getting-better-style. Doc Jen said he could have a shower now but added that he wouldn't let anyone help him out of bed, not even his PT, who was just about ready to kill a SEAL.

"One hand."

His eyes widened, and I could see he was torn between telling me to fuck off again, and as he glanced at the bathroom door, pleading with me to go now.

"I'll get myself to the shower."

I huffed my disbelief. "You can't even get out of bed on your own."

"I can."

"No, you can't."

"I'm not an invalid."

"You are."

"Fuck you."

Not this again. "Fuck you back," I deadpanned, and he scowled.

"One hand," he muttered.

"One."

"And when I win, I'll let you help me to the door, and that's as far as it goes."

“Yep, I’ll wait outside.”

He jutted his chin. “I’m locking the door.”

“Then I’ll shoot it open.”

His lips thinned, but he didn’t even offer a fuck you; instead, he cursed under his breath and ignored me.

For a while, August was still uncomfortable, his focus on the cards, rather than the banter. But as the game progressed, I couldn’t resist making more remarks. “You know, August, you should consider a career in professional poker. You’ve got the perfect unreadable poker face.”

“Torture training,” he said.

My mouth fell open. “Wait, was that a joke? Did the big bad Navy SEAL make a joke?” I made a show of turning on the bed and cupping my mouth to call, “Guys! Get in here! Navy made a joke!” Of course, it wasn’t loud enough for people to come running, but it was more than adequate to cause the corner of August’s mouth to twitch. One day, I’d get him to smile.

I bet he had a gorgeous smile.

Oh god, what if he had dimples? I had this thing for dimples.

And pretty dark gray eyes.

And unruly, flicky brown hair.

And the body of an athlete covered in scars from when he’d been brave or stupid, or

both.

As the game continued, August's shoulders lowered, and he actually got into the game, despite the shakiness of his hands. When he laid down a four of a kind, which beat my flush, he left out a soft whoop of victory, winced, cursed, and when he was done with that, raised an eyebrow.

"Well, lookee there," he drawled in his best approximation of a southern accent, which wasn't much better than mine. "Seems like Navy beat Army. Again."

It was a small victory, but I was happy to let him have it.

"Best of three?" I asked, and he glanced at the bathroom door. "Or you wanna try and get in the shower now?"

He wouldn't meet my steady gaze, but he gave a short, sharp, nod. "You can help me to the door," he said as if he was bestowing a great gift.

I scooted off the bed, my leg itching like mad where the plastic I'd already covered it with was making me sweat. There was no way he was getting into that shower alone, and I was about ready for anything he'd throw at me.

"Sure thing, lieutenant."

"What are you?" he asked, curious, and I blinked at him, not sure what he was asking. "Your rank I mean."

"Specialist," I said. "Comm."

"Okay," he said, as if that was somehow important. He outranked me, but that didn't mean I'd stop reading to him if he ordered me to.

Reading kept me sane, and it beat sitting there in silence.

I pushed the table out of his way—at least he wasn't on an IV, which would have added issues—then with a gentle touch, I helped him swing his legs over the edge of the bed, making sure he was steady, and his breathing wasn't labored before we attempted to get off the bed, let alone make the journey to the shower. Each movement was cautious, his muscles still healing from the surgery, and when his feet touched the floor, he leaned into me. The soft shuffle of his footsteps and the clunkiness of my limp echoed in the room, and his hospital gown hung loose on him, not tied at the back in any way. I gripped the material together as best I could, but he was in a world of his own, determined to battle to the bathroom, which was maybe ten steps from his bed. August's breaths were measured, his muscles tensing with each step, but I could feel his determination.

As we reached the bathroom, I took his entire weight as I opened the door, revealing the small, tiled shower room, and he gasped. I stopped, but I realized all that had happened was that he'd caught his reflection in the mirror, and he hesitated for a moment, raising a shaking hand to the beard that had stolen his face.

"Shit," he muttered, and I glanced at the reflection, not seeing anything past the fact that he'd made it this far, and he was alive.

"You want a shave?"

"I want..." His breathing hitched, and I checked his expression for signs of distress. Doc Jen had warned me that this was going to be shit, but she couldn't know how I felt having this man leaning on me, in my arms, relying on me to help. With utmost care, I helped him under the shower, thankful it was all in one room, and not behind a glass door, with no steps to get over. "You can go now," he said, gripping a handrail, hunching over it, cursing again.

“Not going anywhere.”

“Get out.”

“Jesus, Navy, you’re an idiot.”

He tilted his chin, stubborn ass, and I closed the door behind us, then locked it, and his expression turned mutinous.

“Sit down,” I said, and eased him onto a chair in the corner, rummaging for the electric shaver.

“I can shave myself,” he snapped, but when I handed the shaver to him, the thing fell into his lap. I picked it up, then tilted his face with a finger under his chin. Then, with care, I ran the shaver over August’s face, trying to keep my hand steady. “You know, it’s been a while since you’ve had a shave,” I said.

He grunted in agreement, which was better than him cursing me.

August winced as the razor buzzed over his skin near a healing cut. At least the bruises on his face had gone.

“We’ll get you cleaned up. You’ll feel better after this.”

August responded with another sigh and a muttered thank you, but he didn’t open his eyes all the time I was this close to him shaving, at least not until I was done. When he looked at me, I could see the lighter ring around his pupils, and the way they darkened into a stormy gray, and I was lost in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, raising a hand to his chin.

“Just checking,” I excused my staring, then flicked on the shower, turning the head to the drain so it didn’t fall on him yet, and tested the warmth of it. He reached, shaking, the water cascading over his fingers, splashing him, wetting his gown, and he shivered.

“It’s perfect temperature,” I said.

“You can leave now,” he murmured and struggled to stand.

“Yeah, no.” I said, then stepped close to him, tugging at the gown, and easing it off his shoulders. He struggled to hold himself back, but then, something passed between us, him backing down, me not giving him quarter, and at last, it fell to the floor, revealing the bandage covering his healing wound. “Doc said we need to shield this,” I explained, and making sure he had hold of the grab rail, I took the plastic wrap and made quick and efficient work of covering him up, front and back, stripped off my sweats down to my boxers and T-shirt, and then, as detached as I could be, I supported him to stand under the water for as long as he could.

As August was under the soothing stream, his expression was a mix of relief and exhaustion. The warmth of it cascading over his body seemed to ease some of the tension that had built up during his hospital stay. His eyes were closed, and his expression wasn’t quite so tight. I took his hand and squeezed gel into it, causing him to open his eyes and stare at me.

“It’s okay,” I murmured and rubbed my hand on his to make the suds, and he ran his free hand down his chest, then sagged against me. I braced myself and knew this wasn’t going to work—hell, it was never going to work—but he kind of needed to work that out for himself. “I can help.”

“You wanna clean my junk?” he snarled.

“I’ve seen cocks before, and not just Navy ones, but real Army ones,” I deadpanned.

We were in an epic face-off, and then, he snorted a laugh as if he couldn’t believe what his options were. “Fuck me,” he muttered.

“I expect dinner first.”

I eased his death grip on the support rail, sat him down on the seat there, and made sure I was braced against the tiled wall, ignoring the throbbing in my knee, and washed him carefully, with so many bubbles the bathroom was steamy with citrus. I tried to maintain a sense of impersonal care, even though my heart was pounding with emotions I couldn’t express. I focused on the task at hand, on being as gentle as possible. My gaze was fixed on the washcloth, not daring to look at the skin I was touching, because being this close to August was messing with my head. My soapy fingers traced the contours of his body, but it was all in the name of helping him, of aiding in his recovery.

At least, that was what I was telling myself.

I couldn’t allow my own feelings to complicate things further. So, I kept my voice steady, my touch light, and my eyes averted. It was a difficult balance, cleaning up someone you realized you wanted, but couldn’t fully have, but then, even after don’t ask don’t tell, it wasn’t as if I was new to keeping secrets.

I brought out the big guns—well, a soft sponge anyway—cleaned what I could reach and helped him hold it to wash his boys, supporting him. He was draped over me, and I think he was shaking, although it was difficult to tell under the water.

I could feel the tension in August’s body melting as my fingers worked shampoo through his hair. The warm water cascaded over us, and for a moment, it felt as though we were sharing an intimate and peaceful moment amid the chaos that had

defined our connection so far.

As I covered his eyes and rinsed his hair, the only thing holding him upright was the death grip he had on my T-shirt. He murmured something against my neck, but I couldn't make out the words. I was hyper-aware of the closeness between us. The water droplets glistened on his skin, and I couldn't help but steal a glance at the man in my arms. August's face was tilted away from me as I washed. His eyes were closed, and a faint, contented smile tugged at the corner of his lips. It was a rare moment of peace from him.

"Are you okay?" I asked over the noise of the water.

"Gah," was all he managed, and then, it was all about getting him out of the room, wrapped in towels, and me still dripping wet. I half lifted him to the bed, his heavy ass was drooping, and I eyed the emergency cord for a moment, wondering if I should call someone for help.

But I knew this would be a betrayal of the trust he'd handed to me, so I soldiered on until he was on the edge of the bed, and I helped him sit.

"Stay there," I ordered.

There was no smart comeback, no sarcasm, not even a faint curse, just him hanging his head, water dripping from his wet hair into the towel around his waist.

I stripped off my wet shirt and jersey shorts, roughly dried my hair and wrapped a towel around my waist. Then, I repeated that for him, well, the hair part, and I toweled him off, then, instead of a hospital gown, I found a long baggy T-shirt and pulled it over his head. I smiled at the image of a unicorn pooping a rainbow on the front, and wondered how that would go down with my big bad SEAL, but for now, he didn't have a thing to say.

I eased him back into bed, wondered about what he should be wearing under the T-shirt, like sweats or... but after peeling off the wrap, I could see his wound was right where the waist of those would be. Instead, I ran my fingers through August's hair to straighten its damp length, then helped him into bed, propping him up on the pillows.

"Thirsty? Hungry?" I asked.

He shook his head yawned and closed his eyes. I pulled the blinds to give the illusion it was dusk and not ten in the morning.

By the time I left the room, he was sleeping, the flicks and curls of his hair a dark halo around his pale face.

And by the time I left, my feelings for him had grown way more complicated than respect for his skills.

I think I might be in lust.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

If there was one thing I hated more than being stuck in this bed, it was the people who thought they had the right to sit next to me and preach.

Or read Reacher to me.

Dr. Simmons, a thirty-something counselor with a military bearing and a permanent frown, was explaining how Annie was downstairs, and it was in her best interest for me to be part of her life. All I could focus on was his tie with its teddy bears.

This was his third visit, and I'd listened to him tell me all the crap he thought I needed to hear. Call me a coward, but I pressed the button for meds and drifted away on a cloud of ignoring-the-fuck-out-of-him.

I'd even take another shower with Ryder, if it meant I could hide away—and that was a dangerous thought given all the weird feelings I was having about the idiot ranger. The thoughtful, caring, pushy, stubborn, idiot, ranger.

“August,” Dr. Simmons began and darted in to take the button from me, looping it around his hand and putting it out of reach. “I understand that this is incredibly difficult for you, but we need to talk about Annie.”

“No,” I said, firm and to the point.

“She's been through a traumatic experience, and we want to ensure that she has a safe and supportive environment to heal, and that might include connecting to someone she knew from before.”

“She barely knew me.”

“You were in that house for six months, pretend-married, you were to all intents and purposes her second dad.”

“I said no.” I clenched my jaw and turned away from him in agonizing increments, gritting my teeth against the pain. What kind of asshole takes away a dying man’s meds? Not that I was dying, not before I finished things with Amos, but still, meds.

I couldn’t bear to think about Annie and the guilt, the fear, and the absolute determination that I shouldn’t be anywhere near her. She wasn’t my daughter. I heard the doc sigh, and then, he pressed on.

“Annie needs stability and love. You were a crucial part of her life whatever you think. We can work together to help her remember James.”

“That’s a low blow and fuck you, she’s not mine.” My heart broke at the lie in my words.

Dr. Simmons scraped the chair to the other side of the bed so I could see him, and his expression was filled with empathy. I didn’t want him to understand me. I wanted him to fuck off.

“You’re a connection to Annie’s father.”

“I kill people for a living.”

“And?”

“Fuck you.”

He leaned back in the chair, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Fuck you, back,” he said as if this was a joke.

I wanted to get out of bed and pummel his stupid face. “I have a gun.”

Another shrug, and he pressed a hand to his chest. “So do I. Three tours, Marine Corps, you want to have a gun-measuring competition, then whip it out, sailor.”

I rolled slowly to face away from him again, wires dragging, pain intensifying, and I heard the damn chair scrape again until once more, he was right in my face.

“We can take it one step at a time, and with therapy and support, we can help her heal, and you can remember the love you shared, and we can undo some of what happened.”

I shook my head, which freaking hurt. “I won’t put her through this. I’m not her family. Find her a family who can give her the life she deserves but keep me out of it.”

Dr. Simmons sighed. “You’re a selfish fucker, August Fox.” I closed my eyes, hoping he’d go away. “I won’t push you—I can’t until you’re well enough for me to knock some sense into you, but please consider the long-term impact on Annie. I’ll still be working with Lizzie on her therapy and healing process, even if you need more time. But I will come back, and I will drag you down to talk to her about her daddy.”

I stayed silent, my heart heavy with this decision, but my determination unwavering. I couldn’t bear to look at Dr. Simmons, couldn’t bear to face the reality of what I was doing. I wanted him to leave, to give me space to wallow in my self-imposed exile from seeing the girl who reminded me of my failures.

It was for the best.

“Morning, Psycho,” someone said from the door—Ryder.

Dr. Simmons rolled his eyes. “We’ve talked about that name,” he muttered, but he wasn’t angry, and I guessed the Marine nickname was as much a part of him as Ryder calling me Navy. I’d never been so relieved to see Ryder so we could break up this shit, but I rolled again, in painful increments, to turn my back on both of them.

When the door shut, I heard the chair scrape, then Ryder started reading again, and I lost myself in righteous defense of having nothing to do with Annie.

It was for the best.

* * *

I didn’t know how many days I’d been in this freaking bed, but I guessed it had to be at least a week, maybe ten days, and when I watched Ryder leave after yet another session of him reading out loud and me ignoring it, I was done with being still. I had this restless urge to get up, and the feeling of being confined to that bed, the monotony of the white walls and the constant beeping of machines, was stifling, almost suffocating.

Not to mention, I had to get strong enough to rip that phone out of Ryder’s hands so I could pretend I wasn’t enjoying him reading the book.

Dr. Simmonds came back on a daily basis, updating me on Annie. Sometimes it was Lizzie who was working with Annie one to one. I listened to them talk, but I refused to see her. That was a dangerous slippery slope on the way to me messing everything up.

I suggested that I write some things down for her, he responded with some shit about my healing path.

I turned my back on him. End of story.

I craved a glimpse of the outside world, something to remind me that life was still happening, that there was something beyond these four walls, and I wasn't going to get it sitting here like a freaking invalid.

I felt helpless and vulnerable, and I hated it when I was used to having control over my actions and decisions. This enforced stillness, this dependency on others for even the most basic needs, was driving me insane, and the warrior part of me, that inner voice telling me I could do anything, meant all I really wanted to do was prove to myself I was still capable, despite my injuries. Not to mention the nagging feeling I should be doing something, that resting was somehow a luxury I couldn't afford while there was still so much to be done.

Then, there was that fucking guilt, acid inside me, devastating, and coupled with the weight of unfinished business. I eased to the side of the bed, my feet touching the floor. The icy cold of it beneath my warm toes reminded me I was alive. I needed that for now, to feel in control, no matter how small the first step might be.

I managed to get to the door, thankfully, not hooked up to drips or machines anymore, and opened the door with caution, checked the corridor left and right, noticed the security camera at the end of the hall, but decided that, fuck it, if someone saw me stumbling about, they'd come find me, and that was a problem for future me.

I headed down the hallway, my steps unsteady—still weak from the injury, and pain a constant companion—using the wall to hold me up, until I reached the end where it met in a T along a walkway that went around in a big circle.

Doc Jen had explained that I was in Maine, and when I stared out of the window, it was obvious with the rock formations, and the rolling ocean, and the chill of spring snow.

This was a blast-from-the-past mansion, the contrast between the old and the new was obvious. Grand and imposing inside, it might well have once been something amazing, but for now, it was clear that the place had seen better days.

While what I assumed was the medical wing had up-to-date everything, with fresh paint and security, out here on a gallery overlooking a big hall, the paint on the walls was peeling, revealing layers beneath, and the hardwood floors, though still impressive, bore the scuffs and scratches of time. I glanced at the ceiling, at the intricate moldings dulled by years of neglect, but it was obvious that sections had been restored or were in the process of being renovated. These areas—like the room I'd been in—were in stark contrast to the faded grandeur of the rest.

The sound of laughter pulled me to the railings of the galleried walkway, and I searched for the source of the noise, a man sitting at a large table spread with art supplies, kids milling around, maybe ten of them, and there was paint everywhere. The man had a large piece of white paper, and it seemed as if they were all making hand prints of something. I leaned over a little more and spotted Annie sitting at another table with a young woman who was helping her with a jigsaw, and my heart stopped. Annie's hair was in bunches, and I recalled how much she would wriggle when James tried to do her hair, even at two, she'd been stubborn as anything. She glanced around her, and I stepped back in case she saw me, then, I leaned against the wall, my energy draining, watching the other kids paint. Lost in staring, I didn't notice Jen approaching until she was right beside me. So much for my training.

Her voice, sharp and tinged with irritation, snapped me out of my thoughts. "What the hell are you doing out of bed, Lieutenant Fox?" Doc Jen's tone was way past concerned and right on to angry. She stood with her arms crossed, frowning at me in frustration.

I straightened, feeling a twinge of guilt for causing her distress, and a lot of pain in my belly. "I just... needed to stretch my legs," I replied, my voice unsteady, trying to

justify my actions.

She wasn't buying it. "You're not in any condition to be wandering around," she snapped. "You need to rest and heal. Get back in your room."

"Doc—"

"Do I need to get someone?" I knew at once this had been a rhetorical question given the cameras and the panic button she'd just pressed in full view of me. I didn't know how long we had, but I had questions.

"Who are they?" I asked as she tried and failed to peel me from the wall, my voice barely above a whisper.

She looked down at the children and some of her anger subsided. "Victims of human trafficking. This place—Kingscliff—it's like a halfway house for the ones we've managed to rescue. A safe space to start healing."

Her words hit me like a physical blow, worse than any gunshot to the gut. Victims of human trafficking. The very thing I had fought against, the darkness I'd tried to shield Annie from. And here they were, children who had seen the worst of humanity, yet still found a way to laugh and play. At least, they were here, and I assume the twenty-one I'd managed to divert with Sanctuary's help had also made it here.

But what about all the other ones I couldn't stop—the ones Danvers had made secure before I even got there; the hundreds of kids that would be lost in the system?

"What about the ones I couldn't save?" I murmured, my voice cracking. "The shipments I couldn't divert..."

Doc Jen placed a hand on my shoulder, and I tore myself away. I didn't want her

understanding or gesture of comfort. I didn't deserve it.

She tried again to touch me, and this time, I stepped back, the wall the only thing holding me up. "You've done more than most, August. You can't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders."

But her words did little to wash away the guilt surging within me. What about other children? The ones still out there, still suffering? The thought was overwhelming, a tide of helplessness and regret threatening to drown me. My belly ached, my throat tightened, and I felt nauseous, the walkway spinning around me, and for a second, I thought how easy it would be to find another part of this walkway where no one would see me jump.

My fingers found a raised doorjamb, and I glanced up, the sign on the door indicated a bathroom, and I was so sick, my body rebelling against the emotional turmoil. I shoved it open, then slammed it shut, locking it against Doc Jen, and I barely made it to the sink before I vomited, the violent heaving straining my already injured body. There was the sharpest of pains in my side and a wetness spread across my gown. My stitches had opened, the wound exacerbated by my hasty movements.

"Fuck," I cursed, pressing a hand to my side in a futile attempt to stem the bleeding. I leaned against the sink, my reflection in the mirror a pale, haunted version of myself.

I'd survived a gunshot, but the wounds that ran deeper, the scars that weren't visible, those were the ones that felt impossible to heal, and they hurt.

Fuck, they hurt.

As I stood there, blood seeping through my fingers, the bathroom door was heaved open—some force used, the wood slamming back into the wall—and an avenging angel rushed to my side, a pissed Doc Jen peering in.

“You’ve opened your stitches,” Ryder stated as he reached me.

“You don’t say,” I snarled back at him, pressing my fingers to the blood, feeling it wet on my skin. I pulled my hand away, saw the scarlet stain. What if I pressed harder? Could I make it bleed more? Then it would be easy to lie down here and?—

“Fuck’s sake, Navy,” Ryder snapped, and lifted my arm over his shoulder, dragging me out.

“Get him back in bed,” Doc Jen snarled.

Jeez, was everyone angry at me? I chuckled, but the sound was more like a groan as Ryder near carried me back to my room, mumbling under his breath some nonsense about idiot frogmen.

“I’ll show you, idiot,” I tried to say, but it was a rumble in my throat that never left my lips.

“Whatever, Navy, you stupid asshole.”

He heaved me toward the bed, but then, as I thought he might shove me down and leave me, his touch gentled, and with my head tucked into his neck, he placed me down and helped me back onto the white sheets. He knew how to balance his strength with care, and for a moment, I didn’t want him anywhere near me even as his steady hold ensured I didn’t collapse onto the mattress. Behind him, Doc Jen issued orders, a flurry of motion as other people entered the room. The pain from my wound flared, a sharp reminder of how fragile I was. Ryder appeared to sense this, his grip tightening to take more of my weight.

Once I was on the bed, he didn’t let go. Instead, he made sure I was properly positioned, adjusting the pillows to provide better support. His help was unhurried,

each action deliberate and considerate.

“Okay, how does that feel?” he asked, his voice laced with concern, ignoring Doc Jen trying to get to me. It was as if he knew I needed time, and he stood by the bed, ready to adjust anything if needed.

I let out a breath. “You can go,” I managed to say, despite the discomfort, and he nodded. That was about all the thanks I could manage; all the apologies wrapped up in that single command. Then, he left the room, and Doc Jen fussed, and there was a bright light, then darkness.

I fucking hated the dark.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Twelve days had passed since we'd made it back to Kingscliff.

I'd found a space in a room set aside as a library, which was where I took any downtime—the parts of my day that I couldn't spend with August. It had a view of the ocean and the path leading to the pebbled beach. People walked down there. Only people we knew—this place was locked down tighter than a maximum-security prison—but I'd found out a lot of things from just watching. Like Zach could spend two hours staring out at sea, or that his sidekick Kai always came to find him after a while, then they'd bicker, and it was typical for them to end up in a scuffle. Or that Ethan and Josh liked to meet out there and kiss.

A lot of kissing.

And hugs.

I sighed, watching now, as Ethan pressed Josh down on a bench and hugged him tight.

I needed a hot and dirty fuck, which is what I assumed happened when a laughing Ethan tugged Josh into the building.

Restless, I closed my book, a biography of some guy I didn't know and didn't care about enough to stop staring out of the window. I wanted someone like Ethan had with Josh, a man who knew what I did, accepted it, loved me in spite of it, and could give awesome blowjobs—not that I knew if Ethan or Josh gave awesome blowjobs, but...

“Fuck’s sake,” I muttered, angry I was even having to sit around like an idiot. I could help Shadow Team, work their comm or something, but no, my job was to heal, rest, and most important, to keep an eye on August.

I wasn’t sure what Ethan thought he was going to do given August’s pain and inability to walk far—even action heroes had limits—but still, according to my last talk with Ethan, that was now my job.

I headed to the kitchen, stole two cupcakes frosted brightly with red and green, and scurried out before anyone saw me, despite the fact there were cameras everywhere, so someone watching would know.

Whoever watched this?

Someone at Sanctuary, I assumed? Or maybe Shadow Team had taken over security here?

I took the stairs, then headed straight for August’s room, knocking, and going in before I could get my usual grumpy “What!” Pleased there was no sign of Doc, which meant it was just him and me. I took the cakes into the kitchen and started the coffee, then sauntered back in. He was out of bed now, sitting in a chair, looking more like he was going to survive this, grumpy ass, and all, but his expression was twisted today, and he was tense and frustrated.

“God, I need to be out there,” August snapped, his gaze fixed past me and on some distant point beyond the room’s walls. “Chasing down Amos, not stuck in this damn bed.”

I understood his restlessness, the desire to be doing something, anything other than lying in a hospital bed. God, that was me—I wanted to be doing something. So, what did I say to help? “I know you want to be out there; I get it,” I said, trying to offer

some sort of comfort.

August turned his head to snarl at me—angry and frustrated. “Every day I’m here, Amos is out there, getting further away. I should be leading the charge, not lying here useless. Fuck your nice shit because it doesn’t fucking help.”

His words were sharp, but I knew they were born out of frustration and a sense of responsibility, not malice. “You’re not useless, August,” I countered. “What you did, the information you gathered on the trafficking, the drugs, and weapons, it’s invaluable. I’m sure Shadow Team is making progress because of you.”

He scoffed, turning his head away. “‘Progress’? They’re running in circles with nothing to show for it. They don’t know him like I do, and it doesn’t matter what I tell them, none of it leads to him. Fuck!” He grimaced and cursed again, and I didn’t know what to do.

So, I left.

But only to find something to distract us. I dragged in another chair, then decided we’d need a small table. He stared at me as I pulled things around and, with a bit of effort, brought in a table along with a board game this time, not cards—Sorry!.

“Army versus Navy,” I said as I set up the board.

August stared at the game grumpily. “I’m not a kid.”

“Tell me you didn’t just say that?” I demanded, a fist over my heart.

He stared at me, his lips thin, then rolled his eyes at my dramatics. “Guess it beats listening to your fucking monotone reading.” He was still grumpy, but I wasn’t stopping with my cheer-August-the-fuck-up offensive.

I offered him a choice of colors, two each, holding the pieces out to him, and after a moment of pretending not to care he took red and yellow, which left me blue and green.

“I haven’t played this since I was a kid,” I admitted, picking up a game piece. “My mom has this really old version, and we used to play it on a Sunday.”

“Shuffle the damn cards, Army.”

As we played, the atmosphere lightened a little—not too much, but enough that, despite everything, it felt good to just sit and play a simple board game. I even pulled out some of the healthy snacks I’d rooted from the fridge for me to munch. August was on a different kind of diet, which he described as mushy shit, and only grumbled a little when I reminded him he’d been shot in the gut. He did nibble on a cupcake but that was all.

When I was taking my turn, counting around the board, August took to staring out of the window, lost in thought, the card he’d picked up still in his hand. I’d spent a long time staring at him flat in bed, pale, ill, hurting, and feeling all protective, but now I got to check him out properly.

His appearance told a story of its own. He was compact, but every inch of him was defined by lean, efficient muscle, due to the rigorous training and demanding lifestyle of a Navy SEAL. His body was marked with scars, each one proof of a life spent in the service of his country, or at the hands of the cartel he’d infiltrated, I guess.

I noticed he didn’t have the normal SEAL tattoo, no trident, but there was a ring of thorns around his right arm, bold and stark against his skin. He was exactly the type of hardass I was attracted to, someone who wouldn’t hold back, who’d meet me head-on and challenge me.

I even found the grumpy parts interesting.

I was attracted to him, and it unsettled me. After all, he was someone I'd come to aid in a time of need, and jeez, my feelings were out of place, even freaking inappropriate given the circumstances.

Yesterday, I'd sat and watched him stare at the ocean, trying to rationalize the attraction to the intensity of combat and life-threatening shit, and nothing to do with seeing the raw and real parts of him. It had to be the bond formed through shared adversity, the kind of connection that often develops in high-stress environments, that was all.

So why did I want to hug him when I saw sides of August I bet most people hadn't. I'd seen his resilience, his, vulnerability in the face of pain, his rarer-than-unicorn-shit smiles, and his terror of not getting the job done. I wanted to know more, but it was easy to feel drawn to someone when you saw them in such a raw, unguarded state.

That had to be it.

But, as the days passed, I knew the truth—there was a genuine attraction to August the person, not just August the SEAL, and I didn't know what to do with the revelation, but whatever these feelings were, they could wait.

Still, I wanted to kiss and bite my way along his tattoos.

The fuck?!?!? Where did that come from?

August's hair was dark, not buzzed like in the photo with his fake husband and kid, more a tangle of messy locks and curls that seemed to have a life of their own, and that he'd grown as part of his Aubrey Mitchell persona. It gave him an unruly, but

cute look, one at odds with the hard man I'd witnessed at the compound.

Undercover tangles for the win because I'd love to...

No. Not going there.

I was losing my shit and seeing attraction where there was none.

I really need to get laid.

Only... his eyes were the darkest shade of gray, deep and intense, like storm clouds fading to silver on the outside, and they held a world of thoughts and emotions. Those eyes had probably seen things most people couldn't fathom and had witnessed the best and worst of humanity. They'd been hard as flint when he'd been in SEAL mode at the compound, but I'd also seen them soften on a couple of occasions.

And then, there were his dimples, an unexpected thing I'd found after he'd won his first game of Sorry.!. It was as if he had nowhere to put his glee in beating me, and it had forced a slow grin. This rare smile transformed his entire face, and yep, dimples popped, and I was feeling all attracted to him, and that was shit.

And off-limits.

And fuck, just because he'd been fake-married to a guy, didn't mean he was interested in guys or searching for anything with someone else.

As he stared far into the distance, I felt as if I could see beyond the SEAL, beyond the scars and the stern exterior, to the man underneath.

"What are you staring at, freak?" he asked and snapped me out of my daydream.

“I was staring at you, staring,” I said.

He muttered something, and turned up a Sorry! card, knocking one of my pieces back to home. Fucker.

By the time we were nearing the end of our third game, it was clear that August was the undisputed champion. He moved his final piece into the safe zone with a triumphant grin.

“And that’s three for three,” he declared, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied expression. “What did you say in that panic room about Army beating Navy?”

“We beat them where it matters.”

August fake-gasped, and I saw something in his expression—somehow, he’d forgotten where he was and the weight of everything.

“You mean you don’t think this was serious?” he teased.

“You’re ruthless, you know that?” I said with a mock scowl, but I couldn’t help smiling. It was good to see him like this.

August raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sorry at all,” he joked, enjoying his victory.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Yeah, I can tell. Remind me never to play board games with you for money. Best of seven?”

As we played game four, it became a backdrop to our conversation. “Is there any word on Amos?” he asked, all kinds of casual, as if he hadn’t been waiting to ask me all along. I took a moment to count, moving my piece along the board, sliding on one of his colors and taking out one of his pieces.

“Doesn’t Ethan brief you daily?”

“Yeah, but is he telling me everything?”

“You’re my team, and Ethan wouldn’t keep you out of the loop. You have access to the files, all of our data.” I gestured at the tablet by the side of the bed. “same as I do.”

He sighed, a mixture of frustration and regret, his gaze shifting from the board to the window. “I lost that fucker. All that work, and it ended in a gunfight.”

I made my next move on the board. “Yeah, about that.” I paused as he picked up his card.

He glanced at me. “About what?”

“You took out everyone who came at you. There was the potential to secure some of those guys, but you killed them all.”

“I knew more than all of them,” he said in a dead tone.

“But if we’d just—”

“No!” August was quiet for a moment, then his expression grew somber, his voice barely audible. “If you’d seen what some of them had done...” His dark eyes brightened with emotion, but he shut it down as quickly as it had flared.

Fuck. I was done sitting here, mired in memories and what-ifs, and not having anything to do.

“You wanna get out of here for a bit?” I stood and retrieved the wheelchair from the

corner.

August seemed surprised but nodded. I helped him, making sure he was comfortable before wheeling him out. He didn't even bitch about having to use the chair.

"Water," I said, recalling our conversation in the safe room. "Let's get you to the ocean, Navy."

The path to the small beach was quiet, and it was a typical April day in Maine, the snow that had blanketed the ground now a memory. Still, the chill in the air was enough to make me glad I was wrapped up, and I reached over and shoved August's beanie lower, so it covered all of his ears and almost his eyes.

He didn't scramble to avoid me or shove me away. He let me care for him.

Maybe, he'd even let me hug him, hold him close, and maybe even kiss him? Again, with this? Yep, I needed air. I was going mad.

As we reached the pebble-strewn beach, I parked us by a large rock that kept us out of the chilly wind. August was taking in the view, the expanse of the ocean stretching out before us.

"We don't get many moments like this," I said, staring over the water.

August nodded; his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Men like us. No, we don't," he agreed, then he glanced up at me.

"There was one morning, I was patrolling... overseas... and the sunrise was cool as fuck."

"Nice description there," August deadpanned.

“Well, it was big and empty and orange and pink. I’m a fighter, not a poet.”

I think I heard him chuckle. Or it could have been the murmur of the ocean.

“Where did you serve?” he asked after a while.

“Boiling hot deserts and ice-cold mountains. What about you?” I moved to sit on the rock next to him.

He considered me for a moment, then shrugged. “Classified.”

Asshole. “I dated a SEAL once.” His eyes widened. “Lasted exactly three fucks and a blowjob. All in one night. Impressive stamina.”

“We don’t do relationships.” He smirked, then his smile dropped. “Although, there were moments when I was with James, and I know it was all pretend, but yeah, moments when I imagined it could be real.” He flushed scarlet, probably embarrassed to have revealed so much.

I reached over to tug at the damn beanie again given he kept pushing it up. “What was James like?”

“Kickass, focused, worked at the DA’s office, knew what he wanted, and he wanted to root out the bad guys and be a good dad, all at the same time.” August shrugged.

I squeezed his arm, and he didn’t pull away, and for some stupid reason, I kept pushing.

Why did I do that?

“Annie is up in the house; I’m sure she’d love to hear about her dad?—”

“No. I said fucking no. Get me back to my room,” he demanded, shields in place, self-deprecating humor gone.

“Let’s just?—”

“Now, Army.” He struggled to get out of the chair, as if he was going to walk himself.

I heaved a sigh and encouraged him to sit down. “Sure thing, Navy.”

We were halfway back, silence all-consuming, and an apology on my lips, when we turned the final corner and walked straight into the worst thing of all.

Annie.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

“Shit,” I heard Ryder mutter, and he stopped so fast it jolted me.

I was past the point where it hurt now, healing well, desperate to get out of the room, and now the chair, and even though I was still riding that anger of him insisting I see Annie, I wanted to throw something at him.

A quip, a one-liner to make light of the situation.

I’d gotten too used to his smiles, and he was my anchor in the ocean of shit, where the world outside seemed to go on as usual, people living their lives, while I was stuck in a holding pattern.

“You see a shark, Army?” I snarked, but he still hadn’t shifted, and that was when I saw her—Annie, my little girl, with that guy Josh, who was always poking his head in my room asking me if I wanted anything.

Yeah, I wanted out.

He never listened, just freaking smiled at me.

He was talking with a hand puppet as they walked. Annie was laughing up at him, and jealousy stabbed me. What was she doing with him? Why did he get to see her smile?

But the burn of envy turned to ice in my chest—he would make a good dad, right? Always smiling, had a kid of his own, which he’d told me in detail when I’d been too broken to turn over and ignore him. Annie deserved a big brother, and a dad who was

stable—dads—or a mom maybe.

But his husband was Ethan, and Ethan was Shadow Team, and that made him vulnerable and...

My head hurt.

This wasn't some kind of parade for potential parents.

Fuck this. She was four, and entitled to smile at the man who was helping her, when I couldn't. Flashes of that last morning, of James and the pancakes, and Buzzy-Bear, and Annie's smiles made my chest tight. As they drew closer, she slowed down, frowning at the two of us—Ryder behind, me sitting in the damn chair. Her approach was hesitant, and she gripped Josh's hand, heading toward me with careful, measured, steps. I could see confusion in her eyes as she drew closer, then she passed by with a quick glance, chattering on with Josh, who glanced at me with an expression of something like sorrow. There had been nothing in her beautiful eyes—so like James's.

She didn't know me.

I didn't want her to remember me.

I didn't want to tell her about her dad, and Buzzy-Bear, and...

Fuck. I want her to remember me.

"Ryder, move."

"August—"

“Please.” I wasn’t demanding now, I was begging.

He didn’t argue, but pushed me in silence into the main house, waited for the old elevator, and neither of us talked as we headed up to my room. I got myself out of the chair, got myself into bed, laid down, and turned my back to Ryder.

“You can go now,” I said, monotone.

“If you want to talk?—”

“Just go.”

* * *

That night, after watching Annie down on the pathway, my dreams were vivid, filled with her and James. Annie was there, right in front of me, James holding her. She was laughing, her eyes sparkling, and he was blowing her a kiss. We were in a place that felt both familiar and surreal—a playground, maybe, or our backyard. The details were blurry, but the feeling was crystal clear—a sense of everything being okay, something I hadn’t felt in a long time.

I reached out to them both in the dream, my arms open. James let go of Annie’s hand and she ran towards me, her small feet pounding on the soft ground. The moment she reached me, I scooped her up, lifting her into the air as she giggled. The sound of her laughter was beautiful, and then James was there, and I was promising to keep them both safe.

As I held Annie close, spinning her around, I felt a surge of emotions—love, relief, a fierce protectiveness, a certainty that I would do anything for this little family. In that dream, Annie could know me, because I wasn’t a murderer driven by revenge and a thirst for killing.

But the dream changed, as it always did, James took her from me, making me promise to call, to tell him I was safe.

You need to be safe. Stay safe for me.

Then, there was blood, and pleading, and I woke myself up, with tears on my face, shaking, and so damn angry it burned, panting, and trying to catch my breath, scrubbing at my eyes.

I wouldn't get any more sleep now.

I checked my watch, five a.m. I used the bathroom and showered, then dressed in the loose sweats that formed half of my wardrobe, along with a collection of generic T-shirts in various colors. At least, it was better than a hospital gown, but still, the sweats sat low on my hips, weighing nothing, and felt wrong when I was used to wearing tight jeans and a holster. I made a coffee, searched for a halfway decent snack, then, finding none, stared out at the ocean as best I could, given sunrise was still an hour away.

At least, I could hear it.

I let myself out of the room, passing the cameras and sketching a wave at whoever might be watching before I headed down to the kitchen to find a real snack.

Chocolate.

Cookies.

One of those frosted cupcakes from Ryder that I'd turned down.

Low lighting ran through the entire house and only the main doors were locked at

night, so any one of the guests—me, the staff, or the kids—could walk around any part of the interior. There were several intriguing corridors, one with extra cameras and a key card lock, which I assumed was where the kid's dorms were, a tall woman armed to the teeth sat at a desk by the hall, and we exchanged nods.

Should I try to find Ryder's room? He might be awake, and the thought crossed my mind that he could make things better.

I had all this burning anger, and maybe if we sparred, I could get it out of me? My belly gave a sympathy wince, and I sighed. Fuck this shit. All these days, and I was done being an invalid, fucking Amos shooting me, fucking Amos deceiving me when I was trained to identify guys like him. Fucking everything. Finishing my walk to the kitchen, I grabbed a family-size bag of Doritos, stared at it, swapped it for candy bars, then with a put-upon sigh, put those back as well, and instead, grabbed a pack of chocolate-covered raisins, which were as healthy as it gets, I guess. Then, I made a hot chocolate and rounded the corner to a seating area, shocked to find someone else already there. Ryder. Snoozing on the sofa, the television on an infomercial about some magic stew pot thing. I stopped dead and backed out slowly.

"It's okay," Ryder murmured, his voice sleepy. "Come in and join the one-pot-wonder marathon." He stood, stretched tall, and I couldn't help but look. Come on, he was there, and his belly was flat, and he had a six-pack, and his low-hanging pajamas left nothing to the imagination.

Nothing.

"I should go," I said, scrunching the pack of raisins and grasping my mug tight.

"No, you have to watch. Did you know that this pot cooks two to six times faster than traditional methods?" Ryder asked, and I wasn't sure if he wanted an answer. "Imagine, I'm making a stew, and it cooks in minutes."

“You do that? Cook I mean?” I asked, intrigued. The most I’d ever cooked was heating up MREs when we were on mission.

“I am a master cook,” Ryder chuckled. “I can do a mean mac ’n’ cheese.”

I watched as he crossed to the snack cupboard and pulled out the Doritos, pouring some into a bowl, then sitting back down, and through all of it, I stood there, not quite sure what to do. Then, he patted the sofa next to him, and somehow, it felt right that I sit with him.

We watched the infomercial repeat, as it did every twenty minutes, and I relaxed as the dregs of the dreams faded away. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d dreamed of impossible things and woken up angry, but I’d never considered infomercials to send me back to sleep.

With soft light coming from the muted glow of the television screen, I felt a strange sense of calm. It was late, the rest of the world asleep, leaving Ryder and me, plus the guard outside the kids’ part, in this quiet bubble of time and space. My belly didn’t even hurt, and the raisins were enough sweetness to keep me happy.

Ryder stood, turning off the TV, plunging the room into near-total darkness. I followed suit, standing, feeling a mix of uncertainty and something else I couldn’t quite name. There was a tension in the air, a charged silence that seemed to speak louder than words.

“Bed,” he announced, breaking the epic stare-off we had going on, and I fell into step with him as we headed up the stairs to the medical wing.

“Your room is up here?” I asked, confused.

“Nah, I’m walking you to your door.”

“Where is your room?”

“Second floor, east corner. Why? You coming to visit?”

“No,” I said, then huffed a laugh. “Why would I do that?”

“Because we’re friends?” Ryder suggested and elbowed me in the arm.

“Sure, let’s go with that,” I deadpanned, and by that time, we’d reached the door, and I opened it, turning to say my goodnight—I could be polite when I wanted to. Only, he sidestepped me and shuffled inside, closing the door behind us.

We were alone in my room. And again, staring at each other not knowing what to do or say.

“Ryder?” One of us needed to say something.

“I think I’m going mad,” Ryder said at last, his voice was barely above a whisper, yet it cut sharply through the silence.

“Why?” I asked, trying to make out his expression in the dim light.

“All I can think about is kissing you. That’s madness, right?” His voice was tinged with a mix of confusion and sincerity. “I mean, you’re focused on the Amos thing, and you’re hurt, and?—”

Something inside me snapped. I closed the gap between us, my hands cradling his face, and I kissed him, driven by raw emotion. Tension and the anger of a dream, and attraction I’d refused to think was real made me snap.

The kiss was a collision of need and desire, a release of pent-up emotions. As our lips

met, the world around us seemed to fall away. The pain, the grief, the uncertainty—it all melted into the background, leaving only the two of us in that moment. It was reckless, but it felt like the most honest thing I had done in a long time. In that kiss, I wasn't a soldier—I was August, raw and open, connecting with someone who had come to mean something to me.

Ryder scrambled to hold on, gripping my hair, twisting his fingers in its messy length, tilting his head to kiss me deeper, hard against me, and groaning low in his throat. He pushed me, or guided me, or fuck knows, but I was against the door, and he moved, and he goddamned cradled me as I needed to be held, and he gentled the kiss, resting our foreheads together. This was the moment it was over—madness he'd said—and maybe I could convince myself of that, and then, he kissed me again. Slow. Gentle. Shifting so he was between my legs, but still not crushing me, achingly slow, and when he pressed his cock against mine, I swear I was close to losing it there and then.

It had been so long.

He slid a hand between us, tugging at my sweats, then his own, and our cocks were bare, sliding against each other, the rhythm steady as I lost myself in perfect kisses and murmurs of need.

“We need this,” he whispered against my lips.

I know that I used words in return. I mean, I don't know what I said, but he chuckled, and circled us both with a strong hold, and as our thrusting became jagged, I was lost in the chase to come.

“Need. Fuck.” I groaned, and my orgasm hit me hard, making my muscles hurt, feeling him stiffen against me, coming hard, and then, falling silent.

“Need,” he repeated, then he pulled up his pajamas, tugged up my sweats, and kissed me once more, so gentle I thought I might have imagined it.

When that kiss broke, and we pulled apart, a heavy silence hung between us.

“See you in the gym,” he murmured, and let himself out, and after a few moments, I sat on my bed, my side hurting, but my head buzzing.

What had I done?

What had we done?

And why did it feel so right?

* * *

Eric was one pissed-as-hell trainer.

PT sessions were a necessary part of my recovery, and we focused on strengthening my core muscles, which had been severely impacted by the gunshot wound blahblah... no undue stress on the healing tissues blah blah. I did listen the first time, but I didn't need to hear his lecture every day.

Yes, I was stubborn, and yes, I pushed too hard, so yes, Eric was quietly seething with everything I did that was just a little more than he asked me to.

Or a lot more.

Eric was a good guy, competent and professional, and while I'd tolerated him at first when it was all I could do to stay awake, I'd begun to appreciate his straightforward approach.

He told me to do certain exercises, first in the bed, then when I was more able, down in the gym in the basement.

I did the exercises, pushed too hard, and he got pissed.

But somehow our weird, him angry and me defiant, relationship worked, and I was improving every day.

“There’s pushing for progress, and then, there’s overdoing it,” Eric snapped. Again.

“I’m not?—”

“Don’t even with me,” he muttered and wouldn’t let me explain. “Freaking SEALs, never fucking listen.”

And that was something else—he was a Sanctuary guy, so he had experience with all branches of the military, yet somehow, he had it hard for the Navy SEALs. Or maybe, as he called us, moronic fucking heroic asshole frogmen. Sometimes, he used all of those words, sometimes only a couple of them, either way, he let me know, in no uncertain terms, that I was an idiot.

I respected the fact that he called it as it was—begrudgingly—but I wanted to heal, I wanted to be out there, and when I caught myself pushing too hard, I didn’t want to be pulled up on my idiocy.

I wanted to be told I was strong, and that I could do this.

I needed it as much as I’d needed to come all over Ryder’s tight abs in the early hours of the morning.

Each session left me exhausted, but I could feel myself getting stronger, more in

control of my body. The pain was still there, a constant reminder, but it was becoming more manageable day by day.

And after all the comments about me pushing too hard, as I finished a particularly tough set of exercises, Eric gave me a nod. “You’re exceeding expectations, August,” he said, checking his notes. “Another ten days at this rate, and you’ll be cleared for light duty.” He stared at me, daring me to suggest otherwise.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, feeling a surge of determination. “I’ll be out in three,” I said.

Just then, Ryder walked into the gym, catching the tail end of our conversation, limping, and not relying on his crutches now. He raised an eyebrow, a slight smile playing on his lips, his eyes narrowing on me, his gaze dropping to my shorts, then back up to my face. “Three days, Navy? Should I start the countdown?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You might want to,” I said, and I might have preened a little. Having him there, witnessing my progress, gave me an extra push.

Also, he was in shorts and a T-shirt, and boy, was he hot.

Sexy and gorgeous, rough around the edges, distracting, and far too often, up in my face. And what was worse was that I knew what he tasted like, and I knew the sounds he made as he orgasmed, and I knew he could cook mac ’n’ cheese.

Fuck. I knew way too much about someone I would never see again after I left here.

Eric, noticing my growing tension, and probably thinking it was about the ten-day thing, cautioned, “Remember, it’s about balance, August. Pushing too hard can set you back.”

I shot him a glare, the unspoken message clear: I knew my own limits. “I’m fine,” I snapped, more harshly than I intended.

I gritted my teeth, pushing through another exercise. “I don’t need babysitting. I need to be operational.”

Eric sighed,—then there was a note of firmness in his voice. “Let’s take a break, August. You’re doing great, but we don’t want to overdo it.”

I eased off, every muscle protesting, and as I sat there catching my breath, the room felt stifling, the walls too close. I was tired of this, tired of being confined, of being a patient, and when Eric left, with a warning for no more today, I was tired of my body letting me down.

Ryder didn’t come over to talk about last night, or this morning as it was, probably sensing my mood. Or maybe, he thought I regretted what we’d done.

I didn’t.

If anything, I wanted more.

I needed more.

I lay on the massage bed, feeling every ache in my muscles, and my mind couldn’t help but drift towards Ryder. For the first time since I’d joined the Navy at eighteen, I was feeling something for another man, and Ryder confused me.

His muscles, defined and evident under his fitted shirt, were all about strength and discipline, and I remembered touching them before I’d become lost in the act of getting off. But it was also the way he carried himself—it was raw sex and power, despite the limp.

All I could imagine was him striding over here, straddling me, and grabbing my cock and making me come all over again.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I finished my session at the gym, pushing myself hard on the weights. It was a necessary release, despite the epic sex, a way to channel the restless energy that had been building up inside me over how the hell August and I would navigate what came next. I wiped down the equipment, grabbed a towel and my water bottle, and made my way across the room to where August still hadn't left the massage bed.

The memory of what had happened between us was still fresh in my mind and just thinking about it was enough to get me hard, and given his eyes were at crotch height, and I was in shorts, he was getting an eyeful. He ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip, then stared up at me, and it was everything I could do not to take myself out and beg him to suck me.

What am I doing?

"Ethan wants you at the swimming pool," I blurted, then realized what I'd said when August's eyes widened. "Not like in porn. I mean, Swim Central is where Shadow Team is."

He snorted a laugh. "You immediately assume I equate pools with porn?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, yeah. Doesn't everyone? Now, just get up."

I held out a hand to help him, but he gave a noncommittal grunt in response, swinging his legs off the bed and standing. He was steady on his feet, and his muscles tensed as he levered himself up and stood in front of me, only inches away. If I leaned in, I could kiss him, right in front of the cameras and god knows who else might walk in.

I stepped back. “Hey,” I greeted him, trying to keep my voice casual, as if what happened hadn’t shifted something fundamental between us.

August had a faint smile on his face. “Hey yourself,” he replied, then very deliberately checked the nearest camera, turned, and adjusted his erection.

“I want you on your knees,” August murmured.

I swallowed. “Fuck.”

“Will you go to your knees for me?”

“Will you for me?”

August chuckled, and I would have done anything for him. The air between us was charged with want, but August backed off, and we knew that now wasn’t the time to explore it further.

“We should get going,” I said, glancing at the clock. “Ethan’s expecting us at eleven. So, I’ll come get you ten before.”

August tipped his chin. “I’ll meet you by the back door off the kitchens.”

“The chair?—”

“I’ll walk,” he said, a hint of determination in his voice as he gave me a long look, something unreadable in his gaze.

I admired his resolve and that stubborn streak, which meant he refused to be seen as weak or dependent, while at the same time wanting to push him to sit and take care of himself. Still, I didn’t argue, because if I were him, I wouldn’t want to be in a

wheelchair either.

As we went our separate ways, heading to our respective rooms to prepare, my head was spinning. The attraction was so hot I'd never felt anything like it before, but with the impending team meeting and the responsibilities that came with it, those feelings had to be shelved, at least for the time being. We'd both been hurt; we were mending; we needed to put a stop to Amos. Together.

And then, me on my knees for him.

Because that was inevitable.

* * *

August walked with determination to push through, as if he were channeling every ounce of his SEAL training, refusing to let his physical condition dictate his presence. As we grew closer to Swim Central, I noticed a shift in him. The tension eased, and it wasn't just about the walking; it was deeper than that. He was transforming, right before my eyes, into the hardened man who had taken down cartel crews, from vulnerable human to a lethal, efficient, SEAL.

When we arrived at the unique office space, I watched closely for August's reaction. The place was still a work in progress, a far cry from what it would eventually become, but as August took it all in, his eyes widened.

"This is it," I said, gesturing around the space. "Shadow Team HQ aka Swim Central because, you know, it's built in a pool."

August's gaze swept over the area, taking in every detail. "Okay," he murmured, his voice tinged with genuine admiration. It was clear he was already assessing how the team operated, how he would fit into the dynamic. I could see the wheels turning in

August's head, but he didn't say anything else, and when Ethan walked toward us, Luca beside him, I felt odd.

I didn't have any other word for it.

The thought of going back out there, heading into danger, him lying somewhere bleeding out again made my chest tighten and my head hurt.

Somehow, August had gotten under my skin, and it wasn't just sex—he was determined to take Amos down. He stopped by the wall containing photos and brief bios of the dead men at the compound. The patchwork of photos—some taken when alive, some when they were dead—was a collection of all those people August had killed, plus the ones I'd taken down.

August was quiet at first, his gaze moving along the photos. Then, he pointed to the first one. "I saw him beat a kid," he said, his voice tight. He mimed a gun with his fingers. "Dead," he murmured, then gestured at the next photo. "This one," he continued. "I saw him grab a man and slit his throat for trying to protect his family." He made a bang sound as he pointed at the man's head where a perfect circle was front and center.

As he focused on another, his voice cracked. "This fucker raped a young woman. I don't know how old she was. I couldn't stop it... I was there too late. She bled out." Another bang, another finger gun, and each one was loud in the otherwise silent room. Ethan caught my attention, and I gave a subtle shake of my head. The compound had been cleared out, every person dead apart from Amos, and most of it lay on August's shoulders.

He gestured to others, his bang sounding more and more strained. With each photo, with each snap, the weight of what August had seen and done became more apparent. I exchanged another glance with Ethan, who nodded to Luca before both men left,

giving us space. I got the sense that August was either going to come out of this high with justifying each kill, or he'd be broken.

Either way, I'd be there for him.

August's hand trembled as he pointed at a photo of Eli, and he rested the flat of his left hand on the wall to support himself. "He deliberately cut MDMA with fentanyl, and he fucking laughed. Twenty kids at the Carterville University ended up in the hospital, five of them didn't make it, and he was pissed he only got twenty-five percent." His voice was a whisper. "Bang."

Then, he pointed at a photo of Diaz. "And him... he liked to torture..." August's voice trailed off, his eyes closing as if to shut out the memories. In that moment, he seemed smaller, the weight of his experiences pressing down on him.

I reached out and put a hand on his arm, a gesture meant to offer some comfort. He jumped at the contact, his eyes snapping open, meeting mine. There was a vulnerability in his gaze that I'd never seen before, pain at the cost of the private war he'd waged and the things he'd seen.

In that moment, words weren't enough. All I could do was offer my silent support. August was a warrior, a protector, but he was also human, and the horrors he'd witnessed were a heavy thing to carry.

"Fuck," August snapped, the word was raw. In that charged moment, he turned to me, gripping the back of my neck with an urgent, almost desperate grip, pulling me towards him.

I barely had time to react before his lips crashed into mine. The kiss was fierce with the emotions August had kept bottled up. There was anger, pain, helplessness, all conveyed in the urgency of his touch. For a moment, I was stunned, but then, I

surrendered to the kiss. My own hands found their way to his waist, steadying him, grounding him. I could feel the tension in his body, the rigid lines of his muscles giving way to something more pliable, more human, and he leaned against me.

The kiss was a release of frustration and grief, of the horrors he'd seen, and everything bled out of him in the connection.

As we separated, both of us were breathing hard, faces inches apart. August's eyes were closed, his face taut, all that conflict between soldier and man was written in his expression, and he looked vulnerable. The room around us, the photos on the wall, the mission at hand—all fell away. There was just August and me, and the unspoken thing was that I understood.

After a moment of heavy silence, August opened his eyes and stumbled back, releasing his grip on my neck. His voice was softer, tinged with a hint of remorse. "I'm sorry," he said, his gaze flickering away for a moment. "I shouldn't have... It's just all this," he gestured, encompassing the room and everything unspoken between us. "It's what I did, what I had to do, for James and Annie." August met my gaze again, and I could see him wrestling with his instinct to be all stoic and not crack in front of me.

"I get it," I said, stepping a little closer, but respecting the space he seemed to need.

We stood there for a few moments in silence as the emotions settled, and then, he was finally coming back to the room. He glanced around, blinking, as if he'd just realized where he was, and he saw there was no one else there who'd witnessed his break.

"Let's do this, yeah?" I asked.

When he nodded, I gave him a small smile of encouragement. I headed out to find Ethan who was outside with Luca and indicated they could come back in. Ethan and I

exchanged loaded glances—we'd seen this before, we'd see it again, hell, we'd been through it ourselves.

Ethan briefed us on the current situation with Amos. August stood straight, his hands clasped behind his back, shoulders back as he listened, even though we were both already familiar with most of the information.

“Amos has been hard to pin down. He's gone to ground,” Ethan summarized. “But we've been tracking various aliases he's been using and following the flow of money through several offshore banks. It's led us to a location in the middle of Montana, a place that's pretty much off-the-grid.”

Ethan flicked the biggest of screens, displaying satellite images of the area. It was rugged terrain, sparsely populated, with dense forests and rolling hills—a perfect hideout for someone wanting to stay undetected. There were a few buildings scattered across the landscape, old farmhouses and barns that looked as if they hadn't been used in years, but other than that, it was river, trees, open grassland, and mountains in a ring around the space.

“We have satellite images of the area, but no concrete proof that Amos is there,” Ethan continued, pointing to one of the structures on the screen. “The only images that make sense given how remote they are is this, a likely spot for him to lay low.”

“Do we know that he's definitely the one running this?” August asked after a pause. There was still doubt in his voice, still regret that he hadn't seen through the man.

As if he knew what August needed, Ethan shifted the focus away from location and money trails to Amos. “Amos Harrington, you know him as Amos Stratton, thirty-two. To all intents and purposes, he was clean-cut, nothing on paper at least, adopted by the Stratton family. His parents, Evie and Dom Harrington, died about ten years

ago, drive-by shooting; the dad was already a big player in a cartel based out of New Mexico, put his son out to another family for various reasons—hiding him I guess. We used the logo on the cap you mentioned to get us the link to the New Mexico Lobos football team and worked our way out.” Ethan glanced at us. “Amos Stratton inherited everything, that’s where the killing started, him killing I mean. He moved the entire operation to the Carolinas, and more specifically, the Cooper River area. Over the last decade, he’s grown it into something substantial.”

I glanced at August, gauging his reaction. His face was an unreadable mask, but I could sense the wheels turning in his head.

“Which is where the DA’s office came into play,” he murmured.

Ethan gave a sharp nod. “Sanctuary is following up on the DA’s office, and it was clear James’s death was to warn him away from pursuing leads he had.”

“I know it was. It’s what the cartel did. It’s what Amos and his lieutenants did.”

“We found something else. You might want to look at this alone.” Ethan’s tone was calm, but I caught a flicker of worry in his expression.

Was this something to do with James? I wanted to stay, to be the rock he could lean on, to be the one who tried to understand his pain, but if this was personal, if this was more than he could bear, then maybe he should do it alone.

“I’ve seen photos of James’s body before,” he said, his tone dead.

“This isn’t that. It’s Annie.”

Silence. Luca backed out, and August tensed. I wanted to reach for him, but in the end, I didn’t have to decide if it was a good thing or not because he gripped my hand

and held tight.

“What about Annie? What did Amos do?”

“Evidence suggests Clara was related to Amos, third cousin, and he pulled her in as a care giver for Annie, and there are photos.”

“Please, no,” August pleaded. “Did he hurt her? I don’t want to see...” The possibilities of what Amos might have done to Annie was too awful to comprehend. How could any person bear this much pain? How could a child?—

“Shit, no, I didn’t mean... fuck...” Ethan threw up some images, but they were of Amos and Annie. Posed photos, one of a Christmas tree, playing happy family as if Amos deserved to be with Annie.

As if he was Annie’s parent.

August was silent, and then, he swallowed. “Tell me when we’re killing him. I want to be the one to do it.”

That was all he said before he strode out of the office and up the old pool steps to the main door, vanishing outside.

Of course, I followed.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

With a view of the ocean, taking in the cool air, I couldn't stop thinking about Annie and how I didn't want to be near her. Guilt, worry, you name it, I was feeling it. How was I supposed to step into her life when I wasn't anyone important to her? I mean, after everything I'd seen and done, what could I tell her that wouldn't be drenched in blood?

Was Amos better for her? How did Amos have her affection when he was the worst of humanity, and me...

I was broken into pieces.

Was I better than him?

What if I spoke to Annie, and the two of us ended up moving somewhere quiet, and I pretended I'd never desired to kill so many people in revenge for her dad, or worse, for things I'd seen those people do. I was mortified I'd let my cock lead me to forcing myself on Ryder, but, standing there by myself, I almost thought letting out all that emotion didn't make me weak. I felt strong, and it made me human. Breaking down in front of Ryder, showing that side of me, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing?

Maybe it showed it was possible to trust him.

But I still had to keep it together, at least until I figured things out.

For now, this quiet moment was what I needed. A bit of time to myself to think and get ready for what was coming. Like talking to the therapist about Annie. That was going to be tough, but I had to face it.

I heard footsteps and knew it was Ryder before I even saw him.

“Hey,” he said, coming up beside me. “Everything all right?”

I sighed—might as well be straight with him. “Not really.”

He didn’t say much, just stood there, letting me talk, and for some godforsaken reason, that was all I wanted to do.

“Sorry about that...”

“What?”

“Kissing you like that.”

“Don’t apologize for that.” He leaned in to bump shoulders. “It was...” He wrinkled his nose. “Is it wrong to say it was hot when you were clearly upset?”

“Probably.”

“It was hot though. I felt all big bad protective hero.” He smirked.

I wanted to shove him at first, but his humor pierced the introspection I had going on, and let some light in. “Yeah, it was.”

“I rock,” he teased, and we sat on the large rocks in companionable silence again.

“You know what scares me more than anything?” I blurted after a while.

“Spiders? Snakes? My sexy ass? I mean, I hate snakes, but why anyone would hate on my ass is another thing altogether.”

I side-eyed him, wondering if he were trying to make me snap out of this, but all he did was meet my steady gaze with curiosity and the hint of a smile, and something shifted inside me. I really wanted another kiss, because when he was kissing me, it was as if I didn't have to think—as if he was caring for me, despite everything. Instead of kissing, I fell back on humor.

“Jesus, Army, what kind of soldier hates innocent little snakes?”

“Don't change the subject.” Ryder let out an exaggerated huff, and we exchanged smiles. “So, Annie?”

“What if I talk to her and tell her about her dad, and she never remembers me?” I asked, feeling the words heavy in my throat.

Ryder didn't try to sugarcoat things. “You knew her dad. You tried to help him. That's gotta count for something.”

“I was only in their lives from just after her first birthday, six months is all, she was a baby.”

“But James and you were a couple, right?”

“What?”

“Fake-married, but I'm guessing you were together?”

My heart hurt. “It was easy with him,” I admitted. “Does everyone know about me and him?”

“Was it supposed to be a secret?” Ryder asked after a pause, worried. There wasn't much in my official file, most of it redacted, and the stuff about James and Annie

would have been buried deep—still, not deep enough for Ryder and this Shadow Team not to dig up. But the fact Ryder assumed this about me, and that others would judge me for something I was failing at, was too hard.

“Not to you fuckers it seems,” I snapped, and Ryder winced, and my ire slid away like it was nothing. It wasn’t fair for me to take it out on him. “Sorry.”

“I think you’re entitled.”

“Sleeping with her dad sure doesn’t make up for the rest of it.”

“What, you mean, the bits where you turned in a significant amount of the cartel to Sanctuary, or saving two trucks full of trafficked kids?”

“I didn’t... I...”

“Twenty-one kids,” Ryder said and leaned back on his elbows, tilting his head toward the weak spring sun. “Sanctuary found homes for the ones who didn’t have families and put the money in to make sure all the kidnapped kids got a good start in life. That’s on you passing the information to us. The rest... every person on that wall in there that you killed, well, that’s something you’ll work through the same as the rest of us bad guys who started out good and had to do things to survive that we’d never have contemplated before, and yeah... that’s all I have to say.”

We sat in silence again, and hatred burned inside me at Amos for thinking he had any hold over her, but amidst that anger, there was a flicker of determination.

“I’m not Annie’s daddy,” I muttered to myself, a mantra to remind me of my place in her life. James had trusted me to care for them both, and I’d let him down. “I want to make sure she goes to a good family, but... me? That’s not happening.”

I had to unravel the tangle of emotions that had built up over the past years. Maybe a counselor was a good idea, and if I could start the process of figuring out how to be in Annie's life as a friend, then surely, that was a good thing?

After Amos was gone. After I put a bullet between his eyes.

"You and her, you'll work it out," Ryder said. "You're not the same guy you were, but that doesn't mean you can't be a good person in her life. It's about how you go forward, not what happened before."

He had a point. It was about what I did now, about trying to be there for her in whatever way I could. But it was also naive. I'd changed from someone who wanted to be one of the good guys to a man who was nothing but bad.

But for being in Annie's life, finding something in that innocent connection? Maybe that could happen one day.

"Hey, Army?"

"Yeah?"?

"Thank you," I said, glancing at him. "For listening. For just being here."

He gave a small nod. "Always," he replied.

"Not sure it fixes anything though, I mean, in my head."

"I'm not a miracle worker, Navy." Then, he snorted a laugh, and somehow, it lessened the hatred for Amos burning within me, only now amidst that anger, there was a flicker of determination.

“I need to go talk to Dr. Simmons.”

“Okay. You want me to go with?—”

“No, it’s cool.”

“Well, if you need more kisses, you know where I am.”

“Ass.”

We had an entire unspoken conversation about what I was doing next, and the last thing I wanted was to fall apart in front of him again, so I left him with a sketched wave and headed inside.

Every step through the building echoed, sounding too loud in my ears. My head was a mess. Thinking about everything with Annie, and then there was Ryder as well. The thought of seeing Annie again, seeing James in her eyes, was freaking me out; the thought of Ryder getting under my skin was doing the same. Every press on my senses was too much, and I felt like I was on the edge of losing it.

“Ryder messaged me,” Dr Simmons announced from behind me, making me whirl in defense. He held up his hands in innocence. “Said you wanted to talk.”

“This is hard,” I blurted.

He gestured at his door, waiting for me to go in. I took a seat at the bench in the window, the ocean at my back, not wanting to sit in the damn chair facing the one he took.

“No one said it would be easy,” Dr. Simmons said. “What is this about?”

“Annie. And...” I sighed. “Everything else.”

“Okay—”

“I feel like I’m breaking apart.” I curled my fingers into my hair.

Dr. Simmonds’ eyes widened, then he nodded.

“Like, the idea of Annie growing up without really knowing I was in her life at all is a good thing, and then, a bad thing, both actually, at the same time. So, I stay away because it’s the easiest thing to do, because I have to take down Amos, and the blood on me...” I stopped, bracing my hands on my thighs. “Ethan showed me photos, like this fucking family album, of Annie with Amos, and when I see that she formed an attachment to someone as evil as him, I just want to lose my shit, because he’s evil, and I’m not as wicked as him, right? But I was just in her life for pretend, and I look at myself in the mirror, and I’m cursed.”

“Okay, so?—”

“Can you help Annie remember me? And help her forget about Amos and Clara?”

He took me interrupting him well enough, sinking lower into the plush chair of his and glancing at the glass ceiling, focusing there as he spoke. He was giving himself time to prepare an answer, and I tried not to interrupt to hurry him along, but what I really wanted was all the answers.

“Working with Annie, a child who’s been kidnapped and thrust into another life is a delicate process. It requires a combination of patience, understanding, and the use of therapeutic techniques tailored to the child’s age and emotional state.”

“And in layman’s terms?”

He continued. “Okay, in Annie’s case, we’re using a variety of methods. Play therapy is one approach, allowing her to express herself through toys and games, which can help her process her emotions and experiences. Storytelling is another tool we use to help her access her early memories and reconnect with her real father.”

“James,” I said, in a soft voice.

“Yes. Our primary goal is to create a safe and supportive environment where Annie feels comfortable expressing herself. Lizzie is our resident child psychologist, and she is working with Annie to help her understand her past, differentiate it from the false reality she was forced into, and ultimately, heal from the trauma she has endured.”

“Did Amos ever hurt her?” I forced out the question even though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Surprisingly, no,” he concluded. “He gave her everything she needed, and we need to unravel that father figure approach he was using. There is some residual damage—she had a toy that Amos called Daddy-James, and he made her learn that the toy was bad and needed to be hidden away or punished.”

“That fucking asshole.”

“If that is the worst of it, then it’s something we can work with. This is a gradual process, and each child responds differently, but I promise you that with time and the right therapeutic interventions, we are trying our hardest to get her back to you.”

“Not me. I was just a temporary blip in her life. But a family? One I can know about first maybe, make sure it’s a good one?”

He frowned. “The ultimate aim would be to help Annie reclaim her true identity and

connect her to James. Hopefully, through memories of you?”

“I’m fucked up.”

“We have therapies in place to help with your PTSD, as well.”

I reared back. “I don’t have freaking PTSD,” I snarled.

Dr. Simmonds flinched but returned my gaze steadily. I didn’t regret what I’d done. I was keeping this country safe, and then taking out the bad guys on home soil, so there was no freaking way I was scarred by any of it.

Sure, I had nightmares, but they were all about me messing up Annie’s life, not about the faces of the people I’d killed. Soldiers in war, the bad guys, the black and white of it all, I had a handle on it. I was good with what I’d done, reconciled it in the moral balance sheet I had inside me.

But then, why was I pushing Annie to one side? Why wasn’t I telling her who I was, and hugging her and telling her about things we’d done with her daddy? Making chocolate cookies? The trampoline in the garden. Watching kid’s movies? Why wasn’t I promising her nothing would hurt her again?

Because I’m ashamed that someone got to James.

Because I regret I was too late.

Because I haven’t come to terms with anything at all.

Because all I remember is fire and twisted metal and James dead, and imagining Annie in the car, trapped, and calling for her daddy.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“PTSD isn’t always obvious, it’s insidious and it colors outside the lines. It messes with your head, and so far, you’ve had it in a box, chained up, but bits of it, tiny tendrils, are creeping out and twisting your thoughts.”

I shuddered. What he explained was hard to hear because I was me, and I was okay being me. Wasn’t I? What was I doing? Closing down my heart to protect Annie from me, or to protect myself from the decisions I’d made?

He stared at me, kind of thoughtful, as the epiphany rolled through me.

“Kids are tougher than we give them credit for,” he said. “As she grows up, you can explain, you can be honest, show her the kind of man her dad was in the time you knew her. Then, when she’s old enough, you can tell her what drove you to find her, and why you want revenge, and you can get her to understand your thought process and the decisions you made and let her decide what she thinks.”

“She could hate me.”

“Or she could love what you tell her and hug you so hard that it makes you cry.”

That image was too much, a flare of hope in my heart, the guilt, and so much sadness it choked me, and I swallowed emotion. SEALs didn’t freaking sob their hearts out to brain doctors, they were strong, and fearless, and nothing stopped them.

“Does she remember me at all?” I asked.

“Bits,” he said, and there was hope again, stealing my breath. “She remembers her ‘Gust,’ but it’s random bits and pieces. We’re working on making those memories come forward.” He glanced at his notes. “She associates you with a toy called Buzzy-

Bear. Does that mean something to you?"

Guilt and pain flooded me, and I couldn't speak. I still had Buzzy-Bear, in a lockbox back home.

I could ask someone to send it to me. To send everything to me.

I wanted to give Buzzy-Bear to her myself.

"Do you think... can I ask you...?" I stopped and huffed at the fact I couldn't even get my words out. "Do I even have a right to be in her life?"

Dr. Simmons gave it to me straight. "What you've been through, what you've seen and done, and the choices you've made, it's huge," he acknowledged, "but it never takes away from you being there for the last moments of her normal life."

"Okay."

"Did you have a physical relationship with James?"

I huffed. "Isn't that in my file?"

He seemed confused. "No."

Oh, so Sanctuary or Shadow Team or whoever hadn't shared that with Doc.

There was a question there for sure. "I liked him. He was a good man. It hurt to lose him, and not just because it was on my watch, and I'd let him down."

"I understand."

Did he understand? I knew he'd served, so maybe he did.

"It's not about what you think she deserves. It's about Annie, and what she needs, and right now, she needs memories of her dad. You're working on yourself, for her. That's what's important."

"Okay. And what if I don't want to start this until after we're done?"

"Done with finding Amos? Completing the mission? Hopefully coming back alive?"

I winced at that, then lifted my chin. "Yes."

Dr. Simmons didn't curse me out, or judge me, or tell me I was wrong, and somehow, his silence was way worse, so I filled in the gaps.

"You think I should stop, and be here for her?"

He tapped the notebook in his lap. "Do you?"

That wasn't fair, to turn the question back on me, because my head was spaghetti, and I had no freaking idea what I wanted

"Do you have fond memories to call on? Ones with just Annie?"

I shook my head, then a warmth flooded me when I realized that yes, I did have something. "I remember," I began, my voice tinged with nostalgia, even though it hurt to recall the details. "it was warm. Summer, the last happy time, the day before..." I paused. "Before."

"Okay?"

“James was in the house, and Annie and I were in the backyard, and she had this tiny plastic pool, it had these Disney princesses all over it, and the water in it couldn’t have been more than six inches deep, but to her, it was like a vast ocean. She was wearing a purple swimsuit with this flower pattern and a little sunhat, and she grinned so hard as she splashed around in the water.”

I could feel a smile tugging at the corners of my lips as the memory came to life, even though the despair still clung to me. “I sat on the grass, watching her, and she turned to me with curious eyes, same as James’s, all big and blue. She held out her hand, and I reached out to hold it. We sat there, just the two of us, in our own little world. It was a simple moment, but it felt like the most beautiful thing in the world. And then James came out,” I continued, my voice wavering. “He sat down next to me, and in that instant, I don’t know how, but it was as if I was being given this family.” Grief collected in my heart and trickled down my cheeks in tears. I’d forgotten this moment.

“Go on,” he encouraged.

“They were important to me, and James mentioned something about how when everything was over, maybe we could date for real,” I continued, my tone growing somber as I recalled my reaction to the suggestion. I’d been horrified, scared... hell, terrified. “There was no one who wanted Annie. His parents cut him and her out of their lives; there’s no cousins, siblings.” I paused for a moment; my chest tight. “He said he wanted to make sure that if anything ever happened to him, that I would protect Annie, find her a new home... But I stopped him from talking. I reassured him that he was safe, that it was me who was in danger, right? And then, the next day...”

The weight of those unspoken fears hung in the air. At the time, I couldn’t have imagined the series of events that would unfold, leading me down a path of danger and darkness. But I’d believed we were safe, and that I could protect us from

anything the world might throw our way.

“So, you promised James you’d look out for his daughter?”

I glanced up at Dr. Simmons. “Yeah”

“And how does it feel to think you have to break that promise?” He wasn’t accusing me, he was asking me to consider everything, and his question hit me like a ton of bricks. I’d promised James I would do that, and this wasn’t about my own self-doubt or what I believed I deserved. Annie needed James, not me, but my journey to healing wasn’t just about me anymore. It was about being there for her, being someone steady in her life. Then, I asked an impossible question.

“Will you look after her until I’m back?” From killing Amos.

He sighed but nodded. “If you come back.”

“You think I shouldn’t go?”

“What do you think?”

I hated the questions with the heat of a thousand suns.

“I think I need a safer world for Annie.” I lifted my gaze to meet his. “No, I know I need a safer world for her, one without Amos in it.”

He had to be used to sitting opposite people like me because he didn’t even flinch.

“And then?”

“Then, I’ll come back.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Not sure what else to do, I headed back to Swim Central and found Ethan. “Can we talk, Cap?”

Ethan picked up his coffee and led me into a room that smelled of disuse. “Used to be the changing area, going to rip out the plumbing and turn it into an equipment locker.”

I noticed hooks on the wall, low benches, the showers in the corner, but could already imagine it being a hub for Shadow Team.

“Did you talk to August?” Ethan sat on one of the benches. “I get the concerns about the guy.”

I took a moment before I answered. “It’s hard for him to see the bigger picture when he’s focused on revenge, but I also believe he’s more determined than ever to make things right.”

Ethan’s expression was somber. “I’ve seen too many good people turn into loose cannons out there, Ryder. Too many lives lost because someone couldn’t control their anger or pain.”

I understood the truth in Ethan’s words. “I get it. I’ve seen it too. But there’s something about August. He wants to protect Annie, to ensure she never has to go through what she did again. And he wants closure for himself. He’s not doing anything that we wouldn’t do.”

Ethan sighed; his gaze distant as he considered my words. Finally, he spoke, his voice

filled with a weary kind of wisdom. “I get he’s trying to survive, and protect what matters to him, and we know that these gray situations often arise in complex, real-world scenarios where there are no simple or straightforward answers...”

“You sound like you swallowed an encyclopedia.”

Ethan dipped his chin. “Research.”

“There’s no black-and-white here. Amos is responsible for the hit, and maybe, that is what set him on this journey, but now...”

“He’s seen a lot. But sending him out into the field without some kind of psych clearance could put the rest of us in danger.” An understanding passed between us, born from years of experience and the weight of our shared past. In a world where the boundaries between right and wrong blurred, we knew that, sometimes, all we could do was hold on to our humanity and hope to make a difference in the lives of those we cared about.

“Then, we ask for volunteers. I’ll go. Just August and me if it comes to it.”

Ethan snorted a laugh. “So, I go to my team of heroic idiots and suggest they choose whether to run headlong into danger? Any guesses how many will say they’ll do it? All of them.” I couldn’t argue with that. “Including me. But I have a new responsibility to the team, to the new guys, to you and Luca, and to myself.”

“Then, don’t offer it to anyone else—August and I will go in with a two-man op?—”

“That’s not how this new team works.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I knew that I would have August’s back for whatever it took to get to Amos—I’d seen the way he’d stared when he’d shut that

damn door on us. I owed him a takedown.

“One question,” Ethan murmured.

“Sure.”

“You’ve gotten close to August,” he began.

I met his gaze head-on. He’d seen the kiss and had to know that something had happened. After all, he’d hooked up with Josh after a skin job had gone wrong and look at them now. Passions flared in intense situations.

“As close as he’ll let me, which isn’t that close.”

“Do you trust him not to go off-book? Do you trust him to play his part in the team?”

“I’ll watch him every moment.”

Ethan sighed. “That wasn’t what I asked you.”

“I don’t have an answer.”

“I can’t put the team at risk on you saying you’ll watch him,” he said.

“I understand, but he’s a team player, a SEAL to the core, and he’s got a heart, Cap.”

Ethan was lost in thought for a moment. “I’ll work something up with Aria, ask for volunteers to go in alongside you and August.”

“Thank you.”

We stood and met in the middle, clasping hands before he pulled me into a bro hug. “Watch him,” was all Ethan said, and then, we separated, him back to Swim Central, and me to find August.

As I contemplated the decision to trust August, I did wonder for a moment if I was being led by my dick, seeing things in August that weren’t there, then placing the weight of an entire team’s safety on his judgment.

So how did I fix this feeling?

First off, I needed to track August down.

I found him on the walkway and stood close to him, inhaling the scent of the leather jacket he’d borrowed from someone, and the citrus of his shower gel. I wanted to hold hands, but it was stupid. Both of us watched Annie as she played tag with one of the other kids. Her laughter echoed in the air, and a faint smile tugged at my lips, but when I glanced at August, he was distracted, torn, and I wished I knew what to say. His hands were in fists, he was vibrating with tension, and every time it seemed she might look up at us, he moved out of sight. Eventually, she grew tired and settled on a sofa with a teddy bear, drifting into a peaceful slumber. Josh, along with his son, Ben, were down there with some other kids, and I knew Josh kept a protective eye on her.

“Annie is safe here,” he whispered, “all these people care for her.” Then, he turned to leave.

I couldn’t help but break the silence. “You doing okay?”

He hesitated for a moment before responding. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just need to find Amos.”

My gaze remained steady, and I voiced a question that had been lingering in my

thoughts. “What’s your plan when you do find Amos?”

His jaw clenched. “What do you want me to say?”

I leaned against the wall. “What do you want to say?”

“More fucking questions,” he muttered, then scrubbed at his hair. “Fuck, I don’t know,” he admitted, frustration lacing his voice. “Amos took Annie, he had no reason to, which means he had to be responsible for killing James, which... look; I can’t let him continue to affect our lives. I have to confront him, for Annie’s sake, for the people he’s hurt, and for closure.”

I reached out a hand and waited for him to take it, only a little surprised when he grasped it and laced our fingers. August and I stood there in silence.

“We’re leaving in the morning,” I said.

He nodded, then tugged me closer for the gentlest of kisses. I wished for a moment that the world would fade away, that we could escape the shadows of our past, but reality had a way of holding on, and we had to confront it.

“I need...” he began.

I knew what he meant, and it was right to head back to my room. I squeezed his hand gently, signaling that it was time to go, then I turned and started walking, leading us through the corridors of the facility. August followed, our steps matching, tension so thick I could cut it with a knife.

As soon as my door shut, I crowded him against the door. He could take me down in seconds—I’d seen his moves—but I’d fight him for every inch.

“This could be more,” I said, leaving no room for discussion.

“Yes.”

“I’m negative, PrEP, condoms, vers, you?”

He blinked at me, as if getting that out of the way was something he hadn’t done in a long time.

“They ran tests here, always condoms, and I…” He closed his eyes. “I don’t know what I need.”

I rested my forehead against August’s. There wasn’t anger there, no need for being out of control, and I tugged him to the bed.

Maybe August just needed to forget.

I let him go only so we could strip down to bare skin, and as soon as I could, I had him in my arms, easing him back until his knees hit the mattress, and then, it was game over as we tumbled backward. I want so much of him, greedy, caging him with my arms, not resting against his belly, deepening the kisses until we were both fighting for breath, leaving a lingering sweetness on my lips, a taste that made every kiss feel like a delicious indulgence. I focused on his neck, whispering random nonsense against his skin, falling to one side, and bringing him with me so he could decide how much pressure he wanted where it hurt. He arched his neck when I tugged at a nipple, his breathing shallow as he groaned, and I twisted the nub until he was humping the air, dropping himself so our cocks slid together.

Both of us gasped as I arched up into him and worried at the other nipple. “Fucking hot,” I muttered, cradling the back of his head, and tugging him down for another kiss, my other hand tracing patterns on his nipples and down his chest with its light

dusting of hair. God, I needed more, and I scratched at his skin, taking his mouth, then biting his lower lip, soothing it with my tongue as he took my hands and pinned them above my head.

“You bit me,” he said, making it sound like a threat. He buried his face into my shoulder and sucked a mark there, his teeth worrying at the skin as we rutted.

“You taste good,” I defended. “Sex and fucking and jeeeezzz...” I whined the last when he held my hands in one of his and pulled and twisted my nipple the same as I’d done to him. They were hardwired to my cock, and I wanted his mouth there, sucking me down, or his hand—oh my god; I needed another kiss.

I was lost.

He shuffled back, one foot on the floor, releasing my hands. “Don’t move,” he ordered.

His growl made me even harder. I thought I was making him forget, but I couldn’t even recall my name. Then, he hunched over me, one hand for balance, determination in his eyes, and he ran his free hand from my nipple to my belly button, out to my hips, tracing the scar I’d gotten from a blade, and the one from a bullet fragment that had ricocheted off the wall I’d been behind. He leaned down and kissed each one, as if they mattered to him, and my cock bumped his face when he moved closer. I whined low in my throat, and he chuckled—he fucking snickered—then cupped my balls, smoothing his thumb over them.

“I want to taste everything,” he promised me.

I arched up again, the glide of my cock against his skin was overwhelming, and I pushed down the growing want to come on his face.

God, that would be good.

He lifted my cock, nuzzled my balls, then his clever mouth was on every part of me, fingers tapping my hole as he sucked and nibbled and sent me wild. His finger dipped inside, but then, he rolled off, and for a moment, I thought I'd broken him.

“Stuff,” he managed, his hand on his cock, slipping it from base to tip as I scrambled to the drawers next to my bed and yanked open the top one, pulling out lube and condoms. I don't know how many I grabbed, but they were a rainbow of color on the pale bed covers.

“You're vers,” he panted as he worked his cock, a thing of beauty—cut, flared, mine. “I want you in me, but I can't. I don't think I can...”

His operation, his pain. “Easily fixed,” I murmured, then handed him the lube and crouched over him, offering him my ass. “Get me ready.”

“Jesus, Ryder...”

He opened me up, tugged me back, kneading my ass, swiped his tongue from my balls to my hole, darting and sucking and licking, and fuck... it felt good. So good. He pressed lube inside, his finger crooking and brushing my prostate, and I cursed, then curled over like a damn pretzel, anything to get my mouth on his cock, which I worried and teased, then swallowed to the base.

“Turn... around...” he managed, “I want to see your face.”

I scrambled to obey, nearly kneeling him in the face, which could have been awkward if it hadn't broken the tension and made us grin at each other like idiots. He edged back on the bed, but his feet were on the floor. I rolled on a condom, then slathered him with lube, pushing more in my loose ass, then with my knees spread, I clambered

until I straddled his lap.

“More,” I demanded, even though it was me who lined up, circling his cock, holding it still as I pressed down. The burn was exquisite, it was everything, it was... him... and after initial resistance, I pushed out. He slid in an inch at a time, and I controlled it all, until balls-deep I was in his lap, kissing him, letting my body adjust as he cradled my face as if I were something perfect.

I shifted a little, experimentally, closing my eyes into a kiss as he groaned low in his throat, then I clasped his shoulders, holding myself steady.

I gasped into the kiss. “Open your eyes,” he pleaded.

I opened them, lost in his stormy gaze.

Then, I set a rhythm, rocking, rolling, up, down. He tried to follow me at first, but it was too much, and this wasn't about pain, it was supposed to be him forgetting, it was supposed to be pleasure. I kissed his neck again, biting his corded muscles, and with every sharp nip, he shivered, and I was the most powerful thing in this fucking room, to have control over this strong man. I could break him apart, heal him one orgasm at a time, this was everything.

“Close,” he mumbled, warning me as I ground down on him, balancing myself on his shoulders, then tugging him to hold me close, upright.

The intimacy was more than I'd ever felt, his lips on my skin as he held me, and we rocked together. Then, he gasped against my lips and threw back his head, his muscles cording as I licked and sucked the marks I'd put there. He stiffened, his eyes wide, his mouth open when I stared up at him, and he was coming inside me, and it pushed me over the edge. I cursed and writhed, and he stilled me, holding me so close I couldn't move, my cock trapped between us, as my orgasm tore from me and I

called his name, seeking a kiss, desperate for more as August kissed me.

We were done. Finished. Complete and together.

“I’ve never felt...” he whispered.

“Me neither.”

“This could be something. Right?”

He eased out, and I tied off the condom and discarded it. Then, we fell down next to each other, both sticky with cum and holding hands.

The words hit me hard—I wanted to stop him from going for Amos, to tell him how much he meant to me, to rescue him. But the words remained stuck in my throat, a knot of fear and longing. I loved him, and I knew it. It was more than just friendship; attraction had become lust, then had evolved into something deeper, but I couldn’t give a name to it when we were about to walk headlong into fuck knows what. I’d already seen him shot, nearly dying, and there was so much more I wanted to do with him. “It could be everything.”

“What if I...” He stopped, then, and dipped his gaze.

“What if maybe this could be love one day?” I asked, and he shot up so fast I thought I’d end up on the floor.

I had this desperate need to have a future for him—with him—and somehow love had crept into my thoughts, in all the bits where we made each other smile, or connected over the little things. It was in the way he gripped me when he’d been buried inside me, his eyes wide, begging me for something, or the way we lay in a tangle of limbs, trusting. He’d nearly died. I’d watched him sleep by his bed. We’d seen each other,

and then, the kisses, and more, and there it was.

Love.

He didn't have to do the rest of his life alone. I would be there to help him connect with Annie, to show him that there was life beyond the things he carried with him. But when I thought to tell him that, I saw the hesitation in his expression, and the situation was so fucked up that the words refused to come out. I was someone who took action, and now I was paralyzed by the fear of losing him.

"Pretend I didn't say that," I said.

"No, I'm falling for you, too," he offered, soft and gentle.

"You are?"

He smiled. "Isn't that what you want to hear?"

Guilt gripped me. "Is that what you want to say?"

Then, he kissed me. "Yes. I'm falling for you, and your stupid reading, and the poking at me, and I can see some kind of something in the future maybe." His eyes widened, and he stumbled away, covering his mouth.

"Sounds good to me." I grabbed him for a real kiss, heated, a promise of this maybe turning into something real; then, I went for a washcloth and came back to find him spread out in the middle of my bed.

"That should be me," he mumbled and yawned.

I waved it away, wiped him and myself, then snuggled up to him again. He wrapped

an arm around me, holding me close, and I rested my head on his chest.

Our phones both vibrated and I reached for mine. “Wheels up in sixty,” I read out, passing his battered phone to him.

“Same,” he said, and I could see the relief in his expression. “We’re doing this together then?”

I pressed a kiss to his clavicle where a bruise was forming. I’d marked him, he was mine now.

“We’ll always do things together,” I reassured him. “Shower seems a good place to start.” He groaned, and with his hand pressed to his belly, he rolled up and scrubbed his other hand over his face. “If you think you’re up for it, I might blow you?” I encouraged.

He snorted a laugh. “You can try.”

So, I did.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

An unmarked privatejet took us to Montana, then it was a long drive through the rugged terrain to reach our destination. The mission had been laid out, the intel gathered, and now, it was time to put our training to the test. The familiar hum of the jet's engines and the anticipation in the air were all too familiar.

I'd already sent a message to Josh, copying in my former SEAL team leader, asking if he could visit my bank and find the box of possessions, then get them sent to the safe house, via Josh, without revealing too much. He said he would, asked after me, and said we should get a beer.

I probably needed to do that.

Also, the thought of being able to give Annie her Buzzy-Bear made me hopeful. If I could give her that, then maybe, I could give her memories of her dad one day.

Our team showed a mix of emotions. Zach and Kai murmured and chatted over photos on Zach's phone. Aria was quiet, listening to music with headphones. Yaz was busy on a screen, likely double-checking all her intel. Ethan was pensive, and Ryder, Luca, and I ended up huddled around a small table, examining satellite images and maps, discussing strategies for the upcoming mission. We didn't need to go over the plan again, we were as ready as we'd ever be.

I couldn't stop staring at Ryder, dressed in black head to toe, tight black shirt and pants, and sturdy black boots, along with a vest and holster, where he carried a powerful HK45 handgun, a favorite among Army Rangers. I'd woken up in the medical room, him sleeping in the chair, with my fingers curled around his gun—why was I only just remembering this? He'd given it to me to steady my dreams, to anchor

me. I owed him for that.

But what caught my attention the most wasn't the gun, or the way he frowned down at the map, it was, after all that, how confident and relaxed he was when he sat back in his chair, gazing out at the clouds with a calm and ready attitude.

I probably looked just as calm, just as ready, but did I look as sexy? I doubted it. I'd kissed every inch of him last night, and it still wasn't enough—I wanted more.

Luca stood and stretched. "Coffee? Water?"

"Coffee," Ryder said.

I nodded, then it was the two of us, him staring out of the window, and me staring at him. Was it possible we could have something when we got back? Would he be interested in meeting up to scratch the itch every so often? Would that be enough for him to stay exclusive?

I was open to the idea of a physical relationship with Ryder, if it was on the table, and if he didn't want exclusive, then I'd have to live with that. After all, I had to make sure Annie was happy, to see if I fit into her life, and what kind of life it might be. Ryder had the team and a future there.

I didn't know what my future held.

The Gulfstream G550 descended enough to make my ears pop, and an announcement from the captain suggested we all take seats and buckle up. Our destination was a private landing strip about thirty miles from the apparently beautiful town of Meadowbrook in Montana, known for its stunning natural scenery and remote location. Then, it was three hours in cars, to a safe house Sanctuary had provided, which was an eight-mile hike to where intel showed Amos had holed up.

We had to trust the intel.

The plane dropped a little more, and Ryder turned in his seat to face me, catching me staring. I thought he might call me on it, but there was heat in his expression, and he offered me a tight smile and nod.

That, I could handle.

At the safe house—a smallholding with pigs, two goats, and owners who said nothing—we had satellite images displayed on a screen in the ops room. They showed four vehicles parked outside a large barn. Next to that were scanned bank statements forming a trail of money leading straight to the place where Shadow Team was convinced Amos was hiding.

Ethan rapped the table. “Yaz, tactical, Sierra Base.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Zach, Sierra two; Kai, three—you’ll approach the property from the north.” The two men exchanged fist bumps. “Ryder, four; August, five—the south.” He indicated the terrain on the map. “It’s open, wide, not much hiding space, but this will get the four of you down to the barn, and that is our first priority. We have no idea what’s inside other than vehicles coming and going. I repeat, nothing. The entire structure is shielded from scans, we can’t get a fix on what is inside, or any local intel backing up theories.”

“Could it be a dumping ground?” Luca asked and glanced at me.

Everyone knew about the last cartel mine shaft and the number of bodies found. I’d killed Danvers, an FBI agent on the take, got a step up in the cartel, and as a byproduct, I’d managed to save Ethan’s life.

“Could be. It’s guarded. Could be a holding stage there for product.” My mouth twisted.

“Drugs, guns, humans; we don’t know.” Luca paused and let that sink in.

Ethan cursed. “I want that barn cleared and the guards taken down.” He glanced up at me. “Restrained and alive.”

I met Ethan’s gaze, and he gave me a sharp nod, and at last turned back to the briefing, having made his point, not only to me, but to the rest of us. Was it just me who thought that nod meant he was warning me not to go off page?

“Luca, Sierra six; Aria, Sierra seven—you’re both with me, Sierra one. Yaz is Sierra Base. If there are civilians in that barn, this will be our new priority—does everyone understand that?” Everyone nodded, even me. “No one is going off-book, and we’re keeping this off any alphabet radar for now; although Yaz, you have ATF and FBI on speed dial.”

“Yep,” she said and gave him a lazy salute.

“Any questions, comments?” We all shook our heads. “August, a word please.” One by one everyone else left the ops room and separated—until it was me, Ryder, and Ethan, and I shot Ryder a pointed glance.

“You can stay for the lecture,” I announced.

Ethan straightened. “No lecture, August. Ryder says he trusts you, and you even being here is on him, that was all I was going to say.” Ethan gave an entire speech all wrapped up in those words, making sure I knew it was Ryder who’d vouched for me.

“Was that all?” I asked.

“Yep,” Ethan responded.

In that tense moment, I grasped Ryder’s arm and pulled him into one of the bedrooms, swiftly closing the door behind us. His anger was hot, flashing in his gray eyes.

“Did Ethan just threaten you on my account?” I seethed.

Ryder shook my head, my expression serious. “No.”

“So, the whole posturing about you vouching for me, and what would happen if I fucked up?—”

“I vouched for you,” I interrupted. “If you go off-book and it puts me, or the rest of the team in danger, he won’t forgive you.”

“Like I give a shit what anyone thinks of me.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I dropped my hold from his arm, my chest tight. Was I seeing through the man who said he'd follow rules, to the one bent on revenge whatever losses there might be. He looked wild-eyed and out of control in a second.

I thought he'd keep control for me.

I assumed he would.

Hell, I thought we'd come to mean something to each other, fuck buddies for sure, but friends maybe, and yes, I'd vouched for him. He ignored my current crisis of trust, of not knowing him at all, and sat on the bed, cross-legged, pulling out his SIG Sauer P226 and turning it over in his hands, then adding the two boxes of ammo to the pile.

"Thank you," he murmured after a moment, so softly I thought I'd misheard.

"Huh?"

He glanced up at me. "Thank you for vouching for me. I won't go off-book. I won't put the team in danger by going vigilante. I won't..."

I sat on the other end of the bed, watching him line up the ammo boxes and his weapon, his lips pressed together.

After a few moments, I prompted him. "Won't what?"

Only then did he lift his gaze to mine. "I won't let anything happen to you."

“I know you’ll have my back, Navy.” It was what comrades in arms did—they kept their team safe.

“No, I don’t mean that.”

“Okay?”

“I need you to understand something,” August began, his voice soft and almost vulnerable. “If anything were to happen to you because of something I did...” He inhaled sharply; his gaze locked on mine. “It would destroy me.”

My mouth fell open, and he sighed as he shuffled his Sig to a small bedside cabinet and placed the ammo next to it. Then, he removed the snub-nosed Ruger from his ankle holster, a knife from the other, and unbuckled his shoulder holster as well, each movement deliberate and careful, and with only one wince. He was hurting, but it might just be me who noticed the fine lines of pain bracketing his mouth. He glanced back at me, held my gaze, then reached out a hand. I grasped it on instinct, and he tugged me close until I toppled and ended up flat on my back next to him. His fingers laced with mine, we stared up at the vaulted ceiling of the converted barn, and I felt as if he were about to make some earth-shattering statement.

“I mean it. After losing James, I was broken, and I know he didn’t die because of me, I get that, but I wasn’t there to protect him. An entire nation can rely on my skills, but the one man I loved, nah, I couldn’t keep him safe.”

“Shit, Navy?—”

“August.” He turned his head on the pillow to face me. “Please, can you please call me August.”

“Sure.” I didn’t like the expression he had—as if he considered this to be our last

night, or his last night, or... shit, what was he thinking? “August, losing people is part of the job.”

“Yeah, I know, but this isn’t about the job, is it.”

He was still watching me, and we were so close we could be kissing. I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted something after tomorrow and that scared me.

“You’re helping me make sense of it all. You’re pulling those broken pieces of me together and making me feel like maybe, just maybe, there’s a point to all of this.”

“I am?”

He sighed. “You know you are.” I grinned at him and got a quirk of a smile in return. “Despite the fact he shot you in the back and wrecked your knee, I won’t let your team down, and I’ll help to bring Amos in as peacefully as we can.”

“Okay then.”

“There’s something else.” He rolled onto his side, situating himself and seemed almost reluctant to let go of my hand, only to cradle my face with the other. “You make me feel things I’d forgotten, like wanting something for myself, and more importantly, wanting things for Annie, like maybe when I’m done, Annie and I could be something y’know? Not be her daddy if she didn’t want it, but I could look out for her, or get the house next door to wherever she was happy and...”

“Why wouldn’t she want you to be her new daddy?”

“I’ve done things...” he said in a low tone. “I’m not a good man.”

“For her or for me or for yourself?”

He frowned, thumbed my cheekbone, then leaned down and kissed me—deep, searching kisses that could get out of control if we weren't a thin wall away from the rest of the team, and they weren't due to move out in a little less than four hours under the cover of darkness.

When he pulled back, he smiled, and this time, it wasn't a quirky offhand thing, it was full and wide and beautiful.

Dimples. Full-on dimples.

I was so lost.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Ryder and I were up and ready for the two a.m. departure, and we were joined by the rest of the team in the large hallway of the safe house, Kai and Zach heading down the stairs in the middle of an argument.

“... so, fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” Kai snapped.

“He’s my brother?—”

“And that’s your son!”

“I’m not having this discussion with you.” Zach’s voice was more of a grumble than actual words, and with Ethan waiting, arms crossed over his chest, they stopped.

“Asshole,” Kai muttered.

“Asshole,” Zach repeated under his breath, just as low.

One raised eyebrow from Ethan, and we all fell silent. “Sunrise zero-five-thirty, I want us in place. Comm check.” I answered the voice in my ear—Sierra five firm and in control—and then, we split up and headed out.

Ryder and I were quiet, each step placed to avoid any unnecessary noise. We wore black tactical clothing that blended with the darkness, and our night vision goggles allowed us to navigate the terrain with clarity despite the moonlight casting elongated shadows. The terrain was challenging, with rocks and dense wooded areas requiring us to scramble and maneuver with caution.

We kept a close eye on our surroundings, scanning for any signs of surveillance. Aria's voice would break the silence every thirty minutes, a reassuring reminder that we weren't alone. The air had a chill to it, a reminder that it was May in Montana, and the nights could be unforgiving.

As we moved through the landscape, the sounds of nocturnal creatures surrounded us—crickets chirping, the occasional hoot of an owl, and rustling in the underbrush that made us alert. Overhead, clouds scudded across the moon, plunging us into moments of complete darkness.

Our destination lay about a mile north of the collection of buildings we were surveilling, well outside the perimeter fence. We reached our marker just after four in the morning.

We took up our positions, alternating our roles to provide feedback to Aria at the safe house. The night was alive with movement in and around the buildings, even at this late hour. The darkness provided cover, but we caught glimpses of activity.

“There,” I whispered to Ryder, pointing to the lone floodlight with two bulbs out. It cast uneven light on the area, creating pockets of shadows we could use to our advantage.

As we observed, a large truck arrived, parking behind the largest of the structures we'd called the barn, and a few minutes later, another one departed, its headlights briefly illuminating our surroundings. I tracked its path as it headed toward the main road. What was on there?

Guns? Drugs? People?

Maybe all of the above?

“Sierra Base confirms, Sanctuary has the container truck,” Aria’s voice crackled over the radio. “Waiting on your signal to intercept, Sierra one.”

“Hold Sierra Base,” Ethan’s tone was calm. “Teams call in.”

We reported in sequentially. “Sierra five in position,” I confirmed when it was my turn.

“Send them in, Sierra Base, eyes sharp,” Ethan said.

“North Team, Sierra four and five, it’s a go,” Aria instructed, then did the same for the Zach and Kai team. Ryder and I exchanged a determined glance, a soft fist bump, and I wanted to grab him and kiss him one last time before we headed into fuck knows what. The way he looked at me was almost enough for me to forget my training—at least for a millisecond—but then it was all business. We kept low to the ground, cautious, our fingers wrapped firmly around the cold, textured grips of our weapons. The night was eerily silent, broken only by the soft rustling of leaves underfoot as we descended the hill. Each step was deliberate, ensuring minimal noise and maximum concealment, and we fell into a rhythm where one moved and the other covered, and all too soon we were down behind the barn, outside the security fence and no more than twenty feet from the second truck that had arrived. We slithered closer, bolt cutters enough to make a hole for us to work our way through and no sign of surveillance, exactly as Yaz had suggested. Seemed to me that whatever Amos had going on here wasn’t as high-tech as the compound or some of the other places I’d visited with the crews. The whole place had the air of something that had been here a long time, but security was lax, and that was to our advantage.

As we approached the barn, we could hear faint murmurs coming from inside, people discussing matters unknown to us. The structure itself was weathered and worn, its wooden planks creaking in the occasional breeze. We maintained our proximity to the ground, crouching and moving in silence, taking advantage of the natural cover

provided by the terrain. The barn's shadow offered some concealment, and we positioned ourselves, ready to observe and act when the time was right.

Ryder raised his closed fist to shoulder height, then extended his index finger, pointing in the direction I needed to head, and I acknowledged it with a single, subtle nod. I stepped into position and observed the scene unfolding inside the barn, my heart pounding. "Four, two armed," I murmured into my mic.

"Copy Sierra five."

"Perimeter, south side, three, all armed," I heard Zach confirm. "Make that two."

"Copy Sierra two."

I assumed either Zach or Kai had taken out one of the guards.

"Sierra Base, clear," Kai acknowledged. "Moving forward." That was all three guards down.

A small group of people had congregated in the center of the barn, and that was my focus, them amidst crates and boxes. Among them, one man stood out—a tall, overweight figure struggling to contain his bulk in a suit that seemed a size too small. He held a clipboard, appearing to be in charge.

Two imposing guards, built like fortresses and clad in combat gear, flanked the group, their vigilant eyes scanning the surroundings.

But there was one person, the one I couldn't clearly see yet, his back turned to us. Could it be Amos? I could level my gun, take him and the others out in a single flurry of bullets, but that wouldn't solve anything.

And I'd promised Ethan.

The team.

Ryder.

A hand on my shoulder let me know Ryder was by my side, holding up four fingers, then two.

“Sierra one to all teams, outer buildings clear.”

That just left the barn, the four people inside, and whatever we found in there. Ethan called out to drop weapons, clear, calm, and controlled—the armed men inside the barn seemed disoriented, uncertain of where to turn. Panic flashed in their eyes as they realized they were outnumbered and outgunned.

Zach lunged at the man closest to him, taking him down swiftly and silently. Kai followed suit, incapacitating the other guard.

That left two men standing—the one in the ill-fitting suit and the skinny individual with his back still turned. The odds were stacked against them, and our team had them surrounded.

Turn you fucker. Turn and face me.

The skinny man turned in increments; his hands raised. However, it became evident he was armed, and the situation remained volatile. Ryder, quick and decisive, disarmed him.

I wasted no time, grabbing the man with the clipboard, my voice firm as I demanded answers. “Where’s Amos?”

Frustration welled up inside me as the man in the ill-fitting suit whimpered and claimed not to know who Amos was. It seemed as if he was trying to play innocent, but I wasn't buying it. We needed to find Amos, and we couldn't afford any more delays.

I tightened my grip and leaned in closer, my voice low and intense. "Don't play games."

"I... I'm not." The," the man's voice was shaky.

But I'd been taken in by this shit before—this was Amos all over again, and in a smooth move, I took him to the ground, my knee on his lower back, pushing his face in the dirt. He was wriggling and yelling, and all I could do was shout. There was chaos in my head, as I pressed his Sig against the man's face. Someone was yanking at me, pulling me away, and I rounded on them, gun raised, only stopping when I met dark brown eyes, and Ryder holding out a hand in surrender.

My ire vanished as fast as it had arrived, as Zach and Kai zip-tied both Skinny and Suit.

"We need to clear the barn, Navy." Ryder was right up in my face. "You with me?" He slapped a hand to my chest. "Are. You. With. Me?"

I nodded, and shoulders stiff, I snapped back into the moment. The rest of the team were clearing the space, the four people tied and dumped in a corner, Luca with a gun on them.

Ryder headed for the closest container, but I stopped him as he reached for the handle. There was no sign of a lock, no visible evidence of a booby trap, but I'd seen this kind of thing before. If there was no sign of Amos, then what was inside? Could he be in one of them? I positioned myself, weapon ready, and indicated a

countdown—three, two, one—Ryder pulled the door, keeping himself to one side.

Empty.

Nothing.

“Clear,” I heard Ryder announce.

“Product,” Zach confirmed in the second containers. “Cases...”

“Weapons,” Kai added.

“They must have cleared this one out on that last truck,” Ryder suggested.

I glanced back at the truck we could all see outside, Aria shrugged. “Empty,” she announced, dumping someone I assumed was the driver, zip-tied, with the rest of them.

That was a big enough truck for two containers, and what looked to be a small amount of product. This didn’t make sense. Something compelled me to step inside the empty one, Ryder on my heels, and I shook off the memory of us stepping into that safe room and the pain after. We checked dark corners by small flashlight, but there was nothing to see.

“This isn’t right,” I announced, but didn’t have to go into an explanation about the hinky feelings I had going on, because Ryder nodded. He stalked outside, and I followed, and if I hadn’t been so tuned into this feeling of something wrong, maybe I wouldn’t have felt it, but there was a change in the sound as my boots hit the metal, and I stopped. Not an IED, I’d been in that situation before—something more innocent, a smooth square maybe two-foot square, and I gestured for Ryder to return.

“What is it?” he asked.

I ran the narrow beam of my flashlight around the square, following with my fingers, finding a notch, then indicating Ryder should cover me.

“Sierra Base, I have possible access to an area below the container.”

“Copy Sierra five; Sierra one, your call.”

I glanced up at Ethan, who was in position watching us, and he nodded. Ryder stepped back to cover me. Through my earpiece, Ethan asked Sierra Base for any information on potential underground structures beneath the barn. The reply was disappointing: nothing.

I reached for the hatch’s handle after checking everyone was in place, bracing myself for an explosion or gunfire. I’d faced worse than this, expected death on so many occasions, and on some, since James, I’d even welcomed it.

But, I hesitated, who would make sure Annie found a family if I was hurt or killed?

I wished Ryder was further back, because if this was armed, and he was close and...

Shit. I was losing my edge.

Love for a child, or a man... weakness.

Fuck.

Focus.

I counted down, giving myself time, giving Ryder and Ethan time to steady

themselves, and then, I flicked the catch and lifted the cover, laying it flat on the ground. Low lighting illuminated a short ladder leading into darkness below. I couldn't tell if it was a deep drop, or nothing more than a few feet. I extended my arm downward, palm facing the ground, with fingers outstretched and pointing towards the hatch and ladder. I'm going down.

Ryder acknowledged, and with one last deep breath, gripping the rungs, I descended into the unknown. I dropped the last few rungs, into a crouch, taking out my pistol to back up my rifle.

The underground passage, no more than five feet high, stretched before me in one direction, its walls rough-hewn and irregular. Scattered lights, suspended from the ceiling at uneven intervals, cast a dim and eerie glow, and the floor beneath my boots was level. I couldn't stand upright though and went into a crouch.

"Sierra five, clear," I announced.

Ryder dropped into the passage behind me, then Ethan. One of them cursing when I indicated I was moving further on. We headed deeper into the passage, there was a musty, damp, earthy scent, the air cool, causing a shiver to run down my spine, memories of other tunnels, IEDs, visceral in my mind, the air thick with anticipation of someone waiting just around the corner, and the weight of the unknown.

The passage widened and the ceiling height increased so all three of us could stand upright, and then, a corner led us into a large underground chamber of sorts. We'd been climbing as we walked, and I wondered how close to the surface this was.

"Sierra Base?" Ethan asked, "Sierra two?" But comms were likely blocked down here, and no one acknowledged.

The chamber was lit, but it wasn't the crates that caught my attention, it was the soft

whimper of someone in a dark corner. I held up a fist for Ryder and Ethan to stop, and then, weapon high, I followed the sound. “Come out, weapons down,” I called.

“Don’t hurt us, please,” someone whimpered—a girl’s voice. I holstered my pistol, switched to the flashlight in my empty hand, and raked the area looking for her, catching her eyes as she blinked up at me. Kids. I couldn’t count how many of them were crouched on the cold, hard floor, their small hands bound by chains and their eyes locked onto me with a mixture of desperation and hope.

In the midst of this grim scene, the young woman I assumed had spoken knelt in front of the children. Her voice trembled as she uttered a simple plea. “No, please.”

I lost my voice; I was frozen, the team needed to know... “Sierra five to Sierra Base, there are people here, young, some kids.” I had to rely on Ethan and Ryder covering any other dark shadows.

I placed my rifle on the ground, hands up to show I meant no harm, glancing at my surroundings and dragging a light from the suspension wire so it shone around them, but tilting it so it didn’t blind them. How long had they been in here?

A door opened, wide and open to the morning sky, the space was flooded with light, and every single one of them shrank back, the crying louder. I grabbed the rifle and swung to face attackers, putting myself between the victims and guns.

“Sierra two, clear,” Zach snapped, and he stalked inside, crouching next to the kids, his weapon missing, probably with Kai, and then, he cursed under his breath. “Door opens into the barn we cleared,” he ground out. “Hidden flat like your trapdoor.”

“I want them out of here,” I ordered, and I needed to move, but it was Ryder who stepped silently past me, then found the end of the chain, helping the kids get out.

Because I was frozen.

“Sierra Base to Sierra Teams, located a radar image of tunnels and excavations, sending it to you now.”

My cell vibrated in my pants, and I snapped out of my fugue state when Ryder cursed right by me. He was talking to Ethan, things were heated, Ryder gesturing, Ethan staying calm, and I stepped between them.

“What?”

“We have an idea of how he got away.” Ryder gestured at the wall on the opposite side of the excavated space, Zach and Kai were standing by a gaping hole, sheets of metal pulled to one side.

I blinked at the victims, at the room. “Another tunnel? Where does it come out?”

“No idea?—”

“Then, we follow it. Why is no one going in?”

I hurried over to the space and stopped as soon as I reached Kai, who pointed at the box they’d revealed. “There’s an issue.”

My heart raced as I kneeled beside the improvised explosive device. The wires were a chaotic tangle around the IED, leading to a small, blinking trip light indicating it was armed and ready to go. The digital timer displayed numbers counting down from fifteen minutes, each second ticking away like a death sentence. I had time to retrieve Amos and get out of the exit—he wouldn’t leave a trap that could kill him as well.

My voice, barely above a whisper, was urgent. “Tell me we have bomb disposal on

call.”

“Not gonna happen,” Zach murmured. “We don’t know what’s further down, this could be one of many, and this payload is enough to crater this whole place.”

“Get the victims out of here,” I snapped, my gaze locked on the wires, mind racing to assess the best course of action. “Find the exit to this shit; I’m going in.”

“August!” Ryder was calling my name, but I didn’t have time to turn back, only his voice wasn’t growing more distant, in fact he was close as we were blocked by a wall of stone.

“Go back,” I snapped.

“How do we get past this?” He shouldered his weapon. “Cover me.” Instead of running back to the exit and out with the victims and the rest of the team he was feeling along the wall, but it was nothing clever like the trapdoor in the container, just a sidestep we would have seen if it wasn’t so fucking dark. I shoved through first, heard Ryder scrambling behind me, and hunched over as the tunnel roof became lower every twenty steps or so. There were no comm, and I had no fucking idea what we were going to face, or if we’d catch up to Amos.

I hoped for an exit. I hoped for daylight.

Instead, we faced another wall, and this time, a heavy metal door.

And then, it rained rock as the earth moved.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

The explosion was deafening, and before I could react, I felt August covering me with his body. In that split second, he shoved me to the side, his quick reflexes saving us both from the worst of the blast. The world became a chaotic blur of noise and stone and rubble debris rained around us. That couldn't have been the bomb we'd left behind, this had to be another blast. A booby trap?

Fallen debris collected on me, making it difficult to breathe, and August's muffled voice reached my ears, his urgent words barely audible amidst the chaos. "Ryder? Talk to me."

"M'kay."

I managed to nod, though it was hard to see in the dusty space. August shifted off me, and I rolled to all fours, weapon drawn, covering whatever the fuck he was doing as he assessed our situation—we only had ten minutes left on that other timer, and we needed to get the fuck out.

"Door's moving."

With a determined strength, we worked together to clear the debris blocking our path, not stopping until we had created enough space to crawl through. Inch by inch, we leveraged out from under the rubble—our muscles straining with effort—forced our way through the space, and tumbled into yet another wide room, a chamber empty for the most part, and the remains of a smaller blast zone behind the door.

This is some fucked-up first shooter video shit.

We stood to full height in the vast space, then in sync, we checked and cleared the area as fast as we could—no munitions, drugs, or worse, people—locating the next exit and tunnel.

My heart pounded as I scrambled through the narrow, dimly lit tunnels, waiting for the next explosion, the next trap. The claustrophobic darkness seemed endless. I could hear August's heavy breathing ahead of me, but the desperate urge to get out was becoming unbearable—how long did we have left until the main explosion, and what was it worth when we hadn't even found Amos?

After what felt like an eternity, I saw a glimmer of daylight ahead. Relief washed over me, and for a brief moment, I let my guard down. The thought of escaping the suffocating tunnels and emerging into the open air filled me with hope.

Something hit the back of my knee and I stumbled, then I felt the cold, unforgiving metal of a gun press against the back of my head. My heart skipped a beat, and my blood ran cold. I froze, and then, my assailant—Amos, I was sure of it—stabbed my leg, upper thigh, and I went to my knees in blinding agony as he stabbed me a second time, and a third in my back.

Then, he gripped my hair, and a chilling voice whispered in my ear. Amos. "Call for him." I couldn't see August beyond the blinding daylight anymore, and I knew we were in serious trouble.

"No," I refused, willing August to get out, find the team, and fix this. He took the knife and carved into my neck, pushing me to the ground.

"Call for him."

"He'll kill you," I said, satisfied this was exactly what was going to happen. I might not get to tell him I loved him as blood pooled under my arm, but Amos was a dead

man walking.

He stepped on the back of my neck, slicing through the leather holding my rifle safe and kicking away my weapon, all in the space of a few seconds.

We remained in shadow, but anyone outside would be able to see me now.

“Aubrey? August? Or whatever your name is, take a bow.”

August blocked out the sunlight—it was the only way I knew he was there. “Let him go,” he said, in an even, almost gentle tone.

“I’m not doing that with you. You die; I leave.” He pressed his foot harder, and I tried to scramble free, but I was dizzy and wondered how much blood I was losing. “On your knees,” he demanded of August, who was now blocking out more light as he came closer.

“Run,” I managed, and Amos ground his foot down.

“On your fucking knees,” Amos snarled at August, and at last he was close enough I could see him, watched as he went to his knees, dropping his weapon and linking his hands behind his neck.

“No.” I tried to shove Amos away, kicking up, but he wasn’t moving. He was cackling.

“I’m gonna kill you slowly, and then, find that little girl and—” His words stopped, he gurgled and fell to his knees next to me, grabbing his throat, pulling at the knife embedded there, his eyes wide, one hand clawing out at August, who was still on his knees, one hand in front of him, empty, the other with a gun.

One bullet, then another, and Amos fell to the floor, flat, the knife forced deeper into his throat. Then, August was with me, and there was chaos, shouting. Someone hefted me up, slung me over their shoulder, ran from the end of the tunnel into the light, stumbling, then righting themselves, running until the ground lifted and a deafening explosion shattered the air. We fell, me and the man carrying me—August—tumbling until we came to a rest, and then, he scrambled to grab me and hold me tight.

“Amos dead?” I managed and tried to sit up, August patting my body, checking for wounds.

He cursed and examined his hand covered in blood—well, shit.

“Dead,” he confirmed.

“I never understand why the bad guys start a monologue...” I tried to chuckle, but my chest hurt, my thigh hurt, fuck me, my throat hurt.

But none of that mattered, as the rest of the Sierra team picked themselves up and dusted themselves off.

“Everyone’s okay,” August reassured me. “Jesus, Ryder... fuck... Medic? Who...” He shook me. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Truck,” I whispered, my vision spotty. So much for the heroic Army Ranger who let someone get the jump on him. Fuck. What kind of a wingman gets taken down like that?

“The good guys headed off the first truck—drugs and arms.” He was smiling at me—I think he was smiling. Or was that grimacing? Fuck, I hurt. “Someone tell me we have a fucking medic!”

I should tell him how I felt, just in case. I couldn't keep it inside. "I love you," I forced out, coughing, him gripping me harder, leaning down to put his mouth next to my ear.

"Stop talking," he ordered, but I had to get this out.

With every bit of energy I had, I tried to grip him back. "I. Love. You."

Zach slid in next to us, Luca crouching next to me holding my shoulder, talking to me, telling me it was all good.

Reassuring August that I was going to be fine?

Of course, I was okay—I was with August, the bad guy was dead, and I was alive.

Had I told him I loved him? Had I given him those words, so he knew how I felt?

I couldn't remember.

* * *

The world dipped and heaved, a flash of blue sky, a glimpse of the ground, and through it all, August held my hand and kept talking.

It was fucking annoying—a whole verbal onslaught about me staying with him, and how I couldn't go anywhere, and how Annie needed to meet me, and yeah, yeah, it was all good, but the blood... and the dizziness... and people poking at me.

* * *

"It's all good, August."

“Not going anywhere,” August snarled. Why was he so angry?

“You’re really going to stand there and sew him up.”

“If I fucking have to.”

I was floating—was I on the good stuff? This was marshmallow-soft, and as I closed my eyes, I could hear him shouting that he wasn’t going anywhere, and through all of it, he was holding my hand.

* * *

I drifted back to consciousness, my senses gradually returning, and I was still floating on a marshmallow cloud, the pain meds working their magic to numb whatever Amos had done to me. Blinking my eyes open, I squinted at the soft, diffused light in the room.

And then I saw him—August, sitting by my bedside, his gaze focused on a book in his hands as he read out loud.

“... outnumbered sir. Aye, T’would be good to move the Lady Cameron to—oh you’re awake.” He’d stopped reading, and I attempted to make sense of the romance novel cover featuring a half-naked man in a kilt, a swooning woman draped over one arm and a broadsword in the other, before shifting my gaze to August.

“Hey there, Sleeping Beauty,” he murmured, setting the book aside.

“What in God’s name are you reading to me?” I asked, my voice rough.

He leaned closer, helping me with a drink, then flashing the cover. “The Highland Laird’s Fiery Temptress. Just a little romance to lift your spirits,” he replied with a

smirk.

I couldn't help but smile back, despite the clouds. "What happened to Reacher?"

He rolled his eyes at that. "Reacher does all this improbable stuff," he announced, then thumbed at his chest. "Anyway, you don't need him. He's six-five, and everyone knows good things come in small packages."

I tried to smile. It hurt. "Did I tell you?"

He laced our fingers and smiled down at me, fondly almost. "Tell me what?"

"Did I dream I said it?"

"What?"

"Did I tell you that I love you?"

He lifted my hand and kissed the knuckles. "Yep, you told me that."

"Oh."

There it was then, I'd told him, and even though he was holding my hand and reading out loud to me, he wasn't going to say it back. Not that I expected it—driven by whatever vengeance he had in his heart, we'd probably end up being ships that passed in the night.

"Did you mean it?" he asked after a pause.

"Rangers never lie," I said, attempting to joke it all off.

“Neither do SEALs,” he said, then kissed another knuckle before reaching to adjust my pillows gently, making me more comfortable. As I settled back into the softness, I found myself content. After all, I’d been honest, and now he could do what he wanted with that.

“Army?” he whispered next to my ear, and I turned to see his gray eyes burning with emotion. “Ryder? I love you too.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

I sat in the dimly lit medical room, as I'd done since we'd gotten back last night, the soft glow of a reading lamp casting a warm pool of light on the pages of the sweeping highland romance novel I held. The room was quiet, save for the soft hum of medical equipment and the occasional beep of a monitor.

My attention was absorbed by the romance, and I was halfway through a scene where the rugged hero knelt before his stolen English bride after they'd been forced to marry, of course, pledging his undying love while chaos raged around them in the midst of a battle.

I snorted in disbelief. "Really? Who writes this shit? What hero in his right mind would stop in a battle to declare undying love?"

There again, who was I to question love when it had snuck up on me so quickly? Maybe I'd have done the same thing, given all the feelings I had inside for my man.

I turned the book to check the sexy cover depicting a rugged Scottish Highlander, his chiseled features and piercing eyes capturing the essence of a brooding hero. The stolen English bride, adorned in a flowing white gown, looked both vulnerable and determined, clasping a knife to her torn top. Yep. That wasn't Ryder and me but the passion in the picture was certainly something I understood.

I'd picked up the book from a shelf near the kitchen, searching for something to read until Ryder shook off the anesthetic, and the tale of love and passion amidst the backdrop of battle was about the best I could find that I didn't have to concentrate on.

I carried on reading. "I love you with all my heart," I read out the proud Highlander's

words and even tried to add a Scottish brogue, which sounded atrocious. “I will protect you with my life.” I huffed. “Well, shit, he’s not doing a good job if a stray arrow reaches them. Blah blah, stolen bride, torn between loyalty to her people and her love, gazed down at him with conflicted eyes. Blah blah, love and courage conquer all obstacles. The End. Oh, wait there’s an epilogue.” I cleared my throat, but a slight movement and a soft groan from the nearby bed drew my attention. Ryder was waking up, again. I marked the place in the book and set it aside, waiting for Ryder to regain his bearings. Bit by bit, he was returning to the land of the living after the operation to repair lacerations to his abdominal muscles, also fixing where the knife had missed his femoral artery, and the back of his leg, which had been only a hair away from slicing his popliteal tendon.

If Amos hadn’t been dead, I’d have killed him again.

I shuffled the chair closer, and couldn’t help but steal a glance at Ryder, because everything had changed since I’d told him I loved him.

“Hey,” I murmured. “I hope you’re enjoying the story.”

“What about arrows, for fuck’s sake,” he murmured.

“Exactly,” I said, and he attempted to smile. “So, you’re all good. Doc Jen says you’ll be up and about in around three months.” His eyes widened, and I couldn’t help the snort of laughter. “Sorry,” I said, all innocence, “days, three of them, count it.” I held up three fingers.

He narrowed his eyes. “Fucker.”

I placed the book on his bedside table and stood, leaning over to press a kiss to his forehead. “I’m sending Doc in, but I’ll be back, okay? One thing though...” He stared up at me still sleepy and confused. “I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you, too.”

I pressed the call button, met Doc Jen on her way in, and closed the door behind me. Checking my watch, I saw I had ten minutes to fill, and stopping off at my room first, I wandered down to the room where I was meeting the child psychologist, Lizzie, and having time with Annie under her watchful eye. This was day one, step one, minute one, of me and Annie maybe connecting over her dad, and I was more nervous about this than I was about running towards a gun fight. I peered in through the glass panel, middle top, and saw Annie inside, sitting at a table, a ring of animals in tiny chairs—she was having a tea party, Lizzie sitting next to her, pretending to sip from a cup.

I remembered a tea party with Buzzy-Bear, and James there, making me sit with them, telling me the three of them needed a brave SEAL to keep them safe. I recalled smiling, then all of us sitting at a tiny table, and I recalled James staring at me. I rubbed at my chest.

Maybe I could have had something with James? I would never know, and for a moment, I let the grief consume me. Allowed it to run its course, until I could finally breathe again.

Everything seemed so normal in the room, and my fingers dug into my jacket where I was hiding the brown teddy bear that had arrived by courier this morning.

“Hey, August,” Josh called at my side, startling the hell out of me. I hadn’t even heard him come closer, and I staggered back, eyes drawn to the bundle of kitty fluff in his arm. After a moment where I let my heart slow to its normal beat, I reached out to stroke the cat. “This is Oreo,” he said with a smile, and for some reason, Oreo got it into their head that they wanted to jump from Josh and sit on my shoulder. I reached up to settle them.

“We’ve met before, out on the path. What a cute kitty you are,” I said in my best made-up baby voice.

Oreo purred and kneaded my T-shirt.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked.

“Yeah,” I said with fake confidence, and he raised an eyebrow. “No,” I corrected almost immediately.

“You want to talk about it before you go in?”

“I worry that... I mean...” I sighed. “James and I were just pretend.”

“Until you weren’t.”

“It never became more. There wasn’t time for it to be more than friendship. He was pushing for something, but I doubted myself, wondering if I’d ever break the warrior’s curse and find real life and love. But that doesn’t mean...” All the doubts were there, front and center, and in all of it, Oreo purred in my ear and settled around my neck, sharp claws digging into my skin every so often to remind me of their presence.

“You’re a good man, August, that’s all you need to remember.” Josh reached up for the cat, disentangling claws from my shirt, then patted my shoulder. “Good luck.” With that, he and Oreo departed, and I wished I was going as well because there was something so calm about Josh—I could see what Ethan saw in him, knew Cap was happy with his man and their son, Ben.

I thought I wanted that.

Family.

I thought I could have that.

I checked my watch, ten a.m., and then, knocked on the door. Lizzie glanced up and gestured for me to come in. Steeling myself for a world of hurt and rejection, I forced a smile on my face and stepped inside.

Annie glanced up at me, then back at her table, all set out with miniature cups and saucers, even a tiny sugar bowl with fake lumps, and a bright purple teapot.

“I don’t like this,” she mumbled, and poked at the saucer in front of her.

In that moment, my heart sank. I’d tried to prepare for a myriad of reactions from Annie, but her initial teary-eyed response caught me off guard. Had I done something wrong? I glanced at my empty hand, as if I could sense blood there, and for a moment my breath hitched, and I took a step back.

“Annie, why don’t you like this?” Lizzie asked, holding up her hand to stop me leaving. Guilt grew like a stone in my chest, thinking maybe I’d done something wrong or me being here was too overwhelming for her.

“It’s missing,” Annie announced, and she picked up the saucer and dropped it to the floor.

“Your cup for that one?” Lizzie asked and shuffled back a little so I could get closer. I went to my ass on the carpet, crossing my legs, making myself as small as I could. The source of her unhappiness wasn’t me, but the missing cup in the tea set.

Relief flooded me.

“It’s okay, Annie,” I reassured her, clearing my throat because my voice was catching. “I can help you find that missing cup. We’ll make sure your tea party is just right.”

She glanced up at me and stared, and for a moment, I wondered if she knew me. But then, she looked away and, together, we went through a toy box until, with triumph, I found the cup and passed it to her. She only relaxed when the cup and its retrieved saucer were placed in position with great care.

“Cake?” She handed me a plate of plastic cake. I took a piece and made a show of eating the slice, and she giggled.

“Who are your friends?” I asked and pointed to the lime green stuffie on her left.

“Apple,” she said and patted the circular fruit on its head. “Benny.” She pointed to a doll with its hair in bunches the same as hers. Then, she at some kind of fake copycat of Barney the Dinosaur. “Amos,” she said and frowned. I glanced up at Lizzie, who was leaning by the door, and she nodded at my concern.

“I like your friends,” I murmured. “I have a friend too; can he sit here as well?” I asked, as Annie poured me a cup of tea.

“Sure,” she said and checked around me to see who my friend might be. I reached into my jacket where I’d hidden Buzzy-Bear and held him out to her.

“Here he is.”

She blinked at me, and ignored the bear for a while, and I found myself at a loss for how to connect with her. She was cautious, and I watched as she played with the tea set, her bright blue gaze, eyes so like James’s, scanning the room and checking in with me. She was uncertain, as if she was trying to make sense of who I was and what

my role in her life would be. It was understandable, given the circumstances, and then, with a wrinkled nose, she removed Amos-the-dinosaur off his chair and tossed him behind her, then picked up Buzzy-Bear from where he was waiting, and sat him there instead.

“Hi, Buzzy-Bear,” she said and stroked his soft fur. Relief and gratitude collided—that I had the opportunity to be with her was intense, but there was also this sense of responsibility, and I knew I’d die before anyone hurt her again.

As the single minutes spun and turned into ten, then twenty, a small glimmer of hope began to emerge. Annie’s cautiousness gave way to curiosity, and she tentatively started to include Buzzy-Bear, and then me, in her playtime. We played house, we played jigsaws, we talked about princesses, and we talked about families, and at the end of it—god knows how long I’d been in the room unable to hug her—she crawled into my lap, tired but happy, with Buzzy-Bear in her arms and we showed her the photo that we’d taken of me, her, and James.

“Gust is here,” she murmured, and my heart broke at the familiar name she’d had for me, then she pointed at the photo. “Buzzy-Bear and Gust. I miss Daddy.”

One Year Later

It was a warm and sunny day, and we were gathered at our home. It stood on the grounds of Kingscliff, small but private, with only the two bedrooms, but it held a wealth of love and memories that we'd made since the three of us had moved in and renovated the old place retrieved from the jungle of trees around the main house.

Today was a special day. It was Annie's fifth birthday, and the cabin was adorned with colorful balloons and a banner that read: Happy 5th Birthday, Annie! She'd grown so much in the past year, and her energy and curiosity seemed boundless. Sometimes, she would wake up confused, but with the resilience of a child, she'd replaced all the bad things in her heart for good. The three of us—Annie, August, and me—attended family therapy, learning through play, and our family unit was strong.

Annie's bright blonde hair loose around her shoulders, streamed out behind her as she ran around the yard, her laughter filling the air as she played with Bear, our black Labrador. She wore a scarlet dress that matched Bear's bow, and August and I watched her with pride, sure in the knowledge we'd done our best and created a loving home for her. In her bedroom there were photos of James, things August had kept in that box of his, an old journal with poems James had written, doodles in the margins, and a pair of cufflinks he'd worn every day to work. Annie would never forget her father all the time that August drew breath.

"She's happy," August said as he joined me at the railing of our small porch. I loved sitting there, with our view out to the ocean.

"She loved her party."

“It was more exhausting than a twenty-mile march in full gear,” August moaned, but he was smiling.

“Did you wrap our gift?”

August pointed at a wrapped present over on the table bowing under the weight of gifts from her friends at PreK, all of whom had just left. “I can take apart weapons and reassemble them in the freaking dark, but one stupidly small bow, and I’m beaten.”

I slipped an arm around his waist, tugging him close.

“We could have gotten the shop to wrap it for us, you know,” I murmured.

“I wanted to do it; this is the first birthday since...” He smiled at me and didn’t say the rest. “I wanted it to be me, or you.” We’d bought her a necklace that wasn’t as delicate as it looked, made of some hard-wearing material Kai had sourced for us, with a tiny angel hanging from it, and she was already wearing it. Of course, this being Kai, it also had a tiny tracker embedded into it. August and I debated the ethics of that for about thirty seconds, then realized we were both fully on board with knowing where Annie was at the age she was. We agreed to tell her, and we did, and she seemed to like the idea, as long as her daddies had them, too.

So, we wore matching necklaces, me with a tiny devil, August with a frog, and Annie her angel.

And in the wrapped gift was a matching bracelet for Annie, without a tracker, or so Kai assured us.

“I love our life,” August murmured, tucking his face into my neck. He’d made a choice over the past year, taking on a role with Shadow Team back here, as tactical support, opting not to go back out on missions. His priority was being there for Annie

as she grew up. He never asked me to stop as well, but given my expertise in comm, I was often the one watching from the sidelines.

I didn't miss the action.

I missed when I wasn't at home.

As to the PTSD, after what happened with Amos, we had dark times, where August got lost in his head, but therapy was helping, and the dark days were less now. He said sex helped, and even though we both knew he was lying; I was happy to oblige. Both of us carried nightmares, but together we were stronger, and yeah, sex really did help when it was connecting at such an intense level it blew my mind.

"Do you regret staying here?" I asked, and he knew I meant the action, the adrenaline, the push and shove of winning against the bad guys. I also knew what he was going to answer.

"No." He hugged me, and instead of stopping there, he continued in a soft tone. "I'd lost myself in that life, and here with Annie and you, I've found myself again, like I've found my own version of happiness."

"I love you," I whispered, and he pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, but he didn't say it back, which was strange. I had a ring in my pocket, had had it there since I'd come back from a mission where Zach had nearly died. Time was precious, and I wanted to marry August, and I wanted Annie to be our daughter, and to maybe adopt a few more, have a really big family.

I wanted it all.

I just had to find the perfect time.

"Annie?" August called. "Time for the big present?"

She darted over, Bear ambling after her, whooping with excitement. August scooped her up into his arms, peppering her with kisses, then settling her on his hip.

“Ready?” he asked her.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said, all solemn and big-eyed.

“I wrapped something else,” August said and pulled a small box out of his pocket, the same birthday paper as Annie’s present, with the tiniest of bows.

“It’s for you, Papa. You have to open it,” Annie instructed with an imperious tilt of her chin. “It’s a secret.”

I pulled away the paper and the bow, pocketing both, then opened the small ring box, two platinum rings next to each other, nestled in velvet, a third much smaller ring with a tiny angel on it in between.

“Ready, Annie?” August asked, and she nodded.

“We love you so much, and we want to ask you to...” August began and turned to glance at Annie who was grinning wide.

“... marry us, Papa!” Annie finished.

I held them close, and I had everything I wanted right there in my arms. And it was the simplest decision of my life.

“Yes.”

August swept me into a kiss, Annie laughing as she was dipped, and then, she pressed a kiss to my cheek, and I hugged them again. One handed, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the rings I’d bought and smiled at August. “You beat me to it,” I

whispered.

“Told you,” he deadpanned. “Navy always beats Army.”

THE END