



Protecting Ellis (Loved by the SEAL #1)

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Description: Ellis can't escape her ex. She moves apartments, but when her tires are slashed, she leans on her new neighbor, Greer "Trip" Merano. Trip doesn't want to get involved in a relationship, but there is something about Ellis that he can't shake. It's not just her elfin looks but her spirit that draws him in.

Spending time with Ellis is at the top of his list, but he must leave when called out on a mission. Coming home, he finds that a stranger attacked Ellis, and now they have to find out who committed the crime. With rising risks, Trip feels caught between his job and her safety. The clock is ticking down, leaving Ellis in harm's way.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Get off me!” Ellis Granger couldn’t believe she’d ever thought Bennet was a nice guy or someone she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. The first clue should have been when her dad introduced her to him. A few months ago, she’d finally had enough and called it quits. But Bennet didn’t stop coming around.

Bennet tightened his hold. “Not until you listen to me.”

She’d made a mistake of not locking her front door to her studio as soon as her assistant left. She had no reason to believe he would get this physical. Then again, she was alone with him.

When he’d shoved her up against the wall with his hand on her throat, she’d been surprised. There were cameras outside. Surely, he knew the cameras had picked him up. Maybe he thought they were fake. Worry slid through her as his grip tightened. What if she didn’t survive?

His grip loosened for a moment, and she sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re not moving back in and I’m not moving in with you. We’re done.”

Anger made his face contort, and he pushed her again, causing her head to slam into the wall. Pain blossomed, and she gasped as she tried to catch her breath.

“You’re going to call our parents and tell them you made a mistake, that the wedding is still on, and you were wrong to walk away.”

She shoved at his chest, trying to push him off. It was no use. Bennet was bigger and stronger. He could hurt her, kill her even, but there was no way in the world she would do what he wanted.

The door chime sounded, and she glanced over Bennet's shoulder, glad the door was still unlocked. A police officer stepped in, her eyes narrowed as she met Ellis's gaze. The officer wasn't huge, but she had a gun, and all the other equipment police officers carried.

"Is everything okay?"

Bennet turned on the charm, his smile wide as he dropped his hold on her. "Yes, Officer. Just a lover's tryst. Sorry, we'll head home."

Bennet tried to grab her hand, but Ellis had moved away from him and was shaking her head. "That's not what happened. He threatened me and won't leave."

The officer changed her stance, putting her hand on the butt of her gun. "Sir, can you step outside?"

Bennet's shoulders stiffened, and he shot Ellis an angry look over his shoulder that promised trouble. He was close enough she could hear his low words. "I'm the best you could ever hope for, and now you're going to pay."

She rolled her eyes. "The cop is standing right there, and you're threatening me again right in front of her. Get out, and don't ever come back."

His words hurt. He'd spent most of their time together reminding her how plain she looked. At one point, he'd called her an ugly mutt. Maybe he was the best she could hope for, but she didn't want or need a cheating, abusive jerk in her life.

Bennet huffed as he moved past the officer. Ellis wondered if her ex would try to run. He was white, and his parents were rich, so he probably thought he could either charm the officer or pay her off.

Relief filled her when another officer pulled into the parking lot. Ellis blew out a breath, puffing out her bangs. Bennet hated her bangs, so instead of growing them out, she'd kept them cut short to repel him.

It hadn't worked. He'd still come back to annoy her. At one point he'd told her she looked like a wet dog with her bangs. His insults had stung, but she'd stayed with him because her parents had piled on, too, emphasizing how Bennet was the best she could do.

She guessed it was true. She hadn't been serious with anyone before Bennet. Guys hadn't been bugging her for dates. Heck, most men ignored her. Maybe there was something wrong with her. In her late teen years and early twenties, she'd turned to photography instead of obsessing over guys.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

The officer was back, her eyebrows raised. "He said you're his wife and wants the keys to your car so he can drive home."

Ellis threw back her head, laughter spilling out, echoing off the walls in the small space that was the retail part of her studio. It took her a moment to recover from the hilarity of the statement. She was laughing so hard her sides hurt from the workout she'd done earlier that morning.

"Oh God, you're going to make me choke." She shook her head. "Heck no, I'm not married to that jerk. I called off the wedding. We never made it to the rehearsal dinner or my bachelorette party. He's an as—ope, sorry. Not going to curse. He's not

a nice guy. I found out before the wedding, and I called it off. He's trying to force me to marry him."

The officer looked around at the photos on the wall, her gaze staying on the amazing landscapes she had that featured colorful clouds at sunset. She'd taken that shot in Florida a few days before a huge storm. Her work won awards and had been featured in multiple national travel and nature magazines. She had a good reputation and was proud of the work she did.

"This is you?" The officer pointed at the photos.

Ellis nodded. "Yes. It's me."

"He's claiming that he's the photographer, and you stole all his equipment, too."

That should have been funny, but him messing with her business was pissing her off. "Oh, he can go right to hell for that. He has never been involved in my business. He may have gone on a few hikes with me, but he didn't take the photos or do the work." Ellis shook her head and held up her hand, trying to offer an apology. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to get heated. I take my work seriously, as I'm sure you do. You're in a male-dominated field. Do guys try to take credit for your good ideas?"

The officer rolled her eyes. "I can't even start on that or we'd be here all night. I'm going to tell him to leave. If he doesn't leave on his own accord, I'll run him in. I hope you don't mind, but I have about twenty minutes of paperwork for another case, and I'm just going to sit in your lot. Where is your vehicle?"

"Around back."

The officer nodded. "Can you lock this door and I'll drive around back and meet you there when you're ready to leave?"

Ellis nodded. "I need about five minutes to close down. I'll flash the lights in here when I'm ready to go."

"Sure. And you should get a restraining order. There'll be a report you can pick up from the station. I'll make notes so other officers know to drive by a few times a day just to discourage him from coming back around."

"Thank you."

"Most guys like this back down once they realize you aren't bowing to their wishes."

Ellis smiled, hoping the officer was right, but knowing she probably wasn't. Guys like Bennet didn't like to lose.

She had a small photography store in San Diego, but she had a name in Europe. In her early twenties she'd gone backpacking through Europe and been lucky enough to take some great photos. Back before this current issue, her mother had helped her with her smart investing that she'd learned by watching investment TV for decades. Of course her father always tried to take credit for their money, but Ellis knew the truth. The only reason her parents had any money was because her mother was smart.

After turning off her computers and making sure the doors were locked, she flashed the lights, getting the officer's attention. She waved and watched as the officer backed up and pulled away.

Ellis stepped out the back door, relieved to see the officer already in the lot, her lights shining on the one car in the back. She worried that Bennet had done something to her vehicle. Luckily, he hadn't slashed the tires or broken out the windows. She didn't think he was capable of that, but who knew?

She waved to the officer and slid behind the wheel, making sure her phone connected

to Bluetooth before she took off. The officer followed her for a few blocks before turning down another street.

At the next stop sign, Ellis called her best friend, Ginger. Her parents hadn't been inventive when naming her. She looked exactly like what people thought she would just by hearing her name. Even the freckles that dusted her cheeks and nose weren't surprising.

"What's up?" Ginger asked. The sound of cartoons played in the background, emphasized by the shriek of her kid.

"Bennet is a dick."

"Oh no. What did he do?"

"Came to the shop and threatened me. A cop was passing by and stopped in to make sure I was okay."

"And?"

"I'm going to have to file a restraining order."

"You need to move closer and to an apartment with an alarm."

"I'll buy something for the door. I know I moved to a surprising place, but I figured he would never guess I'd live there. There is no way he will be going out to Riverton to find me."

"The bast—yes, darling, you can have a cookie."

"Wow, you're allowing her to have a cookie before dinner."

“It’s technically after her dinner. You’re running late. You need to talk to a lawyer and get something done about him.”

She let go of a heavy sigh. “I know. I will.”

“And get some sort of alarm for your place. He’s dangerous. Also, a panic alarm at work.”

Ellis blew out a breath. Ginger was right. She needed more protection. She wouldn’t run away, but maybe a trip to Europe was in the cards for her. She could go back and take more photos to sell in galleries over there. Her US customers appreciated her work, but Europeans went wild over her photos. She wasn’t sure why, but she was glad to be able to share the beauty she found while on hikes in Europe.

They talked about Ginger’s kid and gossiped about a makeup blogger they’d been watching for years. She appreciated how Ginger kept her grounded. Bennet hated her friends, especially Ginger, and had tried to prevent her from seeing them. Ellis had told him she wouldn’t abandon her friends. It was one of the main reasons she’d left him. Of course she hadn’t been willing to stand up for herself, but she would always stand up for Ginger.

“I’m home. Get your kid to bed. I’ll check in tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you do that. I’m worried about you.”

“I know. But I’ll be okay. He doesn’t know I moved to this tiny apartment out here. He’ll never find me.”

“I hope he doesn’t. Love you, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Love you, too, Red.”

“Bye, dork.”

The call ended, and she sat in her car for a moment, glad to be home. No one else had pulled into the lot at the same time she had, so she felt confident he hadn't followed her. She slipped from her car, grabbed her bags, and started to the stairs that led up to her apartment. No way would she ever live on the first floor again.

The door on the ground level right under hers opened, and a big, sexy man stepped out. Her neighbor was gorgeous, moody, perhaps, but so freaking good looking. His lips down in a severe frown and his eyebrows had a line between them. They hadn't talked, but he'd grunted at her. He looked mean—no, serious. His body was built and he looked nearly model perfect. Maybe he was a model. He had the bad boy, I could fuck a girl up hard look about him that sent a shiver straight through her.

He glanced up from his phone and narrowed his gaze even more before grunting as she slipped past him. Seriously, the intensity coming off that man made her squeeze her legs together just walking past him.

She pushed the lust away and headed upstairs to unlock her door. The man wasn't interested in her. All he did was grunt. Maybe he didn't speak English or speak at all. It was wrong to stereotype people, but he fit the dumb jock theme to a T.

“Hello, Lucy, I'm home,” Ellis called out to her goldfish. Not that the goldfish cared, but she liked to think her fish wanted her to stick around. She'd thought about getting a cat, but she took frequent photography trips and didn't want to leave a cat alone that often. She had an auto feeder for her fish, and Ginger didn't mind taking the fish when she had longer trips planned.

When she dropped a few pieces of food into the fishbowl, Lucy came up and nibbled. The fish was happy she was home. Maybe it was just the food Lucy was happy about, but Ellis liked to think the fish cared.

She sighed as she leaned against the countertop, wondering if this was all she could hope for. Sticking with Bennet for so long had been out of desperation. She was thirty-three and had never had a serious boyfriend other than Bennet. Guys thought her dark hair and pale skin looked plain. She didn't have curves or even breasts to speak of. Well, she had them, but on a good day with loads of water retention, she was an A cup at best. Maybe she would never find anyone who wanted to be with her. If that was her life, she would embrace the single life. Just dealing with Bennet depressed her. Something had to change.

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CHAPTER TWO

Greer “Trip” Merano usually didn’t relish days off. He liked working hard and enjoyed the hell out of his job. But he needed a break, and as long as the world stayed quiet and no one got some wild hair up their ass, he would have a nice and relaxing day.

Hiking was on the agenda for this weekend. He’d thought about taking a tough trail but wasn’t sure he wanted to spend six hours climbing over rocks. Maybe something easy was in order. The goal was to reconnect and relax in nature. He’s spent too many hours in an office staring at information and collecting intelligence over the last few months and he needed more outdoor time.

He loved his team. The guys were great. They kept him sane, but they’d been spending too much time together doing research at work, and he wanted some alone time.

Their team had started off shaky, but after a few months of working together, Bud, Zip, Rider, Hop, and Q had turned out to be some of his best friends.

With his water and snacks packed, he stepped out of his apartment and stalled. The cops were standing next to his car, but it wasn’t his vehicle that had been damaged. The woman who lived upstairs watched as a tow truck lined up to load her car onto the back.

The first time he’d seen her, he’d thought she was younger. She was so skinny, but then he’d gotten a better look. He’d been entranced by her dark lips and high

cheekbones. She'd taken him by surprise that first time and every time after when he'd seen her. He found her looks to be shocking—no, wrong word. Entrancing? She made him take notice without trying. She wasn't what people called a conventional beauty, but to him she was damn near perfect. He wanted to spend hours watching the way her expression changed, getting to know what each look meant.

As he approached, he could hear her speaking to one of the officers. "My ex threatened me. I didn't think he knew where I lived since I moved. I guess he does."

The officer said something he couldn't make out. Normally, Trip would stay out of things, but he'd passed by that car less than seven hours ago, and it had been fine. Also, they were blocking his exit and he could either go back inside or stand out here and wait for the tow truck to move.

The officer stepped away, and Trip moved to stand next to her. He glanced down, and her head slowly tilted up as though she was moving at a speed different from the rest of the world. Her eyebrows pinched together as she studied him.

"The car wasn't damaged at midnight."

The nearest officer turned to face them, and his eyes narrowed. "And who are you?"

"Trip. I sleep under her. I mean, my apartment is below hers. I got home last night at midnight, and it was fine."

The officer shot him a weird look, almost like he didn't believe him. "How sure are you that it was midnight?"

"I left the base at eleven thirty-six. Traffic wasn't bad, so it didn't take long to get home."

“Base?” The officer gave him a once over, taking in his curly brown hair and scruffy beard. “Navy?”

Trip nodded. “Yes, sir. My car is right beside hers. Y’all are blocking me in. I was tired, but not too tired to notice a mess like this when I pulled in. No one was in the lot either.”

The officer narrowed his eyes. “How sure are you about that?”

“Very. Hyperawareness and all, you know.”

The officer nodded like he understood. Cops were twitchy and kept account of people around them. Navy SEALs were even more twitchy. He knew there were two other officers plus the tow truck driver, in addition to the four people on balconies trying to find out the tea with the new neighbor.

The woman’s shoulders slumped even more. “I’m sure it was my ex. He must have figured out where I live.”

Trip turned to the officer. “Did you check for tracking devices?”

The officer shrugged. “We don’t really have equipment for that in the field. We can check later.”

“Just a second.”

Trip opened the door to his car and pulled out his device scanner. He hopped up on the back of the tow truck where her car was secured and waved the wand over her back bumper, hearing a beep indicating there was a device on her car.

He met the officer’s gaze. “Someone is tracking this car.”

The woman's eyes went wide, and the cop frowned. She looked very upset, and the officer shook his head.

“Well, dang. I should take possession of the device. Let me get some gloves.”

Trip hopped down from the back of the tow truck and moved to his neighbor. “Sorry about that, but I figured you'd want to know. I'm Trip, by the way.”

“Thank you for finding that. Ellis. I guess I'll be the talk of the community.”

Trip snorted. “Trust me, this isn't the most excitement we've had here. It's not a crappy place to live, but we've had our share of drama.”

“I just need a place to sleep and hide. I guess he knows where I am so I'm not hiding.”

The officer had climbed off the back of the tow truck with the tracker in hand. “It may not have been him. He didn't take the tracker when he did this damage. The slashed tires could have been random. We've had a few incidences in other parts of town with random vandalism.”

Ellis shook her head. “What makes you think he didn't come here?”

“First off, he left the tracker behind. We'll probably find his fingerprints on it, which means we can charge him with a crime. Usually, these guys who track exes then vandalize the car remove the devices once they do the damage. Maybe he's not smart enough to take the device off, but usually they are because they know the cops will get involved. If you give me his information, I'll go talk to him.”

“Thank you.”

The tow truck moved, unblocking his car. Trip should take off, but he wanted to know who the jerk tracking her was and see if he could get some intel on him. He should mind his own business. Normally, he was able to turn it off here in the States, but for some reason, this woman, with her willowy frame who almost looked like she could play an elf in one of the Lord of the Rings films, intrigued him more than any other person had in a long time.

The officers were wrapping everything up, and he didn't want to walk away without learning more about her. She bent and picked up a black bag from the ground. Did she have plans that were dashed? He wanted to ask her if she needed a ride, but that might sound weird.

"Did that ruin your plans today?" He couldn't believe he'd asked such a dumb question. Of course, it ruined her plans.

Her eyebrows rose as she looked at him. "Obviously. I wanted to go out and take some shots, but I guess that's out of the question now."

Her answer surprised him. Did she mean with a gun, or tequila shots? "Shots?"

She pointed to her bag. "Photos. I was going to hike a trail and just enjoy the day."

"No water?"

She shook her head. "I was going to pick some up on the way. Also breakfast. I need to eat."

"Well, this is weird, but I'm headed out for a hike. Want to come along?"

She snorted. "You do know the cops are still here, so if you're planning on taking me out into the woods to attack me, they saw us together."

He liked the way she looked annoyed. She was smart, and he wanted to get to know her better. “What kind of guys do you normally hang out with?”

Her eye roll was cute. “Obviously, pieces of shit based on the current state of my car.”

“Seriously, I’m heading out for an easy hike. It’s a three-mile loop, Wright’s Field. It’s about forty minutes from here.”

She closed her eyes, and he studied her face, liking how her nose turned up in such a cute way he wanted to kiss it. He wouldn’t, but the woman was beautiful. She probably got a load of comments about how she looked like an elf, so he kept the thought to himself.

After a moment, she shrugged and opened her eyes. “Sure. The day can’t get worse. Let’s go.”

“Awesome. Send a friend your tracking location. That way, they’ll know where you are.”

Her mouth fell open. “Really? You won’t mind that your location is being tracked?”

“Why would I if I’m not doing anything wrong? And they aren’t really tracking me, just you. So once we part ways, I won’t be tracked.”

Ellis shook her head again. “You’re different—nice.”

He winked. “Don’t tell anyone. I don’t want word to get out.”

The smile he was rewarded with made his insides twist. Why was he getting excited over a smile like he was a hormonal teenage boy? She wasn’t agreeing to a date.

They were just going hiking, that was it.

CHAPTER THREE

Trip stopped at a fast-food place, and Ellis ordered a chicken sandwich and nuggets. He raised his eyebrows at her order but didn't say anything. She wondered if he thought she was eating too much. She needed calories if she wanted to keep going all day.

The drive passed quickly, and they were at the lot for the trailhead long before she expected. "Was that really a forty-minute drive?"

Trip looked at his watch and nodded. "About forty."

"Wow." She pulled out her camera and attached the lens she wanted to use today.

"Nice camera."

"Thank you."

They headed away from the car, her taking in the area, noticing things she might want to take photos of. She had her telescoping monopod to help her steady the shot. It was one tool she took everywhere.

Trip wasn't moving too fast, so she didn't have to run to keep up. "You could go ahead if you like."

He shrugged. "I'm good. My job has a lot of physical activity. This is more for me to relax and reconnect. I need to center my thoughts."

His words shocked her a little. Few men she knew were aware enough to think about recentering and connecting with their inner selves. “That’s very healthy of you.”

He snorted. “I don’t want you to think I’m better than I am. I don’t do this enough and sometimes leave it until I’m frustrated as hell and out of sorts.”

“Well, I’m glad you wanted to come out today. I need to be here.”

“Do you always bring your camera everywhere?”

She shrugged. “Often. I don’t want to miss a shot.”

She paused as she noticed movement in a field a few hundred yards away. Luckily, she already had her monopod attached and extended it, stabilizing her camera as she pinpointed the location through her viewfinder and snapped a shot before zooming in. She was rewarded with an awesome sight.

A little gasp escaped her lips, and she felt, rather than heard, Trip move closer. “What is it?”

“Just a...got it.”

After snapping multiple photos, she smiled and leaned away from the camera so Trip could see the photo she’d just taken. A cougar was moving through the field but had stopped and was staring at a monarch butterfly.

“Damn, that’s amazing. How did you know to stop and take that photo?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t. I just got lucky.”

Trip hadn’t thought Ellis lucky this morning after her tires had been slashed, but that

photo she took was amazing. He knew nothing about photography, but when he saw amazing shots like what she'd taken, he was impressed.

“Can you sell something like that?”

She nodded. “But only because I've been in the business for over a decade.”

He snorted a laugh. “A decade. What are you, twenty-five, maybe twenty-six?”

She rolled her eyes. “Hardly. Thirty-three. Though I do get carded all the time still. Your guess isn't too far out there.”

“Wow, I'm thirty-three, too. But you look amazing. I have sun damage from spending so much time outside.”

She glanced at him, then her gaze shot away quickly as she shortened the stick she'd set the camera on to take the photo. He liked this woman, which probably wasn't good. He didn't need any involvement. He'd been a free agent for years, never even bringing a woman back to his place. Encumbrances would bog him down. His job was a big enough reason to stay alone. He also was very independent and didn't want anyone hanging around.

“Who will you sell that to?” Why was he asking her questions like he was interested? He shouldn't care, but he was interested and he did care.

She shrugged. “It depends. I might do a special treatment and put it up in a gallery. Or I could contact one of the magazines I work with. They may have an article coming up that features cougars or butterflies.”

“So you been working in the industry for a while? How did you get started?”

She glanced up at him, her eyes filled with delight. His stomach tightened, and he had to fight to push the lust away. He wanted to hear what she had to say and what delighted her. The happiness in her eyes was much better than the sadness he'd seen this morning when he'd bumped into her outside their apartments.

“After college, I was lucky enough to travel to Europe. I spent a year backpacking. I took a lot of really good shots and ended up in a youth hostel owned by someone who was in the industry. He saw my work and asked if he could put some of it in his gallery. They all sold and sold well. Instead of coming back to the States after a year, I did more backpacking, taking photos all the way. I had more showings and made some money.”

She paused, setting up to take another photo. He was curious but patiently waited for whatever she had to show him. It was a group of five hummingbirds with a hawk sitting on a tree limb behind them.

“How did you even know to take that?”

“I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.”

“You’re very observant.”

“Usually. But I stayed with that jerk for too long so I guess I’m not that observant.”

“We all make mistakes.”

She shook her head. “I’ve made plenty.”

“If you’re popular in Europe, why are you living here in San Diego?”

Her expression flattened, and he saw annoyance flash across her face. “Him.”

“Oh. Will you leave?”

The sigh she gave made him wonder how tied to him she was. “I can’t. Not yet. I have a studio storefront where I do photos in a lab environment. It’s the opposite of my nature work. I take photos of products. I’m good at it. And I’m booked out for a few months. I also have a small gallery that features photos from the area. You know, all the stuff tourists like, but my work is better than other people’s stuff because I get out and get the difficult shots that other people take from sidewalks. I plan, find different angles, go out on boats, or use drones where I can.”

“Oh, drone use is highly restricted around here.”

“Trust me, I know. I can’t send up a drone where I want because of the Navy.”

“We have our reasons.”

“I’m sure you do. I mean, I don’t like my privacy being invaded any more than Uncle Sam likes it. Bennet tracking me is freaking me out. Thank you for taking me out here to get my mind off things. It helps.”

They walked a little farther, him keeping it slow so she didn’t have to run. Eventually, he glanced over and met her blue gaze. Something sparked inside making him wonder what could be between them, but he pushed it away. Leading her on wouldn’t be fair. “I’m sorry he’s being such a jerk. It sucks.”

“Yeah, well, that’s dating in this age. I didn’t know until it was too late that I had an insane person on the line.”

He chuckled. “Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh, but you’re right, it’s rough out there.”

“What about you? Have you dated people who take it too far?”

He made a face and rolled his eyes, emphasizing the movement. “It can be bad. I’ve had women stalk me to the point that I have to change which bars I go to. Right now, I’m favoring Aces Bar because the new owner doesn’t put up with the BS pickup games.” He shouldn’t tell her where he was hanging out. What was up with him? It was like she drew words out of him without even trying.

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“It’s close to the apartment. A lot of Navy and military types go to decompress. There are a few women who show up to pick up guys, but it’s not awful.”

“I’ve taken to only drinking at home. It’s just safer.”

Trip thought that was one of the saddest things he’d ever heard, but he understood. He knew plenty of women who had been drugged at bars. He’d seen it more than once and interrupted the process at least three times back when he was more active at finding women to hook up with. It was another reason he usually stuck to Aces nowadays.

Ellis thought the hike had been spectacular even though she was out in the wilderness with a stranger. Ginger would be pissed that she’d gone out to the middle of nowhere with this guy. But for some reason, Trip made her feel safe.

He hadn’t made one sexual joke, hadn’t asked if she actually had breasts or tried to force her to prove it. That one always pissed her off. Like guys expected her to pull up her shirt and show them her tits just because they were small. Small or not, she didn’t owe anyone a look at her body.

“You’re frowning. Everything okay?”

She shook off the anger from past experiences and tried for a smile. “Sorry, just

thinking. Thank you for making today better. I needed to get out and take some photos and clear my mind.”

“Same about clearing my mind, not the photos. I’ll leave that up to you. I’m amazed at what you got.”

“Thank you. I’m thrilled by the cougar shot. That was cool. I’d say that’s one of my all-time favorites.”

“I’d love to see your other stuff. I mean, if that’s okay. I don’t want you to think I’m pressuring you to invite me into your personal space.”

“My studio is a better place to look than my apartment. I moved somewhere cheap and small after realizing that Bennet was going to be a problem, so I don’t have much there.”

“Did you break up with him right before you moved in?”

“That’s the odd part. No. I broke up with him about six months ago, but he keeps thinking that I’m going to get back with him. I don’t know if he told his parents that we ended it. He mentioned them a few times when we were talking after the breakup. Also, they contacted me four weeks ago to talk about wedding plans. Stuff like where they should stay, I told them flat out the wedding had been called off months ago. That’s when Bennet started getting mean.”

Trip clicked open the locks on his car and opened the trunk so she could store her camera in the back. She made sure all the zippers were closed before shutting the trunk. The last thing she wanted was something small to fall out and have to ask him to open his car. He would think she’d done it on purpose.

“He never told them that you’d broken up?”

“I guess not. His parents want him to marry and have kids before they’ll give him money. At least, that’s what I understood.” She shook her head. “Really, I don’t know what the truth is, I only know what he told me.”

“He could have spent the last six months finding someone to be with who wanted some money.”

She shook her head. “They require him to marry a woman who has her own money and a career.”

“Well, I’m glad you figured it out before you married the jerk.”

“Yeah. I wish I would have listened to Ginger, my best friend. We almost lost our friendship when she came to me a few weeks after I started dating him and told me to drop him. I didn’t listen. We got into an argument. I’m lucky she’s such a good friend. She didn’t rub my face in any of it. When I found out he was cheating, Ginger held me and never once said I told you so.”

“She sounds like a good friend.”

Ellis never regretted being friends with Ginger. The woman was amazing. “She is. The best.”

Now that they were back in the parking lot, she had cell service. Her phone buzzed, and Ginger’s name popped up on the display. “Speaking of Ginger, she wants to know where I am.”

“That’s good that you have someone watching out for you.”

Ellis texted Ginger, telling her that she was okay. That she’d lost cell service because they were hiking. Her phone buzzed with a reply text, causing her to bark out

laughter.

“She is demanding to meet you. Says it’s not okay that you took me out into the wilderness, and she hasn’t met you.”

“Well, we could fix that.”

More laughter spilled out. “What? You’d be willing to meet Ginger? She’s fierce.”

“I can take fierce.”

Ellis shook her head. “Okay, tiger, calm down. I’m not going to toss you to the lioness just because you had the unfortunate timing of coming outside when the cops were there and my car was being towed.”

He chuckled. “I’ve enjoyed spending time with you. Honestly, it has been one of the best days I’ve had in a while. It’s been relaxing, plus you’ve given me the gift of seeing some awesome photographs.”

“I know you’re kidding about meeting Ginger.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, now she’s calling, so you’re going to get an earful.” Ellis answered the phone, smiling to herself as Ginger launched into admonishing her for traveling out to a place where she couldn’t be tracked.

“You do know that’s what serial killers do, right? You’re with a stranger, some loser you met at your apartment, and you went out where you couldn’t be tracked. You’re lucky I didn’t call the cops.”

Trip's lips spread into a huge smile. "Hello. I'm the loser, Trip."

His words silenced Ginger. "That's a first. You silenced her," Ellis said as laughter spilled out."

"Are you still with him?" Ginger asked.

"Yeah. My car won't work. Someone slashed the tires."

"Bennet, you mean."

Ellis snorted, sure Ginger was rolling her eyes. "Probably, but the cops said there has been some other vandalism like this in the area, so they can't say for certain it was Bennet."

"I don't trust Bennet. He's a creep. Trip, are you a creep?"

Ellis gasped at Ginger's question. She was going to tell Trip he didn't have to answer.

"I don't think so, but I'm probably not the best judge of my own character. I mean, we never are, right? We always end up discounting our mistakes and pumping up our successes."

Ginger was quiet for another moment. "I need to meet you before you take Ellis out again."

"Jesus, Ginger. I'm not dating him. He just lives in my apartment community and was nice enough to take me hiking."

"I know what that's like. How do you think I met Kent? Now we have a baby. So yeah, I'm meeting Trip. What are you, the third of your family with the same name?"

“No, ma’am. It’s my nickname.”

Ginger snorted. “What’s your real name? I need to look you up on social media.”

“Um, well, I don’t have social media.”

“What kind of weirdo doesn’t have social media?” Ginger asked.

“Military weirdo. But my name is Greer Merano.”

“Greer, I’m writing that down.”

“Good. I like that you’re looking after your friend. We all need good friends to keep an eye on us.”

Ginger let out a laugh. “Ellis, this is just plain weird. Either he’s the real deal or a psychopath.”

Ellis cringed as Trip chuckled. She shook her head, hoping Trip didn’t hold Ginger’s words against her. “I’m so sorry. And Ginger, be nice.”

“This is as nice as I can get with so little sleep.”

“Wait, why didn’t you sleep?”

“Nick has an ear infection, and she hates life right now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Get some rest. I’m fine. Give Nicky a hug from her auntie.”

“Sure thing, doll. And Trip, you’d best behave because I’m not someone you want to mess with.”

The call ended, and Ellis had an apology on the tip of her tongue, but Trip started speaking.

“I like her. She’s spunky. It’s cool that she wants to protect you. Too much weird stuff happens in the world, and you have to keep yourself safe.”

“Wow, I’m surprised. You really aren’t a jerk, are you?”

He shot her a questioning look. “What do you mean?”

“Guys get offended when girlfriends demand they behave. Bennet hated Ginger.”

“Well, that’s not me. I mean, some women may think I’m a jerk, but that’s because I don’t normally do long-term relationships. My work is hard and all-consuming at times. I’ve been spending loads of hours working on something that I can’t talk about with you or anyone else outside of my team. In my experience, most women don’t like the long hours. I disappear for weeks at a time, and I can’t say where I’m going or when I’ll be back.”

“I know my work isn’t like yours, but I will sit at a spot for hours to get a photo I want. Today was easy. Stuff like that doesn’t happen often. I mean, there have been a few times I’ve gotten the photo quickly, but usually, I spend hours sitting and waiting. I may not be reachable during that time. If I have to go out for an assignment, I’m going. Like last year, I ended up in Zimbabwe for two weeks. I never turn down those assignments because they pay well and I love photography.”

He nodded as he turned down the street they lived on. “I get that. I would be worried about you, but I wouldn’t demand you not go.”

They pulled into the apartment’s lot, and she shook her head. “What are we talking about here?”

He parked the car and sat there for a moment. “I don’t know. Honestly, hanging out with you is the best date I’ve had in years.”

“Was this a date?”

He shrugged. “What do you think? Would you be willing to go out with me? I mean, even if you aren’t, I’d like to see more of your work.”

She bit her lower lip. “Are you free tomorrow afternoon? Would you be willing to go to the studio?”

His eyes lit with excitement. “Yes. I’d love to spend some time with you and see your work.”

“Good. How about three tomorrow? We can head over to the studio and spend time together.” In the back of her mind, she thought going to her workplace the next day would allow her to check if Bennet had done something stupid, plus she really would like to spend more time with Trip and get to know him.

“I’m looking forward to it. Tomorrow at three.”

She nodded and stepped from the car. Today had started out terrible, but it was getting better by the minute. Trip wasn’t only sexy, he was nice, too. Was he really interested in dating her? Guys who were as good looking as he was didn’t stick around. She wasn’t super sexy, and there wasn’t much she could do overnight to improve her looks. If he wasn’t interested, she would find out soon enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trip ate a sandwich, his mind on Ellis. What was he doing? He didn't have time for a relationship, but he wanted to see her again. One of his key rules was to never let a woman know where he lived, and yet the woman upstairs was who he picked to date. This could go wrong on so many levels.

After his sandwich, he stretched out on the couch and drifted off. Images of Ellis filled his dreams, and he woke with a hard cock. He almost came as he sat up but somehow made it into the bathroom, where he emptied his load into the shower. After washing it down the drain, he dried off, thinking he needed to head out for a run. Exercise would wear him out. He called his buddy, Apple, who didn't live too far away.

"Hey, what's up?" Apple was always down for training. The guy was young and fit and would push him to go harder.

"You up for a run?"

"Right now?" Apple asked.

"Yeah."

He heard dishes clinking and then water cut off. "Fifteen minutes, outside the elementary school."

"Sure. I'll start my jog over there."

“Awesome. Thanks for calling me.”

“Sure, buddy.”

He hung up, happy he had someone to run with. After changing clothes and putting on his shoes, he headed out, glancing up at Ellis’s apartment. He wished he had another excuse to spend more time with her. He needed to pace himself. Besides, he would see her soon enough.

Apple showed up about three minutes after he arrived out front of the school. They shook hands, then pulled each other in for a back-slapping hug. Apple was on Sharp’s team, and they didn’t see each other every day, but they saw each other enough to keep up their friendship.

“Hey, what’s up?” Apple asked.

“Just needed to get some energy out.”

“I hear you.”

They took off, heading toward the beach. Though they spent hours at work on the beach, getting sand in crevices that didn’t need sand, but going out toward the ocean was a no brainer.

“I met someone.” Trip hadn’t meant to reveal his obsession with Ellis.

“Whoa, you admitting that you met someone. That’s big. What’s she like?”

Apple wasn’t involved with anyone. He said he never wanted to get involved. They’d had the same attitude about dating and bonded over it. Now, Trip was falling for someone he didn’t really know.

“She’s different but intriguing.”

“So, not someone you hooked up with?”

Trip shook his head. “No. We haven’t even kissed. I’m so screwed. She’s cute and interesting. She moved in a few weeks ago, and I’ve seen her a few times. We spent time hiking this morning.”

“Whoa, she lives in the same complex as you?”

“Yeah. I know, mistake one.”

“Dude, when you have to move because she’s stalking you, I’ll help you, but only with a huge I told you so, and you’ll owe me a debt.”

Trip rolled his eyes. “Hopefully, it won’t come to that.”

“Man, it always comes to that.”

They hit the beach and were headed back the other way when they saw Wolf and Caroline. They waved, and he and Apple slowed.

“Afternoon, Wolf, Ice.”

“Hey, guys, looking strong!” Wolf called out.

They both chuckled and waved before speeding up again. “He’s a legend,” Trip said.

“He is. And a good person, too. He’s mentoring a few guys from my BUDs class.”

Trip nodded, thinking about the guy who’d mentored him. He should call Diver soon.

“That’s cool.”

“So more about this woman. What does she look like?”

Trip smiled to himself. “She’s beautiful. When I first saw her, I thought she could have been in the Lord of the Rings movies as an elf without too much makeup.”

Apple’s eyebrows shot up. “She looks like an elf?”

“Not a Keebler elf, but a sexy, willowy elf who I want to watch.”

“Whoa, stalker alert.”

Trip rolled his eyes. “Shut up. I’m not stalking her. But I will admit to watching her when she gets home after me.”

“Well, she knows where you live, so you can’t bang her to get her out of your system and walk away.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that, anyway.”

Apple shook his head. “Man, I think this is a mistake. You should stop before it starts.”

He knew Apple was right, but the last thing he wanted was to end this thing with Ellis before it even started.

The next morning, he did a hard workout to contain his excitement. By three, he was ready to climb the walls. Why was he getting all tied up in knots over this woman? She may not be super curvy, but there was something that made him want to be with her. When she’d been taking the photos, he’d spent time watching her, taking in the

slope of her nose and the curve of her cheek. She wasn't a traditional beauty, but he liked what he saw and wanted more.

Exactly three in the afternoon, he stepped outside and was headed up to her apartment when her door opened and she stepped out.

"I was coming up to get you."

Her lips spread into a wide smile. "It's okay. I can find my way down."

He held out his hand when she was on the second to last step. The moment her fingers touched his, shock pulsed through him. She must have felt it, too, because she paused, almost missing a step. She recovered, flashing him an even wider smile.

"I hope you aren't disappointed."

He shook his head. "Trust me. There's no way I would be disappointed."

He swore she shivered. The shock he felt when touching her was a surprise he hadn't expected. As they drove to her studio, he thought about what dating her would look like. He was already planning their future, and he'd only learned her name yesterday morning. She was addicting, and he wouldn't recover if she walked away.

When they parked behind her studio, she gave him an apologetic look. "The back is a little messy."

"It's fine." She seemed more reserved today, but that made sense. He felt it, too, not wanting to make a wrong move. Hopefully, everything would go well and they would make plans for later in the week. His schedule was mostly set, but also erratic as heck. He just hoped nothing from work got in the way of them getting together again.

Ellis stepped inside, wishing there was a light switch she could flip on in the back of her studio. Maybe they should start leaving a light on in this area. She reached back and took Trip's hand, loving the jolt his touch elicited. Her hand fit perfectly in his, like they were meant to be.

She glanced over her shoulder, not seeing him because it was dark, but still feeling him. "Follow me this way."

Trip wove their fingers together, holding her hand tighter. When they stepped into the studio, she glanced over her shoulder again, seeing heat flare in his eyes. Her foot faltered, causing her to turn toward him as she recovered.

He reached up, and his fingers slid over her cheek, sending a thrill through her. Her nipples hardened at his touch, and she leaned in closer, needing to feel more of him. His gaze dipped to her lips, and his tongue ran over his lower lip.

Did he want a kiss? She did.

She put her hand on his chest, missing by a few inches, and it ended up closer to his belly. They both sucked in a breath. It was enough to get him to lean closer. Then his lips were on hers, soft and gentle at first. When he licked at the seam of her mouth, she opened. His tongue slid against hers, and they both moaned. Pleasure spread through her, exploding as need filled her.

It was the fastest she'd gone from lust to ready to hop into the guy's bed. Her nipples pulled so tight it was almost painful. She spun to face him, so they were chest to chest. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her up so her feet weren't on the floor right before he spun her so her back was against the wall. She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist, which meant she could feel the ridge of his hard cock right against her center. Ellis gasped from the rush of lust pumping through her.

Trip ended the kiss. It felt a little awkward. Guilt and embarrassment slid through her. She'd thrown herself at him, and now he didn't want her.

"I'm so sorry." Her whispered words didn't stop the rapid beat of her heart.

He pressed his lips against hers, and she stopped speaking. "No, don't be sorry," he said against her lips before leaning back a few inches. "I'm the one who has to apologize." He set her feet on the ground and stepped back, his expression strained. "We just met, and you're being so nice. I don't want to take advantage of you just because we're alone."

"You weren't taking advantage of me. I was throwing myself at you."

His eyes grew wider. "Um, I picked you up and pressed you against the wall so I could...well, you know what we were headed toward."

"But I?—"

"Darling, I could easily fight you off without breaking a sweat. That was me throwing myself at you, and it's unfair."

She squeezed her legs together, thinking that his stopping was the thing that was unfair. If he'd just kept grinding against her, she would be in heaven now. His words finally sank in, and she cocked her head to the side.

"Wait, you find me attractive?"

His eyes narrowed. "Didn't you pick up on that earlier?"

"I thought you were just being nice. I'm so plain."

He moved lightning fast, and his hands were cupping her face, his lips so close if she breathed their mouths would brush together. “You are not plain, you are beautiful, intriguing, special.”

His words were said quietly but had a huge impact. She jerked back, bumping her head against the wall.

Trip stood tall. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. But I’m not beautiful.”

“Yes, you are. The first time I saw you, I almost fell flat on my face because I couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

“I’m average at best.”

“Trust me, you are way beyond average. You have me so turned on that it would be indecent for me to go out in public right now.” He stepped back, putting distance between them again. “I want to get to know you because I don’t want this date to be the end of our relationship.”

Ellis couldn’t believe any man would want her as much as Trip said he wanted her. Her gaze slid down his body, and sure enough, the bulge at the front of his pants was big. She swallowed, and he cleared his throat. Her gaze shot up to his face, and she saw the smile tilting up the corners of his lips.

“We should look at the photos, or we’re going to both be naked and on the floor.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like I’d have a problem with that.” She moved to the door that led to the front area where her best photos were displayed.

When she opened the door, she could finally see the front window. Shock hit first as she spied the spray paint splashed across the windows. Then the splashes and squiggly lines started to make sense. The jerk had written Slut across the front of her store.

Trip had his phone out and was dialing before she could even think to call the cops. He made the report, and she heard the operator tell him someone would be out eventually. She gave him the case number for her earlier report from when Bennet had been there and he relayed that to the operator.

Anger and sadness mixed. She couldn't believe that someone would do this. It had to be someone who knew her. Her shop wasn't a place random people came in. This had to be Bennet.

"Well, this sucks."

Trip shrugged. "Maybe it will push the police to do something. Do you have access to the security video for the building?"

"No, but I can send an email to the building manager and see if they can get that to me." She pulled out her phone and typed in a quick message as Trip walked around. After she finished, she glanced up and saw him staring at a photo she'd taken in Africa. It was one that wasn't owned by the nature magazine, so she'd transferred the photo to wood.

He turned his head and met her gaze. "This is amazing. I've never seen anything like it. How did you get the photo on the wood?"

She chuckled. "It's not a simple process but I've done enough that it's not too difficult now. It just takes time and skill."

“I like it.”

“Thank you. I’m lucky to be able to work in a creative field I love.”

Trip nodded. “I feel the same way. That I’m lucky to have a job I love. I know the military isn’t for everyone, but It’s something I can be proud of.” He stepped over to a photo she’d taken in Europe of a train bridge in a forest area. “This one is...inspiring. I don’t know what it is that makes me feel something like hope when I look at it.”

She moved to stand next to him, her shoulder only measuring up to about his mid-biceps. His arms were huge compared to hers, but she felt totally safe with him. “It’s the colors and the subject.”

He shot her a look, his eyebrows raised. “Tell me more.”

“It’s a bridge. Bridges mean going forward or going home, both of which people feel hope about. There are flowers in the foreground and the background. The green is vibrant, and the blue in the strip of sky at the top is bright with few clouds. It’s a sunny day with flowers on full display.”

He nodded. “Did you know there would be flowers around the bridge?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I knew flowers were starting to bloom in the small town where I’d found a room to rent. I took a chance and went looking for good subjects. I’d heard that this bridge was beautiful, and I decided to look for it. I brought beer and bread as a peace offering to the farmer who owned the field. His wife liked me. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have led me out to take the photo.”

“Wow, that’s cool.”

“I went back to their place a few months later with a different photo framed for them. They insisted I stay at their place that night. They made me a beautiful dinner, and we drank the wine and beer I brought with me. We spent the evening chatting. It was nice. I’ll never forget their kindness.”

He moved to another photo, one she’d taken of a farmer in Ireland. He’d not been as nice as the couple in Germany, but still kind. “He was a sixth-generation farmer and wasn’t sure if his kids would keep the farm. We talked about how traditions were changing. He didn’t like that his kids didn’t want tradition. I was a young woman traveling the world doing my own thing and he took offense to that. Not in a terrible way, but he thought kids should have to stay at home and take over their parents’ business and he thought I should be home, not out taking photos. It was weird.”

Trip glanced over at her. “In rural areas, I’ve run into young adults who have to stay because their families force them. I get it. Having kids do the chores makes it easier on the older farmers, but those kids aren’t always happy to stay. The males get angry and leave after causing problems. They usually end up in a cult or a terrorist cell.”

“That’s sad. I’ve never gone into a dangerous zone on purpose. I was caught in France during a protest that turned into a riot. I didn’t go out, though. I stayed in my safe hotel away from the mess.”

“That was wise.”

“I try. The worst situation was?—”

Her words were cut off when an officer arrived. She rushed over and stepped outside, apologizing for having the door locked. The officer was an older man and seemed annoyed to have been called out.

She rushed, telling the officer the basics of what had happened, but he cut her off.

“Are you sure it was someone else, and you didn’t do it?”

“Excuse me?”

Right then, Trip stepped out. “Everything okay?”

She saw the officer straighten. Anger whipped through her, but she held it in. Suddenly, the guy was willing to listen, at least to Trip. When the officer turned to face Trip instead of her, she rolled her eyes.

Trip’s lips thinned. “Since Ellis owns this business, maybe you should listen to her.”

The officer was being a jerk, but at least Trip was there to help her make this officer take her information. When the officer was almost finished, another police car pulled into the lot. The male officer seemed annoyed when the female officer who’d helped Ellis on Friday evening stepped from her car.

“I’m sorry to be back here. Do you think it was him?” The officer nodded at Trip but kept her focus on Ellis.

“I don’t know. I’ve sent an email to the building manager. They should have the video by tomorrow at the latest.”

“Let me take a few photos.” The woman turned to the other officer. “Fred, have you started a file in the system?”

Fred cleared his throat. “Not yet.”

“I’ll start it and attach it to the other report.”

It was obvious to Ellis that if this officer hadn’t shown up, she wouldn’t have a report

to file with insurance if that was even needed. She checked her email, not seeing a reply from the building manager.

Ellis smiled when the officer came over to talk to her. “I’m sorry I didn’t get your name the other day.”

“It’s Mackay.”

“Thank you, Officer Mackay.”

She nodded. “Sure. I hate that I’m out here again. Your ex doesn’t seem like a good guy.”

Ellis shrugged. “It may be someone else, but based on the word they sprayed on the window, I don’t think so. Oh, and someone sliced my tires. He also put a tracking device on my car. Well, someone did. It may not have been him, but the police in Riverton have the thing.”

Mackay met her gaze. “Do you know the officer’s name who is working the case?”

Trip cleared his throat. “It’s Driver and Thompson.”

Officer Mackay turned and nodded. “Thank you. That will help. I know Thompson. I’ll call him later, and we can chat. I mean, it may not have been the ex who sliced your tires or did this paint job, but we’ll find out.”

“I appreciate your help. It means so much that you take me seriously.”

Mackay’s lips twitched as her gaze flicked to the other police officer who had already moved to his car. Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything, but she really did appreciate Mackay’s help.

“I’ll be in touch with you later in the week. And stay safe.” The officer turned to Trip.
“I’m assuming you’re friends with Ellis. Do you live close to her?”

“I’m her neighbor.”

“Good. Stay safe, Ellis.”

“Thank you. Oh, Officer Mackay, when can I clean this up?”

Mackay’s lips turned down. “I’ve got photos. Maybe take a few photos for insurance if you need that, then it can be cleaned.”

“Thank you.”

Trip led her inside and locked the door behind her. “Do you have cleaning supplies?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“I’ll go out there and start cleaning.”

“I’m not letting you do that alone.”

Trip’s lips tilted up quickly. “Let’s get it done together. Then we can go out and grab some food.”

“So you want to spend more time with me?”

“Of course. I want to get to know you.”

Though Bennet was being a jerk and her place had been vandalized with an awful word that made her pissed and embarrassed, she was happy to be spending time with

Trip. The man had a way of making her feel good about herself. She needed someone like Trip in her life. She was sure he would never treat her the way Bennet had treated her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trip wasn't sure if it was them cleaning the window or dinner together, but something changed between them that had him leaving the awkwardness behind and feeling more comfortable with Ellis. After dinner, they were back in his car but he didn't start the engine.

“Everything okay?”

Her soft voice washed over him like cool water. He wanted this woman in his life. There were issues, like he was a SEAL and military life wasn't perfect. Before meeting Ellis, he'd not wanted to get involved. He liked being single, but Ellis changed things.

He turned to look at her, taking her in. “I want to walk you up to your apartment and kiss you when we get back home. I know I have no right to come in, and I'm not asking for anything more than a kiss this time.”

She reached out and put her hand on his leg, and damned if her touch didn't send a shiver through him. All through cleaning the window and then dinner, he'd kept his cock in check, but with her hand on his thigh, it was too much to control.

“I want your kisses and more.”

Her eyes stared right into his soul, pulling him in. He wanted to grab her and take both of them to his back seat. He wouldn't, not in this public place.

“You’re driving me crazy with your touches. Tonight, it will just be a kiss. Next time, it may be more. Come tomorrow, I have to go back to work, and life takes over. I may not be able to see you much.”

Her fingers pressed into his thigh, making his cock grow harder. “I understand. We both have lives and work.”

“If we can, I’d like to have dinner on Wednesday or Thursday. Would that be good?”

She nodded. “I’d like that.”

He started the engine and drove home, his mind staying on Ellis instead of wandering toward work like it usually did when he drove. When they arrived, he got out and ran around the car to take Ellis’s hand. He followed her up the stairs, wishing he was going up to her place instead of to his apartment.

When they arrived at her door, he checked around, making sure her place looked undisturbed. At least her ex hadn’t come around here and done something stupid like try to break in.

She keyed open the door, and she stood in the doorway. He wanted to step inside with her but knew better. His kiss was gentle. The intensity building inside had to stay low, or he would do something he would regret. He cupped her cheeks instead of her ass and kissed her with all the intention he had of making this relationship last.

Pulling away from her was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. She blinked up at him, desire shining in her eyes so strong he almost tossed away his promise to himself to take it slow. He wanted to touch her and kiss her everywhere, learning what she sounded like as he brought her to orgasm.

Instead of pressing her up against the wall or walking her over to the couch, he

stepped back. His cock was so hard he had to force control.

“I’ll see you later in the week. Be careful.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand. “You, too. Have a good week.”

“I’ll text you tomorrow to make sure you get your car back.”

“Thank you.”

Her husky voice almost made him break his resolve. Stepping away was so difficult, but he needed to make sure this relationship lasted. Getting his dick wet wasn’t the goal. Having her in his life for years to come was what he wanted.

Once downstairs, he prepped his food for the week that he’d bought this morning after working out. He finished washing his clothes and putting them up while making sure he had everything prepared for the week. He did his weekly check of his go bag. It probably wasn’t necessary, but he never wanted to be caught needing the bag but not having something essential. He had a go bag at work, too, that he checked on Monday mornings. He liked being prepared for anything.

Ellis had caught him off guard. He’d been totally unprepared to feel so much for her after such a short time. The first time he saw her, attraction had fired. But this felt like more than basic attraction.

After a quick shower, he stretched out, wishing Ellis was warming his bed instead of doing whatever she was upstairs in her apartment. He rolled over, trying to get comfortable, but his dick was hard again. Just the thought of her in the bed above him, her naked body twisted in the sheets, made him ache to feel her.

It was useless to keep tossing and turning. He wasn’t going to sleep without jacking

off.

Ellis tried to sleep, but her mind kept going to the fact that Trip was in bed right below her. His kiss had left her wanting more. Cleaning her place hadn't taken away the desire. Maybe he would be a dud in bed, but she imagined he knew how to please a woman.

She bet he wouldn't leave her to her own devices. No, Trip would be the kind of guy to make sure she was satisfied.

Sleep wouldn't come, but she would. With her hand down her panties, it didn't take long. After the intense orgasm, she fell asleep fast. She woke to her phone buzzing and reached over, trying to turn off the alarm, but it wasn't an alarm. It was Bennet.

She answered without thinking and immediately regretted it. "What?"

"You bitch. Sending the cops to question me. I'm going to make sure you?—"

Ellis ended the call and blocked his number. She was done with him. It wasn't how she wanted to wake up, but her alarm would ring in a few minutes anyway, and she had things to do.

As she sat down with her first cup of coffee, she checked her phone, trying to figure out how his call had rung through. She determined that she had him as an emergency contact. Now, with his number blocked, he wouldn't be calling her anyway unless he picked up a burner phone. She changed her emergency contact to Ginger, that way no one would think to contact Bennet. It was something she'd overlooked which could have been devastating. Just thinking of Bennet being called if she had an emergency turned her stomach.

Dwelling on his stupidity wouldn't help her get ready for work. She finished her first

mug of coffee and set up her travel mug for her second cup. Once she was at her studio, she began preparing for a shoot she needed to work on. The customer was set to arrive at ten. She was thankful that Trip had helped her clean the front window of the offending message.

The paint had been annoying, but at least he hadn't broken the window to her shop. She could have lost equipment and product if the window had been taken out.

After doing the initial setup, she stepped out into the main area of the shop, seeing the woman who worked for her. "Gloria, it's good to see you today."

"Hey. I see we had some issues on Sunday."

"Ugh. I'm glad nothing happened on Saturday. Hopefully, we'll get a recording of him spraying the word on the front. Then I'll be done with him."

"I'm sorry you're dealing with his crap."

"Yeah. At least he's not showing up when I'm not here."

"Have you thought more about what you're going to do with the storefront?"

Ellis blew out a breath. "I need to look at the numbers again. I hate the idea of closing the shop altogether, but maybe it's time."

Gloria nodded. "A lot of artists are doing online-only shops."

Ellis let go a heavy sigh. "I could go to that. I probably need to work harder on getting into galleries. I don't like shipping and boxing up stuff which is why I don't have a huge online presence."

Gloria snorted. “Yeah, I get that. I do enjoy it, though. It gives me time to listen to podcasts. What would you do with your studio area if you closed?”

“I’d have to rent a space where I could do work if I want to continue to do that. It does bring in money and pay bills. I don’t know how far from downtown clients would be willing to go. I need to figure some things out, but it looks like my client is here. I’ll chat with you later.”

“Sure thing.” Gloria went back to dusting while Ellis led the client to the back so she could set up.

Doing product photography wasn’t bad. It took special equipment, but the products never jumped up and ran away like the wildlife she liked to shoot. Working in nature was her favorite, but product shots like this paid bills. She enjoyed the challenge of shooting wildlife and hoped she could do more soon. Of course, if she didn’t have the lease for this space, she could spend more time away from the studio.

After finishing the shoot, she went through her email. Luckily, Gloria took care of the orders, so she didn’t have to wrap and box photos for shipping. She was left with the task of weeding out spam messages from people trying to get her to enter nonexistent photography contests that scammed people out of money.

At the bottom of the list, she saw a note from the building manager. They’d been contacted by the cops and sent over the video showing the person spraying the paint. She wanted to know who had done it, but building management hadn’t sent the video to her.

Instead of getting mad, she pulled up her accounting software and stared at the numbers. It didn’t make much sense to keep this lease, which would end in less than three months. She could send a note today so her lease didn’t renew.

Worry filled her. What if this was a mistake? She made some money, but not a lot from sales out of the store space. But leaving this spot would cut off one more tie to Bennet. He wouldn't know where to harass her. A part of her believed that if she left this space, Bennet would leave her alone, but she also knew the man was persistent as a bad cold and wouldn't care if she had this storefront or not. He would just keep bugging her.

Close to four, she received a call saying that her car was ready. At least that had worked out okay. She'd needed new tires and had been planning on buying new ones in the next few months, anyway. This was just earlier than she'd planned.

She texted Ginger, telling her she'd gotten her car back. Her phone rang, and she picked up on Bluetooth. "Hey, girly."

"How are you doing today?" Ginger asked.

"I'm good."

"Good, that's it? I guess you haven't slept with Trip."

Ellis snorted a laugh. "No. We're taking things slow."

"I want details, and I want to meet him."

"You can probably meet him this weekend."

"You two come over. I want to see how he deals with having a kid around."

"Gosh, throwing him right into the fire."

"You need to know this stuff. What is he like under stress?"

“I’m sure he’s perfectly fine under stress.”

“Girl, you’ve got to test these things.”

Ellis chuckled. “Yeah, when Bennet failed the baby stress test, I should have known.”

“Yeah. Next time, listen to me.”

“I will. Now then, how are you doing?”

“Good. Kent is heading out on a business trip next week. I’m not looking forward to spending the week alone.”

“I’ll come over and keep you company.”

“Good.”

“I’m thinking about giving up the storefront and just doing a studio.”

“Really?” Ginger sounded excited.

“Yeah. Why does that make you happy?”

“Because it has been a headache for you. Think about it. You have to have someone staff it, and it hasn’t been easy to keep good people on. Gloria is your fourth employee.”

“Yeah. I hope she’ll stay on.”

“Well, she only works part-time. You’ll have enough stuff for shipping to keep her busy.”

Ellis sighed. "I'm going to have to start contacting galleries."

"Trust me. They'll be happy to have you."

"I hope so."

"We need to take a trip somewhere interesting. Somewhere you can take some photos and a place I can relax."

Ellis snorted. "You wouldn't know what to do if you got hours to relax."

"That might have been true before the baby, but I'm tired. I need some relaxation."

"We'll figure out something after Kent gets back."

"Sounds good."

Ellis pulled into the apartment lot, and it sounded like Nick needed Ginger's attention. "I'm home now. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I want a photo of that sexy man you've been seeing."

Ellis chuckled. "I'll send you one if I get one."

"Now then, I don't believe for one second you didn't take a photo of him."

Ellis laughed. "You're crazy. I'll talk to you later."

She ended the call and glanced around, not seeing his car in the lot. While her car had been in the shop, they'd installed an alarm system, which would at least sound if someone messed with her car. The tracker was gone, which she was thankful for.

Now they just had to figure out who had slashed the tires. She thought it had been Bennet, but it could have been anyone.

CHAPTER SIX

Trip tapped his pen on the table, frustration sliding through him. “What do you mean that our informant is gone?”

The last time he’d deployed, his team had worked with a guy and received excellent information from him. Now, this lieutenant was saying the dude was dead. Trip had promised the guy that the US government would take care of him. Of course, it was difficult to get informants out of war zones and over to the USA, but promises had been made.

The lieutenant giving the briefing continued. “He was discovered and killed. They took out his family, too.”

Trip wanted to break some bones or something else to get his anger out. He drew in a slow breath, trying to keep his cool. They all knew their informants were at risk, but after spending so many hours with them, he felt he knew the informants. It was disturbing when they were killed.

No one said anything, and the lieutenant continued speaking. “We’ll need to find someone we can work with. Our teams over there will start developing a new informant.”

Trip drew in a slow breath to force himself to keep quiet. Later, once they were free to do as they wished, he would scream and curse. His team was set to head out on a run after this meeting, which would help him calm down. The anger was evident on Q’s face, who was sitting right across from him. He didn’t dare glance at the rest of

the guys. There were times to go off, but this wasn't it.

The lieutenant ended the meeting, and they were dismissed. He made his way to the building with the lockers and stripped down before pulling on his shorts and t-shirt. As he was lacing up his shoes, Bud stepped in and let loose a loud scream.

Zip glanced over at Trip and shook his head. They were all feeling it, but Bud had been the one to recruit the guy who'd been killed. Trip had worked closely with Bud, but it had been Bud's decision to bring the guy on.

Rider stood and moved to the door to leave. "Let's head out in five minutes."

They all mumbled their agreement as they finished getting ready to go. Trip headed outside to stretch, anger still bubbling up.

Hop followed him out. "This is fucking bullshit."

"Totally."

"Is that all you have?" Hop asked.

"Man, what do you want me to say? That it's unfair. It's our fault that man and his family lost their lives. They would probably be dead anyway, based on the fighting over there. It's hell, and too many innocent people find out the hard way. They have nothing. Meanwhile, selfish pricks over here make decisions based on how much money they can stuff into their pockets. It's all unfair."

The rest of the guys filed out, none of them smiling. There was little to smile about. Not only had they lost a resource, but someone they'd encouraged to help them was dead.

Rider led them in a few stretches before they took off for their run. Rider set the pace like usual. At least Rider was a good guy. Trip hated this part of their jobs, not the run, the reality. There was nothing simple about the geo-political hellscape that happened when dictators started dictating. Lives were ruined, and families destroyed in desperate times. Sadly, there would always be a portion of the world where strife ruled. Luckily for him and his buddies, they hadn't been born into war.

He shoved away the depressing thoughts and started thinking about Ellis. A few days had passed since he'd seen her. They hadn't texted much, either. Maybe she had changed her mind about him. He hoped not.

They'd run for a little over an hour when Rider called for them to halt. They'd run out and back, so they were close to a building with water. After grabbing a drink, they headed over to the weights and started lifting. It was evident frustration sat heavy amongst everyone.

Q was busy setting up a barbell for deadlifts and Trip walked over. "Are you doing a specific workout or just messing around?"

"Just doing deadlifts."

"Mind if I join?"

"Sure. The more the merrier."

He set up his barbell, and they did a warmup set. Before they started, Q's lips twisted up.

"How about we add in pushups between sets? "So set of three lifts, then fifteen pushups."

“Sure.”

They started their workout, doing twenty rounds. Getting exhausted felt good. After the workout, he dropped to the ground and sat, trying to catch his breath.

Bud came over and tapped his foot. “Hey, Trip, can I take over your bar?”

He glanced up, nodding. “Sure. It’s yours.”

“Are we getting together this weekend?” Hop asked as Kevlar and his team jogged into the area.

Kevlar stopped by Rider, his lips in a broad smile. “Hey, do you all want to do burgers this weekend? I think you still owe us beer.”

Rider chuckled. “Sure, sounds good. Is everyone else in?”

Everyone was free on Sunday, so they made plans to meet at noon. Trip wondered if Ellis would want to join them. He hoped so. He worried about her jerk ex doing something horrible. He hoped the police could find answers and stop the man from harassing her.

Rider came over. “What’s that look for?”

Trip shook his head. “Nothing.”

“That didn’t look like nothing.”

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and grabbed a cup of water. “The woman who lives above me is having issues with her ex.”

“And you’re getting involved.”

He shrugged and didn’t answer.

“You sure this is what you want?”

The question made him think. Was Ellis what he really wanted? They hadn’t spent that much time together, but she was taking up a large portion of his thoughts.

“I think so. I want to get to know her better.”

Rider sat on one of the blocks they used for jumps. “How well do you know her?”

“We went hiking on Saturday and spent time together on Sunday.”

Rider shook his head. “That’s not enough time.”

Kevlar had moved behind them and snorted. “It took me just a few hours to decide about the woman I’m with.”

“Yeah, but that was different,” Rider said.

Kevlar raised his eyebrows. “Maybe Trip knows what he wants.”

Trip shrugged. “I don’t know, but I feel something. I want to spend more time with her and get to know her better.”

Rider wiped his hand over his face and rolled his eyes. “Just be careful.”

“I will be.” And he would, but he wanted a chance to explore what could happen with Ellis.

“What’s her name?” Kevlar asked.

“Ellis.”

“Well, I hope you and Ellis figure it out.”

Q stepped close and wagged his eyebrows. “Is it her tits? I bet it’s her tits.”

Annoyance flashed through Trip. “Jesus, Q. Stop being a jerk. Seriously, it’s more than her body. There’s just something about her that I like.”

Kevlar squeezed his shoulder. “I get it. Remi was it for me, and I knew it fast.”

Zip snorted. “Yeah, didn’t you bone her like twenty minutes after you met her?”

Kevlar rolled his eyes. “It was more than twenty minutes, and no, we didn’t bone in the water.”

Zip shook his head. “I can’t believe you’ve tied yourself to a woman. I’m a free agent. Never get tied down is my motto.”

They all chuckled, and Q reached out and held onto Zip’s shoulder. “That’s going to come back to bite you in the ass.”

Zip brushed off Q’s hold. “No way.”

Trip had heard Kevlar’s story a few times. It was sickening how some twisted fuck had almost killed Kevlar just so he could lead a team. All the jerk had to do was ask, and he would have eventually been put into a position of leadership.

Trip was thankful everyone on his team was solid. They weren’t into settling down or

having long-term girlfriends, but they were professionals who would never stab each other in the back. There were a few guys out of the nearly four thousand SEALs who couldn't be trusted, but the numbers were very low.

After another hour of lifting weights, his team headed in to shower. Rider had received notice that their team needed to meet for another briefing in about thirty minutes. Hopefully, this wasn't anything bad like the last meeting.

Once he was dressed, he headed toward the conference room. He thought about sending a message to Ellis but put away his phone, then grabbed it back out and sent Ellis a quick text, telling her he was thinking about her.

The briefing wasn't simple or good. The news would totally ruin their plans for the weekend get-together with Kevlar's team. The unrest they'd been watching in Mali had exploded, and a group of terrorists had crossed borders and were heading toward Nigeria. Their goal was to take over multiple countries and destabilize the region.

Niger and Nigeria had both asked for help. They needed to do more than just bomb the area. They needed a precision strike to take out the head. They were leaving in an hour. He would just have to take the go-bag he kept here on base.

Once they were done with the meeting, he grabbed his phone from the shelf and saw that Ellis had returned his text. He hated that he would have to leave without seeing her. They'd just begun their relationship, and his leaving might end it. Nothing like a test to see if the spark he'd felt grew or fizzled out with him gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ellis's phone rang, and she thought about ignoring it but glanced at the screen, seeing that Trip was calling. Pleasure spread through her as she swiped to answer.

"Hello. I hope you're having as good of a day as I am."

He cleared his throat, and she could tell just by that sound he wasn't. "Not really. I have to leave town. I wanted to see you, but we're flying out in an hour."

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say. "I guess I'll see you when you get back."

"You will. I know the timing isn't ideal."

"Trip, things happen. The timing may never be ideal. I'll be here when you return, and we can get reacquainted."

Trip said nothing for a few seconds, and she was about to break the silence when he spoke. "Thank you for understanding. I really appreciate it."

His words had deeper meaning than what he'd said. She could sense it in the way he spoke. "I'll be thinking of you while you're gone. When you get home, send me a text so I know."

"I will. And thank you, Ellis. It means a lot. I have to go. Be careful, and I'll see you when I get back."

The call ended, and she stared at the phone until Gloria opened the door from the front area. “I was—hey, are you okay?”

“Yes. Were you going to ask about packing?”

“I was wondering when you wanted me to pack up the items for shipping.”

“Sure. I’ll come out front and keep an eye on the place so you can pack.”

Gloria stepped to the side so Ellis could pass. She stopped before the door closed, studying her employee. The woman was good at her job, and it would make sense to keep her around. But would Gloria want a job with little customer interaction?

“Would you be willing to work for me if we didn’t have the storefront? I’m looking for a studio space, and I think I might have found something farther south, not too far, but your hours would be a lot more flexible. Some of them could be done from your home.”

Gloria’s lips thinned and she looked like she was thinking. “That would be interesting.”

“There wouldn’t be the same kind of interaction with people coming in. Work would be boxing and shipping orders, like now, but no direct sales from a storefront. You could spend a little time printing labels at home for shipping and going through orders. Then the only things you’d have to come in for was the actual boxing.”

“Do you think there would be enough hours?”

Gloria was getting between fifteen and twenty hours a week. The shipping wouldn’t take too long, but there were other tasks that would take time. Gloria was good at her job, and Ellis knew she could trust her with more.

“I’ll be submitting to galleries, so there’s that. Hopefully, I’ll have more online orders. Also, there will be studio work you can help me with, like setting up for shoots.”

Gloria nodded. “I like the idea. We could do a trial period, and if it’s not enough hours, we can discuss before I try to find a new job.”

Ellis felt better about everything, bringing a smile to her lips. Gloria was a good employee who she could rely on. Now, she had to make plans on closing down the shop and setting up a new studio in a different area of town. The new place would be more industrial, which meant it would be cheaper. Maybe she could go on more photography excursions, but traveling would mean leaving Trip behind. She blew out a breath, worry and excitement hitting her.

She couldn’t give up a part of herself just to be with Trip. If they were supposed to be together, it would work out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trip hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours, but they were so close to ending this that they couldn't take a break to rest or refuel. They had to keep the heat on because they had the group surrounded outside of the city. There were only six of them and more than thirty terrorists. The odds seemed good to him.

A group of Marines would arrive to help them finish the assignment, but they couldn't let any of the terrorists escape. He kept his eye on the compound as he took a sip of water. That was when he saw something flash in one of the buildings.

"Movement in the building to the west."

"Saw it," Zip replied.

More movement set him on edge. It was more than just what he saw, he had a feeling. "Something is about to happen." They would need to make their move, even if it meant the Marines would arrive after their action.

Rider spoke, his voice even though the tension was evident. "I don't like this."

"None of us do," Q said.

"Can we take them out?" Hop asked.

"Just a?—"

Trip saw someone rush out of the building. Zip was set up with his sniper rifle and dropped the guy. Then, an explosion ripped through two of the buildings.

Trip clenched his muscles as the shock shot through him. It took about five seconds or so for him to recover enough to figure out that two men were running straight at him. Zip took out the first guy, and Trip dropped the second one.

Based on the chatter on coms, it sounded like chaos for the next minute or so. When the air finally cleared, and everything calmed down, he realized it was over.

Everyone on their team checked in. He breathed easier knowing no one had been injured. They discussed approaching the compound when a motorcycle fell over, setting off a chain of explosions. Trip ducked along with Zip. He couldn't see the rest of the guys or what their reactions were, but he imagined they too were ducking to escape projectiles.

"Fuck, that was intense," Q said.

The explosions had rattled his bones. "Damn, I wonder if they have more explosives."

"Probably," Zip said.

They decided not to rush in since they'd taken out all the people. They needed to watch and make sure no other members of their group rushed in to save the day, not that they thought there were more members of their group out in the wild. They had good intelligence that said all of the members of the organization were in that compound.

The Marines had the equipment to check for more ordinances and clear the area so waiting was the smart thing to do. The minutes ticked past, tension building before

the Marines arrived with equipment to check for explosive devices. In the rubble, they found the man they were looking for. Trip wished they could have brought him in alive, but there was no one left from the terrorist's cell. Another group of SEALs was in Mali going through their compound there. It seemed like they would be able to shut this guy down for real.

Before the day was over, they were flown to an aircraft carrier, where they showered and then headed to the mess hall. He couldn't wait to get back to California and see Ellis. He hoped she still wanted to spend time with him. It had been more than two weeks since he'd left.

SEALs had a hard time keeping girlfriends when they traveled so much. Even the married guys couldn't always keep their wives happy. He still wouldn't change his profession. He loved taking out terrorists and making the world a safer place.

What business did he have even trying to be with someone? None of the guys on his crew were dating. Wolf was someone he looked up to. But could he even come close to emulating his relationship with Caroline?

"Shit, I'm ready to head out," Zip said as he settled next to Trip.

Q snorted. "We just started having fun."

"We have an hour," Rider said.

Hop's lips screwed up to the side. "I hope I can get some sleep on the flight home. I want to go out and party when we get back."

The guys chuckled. Hop had a lot of exploits. It was amazing he hadn't ended up getting some woman pregnant just based on the number of women he'd been with. If Trip had to place bets, he bet on Hop never settling down.

Trip knew there was a lot to talk about with Ellis. His stomach twisted at the idea she would be there waiting for him, and then it sank when reality hit. He'd taken off for weeks, and this wouldn't be the last time. She may not want anything to do with him after he'd been gone. It was a hard life for women left at home alone. Plans had a way of being dashed, and there was nothing he could do to change the facts except leave the Navy, and he wasn't ready to do that.

CHAPTER NINE

Ellis found a new space that would be perfect for her studio. The rent wasn't expensive, and the price was low. The area was quiet for the most part and safe. There were cameras on the building and in the lot. Plus, the unit had an alarm that was already in place.

Her new lease would start three weeks before the old one ended. That would give her plenty of time to move. Gloria had decided to stay on with her. Having someone she trusted already on her team made her feel better about the future of her business.

Now, she needed her personal life to calm down. Bennet was pissed, but the police had warned him off. There was no evidence he'd sliced her tires, but he had been the one who'd written the message on the window at her shop. He wanted her to drop the charges, but it wasn't up to her since the owner of the building wanted to go after him.

She'd purchased one of those tracker detectors she'd seen Trip use and made sure to wand her car before heading home. Dating Bennet had been a mistake. Based on outward appearances, he should have been safe. Her father knew him, which really wasn't the best endorsement, but she'd thought he would at least be halfway decent. She'd been so wrong about a lot of stuff.

Their life together hadn't been terrible. Now that she'd broken up with him, she could admit that he hadn't been a great guy to date. Sure, they were welcome in nice country clubs and did plenty of fine dining. But there was more to life than money and expensive wine.

When she broke up with him, she learned that his grandparents and parents had stipulations preventing him from getting money unless he married. That's when she really understood she wasn't important. The only thing that mattered to Bennet was marriage to a woman who had a professional career. She assumed her father hadn't known about the requirement. At least she hoped he hadn't known.

Trip was rough compared to Bennet. He looked like trouble and wasn't anywhere near as polished. But she felt safe with Trip. She also felt like he would be honest with her. If he was going to cheat, he would tell her straight up. Actually, he probably wouldn't cheat. Instead, he would end the relationship and treat her like a human being instead of property.

Every morning she glanced out into the lot, searching for Trip's vehicle. This was what it would be like being with him. He wouldn't be around all the time, instead his work would take him away time and time again.

Did they even have something between them that could grow into a relationship? A few hours on the weekend wasn't enough. Or was it? Maybe he would come home and never want to see her again.

Work had been normal, nothing exciting. She and Gloria were making plans for how to box up her equipment and when to begin the process. Tonight, she planned on picking up dinner from a restaurant close to her apartment.

As the sun sank low, she began locking up. With Bennet warned off, she felt secure that she was safe. No one had bugged her at her apartment or here.

She turned on the alarm and headed out the back door. The lot wasn't dark, but it felt weird, like maybe something was lurking close by. She made it to her vehicle and was about to open the door when the guy struck. The first blow to the side of her head knocked her to her ass. Pain made everything shoot with stars and then go black. The

kick to her side stole her breath, and she slumped to the pavement as another kick landed. Pain rocketed around her body. As the beating continued, she thought for sure she was going to die.

Maybe she blacked out, or maybe it all just happened fast, but suddenly she saw lights flashing. The blood rushing in her ears made it impossible to hear anything as she watched a police officer run around the building.

Pain ruled everything as time slowly ticked by. It took forever to peel her face from the pavement. Sitting up took too much effort. Then, the hard pavement scraped against her face again. Breathing was painful, and her head swam.

At some point an ambulance showed up, and they loaded her into the back. The officer hadn't caught the guy who'd beat her, and she had no idea who had attacked.

Confusion and pain took her under. She came to at some point in the ambulance but then passed out again. They roused her in the hospital to tell her that she needed surgery to stop some internal bleeding. She had them call Ginger. Luckily, she'd granted her best friend medical power of attorney in emergencies. This seemed like one of those emergencies.

Trip pulled up at the apartment, sad that Ellis's car wasn't in the lot. He wondered if Bennet had struck again. Before going inside, he glanced upstairs, contemplating heading up. It was late, which may be why she hadn't answered his text. But why wasn't her car in the lot? Maybe she'd stayed at Ginger's place. He still needed to meet Ginger. This week, he would make that a priority.

Deciding against knocking on her door, he headed inside and dropped into bed after a shower and a sandwich. The next morning, he woke early and headed out. A redhead was coming down the stairs. He paused, smiling up at her.

“You’re Ginger, right?”

He’d expected her to say something sassy, but she burst into tears and reached out when she was on the ground level and grabbed his arm. “Oh God. You’re back. Shit.”

Panic feathered out from his chest to his limbs, and he went into fight mode. He clenched his fists so he didn’t do something stupid. “What?”

“She’s at the hospital. I grabbed some clothes. She’ll be there for at least one more day.”

His head swam with anger and fear. “What happened?”

“She left work, and someone attacked her. The doctors are hopeful that just the one surgery will fix the bleeding.”

“Fuck!”

“Follow me. I’ll get you in to see her.”

The drive to the hospital was too long for his comfort. He’d had no idea she’d been attacked. Why hadn’t anyone called him or texted? Why should they? They weren’t in a relationship, at least not yet. Plus he hadn’t had his phone on him. There was no way they could have gotten hold of him.

Fuck, he was the one with the dangerous job, and yet, she was in the hospital. It should be him, not her, fighting for life.

Ginger advocated for him to get inside to see Ellis. He would owe Ginger big time. When he stepped into the room, tears sprang to his eyes. The bruises on her face and neck looked awful. Had someone tried to choke her? He had to force his anger down.

Soon enough, he would figure out who did this, and then he could punish them.

His hands shook as he stepped closer and saw more damage. He wanted to kill whoever had done this. Killing wasn't that hard. He did it for work, and he could do it here.

Ellis's eyelids fluttered, and then her eyes were open and on him. Her swollen jaw moved slowly. The words formed but were slurred. "Is that really you or a hallucination?"

Her voice sounded rough and shaky. He put his hand on her arm, squeezing gently. She winced, and he jerked back. "Sorry. It's really me."

Relief filled her eyes before she closed them. The swirl of anger was hard to keep down. He didn't want to get thrown out, so he pushed it as low as it would go. Helplessness filled him. How could this have happened?

After he was sure she was asleep, he typed in a text to Rider, but he didn't know what his buddy could do for him. Desperation filled him. Who could help him?

He started going through names and he landed on Wolf. He'd found the one person who might actually be able to help. The text was short, but he'd given enough information to Wolf that maybe something could be discovered.

When his phone buzzed, he jumped. His gaze shot to Ellis, wanting to make sure she hadn't been disturbed. She was still asleep, so he took his phone out to the hall and answered the call from Wolf.

"Hey, Trip, so what happened?"

He wiped his hand over his face. "I don't know what to do. I came back from a

mission, and the woman I'm with was beaten up. This isn't the first attack against her. Her tires were slashed, and someone spray-painted a slur at her store. I feel like it's more than just her ex. There's something I can't put my finger on. She's in the hospital now. I don't know who did this or where the threat is coming from."

Wolf grunted. "Could you email me the information? I can't make any promises, but we can look into it. See if we can figure out who is after her."

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver."

"Don't thank me yet. We may not be able to find anything."

Trip ended the call and stepped back into Ellis's room. The head of the bed was up about fifteen degrees, and her eyes were open, though one was swollen so it wasn't fully open.

"Hey, you're awake."

"I thought I made up you being in here."

"I just had to take a phone call. How are you?"

"I feel like shit."

He fought tears and forced his emotions down so he didn't scare her. "I want you to stay at my place for a few days when you get out of here. I can sleep on the couch, but I want to make sure you're okay."

She held out her hand, and he moved to take it, holding it gently. He didn't know how badly she'd been beaten, but Ginger had said it had been bad.

“I ran into Ginger this morning, and she brought me here when she delivered your clothes. She had to go home and take care of her kid. I’m off work today and tomorrow, so I’m not leaving your side.”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“I do because I want to.”

Ellis sighed. “I don’t know who did this. I haven’t talked to the police. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I’ll see if I can figure out what is happening with the investigation.”

“I decided to close the store.”

Shock hit, and he might have gasped. “Really? Was it because of this?”

She shook her head but moaned. “No. I decided earlier. Like last week. I’m going to move to a place where I’ll have a studio and more security.”

He kept his anger in check because he knew it would come out wrong. She hadn’t done anything to deserve this. The person who attacked her was the problem, not her.

“I’ll help you move your stuff.”

“Thank you. That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is.” He pulled one of the chairs closer and sat next to her bed, holding her hand. “Do you know what the damage is?”

Ellis shrugged and then coughed and moaned. “I’ve heard bits and pieces, but I’ve

been out of it. Ginger has been making decisions for me.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah. She lives close by, and I didn’t want to leave it up to my parents. They like to travel and...”

She trailed off, and he didn’t ask for more. Later, once she wasn’t in the hospital, they could have that chat. The Navy was responsible for him, so maybe it wasn’t that weird that she had someone authorized to make decisions other than her family.

The door opened, and he turned to see a man in scrubs step in. Trip stood and pushed the chair out of the way.

“Oh, good. You’re awake. I’m Nurse Michael. The doctor is about ten to twenty minutes behind me. Let me get you set up and change any bags I need to. Are you having pain?”

Ellis tried to sit up and grunted. “Yes. There’s pain.”

“Okay, we’ll see what the doctor wants to do about that.”

Trip caught Ellis’s gaze. “Do you want me to leave?”

“I’d rather you stay. I might not remember everything.”

“Sure.”

He stayed out of the way, waiting for the nurse to finish checking and changing things. He hated that Ellis had been hurt and hoped that his friends could help him figure out what happened.

“The doctor has ordered an antibiotic and something to reduce the swelling. We’re about thirty minutes away from more pain medication, but once the doctor talks to you, she’ll decide which medication to give you. Do you think you could swallow a pill?”

Ellis’s throat moved as she swallowed. “I’m not sure.”

“Your throat may be sore for a while.”

Trip’s gaze went to the bruise around her neck. It was obvious the person had tried to choke her. He blew out a breath as frustration filled him. It had been a long time since he’d had to engage in real hand-to-hand combat. Years probably. Sure, they trained, but the guys didn’t go in for the kill. Ellis had been in the thick of it, and this could have had a very different ending.

“Why is my throat sore?” Ellis’s voice cracked as she spoke.

The nurse tried for a smile, but his gaze nervously flicked to Trip before looking back at Ellis. It was obvious the guy didn’t want to tell Ellis how bad it had been.

Trip stepped forward. “Honey, it looks like someone tried to choke you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember that part. I remember being kicked, and I remember the pain. I blacked out at some point.”

“You’re lucky,” Nurse Michael said.

“My ribs don’t feel very lucky right now.”

The door opened, and a woman stepped in, her smile wide. “Ah, good. You’re awake. I’m Doctor Taylor. The one who performed surgery on you. When you came in, you

were out of it. We're glad you gave us Ginger's number. And who might you be?" The doctor turned to face Trip, her eyebrows raised as she studied him.

"I'm Trip Merano, a friend."

"Ellis will need someone to help her for a few days."

"I'm off work today and tomorrow, so I'm helping her."

"Where do you work?"

"Naval base. Petty Officer Merano."

Doctor Taylor narrowed her eyes, and her lips twisted up on one side. "Long hair, beard. Special forces?"

"Yes, Doctor Taylor."

"Ellis, do you have someone else who can help you once Trip goes back to work?"

"Ginger can help me or the woman who works for me."

"Okay. I think you'll be able to leave either later today or tomorrow morning. I need to check on a few things." Doctor Taylor turned to the nurse. "Did you take some blood?"

"Yes, Doctor. Four vials."

"Good. We'll run some tests and see how you're doing. Get some sleep, and I'll be back around four this afternoon."

“Thank you,” Ellis squeaked out.

She sounded tired, and Trip hoped she slept for the next few hours. It would give him time to figure out a few things. First, he needed to see the video from her office. Hopefully, the attack was caught on camera. Then, he needed to figure out who had attacked her and how he would make them pay.

CHAPTER TEN

Ellis couldn't believe Trip had come to see her. She was a mess, and yet he was here, standing beside her to offer support. She slept but woke up after an hour or so, maybe more. She'd eaten some soup and soft bread, and had been walked around the hall and used the bathroom, then she had gone back to bed for another nap.

When she'd woken up this time, she'd found Trip in the chair, asleep. She studied his face, taking in the longer beard growth and his messed up hair that looked like he'd been pulling on it in frustration.

Her heart squeezed. This man, who had so much going on, had come to the hospital after what had to have been an awful trip just to sit with her. How could she ever repay him?

His eyes blinked open, and he sat up, wiping his face with his big hand. "Hey, you're awake. I didn't mean to fall asleep on you."

"You can sleep. I know you must be tired."

"I'm fine. I'm worried about you."

The door opened, and Doctor Taylor stepped in. "Your numbers came back, and it's good. I feel good letting you go. We've set you up with an appointment in a week to recheck and make sure everything is going well. You can go home, but you'll be on limited activity. I don't want you pulling anything. If you pass blood or have a lot of pain, please come to the ER. You really need to take things carefully. Do you have

stairs where you live?”

“I live on the second floor.”

Trip cleared his throat. “My apartment is on the first floor. She will be staying with me.”

The doctor’s lips twitched. “No stairs for at least three days. Take it easy, get sleep, and watch some movies. Don’t work. Sleep and rest as much as possible.”

“Thank you,” Trip said.

Ellis wished she could do this on her own, but she had to heal so she could close down her shop and move to the new studio. “Thank you, Doctor Taylor. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“I enjoy my work, so that’s a plus. I did look up your studio. I recognized your work from when I was traveling in Germany and saw some of the photos you took. At the time, I wasn’t sure where I would end up, so I didn’t buy anything. That always made me sad. There was one shot you took in the Black Forest of Germany. I found it or something very similar on your site. I placed an order today. I’m ridiculously happy about it. Now I can say I know you.”

Shock coursed through Ellis. “Oh, wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“It has been a pleasure to meet you.” Doctor Taylor turned to leave, then spun back. “The nurse will be in to start the ball rolling on checking you out. I’ll see you next week at the office.”

Ellis blinked at the door as the woman left. “I’m shocked she knew my photography and bought one.”

“Your work is good. You shouldn’t be shocked. I saw what you did while we were on our hike. If I took pictures while we were out there, I know they wouldn’t have looked as good. What you did was amazing.”

“I’m sure you could have taken decent photos.”

His chuckle warmed her. “No, you know how to frame the shot to make it look good. You’re good at what you do.”

Taking compliments had always been difficult. When she first started with photography, she saw all her flaws. Trip’s words made her feel good about her abilities. She did have an eye for photography that made people take second and third looks. It wasn’t just that she’d snapped a photo. She had thousands of shots that weren’t remarkable, but she knew when a shot was excellent.

It took a few hours, but she finally had the paperwork for her release. Ginger offered to come get her, but Trip was already there to take her home.

Sitting up and riding in the car exhausted her. When they reached the apartments, she was glad she didn’t have to climb a set of stairs. Trip carried her up the three steps and inside. She made a pit stop in the bathroom, spending a few minutes staring at her reflection. It wasn’t just the medicine she’d taken that made her look awful. Her face was swollen, and the bruises and scrapes looked almost cartoonish. How had this happened?

Sadness filled her. Why would Bennet do this to her? She just wanted to be free of him. Why couldn’t he just take no for an answer?

She napped off and on, finally waking close to eight when her phone rang. It was her father. She braced herself as she answered, trying to sound even. “Hello.”

“Ellis, we’ll be there in the morning.”

The last thing she wanted was for her parents to come to see her. She loved them, but there were issues with things they’d done in the past. There was a reason she hadn’t told them about her new apartment or where it was located. They had the address of her studio, and that was it. “You don’t have to come down here.”

“Nonsense. We’ll be there to take care of you.”

“I’m staying with a friend. I have someone to care for me.”

“You will stay with us.”

The call ended, and she pulled her phone away from her ear, wondering if she’d hung up on her dad by mistake or if he’d ended the call. He liked to have the final say, so he’d probably ended the call so she couldn’t tell him no again. When she’d broken it off with Bennet, her father had been angry and told her to get back with him. She’d refused, and that one act had caused a huge rift. She hadn’t spoken to him in about five months.

She let go a heavy sigh as guilt wove through her. She loved her parents and tried to be nice to them, but it was difficult.

“Everything okay?” Trip asked.

She shrugged. “My dad.” She shook her head, unsure how to explain her parents. “He says they are coming down here to take care of me. I told them that wasn’t necessary, but he insists.”

“Oh.”

She met his gaze. “I don’t want to stay with them. I want to be here with you.”

“Well, when they show up, you can tell them.”

Her lips twisted up to the side. “I never told them where I moved to. They will go to the studio.”

He moved to the couch next to the recliner where she was sitting. “You didn’t tell them your new address?”

She shook her head. “I love them, I really do, but we aren’t really close, and there are trust issues. I think my dad would tell Bennet my new address.”

Trip nodded, and his lips thinned. “I understand. Parents can be difficult.”

She reached out and put her hand on his. “I don’t want to stay with them. I want to be with you.”

He squeezed her shoulder gently. “I’ll keep you safe when we meet with them. We can head over to the store or their hotel tomorrow afternoon. We won’t have them here, and I’ll make sure they don’t follow us when we leave.”

“Thank you.”

It made her sad that there were issues with her relationship with her parents, but she couldn’t forget the past. It hadn’t been awful, but there had been things that made her step away from them.

When she’d backpacked through Europe, her father had threatened to cut her off. She’d been earning enough through her photography and odd jobs that she’d told him she didn’t care. He’d said some rather harsh things and called her some names, and

she hadn't talked to him for a year.

When she'd arrived back in the States, she'd thought about not contacting them, but she'd wanted to see her mother. Things calmed between her father and her, enough so that when he introduced her to Bennet, she'd been open to the relationship. Now, she wished she wouldn't have given Bennet a chance.

It was weird how much her father wanted her to be with Bennet. She hadn't had the energy then to figure out why her dad wanted her and Bennet to be together and she didn't have it now. Eventually she would have to have a conversation with them. For now, she would concentrate on getting better.

Trip wasn't sure what to say about Ellis's reactions to her parents coming to San Diego. He understood that sometimes relationships with family could be difficult, but there'd been something more to Ellis's words. He just couldn't put his finger on exactly what was bugging him or her.

The next morning, he could feel Ellis's emotional discomfort. Physically, she was doing better and moving faster. A few times, she shuffled around with one hand out to keep steady, but she also looked more confident in her steps part of the time. It made him angry and sad that she'd been injured.

Close to two that afternoon, her parents texted, wanting to know where to go. She gave them the address for the studio, which they already knew. They seemed upset, but Trip was proud of her for sticking to her decision to not allow them to know where she lived.

They headed to the building where she had her studio, her nervous as heck, him wondering if these people could end up being a part of his life because they were connected to Ellis. Drama sucked, and he tried to operate with minimal drama. Ellis was worth it, or so he thought. Maybe after today, he would change his stance.

He parked at the front of the studio, seeing the closed sign on the front door. “Do you think you’ll open back up?”

She shook her head. “No. The sign directs people to the website. Gloria is helping so much, working extra hours to do shipping. She’s a good person. I’m letting her work when she has time. With her kid in school, it’s mostly from nine until two, but it works for her and for me.”

“That’s awesome.” He was glad she had someone backing her up. It would take her a while to really get back on her feet.

When he helped Ellis out of the car, a shiver ripped through her, and she glanced over her shoulder, nervous energy pouring through her.

He squeezed her hand. “I’m here. I’m not leaving.”

“I don’t want anyone following us. I mean, I know Bennet could have known where I lived because of the tracker, but I’m not sure he does. He’s not good about checking stuff like that, and he might not have even remembered he’d placed a tracker on my car.”

Trip nodded, not wanting to tell her that the tracker could have sent a detailed map to the receiver. He wasn’t sure how that particular model worked because he hadn’t really examined it. Hopefully Bennet would disappear into the background of her life. A part of him wished they could move now, but he still had six months on his lease, and he knew she’d just moved in.

“Let’s get you settled inside. What time are your parents supposed to be here?”

She shrugged. “Well, they should have been here about fifteen minutes ago, but they are habitually twenty to thirty minutes late. So maybe in the next ten minutes.”

“Okay. I’ll keep an eye out for them. I’m going to leave the front door locked.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel better.”

If he ever met this Bennet person, he might explode with anger. The jerk had hurt Ellis horribly, and the only thing he deserved was pain. At least, he thought it was Bennet who’d attacked her. He needed to figure that out. Luckily, he had people helping him with that task.

With Ellis sitting comfortably in the studio, he went out to the front and took stock of her items. A few photographs were no longer hanging on the wall. He guessed someone had bought them, and Gloria had shipped them out.

He was proud of the work Ellis had done, and he didn’t even know her that well. He couldn’t imagine how proud her parents were. If he had a kid as talented as Ellis, he would never shut up about her talent. Now that he was dating her, he had little doubt every person on the naval base would know about her.

A car pulled up outside, and a man with gray hair got out. The passenger door opened slowly, and an older woman stepped out and shut the door. Trip couldn’t believe the man didn’t even offer to help the woman who seemed way too frail for such a heavy door.

Trip moved fast after the initial shock wore off and unlocked the front door and stepped out to take her mother’s arm and help her inside.

“Hello, you must be Ellis’s parents.”

“She’ll make it inside on her own. She’s fine,” the old man snapped as he strode inside, totally ignoring his wife.

“Thank you, dear. I’m Eloise and that is Dean.”

“My name is Trip.”

“Oh, a third.”

“Not quite.” They stepped into the shop, and he heard the old man speaking loudly to Ellis. Anger made his muscles clench, and he wanted to rush Eloise inside, but he couldn’t push her ahead of him.

As his ears stopped buzzing, he heard the words, and he wanted to detach himself from her mother and get between Ellis and her father.

“You’re not staying here. I won’t stand for it!” Dean yelled.

“I’m not coming with you. You and Mom can see that I’m fine.”

“Nonsense. We have room. I don’t know why you didn’t move in with us in the first place. This is no place for a woman to live. You will come home with us, and that’s the end of the story.”

“No.” Ellis didn’t elaborate, and he was so proud of her for standing up for herself.

Eloise let go of his arm, and he moved to the other room to stand beside Ellis. He crossed his arms over his chest, trying not to look intimidating but also not like a pushover.

“Ellis has friends taking care of her.” Trip didn’t care that Dean shot him an angry look. Impressing him wasn’t important. Taking care of Ellis was.

“Who? That fucking whore, Ginger? She’s a twat. She wouldn’t know how to take

care of anyone. She's a fucking drug addict."

Before he could say anything, Ellis responded. "Leave now."

Dean's head whipped toward her. "We drove all the way here to pick you up. Now you're coming with us. You've lost your mind. First, you break up with Bennet, and now this. You're getting married to Bennet, and all this will stop. You'll stop with the ridiculous notion you have talent and become a housewife and take care of Bennet like a woman should."

Trip's fists squeezed tight as anger rolled through him. Luckily, he was a master at keeping his emotions in check. "What exactly do you mean by if she marries Bennet, everything will stop? Do you know something about his involvement in the violence against Ellis?"

It was obvious Dean wasn't used to being questioned and didn't like it. Trip was very offended by the man and his views on Ellis's talent and what she should be doing with her life.

Dean scoffed like he thought Trip was way beneath him. Trip didn't care if people thought he was beneath them, he knew his value.

"What's your name? You have no say in what happens to Ellis."

"I'm Trip, and yes, I do have a say in what happens to her. You never introduced yourself to me, so what's your name?" Trip should have just stopped talking, but he wanted to put this man in his place.

"His name is Dean." Ellis's voice was flat as she spoke. "Trip and Ginger are the only ones who have a say in where I stay. I'm never marrying Bennet, ever. I think it's time for you to leave."

Dean's face went red, and he looked like he was going to put his hands on Ellis. Trip moved between them, raising his eyebrows as he stared the man down. "It's time for you to go."

"This is ridiculous. I'm going to report you to the police. You'll be sorry you didn't come home with me and your mother. How do you think she feels about this? You're going to regret not coming home with us. This is wrong, and the police are going to hear about this."

Trip almost lost control, but he held it together until Dean and Eloise were outside. Eloise said nothing. He thought it sad that her mother didn't speak up at all. No question, Eloise was a pawn of that man.

When he turned back to the studio door, Ellis was leaning up against the doorjamb, sadness filling her face. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure her parents' car was pulling out of the lot.

"And now you know why I don't spend much time with them and why I put Ginger in charge of my medical decisions if I wasn't capable."

"Wow. That's a whole lot of controlling and manipulating. I don't even know what to say."

"Well, it is what it is. I tried to rescue my mom, but she won't leave him. I've asked so many times, and she won't budge. He has gotten worse over the years. It really got bad when we started going to this one church. It was very cult-like."

"Which church?"

"The Sacred Village Assembly. It's non-denominational. I think that's where they met Bennet's parents after I moved out."

“So that’s how you two got together?”

“He introduced me to Bennet. I had my reservations. Then Bennet wasn’t bad, or he didn’t show me his bad side. I feel like I was duped. We were together for more than a year. But things started going south, and I broke up with him when I found out he was cheating. My dad called a few times, trying to talk me into going back to him.”

Trip had a wild thought but didn’t want to get deep into it without proof. He tucked away the idea for later. Once he had time to talk to some of the other guys, maybe he would present his theory to Ellis. One thing for sure, he didn’t trust Ellis’s dad.

“How about we get you home, and you can sleep while I make dinner.”

She nodded. “Thank you. You’re really nice.”

Laughter spilled from his lips. “Some people don’t think so, but I’d never manipulate you into doing anything. Also, your dad is wrong. You’re insanely talented, and I’m so freaking proud of your work. You should make your own decisions about what you want to do. And if you ever disagree with me, I expect you to speak up. You can say it to my face or in front of a group of friends. Any man who can’t be questioned by his partner is no man at all.”

How much kindness had she grown up with? Had her mother always been this way, or had she ever stood up for Ellis? Now wasn’t the time to ask questions, but he stored them away for later. No doubt, he would always support Ellis, even if it meant she left him at home while she traveled the world shooting awesome photographs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The week passed quickly, and on Friday afternoon when Trip came home from work, she was up and preparing dinner.

“Whoa, you’re supposed to be resting.” He glanced around, not seeing any signs of her friend. “And where is Ginger?”

“There was an emergency with Nick. She’s fine. Ginger just had to take her to the clinic for an ear infection.”

“I don’t like that you were home alone.”

She moved to him and placed a hand on his chest. “I’m fine. Nothing is wrong. Don’t be so ruffled. It’s all good.”

His nostrils flared as he blew out his frustration. She was fine. She was healing, and the dinner she’d prepared wasn’t difficult. All she had to do was dump a bag of meat and vegetables into the pressure pot. He’d prepared a few meals earlier in the week so he would be able to get food cooked quickly when he got home.

He leaned in, resting his forehead against hers. “I worry about you.”

“I know. But the police are looking into the attack. They also are still coming by to check on me. Officer Mackay called and said they have someone watching all the footage they’ve collected and hopefully will get some information about who attacked me.”

He shook his head. This was another point of contention. They didn't know exactly who had attacked her. Bennet had an alibi, and they couldn't find any payments from him to anyone else.

That meant the attack had been random, but nothing about it felt random to him. There was something deeper at play, and he wasn't sure how to help her solve the mystery.

"I really feel much better and I've been careful. I feel good."

He leaned back and met her gaze. Her eyes were still rimmed with bruises, but her eyes were bright and clear, showing that she felt better. "That's a positive."

"It is. I'm ready for my appointment with the doctor on Monday."

"Yeah, why's that?"

She scoffed as her gaze ran down his body then back up. "Sleeping in the same place as you but not being able to do anything is frustrating."

He adjusted his stance, trying to relieve some of the pressure on his dick. He was having the same issue but didn't want to think about sex with her standing right in front of him. The desire to bend her over the back of the couch and slide in or pick her up and hold her against the wall, or the kitchen counter raced through him, but he wouldn't do that with her injured. He knew how great her hot, wet pussy felt wrapped around his dick, but he could jerk off in the bathroom if he needed to.

He shook his head and chuckled. "Jesus, you're killing me."

Her laughter made him even harder, and he reached down and adjusted his cock. She didn't hide her interest. Instead, she stepped closer and put her hand on his arm.

“We could do something.”

He shook his head. “Your body still has dark bruises that haven’t faded. That means you still hurt. I wouldn’t ever forgive myself if I hurt you. And with you in my arms, I would lose control. I couldn’t go slow. You’re too sexy, and I want you too much.”

Her eyes grew wider. “You think I’m sexy even looking like this?”

He cupped her face and gently held her. “Ellis, you’re very sexy, even with the black eyes and the swelling. I want you so much, but I won’t lose control and hurt you. Your body needs to heal. Once the doctor has seen you again and released you for activity, we can go slowly.”

Tears filled her eyes, and he didn’t know what he’d said. She wrapped her arms around him. Her shoulders shook as she cried.

“I don’t want you to be so sad.”

“I’m not sad. I just can’t believe you care that much about me.”

He leaned back and met her gaze. “I care so much, and I want to show you how much, just slowly so I don’t hurt you.”

“I’m stronger than I look.”

“I know. You took a terrible beating. I know guys who would still be out of commission with the beating you took. You had to have surgery to stop internal bleeding. No question, you’re a badass. But I’m not contributing to anything that hurts you. You’re too precious. I care too much for you.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she slowly nodded as though what he said was foreign to her.

He hoped she knew how important she was. He was falling hard for her, and he really wanted to show her how much he cared. Soon enough, she would be wrapped in his arms. And then, she would know for sure that she was the one for him.

Even with being engaged to Bennet, she had never felt that anyone ever cared for her. Slowly, as she'd grown more distant from her parents, she realized their love had been very conditional. Bennet had performative love that she'd accepted because she thought he was the best she would ever get.

Her mother had been too beaten down to stand up for her, and now that she was older, she fully understood that her father didn't care about her. Her parents had used manipulation and control in dealing with her. It was a miracle that her mother had helped her grow the money she'd made doing photography. It was the one thing her father didn't know about, and she doubted her mother had ever divulged the information to him. Why couldn't her mother walk away from that man?

If she hadn't gone backpacking through Europe, she may not have ever understood how much her father didn't like her. Growing up, she'd thought his criticism of her had been normal. Before leaving home for her trip, she'd thought it normal for parents to read all her correspondence. It had started when she'd been eleven and gotten her first email address. But her parents never stopped intruding. She'd just assumed that was what parents did.

There were other things like her parents going through her room every month to check in on her. She had no idea what they'd been looking for because she trusted them. Now, she understood they were just trying to manipulate her. She'd been way too compliant as a child. Any time she'd ever pushed back the punishment had been harsh, so she learned never to push. Her staying in Europe had been so off brand for her. She'd grown so much, but not enough to recognize her father's manipulation by introducing her to Bennet.

With all she knew now, there was no way she would move back in with her parents. They wouldn't care for her if she lived with them. Besides, she valued her privacy now. They would never honor her boundaries. No way would she go back.

After dinner, exhaustion hit hard. On Saturday morning, she was glad to have Trip all to herself. They hung out, and he read while she looked at what some other photographers were doing.

"Oh, is that yours?" Trip asked as he stepped in from the bedroom.

"No. It's another photographer who does awesome work. I like how they framed this."

He came around the couch and sat next to her. "It is good. Do you know them?"

She shook her head. "No. I've never had the opportunity to meet him."

"Do photographers work together much?"

She shrugged. "Not in my line. Paps might know each other, and there are some in fashion who have worked together, but my line of work is fairly solitary. I don't really want other people there to talk or make noise."

"Makes sense."

"I've done a few events where fifty nature photographers came together at a national park and took photos. It wasn't great. Too many people were traipsing through the brush and making too much noise. I guess I'm just different."

"How so?"

“I’ll sit for hours for a shot. I don’t need entertainment or chatting. That just scares away wildlife. I like being alone or with one other person who understands that being silent is preferred.”

“Maybe we can go out hiking again sometime soon.”

She nodded. “I’d like that. The last time we went out was a fluke. Normally, I don’t get such great shots in such a short period of time.”

“I’m willing to sit for hours with you.”

“Have you ever sat like that, still and quiet for hours?”

Laughter spilled out. “As a SEAL, I’m a trained sniper. I may not be as good of a shot as Q, but I can do it. One mission we stayed in place for thirty-six hours.”

“Oh my, I don’t think I would sit in the same place for that long.”

“It wasn’t fun. I’m going to put seasoning on the steaks. Are you good with eating close to six thirty?”

“Yes. At least I’m able to eat now.”

“It’s a good sign. I hope the doctor is satisfied with your progress.”

Laughter bubbled up, and this time, it didn’t hurt as much to laugh as it had even on Thursday. “I hope so, too, because I want to jump your bones.”

“It will happen soon. Do you want to lie down before dinner?”

She let go a heavy sigh. “I should. I don’t want to, but I don’t think I’ll be able to stay

up until ten if I don't take a nap now.”

Trip kissed her before she headed into the bedroom to nap. She was happy she'd met him. If anyone else had been her neighbor, she wasn't sure what she would do. Ginger was busy with her family, and she hated the idea of taking her away from her child and husband, Kent. Relying on her parents was out of the question.

She worried about her father. He'd been acting strange, much more controlling than normal since she'd broken up with Bennet. Maybe she'd missed something about her father and Bennet's relationship, but she couldn't imagine what that could be.

Trip's phone buzzed close to five. He saw the message was from Wolf and clicked it open, seeing that Wolf asked him to call. Maybe there was progress in finding information about who had hurt Ellis. He called Wolf, who picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, how is Ellis doing?”

He appreciated Wolf asking about his woman. The man was a class act. “She's recovering well. Thank you for asking.”

“I didn't find any connection between the attack and her ex, Bennet. I was sure we would find something, but there's nothing there. No change in his bank account, no communications tying him to anyone who could have done the attack. I'm sorry, but I don't think it was him.”

“Who else could have arranged it?”

“I don't know. The police need to find the guy who did it. So far, there aren't enough recordings of the area to piece together a convincing trail that points to one person. And no one is talking.”

“Shit. This is making me crazy. I don’t know how to keep her safe if I go out for another mission.”

“You have support here. The network of retired guys can help. There are more than a few guys I trust. Not everyone is good news, but there are hundreds of guys in the area who are good people.”

Trip knew that to be true, but he also knew those people had lives. “I understand. I just feel responsible and don’t want her getting hurt again.”

“I get that. Sometimes, you have to ask for help, though. I know it’s not easy to ask, but we need other people, just like on teams.”

Trip nodded, glad he had other SEALs, retired and active, he could trust and lean on. “Thank you for looking into it.”

“We’re still looking. I don’t know what we’ll find, but we’re going to keep looking.”

“You’re the best. Thank you. I don’t even know what to think about this. I’m used to seeing guys getting hurt. Seeing Ellis injured freaking tore me up.”

“I understand completely. And I have your back.”

“Thank you.”

The call ended, and he wasn’t sure he felt better, but he absolutely knew he had to keep it together if he wanted to help Ellis. Maybe it had been just some random person, and she wasn’t being targeted, but he didn’t want to change it. If someone she knew was behind this, they would find him and make him pay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ellis left the doctor's office with a skip in her step. Ginger was downstairs in the parking lot, waiting for her. When she hit the lobby, she texted Ginger telling her she was ready to come out. Ginger picked her up at the door so she didn't have to walk across the lot and be vulnerable to another attack.

"How did it go?" Ginger asked.

"The doctor is happy. Said I could resume physical activities on Friday but to take it easy. I think I'm going to start packing up the store and studio this weekend."

"You still need to take it easy."

"I can do the little stuff. And I'll have Trip to help."

"He's a good guy. I saw how he was with you. I like him."

Shock pulsed through her. "Whoa, that's a huge endorsement."

Ginger snorted. "Well, he's not a jerk."

She nodded, glancing out the window as cars slid past. "It was weird with Bennet."

"You're telling me. He was always weird."

"I know you never liked him. I should have paid better attention."

“You didn’t know.” Ginger’s voice had softened, the blame gone.

“True. I didn’t know. Trip is so different from him.”

“That’s good.”

“I hope it works out. I’ve only known Trip for a little while. My dad knew Bennet. On paper, Bennet should be the one I stay with.”

“But he was a cheater. Plus, your dad isn’t your biggest fan.”

Ellis rolled her eyes. “You’re telling me. He certainly isn’t. I never really understood until I met you and saw how your parents are with you. I wish I’d known you when I was younger.”

Ginger chuckled. “My parents may be dorks, but they love me.”

“If I have kids, that’s what I want. A real relationship with them without the manipulation tactics.”

Ginger nodded as they turned onto the road with her apartment. A weird thought entered her mind. What if...she couldn’t go down that road. She didn’t want to believe it could even be true. Her father wouldn’t do something to purposely hurt her, would he? Sure, her dad wanted her to marry Bennet, but he wouldn’t hire someone to attack her.

Ginger leaned in and kissed her cheek. She appreciated her friend more than she could voice. “I’ll take off when you get inside safely.”

“Thank you. Call me when you get home.”

“I will. And I will be careful.”

Ellis was happy that her walk from Ginger’s car inside was mostly pain free. After drinking some water, she sat on the couch to relax and texted Trip, telling him that the doctor said she could resume activities on Friday. She hoped he understood what she meant. She didn’t think the text message was that cryptic.

A minute later, her phone rang. “I take it that was a good appointment.”

Ellis laughed. “So good. The doctor likes what she sees. Says we can do stuff on Friday.”

“We’ll still take it slow.”

“I’m fine with that.”

Trip was quiet, and she wondered if the call had been disconnected but then she heard him groan. “Just thinking about getting you naked. I’m excited.”

“You are at work, don’t get too excited.”

Laughter carried over the line, and her lips spread into a smile. “I’m about to go jump in the ocean to cool off. I’ll be home around four thirty today.”

“Cool. I’ll have dinner ready for then.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I want to. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Being with Trip was more than she thought it could be. He was kind and sweet but

also very intense in a good way. When she was his focus, she felt like they were the only two people in the world.

They hadn't fooled around before he'd left for his mission. Now, they both seemed primed and ready to jump each other's bones. Since meeting him, she'd actually lost weight, so she looked even more skinny, but Trip had told her more than once he found her sexy. She would just have to believe him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For Trip it felt like the week dragged on, going way too slow. When he left work on Friday, there was one thing on his mind. He wanted Ellis but wasn't going to push her into having sex immediately. He pulled up outside his apartment and drew in a slow breath, trying to calm himself. The desire he felt for her was pumping hard, so he reached down and pinched his dick before getting out of the car.

The second he stepped from the car, the door to his place opened, revealing Ginger. She was the last person he wanted to see. He liked the woman, and she was Ellis's good friend, but they couldn't have sex with Ginger in their space.

"Hey, Ginger. It's good to see you." He tried sounding upbeat.

"Oh, hey, Trip. I was heading out after I grabbed something from my car. She's asleep, so I feel better leaving knowing you're here."

"Asleep. Is she okay?"

Ginger nodded. "Yeah. She just wanted to nap before you got home."

"Oh, good."

Ginger opened the passenger door to her car and grabbed a bag from the floorboard. She handed it to Trip, smiling the whole time. "You two have fun tonight."

Trip nodded and smiled. He wasn't really sure what Ginger was talking about, but he

had an idea. Heat rose up his neck. “Have a good evening.”

He headed inside, unsure if he was happy Ginger had given them her blessing or afraid that Ginger knew what he and Ellis would be doing tonight.

He put up his things, washing out his lunch bag before making his grocery list for the upcoming week. The list was almost finished when his bedroom door opened. Ellis’s lips spread into a wide grin when she saw him at the table.

“Good, you are home.”

Just seeing her brought a wave of happiness. He stood and moved to her. “I am.”

She put her hands on his chest, then wrapped them around his body, tugging on his shirt, untucking it. He had intended to move slower than this, but Ellis putting her hands on his skin made his dick incredibly hard.

“I’m not going to last long this time.”

She nodded. “Neither will I.”

“I want to do everything, but I think we should take it really slow and maybe only kiss.”

She shook her head. “No way. I want to feel you inside me.”

Her words made his cock finish filling out. She pressed her body against his, and he almost blew.

“You are close to pushing me over the edge. I need you to come first. I want you wet and slick for me.”

She moaned, and he picked her up gently, carrying her into the bedroom. He gently placed her on the mattress and stood above her.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. And before you say anything, if this hurts, I’ll tell you. I certainly don’t want to screw up my progress.”

He nodded, then pulled off his shirt. Ellis stared up at him like she wanted to devour him whole.

When she tugged up her shirt, revealing her bare breasts, he couldn’t help but reach out and squeeze her nipples. She arched into his touch and moaned.

The urge to do more than touch hit and he went to work on her pants, pulling them down her legs to expose her pink panties. He stared at her for a long moment, taking in her beauty. Most of the bruises had faded, and the scar from the surgery was small. Even with the reminders of the beating she’d taken, she was beautiful.

He lowered to the mattress and kissed her gently before making a trail of kisses down her neck to her breasts. Ellis moaned and sighed as he licked and nipped. After a moment, he moved lower, licking and kissing along the way.

When he pulled her panties down her legs, she let out a sigh and then a gasp as his tongue slid over her pussy. Her fingers were in his hair, tightening just enough to tug a little. He wanted more, but he would pace himself. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

Trip sucked on her clit, causing her to gasp. He chuckled as her body started to shake. Trip slid his fingers between her legs and over her opening. She couldn’t think with him touching and tasting her.

She was going to come without a vibrator or her own hand. His tongue on her was too much, and her orgasm hit, almost knocking her out as her body seemed to explode in a burst of fireworks.

When she blinked open her eyes, Trip was staring down at her, concern evident on his face. She reached up and touched his chest.

“Wow. That felt amazing.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Very. Now I want to feel you sliding into me.”

His lips turned down. “I don’t want to hurt you. Are you really okay?”

“Yes, I’m good. I want to feel you inside me.”

He frowned again, and she put her hand on his face and made eye contact. Hesitation was evident in his gaze, but she wanted him and didn’t want to stop. She was still sore, but as long as they took things slow, she could handle it.

“You can go slow. I know it will be tough, but you can do it. I want to feel you inside me.”

He breathed in a shaky breath and nodded before he moved between her legs. She lifted her legs and held her knees so he could position himself with his cock at her entrance.

With her knees up, she wasn’t very comfortable, but the last thing she wanted was to give Trip any reason to stop. She drew in a slow breath, trying to push away the pain.

His smooth cockhead brushed against her opening, taking her breath away. He stalled, but she arched her hips, needing him to slip inside.

“Please,” she begged.

He slowly slid in, his cock stretching her, making her feel fuller than she ever had in her life. He was a good size, perfect for her.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “So good.”

“I’m going slow.”

“I just need you to fuck me. I need to feel you possess me. I want the memory of this to wipe away the bad. Make love to me. Make me forget everything else.”

Trip grunted and slowly drew his cock out, then pushed back in just as slow. It was nearly torture, him moving at this pace, but so good. When he grazed her clit, she gasped. Everything was overly sensitive. Every time his chest hair brushed against her nipples, she thought she was going to lose it.

He was moving so slow it was driving her crazy. His gaze held hers as he moved against her, driving her crazy with his intensity. She arched up as he pressed in, causing the pressure on her clit to increase.

She gasped, and he jerked his hips back fast as he sucked in air. They were both on edge. Moving slowly had ramped up the desire inside her. It was like his every move pushed her closer to another orgasm. When he ran his thumb over her clit, she couldn’t hold back. Another orgasm hit, stealing her mind as she pulsed around him.

Trip had never fucked anyone so deliberately and didn't know that he could get off by going slow. Sliding into Ellis's tight pussy had left him on edge. When she clamped down with her orgasm, it was too much. He came hard and slammed his eyes closed as his balls emptied.

When he finally could move again, he lifted off her and pulled out, tossing the condom in the trash can he'd put beside the bed.

Ellis rolled to face him. "That was amazing."

"Are you okay?"

She stretched her arms over her head and moved around a little. "Yeah. Nothing bad. I mean, that was the speed I can do that at for a while."

"That was intense. I really felt you."

Her lips curved into a smile, and he reached out, running his fingers over her cheek, then her lips, and to her shoulder. He wanted to explore her body, but not while she was covered in fading bruises. His desire to kiss and touch her, to lick and show her how excited he was almost overwhelmed him, but he held back, deciding it was better to wait.

She put her hand on his arm, squeezing. "You really are strong. I mean, that's a stupid statement, but you have so much control. I was a little surprised at how you could hold back."

He snorted. "It was difficult. You felt so good wrapped around me. I can't wait until you're better and we can be a little more active."

She palmed his biceps again. "How strong are you? Like, do you think you could

hold me up?”

Her question made him laugh. “Oh, Ellis, I could hold you up easily.”

Her eyebrows pinched together as her gaze swept down to look at herself. “I’m too skinny, I know that.”

He moved fast, cupping her face. “Oh hell no, you aren’t too skinny. You’re perfect. If you gain weight, you’ll be perfect then, too. Don’t discount yourself. Your body is beautiful.”

Her nose scrunched up. “You really think so?”

“Totally. And why are you so down on yourself?”

She shrugged. “I’ve just heard for years that I’m not good-looking.”

“Whoever said that is an idiot. You’re very cute and sexy and beautiful.”

When she shook her head, he narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t yell at her. He seriously wondered what kind of asshole her ex was. It would take him a while, but he would have to build her up so she understood that he found her very attractive.

“Some of the guys wanted to come by tomorrow and check on you. Is that okay?”

“Sure. That’s nice of them.”

“They were worried when they found out someone had attacked you.”

“I’m up for seeing them.”

“Okay. They’ll bring pizza.”

“They don’t have to. I can?—”

“Oh, heck no. You’re not putting together a meal for my friends. They are worried about you, and they want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Well, okay, I won’t cook. I’m glad they want to come by. I guess I’m surprised they are interested in my wellbeing.”

“You’re important to me, so they will be interested. It’s part of who we are.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. He liked watching her when she relaxed. After a moment, he realized she had fallen asleep. It took him a few minutes to get his arm free and make sure she stayed asleep.

Once in the den, he sent a text to his buddies, telling them it was okay to come over the next day. He ate some food and read an article he’d wanted to look at. He was surprised Ellis slept for two hours, but then again, she was recovering.

He liked having her in his space. Maybe she would want to go back to sleeping at her place, but he hoped not. Maybe having her move in this fast was wrong, but he knew what he felt and didn’t want to let her go. Ellis meant too much to him, and he hoped he meant as much to her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ellis's hands shook as she stood in the bathroom, staring at her reflection. Would Trip's friends like her? Would they think her lazy because she hadn't cooked, and the place wasn't spotless? As she left the bathroom, the urge to vacuum and dust hit, but Trip was making her rest. A part of her thought she should make them cookies, but Trip nixed that suggestion.

At noon, a knock sounded on the door, and her stomach tightened. She hoped they liked her. The guys filed in, giving Trip fist bumps or hugs. They moved into the apartment and shook her hand. They were gentle, their gazes respectful, but searching her face, probably taking in the fading bruises. Ellis wasn't sure what she expected, but the guys were very nice.

"I'm Zip," a tall guy with a beard said. "I'm glad you're recovering. When Trip told us about what happened, we all were upset."

"Yeah, very upset. I'm Q. Just the letter Q. I've known Trip for a while. He's like a brother to me, so that means you're like a sister. We protect our own."

Q wasn't as tall as Zip, and he had less facial hair. Based on the look in his brown eyes, she could tell it wasn't just talk. He would protect her.

"I'm Rider. I'm sorry you went through that. Are you feeling okay now?" Rider was about Trip's size but a little heavier. It was probably mostly muscle. He looked a little more country, like he would fit in very well in the rural areas of Georgia.

“I’m Hop. Been friends with Trip for years. He’s a good guy. I’m glad you’re with him.”

“And I’m Bud. Trip said you were planning on moving your studio. We can help.”

“Wow, thank you all. I’m surprised you all wanted to check on me and that you’re willing to help move my studio.”

“Of course. You’re with Trip. That means you’re family,” Rider said.

She wasn’t sure what their definition of family was. She didn’t have the best track record, but she felt like these guys would show her how real families operated. “It’s a lot for me to take in.”

Bud chuckled. “Well, get used to it. You not only have us, we’re friends with other guys and teams. Then, there are a few retired SEALs who are still around. We help each other out when in need. I think you’ll be safe from here on out.”

“Thank you.”

The guys got everything ready in the kitchen and handed out slices of pizza. They joked with Trip and included her in the conversation, explaining the jargon they were using, and making her feel like she was part of their group. When it was time for them to leave, they cleaned up the kitchen and took the trash out for them. It was amazing.

Trip walked the guys out, then came in and sat on the couch next to her. “Was that okay?”

She nodded. “Yes. They are all so nice.”

“They are when they’re in situations like this. They also are warriors and won’t hesitate to take out the enemy, which includes the people hurting you. If we find out it was Bennet who attacked you, he might not have a happy time of it.”

“They wouldn’t kill him, would they?”

Trip shook his head. “No, but Bennet might wish they had.”

“They won’t do anything to get in trouble, would they?”

Laughter spilled from Trip. “If Bennet did this, no one would have any idea who brought the guy down. We’re good at what we do.”

She nodded, worried about what would happen. “I trust you.”

“Good, because I will work to make sure you’re safe.”

She fought the building yawn, but it won. Trip stood and picked her up. “Hey, what are you doing?”

“Meeting my buddies was tiring. You should get some sleep.”

She tried to waggle her eyebrows, but it may have looked ridiculous. “We could fool around.”

Trip shook his head. “You’re tired. We can mess around next weekend after you’ve had more time to heal.”

She laughed, and he squeezed her tighter. Being with Trip was perfect for her. She was falling for him, and she hoped that was okay with him. Maybe they were moving way too fast, but she knew what she wanted.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On Monday, she felt good enough to go to work. She promised Trip she wouldn't overdo it. There was no way she would park in the back, though. There weren't enough eyes on the area, and she couldn't see if anyone was waiting for her.

It bugged her that the police didn't know who had attacked her. No one was taking credit, and Bennet's alibi was solid. Maybe he'd paid someone, but the police hadn't found any link to Bennet. Also, Bennet seemed genuinely shocked and repulsed when he'd heard about the beating.

She let Gloria take on the heavier stuff while she focused on the light work. About noon, there was a knock at the front door. A woman stood at the door wearing jeans and a t-shirt. She looked like a customer. Ellis hated to disappoint people, but they were closed. Staring at her from this side of the glass was awkward and she decided to open the door.

Before turning the lock, Ellis glanced around, looking to see if anyone else was with the woman. The parking lot looked empty. Cautiously, Ellis opened the door, ready to tell the woman they were closed.

"Hi, Ellis, right? I'm Remi. I'm with Kevlar."

The words didn't make sense. "What?"

"He's a SEAL. Trip was chatting with Kevlar about you closing your shop and everything that happened, and I know it's weird, but I knew where your shop was and

wanted to see if you needed help.”

“Oh.” Right then, her phone rang. It was Trip. She answered as she let Remi inside.
“Trip.”

“Hey, one of the women might be stopping by. I mentioned that you were closing your shop and the attack, and well...”

She met Remi’s gaze and smiled. “Remi just got here. Thank you for calling.”

“Sorry, I should have told you earlier. We were on a run.”

“It’s all good. I’ll text you later.”

“Sure.” Trip hesitated before he said bye. She wondered what that was about but didn’t have much time to think because Remi was there, and she wanted to find out why.

She shoved her phone into her pocket and turned to face Remi. “So you’re with Kevlar. I don’t know if I’ve met him.”

Remi’s laughter was more snort than laugh, but it made Ellis smile. She had a feeling she would like this woman.

“Sorry about just stopping by. I ran into a snag at work, and I needed a break.”

“Oh, where do you work?”

Remi bit her lower lip and glanced up at one of the photos Ellis had of lions she’d taken in Africa. “I work for myself. I’m an artist. I draw Pecky the Traveling Taco.”

“Oh crap, that’s you? Pecky is brilliant.”

Remi’s cheeks turned pink and her smile grew wider. “I love the work. But sometimes I get stuck. I heard about what happened, and I want to help. I need some exercise, and I can help you however?—”

The door to the back studio opened, and Gloria came out carrying a bin of supplies. “Oh, I didn’t realize anyone else would be here.”

“Gloria, this is Remi, Remi, Gloria. She works here.”

Remi shook Gloria’s hand after she set down the bin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Remi was just telling me she draws Pecky the Traveling Taco.”

“Oh, nice. My husband loves it.”

Remi smiled. “Thank you.”

Ellis glanced around. “I’m still doing light stuff. But yes, we could use your help.”

“Awesome. I feel like this space will give me inspiration. I love the lions.”

Ellis had been proud of that shot. “I enjoyed my time in Africa. It was beautiful.”

“I bet. These shots are spectacular. Now then, what can I do?”

Gloria had a list of tasks that needed to be accomplished. With Remi’s help, they were able to work through half the items by three that afternoon. They chatted, and Remi said it would be cool to draw Pecky traveling to Africa to take photos.

Ellis chuckled. “That would be awesome. I loved it there. I have loads of photos you could see. We should make a time when I’m not exhausted.”

“Yes. That would be great.”

Exhaustion hit Ellis and they decided to call it quits.

“Thank you so much for coming by to help.”

Remi gave her a gentle hug. “Any time. I really enjoyed getting to know you. I’m happy you and Trip are together.”

Ellis smiled as she thought about Trip. “He’s really a great guy.”

“I totally get that. Kevlar is amazing. My life would be much duller without him in it.”

When Remi had told her what had happened and how she’d met Kevlar, she’d been shocked and amazed. That someone would go to those lengths was chilling. Then again, she was recovering from an attack, so she knew people would go to great lengths to be awful.

Remi took off, and Ellis grabbed her bag so she could head home. Gloria walked out with her. She was thankful Gloria had moved her car, backing into the space so their driver’s side doors were next to each other. It made her feel safer getting into the car with Gloria right beside her.

Gloria gave her a brief hug before opening her door. “I like Remi.”

“So do I. She’s really nice.”

“And funny. She reminds me a little of Ginger.”

Ellis laughed. “I can see that. It was nice to have help. I need to send her a thank you. I feel good about how much we got done today.”

“So Thursday then?”

Ellis nodded. “Yes, that will give me time to rest.”

“Good. I’ll keep you informed if anything that needs your attention comes through.”

“I really appreciate you working extra last week. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Luckily for us both, you don’t have to do it without me. I’ll see you on Thursday.”

Gloria waved her out first, and Ellis took off, heading home. She pulled into a grocery store lot to make sure she wasn’t being followed. It was weird having to jump through hoops just to get home safely. The attack still bugged her, but she wasn’t having too hard of a time with fear. At least that had gone in her favor.

Trip arrived a few minutes after her. When he pulled her into his arms, she sighed and relaxed against him. This man knew how to comfort her and make her feel better just by being around.

“How was today?” he asked after kissing her.

“Remi is great. I’m glad she came to help.”

“I don’t know her well, but from what I do know, she’s a good person.”

“I really appreciated her help, and it was nice to chat with her. I’m glad things worked out for her and Kevlar in Hawaii.”

“Oh, yeah. That was bad. It sucks that it was one of our own.” Trip shook his head, disgust evident on his face before he rolled his shoulders. “The ass got what he deserved. Well, he probably deserved worse.”

She wrapped her arms tighter around him, and he rested his cheek on the top of her head. After a few seconds, he relaxed against her, the tension easing from him. Betrayal sucked. She wasn’t sure how someone could betray anyone like the guy had. Especially someone they were close to. Then again, Bennet had been sleeping around with other women. It was the reason she wasn’t planning her wedding at the moment.

“I feel incredibly lucky to have found you.” His deep voice vibrated against her cheek, warming her more. She felt so protected and loved in his arms.

She leaned back and met his gaze. “I’m the lucky one.”

She really felt like she’d struck gold with him. He was strong and could keep her safe, but also so loving and kind. This was the type of man she’d never expected to meet and yet here she was. Hopefully nothing would get in their way because she wanted forever with Trip.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Holding Ellis was making his cock swell. He either needed to step away, or she would figure it out fast. Then he saw the change in her eyes, and heat filled her gaze. Guilt filled him. She was still hurting.

“We don’t have?—”

She put her fingers on his lips. “I want to.”

The bruises were mostly gone, and she felt better, so instead of keeping his hands where he could see her skin or planning where to touch based on her bruises, he ran his hands down her body to her butt cheeks. He palmed her ass, loving the feel of her tight little globes.

She pressed against him, her body brushing against his cock. It was too much, and he picked her up so she could wrap her legs around him. She was so light, and he made a mental note to make sure she ate dinner. She needed to gain back the weight she’d lost after the attack.

Right now, he was going to focus on making her come. Once in the bedroom, he relieved her of her clothes and set about bringing her to orgasm. He loved how her nipples grew hard as he licked her and teased her clit with his fingers. She was hot and wet and about ready to blow when he slid two fingers into her. She threw back her head, moaning as she came.

He pushed his pants off and tugged off his shirt before grabbing a condom. When he

slid in, he held still for a moment as she adjusted to him.

His gaze met hers, and he knew he had to tell her how he felt. He pulled out and then pushed in slower than he would have liked, but he didn't want to hurt her. Being inside her felt so good. Over the last few weeks, she'd become his world.

"More!" Ellis begged.

He wanted to give her more but didn't want to hurt her. He pumped in, and she arched up and met his thrusts. After a moment, she pushed at his shoulder. Worry made him stop moving.

"You okay?"

"Roll over. I want on top."

He rolled them and helped steady her. She put her hands on his chest and lifted then lowered fast. He gasped as her body slammed down on his. Her eyes rolled up in her head when she did it again.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and helped her lift and lower, pumping her on his cock. It felt so amazing he thought he might come just watching her get on top and riding him.

"So good." Ellis's words came out in a deep moan.

He was losing control fast. With her body on display, looking like she was having the time of her life riding his cock, it was too much.

"Ellis, I'm going to come."

Her gaze linked with his, and it was almost like her eyes glowed as she lifted and then lowered one more time. He gasped and pumped up, his balls pulling so tight it was almost painful. Then release hit, and his whole body shook as he came deep inside her.

She rolled her hips and gasped as she reached between them, her fingers on her clit. Her orgasm was almost too much to take as she squeezed his cock.

After tossing the condom, he lay beside her, feeling like he was the luckiest man in the world. "I can't get you out of my mind. I want to be with you all the time."

She ran her hand over his shoulders to his face and cupped his cheek. "I want to be with you."

"We haven't been together long, but I've fallen in love with you."

Ellis's eyes grew bright, and her hand moved to the center of his chest. "Love, yes, that's what I feel for you. I've fallen for you, too."

"I don't want you to go back to sleeping at your place. I want you here with me. I know you're doing better, but I don't want you to leave."

She nodded. "I won't. I wasn't looking forward to sleeping in my own bed. I like having you close."

"I'm glad you like being close to me. It's nice having you in my bed, but it's also nice just having you with me. I like cooking meals for you and spending time just hanging out."

Ellis chuckled. "I love hanging out, too. And yeah, it's nice to have you cooking for me. Speaking of that. We should get up and eat, eventually."

“Oh, I want to order pizza.”

“Are you sure? We could just eat a sandwich.”

“Yeah. I had a rough day, and you spent time being physically active. You need some extra calories. I’ll order on my phone.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Sure.” He liked that he knew exactly what kind of pizza she liked. He knew a lot about what she liked and didn’t like. When they’d talked about food she enjoyed he paid attention and she seemed to know what he liked. It made him feel good that they both were so into each other that they took note of likes and dislikes.

He found it funny that her biggest quirk was her shoes had to be lined up a certain way when she took them off. If they were messed up, she had to fix them. He had quirks, and not once had she complained about his little idiosyncrasies. She never got upset when he checked the peephole before opening the door or if he did a scan of the area before turning off the engine or parking. There was little chance they would run into problems while out running errands or at the apartment, but he was always on alert.

She accepted him for who he was, and that felt amazing. That she also loved him made him feel great. He hoped she could deal with his schedule once it got rough again because, sure as the sun rose in the east, his schedule would become complicated.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ellis felt accomplished. She'd gone up to her apartment and spent the day packing up her things that she wanted to move down to Trip's place and then figuring out what she could sell versus what she would want to store. They were talking about moving into a bigger place. Not a huge house, but maybe one of the duplexes not too far away. It would give them an extra bedroom, though small, and a room at the front that could be either a dining room or a sitting room. The duplex would also have an outdoor area so they could have people over for grilling. They were moving forward in their relationship which made her happy.

She was coming out of her apartment when she saw Bud and Zip in the parking lot. She waved, and they came over, rushing up the stairs to take her bags from her.

"Hey, I didn't know you were coming over."

"Yeah," Bud said. "We're meeting Trip here. He got stuck at a light, so we were a little faster. He should be here any second."

Zip pointed at the parking lot. "There he is."

Ellis's heart filled with love and happiness. She missed him when he was at work. It was silly because they both worked, but she really liked spending time with Trip. It did make their time together special.

Trip jogged up from the lot, giving Ellis a quick kiss before opening the door. "Hey, guys. Thanks for helping Ellis."

“Sure. We’re looking forward to helping her move her studio.”

“I can’t believe you all want to help with that.” Ellis was surprised Trip’s friends wanted to help out so much. She would owe them big time. Just like with Remi. They’d talked a few times since she’d helped, but she hadn’t seen Remi again. They needed to get together so she could show Remi her photos from Africa.

“So, Trip, show us what you’ve got,” Zip said.

Ellis took her bag to the bedroom and put up the clothes she’d brought to his place. Once she had everything hung or put up in drawers, she stepped out into the main room and saw the guys were huddled around Trip’s laptop.

“What’s up?” she asked as she stepped into the kitchen.

Trip glanced up, his lips thinning. “I asked someone, a retired SEAL, for help in looking into the attack. They’ve got some information, but it’s not much.”

“Oh.” A part of her wanted to push thoughts of the attack out of her mind, and another part was curious about what had been found.

“Do you all have any idea who did it?”

Bud shook his head. “No, not yet.”

A line had developed between Zip’s eyebrows, and his lips were down in a frown. “The issue is there isn’t a camera that tracks where he goes after he runs off. None of the cameras pick him up well enough we know which vehicle is his or if he lived in the area. So he either stopped somewhere close or he disappeared into thin air.”

“I haven’t seen any videos of him. Maybe I recognize him or something.”

“Hold up.” Trip held up his hand, and she paused. He looked up at her apologetically.

“What?” She didn’t think Trip was going to answer, but then he sighed.

“It was the video from the officer’s dashboard camera. It was disturbing.”

“Oh.” She rolled her shoulders, shrugging off the weirdness. “I don’t remember what happened.”

Zip met her gaze. “That’s probably good.”

She shrugged. “Show me a different video of him. I’ll see if I can tell you anything.”

Trip turned the computer around, and she watched the guy running away from her building. He was dressed in black and had something covering his face. There was nothing distinguishable about his run or how he moved.

“I can’t tell anything. I do remember his face being covered. I don’t really remember anything else after a few hits.”

Trip came around the table and put his arms around her. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Maybe it was a random person, but it didn’t feel random. The fact his face was covered makes me think it was more than just a random tweaker in the lot or someone trying to rob me.”

“The guy didn’t take anything, did he?” Zip asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. There was money in my purse, and it was still there when I woke up in the hospital.”

Bud played another video, this one with the guy running toward the camera. “This is another shot. And I’m glad you’re living here with Trip. Also, it’s good that you’re moving your studio.”

She hated that she had to move, but she’d already decided, so it wasn’t the attack that made her change her location. It was time for her to focus more on studio work and less on having a shop where people could come in to buy her work.

“It’s closer to the apartment, so that’s really nice.” She wanted to look at the positive aspects instead of focusing on the negative stuff.

Zip cleared his throat, his gaze flicking to Trip before bouncing back to her. “Trip mentioned that you may head to Europe.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know yet. The attack delayed whatever trip I was thinking of doing. I’m in contact with one of the publications I work with, and I might be going to New Zealand first.”

Zip flashed a smile. “Wow, New Zealand. That’s a beautiful country.”

“Have you been there?” she asked.

The guys shrugged and Trip answered. “There was a training mission. It was one of the best places we’ve done training.”

“Oh, nice. My trip is just the talking stage right now. I won’t know for a few weeks, maybe more. And it wouldn’t be until March of next year.”

Zip looked shocked. “Oh wow. That far out?”

“They have to plan, get the whole team set up. There are so many people. They need

someone to write the script, someone for voiceovers, the camera people, and the photographers. It's a lot. I'd be there for stills, not video."

"That sounds like a lot," Bud said.

She nodded. "It is, but I like working with them. I have a good relationship with the company and they pay well."

Zip's phone buzzed. "Oh, I have to take off. I'm seeing Wolf and Caroline this weekend. I'll see if he has any more information."

"Thanks, man." Trip did some handshake hug thing that she didn't understand, but it worked for them. Bud took off, too, leaving them alone.

"It was good to see them." She liked his friends. They were good for him, and they were nice to her.

"I hope seeing the video didn't disturb you."

She shook her head. "No. I'm good. I mean, it's weird thinking about what happened, but I'm good for the most part. Like I'm not waking up having issues. I think it's a blessing I can't remember anything."

He brushed his lips against hers in a sweet kiss, then stepped back. "We can heat up leftovers. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah. That sounds good."

"Awesome."

"Let me pop something into the microwave, and you can change."

“Thanks. Maybe we can finish that movie tonight.”

Ellis threw her head back, laughter spilling out. “Sure, we can attempt it again. But giving you a blow job was much more fun.”

He snorted. “Yeah, that was better.”

“We’ll see how it goes.”

Being with Trip was fun. She’d never experienced a relationship like this. While she was heating up the food, she pulled up her email. She’d meant to do it before, but after the attack, Gloria had been handling everything important, calling her if she needed input and telling her about everything that had come in.

Gloria had mentioned that there were a few emails from her parents, but she’d ignored them. Maybe she could catch up on her emails this week. Ellis dreaded looking into what her parents wanted. They hadn’t handled their last meeting well. They were way too pushy and wanted her to follow their demands. She had been on her own for too long to just blindly obey her father.

It took a moment for the emails to load, and she saw that Gloria had created a folder for her personal stuff, which she appreciated. Before she opened the folder, she looked over the work emails. It was exactly what Gloria had told her about. Nothing surprising had popped up. She was impressed by the number of orders she’d received. Her bank balance was healthy, but she needed to really go through her expenses and income. She sighed as Trip stepped out of the main room.

“Hey, everything okay?”

She rolled her eyes. “Just looking at email. I haven’t really kept up after the attack. It’s time I start getting back into work mode.”

“Well, I’m here if you want help.”

“Thank you. I’ll start looking into it tomorrow. Right now, I’m happy with what I saw. It’s just a lot of work I have to get back into.”

He gave her a hug before grabbing plates. “I’m hungry. Maybe we could head out to the beach tonight and watch the sun go down.”

“That sounds good. I’d like that.”

She was incredibly happy with her life with Trip. Being with him wasn’t difficult at all, which was such a huge change from what she was used to. She wished she had met him earlier in her life but was happy now to have what they did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The call came in before Trip rolled out of bed. He hoped it wasn't a trip out of the country. No question, he would go, but he didn't want to leave Ellis again so soon.

He stepped into the bathroom as he answered. "Trip here."

"Get ready for a long day," Rider said.

"Really?"

"Just got word we're conferencing in with a group doing an extraction. We need to be on base in an hour and ready to go. We probably won't be home until midnight."

He grunted, thinking about how the change would affect him. "Thanks for calling. I'll be there."

"See ya soon."

Trip hopped into the shower, washing quickly. By the time he got out, Ellis was brushing her teeth. Her eyebrows shot up, questioning why they were up so early.

"Rider called. It's going to be a long one. I'll be home closer to midnight."

She rinsed her mouth and then rose to meet his gaze in the mirror. "Want me to heat a breakfast sandwich?"

Emotions rose. She was the best. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” She rose up on her toes and brushed her lips over his cheek. This weekend he would make sure to focus on her. That she never complained when he had long hours or when work got in the way made him feel great. She cared about him, and that was special. He’d seen way too many people in the military get to the point their partner didn’t care for them. He would do everything possible to make sure Ellis never had reason to become jaded.

When he came out of the bathroom, Ellis had the sandwich wrapped and ready for him. She’d also poured up a travel mug of coffee for him.

“You’re the best.”

Her laughter was balm to his soul. Knowing there were people like Ellis here made fighting for his country even more important.

“No, you are. I’ll see you tonight, or if I’m asleep, I’ll see you in the morning.”

He held her close for a long moment, breathing in her scent. She smelled like happiness and home. When he loosened his hold, she tilted her face up to meet his. The kiss was slow, a prelude to a promise he knew she would fulfill.

“I have to go, but I want you to know when I get home, I’m not going to be distracted by work. I promise to leave that at the base so I can focus on you.”

She cupped his cheeks. “I trust you.”

He nodded. “I know, but I never want to give you a reason not to trust me.”

Ellis lifted on her toes and kissed his cheek before stepping back, her smile still

warming him. “Have a good day. I don’t know what you’ll be doing but know I love you, and I’ll always be here when you come home.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek. “I love you, too.”

The drive to the base didn’t take long. He was early, so the stream of cars heading wherever they normally went in the morning was much fewer. Most of the guys were already there when he walked in. They had coffee flowing and were ready to get to work.

Being on this end of the equation was hard. Looking over other SEALs’ shoulders, telling them what to do wasn’t his favorite task. It was a necessary function of the job, and he would do it to keep the other SEALs safe. Everything they did was important, and he would treat this task that way.

After their initial assessment they headed into the situation room. He texted Ellis, telling her he would be without his phone for hours, maybe until the next day. Worry for her rose, but he tamped it down. She would be okay. She was smart, and cautious.

The police hadn’t found any connection to Bennet. The attack had to have been random. Ellis would be perfectly safe. She had to be.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ellis decided to head to the shop to finish packing the final items. After an hour of working, she was tired and wanted to sit. It was the perfect time to deal with her emails. Then she remembered she had a load of emails from her parents. Her stomach twisted with dread as she stared at the folder that held their emails. A part of her wanted to ignore them. Their last exchange had been very disappointing. She hoped they were over their issues so they could get back to trying to be decent to each other.

She'd spent years trying with them, and a part of her wished she could walk away and never have to deal with her dad trying to control her. But she was a people pleaser where they were concerned. She knew if she cut off her father, she would have no contact with her mother. It sucked. She should stand up for herself more.

The first email from her dad was the morning after she'd last seen them. Dean demanded that she stop being a fool and get back with Bennet. The second email Dean said they were going to call the venue where she and Bennet had planned to get married and make sure they still had a date.

Ellis rolled her eyes, thinking about shooting back a reply, but it had been a while since they'd sent that email. In the next email her dad was pissed that she hadn't replied. The next email was even more unhinged.

Her stomach twisted up in knots. She needed to get them to realize they couldn't act this way. She would have to cut them off. Thinking back over the last few weeks, she kind of had cut them out. After the attack and them driving here in their failed attempt to force her to go home with them, she hadn't spoken to them once.

She picked up her phone, thinking she should call. It would be easier to send them an email, telling them to stop trying to control her. She wished she could explain that she would love to have a relationship with them, but she wouldn't be bullied into marrying a jerk who cheated on her.

Not contacting them would be easier, but she needed to give her parents a chance to change. She had to tell them to stop threatening her about Bennet, or she was cutting them off.

She dialed their number, her heart racing. She wanted to hang up and pretend like she hadn't called, but they would see that she had. Caller ID was great, unless you wanted to remain anonymous.

Dean answered on the third ring. "Your mother is in the hospital. Heart attack."

"What?" His words didn't make sense. "Where?"

"Come to the house. We'll go from here."

Dean ended the call without giving her a chance to ask more questions. Worry exploded, and she grabbed her laptop, shoving it into her bag. She made sure the alarm was on and left out the front door, wishing Trip wasn't tied up.

She would call on the way to LA, leaving a message for him. The drive would take about two and a half hours, maybe three if traffic was bad. Trip had said they would be tied up until midnight. She wished she could get a message through to him, but she understood that he couldn't be interrupted. What they were doing was important. She could handle going to the hospital to see her mother on her own.

She hoped her mother would be okay. Her dad didn't answer the phone, and neither did Trip, which didn't surprise her since he'd told her he wouldn't have access to his

phone for hours. With about thirty minutes left on her drive, she called Ginger and got her voicemail.

Later, once she checked on her mom, she would get hold of someone. She pulled into the driveway, her stomach clenching. She hadn't been home in a while, not since leaving Bennet. Before, when they'd been planning the wedding, she'd visited her parents at least once every month. But after ending the engagement, things became so strained that she couldn't take her dad's anger.

Rushing in felt wrong, so she rang the bell, a weird feeling sliding through her belly. The door opened, but it wasn't her father. The hair on the back of her neck rose, and she turned to leave, but her path was blocked by two big men.

She glanced back and saw her dad in the entryway, his arms crossed over his chest. Real fear rose, and she knew she wouldn't get out of this without a fight.

Dean moved around the man who'd answered the door, his fingers stroking his chin like he was some evil villain. Nervous laughter bubbled up as her stomach dropped. Maybe from nerves or maybe because the situation was more than ridiculous, but she couldn't stop laughing.

"You're laughing now, but you will do what you should have done in the first place."

She shook her head, not understanding the reference. "What?"

"You're marrying Bennet."

She scoffed. "No, I'm not."

Dean turned, his eyes wide and his teeth clenched. Anger seethed from him. "You will marry Bennet."

“I won’t stay married to him.”

Now, it was her dad’s turn to laugh. “You don’t have to live past the first few days. All we need is for the marriage to be validated. If you die on the honeymoon, we don’t care.”

“What are you even talking about?”

Dean looked at the two men standing behind her. “Get her inside.”

Ellis tried to fight, but she was like a leaf trying to rage against a strong wind. They won, and she was deposited in a chair in Dean’s office. She tried to get up, but they had straps on her wrists and something around her chest that held her in place.

It was like an evil villain had taken over her father—no, not taken over. Dean had always had something lurking underneath that seemed evil. Maybe it hadn’t been underneath anything. Maybe she’d just given excuse after excuse for her dad’s behavior.

“Where is Mom?”

Dean turned, looking at her like she was stupid. “Getting the flowers arranged.”

His answer made even less sense than anything else had. “I don’t understand.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You always were dense. You and that stupid camera. What a waste. Bennet’s inheritance doesn’t come in unless he gets married.”

“Then he should marry someone else.”

The anger in her father’s eyes made her recoil. “He has to marry you.”

His words didn't make sense. "Why?"

"Because I need the money."

She shook her head. "You aren't making sense."

He stalked forward, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. A deranged look filled his eyes. "I owe them money. Millions. The way I pay them back is to deliver you to the church. If you don't marry Bennet before the end of the month, half the money goes away. His fucking grandfather's stupid stipulation that he marry a woman who has her own career and can pay her own way is fucking ridiculous."

The mention of money had frozen her. Of course, it was all about money. Dean had done something stupid, and now she would be used to pay off his debt. It had always been a setup. Dean had used her to get Bennet's money. Then, when whatever market he'd invested in had crashed, he'd made a deal with Bennet's family.

God, she was a fool. How could she have fallen for this? Why hadn't she seen Bennet for the fraud he was from the first moment she'd met him. The man hadn't been interested in her. How did her dad think this would ever work?

"I won't marry him."

The slap across her face made her breath stall in her lungs. She gasped, trying to recover. "You will marry him. If you don't, I'll cut off one of your fingers until you agree."

She shrugged. "Fine."

Dean's face turned even deeper red. "That won't sway you. Fine, I'll cut off your mother's fingers. I'll torture her until you break. You will marry Bennet."

Ellis didn't know how she would get out of this. Trip didn't know where she was. Sure, she'd left messages, but she hadn't sent him her parents' address. How would he find her?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Trip was glad they were done for the day. The SEAL team had gone in, found the guy they needed, and gotten him out of the country. It was all very hush-hush, mainly because the man was second in command of a group who were causing trouble. The operation had to be very delicate, so no one was tipped off about who had abducted the guy.

Now the CIA, or whoever they'd delivered the man to, would get answers to questions. He'd done a few interrogations, but he was thankful he wasn't deeply involved in that part of the operation.

He checked his messages and saw that he had a message from Ellis. He listened as he made his way down the hall, worry filling him as he heard what she had to say.

Her mom was in the hospital, and she was driving to her parents' house just north of Los Angeles. He checked his phone. She hadn't left any other messages, but he had a text from Ginger asking if he'd heard from Ellis this evening. She was worried that Ellis hadn't given an update on her mom.

He thought about calling Ginger, but he didn't want to wake her kid, so he sent a text telling her that he'd just finished a meeting and had only received the one call.

His phone rang almost immediately. It was Ginger calling him.

"I'm worried," were the first words out of her mouth.

“Would she update you?”

“Yeah. We text a lot when we’re nervous. When Nick had a scan, and I was freaking out, I texted her every few minutes. Same with her when things get weird. Once she woke up after the attack and could text me, she sent a bunch of texts.”

“I remember that.”

“She would have texted me after she saw her mother,” Ginger said.

“Do you know which hospital?”

“No. She never said. I’ve called around to a few.”

“What is her parents’ address?”

“I’ll text it to you. Please find her. I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t think it’s good.”

“I will. And Ginger, thank you for texting me and saying that you were worried.”

“Sure. I’ll text if I hear anything.”

The call ended, and Trip looked up, realizing that his buddies were standing around him. They’d heard some of the conversation and knew something was up.

Rider spoke first. “What is going on?”

Trip ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Ellis called and said her mother was in the hospital. That message was left closer to three. There are no other messages, nothing else. She never sent any updates to me or her friend, Ginger. I

don't know what is going on.”

Bud pulled out his phone. “Which hospital.”

Trip shook his head. “I don't know. Ginger called around and couldn't find her.”

Zip shook his head. “Shit, we need to get on this.”

“Guys, I can't?—”

Rider's reply was fast. “Hush. We're helping you. Let's head to my place, it's closer and bigger. We'll search for information and figure out where Ellis is.”

Trip couldn't believe his buddies were willing to stay up and help after such a long day. It only took about fifteen minutes to get to Rider's place. In that time, Rider had sent a message to Tex, asking him if he could help. Trip appreciated any help they could get.

They took turns looking up information while a few of the guys slept. By six the next morning, he'd gotten two hours of sleep, and the rest of the guys had slept about three hours. They were rested and ready to head to Glendale. If they couldn't figure out which hospital was treating Ellis's mother, they would trace her path. One way or another, they would find Ellis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ellis couldn't believe this was happening. Her father had her try on a dress while being watched by two guards. They wouldn't even let her shower or go to the bathroom without someone watching her. She felt horribly violated.

As she'd laid in bed, she'd tried to come up with a way to escape. She hadn't found any opportunities to leave. She had to get away before they took off on a honeymoon. She'd been warned that she wouldn't make it home from the trip. Her dad said he wouldn't let her ruin this for him. He was willing to let her die just so he could get money.

From an early age, she'd known her dad wasn't a good person and didn't really care for her. But he was threatening to kill her for money, and that made her feel absolutely awful. How could he do this?

The door opened, and the object of her ire stepped in. It was impossible to think of him as her father without thinking terrible thoughts about him. The man had stopped caring for her, if he'd ever cared for her in the first place. Her mother was behind him with her eyes on the floor. She wouldn't get any help from here. Whatever little power Eloise had in their relationship wasn't enough to overcome Dean's anger at this point. He seemed desperate for money, and he would do anything to get it, even sacrifice her life.

She felt the need for information. "How did you get the marriage license?"

"I have a friend at the county clerk's office. They did me a favor."

She shook her head as disbelief poured through her. “Who will perform the ceremony?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that. We have everything covered.”

Anger filled her. “This won’t work. Someone will figure it out.”

He threw his head back, laughter spilling out. “No one cares about you enough to stop this marriage. It will work, and there is nothing you can do to stop it.”

She feared he was right. She didn’t know where they were going or who would be there, but she wouldn’t get free unless she fought to free herself. Dean was taking too many precautions and paying too many people to keep an eye on her.

“Time to go. You’ll be married in the hour, and then we’ll have our money.”

“When are you going to kill me?”

Her mom whimpered, and she wondered if Eloise knew exactly how deranged her husband was. Did she think Ellis would just go along with this fucked up plan and say nothing?

Perhaps there was some hope. If only her mother would finally stand up for herself. It would take a lot to get her mother to do anything, but maybe Dean threatening to kill her would be enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The drive slowed the closer they got to their destination. There were just too many people living in the area and not enough space on the road for all the cars. Frustration built, and he wanted to be able to just zip past everyone.

They still didn't know where Ellis's mother was being treated, or if she was even in the hospital. Trip had been calling Ellis's number every thirty minutes, and she hadn't answered. That made him really worry.

If this was all some big misunderstanding, he would apologize profusely. Something in his gut told him he wasn't wrong to worry.

When they had about twenty minutes left, Rider's phone rang. He answered over Bluetooth. "Rider here."

"It's Tex. I woke late, sorry. I've been researching information. I couldn't find anything about her mother being in any hospital, but I've got bad news."

"What?" Trip asked, his stomach so tight it felt like it was in knots.

"It looks like a marriage certificate was issued for Ellis yesterday, and it's not for Trip and Ellis."

Anger exploded, and he had to clench his fists tight. "What?"

"Tex, do you know where they are getting married?" Rider was asking the important

questions. They needed to know everything.

“I’m still looking. Most of those venues are booked out months in advance. It’s going to be somewhere small or unassuming. Or maybe a private club.”

Rider took the exit off the freeway. “We’ll start calling the private clubs.”

Trip grunted. “I’ll keep you updated and let you know if we find anything.”

“I’ll text if I find something. Stay safe,” Tex said.

“You know we will.”

The call ended, and Trip was close to exploding. “Shit, now we need to call more places.”

Q whipped out his phone. “I’ll pull up a list and have the guys in the other car call the bottom of the list. We’ll call the top half.”

Trip drew in a slow breath, trying to calm down. “Thank you.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Rider said.

Trip felt like they didn’t have much time. Something bad was going to happen, he could feel it.

Q gave him two places to call. Neither place had any weddings scheduled. He pulled up the map, looking at the area. He spied a church, and a memory hit.

“Ellis mentioned a church her parents were involved with. The name was...” he scanned the churches in the maps application, finding the place at the bottom of the

list. “Found it. I’ve mapped a route to the church. I’ll text the information to the gang so they know where we’re going.”

“Do you think this is it?”

“Yes. From what Ellis said, her parents have been going to that place for years. It’s the best lead we have. I should have thought about it earlier.”

“Let’s go.” Rider took the turn that would take them to the church.

Trip sent a text to Tex, telling him about the church. Maybe Tex could find something to help them. If not, at least Tex would know where they’d gone.

He hoped they arrived in time to stop whatever bad shit Dean had planned. Trip was beginning to suspect that the attack had been orchestrated by Dean. He couldn’t imagine being such a dick to a child. Hurting Ellis on purpose was low. Ellis was one of the kindest people he’d ever met. She was honest, gentle, passionate, and sweet, and didn’t deserve anything Dean threw at her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ellis couldn't believe the pastor of the church she'd attended in high school, the one where her parents had attended for years, was doing this. Surely, he could tell she wanted nothing to do with this charade.

Eloise wouldn't look at her. She wasn't sure what her mother thought of this, but her mom wouldn't go against Dean and step in. After the ceremony, she had to escape. There were no other options for her. Desperation clawed at her. Maybe she could make up something like needing to use the restroom, or maybe she could pass out.

Instead of her walking down the aisle, it had been Bennet coming in to stand across from her. He also wouldn't look at her. Was he being forced into doing this? He would get money, so how much pressure had been put on him? Maybe he was doing this willingly. She was so screwed.

"Let's get started." It was obvious Dean was directing this and that the men standing behind Ellis were there to force her to marry Bennet. How could the preacher go through with this charade?

She was about to say something when Dean came up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing hard. No question, there was no one here she could appeal to. She would be forced to go through with this farce.

Ellis looked over her shoulder at her mother, noticing that two men were flanking her. One of them had gardening sheers poking out of his suit jacket pocket. Dean would make Eloise pay if she rebelled. Could she cause her mother to lose a finger?

Yes! Eloise was okay with her death. She couldn't hold back. No one was coming to save her.

Ellis had never really fainted, not in a swooning, falling to the floor slowly sort of way. She'd seen it in movies, but those were fake. This had to be convincing.

The pastor was talking, droning on about the sanctities of marriage. She almost rolled her eyes. Instead of doing a normal eye roll, she let them roll up in the back of her head and let her knees go.

She felt her dad trying to hold her up, but she dropped, hoping she didn't hit her head on something that would hurt.

The slow fall may have been overdramatized, but she had to make it believable. She would claim lack of food, illness, the dress was too tight, or heat, but she had to stay down.

Luckily, her hair had fallen over her face, and no one could see her trying to fix a blank expression. Her mother was crying, but she couldn't look back. She had to keep pretending that she'd passed out.

Her biggest hope was the pastor would finally call this off and refuse to marry them. At least she would buy herself thirty minutes, maybe more. Once all the documents had been signed, it would be over for her.

Bennet was trying to get her up, but Dean's rough hands pulled her up, forcing her to sit.

"You'd better get up, or your mother is about to pay dearly."

Ellis couldn't have hated him more. She wanted to punch him or stab him or

something. She had no weapons and no way to hurt him. Her only defense had been not responding when he'd yanked her up. She kept acting like she'd passed out. It was the best way to keep her and Eloise safe.

Dean tried to pull her up, but she didn't move. "Get up."

"Dammit, she passed out. Give her a minute," Bennet said. She didn't like the man because he'd cheated and lied, but at least he was trying to help her.

Dean blew out a frustrated breath, and she wanted to laugh, but she held it in. "Fine. Get her some water, then we're doing this. You have to get married today."

She'd bought herself five minutes. It wasn't enough time to figure out what to do. She felt tears building. Desperation filled her. She wasn't going to survive. Dean would force the marriage, and then they would take her out to the Pacific and dump her.

Bennet helped her sit in a chair and was getting up to get water when the doors pushed open and people rushed in. Confusion erupted. Ellis dropped to the floor and rolled under the pew, then rolled under another one, trying to get as far from Dean as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Trip wasn't positive they had come to the right place until he entered, and the receptionist, an older woman with gray hair and two hearing aids, asked if they were with the wedding party. She started muttering something about how it was supposed to be small.

Q held up his hand, interrupting the woman. "Where?"

She lifted her thin age spot-covered hand, pointing down the hall. "Down there."

They took off, rushing down the hall to the double doors. Trip pushed through first, taking in the people. He spied Ellis's father, Dean, and knew he'd picked right. Ellis was nowhere to be seen, but that didn't stop him from advancing.

"Where is she?"

"Get out!" Dean roared. "Shoot them."

Rider was beside him, his piece raised and aimed at the closest man carrying. "You'd best not. You're outmanned and outgunned. You'll be dead on the floor before I take my next breath."

Trip saw the guys hesitate then raised their hands, backing away like they wanted no part of what was going on.

"Shoot them!" Her dad's histrionics were getting to Trip. Instead of telling him to be

quiet, Trip just walked up to him and punched him in the face, knocking him out.

Trip turned to the rest of the group. “Anyone else want to say anything?”

He heard someone off to his left, then saw a head pop up. It was Ellis. “I do.” But tears made her voice crack as she stood on shaky legs.

Trip stepped up on the first pew and made his way back to her, stepping on each pew until he was in the row with her.

“I’m here now, love.”

Her shoulders shook as she buried her face against his chest. He held onto her, thankful he had good friends who would stand up for him and help him when he needed. They’d spent the night working hard, and here they were in some church, rescuing his woman from her demented father.

The police were called. Ellis and her mother were both checked out by the EMTs. Eloise had bruises but nothing else. Physically, Ellis was fine, but she’d been through a lot.

When they were finally home, they both dropped into bed and slept until four the next morning. Thankfully Q drove Ellis’s car home, and she had no reason to ever go back to her parents’ house.

The police were able to connect the attack to Dean. Bennet spilled the beans about Dean’s motivations. Officer Mackay had sent a text, checking in after she heard from the police in Glendale.

Trip wanted to protect Ellis from it all, but he knew she would end up having to testify in the eventual trial. Ellis was the strongest woman he’d ever known. She may

be small in stature, and look ethereal like an elf, but she was a powerhouse. She could withstand a trial, and come out the other side on top.

They were sitting outside, coffee in hand as the sun was starting to slowly come up, turning the sky light grey.

“Thank you for finding me.”

He reached out and held her hand. “I want to give you something to wear that has a tracker in it. I know that may seem like I’m stalking you, and I’ll always tell you if I put a tracker on your car or in your purse or something so you can get rid of it if you ever feel unsafe, but I didn’t like not knowing where you were.”

She let go of a bark of laughter. “Sign me up. I don’t want to ever be in a situation like that again. Besides, I know you won’t stalk me. You’d be looking to make sure I was safe, not to take advantage of me.”

“I love you so much.”

She turned her gaze on him, her eyes moist with fresh tears. “I love you so much. I don’t want to wait to get married. I want to be yours.”

His lips curved up, and he set his coffee down before he dropped to one knee in front of her. “Ellis, you mean the world to me. Marry me this weekend. We can take a trip later to celebrate, but I want you to be mine.”

The light in her eyes said yes for her. He knew his woman well enough to see that all the love she had for him meant they would be together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ellis couldn't believe they were really doing this. It was near sunset on Saturday. He'd invited his team and a few other SEALs, and she had Ginger, Gloria, Remi, and a few other friends in attendance. One of his buddies, Peach, was doing the ceremony.

The sky was a beautiful shade of orange and purple. The ocean was calm for the Pacific, and the few families around them had older kids, so there was no screaming in the background.

Trip looked perfect. They'd opted for casual, and he was wearing a short-sleeve white shirt with thin tan stripes. She had on a yellow and blue dress. Neither of them wore shoes.

This wasn't the wedding she'd dreamt up as a teenager, but it was perfect. She was a little sad that her mother wasn't there, but then again she needed to break from her past. Dean was still in jail, but her mom was out on bond. She hoped her mother could figure out how to live away from Dean, because she was sure her dad would end up actually getting time.

The ceremony started, and Peach was a natural. She thought it wild that such a good-looking guy was a SEAL and not a movie star or model. To each his own. She was happy marrying Trip, and she was sure other photographers would think she was crazy tying herself down here. But she could work from anywhere and Trip loved her enough he didn't want her to stop working. They would figure everything out as they went along.

More important than her work was the man she was marrying. He wouldn't manipulate her or try to force her to fit his idea of who she was. With Trip, her life would only get better.

When Peach said they could kiss, Trip didn't just peck her on her lips. He bent her backwards in a huge dip. It took her breath away, just like Trip usually did. The feelings she had for this man were bigger than anything she'd ever felt before.

When he stood and they were facing their friends, tears flowed freely. She was in love, and Trip was her man. She could do anything with Trip's support. Her life was only getting better, and she thanked her lucky stars for moving here. If she'd picked another place, or stayed where she'd been, she never would have met this man, the best thing to have ever happened for her.

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Hop wasn't jealous of Trip. The man deserved to find the love of his life. Love wasn't in the cards for Hop. He'd tried and it had turned sour before the honeymoon was even half over. His ex had been sleeping around, betraying him every day and he hadn't even known. When he found out, it had crushed him.

He vowed to never get involved again. Sure, he picked up women at bars, but one time with a woman was enough. If a woman wanted a second date, he said no. He wasn't a dick about it, but being upfront was his way. When he met a woman, he would tell her straight up he wasn't into relationships. Some women didn't believe him, but he never broke the vow he'd made to himself once the divorce was finalized.

He'd stayed out late after Trip's wedding, making his way home close to four in the morning. His grandmother had passed away recently, leaving him her house that wasn't too far away from where most of the SEALs lived in Riverton. His sister had received a house in Texas, which wasn't too far from where she and her husband lived so it fit their needs.

Every day Hop lifted up a thanks to his grandmother for keeping both houses for them. Having a mortgage-free house made a huge difference in his life. He thought about getting a roommate since there was an extra bedroom, but on mornings like today, he liked having the place to himself.

Way too early his phone rang and he thought about letting it go to voicemail, but it was his sister. She'd saved his life after his not so lovely marriage, so he answered because he still owed her.

"What's up, Frizz?" His sister's name was Caroline, but she had brown curly hair that

went super frizzy in the humidity. She no longer got upset at the nickname, which made him love her even more.

“I need a favor. It’s big, and if you say no, that’s okay, but I’d owe you big time.”

Hop sat up, wiping his hand over his face. Frizz sounded serious, much more serious than she usually sounded. “What do you need?”

“Do you remember Vera?”

“No.”

“She was my roommate in college.”

“I don’t think I met her.”

“Yeah, you were deployed then.”

“What do you need from me? I stayed out late partying and I’d like to go back to sleep.” He could almost hear Frizz rolling her eyes as she sighed.

“This is a huge favor. She needs a place to stay, somewhere her ex can’t find her. A place he would never think to look. She works from home, so she doesn’t need to get a job out there, she just needs to lie low until he moves on to someone else.”

Hop swung his feet over the side of his bed and blew out a breath. “Really? This is the favor you call in? I mean, it’s huge, but I do owe you my life. Just a sec.” He put the phone on mute as he used the bathroom then brushed his teeth. He clicked off the mute button and sighed again. “Can you send me more details? She knows I’m not an option for a relationship, right?”

“She’s sworn off men. Also, you aren’t her type. She won’t be a bother. She’s an

excellent cook, and she likes to clean. It would be just a few months until he gives up and decides to pester someone else.”

“Jesus, Frizz. I guess it’s okay. Send me her information and I’ll call you later. But sure. As long as she isn’t some crazy stalker type herself.”

“She isn’t. She just made a bad choice when it came to guys. You know how that is.”

The reminder of his failed marriage hit him hard. “Ouch. You vouch for her?”

“Yes, dear brother. She was the good roommate who helped me get my spending and drinking under control.”

“Oh, that was Vera?”

“Yeah. Mom met her. She talked about her all the time.”

“Okay, if you trust her, I’ll trust you.”

“Thank you, Ben. You’re a lifesaver.”

He chuckled. “So are you.”

They were both quiet for a moment as the past washed over them. That night, he’d been so close to letting it all go, and Frizz had talked him into facing the future and choosing life. They’d been close growing up, having only their mom around had meant they had to pitch in more than their friends. After that night, they’d grown even closer. If Frizz trusted Vera, he would, too.

He ended the call and sighed, realizing he was up for the day. The house needed a deep clean, so he guessed that was next on his agenda. At least he had a place where Vera could stay, he just hoped he didn’t live to regret this act of kindness.