



LYON (THE GOLDEN TEAM #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She Once Saved Him—Now He'll Risk Everything to Save Her

Lyon Spencer never forgot the girl who stepped into a fight to protect him. Niki Bannon was fierce, untouchable, unforgettable. Now, years later, she's in the fight of her life, and Lyon refuses to let her stand alone. When a covert rescue mission takes Lyon's team into Afghanistan, the last thing he expects is to find Niki—disguised, desperate, and determined to bring her missing brother home. But Lyon knows what she doesn't—this mission isn't just dangerous. It's suicidal. He'll protect her with his life, but Niki doesn't trust easily. And Lyon? He's never backed down from a challenge. As bullets fly and secrets unravel, one thing becomes terrifyingly clear: losing each other might be the most dangerous risk of all. She saved him once. Now it's his turn. And this time, he's not letting her go.

Total Pages (Source): 34

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

1

Lyon

I remembered the girl who saved me when I was fifteen. I knew I'd never forget her.

My mother had moved us to Los Angeles, settling in a rough inner-city neighborhood. I had to fight constantly just to survive. But the worst day was when three older boys dragged me into an alley. I was sure I was about to die.

Then, like an angel sent from heaven, she appeared.

Her hair gleamed in the sunlight; she was all legs and fists. She launched into the fight without hesitation, knocking all three of my attackers down. I had always been small for my age, and she was taller than me. She probably thought I was just a helpless kid.

"Shame on all of you! That's dirty fighting, and if you keep this up, you'll never be anything," she scolded, her voice fierce.

Then she turned to me and offered her hand. The moment my fingers touched hers, I fell in love. I'm not exaggerating. She looked to be around twelve, but I didn't care. I knew, one day, I would find her again.

As we left the alley, a boy stormed toward us. "Where the hell did you disappear to? And who's this?" he demanded.

“I don’t know his name,” she replied, unfazed. “Those guys were beating him up. Of course, I had to help.”

She glanced back at me.

“I’m Niki. This is my brother, Max. We’ll walk you home.”

“Niki, we’re not supposed to be on this side of town,” Max warned. “We need to get back to Grandma’s before Mom finds out where we are.”

“What’s your name?” Niki asked, watching me as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

“Lyon. You don’t have to walk me home. Was that martial arts you used to fight those guys?”

“Yes. You should take lessons—it could save your life.”

“I will. Thank you, Niki.”

“You’re welcome, Lyon.”

Then, to my utter shock, she leaned in and kissed my cheek. Just a peck. But it sealed my fate.

At fifteen, I hero-worshipped her. As I got older, I thought of her differently. I often imagined what she might look like now.

I had told that story to my buddies once, and I regretted it ever since. Now, every time they saw a red-haired woman, they teased me, claiming it was Niki. I used to draw pictures of her, sketching that beautiful red hair, that perfect face, and those

striking green eyes.

“Are you daydreaming?” Raven’s voice snapped me back to the present.

“No, just resting my mind,” I replied. “Do I ask you if you’re daydreaming when your eyes are closed? You’re probably wondering if you have more siblings, but I don’t ask you nosey questions.”

Raven dropped the subject immediately. “How’s Brutus doing?”

“He’s in love with Gage. Every time Gage comes around, Brutus whines and runs to him. Hell, he even tried climbing into Gage’s lap. I had to put him outside because he was acting love-struck.”

“I heard Gage stayed with him through surgery and carried him everywhere while they were looking for you.”

“Thank God they found Brutus before those men killed him. I was glad to get out of that country. So, where are we going?” I asked.

“We just found out there are hundreds of Americans still in Afghanistan. Some people in the government thought it would be a good idea for us to check it out.”

“What people in the government?”

“I don’t know. River has that cousin who never made it out of Afghanistan. Remember how they told River he must have died?”

“Yeah. I had to tackle River before he killed the guy who suggested that. So, River thinks he might still be there?”

“He was just eighteen, a kid. River says he’s the smartest person he knows. So maybe he’s alive. Who knows?”

“I know,” River said, walking to the back of the plane where we were sitting. His voice was firm, edged with certainty.

“Leo was always sharp, always aware. If he was left behind, he wouldn’t just sit around waiting to die.”

He’d gather as many Americans as he could and take them somewhere safe. I believe that’s exactly what happened,” River said, glancing at both of us.

I turned to River. “I want a truthful answer. Did the government send us over here?”

River met his gaze. “No. I sent us over here. Because I want every American in that hellhole home; their families already grieved for them, believing they were dead. Now, they hear there are hundreds still alive.

“Do you know how many people called The Golden Team yesterday? Five hundred and sixty people. All asking what we knew about the Americans left behind and if we were going to get them out.”

“So you lied to us and said the government sent us,” I said, laughing as he clapped River on the back. “You’re turning into me. I never thought I’d see the day when River Channing would be just like me. I’ve told you before—sometimes you have to say screw them and do it on your own.”

“I never said you were wrong about that,” River admitted. “Most of the time, I silently agreed with you. I’m saving Americans. That’s all I’m doing.”

“Where are we landing this plane?”

“Where we would if the government had sent us.”

“Did you tell them the government sent us?” Lyon asked.

“Yes, I did. And I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

I must have dozed off because when I woke up, my neck ached, and River and Raven were asleep. I stood and walked up to the cockpit, where Gage was piloting.

“Nap time. I’ll take over from here.”

“Thanks,” Gage muttered, yawning. “I could sleep for twenty-four hours.” He left the cockpit, leaving me alone with my thoughts as I flew us toward Afghanistan and the Americans.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

2

Niki

I knew Max was one of the Americans still in Afghanistan. He would never die on me. He knew how brokenhearted I'd be. He's my brother, and I love him more than anything. I will find him if it's the last thing I do.

I paced back and forth, my heart pounding. I had to find someone who could show me where the Americans were. I have to rescue my brother. I know he's alive.

I had taken two weeks off from my job as a special agent with the FBI—just enough time to track Max down and get him out.

Now, I stood in the middle of this scorching desert, scanning my surroundings. There were no Americans here—or if there were, they were in hiding. I had expected them to be moving fast, working to save the others trapped here. Reports said there were over six hundred Americans still left behind.

So where the hell were the rescuers?

I had already lied once, telling the locals I had been sent here on an official mission. But if I didn't find someone soon, they would send me straight back to America.

I stepped outside. Damn, it was hot.

I was used to California's warm but comfortable climate—not this unrelenting,

suffocating heat. As I wiped the sweat from my forehead, I noticed a plane coming in for a landing. My pulse jumped.

Was it American?

I walked over and stood against a building, watching closely. If it was an American plane, I wasn't about to let it go into Afghanistan without me.

I could be a huge asset to anyone willing to take me along. I know how to fight, I know how to shoot, and I know how to plan. If they'd just give me a chance, I could actually help.

Then, my heart soared—it was an American plane.

Now I just had to convince them to take me with them.

Dressed in a black wig, with brown contacts and dark smudges across my face, I was unrecognizable. Even Max wouldn't know it was me. I had done a damn good job of disguising myself.

As the plane doors opened, I saw them step out. Army Special Forces.

My stomach tightened with anticipation. These were the guys I needed. But would they really go into Afghanistan dressed like that?

I glanced down at myself—tight blue jeans, boots, and a black T-shirt. Maybe I should change. Should I wear what the local women wore? Or see if they had extra fatigues I could borrow?

My eyes stung from the dark brown contacts. I blinked a few times, trying to ease the irritation, then squared my shoulders and strode toward them.

“Excuse me! Excuse me! Are you going into Afghanistan?” I demanded, hurrying up to them. “If you are, I need to go with you. I’m searching for the Americans trapped there. My brother is one of them. I always knew he wasn’t dead. Now, I can prove it to my mom and dad.”

The group turned, all eyes locking on me.

A big, handsome guy stepped forward. “Uh, I’m sorry, but we don’t take civilians with us. It’s way too dangerous—it’s dangerous for us, too. Give me your brother’s name, and we’ll look for him.” His brows furrowed. “I’m surprised they even let you stay here.”

“I don’t need anyone taking care of me. I can handle myself,” I said. “I told them I was waiting for someone, and when you guys flew in, I thought you’d be perfect for my cover.” I crossed my arms. “If you don’t take me with you, I’ll just follow you.”

The big guy sighed. “I’m sure you can take care of yourself, but you’re not coming with us. We’re a team—we train together and fight together. You’d only complicate things.”

“There are four of us,” he continued. “We have a buddy system. How are we supposed to work that with five?” His voice was firm. “The answer is no.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You don’t have to be such an asshole about it. You don’t even know me.”

I took a breath, forcing my temper down. “Look, I don’t need to be part of your little ‘buddy system.’ I just need someone to show me where the damn Americans are so I can get my brother and get the hell out of here.”

His expression remained stone cold.

I huffed. “If you don’t want me to go with you, fine. But I will follow you. Whether I’m with you or on my own, I’m going. My brother is out there, locked up somewhere. I’m getting him out.”

I glared up at the man towering over me. He had at least a foot on me—but I wasn’t intimidated. His blond hair fell over his forehead, and his smoky blue eyes burned right through me.

Damn.

My panties were suddenly wet.

I clenched my jaw, shaking off the thought. Not the time, Niki.

I stepped around him, ready to plead my case to one of the other men, but he moved with me, blocking my way.

I stepped again. He blocked me.

Again. Blocked.

Was this asshole laughing at me?

I tilted my head up, locking eyes with him. “If you don’t move, I will lay you out on the ground and embarrass you.”

And the bastard laughed.

My father always warned me— Niki, that red hair of yours is going to get you in trouble.

Now I knew what he meant.

Before I could stop myself, I had the big guy on the ground, flat on his back, before he even realized what hit him.

I smirked, stepping over him. “Now—”

Boom.

I was suddenly flipped onto my back, he pinned me down before I could blink.

Shit.

His face hovered close to mine, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Good move, sweetheart,” he murmured. “But never turn your back on your opponent.” His voice dropped, his breath warm against my cheek. “If you do, you’re dead.”

His face was so close, his mouth just inches from mine.

I didn’t breathe.

Did I want him to kiss me?

...Yes. Oh, my God, Niki, you are disgusting.

I barely knew this guy. And he’d just thrown me to the ground. And yet ... my nipples hardened, betraying me.

He can’t know, can he? No. He damn sure can’t know.

I scrambled to my feet as the others watched.

The big guy crossed his arms. “Alright, if you’re coming, you follow our rules. When we tell you to do something, you do it. No tough girl act. These people have machine guns—you won’t get close enough to throw them on the ground.”

I swallowed hard, nodding.

“And lose those tight jeans. You’ll have to dress like they do—just like we will. Follow me. I’ll show you what to wear.”

I clenched my fists.

I should thank him. He did protect me from the fall. And he was right—I never should’ve turned my back.

But I’d be damned if I was thanking this brute for anything.

One of the others spoke up. “What’s your name?”

“Niki O’Riley.” I gave him my Mom’s maiden name. I don’t even know why I did that.

I wasn’t about to tell them I was an FBI Special Agent. As far as they knew, I was just a woman looking for her brother.

The man nodded. “I’m River Channing. This is Gage Sparrow, Lyon Spenser, and Raven Jackson.”

“We’re the best of the best,” River said. “We know what we’re doing. If you’re coming, you follow our lead. Agreed? ”

I hesitated.

“Sure,” I said.

Total lie.

River eyed me before nodding. “Follow us. We’ll get you different clothes.”

I smirked. Step one—complete.

3

Lyon

I thought she should go with us. She was tall for a woman, and I didn't want her getting separated from us. The only way to prevent that was to keep her as close as possible.

"You'll have to wear men's clothing," I told her. "The robes they wear here will help you blend in. At least that way, if we get stopped, they won't force you into the women's section."

"We'll call her Nick," I added, turning toward Niki. "From now on, while we're in Afghanistan, your name is Nick. If you wear what the local women wear and we get taken in for questioning or anything else, they'll separate you from us. We wouldn't be able to protect you if that happens. But if you go as one of us, we can."

"I don't need you to protect me. I can defend myself," Niki shot back.

I sighed. "Did you, or did you not, say you'd listen to what we told you? We haven't even started yet, and you're already arguing." I met her gaze, holding it steady. "I know you can fight. I know you're tough. But this is different. Over here, women are treated like dirt. They think nothing of stoning a woman to death just because a piece of her hair is visible."

Niki inhaled sharply and held her breath. Counting to ten. I could tell by the way her nostrils flared.

Then, with an exaggerated eye roll, she exhaled.

She looked like she was biting her tongue to keep from saying something smart. I wanted to chuckle, but I knew that would only piss her off—and if she got mad enough, she might flip me again.

“Fine,” she finally muttered. “Where are these men’s clothes you want me to wear?”

“You can pull them over your own clothes,” I explained. “That’s another advantage—it gives you an extra layer of protection.”

An hour later, we were packed into a Jeep, bouncing over rough terrain under the unforgiving sun.

Niki was dressed head to toe like the rest of us, and she was already sweating bullets.

“Why do they wear so many layers when it’s so damn hot?” she grumbled. “How do they even breathe in this?”

“It’s better for them,” I said. “If they didn’t wear these robes, their skin would turn to leather. Imagine having these sun rays beating down on you every day. You’re better off covered up. The more you cover, the less you burn. Even people with dark skin still burn. The sun here is brutal. If you stop complaining for a second, you’ll see I’m right.”

“I wasn’t complaining. I was stating a fact.”

“That’s good,” I said. “Because if there’s one thing in this world I can’t stand, it’s a woman whining all the time.”

“I hope I won’t have to break you two up constantly,” River cut in. “Nick, keep your

talking to a minimum. Your voice will give you away every time you open your mouth.”

I turned and looked at her. “Yeah, Nick, every time you speak, that sweet honey voice of yours drips sex.”

Why the hell did I say that?

I snapped my head forward quickly, feeling the weight of their stares. Damn it. That was stupid.

I cleared my throat. “From now on, we call her Nick. No one slips up and says Niki.”

Before I could stop myself, I added, “And another thing—you’re not allowed to talk to me. I don’t want you looking at me, I don’t want you breathing near me, and I damn sure don’t want you talking to me.”

Niki narrowed her eyes.

I smirked. I couldn’t help it. She was so damn cute. I could only see her eyes—just plain brown eyes—but why the hell did I still think she was so damn sexy?

I was losing it. Completely.

And then she said, “Why did I have to end up sitting next to you? Change places with Raven. Hell, change places with anyone. I don’t want to be squeezed next to you. I swear, I’ve never disliked a man as fast as I dislike you.”

I grinned. “And why’s that, Nick?”

“Because you think you’re superior to me just because you’re a man. Let me tell you

something—you're not. And that's all I'm saying to you. I'm done talking to you."

I chuckled. "How come every time you talk to me, you end it by saying you're done talking to me?"

She exhaled sharply, clearly annoyed.

"Gage," she said, "please tell your friend that I'm done talking to him, and I don't want him talking to me."

Gage smirked. "Lyon, can you please stop talking to Nick? She's tired of hearing your voice. And, for the record, I agree with her."

I rolled my eyes. "You're supposed to say he , not she ."

I barely got the words out before I started laughing.

Niki turned toward me, crossing her arms. "Are you making fun of me again?"

I just grinned wider.

"No, I'm not making fun of you. I was never making fun of you," I said, keeping my tone calm. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I'll try harder not to annoy you."

"Liar," she muttered.

The rest of the ride was quiet.

As soon as we crossed into Afghanistan, we all stayed alert. I didn't bring Brutus I would risk his life again. We knew there were still a lot of Americans trapped in this country. Our plan was simple—check in with our contacts and see if they had heard

anything about any Americans who were still alive.

If they had, we wouldn't waste a second getting them out.

And I prayed to God that River's brother and Niki's brother were among them.

We had driven about twenty miles when we spotted a massive cloud of dust in the distance.

"What do you think is going on over there?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. The cloud was getting bigger, fast. My gut twisted. "Shit. We better take cover. I think we're about to get hit by a dust storm."

We scanned the area, looking for shelter. There was nothing —just endless stretches of dry land.

Then, we spotted an old shack.

It wasn't much, and I doubted it would hold up against the storm, but it was our only option. We parked the truck so it would take the brunt of the dust, then sprinted toward the shack.

Inside, I positioned Niki in front of me and wrapped my arms around her.

"When the dust hits, it's going to come hard," I murmured against her ear. "You need to cover your face completely—don't inhale any of it."

She didn't argue.

Instead, she pressed closer to me, burying her face against my chest. I was shocked. I had expected her to fight me on this, to insist she could handle it on her own.

But she wasn't stupid.

The moment the storm hit, we were completely engulfed.

I had been through these dust storms before. I hated them then, and I hated them even more now. At least back then, we had buildings to take shelter in. Here, all we had was this flimsy shack, and the wind was slamming into us like it wanted to tear us apart.

I tightened my hold on Niki, shielding her with my body.

It lasted over an hour before it finally started to die down.

When the air settled, I slowly uncovered my head. Sand was everywhere. We were buried in it.

"Don't rub your face or touch your eyes," I warned her in a low voice. She nodded, listening.

I stood and helped her to her feet before pulling the men's robe over her head. I took it outside and shook it out. The others were doing the same.

"If you want to shake your clothes out, now's a good time," I told her when I stepped back inside.

"Thank you." Her voice was softer than usual. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't told me what to do. I've never seen anything like that before." She paused, her gaze meeting mine. "And... thank you for blocking the sand and protecting me."

I shrugged. "I'm a protector. That's what I do. You did great."

She frowned slightly. “What do you mean, you’re a protector?”

“We’re all former soldiers,” I told her. “When we retired, we started a business together. We don’t just rescue people—we guard them with our lives.”

“That’s... really amazing.”

I nodded toward the door. “I’ll step out so you can shake out your clothes.”

Outside, I walked over to the Jeep and ran a hand along the hood, grimacing. “Is the Jeep going to start?” I asked, peering under the hood. “Look at all this sand.”

“That’s why they use Jeeps here,” Raven said. “It’s all sand. We just have to brush it out. There’s a brush in the back—I’ll grab it. We’ll clean out the engine and cross our fingers.”

I turned just in time to see Niki step out of the shed, carrying the robe over her arm.

“Let me see that,” I said, reaching for it. “I’ll put it back on you.”

She hesitated.

“You shouldn’t be walking around outside without boots,” I added. “There are scorpions all over the ground.”

She huffed but handed it over. I helped her into the robe, adjusting it over her shoulders.

“Now, let me do your hair,” I murmured. “There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

She sat on the back of the Jeep, watching me.

“I can put my own boots on,” she said, a sharp edge in her voice. “And I know how to put my own robe on. Are you always this... what’s the word? Controlling? Or is it that you just feel the need to take over everything? You’re a people-pleaser, aren’t you?”

I smirked. “Believe me, I am not a people-pleaser. Most of the time, people can’t stand being around me. I’m just trying to help you. If you want me to back off, all you have to do is say so.”

She tilted her head, watching me. “Please let me do everything on my own. Unless, of course, we get caught in another sandstorm.”

I grinned. “You got it.”

With that, I turned my attention back to the Jeep and got to work.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

4

Niki

I could never live out here in this sand trap.

I scanned the endless stretch of desert, my thoughts running wild. Jeez, there's nothing out here—just sand.

Or maybe we were just in the hills where it was like this. Surely, it wasn't all the same. There had to be cities and neighborhoods where kids played, where grass grew, and where trees offered shade.

It couldn't all be like this.

And these poor women... Do they have to ask their husbands before doing everything?

After an hour of work, the Jeep finally started. Relief flooded me, and I had to resist the urge to clap my hands.

"Maybe we can find a cold soda somewhere," I said, climbing into the back seat. "Maybe even a taco stand—get something to eat."

Lyon turned to me with an incredulous look.

"You've gotta be kidding," he said. "There are no taco stands around here. You'd

have to go a long way just to find a Pepsi. And if you step into the wrong city, the Taliban will catch you and lock you up.” He handed me a bottle of water and a strip of beef jerky. “Just stay low and do what we say, and everything will work out. Here, eat this.”

I took the jerky, eyeing it warily. “Does this mean jerky is all we have to eat?”

“No,” he said, pulling something out of his bag. “I also have granola bars.”

I took the bar he handed me. “Thanks.”

Reaching into my own bag, I pulled out some trail mix I had grabbed from Costco last week. “Here,” I said, passing out small bags to each of them. “Looks like the M&Ms melted, but if you mix the nuts around, the chocolate coats them.”

“Thanks,” they all murmured.

Just as I was about to take a sip of water, Lyon spoke again.

“Nick, if anyone comes around, don’t lick your lips. They would know instantly that you were a woman.”

I turned to him, glaring. So much for being his friend. Without responding, I took out my baby wipes and cleaned my hands.

I might be a kickass FBI agent, but I never traveled without my baby wipes.

My uncle Michael always said, Never leave home without them.

I handed each of the guys a wipe. They took them without complaint.

We were getting close to where people actually lived, which meant we had to be careful. The Taliban would love to get their hands on former Army Special Forces. If we were caught, I had no doubt we'd all be tortured.

We drove through the night until we needed to refuel.

I watched as Lyon pulled off a tarp and filled the gas tank from two reserve cans. The area around us was changing—buildings were beginning to appear, scattered at first, then closer together.

“My friend lives down this road,” Lyon said, turning left.

The house was tucked in among dozens of others, all packed tightly together.

The moment we stopped, a man stepped out. He studied us for a long moment, then recognition dawned in his eyes.

“What the hell are you guys doing back here?” he demanded. “You know how dangerous this is.”

“We heard there are still a few hundred Americans stranded here,” River said. “Have you heard anything?”

The man, Mack, nodded. “Yeah. We’ve found some of them. We split them into small groups—twenty-five max. You can’t gather three hundred people in one spot without drawing attention. I was actually about to call you guys to see if you could help move them out.”

“Where are they?” I blurted, forgetting I wasn’t supposed to speak.

I heard Lyon growl beside me.

“I told you not to talk,” he hissed. “What if this wasn’t Mack? You can’t just go around asking questions.”

I ignored him.

“Hello,” I said, stepping forward and offering my hand. “I’m Niki. I’m looking for my brother. His name is—”

Mack held up a hand, cutting me off. “It’s too dangerous for me to know your full name. Just tell me your brother’s first name.”

“Max.”

His expression didn’t change. “I know a few Max’s. They’re all in the groups. If you keep looking, you might find him.”

My stomach twisted. God, please let him be one of them.

“Where’s the first group?” River asked, his voice tight.

“They’re in an underground tunnel,” Mack said. “Leo’s in that first group. Let’s go there now. I was going to call you about Leo being alive. Are you going to be able to move them?”

River didn’t answer. He just turned and walked away, rubbing his eyes.

I glanced around. The other guys were doing the same.

“Yes,” Gage finally said. “We’ll take the first group and come back for the others. Take us to them.”

We followed Mack down a quiet street to another house. It looked abandoned, but he led us inside anyway.

In the bedroom, he pulled back the carpet, revealing a trapdoor.

If you didn't know it was there, you'd never see it.

River was the first one down. I followed, my heart racing as I scanned the room filled with Americans sitting in chairs, waiting.

I swallowed hard, then called out, "Max?"

River had already found his brother. He wrapped him in a tight hug, their resemblance unmistakable. Leo was younger, but they shared the same features, the same sharp intensity in their eyes.

"Let's go," River said, his voice thick with emotion.

Mack nodded. "I'll get the van. The sun is almost down. It'll be safer if we wait a few more minutes."

I walked at the back of the group, my heart pounding. I will return with them—but only if I could find my brother.

As the others climbed into the van, I stepped back.

"Nick, what are you doing? Get in," Lyon said.

"I'm staying," I said firmly. "I have to find my brother."

His jaw tensed. "We'll look together when we get back. It's too dangerous for you to

be here alone.”

“Mack is taking me to another group tomorrow morning,” I said. “I’ll be fine.”

“No! I don’t want to leave you here alone.”

“Lyon, come on , ” River said impatiently. “You can finish your argument when we get back.”

Lyon’s eyes burned into mine. “You better stay hidden,” he muttered. “And don’t talk when people are around.”

“I know,” I said. “I won’t talk.”

He shook his head, clearly pissed, then climbed into the van. As it pulled away, I saw him say something to River.

I knew he was angry with me.

But I didn’t care. I wasn’t leaving until I found Max.

That night, I was able to shower and wash my hair. It felt incredible.

Before leaving the bathroom, I put my contacts and wig back on, then washed my clothes in the sink and hung them up to dry.

The second my head hit the pillow, I was out.

I dreamed of Max.

His voice called to me, leading me to him. I saw him lying on the floor of a dimly lit

room, blood staining his clothes. His eyes locked onto mine.

And then he whispered, “Run.”

I woke up gasping, my heart hammering against my ribs.

At dawn, I dressed in my men’s robe and covered my head. At least my clothes were clean.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mack and his wife greeted me with warm smiles. They handed me a plate of food and a cup of coffee.

I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. I tried to eat slowly, but it was so good, it didn’t last long.

“Are you ready?” Mack asked.

“Yes,” I said, standing. I turned to his wife. “Thank you for breakfast. And for letting me stay here.”

She smiled. “I hope you find your brother.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

I hugged her, then followed Mack outside.

“We’re going straight to the next tunnel,” he said. “I didn’t have time to meet all of them, but I know there’s a Navy SEAL there. He was shot. I just pray he’s still alive.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

5

Lyon

Damn it, I didn't want to leave her.

The thought burned in my mind, making me angrier by the second .

River said Mack was with her, but what if something happens? What if they all get caught? It was wrong to leave her behind.

I should have forced her to come with us. Or I should have stayed .

I dropped into the seat next to Leo on the plane, trying to push my frustration aside.

“Did you ever meet an American over there named Max?” I asked.

Leo frowned. “Max? What’s his last name?”

“O’Riley. He’s the brother of the woman who was with us—Niki. She refused to leave until she found him. I should have forced her to come with us.”

Leo’s expression darkened. “I haven’t heard the name Max O’Riley. But there was a Max Bannon who was shot in the side. I can’t imagine he survived without a doctor or medicine.” He paused. “He was a Navy SEAL. A good man. He tried to help everyone. He knew martial arts as well as you do. He could have left, but he refused to abandon the stranded Americans.”

“Then he was shot,” Leo said.

A weight settled in my chest.

“There were no doctors left behind?” I asked.

“There were some medics, but they weren’t with us. I don’t know where they went. I think they were on the other side of Afghanistan. Everyone spread out to avoid being trapped in a big group.”

A sick feeling churned in my gut.

“You think any of the groups were found?” I asked. “Back home, we’ve been told there were over six hundred Americans left behind. Did you guys actually see that many?”

“All the Americans I met said there were more. They waited for the U.S. to return for them, but no one did.” His jaw tightened. “It’s been four years, and no one has fucking come to rescue us. What the hell happened? Why did we exit Afghanistan the way we did?”

I sighed. “It was a mess. There was a huge mix-up, and a lot of people were left behind. But now we know, and we’re going to get them out.” I hesitated, my mind drifting back to Niki. “I need to know if it’s safe enough that she won’t get caught.”

Leo studied me for a second. “Is she your girlfriend? Why the hell would you bring your girlfriend to Afghanistan?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I muttered. “I didn’t even know her before this. She hitched a ride with us, and now she’s over there, searching for her brother. That’s why we call her Nick instead of Niki. We all know what will happen if she’s found

out.”

Leo sighed. “There are a lot of women left behind, as you could tell from our group. If Mack takes her to the next group, maybe she’ll find her brother if he’s still alive. Some of the Americans starved to death. No food. No water. They prayed for rain that never came. Babies died in the hospitals. The Taliban didn’t give them anything. They didn’t give a fuck about anyone except themselves.”

“I hope she finds her brother,” I said.

“River found me.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “I’ll give River a break and fly the plane for a while.”

I found River in the cockpit, his hands tight on the controls, his eyes staring straight ahead.

“Visit your brother,” I said. “I’ll take over.”

He glanced at me, then exhaled and nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

As he left, I slid into his seat. The hum of the engines filled the silence, but my thoughts were far away.

Niki.

Alone in a foreign country, hunting for a brother who might already be dead.

I hated that she was still there. But Mack was with her. And for that, I was grateful.

Gage sat in the co-pilot seat, his arms crossed.

“You think she’ll find her brother?” he asked.

I exhaled slowly. “I don’t know. I hope she does. They seemed close.” I paused. “We found Leo and a lot of others. We’ll drop these Americans off and head back as soon as possible, pick up more, and bring them home.”

“Hopefully, she’s with them when we get back,” Gage said.

I nodded.

“I just hope she’s safe,” I said. “I don’t want anyone kidnapping her.”

That thought made my chest tighten.

“Hopefully, she won’t talk,” Gage continued. “She’s smart. But with a voice that sexy , you know they’ll figure it out the second she opens her mouth.”

I clenched my jaw. The idea of anyone realizing she was a woman made me fucking furious.

Gage pulled out his phone. “I’ll have to call Lori and tell her where I am. And we need to reach someone about these groups—get more help flying them out.”

I nodded. “Yeah. We need reinforcements.”

I gripped the controls, my mind drifting again.

Stay safe, Niki. Just hold on until we get back.

“Yes, we do. Moving all these people out on our own would take forever. We need more help. I wonder if the Navy SEALs or Army Rangers could assist. I’ll call Kash

to see if he can gather some men.”

“Should we land in Pakistan or India? India is friendlier and nearby. Let’s head there.”

“I agree, India is our best option. We’ll try to secure more planes and see what we can arrange. We definitely need assistance; there’s no doubt about that. I hope we aren’t spotted. This mission is dangerous, and we must treat it as such,” I said, frowning with worry about Niki. “I have to get her out of there. I have a bad feeling about her being there,” I added, a chill running down my spine.

“Yeah, I don’t feel good about leaving her alone either. I know Mack is with her, and he’ll take her to that other group. But what if someone is lying in wait? Did she have a gun?”

“Yeah, I think I saw two guns on her, and if I’m not mistaken, some knives tucked under her boots. I meant to ask her about them but forgot. I hope she knows how to use them,” I said, shaking my head. “The sooner we get back and pick her up, the more at peace I’ll be.”

“I agree,” Gage said. “Hopefully, she’s found her brother, and he’s alive. She won’t leave until she finds him, dead or alive. She wants to bring him home, and that’s what she’ll do.”

“Okay, here we are. Let’s find a landing strip. I hope they let us unload.”

“These are Americans,” Gage said. “They better let us unload.”

Authorities were waiting as we taxied to a stop. They boarded the plane, demanding papers from everyone. I approached one of them. “Listen, these are Americans left behind in Afghanistan. We’re taking them home, but first, we need to return and get

more.”

“You can’t unload them here. What if Afghanistan attacks India? You have to fly them to America.”

“I want to speak to your President. While I’m on the phone with him, we’ll Zoom call my President to see who will allow these Americans off our plane. If you’re smart, you’ll let us unload these tired, terrified, starving people. They need a place to stay until they’re picked up and taken home. Can you find them something to eat? My government will reimburse you for everything.”

“No need to call the President. Of course, we’ll take care of these poor people.”

My phone rang. “Hello, who is this?”

“This is Kash Walker, Army Ranger. We’ll be there in a couple of hours. What base are you using?”

We’re in India; they’re the friendliest. We’ll be leaving again as soon as we refuel. I’m sure we’ll see each other while we’re here. Don’t let anyone find out about this. We don’t want to tip off the Taliban. Thanks, Kash.” “The government sent some planes to pick up the Americans left behind. They’ll be here in a few hours.”

I turned to the official. “The government will be here to pick up the Americans. They can stay here at the airport and board the plane when it arrives. Can you get them something to eat and drink, please?” “Of course, I’ll take care of it right now.” “Thank you,” I watched as everyone exited the airplane, holding hands. Most were crying and talking on phones provided by people in the airport. I hoped their spouses would be there for them. I knew some of my friends had remarried, believing their spouses were dead and buried.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

6

Niki

I walked past the starving individuals; twenty-three were in this group, but my brother wasn't among them. I assured them that help was on the way.

As we moved to the next group, my stomach growled—a stark reminder that I hadn't eaten in a few days. I'd given away all my snacks, including those Lyon and the others had left me. Knowing how hungry these people were, I couldn't bring myself to eat; they were mere skin and bones.

In the distance, we saw a dust cloud approaching. Mack quickly led us behind a building. The vehicles passed by but then turned and headed straight toward us. I glanced at Mack.

"It's okay," I whispered. "There are only five; we can handle this."

"We can't use our guns," he cautioned. "The entire Taliban force will descend upon us. Let's act normal; they'll think we belong here. Just walk into that building over there."

"What makes you think we can take on five men?" Mack asked.

"I'm an FBI Special Agent," I replied.

"Oh, yeah? Have you ever fought multiple men at once?" Mack inquired.

“Many times. I can handle myself. I told Lyon that, but I don’t think he believed me,” I said.

“He’s a protector. He’d step in front of a bullet for you,” Mack noted.

“I don’t want anyone doing that for me,” I said, sensing someone approaching. “They’re here.”

“Don’t talk,” Mack warned. “They’ll tear your clothes off.”

“Stop! Who are you?” one of the Taliban demanded, aiming a machine gun at us.

Mack spoke for us. I understood most of it but pretended to be interested in the items hanging on the walls, subtly adjusting my stance for a potential high kick.

When the man shouted at me to turn around, I complied. Anticipating trouble, I glanced at Mack. The man seemed ready to shoot, so I swiftly kicked him in the neck, killing him instantly.

“Let’s get out of here,” he urged. “Through the back door, before the others come.”

We hurried out and ran as fast as we could without drawing attention.

“Follow me,” Mack directed.

After an hour, we paused. I leaned against a wall. “Where’s the next group?”

“Not far. There’s a bus there. We’ll move them when the sun sets,” Mack replied.

“They need food. Where can we get some?” I asked.

“There’s a market nearby, but I don’t have much money. I’ve spent everything on food for the Americans,” Mack admitted.

“You’ve done an excellent job. Are you coming back to America with us?” I inquired.

“Yes, on the last trip,” Mack said.

“Then you’ll be compensated for everything you’ve done. Our government owes you for saving and caring for our people.”

Entering the next building, which housed more Americans, I searched for Max. I stopped when I saw a man lying on the floor, dried blood covering his shirt. He looked dead, but then I saw him breathe.

I rushed to him and knelt beside him. “Max, open your eyes. Can you hear me?” I lifted his shirt, revealing a swollen bullet wound.

“Is this your brother, Max?” Mack asked.

“Yes. Is the bullet still in him?” I asked.

“Yes. No one could remove it. We couldn’t find a doctor without risking everyone here,” Mack explained.

“How long has it been?” I demanded, anger rising.

“Seven days. He was shot while getting food for everyone. When he didn’t return, some teenagers found him after dark,” Mack said.

“Seven days with a bullet inside him?” I exclaimed.

“I’m sorry. There was nothing we could do. We need to leave now. Are you coming with us?”

“Help me get my brother on the bus.”

“No, leave me here.”

“Max, thank God you’re awake. I’m not going to leave you here.”

“Niki, why are you here?” He reached out to touch me.

“I came to find you. I knew you weren’t dead. I’m not leaving without you. Help me get him up,” I said, looking at Mack.

“No, I can’t be moved because the bullet is up against my spine. I want you to leave me here.”

“How do you know it’s against your spine?” I pushed his hair back from his eyes; he was burning with fever. I had to get that bullet out.

“Niki, you have to leave. It’s too dangerous for you here. Please go. You shouldn’t have come.”

“Just add it to the list of things I shouldn’t have done,” I said. When I glanced at him, I saw he was sleeping again. I had to find a way to get Max out of here and to a hospital. I looked at Mack again. “I’m staying here with my brother. I’ll figure something out.”

“The Golden Team won’t like it.”

“I don’t care what they like. I’m staying with my brother. They can get as mad as

they want. I won't leave him to die alone," I whispered, anguish bringing tears to my eyes. I covered my face with my hands and shook my head. "I'll be fine."

"Hurry and get those people somewhere safe. They're starving. You've taken care of them all this time. Thank you; it's an honor to know you, Mack. Now go."

"It's my honor to know you, Niki. Please be careful."

"I will." As soon as he left, I got to work on Max. I felt guilty for hiding my water and alcohol. I knew in my heart I would need them, so I kept them in my bag. "Oh, Max, you've lost so much weight."

I poured some alcohol on the wound and felt around it until he screamed in pain. His eyes opened, glazed over, but he recognized me. "Why the fuck are you still here? You have to get out. It's dangerous."

"Max, how many times have I been in dangerous places? Hundreds of times, sometimes with you."

I pressed on the wound to see if I could feel the bullet. "What are you doing? That hurts."

"I'm going to try to get this bullet out. The longer it's in, the worse it is."

"Please don't touch it again. If it's my time, then it's my time. Listen, Niki, I can feel myself fading; you know how much I love you. You're the best sister in the world. Tell Mom and Dad I love them. I'm sorry about dying. I know it's hard for you. That's why I want you to leave. I don't want you to see me die."

I chuckled; I couldn't help it. Max knew I would never let him die if I could stop it, and I would. When I glanced at Max, I saw he was sleeping. I wiped away more tears

as they fell.

I got up and walked around the building. I decided I would take Max myself to a hospital. I needed to find materials to make a makeshift stretcher to pull him out of there. Should I wait for Lyon to come back? What if they don't return, and we're both dead before anyone finds us?

I found a blanket, a tarp, and some leather straps. I placed everything next to Max and started making a stretcher. This was going to be more challenging than I thought. Max had lost weight, but he was still a big, tall man. I knew the wood I found wouldn't be enough.

I lay down next to Max and slept for a few hours; it was so dark I couldn't see anything. I didn't want to use the rest of the candle yet, so I lay back down and put my arm over Max. I wanted him to feel me and know I wouldn't let him die.

Lyon

It had been eight days since I last saw Niki. In that time, we had evacuated two more groups of Americans and received additional assistance. Now, we were back to retrieve Niki. Mack informed us that she had found her brother, who had been shot in the side—the same individual Leo had mentioned.

“Do you think she’s still there?” I asked River.

“If it were my brother, I wouldn’t leave his side. Unfortunately, Mack fears her brother might be dead by now. I hope we find her in good health. Staying with a deceased sibling can’t be good for her.”

We needed to reach her as quickly as possible. Unaware of whether or not Niki was alone with her possibly deceased brother, I was frustrated that we hadn’t been informed of her exact location earlier. We had assumed she was already en route home on another plane.

“It’s this building,” Mack said, accompanying us. I opened the door and heard the click of a trigger being cocked. “Niki, it’s us.”

“It’s about damn time. My brother is driving me frigging crazy, insisting I leave him to die in peace. Are any of you medics? He needs that bullet out before it causes more damage. He wouldn’t even let me move him, and I spent days crafting a makeshift stretcher. So it would hold his weight.”

I chuckled. “We’re all medics. There’s food and water in this bag. Let me check on your brother,” I said, kneeling beside her. She opened the bag, took a long drink of water, and ate a pepperoni stick while I examined her brother.

“Did you have any food all this time?” River asked.

“I snuck into the market square and hid some food in this robe. I managed to feed both Max and myself, though I had to force him to eat and drink. I only went twice, fearing I’d get caught and leave Max here alone.”

“What do you think?” she asked as I examined Max.

“This bullet needs to come out before gangrene sets in. Max, can you wake up for me?”

“Max! Wake the hell up!” Niki shouted. “You have to yell to wake him. He’s always been a heavy sleeper.”

I saw her chin quiver, tears threatening. “He’s been so stubborn, asking me to tell Mom and Dad he’s sorry he died. Can you remove the bullet now?”

“I’ll do it on the plane. Let’s load him up, guys. We’ll use the stretcher Niki made.” Max opened his eyes, clearly in pain. I administered a painkiller, started him on IV fluids for dehydration, and gave him an antibiotic drip. Once the pain medication took effect, I made an incision to drain the infection.

“He screamed every time I touched his side,” Niki said.

“I understand. I was shot in the side once and lay in the mud for days until my team found me. When they touched me, it felt like a hot poker.”

“Yes, that’s how I feel. Thanks for the shot. I’m ready for that plane ride,” Max said before falling asleep.

We placed Max in the jeep without waking him. River held onto him as we sped to the plane. Once aboard, I prepared him for surgery. Six hours into the flight, with Raven’s assistance, I completed the procedure. I sensed Niki in the background, observing everything.

“How is he?” she asked when it was over.

“We have to wait and pray. But if you want my opinion, I think he’ll be fine in a few weeks. He’ll sleep for a while. Why don’t you get some rest?”

“Okay,” she murmured before her eyes closed.

“She must have been through hell, alone with her brother, refusing to let him die. Her yelling at him probably kept him alive,” I said to Raven and Gage.

“You should get some rest, too. I’ll relieve River,” Gage said.

I didn’t argue. I sat down, reclined my seat, and fell asleep. When I woke, Niki was talking to her brother.

“I swear, Max, if you ever tell me to say goodbye to Mom and Dad again, I’ll kill you myself. I told you I wouldn’t let you die,” she said, hugging him. “Damn, brother, you need a bath.”

“Hey, if the shoe fits. Have you called our family?” Max asked.

“I called Uncle Michael; he told Mom and Dad. They’ll meet us at the airport in Germany, where you’ll go to the hospital. I can’t stay long; I have to report in. I’ve

been gone too long.”

“I wish you could take a month off work. Niki, how can I ever thank you for treating me so mean and not letting me die? That hair is so ugly. Why are you wearing it?”

“I was in disguise. I think I’ll stay in disguise longer, so don’t say anything about it.”

“I’m sure you have a reason, so I won’t say anything. I can’t wait to get home. I’m going to retire from the Navy SEALs and see if any of my buddies want to start something like the Golden Team.”

“Mom and Dad will be so happy. Maybe I’ll help you out when I have free time.”

“It’s for Navy SEALs, not FBI agents. But you can hang out with us anytime. Will you be coming home to the winery?”

“I wish I could, but I have to check in with Joseph. I told him I’d be gone two weeks; it’s been a month. I’m not sure I even have a job.”

“Then come work at the winery for a month. I want to spend time with you.”

“Then come to Santa Barbara and visit me. I have a home there. I can’t be at the winery all the time. Jeez, I’m twenty-seven.”

“I know how old you are because I’m twenty-seven, too. Remember, I was born before you, so I’m your older brother. I have to take care of you,” Max said.

We both laughed. Max had told me that so many times. His eyes were closing when I returned to my seat.

Max and I met when we were seven; he’s my half-brother. We’ve been apart since

Max joined the Navy SEALs, and that first month was the hardest. That happens with siblings. We all have our own lives. Over time, it got easier, and we talked often unless he was on a mission. This isn't the first time Max has been shot, and I'm sure it won't be the last.

"Are you hungry?" Lyon asked, holding two sandwiches. He handed me one and sat down to eat the other.

"I'm starving. Thank you."

"How are you doing?"

"I'm good. Thank you for saving Max; he's the best brother there is."

"You're welcome. I'm glad we got there when we did. He'll be fine. It must have been horrible staying in that tunnel, waiting for someone to come and get you. I would have taken you home if I knew you were there."

"I know. How are you doing? You guys have been busy. I bet your wife will be happy to see you."

"I'm not married."

"Then your girlfriend?"

"Are you asking if I'm involved with someone?"

"No, just making an observation," I said.

"I'm not involved with anyone," I said, smiling.

“Neither am I. I was. I mean, he was more serious than I was. I didn’t know that until he asked me to quit my job. That’s when I realized he was more than serious; he asked me to marry him. I hated hurting him, but I never told him I loved him. I loved him, but not as a husband.”

“That must have been hard for both of you.”

I’m sorry. God, sometimes I need a button to shut me up. Ignore everything I said. I’ll eat my food now.”

I watched the red creep up her neck to her face. I thought she was beautiful, even if she had the same clothes she’d had on for three weeks.

“Tell me about your job. What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m an FBI Special Agent.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you do on your job?”

“I’m undercover most of the time.”

“Undercover with who?”

“What do you mean? You know I’m not allowed to discuss my undercover assignments.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I said.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, but I still can’t discuss my work.”

“Okay, I won’t ask anymore—for now. Can I take you to dinner when this is over?”

“You don’t even know where I live,” Niki said.

“I don’t care where you live; I won’t be late. Where do you live?”

“Santa Barbara.”

“I live in Carlsbad, California. We’re not too far apart. How about I pick you up next Friday? We’ll go to dinner. It’ll be fun.”

“I’d love to go to dinner with you.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“You’ll need her address,” Raven said from behind us.

We both chuckled, and then Max spoke up. “Her home is easy to find; she lives in the hills on a horse ranch.”

“Do you have horses?” I asked.

“Yes, I have beautiful horses. I breed them.”

“I don’t know anything about horses,” I admitted.

“That’s okay. You don’t need to know about horses to take me out,” she said.

I smiled. “That’s a relief.”

We both laughed.

“Give him the address,” Max insisted.

“Jeez, my brother and your friend are so nosy. Can’t they pretend not to hear us?”

“You’d think so. Raven’s always been this way.”

“So has Max. He’s always butted into my business,” Niki said. “But I’m glad I have my brother to butt in because I love him.”

“Did everyone hear that? You’re my witnesses when I butt into her business,” Max said. “I love you too, Sis.”

“Buckle up. We’re landing at the German airport,” Gage announced.

“Remember to give me your address,” I reminded her.

“Give me your phone,” Niki said. I handed it over, and she added her number. “Call me,” she said.

When we landed, a man and woman rushed onto the plane. “That’s our parents. They thought Max was dead, so I’m sure they’ll start crying.” EMTs followed them inside. Mom looked at me, then did a double-take before leaning down to kiss Max.

“Max, we love you so much. Thank God Niki didn’t believe you were dead and ignored everyone to find you. I’m sorry for yelling at you, Niki.”

“Mom, you didn’t yell at me.”

“Yes, I did. You just didn’t hear me.”

Michael came over and hugged me. “Uncle Michael, Uncle Chris, Dad, Mom—this is Lyon Spenser. He operated on Max earlier. We need to get Max to the hospital,” Niki said.

“Yes,” her mom agreed. Max was loaded onto a gurney and rushed off the plane.

“Niki, I’ll see you Friday,” I said. I walked over, leaned down, and kissed her. She slipped her arms around me and kissed me back.

“Niki, are you coming?” Michael called from the door.

I lifted my head, and she smiled. “See you Friday.” Then she was gone.

8

Niki

That kiss nearly knocked me off my feet. I shouldn't have been that close to Lyon—I reeked. For weeks in Afghanistan, Since that one shower at Mack's home, I'd only managed to clean myself with a napkin and water in the plane's bathroom. I rarely removed my wig during that time.

I remembered Max's friend warning me that men in the region might shave my head and use my red hair to make wigs for their wives. To prevent that, I wore one of my disguises. But now, the biggest problem was my stench. When I hugged my parents, Mom gave me a funny look—I knew it was because of how I smelled.

My head itched, and I couldn't wait to remove the wig. We climbed into the vehicle my parents had rented. They dropped me off at the hotel before heading to the hospital. The first thing I did was strip off my clothes and step into the shower. I stayed there until I felt truly clean, washing my hair three times. I found the extra toothbrush Mom brought and brushed my teeth for twenty minutes.

They had packed a bag with some of my belongings from their house. I put on something comfortable and climbed into bed, sleeping through the night. The next day, I went to the hospital to say goodbye.

“You're leaving?” Dad asked.

“Yes, I have to report to my boss.”

“Max told us everything you did,” Dad said, pulling me into a hug. “We could have lost both of you.”

“But you didn’t. You and Mom know I’d do anything to save Max. He’s my brother; he’d do the same for me,” I said, resting my head on his shoulder. I remember the first time I saw him when I was seven.

I recognized him at the FBI building in Los Angeles from the photo I kept by my bed. He didn’t know who I was because he didn’t know he had a daughter. That’s when I first realized I also had a brother. Max was one of the kidnapped boys Mom rescued. She was FBI Special Agent Raeann O’Riley.

“Will you visit us when we get home?” Dad asked.

“As soon as I can. I’m already late returning to work. Who knows, maybe I don’t even have a job.”

“Niki, that’s nonsense, and you know it. You’re one of their best agents,” Mom said, walking in with coffee. She even brought one for Max.

“When are you leaving?”

“Right now. I’ll take my coffee with me.” I looked at Max, who was grinning. I knew why—because I had a date with Lyon on Friday. “Goodbye, Max. Take care of yourself. Did you tell the parents you’re planning to retire?” I grinned as I walked out.

The flight home felt endless. Once home, I called Joseph. “Hello, I just got back. Do I still have a job?”

“Of course you do. How are you?”

I'm good. I found Max; he's in a hospital in Germany." Why don't you take the rest of the week off and come in on Monday? An old friend called and told me what happened." "That sounds good. Who was the old friend? Was it Raeann O'Riley?" "No, it wasn't your mom. See you Monday. Niki, I'm glad you found Max and are home safe. Rest; I'm sure you need it." "Thanks, Joseph. See you Monday."

Okay, Niki, you have five days to do nothing. Maybe I'll paint the house. I've wanted to do that for a while, and this is the perfect time. I walked out to the barn, talked to my horses, and cleaned the stalls as I chatted. Before I knew it, the sun was setting. I finished with the horses and headed inside, straight to the shower.

I ate a can of soup and cleaned the fridge, deciding to throw everything out and go shopping tomorrow. Thirty minutes later, I fell asleep. I woke at three to the sound of my horses. Without turning on a light, I grabbed my gun, slung the holster over my shoulder, and then grabbed the rifle on the way out.

I saw a flashlight and, stepping outside, spotted three men trying to steal my horses. I cocked my rifle, and they froze. "Back away from my horses before I kill all of you."

"What about me?" said a voice behind me. I turned and kicked him in the neck; he went down, but his gun went off, grazing my arm. I knew these men would kill me if I didn't act first. I aimed and shot the first man I saw. Suddenly, bullets were flying. I hit the ground—they had an AK-47. They came here to kill.

My horses were going wild. "If you don't put the gun down, I'll mow these horses down," one of them shouted.

I didn't say anything. I moved to the side, and the man with the gun went down. Another ran across to another stall; I aimed, and he fell. A bullet pierced my chest, and I collapsed. The shooter emerged, laughing. I pointed my gun between his eyes and fired.

I woke up in the hospital. A neighbor had heard the gunshots and called the police. Joseph entered, shaking his head.

I'm giving you a month to recover. Don't try to talk; it'll hurt your chest. I know because I've had the same injury before. You were safer in Afghanistan. You're all over the news."

"I hope my parents don't hear about it," I whispered, wincing. "I told you not to talk," Joseph admonished.

The door opened, and Lyon entered, along with a very large German shepherd. "Is this Niki O'Riley's room?"

"Niki Bannon. She always changes her last name when she's on a case. Who are you?" Joseph asked.

Lyon turned to me. "I know you. You saved my life when I was fifteen, in an alley where some older guys were trying to kill me. You were wearing a wig and contact lenses in Afghanistan."

"She wore the wig because someone told her men in that country would shave her red hair and keep it for their wives. Since she had black hair, she decided to have dark eyes," Joseph explained. "Nice dog."

"Thanks."

"Lyon, push him aside and sit next to me," I said, clutching my chest. "It hurts when she talks. The bullet went into her chest and one in the leg. But she killed all the bad guys."

"Goodbye, Joseph"

“Stay out of trouble for a month. Then come back to work. Call me if you need anything.”

I nodded, then turned to Lyon, placing a pillow on my chest. “I can’t believe it’s you. I’ve often thought of you, wondering if you survived the inner city of Los Angeles.”

“I’ll do the talking; you rest. Fighting those boys toughened me up. As you suggested, I worked for a man who taught martial arts for free. I learned to defend myself and pursued an education, knowing I wanted to join the Army Special Forces.”

“I’m so proud of you, Lyon. I thought you were around eleven; you were so small.”

He chuckled. “I was fifteen. I finally started growing in my senior year of high school. I told my friends about you. Seeing you kick those guys’ asses made me determined to do something with my life. I owe you for that. Plus, I had a huge crush on you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I had a massive crush on you. With all that beautiful blonde hair and those sexy smokey blue eyes, even though they were swollen. That’s why I kissed your cheek. Max yelled at me all the way back to Grandma’s house for that.”

“I’ll sit here for a while; you rest,” Lyon said.

“What’s your dog's name?” I whispered.

“Brutus. I told them he was a service dog, so they let him in the hospital.”

I felt my eyes closing, smiling inside because my Lyon was already mine.

9

Lyon

I paced the waiting room, my frustration mounting with every second. Tomorrow, I was supposed to leave for a mission, but now, out of nowhere, Niki had been rushed into emergency surgery. They couldn't get her fever down—something I'd been telling them for days.

The sound of footsteps near the door made me look up. Max and his parents stood there, their expressions a mix of surprise and concern.

“Lyon? What are you doing here?” Max asked.

“I'm here because Niki is. They just took her in for surgery again, but they won't tell me why because I'm not family.”

Raeann's face tightened. “I just spoke to the doctors. Apparently, they missed another bullet the first time around. Do you know why she didn't call us?”

I exhaled sharply. “Because you, Nick, and Max have been through hell. She didn't want to put more on your shoulders.” I hesitated. “How did you find out she was here?”

“My neighbor saw it on the news,” Raeann said. “I called Joseph, and he admitted Niki told him not to say anything. She's getting an earful from me when she wakes up.”

Max chuckled. “Mom, you’re starting to sound just like Grandma when she worried about you working for the FBI.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll shut up,” Raeann muttered, already marching toward the nurse’s station. “I want answers. Why was my daughter taken back into surgery?”

“Are you Niki’s mother?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, that’s what I just said.”

The nurse sighed. “Her fever kept spiking, so the doctor ordered a CAT scan. That’s when they found another bullet hidden behind her kidney. She’s in surgery now.”

I clenched my fists, my pulse hammering. “How the hell did they miss that the first time? That could’ve caused an infection—could’ve killed her!”

“Sir, the doctor ordered the scan because he was concerned about Miss Bannon’s fever,” the nurse replied calmly.

I inhaled sharply, willing myself not to lose it. Without another word, I turned and stormed outside, counting to a thousand to cool down. I took Brutus to use the bathroom.

By the time I returned, Niki’s family was gathered in the waiting room.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice rough. “I was just—angry. I knew something was wrong, and they waited three damn days to do anything about it.”

Nick Bannon studied me for a moment. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Didn’t you and Niki just meet when you both went to Afghanistan?”

I hesitated. “No. We met when I was fifteen. Some guys jumped me in an alley. Niki saved my ass. Max was there, too.”

Max’s brows lifted. “Wait—you were that kid? I remember that. Niki dragged us to the rough part of town without telling Grandma. She was hell-bent on helping people.”

Nick crossed his arms. “So, is something going on between you two?”

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But when she gets out of here, we’re going to dinner.”

Before Nick could respond, a doctor entered.

“Are you Niki’s family?”

“Yes,” Nick said, stepping forward.

The doctor nodded. “She’s going to be fine. We located the bullet behind her kidney and removed it without complications. She’s lucky we caught it in time.” His gaze flicked to me. “You were right. I’m sorry I didn’t listen sooner.”

Relief flooded my chest. “I appreciate that.”

I turned to Raeann. “I have to leave for a mission tomorrow. Can I give you my number?”

She handed me her phone, and I quickly typed it in before heading out.

Later that night, I stood on my deck, staring out at the ocean. From here, I could see

the entire valley, sprawling and untouched. When I first found this land, I knew it was where I'd build my home. Others preferred to live on the beach, but I liked the open space. It reminded me of how far I'd come—from growing up in poverty, watching my mom work three jobs just to move us into a mobile home park. That we loved, it was the first time we owned our own place.

She still lived there. No matter how many times I'd offered to move her in with me, she refused. It was her home.

With a sigh, I grabbed my bag and headed to the Golden Team's headquarters. In my office, I printed out my mission briefing. Two Navy SEALs had gone missing in Iran while searching for a friend. No one knew if they'd found him—no one even knew if they were still alive.

At the briefing, I scanned the room. "Who's going with me?"

"Cyclone and Raven," River answered.

I nodded. "We get in and out, fast. Iran isn't exactly rolling out the welcome mat, and I'd rather not end up in one of their prisons. We're looking for two SEALs, possibly three if they found their friend. With any luck, they're still breathing."

Cage leaned forward. "How's Niki?"

I exhaled. "Remember how I kept saying her fever wouldn't go down? Turns out there was another bullet. I told the doctors three days ago something was wrong, but they wouldn't listen."

"At least her family's with her now," Raven said. Then he smirked. "By the way, you said we'd freak when we found out who she is. So? Who is she?"

I hesitated, then grinned. "My Niki."

Gideon blinked. "Your what?"

I ran a hand through my hair. "She took off the wig. She's got red hair. Green eyes. When I saw her, I almost passed out. I knew right away. I've had a crush on her since I was fifteen."

Raven snorted. "So, fate, huh?"

"Fate," Gideon echoed. "Like it was meant to be."

Raven rolled his eyes. "You sound like Laney and Haley."

"What else would you call it?" Gideon challenged.

Raven shrugged. "Alright, fine. Since you saved my sister and niece, maybe fate is real."

I smirked. "So, you're saying fate didn't bring me and Niki together?"

"Wait—you guys are together?"

"Not yet," I admitted. "But we will be. We have a date as soon as she's out of the hospital. And I did kiss her once. She kissed me back." I grinned. "So yeah—fate had a hand in that. Plus, I didn't even know she was my Niki then. She was still in disguise."

Raven crossed his arms. "And what do you think she'd say if she heard you calling her 'my Niki'?"

I smirked. "I think she'd like it."

Cyclone chuckled. "Alright, Romeo. Are we going, or are we standing around talking about destiny all morning?"

I grabbed my gear. "Let's move out."

10

Lyon

“Damn, how many guards are in this prison?” Cyclone muttered under his breath. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many clustered together. There’s no way they’re all here for just the two guys we came to get. Someone important must be inside.”

I nodded, scanning the facility. “You think this is about the same guy our SEALs were sent to rescue? If they got caught trying to extract him, are they locked in with him, or did they get killed in the process?”

Raven let out a low breath. “That’s the real question. How the hell do we get in there to find out?”

“I’m working on it,” I whispered. “First, we need guard uniforms. That’s our ticket inside.”

“And where exactly are we supposed to find those?” Farron asked, skeptical.

I smirked. “We find the laundry room.”

Farron scoffed. “And how do we do that when it’s inside the prison?”

I shook my head. “Prisoners’ uniforms might be cleaned on-site, but the guards? No way. They’d send theirs out to a cleaner, either hiring someone or taking them into town. We need to find a local cleaner and casually ask if they handle the guards’

laundry.”

Cyclone nodded. “Makes sense. Let’s find the uniforms, then we’ll come back and see who they’re guarding. The upside? With this many guards, slipping inside unnoticed will be easier than we thought.”

“Easier?” I huffed. “We need to be careful. If they’re expecting more Americans trying to rescue those three, they’ll be on high alert.”

We’d secured a vehicle earlier to blend in with the locals, making it easier to move around unnoticed. Each time we spotted a cleaner’s shop, we stopped and checked it out. The first two were dead ends. The third? Jackpot.

Through the back window, I spotted five freshly pressed uniforms hanging in the rear of the shop. We circled around, checking for an entrance, and sure enough—there was a back door.

Cyclone, being the only one who spoke the language fluently, went inside alone. The rest of us waited in the vehicle. A few minutes later, he walked out—with his arm wrapped around a woman. Before I could process what was happening, he leaned down and kissed her. She giggled, then ran back inside.

I raised an eyebrow. “What the hell was that about?”

Cyclone slid into the car, tossing the uniforms into the back. “Sometimes, you have to sweet-talk people to get what you need.” He exhaled sharply. “Also helps when the woman is the owner’s wife.”

I frowned. “Wait, what?”

“She wanted me to follow her into the back room so I could ‘pleasure her.’ Her

words, not mine. Apparently, her husband only married her to get control of her father's cleaning businesses. He doesn't touch her—saves that for his mistress.”

“Did she actually tell you all that?”

“Oh, yeah. Whispered it right in my ear while grabbing my crotch and trying to get my zipper down.” He shuddered in disgust. “It was either let her believe I'd come back later or cause a scene and risk blowing our cover.”

I chuckled. “So, did you promise her a romantic rendezvous?”

Cyclone shot me a glare. “Let's just say I won't be stopping by anytime soon. Now, let's get the hell out of here.”

The uniforms were... less than ideal.

“These are tight as hell,” Farron grumbled, shifting uncomfortably.

Cyclone rolled his eyes. “Be grateful. If you want a bigger size, feel free to march back in there and ask her to measure you.”

I smirked. “What time's the shift change?”

“We've got two hours,” Cyclone replied. “But we need weapons. Where are we getting those?”

“We take them,” I said simply.

Raven gave me a skeptical look. “You make it sound easy.”

“Because it is. We walk up to a couple of guards, pretend we're one of them, knock

them out, take their weapons, and tie them up. Then we get the captives out of there and head home.”

Cyclone huffed. “I hope it’s that simple.”

I shot him a sideways glance. “Why are you always so damn grumpy?”

“Because I am.”

We all laughed, but I knew the truth behind his mood. Cyclone used to be the easygoing one. That changed when he was overseas too long, and his fiancée married someone else—his cousin, of all people.

When Cyclone finally came home and found out, he beat the hell out of the guy. His family turned against him after that, blaming him for the fallout. He never talked about it, but Kat once said it still hurt him more than he let on.

The kicker? His cousin ended up divorcing her because she cheated on him, too. Poetic justice.

We spotted two guards walking toward the prison and pulled over. Cyclone got out first, engaging them in casual conversation. I knew he was talking about us—probably spinning some ridiculous story at our expense—because he kept glancing back with that damn smirk.

Then, without warning, he struck. One punch each. Both men crumpled.

“What the—” I started.

Cyclone was already stripping them of their weapons, tying them up, and swapping clothes with one of them. The guy was tall enough, but Cyclone’s broad shoulders

stretched the jacket tight.

He dusted himself off. "Let's move."

We parked our vehicle near the prison entrance, positioning it for a quick getaway.

"Whatever you do, don't make eye contact," I reminded the team. "They'll spot us as Americans in a heartbeat."

They knew that already, but old habits died hard. I was used to telling them things.

"We go in two at a time," I said. "Once inside, look for any Americans. If we can talk to one of them, we explain the plan fast and move on. I want to be in and out in minutes."

Cyclone adjusted his collar. "Then let's get this done."

We straightened our stolen uniforms and walked toward the prison doors.

"Everyone, take a deep breath. Let's move," Cyclone ordered, his voice low but firm. "The SEALs we're rescuing know the drill. They'll be ready as soon as they see us unless something's preventing them. Let's hope that's not the case."

Getting inside was almost too easy. We walked in like we belonged, moving with purpose. The key was confidence—act like you're supposed to be there, and most people won't question it.

As I passed the fourth cell, something made me stop. Lieutenant Zack Taylor sat slumped in the corner, his face black and blue. This was the man Jason Jones and Sean Reed had come for.

Taylor's swollen eyes met mine, and he slowly stood. I gave him a quick nod and kept walking. No sudden reactions. No tipping off the guards.

A few steps ahead, Cyclone suddenly veered into a cell and lifted Sean Reed, who looked barely conscious, into his arms. His expression was tight, full of rage.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I whispered, stepping in front of him.

"I'm getting Sean some help," he snapped.

"We help him when we're the hell out of here. Follow my lead." I turned and motioned toward Taylor's cell. "Leave Sean here with Taylor for now."

Cyclone exhaled hard but followed my direction. I caught movement as he stood back up—a guard heading our way. I peeled off, letting Cyclone handle it.

Across the room, Raven was talking to someone—had to be the other SEAL. Then I spotted Farron moving toward me fast, his face tense.

Shit. We were screwed.

Guards trailed behind him.

I spun toward Cyclone. "We need to exit. Now."

Cyclone hauled Sean back over his shoulder. I turned to Taylor. "Let's go."

Before we could move, an explosion rocked the prison. Dust and smoke filled the air.

Farron grinned.

I shot him a look. “What the hell was that?”

“Someone else is breaking out,” he said. “No idea how they got explosives, but hey—it works in our favor. Let’s move.”

Raven had Jason Jones half-dragging behind him. The man looked barely conscious. Without hesitation, Raven slung him over his shoulder and headed toward the exit.

We followed.

Taylor staggered, slamming against the wall. His skin was ashen—he was barely holding on.

I didn’t think. I threw him over my shoulder and pushed forward.

The chaos worked in our favor. Guards were too distracted by the explosion to notice us slipping through the front.

We sprinted for the jeep and piled in. I hit the gas, weaving through the streets, trying to put as much distance between us and that prison as possible.

For a moment, I thought we were clear.

Then— CRACK.

A bullet whizzed past my ear.

“Shit! We’re being fired on!” I shouted. “Get down!”

Cyclone twisted, aimed, and returned fire. Two shots, then a pained yell.

Then silence.

“Cyclone, you good?” I called back. No answer.

“Damn it, Cyclone, answer me!” I shouted.

Raven climbed into the back, carefully lowering Sean to the seat before checking on Cyclone.

“Shit,” Raven cursed. “He’s hit—badly.”

I clenched my jaw. “You need to stop the bleeding.”

“I’m on it,” Raven said. “He’s losing lots of blood.”

“I have the same blood type,” I told him. “Let’s get to the plane before we start a transfusion.”

Raven leaned out and took another shot at the jeep chasing us. I glanced in the rearview mirror just in time to see the vehicle swerve off the road.

Two hours. That’s how long it took to reach the plane—two long, agonizing hours.

The second we landed, we rushed Cyclone inside. Farron sprinted to the cockpit while the rest of us worked on him.

I stretched out beside him, rolling up my sleeve as Raven prepped the transfusion. My blood flowed into Cyclone’s veins, but he still wasn’t waking up.

“Cyclone,” I said, my voice rough. “Wake your ass up. There is no reason for you to still be out cold.”

Nothing.

I checked his wound. We had stopped the bleeding. So why the hell was he still unconscious?

“We must have missed something,” I muttered. “Raven?”

Taylor, now sitting up, forced himself over to us. “Turn him over,” he suggested. “If there’s another bullet in him, that could be why he’s out.”

We moved Cyclone onto his stomach. I ran my hands over his back—nothing—no extra wounds.

Taylor reached for the back of his head, then froze.

“It’s here,” he said grimly. “A bullet’s lodged in his skull. We need to get it out now.”

I clenched my teeth. “Unhook me from the drip,” I ordered.

Raven hesitated. “Are you sure we should move it?”

“If it had gone deep enough to destroy his brain, he’d already be dead,” I said. “I have to do this.”

Raven pulled the needle from my arm. “You’re gonna be dizzy.”

“I’ll be fine,” I muttered, pulling out my field kit. “Cyclone’s always been hardheaded. Now I have proof.”

It took over an hour to extract the damn bullet. It was buried deeper than I

expected—at least a fourth of an inch into the bone.

By the time I got it out, my hands were shaking. I exhaled, leaning back, my body screaming for rest.

Cyclone was pale as death. Too pale.

I cleaned the wound, pressed gauze over it, and wrapped his head carefully.

“Come on, man,” I whispered. “Wake up.”

Across the plane, Sean, Jason, and Taylor had managed to sit up.

“You guys good?” I asked.

Sean gave me a weak thumbs-up. “Yeah. Thanks for coming for us.”

I nodded. “You’d do the same for us.” Then I turned to Taylor. “You ever miss all that money you made as a singer?”

He smirked. “I still make money from it. But I wanted to be a Navy SEAL like my dad.”

I chuckled. “Guess that makes sense.”

Then I glanced back at Cyclone.

And I prayed like hell he’d wake up.

11

Niki

It had been a while since I'd seen Lyon, and I wondered where he was. Last I heard, he had gone to Iran on a mission to rescue some Navy SEALs. I shoved the thought aside and focused on the task at hand.

I wasn't happy with my disguise. Playing a drug-addicted prostitute living on the streets wasn't exactly my dream assignment. I glanced in the mirror, critiquing my reflection.

The dark circles under my eyes, the hollowed-out cheeks—I looked like a real addict. But my clothes still weren't right.

The fishnet stockings had the right amount of rips, but the skirt barely covered my ass, and the top dipped so low it made me feel exposed. I yanked it off and pulled on a knotted tee instead. Better.

My hair was hidden under a blonde wig, tied back with a strip of black cloth I'd soaked in tea to give it a filthy, worn-out look. I stepped into a pair of black, knee-high boots—scuffed but sturdy. Good enough to fight in if it came down to that.

Grabbing my long coat, I headed out.

I made my way to an old, broken-down car hidden in a shed. The rust on the hood made it look like a piece of junk, but under the hood? This thing could outrun half the

cops in LA. A gift from Joseph—one I'd learned never to underestimate.

This mission wasn't like my usual gigs. We were after a cartel kingpin running a human trafficking ring in Los Angeles. We knew who he was. We just needed proof.

The problem? This bastard was ruthless. He'd slit your throat without blinking if he thought you were cheating him. And once I was inside his world, there'd be no turning back.

I couldn't afford to be Niki Bannon anymore. I had to become Candy Lewis.

Truth be told, I was always nervous going undercover in the cartel world. One of my closest friends had been murdered by this same organization when they discovered she was working for law enforcement.

That wouldn't happen to me.

When I went undercover, I became that person. But one thing never changed—no one laid a hand on me without consequences.

I wouldn't let them kill me like they did Jill.

These men weren't worth my life.

They needed to be locked away, or dead, every last one of them.

I stood on the street corner, surrounded by filth—both literal and human. The scum catcalled me, throwing out crude offers like I was a piece of meat. I ignored them, scanning the area.

Then, a strong arm wrapped around my shoulders.

My pulse spiked—until I heard a familiar voice.

“It’s me,” Jackson murmured in my ear. Then, louder: “Hey, sweetheart, how about takin’ me to your room for an hour? Show me what you got.”

I played along, slipping my arm around his waist. “Oh, honey, you’re gonna love what I can do with my tongue. Follow me, and I’ll make you real happy.”

His grip tightened as we walked. “You’ve been standing out here for four days. What have you found?”

“They’re planning to move me,” I whispered. “One of my sources said I’m being taken to ‘the big guy.’ If it’s who I think it is, we can finally bring him down. The way the other women talk, I’m almost certain he’s American. His name is Luke.”

Jackson frowned. “We don’t even have a photo of him.”

“I know. But if I get close enough, that changes.”

His jaw clenched. “You need to leave. This is getting worse by the day. I came because someone’s after you.”

I stiffened. “That’s impossible. No one knows who I am.”

“Mike called me. He said someone tipped off Luke about an undercover agent. You need to get out of here.”

I exhaled slowly, keeping my face neutral despite the dread curling in my stomach. “I can’t just disappear. That would blow my cover. Besides, I need to find Connie.”

Jackson narrowed his eyes. “Connie?”

“She’s nineteen. She was here earlier, and now she’s gone. No way she just walked away. Someone took her.”

Jackson shook his head. “You better worry about yourself.”

“I’ll handle myself.”

Before he could argue, a sharp noise outside made me freeze.

Then, gunfire erupted.

Jackson grunted, staggering back. Blood spread across his shirt.

“ Go through the trap door , ” I hissed. “Now.”

He hesitated, but I shoved him toward the hidden passage. It led to the building next door—our only escape.

The door burst open, slamming against the wall.

I turned slowly, my heart hammering.

Luke. I didn’t have a doubt.

He was white, wiry, and strung out—the kind of man who had lost his soul a long time ago. He ran the Los Angeles branch of the cartel, and I had just become his next target.

His gaze was cold as he stepped forward. “You’re dead. No one messes with my business. I haven’t seen a dime from you.”

I squared my shoulders, forcing a smirk. “Why the hell would I pay you? I don’t even know who you are.”

Luke let out a dry chuckle. “Oh, sweetheart, you’ll know soon enough.” He gestured to his men. “Take her.”

Not happening.

The sirens outside wailed louder.

I lashed out, my boot connecting with Luke’s gut. He went down hard, gasping for air.

One of his men lunged—I slammed my elbow into his face, sending him sprawling.

The third man hesitated. Then, instead of fighting, he grabbed Luke and hauled him toward a waiting car.

I turned to the last guy, who was still groaning on the ground. I stomped down on his wrist for good measure, then grabbed my bag and bolted for the trap door.

I crawled backward into the tunnel, my foot knocking into something solid.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “We need to make a decision. If we leave the tunnel now, we risk being seen.”

“I’m calling Joseph. We need backup. Someone from the inside leaked my identity, and when I find out who it is, they’re dead.”

I dialed. “Joseph, someone told the cartel I was undercover. We need an extraction at the tunnel house. Now . ”

“Who’s with you?”

“Jackson. He got shot. We need a medic.”

“Understood. Medic will be there in three minutes.

Then— creak.

I tensed.

Someone had just opened the trap door behind us.

“Move,” I whispered.

Jackson grabbed my arm, pulling me forward. We scrambled into the next building, locking the trap door behind us. I checked his leg— the wound was bad.

“We need to get to the side alley,” he said, as we ran outside.

“You go,” I whispered. “I’ll hold them off.”

Jackson glared at me. “Not happening. We stick together.”

Before I could argue, another shot rang out.

Jackson staggered, his body slamming into the wall. Blood bloomed across his shoulder.

And then—a slow clap .

I turned.

Luke stood there, a pistol in his hand, his expression smug.

“It’s your choice,” he said smoothly. “I finish him now, or you come with me.”

12

Lyon

After three uneventful days at home—Cyclone still slept—I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that something was wrong. I tried calling Niki, but there was no answer. With worry mounting, I decided to call Joseph Brazil to see if she'd gone on a job.

"Hello, this is Joseph Brazil."

"This is Lyon Spenser. I've been trying to reach Niki, but I'm not even getting a voicemail. Is she on a job?"

"Lyon Spenser, are you with The Golden Team?"

"Yes."

"Can you come into the office?"

A chill ran down my spine; I didn't need further confirmation that trouble was brewing. "Where is your office?" I asked. He gave me the address, and I left immediately.

Pulling onto my driveway, Raven called out, "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to the FBI headquarters," I replied.

“Then I’ll drive,” he said. I climbed into his vehicle, and we arrived within an hour.

Inside the office, I found Joseph talking with another man. He waved us over.

“Jackson, this is Lyon Spenser from The Golden Team.”

“And this is Raven, who’s also on my team. So, where is Niki?”

Jackson’s expression was grim as he explained, “The head of the Los Angeles cartel has her. They were after her—and someone in this office turned informant. They knew exactly where she was and attacked us. They even shot Jackson a couple of times, threatening to blow his brains out if she didn’t come with them.”

“She didn’t want to go. If those guns hadn’t been pointed at her, she might have fought back. That was two days ago,” Jackson added.

“Fuck! Have you heard anything from her at all?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” he replied.

“We’ve got FBI agents all over the city now, hunting for her,” Jackson continued.

I pressed on, “Who was the informant?”

“One of her team.”

“And where is that team member?”

Jackson’s voice darkened, “We found her with a note stabbed into her head that read, ‘Yes, it was me.’”

“Fuck. I’ll find her. Have you called her mother?” I asked urgently.

“Yes,” Jackson confirmed. “Raeann and her friends from the FBI Special Agents are on their way. They won’t come here—they’ll start working on finding her immediately.”

“Do you have his address?”

“No.”

“Do you have any address at all?”

“No.”

I exchanged a determined glance with Raven. “We’ll find her. Let me know if you hear from anyone.”

Joseph hesitated, “I don’t think it’s wise for you to start looking right now. With so many people involved—I never thought Niki’s mother would call in reinforcements—I’m telling you this because I know you’ll keep reaching out, and I’ll keep you informed on everything.”

Ignoring his caution, I left the office. I immediately began dialing every informant I knew, promising them anything they wanted if they could reveal where the cartel was holding Niki. I knew Raven was doing the same.

Later, we headed to the location where Niki had been undercover. As we combed the area, I noticed a young woman who appeared to be suffering from a drug overdose. I raced back to my car, grabbed my Narcan, and quickly administered it. Within moments, her eyes fluttered open, and I called for an ambulance.

While we waited, the girl fixed her gaze on me. I realized she was barely out of her teens and could tell she needed to speak. “You can talk to me,” I urged gently.

In a trembling voice, she said, “They shot me up with drugs because I talked to Candy, at his house. They’ve locked her in a room—and beaten her. I heard them say she killed one of Luke’s men, and now he’s furious. You have to call the police.”

“That’s the group we’re after. Do you know where they are?” I asked.

She hesitated, “No. I’ll try my hardest to remember something, but they’re always watching me.”

Before I could ask any more questions, she was loaded into the ambulance and whisked away.

I looked at Raven and said, “Someone here knows that address. If I have to beat it out of them, I will. Who do you think is keeping watch over these prostitutes to make sure they don’t cheat the boss?”

Raven replied, “How about we split up and do some scoping on our own? Whoever’s in charge here is bound to have a bunch of drugged-up men kissing his feet for more drugs because he’s in with the cartel.”

I crossed the street and spotted a dark-haired woman arguing with a man. Although she was dressed like a prostitute, the way she carried herself—her immaculate hair and the gentle way she clung to him—revealed she wasn’t one of the streetwalkers.

I approached them. “Hello,” I said, “you don’t look like a typical hooker. You must be here to help Raeann.”

“Who are you?” the man demanded.

“Lyon Spenser. I’m with The Golden Team and looking for my friend.”

“We’re after the same person,” the woman interjected. “Why do you think I don’t look like your average hooker?”

“You’re too clean,” I replied. “Look around—can you name a single clean prostitute?”

“My name’s Sage Brooks,” she said. “I told my husband I needed to get dirty, but he wouldn’t let me. He watches over me like I’m his damn queen.”

“You are my queen, sweetheart,” Wyatt said, pulling her close and kissing her.

Sage rolled her eyes. “You two will never catch the cartel if you’re busy making out. I’m here to locate the guy who’s supposed to be watching over the women. If we can get him to give us the address, we can rescue Niki—she’s being held at Luke’s house.”

“How do you know she’s there?” Sage asked.

“There was a young woman here I had to use Narcan on—she’d been shot up with drugs. She told me Niki was at Luke’s place and that they beat her badly.”

Sage scanned the area. “It’s that guy over there,” she said.

I followed her gaze and spotted a nervous man standing at the end of the alley. Just then, Raven strode over, grabbed him, and disarmed him. We converged on him quickly and led him to the far end of the alley.

“I’ll give you a chance to live,” I growled. “Tell me where they took Candy.” Looking into his eyes, I realized he wouldn’t offer anything willingly—he knew his

fate was sealed.

Without waiting for his answer, I rifled through his pockets, extracting his phone and a few syringes. Flipping through his contacts, I found the number I'd been hunting. I passed the phone to Raven. The man fought like a cornered animal, unwilling to surrender; he'd rather die than be drugged up. I shot whatever drugs were in those syringes into him.

"Why did you do that?" Sage demanded.

"I knew he wouldn't give up the address on his own—he understood that his death was inevitable. But when drugs are involved, he'll say anything for more," I explained.

"Where are you taking him?" Wyatt asked.

"Right here," I said coolly. "We'll keep him for a few minutes. He'll want more, and eventually, after an hour of wrangling the information out of him, I'll administer one final shot to ensure he never wakes again."

With that, the grim interrogation continued, each of us driven by the hope of saving Niki from Luke's clutches.

13

Niki

My eyes were swollen shut—I couldn't see a thing. I tried to force them open, but the pain and pressure made every movement a struggle. It felt as if a heavy weight was sitting on my chest. It hurt like hell when I raised a hand to push it away. I encountered a solid surface, and my other hand brushed against a side. My arms hurt so bad they must be broken.

I was trapped in a small box, unable to breathe. I tried kicking my legs free, but the space was so cramped that I couldn't even move them. With every shallow breath, I felt as if I were smothering in this tiny prison. At that point, pain no longer mattered. I had to do something about breathing.

I focused inward, trying to shut everything down and reach inside my body for control. Concentration was nearly impossible as my mind screamed in protest, desperate for air. I attempted to stretch my neck, only to be reminded of the rope burns—a cruel souvenir from that monster dragging me around with the rope tied tightly around my neck. The memory made swallowing even harder.

Just as my mind began to drift into a calm, meditative state, a brutal kick shattered the silence. “Are you still alive in there? I want you to die slowly for killing one of my men. Do you hear me, bitch? Die painfully and slowly.” He kicked the box again, and I screamed in agony.

“Good, you're dying slowly. Can you even breathe in that box?” he taunted, laughing

like a madman. “I’m going to bury you in a grave. Don’t worry about a funeral—I’ll say a few words for you,” he added with a cruel chuckle.

I heard his footsteps receding as he walked away, leaving me with the grim certainty that he’d return to finish what he’d started. Was my life over? Would he be the one to bury my body in this small box?

It took another hour before I could manage to slip into a meditative state. In that dark moment, I clung to the hope that Jackson had managed to tell Joseph who had taken me. I held onto the thought of the relief and happiness I would feel when they finally rescued me.

14

Lyon

I sat down for a moment and closed my eyes, finally allowing myself a brief rest—I couldn't even remember the last time I had slept. Maybe two minutes of sleep would do me good. The next thing I knew, voices were waking me up.

"Hey, I'm glad you got some sleep, even if it was in a chair. How do you feel?" Raven asked.

"I feel like crap. Has anything good happened?" I replied.

"No, well, maybe. I just got a call from that girl who went to the hospital. She said the place she was in was Englewood—she remembered because she overheard a man asking why were they in Englewood instead of the city," Raven explained.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"She said he got punched in the face for mentioning where they were."

"The others are getting ready," someone added.

"Who's that?" I inquired.

"That will be us. I met you at the hospital; this is my partner, Chris. We're Niki's uncles—and both former FBI agents. Thanks for letting us tag along," Michael said,

walking into the room.”

“It’s good to meet you,” I said, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. We left immediately, and I asked, “Do we have any address or area?”

“No. But she mentioned that when she looked out the window, she saw a large property full of trees.”

“So it won’t be right in Englewood—it’ll be on the outskirts where they can have a bigger property,” I mused, pulling onto the freeway.

Two hours later, we were driving the back roads of Englewood. Without a precise address, this was going to take forever.

“We can’t talk to the local police because we don’t know if they’re paid off. Who can we question? Maybe we could ask people in the neighborhood—locals will talk if they’re suspicious of their neighbors,” Michael suggested.

“If we see families outside, concerned about what’s going on next door, we’ll stop and talk to them,” Michael said.

That’s exactly what we did. We pulled over and asked a few questions whenever we spotted neighbors standing outside. Most complained about trivial matters—like how one neighbor mowed his lawn—but nothing that pointed us in the right direction.

As the sun began to set, I noticed a group of men acting strangely. “Check out those guys on your right—what are they doing?” I asked.

“It looks like they’re loading that coffin-like box into a truck. I think we’ve found Niki,” Michael observed.

I pulled over and approached the men. “Excuse me, can you tell me where Niki Street is?” I asked.

“Get the fuck away from us,” one of them snarled.

Before I could press further, I heard a woman's cry: “Niki, sweetheart, are you in this box?” That was all the encouragement I needed—I punched both men, and they went down immediately.

“Lyon, more are in the house. One is the leader, and his name is Luke. I can’t breathe,” Michael growled as he ran and got something to open the box.

Michael was already prying the lid off when we rushed inside. At first, the house was eerily silent, but then chaos erupted. We took out everyone before they even knew what hit them. As we swept through the rest of the house, a noise made me pause—I knew Luke was waiting behind a door, ready to kill us.

I signaled to Raven, who was positioned near the door. “I don’t think there’s anyone else here,” he said, feigning calm. Then, as he opened and closed the door, he remarked, “Wow, I can’t believe she was in that homemade coffin.” I waited a few seconds, and when Luke finally stepped through the doorway, Raven shot him dead.

“I was going to shoot him,” I said.

Raven replied, “I saved you the trouble of killing another person. I’ll call the FBI—you go check on Niki.”

I stepped outside and found Michael holding Niki. I rushed to her side, my head spinning. “Who is that?” she asked.

“It’s me, sweetheart,” I whispered. Michael wiped his eyes while Chris stood on the

other side of the vehicle, clearly upset. I glanced down and saw that both men were dead—good, they deserved it.

“Did you kill him?” Niki asked.

“Yeah, he’s dead.”

“Good, my case is closed. Can you call Joseph?” she said.

“Raven is doing that. Let me hold you,” I replied, taking her into my arms as she settled closer to me.

“Lyon, I’m glad you showed up when you did. They were going to bury me. How did you even find this place?”

“Luck—God sent us here. He knew you were here and needed us,” I replied, leaning down and gently kissing her forehead. “I’m taking you to the hospital as soon as the FBI arrives.”

“What about an ambulance?” she asked.

“No, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“I must look like a mess—there isn’t a spot on me that doesn’t hurt. Is my whole face swollen?”

“Yep, but you’re still beautiful,” I said, kissing her forehead again. “Plus, you still have a blonde wig on.”

“Can you please take it off? Are Uncle Michael and Uncle Chris still crying?”

I glanced over at them; they were both wiping their eyes. “They’re done crying,” I remarked as I gently removed her wig, letting her long braid fall free.

“Lyon, my arms are broken—and my fingers are all pulled out of their sockets,” she whispered.

“Can I see your left arm, sweetie?” Chris asked as he gently touched her hand.

I couldn’t help but wonder why she held her arms so protectively; I was sure she had more broken bones than she let on.

Just then, a car skidded to a stop beside us, and Raeann, along with her FBI buddies, hurried over.

“How do you feel, honey?” Raeann asked, her eyes fixed on Niki as she inhaled sharply.

“Mom, I’m fine. Lyon is taking me to the hospital. Can you come with us?” Niki replied.

“Of course I will. Joseph can take care of things here, and the girls and I will follow you,” Raeann assured her.

“What girls?” Niki asked, confused.

“My FBI team,” she answered.

“All of them?”

“Yes. Say hello to them.”

“Sage, are you here?” Niki whispered.

“Yes, sweetie,” came the gentle reply.

“Emma, Brinley, Skye—are all of you here?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Please go home to your families. I love all of you so much for coming to find me.”

“We have to go,” I said. Raven climbed into the driver’s seat, and we drove off.

I looked down at Niki, and she was already sleeping.

15

Niki

I decided it wasn't going to work out with Lyon and me. Lately, I seemed to be injured every time I turned around, and he was usually away on a job. The only way we could make it work was for me to quit my job. I could do that—if Lyon truly wanted to be with me, I'd leave everything behind for him.

That thought surprised me, filling me with a strange pleasure at the idea of freedom. I no longer wanted to be an FBI agent; I didn't want the horses, the big home, or the constant danger. I longed to downsize, to simplify my life. Was this just a fleeting impulse, or would this desire stick? I knew I had to mull it over a bit longer.

I was dozing when I felt someone watching me. When I opened my eyes, Max was sitting in the only chair in the room.

"Max, why are you here? One day they'll boot you out of the Navy Seals for abandoning your post whenever you feel like it," I teased.

"Damn it, Niki, I'm so fucking angry," he snapped. "Look at you—you'd be dead if Lyon hadn't driven by at that exact moment. This has to stop." I noticed him quickly wiping his eyes. "I'm no longer a Navy Seal, you know. The government left me to rot in Afghanistan. I'm thinking about starting a business like The Golden Team. Some of my friends from the service are already interested."

"That's good—I was hoping you'd say that," I replied, a hint of excitement in my

voice. "I'm planning to quit my job too. I might even sell my house, get rid of the horses, and live a quiet life in a small, comfy home that doesn't take two days to clean."

"When did you decide all this?" Max asked.

"This morning, when I realized I was tired of being shot, beaten, and injured every damn day," I admitted.

Max nodded. "I'm glad you're quitting the FBI—no more undercover work. Call Joseph today and tell him you're done before you change your mind. Whatever you do, don't let him talk you out of it."

"Max, stop worrying about me. I promise I won't let him talk me out of quitting my job," I said with a rueful smile. "I must look pretty bad—it's been three days."

"You haven't seen yourself?" he asked.

"No, but now that my eyes are open again, I can see everyone's reaction when they look at me."

"Are you saying your eyes were swollen shut?"

"Yes, and my jawbone is cracked. It hurts to talk for any length of time. I was hit in the face every time he saw me. But he's dead, and I'm done with that life. How are you holding up?"

"I'm good. It feels so nice to be home again," Max replied.

"Did you talk to Olivia?" I asked.

Max sighed. “Yes. I don’t blame Olly for getting married. She thought I was dead, but she waited three years—our love was so strong, it’s still strong. Now, she has a baby and a husband. I left Oregon because being so close to her was too tempting, and it was hard for both of us.”

“I’m sorry she went through that,” I murmured. “I know how much you two loved each other. Olly nearly died from a broken heart; she was in the hospital for weeks. I told her I didn’t believe you were dead—she was so excited, I felt terrible about that. But after a while, she stopped believing you were alive.”

Max’s voice softened. “I hate that she suffered. My love for her will never die. Her husband even begged me not to take her away from him and their child. That’s why I left Oregon. I’m moving to Montana. I bought a nine-bedroom, ten-bathroom bed and breakfast for myself and anyone who wants to join. It’s on a mountain called Fraiser’s Mountain. It’ll take time to get it running, but the Band of Navy Seals promised to help me get started when I’m ready.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said, genuinely excited for him. “Is the bed and breakfast furnished?”

“Completely. I’ve already moved all my things there. The master bedroom even has a small living area attached, and I’ve claimed that space for myself.”

My head ached terribly at this point, so I closed my eyes, willing the pain away as sleep overtook me. When I woke again, Lyon was in the chair, absorbed in a book—a reminder of one of his quirks, his love of reading. Brutus was sleeping on the floor in front of the window. I noticed once in his bag a collection of books spanning different genres. I tried to smile, but my lips wouldn’t move; they were still swollen.

“Hi,” he said, standing up and moving his chair closer.

“Hi,” I managed.

“Max said he’d be back later. He told me about his plans—they sound exciting,” Lyon continued, a grin tugging at his lips. “I mentioned a bit about the Golden Team, and he said he’d have to come up with a good name for his new business. River wanted to call us the Best Of The Best,” he grinned.

I actually managed to chuckle, remembering River’s repeated claim on our first meeting that they were “the best of the best.” You are the best of the best, I teased, “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be away on a mission?”

Lyon grinned. “I leave tomorrow, but it’s only for a few days. Then I’ll take some time off work. Please, come home with me when you’re released. Your mom might argue that you’re going home with them, but just tell her you’re coming home with me. What do you say?”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do you think I need someone to take care of me? I should be fine on my own.”

Leaning down, Lyon pressed his lips to my fingers. “Sweetheart, have you looked at your fingers? Both your arms are in casts.” I glanced down and saw my swollen, injured fingers—reminders of how he had pulled them out of their sockets. The pain had been unbearable, and I had passed out. He’d waited until I came to before continuing.

“That was excruciating,” I whispered. Lyon kissed my fingers again.

“Will you kiss my pain away if I go home with you?” I whispered.

“Every chance I get,” he replied.

“Then yes, I’ll go home with you. But I’m going to need a nurse to come for an hour each day to help me with... other things.”

Lyon arched an eyebrow. “What other things?”

“My shower, for one,” I answered.

A mischievous smile spread across his face. “I can give you a shower. I’m looking forward to showering you.”

“Are you telling me this to get me hot? Because if you are, it’s working. I might be broken right now, but every sense is on fire, and I can’t wait for you to help me with my shower. I want your hands to soap every inch of me.”

“If you keep talking like that, I’ll shock everyone on this floor and put you in the shower right now,” he warned playfully. “I’ll have you crying out for more, leaving them all in awe.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, even as the pain in my face reminded me of my injuries. Despite everything, I yearned for his touch—wanted to feel his hands on me, sending shivers of pleasure through my battered body. The heat rising within me was undeniable, I wanted to feel his hands on me, giving me an orgasm. I felt my panties getting wet. Wait, I don’t have any panties on.

“No matter what shape your body is in, those feelings never fade,” I teased. “Will you give me an orgasm every time you give me a shower?”

“I’ll give you one right now if you keep talking like that,” he murmured, leaning down to lick my lips. A moan escaped me as his hand slipped under the sheet, igniting a fire I could hardly control.

Just then, the nurse interjected, “Am I interrupting you two?”

Lyon chuckled. “Yes, but we’ll set our feelings aside for now. We have plenty of time when we get home.”

I wanted to see if Niki wanted to try getting up and showering. I’ll wrap your arms so they don’t get wet. There is a chair for you to sit on, so you won’t have to stand for a long period.”

“I would love to shower if you wrap my arms. Lyon can help me shower.” The nurse chuckled as she walked out to get the wrap. I looked at Lyon. “I get to feel you touching me quicker than I thought. Do you think they heard us talking?”

He grinned. “I’m not sure, but I’m thankful if they did.”

16

Lyon

My hands shook as I helped Niki walk to the shower, my touch gentle despite the tremor in my fingers. I carefully undressed her, then removed all my clothes except my boxers. I started the shower and guided her to the chair, making sure the water never touched her injured arms. “I’m going to wash your hair first,” I murmured softly.

As I worked, I felt a stirring desire mixed with the lingering tension of pain. When I nearly finished, I asked, “Can you stand?” Not realizing I had been kissing her neck and that she had already risen on her own—she must have stood by instinct.

I soaped her body slowly, and as my hands moved between her thighs, she moaned softly and pressed closer. My middle finger traced a delicate path through the heat of her skin while my thumb expertly caressed her clit, coaxing a cascade of pleasure. Her breath hitched, and she cried out, “That feels so good—don’t stop, I want more.”

I gently helped her settle into the chair before kneeling beside her. My tongue set to work, lavishing attention on her sensitive spot as my thumb continued its tender exploration. The intensity built until she climaxed repeatedly, her body trembling with each release.

Afterward, I carefully dried both of us and helped dress her, then changed myself—discarding my boxers without hesitation. All the while, Niki watched me intently. “When my mouth heals,” she whispered with a playful glint, “I’m going to

return the favor and take you in my mouth, giving you as much pleasure as you've given me."

I picked her up in my arms and carried her back to bed, planting gentle kisses along her skin as I laid her down. I settled in to read while she dozed, until her family eventually entered the room.

"Hello, I'm glad you're here," I greeted them. "I have to leave for a few days, but when Niki is discharged from the hospital, she's coming home with me. I'll take care of her. Now, does anyone have anything to say?"

Raeann responded quietly, "I don't." Then she turned to Nick: "Do you have anything to say, Nick?"

Nick added, "I'm sure Niki will be in good hands." I heard Niki chuckle softly. I rose to leave and gently kissed her goodbye, but she stopped me. "How is Cyclone?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

"He's still unconscious. The doctor said they're not sure why he hasn't woken up yet," I replied. Niki whispered, "I pray he wakes up soon."

I stepped closer and kissed her again. "I'll be back in a few days," I promised.

"Okay. Stay safe," she murmured.

I paused at the door. Turning back, I heard her say, "Thank you for helping me shower." I chuckled, returning to the bed. "You're welcome," I said, kissing her once more. As I neared the exit, I heard her soft whisper: "I love you."

I stopped and noticed Nick and Raeann watching us. "Could you give us a moment, please?" I asked. They stepped away, and I returned to Niki. Helping her sit up, I saw

a tear roll down her cheek. Gently, I cradled her face in my hands.

“Sweetheart, I love you more than anything in this world. I will never love another woman as long as I live. You are my life, and I promise to return to you,” I vowed, kissing away her tears. “Even if I’m late getting home, I’ll always return to you.”

Niki nodded, and I left. Outside, Raeann—wiping her eyes—whispered, “You are so lucky to have Niki’s love, and she’s lucky to have yours.” she replied softly.

“I know, and thank you. I’ll make sure someone stays with her. It’s better if she isn’t alone at night.” I said.

“We’ll stay with her,” Raeann promised.

This wasn’t an easy time to part. My lady had confessed her love, and I longed to ease all her pain. I smiled, marveling at how lucky I was to have her love. Two hours later, I was still smiling as I entered our local hospital.

“Why are you smiling?” River asked.

“Niki loves me, and I love her,” I replied.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. How is he doing?”

“There’s been no change. This isn’t good. They want to send him to a rehab facility, but I said no. If he has to be somewhere, he can stay with one of us. Raven wants him to stay at his place—I think that’s a good idea. He can sit on the beach and get his tan back.”

“Have they checked his brain waves lately?”

“Yes, everything appears to be functioning as it should. No one knows why he isn’t waking up.”

“I mean, look at him. He just looks like he’s taking a nap. He’s going to be starving when he finally wakes up. They’re feeding him through a tube—I bet he’ll crave a steak and an ice-cold beer as soon as he comes around.”

“You’re right; I wouldn’t mind that myself. I’ll stick around with Cyclone if you want to head home to your family.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you early in the morning. Who else is coming with us?”

“Oliver is coming. He’s staying at my place while his new home is being built,” I explained.

“So, he found the property he wanted?”

“Yes. It’s the one right next door to me. I was planning to buy it so no one else could develop it, but then Oliver said he wanted it. I thought that was perfect. Now he stays with me until his house is finished. He even checks on the construction to make sure everything’s done right,” I laughed, recalling Oliver’s temper when he’d inspected the progress on his home.

“Once, when he went to check on his workers, they were drinking and swimming in my pool. One guy was passed out on my floaty—he was the contractor. They even helped themselves to my outdoor fridge. And you know Oliver—he hates wasting money, he was paying them by the hour.”

River laughed until his side hurt. We all knew how much Oliver despised wasting

money; he'd said so many times.

"I wish I could have seen that," Cyclone chuckled.

"Cyclone, damn, it's about time you woke up."

"Wait—how long have I been asleep?"

"Five weeks."

"What? No way—it's been five weeks? Where am I?"

"You're in Carlsbad."

"Wait, where were we?"

"We were in Iran, rescuing those Navy Seals."

"That's right—I was shot. That's all I remember."

"A bullet went into the back of your skull. Thank God it didn't go any further. I told you that you were hard-headed."

Cyclone felt around for his wound and discovered the patch on his shaved head.

"Who took the bullet out?"

"I did," I replied.

"And what about the other bullet?" he asked.

"You lost a lot of blood, but I shared some of mine with you."

“Thanks, Lyon. Did you call my family?”

“No—we decided to wait and see if you’d wake up.”

“Good, because the last thing we need is my brothers getting pissed off. Well, I’m ready to leave. Are you heading home?” he asked, glancing at me. “Are you leaving?”

“They aren’t going to let you leave today,” River said.

“Then can you please get me three giant hamburgers and a cold beer? Cyclone asked. He looked at me.

“Are you leaving?”

“Just for a few days.

I’m calling the doctor so they can unhook you from all those drips,” Raven said.

“Why is there a tube in my stomach?” he demanded.

“That’s your feeding tube,” River said, laughing at Cyclone’s bewildered expression.

“What kind of food do they put in it? It doesn’t fill me up—I’m starving. Can we stop on the way home and grab some steaks?”

It was obvious he didn’t hear when River said he wouldn’t be going home today.

“By the way, Lyon is in love,” River said.

Cyclone looked at me as he disconnected his IV drips. “Who are you in love with?”

“She loves me too. It’s Niki.”

“Niki. That doesn’t surprise me.”

“She’s in the hospital and will be there for a while,” I explained, recounting what had happened to her.

“Fuck, she was in a homemade casket. God put you in the right place at the right time. She must have been in so much pain— they even pulled her fingers from their sockets. Fuck, that must have made her pass out from the agony.”

“Yes, she said she passed out every time they beat her.”

“Fuck.”

17

Lyon

Oliver and I picked River up at five. Our flight was set for Texas, where we would escort a woman and her two children to North Carolina, reuniting them with her billionaire husband. They had purchased a mountain estate, and she had stayed behind to ensure the movers packed everything properly.

She carried a heavy case—one we knew contained the family’s prized jewelry. She told us at least twenty times. Hopefully, no one else knew. But the way she clutched it, her grip white-knuckled, would make anyone wonder what she was protecting. I positioned myself to block curious onlookers as we made our way to the plane.

Out of the corner of my eye, movement registered—too fast, too deliberate. A hand. A gun. Instinct took over. I pivoted, seizing the man’s wrist before he could fire. A swift strike sent him sprawling, unconscious, just as the airport police arrived.

I gave a brief explanation, ready to move on, letting them take over when an officer stopped me.

“This is a U.S. Air Marshal,” he said, gesturing toward the downed man. “If he pulled a weapon, there was a reason. You say you’re escorting a woman and her kids to North Carolina? And she’s carrying all the family’s jewels? Where’s the husband in all of this? You don’t find that odd?”

I had to admit, it was strange that her husband left her to transport millions in jewels

alone.

“We’ve been watching her closely,” I replied, heading toward the plane.

“Call me with any updates,” the officer said, then reconsidered. “Never mind. I’m coming with you. We’ll call it extra protection.” He extended a hand. “Stanley.”

I sighed. “Fine. But stay out of our way. We’ll handle this.”

His brows lifted. “Noted.”

My mind was racing. Something wasn’t adding up. When I boarded the plane, I turned to Oliver and River. “Stanley’s coming with us. I think we have a situation.”

Tonya—the woman we were escorting—watched us carefully.

“Are you all right?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Yes. Thank you for saving us.”

“That’s why I’m here. Are the kids okay? Do they need a snack?”

Her expression hardened. “No. They eat only their designated meals. No snacks.”

That raised a flag. What parent doesn’t allow their kids a snack?

Stanley stepped in. “I’m here as backup, in case anyone tries to harm you or the kids.”

“That’s why I hired these men,” she said sharply. “I don’t need more protection.”

Her reaction was almost defensive—angry, even. Why would a police officer’s presence bother her? As the plane taxied, she sat stiffly, jaw tight, fingers gripping the armrest like she wanted to crush it.

Something was seriously off.

Once we were in the air, I made my way to Oliver in the cockpit. “Something isn’t right,” I muttered.

Oliver frowned. “Yeah. I’ll get George, the husband, on the line.”

I nodded. “Keep it quiet. I don’t want her overhearing.”

Returning to my seat, I kept my gaze on Tonya without making it obvious. The four-year-old was eerily obedient. No requests, no complaints—not even a glance toward her mother for reassurance. Even the baby was silent. Not normal. More like they were afraid to talk.

River’s phone buzzed. He read the text I sent him, his face blank. Then, casually, he offered, “Would you like something to drink? We’ll be landing in a couple of hours.”

“No, thank you,” Tonya said curtly.

“So, are you excited for the move?” I pressed.

She barely turned my way. “I have a headache. I’d rather not talk.”

That was odd. Yesterday, she had been chatty, excited about reuniting with her husband.

Her shift in behavior made my gut churn.

A few minutes later, she got up and went to the bathroom. I turned to the four-year-old and kept my voice low.

“Is she your mom?”

The little girl hesitated, then whispered, “No. That’s Sherry.”

A cold chill ran down my spine. “Where’s your mommy?”

“She’s locked in the basement.”

I pressed a finger to my lips, and she nodded, understanding the need for silence.

Keeping my expression neutral, I stood and approached River. Low enough that only he could hear, I said, “The little girl says her real mom is locked in a basement. This woman is Sherry.”

River’s jaw tensed. “I just talked to the husband. I described her. He said she sounded like their nanny, Sherry. She’s been with them since the oldest was born.”

“She’s the nanny?” My pulse quickened.

River’s expression darkened. “Yeah. He said she started getting...weird. Dyed her hair like Tonya’s. Wore green contacts. They noticed the kids acting terrified around her. They fired her—told her she wouldn’t be moving with them.”

Dread settled in my gut. “You think she killed Tonya?”

River’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “I’m calling the local police to check the house. I’ll have the husband meet us at the airport.”

Before I could respond, I noticed something. Sherry was having a silent meltdown. Her breaths quickened. Her hands trembled.

Then I realized—her case was missing.

Heart pounding, I darted toward the bathroom.

And there it was.

A bomb.

“Oliver!” I barked. He saw it and immediately rushed to River, taking control of the plane.

Stanley, watching the kids, muttered, “The Air Marshal must have recognized her. She’s wanted.”

River glared at Sherry. “So, you’re the nanny. You wanted the wife’s life. When they fired you, you decided to kill their kids along with yourself.”

Sherry’s lips curled into a deranged smile. “That’s exactly right. Tonya got everything. But she didn’t deserve it. She didn’t even know—we’re cousins. I tricked her into hiring me. I locked her in the basement—with another bomb.” She laughed, a wild, unhinged sound.

Rage burned through me.

River didn’t hesitate. He punched her in the chin, knocking her out cold.

“She has the detonator,” he muttered, already checking her for it.

I tore her dress down the front.

And there it was.

The bomb, strapped to her thigh.

River grabbed his phone. “Cyclone. We’ve got a bomb on board. I need you to walk us through disarming it.”

Cyclone’s voice was calm. “Describe it.”

“Orange and red wires. And...wait. Green.”

“Good. River, make sure she stays unconscious. The detonator is on her thigh. If she wakes up and struggles, it could go off.”

River took a steadying breath. “I’m cutting the tape.”

“Lyon,” Cyclone said. “Tell Oliver to fly away from populated areas.”

I relayed the message. Oliver nodded, angling the plane away from civilization.

River held the detonator now.

“Okay,” Cyclone instructed. “Open it. It’s like a garage remote. There should be a way to pop it open carefully.”

River grunted. “Tell Cyclone to stop telling me to be careful—I got this.” Then, quietly, “If this goes south, tell Kat I love her and the kids.”

“Nothing’s going south,” Cyclone said firmly. “Cut the green wire first—on the

detonator, then the bomb.”

I held my breath as River severed the wire.

“Good,” Cyclone said. “Now the red. Same order.”

River’s hands were rock steady as he worked.

Silence.

Then—

“It’s done,” River exhaled. “Bomb’s defused.”

Sherry groaned, starting to stir.

I leaned down, my voice ice-cold. “Your plan failed. Instead of killing us and those kids, you’re going to rot in prison.”

Her scream was pure rage.

I smiled.

18

Niki

Fire. My body was on fire. Every breath felt like a struggle, like I was back in that suffocating little box. I couldn't focus. Everything around me blurred and shifted, slipping through my grasp like a fading dream.

I searched the room for Lyon. Where was he? Panic swelled in my chest.

"Mama," I croaked, my throat is raw. "Call Lyon. I need to tell him something."

Her warm hand smoothed over my forehead. "Sweetheart, they're trying to bring your fever down so you can breathe easier."

"Please, Mama. I need him."

That's when he walked in. His strong and unwavering presence filled the room, but the moment he laid eyes on me, his confidence in his stance faltered. His gaze flicked to my mother, then to the doctor, and finally to me. My skin burned, my breathing ragged.

"What the hell is going on?" Lyon's voice was sharp, demanding answers. I heard a growl and knew Brutus was with him.

"Brutus, stand down," Lyon demanded.

I mustered the last of my strength. “Lyon, I’m so happy you’re here.” Tears pricked my eyes, slipping freely down my cheeks. “I had some... complications. My organs... they aren’t doing so well.” My breath hitched, but I pushed through. “I love you. You’re the only man I’ve ever loved, the only one I ever will. Thank you for loving me. I’m sorry that I’m dying. If I could, I’d live to a hundred just to be with you.”

His face darkened. “Sweetheart, I would never let you die.”

I felt the wetness from my tears pooling beneath my head, soaking my pillow. But what did it matter? They were taking me away from the man I loved more than anything.

Lyon turned on the doctor, his entire body rigid with fury. “Why would you tell her she’s dying? Why would you put that fear in her head?” His voice was pure steel, dangerous.

The doctor paled. “I—I didn’t say her organs were shutting down right now. I only meant that—”

“That’s not what you told me.” My voice wavered, my vision swimming. “You said I didn’t have much longer.”

Lyon’s jaw clenched. “Sweetheart, do you trust me?”

I nodded, unable to form words.

“We trust you too,” my mother added her tone tight with suppressed rage.

Without another word, Lyon scooped me up, carrying me out of the hospital. My parents followed, not questioning him for even a second.

He placed me gently in the back seat of a large pickup, my father taking the front beside him. The ride was long, the roads winding, until we reached a secluded house perched on a cliff with the most breathtaking ocean view I'd ever seen.

Lyon carried me inside like I weighed nothing, his arms solid and protective. "From now on, I'm taking care of you." His voice was firm, resolute. "First thing's first—getting that fever down. How long have you had it?"

"A few days," I admitted, feeling exhausted. "It's weird... the doctor had me convinced I was dying." I frowned something twisting in my gut. "Where did that doctor even come from?"

Lyon's expression darkened. "We're going to find out."

He brought me into his room, where floor-to-ceiling windows framed the sea. "Oliver is here somewhere," he said, drawing back the drapes. "He's building a house next door. I'll see if he can mix one of his herbal remedies for you."

Then he leaned in and kissed my forehead. "I'm going to show your parents to their room."

The bed was impossibly soft, the blanket warm and inviting. As soon as my head hit the pillow, sleep finally, mercifully, claimed me.

When I woke, the room was dark except for a faint glow from the bathroom. For a moment, I forgot where I was. Then I stretched out my hand—and found Lyon beside me. My lips curled into a smile before I let sleep take me again.

The next time I woke, sunlight streamed through the windows. I felt better—weak, but no longer burning up. I wanted to get up, but no one was around to help me. I didn't want to risk falling.

A noise caught my attention, and I turned my head.

Lyon stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

My breath caught.

He was gorgeous. Strong. Confident. Completely unaware that I was shamelessly staring.

He smirked, walking over to me. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll help you up.” He leaned down, brushing a kiss against my lips, then disappeared into the closet, still talking casually.

I barely heard him. My mind was still stuck on the way the water had glistened against his tanned skin.

“Your parents had to leave,” he said as he emerged, pulling a shirt over his head. “They got an emergency call from the winery. They didn’t want to go, but I convinced them I’d take good care of you.” He sat on the edge of the bed, watching me closely. “Your fever’s gone.”

I exhaled in relief.

“I also talked to the hospital administrator.” His tone hardened. “No doctor by that name works there.”

My stomach twisted. “What? That’s insane. Was he trying to kill me?”

“We’re looking into it,” Lyon said grimly. “You weren’t the only one. Three other women—young and healthy—ended up in critical condition under his care. He had them sedated, put on life support before anyone could question them.”

A chill ran through me. “Did any of them... die?”

“We don’t know. The FBI is after him now, but as soon as I took you out of that hospital, he disappeared.”

My skin crawled.

Lyon stood and grabbed a cup from the nightstand. “Oliver made this for you. You need to drink it before you try standing.”

The liquid was dark green and honestly looked awful.

I wrinkled my nose. “What is it?”

Lyon grinned. “No idea. Oliver swears it’ll stop the dizziness.”

I took a sip. Then another. It was surprisingly good. “Okay, I expected it to taste like dirt. But it’s actually decent.”

Lyon chuckled. “Good. Now let’s see if you can stand. How about a shower? I’ll wrap your arms so your casts don’t get wet, and I’ll set up a chair in the shower.”

I nodded, grateful for his thoughtfulness. I would love a shower.

After the shower, Lyon was waiting. He dried me off, helped me into one of his oversized T-shirts, and carried me back to bed.

But something inside me twisted.

I couldn’t stay here. It was too personal. Too intimate.

Tears burned my eyes as I whispered into his chest, “I can’t do this, Lyon. Not like this. I need to go home.”

His arms tightened around me. “Sweetheart, I want to do this. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I admitted, voice cracking. “But this is too much. If my mom had stayed, it would be different. I don’t want to mess this up before we even have a chance. I can’t even move my arms or use my hands.”

Lyon exhaled, his breath warm against my temple. “How about I bring in a nurse? She can help with everything. I’ll just carry you around and kiss you.”

I shook my head. “I need to go home. Even though the carrying around getting kisses sounds wonderful.”

His grip loosened. “Home to where ? Your big house with all those stairs? How are you going to manage alone?” His voice was gentle, but I could hear the frustration behind it.

“I’ll have help.”

He fell silent for a moment. Then, softly, “I won’t stand in your way if this is what you want. But I’m not going anywhere.”

I looked up at him. “You better not. Because I’ll never love another man.”

His lips brushed mine. “Damn it, woman. How about I just move in with you?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “No.”

“Marry me, then.”

“Lyon.”

He grinned. “Worth a shot.”

I kissed him again, lingering. “We’ll figure it out.”

His arms tightened around me. “You’re damn right we will.”

19

Lyon

I was heading to Niki's before leaving for another job. It had been three jobs now since she'd gone back home—not moved back, just gone home. I always said she moved back home, but that wasn't really the case. She'd never lived with me.

This job would take a while. We had no clue where Tag Harris was. He'd gone on a solo hike through the Brazilian jungle three months ago and never returned. His sister had only just realized he was missing.

Three months , and no one had noticed?

Tag had spent two years in a wheelchair before Graham Wilson, a former Navy SEAL surgeon, performed life-changing surgery on him. The man had defied the odds and walked again. I could only pray to hell that his legs hadn't failed him out there.

I pulled up to Niki's home and spotted her immediately. She was lounging in a hammock, lazily rocking it with her foot, wearing a sundress that swayed with the breeze.

She turned her head, saw me, and smiled.

That was all it took.

I was out of the truck in seconds, pulling her up into my arms. Her laughter melted against my lips as I kissed her, holding her close.

“I love you,” I murmured, my lips brushing against hers.

Her face had finally healed. A couple of faint scars remained—tiny reminders of her strength. The woman had been through hell, and yet, here she was. Beautiful. Resilient. Smiling up at me.

She reached up and licked my lips teasingly.

“Let’s go to bed,” she whispered against my ear, her breath warm, enticing.

“Where’s Holly?” I asked, my voice already rough with need.

“I sent her home for the night.” She grinned mischievously. “Because my sweetheart is staying with me.”

Desire surged through me, but reality tugged at the back of my mind.

“When do you have to leave?” she asked, running her fingers over my jaw.

“Early.” I exhaled, fighting the pull of her. “Let me grab the Chinese food from the truck.”

She pouted but kissed me anyway. “We can heat it later. If you have to leave early... we need to make the most of tonight.” Her voice dipped into something sultry. “We’ve waited long enough.”

Hell.

That was all the encouragement I needed.

After tossing the food in the kitchen, I lifted her into my arms and carried her straight to the bedroom.

No more waiting.

She wore a simple T-shirt dress—something that took no effort at all to remove. I pulled it over her head, and she stood naked before me, her body perfect, soft, and mine.

I ran my hands over her skin, careful of the smaller cast still on her arm. But Niki was impatient. She reached for my shirt, trying to pull it over my head, but her cast kept bumping my nose.

I laughed. “You trying to knock me out, sweetheart?”

“Sorry,” she mumbled, determined.

I ripped the shirt off myself before she could try again, then picked her up and laid her across the bed.

Her fingers skimmed over my waistband. “Take them off,” she whispered, her breath hot against my ear. “I want to see all of you. I’ve waited for this moment since I first saw you in that damn desert.”

I was burning up, seconds from losing control.

Apparently, I wasn’t moving fast enough.

Niki took matters into her own hands, shoving my pants down. I kicked them the rest

of the way off, my eyes locked on hers.

The second I touched her, she gasped, her body arching. My mouth traced the inside of her thigh, savoring the way she trembled beneath me. She tangled her fingers in my hair, pulling me closer, urging me on.

Her moans filled the room as I devoured her, my hands memorizing every inch of her.

I wanted to hear her scream my name.

I wanted to ruin her for anyone else.

Our bodies moved in sync, desperate, hungry, right .

I kissed her deeply, our tongues meeting in a dance that mirrored what was to come. My hands tangled in her thick, gorgeous hair, and hers roamed my body like she was memorizing me.

I slid my mouth over her breast, sucking her nipple as she gasped and gripped my shoulders.

God, I was starving for her.

“Make love to me,” she whispered.

She didn’t have to ask twice.

I entered her slowly, savoring every sensation, every soft gasp that left her lips. I held still, just for a moment, because if I moved too soon, I wasn’t sure I’d last.

She tilted her hips, urging me deeper.

“Faster,” she murmured.

That was it.

I lost control, thrusting into her as she wrapped her legs around me, meeting me stroke for stroke. Her moans turned to cries, her nails digging into my back as she shattered beneath me.

I followed, burying myself inside her, our bodies perfectly tangled in a moment that felt bigger than both of us.

We made love all night.

When I woke, she was in the shower, singing softly.

I grinned, rolling out of bed, still naked, and joined her under the hot spray.

“I was hoping you’d hear me in here,” she teased, turning into my arms.

I kissed her, and soon, we were lost in each other again, steam swirling around us as our bodies came together one more time.

But then—too soon—it was time to go.

I stood by the door, dressed and ready, reluctant to leave. “Be careful while I’m gone,” I murmured, kissing her forehead. “Promise me you won’t go back to work yet.”

Her next words caught me off guard.

“I quit my job.”

I pulled back, searching her face. “You quit ?”

She nodded.

Something warm and fierce burst inside my chest—relief, joy, something bigger than words. I gathered her close, holding her like I’d never let go.

“I don’t have to worry about you getting hurt now,” I murmured.

She smiled up at me. “Are you going to sell your house?” I asked.

“I’m thinking about it,” she admitted. “We’ll talk about it when you come back.”

I tightened my grip. “Sell it, baby. Move in with me. I love you. I want you with me.”

Her fingers traced my jaw. “I love you too. I’ll think about it. I promise .”

I exhaled, pressing one last kiss to her lips. “Please stay safe.”

She nodded, eyes filled with something I couldn’t quite place.

With one last lingering look, I stepped out the door and into the world that kept pulling me away from her.

I hated leaving.

But this was my job.

And I loved my job most of the time.

It's what we all had to do.

And the sooner I got it done, the sooner I could come back to her .

20

Lyon

Sweat dripped down my face, soaking into my shirt as we pushed deeper into the thick, suffocating jungle. The Brazilian rainforest was breathtaking—if you could ignore the fist-sized spiders, venomous snakes, and every other nightmare creature lurking in the underbrush.

I swiped at my neck, shuddering. God, I hate snakes.

“Fuck! If another one of those things drops on me, I swear to God, I’m gonna start screaming like a damn girl,” I growled.

River smirked. “You already screamed like a girl.”

I shot him a glare.

He grinned. “You haven’t shut up about it since that spider landed on your face the first morning.”

“That thing was huge! And we were inside a cabin!” I shot back. “Spiders are supposed to stay outside.”

Raven chuckled, leaping over something that didn’t look particularly safe. “Then maybe zip up your tent at night. You keep leaving it open—you’re inviting them to bunk with you.”

“It’s so damn hot, I can’t breathe with it zipped up.”

As if the jungle wanted to punish me for complaining, the sky cracked open, and a sudden downpour drenched us in seconds.

We just stood there, soaked, before bursting into laughter.

“Why the hell would Tag hike through this jungle?” Raven muttered as we slogged forward. “He wasn’t here for the hiking. There had to be a reason.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said. “Remember when he told us about his friend who owned a gold mine out here? He was worried because the guy wouldn’t shut up about how rich he was getting. Then he stopped hearing from him.”

“Yeah,” Raven nodded.

“Tag figured he’d gone to visit family or something,” I continued. “But he also mentioned that the guy had become obsessed with the mine. Like, gold-fever obsessed. It was all-consuming.”

River frowned. “So, what? You think he came here to check on his friend?”

“Maybe he heard something—maybe the guy went missing,” I guessed. Not knowing what Tag was doing.

Before Raven could respond, a rustling sound made me pause. I turned just as a massive tiger sprinted past us, its muscles rippling as it disappeared into the trees.

We froze.

The next second, a group of men ran past, gripping rifles. Chasing the tiger? Or

running from something worse?

“What the fuck?” I whispered. From where we were hidden.

Then came another sound. More running— hundreds of feet, pounding the ground like a stampede.

We barely had seconds to react before a wave of armed soldiers burst through the jungle.

“What the hell is going on?” Raven muttered as we stepped deeper off the trail, making ourselves as invisible as possible.

The Brazilian Army stormed past, focused on the men ahead.

“That was weird,” I muttered, watching them disappear into the trees.

“Let’s get the hell out of here before we end up in the middle of something we don’t want to be a part of,” Raven said.

We picked up our pace, jogging in the opposite direction of the army. The path was busy enough, but leaving it wasn’t an option. In a jungle this dense, stepping off the trail could mean the difference between making it out alive or vanishing forever.

“Anyone know what day it is?” Raven asked, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I swear I’ve lost all sense of time.”

I shrugged.

Raven sighed. “It’s my dad’s birthday next month, on the twenty-seventh. We better be back by then. Hopefully, we’ll find Tag in the next four days.”

We chuckled. Raven was close with his family—most of whom he'd found through DNA testing. His dad, apparently, had been quite the ladies' man in his youth. That's how Raven discovered his sister, Laney, and her daughter, Haley. A DNA test had confirmed they were all connected.

"It's the tenth," I told him. "You'll have plenty of time to get back for his birthday."

We stopped dead in our tracks when the sharp crack of gunfire echoed through the jungle.

"Move!" I hissed.

We ran. Fast.

The sun had started dipping beneath the horizon when we stumbled upon a shocking sight.

The jungle... was gone.

Trees that had stood for centuries had been ripped from the earth, leaving behind a vast, empty stretch of destruction. It looked like a giant had reached down and torn the rainforest apart.

We stared in disbelief.

"Holy shit," Raven breathed.

"This is why people are protesting," I muttered. "This... this is insane."

Further ahead, a crudely built shed stood alone in the wasteland.

“Maybe we can stay there for the night,” I suggested.

River eyed it warily. “One of us will have to keep watch. We can sit on the roof.”

Before we could check it out, the shed door creaked open.

We all jumped back.

The shed was filled with snakes .

We slammed the door shut and backed away.

“Nope,” Raven muttered. “Absolutely not.”

With no other choice, we moved on, crossing the demolished land until we found a safer place to camp.

Three weeks.

Three weeks of trekking through the jungle, asking locals if they’d seen Tag.

Nothing.

We described him: tall, gray-eyed, brooding as hell. Added that he had a right to be cranky—after all, he’d spent two years in a wheelchair, convinced he’d never walk again.

Still, blank stares. No one had seen him.

Then, finally, we found a village with Starlink internet.

We charged our phones.

A message popped up.

Tag: “Call me.”

I stared at the screen. “What the fuck?”

I hit call. The phone rang twice before Tag answered.

“Where the hell are you?” I demanded.

“Alaska,” he said casually.

Silence.

“Excuse me?”

“I talked to my crazy sister,” Tag continued. “Apparently, she thought I was lost in the Brazilian jungle.”

I clenched my jaw. “You’re telling me we’ve been fighting off wild animals for three damn weeks because your sister got her wires crossed?”

He hesitated. “I... guess so?”

I exhaled sharply. “Tag. Do you have any idea what we’ve been through? Spiders the size of my face . Snakes everywhere. I hate snakes.”

“I told her— hypothetically —‘what if I was lost in the jungle, and no one knew?’” Tag sounded defensive. “She must have taken it literally.”

I was going to murder this man.

River grabbed the phone. “Tag,” he said, voice dangerously low. “Have you even been in this jungle?”

“Not for years. Last time I was there, I got bitten by a spider and was sick for weeks.”

River closed his eyes. “Then why the hell would your sister think you were here?”

“She and I haven’t talked much,” Tag admitted. “I might have mentioned the jungle once. I might have said something about people going missing. She might have been drinking.”

River groaned. “No shit. We’ll see you Monday.”

Tag hesitated. “Listen... I really appreciate you guys looking for me, even though I wasn’t lost.”

River sighed, his frustration softening. “You’d do the same for us.”

“Damn right, I would,” Tag said. “Thanks for knowing that.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. We wasted three weeks. At least he was safe and alive.

“Next time,” I muttered, “just send a damn text.”

21

Niki

The moment the casts came off my arms, I felt weightless—like I'd been set free. A laugh burst from my lips as I flexed my fingers, marveling at the newfound lightness of my limbs. Freedom. After months of being trapped in those damn things, I was finally free.

I was in Oregon, visiting my parents. I had officially moved out of my home and was now rid of the last physical reminder of my injury. The feeling was incredible.

“How does that feel?” my childhood doctor, Dr. Jack, asked with a knowing smile.

“Wonderful,” I said, stretching my arms as if testing their limits. “Are you coming to Marie’s wedding this weekend?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said. “Joaquin’s flying in tonight. He and Katherine are expecting their fifth child, and he’s finally retiring from the Navy SEALs. Best news we’ve had since all these grandbabies started arriving. I love being a grandfather, and now both parents will finally be home with them.”

“That’s fantastic!” I grinned. “Marie told me she wants as many kids as her parents had. That’s... a little terrifying.”

Dr. Jack chuckled. “And what about you, Niki? When are you settling down and having kids?”

I arched an eyebrow. The assumption that a woman had to settle down to have kids never failed to amuse me. “I’m not with the FBI anymore, but once I’m fully healed, I’ll get back to work. I don’t know what yet—I still have to figure that part out.”

“You need a nice, quiet job,” he said, his voice laced with gentle concern.

I smiled. Dr. Jack was old-fashioned, the type who probably thought I should be at home raising kids while my husband worked. And honestly? I didn’t hate the idea. Katherine had once told me that becoming a mother was the best thing in life. She had a law degree but chose to stay home after her first baby and never regretted it. Maybe I’d love that, too. Maybe a house full of kids would make me just as happy.

But then my thoughts drifted to Lyon.

I couldn’t picture him in a house bursting with kids. His place was pristine—spotless. Not a single fingerprint on the walls, no stray toys underfoot. No, Lyon was the one-or-two-kids type. My dream of six? Yeah, that would probably stay just that—a dream.

As I stepped out of the doctor’s office, my gaze landed on him instantly. He was striding down the sidewalk like he owned the world, his confident presence drawing every eye.

My heart leaped.

I ran to him, and he caught me effortlessly, lifting me off the ground before crushing his lips to mine. Right there. In the middle of town. For everyone to see. Neither of us cared. We’d been apart for eight weeks, and he had come for me.

“You didn’t even call to tell me you were back from the jungle,” I scolded, breathless. “I missed you. I hope you don’t have any more jobs that keep you away

that long.”

Lyon kissed me again before answering. “I don’t want to talk about work. I want to talk about you selling your house.”

“I sold the house,” I confirmed. “Sold the horses, too.” I lifted my arms. “And look at these! White and scrawny.”

He grinned, pulling my arms to his lips. “They’re beautiful.”

I laughed. “You know my arms haven’t touched water in months.”

His brows lifted. “Oh?”

“I’m kidding. I washed them in the bathroom.”

“I don’t care if they’ve never been washed,” he murmured, his voice low and warm. “When are you moving in with me?”

I smiled up at him. “I promised my parents I’d stay for the grape harvest. And Marie’s wedding is this weekend. But I am so happy you’re here. How long can you stay?”

“A few days.” His gaze swept over the town. “I can see why you love this place. It’s beautiful.”

“I’m just visiting. I live in Southern California.”

“Good.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What happened with your friend in the jungle?”

He groaned. “He was never in the jungle. He was in Alaska. His sister sent us on a wild goose chase.”

I blinked. “Wait. You went all the way to the rainforest without confirming he was actually there?”

“It was his sister!” Lyon shook his head, exasperated. “She swore he’d been missing for three months. We believed her. Turns out, she just thought he was there. Then she claimed she must have dreamed it.”

A laugh exploded from me so hard I could barely breathe. “You’re kidding .”

“She actually blamed us for rushing out there before making sure,” he grumbled.

“She sounds like a real gem. What’s her name?”

“Sheila. One of those wanderers—travels the world, meets random people, listens to people talk about manifesting, and meditates. Drives Tag crazy because he never knows where she is.”

I shook my head, still chuckling. “I have to meet this woman.”

“Then we were called away to help some guys in Afghanistan,” Lyon explained.

I sighed, leaning into his shoulder. “I hate being away from you for so long.”

He pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Me too.”

He kissed me again. “I know. It never bothered me until I met you. It comes with the job.”

“My job was the same way,” I reminded him. “Speaking of which, I got an offer to work for a high-security business.”

His body tensed. “What are you talking about?”

I saw the frown forming and knew he wouldn’t like what I was about to say.

“Ryker Reynolds asked if I wanted to join his team. They do about the same kind of work as your team—high-risk security and international assignments. Sometimes, I’d have to go overseas, but I can handle that if necessary.

I’m taking some time off for now, but I know I’ll get bored while you’re away. I’ve worked my whole life—I can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

Lyon’s jaw tightened. “Ryker? I know who he is. Doesn’t he work with the DEA most of the time? I don’t want you walking into something even more dangerous than what you just left.”

“He doesn’t always work with the DEA,” I said, crossing my arms. “Look, I love you, but I work where I want to work. I don’t tell you where to go, and you don’t get to tell me either. Do you agree with that?”

He exhaled slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t want to, but yeah, I’ll agree.” A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. “I’m sorry if I sound like River. I guess he’s rubbing off on me.”

I softened. “Apology accepted.”

He leaned down and kissed me, and just like that, the tension melted away.

“I really am glad you’re here,” I said. “Marie’s wedding is tomorrow. You’re going

to love their family.”

I spotted two familiar faces approaching and waved. “Oh! There’s Uncle Michael and Uncle Chris. Hey, you two! Wedding gift shopping?”

Michael grinned. “Hey! You got your casts off.”

Chris nodded in greeting. “Lyon, we didn’t know you were in town.”

“I just got here,” Lyon said, shaking their hands. “How have you been?”

I held up my arms and wiggled my fingers. “I have weenie arms now,” I joked with a laugh.

Michael chuckled. “We’ve been great. Chris picked up something special for Marie when he was in France last month, but we wanted to find something else, too—something meaningful.”

“She already knows how much you care about her,” I assured them. Then I grinned. “Did you hear? Joaquin is retiring from the SEALs.”

“Yes! About time,” Michael said. “Oh, and Katherine’s expecting twins—” His eyes widened, and he slapped a hand over his mouth. “Don’t tell anyone. That’s a secret.”

“She’s going to have six babies now,” I murmured.

Before I could stop it, a stupid tear slipped down my cheek.

Lyon’s brow furrowed. “Why are you crying? Aren’t you happy for her?”

“Of course I’m happy,” I said quickly, brushing at my face. “I just had something in

my eye.”

His skeptical look told me he wasn’t buying it.

“Niki wants six kids,” Michael announced, smirking. “She’s always said that’s what she wants. Is that what made the tear escape?”

“That was not a tear,” I said, scowling.

Lyon’s gaze locked onto mine. “You want six kids?”

I hesitated. “I never even asked if you want kids.”

“Yes,” he said, without a second’s hesitation. “I’ve always wanted a house full of them. Whenever we visit Raven’s dad, there’s always this big, loud family around, and I love it.”

Then he turned to me, his hands settling on my shoulders, his expression serious yet full of warmth.

“Niki Bannon, will you marry me, and we’ll fill our house with kids?”

Michael and Chris started clapping, drawing attention from the people around us. But I didn’t care.

A laugh bubbled out of me, mixing with happy tears. “Yes!” I threw my arms around his neck. “I’ll marry you—and we’ll have a dozen kids if you want.”

Lyon swept me into his arms and kissed me until we were both breathless.

“You just made me the happiest man alive,” he murmured.

Still in shock, I turned to Michael and Chris, my voice a whisper. “He wants lots of kids.” I wiped at my damp face. “I was scared he wouldn’t, and I would have given up on that dream—but now I don’t have to.”

Michael rolled his eyes and handed me a handkerchief. “Here, for goodness’ sake, wipe your face.”

Lyon laughed, and soon, we were all laughing.

“So, I guess we’re getting married,” he said, picking me up and twirling me around. “Let’s not wait too long. You’ve made me so happy.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, my heart bursting. “You make me happy,” I whispered against his lips.

22

Lyon

I was crouched behind a building in downtown Los Angeles, my senses on high alert. A noise behind me made me turn—Raven stood against the wall, counting under his breath before sprinting to the other side.

I had dragged him down here while I searched for the perfect ring for Niki. This was our third jeweler, and someone at one of the previous shops had directed us here. The moment we approached the building, gunfire erupted from inside.

I immediately called the police. Then, we slipped around to the back, where we could hear a woman crying and shouting for help. My gaze locked on a half-open door, my instincts kicking in.

Raven shook his head. Stand back.

But I couldn't.

I was a protector—that's who I was, what I did. And I wasn't about to let someone die if I could stop it. I shot Raven a look before squeezing through the narrow gap.

The smell of blood hit me instantly.

Inside, a woman lay on the floor, clutching a baby to her chest. A man was sprawled beside her, his body half-submerged in a pool of blood. His hand trembled as he

reached out, touching the woman's leg.

How many men were in here?

Movement in my peripheral vision made me spin just in time to see another man raising his gun at the woman.

I fired first. He crumpled.

Before I could react, another shadow flickered in the corner. A second man. His gun was trained on me.

I raised my weapon, but I was too slow.

A gunshot rang out from the doorway.

My body slammed against the wall, my head cracking against something solid. Or was it the bullet?

Pain blurred everything, my vision swimming in darkness.

Then—shouting.

I forced my eyes open. Raven loomed over me, his voice urgent.

“Lyon! Listen to me. You need to fight— dig deep and make sure you live. I don't want to be the one to tell Niki that you died.”

What was he talking about?

I tried to respond, but my mouth wouldn't move. My head felt light, like I was

floating. I didn't feel like I was dying, but Raven's panicked tone told me otherwise.

When I woke up, a woman was sleeping in a chair beside my bed.

My gaze shifted—Raven and Gideon stood at the foot of my bed, watching me.

I wanted to ask what had happened, but I didn't want to wake the woman.

"How do you feel?" a nurse asked as she entered the room.

I pressed a finger to my lips and pointed to the sleeping woman.

"She won't wake up," the nurse whispered with a small smile. "Niki's been awake for three days straight. She just finally fell asleep."

Niki.

I frowned. "Who is she?"

Three pairs of eyes locked onto me like I'd lost my damn mind.

"Niki Bannon," Raven whispered. "She's your fiancée."

My fiancée ?

I shook my head. "I don't have a steady girlfriend, let alone a fiancée. Who said she was my fiancée?"

Gideon pressed a finger to his lips just as the woman stirred.

She blinked up at me, and I sucked in a breath.

Green eyes. Beautiful. Breathtaking.

Then she smiled.

She stood, leaned over, and kissed me.

“I’m so happy you’re awake,” she whispered against my lips before kissing me again.

The nurse and the guys were watching me like they were waiting for something.

But I just kept staring at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her expression shifting to concern.

“Nothing,” I rasped.

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m not stupid. Tell me what’s going on.”

She turned to the nurse, who hesitated, looking at Raven.

I exhaled. “I... I don’t quite remember you.”

Niki stiffened. “You don’t remember me?”

“You seem familiar,” I admitted, “but I can’t remember how I know you.”

Her lips parted slightly. I saw the hurt flash in her eyes before she stepped back.

“Well, I didn’t expect this reaction,” she muttered. “I’ll tell you what—I’ll go. And when you remember me, you can call me. Because right now? I don’t have the energy to help you remember me.”

She turned toward the door.

“Well then,” she said quietly, “I’ll see you around.”

“Niki, where are you going to live?” Raven asked. “You sold your house.”

“I have a place. Don’t worry,” she said, her voice steady even as she walked out.

I heard sniffing and turned to the nurse—tears were running down her cheeks.

“She stayed by your side,” the nurse murmured. “She never slept until we told her you were going to be okay. I wish you could remember her.”

I swallowed hard. “I wish I could too.”

I turned to Raven. “Tell me about her.”

He studied me for a long moment. Then—

“Do you remember the girl who saved your life?”

I frowned. “Yeah...” My stomach tightened. “Wait—was it her?”

Raven nodded.

My breath stalled.

“Oh my God,” I whispered. “I’m engaged to the girl who saved me.”

“I don’t know if that’s still the case,” Raven said. “We were in the city because you wanted to buy Niki a ring. But you didn’t think any of them were good enough.

That's why we were at that last jeweler. That's where you were shot."

I tried to process it. "What's the last thing you remember before this?"

Lyon exhaled. "Gideon and Laney's wedding. River and Kat getting married."

I nodded. "Yeah, I remember that."

"What about Gage? Do you remember him and Lori getting married?"

I opened my mouth—but nothing came.

"No," I admitted. "What the hell is going on? Why can't I remember her?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe if I slept, I'd wake up and remember everything.

"When do I get to go home?"

"You just woke up," Raven said, exasperated. "You were shot. Then you fell, and your head hit a damn spike on the wall. You're not going anywhere for a while."

I rubbed my forehead. "Maybe if I sleep, I'll remember."

Raven scoffed. "Yeah, well, let's hope ."

Something in his tone made me glance up.

"Are you angry at me?"

"Hell yes, I'm angry." His fists clenched. "You hurt Niki's feelings, and that pisses me off."

I frowned. “Do you have feelings for my fiancée?”

Raven’s nostrils flared. “If you weren’t injured, I’d kick your ass for that.”

“Don’t let my injury stop you,” I muttered. “I probably need my ass kicked.”

Raven huffed and stalked out of the room.

I turned to Gideon.

“You’ll remember,” he said simply. “Get some sleep.”

I nodded, but even as my eyes drifted shut, one thought clung to me.

I’d lost something—someone—and I had no idea how to get her back.

23

Niki

“Are you going to see him today?” Ryker asked.

I shook my head, keeping my expression neutral. “No. He doesn’t remember me. It’s been two weeks, and he hasn’t called. When he does, I’ll go. Until then, there’s no point.” I exhaled. “Now, where are you sending me?”

“I need you to go to New York and find Jada. She hasn’t checked in since Monday, and she knows she has to call daily.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“She was investigating a missing woman. Her sister thinks her boyfriend kidnapped her for human trafficking—said he was acting strange before she disappeared.”

My stomach tightened. “I’ll do my best to find her,” I said thinking that this reminded me of the cartel, and I prayed I didn’t see anyone who would recognize me.

“I know you will. Just don’t take any unnecessary risks. If something feels off, call me.”

“I will.”

Ryker studied me for a moment. “How long are you planning to work for me?”

I forced a smile. “Until Lyon remembers me. Then, we’ll get married and have a dozen kids.”

I found Jada’s hotel and knocked on the door. When I turned the handle, it swung open.

My instincts went on high alert.

The place was trashed .

I pulled out my phone and dialed Ryker.

“I’m in her room. It looks like a struggle happened here. She put up a fight. I’m looking around for clues.” My gaze landed on something. “Wait—I found her phone. She took pictures. I’ll call you back.”

“Don’t put yourself in danger,” Ryker warned. “You have all those babies waiting for you have them.”

I smirked. “I won’t let anyone hurt me. I promise.”

“Call me twice a day, and I mean it. I wish I could be there, but I’m already on my way overseas.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine,” I said before hanging up.

I sat down and went through Jada’s phone. She had recorded everything.

A video played, her voice low but determined. It’s the boyfriend. I befriended him so he’d take me. I need him to bring me to Sherry.

I clenched my jaw.

She had set herself up as bait.

Now, I was going to do the same.

It took a week before he finally took me.

He thought I was stupid. Thought I was weak .

I could kill him in the blink of an eye—and when this was over, I planned on doing just that.

I was shoved into a dark room. Seven women were tied to the walls—naked, bruised, and terrified.

Jada was among them.

“You don’t open your mouth,” the man growled. “If you do, I’ll beat you like I beat the others. I’m collecting as many women as I can to trade for a shipment of drugs. I’m going to make a fortune .”

So this was all about money.

“Are you saying it’s just you ?” I asked, hoping he’d slip up.

A second voice cut in. “No, there’s me too. And you were told not to speak.”

A fist flew at my head.

Pain exploded through my skull, and I slumped, pretending to be unconscious so he

wouldn't hit me again.

“ Tie this bitch up! ” the man barked. “I told you to get teenagers ! You can't even do that right. I don't know why I let you talk me into this. I'm calling to have these women picked up.”

They bound my wrists, but at least they left my clothes on.

I kept my eyes closed until they left.

When I finally opened them, Jada pressed a finger to her lips, nodding toward the surveillance camera in the corner.

Damn it.

I had to wait. They had to sleep at some point.

A sliver of light peeked through a window painted black. It was daylight—meaning I'd know when it got dark. I leaned my aching head back against the wall, planning my next move.

I must have dozed off because I woke with a jerk as rough hands grabbed my arms, dragging me to my feet.

“You get to please me tonight, darling,” the man sneered. “Aren't you the lucky one?”

My stomach churned.

I retched—and vomited all over his shoes.

He lost it .

His fists rained down on me—my ribs, my back, my face.

I threw up again.

The more he hit me, the more I vomited.

The other women screamed for him to stop.

Eventually, he did—cursing as he stormed out.

I collapsed against the wall, dizzy, hurting, gasping for air.

Jada's voice cut through the fog. " Niki—wake up! "

I forced my eyes open. She was crouched beside me, her face tight with worry.

I followed her gaze to the broken camera.

He ripped it down in his rage.

"Why are you here?" she whispered. "You should be on your honeymoon."

My chest tightened. "Lyon was in an accident. He doesn't remember me." I swallowed hard. "As soon as he does, we'll get married."

Jada exhaled. "If there's anything left of you."

"I'll kill that bastard when I get a chance," I muttered. "Both of them."

My throat was dry. I needed water. Damn it, Lyon, hurry up and remember me.

If those two men came back, I wouldn't let them hit me again.

Jada could fight—Ryker said so.

Maybe I should have called for backup.

At least I wasn't throwing up anymore.

But the room reeked .

“Sorry about the smell, ladies,” I said, my voice hoarse.

Sherry forced a weak smile. “Maybe it'll keep them away from us.”

I turned to the group. “We will get out of here. The next time they come in, we take them down.”

“They have tasers,” Jada warned. “They'll use them.”

I nodded. “Then we have to be smart. Do both of them stay here?”

“The ex-boyfriend has an apartment on the outskirts of the city,” Sherry said. “I only went there once—when he drugged me.” She shuddered. “If I'd seen his place before, I would've dropped him like a hot potato.”

I clenched my fists. “We need to get out before they sell us. Listen to me—when they try to take you, you have to fight. If they sell you, it only gets worse.”

One of the women hesitated. “What if we don't know how to fight?”

I gave a grim smile. “Then you grab him by the balls and squeeze like your life depends on it. Because it does , don’t let go. That’ll bring him to his knees. Then you kick him and run like hell.”

They all nodded.

Then silence fell.

I closed my eyes, but Lyon’s face filled my mind. His blue eyes. The way he looked at me— except now he didn’t even know who I was.

God, it hurt .

I felt a single tear slip down my cheek.

The women would think it was because of our situation.

They didn’t know it was because my fiancé had forgotten me.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became.

It’s not his fault. At least he’s alive. That’s all that matters.

Now, I had to get out of here.

They had my left wrist zip-tied to a metal ring on the floor and my right handcuffed to a ring in the wall.

I studied the cuff.

It was a cheap one—something you’d buy on the internet. Idiots.

I twisted my hand. Pain flared up my arm—a reminder that my casts had only recently come off.

One more twist—

Snap.

I was free.

The others followed my lead, working at their cuffs. Jada was the first to break hers. One by one, the others slipped free.

The zip ties would be harder.

“Someone’s coming!” Jada hissed. “Put your hands back in the cuffs— now! ”

A man stepped in.

“I’m giving you water. Don’t try anything.”

He held out a cup to our lips, and we drank.

Next time, I vowed. Next time, you die.

The next time I woke up, we were on a boat.

24

Lyon

I was with the guys, celebrating River's fortieth birthday, when a sharp pain stabbed through my skull. I winced, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to block it out. The noise around me faded, replaced by a pounding in my head that wouldn't let up.

I pushed back from the table and staggered toward the bathroom, barely making it before I vomited. My hands gripped the sink as I splashed cold water on my face, trying to steady myself.

When I stepped back outside, the blinding sun hit me like a sledgehammer. The world tilted. My knees buckled.

Then—nothing.

I slowly came to, my thoughts tangled and sluggish, but one name burned through the fog.

Niki.

A wave of dread rolled through me. What have I done?

I turned my head and found Raven watching me, his expression unreadable.

“How long?” My voice came out rough, raw.

Raven hesitated. “Two months.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. “Two fucking months?” I shot upright, my pulse hammering. “How the hell did that happen? Do you know where she is?”

Raven’s gaze darkened. “She works for Ryker now.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“She took a job with Ryker.”

God, I must have hurt her so much. I put my hand to my chest, where a sharp, twisting pain shot through my chest. I pinched the bridge of my nose, forcing back the burning in my eyes. I needed to see her. Now.

River handed me his phone. “Ryker’s on the line.”

I snatched it. “Ryker.” My voice was steel. “Where the hell is Niki?”

Silence. Then—

“Oh, so you finally remember you have a fiancée?” Ryker’s voice was ice-cold. “Took you long enough.”

“I need to know where she is.”

“You’re too late, Spenser. Niki’s been missing for two weeks.”

My blood went cold. “What do you mean, missing?”

“I sent her on a mission to track down a missing team member. She was supposed to

check in twice a day. Then—nothing. I’ve got her parents breathing down my neck, and my people are scouring the city. Last I knew, she was in New York.” Ryker’s voice turned grim. “I think it’s the human traffickers.”

A roar built in my chest. “What human traffickers?”

“The same ones who had Jada and the woman she was hunting for.”

I shot to my feet, my body vibrating with rage. “Did she have backup?”

“No. She refused. Said she’d be better off alone.” Ryker exhaled sharply. “Damn it, she’s just like her mother.”

I dragged a hand down my face, my heart pounding. “Where are you now?”

“New York. Where else?”

“I’ll see you soon.”

The second I hung up, a fresh wave of pain lanced through my skull. I clenched my teeth, forcing past it.

Raven was already moving. “I’ll fly us there.”

“I’m coming too,” Cyclone said, standing.

I didn’t argue. We had to move—now.

As we headed for the airport, my mind wouldn’t stop tearing into me.

You should’ve been there. You should’ve never let her go.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Raven muttered. “You lost your memory. You couldn’t have stopped this.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I growled. “I should’ve married her the second she said yes. I should’ve kept her close. Now she’s missing again.” My hands clenched. “When I find her, I swear I’m keeping her pregnant for the next ten years so she stays the hell home.”

Cyclone choked on a laugh, but my jaw was set. I meant every damn word.

Raven exhaled. “Where do we start looking?”

I hit redial. Ryker answered immediately.

“Where do I start?” I demanded.

His voice was tense. “Jada and the others are with me. We found the guy who kidnapped Niki. He spilled everything. The cartel took her.”

My gut twisted. “She’s still alive?”

“For now. She’s on a boat.”

I swore violently. “And your team left her to fight them alone?”

“They didn’t have a choice. Jada had to get the other women out.”

“Do you know where they’re taking her?”

“The guy said they were headed for Mexico.”

I gritted my teeth. If they haven't tied her up, she'll jump overboard. Niki would never let them take her to Mexico without a fight.

"We have to find her," I said, my voice rough. "She wants babies, and I'm going to make damn sure she gets as many as she wants."

"Where do we start?" Raven asked.

I met his gaze. "The Gulf of Mexico. Fast."

Raven nodded. "Then let's move."

25

Niki

I couldn't believe I was living this nightmare again. But this time, there was no way I'd let them shove me into a casket. If we reached Mexico, I'd be dead—after they were done with me. My only chance was jumping overboard before we got there.

Three men. That was all. If I got an opening, I was taking it. Their voices slithered through the dark, their disgusting laughter making my skin crawl. They were talking about taking turns with me. I curled in on myself, playing my part—too terrified to look at them, trembling like prey. But inside, my mind was razor-sharp, focused on one desperate mission: save my baby.

The realization slammed into me like a freight train—I hadn't had a period in two months. That's why I'd been so sick in the mornings. My breath hitched as I pressed a shaking hand against my stomach. I will keep you safe. I swear it. Somehow, I just knew—it was a boy.

Lyon had better remember who I was soon, or I'd knock some sense into him myself. The thought burned, mixing with my tears. I never should have worked for Ryker. I'd been reckless, stubborn, angry that Lyon didn't remember me. And now, my baby was at risk because of my choices.

No more mistakes. No more risks. I wasn't drinking anything they gave me. I needed every ounce of strength to swim when the time came.

At some point, exhaustion must have dragged me under. A sharp yell yanked me awake. One of the men barked at me to get below deck. My pulse pounded as I sat up, disoriented. But they weren't looking at me. Their attention was locked on another boat.

A surge of hope shot through me. If I could get their attention—

Gunfire erupted.

I flinched as bullets tore through the night. One cartel against another. This was my chance. Heart racing, I bolted for the back of the boat and jumped.

The cold slammed into me like a fist. Saltwater filled my nose and mouth as I fought to stay under, my heart hammering. When I finally surfaced, I flipped onto my back, watching the chaos unfold. The men from my boat were losing. Then—movement. Two figures climbed aboard, searching frantically.

And then I saw him.

“Lyon!” I cried, swimming toward the boat. “Lyon!”

He froze, his head snapping in my direction. The second our eyes met, he dove into the water, cutting through the waves like a predator.

Then he was there, arms locking around me, his lips crashing into mine. I clung to him, sobs wracking my chest.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “Can you ever forgive me? I love you so much.”

Tears blurred my vision. “Yes, I forgive you. Just take me home. I swear, I’ll never

leave our house again.”

A raft pulled up beside us. Cyclone peered down, smirking. “You two done with the dramatic reunion, or do you wanna stay in the water a little longer?”

Lyon lifted me into the raft, then climbed in after me. Cyclone’s gaze darkened as he took in my bruised face, his jaw tightening.

“I bet you think I’m always getting myself beaten up,” I whispered. “This is the last time. I’m telling Ryker—I quit.”

Lyon pulled me onto his lap, holding me like he’d never let go. “I love you more than anything,” he murmured. “I don’t know why I couldn’t remember you.”

I traced my fingers over his jaw. “You had a head injury—you couldn’t control that. Just promise me you’ll never forget me again.”

His lips brushed mine. “Never.” Then he kissed me, sealing the promise between us.

Cyclone cleared his throat. “Did those bastards hurt you?”

“No,” I said, my voice like steel. “But I heard them planning it. I was already set on jumping ship. The gunfire just made it easier. I had no idea who was on that other boat—I thought they might be more cartel men.”

Raven scoffed. “And what was your plan? Swim until you hit land?”

I shrugged. “If that’s what it took. Staying with them wasn’t an option.”

Raven glanced at the abandoned boat, expression unreadable. “What are we doing with that?”

Cyclone smirked. “Nothing. Let it drift. The sharks will take care of the men we threw over.”

I swallowed hard and glanced back at the endless ocean. No land in sight. Maybe my plan had been reckless. Maybe it had been pure desperation. But one thing was clear—I wasn’t going down without a fight.

Now, all I wanted was to go home. I had to tell Lyon about the baby. I’ll talk to him when our life returns to normal. A bitter laugh bubbled up inside me. Has it ever been normal? I couldn’t remember a time when Lyon and I were just... ordinary. But now, we were going to be a real family. A normal family. Two parents, home with their baby.

At some point, exhaustion won. When I woke up, we were pulling into a dock. Florida. From here, we’d fly home. Relief washed over me. I needed a shower, a warm bed, and a doctor—for me and the baby.

Lyon had chartered a private plane, and as we walked through the airport, he pulled me closer. His warmth wrapped around me, grounding me.

“When are we getting married, sweetheart?” he asked.

I tilted my head up at him, half smiling. “We should just go to Vegas. That way, we won’t have to plan a wedding.” I meant it as a joke. Mostly. The last thing I wanted was to stress over dresses, invitations, or flowers. I just wanted to wake up and be married to Lyon.

We took our seats, and I relaxed. He didn’t even hesitate. “Why don’t we go home, rest, and then drive to Vegas? Just me and you. We’ll have someone bring your things to our house. After we marry, I’m taking a year off work. Just the two of us. Peace and quiet.”

I chuckled at that. “Peace and quiet?” I snuggled into his arms, letting fatigue settle into my bones. “It won’t be just the two of us for long.”

His speech faltered. His body went rigid. He gathered me even closer as if trying to shield me from the world.

“Our baby will be here in about seven months. Maybe six and a half,” I whispered.

I felt it the moment the air left his lungs. The moment it hit him. His grip tightened, and a shudder ran through him.

“I’m going to take such good care of you,” he murmured. His voice was thick, raw. “You and our baby. I love you so much.”

I felt the tear before I saw it, warm as it slipped onto my forehead.

Cyclone and Raven sat across from us, silent. Watching. Lyon held me tighter, and my eyes grew heavy.

When I woke up, they were still there.

I blinked at them. “Did you two watch me sleep this whole time?”

Cyclone smirked. “I’m just making sure you’re real.” His expression softened. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through. But I’m happy for you. A baby. That’s a start on the six, right?”

I gave him a confused look. “Six?”

He grinned. “You want six kids. Remember. This baby girl will be here by Christmas. Then you can have another one.”

A baby girl? I frowned. “I feel like I’m having a boy. Why do you think it’s a girl?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Just a feeling. I’m usually right.”

I let out a watery laugh. “Maybe you are. Maybe I am having a girl.” The thought sent a fresh wave of emotion crashing over me, and suddenly, I was crying.

Lyon stroked my back, whispering soothing words. “Shh, sweetheart. You’re safe. We’re safe.”

I wiped at my face. “I will never risk my life like that again. Not for anything. Not for anyone. I’m going to raise my kids and be a stay-at-home mom.”

Cyclone smirked. “That’ll keep you busy. At least, that’s what Kat says.”

“You’ll be the best mom in the world,” Lyon murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. His arms never loosened, never wavered.

I nodded, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

“I’m so tired of this life,” I whispered.

Lyon’s arms tightened, as if he could hold me together through sheer force alone. “Then we’ll build a new one,” he promised.

And for the first time in a long time, I believed him.

26

Lyon

We'd been home for two weeks, settling into a quiet routine—if life with Niki could ever be called quiet. But today was different. Today, we were going to see our baby for the first time.

It was still too early to know if we were having a boy or a girl, but that didn't matter. We just wanted to see her, to know she was safe. I say her because Oliver, who had been crashing at our place, refused to call the baby anything else.

Brutus had also made his stance on the matter clear. He had taken to growling at anyone who got too close to Niki, his massive form positioning itself between her and anyone who so much as looked at her the wrong way.

"He knows," Niki had told me last night, stroking Brutus's thick fur as he rested his head in her lap. "Dogs always know. He's already guarding the baby."

I didn't doubt it. That dog would give his life for her—and for Niki.

As we stepped outside this morning, Brutus padded after us, his watchful eyes scanning the yard. He wasn't happy about being left behind but obeyed when Niki told him to stay.

I opened the car door for her. "Are you ready to see the first photo of our baby?"

Her entire face lit up. “I’m so excited. It’s too bad we won’t know what we’re having yet, but I don’t care. I just want to see her. To know she’s safe.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “I want to make sure both of you are safe.” I glanced at her as I pulled onto the road, hesitating before asking, “Do you still want to go to Vegas to get married?”

She was quiet for a moment, chewing on her bottom lip. “I think so...I don’t have the energy to plan a big wedding.”

I could see the wheels turning in her head before she spoke again.

“We could get married here,” she said thoughtfully. “Just our close friends and family. That would be simple, and it would make my parents happy. What do you think?”

I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers through hers. “That would be perfect. We stay home, our friends get to celebrate with us, and your mom gets to plan something without driving you crazy.” I smirked. “But what about all those FBI friends she has?”

She rolled her eyes. “No. We’ll send them a photo. They have enough on their plates. They’ll be happy with a picture.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like a plan.”

She leaned back in her seat, a small smile on her lips, her fingers absently tracing circles over her stomach.

I glanced at her, my chest tightening with something deep and unshakable. Love. For her. For the life we were building. For the tiny heartbeat we’d soon see on a screen.

No matter what happened, I would protect them. Both of them.

27

Niki

Today, we found out what we were having. The doctor used a 3D ultrasound, showing us her tiny face, her delicate hands curled into fists. We didn't care whether it was a boy or a girl—we just wanted a healthy baby. But Oliver had already made up his mind.

A few days ago, he ordered the most beautiful crib, handcrafted by an artist who had never made one before. The craftsmanship was breathtaking—intricate details carved into the wood, delicate patterns woven into the design. But it wasn't just the beauty of the crib that stole my breath.

It was the name on the headboard.

A name none of us had chosen.

A name that felt like it had been waiting for her all along.

Gracie Hope.

The moment I saw it, tears welled in my eyes.

Because somehow, it was perfect.

Because somehow, everyone already loved her.

She looked like she was smiling.

I glanced at Lyon, and the emotion on his face nearly undid me. If we weren't in this room, if he weren't trying to hold it together, I knew—he'd be bawling his eyes out.

His fingers reached toward the screen, barely brushing the image of our daughter.

"I love you, Gracie Hope," he whispered. Then he turned to me, his lips pressing against mine in a lingering kiss.

"I can't wait to hold her in my arms," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "She's beautiful."

I stared at the screen again, my heart swelling and twisting all at once. "You don't think it's a little spooky how she just... stared at us? Like she could actually hear what we were saying?"

Lyon chuckled.

"Oh, she can hear you. She hears everything. Lots of parents read to their babies in the womb. When they're born, they recognize those voices instantly," The doctor said.

I looked at him, fascinated. "Really?"

He nodded. "She already knows how much you love her. She feels everything you do—when you're happy, when you're scared. Your heartbeat, your emotions... they're all part of her world."

The doctor smiled. "Your umbilical cord connects you both—not just physically, but emotionally. Her life depends on yours in every way. A lot of parents don't realize

that at first, but when they do, it changes everything.”

Niki squeezed my hand, eyes shimmering with wonder. “That makes perfect sense. No wonder babies know their parents the second they’re born.” She turned to me, determination flashing in her gaze. “We’re stopping at the bookstore on the way home.”

I blinked. “The bookstore?”

She grinned. “I’m getting children’s books. I can’t wait to start reading to her.”

Lyon chuckled, shaking his head. “Our daughter’s going to know every story by heart before she’s even born.”

I just smiled, rubbing my stomach. “Good.”

I felt at peace. I hadn’t felt this way since I was five, and my mother almost died when a serial killer kidnapped her, and she was severely injured. They told me she was away on a job, but I knew she was in the hospital. I overheard my uncles talking about it when they thought I was sleeping. That was my mom’s last job as an FBI Special Agent.

I felt Gracie stretching, and I smiled. I took Lyon’s hand and put it right where she was turning. His fingers curled on my tummy like he was hugging her. I had a feeling we would both want to read her stories.

28

Lyon

Oliver's home was finally finished, next door to ours. The scent of freshly turned earth filled the air as we worked, digging holes for the fruit trees he was planting. His phone kept ringing, an incessant buzz that broke the quiet rhythm of our labor.

"Are you going to answer that?" I asked, wiping the sweat from my forehead.

Oliver barely glanced at the screen. "No. If it's Sean, he'll want me to leave early. We've got a big job—there was an earthquake in Turkey. General Montel called us in to help with search and rescue. Digging for bodies... hopefully, they're alive." His voice was steady, but I could hear the weight behind his words. "We leave in the morning. I just wanted to get this automatic watering system set up before I go."

The air felt heavier. "That's horrible. I saw it on the news. I try not to pay attention to world events anymore."

"Tag, Cyclone, and Raven are coming with me. We leave at three a.m.—" His phone rang again, and he sighed. "Let me answer him. Maybe something changed."

While he stepped away, I planted the two trees we had prepared and started digging another hole. I never said it out loud, but I missed the rescues. The adrenaline, the purpose. The mission. But then I thought of my baby, of reading to her at night, letting her know my voice before she even entered this world. I wanted to be ready for her—her protector, her safe place.

Oliver returned, his expression grim. “Change of plans. We’re leaving tonight. It’s worse than we thought. A school collapsed, and they can hear children crying beneath the rubble.”

A chill ran through me. “Those poor kids.”

A soft voice interrupted us. “Do you want to go with them?”

Niki stood in the yard, her gaze locking onto mine. She already knew the answer before I said anything.

I exhaled, rubbing the back of my neck. “I want to stay with you and the baby.”

She stepped closer, placing a gentle hand on my chest. “I know you do. But you’re a protector. It’s who you are. I think you should go.” Her voice wavered, but she held firm. “Just be careful. Aftershocks can be just as dangerous.”

“I’ll record a story or two for Gracie before I go,” I whispered, brushing a kiss against her lips. “I love you. I don’t think I could sleep knowing those kids are trapped under that building.”

She smiled, but her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “That’s why I love you.”

The devastation was worse than I had imagined. The streets were filled with dust and grief, the air thick with smoke and dust that still hadn’t settled, and crumbling buildings. People were digging through the rubble with bare hands, desperate to find their loved ones.

A local man guided us to the collapsed school. My stomach tightened at the sound of cries—weak, terrified, but alive.

We immediately started digging. Our team had brought extra gloves, and we handed them out to parents, whose hands were already raw and bleeding. They barely noticed the pain. The only thing that mattered was the hope buried beneath the wreckage.

Hours passed. Sweat dripped down my back, and my arms ached, but I refused to stop. Then, I saw it—a small, dust-covered hand poking through the debris.

“I see someone!” I called out.

I reached for the tiny fingers, and the moment my skin touched hers, she grasped onto me with surprising strength. My heart clenched. She was alive.

“Hold on, sweetheart,” I murmured. “We’re going to get you out.”

I shouted for everyone to pause as I noticed large rocks shifting dangerously near her. We moved each one carefully, working together to free her without causing more harm. Then, finally, I saw her—a little girl, no older than five, her dark eyes wide with shock.

She saw my face and, she smiled—a tiny, fragile smile in the middle of all this destruction.

A woman crawled beside me, whispering softly to the girl in Turkish. The child didn’t respond; she just kept staring at me, clinging to my neck the second I lifted her free.

Oliver took a picture—though I didn’t realize it at the time—and sent it to Niki.

The woman, likely a volunteer, reached for the girl, but her little arms only tightened around me.

“That’s okay,” I reassured her. “I’ll check her. I’m a medic.”

The others kept digging, but I barely heard them over the sudden scream that ripped through the air. A woman and two children came running toward us, their faces streaked with tears and dust.

The girl in my arms tensed, then let out a choked sob as she buried her face against me.

“Is this your daughter?” I asked as the woman reached us, her voice breaking as she cried, “My baby! My baby!”

I gently pried the child’s arms from my neck and passed her into her mother’s trembling embrace. The moment they connected, they clung to each other, crying openly.

The mother turned to me and grasped my hands. “Thank you. Thank you for saving my daughter. My husband is a doctor at the makeshift hospital. He will be overjoyed to see his little Gracie.”

I froze. “Her name is Gracie?”

She nodded.

Emotion swelled inside me. “My wife is pregnant with our daughter—Grace Hope.” I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “I need to get back in there. We’re not stopping until we find the others.”

The woman gave me a tearful smile. “God bless you.”

I turned, heading straight back into the wreckage, my heart pounding.

God, I wasn't going soft, was I? Every time we pulled a child from that rubble, I felt like breaking down.

By the end of that first day, we had saved eleven kids. Eleven lives were pulled from that pile of rubble and glass.

We didn't want to stop. But as darkness fell, the site became too unstable to continue without light.

Someone brought us sandwiches, but I could barely stomach them. How could I eat when so many were still trapped beneath the rubble?

Still, I forced myself to take a bite. We needed strength to keep going.

Tomorrow, we would dig again.

Tomorrow, we would find more children.

We worked for six days before we had all of the children out of the rubble. Not all were alive, and most were in bad shape. There was a doctor who set up at the school, so someone was there when we would bring a child out. This was heartbreaking. It was so hard for the parents who refused to leave.

We moved on to other buildings, and we worked for two weeks until we went home. I couldn't wait to see Niki.

29

Niki

A sharp pain caught my breath, and I wondered if it was a contraction. I decided not to say anything to Lyon—I knew he’d drive me crazy with worry. Ten minutes later, another one hit. I smiled to myself as I knelt in the dirt, planting flowers. It was winter, but in Southern California, the sun kept the temperature at a warm seventy degrees.

The pains came and went all day, mild and fleeting, until I was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes. Then, a strong one gripped me, stealing my breath. My hand flew to my stomach. This is it. It was time to go to the hospital.

I turned to call for Lyon, but he was already there, watching me with wide eyes.

“Is it time?” His voice was calm, but I could see the tension in his stance.

I nodded, and he bolted upstairs to grab my hospital bag. Brutus, our ever-loyal dog, hovered at my side, his big brown eyes filled with concern.

“Brutus, you can’t come with us, buddy,” I said, running a hand through his fur.

Oliver stepped into the room, taking in the situation instantly. “I’ll keep Brutus. Just go.” His voice was firm, but before I could thank him, another contraction hit.

Lyon helped me to the truck, his grip steady and reassuring. We hadn’t even pulled

out of the driveway before an intense wave of pain hit, making me grip the armrest.

Lyon shot me a look. “How long have you been having contractions?”

I blew out a breath. “Most of the day, but they were small. They started getting stronger about an hour ago.”

He exhaled sharply. “And you didn’t tell me because...?”

I shot him a glare between breaths. “Because I knew you’d hover and drive me insane. Can we not argue about this now? Gracie is pushing already. She hears us talking and wants out.”

Lyon chuckled, which made me glare harder.

“This is not the time to start laughing. Damn, that hurts. Can you drive faster?” I snapped. I knew I was getting grumpy, but I couldn’t help it.

Then, without a second thought, I grabbed my phone and dialed 911.

Lyon’s head whipped toward me, concern flashing across his face. “Why are you calling for an ambulance?”

“Because I want them following us to the hospital in case Gracie won’t wait that long. And I should have told you earlier, but I want the epidural,” I admitted, my voice breaking. Tears welled in my eyes. Of all the pain I had endured in my life, this was making me cry. “I’m sorry for being a baby.”

Lyon took my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. “Hey, you’re not being a baby,” he said gently. “Your emotions are in overdrive because we’re about to meet our daughter.”

I wiped my eyes. “I just want to hold her.”

“I know,” he whispered. “Me too.”

We were almost at the hospital when flashing lights appeared in the rearview mirror. The fire truck pulled up behind us, following us all the way to the entrance. As soon as Lyon parked, a firefighter approached— a woman.

“That was smart, calling us just in case,” she said, offering a kind smile. “I’m Beatrice Jones. I’ll let your husband take you in. Good luck!”

“Thank you,” I managed, just as another contraction stole my breath. Then, suddenly, my water broke.

Everything became a blur. Lyon stayed glued to my side as I was rushed up to the delivery room.

“You’re doing great, sweetheart,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Gracie will be here soon. I love you.”

And then, after what felt like a lifetime but also a single breath—she was here.

Gracie Hope.

A perfect head full of red hair.

The nurse placed her on my chest, and she opened her tiny eyes. My heart clenched as I stared at her, overwhelmed by love.

“Gracie,” I whispered, voice thick with emotion. “I’m your mommy.”

She blinked, her gaze darting around as if searching for something— someone.

Lyon stepped closer. “Hey, baby. I’m your daddy.”

Her eyes locked on him immediately. Found you.

The nurse smiled. “Let me clean her up, and then Daddy can hold her while we take care of you.”

I watched as Lyon followed the nurse, his entire world now wrapped in that tiny, wriggling bundle. Gracie turned her head, her gaze tracking him like she never wanted to let him out of her sight.

When she was ready, Lyon took her in his arms, whispering something too soft for me to hear. I swear she smiled.

Then he brought her back to me, gently placing her in my arms.

I didn’t want to sleep—I wanted to soak in every second, memorize her face, her warmth, her little fingers curling against mine.

But my eyes grew heavy, and Lyon took her from me, his voice the last thing I heard before everything faded into soft, blissful exhaustion.

30

Lyon

I looked around our home and smiled. Everywhere I turned, there was something of Gracie's—a blanket draped over the couch, a tiny sock abandoned on the floor, a stuffed animal resting in the corner. Our world had changed in the best way possible.

Brutus had taken his role as protector to heart. He refused to sleep anywhere except in the baby's room, and if she stirred in the night, he didn't wait for the baby monitor to alert us. Instead, he'd march into our bedroom and bark directly in our faces.

I cradled Gracie in my arms, gently rocking her as she let out a soft sigh.

"Lyon, you're going to spoil her if you keep holding her all the time," Niki teased, arms crossed, though the warmth in her voice betrayed her amusement.

"What are you talking about? If I'm not holding her, you are."

"Exactly. We're both guilty."

I grinned down at our daughter. "Look at this face. Does she look spoiled to you?" I kissed her chubby cheek, inhaling the sweet scent of baby powder and warmth.

Niki smiled. "No, she looks happy. But you know, we could start on number two tonight..."

My eyebrows shot up. “Yeah?”

She nodded, her eyes glinting with mischief.

A slow grin spread across my face. “Then we’ll put Gracie to bed early, because I’m ready to start on that baby right now.” I wrapped my arms around my beautiful wife, pulling her close.

The only woman I would ever love.

The one who saved me when I was fifteen and she was twelve. I could still see it—the moment she stormed down that filthy alley, fearless and fierce, pulling those older boys off me and leaving them sprawled in the dirt as she took my hand and led me away.

I tightened my hold on her. “You know, the best thing that ever happened to me was when those boys dragged me into that alley and started beating the hell out of me.”

She frowned. “Lyon—”

I cupped her face. “Because if that hadn’t happened, I never would’ve met you.”

Her lips parted slightly, her breath catching.

“I always knew,” I whispered. “From that day on, I knew you were the only one for me. Fate put us together, Niki because it knew we belonged together.”

Her eyes softened, shimmering with emotion. She reached up, threading her fingers through my hair, and whispered back, “I feel like I have loved you forever.”

And as I kissed her, holding her close, I knew—our story was only just beginning.

31

RAVEN

I was sitting on my deck, minding my own business, when a scream cut through the salty air. I sat up, listening.

“Damn it, Mike, stop it!” a woman’s voice shouted.

Another scream followed, this one coming from down the beach. I hesitated for a second before curiosity got the best of me. When I spotted the source of the commotion, I let out a laugh.

A woman lay sprawled on the sand, a dripping-wet golden retriever bouncing around her, his tail wagging like a helicopter blade. He kept darting into the waves, then back to her, leaping on her with uncontainable excitement.

She groaned, clearly exasperated, before finally giving in. She picked up a tennis ball and hurled it into the ocean. The dog—Mike, I assumed—tore off after it, and to my surprise, she followed, running straight into the waves before diving beneath them.

I watched for a while, entertained by the playful scene, but forced myself to turn away before I started looking like some creepy neighbor or a peeping Tom.

I went inside and started making lunch. I was halfway through my burger when another scream—sharper this time, tinged with real distress—yanked me to my feet.

I strode onto the beach, my gaze locking onto the woman treading water offshore. On the sand, Mike pranced around, something dangling from his mouth. As I got closer, the realization hit me.

Her bikini top.

Suppressing a grin, I called out, “Need some help?”

Her eyes widened before she ducked under the water, resurfacing a second later, clearly debating whether to accept assistance.

“Can you grab my top from Mike?” she finally asked, her voice wary.

I turned to the dog, who immediately decided this was a game. He danced just out of reach, his eyes sparkling with mischief. Then, in an ultimate act of defiance, he bolted into the surf. The woman lunged for him, but Mike was too quick, splashing out of her grasp like an eel.

I chuckled. “Looks like he’s enjoying this a little too much.”

She sighed. “Tell me about it.”

Pulling off my T-shirt, I held it up. “Here, take this. I have a feeling Mike’s going to lead us on a wild goose chase before you get that top back.”

I balled up the shirt and tossed it. It landed about six feet from her, and I immediately turned around to give her privacy.

A few moments later, water dripped around me as she stepped onto the shore, adjusting my oversized shirt over her bikini bottoms. “Thanks,” she said, pushing a wet strand of blonde hair from her face. “Mike’s still young. He doesn’t listen to a

word I say.” She sounded defensive, like she needed to justify his behavior.

I shook my head. “Nah, he’s just being a puppy. A little training, and he’ll get there.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“I’ll wash your shirt and bring it back,” she added, shifting awkwardly.

That’s when I really noticed her. Sun-kissed skin, lean muscles in her arms and legs, and the kind of confidence that didn’t need makeup or a designer wardrobe to stand out. She wasn’t movie-star beautiful. She was real—gorgeous in a way that made you want to know her, not just look at her.

“I’m Beatrice Jones,” she said, holding out her hand.

I took it, momentarily forgetting my own name.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Uh—Raven Ledger, I finally managed. “I live just down the beach.” I nodded toward my deck, where my German shepherd sat, watching us with sharp, unblinking eyes. “See her? That’s Mandy. She’s mine.”

Beatrice eyed the dog warily. “She’s huge. What a beautiful German Shepherd. Is she tied up?”

I grinned. “Nah, Mandy doesn’t need a leash. When I tell her to stay, she stays.” To prove my point, I whistled. Mandy shot to her feet but didn’t move until I called to her. Then she trotted over, sitting obediently at my side.

Beatrice crouched slightly. “Hello, Mandy. You’re gorgeous.” She glanced back

toward the ocean, where Mike still pranced around with her bikini top. “I wish Mike minded as well as she does.”

“He will,” I assured her. “Just gotta be consistent.”

She sighed like she wasn’t buying it. “Thanks again for the shirt, but I should get going.” Then, as if realizing she was standing in a wet T-shirt, she quickly turned and jogged toward her place.

“Nice meeting you, Beatrice,” I called.

She threw a glance over her shoulder and waved before disappearing inside.

Later, sitting in my office, I overheard River talking about the new neighbor.

“She’s a firefighter,” he said. “Kat met her and invited her to the barbecue this Saturday. I thought we could all have dinner on the beach and get to know her. She said she’d bring her brothers. They all live together, and apparently, she volunteered them to help cook.”

“I met her yesterday,” I said, explaining what happened yesterday.

Cyclone laughed. “That retriever of hers? He came into my house and passed out on my sofa before I walked him back down the beach. No one was home, but the back door was open, so I put him inside and shut it.”

I leaned back in my chair, still thinking about Beatrice. This weekend was going to be interesting.

“I love barbeques,” Lori said, walking into the office. “When are we having a barbeque?”

“Saturday, why don’t we make something?” Gage said.

“Yeah, I’ll make fruit salad. You can make potato salad,” she agreed.

“That’s perfect,” Gage said as he pulled Lori in for a kiss, even though she was ready to have that baby any day. “I’m hungry, wife. Let’s go home for lunch.”

“Ow,” she said, grabbing her tummy. “I came to tell you I’m ready to go to the hospital.”

Gage stiffened. “What? Are you in labor?”

“She just said she’s in labor,” I cut in, already moving. “Get her bag. I’ll walk her to the car.”

“Wait, hold on—what am I supposed to do?” Gage ran a hand through his hair, looking completely lost. “I’ve talked myself through this, but my brain just went fuzzy. What am I going home for?”

Lori exhaled, patience wearing thin. “Sweetie, you’re going for my bag. Now move your ass before we have this baby right here in your office.”

Gage blinked like he needed that to sink in. Then his eyes narrowed. “Did you walk all this way by yourself?”

“Walking is good for me. The doctor said I should walk,” she shot back.

“Gage, get the damn bag, or we’re leaving without you,” I said, taking Lori’s arm to steady her.

We barely made it out the door before her water broke.

Lori and I locked eyes, both realizing the same thing at once.

“Oh, crap,” she muttered.

“Change of plans,” I said, adjusting my grip on her. “Let’s get you back to your house.”

By the time we made it onto their deck, Gage came barreling out the door, bag in hand. “I thought I was meeting you at the car—” He froze when he saw Lori’s wet leggings.

“There’s been a change in plans,” I said. “Her water broke. We don’t have time to get to the hospital. She’s having the baby here.”

Gage paled. “What the hell are you talking about? We have to get her to the hospital! This is too dangerous—”

“Breathe, man,” I said, giving him a subtle shake of my head so Lori wouldn’t panic. “It’s gonna be fine.”

For a second, I thought he was going to pass out. Then, to my utter shock, he turned and bolted—down the beach.

Lori and I stared after him.

I sighed. “We’re gonna need to give him a drink when he gets back.”

Lori chuckled, even as another contraction hit.

Ten minutes later, Gage returned, dragging someone behind him.

“Sweetheart, this is our new neighbor,” he panted, gesturing to the woman beside him. “She’s a firefighter. Her name is...” He paused as if suddenly realizing he hadn’t asked.

“Beatrice,” I filled in, giving her a quick once-over. “Ever delivered a baby before?”

Beatrice nodded, completely unfazed. “Yeah, I’ve delivered a few. Let’s get her settled.”

I turned to Gage. “Strip the bed.”

Gage blinked. “What?”

Beatrice didn’t wait. She moved straight to Lori, assessing her. “Are you having contractions?”

“Her water broke, and she needs to lie down,” I answered. “Gage, I’ll make you some chamomile tea while Lori gets ready.”

“Tea?” he echoed, dazed.

Beatrice shot him a sharp look. “Move. Now.”

Gage scrambled to obey, heading for the bedroom.

By the time I had the tea ready, Gage was downstairs again, looking rattled.

“I called an ambulance,” he announced. “They’ll check Lori and the baby after delivery. I’m sure she’ll have to go to the hospital.”

I eyed him. “Why are you down here?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Beatrice yelled at me. Told me to go find my tea.”

I smirked. “And why would she do that?”

“I... might have panicked a little when Lori had a sharp pain.” He exhaled heavily. “She’s so damn brave.” He eyed the mug in my hand. “Give me that. I’ll take it upstairs.”

“Try not to say anything,” I advised, handing it over. “Just hold her hand when the pain comes.”

“I know, I know. I’ll be quiet.” He hesitated, swallowing hard. “I just hate seeing her in pain.” He exhaled sharply. “And I really don’t want the firefighter kicking me out again.”

As he trudged upstairs, I shook my head.

Damn, what was wrong with my buddies? These were the toughest men I knew. We were Army Special Forces, the best of the best. The ones people called when terrorists needed taking down, when cartels needed dismantling when serial killers needed stopping.

And yet, the second their women were in labor?

They turned into complete pussies.

I snorted. That would never be me. No way. I was strong. I was a leader.

No woman was ever gonna turn me into a pussy.

32

Beatrice

I had to chase Lori's husband out of the room three times already. If he tells me to be gentle one more time, I swear I'll strangle him. Lori just laughs every time he does.

"Did you know Gage and the Golden Team are Army Special Forces?" she asked, her voice strained but steady.

"Are they?" I glanced at her, wiping my hands on a towel. "I guess he's just worried about you. The next time you have a contraction, push down. It's almost time."

I stepped to the door and shouted, "Gage, it's time!"

I barely finished speaking before I heard him—taking three steps at a time, I bet. He rushed into the room, his face pale as a sheet. But as soon as he reached Lori's side, all his nerves seemed to vanish. He took her hand, whispered sweet words against her damp skin. I hoped he meant them. I had seen too much in my years as a firefighter—seen men make promises in moments like this only to walk away later.

"Lori, I can see the head! There's a lot of blond hair. Ready? Push!"

She gritted her teeth and pushed, her grip on Gage's hand tightening. Once. Twice. Then, with a final effort, the baby slipped free into my hands. I quickly cleared his mouth, and he let out a furious wail, letting the whole world know he had arrived.

Lori and Gage both laughed, relief and joy shining in their eyes as they heard their son cry for the first time. Gage kissed her forehead, then her lips.

“You have a boy,” I said, smiling as I wrapped the tiny, squirming infant in a blanket. “A beautiful baby boy.”

A noise from the doorway caught my attention. I turned to see my brother standing there, watching me. Daniel. Of course, he was checking on me. My brothers always felt the need to watch over me, as if I couldn’t take care of myself.

Gage jumped to his feet, instinctively on alert, but I just smiled. “It’s a boy,” I told Dan.

“Congratulations,” Dan said, stepping forward. “The ambulance is here. They’ll take over from here—we have to go.”

“Thank you so much for everything,” Lori said, exhaustion and gratitude thick in her voice.

“I’m glad I was here.” I turned to Dan. “This is my brother, Daniel. We’re on duty, so we have to leave. Dan, this is Lori and her husband, Gage.”

We said our goodbyes and headed out.

Dan shook his head as we walked toward the truck. “Bea, we’ve lived here for a week, and you already know everyone. Some guy told me he’d see me at a barbecue on Saturday.”

I smirked. “Kat invited us. Was I supposed to say no? And when Gage showed up, telling me his wife was in labor, was I supposed to shut the door in his face?”

Dan sighed, conceding. “I guess not. So, what’s their story? I heard they all work together.”

“They are former Army Special Forces. Now they run a high-security business—the Golden Team.”

Dan whistled low. “I’ve heard of them. They go all over the world rescuing people. Good to have them as neighbors. I’m surprised one of them didn’t deliver the baby. I thought Special Forces trained as medics.”

I laughed. “I’m sure Lori didn’t want one of them delivering her baby.”

As we walked toward our house, a German shepherd stood on the deck of one of the nearby homes, watching us with sharp, assessing eyes.

“Brutus, stand down,” a deep voice commanded. A man stepped forward, accompanied by another familiar face—Raven Ledger.

“Hi, I’m Lyon Spenser,” the man introduced himself. “And thanks for kicking Gage out of the room a few times. We’re never going to let him live that down.”

I chuckled. “He was driving me crazy.”

“I’m Raven Ledger,” Raven said, shaking Dan’s hand before glancing at me. “Thank you for being there for Lori. She’d never admit she was scared, but I saw it in her eyes. She’s tough—former Army Special Forces—but this was different.”

“Was she?” I said, thinking back. “She was fearless. Gage, on the other hand... not so much.”

We all laughed.

“They’ve been in love for years,” Raven said, shaking his head fondly.

Dan and I continued on our way, both of us smiling.

“Looks like we’ve got some interesting folks for neighbors,” Dan chuckled.

When we got home, Troy was pacing the floor. “What took so long?”

I shrugged. “I delivered a baby. Then our new neighbors introduced themselves.”

Troy’s eyes widened. “You delivered a baby? Who had a baby?”

“Lori Sparrow. She’s former Army Special Forces. Oh, and all of our neighbors? Also former Army Special Forces. Now, they’re the Golden Team. And we’re going to a beach barbecue on Saturday.”

Troy stared at me like I’d just told him we were moving to Mars. “The Golden Team? Wow. They’re famous. It’s good to have them as neighbors.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. My brothers—most of the time, they were like overgrown teenagers. But when it came to work, we were all business.

We loved our jobs. It was in our blood. Our father had been a firefighter, too. A smokejumper. He died doing what he loved.

I was seventeen when he jumped into a wildfire in Arizona and never came back. That was the worst pain I had ever felt.

My oldest brother stayed home with me until I turned eighteen, and then I left for college. But no matter where I went, firefighting called me back.

And now, here we were—starting over in a new place, surrounded by some of the toughest men and women I'd ever met.

Something told me life here was going to be very, very interesting.

I was always going to be a firefighter. It was in my blood. I wanted to be a smokejumper like my dad, but my brothers had a fit at the mere thought of it. They practically staged an intervention. So, I changed my mind.

I started working with them a year ago, and at first, it took them a while to stop treating me like their little sister and start seeing me as one of them. Now, things were different. They knew I could hold my own.

But tonight, my mind drifted to something—or rather, someone—else.

Raven.

Those green eyes had locked onto mine, holding me captive for a heartbeat before he turned away. I didn't have time for distractions, especially not my hot new neighbor. I had work to do—lives to save.

We got a call about a heart attack victim. These were always the hardest. Some people made it, some didn't. And the worst part? The families—watching them begging, pleading, praying out loud for their loved one to hold on while I silently did the same. The weight of telling them, I'm sorry, we did everything we could, never got easier.

But this time, she lived.

I whispered a thank-you to God as we loaded back into the truck, heading back to the station.

We had barely returned to the firehouse when another call came in.

A warehouse fire.

We rolled out, arriving on the scene to find two fire trucks already there. Smoke billowed from the building, thick and dark, but the flames were inside. Something about it felt... wrong.

I glanced at my brothers.

“I don’t like this,” I murmured.

Troy, turned to me. “Bea, I don’t want you going inside that warehouse.”

I crossed my arms. “Troy, I don’t want any of us going inside. This fire doesn’t feel right. We should use tools to push the doors open— without standing in front of them.”

“I agree,” Dan said.

And then the explosion ripped through the air.

We ran toward the front, hoses ready, but my stomach twisted into knots as the smoke cleared.

Two firefighters had opened the doors and then the blast went off. And now...

They were gone.

Literally.

My stomach lurched. Pieces of them were everywhere . Blood. Flesh. Uniforms shredded beyond recognition.

Troy grabbed my arm and yanked me back before I could step into the carnage. Around us, everyone stood frozen in shock. Someone started retching. The metallic scent of blood mixed with smoke in the air, and for the first time in a long time, I thought I might be sick, too.

I pulled my radio from my belt with shaking fingers. “Katherine, we’ve got a situation. A bad one.” My voice sounded steadier than I felt. “We’re at the warehouse fire out of town. Two firefighters opened the doors and—” I swallowed hard. “They were blown to pieces.”

A pause. Then, “Who were they?”

“I don’t know. I called you first.”

“Send me the address. I’m on my way.” Katherine O’Neal was our investigator, the best one I’ve ever known.

I barely nodded before I heard another round of vomiting behind me. This wasn’t just another tragic call.

This was murder.

“This is a homicide,” Captain Larry Morris said, wiping his face with the back of his glove. His voice was hoarse with emotion. “We need to back the hell away. This is a crime scene now. The warehouse can fucking burn down for all I care.”

His words hit hard.

Someone wanted this to happen. Someone set this up .

“We had a bad feeling about this one,” Troy muttered.

“I told them to stay away from the doors,” Captain Morris whispered, his voice breaking. “I told them.”

I turned to another firefighter. “Who were they?”

Leon’s face was pale. “Donny and Robert.” He swallowed hard. “Captain told everyone to stay back. I don’t think they heard him... or they would have listened.” He clenched his jaw. “That means someone out there wants to kill firefighters.”

I froze, scanning the shadows beyond the burning building.

“If this was intentional,” I murmured, “then they were watching.”

He stiffened beside me. “Yeah.” He slowly lifted his head, eyes scanning the darkness.

“That bastard is watching us right now .”

33

Raven

I had to leave for an assignment, so I missed the barbecue on Saturday. The guys filled me in on the warehouse fire—it was deliberately set. The doors had been wired with enough explosives to obliterate anyone within ten feet.

My heart dropped at the thought that Beatrice could have been among them. I needed to see her.

Before leaving for the firehouse, I called Mandy, and she eagerly jumped into the truck's passenger seat. She loved going places with me.

When I arrived, I hesitated, debating whether to get out of the vehicle. Then I saw her walking toward me. I opened the door, stepped out, and met her gaze. I didn't say a word—just nodded—then climbed back in, ready to leave.

“What are you doing?” she asked, stepping up to my window. “Is that all you wanted? A nod?”

What was I supposed to say?

“The guys told me what happened. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She studied me. “You came here just to see for yourself that I was okay. Why?”

I exhaled, gripping the steering wheel. “I don’t know. I just needed to see you were whole. Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Her expression softened. “I’d love to. My next day off is Thursday.”

“I’ll cook for you. I’ll pick you up at six—no, make that seven. If you want, we can spend the day together. Go for a hike in the hills. Or do anything you want.”

“I’d like that. I’ll be ready at seven in the morning. I love hiking.”

“Me too.”

For a moment, I considered reaching for her, pulling her close—but before I could, Beatrice closed the distance, pressing her lips to mine. That was all the encouragement I needed. I pulled her halfway through the window, kissing her until we both had to come up for air.

“I’ll see you Thursday,” I murmured, brushing my lips against hers one last time.

Mandy pushed between us, making us laugh.

“I better go before your brothers come after me,” I said.

“Until Thursday,” she whispered against my lips.

I didn’t want to let her go, but I did, watching until she was safely inside. Then Mandy and I went shopping. I secured her service vest, ensuring no one would question her presence.

Thursday arrived at last.

I was up by five, so I took an early swim in the cold ocean, had my coffee, and dressed by six.

At six-fifteen, Beatrice arrived. “I saw you swimming, so I thought, why not check if you’ve had your coffee yet?” she said, smiling.

“I have. How about you?”

“I’m good. Are we taking Mike and Mandy hiking with us?”

“Why not? They’ll love it.”

“Mike will, for sure. He has more energy than any dog I know,” Bea said.

I turned to reply and hadn’t realized how close she was. Without thinking, I leaned in and kissed her. When her arms wrapped around my neck, I pulled her even closer. When I finally lifted my head, we exchanged soft smiles.

“I enjoy kissing you,” she whispered.

I brushed my thumb along her jaw. “I enjoy kissing you too.”

“Then we should do more of it.”

“Agreed.”

Reluctantly, I let go. “Ready?” I called for Mandy, and Mike was already waiting by the door.

As we loaded the dogs into the backseat and got into the front, I caught Bea watching me.

“Do you always carry your gun?” she asked.

“Yes. Always. You never know when you’ll need it. Carrying this gun has saved my life—and others.”

She nodded. “Good. I always carry mine too. I just didn’t want you to freak out if I had to use it.”

I grinned. “Duly noted.”

We hiked until the sun was high overhead. Eventually, Mike, all energy spent, refused to take another step. Finding a shady spot, we settled in for a break.

I dug through my backpack, pulling out water and snacks for us—and treats for the dogs.

Mike inhaled his snack in two bites, then tried to steal Mandy’s. One warning growl from her put an end to that.

We laughed as Mike whined dramatically, begging for Beatrice’s snack. She sighed, popping the last bite into his mouth. He didn’t even chew—just gulped it down whole.

Shaking our heads, we packed up and continued our hike.

That’s when we heard it.

Crying.

“That sounds like a baby,” Bea said, immediately heading toward the crying.

Sitting in a stroller was a small child, alone. We searched the area, calling out for anyone who might be with the baby, but no one answered. A diaper bag had been shoved into the back of the stroller, fully stocked.

Bea scooped up the child, soothing her while I stepped toward the cliff's edge. Mandy barked, her sharp senses picking up something before I did. She had found a small, winding path leading down the steep drop-off.

“Mandy, be careful!” I called after her.

I glanced at Bea. She was rocking the baby gently, her face tight with concern. The child was sunburned.

“I have a bad feeling,” she murmured.

“I do too,” I admitted. “One of her parents has to be down there.” I pulled out my phone and called for backup. It was a three-mile hike back to my truck, but I figured a helicopter would get here sooner.

Mandy returned moments later, holding something in her mouth. A phone. I took it from her and saw it was flooded with missed calls and messages. One message in particular caught my attention—it was from someone desperate. A husband.

I quickly replied, explaining what we had found. Seconds later, he responded: Where are you?

I sent him our location, and thirty minutes later, a man arrived on a dirt bike. He was still wearing a suit, his tie loosened and his face pale.

The moment he saw his daughter, his breath hitched. He snatched her into his arms, tears streaking his face. “I knew something was wrong. That’s why I came up here.

Where is Jenny?"

"We think she fell," I told him. "Mandy's been searching. I have a rope in my truck three miles from here. If you can get it, I can go down and look for her. We've been calling out, but no one has answered."

The man swallowed hard. "Jenny is deaf. She wouldn't be able to respond."

That changed everything.

"I'll get the rope. Be right back." He reluctantly handed his daughter to Bea and took off on his dirt bike.

Mandy suddenly darted toward us again, this time with something else in her mouth—a shoe.

Bea gasped. "She's down there," I said. "Jenny must have given Mandy the shoe as a sign."

Just then, a blur of movement caught my eye. Mike. The big dog had wandered too close to the ledge.

"Mike! Get back up here right now!" Bea's voice was sharp with panic.

Before I could react, she secured the baby in the stroller and sprinted after him.

"Bea, be careful!" I shouted.

She glanced back, flashing a confident smile. "Did I mention I'm a rock climber? And I'm pretty damn good at it."

I still wasn't convinced.

Mike, spooked by all the commotion, hesitated near the edge. "Mike, don't move," Bea warned. "Stay right there."

The distant rumble of the dirt bike signaled the man's return. "He'll be here any second with the rope," I told her.

Bea shook her head. "Mike is scared. He won't do this alone. I have to help him."

Mandy barked from below, her excitement cutting through the tension. Then Bea's voice rang out. "I see her! Jenny is petting Mike!"

Relief flooded me. "Is she hurt?"

"She has a broken leg," Bea called back. "She said she tried to climb back up to her baby but couldn't."

Before I could ask how she knew that, Bea glanced up at me and signed: We need to stabilize her leg before we move her.

I blinked in surprise. "You know sign language?"

Bea grinned. "Of course."

Jenny's husband shouted from above, his voice raw with worry. "How is she?"

"She has a broken leg," I called back. "We need two sturdy pieces of wood to splint it before we move her."

It took another forty minutes to get Jenny stabilized and lifted up. I carried her up the

last stretch, passing her to her husband, who hugged her tightly, whispering words only she could read on his lips.

Just as I climbed over the edge, the helicopter arrived. We loaded the dirt bike into my truck, and the father drove their car, following us back into town.

I glanced at Bea as we unloaded the bike. “Good thing we decided to go hiking today.”

She let out a breathless laugh. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I hesitated, then said, “How about you go home, shower, and then we’ll have dinner?”

She tilted her head, studying me.

I don’t know why I said what came next, but I did. “Or... you could shower at my place. With me.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. “Forget I said that.”

Bea’s lips curled into a slow smile. “I don’t want to forget it.”

I stilled. “You don’t?”

She leaned closer. “No. I love your idea.”

Damn.

“You do?”

Her hands slid up my chest, her eyes dark with something deeper than amusement.
“Yes, I do.”

Before I could say another word, she kissed me—slow, deep, and unhurried—right as the traffic light turned red.

When she pulled back, she whispered, “I want you to make love to me. I’ve wanted that since the moment I met you.” Her cheeks flushed. “I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

I swallowed hard, my heart hammering. “I like that you said it.”

Her fingers laced with mine.

“That means we’re thinking the same thing.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:44 pm

I was so nervous about showering with Raven. I knew there would be way more than showering. My panties were getting wet thinking about what else we were going to do. As soon as Mike jumped out, he ran home barking. I tried calling him back, but he ignored me. I swear he is so spoiled. Troy opened the door and spotted us and he walked over.

“I heard about what happened. Thank God you hiked there and heard the baby crying.”

“I know that poor woman couldn’t hear anything; she was def; I’m so glad we were there. How did you hear about it?”

“Tom called and told me what happened.

“We are still on our date, so I’ll see you around.”

“You’re covered in dirt,” he smirked. “You should run home and take a shower before dinner.”

I glanced at Raven and then a little whirlwind ran over and hugged Raven. I looked at her and she had the same green eyes as Raven. Then a woman called out to her.

“Haley where are you?”

“Mom, I’m with Uncle Raven,” she said as she walked around the corner of the house and smiled.

“Laney, this is Beatrice Jones,” Raven said.

“Hello, Beatrice,” Laney said, holding her hand out to shake mine.

“Laney is my sister, and this is her daughter Haley. They also have another child, a toddler. Laney is married to Gideon. We’ll talk to all of you later. We are still on our date, and I don’t want to miss a moment. So we’ll talk to you later. Oh yeah, and this is Troy. He’s Beatrice’s brother. Bye,” he took my hand, and we walked inside his house, and he locked the door.

“Shower time,” he said, pulling me into his arms.

Thick and warm steam swirls around me as the sound of water fills the space between us. My heart hammers against my ribs as I step into the shower, my skin already damp from the heat. Raven is standing beneath the spray, his dark hair wet, water gliding over his strong shoulders.

I should be nervous. Maybe I am. But when he looks at me, there’s something steady in his gaze that makes me feel safe even in this moment of vulnerability.

He lifts a hand, brushing my wet hair back from my face, his fingertips grazing my cheek. A shiver moves down my spine at the tenderness of the touch.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, his voice deep and husky.

Warmth pools in my chest, and I force myself to breathe. I’ve spent so long guarding myself, building walls I thought would never come down. But here, now, with him, I don’t want those walls anymore.

His hands are gentle as he lathers soap between his palms, then smooths it over my shoulders. I close my eyes as he moves lower, his touch slow, reverent, learning me. Every brush of his fingers leaves a trail of heat, and when he reaches down between my thighs, I have to steady myself with a hand against his chest.

His skin is warm beneath my fingertips, muscles flexing as I slide my hands over his chest. A drop of water trails down his jaw, and before I can stop myself, I reach up and brush it away. He catches my wrist before I can pull back, bringing my hand to his lips.

A soft kiss, nothing more. And yet, it steals my breath.

“Are you sure?” he asks, voice low, rough.

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. “Yes.”

His arms wrap around me, pulling me into him, the heat of his body melting against mine. The first touch of his lips is slow, testing, but when I press closer, his restraint snaps. The kiss deepens, a slow, consuming hunger that sends fire licking through my veins.

I lose myself in him, in the feel of his hands, the way he holds me like I’m something fragile, even as his grip tightens with need. The water washes over us, but nothing could drown out this moment, this feeling.

As his finger enters me, I cry out, ready to orgasm; I start moving as his fingers move faster. I can’t stop the scream of release as my body shakes with an orgasm.

Later, wrapped in his sheets, I lay against Raven’s chest, my fingers tracing lazy patterns over his skin. His arm is draped around me, strong and protective, and for the first time in a long time, I feel like I belong somewhere.

“You’re staying, right?” he asks, voice rough with exhaustion and something deeper.

I tilt my head, watching the soft glow of light cast shadows across his face.

“I’m staying,” I whisper, pressing a kiss over his heart.

His arms tightened around me, holding me close, and I knew I'd made the right choice.

When I woke up, an arm was across my waist, and a leg was thrown over mine. I smiled and snuggled into him more. I could hear the rain pouring down and slashing against the window. I didn't even know it was going to rain. I went right back to sleep. Lips kissing me woke me up again. I made a noise that let him know I was enjoying it.

"Do you feel like making love?" Raven asked.

"Yes," I whispered, kissing him back. His scent surrounded me, and his hands ran down my body. My blood pounded in my ears as loud as the rain that slashed against the windows. Raven bent his head and touched his warm lips to mine. He devoured my mouth and found out I was as hungry for him as he was for me. His tongue plunged between my lips. Unreserved fire and passion met him head-on. His hands ran through my hair, and he crushed his mouth to mine. My body melted against him. Hunger surged inside us. He was careful not to crush my body under his. He held himself over me.

"No, I want to feel your body touching mine," I whispered. The touch of his hands so warm on my skin sent sensations straight to my center and made me ache as a slight sound escaped my lips.

Raven kissed my neck and looked into my eyes. "We are going to take our time, sweetheart, so lay back, and let's enjoy each other."

He slid his hand over one curved hip. Over the smooth skin, my hips lifted when he pulled me against his hardness, pressing it into my hip.

I ran my hands across Raven's broad chest and felt his muscles quiver at my touch.

His hand slipped between my thighs, and I cried out on a half sob of pleasure as he touched delicate, aching flesh.

All I could feel was his touch. All I knew was the heat and the need that moved through my body. I was speechless, nearly mindless. When Raven entered me, I thought I would perish lying under him as he made passionate love to me.

I have never felt like this with any other woman. We made love throughout the night. I lay on my side, watching her sleep. She smiled. “Was I snoring?”

“No,” I replied and smiled. “You’re beautiful. Want to shower with me?”

“I was hoping you would ask me that question. I love showering with you.”

Beatrice stretched and held her hand out for me to pull her out of bed. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. As I led us to the shower, our bare bodies wrapped around each other.

I didn’t know her body could be so sensitive. Just a little touch from me and her body would orgasm. She cried happy tears and tears of fulfillment. I kissed her everywhere when she cried tears of satisfaction. I tried to calm her tears. My heart expanded in my chest with feelings for Beatrice. I whispered sweet words to her as we made love.

When the water turned cold, we got out. How about I cook you breakfast? She was drying my back. I bet those hurt she said, kissing a bullet wound on my back. I chuckled, bent my head, and kissed her. Beatrice kept on drying my body. I chuckled, bent my head, and kissed her. Beatrice kept on drying my body. When she came to each scar, she would kiss it.

I have to go home and get dressed; I have an appointment with the Fire Marshal. I’m going with her to check on a fire in Palm Desert. There was a fire there, just like the one we had here. Two men were severely burned when a door exploded. They didn’t

try to open it, but when it exploded, they were close enough to be badly injured.

“Beatrice, please be careful when inspecting those explosions. You don’t know who is watching. There are so many crazy people out there.”

“I will be. You don’t have to worry about me. I’ll wear your shirt home. I’m going to leave now before anyone wakes up.”

“Bye. I will see you later today. Let’s have dinner tonight. They have this great place down the beach if you like seafood.”

“I love seafood. I should be back in plenty of time, bye.”

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