



Hunt (Axel Wulf #4)

Author: *Stella Marie Alden*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Risking their lives was part of the job. Risking their hearts? Never.

FBI Special Agent Scott Hunter expected a routine assignment—gather intel, crunch numbers, and leave. Instead, he walks into a mystery. The Chief Border Patrol Agent is missing, and his second-in-command, fiery Agent Kelly OMalley, is less than thrilled to have a fed interfering in her territory.

She doesn't trust outsiders, especially not cocky ex-Marines. However, when their mission turns deadly, and they stumble upon a ruthless group of Iranian operatives, survival forces them together.

Hunted by mercenaries, stranded in the frozen wilderness, and snowed in at a remote cabin, they have only each other to rely on. Passion flares between them, hot enough to melt the ice, but falling in love is the one thing neither can afford. As bullets fly and secrets unravel, will they trust their hearts—or walk away before it's too late?

Note: Heated scenes with a satisfying happily forever after.

Total Pages (Source): 44

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Scott Hunter

With nothing but trees and farms for miles, a shiver runs down my spine. In single-digit temperatures, I exit my Explorer. My eyes stinging, my breath's wispy smoke freezes instantly to my face. Icy snow crunches under my dress shoes as I trot to the US Customs and Border Protection sign. A stone's throw away from Canada, I knock on the cement building's thick green door.

No one answers. Too damn cold to wait, I turn the handle.

When I push, frigid metal hinges creak, a blast of heat warms my face, then a soprano voice calls out, "Give me a sec. Be right wid'cha."

Border Agent Kelly O'Malley's cute accent has a twist of French Canadian mixed with classic New England.

"No hurry." Smiling, I pull off my heavy gloves, unbutton my coat, and tug off my hat. As I shake off the melting snow, a white cat jumps atop a file cabinet, daring me to stare back.

"Hey there." With my hand forward, I squat on my heels, closing my eyes. Before long, four paws plunk down on the wood, followed by a wet nose against my knuckles.

"Well, that's a new one. Monstro hates everyone." Her footsteps closer, I lift my lids.

Whoa, steady Hunt. Ignoring the blood rushing below my belt, I reboot my brain.

Part pixie, the siren tilts her head, no doubt waiting for my jaw to snap closed.

My reaction is not my fault. Nothing in my FBI file had prepared me for those vibrant green eyes, pert freckled nose, and shy smile.

Standing, I hold out my hand. “Jack Gurion, Vermont Fish and Wildlife. Chief Patrol Agent Robert Dante is expecting me.” The lie floats effortlessly off my tongue.

“He’s not here.” Despite my wide-open grin, she steps back. Eyes guarded, she slowly retracts her arm until her fingers brush against her sidearm’s handle.

Why the vigilance? The techies assured me my cover was tight. Wiggling my left digits, I slip my right hand toward my lapel.

“Do you mind if I take out my wallet?”

Her nod causes loose curls to escape from her ponytail. After they tumble around her face, an image of kissing her soft pink lips flips across my consciousness.

Insta-lust set aside, I pull out my ID card. Once I place it on her neat desk, she purses her lips, then scans my six-foot-two inches as if studying some weird insect.

“Department of the Interior, huh?” Her scrunched face is a clear tell.

She’s not buying the ruse, but why? Does my team have a leak?

I walk behind a wooden table near a coffee pot shelf, stifling a yawn. “Would you mind if I make myself a cup of joe? I had to leave Burlington in the middle of the night.”

After a curt bob of her head, I place a mug underneath the spigot, a pod in the

machine, then press the start button—liquid slurps. Inhaling the delicious dark roast, I lower into a rickety antique chair.

“Meowph.” Sudden pressure on my lap is followed by purring. Elf-green eyes continue their assessment—the woman’s, not the cat’s.

“Forgive me, but your outfit doesn’t scream outdoorsy.” As she eases into a seat across from me, I shrug.

She’s right. Having no time to shop for flannel, I chose one of my warmer wool suits. “Listen, I’d love to talk fashion, but I’m on the clock. The guys in Swanson told me I would find your boss here. Was I misinformed?”

A honk outside makes her jump up. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Slipping into her thick jacket, she races toward a 1980s F-150, which just stopped at the candy-striped barrier. A quick chat later, she studies a senior gent’s passport before raising the gate and allowing the truck to enter the States.

She stomps her feet on the mat, then plops behind her desk. “I’m sorry you drove all this way for nothing, Mr. Gurion. Like I said, the chief’s not here.”

Those sly green eyes don’t fool me. She may not be lying, but she’s holding back intel. My team lead, FBI Special Agent Batt Hornsby, told me to connect with the man directly, precisely what I intend to do.

Arms crossed, I lean back in the creaky chair. “Sorry, I can’t leave without speaking to him.”

Her cheeks brighten into a deep red. “Well, you can’t. My boss has been ah... out on assignment. We haven’t been in contact for a couple of days.”

“Is that normal?” It’s my turn to stare. Mine is way scarier.

While she averts her gaze, the furball jumps off my lap. Tail in the air, he saunters to his bowl, paws it twice, then turns toward me.

“Mrumph?”

The poor guy’s thirsty. What kind of pet mommy is she?

After I fill the container and set it down, his pink tongue slurps greedily.

Mimicking my scowl, she points at the cat. “I filled his damn bucket this morning.”

“What? Did I say anything?” At my scoff, her frown deepens.

“No, but you might as well have. The little shit tips it over every five minutes. After, he expects me to drop everything to refill it.”

“Meeeow?” Monstro hops on the countertop, knocks over a package of coffee stirrers, then zooms under the desk.

“See what I mean?” She kneels to pick up the mess and feeling a bit guilty, I help.

Sharing this small act lessens the tension, so I use it to my advantage. “Back to your chief, Dante—I called twice last week to confirm our meeting. He assured me he would be here.”

“Like I said before, he’s not, plus I don’t expect him back anytime soon. I’m his acting deputy. Why not tell me what you need?”

Ah, sweetheart. There’s a whole lot you could help me with, but none of it work-

related.

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Kelly O'Malley

"The chief didn't mention you coming." Tossing the stirrers into the trash, I glare at the attractive yet bull-headed giant.

His ID may say US Department of the Interior, but I'm betting he works from a home office near Burlington or Boston. Any fool would know better than to wear a wool coat in the North Country. The moment wet snow falls, he'll be soaked to the skin. No sweater, no thermal underwear, he won't last a minute in our frigid weather.

When the suited Adonis stretches, he takes up all the free space. Staring defiantly, he sits back down and crosses his ankles.

Fine, ignore me, Mr. Not-From-Around-Here. You'll find out the truth soon enough . I haven't seen Dante in five days, but I'm not about to tattle to the hot city slicker. Hell, if Robert wants to go ice fishing, he's earned it. A few months away from retirement, who am I to stop him?

"Well, are you going to just sit there? How about you explain why you've graced my border station with your blessed presence."

Is that how we treat people, Kelly O'Malley? As my gram scolds me from heaven, Jack Gurion raises a brow, piercing me with those deep blue eyes.

He's not my type. Sure, he's built, but he probably attends a fancy gym where they play pickleball and guzzle protein shakes.

Whatever. Being handsome does not give him the right to judge me. My cat has tipped over every bowl or dish known to man. He can lap water from the toilet, for all I care. Come to think of it, he prefers it.

Despite the fact I feed him, buy him toys, talk to him, and take him to the vet, the damn animal hates me. Of course, sensing a kindred alpha, he becomes instant besties with Mr. Fishy.

Oh shit. Caught day-dreaming, my face heats. “Come again?”

Mr. Wildlife’s jaw ticks. “I asked, ‘Can you help me?’”

The embarrassment spreads to my chest and ears. “Sorry, help you what?”

Hissing between his teeth, he rolls his eyes. “My department teamed up with the University of Vermont. We have a significant grant to determine the environmental damage caused by illegal crossings. My first step is to report to your chief. He agreed to show me the most affected areas.”

What man needs lashes so damn long? Images of naked flesh slapping...

Oh sure, he has a pleasant face, but it doesn’t mean I should fantasize banging the muscled bod underneath it. Holy fuck, I need him out of my office before I do something stupid like grab him by the lapels and kiss his soft, plump lips.

Droning on about his mission statement, he flattens a map on my table. “Dante said he would be my guide.”

“Sorry, I can’t leave my post right now. We’ve been downsized. Except for emergencies or PTO, I have no backup.”

He frowns. "That's why I asked to see the Chief Patrol Agent."

"Like I already mentioned, he's not available." While I hum Mick Jagger's tune, "You Can't Always Get What You Want," Debra, a regular, bangs on her horn outside.

I grab my coat, rush out, then wave to the woman in the old Chevy van. "Apologies. I have company."

"Who's the hottie?" Wolf whistling, she lifts from her seat.

I follow her gaze through the glass, trying not to stare at the man making my libido come to life in a way it hasn't for years. "He's some tree hugger looking for Rob. He's worse than bedbugs. Can't get rid of him."

Her tongue clucks while she passes me her passport through the window. "Is your boss AWOL again?"

"A-yup." Although I've known her for years, I open her document and glance at it before returning it. "Coming back tonight?"

"Nah, I won't be done by five, so Ellis said I could stay at his place. You know how it is with fresh-packed snow. The slopes and the day lodge will be jammed."

Reaching across the passenger seat, she hands me a tin of cookies. "Stress baking. These are Mack's favorite."

"My daughter will be thrilled. You're too kind." After I wave goodbye, Mr. Sexy Suit steps to the window and scowls at me.

What? Does he imagine I'm taking bribes? God, he is so annoying. Once I'm back

inside, I remove my boots before sticking a pod in the coffee machine. “So, what does your environmental study entail?”

He parks his ass in my chair as if he owns the place. “I already told you. I’m checking the impact of illegal immigration on the local wildlife.”

Fish-and-game types will chat your ear off. Mr. Hot Bod appears reluctant to talk. Something is off.

He probably thinks I’m too stupid to understand his research. “It’s clear you need more from me, or you wouldn’t still be here. What can I do to help?”

When his frown deepens, I sigh and sit across from him. “Listen, Rob’s been on vacation for a couple of days. It happens. We cover for each other.”

“Drinking?” His assumption annoys me.

“No, fishing.” My aggravated tone makes one of his brows rise, much like Spock in the original Star Trek series.

“Excuse me?” His head tilts as if I was speaking an alien language.

Figuring he left his translator on the shuttle, I speak more slowly. “Robert likes to go out on the ice, okay? He wanted the day off. Being a normal coworker and friend, I said I would take over. Do you have a problem with this?”

“I care neither for his hobbies nor your attitude. I am simply here to gather data on how border crossing impacts our pure Vermont environment.” The man’s scowl reminds me of my junior high school principal.

I bet he couldn’t tell a Tamarack from a Pitch Pine tree. “What’s the hurry? Why not

wait for the chief to return?”

After folding up his map, he stuffs it in his back pocket. “The federal grant has certain cutoff dates. If I don’t comply, they stop our funding.”

“Welcome to the party. If they were so goddamned concerned about the border, they should not have slashed our budget.” I bite my tongue. Those words came out sharper than I intended.

The hottie shrugs, his piercing blue eyes focused on me. “Above my paygrade.”

Feeling like a petulant adolescent, I offer him an oatmeal raisin cookie. “Listen, I’m sorry. We recently lost half our staff. Now, my Canadian friends with jobs in the ski area are in a bind. They don’t earn enough to pay for a room overnight and can’t afford to quit. It sucks.”

Hoping for a crumb, Monstro jumps on the table, but Mr. Wildlife gently pushes him down. “None for you, buddy. They’ll make you sick.”

While I open the kibble and put a handful on the floor in front of the cat, he turns to me. “How many coworkers do you have here?”

Because he sounds genuinely interested, I figure there’s no harm in sharing. “There’s only two of us to cover 8 AM to 8 PM, seven days a week. If me or Jeremy become ill or someone needs time off, the central office sends over a temp.”

“Don’t you ever go out in the field?” My heart pumps as memories of The Incident try to break out of my locked mental box.

Avoiding his gaze, I stuff a cookie in my mouth, then shake my head no.

Phew, that was close.

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Hunt

A simple question about fieldwork set her off? She sure is prickly.

Whatever. I'm here to add up undocumented entries. After my penance, I can go home. I'm lucky I wasn't fired for saving Axel's wife in Belarus. Now, with a new FBI director, it could still happen. I need to keep a low profile.

When she glances up, I smile encouragingly. "I'm simply here to study the environment, nothing more. I promise to stay out of your way."

"Okay. Let me see your map." Grabbing a marker off her desk, she hovers it over the paper. "Do you mind?"

"No, go for it."

While I watch, she highlights places without roads. "These are the deer trails. I would start there. The farmers can give you feedback about moose, rodents, and the occasional wolf. We do have a family of bobcats, but they're shy. You probably won't see them. The mother can be vicious if you get too close to her brood."

I'm supposed to be an expert, so I grunt as if insulted. I wish I could share more of my real purpose, but Batt Hornsby was clear. I could only tell Dante. With him out of the picture, I'm on my own. "Thank you. I think I can take it from here."

"Meeeeorrrrmph." Monstro jumps off the file cabinet and butts his head against my leg as I slip into my heavy wool coat.

Squatting, I pat his head. “Behave, buddy. Never bite the hand of anyone who feeds you.”

He blinks at me, swishes his tail, and noses his water bowl to the wall until it overturns.

“You are such a monster! What did I tell you?” While the lovely customs guard grabs a roll of paper towels, I grab the door handle. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck. You might want to change your clothes. The winds are picking up. Storms are moving in later this week.”

“While I appreciate your concern, I think I can manage a patch of winter weather.” As I open the door, she snorts out her disagreement.

Holy Mother of God, I’ve had enough of her attitude. “What’s your problem, O’Malley?”

“Nothing. Traipse around the forest. Do your thing. By the way, phone signals are spotty up here. Make sure you have an emergency kit because if you get lost, you could die of hyperthermia before we’d ever find you.”

Typically, insults roll off my back. However, I want to impress this woman, not appear incompetent. Worried I might blow my cover, I bite my tongue, shake my head, and slam the door on the way out.

At my hotel, the curtains remain shut so I can grab a quick nap. Upon waking, I warm up an MRE, clean my firearm, and inspect my gear. By midnight, I’m ready.

My plan is simple. I’ll set up my cams, take a few vacation days on the slopes, then return to DC. Compared to my last few assignments, this one’s a breeze. Whistling to

myself, I call the FBI Special Agent in Charge of Counting Illegal Immigrants, Bartholomew Hornsby. “Hey, Batt. You told me to ping you when I started my workday, so here I am.”

When the man’s girlfriend moans in the background, I chuckle. Paybacks, pal, are a real bitch.

Adjusting my night optical device, I climb the muddy path between the thick pines. “Yes, sir. I figured you’d be waiting to hear about my progress. Dante is MIA, off somewhere ice fishing. I’m going to install the first of our surveillance this evening.”

“How long will it take? The president is anxious to have all this data before addressing Congress.” Batt sounds rattled, but I don’t blame him. Nowadays, no one’s job is secure.

I do my best to remove any doubt from my tone. “A week, perhaps two. It depends on how many paths I find. Once it snows, I can track people much faster.”

“Remember what I said. No arrests. We only need a tally.” His constant reminders make my teeth grind in the back.

What am I, five? How I miss working with Axel. Hopefully, after this assignment, my old team can be reassembled. Fucking politics have no place in the trenches.

“Understood. Talk soon, sir.” After I hang up my SAT phone, I park my car near a farmhouse where the owner had made multiple complaints.

About a mile into the woods, male voices carry on the breeze. It’s been a while but I recognize a few words of Farsi. Pulling out my cell, I hit record to translate it later.

Deeper under the brush, I count six men in white camouflage snowsuits. Shit. The

buzzing overhead worries me. If that drone has thermal imaging, I will be found out.

These half-dozen night crawlers are not your average illegals. The ones on either side of the line hold AKs, wear ammo belts, and are sporting fifty-pound backpacks. Their whole demeanor screams special forces.

What the hell did I stumble into? Backing away, I pray the drone's pilot is eating cheese puffs and watching the game.

In silence, I traverse the narrow trail. The moment my car comes into view, I breathe easier until a woman shouts, "Hands where I can see them."

Figuring there's a gun aimed at my chest, I lift my elbows high, fingers spread. "Don't shoot. I'm with Vermont Fish and Wildlife."

"In the middle of the night?" A dark-haired woman in her mid-forties wearing a star on her belt shines her fucking flashlight into my night-vision goggles.

Eyes stinging from the headache-inducing brightness, I turn my head. "Mind focusing your beam elsewhere?"

When the light fades, I lace my hands behind my back, reminding myself to be polite to the local sheriff. "Care to see my ID?"

Lips pursed, safety off, barrel pointed, she nods. "Real slow, mister."

"Yes, ma'am. And would you mind lowering your weapon?" Tugging out my wallet, I tamp down my anger. A bunch of mercenaries walk into the United States without any questions asked, but I'm the one targeted?

While my heart races, she studies my fake identity card, taps it on her palm, and

frowns. “Gurion? How come I never heard of you?”

One of law enforcement’s first lessons is to announce yourself. This woman must’ve missed that class. “How about you introduce yourself, first.”

“I’m Sheriff Loughlin. I’d like to say nice to meet ya, but it’d be a lie.” The woman has the authority to detain me, so I try to remain calm.

“Well, as for your question, I’m a new hire from Burlington. The university and our department have a grant to examine the effect of illegals encroaching on our wildlife’s habitat.” Any lie said with enough conviction is believable.

She hesitates, scratches her head, then raises her pistol. “Well, you shouldn’t be out here, so I’m arresting you for trespassing. Are you armed?”

“Sorry. The only thing that shoots are my cameras.” My pulse spikes. If those armed mercenaries show up, it could be lights out for all of us.

“Well, you’re fortunate I’m the one who found you. These forests are full of coyotes and not the four-legged kind.” Her scowl doesn’t scare me nearly as much as the men I spotted earlier.

“Thanks for the warning. In the future, I’ll be more cautious.”

“Let me be succinct. There will be no next time, Mister Gurion. Let’s go.” She beams at my feet, cuffs me, and leads us back to the road.

While I sit in her SUV’s back seat, she flicks her eyes in the rearview mirror. “By the way, did you see anyone tonight?”

She’s given me no reason to trust her, so I lie, “No, ma’am, not a soul.”

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Kelly

My cell phone rings. Woken from a sound slumber, I struggle to snatch the damn thing off my nightstand. Seconds later, the bright red digits of the sheriff's caller ID light up in front of my nose.

No, no, no. It's 2:03 AM. Did Mackenzie sneak out? Is she injured or worse? Thirteen-year-olds can be so unpredictable.

As I swipe to answer, I stumble out of bed. "Hello?"

"Hey O'Malley, It's Sheriff Loughlin." My friend's formality causes my racing heart to thump harder than ever while I bolt down the hall.

Terrified of what she might say, I gasp for air as I reach my daughter's bedroom door handle. "A-yup. What's going on?"

My hoarse whisper wakes my teenager, who calls out, "Mom? Who is it?"

Thank the lord, she's here . "It's Aunt Ginny. Probably work. Go back to sleep."

My brother's been suffering from depression. Surely he didn't...

I bring the device back to my mouth. "Is Kade hurt?"

"Relax. Everyone is fine. I picked up this asshole in the woods. He claims you'll vouch for him." Her reason for calling me at this ungodly hour makes me want to

throttle her, along with Mr. Sexy Suit.

The breath I was holding whooshes out my lungs. “Holy shit. You scared the hell out of me, Gina.”

“Sorry. I need you to describe him.” Because she doesn’t sound the least bit apologetic, my temper flares.

“Fortyish, ridiculously dark blue eyes, buff, kinda conceited? Says he works for Fish and Wildlife?” Fully awake from the adrenaline in my veins, I feel my way into the kitchen before plopping into a chair.

I’m still not sure I’m buying what he’s selling, but that’s between him and Dante. I’m certainly not obligated to share, not at this point.

“Yeah, that’s him. I found him wandering around the forest behind Tucker’s place. Damn, he’s hot. Did you call dibs?” She’s delusional if she thinks arresting him will make him ask her out. However, stranger things have happened.

“Do us both a favor. Keep him overnight.” Perhaps I’m overacting, but in my mind, the two night owls deserve each other.

“Hold on, I’m sending you his picture to be sure.” She sends me a wink emoji.

While I wait for the image to appear, a pang of jealousy hits me dead center. At the station house, despite some differences of opinion, I thought we connected on some level.

My clit twitches when Gurion appears on my screen. Hair mussed, dark eyes furrowed, he reminds me of an angry porcupine.

It may be petty. Nonetheless, knowing my friend hasn't a chance in hell attracting him makes me smile. "What'd you do to piss him off?"

"Do? I saved his ass and told him to go home. What kind of idiot walks around the border at night unarmed?" Her words carry some weight, but she's missing what I sensed. Under his city-slicker exterior, the man carried himself like a warrior.

Hoping for a few more hours of sleep, I don't get into it with her. "Listen, I'd love to chat, but I have an early start in the morning."

"Uh-huh. Sorry again for bothering you. Nighty-nite." When she hangs up, the day my life changed forever drifts into my mind, Tonight's events cracked open my mental box, formerly welded tight.

Oh crap. As ghosts shoot forth, I brace for the onslaught of memories marching out of my subconscious.

Shivering in my SUV, I inhale scents of manure mixed with pine needles. Alarmed cows moo as six armed men circle the dairy farm. The buzzing drone overhead sounds out of place in the still night.

My heart races at the sudden knock on my back window. After that, things get fuzzy. An angry bass voice. A gun to my head. My face in the cold, wet grass. Flickers of scenes pop into my head, but nothing remains long enough to focus on.

What I do remember clearly is the hospital nurse telling me something no woman should hear. I swallowed a thick pill to prevent pregnancy. My boss insisted on counseling, which I did, but stopped because nothing happened.

I'm fine. I really am.

Placing all the images back into my box, I weld it shut. The shrink advised against this, but she isn't a single working mom.

Back in bed, sleep refuses to come. Damn, the handsome scientist all to hell. I was mostly okay until yesterday. Now, it'll take days, maybe weeks, to stuff everything back where it belongs. Without Dante to cover, I'll be a mess.

Sighing, I fluff my pillow, grab my e-book, then settle into my romance. At some point, I must've given in to slumber. Otherwise, Jack Gurion broke out of jail so he could make love to me. His huge cock slides in and out while his lips press to mine.

Close to orgasmic delight, I groan...

Bling-ding.

Good God, I switch off my alarm and pull off my wet panties. In the shower, I reach between my legs, envision his hands on me, and take care of the ache. During my second cup of coffee, I have an epiphany of sorts. Perhaps a short fling will end my nonexistent sex life. Unless, of course, he's already hooked up with my best friend.

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Hunt

A Marine can fall asleep just about anywhere. A cot in a warm cell is a hell of a lot better than a rock on a mountain.

When I wake, a young man barely out of college makes coffee. As he passes me a paper cup, he avoids my gaze as if I could kill him with a look.

Around ten, the sheriff arrives. After the shapely woman drops her coat on the desk, she unlocks my cell and saunters to my bunk. “I called your superior. I don’t know what kind of leverage you have, but I’m supposed to let you go on about your business.”

I shoot her my most winning smile. “Yes, ma’am. I totally appreciate it. Now, if you’d like, I’ll get out of your hair real fast.”

My fingers are itching to call Wulf. I don’t care what the higher-ups say. Those hired thugs in the woods don’t need counting. They need incarceration. Hopefully, Axel will have the clout to make it happen.

Last night, I could’ve sworn the officer wanted me to fuck her. I’m guessing it’s the reason for her scowl as she hands back my stuff. “You have no clue, do you? The Mexican border gets all the attention while our budget is cut. Arrests last year exceeded the previous seventeen combined. Meanwhile, you get a friggin’ pile of money to study squirrels.”

After signing her forms, I hold up my hands. “Honestly, Sheriff. I’m in no way

political. I simply like animals more than people.”

Scoffing, the fortyish two-by-four shoves my coat in my hand then leads me to the door. “Go back to Burlington or wherever the hell you’re from. You’re going to get someone killed.”

“What about my car?” I pray it’s still where I left it. Otherwise, I’ll waste hours trying to procure another.

“Call an Uber. You can wait at the diner.” When Miss Hell-Hath-No-Fury points across the street, I zip up my mouth and coat.

“Thanks.” For nothing. Exiting, I almost plow into yesterday’s gorgeous pixie racing up the icy walkway.

My unruly cock twitches for absolutely no reason except her blush.

Biting her lower lip, she reaches a gloved hand to mine. “Umm... I heard you were arrested last night. Sorry, some of those trails are posted and...”

“Hey Kelly, what’re you doing here?” Loughlin’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes, but the other woman doesn’t notice.

Instead, her grin widens. “I’m taking your prisoner to breakfast. Want to join us?”

“Go ahead, be my guest.” As the shorter of the two slams the door, I glance at the time.

What the hell is going on here? My sleep-deprived brain is having difficulty understanding these women. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” If memory serves, the last time we spoke, O’Malley was pissed off because her cat liked me better.

Grabbing my arm, she tugs me across the street. “I asked Jeremy to cover for a couple of hours. He owes me—What? Aren’t you hungry?”

Her hopeful grin sends a bolt of lust to my libido, but I tamp it down real fast. I need to focus on what I saw last night. One mistake, and there is no coming back. Still, a man needs to eat. If all goes well, maybe she’ll give me a lift to my SUV.

“So, what changed your mind about me?” I capture her green eyes as they flick over her menu.

“Huh? Nothing. No one wants to see you hurt.” Her offhanded tone sets off alarms.

She’s hiding something more than Dante. Perhaps I should keep her on a short leash. The primal brain, the one below my belt, cheers my logic.

“I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot.” Her first sincere smile catches me off guard.

Hell, she’s a spring day after a frigid winter. I’ve heard of shit like this but never thought it would happen to me.

Shifting in my chair, I place my hand on hers as we both reach for the cream. “It’s not you, it’s me. I’m Prince Charming. Ask Monstro if you don’t believe me.”

Her blush spreads to the tips of her ears and down her long neck. “Are you flirting, Mr. Gurion?”

As she plays with an errant curl, I enter the minefield. “Why? Is there a boyfriend in the picture?”

“No. Is there a Mrs. Fish and Wildlife?” Irises widen as she draws me in further.

Under her spell, I chuckle. “Not even close.”

Her grin widens, hitting my heart dead center.

Holy crap, I am so screwed.

To keep my mouth from saying any other foolishness, I stuff it with eggs, hashbrowns, and toast. Downing my coffee, I throw some bills on the table.

I should open my phone and call a rideshare. Instead, I tuck that damn lock of hair behind her ear, then help her with her coat. “You sure you don’t mind dropping me off?”

Say no.

“Sure, not a problem.” When she strolls to the door, my hand reaches for her lower back as if I’d known her for years rather than hours.

Soon, we’re in her vehicle. She brakes at the town’s only stoplight while glancing over the stick shift. “I’m sorry you spent the night in jail, but Gina was only looking out for you. Would you go off to some remote area of Texas at night by yourself?”

Yes. Scott Hunter, ex-Marine and member of the FBI, would have no qualms. Jack Gurion, however, not so much.

I hang my head, “Probably not.”

“So, why in the world would you do it here?” At her chastising tone, I hold back my grin.

“Because Canadians are more polite? Nicer?” I snicker, causing her eyes to roll.

After, she bangs her palms on the steering wheel. “Sometimes you are such a jerk. Do you make light of everything?”

What is it about this woman? “Listen, it’s not my fault things have changed. It’s not like I can give the grant money back. What would you suggest I do?”

Instead of answering my question, she purses her lips, concentrating on the drive. Soon, the sun comes out from under a cloud. The yellow light reflects on the thin, icy layer of snow, and everything sparkles.

I don’t know why, but I need to see her smile again, so talk about something safer. “It’s so damn beautiful up here.”

Her brows arch while a corner of her mouth lifts. “Don’t get out much, huh?”

Shit. Another mistake. “You’re right. I’m stuck behind a desk—a lot.”

“Mmm.” Passing a barn with a milk tanker parked in front, she turns up a hill.

Soon, the paved road ends. As pine boughs brush against the side of her 4-wheel drive, we bounce across the frozen mud.

Once we reach my vehicle, I jump out and curse. The mercenaries slashed all four tires, or maybe the sheriff did it. Of course, my phone has no bars.

Kelly’s eyes widen as she circles the damage. “I hate to say I told you so—but you can’t be out here.”

“Yup. I hear ya.” Not for the first time, I wish I could shed my alter ego and tell her I’m FBI.

She thinks I should be scared, but I'm not. What I am, is determined. However, with the agency watching every penny, Batt is going to ream me a new asshole.

I've already blown my budget, and I'm just getting started. "Can you drop me off at the closest garage with a tow truck?"

Back in the driver's seat, Kelly glances over the cup holder. "I know a guy. He'll save you money but doesn't deal with insurance."

"Thanks. Appreciate it." The damage doesn't worry me as much as the message they sent. It could be the two-legged coyotes noticed my presence, or the sheriff wanted me out of the way more than she was letting on.

The border agent purses her lips. "Is there any other way to conduct your research?"

"No. I've already bought the cameras. I simply need to install them." I recall a similar argument in Batt's office. When I suggested we use drones with satellite coverage, he shot me down. Yeah, big surprise there. Everything is being used in the South.

"The noncitizens will take them down. Your stuff won't last a week." Her patronizing tone grates on my nerves.

Grumbling, I poke around in my knapsack and when I lift one of my hi-tech cameras with thumb and forefinger, she whistles through her teeth. "Whoa. Those are tiny."

"You get it? Why I can't give up?" A pang of guilt washes over me, but I swallow it back. It's safer if she thinks I'm here for the environment.

While she drives, oblivious to my stare, her lips move as if talking to herself. If her scowl is any indication, she has reached a conclusion. "Fine. There's only one thing to be done. Next time, you take me with you."

I snort out laughing. “As what? My bodyguard?”

“No, Wildlife, your babysitter.” Her pointed gaze and snarky barb hit their mark dead center.

Ouch. “I don’t think-”

“It’s settled.” Her caustic words remind me of my night in jail. Perhaps, if I let her help with the electronics, we could concentrate on heated kisses—sex against the bark of a maple tree under the moonlight.

As the fantasy plays out, my cock hardens. In my defense, I didn’t sleep much last night. Mentally kicking myself, I remember she’s a gun-toting DHS agent—not someone to be trifled with.

As if hearing my thoughts, she stops at a farmhouse, deals with my broken SUV, then jumps into the driver’s side. “All set. He’ll tow it wherever you want.”

Back at the border building, she hops out, runs around the car, and opens my door, of all things. “You can wait inside.”

“I’ll be right in.” Never having a woman act the gentleman is more than a little unsettling.

Putting my battered ego on hold, I text Wulf, who calls back on my burner phone. “Hunt, out of jail so soon?”

“Ha, ha. You’re hilarious. Listen, I don’t have much time. Last night, I saw six men coming over from the north. Two were fully armed professionals. They had eyes in the sky. We’re talking top-dollar. Before I could follow, the local law arrested me. Funny enough, the sheriff knew exactly where to find me. When I returned to retrieve

my vehicle this morning, my tires were slashed. I need more intel, like yesterday. There's a lot more going on under the surface than I was led to believe." Worried I might be overheard, I move further away from the building.

"How can I help?" I picture my friend in his comfy DC office, wishing like fuck I was still part of his team instead of Batt's personal abacus.

"I'm sending you a recording. Can you get it translated? I tried, but it was too garbled, and my Farsi is rusty. By the way, if anyone asks, I have followed Batt's orders to the letter. I am tabulating illegal immigrants. Nothing more, nothing less."

Wulf whooshes out a long breath. "Keep your head down, my friend. Stay safe. I'll get back to you the moment I have something."

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Kelly

While Mr. Wildlife makes his call, I warm my fingers on my coffee mug. The way angry dark clouds whip across the gray sky, I believe the weatherman. The Nor'easter headed our way may well turn into a bomb cyclone.

Friggin' awesome. I'll need to fill the snow blower's plastic gas tank, buy ice melt, and pull the chains from my vehicle's tire well.

I'm still adding to my mental list when the sexy scientist wanders in the front door. "Hey, Kelly."

My jaw opens to respond in kind until I realize I simply can't. "I'm sorry. You don't look anything like a Jack.

"No? What then?" Smiling, he bites the tip of his glove.

As he removes his outer gear, my fingertips drum the desk. "I'm not sure. Something more nebulous, more unusual."

"Bruce Wayne? Clark Kent?" His wink makes me blush at my foolish attempt at flirting.

I blame lack of sleep for what passes from my lips next. "I know. The Incredible Hulk."

Flexing his muscles, he chuckles, sits, then opens his laptop. Ink peeks beneath his

flannel shirtsleeve rolled halfway up his forearms. A Semper Fi draws my attention.

No wonder he has that I could kill you with a spoon vibe. “What was your unit?”

“Force RECON.” His steady, unreadable blue eyes send chills down my spine.

Because he shared his service, I think it’s fair I do the same. “Second Battalion, First Division. Afghanistan.”

Strolling behind him, I pick a pine needle from his hair, surprised at the silkiness of his locks. Holy crap, for a guy who spent the night in jail, he smells delicious.

When he turns, electricity snaps between us. We’d probably still be sitting there, but a horn honks outside, reminding me I’m on duty.

Dammit. I rush out, check passports, and raise the gate. When I return, the atmosphere reminds me of the millisecond before lightning strikes.

I glance over his shoulder and point to the third garage on his screen’s list. “Ames will give you a fair price on tires.”

“Thanks.” His fingers clamp around mine, keeping me prisoner.

Again, I’m drawn into the depths of his blue eyes. I don’t believe in love—but lust? Sure. We’re both adults. Who would blame me? The sex police? Besides, after he heads back to Burlington, we never have to see each other again unless we agree to the occasional booty call. My lower lips tingle. How long has it been since the she-nub has shown interest?

My mental box makes an appearance in my mind’s eye, but I quickly set it back into the bowels of things better not thought about .

Around one, I make him a leftovers sandwich. By mid-afternoon, we're chatting, so I move my laptop to the table, where we sneak glances and share random touches.

At one point, I picture him in my bed, kissing me in intimate places until I become wet with want. Face heated, I squirm. Eyeing me, he tilts his head and stretches before opening his legs. His body language could not be more explicit.

Just my luck. The door flies open before I can gather the courage to invite him home.

In struts my daughter. "Hey Mom, Dad claims he's way too busy to..."

Her eyes widen, locking onto the stranger sitting at my table. "Hello. And you are?"

Mr. Wildlife rises smoothly, a hint of amusement flickering across his face, "Hi, I'm Jack. I work for Vermont Fish and Wildlife."

My offspring turns to me, her brows lifting in a silent, seriously, Mom?

I never allow anyone to park in my building, let alone get comfortable. She crosses her arms before relenting to take the outstretched hand. "I'm Mackenzie, but everyone calls me Mack. A pleasure meeting you."

She grips firmly, capturing his gaze precisely like I taught her. Gurion returns the shake with easy confidence, his smile warm, not at all condescending.

Quite sure he passed the first test, I clear my throat. "You were saying something about your father?"

Mack's face shuts down, fingers twitching at her side. "He doesn't want me tonight. He's too busy."

When her voice cracks at the end, my stomach tightens. Dammit, Peter. The bastard doesn't try to pretend anymore. His personal assistant is barely older than a babysitter, yet he ditches his daughter without a second thought.

As tears pool in her eyes, I shift forward, arms open. "C'mere. Give me a hug."

"Eww. Mom. I'm thirteen, not six." She dodges me like a pro and squats beside Monstro.

The white furball stretches luxuriously, arching into her touch while she buries her fingers in his thick fur. Smug as hell, the crazy feline meets my stare.

Stupid cat.

Mackenzie swipes her sleeve across her face, grabs the knapsack off her shoulder, and thunks it onto the table. "I'll be right back."

Spinning on her heel, she vanishes into the restroom.

As the silence settles, my guest leans back, one arm draped over the back of the chair. A few moments later, he stirs, "She's a great kid."

"She likes you." My breath hitches while he scratches the feline's head.

What would it be like to have his hands in my hair?

The traitorous feline purrs like a damn motorboat as the man smirks. "Told you. Everyone loves me, including Monstro."

Folding my arms, I scowl at the picture of pure contentment in front of me.

I can't believe I'm jealous of the cat.

None too soon, my daughter returns. She's pulled her tresses into a neat ponytail. A faint sheen of lip gloss catches the light.

Oh no. She's up to something.

Once she's plopped onto the chair across from our visitor, she tilts her head in mock curiosity. "So, what are you doing here, Jack from Wildlife?" Her tone is spot-on, mimicking Jake from the State Farm commercials.

While I snort, my guest raises an eyebrow. "I had a little car trouble. Your mom was kind enough to let me stay until my tires are fixed."

My teenager hums, tapping a finger on the table like she's considering his words carefully. With the confidence of a kid spoiled by her dad's guilt trips, she announces, "Well, if that's the case, why not take us out to eat?"

I groan. "Mackenzie, that's not polite."

She shrugs, completely unbothered.

Thankfully, Gurion chuckles. Not missing a beat, he bobs his head. "Dinner sounds like fun."

"Wait, what?" Nonplussed, I blink to ensure I haven't fallen into an alternate reality.

Challenge in his eyes, he places his elbows on his knees and leans forward. "Yeah. I mean, it's only fair. Your mom saved me from being stranded in the middle of nowhere. The least I can do is buy you both a meal."

Mack beams. “See, Mother? He doesn’t mind.”

I sigh, rubbing my temple. Clearly, my vote doesn’t count, and if I’m honest, I want to spend more time with the hot ex-Marine.

I push back from the table, shaking my head. “Fine. But if we do this, I get to pick the place.”

“Ugh. No salad bars, please.” The groan from my daughter makes me laugh. She thinks pizza sauce counts as a vegetable.

“I was hoping for steak.” The Natural Resources employee smirks as I thumb through the menus in the drawer under the coffee.

Excellent. Now they’re ganging up on me.

Before long, five o’clock rolls around, and my replacement shows up.

“Hey, squirt.” Jeremy, clad in his cow-scented plaid jacket, ruffles Mack’s hair as he steps inside.

She swats at him half-heartedly, but a grin tugs at her lips.

Shrugging off his coat, he settles behind the desk. Grabbing the logbook, his sharp gaze flicks to Mr. Gurion. Just like that, the farmer’s easygoing demeanor shifts. The death stare he levels at my guest is straight out of a sci-fi novel—cold, assessing, and terrifying.

“Anything noteworthy I should be aware of?” He scratches his salt-and-pepper beard, his attention still locked on Jack.

“Nope. Same ol’, same ol’.” I suppress a sigh while maintaining a neutral expression. The town grapevine has undoubtedly worked overtime, spinning his arrest last night into something far more interesting than the truth.

Jeremy grunts but doesn’t appear convinced. “What about Rob? Have you heard from him yet?”

His question twists my stomach. Dante isn’t only my boss—he’s one of Jeremy’s best friends. The fact he’s gone radio silent concerns us both.

I shake my head. “To be honest, I’m starting to worry.”

My friend and coworker exhales, settling his heavy frame into the desk chair. “I wouldn’t. You know how he gets.”

His comment doesn’t quell the acid burning my esophagus. “Yeah, I suppose.”

Eyeing me for a moment, he smirks. “Are you going for his job when he retires?”

“Me? Hell, no.” My laugh, more like a seal’s bark, makes me slap a hand to my mouth. “I like my cushy position.”

Jeremy chuckles. “Me too. Besides, I’ve got a farm to run.”

Done changing the guard, we say our goodbyes and race to the car. As I blast the heat, Jack’s phone buzzes.

“Yup, okay. Thank you... We’ll pick it up after dinner. I will. Bye.” He shoots me a warm smile. “My car’s finished. If you wouldn’t mind, can you drop me off on your way home?”

“Sure.” My grip tightens on the wheel while a strange pang of disappointment settles in my chest. Not that it matters—with my daughter sleeping at my place tonight, sex is officially off the table.

Just as well.

But still... the thought of a quick tumble had been enticing.

After a twenty-minute drive, we settle into a booth at The Old Barn. The warm scent of grilled meat and seasoned fries fills the air, mingling with the muffled hum of conversation.

I order a light beer, our host goes for the local brew on tap, and Mack gets a Diet Coke. As we dig into our burgers, the door swings open.

Oh fuck. My mouth freezes mid-bite.

John Bourdin strides inside, scanning the room like he owns it.

Shrinking in my seat, I casually let my napkin slide off my lap, hoping—praying—he doesn’t notice me.

No such luck.

By the time I straighten, the man of my nightmares beelines to our table.

Frowning, the former Marine shifts closer. As his arm brushes against mine, his body coils. His hands may rest at his sides, but I don’t miss the tension in his fingers.

Quietly for me, he mutters, “Your ex?”

“No. He’s nobody,” I whisper back. “Say nothing. Let me handle this.”

Before John can open his obnoxious pie-hole and ruin my evening, Jack slips an elbow around my waist, pulling me into a kiss. A real one. Not a polite, let’s-make-this-convincing peck.

Nope.

Firm, demanding lips claim mine. His tongue teases the seam of my mouth until it parts. As his left hand slides up to cradle the back of my neck, he holds me in place to deepen the connection.

Moaning softly, my brain misfires. Synapses crackle as if stepping onto thin ice—my sole excuse for melting into him. When we finally come up for air, my thirteen-year-old applauds.

Only seconds have passed, yet, in that time, Bourdin’s face has turned an alarming shade of purple. While his neck muscles pulse, my fake boyfriend pushes back from our make-out like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Smirking, he rises to his full height and thrusts out a hand. “Jack Gurion.”

To his credit, the coyote shakes the offered greeting. He towers over many men, but next to Mr. Wildlife, he’s simply another guy trying too hard.

“John Bourdin. Friend of the family.”

Like hell he is.

Nostrils flared, eyes narrowed, the Canadian grimaces. His clipped nasal accent makes his first name sound more like Zh un.

My fake date's smile doesn't falter. "A pleasure to meet you. Me and my sweetheart met online. I think I'll keep her." He winks at me, but his eyes hold danger, like MI6's Agent 007.

Sensing the challenge, the thug bristles. He snatches a fourth chair, flips it around, then straddles it. Leaning in, he snarls. "How long you here for, zhjack?"

The ex-Marine doesn't flinch. Instead, he simply glows at me like he has a naughty secret. "As long as it takes to convince this woman to give me a chance."

The romantic gesture makes my heart stutter. That's why I miss what is said next.

Sparks flickering in his eyes, Gurion's lethal, smooth voice lowers. "How about we discuss this outside?"

My eyes roll. I can already picture it. The fistfight. The sheriff. My daughter watching, as two grown men go at it in a diner parking lot.

Nope. Not happening.

"This is not Victorian England," I snap. "There will be no duels outdoors or otherwise. Do I make myself clear?"

Jack chuckles but doesn't argue.

John, however, licks his lips, letting his gaze drop—to my thirteen-year-old seventh-grader. His eyes linger a fraction too long on her chest.

"Remember what I told you." His threat snaps what little patience I had left.

As I reach for my sidearm, Jack's lazy charm vanishes. A blizzard brews in his gaze,

his jaw tightens, and his fists clench.

I don't know what's about to happen next, but one thing is certain—this night has taken a dangerous turn.

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Hunt

I grab the pedophile's arm, drag him through the restaurant, then shove him out the door. "You come within an inch of those two ladies, I will kill you."

The lowlife scumbag snarls. "You won't be here forever, asshole."

"Fuck off. Now." My knuckles ache to connect with his flesh, but it would blow my cover.

Watching his hands, I keep mine by my waist, ready to react.

Gun? Knife? Fists?

Finally, he points a finger, spitting at my feet. "Next time."

Arms crossed, I wait for his Hummer to disappear before fetching the O'Malley women.

As Kelly drives me to her friend's garage, my mind shifts from the intruder to the way her willing lips molded to mine. A simple kiss turned my cock to steel. Huh. I can't remember that ever happening before.

Focus, Hunt. I pull on the bothersome thread, dangling on the edge of my subconsciousness.

What kind of man ogles a young teenager? Why didn't her mother speak up? I would

ask, but not in front of young Mack, who seemed oblivious to the sexual undertones.

His voice sounded so familiar...

Shit. He was one of the mercenaries in the woods last night.

Bracing my arm against the driver's seat, I lean until my mouth meets her ear. "Out with it. Who is he?"

"I already told you. Nobody. Leave it." Face pale, she glances in the rearview mirror. In the back seat, her daughter listens, thumbs halted over her phone.

"What, exactly, were you supposed to remember?" My inner FBI agent has forgotten I'm a science guy, not a representative of the law.

She, however, has not. "I can take care of it." White-knuckling the steering wheel, her mouth tightens.

Is it possible she's aware of the Iranians coming over the border? If so, no wonder she wants to partner with me. She'll make sure I see nothing. It would explain her heated response to my kiss. If I'm caught up in her sexuality, I won't be able to think straight.

Well, babe, I am forty years old and not so easily duped.

We ride the rest of the way in silence. At the garage, I find my key under the mat and wave goodbye. I don't ask if she will join me tonight in the woods. Circumstances clearly have changed.

Back at my hotel, I try to ignore thoughts of her as I layer on clothes. Finally, I step into my snowsuit. White, gray, and black splotches will make me one with the forest.

This time, I park my SUV near a farmhouse, closer to where the sheriff arrested me. The stillness reminds me of Afghanistan. A ghost, I traverse the woods soundlessly. The black balaclava warms my face. Thick gloves, specially made for shooting, cover my hands.

I'm ready.

When a twig snaps, I stop in my tracks. Two hundred feet to the south, a guide leads two adults carrying two preschoolers. Their thin coats and wet sneakers say much about their finances. I am after predators, not prey, so let them pass.

Quiet again, I stick one of my miniature cameras high up in the bark of a maple tree. Moving deeper into the woods, I walk parallel to the deer trail. About thirty minutes later, Farsi mixed with Québécois floats on the breeze.

Soon, three men come into view. No wonder Bourdin ran off. He had two Persians to escort over the border.

While he leads, one of the men points. If my translation is accurate, he said, "We should kill him when this is all over."

"Silence. Allons-y." The pedophile from the restaurant waves them forward.

The urge to arrest him consumes me, but I tamp it down. If I show my cards now, I may never learn their agenda. I follow them to their car, copy the license plate, and return to my hotel. Once I've removed my outerwear, I call Axel and describe everything I have seen in the woods to date.

My former task leader chuckles. "How many undocumented did you see? You still have toes if you need to count higher."

“You’re a fucking riot. Listen, as much as I love our little tête-à-tête, I wanted to run something else by you.” I explain how Bourdin walked up to our table, threatened Border Agent O’Malley’s kid, and how she did nothing to stop him other than telling me I couldn’t take him outside to teach him some manners.

Axel sighs. “Well, the way I figure, you have two choices. One, you put up your cameras, estimate the traffic over the border, then come home. Your second option is to investigate. If you choose door number two, don’t tell Hornsby.”

“Why not?” My gut clenches.

“We’ve pissed off Canada—cozied up to Russia, who happens to be in bed with Iran. You were told to tally up undocumented aliens. So, officially, that is what you do. Keep in touch.”

Shit, shit, shit. I jump under the covers, fully intending to get some sleep. Around three in the morning, college kids slam doors, shout, and carry on. Of course, my thoughts turn to the sexy border patrol agent. Damn that woman. Damn her kiss. In the bathroom, I grab my cock to relieve the pressure. Only then am I finally able to rest.

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Kelly

After dropping Hunt off at the garage, I drive home. When Mackenzie's breathing becomes steady, I snatch my pillow, reset the alarm codes, and stash my gun under the sofa.

For hours, I stare at the ceiling. What the hell was up with the kiss, gram? Why did it affect me so?

Her voice responds in my head, He protected you, sweetheart. It's not so hard to understand.

What am I going to do about John Bourdin? He sent a clear message to stay out of his business. How can I avoid him with Mister Fucking Wildlife, putting up cameras all over the place?

Argh ! I punch my pillow. Why is my stupid life so difficult? And why does Ranger Gurion need to be so damn attractive?

At times like these, I always relied on Robert. I try his cell phone. As before, it goes straight to voice mail. Surely, he's had all the time off he needs. For chrissakes, he's retiring in a few months.

This thought sends me down another rabbit hole of dread. Without him playing interference, Bourdin will feel free to bully me more.

Reaching beneath the couch, I find comfort in the pistol's cold steel. If that coyote

tries to break in, he's in for a surprise. This mama bear will protect her cub. But what about when she's at her father's house? Or at school? If anything should happen to her...

Dammit. No paycheck is worth this stress. Images of The Incident clang against the sides of my mental box, trying to break free. I squeeze my eyes as I force them back. The hinges crack. It doesn't take a psychiatrist to know I'm on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

In desperation, I turn my thoughts to Jack Gurion's kiss. In my dream, he takes me home, undresses me, and worships my body. While he pistons inside me, someone pounds on the front door. Grabbing my service weapon, I bolt onto my feet, squinting into the bright morning light.

Where am I?

Mouth full of toothpaste, my daughter walks down the hall. "Mom! What is wrong with you?"

Her eyes widen as she glares, snapping me awake from my sleepy state. Holy fuck, I'm officially the shittiest parent in the history of humankind.

"Sorry, honey." Shaking all over, I lay my weapon on the coffee table.

Meanwhile, she spreads the curtains. "It's him, the hottie. He's at the door. Gonna open it?"

Oh, shit. Pulling my tangled mess into a ponytail, I take a deep breath and pull on the handle. "Hey, Wildlife, wassup?"

The smile on the environmentalist's face disappears as he tucks an errant lock behind

my ear. “Are you alright? Did something happen after I left?”

My private parts cheer at his touch. Oh hell, no, missies, we are not going there.

Unaware of my sidebar with my sexual extremities, he holds up a cardboard tray. “Coffee, hot chocolate, and danishes from The Peak’s.”

Mackenzie grabs the bag. “Wow, that’s what I’m talkin’ about. Thank you so much.” She shoots me a double glare—teenage-speak for Invite him in already.

“You shouldn’t have, but we appreciate the kindness.” Inhaling cinnamon, I lead him to my second-hand table in my 1960’s kitchen.

Tossing coats onto the sofa, I offer him the spare chair. “Sit.”

As I grab napkins, I see my broken, chipped cabinets through his eyes, and cringe. “It’s, uh... a work in progress.”

His hand captures mine in midair. “No judgment. Extremely retro. Probably fetch a fortune in the right market.”

“Huh.” As I reevaluate my stove, the old-fashioned clock jolts my brain. Despite the fact a handsome stranger brought us sweets, today is not a weekend.

I shout down the hall. “Mack. Five minutes.”

“Mom. I need to finish my makeup.” She slams the bathroom door while the star of my morning wet dream pulls me into his lap.

Caught off-guard, my heart thumps. Does he want a repeat performance of last night? If so, his timing is way off.

When he leans in, I slip my tongue over my dry lips.

As our mouths are about to meet, he lets go of my hands in favor of my shoulders.
“Listen, about last night...”

I snap my index finger to his lips. “Do not apologize. Best fake kiss ever.”

“Yeah?” Gaze locked on mine, his nostrils flair.

Tits and clit aching to be touched, I cup his stubbled cheeks.

For the love of God, kiss me, already. If not for the teenager in the house, I’m sure we’d be halfway to the bedroom.

“Okay, you two, I’m ready.” Mack breaks the spell, sauntering into the kitchen.
“Can’t be late unless you want to write me a note.”

Unable to face Principal Wierzbicki, I grab my handbag and car keys. “Yup. Be right there.”

Now outside, my kid tugs him away from his SUV. “You come too, Jack.”

When the man shakes his head, my daughter pulls harder. “You will make me the most popular girl in school. Pah-lease.”

“How can I say no?” He jumps into the passenger side seat while Mack bounces into the back.

Making sure everyone sees, he calmly waves out the window as we drop her off. Back at home, he follows me into my house. Holy crap, I’d love to drag him to the couch, the mattress or the rug, but adulting must take precedence.

“I’d love for you to stay, but I have work.” When I place my fingers on his chest, the muscles underneath give me pause. Maybe, this once, I could be a few minutes late.

He traps my hands and steps so close, static electricity sparks between us. “You slept in your clothes last night. You brought your sidearm with you in the car. Why?”

Damn the man for being so perceptive. “No reason. I often do.”

At my blatant lie, his soft lips purse. “Right. So, it had nothing to do with John Bourdin?”

Ah, fuck it. He’s a nerdy scientist, no match for those bringing people over the border. If I say yes, he’s going to want to help me, which could get him killed.

“It’s none of your concern. Finish your studies, then go back to the city.” Grabbing a clean uniform and undies, I race into the bathroom.

As I strip, an unwelcome new voice shouts from the other room, “What the blazes are you doing here?”

How many times have I told my ex-asshole he cannot barge into my house without my permission?

“I’ll be out in a second, Pete.” I button up my shirt as fast as humanly possible to prevent the shitshow about to take place.

For no reason I can possibly think of, Mr. Wildlife decides to butt into my life once again. “I’m Jack, Kelly’s boyfriend, and you are?”

No, no, no. Zipping up my pants, I rush to the living room, hoping to avoid bloodshed. “Peter, get out. Now.”

“This is what you’re exposing our daughter to? Adultery?” He’s so wrong on so many fronts, it’s not worth the breath it takes to argue.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Let me spell it out for you. D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D. It is legally off-limits to you.”

“It won’t be if I take up your loose behavior with Judge Statton.” My ex-husband has got to be the most annoying man on the planet.

Taking a deep breath, I count to ten, noting the time on my phone.

I’m late for work and he is standing in front of my goddamn door.

Gloves off, I poke him in the chest. “ You cheated on me, but I’m the bad influence? You may have married a holy roller, but it doesn’t give you the right to come into my house and preach your fucking upside-down version of the gospel. Get out before I arrest you. I mean it, Peter. I will do it.”

When he recoils his fist, I slip my gun from my holster. “Go ahead. Try it, motherfucker. I have a witness.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Hunt

After the scene with her ex-husband, I drive behind Kelly to the border building. There, I sit in the car and debate whether I should invite myself in.

This morning demonstrated how well she can defend herself. So, what happened last night at dinner? Could it be, the alpha in me wants her to be weak so I can play the hero? Perhaps the reason I kissed her is simpler. I'm simply a lonely guy in need of a hot fuck.

Tired of analyzing my motivations, especially in the cold, I turn the locked handle. When it doesn't give way, I knock. "Hey, Agent O'Malley, it's me, Sc—Jack." Holy crap, I almost gave my real name.

As I reel from my misspeak, she opens the door. "Don't you have some animals to study?"

My hands ache to touch her. Instead, I backpedal a bit. "I would, but first, I have to talk to you... Please."

Frowning, she raises her gaze to mine. For a moment, she says nothing but steps aside. "Fine. Come in."

Inside, I help myself to a cup of coffee while she crosses her arms. "If you're waiting for me to thank you, don't hold your breath."

I chuckle. "I figured as much. I didn't like the way he assumed we were sleeping

together.”

“Yeah, well, if he were a decent human being, I wouldn’t’ve divorced him, right? So, why are you here?”

The silence looms. As we stare into each other’s eyes, the black centers of hers widen. Licking her lower lip, she plays with her hair. I don’t need an FBI course in body language to know she’s interested. The question is, if I call her out, will she act on her desire, or will she toss me on my ear?

While we’re stuck in the moment, the sun rises a degree through the front window and reflects on a tiny object placed on the paneling above the cabinets.

“For chrissakes.” I place a finger over her lips before leading her outside. “There’s a surveillance camera in your back wall.”

Eyes round, her jaw drops. “What? Are you saying someone is spying on me?”

Biting my tongue, I remind myself I’m not a Fed. I’m supposed to work for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. “It might not be you. It could be Jeremy or your boss, Dante.”

Her face scrunches up. “Just a damn minute. How did you know it was there?”

“I didn’t until the sunlight caught the lens.” My logical explanation does nothing to erase the doubt etched on her face.

“Bullshit. Who are you? Wait, don’t tell me—the suit, the wool coat, the traipsing around in camouflage. God, I am such an idiot. You’re internal affairs.”

“Nope. You’re way off base.” Cupping her cheeks, I bring my lips so near to Kelly’s

mouth, we almost touch. “I need you to be quiet. Trust me, for one second, okay? Can you do that?”

Shivering, she nods, halving the distance. No longer able to resist, I brush my lips across hers. Moaning, she slips her fingertips under my ears, which kickstarts my cock. When I tilt my head to deepen the kiss, she delights me by thrusting her tongue deep.

It’s only a little smooch, and yet I want to strip off her clothes. When we break for air, it takes a moment to reboot reality. Lifting her hair, I press her body to the door and grind my want into her arched pelvis. “I’m going to drag you inside and hope whoever’s watching will believe we’re about to fuck.”

“I suppose I could try to act like I’m attracted to you.” She wraps her long legs around my waist.

Groaning, I place my left hand under her butt, carrying her to the bathroom. “We need to make certain there’s no surveillance in here.”

Her hands rub up and down her arms while she cranes her neck toward the drop ceiling. “Surely, no one would—”

“We’ve no idea who we’re dealing with.” After I plant a kiss on her frown, I continue my search.

Finding nothing, I slide her hair away from her ear, then lean in. “Speak quietly. There could be mics.”

Eyes widening, she palms my unshaven cheeks. “Who are you, really?”

I could lose my job, but circumstances have changed. The way I see it, I have no

choice but to let her in on the operation. “I’m FBI. The president wants an accurate count of people coming over the border. No more. No less.”

Mouth skewing, she shakes her head. “Seriously?”

“Yup.” I nod and pop the ‘p’.

“That’s it. The truth.” I leave out the Iranians because I haven’t yet decided how to deal with them.

“And the camera? Was that your doing?” Her accusation cuts deep, but I can hardly blame her.

“No, babe.”

Closing her eyes, she scowls. “If we remove it, they’ll know we’re onto them. Until we figure out the who and the why, we should leave it be.”

“Agreed.” As the tension in my shoulders fades away, she slides from my grasp and pokes my chest.

“So, why leave Homeland out of your Federal count-fest?” The fluorescent light buzzes overhead while I try to invent a valid reason to keep her out of the woods.

“It’s not safe.” The instant the words exit my mouth, I know I’m screwed.

Her grimace tightens. “I’m the border agent, babe . It’s my job.”

She can give me all the attitude she wants, but I’m not changing my mind. “We’ll talk about it. By the way, my real name is Scott Hunter. Everyone calls me Hunt.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

It took me all day to convince Jack, AKA Scott Hunter, that I should join him tonight in the woods. Now, sitting in his Ford Explorer, my tsunami of thoughts rises, ready to smash me into tiny bits.

Hunt? What kind of nickname is that? What was up with calling me babe?

Gram's voice speaks from inside my head. Admit it, sweetie, you loved it.

Oh fuck, now I'm arguing with my dead grandmother. If you add this to my unhinged mental box, I'm two clicks away from a psychotic break.

Oblivious to my inner crazy chatter, Mr. FBI hands me a silver space blanket and hand warmers. "Who's watching your daughter?"

"M-Mack is with my brother, a former Ranger. Sh-she'll be fine." I dressed for the cold. Other than nerves, I have no reason to shiver like this.

His brows lift, his version of a silent question mark. He wants more intel, but I'm not ready to share my family's drama. "It's complicated. She's safe. That's what counts. Don't you think we should go out there and poke around—maybe put up some more cameras?"

When I reach for the door handle, his arm reaches across my waist.

"Don't." His bossiness annoys me. Yet, in a way, I find it comforting. How can both

things be true?

“You didn’t want my help tonight, did you? This is your idea of placating me.” As I press the hand warmers tighter, their heat seeps into my palms and eases the tightness in my chest.

A breath I didn’t realize I was holding slips free when he hands me his phone. “Here are the feeds from my surveillance cams. No one is out there unless you have other paths you haven’t told me about.”

His response is reasonable enough, but I don’t buy it. Not for one moment. “I was a Marine. Because of my short stature, I had to be more qualified than any of my team. This is what makes me a damn fine border agent.”

“I never said you weren’t.” He studies my face like I’m the one being unreasonable, and maybe I am.

Shit. Since The Incident, I’ve had to second-guess all my actions. The awkward silence stretches on for too long. He’s probably glad I shut up. I imagine he’s contemplating how to handle this crazy woman.

God, I hate stoic men. Perhaps we should discuss the sexual attraction between us.

Nope. Not going there, either.

When the leaves rustle nearby, Hunter grabs his gun. I do likewise. While holding our breaths, a majestic moose strolls near our car.

“Don’t move. If her calves are nearby, she could ram the vehicle.” My heart pounds in my ears for I don’t know how long.

Finally, the cow grunts and hooves the ground, then wanders away.

“That was amazing.” Shaking his head, he stares at the empty outdoors so intently I have to laugh.

“So, Mr. Wildlife, never seen a momma moose before?”

“Not up close and personal.” His smile melts the ice which previously permeated the mood in the car.

Not wanting the lightness to leave, I blurt out the first thing to come into my head. “Soo... a handsome guy like you. Why no girlfriend? Is there something you’d like to share?”

The moon slips under some clouds, turning the vehicle into an intimate cocoon where anything can be said.

His soft chuckle hits the mark between my upper thighs. “There’s been a couple over the years, but it takes a certain type of woman to put up with my career.”

Since he shared, it’s only fair I do the same. “I got married young. We started a family, but Peter lost his job. We had no money and no healthcare, so I enlisted. The second my term was up, he divorced me. Turns out, he found someone to keep him company while I was serving my country.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Reaching across the cupholder, he places his hand on my knee.

Tits hard, liquid pooling between my thighs, I wish I could see his face. “Don’t be. You met him. He’s a jerk. What about you? Ever married?”

His breathing hitches when his hand inches higher. “Nope, never took the plunge. Came close a couple of times, but they smartened up before going down the aisle.”

“Relationships suck.” Squeezing his gloved hand, I spread my legs.

“Agreed.” The seat squeaks. A moment later, his exhaled air warms my face. “The worst.”

His pinky skims across my clit, sending a jolt through me, emboldening me. “We could skip all the drama and go straight to the fun stuff.”

“No texts? No heart emojis?” My breath hitches as his fingers dig into my muscles.

“Exactly. No overanalyzing, no deep discussions about what this means or where it leads.” His speech barely registers before his lips crash into mine.

With his hand tangled in my hair and his tongue teasing me, I know—instantly, irrevocably—I’ve made a mistake. We must have slipped through time because years have passed by the time we part.

“I’d love to start our affair right here, but I’d rather not risk getting caught naked.” His voice breaks through the Milky Way, grounding me.

Back in my galaxy, I fumble for words, my mind still light-years away. “Guess we’ll simply have to let those embers of desire smolder awhile.”

His maddening chuckle only stokes the fire. “Sounds like someone’s been reading too many romance novels.”

“Guilty as charged.”

Hunt

Waking up alone, I thank God I had the sense to leave the sexy border agent at her door. No texts—we agreed. So I don't. Instead, I press my forehead against the bathroom mirror. What the ever-loving fuck was I thinking?

She got under my skin. I took her to the woods to placate her, not to make out like a randy teenager. I need an ally, not a complication. In addition, I sure as hell can't risk her daughter becoming collateral damage in this chess game.

This stops now. It'll sting, but we haven't crossed the line. Not yet. The memory of her soft mouth lingers, tightening something in my chest. Just because she swore her heart wasn't involved, it doesn't mean I believe it. Despite all my screwups, I don't hurt vulnerable women.

I don't have time for this shit.

Done examining my feelings, useless as it was, I check the time. Kelly's at work. Excellent. After layering up, I fire up the rental's heat and head out.

Her street is quiet. Too quiet. I pull into her drive, scanning for signs of surveillance. If anyone asks, I'm her new boyfriend.

No key under the mat. I tip the flowerpot. Bingo. Inside, I sweep my RF wand through the pine-paneled first floor. Upstairs, I duck beneath a dormer, then freeze. Someone has kept the first room military-neat. I test the twin bed and the antique desk, but everything here is squared away.

The next room has clothes everywhere. USB chargers and extension cords clutter the top of a small bookcase, doubling as a nightstand. No listening devices. Either she's clean, or someone's better at this game than I am.

Back at my hotel, I dig into her ex, Peter. I find nothing except parking tickets and a DWI. The real mystery? John Bourdin. No surprise, there. He doesn't exist.

Once I fire off an email to Wulf's private account, I drive to the farmhouse nearest where I first spotted the Iranians.

A few knocks later, the door creaks open, revealing a gray-haired man with rheumy eyes under white caterpillar brows.

I extend my hand. "Jack Gurion, Vermont Fish and—"

"I know who you are." His sharp gaze locks on me, but he doesn't slam the door.

Encouraged, I talk fast. "I'm researching how Canadian crossings affect the local wildlife. Do I have permission to walk your posted land?"

He scratches his stubbled chin, frowning. "'Bout time someone checked into this. I've complained for years. No one's done a damn thing. Found a deer carcass a month ago, the meat wasted. That's mine. I keep some. The rest I use to stock the food center's freezer. It's not right."

A deep arooo echoes inside. Claws skitter on wood, followed by a beagle shoving its nose into the doorway. The frail man finally cracks a smile. "This here's Brutus. I'm Andre. Neither of us bite...long as you don't piss us off."

Chuckling, I offer my hand to the floppy-eared canine. He sniffs, then licks my face.

“Well, I’ll be damned. He don’t like nobody.” Andre’s surprise makes me return his grin.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

Wiping away the slobber, I straighten while he holds the screen door open. “Well, ya might as well stay for coffee.”

Later, my fingers itch to text Kelly, but what would I say? I changed my mind and would love to tear up the sheets?

What I can’t say is the truth. Bourdin threatened her daughter, so she cannot be trusted. That’s not a conversation I’m ready to have.

Instead, I install a few trail cams, making sure the locals see me. Despite finishing later, there’s still no word from Kelly. She has to know where I am—what I’ve been doing. Small towns gossip. Everyone knows everything about everybody.

Frustrated by our rules, I return to my hotel for several hours of shut-eye.

Lit by moonlight, back in Andre’s forest, I trace a narrow path through trees and fields surrounded by barbed wire. Reaching the spot where the Iranians spoke of killing Bourdin, I add more surveillance.

With nothing more to be done, I sleep. In the morning, I send my task lead a short email:

From: Scott Hunter

To: Bartholomew Hornsby

Status: I've mounted cameras on the local trails. Should be done by the end of the week. Once completed, I'll estimate foot traffic at this port and move on to the next.

Wanting an outside opinion, I call Wulf's friend at Patten Securities. A civilian with military experience, he understands FBI protocols. He's the best source I've got.

The man doesn't waste time, so I skip the pleasantries. "Hunter here. I've been reassigned from Axel's team. Now, I'm tasked with installing security cams on the Canadian border to get a headcount."

He grunts. "Waste of resources."

"Agreed. Putting the stupidity aside, I want advice. While I was in the woods, I distinctly heard Persian. The coyote leading them spoke French. My task force lead says I should not engage, but if I need backup, can I count on you?"

A beat of silence passes, then I add dryly, "No pun intended."

"Yes. And listen, do the right thing. Political fallout be damned. If the Feds fuck you over, you have a job here. The pay's better, too."

Pacing between the dresser and the mattress, I stop to stretch. "Thank you. Can I ask... Have you heard of the Iranians planning anything on U.S. soil?"

"When have they not?" His acerbic tone gives me pause.

As the sun casts long blue shadows across the nearby ski slope, I wonder how the world changed so quickly. "If we're now cozying up to the Russians and the Chinese, surely their allies won't attack us."

"You think?" His pointed question sends an arrow of fear through my heart.

“I honestly don’t know.” All the rules have changed. Countries no longer know who their friends are.

He grunts. “I’ll be in touch.”

I stare at the phone for a moment. If it were anyone else, the abrupt hang-up would be rude. With him, it’s efficiency.

Outside, the wind rattles the windowpane. As I rub my hands together, the weight of uncertainty settles deep in my gut. I’ve been trained for many things, but playing politics with national security isn’t one of them.

I need to figure out what the hell is going on, or end up playing for the wrong team.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Hunt

When I knock on Kade's front door, solid oak vibrates under my fist. A second later, heavy boots shuffle on the other side.

"Gurion?" The bass voice exits a hi-tech smart bell.

Facing the device, I lean in. "Affirmative."

Locks click, bolts slide, then sharp, assessing eyes meet mine. The man's built like a boulder, all thick shoulders and an immovable presence. Dark circles under his eyes tell me he hasn't slept much, either.

"Come in. Coffee? You look like shit, by the way." His rough voice contains no hostility, only exhaustion.

"I was about to say the same about you." I step inside, scanning the space from habit. Military-neat, there's nothing out of place. The functional furniture consists of stiff-backed chairs and a leather couch from the seventies. The walls contain no unnecessary decorations. This domain belongs to a man prepared for war.

I stay near the entrance, shifting my weight, keeping one ear tuned for any signs of Mack in the house. "I need to speak to you about your niece. She here?"

He nods, moving toward the kitchen. "Figured you might stop by."

While I follow, my spidey senses tingle. My mind replays the grainy footage of the

bastard who threatened the girl in the restaurant.

I don't believe in coincidences.

"I spied John Bourdin last night in the woods." I keep my tone steady, but the tension in my shoulders gives me away. "Transporting Farsi-speaking men across the border."

Kade snorts, shaking his head as he pours two cups of joe. "Fish and Wildlife, my ass."

"Funny enough, I'm only supposed to count noncitizens." Having stayed up all night, I gladly take the offered stimulant.

As I drink deep, he exhales sharply, scrubbing a hand down his face. "Jesus."

My head shakes side to side. "I don't think He has anything to do with this. I only want to ensure the girl is safe before taking action."

A flicker of respect shifts his expression. Setting down his cup, he strides to the fridge. There, he stops, grunts, and shoves it aside. My muscles tense, my hand hovering near my concealed weapon.

Holy fuck. He has a locked steel door embedded in the wall. Kade punches in a code. One soft beep later, the latch disengages. He swings it open, revealing an arsenal that would make a doomsday prepper jealous. Alongside pistols, shotguns, and a high-end compound bow, there're knives capable of skinning a bear.

"Expecting WWII?" My attention locks onto the military-grade rifles lining the back wall.

Kade doesn't blink. "Aren't you?"

His certainty reminds me of the survivalist group I helped extract Axel's wife from last fall. They held the same determined stare in their eyes—people who'd decided the world was going to hell and needed to be ready.

I sip my scalding hot coffee, allowing the bitter brew to twist my innards. Mack might be safe for now. However, her security could change at any moment.

Eyes on the dangerous man, I lean back in my chair. "I'm more of an optimist."

"So am I. I'm also a realist and a just-in-case kind of guy." When Kade raises his brows, I recognize Kelly's unwavering, determined jaw.

I let a slow whistle slide through my teeth. This conversation is not going as well as I planned. "You need to tell your sister to stand down."

As his left eye twitches, a jaw muscle jumps. "I hate to tell you, but she's already in it. Deep."

"If she continues to ignore things, she should be fine."

His nostrils flare. "That's what you think? If so, you're dumber than I thought."

"So, fill me in." While I wait for him to decide, Kade checks the clock.

"This is going to take more than coffee. Mack needs a ride to school in an hour." Hopping up, he pulls a bottle of Kentucky bourbon from the top of the fridge.

My mug out, I nod. "Okay, I'm listening."

After splashing amber liquid in both cups, he runs his hand over his closely cropped hair. “It was last summer. Dante, her boss, called me to the hospital. Kelly had been beaten up. Bad.”

His neck muscles twitch while he takes a beat to recover. “When I asked what the hell happened, no one would tell me shit. All I know is she was never the same.”

As he speaks, I grip the coffee cup so hard, it’s a miracle it doesn’t break apart.

“I waited until she came home, then pushed. Told her she needed to process it. We shared words.” He snorts bitterly, mouth twisted.

“Suffering from PTSD myself, I told her not to bottle it up. Wouldn’t you know, she threw it back in my face—pot calling the kettle and so forth.” He allows the heavy silence to stretch between us while my pulse thunders in my ears.

“The doctor wouldn’t say, but I suspect... well... more.” His gaze lifts to my face, lizard eyes gauging my reaction.

Sucker punched with a sledgehammer, I swallow hard. My memory flashes to the first time I kissed her. She didn’t flinch, didn’t pull away...I thought it was normal—her taking control, setting the pace. Thank God I didn’t push.

Kade exhales roughly. “Whatever happened, she doesn’t want to appear vulnerable, and professionally?” He shakes his head. “She’s got way too much pride.”

Hissing, I unclench my back teeth. “She doesn’t remember, does she?”

“No.” His eyes darken. “They found Rohypnol in her system.”

I go still. The bastard roofied her.

“Was it Bourdin?” My fists curl against my thighs, and it takes everything in me not to launch the coffee cup across the room.

Shifting in his chair, Kelly’s brother turns his head toward his arsenal. “I can’t be sure. She refused to press charges.”

Unspoken words hang between us. If I’d been in his shoes, I’d have torn the motherfucker apart.

“I got pissed.” Kade makes a fist, then releases it. “Probably didn’t handle it well. She’s my fucking sister, for chrissakes.” His voice cracks slightly before he turns away.

Once he gathers his composure, he exhales through his nose. “Dante said he’d handle it. Kept her out of fieldwork and put her on vehicle crossings instead. She’s got her job, her insurance, and her daughter has been safe... until you showed up.”

I meet his eyes. “Say the word. I’ll make sure the pedophile suffers.”

Mackenzie’s uncle lets out a short, bitter laugh. “Why do you think I haven’t already?”

Not wanting to guess, I remain silent.

“No proof, bro, no proof.” When his eyes glisten, I turn away, giving him a moment to recover.

Afterward, I refill my coffee, my hands still shaking. Slate told me to do the right thing, but what the hell? How am I supposed to know? One thing’s clear, I can’t leave Kelly on her own.

Standing, I stretch out my hand. “Thanks for telling me.”

Grip firm, voice steel, he rises from his chair. “I didn’t do it for you.”

Traces of his earlier emotion now gone, his brows furrow. “I see how she looks at you. Hurt her, it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

“I won’t.” I meet his stare head-on. “You have my word.”

Later, back at my hotel, I review my last few days. How do I keep my job, protect the O’Malley’s, and figure out why Iranians are sneaking into Vermont?

In my experience, the tip of an iceberg can hide a much larger disaster. While I pray the other northern states are not experiencing a similar migration, my pessimistic gut prepares for battle.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

Wildlife : I know we said no texting, but can I see you? Dinner?

Having been ghosted for five days, I hesitate before responding. I don't want to appear too eager. Neither do I want him to think he's hurt my feelings. We're not a couple. Hell, we haven't had sex...yet. Why am I acting so childish? Gritting my teeth, I thumb a message back.

Kelly : I have the 5-8 PM shift. Afterward, I'm free.

He sends me a thumbs-up emoji. Because Canadians are boycotting the US, I literally have nothing to do but stare at the minute hand on the vintage wall clock while gazing at the parking lot. Finally, Hunt pulls into the drive. My heart pounds as I push my chair away from the desk. Standing fast, I realize my foot's asleep.

As I tap the tingling extremity away, in walks Mr. Sexy Fed.

"Hi." His heated gaze triggers all my hormones at once. Tongue-tied, I struggle to sound like he doesn't affect me.

"Hi back. Did you finish your...work?" I almost said investigation which sounds a lot more FBI-ish than environmental-ish.

I'm sure the people watching me would be eager to share that information. Holy crap, I need to pull up my big girl panties and stop drooling over the man who has ignored me for the better part of a week.

Unzipping his coat, the G-man doesn't miss a beat. "Thanks for asking. From what I've seen, the deer herds are healthy. Only yesterday, I studied a Moose cow with her calves."

Phew, this safe topic, I can discuss. "Yeah, they stay near their mom for almost a year."

His eyes twinkle as if he has some kind of x-ray vision able to see under all my layers of clothes. "It will be a while until we can learn if the habitats of predators or smaller mammals have been disturbed. So, I'll definitely need to return in the spring."

For a moment, I had forgotten. The grant is a ruse. The minute he's done counting, he'll be gone, leaving me to lick my invisible wounds.

"Ready to go, babe?" He brushes a kiss across my lips and places a hand at my lower back before walking me to his vehicle.

Inside, he turns the key. When the engine gurgles but refuses to start, he scratches his beard. "That's weird. It was working fine a second ago."

Shivering, I shrug. "It's below zero. You probably have water in the fuel line. Let's take my car. There's a lot of great chefs on the mountain. On the way we can stop for dry gas."

Hunt blocks the wind while I open my door, then quickly slips into the passenger seat. As I merge onto the highway, I steal a glance at his handsome, silent face. He probably expects some snarky comment about ignoring me, but I keep quiet. We agreed that if we got together, it would be strictly casual. Perhaps he's not as into me as I thought.

With more important things to discuss, I clear my throat. "So, how's my brother?"

Hunt shifts in his seat, a faint blush creeping up his neck. “It’s not what you think. A lot of farmers mentioned Kade spends time in the woods. I figured he might have some insight.”

Pure unadulterated bullcrap . “So, you didn’t talk about me?”

“Not exactly.” He scratches his jaw. “He did mention not to hurt you—in the politest way possible.”

“Right. And?” Catching my furious glare, his eyes soften. Clearly, he hadn’t expected me to call him out.

His voice lowers. “He mentioned your hospital stay, but only so I’d understand. He cares about you.”

“It wasn’t his story to tell, dammit.” So long friend-with-benefits. Thanks a lot, Kade.

Halfway up the mountain, a loud pop echoes from under my Kia—not a sound any engine or muffler should make.

“Slow down. Pull over.” Fingers wrapped around the emergency brake, Hunt remains unnervingly calm.

My pulse spikes as I ease my foot off the accelerator and press on the pedal to the left. It sinks to the floor.

“Oh shit. No brakes.”

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Hunt

Thank God the brakes failed driving uphill, not after she dropped me off. At least the steep incline will slow us down.

As she white-knuckles the wheel, I bend forward to switch off the ignition, hoping to kill the engine. For a second, nothing happens. Then, a sharp crack erupts under the dash, followed by a sizzle. The control panel dark, the SUV lurches as if yanked by an invisible chain.

Possessed, it comes to a dead stop.

A beat of eerie silence passes without incident, before we begin to roll backward.

“Hunt! Oh God. I’ve lost power steering.” Kelly swivels in her seat, panic flashing over her face while she struggles to stay on the road. If she backs us into a truck climbing the mountain, we’ll be counting our sins at the pearly gates.

When blinding headlights flare in the rearview mirror, my stomach bottoms out. I yank instinctively on the wheel. We bounce across the asphalt. As my back teeth clunk together, we swerve into the opposite lane, missing a Greyhound bus by mere inches.

Not done fishtailing, metal shrieks as we collide with a guardrail.

Goodbye, bumper.

The best news? Although we're rolling the wrong way, at least we're moving with the traffic. Intending to throw the transmission into neutral, I grab the stick shift, but it won't budge. The person who sabotaged her electronics knew exactly what they were doing.

I assess the situation. Steel barriers line both sides of the highway. To hit them again would put us in a deadly tailspin.

"Hunt, what do I do?" Twisted, looking out the back window, Kelly bites her lower lip.

"Think, you know this road. Where's the closest pull-off?" Despite the fast approaching sports car, I keep my voice calm.

A car horn blares. Lit by our headlights, a young couple waves their fists. By some miracle, they swerve around us, vanishing in our rearview.

"The next turn's on our right. We're going too fast! We'll never make it." Her panic rises, becoming almost palpable.

I need to be her rock. "Gotta do it, babe. I'll help you turn, you tell me when."

"Now!" At her scream, we both yank hard.

Her Kia slams into the rusted guardrail, grinding along the metal's curve nestled into a narrow dirt road. After the rear tires catch in a gully, we're jerked into a spin. Pine boughs slap the windshield as I wrench the sluggish helm the opposite way. No way in hell are we heading back onto the highway.

The ground beneath us drops away. Our vehicle pitches forward. We tumble into a ditch, flipping on one side, but we keep rolling downhill.

When we finally stop, we're upside down, wheels spinning, a turtle on its back.

"O'Malley, you okay?" Bending my knee, I slip a knife from my boot holster.

"Oh, my freakin'...my car!" Her head turns, eyes unfocused, in shock.

"Babe, listen. Are you hurt?" I tap her cheek until she stops struggling and coughs.

"Huh? No. I don't think so." Her green eyes land on mine. "I'm fine. Can you get me out? I'm choking."

Relieved she's coming around, I saw through my seatbelt. The moment it gives, I face-plant into the dash.

Knees braced against the vehicle's fabric headliner, I find her buckle. "Careful. When I release you, you're gonna drop onto the console. Ready?"

"Do it." After she falls with a grunt. I fish my phone from my pocket and call 911.

The dispatcher says someone's already reported us. The State Police are en route.

Next step? Get us the hell out of here.

With side doors jammed, we scramble over the seats, and kick open the back hatch. As we back away, my lizard brain registers a soft pop near the gas tank.

Oh fuck. "Move!" Grabbing the dazed woman, I launch us into the gully. A heartbeat later, a blast wave carries us a few more feet.

As I land on top of her, the scene changes to the endless desert. The air thickens with dust and burning fuel. My Hummer must've hit a landmine. Ears ringing, I have no

idea how I got here.

“Jack, Scott—whoever the hell you are today—answer me, dammit.” A hard slap to the face shatters the illusion.

Blinking, I sense the recent snowfall below me, thankfully cold against my blistered back. Groaning, I shift my weight, but the body underneath me shoves weakly.

“I can’t breathe,” she gasps. “Move. Please, Wildlife. Do it for me.”

Somehow, I roll onto my back, staring up at the night sky. Damn, the snow on my naked flesh feels awesome.

“Agent Hunter,” she hisses. “Your jacket. It’s disintegrated.”

I grunt. “Always wondered about The Incredible Hulk. His clothing bills must be insane. In my defense, I might have a concussion.”

She’s not laughing. Instead, she grabs my arm, eyes sharp, glowing with urgency. “We need to hide. The perp who blew up my car will want proof we’re dead.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

While the Burlington doctors evaluate Hunt's burns, I wait with State Police Officer Joe Young outside the hospital room. Unlike my boss, the sixty-year-old beside me shows no sign of slowing down.

Sighing, he leans back in the green vinyl chair. "Spill. What the hell is going on?"

A friend of my gram, I've known him forever. Lying is pointless. He'll sniff it out in a heartbeat. I stick to the truth—at least part of it.

"Jack and I went up the mountain for dinner." My voice wavers. Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill... A laugh bubbles up, completely inappropriate, but I can't stop it.

Young's brows furrow. "Something funny?"

"Sorry," I mumble, pressing a hand to my mouth. "I think I'm a little freaked out."

A large hand reaches over to stop mine from wringing.

"Go on." His kindness helps, but the hard set of his jaw tells me I'm in for a long night.

When my breath hitches, my cracked ribs throb. I swallow back the acrid bile at the back of my throat. "I'm not sure where to begin."

If I tell him too much, I put everyone I love at risk. Perhaps, I can contain the fallout by sticking to the accident. “Not much to tell. We were almost at The Barn when something popped under the carriage. I lost my brakes, the dashboard went dark. Suddenly, we were rolling backward down the steep incline. I swerved into the opposite lane so I wouldn’t crash into someone coming up the hill. I remembered Gravel Pit Road. We hit the gully hard. Flipped over.”

Trembling, a salty tear slips down my cheek landing on my lips . I’m crying? “I don’t remember much afterward. My understanding is that the gas tank exploded. Jack saved my life.”

Laser focused on me, Joe hands me a box of tissues from the side table. “Who is this Gurion guy and why was he with you last night?”

My spine stiffens. He has no right to sound like my dad. “He works for Vermont Fish and Wildlife. We had a date.”

Frowning, he taps his pen on his notepad. “You two romantically involved?”

Because I don’t understand how my love life, or lack of it, has anything to do with my accident. I smirk. “Are you asking if we had sex?”

His face turns red. “Dumbass shouldn’t’ve been setting up cameras in the woods.”

A chill snakes up my spine. He’s not simply making conversation. He suspects something.

“Hell, I told him the same thing, but he said he got a sizable grant. He couldn’t afford not to, no question about it.”

And the truth shall set you free. Amen.

The human lie detector nods, and glances down at his notes before staring directly at me. “And Dante? What does he say about it?”

Oh crap, I should’ve guessed he would ask about my missing boss. I answer as honestly as I can. “I texted him.”

“How long has he been gone this time?” When the senior officer digs his thumbs into his temples, I try to make light of the situation.

“A few days. I’m sure he’ll return soon.”

As he shakes his head, his phone pings. Checking his messages, he stands. “It says here Ames towed your car to our facility. I’ll let you know what we find. Meanwhile, I suggest you stay clear of this Jack Gurion. He’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Yes sir. I will.” Not on your life... or mine.

From the way he scowls, he reads my mind. “Write up your statement, email it to me, and we’ll talk at the Newport station. We’re not done here, missy, not by a longshot.”

Once the officer leaves, I call my best friend, Gina. Pouring out my heart, I tell her all except for Jack’s FBI identity.

“What the fuck, Kell? You might’ve been killed. You need to be more careful.” While I understand she’s sheriff, right now, I need sympathy, not scolding.

I sigh heavily. “I’m not sure how any of this is my fault.”

“I’ll tell you how. Jack Gurion and his fucking cameras. Clearly, he’s pissed off some people he shouldn’t’ve. Explain to me, why was he in your car?”

“His wouldn’t start. Probably water in the tank. We were going to stop at Harvey’s for a can of dry gas.”

“Don’t you find any of this suspicious?” Her interrogative tone makes my arm hairs stand on end.

“Nooo... It’s below zero. My car is old. The electronics caught fire which caused the gas tank to explode. No conspiracy, just an accident.” No point in worrying her until we have the full forensic analysis.

“Well, if you want my advice, send the city boy packing. If you won’t do it, I will.” She steps so far out of her lane, I roll my eyes.

“Yes, Mother.” Hanging up, I scrunch my nose and stretch. Why does everyone think they should butt into my business?

By now, the town grapevine has declared me dead. Either that, or I’ve shaved my head, becoming an extremist tree hugger.

Not wanting him to worry, I text my brother.

Me: Had a car accident. I’m fine.

Kade: Call me. Now.

Heart racing, I speed dial my brother. “Is Mack okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. Sleeping.” His surprised tone only serves to piss me off more.

“Do not scare me like that.”

“Hello, Kettle. I’m Pot.”

“Oh, shut up. What do you want?”

It takes me over an hour to explain my night. Unlike Joe and Gina, Kade asks pointed questions.

When done, I confess, “I’m quite sure my car was sabotaged.”

“Dammit, Kell. You need to be more careful. Are you armed?”

“Yeah, of course. Listen, the nurse is coming, I need to go.” The white lie slips off my tongue as I add it to the growing list.

I wave my badge at the nurse’s station, then pause at the G-man’s door. What do you even say to the hero who risked his life to save yours? Taking a deep breath, I push the door open and gasp.

Jack, AKA Hunt, sleeps on his stomach wearing a hospital gown, his muscled ass on full display.

Holy crap, girl, get a grip.

Forcing my gaze on the angry, burnt skin, I clear my throat. “Hey, Mr. Wildlife, what did the doc say?”

Turning his head, he blinks twice. He doesn’t try to cover his naked backside. “Surprisingly, it’s not much worse than a sunburn. Turning into the snow probably saved my hide, literally. They gave me some antibiotic lotion for a few of the worst spots. Otherwise, they should let me out in the morning.”

“Uh... Great news.” Unable to form a coherent sentence, my breath hitches. For the first time since The Incident, my libido roars to life.

No doubt a connoisseur of women, he reads my body language as if tasting a fine wine. Unlike my gender, his attraction jumps to life. Shifting to a seated position, he spreads his legs.

When he holds out his arms, I could run, but what would be the point? He’s a tractor beam to my disabled shuttlecraft. I’m pulled into his grasp where I inhale a mix of pine and burnt hair.

Careful not to touch his back, I snuggle closer.

With both hands on his chest, my palms tingle at his rapid heartbeat. Once our gazes connect, we kiss like two people who narrowly avoided death. Turning, I lock the door, not about to miss this opportunity to make myself whole.

His eyes widen as I unbutton my uniform top before ducking out of my thermal undershirt. When my bra drops to the floor, his jaw does, too.

As I’m about to step into his embrace, the door handle jiggles, and a woman says, “I have your release papers, Mr. Gurion.”

Hunt gasps, face heated. “Yup, I, uh, need a few minutes. Talking to my mom. She’s... worried. Needs details. Lots of them.”

After a long pause, the voice takes pity on us. “Sure, take your time.”

We both hold our breath until the footsteps fade. Afterward, I snicker. “I thought you worked undercover.”

Groaning, he scrubs a hand over his face. “Most embarrassing.”

“Bare? Ass? Ha ha.” Snickering, I unbutton my pants and kick them to the side along with my undies. Unclothed now, my heart hammers as I stand in front of him.

“Oh, fuck me.” His raw tone sends spikes of desire throughout my body.

A bit nervous, I smirk. “Well, yeah, that’s the general idea. Or did I misread the tenting under your ridiculous gown?”

Eyes locked on mine, he drags a hand through his hair. “I’ve never done it in a hospital.”

“Well alrighty, it’s a first for both of us.” Leaning in, I allow the heat between us to build before whispering, “I think the only rule is no loud noises.”

Hunt

Stepping between my legs, she reaches behind my neck to loosen my hospital gown. For a moment I wonder if I died in the car crash. Right now, I can't imagine a better heaven. Heart thumping, I tease and kiss the soft breasts she offers.

"Oh wow." A gasp later, she slides off my cotton shift and straddles my lap. "Is this okay?"

"Babe." The word barely escapes before she slides her wet core across my arousal, stealing my sanity.

My mouth devours her while my palms slide over every inch of her soft skin. As our heat rises. I claim her body as she does mine.

"Ow." She winces.

"What's this?" Gut twisting, I remove my hand from the ugly bruises above her hip. "Stop. You're hurt."

"And? So are you." Fingers behind my neck she tugs me to her plush insistent lips, reminding me of how I almost lost her.

Gentler now, I cup her cheeks. My tongue coaxes hers to play. Melded to her, every ounce of oxygen abandons my brain to rush south.

Lust struck, I lower her onto her back, kneel, and focus on her glistening, swollen

sex.

“Jesus, you take my breath away.” Citrus, mixed with something purely her, intoxicates me, hitting me harder than any drug.

Dizzy, desperate, on fire, I dive between her thighs. As my tongue circles and teases, she writhes underneath me. A madman, I have but one goal. Take her over the cliff.

While she blossoms, I slide one finger in her wetness, followed by a second. Curling them, I suck her clit until she screams into my pillow.

“Inside me.” She scoots onto all fours, looking over her shoulder.

Shocked into a moment of clarity, I halt. “No condom.”

“Clean. Pill. Do it, Wildlife. Now.” Jaw set, she locks onto my gaze.

“Me too. Tested, I mean. Fine. You sure?” Thick cock in hand, I rise to my feet.

“Formally invited. There. Okay?” When she wiggles her butt, I place my sensitive tip to her hot, silken core, and dive in.

My vision blurs, my control slips. Heart racing, I hold onto her hips and hold back this primal urge to fuck her into oblivion.

She bucks back. “Faster. I need this. I want you.”

Brakes off, I thrust, piston, driving into a spot that makes her wild.

Seconds later, her inner muscles flutter. “Oh, oh God. Yesss.”

This second release sends sparks of lightning down my spine. When the electricity hits my balls, fluids shoot forth.

Sweeeet.

We agreed this was sex only, but holy shit—I’ve never felt so connected in my life.

While we float back to earth, the same polite voice as earlier resurfaces with a gentle knock. “Mr. Gurion. Are you alright in there? Did you fall?”

If she only knew how fast and how far I have tumbled for the gorgeous, brave border guard, she’d probably keep me another night—examine my head. Hell, I’ve jumped from planes at less velocity. This is nuts.

After putting a pillow over the face of my giggling lover, I yank on the johnny, then shout, “Ah, yes. Sorry. I fell asleep. Give me a sec.”

Still laughing, Kelly rolls out from under the covers. She snatches her clothes before padding her bare feet to the bathroom. As she clicks the door closed, the administrator steps inside, glancing around the room. I school my face into something neutral while my pulse hammers in my ears.

“Glad you’re awake. Here’s your paperwork. Let me know if you have any questions.” The moment she leaves, my gorgeous lover peeks out, eyes twinkling.

Grinning, she sprints across the room and hops onto the bed. “I texted my brother. He’s going to bring you something to wear. A warm coat, too. He also poured dry gas into your tank. Your SUV started right up.”

Relief rushes through me as my thoughts shift. “What about your daughter?”

Expression dark, the momma bear hesitates. An instant later, she shakes it off. “Kade said not to worry. I trust him.”

I’d question her further, but a wave of exhaustion washes over me. No Marvel Comic here, my burnt back throbs in tempo to my headache. As I lay back on the pillow, the nurse pops her head in. Apparently, I still need a doctor’s final blessing. Because he’s busy elsewhere, we give up waiting.

Following a short snooze, we wake to a firm rap on the door. While Kelly stirs, in walks her brother carrying a coffee tray and a paper bag.

“Hey sis.” His eyes widen, but if he is bothered by us squeezed together in the tiny hospital bed, he doesn’t say so.

His gaze shifts to me as he extends a hand. “Thanks for saving my sister.”

Grunting, I return his solid grip. Like the hypocrite I am, I snatch the clothes he brought and bring them into the bathroom where I gasp for air. I don’t deserve his gratitude. Hell, if it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t’ve been targeted.

By the time we’ve recapped the night’s events, the doctor finally arrives. A brief conversation later, I get the green light.

Oorah, I can leave. Shrugging into the borrowed outer gear, I shadow the O’Malleys to the parking lot.

On the interstate, one eye on the rearview mirror, his shoulders lower. “Should be home in a little over an hour.”

During the long trip from Burlington, my mind refuses to settle. Clearly someone has targeted not only me, but Kelly.

All on the same page, when we arrive at her house, we extract our weapons.

“I’ll sweep the interior. You guys check the perimeter.” Gun forward, Kade cracks open the front door, switching on the outside lights.

Snow crunching beneath my boots, flashlight out, I search for footprints under the windows. Finding nothing, I return to the siblings.

“All clear?” When the protective sibling glances at me, I nod.

Kissing his sister’s cheek, he bobs his head. “I have to get back. Phone me if you need anything.”

As he backs out of the driveway, my woman holsters her weapon.

I need her to know that what happened earlier was no mistake. No words come to me, so I tell her with my kiss.

When we come up for air, I squeeze her behind. “I’ll be right outside. I gotta make a call.”

Lips swollen, hair mussed, she smiles shyly. “No problem. I’ll find us something to eat.”

The frigid air bites at my skin as I step onto the porch to dial Wulf. The second he picks up, I get straight to the point. “Someone wants us dead.”

His heavy sigh says it all. “Putting cameras in the woods? What could possibly go wrong?”

“Yeah, I know, but that was the command. I’m beginning to think my assignment

was more than a punishment, it was a death sentence. The only question is, why?”

“I’ll do some snooping and get back to you. Rescuing my wife in Belarus probably caused us some problems—not to mention her friendship with the outgoing president. The new administration is cleaning house.”

I exhale sharply, my breath sending smoke signals in the icy air. “I’d rather be fired than killed.”

“I hear you. Slate called me. Smart move including him. Let me know what I can do to help.”

My mind spins, again wishing he were my boss instead of Hornsby. “Not much—yet. For now, I need intel—whatever you can find on Deputy Agent Robert Dante and Sheriff Gina Laughlin.”

We finish up our conversation. After, I grab my sidearm and circle the house one more time before I head in. While I stomp my boots on the mat, Kelly leans over the freezer drawer.

My cock twitches as it takes note of how her tight jeans hug her lovely derriere. “Hungry? I have hamburgers or hamburgers.”

“Either one is fine.” At my chuckle, she breaks out in a grin.

“Excellent. I have tomatoes, onions and pickles for veggies. Bread will have to suffice. I didn’t buy buns.” On all fours, looking over her shoulder, I’m reminded of our bed play.

“Mmm. I might want dessert.” I wait for her to stand before stepping behind her to slip my arms around her waist.

She stiffens for half a second, turns, then murmurs into my neck. “Not sure what to say. I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

“What, exactly, are you referring to?” My lips pressed against her temple, I allow my hand to press into her abs.

“You know, us. Friends with benefits?” As her green eyes search mine, my airway shuts down. When we made that agreement, I didn’t know her. Now, I want more.

Until I can tell her how I feel, I guess I can keep it light. “Well, definitely no stalking on social media.”

“Right.” She opens the fridge and hands me a beer. “Absolutely no creeping.”

I feign a look of horror. “No, never!”

Her eyes sparkle as she grabs another bottle. “Or using the Federal database to investigate each other.”

“Cross my heart.” A virtual X drawn on my chest earns me a snicker.

“And no sexting.”

“Okay, deleting dick-pic now.” Setting my drink on the counter, I pull out my phone and pretend to erase a non-existent photo.

“Let me see.” She lunges for it, but I hold it high above her head, laughing as she tries to snatch it.

“No way.” Unable to resist, I tickle her ribs until she squirms, wriggling in my arms.

“Uncle. Stop, stop.” In retaliation, she grabs the back of my head and kisses me senseless.

Without breaking apart. I blindly click off the burner. Some hungers can wait. Others can't.

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Kelly

“Sorry about the mess.” Scott’s hand in mine, I lead him down the hall toward the bedroom.

Recalling our benefits agreement, I hesitate, which makes no sense. We just had mind-blowing sex in a hospital room. Nothing has changed. We both agreed it’s physical. Life affirming sex after a near-death experience is perfectly normal.

Why then, does my heart ache so?

Scott pauses in the doorway, cups my cheeks, and stares directly into my soul. “What’s going on in there? We don’t have to do this. We can watch a movie.”

Damn, why does he have to be so understanding? It’s going to make it hard not to fall for him. Who am I kidding? It’s already too late. “I like you... a lot... I mean... We’re friends, right?”

Oh shit. Why do I bother to open my mouth? My gaze lowers because when it comes to matters of the heart, I’m a U. S. Grade A chicken.

“Face me, babe.” When his forehead touches mine, I drown in the vast oceans of his blue irises.

Catching my breath, I lean forward to his waiting lips. His kiss is a mere brush, not at all like any of the others. This one makes me dream of the impossible, where he and I find a future together. All these thoughts fly away when he takes his tongue deeper.

As I'm about to jump him, a lock of burnt hair falls over my face.

I scrunch my nose. "How about a shower—oh crap. Sorry. I wasn't thinking about your back."

God, I am so stupid.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we can figure it out." Noses touching, his warm smile melts my insides.

"Okay. Give me just a sec." In the small room, I ball up clothes and stuff them into the closet. A quick sweep of my arm sends all of Mack's makeup clattering into the vanity drawer.

Perfect.

Watching my antics, the now completely naked Hunt smirks when he tugs me back into the bathroom. "Have I ever mentioned I love a woman in uniform?"

Face heated, I pretend to check his temperature by placing my palm on his forehead. "Huh, no fever—there is nothing sexy about khakis."

He makes the sound of a gameshow buzzer. "Wrong. The fact you can protect yourself turns me on."

His nostrils flare as he unbuckles my sidearm belt. It clunks on the countertop, where we can access it if needed.

"It's better than unwrapping a birthday present." Kissing me as he goes, he takes his time removing my outfit.

“Hunter.” By the time he pulls down my undies, I’m breathing hard.

Skin to skin, he pulls me to his chest. Safe, desired, cherished. My heart expands, breaking the bonds of The Incident.

When the water warms, I step under the spray. Facing me, he pumps shampoo into his palm. My eyes close when he massages my head, releasing hours, perhaps days’ worth of tension.

Next, his fingers dig into my shoulders. “Mmm, your massage feels so wonderful.”

I reach to return the favor, but he holds my wrists, pulling them to the shower head pipe. “Hold on here. I’ll tell you when to let go.”

Before I can argue, his mouth finds my lips. As his hands cease roving over my whole body, I open my eyes.

Reaching up one thick bicep, followed by the other, my lover showers in front of me.

His head, legs, and torso are next. Finally, our gazes locked together, he circles his cock, giving it a tug.

If not for the water, I’m sure our heat would set the house on fire.

“Now let me touch you, Wildlife.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he nods. In no hurry, I slide my fingers down his front, past his navel, stopping short of the promised land.

Groaning, he swells.

When I cup his balls, he shuts off the shower. Gathering me into his arm, he snatches a towel. In the bedroom, he rubs the coarse terry over my over-sensitive nipples before paying equal attention to my whole body.

He towels off in a second. Then, he lifts me, lies me flat, and crawls up until he reaches my lips.

Foreplay at an end, I spread my legs. I'm so wet when he thrusts inside me, he hits my bullseye.

Gasping, I arch up to meet him.

His eyes roll. "Fuck Kell. Holy fuck."

As he jackhammers into my G-spot, I lock my ankles behind his calves, so close to the edge I can hardly breathe.

Sweat lubricates our bodies. Nature takes over. I hold back. I want—no need him to come with me. When he does a one-armed pushup to pinch my clit, I scream and splinter apart into the immense universe.

His triumphant shout follows. After, we collapse onto the bed, so totally spent I don't recall falling asleep.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Hunt

When her breath becomes steady, I slide out of bed, resolved to end this assignment so I can declare my true feelings. Friend my ass. She may lie to herself, but her eyes say so much more. Inhaling her pheromones, my chest heaves. I already miss her warm body wrapped around me. I almost lost her, for fuck's sake.

As I slip into my borrowed clothes, the ghosts of Dave and Speedy haunt me. Our FUBAR mission, their funerals, the whole shebang—it hits me like a brick. I might have failed them, but it can never happen again.

Dressed for war, I sweep the perimeter. In my SUV, I read the note taped to the steering wheel— Call me if you need help, K

I'll bet my badge—Kelly's brother knows all about those Iranians. They aren't here to paint nails and braid hair, that's for sure.

While I wait, I raise my automatic weapon. Night vision goggles lowered, I recall Batt's instructions.

“The president wants numbers. You will get them.” He assured me, after we had an adequate count, the army would be deployed at both borders.

Back then the idea sounded ludicrous. “But cameras, sir? Give me a few drones, satellite feeds, and a couple of data analysts. I could have this done in less than a week.”

“Orders from the top. If you don’t like it, take it up with the director.”

You, Agent Hornsby, have the backbone of a jellyfish.

I suppose it’s lucky I didn’t say those last words out loud. No doubt I would’ve been facing insubordination—suspended sans pay.

For the first time, I relish my exile. Had I not participated in Wulf’s last adventure, Kelly and her town would be on their own. Waiting, I pray these crossings are only stage one in a much longer operation.

I need more time.

A shiver, unrelated to the cold, runs down my spine.

Fuck it. A professional, I silence my thoughts. Once the forest has absorbed my essence, a coyote sniffs me before racing into the dark.

Nothing to see here, buddy. Only an armed man, protecting the woman he’s falling for.

A twig cracks. For a moment, my breathing halts.

A flashlight beam appears. A man in snow camos follows. He carries a wand and a can of paint. Except for the eyes, his face remains hidden under a ski mask.

When his electronics beep near one of my devices, he sprays the miniature lens. Afterward, he waves civilians and their four guards forward.

Giving no prior warning, the mercenary at the tail end of the procession hisses through his teeth. “Merde . Stop.”

When they all turn, he raises a fist. Slowly, he places a finger to his lips.

Do I live or die? It's a coin toss. While I place the closest in my crosshairs, I blink away a drop of sweat. Time dilates. I slow my heart rate and calm my mind.

The gun, my lover, I caress the trigger. C'mon, boys, make your move.

All at once, John, or Zhun , as he pronounces it, whispers, "There's no one out there. Let's go. We have another run before dawn."

As they pass by me, the foreigners mutter. If my Farsi is accurate, they have an even lower opinion of the French Canadian than me. Hard to believe.

Safe now, I walk behind at a distance. After their taillights disappear down the narrow road, I race to where I hid my vehicle. Jumping in the driver's seat, I follow the tracker I placed under their chassis.

The signal leads me to a swanky motel near the slopes, where they exit their white Mercedes van. I snap pictures of their now uncovered faces. After storing images in the cloud, I text the URL's to Wulf and Patten, then order a drink in the lobby bar.

Done for the night, I crash on Kelly's couch, my pistol on the floor beside me.

In the morning, I rise to the scent of coffee. O'Malley's green eyes lock onto me, sharp as a sniper's aim. "Yo, Wildlife, want to tell me where you went yesterday evening?"

Busted.

My gut tightens at the distrust in her gaze.

“Babe.” Rubbing my eyes, I stand, swivel my feet toward my weapon and open my arms.

She crosses hers. “No, Hunt. No babe.”

Shit. If I want this relationship to move forward, I’m going to have to tell her the truth. “Bourdin was in the woods last night, leading a group of Iranians from Canada. They’re staying at The Alpine Luxe Resort.”

I step in , praying I haven’t fucked things up.

Her brows furrow more. “Why didn’t you bring me? I’m the border agent, not you.”

She’s right, and yet, oh so wrong. “You told me you haven’t been in the field since your attack. I couldn’t risk it.”

A gasp escapes from her lungs.

Have I overstepped? Dammit, I’m in uncharted territory. I was looking forward to another round of love-making. Instead, an angry stranger stands in front of me.

Tone all business, she paces her living room. “What are we thinking? Fentanyl? Sex slaves? Have you seen any girls?”

Trying not to let her see me bleed inside, I match her tenor. “No, mostly middle-aged men. Black hair, brown skin, bearded. Spoke Farsi. One had a signet ring. I sent jpgs to the FBI and another group I trust.”

She glances at her phone, then rolls her eyes. “Listen, I don’t have time for this. Can you bring me to work?”

“About last night...” I want to tell her how everything changed in her arms, but she gives me a cold shoulder.

“Later.”

I drive her to the station in one of the most uncomfortable silences I have ever experienced. I half expect her to lock me out.

Unable to broach her emotional wall, I park in a chair, lift my feet, and close my eyes. Sometime around noon, her ringtone startles me awake.

“Hello... Yup.” Face pale, she sits, listening intently. A few minutes go by before she sighs, massaging her temples. “Thanks for letting me know. Buh-bye.”

Cell phone down, she turns to me, face soft, perhaps a bit apologetic. “That was Ames. My brake line exploded. The control box had been tampered with, and they found traces of C4 near the gas tank. Thank you, again, for saving my life.”

“Please don’t. The FBI brought this to your doorstep.” Gaze locked on hers, I walk to her side, hoping she’s not still mad at me.

My heart pounds when she meets me halfway. “This problem existed long before you came. You can’t hold yourself responsible, Wildlife.”

With her back in my arms, the despair from earlier melts away. She’s giving me another chance. This time, I won’t fuck it up.

Her phone rings again. After she picks up, she stiffens and pulls from my embrace. “What? Say again... No way... How bad is it?”

Her eyes water. “That’s impossible.... No. I shut the damper. I am not an idiot, Bob.

This was arson, clear and simple. Well, do your freakin' job. You find them. I'm not kidding around here. I'll be there as soon as I can. Yup... No, I'm sorry. Bye."

In answer to my raised brows, she starts to sob. "My chimney caught on fire."

She buries her face in her hands once she sinks into her desk chair. "I can't do this, Hunt. It's too much."

While I reach for her, she slams a fist on the wood. "I am so fucking tired of this crap. I clean my fireplace every year. I have it inspected. There is no way I had any creosote. That's bull."

The urge to fix this is so overwhelming that I literally bite my tongue. This capable woman has reached a crossroads. It's up to her to decide who she wants to be moving forward.

I will support her each step of the way.

Kelly

Opening the window, I gulp in frigid air until I stop gasping. Last night, I almost died. Now, someone tried to burn down my house. Bourdin and his pals are never going to stop coming for me. How can just one person defeat an army? They have all the power. Dear Lord, I can't live like this anymore. My mental box is full, overflowing with all the shit I can't handle.

"Goddammit!" Paperweight held like a softball, I pitch it with all my might.

It bounces off the wall, rolling on the floor, undamaged.

Monstro hisses and skitters under the desk.

Hell, I can't even do that right.

Determined to end the harassment, I stomp toward the coffee maker and climb onto the countertop. With the surveillance cam at eye height, I shout, "This ends here."

Hunt, watching silently up until now, tugs on my pants' leg. "Take this."

"Thanks." I grab the offered knife, dig the device out of the paneling, then drop it in his palm.

While he photographs it, I climb down, relishing each satisfying crunch as I grind it under my heel.

A deep inhale later, my head lifts from the broken bits to my lover's soul-searching gaze. "Babe, how can I help? I'm all in."

My jaw drops. I expected him to drag me to a safe house, to call his boss, or send in a squad of investigators. Despite all the crap in my life, I smile.

For once, a man trusted me to take charge.

"Oorah." My inner Marine doesn't fret about imaginary hinged boxes. In fact, she fires her automatic rifle repeatedly. The thoughts and memories stored inside float out, much like the Ghostbusters' Ecto-Containment Unit.

I wait. And wait.

Where's the nervous breakdown? I think I might be crying. Incredibly strong arms wrap around me—his wet shirt beside my face.

Not letting me go, Scott reaches for the tissues and shoves a few into my hand. He speaks neither platitudes nor there-theres . No head pats, no this is all going to be okay , he simply holds me.

I let myself sink into his warmth, absorb his strength, and breathe it all in.

Done with my mini pity party, I blow my nose. Once I glug down a glass of water, my voice steadies enough to call Jeremy to cover for me.

Hanging up, I swallow hard. "I am not a victim."

Hunt tips my chin up from his torso. "No, ma'am. I never thought you were."

Before I lose my newly found backbone, I phone my brother. My daughter's life

depends on keeping him informed. “Is Mackenzie with you?”

“She’s in school, why?”

A playground full of kids sounds in the background. I should’ve guessed he’d be nearby.

Exhaling, I unclench my cell. “Someone tried to burn down my house. I’m finished hiding. It’s time to fight back.”

In the silence, I picture him considering the pros and cons. Finally, he clicks his tongue. “Alright, sis. I got the kid covered. You and your city boy go kick butt.”

“He’s FBI.” My chest constricts. A reasonable mom would’ve told him the moment she found out.

“I’m shocked.” His dry tone gives me pause.

He knew and didn’t say anything. “Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

“Backatcha, Kell.” This is the relationship I remember before we enlisted. God, how I’ve missed him. I’m guessing it goes both ways.

My throat grows tight, my weepy eyes watering yet again. “I’ll keep in touch... and thank you, so much. I love you, Kade. Really. Bye.”

After hanging up, I leave a voice mail for Gina. “Hey, had a small chimney fire ... There was some smoke damage. Kade is watching Mack. The wildlife guy has my six. Talk soon. Don’t worry. This ostrich has finally pulled her head from the sand.”

When I turn, my G-man—my rock—shakes his head as he leans against the counter. “Holy fuck, Red. I’m impressed.”

As a plan takes shape, a sly grin breaks out on my face. “Me, too. When Jeremy arrives, how about you drive me to The Alpine Luxe Resort?”

One side of his mouth lifts as he raises his eyebrows. “Only if you promise not to shoot anyone.”

My gaze laser-focused, I tug on his ear lobes until his lips meet mine.

“Tell me I’m not crazy.”

Hunt

The kiss we share sets my blood on fire, but more will have to wait. By installing those cameras, I put a bullseye on our foreheads.

Eyes locked on hers, I remove my fingers from the back of her neck. I need a moment to ground myself. “We should go.”

“Right.” The set of her jaw, the fierceness in her face? All I want to do is take this majestic warrior back to my hotel room and make love until we’re completely sated.

While my cock throbs, I take a breath. Shoving my arms into my jacket, I force my focus back on the mission. I want both heads in the game—the one on my shoulder as well as the one below my belt.

Outside, the cold douses my lust. Focusing on our objective, I program the alpine destination into my SUV’s GPS. “We should be there in thirty minutes.”

“Copy that.” After almost dying, she jumped into the passenger seat without hesitation. I know seasoned operators who would’ve balked.

Now, as we drive up the mountain, her hand rests on my thigh, steady and relaxed.

Something triggered her earlier. I need to know if the change is permanent. What if her determination isn’t enough?

If she is to be my partner, I want to trust her. “We’re just going to take some photos,

send them to the FBI, and wait for instructions. Agreed?”

She snorts. “What? So they can count them?”

Perhaps, I do deserve her derision, but dammit, it stings. “Whoa—low blow.”

“Sorry, Wildlife. I feel so, so... Shit, I can’t find the right word. Empowered? Enabled? Free? No, no, none of them fit. It’s as if I took a Wonder Woman pill. I’m ready to take on the whole damn world. As a Marine, I remember feeling this way. It’s been so long, I had almost forgotten that version of myself. This is me—the real Kelly O’Malley.”

“Okay, hotshot. Only don’t shoot anyone, alright?” Despite my resolve to table my emotions, a grin breaks out on my face.

The smile she returns makes me groan. Hell, reel me in babe. Put me in your basket and eat me for supper.

“I promise. However, if I see Bourdin, all bets are off.” While she pats her sidearm, I suck in my breath.

“Don’t tip your hand to the mangy coyote. Let him believe you’re still his simpering victim.” The moment the words leave my lips, I wish I could take them back.

“Is that what you thought of me?” Her voice goes up an octave, so I pedal back real fast.

Damn, after everything she’s been through, she came out whole. “You have stones of steel.”

When she brightens, I ask about her service. Swapping war stories, we make it to the

resort without another foot-in-mouth incident.

Inside, my stomach grumbles as we follow the enticing scents of breakfast sausage, waffles, and warm toast.

I request the booth facing the open entrance. From here, we can easily exit to the hotel's elevator, the restroom, or the kitchen's swinging door.

While the waitress takes our order, a Middle Eastern man in an expensive suit sidles up to the table. His smarmy smile doesn't reach the soulless eyes.

I level my pistol under the tabletop and lift a brow. "Can we help you?"

Catching my intent, the guy inches back, palms up. "I work with Kelly's ex-husband, Pete. I only wanted to convey my condolences... about her car and house. Hate to think what could've happened to sweet Mackenzie."

As I snap his picture, Kelly's phone pings. Face pale, she holds her device down below as she scrolls through pictures of her daughter.

Fists clenched, the angry momma bear rises up, hand hovering over her holster. "What did you say your name was?"

"S-S-Smith." Sweating, the fortyish thin man glances over his shoulder.

"ID please?" The moment she sticks out a palm, he bolts, saying something about leaving it in his room.

"I know all of Peter's coworkers. He's not one of them." Scowling, my border buddy plops back down in her seat.

After brunch, I snap a few more shots, before exhaling my frustrations. “Let’s head back to my place. We’ll figure out our next moves from there.”

She tucks an errant lock of hair behind her ear. “You’re not thinking of seducing me, are you, Mr. Wildlife?”

God, this woman. “It might’ve crossed my mind.”

Jumping up, she gestures at our waitress, who’s chatting up another lady near the cash register. “Hold on, I’m going to ask if they’ll add a couple of coffees to go to our bill.”

While she waits for her drinks, a young man approaches her. At first, I don’t think anything of it. Once I see it—his signet ring, I realize he was in the forest the other night. Holy fuck.

He tilts his pelvis. They lock eyes. He says something to make her blush. It takes most of my self-control to remain seated as she flirts with the undocumented man.

Paper bag in hand, she returns to our table. “Sweetheart, I just met the nicest guy. He told me about the new ski instructor. They have a spot open for two. Isn’t it simply perfect?”

She’s laying it on thick, but hell, I’ll play along. The jealous-boyfriend-routine it is. “I think he wants to give you private lessons, babe... and not on the slopes.”

“Don’t be silly. His name is Ahmad and has a wife at home in Iran.” Her fake giggle makes me laugh, for real.

“You learned all that while getting coffee?”

“Uh-huh. He’s here, working for the government, but has a few days off to go skiing. We have to hurry and grab our gear. The class starts in a couple of hours.”

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Kelly

In front of the lodge, my lover stares up at the mountain. Dressed in the latest ski gear, he's every snow bunny's wet dream. Lusting after him, I lean on my poles. His thoughts, however, remain hidden by those mirrored sunglasses.

"You're doing fine, luv." Scott's friend Lucky resonates in my inner ear. "Stay close to the Persian who invited you to the lesson, he'll probably arrange to sit next to you on the lift"

Resisting the urge to adjust the comm device, I lower my chin to clear my throat.

Before I can reply, a giggle catches my attention. Skis forward, I turn at the waist, and swallow back acrid bile.

Behind me, the same man who had me tangled in the sheets hours ago, flirts shamelessly with an après-ski-chic model. Her diamond studs sparkle in the sun, as does her bleached-white smile.

Dammit. We're undercover. This is all fake. I need to exorcise this green monster, or it will ruin everything.

When the gorgeous man-stealer pats a trendy mitten against his cheek, I picture pushing her face, designer goggles and all, into the snow.

Jealousy over, I force my mind to the mission, flipping through our playbook. Hunt and I are supposed to be having a lover's quarrel, but it appears he's enjoying the

powder princess's company a little too much.

Perhaps this isn't an act for him—maybe it's second nature. I'm just another conquest in a string of seductions—no different from the rest. Damn. I'm being naïve. We never agreed to anything more than sex. So, why do I have this overwhelming urge to tear Miss America's hair out?

Needing to store these unhelpful thoughts, I try to shove them into my mental lockbox, but with the hinges broken, the whole thing collapses.

Crap.

After a deep, cold, cleansing breath, I shuffle to the chairlift queue. At the last moment, Ahmad makes his move. Excusing himself, he slides forward and barges into the line in front of me. As we settle in, my companion claims the middle seat. I expect him to strike up a conversation, but instead, the man on his left engages him in a barrage of foreign dialogue, shutting me out.

After a few minutes, Ahmad turns to me. "Please forgive my rudeness. My friend has never visited your Green Mountains and his English is limited."

Hoping my face gives nothing away, I keep my tone light. "Thanks for inviting me to your class. I appreciate it. Are you here for long?"

"Only a day or two, but if you give me your number, next time I am here, I will call you."

"Oh." My mouth a tight pout. I stare at a kid on a snowboard, jumping moguls. "Don't bother. I'll probably be busy."

His gaze flicks toward the exit ramp, as if gauging the distance—an escape route? A

signal? “What about your boyfriend? If you don’t find my question too personal.”

“It’s complicated.” Grabbing my poles, I shrug him off with a wave of my hand.

His laugh is so normal, I almost forget he’s my suspect. “Ah, you Americans and your cryptic phrases. That means you do not want to talk about him, yes?”

“It means what it means.” I add as much irritation as I dare.

“Listen, if my work goes well, I could be staying for quite some time.” As a seductive smile breaks out on his face, I lean in.

“Oh. Well, what is it you do?” Interest sparking in my eyes, I flick my tongue over my lower lip.

“I am a chemical engineer.” When he puffs out his chest and lifts his chin, the man to his left furrows his brow.

After their short argument, Lucky fills me in. “His friend told Ahmad to shut his trap. Good on ya. You’ve given us something to go on.”

Raising the safety bars, my mark takes the bait. “I’m giving a party at my chalet tonight. Do you think you could slip away from your partner and come?”

My grin widens, but not for the reasons he thinks. “He has the car keys, but no worries. After a few drinks, he won’t notice I’m gone.”

Hunt

As Kelly exits the chairlift in front of me, I raise my safety bar. After sliding down the ramp, I spot her flirting with Ahmad. Scowling at them, I open my ski tips, push in my poles, and skate toward the lesson. The last student to arrive, I snowplow to a stop near two thin, middle-aged men arguing in Farsi. They talk too fast for my limited skills.

Lowering my chin to the mic taped to my chest, I murmur, “Lucky, you hearing this, mate?”

“Affirmative.” Back in his home office, I picture him recording the conversation, perhaps translating in real time.

The wind whistles past my ears, biting through my jacket as I shift on my skis, trying to catch more of the men’s rapid exchange. Every word feels like a puzzle piece just out of reach.

My attention shifts to the teacher who slaloms for a short distance, stops, then waves us forward. “Show us what you’ve got. One at a time.”

From the back of the line, the two Iranians continue to converse.

When I catch the word ricin, my skis slide out from beneath me. Holy shit. They’re talking about a deadly nerve agent.

Standing, I brush off the snow. “Sorry. I’m a little nervous about this steep slope.”

“No problem.” Brows furrowed, the larger guy tilts his head and studies my face. A beat of silence later, he utters something under his breath to the other man. All at once they both switch to English, discussing the weather.

Dialog at an end, Lochlan whispers hoarsely in my earpiece. “What the bloody hell have you stepped into?”

Jesus, I wish I knew.

I wait until it’s my turn to ski before lowering my mouth to the mic. “Did I hear the word, ricin?”

“Damn straight, mate. Keep your head down. Don’t let on.” For once, the operative didn’t crack a joke.

Shit. I am so fucked.

When I shoosh to a stop next to my border guard she shoots me a scowl but beams at Ahmad.

“Babe, I’m sorry. Can we talk?” I must get her alone—tell her what I heard.

Ignoring my pleading eyes, she continues the sham. “Well, I’m still mad, Jack. You can’t simply say what you did and expect me to forgive you right off.”

Her authentic tone makes me wonder. It doesn’t sound like an act.

I think back to the restaurant. Okay, I guess stones-of-steel wasn’t the best praise, but she didn’t appear to mind.

While I second guess myself, the interloper smirks. “Perhaps, you should afford the

lady some space.”

What the hell is this? Fists clenched, my vision blurs. For a moment, I consider arresting the bastard. It would be reckless, but right now, I don’t care. She may be playing a role, but he’s a shark, contemplating his next meal.

Focus, Hunt. You’re better than this.

Needing intel more than a pissing contest trophy, I banish my jealousy.

Finally, the class ends. Now she sits in my SUV, warming her hands over the heater. As I start to back out of the parking space, she stretches over the cup holder, pulling my sunglasses to the tip of my nose. “You can turn off the scowly face, Hunter.”

I shove my mirrored lenses back in place. “We can talk at the hotel. Right now, I have to concentrate, babe.”

“Wait!” She grabs the wheel. “Don’t go. What if someone tampered with your vehicle?”

Fishing out my phone, I press the security app icon. “No one has been near our car. See?”

“Wow.” Her shoulders drop as she sinks into the heated seats. “Would’ve been nice to have that program, a few days ago. My poor Kia was totaled.”

“We didn’t know the risks. I’m not taking any more chances. You’ve sort of grown on me.”

Done checking for tails, I ease onto the highway. “ETA to my room, ten minutes.”

Once I'm sure we're not being followed, I ask Lochlan James, the question lying heavy on my mind. "Have you had enough time to translate the video?"

The Aussie hisses. "Some, but not all. Your two Iranian friends were describing a mass poisoning event. They stopped talking when you showed too much interest."

Eyes widening, O'Malley stiffens and digs her nails into my thigh. "Oh my God."

"Dammit. I can't believe it." A cold sweat prickles my neck as I tighten my grip on the steering. "Shit. If I hadn't reacted, we could've learned more."

"No worries, mate. Slate's debating a possible timeline with our top guys. If the terrorists make a move, we'll know."

But it may be too late. "Keep in touch. I'll keep my phone nearby. Over."

"Copy that. Hang tight. We got your six. We'll reach out soon."

After the call ends, silence lingers between us, thick with unspoken fears. Kelly stares out the windshield, her fingers tearing at the day pass, stapled to her zipper.

"Are you okay?" One glance over the stick shift makes me wish this was all a nightmare—one I'd pay a small fortune to wake up from.

"Yeah, yeah. Just wondering where they've targeted the attack." Her digits clutch my knee, her breathing shallow.

"Well, fuck them." After she slams her fist on the dashboard, her eyes flick toward my hotel, coming up fast on our right. "We should eat."

I nod my agreement. First food, then plan . We've burned through a lot of energy.

Soon, we sit in my hotel's restaurant where she slips off her after-ski boots and rubs her ankles. Letting out a sigh, her head snaps to the entrance.

"For the love of God, here comes Bourdin."

Parading across the room, the coyote parks at our table. "How's the snow?"

Kelly narrows her gaze and points out the door. "Beautiful. Why don't you go check it out? Like now?"

His face darkens with rage. When his fingers curl into a fist, I clamp onto his elbow, applying pressure until his eyes water.

"Don't even think about it."

Still in my grasp, a diamond sparkling in his front incisor, he smirks at my date. "Your brother can't watch her twenty-four-seven."

He's threatening her kid? As I squeeze his arm tighter, I picture my hands around his throat. When it's clear who's weaker, I let him go and shove him toward the door.

Out of my reach, the bully stabs his finger in the air. "I warned you. Now that Dante's missing, I'm coming for Mack."

Full of venom, coiled to bite, her green eyes narrow. "He's not gone. He'll be back."

The man chuckles. "Sure, he will."

Something about his derision raises the hackles on the back of my neck. "Got something you want to share with the whole class, John?"

Facing us, he inches back. “Better be careful, or you’ll end up ice fishing, too.”

“Are you trying to intimidate me, Bourdin?” She instinctively reaches for her sidearm, but she’s not in uniform.

When I slide my hand inside my jacket, the Canadian lifts up his palms. “Calm down, Fish and Game man. Just don’t get in my way - tout va bien se passer . You know how this works. If not...”

The way he pumps his pelvis sends any civility I might have had out the window. Jaw tight, I snatch the guy’s shirt collar and drag his ass outside. “You do not threaten to sexually assault a minor. Ever.”

That damn smirk. Cameras? None. Excellent.

I slam his face into the wall—once, twice—until cartilage gives way with a sickening crunch.

He howls, blood pouring between his fingers. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyers.”

Fucking child.

This time, it’s my turn to grin. “You go right ahead. If I see you anywhere near Ms. O’Malley or her family, I’ll shoot you and claim self-defense. We clear?”

“Not if I kill you first.”

“Wrong answer, dude.” I toss him in the backseat, cinch his wrists, and slide behind the wheel.

A few seconds later, I stop to get Kelly, looking lost at the front of the hotel. “C’mon.

Get in. We're running out of time."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

As soon as he's free, Bourdin will come after everyone I love. Like a catchy, terrible song, the thought replays on an endless loop.

Heart racing, I glance over my shoulder, then at the driver. "What're we going to do with him?"

The G-man smiles as if he hadn't just trussed up a dangerous criminal and stuffed him in the back of his Ford. "Me? I'm not going to do anything, you are. A Canadian entered the United States illegally. He's your prisoner, Border Agent O'Malley. Where do you want him?"

"Gina's cells are the closest." While I program the dashboard's GPS, thick gray clouds race across the sky. We're in for a helluva storm.

"Seems to me you should've arrested him long before now." Pursing his lips, he checks on the asshole in the rearview mirror.

"Dante said he had it handled, and I believed him. Honestly, until last week, we had an agreement of sorts—a truce, if you will." I hate how defensive I sound.

"So, this is my fault?" When his brows shoot up, mine furrow.

Hissing out my breath, my shoulders heave. "No, let me explain. There aren't many jobs around here. Most pay minimum wage. I inherited a fixer-upper, Mack is going to college soon, and I have zero savings. Are you getting the picture? I can't tell.

Can't move. Can't change jobs. Stuck." I stare across the cupholder, willing him to understand my hopeless situation.

"So, you turned a blind eye to his trafficking?" He white-knuckles the steering wheel.

How dare he get angry at me? "Wrong. Dante assigned me the port. The forests are not my job."

"Semantics, Kelly." The guy pokes and pokes. Why can't he leave me be? "My boss said he would take care of it. Unlike you, I have a life. It's easy to be brave when you have little to lose."

His jaw muscles pulse. "You know nothing about me."

"You're right," I snap. Tears well, but I hold them back.

"Just sex, remember?" Eyes on the road, the cold stranger refuses to meet my gaze.

I clunk my forehead against the cold, passenger side window. "Grahhh! This is exactly why I don't do relation—"

"No, ma'am. You don't get involved because you're scared." His curt tone is so out of line.

"Hey, that's not fair." That's my comeback? A whiney two-year-old?

"You've built a wall of excuses, but the truth is, you don't want to get hurt."

For a moment, I hate him more than I have ever hated anyone in my life. "Fine. Terrorists scare the hell out of me. So, tell me, Mr. FBI man. What's going to happen when you go back to DC, leaving me to deal with the fallout, huh? Do you think the

president is going to send an army to guard a tiny piece of land? These guys have power, guns, money. I. Have. Nothing.”

For this one instant, there’s blessed silence. I figure we’re done until he curses under his breath. “So have you heard from Dante or is that a lie, too?”

“Are you for real?” I screech. I’ve been nothing but trustworthy since he arrived. “You know what? Just shut up and drive. I’m calling Gina to let her know we’re coming.”

He mutters under his breath, then clicks his tongue. “The bugs in the office? It all makes sense now. You’re working for the other team.”

My stomach drops. Now he’s accusing me? The lump in my throat grows, making it hard to swallow. Betrayal mixed with real hurt slams against the walls of my mental prison. Shaking all over, I try to clamp down to reinforce the welded seal, but no can do. A deafening, shattering burst scatters fragments of steel and unleashes a tsunami of emotions so fierce, I can’t breathe. Fury, fueled by heartbreak, roars to my tongue, arming it with a sharp retort.

“I would never help them.” My airway tightens. Words, desperate and raw, claw to the surface as I bite my lower lip until it bleeds. It’s useless. Once let loose, feelings don’t stop. They can’t be buried. Starved for air, they tear free.

"I was raped." Not wanting to see the pity on Hunt’s face, I close my eyes.

Brakes squeal. As tires crunch against the gravel, the trussed up snake in the back senses blood and hisses.

From the driver’s side? Nothing. No gasp, no fumbling for the right speech. Just the soft sound of his breath—too even, too controlled.

Why doesn't he say anything?

Pulse rate maxed, I sit with my hands clamped over my mouth, waiting for the guys in white jackets.

More silence. Jesus, God almighty. I've never said those words out loud. Shouldn't my head be exploding? Why is everything so fucking normal?

Scared? Hell no. I'm terrified.

His door slams. A moment later, mine opens.

Outside, his too-tight, overly calm voice cuts through the dead air. "Dante knew and didn't do anything?"

"Other than the doctor, no one knows, or rather knew, until this second." I crack open my lids to search his face. Pity? Anger? Disgust? Damn his FBI training.

"Why, babe?" When his fingers squeeze my hand, I let out the breath I didn't even know I was holding.

Perhaps what I broke, I can now mend. "Could you be a bit more specific?"

His eyes soften as he cups my face. "To start with, why did you not press charges?"

"I was roofied. I don't know who, how, where, or why. Who would take my case?"

"Surely, the DNA—" He swallows hard, no doubt thinking he can swoop in to save the day.

Too late for that, I shake my head back and forth. "He used a condom. Cleaned me.

Nothing.”

His cheeks darken, his lids lowering halfway. “I am so, so, sorry. Had I known I never—”

“Would’ve agreed to ‘friends with benefits’?” I force a smile. “That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

His blue eyes search my face, sharp, penetrating, giving no quarter. “Why me? Why now?”

I shrug, my chest so tight it hurts. “You needed to know I would never ever help them.”

Hunt’s expression hardens as he points to the hatch. “Tell me—was it the bastard in our back seat?”

As the seconds tick by, his brows furrow deeper, while my heartrate spikes. If I say yes, will he put a bullet through my prisoner’s brain?

Hunt

If John Bourdin violated her, I vow right now—he will pee into a bag the rest of his life. I won't have an ounce of remorse for what I do to him. Settling behind the wheel, I lay my hand on her shoulder.

When she turns, I wait for her gaze to raise to mine. "I'm so, so sorry I implied you were working for them."

"Don't be. If I were in your shoes, I would've thought the same. Let's go, okay? I'm fine." She lowers her head, staring back down to her fidgety hands.

I probably ought to say something more, but I'm so far out of my comfort zone, I'm lost. Racking my brain, I try to recall one thing from my trauma class.

Talk? Yes, that's it. Encourage the victim to open up.

"How long ago did this happen?" Despite my reassuring smile, her frown deepens.

"My first month on the job. I received a call from a farmer whose property borders Canada. When he saw a group of armed strangers on his property, he hid in his basement. He was praying they wouldn't find him."

I listen to a bird sing chickadee-dee-dee for a while before I move my hand to her knee. "Go on. I'm listening."

Kelly swivels toward Bourdin. Biting her lower lip, she leans over the armrest and

whispers, “I called Dante for backup, then Gina. Even the state police were more than thirty minutes away. I was the only one close by. It was all up to me.”

A new hire should never have been left on her own. They should’ve instructed her to stand down.

My grinding back teeth must reveal my infuriation because now, she pokes my shoulder. “I’m not an idiot, Scott. I stayed in the car, waiting for help. I honestly don’t know what happened. The next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital. The doctor said I must’ve fought hard. My knuckles were broken, as well as my nose and jaw. Bruising, too—I guess I don’t need to tell you where.”

Tips of her cheeks red, she clenches her fists. “It’s so weird to be missing a chunk of memory. I hate it. Perhaps if I knew who did it, I could point my anger in the right direction. It’s difficult to explain. Finally, I gave up. I stuffed all the emotions in a mental box, then welded it shut. And don’t you say anything, I know it’s unhealthy. Okay? I’ve had tons of therapy, but what works works.”

“Until it doesn’t.” I keep my face neutral, but inside, my heart aches for her.

“I know, I know. I was stupid. I’ve got no one to blame but myself.” She swallows back a sob which tightens the knot in my throat.

“I’m sorry.” Never have my words sounded so trite, so impotent.

Despite this, she forces a smile and lifts her wet lashes. “For what? You didn’t do one thing wrong.”

I twist in my seat, then catch a fat, glistening drop on my thumb. “I didn’t want you to relive the...”

As my sentence hangs in the air, worse than any toxin, she kisses my palm. “It’s okay. I call it ‘The Incident’.”

Pulling away, I rasp my hand over my chin. “I can’t help but feel like I’ve added to your trauma.”

She cups my cheek, her steady gaze willing me to believe her. “No, Scott. You helped me break the box. Now hit the road, Wildlife. We have a prisoner to deliver.”

Her firm tone leaves no room for argument. This conversation is over. Respecting her decision, I grip the wheel as my mind buzzes. How many people has she told? Why me? Why now?

A long silence stretches between us until she taps my arm. “Listen, once we get rid of Bourdin, if you need to leave, I’ll understand.”

Where the hell did this come from? “I’m not going anywhere until you and your town are safe from these assholes.”

“But the FBI only authorized you to count heads, right?”

Martyrdom? Is this where we’re going? After all she just shared, does she think I would walk out on her? What other baggage is she carrying?

Not wanting to trip any wires, I tread carefully. “Babe, I called in a few favors. A buddy at the Bureau is helping me out. I also contacted a private agency who guards some of the wealthiest and most influential people on the planet.”

“Lightweights?” Her teasing smile loosens the tightness in my chest.

My guard lowered, I laugh. “Exactly. I won’t let anything happen to you or your

family. Dante was right to protect you. You've gone through enough."

Lightning fast, her eyes spark in her hardened expression. "I know you mean well, but stop. I'm not a victim. I'm a Marine."

Channeling my VA therapist, I exhale. "You can't go back. Bad stuff, not so bad stuff, everything shapes who we are. Healing is about embracing the new you."

When a corner of her lips quirks up, I wipe my brow. Phew. That was close .

"Affirmative." She punches a fist into a palm. "Now, our next step is to obtain evidence. And if I understood correctly, we can't call your direct supervisor, but we have your security buddies and a colleague willing to help."

"Ah-huh."

As my brain struggles to keep up, she bounces in her seat. "So, we drop off Bourdin, then head to Ahmad's party. Simple."

I roll my eyes. "You're forgetting one thing."

Her face skews. "I am? What?"

Kelly

Brows creased, voice guttural, Hunt captures my gaze. “You haven’t once mentioned us.”

Holy crap. Did I hear him right? Is he suggesting more than we agreed to? A slow, smoldering heat unfurls from deep within. It creeps into my limbs, down to my core, making it hard to think straight. While we drop off our prisoner, the feeling lingers, curling around us like smoke.

Gina must sense it, too. Her scowls are impossible to miss, but I ignore them. I’ve colored inside the lines for too long. It’s time to break free.

At the jail, Bourdin refuses to talk without a lawyer, so we leave him behind bars.

“I’ll file the paperwork in the morning.” Flicking my wrist, I slip into the car as my pulse pounds in my ears.

After we stop at my house for party attire, Scott drives toward his hotel, his face half-lit by the dashboard glow. His heated glances sear me, right down to my damp panties. Each one is a spark threatening to set me ablaze. Before my brain fries completely, I text Kade. After I confirm Mack is well-guarded, I toss aside my phone.

The moment we step into his room, the simmering volcano erupts. Our mouths crash together while our desperate hands roam blindly. We strip off layers of fabric until they lay tangled at our feet.

A wisp of a warning blows through my lust-fueled thoughts. This is more than physical. Everything I've held back is about to be released. There will be no turning back.

Pressed against the cool, full-length mirror, a shiver runs down my spine as his warm breath skims my ear.

"Babe," he murmurs, his voice rough with need, "If this is too much, tell me to stop."

I nibble on his neck, the salty taste urging me on. How can I describe the newly freed fireworks of emotions? "Please. I want everything."

His palms slide up and down my side, thumbs stopping at my breasts. As they caress the tips, his heated gaze slams into mine, leaving my knees weak.

"You're so beautiful." Soft, feathery kisses move down my body.

His tongue wets my collarbone and lavishes my nipples until they become super sensitive.

I'm so turned on I can hardly breathe. "The. Bed."

His hands cup my butt cheeks, fingers digging into the muscles. He lifts me off my feet as I wrap my arms and legs around him. The world spins as his strong forearms guide us to the mattress.

Spreading my thighs, he kneels to worship. His licks stroke my most erogenous areas. My fingers grip the silky sheets. Every nerve-ending tingles. Which touch will set me off? A flick of a fingertip? The perfect slide along my length?

As he curls a finger inside of me, I gasp. "Please, Scott. I need to come."

“Mmm.” His groan vibrates against me.

All my muscles clench. Tension mounts.

“Oh, oh, oh. Yessss.” Stars explode behind my eyelids while waves of pleasure crash over me.

I can’t even catch my breath before he climbs up my body. His tip nudges my still throbbing entrance. With one tremendous thrust, he fills me. A bucking bronco, I go wild beneath him.

“Eyes, babe.” His whisper barely registers through the haze.

Lips brushing against my lids, he coaxes them to lift. When they do, I drown in a stormy ocean of blue, flecked with gold swirls.

While emotions I’m not ready to name boil under the surface, I clamp on tight. Whimpering, matching his rhythm, I ride my bliss. A moment later, a raspy moan rumbles from his chest.

His release is so filled with passion, I gasp, sharing his high.

“Holy shit.” Bodies connected, he collapses, then rolls me on top until my ear rests against his thumping heart.

Once the drumbeat slows, this tidal wave of awareness hits me. This isn’t just sex. It’s much more terrifying. Is it love? If so, no wonder Peter left me. I’ve never felt anything like this.

While we float back to earth, tears leak down my face. What the hell have I done? I wasn’t supposed to fall for him.

“Are you crying? Did I hurt you?” When Scott tips up my chin, the creases beside his eyes make my chest ache even more.

“I’m... so... overwhelmed. That was amazing.”

His face softens as he wipes the wetness with the tip of his finger, still holding my scent. “You are all that and so much more, Kell.”

I nod, swallowing hard. Isn’t life a bitch? The moment I reach for the merry-go-round ring, fate tugs it away.

His soft, firm lips press against mine. When they release, he exhales. “I wish we could stay in bed forever, but we do have a party to attend.”

Hunt

As I shower for this evening's event, I clunk my forehead against the tiles. I am so damn screwed. We didn't fuck, we made love. Hell, at forty, I know the difference. My climax was—an Amazing Grace kind of moment.

My friend Wulf told me all about his ah-ha moment at his bachelor party. At the time, I said he was full of shit. Now I understand, but it's too late.

It's going to shred me when I leave. What other option do I have? I should stop the madness, but it'd be easier to halt the pounding of my stupid heart.

Shaking my head, I table those thoughts. Peoples' lives are depending on us. Game-face on, Special Agent Hunter.

We dress together in silence, stealing glances occasionally, more like teens than grown-ass adults. Once I've slipped into black jeans and a matching long-sleeved shirt, I add a shoulder holster under my wool suit jacket.

As I recall how she mocked it the day we met, she grins, no doubt on the same page. Chuckling, I turn as she twirls in front of me. My breath catches at her stunning beauty. She wears a dark blue tunic, leggings, and thigh-high heels. The outfit, while modest, shows off her athletic body, making me randy all over again.

I should be focusing on the mission, but she makes it hard—so to speak.

Objective back in mind, I reach into my suitcase. Dropping a comm device in her ear,

I undo her top buttons to hide a mic under her bra.

I nip her nipple through the layers of fabric. “Sure you don’t want to stay here?”

“Scott, I need my life back.” The heat in her eyes tells me I could lure her back to bed, but I don’t. She’s a former warrior turned federal officer.

If she were a man, I wouldn’t be hesitating. This thought gives me pause. I never considered myself chauvinistic. Hell, she’s not any woman—she’s mine .

Tucking my concerns aside, we shrug into our heavy coats, hats, and gloves.

At the door, I remind her. “Intel gathering only.”

“Right.” Her overconfidence twists my gut.

The Iranian chemical engineer has had her in his crosshairs since bumping into her over coffee. I suspect he’s not the kind of man you say no to.

Without warning, a deja vu flashes in my mind’s eye causing goose bumps from shoulders to fingertips. Buckle up, buttercup. We’re in for a helluva party.

Fifteen minutes later, we enter a posh ski chalet’s living room. With its loft, floor-to-ceiling slate fireplace, and geometric rug, it probably won an award for interior design.

Acting the part of an unhappy couple, I make a beeline for the bar. She searches for Ahmad while I wander around, beer bottle in hand. Eventually, I lean on the wall near a guitarist who plays a nylon-stringed guitar by the crackling fireplace. His chords are barely audible over the clinking glasses and boisterous laughter.

On the surface, it's a group of elite skiers enjoying a party. The men's whispers and dark faces tell an entirely different story. Done with my perimeter check, I sit on a white leather couch next to a woman in her sixties.

Before she can share any more stories of her sexual prowess, I excuse myself. "Sorry, my girlfriend needs me."

Jumping up, I meander toward Ahmad, who stands way too close to Kelly. One hand on the bar, the other holding a drink, he curves around her as if he's already her lover.

"Everything okay here?" I step between the two.

Kell rolls her eyes at me, gently pushing the terrorist away. A phony wink tells me she's in control.

"We're fine, Jack. Jeesh. Why do you have to make shit so complicated?" She might as well have slapped me across the face.

The urge to grab her bicep and drag her home almost overpowers me. Taking a deep breath, I recall the most important thing. Ricin. If we leave now, thousands, perhaps millions of people could die.

"Ditch your boyfriend and come up to my room." The smirking chemist puts his arm around my woman's waist.

As he tugs her closer, it's a goddamn miracle I don't snap his wrist.

Oblivious to my internal struggle, her gaze shifts to his left hand. "What about your wife?"

"She's back at home. What I do is none of her concern." Scowling, he tightens his

grip.

No act, her wince makes me inch forward, but a short toss of her red hair warns me not to intervene.

“Listen, I hardly know you.” Giggling, the actress flutters her damn eyelashes at him. No way she’s going to sleep with him. Even so, my fists clench, itching to beat against my chest.

Me Tarzan.

Eyes on me, the slimeball caresses her face, and slips a loose curl behind her ear. “We both know John Bourdin. If he gives his blessing, will you consider my offer? Believe me, a man of my wealth can treat you far better than your so-called boyfriend.”

His disdain makes me want to drag the cheating dirtbag outside and pummel him to a bloody pulp.

Right now, my hands are tied, but soon, Ahmad, real soon.

Kell rubs her nose to his, much like a kitten. “Call John. Do it. For me.”

Excellent ploy, babe.

I pinch my lips to cover my smirk. The coyote’s in lockup, his phone locked up.

Sorry douchebag.

Not giving up, the sleazy player shoves his screen in front of her face. “This is my company.”

He swipes. “Here is one of my many homes.”

O’Malley studies the photos for a long time as if making up her mind but hands the electronics back with a shrug. “Sorry, I don’t do one-night stands.”

“What game are you two playing, huh? You take me for a fool?” Snarling, the man clamps onto her upper arm.

“Let go!” When she kicks him in the shins, the man doesn’t flinch.

Wondering why she’s holding back, I recoil my elbow, happy images of decking him dancing in my head.

As I’m about to strike, she winks. “I got this, sweetheart.”

Fingers clenched, Glock unholstered, I follow them out. Before I can shout stop, she swivels. Fingers around his neck, she thrusts up her knee. He crumples into the snow, moaning, hands cupped over his crotch.

Ouch. I step over the asshole, tug her to me, and brush a kiss across her lips. “Note to self. Never piss off an ex-Marine.”

“Oorah.” Squatting, she removes a wallet from his back pocket.

While she thumbs through it, she says, “Can you grab our coats? We should go.”

By the time I return, she’s hogtied the man and dragged him behind a bush. A glove in his mouth muffles his curses.

Finger near my pistol’s trigger, head on a swivel, I hand over her jacket. “I thought we agreed. Gather data.”

“Yeah, well, plans change.” She tucks a passport into my hand.

Flipping the pages, my pulse quickens. “Last valid stamp is Canada. The U.S. entry is a fake.”

My border guard nudges Ahmad with her boot. “Sorry, mon ami , I believe you are under arrest.”

Kelly

“I’ll be right back.” Hunt drives his Ford to the walkway and shoves the Iranian into the back seat.

Lifting my prisoner’s wrists to the grab handle, he zip-ties them securely in place. Once we’re on the road, I turn in my chair while the driver flicks his eyes to the rearview mirror.

“We know about the ricin, Ahmad. If you talk now, you might avoid Guantanamo Bay.”

Sweat beads on the chemist’s forehead as he trembles. His frantic gaze darts to mine, pleading. “I have family back home. They will be killed if I say anything. Do what you will. You will learn nothing from me. Soon, it will not matter.”

Oh God, we’re out of time. I sense my heart rate rising. “Tell us.”

“You will find out.” A spark of amusement enters his eyes as a slow, reptilian smile spreads across his lips.

“Many will die, including us.” Lowering his chin, the would-be martyr hangs his head.

“Dammit.” Flesh slaps against leather as the Fed bangs his palm on the outside edge of the steering wheel.

Exhaling, he says into the air. “Phone Slate.”

I dig for my cell, only to realize he’s not talking to me. Instead, Bluetooth picks up and makes the call.

“Talk.” Seconds later, a baritone voice shoots to my spine, delivering shivers throughout my nervous system.

Scott matches the man’s fast pace. “Iranian chemists in the US. Ricin. Huge clusterfuck.”

Deeper and more dangerous, Slate’s speech slows as it crackles through the speaker. “Iran’s president is in Washington—being treated like royalty.”

“That’s why I’m calling you instead of the friggin’ FBI.” Eyes on the road, my German’s Adam’s apple bobs.

Wow, Hunter trusts this shadow network more than his own? How deep does this rot go?

While my heart races, the commander on the other side of the line remains impassive. “I’ve got a team standing by. Say the word, and we’ll be there.”

“Babe?” Scott raises his brows at me.

Once I nod, he says, “Do it.”

After they hang up, my mind buzzes with implications. It takes a moment for me to form a coherent question. “Who’s footing the bill for all this?”

“If I had to guess, the billionaire, Grayson Patten, the security firm’s owner.” His

dark eyes flick to me, shadowed with something I can't quite name—guilt? Regret?
“Sorry I got you into this mess.”

Biting my lower lip, I place my hand on his muscled thigh. “If I hadn't stuck my head in the sand, we wouldn't be on the cusp of a mass casualty event.”

We drive for a couple of miles. Then, I remember. I need to call Gina. We have another prisoner for her.

After a quick explanation, she curses. “Keep this up, and there won't be any space for the local drunks.”

“Guess they'll have to dry up on their own couches this week. Bye. See you in a few.” I hang up to the beat of ricin, ricin, ricin. The poison could be used in so many ways. How can a few individuals possibly stop it?

All of a sudden, my chest tightens as if clamped inside a human-sized vice. Oh my God—my daughter.

My brother answers his phone halfway through the first ring. “Wazzup, sis?”

“We think the Iranians have amassed a huge quantity of ricin. You and Mack need to get someplace safe.” After I say it, I realize how it's asking the impossible.

His breath hitches, sharp and unsteady. “How soon?”

“I don't know.” As a sob escapes me, he hisses.

“Where?” The raw edge in my sibling's voice spikes my blood pressure.

“I don't know that either.”

“Put me on speaker.” He gives me a few seconds before asking, “Fed, are you there?”

“Yup.” Tone firm, Hunt’s hand lands on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Fix this.”

Holy shit, I don’t think I’ve ever heard Kade sound so furious.

“Working on it. We’ll keep in touch.” Thank heaven, Wildlife takes no offense but me? I’m mortified.

Ending the call, I watch the double yellow lines curve this way and that before putting words to my thoughts. “Why the hell can’t we find a judge and ask for a warrant?”

Hunt frowns, letting the silence stretch. “Do you think we have enough evidence?”

I shake my head. “No—If only I could talk to Dante. He’s the key to all of this.”

“Right. So, tell me where he is.” His narrowed gaze strips away my last excuses. I’ve dodged his question for too long. My mentor values his privacy, but this is something way more important. Without the border chief’s input, people could die.

“He has a shack in the middle of nowhere. No power. No roads. It’s a mile hike, all uphill. I’ll take you but be prepared. He’ll be pissed.” Cringing, I imagine Dante’s bright red face as he swears over a pot of the thick sludge he calls coffee.

Scott furrows his brows, knuckles white on the helm. “Angry? Hell, so am I. First light, we’ll head out.”

He inhales, then exhales through his teeth. “Perhaps Wulf has a better play.”

Jaw jutted, he places his call while muttering, “Pick up, pick up.”

Five tortuous rings later, his groggy, irritated friend answers. “Damn, bro, don’t you ever sleep?”

Speaking as if each second counts, my FBI guy leans forward. “Didn’t plan on dragging you back into this. Shit’s hit the fan. The Iranians didn’t simply smuggle in ricin—they brought an army of chemists. Whatever they’re up to? It’s happening soon. Washington’s in chaos. I already called Patten. They’re sending as many men as they can spare.”

The pause in conversation lasts so long I wonder if Wulf got disconnected. Finally, he sucks in his breath. “Poisoning a whole city? Is this what you’re thinking?”

Hunt laughs, but it holds no humor. “Unless you know some humanitarian use for ricin, yeah.”

“Jesus, who knows about this?” Wide awake now, Hunt’s inside man sounds almost as freaked out as I feel.

“Besides the Iranians? Me, Kelly, Lucky, Slate, and now you.”

“What about Hornsby?”

Scott snorts out his derision. “My boss, the Counter Czar? He doesn’t know. Listen Axel, every bone in my body says we’re hours away from a disaster, the likes we’ve never seen before.”

“Understood. I’ll do whatever it takes.” His lack of hesitation gives me hope.

Once he’s hung up, Scott shakes his head, no doubt trying to dispel the same demons

as me. “That’s it. Every favor I’ve ever been owed. Cashed in.”

Anchorless, floating over an abyss of terror, I reach for his knee. Despite his coiled-up tension, his rock-solid muscles give me strength. Picturing a calm day on Lake Champlain, I wiggle my fingers, release my death grip on his leg, and pray.

Hunt

After dropping Ahmad with the lady sheriff, Kelly and I return to my hotel. Unable to keep our eyes open, we fall asleep.

Too soon, yellow light sneaks between the curtains. Under my chin, a gorgeous redhead uses my chest for a pillow. Knowing I could easily become addicted to the warmth of her body, I should pull away—give her space. My counsel ignored, my hand traces slow circles down her back.

Fast-forwarding, I picture marriage, two kids, a house, a dog. Wrinkled, we hold hands as we walk along the beach. Before the image takes root, I tear it up. We made our boundaries. Two people having sex. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But why does it feel so wrong?

As if making a point, my morning wood pushes against her stomach. Eyes closed, she smiles, arching back. No doubt, her body wants me. Perhaps I need to accept that lust is all we will ever have. Tossing the depressing thought aside, I focus on the here and now.

Her breath warms my skin as she shifts closer. When I kiss her nose, she scrunches it up—so fucking adorable.

“Morning, babe.” My fingers thread through her silken hair.

As she reaches over my shoulders to the back of my head, her tongue plays with my

mouth, pulling me into the moment. Once we've recharged, we can climb any peak fate throws at us.

Slowly, I inch my palm down her body until I cup her mound. Wet, slick folds send blood rushing south of my navel. Lifting her behind, she slides her panties to her calves. Her toe finishes the job.

"Hi." As she wraps her legs around my waist, her green eyes darken, lips parting in a silent moan.

She's my heaven, my home, someplace I never want to lose.

On top now, I place myself at her core. Arching, her breath hitches while her fingertips graze my skin. With a teasing grind and a shared gasp, I sink into her. In this moment, nothing else exists. Connected, body and soul, I bring us higher. As her heels press into the mattress, her nails bite into my back. Her mouth devours mine until I can barely breathe.

We kick off the covers as the temperature rises. Grinding, pulsing, pushing, we gain steam. My heart thumps, not only from physical exertion, but from the overpowering need to please her.

When she pants, I place my finger where we're joined and blast off.

"Oh, God, Wildlife. I, ah. Ohh!" She screams, her body vibrating, locking on like she'll never let go.

Delighted by her extreme enthusiasm, heat coils in my lower back. The tightening burns until it ignites into fireworks. I groan into her shoulder, shuddering as waves of orgasmic pleasure crash through me.

As we drift back to the surface, my brain disengages. “I love...” Oh shit. Do not say it ...“waking up with you.”

Instead of retreating, soft, swollen lips brush across my neck to my ear. “Me too.”

Her admission should reassure me, but oddly, a prickling sensation skates up my backbone. Every hair on my arms stands on end. If this isn’t plain old uncomplicated sex... what the hell am I doing?

Before I can answer, an elevator chimes outside our door. As hushed, excited voices pass by, reality creeps up on us.

I wish I could make love to her all day, but we need to be on our way. Dante awaits.

Mid-fly-zip, a sharp rap on the door is followed by a man calling out, “Complimentary breakfast.”

Kelly’s eyes snap to attention. Tugging my earlobe to her mouth, she whispers, “There’s no such thing.”

Adrenaline floods my veins. Gun drawn, I raise a finger to my lips as I locate the peephole. A dark-haired man waits by a food cart, too stiff, too alert.

When we don’t respond, the guy pulls a weapon from his belt, knocking again. “Hello? Room service.”

“He’s armed.” After I pantomime my next move, she nods.

In a swift motion, I yank open the door, ramming the metal trolley into his midsection.

He gasps as he doubles over. One well-placed chop to his arm sends his pistol clunking to the carpet. A right hook to his temple, an uppercut to his jaw, and he's out cold.

As I drag him inside and dump him in the bathtub, Kell grabs his sidearm and peeks between our curtains. "There's two Iranians in the parking lot. I recognize them from last night. One is leaning against a sedan, the other is pretending to check his cell. But they're watching."

What a shit show. I crouch, patting down our unconscious visitor. A burner phone, a silencer, and a set of plastic ties. Professional.

O'Malley swears under her breath. "They're not waiting for us to come out. They're waiting for backup."

I glance at the clock. We've got minutes, not hours.

"We're trapped here?" My back teeth clench. It's a bold move to come after us in broad daylight.

She frowns, pacing between the bed and the dresser. All at once, she pauses, eyes bright. "The slope. We can ski to the foot of the mountain."

Shaking my head, I run my hand through my hair. "In what? Our underwear?"

"I have friends in the shop downstairs. They'll give us everything we need. Trust me. This will work. It's our best bet."

She leads me down the staff stairs to the kitchen, weaving through the employee hallway until we reach a room stacked with outdoor gear. Minutes later, we're suited up.

"If this goes sideways, we're dead." My boots click into the bindings. "You better be damn sure."

My lover winks. "For chrissakes, stop whining and keep up, Wildlife."

Long blue shadows make it difficult to see the ice, but the intermediate incline isn't too hard to navigate.

Smiling, I relax, until a shot cracks the air. Snow explodes inches from my boot, spraying ice shards into my face. My heart in my throat, I plant my poles, vault toward Kelly and topple her into the bank. These terrorists will never let us leave the mountain alive.

Legs splayed, we dig in our edges as we crawl into the pines. When a second round echoes, bark flies over our heads. Hesitating, I try to formulate a plan.

The undaunted Vermonter pushes forward. "There's another way. Follow me."

Ducking under the trees, my ski bottoms scrape rock as I slide between stumps. Finally, we burst into a clearing.

Oh crap. My stomach lurches. Below, a steep cliff looms, more like a graveyard of powder-covered boulders intertwined with icy troughs.

Grinning, my border guard launches over the precipice. Knees flex, skis turn, and seconds later, she's gone from view.

Somewhere up the hill, a snowcat buzzes. A chill runs down my spine. If that mother catches up with us, they won't find our bodies until spring.

More of a snowplow-slash-survival skier, I travel in her wake. Halfway down, I wipe-

out for the third time. Ice scrapes my cheek. My ribs ache from the impact. Spitting out the frozen white stuff, I struggle to my feet and consider sliding the rest of the way on my ass.

Dammit. A fresh spurt of gunfire dispels that notion.

“Psst. Over here!” In the trees, Kelly motions me over. I scramble toward her, break off a pine bough and sweep away our marks.

Finally—hallelujah—a bunny trail where we trace the winding, tree-lined path to the bottom. No more gunmen.

For now. Woo hoo.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

My friend from the rental shop waits for us in the ski area's parking lot. We quickly stash our skis and poles in the back of her rusty red pickup, then hop in the front.

"Where we off to?" The fiftyish woman creases her brows, wanting answers, but anything we might say could put her in danger.

"Enterprise." By way of explanation, I turn to Hunt. "It's the closest rental place."

Thirty minutes later, with the Honda paperwork between us, I drive down the mountain.

Jaw clenched, gun ready, the silent G-man watches out the back window.

"How long before they find us?" My foot itches to lower to the floor, but we're already fishtailing.

While I struggle to keep the new CR-V on the road, he twists in his seat. "Not long."

The tension grows as I dash toward the border building. Better armed, we can make a run for it, and hide out until reinforcements arrive.

Only a mile from our goal, he hisses and rolls down the glass. "Move it, babe. It's them."

I stomp on the pedal. The engine whines. Cranking right, then left, I slide all over the

icy pavement.

As the seatbelt bites into my neck, frigid air rushes in, chilling the nervous moisture rolling down my sides.

Crack! God, that was too close. My left mirror gone, pebbles pelt the side of the car.

“Fuck.” Arm braced against the door, Scott leans out the window, steadies his weapon, and returns fire.

I only took my eyes off the road for a second. Dammit, not the ditch. Not now. The tires skid sideways. All at once, the treads catch on the deeper-packed snow, and we lurch forward.

Unable to take my eyes off the highway, I ask, “Did we lose them?”

Hunter ducks back in the vehicle. “Not sure. Keep doing what you’re doing. We’re almost there.” Tone steady, he rests his palm on my thigh.

Grounded by his firm hand, drenched in sweat, I plow through the stoplight, slam on my brakes, and screech to a stop in front of the border building. Fingers numb, I unclench the wheel while wooshing out a long-held breath.

Holy crap, we made it. Inside the border building, the cat skitters under the desk.

“What’s going on?” Jeremy jumps up, eyes widening.

“No time. They could be here any second.” Safe unlocked, I toss firearms, bullets, and vests on the table. “Have you heard from Rob?”

“No, nothing.” The part-time agent stares, slack-jawed, his face unreadable.

Scott steps away from the front window. Stuffing his pockets, he grabs a rifle. “We were never here. Understood?”

The farmer nods.

Snatching the rest of our stuff, I give him a quick peck on the cheek, then bolt outside.

At the open hatch, I throw in our weapons and shut it hard. “Get out. I’m driving.”

The FBI agent opens his mouth and snaps it closed. Smart man. He sprints around the hood and drops into the passenger seat.

While we were inside, the snowflakes doubled in size and now fall twice as fast.

“Check the forecast, would ya?” I press the ignition.

My partner ducks and squints up at the threatening gray blanket of clouds. “Shit.”

He pulls out his phone. “Heavy snowfall. Over an inch an hour. Total accumulation two to three feet, depending on the elevation.”

As I ease onto the county road, I creep forward to the beat of the wipers. Thump-thump, scraaaape. Thump-thump, scraaaape. No one, not even a terrorist, would venture out in this mess.

“Anyone following us?” The heater blasts my face as I lick my dry lips and risk a glance over the cup holder.

Game face on, Hunt’s hands rest in his lap, his shoulders neutral. “Not a soul. Can I ask where we’re going?”

“Dante’s cabin, but first, we’ll need supplies. Can you hook my phone up to Bluetooth?”

One rushed call later, we beg Walmart to stay open. By the time we stow the survival gear into our new backpacks, six more inches have fallen. Visibility? Zero.

The trip takes four times longer than it should. At the base of the incline, I stare up at the endless white and question my sanity.

My voice comes out hoarse. “I’m not sure we can make it.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, the worried man exhales. “Too late now, babe.”

With the blizzard swirling around him, he yanks up the vehicle’s frozen rear access. We shoulder our packs, rifles slung for marching.

Before stepping out, he cups my face, pressing a warm kiss to my chilled lips. “You got this.”

I hope so.

The wind howls as we trudge uphill. Sharp pellets bite my exposed skin. My cheap boots leak, turning my toes into ice cubes. Every step a battle, my damaged ribs screaming, I grab onto branches, desperate to stay upright.

Don’t slip. Keep moving. I lift one boot, then the other, reciting my mantra.

In a clearing by a rock I may recognize, I sit to catch my breath. This is where we leave the trail. I think. The last time I was here, it was summer. I had a solid GPS signal. Now, I have nothing but a belly full of doubt.

The unflappable Scott eases down next to me, his arm draped over my shoulder. “Okay. How much further?”

Throat parched, exposed face stinging, I swallow hard. “About a mile.” Pretty sure.

By the time we arrive at the shack, my fingers ache, and I can’t wiggle my piggies, but none of that matters.

We’re not lost. Woo hoo! While visions of a blazing fire take over my senses, I race to the door.

“Wait!” Scott shifts in front of me. Shucking his gloves, he raises his pistol. “There’s no smoke. No footprints. You positive he was here?”

The panic lodged in my intestines slithers up my spine. My boss said he was going to be here. He must be.

“Robert?” Voice trembling, I stretch for the handle.

It shouldn’t turn, but it does.

The metal hinges creak as I push on the wood. “It’s me, Kelly? You in there?”

Silence.

Hunt enters first, sweeping the room. My pulse pounds in my ears until he gives a clipped, “All clear.”

Inside, I kneel by the fireplace, place my hands on the blackened log, then shake my head. “Cold.”

My Fed moves to the stove, lifts a lid, and sniffs. Frowning, he inventories the fridge. “Eggs, tuna, bread, and milk. He planned on staying a few more days.”

“But where is he?” My mind conjures worst-case scenarios. Perhaps he broke his leg and lies stranded in this storm, slowly freezing to death. “We need to find him.”

Eyes softer, my lover shakes his head. “He’s been gone for at least 24 hours, probably more.”

I hold back a cry. No, no, no. He must be out there. He’s alive. I know it. “He could’ve built a shelter.”

Mouth tight, he bobs his chin. “Tell you what, we’ll start a fire. Afterward, you can take me to the lake.”

With a wave of relief crashing over me, I press my lips to his. “Thank you. I’ll just bring in a couple of logs. Be right back.”

Outside, I slog through the knee-deep drifts. As I yank back the woodpile’s tarp, a critter skitters away and vanishes into the woods. At the same instant, a redheaded woodpecker hammers his S.O.S. on a hollow tree.

My heart rate kicks up a notch before I let out a shaky laugh. Girl, you need to calm those nerves.

Have mercy on me Jesus. Something pale catches my attention.

Is that a nose? Frantic, I blink hard, doggy paddling away the thick white powder.

Open dead eyes. Blue stiff skin, much of it missing—gnawed away.

Ice floods my veins, my vocal cords lock, and I can't even scream. On my knees, my stomach heaves. Acid scorches my esophagus. Remembering the rules about crime scenes, I twist away right before losing my lunch.

I found Robert.

Hunt

A miniature flame flickers to life while I blow on the embers. The crackling heat rises. Smoke curls burnt pine into my nostrils. As I'm about to remove my coat, the front door opens. A frigid blast of air whooshes up the flue, causing devilish tongues of reddish-orange to dance inside the bricks.

I turn. Ah, hell.

Face pale, eyes shining, Kelly drops the bundled wood by her feet. "I found him." Her hoarse whisper is barely audible over the storm's roar.

"Babe." I walk the rough plank floor in two strides.

Shoving the door against the howling wind, I squeeze her trembling body into my arms. Her fingers clutch my jacket as silent sobs wrack her frame.

When she stills, I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and tip up her chin. My gaze latches onto her fields of green, circled by lashes laden with tears. In this never-ending winter, she is my spring. I will not let her lose hope.

My airways constrict. Dammit. I should've left her by the fire. If I had, I would've been the one to find him, not her. "Can you show me, sweetheart?"

Swallowing hard, she nods.

Outside, her footprints lead us to a mound of white. A sudden gust of arctic air stings,

but it's nothing compared to the dread settling in my gut. Brushing away over an inch of fresh powder, my innards churn.

Who the fuck leaves a man to be gnawed at by scavengers?

The snow crunches as I brush it off the blue, frozen skin. The execution-style small caliber hole to the forehead makes my stomach retch.

Message sent and received.

Time expands while my mind explodes with likely scenarios. Finally, my inner Marine takes over, forcing emotions aside. "There's nothing we can do for him. We need to talk. Now."

Hand to her lower back, I escort her toward the cabin's relative safety. Inside, I tear through my backpack. Once I find the SAT phone, I yank it out.

Fuck. "No signal."

How long before we end up like Dante? Needing her to focus, I cup her cold cheeks. "How many people know about this place?"

"I-I don't know." Shaking her head for a moment, the blood drains from her face. "You think we're next?"

There she is. My border guard and ex-military hottie.

"Don't you?" While I raise my brows, she snatches her outerwear from the hook near the fireplace. "You're right. We've got to go."

My hands on her shoulders, I wait for her to settle down. When the wild-eyed panic

disappears, I state the obvious. “Listen Kell, it’ll be dark soon. The roads are buried. Think. How long before the plows come?”

Exhaling, the creases in her brow vanish. “It’s a county road, not even on the maps. It could take more than a week.”

I free her arms from her coat sleeves, then tug her into me. “Are there any snowmobile trails nearby?”

“Yeah, but it would be suicidal in the dark. One wrong turn and boom—Goodnight Moon.”

Chuckling at the kid’s book reference, I rephrase my agenda. “So, you’re saying we should stay hidden, get some rest, and hike out at first light.”

Lids heavy, she yawns before glancing at the cot. “Not sure I said that, but okay. It’s a plan.”

“Take the bed. I’ll be fine right here.” To make a point, I place my pack under my head and shut my eyes.

Rustling fabric makes me twist my head. Damned if she doesn’t drag the sleeping bag across the floor for me to use.

When I tilt my head to argue, she places an index finger over my lips. “As the fire dies down, we’ll need to share body heat. Undress, soldier.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Once our wet clothes are situated near the fire, I grab her wrists. Directing her to my lap, I cover us up.

One chaste kiss on her chapped lips later, I press her head to my shoulder. “We’ll get

through this. I promise. Grab a few Z's. I'll keep an eye out."

When her breath steadies, I cross my legs so I can cradle her better.

The storm rattles the cabin walls. The firelight dances. Ice pings the windows. I am one with the night.

At some point, she stirs. "Is it my turn?"

"No. Go back to sleep." I have no intention of sharing the watch. I've gone for days with nothing more than catnaps. Tonight's no different.

She yawns and stretches with a cute snort of annoyance. "Nope. Not happening. I'm wide awake. How about we talk?"

Shifting her weight off me, I uncurl my numb limbs. "You start."

She laughs, a little rueful, then snuggles her nose into my neck. "Not much to tell. Mom and Dad owned a small dairy farm. I had a lot of cousins. They were my best friends. They loved helping take care of the cows."

"Sounds like fun." As I picture the idyllic scene, she shakes her head.

"What part exactly? Getting up at the ass-crack of dawn? Shoveling manure? Lifting a forty-pound bale of hay? Basically, we kids were their indentured servants."

A half-hearted chuckle later, I stretch my feet out in front of the fire. When the attraction between us sizzles, a glimmer of wonder streaks across her face. I open my bent legs to hug her to me.

Under the spell of her cedar-cinnamon scent, my palm inches down her tense coiled

back.

“How many siblings do you have?”

Her weighty sigh says more than the words to follow. “Five. Once my three older sisters married, they moved away. My little brother lives in Arizona near my parents. Only me and the oldest stayed here.”

“You two must be close, yeah?” I smooth her hair, loving how the silk glides against my skin.

She hesitates while she curls her fingers around mine. “Not so much, to be honest.”

Voice pitched down, her glances drift to the fire. “Kade wanted the farmland, but Dad sold it out from under him. Soon after, Gram died, leaving her house to me. You can see why he might be bitter. This is the most we’ve spoken in years.”

I get it. Families are complicated. I mean, my family was no picnic. But O’Malley’s? That’s a lot to unpack. No mystery why she has intimacy issues. “What about your daughter? Where does she fit in?”

She leans back into my chest, eyes closed, her golden eyelashes resting against her windburned skin. In the dying light of the fire, her jaw tightens with pure strength and raw beauty. It takes my breath away.

Her words jumble together, tangled in exhaustion. “Peter was my high school sweetheart. I had Mackenzie, he lost his job, so I enlisted. He cheated while I defended our country. When I came back, he wanted a divorce. I had no work, no money...I should’ve left the state, but Mack needed a father.” A long silence falls upon us.

As I'm thinking she's drifted off, she exhales, throat tight. "Dante's job saved me. Now he's dead. It's all my fault."

"No way, honey. You didn't pull the trigger." Chin on her head, I wrap my arms around her.

She jerks away, tossing her head wildly. "You don't understand. I might as well have. Because of The Incident, he made a deal with Bourdin."

I swivel her to face me, my hands firm on her hips. "Babe, you can't own his actions."

Doubt-filled eyes stare back as her thighs straddle me. For the longest time, neither of us move.

I'm not sure who inches forward first, but at this moment, our lips hover a breath apart, electricity sparking between them.

As if on cue, a smoldering log snaps. She jumps, our mouths crash, and teeth bump. We freeze for a millisecond before laughter bubbles up. Still giggling, she slides her soft palms behind my ears. Those clever fingers thread through my hair. Holding me in place, her hungry mouth devours mine. Slow at first, she teases, tastes, then claims me.

Undone, a primal groan rips from my upper body. My hands move lower to cup her lovely butt and press her tighter. Legs stretched, molded to me, her hot, slick center grazes over my abs. Separated by only our underwear, a shudder wracks through me. Liquid lava races through my veins as her warmth pools in my navel.

Lying back on the stone hearth, cushioned only by a sleeping bag, a sharp jolt rips through my burn. Pain cuts through my hormone-induced haze.

Am I out of my mind?

The last time adrenaline hit me this hard, I was being shot at. A fear worse than death claws up my spine as I grab her shoulders. “What are we doing here?”

Lips plump, face flush, she lifts her eyelids. “Huh?”

Am I alone in this fucking quagmire of feelings? “Is this just sex?”

“Does it matter?” she asks.

“Yeah, it does.” My heart’s in this, whether I want it to be or not. I’m not about to go down this road alone.

Her bewitching green eyes zoom to my face, casting their spells. Right now, I could believe anything is possible.

“What we were about to do, Wildlife, is make love in front of the fire... unless you want to stop?”

I answer her with a kiss, so hot, she moans. She didn’t say fucking, screwing, or buds with benefits. Tomorrow, if we survive, we’ll figure out the rest.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

Did I really say making love?

It wasn't meant as a forever promise. Yet, in the heat of the moment, I'd admitted more to Scott than to myself.

I gasp when he unclasps my bra. As it drops to the hearth, calloused thumbs flick over my nipples. Leaning forward, he sucks, shooting zings of pleasure to my lady parts.

"Wild...." A desire, an ache, an overwhelming need floods my senses.

Mindless, I lose my panties and slide my wet want over his hard shaft.

"Babe." His guttural tone plucks a lusty string inside me.

So near to the edge, so high, I shove down his boxers. My hand slips between us, guiding him to my entrance. With his silky helmet stroking the perfect spot, he grips my hips, impaling me to the bone.

"Yes!" Brain cells explode behind my eyelids. I buck, I shudder, and as I ride him into oblivion, his fingertips dig into my hips.

Impossible for me to believe, but another wave swells.

"My God, Kell." He doesn't let me come down. Instead, he holds me in place as he

thrusts.

This momentous tsunami of passion devastates me, I'm powerless to do anything but reach our bliss together.

"Stay with me, baby." His thigh muscles clench, his abs tighten, and as he shouts, he drives so deep, I climax again.

Gravity-free, we stare into each other's glazed-over eyes. We float for an eternity before we slowly slink back beside the fire. Inhaling his musky scent, I collapse on his chest, heart thumping in my ear. As he slips the thick sleeping bag over my back, I blink back tears.

Damn it, I've fallen. No man will ever be enough after him. What the hell have I done? With nowhere to shove my feelings in, my tears drip onto his skin.

His steady breaths tell me he's asleep. Thankfully, he won't ask questions.

Too exhausted to sleep, I turn my head toward the dancing flames. Outside, the wind howls through the trees, rattling the tin roof. The storm mirrors the chaos inside me. I should be lost in the afterglow, but my thoughts spiral to poor Robert and the looming danger.

My body is sated, and for now, I'm safe in Scott's arms. But the moment the blizzard moves on, I have no doubt these terrorists will come for us.

Was Rob's murder connected to the FBI cameras, or was Jack Gurion's appearance a mere coincidence? There are so many pieces to this puzzle, yet none of them fit.

Stirring beneath me, my lover pulls out, staring into my face. "Where'd you go?"

“Is this pillow talk?” When I roll off his torso, he sits cross-legged beside me.

Snuggling under the blanket, he tickles me while pretending to search. “Uh, not unless you got one in here, somewhere.”

I cup his rough, stubbled cheek, locking eyes with his sharp, intelligent blue ones until he realizes I’m deadly serious. “Be honest. Was Dante murdered because of you?”

His brows lift. “Huh? No, sweetheart. He’s been dead for days. Why?”

My throat tightens. “If I hadn’t asked him to handle The Inci—” I swallow hard. “The rape—he wouldn’t have struck a deal with the devil.”

Scott rakes a hand through his hair and hisses through his teeth. “Listen, I don’t know all the details but here is my take. Robert made his choices. He could’ve asked for more resources and hunted these bastards down. A coward, he let Bourdin operate under his nose. Now, we’ve got God knows how many Iranian chemists working on some kind of ricin project, not to mention trying to kill us.”

“But he did keep Bourdin away from me and my family,” I whisper.

When the final log collapses into embers, Scott dresses. “Kelly, no more what-ifs. Move forward or we die.”

He pulls on his boots. “Speaking of... we need more wood. I’ll be right back.”

A frigid blast hits me when he exits. Three trips later, we’ve got plenty of split logs stacked by the hearth, the fire roaring once more. As the cabin glows orange, firelight flickers across the plaid curtain under the old sink.

Is it possible? Heart drumming, my bare feet race over the wooden planks. I yank the fabric aside, but it's too dark. "I need a flashlight."

Mr. Prepared-for-Anything reaches into his pack. Light in hand, he squats beside me. "What is it?"

I grab a knife from the drawer, slide it into a gap in the floorboards, and pry it up. "I can't believe it. It's here."

Tipping forward, I remove a Glock, a rusty tackle box and pull out Dante's laptop. "I hope it still has battery life."

We bring it back to the fireplace where I sit in a half lotus. Crossing my fingers, I hit the power button. "Crap. I don't know his password."

"Give it here." Scott wraps his shirt around the computer and shrugs on his jacket as he disappears outdoors with the flashlight. When he returns, he shakes off the snow. The PC is now parked at the home screen.

Wondering what miracle he performed, I raise my eyebrows.

He grimaces. "I used Dante's thumbprint."

Ugh. I shove down the tension rolling through me before clicking on the file explorer. My pulse spikes as I point at the display. "See here? Rob had an external drive plugged in the last time he powered down. We need to find it."

Scrambling to the kitchen, I drop to my knees. "Dammit. Nothing."

Scott kneels beside me, one hand solid against my lower back. "Open the tackle box."

Reaching for the corroded container, I set it on the floor. The circle of light steadies while I tilt the lid up. The top tray contains colored bobs, hand-tied flies, and hooks of all sizes. Wedged in the corner? A bright blue USB drive.

“Gotcha.” My breath hitches when I pick it up between my thumb and forefinger. Hell, I half expect it to detonate.

Once I’ve shoved everything back in place, I hurry to the slate hearth, hitting it hard.

My hands tremble as I plug in the stick then open the only document. The first tab displays GPS coordinates. The second lists names.

My partner leans over the display, scanning the contents.

After a moment, he stiffens. “I know some of these people. They’re FBI.”

My arm slides around his waist so I can burrow into his side. Perhaps, if I get close enough, I’ll wake from this nightmare.

Heart pounding, I pose the question I’m not sure I want answered. “Are they helping the Iranians or working against them?”

“No clue.” Jaw clenched, he copy-pastes the locations into Google Maps while I look on. New York City. LA. Chicago.

Back on the spreadsheet, he reveals a hidden column. “Oh shit. These dates are this week.”

OhmuhGod, ohmuhGod, ohmuhGod. Throat tight, my heart slams so hard, my ears start ringing. Ricin. FBI agents. Iranians. Millions of deaths.

While I clutch onto his forearm, his stormy eyes snap to mine. “We need to send this. Think, Kell. How?”

“We might get a signal at the summit.” It’s a crap shoot, but hey, we have to try.

“How far?” No question, he’s already calculated our odds of survival.

“No more than a mile. In the summer, there’s a decent path. Now?” Picturing the treacherously steep trail, I shake my head.

The veins in his neck throb while he nods. “Let’s get some shuteye. We move out at dawn.”

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Hunt

On my side, I pull her warm body into my chest, my morning wood pressing her sweet ass . Sorry dude, you'll have to wait.

Sliding out from under her, I scrape the frost off the window. Outside, the falling flakes have turned to sleet. The cabin walls no longer rattle from the wind. While still dark, we're not hidden by the thick fog hanging over the ground.

Ah, shit . Our chimney smoke will act as a lighthouse for the terrorists. "Babe, we need to move. Fast."

When I lift the covers to playfully pat her behind, my cock twitches, ignoring my earlier command. Yo, dude, focus. Wulf needs Dante's data.

Moaning, my lover opens her eyes, then gives me an appreciative once-over.

Hell, I'd love to go back to bed, but my itchy skin tells me we're in danger . "When you're ready, we'll make a trip to the outhouse. From now on, we don't go anywhere alone."

Soon, we trudge through the thigh-high snowfall. She hisses as we pass her boss, but there's nothing we can do. He's dead and if we don't move faster, we'll be joining him.

She adjusts the rifle straps over her shoulders. Her snowshoes are fashioned from fishing rods, poles, and pine boughs. I wear Dante's.

In places, six-foot banks of white stuff bar our path. Conversely, there are areas where the gusts have blown the drifts clear. Despite the cold, I'm covered in sweat when we pause at the first clearing. Standing at the ten-story sheer cliff, I gasp at the miniature lake, ski slopes, and farms below.

At any other time, I'd stop to admire the view. Now, all I want is a satellite signal.

Shit, still nothing. "How much further to the top?"

"We're about halfway." Her eyelashes lift as her long neck cranes toward the peak.

Oh fuck. A red laser dot?

As it wobbles on her jacket, the pit of my stomach churns. Arms out, I spring. As I flip to protect her, a shot echoes. Bark explodes.

"Move, move, move!" Head blanketed in snowflakes, adrenaline speeding through my veins, we crab crawl to a boulder.

I can't believe I almost lost her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Mostly pissed." Her no-nonsense tone sets me at ease, making it easier to do my job.

My scope pressed to my eye socket, I inch forward on my belly toward the precipice. A moment later, the snowstorm shifts in the valley. I adjust the lens until the sniper's in my crosshairs. Gotcha.

"Wind, babe?"

Behind me, she calmly calls out, "Out of the northeast. Twenty, twenty-five miles per

hour. Gusts twice as much.”

Calming my breath, I caress the trigger and curl my finger ever-so-slowly.

I fire. I miss. Dammit.

As the bastard jumps. I send another round. He doesn't get up, so he's either hiding or wounded. Regardless, I bought us some time.

“Follow me.” Butt high, thighs wide, Kell crawls toward a group of stubby pines.

Under the trees, airways tight, I settle my nerves and focus. We reach the summit. We save lives. There are no other choices. “We need cover, Kell.”

“Working the problem. Give me a second.” Binoculars raised, she scans the panorama. A few moments later, she scrambles up the steep incline on all fours. Following her, my knees wet and sore, I check for a signal every hundred yards or so.

“Stop. I've got bars.” My hands shake as I tear off my glove. Once the spreadsheet is sent, I text our GPS position to the FBI and Patten Securities.

If nothing else, our bodies will be recovered. Placing my call, a wave of remorse washes over me. I wish I had let my mom know I did forgive her. Dammit, I don't want to die.

“Hunter? What the hell is going on?” When Wulf answers the phone, my mind snaps back to the present.

Worried we may lose our connection, I rapid-fire my report. “Spreadsheet. Ricin event. Locations, dates. Did you get it?”

When the device crackles a response, I say a short prayer. “Repeat. Over.”

“We have the spread—Sitrep?” At least if we’re killed, it won’t be in vain.

My gaze locked on Kelly’s, I pick up my long gun. “Two of us. Armed. Terrorists closing in. Number unknown. Cabin compromised. Target road.”

“Roger that.” Over the static of his voice, the buzz of snowmobiles grows louder.

Swallowing hard, I speak to him for perhaps the last time. “Thanks, Wulf. Tell my... Never mind. Take these bastards down, dammit.”

I grit my teeth, prepared to fight. If I’m lucky, I can rescue the woman I love.

When an icy glove cups my cheek, I raise my eyes to a fiercely determined face. “Are you giving up on me, Wildlife?”

My heart swells. She is so magnificent. “Not yet, sweetheart, but it’s going to get rough.”

She stands, her automatic under one arm. “Well, get off your butt. Today is as good as any to die.”

Wouldn’t you know it? Fate gives me reason to live, then tries to off me. Ain’t life a bitch?

Done with my mini-pity-party, I picture girding my loins, and chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” When O’Malley loses her balance, I reach out to catch her.

“Tell ya later.” Closer now, the Skidoos’ engines whine. No doubt, their riders

struggle over this hilly terrain.

Near a glade, she slips off her snowshoes. On her belly, she climbs on a flat rock, aiming down the hill. “Let’s take out as many of these motherfuckers as we can.”

Under the circumstances, I grin at her pure grit. “Yes, ma’am.”

One, two, three vehicles roar into sight. While their motors rumble, I kill one mercenary while she takes out another.

We engage until we run out of cartridges. As I pull my pistol, a male uphill from our position strikes terror into my heart.

“Drop your weapons.”

Arms up, one digit still on the trigger, I turn toward a towering mercenary in white camos. Praying for a quick death, I coil my body.

Sensing my intent, the grinning man points his barrel at my woman. “Try anything. She dies. Weapons to your feet. Now.”

Wondering why he doesn’t simply shoot us, I lower my Glock, then my rifle. “I love you, Kell.”

My throat tightens at the tears dripping down her face. “I’m not giving up, Wildlife. Meet you on the other side.”

Disarmed now, I step in front of her. “Let her go. I’m FBI. She knows nothing.”

She pushes out from behind me. “Border Patrol. Your plan is toast.”

A sudden thunderclap makes the huge man flinch. He glances up nervously when a jagged streak of lightning cracks. “We’ll sort it out back at the shack.”

Was that some kind of heavenly reprieve? Tie-wrapped, we stumble toward the sheer slope.

Be killed now or later? Screw it. I suck in a breath, leap, and tuck tight. Like jumping from a plane without a parachute, I free-fall into oblivion.

Pain implodes in my ribs on impact. White powder packs my nose and mouth. Coughing, spitting, I claw for oxygen. The world spins. Trees and sky blur in a dizzying tumble. Scraggly brush finally slows my roll, scraping my skin raw.

When gunfire cracks in the distance, my senses sharpen.

Arms and legs flail as I dig in my toes, skidding to a stop. The earth tilts under me, but I push to my knees. Wheezing, I crawl under the nearest pine. No firepower. No backpack. Only a lighter, a knife in my boot, and a damn candy bar.

My wrist throbs. Broken? It moves, so probably not. Come to think of it, every inch of my body hurts, but hey, I’ve survived worse.

Kelly, baby. Hold on. I’m coming.

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Kelly

“Scott!” I lunge toward the cliff’s edge. Far below, he tumbles, rolling so fast he’s just a blur. How could anyone survive that leap?

He did this for me. I’m not about to waste his life. The moment my captor, Scowface, takes his eyes off me, I butt my head into his ribs, throwing all my weight into it.

Go over, you bastard.

Crap. I might as well have hit a brick wall.

“Bitch.” The mercenary smirks, raising his gun.

Closing my lids, I brace for death. Please, Jesus. Help Kade and Mack. My biggest regret? Not seeing my daughter grow up.

“Stop.” A commanding bass voice booms from down the hill.

A blink later, I open my eyes to a militiaman in a white camo snowsuit trudging up the path. “Lower your automatic, stupid.”

Granted a stay of execution, no matter how short, tears sting my cheeks. While I swallow hard, the guy I’ve dubbed Mr. Freeze glares at my guard.

“Fucking idiot. We need to question her.” He hammers his fist between my shoulder

blades, sending me sprawling.

With my wrists bound behind my back, I dive onto the ice, chin first. My molars clack together, firing bolts of lightning through my skull. Skin raw and burning, I rise, then spit out a piece of filling.

Their evil laughter echoes as I trudge down the slippery path. Each step drags me closer to whatever hell they have in mind.

Gram sounds in my ear. Think positive, girl. Hunter reached Wulf. Your job? Stay alive.

Too soon, I kneel by the hearth, wiggling the sting from my fingers and toes. If I'm lucky, frostbite will be the worst of my worries.

"Where is the thumb drive?" The leader jams his pistol into my temple.

"I don't know." It takes no skill to act bewildered. I have no idea what Scott did with it.

The one who almost shot me earlier sneers, whacking the barrel into my head with a sickening crack.

Pure agony is followed by blessed blackness. When I come to, blinding pain detonates under my eyelids. My stomach lurches. Shivering, icy water crashes over me. Lungs desperate for air, my body seizes.

I swear to God, if I get free, they're mincemeat.

The one in charge slams Rob's laptop on the puddle in front of me, jabbing a finger at the empty folders. "Who did you tell?"

“You’re delusional. We’re in a dead spot—no signal, no satellite. Try it yourselves.” I could say we sent the data to the FBI, but that would move up their timetable. Who knows what they’re planning with the ricin, but according to the spreadsheet, it’s days, if not hours away.

As they fumble with their devices, Iranians shout outside.

Wet, frozen to the bone, the draft from the open door guts me. When two lackeys toss an unconscious Hunt on the floor, my shivers turn to uncontrollable shakes, this time from terror.

He’s not gone. He can’t be—and yet he doesn’t move. His eye is swollen shut, his lip split, his broken nose twisted.

Mr. Freeze uncrosses his arms, then jabs his weapon at the firelit faces of his men. “What use is he? Huh? I need him awake, talking. Make it happen. Now!”

As my heart pounds, an idea sparks. It’s risky, but it might work. Bracing for another blow, I inch my hand up. “There’s a first aid kit in the kitchen. I can get it if you want.”

“You. See to it.” Their commander grunts at the teenager, who flicks open a switchblade.

Oh shit. I gasp as the sharp metal inches toward my face. Only when my zip ties fall to the floor do I exhale.

Please, Scott, come back to me. He jumped off a cliff to save me. Now, it’s my turn to take the lead.

On all fours, unsteady, I crawl to the sink, and yank the fabric curtain aside.

Turning to the young soldier, I point next to the sink. “There’s a butter knife in the drawer. I need something to pry up the floorboard.”

When the twentyish man hesitates, the commander shouts from where he stands near the other three mercenaries. “She’s not going to kill you with tableware. Hurry the fuck up.”

Terror claws at my throat. Palms shaking, my head under the basin, I lean forward. Courage isn’t the absence of fear. It’s pushing through it.

In the dark, my fingers grope the hollow space, wrapping around the gun’s cold steel. Thank you, Robert.

“Found it.” I lift the rusty white box with my other hand.

Raising it high, I let it clatter on the floor. As planned, all heads turn. Quickly I tuck the pistol in my waistband. With it hidden under my shirt, I back out.

Did anyone see? Sweat rolls down my spine.

Time ticks by.

Slowly, I let out my held breath.

Holy shit, I did it.

“What are you waiting for? Wake him up.” The young guy grumbles, kicking the med kit toward me.

Eyes lowered, I shuffle back to the fireplace where I flip the latches open. Thank you, Jesus. Underneath the bandages lies an ancient bottle of Ipecac. Trembling all over,

eyes watering, I break the tube of smelling salts, then wave the strong ammonia scent near Hunt's face.

Wake up, Wildlife. I need you.

Under our captor's watchful gaze, my FBI guy coughs. As soon as his eyes clear, I slip the syrup into my palm, sweeping it over his lids. His brows crease. A curt nod tells me he's back.

Game on.

I unscrew the cap, tilt my head back, and force the whole dose down. A fist of fire slams into my gut. I double over, groaning. The nausea grips me hard. Worse than any flu or hangover, I retch, puking all over Scowlface's shoes.

The mercs recoil, horror-struck by the putrid stench.

Just as planned, my lover rises to his knees, holding back my hair. His voice is hoarse, but at least his hands are steady. "Babe, you okay?"

Nodding between gut-wrenching gags, I slip Dante's weapon to his chest.

Hunt's brows rise, but he slides it into his belt without missing a beat. "You're insane."

His hiss catches the leader's attention, but thankfully, he misses the G-man's sleight of hand. "No talking, you two."

Not empty yet, my insides churn as my body violently rebels against the poison. The gross vomit turns the newbie green. Slapping his hands to his mouth, he bolts out the door. The other two stare as if they've never seen a woman throw up before.

“Take her outdoors and shoot her.” The leader’s order should terrify me, but I’m so wretched, it sounds like a mercy killing.

When an older guy reaches for my arm, Hunt shoots him between the eyes. The bossman drops next, but the other two dive out the door.

“Don’t worry about me. Go get those bastards.” Snatching an abandoned rifle, I check for ammo, then slap the side.

After a sharp nod, Scott cups my cheek, grabs a gun and barrels after them.

The moment he’s gone, my knees give out.

Damn, that was close.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Hunt

I can't believe my woman deceived a group of trained mercenaries. Damn, if I hadn't fallen already, her cunning bravery would've sealed the deal. Admiration set aside, I concentrate on the imminent threat.

Two sets of footprints lead downhill. Too risky to track them, I gamble. Ignoring my blinding headache, limping from my fall, I scramble to the first lookout point.

You got this, Marine. Belly to the ground, I shove the long gun to my shoulder. Exhaling, I steady my aim and—

Bang!

When a spray of red stains the pristine white, I grit my teeth, racing forward. Another killer's still out there. No way in hell will I let him call in reinforcements.

The deep snowbanks challenge the last mercenary. Taller, stronger, my only mission is to overtake him. My legs scream. My lungs burn.

Then—click.

I throw myself sideways as his rifle misfires. His massive body slams into me, and we hit the ground. I roll. Fists slam. Razor-sharp metal glints. He lunges. Somehow, I catch his wrist as he's about to bury a knife in my eye socket.

The blade vibrates, its tip a hair from my iris.

Not today, motherfucker. My knee rams into the paid assassin's groin.

Protected by layers of outer gear, he doesn't go down, but he flinches.

With adrenaline ripping through me, I clamp my legs around his waist. Flipping so I'm on top, I yank his wrist back—hard.

His bones crack, his weapon falls, but he's not done. His arm wraps around my neck, crushing my larynx until black dots dance in my vision.

My fingers claw and my fists hammer but—He. Doesn't. Budge.

“Fuuuuck!” I snap my head back.

Cartilage cracks. When his grip loosens, I duck. Sucking in air, I snatch the weapon by my foot and end him.

Lungs burning, I collapse on my back. A few flakes swirl from the sky indifferent to the carnage. As I allow my heartrate to calm, the whine of snowmobiles shatters the silence.

A too familiar rat-a-tat sets my pulse pounding again as I bolt uphill.

“Kelly!”

While my aching legs protest, an explosion roars through the forest. Knocked off my feet, I topple. Icy shards pelt my face like hail. My ears ring. Smoke burns my throat.

Dear God, please let her be alive.

Teeth clenched, I ignore my battered body and push on. By the time I reach the ridge,

the drum in my chest hammers like a boot running his first ten miles.

Oh no. My heart sinks.

Dante's fishing cabin is totally engulfed, flames clawing at the dimly lit sky. As I approach, heat sears my face, wood snaps, and snow sizzles. The roof must've caved in during the blast. If she was in there...

No. She can't be gone. I would know.

With fear clamping it's iron chain around my torso, my vision tunnels. The stench of charred flesh catches my attention. In a smoldering, black snowmobile, a body slumps in the seat. My stomach clenches until I calculate the person's height.

It's not her, Hunt, move it .

My weapon hugged tight, I follow a bloody trail snaking up the hill. At the first curve, I find a man in white camos motionless on the ground. While blood pools beneath him. I crouch to press a digit to his neck. No pulse.

Kell, what the hell happened here?

A rustling to my right makes me spin.

Gun raised, I shout, "Freeze."

The kid's chin is patchy with stubble—barely grown. Jeesh. Still dangerous, his eyes dart around as he slowly spreads his fingers.

"Gonna put down my rifle, okay?"

“Real slow-like.” I nod with my finger on the trigger.

The moment the rifle hits the ground, I kick it out of reach and step back. “Now lie flat on the ground. Hands laced behind your head.”

When he hesitates, my jaw tightens. “Now.”

Smarter than he looks, he complies. A zip tie from my belt secures his wrists at his back. Flipping him over, patience worn thin, I get in his face.

“Where is she?”

“Up there.” He swallows hard, nodding toward the hill.

Butt to my heels, I squeeze the back of his neck. “If you’re lying, you die next. Understand?”

“I’m not. I swear. That’s where she went.” His Adam’s apple bobs.

I follow his gaze to a smaller set of tracks leading uphill.

An ounce of hope surges. Dammit, babe. Where are you?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

Pacing the cabin, I avoid looking at the two bodies. Every so often, I glance out the window. When a gunshot echoes through the mountain range, my knees buckle.

I would know if it was Scott, wouldn't I? Oh God, please, let him be alive.

A raw, helpless groan rips from my soul. I push my hair from my face, my belly churning. I could have acted sooner. I wish I never asked my boss to shoulder my responsibility. Now, millions could pay the price for my mistake.

And Hunt could be...

No. No way. Biting my knuckles, I swallow back bile, refusing to give up.

If he doesn't return, I swear, I'll finish this. These bastards won't get another chance to make trouble for anyone.

When I try to shove my emotions into my mental lock-box, it's not there. I can't even summon a new one. How screwed up is that?

I'm coming, Scott. Fists clenched, I strip and squat by the nearest dead mercenary. The bloody clothes are giant-sized, but they'll keep me warm. The boots are useless, so I stick with mine.

Rifle in hand, drowning in oversized tactical gear, I open the door and—

You gotta be fucking kidding me. Snowmobiles? Jesus, cut me some slack, would ya?

My heart hammers as I head for the trees and pray it's our backup, not theirs. No such luck. Those dismounting Skidoos are equipped like those we shot.

Time slows while I calculate my options. Four to one? I got this.

Mind sharp, hiding in the forest, my long gun raises. As they reach for the shack door, I exhale and caress the trigger. The closest one crumples. The rest bolt for their snowmobiles.

Without missing a beat, I pivot, firing into a gas tank. The massive explosion makes my ears bleed. At first, a heated breeze rushes over my back. Next, a man screams so horribly, I cringe. The stench of burning flesh turns my stomach, but I sprint forward. He made his choices. This is my country. These are my woods. You should never have threatened us.

They may have longer legs, but I know every trail, every shortcut, every boulder.

The slowest doesn't see me until it's too late. The second catches a bullet in the leg. The third won't last too long, either.

Ah, shit. A cramp twists my gut. Forced to stop, I double over. Damn the Ipecac. What if the guy I was chasing doubled back? As I choke back nausea, footsteps crunch the ground down below me.

I freeze, inching my weapon to my shoulder. A white jacket appears in my crosshairs. Taking a deep breath, I curl my finger and—

“H-Hunt? For chrissakes, I almost shot you.” Heart pounding against my ribs, I lower

my automatic. If I had fired a second earlier...

When he spreads his arms, I race into his welcome embrace, burying my face in his chest. “Wow, you’re not dead?”

“Yeah, last I checked.” With a concerned gaze, lashes wet, he tips up my chin. “We need to move out.”

“No, there’s a guy still out there.” I point at the tracks, but he tugs me in the opposite direction.

Gun raised, he scans the trees. “Leave him. The weather’s cleared. Soon, they’ll be swarming the forest like cockroaches.”

With more motors buzzing in the distance, he grabs my hand. “Now.”

“Where are we going?” Trotting after him, I try to keep up.

“My car.”

I blink. “Are you insane? It’ll be buried under all this damn white stuff. We’ll never get it out.”

“Open to suggestions, babe.”

“Fine.” As I stumble down the trampled path, graphic images of those I killed flash through my mind. They might’ve had kids, parents, or lovers.

These thoughts fade as we trudge through deeper drifts. Feet up, feet down. Sweat trickles down my spine. Finally, we reach the highway.

Hallelujah, the plow came through .

Down the road a piece, a car engine roars. Hoping for Gina, Kade, or Jeremy, I brace to jump in front of it. Mr. Cautious, however, yanks me back into the forest. “Let’s see who it is, first.”

Hell, I’d invite Detective Barbie to the party, if she was armed.

A flatbed rumbles to a stop in front of us. My pulse skyrockets as the driver drops the ramp and a tank-like snowcat coughs its way to the road. When a second truck rolls into view, carting two snowmobiles, I moan. Holy crap, we’re dead meat.

Scott’s face tightens. He taps my shoulder, points two fingers at himself, then aims toward the newcomers. I nod, signaling I’ll take care of the others.

While we wait for the right moment, a burst of wind shrieks through the trees. Hunt’s jaw tightens as he counts down on his fingers. Clouds move. The sky darkens.

Three, two, one—

Our gunfire tears through the silence. Blood sprays. Bodies crumple and twitch before going still.

“We did it.” I skip two steps—then freeze.

Where’s Hunt?

Whipping around, my heart slams against my ribs.

Pale, brows furrowed, Hunt collapses against a tree. Beneath his coat, dark liquid drips to the snow creating a puddle of red by his feet.

“Fuck,” he rasps, sliding to the ground. “I’m hit.”

Hunt

Kelly squats by my side, unzipping my coat. “How bad is it?”

“Well, I’m not dead.” Yet . Teeth clamped, I embrace the excruciating burn as she cuts away shirt fabric, then yanks off her hat.

“Dumbass.” Her hands press into my side so hard I see stars.

Not too far away snowmobiles rev their engines. Those hungry wolves will be upon us in minutes. Useless, I can’t let her die trying to save me.

“Me and Betsy will be fine. Leave.” Leaning back against the tree, I pat my weapon.

“Like hell, I will.” Voice firm, she slides her arm around my waist.

A fog settles, turning the forest to boot camp. Sergeant Lewis crosses his arms, face fierce. “On your feet, soldier.”

Standing, I stumble toward the trucks. “Yes, sir.”

His angry spit hits my face as he shouts, “Are you a Marine or a wuss?”

“Marine, sir.” While I wobble, he morphs into Kelly, who points at the Skidoo seat. “You’re hallucinating. Sit.”

A stinging slap to the cheek wakes me from a blessed blackness. “Dammit, Scott

Hunter. Stay awake.”

Nose inches from mine, her steady green eyes narrow. “There’s a ranger station a few miles away. We’ll hole up there. No more sleeping.”

“Miles? I’ll never make it.” I can barely remain seated, and the vehicle isn’t moving yet.

“You fucking will, you hear me?” She pulls a stapler from an orange medic kit.

My skin pinched between her fingers, she clicks until the bleeding stops. Without warning, a needle sinks deep into my thigh. The sharp sting is followed by a wave of cold sweats.

Wide awake, my heart jackhammering, I catch the roll of gauze thrown at me. “An EpiPen? What about painkillers?”

“Wrap it up, Wildlife. We leave in two.” She dashes off to the flatbed’s cab.

By the time she’s returned, I’ve bandaged my wound. After she ties a canvas sack to the rack behind me, I grab her hand, pointing to one of those we shot.

“Grab his comm unit.”

“Good idea.” She digs it from his ear, then snatches loops of plastic from his utility belt. As I clamp my arms around her waist, she makes a long string of zip-ties, belting me to her.

No way. If I tumble, I’ll take her with me. She’s signed both our death warrants.

When I struggle to break free, she swivels her head, handing me the tiny listening

device. “My mission. My call. Put that in. Keep me apprised.”

The snowmobile rumbles under my ass as she puts it in gear. A second later, we lurch forward. Eyes closed, face pressed to her back, I concentrate.

Stay on the damn seat, soldier.

Every so often, the mercenaries looking for us check in. Nothing like kicking the nest to piss off the hornets.

Time slows. An eternity passes. I can’t drift off. I can’t let go.

When she shuts off the engine, a wave of relief engulfs me. We’re alive?

Cutting the plastic ties, she glances over her shoulder. “I knew you could do it.”

Unable to speak, I nod . Babe, for you, anything.

Arm over her back, I lift my feet and drag myself inside the ranger’s shack. No longer cold, sleep beckons while O’Malley watches out the window. It would be so easy to simply shut my eyes...

No. Not a coward, I force my brain awake and drink from the straw she places in my mouth.

Still alert as the sun starts to set, some part of my mind registers the wop-wop of Black Hawk blades. No doubt, another hallucination, I decide to keep quiet.

“Helicopters!” The border guard sprints outside.

When she doesn’t return, I pick up my weapon, clutch the windowsill, and pull

myself vertically. What if those birds belonged to the mercenaries?

Trembling, I take two shaky steps.

“They’re here.” Face bright, she bursts back in, carrying a ringing package tied to a parachute. After extracting the SAT phone, she answers and switches it to speaker.

“What took you so long?” My face breaks out in a grin. I can’t believe they found us.

“You missed me, sweetheart?” Wulf’s chuckle makes it official. We endured, we never gave up, we survived.

Grabbing my brave woman’s arm, I tug her to my lips. Lightheaded, half-frozen, I hold on until nothing else matters. I almost lost her. Now, I’m never letting go.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

Ribs, head, everything throbs as I pace the surgical wing's waiting area. I'm not sure what's worse, the fluorescent lights or the cloying scent of antiseptics. As they have since landing on the roof, Hunt's friends huddle nearby.

I'm so grateful for their rescue, I don't know what to say. While dangling from a rope hundreds of feet above ground was not my favorite exfil, it was way better than what those mercenaries had in mind.

I jump when my phone pings.

Kade: Any news?

Me: Not yet.

Kade: Hang in there.

A few seconds later, I divert the Border Sector Chief's call to voicemail. There will be plenty of time for Homeland to question me once Scott's out of surgery.

After yet another person in scrubs strolls by, my fingernails dig into my palms. What the hell is taking so long? Can't someone give us a friggin' update? What if he was too weak? What if my staples caused an infection?

I'm about to go Mount Vesuvius when FBI Special Agent Axel Wulf hands me a Styrofoam coffee cup. "You do realize you look like shit, O'Malley? You should get

checked out while we wait.”

“I’m fine. Hunt caught a bullet, not me.” My throat tightens as I picture the pain in his eyes during those hopeless moments on the mountain. “H-He even jumped off a cliff.”

Brows furrowed, the silver fox’s mouth purses. “So tell me, are you worth it?”

What? Where the hell did that attitude come from? Before I can defend myself, the task force leader’s phone rings. “Excuse me, I need to take this.”

Earbuds in, lips to the device, the rude man who apparently hates me walks toward a deserted corner of the room.

Can I blame him? By now, he probably knows Iranians have been pouring into my piece of Vermont. I should’ve gone over Dante’s head ages ago. By protecting me, he put millions of people at risk.

Using both hands, I gulp down my hospital coffee, AKA mud, and grimace. Eating away at what’s left of my gastric lining, the caffeine kicks in.

When Wulf pulls out his headphones, I intercept him on his way to sit with his coworkers. It occurs to me, after all I went through, he could at least keep me in the loop.

“Can I ask if you confiscated the ricin?”

The G-man hesitates so long, I’m sure he’s going to say no. Releasing his resting bitch-face, he exhales. “The United States has some of the safest drinking water in the world.”

Head swimming, my knees buckle.

Holy shit, those chemists were going to poison our reservoirs? “But you stopped them, right?”

“Yeah, but not without casualties. That’s on you.” He scrolls his phone and lays it in my trembling hands for me to read. The article describes dozens of chemical factory closures.

“For emissions violations?” My eyes roll. “That’s the best lie your guys could come up with?”

“The Bureau’s got a whole department dedicated to misinformation.” He shrugs. “Not my circus, not my orangutans.”

Fresh out of snappy retorts, I lean back in the chair. Nervously, I reach for the epicenter, the place where the mercenary cracked my head open. My gentle probe sends blinding shocks shooting behind my eyes with an extra dose of nausea.

My head is still between my legs when a physician holding an iPad calls out, “Agent Wulf?”

Struggling to my feet, I ignore the burning in my gut and join the other four gathered around the bearded man.

I miss the first part of what he says, catching only, “...into a private room soon.”

The task leader shoves a badge under the doctor’s nose. “National security. Can we talk?”

Heads together, they walk away.

What about me? Don't I get to know? Fuck HIPAA.

Of the three left, the woman, Rhonda, appears to be the most approachable, so I ask her, "How is Scott? Is he okay?"

I'm ready for a fight until her eyes soften. "Oh boy. You got it bad."

"Yeah, I love him." Did I just blurt out my secret?

Steady grip on my elbow, she directs me into a chair. "He's going to be fine. They were worried he might lose a kidney, but the treatment is working."

Tears well as everything comes crashing down at once. Standing there, in the middle of the waiting room, in front of his FBI crew, my airways constrict.

Unable to hold back, I sob. I cry for the woman I was before The Incident. I cry for my brother, my daughter. I cry for the mercenaries who will never see their families again. I cry for a world overtaken by the power of hate and fear.

When I'm finished, I hide my face, racing to the ladies room. While I hiccough and blow my nose, Rhonda slips inside. "Don't be embarrassed. It's healthy to get it out."

"Thanks." I moan at the monster in the mirror. With bruised, wind-burnt cheeks, stringy red hair, and deep circles under her eyes, I don't even recognize myself.

Ignoring my reflection, I splash water on my face until I feel more human. As I pat dry with a paper towel, Rhonda grabs the door handle. "Wulf's waiting to debrief you. You ready?"

"No, not really." Why would I want to discuss the shitty decisions which led to this week? I'd rather have a wisdom tooth pulled, maybe all four.

“You’ll be fine. Beneath his gruff exterior, Axel’s a real softy.” Arm around my waist, she leads me to an admin office, empty except for one fierce-looking G-man.

Room spinning, I sit in a chair facing the desk. “Is Scott awake?”

“Not yet. Did you do the stapling?” His accusatory stare is too much to bear.

Again, I blink away tears. “You don’t understand. We were under fire. I had so little time...”

“The doctor said you saved his life. Thank you.” The man who spent oodles of taxpayer dollars to rescue me is probably trying to soften me up.

I need to set him straight and come clean. “Listen, Special Agent—”

“Call me Wulf.” His smile appears genuine enough, but I’m not buying it.

While I try to make sense of his change in attitude, a young orderly places a tray of questionable food on my lap. My stomach growls. I can’t quite remember the last time I ate.

“You can start whenever you’re ready. I’m recording.” As he clunks his cell phone on the oak table, I gasp.

This is it. My day of reckoning. Where should I begin? “I served one tour. After I came home, I was hired by DHS. At that time, we rotated. One person patrolled the woods almost every night.”

Nerves on edge, I place a straw in my mouth and swallow hard before putting the carton back in the tray. This is going to be harder than I thought. “My first month on the job, I received a call from a farmer. He was hiding in his basement while armed

men invaded his property. Following protocol, I called for backup. With their ETA's of over thirty minutes, I had to decide. Wait or act?"

"Go on." The agent's steely gaze sends a chill down my spine.

You can do this, Private. "I drove to the farm, pulled to the side of the road... and woke up in the hospital. The attendant told me I fought hard. My knuckles were broken, as were my nose and jaw. They did a test because of... of internal bruising."

My face heats. The therapist said none of this was on me, which, of course, it wasn't, but it's still nothing I want to discuss. "I was roofied. I remember nothing of the attack and never will."

"I'm very sorry that happened to you, Miss O'Malley." Wulf's unreadable face twitches.

I want to believe he cares, but I know better. The world is a cold, hard-hearted place. "Thank you, Wulf, but I don't want, or need, your sympathy. Please just understand my mindset at the time."

To stop my hands from wringing, I slip them under my butt. "After The Incident—Sorry, I mean the attack, I was transferred to traffic duty. Soon after, Vermont lost funding. Dante said I was only to cover the port. All field calls were forwarded to him. This was the status quo until Jack Gurion showed up, claiming to work for Fish and Wildlife."

"How does Bourdin fit into the picture?" Respect. The man has done his homework.

"He's a coyote, a thug, and a bully. He's even sexually threatened my thirteen-year-old daughter. Everyone knows he brings people from Canada through the woods, but they're afraid to say anything."

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but he escaped.” Maybe it was unintended, but the sucker punch hit below the belt.

Clasping the chair arms, I resist the overwhelming urge to bolt out of this room, pick up Mack, and drive until no one can find us.

No doubt sensing my reaction, Wulf rolls his seat closer. “Start from the beginning. Again.”

Mind numb, I fixate on a stain in the drop ceiling, recounting everything—from the moment Scott arrived to the harrowing helicopter rescue. By the third retelling my voice is hoarse, my foot asleep.

“We done?” Wiggling my toes, I stifle a yawn, barely able to keep my eyes open.

Fingers steepled in front of his lips, Hunt’s friend purses his lips for the longest time while I sweat.

Finally, mind made up, his gaze meets mine. “This isn’t going to be easy to hear. Dante made thousands of dollars working for Bourdin.”

“No.” The undigested food in my bowels churns. “That’s not possible.”

The room fills with fog. Back in my car on the night in question, I call Rob. “I’m outside Lamoille’s farm. Please. Send help.” But, if he was dirty...

Oh God. The past disappears. Now, I’m back in the office, my vision sharper than it’s been in years.

The betrayal’s so obvious, my chest aches. “He set me up?”

“There can be no doubt. I’m sorry.” Using a much softer tone, the agent turns his laptop screen, scrolling through bank statements and text messages.

My fists clench. Dante ruined my life. This is so totally fucked up. "How could I have been so blind? So stupid? I deserve whatever’s coming."

Holding out my wrists for cuffs, I bite back a sob. “You can arrest me now. I’m ready.”

“For what?” Face skewed, he picks up a ringing cell phone and presses mute.

Was he not listening to anything I said? “I knew noncitizens were crossing over the border. I should’ve stopped them.”

“Robert was your direct superior, employed by DHS for over forty years. No one would’ve taken your word over his. Case closed. Put your hands down. Let’s go see if Hunt woke up yet.”

“Could you give me a moment?” I hate the weakness in my shaky voice. I don’t deserve kindness. Why doesn’t he see this is all my fault?

I was right. Emotions make you weak. It’s time to regroup, to roll back to who I was before Scott Hunter showed up. I need to lock this part of me away—this time, for good.

As soon as the door clicks shut, I squeeze my eyes tight. Alone, I rebuild the image of my mental box, then shove every stupid, useless feeling inside. Wrapping it in thick chains, I snap the padlock closed with a satisfying clunk, then hurl it into the ocean’s abyss.

Never, will I open it again.

Hunt

“I’ll take ‘Noises’ for three hundred, Alex.”

The camera zooms in on the ghostly game show host. “The answer is: beep-beep, hushed voices, clanking, TVs, and squeaky food carts.”

I slam my palm on the buzzer. “What are hospital sounds?”

My pal Wulf answers instead of Trebek. “Yeah, we’re in Burlington. Welcome back.”

“Hey, since when are frogs allowed on Jeopardy?” I assume the voice belongs to me—why else stick a straw in my mouth? Swallowing hard, I lift my eyes to my friend’s grin.

His punch to my shoulder is gentle but firm. “You were supposed to count undocumented aliens, not sheep.”

For some reason, this strikes me as hilarious. I laugh until a white-hot pain stabs my side. When I throw back the sheets, I expect to find a knife lodged there. Instead, a thick bandage stares back, covered in plastic wrap.

Oh, yeah. I was shot. “Where’s Kelly?”

Wulf tilts his head toward the hall. “Right outside. She’s anxious to see you.”

After the door swings open, in walks the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on.

Face bruised, hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, she smiles shyly. The light catches behind her head, creating a halo or perhaps it's the drugs.

Her hand fits perfectly as she squeezes my fingers. "How ya doin', Wildlife?"

Other than like I fell off a mountain, got beat up, shot, and almost froze to death? "Never better."

The heart monitor disagrees. It beeps in protest at the tsunami of memories flooding my brain. "Did we stop them?"

Wulf steps closer. "Hundreds arrested. Biggest bust in years. Too bad we can never tell anyone. You'll probably get one of those medals you can never wear."

We joke. People come and go. Meds. Eyelids lower.

Goodnight, moon.

When I wake again, sunlight floods the room. A uniformed man blocks my view of the hall. Nose red, eyes swollen, Kelly snores in a recliner beside my bed. Five coffee cups and two empty water bottles clutter the windowsill.

Her puffy lids flutter open, so I pat the mattress. "Come here, babe. What's the matter? Is Mack okay?"

Careful not to disturb my side, she brushes her lips across mine. "Everyone is fine. It's all...a bit overwhelming."

She's lying.

"Talk to me." I plan on spending the rest of my life with this woman. To do that, I need to get better at dealing with her vacillating emotions.

"Dante was dirty as hell." Snatching a tissue from a box near my head, she blows her nose and exhales through her teeth.

The slimy bastard. My hands fist. If he wasn't dead already, I'd make him wish he were. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"I t-trusted him. I covered for him. He was a surrogate father to me." When her voice cracks, it reverberates in my aching chest. If only I weren't stuck in this damn bed. I'd hold her, kiss away her grief, and then make love until nothing exists except our future.

Cupping her cheek, I pray for the right thing to say. "He's gone. He can't hurt you anymore."

"Know what? I'm glad he's dead." Eyes lowered, she pulls on a loose sweater thread. "Does that make me a bad person?"

Seriously? My woman risked everything to save millions. Where the hell is this coming from?

As I wait for her to reveal more, a knock interrupts us. Mack rushes in first. Leaning over the side rail, she shares a shy hug. While Kade and I shake hands, the other two embrace. Seeing their love, a longing like I've never had before, cuts me deep. How the hell am I supposed to return to my lonely life in DC?

Once her family leaves, I'm left alone with the teary-eyed warrior I adore.

“I guess you’ll be going home soon.” The emptiness in her voice sends a chill down my spine.

Ah, babe, don’t give up on us. “Perhaps I’ll apply for Dante’s job.”

She shakes her head, smile strained. “But you’d be my boss, and sex would be off the table.”

If she was trying to be funny, she missed the mark.

Hands rubbing up and down her arms, she stands. “We both knew it couldn’t last.”

I freeze. Huh? Is she giving me the brush-off? Was I only some... adrenaline-induced fling? What a fucking idiot I was. Here I thought, I’d found my forever woman. My throat closes, choking off my words.

In the end, all I manage is a hoarse “Yup.”

When she turns to walk out the door, she takes my heart with her.

What the fuck happened here?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Kelly

Same ol' steel counter, same ol' lunch menu, same ol' friend. Why then, is everything so fucked up? I swivel my bar stool, so Gina won't comment on my new phone addiction.

No calls. No texts. No emails. After a month, you'd think I'd stop looking.

Once again, my eyes sting as my throat constricts. Doing the same thing while expecting a different result, I conjure up my mental box. Broken and rusted, it lies on its side. Alone on a lonely beach, only an empty shell remains. Perhaps it's better this way.

My coworker snaps her fingers in front of my face. "You look like shit."

"Thanks a lot, girlfriend. Just coffee for me." I gently wipe my sore nose. Ow. For it to heal, I need to stop crying—but how?

"Has he called?" In the past, her long, drawn-out, exaggerated sigh would've irritated me.

Now, it's merely a blip on my annoyed-o-meter. "Can we talk about something else? How about John Bourdin? Did you find him?"

She diverts her eyes. "We think he fled to Canada, then flew under an assumed name to Iran."

Touching my arm, her face softens. “I’m sorry, Kell. I know how hard it must be to hear.”

I shrug. “What’s another shitty piece of news? My life sucks. It’s never going to change, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.”

The sheriff grabs the carafe, refilling my mug. “You’re better off without him.”

“I know up here...” I point to my temple before pounding on my chest. “...but not in my heart. My life is here. His is in DC. Nothing has changed.”

With no place to store my feelings, tears flow freely down my cheeks. I don’t care anymore. Oorah for the FUBAR marine.

Gina rushes to my side of the booth to hug me. “I’m so sorry. Please don’t cry.”

“Don’t be.” Letting out a shaky breath, I swipe a sleeve over my face. “I’ll be fine.”

Ignoring my blatant lie, she squeezes my arm. “I hate seeing you like this. I wish I could help.”

“You and me both.” While I sip my bitter, cold coffee, a pause rife with unspoken words lingers between us.

“I know.” She shoots me a way too perky smile. “Tell me about Mack. How’s she doing?”

The shift is gentle, a lifeline I grab onto. “One second, she’s an obnoxious, hormonal teenager—the next, a needy toddler.” As I share my daughter’s latest antics, the ache in my chest eases, if only for a minute.

Later, I return to an empty house. With my kid at her dad's, I find no reason to remain sober. Pouring my third glass of wine, I stare at my phone. My God, I am so pathetic. Why can't I get over him? I type a novel's worth of text messages but erase them all. My heart hammers. My thumb hovers over the send.

Cringing, I press the icon.

Me: Hi.

WL: Hi.

I didn't expect him to answer right off. Biting my lower lip, I write I love you , delete it, then settle.

Me: How R U?

This time, exactly five minutes and thirty-three seconds crawl by, then—

WL: Not great.

ME: Me too. I miss you.

Does doing a happy dance make me an asshole?

WL: I thought we said no texting.

Me: I lied. ??

WL: Can we talk?

Me: ??

When my phone rings, my hands tremble so badly that I fumble the swipe and have to call him back.

“What do you want, Kell?” His frigid tone is such a punch to my gut, I almost hang up.

I whisper, “A do-over?”

“No such thing.” His curt response slices me in half.

With nothing left to lose, I blurt out, “But I love you.”

Oh, hell. I slap my forehead and brace for the final blow. The thick silence stretches on forever.

Finally, he whooshes out his breath. “Whoa.”

That’s it? Whoa? I am never drinking again. “I’m sorry. I won’t bother you any more. The wine? Jeesh.”

Where’s a sinkhole when you need one?

His speech tone shifts, softer now. “Wait. You surprised me, but I feel the same as you, babe.”

Ohmuhgod, ohmuhgod. My brain short-circuits. I can’t remember a single word of the speech I’ve rehearsed for days. “I’m so sorry for the way we—no—for the way I left things.”

“Me too. I handled everything badly.” When his voice cracks, my heart stumbles. If I had any tears to shed, they’d be puddling on the table next to my empty bottle.

“Do you mean us, Wildlife?”

“Yes, I mean—no. Listen. I’m an FBI Agent. I shouldn’t have slept with you, and I apologize. After all you’ve gone through, I had no right to add to your trauma.”

“Hold on, mister.” I shoot out my palm as if he were standing in front of me. “I’m as much to blame, maybe more. And as for my issues, I’m seeing an online therapist. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still a hot mess, but I’m working on it.”

His chuckle releases the dam holding back my tears. God, how I have missed that sound. Like the moment when Dorothy steps into Oz, my black-and-white world bursts into technicolor.

We talk all night about nothing and everything. We discuss work, family, and all the little things that make us who we are.

When dawn breaks, the knot that’s been twisting in my gut for weeks is gone. Not even tired, I take a deep breath. For the first time in forever, I’m excited about the future.

Hunt

After twelve hours behind my desk, my back creaks as I push my chair back and stand. I stretch, but it does little to clear away the brain fog. With the fluorescents off, most of the offices sit empty. A few faces remain, lit blue by their monitors.

Yawning, I rub my eyes. Hell, I need a beer—better yet, a week off. Instead, I head to Wulf's office and knock on his doorframe.

“Ready, boss?” My keys jingle in my hand while I shift on my heels.

Finally, he snaps his laptop shut before grabbing his coat. “I had no idea it was so late. Let's go.”

In the elevator, I smirk. “Where's your wife?”

His eyes warm the way they do whenever he talks about her. “Gwen took the kid to Florida. Gave me a hall pass for the weekend.”

As thoughts of my woman flood my head, I zone out until we arrive at the local dive. Saying hi to our coworkers, we place our orders and settle into a booth away from the crowd.

Once our drinks are served, I clear my throat. “Kelly called me last night.”

Instead of I-told-you-so, he just raises a brow. “And?”

“We’re going to try long distance for a while.” My grin stretches so wide, it strains muscles I forgot I had. If it wouldn’t get me hauled off in a straitjacket, I’d jump up and fist-pump the air.

He pats my back, clinking his bottle against mine. “Congrats. I assume this means you’ll quit moping?”

“I don’t mope.” Curse? Yes. Punch holes in my bedroom walls? Affirmative. But mope? No way.

“If you say so.” His smirk says quite the opposite.

Before I can call him out, a commotion erupts from those watching the game.

When the noise dies down, my friend leans back in his chair. “So, how is this going to work?”

Fingers virtually crossed, I say a short prayer he’ll approve of my idea. “I’ve got some unused paid leave. I’m thinking long weekends. Would you mind if I took Fridays off for a while?”

“I can’t.” His deadpan face makes my pulse pound.

What the fuck? “After everything I’ve done for—”

Beer sprays all over the place as his laughter interrupts my rant. “You should see your face, man. Priceless.”

Still chuckling, he shakes his head. “Chill. The director wants a man in Burlington. You in?”

My mouth gapes open while my brain cells misfire. Then, I lunge forward, pinching his cheeks.

“I could kiss you right now.”

“You do—the offer is off the table.” He shoves my chest but yanks me into a bro-hug, slapping me hard on the back. “All kidding aside, when I needed you, you’ve always been there. This hardly begins to repay all I owe you.”

“Consider us even.” I tap the passing server’s arm. “Single malt. Top shelf.”

Heart soaring, I picture Kelly, Mack, and me. Maybe a dog. And a fence, but I’ll gladly fix up her grandmother’s house.

Before any of this can happen, I need to make sure she’s safe. “Any word on John Bourdin?”

My friend’s frown reflects my own thoughts on the matter. “Other than the original rumors, he escaped to Iran, nothing.”

“Those mercenaries had it in for him. I’m betting we’ll find his body come spring. If he’s still alive, he better not show his face anywhere near me.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” Baring his incisors, Wulf grins. I know that look. A year ago he dragged my ass to Belarus to save his wife. He’s telling me to do the same.

Because of this, I press my luck, “You think you could live without me tomorrow? I could take an early flight and get there by mid-morning.”

The happily married man chuckles. “Hah, we’ll survive, no worries. Do me a favor.

Bring your PC. Check-in a few times a day to make sure nothing is blowing up.”

“No problem.”

We talk for a while longer, the conversation winding down as the night stretches on. Eventually, he scrubs a hand over his face and exhales. “Guess I should head home.”

“Yeah, me too.” I get up from the table, rolling the tension from my shoulders. “Night, Wulf. Thanks again.”

By the time I make it back to my apartment, the city is quiet, the streets nearly empty. Inside, the air is still, the only sound, the faint hum of the fridge. Kelly’s probably been asleep for hours, but if I don’t call her right now, I might actually explode.

I slip off my jacket, drop onto the couch, then dial her number.

“Wildlife?” Her sleepy-thick voice has a soft rasp which makes me smile. “What time is it?”

Unable to hold back, I shout out my news, “Hey sweetie, I’ve been reassigned to Burlington.”

A thud follows a rustling noise. “Holy crap. What? How? I thought the nearest FBI station was in Albany.”

My smile broadens until it hurts. “After the ricin debacle, the boss says we need a presence near the northern border. Axel helped make it happen.”

Her breathing quickens, excitement bubbling through the line. “I can’t believe it. Is it too soon to ask you to move in?”

My chest expands at the thought of her waking up in my arms every morning. This—us—it's everything I've ever wanted. "As long as Mack's okay with it. If she needs time, I can hold off until she graduates."

"When are you coming?" She sounds like a kid on Christmas Eve, and I'm her Santa Claus.

"Next week. I just need to wrap up a few things here."

"I can hardly wait to see you."

I chuckle, knowing if I let this go on, we'll be up all night. "Go back to sleep, babe. I'll phone you in the AM."

A sleepy sigh drifts through the line. "I love you."

"Love you too." Ending the call, unable to relax, I lean back to stare at the ceiling.

On my next inhale, I open my computer and purchase a ticket to Burlington, leaving in the morning.

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Kelly

When my alarm buzzes, I swipe my phone to silence it. Grinning, heart full of joy, I jump out of bed and text my lover.

Me: Good morning. Love you.

No answer. Damn.

Busting to tell someone my news, I call Gina. “Guess what?”

“You won the lotto?” Her dry humor can’t dampen my enthusiasm.

Everything, from the pile of laundry to the stain on the wall, is absolutely beautiful. “Nope. Scott Hunter is moving up here.”

“What? You barely know him.” Her edgy tone catches me off guard.

I know best friends can get protective, but this reaction feels ... off. “I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“What about your daughter? Have you considered how your selfishness will affect her?” Wow. My friend has never been judgmental. Maybe she’s figured I won’t have as much time to hang out with her.

Voice placating, I try to understand. If our roles were reversed, perhaps I’d be worried, too. “Hey, we’ll still be friends.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry. Listen, I need to go. Bye.” Once she hangs up, I stare at the screen.

God, that was so not what I expected.

Hoping to have more success with my offspring, I open my bedroom door and call down the hall. “You up, hun?”

“Mmm... Yeah... Sort of.” Her bedding rustles, and when her feet pad to the bathroom, I trot downstairs.

With coffee made, peanut butter toast on the table, I pull out her earbuds. “Can we talk for a sec?”

My daughter rolls her eyes. “Ugh. Now?”

I take a deep breath. “Scott is moving to Vermont.”

She grins. “That’s great, Mom. You deserve to be happy.”

A tsunami of relief washes over me until she asks, “Did you tell Uncle Kade yet?”

I blink, surprised. “Not yet, why?”

Shrugging, she swallows. “Mo-ommm. I’m not a kid. I know what’s been going on. Bourdin’s still out there. With an FBI agent nearby, we won’t have to worry so much about you.”

Her offhanded remark gnaws at me. I’m the parent, the one who should be concerned. Long after I drop her off at school, I continue to wonder. How do I turn this around?

DC rush hour over, I message Hunt. No response. Weird—he ought to be at work by now. Maybe he’s just busy.

Pouring myself a cup of coffee, my phone pings. My pulse races as I check the screen, but no joy. It’s my not-so-enthusiastic friend telling me she’s going to stop by in a few. Her attitude better be improved or she’s not staying.

A solid knock later, the door creaks open, and she asks, “Hey Kelly, you alone?”

That’s weird. Who else would be here? “Yeah, come in.”

I stand wearing my best smile. Everyone has difficult mornings. In a couple of minutes, we’ll be hugging and shooting the shit like always.

“Mack? What’s wrong?” My brain freezes when my daughter steps inside. Ghostly pale, hands behind her back, she inches forward.

“Are you sick?” I snatch my cell. Jeremy will need to cover so I can take her to the urgent care doctor.

Before I can dial, Sheriff Laughlin jumps forward, gun raised. “Put your phone and your pistol on the floor, then kick them to me.”

Her cool, overly calm demeanor sets my heart thumping. “G-Gina, what the hell is going on?” As I do her bidding, the crazed woman jams her gun barrel into my girl’s skull so hard she cries out.

Adrenaline slams through me. Hurt my kid? You are dead meat, bitch.

Unaware she’s made the worst mistake of her life, she motions me toward the table. “Put two chairs back to back. Sit with your hands behind you.”

I drag my feet, stalling for time. “You can’t just kill us. They’ll lock you up for life.”

“I can, and I will.” Pupils pinpricks, gaze darting, her tenor rises to a shriek.

“You ruined everything.” As she steps closer, my stomach churns at her sick scent.

She’s high. Even so, if I can keep her talking long enough, a vehicle is sure to arrive at the crossing. When I don’t come out, they’ll come looking for me.

“I want to know. What did I do wrong?”

She paces, her Glock waving wildly in the air. “Why couldn’t you butt out of my business?”

I need to stop her from totally losing it. “Gina, it’s me, Kelly. Tell me what I did.”

She throws her head back, her sharp laugh brittle. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

Fidgeting, I mask the nausea twisting my gut. A whiff of her offensive smell makes it worse.

She wipes her spittle with the back of her hand, then counts on her fingers. “First off, you got Dante killed. Secondly, you arrested John. Now, I’m under all sorts of scrutiny. I had to let him go. Surely you, of all people, can understand.”

“Y-you and B-Bourdin? Together? Knowing what happened to me?” The depth of her betrayal smashes into me, stealing my breath.

“He saved you. Don’t you see? Because of his attack, Robert agreed to keep you out of the woods.” Her warped logic sounds a warning bell in my mind. She’s officially

gone looney-tooney.

Digging my nails into my palms, I slow my cadence. “So, tell me, please. How do you see this playing out?”

“Easy. Your daughter here was distraught about your new boyfriend. Before I could stop her, she shot you in the head. Once she turned the gun on me... Well, there was nothing I could do. A terrible tragedy.” Her words snake through the air, coiling around my head.

As this noose of fear tightens, the drumbeat of my heart pounds in my ears. Swallowing over the knot in my throat, I steady my voice. “Forensics, Sheriff. There is no way your story will hold up in court.”

Her face turns crimson as she screams, “I don’t fucking give a shit! I’ve lost everything.”

Sensing our time is up, I squeeze Mack’s hand, twist my neck and mutter, “When I say go, tip to the right.” With any luck, the old chairs’ loose rungs will snap from our weight. This move could buy us a few more precious moments.

My former bestie giggles. Weapon aimed, she curls her index finger around the trigger. “I heard you, you know. It won’t work. Adios, girlfriend. You did this to yourself.”

Time shifts, slows, then halts. I recall the first time I held my baby and how her bright eyes bravely met the world. Missing a front tooth, she charged into kindergarten using the same self-confidence.

Breath hitching, heart aching, I take her hand again. She’ll never grow up, never graduate, never fall in love.

My head turns. In my mind's eye, I peck her cheek goodbye. "Close your eyes, honey. I love you." The words scarcely leave my mouth before our door explodes.

As shards of wood burst into the room, our would-be assassin swivels toward the noise. "What the—"

"Now, Mack. Now." This is it. With my foot to the table's edge, I shove with all my might.

Gunshots blast. We hit the floor.

A breath later, a familiar voice calls out. "Kell? Mackenzie? Are you hurt?"

Wildlife? What's he doing here?

Face fierce, his 9 mm drawn, he drops to his knees beside us. "Is anyone else in the building?"

I shake my head no. "But Bourdin... He could be nearby. He and Sheriff Laughlin were a couple. I had no idea."

My gray matter struggles to catch up to reality. Knife out, he cuts our zip ties, then yanks us into his arms. Safe, we sob into his warmth, absorbing his strength until he gently lifts us to our feet.

Standing, looking over my lover's shoulder, I wave at my silent, loyal brother, Kade who just arrived. He's always been there for me. How had I never truly seen him before? After a quick yet firm hug, he nods at my hero.

"C'mere, Mackenzie." A fatherly arm around my daughter, he leads her outside.

Alone now, sirens wail in the distance. My fingers slide over Scott's shoulders, lacing behind his neck. Our gazes locked, he brushes his soft lips across mine. I dig my digits into his scalp to trap him in place. Soon, I'm carried away by his kiss.

When we break apart, I gasp in fresh oxygen until my foggy brain clears. "How did you know?"

He shakes his head. "I didn't. I wanted to surprise you."

Whoa. If his plane had been delayed, or he'd stopped for coffee... No way, not going there. Slipping on my coat, I blow through my teeth and walk with him into the cold.

Together, we can face anything.

Hunt

Most say spring is the season for lovers, but I disagree. With its crisp air, tart apples, and vibrant foliage, fall wins. If you add bonfires and steamy nights beneath the sheets, there is absolutely no comparison.

With Kelly's delicate hand in mine, we stroll through the craft fair in our raincoats, enjoying our root beer barrel candies. A stringed puppet tap-dances to an Appalachian dulcimer. I swear, I could stand here for eternity, simply basking in her smile.

Every day, I wake up more in love than the last. My heart thumps, expanding at the fuzzy box I hid under my socks. We've talked about marriage often enough. So why are my palms damp?

I must've been silent for a while because my future wife tilts her head, palm heated against my cheek. "A penny for your thoughts."

Not yet ready to share my secret, I kiss the tip of her pert nose and nibble her earlobe, "I was thinking how much I want to hear you scream as you come."

With cheeks flushed, her gorgeous eyes lift to mine. Caught by her gaze, my smoldering desire bubbles to the surface. As I'm about to tug her into my arms, the sprinkles turn into a downpour.

Hoods up, we laugh, dashing to our SUV. Soaked and breathless, we make out until the windows are covered in steam. Cock painfully hard, her hand on my upper thigh,

I grip the wheel, struggling to stay under the speed limit.

Now, beneath the warm comforter, I move her hair so I can get lost in the forest of her green irises. “God, I don’t know what it is. For some reason, I can never get enough of you.”

She traces a digit over my stubbled jaw, her voice soft, teasing. “Well, it’s lucky I’m not going anywhere.”

“Forever, Kell.” We’ve said this before, but with the ring close by, it holds more weight and more meaning.

Her mouth parted slightly, she inhales and serenades me. “Wild thing, you make my heart sing.”

Her hand slides down my torso, fingers wrapping around the beast. No beginner, he knows what’s coming. However, this time, I’m the one who sets the pace. Lying on my side, I brush over her lips and chin and nuzzle her neck. Pausing for a moment at the dip in her clavicle, I lick my way to her lovely breasts, savoring each sigh and every moan.

As I straddle her waist, I try to croon like Joe Cocker. “You are so beautiful to me.”

She giggles, her hands skimming my ribs. “Do you want to make love, or do you just want to fool around?”

Red hair fanned out on her pillow, mouth puffy from my kisses, my goddess arches her back. “Do me baby, one more time.”

Her silken voice strikes a chord below my navel, setting me on fire. Sucking, licking, pinching, I savor every part of her.

“Please...” Fingers on top of my head, she pushes me downward.

A dutiful lover, my lips trail south, worshipping until they reach the promised land. My hands cup her sweet behind. Lifting her to my face, I inhale her honeyed scent laced with the addictive spice of her arousal.

She stretches a toe to the side of my swollen Johnson, a not-so-subtle hint.

With a knowing chuckle, I stroke my tongue over her, coaxing her nub to blossom beneath my touch. The moment it swells, she digs her heels into the mattress, biting down on her bottom lip.

As my index finger curls inside of her, my Neanderthal DNA flares to life.

Mine!

She shudders, gasps, and screams, “Wildlife!”

Surging forward, I press my thick length to her entrance and sink to the hilt. Her inner walls quiver around me.

As these exotic sensations set my blood on fire, the bed bangs the back wall, our skin slaps, but I hold back. I want, no, I need her to come again, this time with me.

“Babe.” I grind into her the way she likes best.

She locks her ankles behind my back. Her nails dig into my shoulders.

My body tightens, balls drawing up, pressure building to the breaking point. “Open your eyes, sweetheart.”

We connect at a level way beyond physical.

Unable to resist any longer, I plunge over the abyss.

Squeaking my new favorite sound, she follows me into oblivion.

Sometime later, I stretch my hand to the bedstand. Smiling, I place the fuzzy box on her naked chest. We don't need a flash mob or a TikTok performance. What we have is real.

Tears in her eyes, she puts my gift on her left hand. "I will love you always, Wildlife."

"You, too, sweetie, you too." As I interlace my fingers with hers, my heart nearly bursts.

Eyes closed, images of this past year shift into dreams.

"Baaaa, baaa." Hundreds of woolly animals mill about, numbers painted on their backs.

I count while the shadows fade away. The threats at the border remain, but we will prevail. Tonight, there is only warmth, adoration, and growing old together. Grinning from ear to ear, I spoon my fiancée closer until sleep takes me.

The End

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:52 am

Lilac

Good God. What in the world have I got myself into?

I stare at the man's muscled form, covered in nothing but tats, a sheet, and a bandage. According to the pet-care agency, this Mr. Slate wasn't supposed to be in residence. I specifically asked the woman who hired me and she assured me he worked in Manhattan and rarely came home.

Why then, does he even own a dog? Selfish bastard. He probably has a Doberman or a German Shepherd as a guard and needs someone to feed the poor thing.

I thought I landed a cushy job for the summer, especially when she told me it came with a place to live. Until about ten minutes ago, I was thrilled. It just goes to show you, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Shit, shit, shit. The man with thighs on either side of mine is pure testosterone. He's got dark, bedroom eyes, black lashes and a short beard. It looks so soft, I have to force my palm from caressing it. His lips, turned down at the moment, look like they could curl my toes when pressed to mine. That is, if I was looking for sex, which I definitely am not.

Enough! Jeesh.

Luckily, the doctor within takes over as I peel off his bandages and hiss.

Oh My God. What kind of guy is he?

“You were shot?” Shivers run up and down my spine. “Are you a cop?”

Please say yes. Please say yes.

Of course, he’s going to say yes. What else could he say? ‘No, I got shot robbing a bank?’

“Bodyguard.” He shrugs it off as if he just said he’s an accountant.

Okay. It could be worse. I take out my new doctor’s bag from under the bed and assess the pulled stitches. “You got alcohol or something to clean this with?”

He grunts some kind of affirmation and I wonder why I can’t understand him so I look down. His face is toward the window, otherwise his mouth would be right at my breasts. Realizing how intimate this seems, I step back and my butt bumps the open dresser drawer. It slides in with a loud thunk and I jump.

“And where would I find this alleged alcohol?” Damn, talking with him is like pulling teeth.

He starts to get up but I take his hand and use it to press the towel into his shoulder. “I’ll get it. Just tell me where to go.”

He smirks at my unfortunate choice of words. “In the main house. Go up the deck and down the long hallway. The bathroom is the fourth door on the right.”

Where my palm rests over his knuckles, my skin tingles and a part of me doesn’t want to pull away. His dark eyes widen, his nostrils flair, and his breath hitches.

That can’t be good.

“I’ll be right back.” Best to run, rather than walk but I come to an abrupt stop at the kitchen door when his dog barks wildly from the main house.

“What’s her name?”

“Who?” Dark eyes shoot me a confused look.

“Your dog? Its name?”

“How the hell would I know? I call it Dog.”

What an asshole. Doesn’t even bother to name his pet. I click my tongue and pause, needing just a bit more intel.

“Well does Dog bite?”

“I don’t think so. Didn’t bite me.” A cocky grin spreads over his face.

“That’s not funny, Mr. Slate.”

“Just Slate.”

Oh great. We go by one name, do we? Like Prince? Fine.

“Listen, Slate . I don’t fancy being bit by your dog. I believe we’ll both agree we’ve had enough blood for the evening.”

His face goes earnest on me, with a voice to match. “Hey, I’m not messing with you. This puppy shows up on my doorstep last night and I took him in. He was pretty banged up and it looked like someone took a shot at him. So, I stitched him up. I think you and he will get along fine as long as you drop the attitude. Dogs sense shit

like that.”

Maybe I should let him bleed out.

“I’ll be right back,” I smile sweetly and slam the damn door behind me.

Attitude? He hasn’t begun to see attitude. I stomp across the paving-stone path, up the deck stairs, and open the double glass doors. Suddenly, an English Sheepdog places oversized paws on my chest and slobbers all over my face.

“Well, hi there, baby. How ya doin’? You’re such a good doggy.” Laughing, I squat and let the puppy give me a few more licks before trying to follow Slate’s directions.

The kitchen is bigger than the whole guest house with granite countertops, two islands, and enough counter space for a TV celebrity chef. I turn left at a long hall, pass at least six doors and find the bathroom. After searching multiple cabinets, I finally locate alcohol, clean bandages and a tube of antibiotic cream.

Before I go, I have a second thought and stop in what must be Slate’s bedroom. There’s a pair of boxers on the floor and I grab his jeans as well. I really do need this job and any kind of sexual attraction will just screw things up.

However, I’m not blind. I can’t help but note there’s just one pillow and not one girly decoration in the room. The fact he probably lives alone makes the girls between my legs cheer but I am not amused.

“C’mon boy.”

I open the door and the puppy gets away from me. He bolts halfway across the yard, turns and barks. Then, he returns with a bound and presses his head to the back of my knees to urge me on faster.

I have to laugh, despite the completely screwed-up situation. After I make sure Mr. Sexy is not going to die from loss of blood, I'll pack my things and... I don't know. I guess I'll find some park and sleep in my car. It wouldn't be the first time.

By the time I get to the little cottage, the pup is sitting next to Slate. His tail thumps while Slate gives him plenty of love. In the light, I notice the puppy's bandaged too.

Like owner, like dog.

"Okay, let's have a look-see." I pull away the towel, our hands connect again, and my lady-lips do somersaults. This makes it more difficult to get serious and inspect the bullet wound.

"How long ago did this happen?" I pitch my voice professional and detached.

"A couple weeks." He opens his legs so I can step between which is the right thing to do but way too intimate given the fact he is sexy as all hell and naked except for the sheet wrapped around his waist.

"Okay. I'll repair the stitches that broke open but you should see your regular doctor in the morning." If he can ignore the attraction, so can I. Besides, I feel bad I was the one who caused him to bleed.

He grunts something which could be agreement or dissent.

"This is going to sting." When the denatured alcohol sinks in, he hisses and glares.

"Sorry." While I work, he studies me so hard he either wants to become a doctor or is worried I'm incompetent.

I cut the thread and he nods with a look more suited to a professor than a patient.

“Not bad.” He leans onto his elbows to get a better look, this time at me.

Quickly I step out from between his legs, sweat rolling down my back. The suitcase on my bed reminds me I need to go.

“I, uh. Okay. Mr. Slate. I’m heading out.”

“Where to?” He looks at an old clock on the wall, then checks his wrist. “Now, it’s three in the morning.”

He stands as if that were that and, well, it’s not. “Listen, it’s obvious this job isn’t going to work out. Best if I just go, but thanks.”

For nothing.

“Knock on my door when you wake.” He turns on his heel, grabs my car keys off the kitchen table, and strides out of the house.

The puppy turns his head between outside and inside, apparently confused as to who to follow.

His bark sounds an awful lot like his new master as he runs out the door.

I think about running after my keys but something about Mr. Slate screams danger. I don’t think Edna would’ve sent me to a serial killer but still, who knows? They say it’s the quiet ones you need to worry about.

I chuckle to myself. Well, hell, he wasn’t all too quiet while he was banging on my door. Still, I wouldn’t want to cross him and he’s definitely not a guy to argue with in the middle of the night.

I push the suitcase to the floor and lay down on top of the comforter, tossing and turning, wishing he hadn't stolen my sheet. At one point in the night, I remember I didn't lock the door and almost get up.

Seriously? With his alarms?

Knowing he's watching makes me feel strangely safe.

Sleep does finally come but it's full of weird dreams and too soon I wake, just before dawn. I glance over at the main house where Mr. Sexy types, his skin lit blue by his computer monitor. Must be he couldn't sleep, either.

For the first time since 'The Incident' I turn over and drop into a deep, dreamless sleep. When I wake again, the sun is high and I have a caffeine headache. Damn it. I grab a couple acetaminophen pills out of my purse and gag them down with a glass of warm water.

After, I find a kettle and some instant coffee, the most important part of the day. In minutes, heavenly java is steaming in my mug. I search the empty fridge and cupboards for cream or sweetener.

Whatever. Black it is.

Once caffeinated, I pick up my phone, push dial and let my breath out in a long stream.

Hopefully, Edna will find some other dog-walking jobs. I know none will have the house included but I'll deal. The worst part will be sleeping in my car but it can't be helped. After this final class at Columbia, I'll be all caught up.

Outside, some cardinal warbles, looking for a mate. Good luck with that.

“Hello? Mrs. Weinstein?”

“Just a second. Is this Lila?”

I don’t bother to correct her. It’s Lilac, like the flower, but nobody ever gets it right.

“Yes, Mrs. Weinstein, it’s me.”

“Did you get settled in all right last night?” In the background, her three beagles bay, almost drowning her out.

I shout into the phone, “Well, actually, that’s why I’m calling. Mr. Slate was not aware I would be staying in the guest house. He was actually quite annoyed.”

I leave out the part about the gun and mace.

“Oh dear. Just a sec.” It sounds as if she’s covering the mouthpiece of her phone but not successfully. “Mother? Are you there?”

An elderly woman responds like the teacher in the Charlie Brown specials. “ Wa Wa Wahhhh.”

Mrs. Weinstein seems to understand fully and continues to converse as if I wasn’t on the other end of the phone. “Didn’t you inform Mr. Slate we got him a walker? Okay... Yes... Okay.”

She speaks again and I guess she’s addressing me, now. “Don’t go anywhere, dearie. I’m coming right over. Bye now.”

My cell phone indicates she hung up and I shake my head. Where the hell can I go? Mr. Sexy-Abs took my keys. I suppose I could just demand them back but something about going over to his house and knocking on his door is too much this morning. I

need a hell of a lot more coffee to deal.

Not only that, unlike last night, my thoughts are clear and I'm in no hurry to go. The hundred bucks in my wallet won't take me too far, especially when you consider my credit cards are maxed.

Slate

Edna Weinstein's muffler announces her arrival long before she turns into my drive. That's why I'm waiting by my door as she parks in my paving-stone circle. When all five feet of her jump out of the car, I can't help but note how her powder blue hair matches her Mercedes. She must be eighty which would make her mother over a hundred. Together, they've cornered the market on dog walkers or so I learned since becoming a foster puppy-parent.

After brushing the wrinkles out of her Hawaiian pantsuit, she uses her hand for a sun visor and squints up the steps. "Alexander James Slate. What did you say to that poor girl?"

Pup whines, so I let him out and hold his collar. "That poor girl you sent opened up my stitches. She would've maced me, too, if I hadn't stopped her."

"You probably scared the living daylights out of her. Poor little lamb."

Are you shitting me? Little lamb?

I stay cool because she reminds me of my grandmother or maybe because she's a friend of my boss's wife. Perhaps, it's because I have the dog by the collar. Whatever the reason, I don't march down the steps, scoop her up, and set her back in her car.

My voice is tight as I reiterate my demands. "I was quite specific when I ordered a dog walker. I said I wanted a male."

The pup woofs, his legs quiver, and my palm pushes down on his butt. “Stay.”

The woman steps between the two feng shui lions at the foot of my entrance. “Don’t be ridiculous. What difference does it make? You’re gone most of the time and you’ve got that whole empty cottage with no one in it.”

Suddenly, her eyes go wide, her hands shoot to her mouth, and in an exaggerated move, she covers her heart. “Is it because of your dear departed wife?”

Almost everyone knows there was nothing dear about my departed wife. Charlene slept around while I was deployed, killed my son, and most have the good sense not to speak of her.

“If I want a goddamned male employee, it’s none of your business.” My teeth grit down, my chest constricts, and my fists clench at my side.

“Woof.” The pup jumps up and I settle him down with a pat to the head. “Good boy.”

Mrs. Weinstein must be getting senile because she neither catches my tone nor the muscles pulsing in my neck.

“Don’t be rude, young man. For your information, all my men are booked. This is your only option and if you want my services, you’ll take what I give you. I’ll have you know I have a waiting list that goes out almost a year. The only reason I gave you Lila was to do Isabella a favor. Go ahead and try to find someone, especially a man.” Her chin waggles when she strains her neck to look up at me.

Damn it. Isabella is my boss’s wife and I don’t want this to get back to her. I never wanted a dog but the poor thing came to me wounded. What could I do? I wasn’t going to put him in a shelter. And, no way will I return him to his owner, not until I find out who shot him. What kind of bastard hurts an innocent puppy?

Besides, the dog has grown on me. At least he'll have a good home while I sort this out. All this goes through my mind while I try to calm the puppy and the fuming octogenarian.

I heave out a sigh. "Fine. She can stay."

"Hmph. I'll cut you some slack, Alexander, because of what happened to your family, God rest their souls, but that doesn't give you a free pass with me, forever. Now, march yourself over to the carriage house and apologize to that girl. I'll hold the dog."

"Me? Apologize to her? I'll have you know she broke open my stitches and held a weapon to my face."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." She rolls her eyes. "Everyone knows you're Grayson Patten's bodyguard and took a bullet for him. You can't tell me that itty-bitty slip of a girl was any danger."

Hell yeah, she was a danger and still is. My stupid cock hasn't been so interested since my failed marriage. I sure as hell am never doing that again. Worse, last night, when the beauty stood between my thighs, I felt something break free in my chest. It's far worse than lust and that can't happen, either. I like my life the way it is.

"I'll go speak with her."

It's no doubt the only way I'll be rid of Mrs. Weinstein.

"Good idea, Alexander. I'll wait here." Her smug smile makes me feel about twelve as I hand off the pup's collar and head to my guest house.

Pup whines and I know just how he feels. This sucks. I don't want a beautiful young woman around who smells so good, with mile-long legs.

It'll be hard but I can avoid her. She's my dog walker, not my housekeeper, and not my nanny. For fuck's sake, I'm Air Force, Special Ops. I'm a goddamned bodyguard for one of the richest men in the world. Surely, I can deal with one pretty little med student until I find a good home for Dog.

On second thought, I circle back for the pup. Perhaps, his cute charm will soften up the girl.

Shit, this may be pointless. When I circle the house, the brunette's got the trunk open, her suitcase in hand.