



Protecting His Future (Eagle's Nest Securities #4)

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Description: Chase Boyer has been in love once in his life, but a cruel twist of fate destroyed the future hed already built inside his young mind.

Since then, his focus has been on helping the innocent.

First with the Navy, and now, as part of Eagles Nest Securities.

Working alongside his former SEAL brothers, Chase and his team continue fighting the good fight.

Only now, its on their terms.

When that same work brings him face-to-face with his past, he realizes its actually the future hes been waiting for.

Scottlynn Scottie Cahill used to dream of being in the spotlight.

But a night of unexpected violence changes all that, and soon, she cant seem to get out of the public eye fast enough.

Starting over, Scottie decides to turn her experience into something good, and she becomes the new chef for Liberty Housea shelter for abused women in need of a safe haven of their own.

In a shocking turn of events, Scottie runs into Chase, her former high school sweetheart.

Before long, the love these two shared rekindles, and it seems as if theyll finally get the future theyve both thought to be lost.

But just as Scottie is faced with another surprising-and life-changing-event, a danger neither realized existed strikes out.

If Chase and his team cant find Scottie before its too late, he wont only lose the woman who owns his heart.

Hell lose a future he didnt even realize was within his grasp.

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PROLOGUE

Los Angeles, California

One year ago...

“Nice job tonight, Miss Cahill. That risotto you made looked out of this world.”

Scottie Cahill smiled at her studio-assigned bodyguard as the sweet man opened the car’s back passenger door. Six-four, late forties. Kind eyes and a body built like a prize fighter.

The former police officer-turned-bodyguard to the stars offered a sense of safety when she’d needed it most. Not that Scottie saw herself as a star. Far from it. She was simply a small-town girl trying to enjoy her ten minutes of fame.

Recent events, however, had taught her that life in front of a million-plus viewers wasn’t always what it was cracked up to be.

“Thanks, Mitch.” She stepped past the muscular man on her way into the awaiting vehicle. “I’m just glad the judges thought so, too. And I’ve told you a million times, you can call me Scottie.”

“And I told you, as long as I’m on the clock, I’ll address you with the respect you deserve. Now. As for as the judges go...are you kidding?” His deep voice held a hint of playful rasp. “I saw their faces when they sampled your dish. Even Chapman’s eyes lit up when he got his first taste.”

Scottie chuckled, recalling the panel and the toughest judge's reaction to her dish. "They did, didn't they?"

"Mark my words..." Mitch stood with his jacketed arm resting on the door's metal frame as she ducked into the car. "You're going to win this thing, lock, stock, and barrel."

"From your lips to God's ears."

She settled herself back against the flawless black leather, pretending not to notice the gun strapped to her bodyguard's right hip. If she noticed it—if she acknowledged its existence—she'd also be forced to acknowledge why Mitch had been hired in the first place.

And she was too damn tired to think about that.

Scottie waited until he shut the door beside her to release a tired breath. Who knew being a contestant on a live reality cooking show would take so much out of a person?

Your exhaustion is about more than just working your ass off to prove yourself to the judges...and you know it.

Her head fell back, resting against the cushioned seat. Looking out into the night through the window's tinted glass, Scottie watched the city of Los Angeles pass by in a blur.

It was the first time all day that she felt like she could truly relax. But when Scottie allowed the tension in her muscles to ease and her mind to accept the fact that she was safe, true exhaustion began to set in.

“Why don’t you close your eyes for a spell?” Mitch asked, his knowing gaze meeting hers from the rearview mirror. “This time of night, the traffic’s going to be brutal. It’s gonna be at least another thirty, forty-five minutes before we make it back to the hotel. I’ll wake you when we get there.”

“I appreciate that, Mitch.” She really did. “But if I take a cat nap now, I’ll be up half the night. So as much as I’d love nothing more than to fall blissfully asleep, I think I’ll wait until after I get back and take a ridiculously long, hot shower.”

A deep chuckle left the middle-aged man’s broad shoulders shaking behind the wheel. “You’re the boss, Miss Cahill.”

He reached down and turned on her favorite station.

Scottie smiled, resuming her previous task of staring blindly out the back passenger window. The next thing she knew, Mitch was waking her up to tell her they’d arrived back at the hotel...

“Sorry again for falling asleep on the ride here.” They approached her room. “I hope I didn’t snore.”

Her bodyguard’s lips curved into a grin. “Your secret is safe with me.”

She giggled, standing to the side so he could open the door. As per her newly implemented protocol, Scottie waited just inside the room as Mitch cleared the small suite to ensure it was safe to enter.

“Looks good.” He gave a friendly smile as he let his hand fall away from his holstered weapon. “You need anything before I go?”

Now that you mention it, would you mind standing outside my door all night while I

sleep? I'd really appreciate it.

"I'm good." She shook her head. "But thanks."

"Okay, then. Have a good rest of your night, Miss Cahill." His brown gaze softened. "Try to get some rest, yeah?"

Her heart warmed, knowing there was someone looking out for her. Even if it was a man she'd only known a few weeks who was only here because it was his job.

"Oh, don't worry," she assured him. "I'll be out the second my head hits the pillow." As long as the nameless, faceless monster stays out of my head, that is.

"Goodnight, Miss Cahill. And remember...you need anything, I'm right next door. All you have to do is call."

"Thanks, Mitch. I'll see you tomorrow."

As was their routine, she locked the door behind him the second it snicked shut. Turning around, Scottie blew out a breath, relieved the day had finally come to an end.

Only three more episodes left to go before the season finale. After the last few weeks, three felt like thirty. But she hadn't come this far to give up on her dream when it was almost within her reach.

You can do this, Scottie. Just three more weeks to go.

Three weeks, countless interviews, and who knows how many public appearances? But who was counting?

Pretending she wasn't, Scottie went to the bed and plopped herself onto its foot. She didn't bother to untie her sneakers before toeing them off her tired, aching feet.

The temptation to let herself fall back onto the plush mattress was profound. But the combinations of savory aromas from tonight's main dish—along with the other remaining contestants' entrees—reminded her a shower was a definite must.

With a groan, she pushed herself back onto her socked feet, padding heavily across the carpeted floor toward the room's provided dresser. Scottie quickly retrieved a clean pair of panties and her favorite pajamas, tossing them onto the bed as she passed before making her way to the bathroom.

Several long, glorious minutes later, she was clean, relaxed, and almost ready to fall under the Sandman's spell. Almost because she was still only dressed in the hotel's thick, white, monogrammed robe.

Scottie squeezed the remaining drops of water from her long, damp hair as her tired legs carried her back into the bedroom. She was so focused on the bed in front of her—and her desire to crawl beneath its covers—she didn't notice the man standing a few feet away, hiding in the shadows.

"I knew you'd win tonight."

Scottie yelped in surprise, every muscle in her body jumping at the sound of the unfamiliar male voice. She spun around on the balls of her bare feet, the movement so hurried that several strands of wet hair stuck to her cheek.

A man she'd never seen before stood less than ten feet away. Not super tall.

"W-Who are y?—"

“You know who I am, Scottie.” His voice was thick and slightly slurred. “It’s me. Dustin.”

The man said this as if it should mean something to her. But his uninvited introduction only meant that she needed to get Mitch...and fast.

“I don’t know who you are or how you got into my room, but you need to leave. Now, before I call the police.”

“The police?” Dustin continued, taking slow, methodical steps toward her. A look of confusion spread across his almost boyish face.

In a twisted dance of fear and pursuit, Scottie moved when he moved. Stepping backward as he brought himself closer.

“Don’t be afraid of me, Scottie.” The deranged man lifted his hands palms-up. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’d never hurt you. I...I love you.” He moved in closer. “Just like I said in all those letters and notes I sent to you. And the notes I left on your car and at that other hotel before they forced you to move here.”

They didn’t force me to do anything, asshole. All they did was try to keep me safe from you.

“Dustin, I know you think you love me, but you don’t.” Another step back. “You don’t even know me.”

His gaze became almost wild with an unsettling excitement.

“You’re wrong, Scottie.” Another step toward her. “I know all about you. Where you grew up. That your grandparents raised you after your mother died and then left you everything they had when they died, too. I also know no other man has ever been

good enough for you.”

He was wrong about that.

Once upon a time, there had been a man who was good enough for her. Too good, if she was being completely honest with herself.

Though it was a lifetime ago, Scottie had never forgotten about her high school sweetheart. The boy who'd taught her to see the positives in life when it seemed as if none existed.

Chase had been so funny and sweet. Smart and sexy. And to this day, she'd never seen eyes as piercingly blue as his.

Yep, for a minute there, Scottie had been stupid enough to believe she could have everything she wanted in life. Love. Marriage. Kids.

Happiness.

Then the realities of her decidedly uncharmed life had hit yet again, and she'd lost him. Just like she'd lost everything else that had been good in her world.

You're about to lose your entire damn life if you don't focus on getting past this guy and out of this room!

And just like that, Scottie's attention snapped back to the terrifying present. Back to the very imminent dilemma of what the hell she was going to do to get herself free.

How the hell, indeed?

She was in a standoff with her stalker, dressed in nothing but a robe, as she attempted

to keep a safe distance between them. So far, it was working. But the room was only so big, and Dustin Whoeverhewas was still standing between Scottie and her only means of escape.

You need anything, I'm right next door. All you have to do is call.

Her pulse spiked when she thought of Mitch, who was right there on the other side of the wall. She wanted nothing more than to call out to him. To scream that her stalker was here and she was in immediate danger.

But the hotel's landline on the nightstand behind her was out of her reach. And while the weight of her cell phone called out to her from the robe's left pocket, Scottie didn't think the maniac would be willing to wait while she made the lifesaving call.

You don't have to pull the phone out of your pocket to call, remember?

Hope flourished as she recalled what Mitch had shown her during his first night on the job. The former cop had been going over his own safety protocol when he showed her an alternative—and hopefully unnoticeable—way to call for help.

“We're meant to be together, Scottie.” Dustin inched closer. “You and me. We're finally free to pursue the life we've both been wanting. You can move into my place. It's not huge, but there's more than enough room for the two of us. We should get married right away, so that everyone can share in the celebration of our love! And as soon as you're ready, we can start trying for our first child. I'm hoping for a girl first. She'll have pretty blonde hair and green eyes, just like yours...”

Dear God. This man truly is certifiable.

While Dustin continued rambling on about things that were never, ever going to happen, Scottie pretended to listen, holding onto his gaze as if she hung on his every

word.

In reality, while the man who'd been terrorizing her for weeks stared back into her eyes, she was slowly sliding her left hand down into the robe's slightly gaping pocket.

Her throat worked with a nervous swallow as her fingers searched for the right button. The phone's slightly raised, circular lenses on the back let her know which way the device was facing.

Find the button on the left.

Thanks to Mitch's overbearing insistence, she'd practiced this exact scenario a handful of times. After moving from her previous hotel to this one, he'd gone over several different potentially dangerous scenarios. And then...he gave her detailed instructions on the best ways to make it out of each and every one unharmed.

Unharmed is good. Let's definitely go for unharmed.

Scottie found the button she needed on the phone's outer left edge. As Dustin went on pleading his case as to why she should leave this room with him and never look back, she pressed her finger to the button, holding it down as she spoke.

"Dustin, please. If you don't go now, I'll have no other choice but to... call Mitch. "

She made sure to emphasize those last two words, speaking a touch louder as she did with the hope her phone was listening and would follow the hidden command.

Dustin's expression dropped, shifting from excited to almost angry when he heard the other man's name fall from her lips.

“Who the hell is Mitch?”

“My bodyguard,” she answered truthfully. “And if you don’t leave my hotel room right now, I’m going to go to that phone behind me and call him. If that happens, you’ll be arrested and hauled off by the cops.” If he doesn’t beat your ass first, that is. “You don’t want to go to jail tonight, do you Dustin?”

“That’s not going to happen. You wanna know why?” He shook his head and smiled. The curve of his lips forming in a slow, almost sinister way as he slowly reached behind his back. “Because I won’t let it.”

When his hand came back into view, Scottie’s entire system locked down.

Oh, god!

“Dustin, why do you have a gun?” she spoke loudly, praying Mitch had picked up and could hear the conversation. Her eyes bounced back and forth between his unpredictable gaze and the black pistol held loosely in his fist.

A look of bemusement softened his unsettling expression. “Don’t worry, sweet Scottie. I’m not going to hurt you.” He took another step closer.

Like I’m about to believe a word this guy says.

In return, Scottie moved backward a few inches. Once. Twice. But when she tried the defensive move a third time, her bare heel struck the nightstand’s wooden base.

She was running out of room, and unless Mitch got here in the next few seconds...

I’m going to run out of time.

And since Mitch wasn't here yet, chances were good he wasn't coming at all. Which meant she'd have to find a way out of this frightening situation herself.

Think, Scottie. Think!

"Because you care about me." She went with the only plan to come to mind.

Dustin stopped mid-stride and nodded. "You finally understand."

"I do," Scottie lied. "I see it now."

"See what?"

"That we're meant to be together."

Just uttering the nauseating falsehood made her want to vomit all over the hotel's fancy carpet.

Excitement flourished across his ever-changing face. "That's right! We are meant to be together. That's what I've been trying to say! You and I...Scottie, we're?"

"Soulmates," she finished for him. "I know that, now."

"That's good, Scottie." Dustin's movements became slightly erratic as he switched gears to focus on the next step in his plan. "That's really good. So...you'll come with me, then?"

"Of course, I will, Dustin." She lied through her fake-as-hell smile. "But I should probably get dressed, don't you think?" Scottie looked down at her robe. "I mean, if I walk through the lobby looking like this, people are going to ask questions. And, I may be wrong in my assumption here, but I'm guessing you'd prefer we leave

without a bunch of attention being drawn to us.”

Something akin to admiration lit up the man’s widening gaze. “I knew it.” His lips curved even higher. “I knew you loved me, too! That’s why you’re worried about the people in the lobby, isn’t it? You don’t want them to keep us from finally reaching our dream of being together. You’re...” He moved a bit closer. “You’re trying to protect me.”

“No, Dustin.” She stepped forward that time, playing to his delusional psyche. “I’m trying to protect us both. I mean...” She swallowed hard. “Now that we’re finally together, it would be a shame to let anyone come between us...right?”

“You mean that?”

Not even a little bit, you freak.

“Of course, I do.” Scottie let the curve of her lips grow. “I...I was only trying to push you away before because I know that’s what everyone else expects me to do. But?—”

“They don’t matter.” Dustin shook his head excitedly. “No one else matters but the two of us.”

“I know that, now.” She inched closer. “So I’ll change clothes, put a bag together with a few of my things, and then you and I can finally start that amazing life you just described.”

“You don’t need a bag. In fact, you don’t need anything at all. Because I already have everything you need waiting for you at home.”

Dear God.

With her heart feeling like it would leap straight out of her chest, she approached the man with the gun. Luckily, he was still holding it down, letting it hang loosely at his side. And—so far—he hadn't made a move to point it in her direction.

“Great.” Scottie steadied her breathing and schooled her expression. “That’s...really great. Just give me like...two minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.”

Taking a huge risk, she began moving in small, slow steps toward the bathroom door behind where Dustin stood. His spine stiffened at first, sending her heartbeat skyrocketing into an even more frantic rhythm.

But when she flashed him the most affectionate look she could muster, the man who'd been terrorizing her for weeks relaxed. His expression that of an almost timid and bashful man.

Timid, my ass.

Scottie held her breath as she passed by her stalker, her smile falling flat the second her face was no longer within his view. If she could get to the bathroom, she could lock herself inside, call the police.

A door isn't going to stop a bullet.

True, Dustin could shoot his way in, if it came to that. But Scottie was already half-way there. If she called nine-one-one the second she shut the door, she could—hopefully—buy herself enough time for the cops to show up and put the psycho in cuffs.

“Scottie?”

She closed her eyes as her steps came to a stop. Looking over her shoulder, she found

him staring straight at her. A look of pure joy lighting up the man's entire face.

"I'm going to make you happy, you know." It wasn't a question. "I'll make you so happy, you won't ever want to leave."

"Can't wait." She forced the words to come.

A heartbeat later, all hell began to break loose.

Everything happened at once, and Scottie was so taken off guard by it all, she never had the chance to even try to react.

The door to her hotel room burst open. Mitch appeared suddenly. He held his gun steady, the deadly weapon up and ready to shoot. But by the time she realized what was going on, Dustin had already made his move.

A burning pain twisted in Scottie's upper arm as Dustin gave her a rough pull.

Crying out, she stumbled over her bare feet as she was yanked against her attacker's body. Her back flush with his front.

"Let her go!" Mitch roared, his deep voice booming off the room's thin walls.

Rather than follow her bodyguard's orders, Dustin wrapped one arm tightly around her neck while using his other to lift the gun to the side of her head.

"Take another step, and I'll kill her!"

"No, you won't." Mitch shook his head. "You kill her, and you lose the only thing that matters to you."

Somewhere in the back of her fearful mind, Scottie noticed Mitch was dressed in nothing but a pair of jeans. Water droplets balanced on the exposed skin of the man's forehead and broad shoulders, and his hair was damp, as if he'd come straight here from the shower.

"P-Please," she begged both men simultaneously.

She wasn't sure which she was pleading for most. Dustin to put down his weapon and let her go...or Mitch to figure out a way to get her away from the maniac using her as a human shield.

"Tell him, Scottie!" Dustin's panicked voice tore through the room. "Tell him what you said about the two of us leaving here together."

"He's right!" She eyed Mitch closely while praying he could read the true message she was trying to convey. "I-I was just about to get dressed and...put some things...together."

The pressure being placed against her throat made speaking a struggle.

"And then what?" Her attacker demanded. "Tell him, Scottie. Tell him what happens next!"

With careful speech and a steady tone, Scottie relayed Dustin's twisted plan for her to the man who'd been hired to keep her safe.

"A-And then Dustin is going to take me to his home."

She pleaded silently with her eyes for Mitch to never let that happen.

"Our home, Scottie," Dustin corrected. "Remember? It's ours, now."

“R-Right.” She nodded as best she could despite the tear that had just fallen down her cheek. “Ours. You’re absolutely right...d-darling.”

Bile rushed to the base of her throat as she choked out the insincere endearment. This couldn’t be all there was. This couldn’t be how she died .

Please, God. Don’t let this be the end.

There was still so much left undone. Countless things she’d wanted to do with her life.

So many things left unsaid.

A face appeared in her frightened mind’s eye. Handsome. Smiling. A face that brought with it a sense of peace and safety unlike any other she’d ever known.

It was a ghost from her past, but one Scottie dreamed of often. Because that handsome, smiling face...it belonged to the only person to truly make Scottie’s heart feel whole. And now?—

The gun’s barrel pulled away from her temple.

“See?” Dustin taunted Mitch. “Told you she loved me. So why don’t you run along now and let us be?”

The lunatic was suddenly acting so casual. As if he were speaking to a used car salesman, rather than a former cop with a gun pointed at his heart.

“Is that really what you want, Scottie?” Mitch’s blue gaze turned her way.

Her expression turned incredulous as she met his stoic gaze. Did he seriously just ask

if she wanted to leave with this deranged man?

Uh...hell no, that's not what I ? —

She spotted something in Mitch's dark eyes. A glimmer so slight she almost missed it.

Her bodyguard was doing his damndest to relay a message of his own, and Scottie prayed she hadn't misunderstood.

Playing along with what she hoped like hell was the plan, she gave the man she'd entrusted with her life a shaky nod and lied.

"Y-Yes." Scottie swallowed past the fear still consuming her body's every cell. "That's exactly what I want."

After a moment's hesitation, Mitch dipped his chin and began walking backward toward the door. Wait...he was leaving?

No!

Oh, God! Did she get it all wrong? Did Mitch really believe she wanted to be with the maniac holding her against her will...at freaking gunpoint? Surely he wouldn't...

Mitch brought his stare to her once more, and it was only then that she realized his true intent. He wasn't leaving her. Not really. He just needed Dustin to think he was.

Play along, Scottie. Keep. Playing. Along.

"Th-Thank you," Scottie offered softly as the retreating man reached the door leading to the hallway.

Her captor probably assumed she was thanking Mitch for leaving when, in reality, Scottie had just thanked him for whatever he was about to do next.

“No problem.” Mitch reached back and pushed the metal handle downward. Inching the door open, he slid his gaze to Dustin before bringing it back to her. “Have a wonderful life, Scottie,” her bodyguard wished her well.

A smile that appeared genuine lifted the corners of his lips.

“You, too, Mitch.” She gave the man her own watery smile in return.

A second later, Scottie watched in horror as her only means of protection disappeared out into the hall.

With her heart in her throat, she pulled upon every ounce of inner strength she had not to break down into a puddle of tears and sobs. Instead, she managed to stay in character while giving Dustin’s forearm a gentle pat.

“He’s gone, Dustin.” Her voice remained soft, her tone unthreatening. “Y-You can let me go now.”

Overwhelming relief blanketed her when he lifted his arm away from her neck.

“I’ll never let you go, sweet Scottie.” The man’s claim contradicted his most recent act. “But yes, you should get dressed. And hurry. Just in case your worthless bodyguard decides to change his mind and come back.”

That’s exactly what I’m counting on, you sick son of a bitch.

Knowing her situation was still far too volatile to risk exposing her true intentions to escape, Scottie forced herself to take a single step forward. Then another. And

another.

By the time she'd almost reached the bathroom door, the fear that Mitch had misunderstood what she'd really wanted him to do was so great it was all she could do not to give into the overwhelming despair. But then?—

“Scottie, get down!”

Mitch's imposing form appeared suddenly in the doorway. Without question, Scottie dropped down to the floor, her arms flying over her head in an attempt to protect herself as she curled into a tiny ball.

Two gunshots blasted through the tense air, the deafening sounds so close together they were nearly succinct. Half a heartbeat later, she heard the dull thud of two bodies hitting the carpet. First one. Then the other.

Scottie's head flew up, her eyes frantically scanning the terrifying scene. She gasped with shock when she saw both Dustin and Mitch lying motionless on the floor. Their eyes were closed, and both men were bleeding from their chests.

A terrified scream filled the entire room, and it took her a moment to realize it was coming from her. The screaming stopped, and though shock ran rampant throughout her entire system, she had enough wherewithal to grab Dustin's discarded weapon from the carpet nearby before rushing to Mitch's side.

“Mitch!” She fell to her knees beside him, her attention split between her attacker and her savior as she slapped her palms against the fresh wound in his shoulder. “Oh, God! You've been shot!” she blurted out the obvious.

Scottie wasn't sure if Dustin was still alive, but another quick glance his way confirmed he still wasn't moving. So she had to at least try to help Mitch while she

still could.

Mitch's eyes fluttered open, pain filling his unfocused gaze. His lips parted, the man's strained voice like music to her ears.

"Nothing...v-vital." He spoke through a set of clenched teeth. "Pretty sure...bullet went...clean...th-through."

Tears flooded her vision, distorting the man's fallen image as his warm, sticky blood coated her fingers. "Oh, thank God!" Her chin quivered as she sent up a real, silent prayer of thanks.

"Need to...call...the cops." Mitch instructed as he attempted to push himself into a seated position.

The door to her room flew open for the third time, and just like that, two security guards were there.

"I don't think we have to worry about that," a very relieved Scottie told the wounded man.

Within seconds, the entire hallway was filled with people. Guests and hotel staff alike had all rushed to the scene to see what had happened.

Chaos ensued as they stood in and around the propped-open doorway while staff rushed to where she and Mitch remained. The guests standing around outside—and even a couple of the hotel staff—had their phones in their hands, their cameras recording her every move.

And as Scottie lowered Dustin's weapon, which was still clutched tightly in her hand, she realized...

I never want to be in the spotlight again.

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Present Day...

“Where do you want this stuff, Boss?” Chase Boyer adjusted the box in his arms as he spotted the woman in charge.

Natalie Hayes turned and looked his way. “Chase! You made it!”

The petite brunette smiled wide as she abandoned the donated items on the table before her and began walking toward him. Dressed in dark jeans and a forest green, long-sleeve maternity shirt, her noticeable baby bump was as adorable as the woman herself.

“Said I’d be here, didn’t I?” he quipped without any real heat. Small bits of displaced gravel crunched beneath the rubber soles of his boots as he crossed the last stretch of the shelter’s asphalt parking lot.

“You did.”

“So...what?” Chase challenged playfully. “You suddenly don’t trust that I’m a man of my word?”

“I trust your word as much as I always have.” Natalie led him over to the table where she’d been working. “It’s your track record of sleeping through your alarm when it’s set for something non-work related that had me second-guessing your appearance.”

He set the box down in the nearest available spot. His lips parted, and he was just about to come back with the perfect one-liner when they both heard?—

“Don’t even try denying it because we both know it’s true.”

Chase swung his gaze around just as Logan Hayes—Natalie’s husband and Chase’s team leader—sidled up to his wife. With a hand resting low on her back, the former Navy SEAL leaned in and planted a quick kiss on Nat’s cheek.

Solid build. Short brown hair. Blue-green eyes with nothing but love and admiration for the woman next to him. Unless, of course, they were focused on one of their team’s targets. In those instances, those loving eyes quickly turned as deadly as any Chase had ever seen.

Taking the other man’s advice, Chase didn’t bother trying to defend himself against the couple’s claims that dragging his ass out of bed was an occasional struggle. No reason to, really. Mainly because he did have a propensity to ignore his alarm when work wasn’t on the line.

But for this...

“While I may enjoy the intermittent lazy Saturday morning”— Guilty as charged —“I also know how important this place is to you.” Chase gave his glowing, pregnant friend a solemn look as he added, “Which means it’s important to me.”

“Well, thank you.” Natalie tilted her head in return. “And you’re right. Liberty House is important. This shelter has already given several of our clients a tremendous amount of support and guidance. Truth be told, the help this place offered to those women...and so many others...has been nothing short of amazing. That’s why, when Sloane told me about their first annual Fund and Food Drive, I didn’t hesitate to offer my assistance.”

“And by yours, what you really meant was ours ,” Chase teased.

“Of course, that’s what I meant.” Natalie blinked, her expression as flat and unmoving as he’d ever seen it. She held the look steady a few more seconds and then...ever-so-slowly...the little sister Chase never had curved her lips into a shit-eating, Cheshire grin. “But seriously.” That same smile instantly turned genuine. “I really do appreciate your donations and your time. And I know Sloane and the women who come here looking for help will, too. So, thank you.”

Sloane Richardson was the shelter’s sole operating manager...and a new asset to Chase’s private security team.

“No thanks needed, Nat.” He flashed her a crooked grin.

From behind his dark, polarized lenses, Chase studied the three-story brick building before him. Based on what Natalie had previously shared with him and his team, the structure had been built two decades earlier by a real estate developer with the plan to rent it out as “high-end” office space. Eighteen months ago, however, that same owner filed for bankruptcy.

Enter Sloane Richardson.

The big-hearted—and determined—woman convinced the non-profit agency she worked for to buy the property. After a few months of hard work and tireless fundraising efforts, Sloane and her people turned the empty space into the beacon of hope it is today.

A safe haven for many, Liberty House had quickly become one of Seattle’s most well-known and trusted women’s shelters. And Natalie was right. The woman in charge of it all was someone he and his teammates both respected and admired.

“How’s it going out here?” Logan asked his wife as he studied the donated items already neatly spread out atop the tables. The man’s hand lifted lovingly to Natalie’s growing belly, which prompted her to cover it with one of her own.

“Great! I just have a few more boxes to sort through, including the one Chase just brought.” She motioned to the large cardboard box filled with donations Chase had picked up from various businesses on his way to the shelter. “I still can’t believe the number of local businesses that agreed to donate. Especially with the shelter still being relatively new.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Logan wrapped an arm around his expectant wife’s shoulders and pulled her close to his side. “You’re a hard woman to say no to. Trust me.” He kissed her temple. “I know.”

Natalie’s soft chuckle fluttered into the air as Chase’s lips twitched with the urge to do the same. Damn, he loved these two. He loved even more that, after years of avoiding the obvious, they’d finally figured out they belonged together.

Now, after nearly losing Natalie to the hands of some ruthless assholes who cared more about money than an innocent woman’s life, she and Logan were happily married and expecting their first child.

Must be nice.

Chase’s lips no longer twitched, and his eyes were doing some sort of super-fast blinking shit. But who could blame him? Hell, he was barely thirty. What business did he have being jealous of his friends’ domestic bliss?

None. That’s what. So knock that ridiculous notion away.

He blinked again, more than willing to take his own advice. Did he hope to someday

meet the woman of his dreams and build a life like the one Logan and Nat were well on their way to achieving? Sure. But until such time, Chase planned to do what he did best.

Live life to its fucking fullest.

But even as the silent motto rolled through his mind, another thought struck. It was as unexpected as the momentary wave of jealousy he'd felt seconds before. Unexpected and...unsettling.

A life without someone to share it with seems pretty damn empty, if you ask me.

Well, he hadn't asked. Not himself or anyone else. And damn it, where was all this coming from, anyway? Chase was perfectly happy with the life he was currently leading.

He'd served his country with all the honor, loyalty, and dedication Uncle Sam could ask of him. He had a kickass job working private security with his former Navy SEAL brothers. His apartment rocked, he had a sweet ass ride, and he could go wherever and do whatever the hell he wanted.

Not a chance married life was better than that. None. Zilch. Zippo.

Back in check, Chase stood awkwardly to the side, watching as Logan leaned down and whispered something in Natalie's ear. Whatever the man said had not only made his wife giggle like a schoolgirl...it also made her blush.

You may want to check those odds again, Boyer. 'Cause those two sure seem a lot happier now than they did when they were still single.

"So." Chase clapped his hands together loudly with a smile. "I'm here, and I've got

two good hands, so you might as well put me to work.”

Please, for the love of God, give me something else to focus on besides a future I’m not even sure I really want.

Thankfully, Natalie came through for him. Just like always.

“I’m almost finished here, but you might check with Sloane,” the sweet woman offered. “The last time I saw her she was headed inside to talk to the shelter’s chef about something related to tonight’s dinner.”

Shit. I forgot about tonight.

A long, deep groan of dread did its damndest to escape. There were very few things in life Chase truly hated. One of those was wearing a tux. But, since he loved Nat like a sister, he kept himself in check and his expression carefully schooled.

“Kitchen, it is.” He side-stepped Logan and began walking in that direction. He stopped mid-stride when Natalie hollered after him.

“Wait! Do you remember where it is?”

He’d been here once before, back when he and his team had been working a related case. It had been a few months, but he was fairly certain he remembered the building’s layout.

Refrigerator. Stove. Sink. How hard can it be?

“It’s a kitchen, Nat.” Chase shot her a quick smirk from over his shoulder. “Pretty sure I’ll know it when I see it.”

He was also pretty sure Logan had just called him a smartass, but the guy's muttered comment was low, and Chase was still walking away. It was all good, though.

He was a smartass.

Reaching the building's side entrance, Chase opened the steel security door and stepped inside. From what he knew of the place, the shelter's exterior doors were typically kept locked at all times. An added level of security for the building's occupants.

Today was a rare exception.

That wasn't to say the property had been left in a fully vulnerable state. A black wrought-iron fence surrounded the entire perimeter, and entering through the gate required a personalized code.

If an employee or volunteer made it into the parking lot and up to the building's main entrance, they still had to punch in their code again to enter the building from the door around back.

All visitors went through the building's front entrance and were buzzed in only after prior approval from Sloane.

Protecting those inside these walls was Liberty House's number one priority. That was abundantly clear. So far, from what Chase had seen, Sloane and her people were doing a damn fine job.

He paused a moment to get his bearings. If memory served him correctly, the hallway he'd just stepped into would lead him to the building's main entrance. From there, all he'd have to do is take a right at the elevators, and voila!

His booted feet began to move once more, carrying him further down the hall. A low hum of conversation traveled through the air, and Chase was only feet away from reaching the end when a large man suddenly appeared.

Tall. Built. Tatted arms, short, salt-and-pepper hair, and a matching beard. The well-trimmed facial hair covered a noticeably square jaw, and the man's holstered gun looked ready for action.

Ah, the Marine.

"Who the hell are you?" The other man stopped dead in his tracks, effectively blocking Chase's path. Crossing his arms, a set of massive biceps threatened to rip straight through the guy's short sleeves.

"Chase Boyer." He offered his hand in a friendly gesture. "I'm with Eagle's Nest Securities. You must be Hank. I heard Sloane hired a Marine to keep an eye on the place. I'm gonna take a wild guess—That's you?"

A steely blue gaze fell onto his hand, but good ol' Hank—or whoever he was—made no move to take it. Instead, those suspicious eyes lifted back up to Chase's as the guy asked, "You got some ID?"

Thorough and untrusting. Both awesome qualities to have in a bodyguard.

"Sure." Chase dipped his chin with a nod.

Unlike the legally concealed pistol he never left home without, the other man wore his loud and proud, right there on his hip. Given the shelter's policy of no weapons, only two possibilities seemed plausible...

Either the guy was, in fact, the new day guard Nat had previously informed him about

or he was here with nefarious intent.

Since the shirt he wore possessed the shelter's logo—and the two women who'd just walked behind the man didn't so much as flinch—Chase deduced the armed dude was most likely the former. Even so, he kept the deadly weapon in mind while purposely keeping his movements slow and careful.

Raising his left palm up—and keeping that hand right where Maybe Hank could see it—Chase made a wide, slow swing with his other as he reached in his back pocket for his wallet. Once the folded leather contraption was free, he opened its flaps and pulled out his driver's license and business card.

“See?” He held them out for Maybe Hank to check. “I'm with Eagle's Nest Securities. And if you still need more in the way of confirmation, you can check with Sloane. I have no doubt she'll vouch for me.”

A deep grunt preceded Chase being handed back his things. It wasn't until after he'd returned the ID and card to his wallet that the wall of muscle finally relaxed.

“Hank Farmer.” He held out a large, meaty hand.

“Good to meet you, Hank.” Chase shook the guy's hand.

“Sorry about that.” The man's deep voice rumbled. “You never can be too careful. Especially with the kinds of assholes these women have had to deal with.”

“No apology necessary. It's good to know they have someone like you watching out for them.”

Hank released Chase's hand, letting both of his fall loosely at his sides. “You helping with the auction, or are you here on official business?”

“Auction.” He grinned. “I’m looking for Sloane. Have you seen her?”

“Kitchen, I think. At least, that’s where she was a couple of minutes ago.”

“Great. Thanks.” Chase took a step forward, unsurprised, when Hank shifted his massive form out of the way so he could pass.

The hallway opened up to a spacious lobby designed with the women who came through its doors in mind. Light gray walls. Soft pinks, peaches, blues, and greens. Furniture that looked warm and inviting had been arranged around the large space, offering several places for the residents to relax and converse.

A few indoor trees had been placed throughout. One in each of the two corners near the building’s front windows, and two near the building’s central elevators to Chase’s left. Simple yet classy flower arrangements adorned the accent tables scattered throughout, and several pieces of tasteful artwork hung from the walls.

Even the reception desk was more welcoming than most he’d seen. The way it curved into a slight S shape offered those who approached a clear view of the friendly faces greeting them from the other side.

The modern-yet-comfy space was a bustle of activity with women moving this way and that. Their steps were quick and purposeful, some looking his way as they moved.

No, scratch that. Every woman who spotted him looked his way. Each possessed the same sort of haunted, guarded gaze that twisted Chase’s gut into knots.

He’d expect them to be cautious around a man they didn’t know. Especially when, other than those hired to protect them, men were not allowed inside the shelter. Good for them.

And lucky for you, Hank just gave the women a wave and a nod to let them know you aren't a threat.

Having caught the other man's supportive gesture from the corner of his eye, Chase turned his head, giving Hank a wave of his own. He needed to let the guy know he both saw and appreciated his help. Because, again, the sense of safety these women desperately needed at this juncture in their lives—in this, of all places—was of the utmost importance.

A sense of familiarity struck as Chase continued through the lobby, and before conscious thought struck, his legs were carrying him to the set of doors ten feet back and to the left of the elevators.

Bingo.

He'd been in the shelter's kitchen one other time. It was a case involving a woman who came to his firm looking for protection. Her husband, the bastard, was an abusive prick with lots of rich asshole friends. And as it went with so many aspects in life, money talked.

The son of a bitch had all kinds of snakes slithering around in his pockets. Cops. Lawyers. Judges. In the end, Chase and his team were able to obtain enough evidence to help put the dickhead away.

In the interim, however, his wife had stayed here. At Liberty House. And that first night...

I walked into this very kitchen—with permission from the lady in charge—and made the battered woman a cup of hot tea.

He opened the door on the right and immediately became enveloped in an array of

delicious-smelling aromas. Sweet. Savory. A touch of spice, if his nose wasn't mistaken.

Hunger hadn't been in his thoughts until that very moment, but now...

Chase slapped a hand to his abs in an effort to diminish the sudden and incessant growling brought on by the tastebud-tempting scents. Sizzling sounds pulled his attention toward the massive commercial-grade gas stove covering half of the back wall.

Steam billowed up from some pots and pans covering a few of the burners.

He was still standing there, holding his midsection while he scanned the large space for Sloane when he heard a voice from somewhere he couldn't see.

"If you're here to pick up the first load of food, the boxes are marked and in the fridge."

Warm. Feminine. Confident. A touch of rasp that reminded him of another time.

Another woman.

He turned his head toward the section of the room where the intriguing voice had originated. Sounds of stainless-steel cookware being moved around helped in his search for the person who'd just spoken.

"I'm, uh...I'm actually looking for?—"

"The chocolate tart truffles, cheesecake bites, crudité platters, and Boston Cream pie puffs are ready to go. They're in the walk-in cooler on your right."

His gaze slid to the right. Sure enough, there was a giant metal door with an air-tight seal. Good to know...if he'd come for the food.

"I'm not here for a pick-up," he informed the invisible woman. "I'm trying to find Sloane Richardson. I was told she might be in here. You know where I can find her?"

"Oh! Sorry." More clanging ensued. "I thought you were the volunteer here to pick up the first round of deliveries for tonight's gala."

A flash of long, sandy blonde hair caught his attention as the woman popped up from behind the room's massive center island. Her back was to him, so he couldn't see her face, and most of her body was shielded by the many pots and pans hanging from above. "Sloane was just in here a minute ago, but she mentioned having to make a last-minute run to the store. Is there something I can help you with?"

The woman turned around, her words falling off as fast and hard as Chase's jaw dropped.

Holy shit. Is it really her?

In another life, Scottlynn Cahill was Chase's high school sweetheart. In this one, she was his greatest regret.

The last time he was in a room with her, she'd been a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl. She'd worn glasses back then and had long, thick waves that had fallen all the way down to her waist. Her body had been smokin' hot, or so he'd thought.

Fast forward to today, and Scottie was all grown up.

Her hair was half-up beneath an adorable as fuck chef's hat. The glasses he remembered were gone, and there was a smudge of what he assumed to be flour

across one of her flawless cheeks. Her body was hidden behind a long white apron.

But even with that, the jeans, and her white t-shirt, Chase could tell she'd filled out quite nicely over the years. In fact, from where he stood, she'd grown into the most beautiful woman he'd ever lain eyes on.

"Chase?" She reached up and removed the hat from her head. A few strands pulled free from the tight, neat bun there as she stared back at him with a look of utter surprise.

"Scottie?" He couldn't believe his eyes.

She dropped the hat onto the stainless steel island and practically ran to where he stood. They both started talking at the exact same time.

"What are you?—"

"Oh, my god!" Scottie threw herself into his welcoming arms. "I can't believe it's really you!"

Chase wrapped his arms around her petite form and pulled her body flush with his. His lids fell shut, and he savored the moment. It had been fourteen years since they'd said their goodbyes. Nearly a decade and a half since his heart had been silently shattered.

He'd kept the pain well hidden in the days and months that had followed. From her. From the rest of the world.

But deep, deep inside—in a place no one since Scottie had ever been allowed to reach—slivers of the heartache he'd experienced from losing her still lingered.

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Ho...ly...shit!

Chase Boyer was here. In the flesh. Very warm, very muscular flesh. Aaaand...she was still holding onto him as if she never wanted to let go.

I don't.

But she did it anyway. Scottie forced herself to pull away from Chase's warm embrace. Stunned by how familiar it felt—how familiar he felt. Even after all this time.

“Wha...what in the world are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

Oh, that voice.

Deeper. All grown-up and manly. And the way it had rumbled just then...

When Chase pulled back a bit and smiled down at her, Scottie's heart did a sort of weird flip thing inside her chest. It took her a moment to realize she'd felt that exact same sensation before. It had been years, but she recognized it for what it was.

It was the same reaction her body had the first time Chase Boyer flashed his panty-dropping smile her way. Only now, that smile of his looked even better than before.

How is that even possible?

To make matters worse, from where she was standing, the whole package had been given a tall, rugged, sexy-as-sin upgrade. Complete with hair that was a bit too long on top, well-trimmed facial hair to match, and a fit and muscular form that was proof Chase was one hundred percent man.

“So?” That rumble of his accompanied a prodding look. “What brought you to Liberty House?” The inquisitive words had no more fallen from his lips when those incredible blue eyes of his—his whole handsome face, really—grew hard as steel. “Ah, hell, Scottie. So help me, if someone hurt you...”

They did hurt me. Just not in the way you’re thinking.

“I’m not a resident of the shelter, Chase.” She finally found her voice again. “I...work here. I’m the new head chef.”

There went that smile of his, growing even bigger than before. Scottie’s lower belly tingled, and she was pretty sure her toes just curled inside her sneakered feet.

“No kidding? Since when?”

“Um...I guess it’s been a little over two months, now.”

Time sure flies when you’re completely rebuilding your life.

“So you live here. In Seattle.”

Not a question. More like a statement of clarification.

“I do,” Scottie confirmed. “I moved to the city three months ago and started working

here shortly after.”

Chase’s entire too-damn-hot-for-his-own-good face seemed to light up at the unexpected news. “I moved here a little over a year ago.”

Scottie’s heart didn’t just flip then. It soared.

You both live in the same city for the first time in fourteen years. Maybe, if you play your cards right, this could turn into more than a simple one-off chance encounter.

Scottie nearly laughed at the unsolicited thought. Running into Chase like this was great. More than great, really. But Seattle was a damn big city, so their little impromptu reunion wasn’t guaranteed to lead to anything other than this moment right here.

Sure, there was a part of her—a big, big part, if she was being perfectly honest with herself—that still fantasized about what life would have been like if she hadn’t been forced to leave him behind all those years ago. Would they have stayed together through graduation? Gotten married? Had kids?

Unfortunately for Scottie, that ship set sail when she was sixteen years old. And as far as she was concerned, it was still out there somewhere...perpetually lost at sea.

Kind of like me.

Speaking of being lost...

“You can’t be back here.” The blurted comment came out harsher than she’d intended. When Chase blinked with confusion, Scottie quickly offered a rushed explanation. “Sorry. What I meant to say was that my boss doesn’t allow men inside the shelter. Other than the guards she’s personally hired, of course.”

“Like Hank?”

It was her turn to blink. “You know Hank?”

“Know is a subjective term.” He smirked. “We just met on my way in here. But I do know Sloane Richardson.”

“You know Sloane?” Another adorable frown. “How?”

“Through the private security company I work for. We’ve sent a few clients Sloane’s way since we first opened last year. And, in the spirit of keeping our working relationship with my firm and the shelter going strong, my team’s working tonight’s fundraising event.”

“Private security?” Scottie stared up into those seas of blues. “You left the Navy?”

“More like the Navy left me.”

The man’s muttered words left her frowning once again. “What do you mean, the Navy left?—”

“Nothing.” He brushed the comment away. “I’m just being a smartass.”

“I guess some things never change.”

“Guess not.” His broad shoulders shook with a low chuckle that took her back to the best time of her life. “But seriously, working for Eagle’s Nest Securities...” A soft huff escaped past his lips. “It’s so much better than being under Uncle Sam’s thumb. Plus, I still get to work side by side with the same group of guys as when we were still SEALs, so at least there’s that.”

“Oh, wow. Sloane told me the Eagle’s Nest guys were former SEALs. She never mentioned you all served together, too. That’s pretty cool, you and your friends still being able to work alongside each other.”

Just like the man himself, Chase’s smile was one hundred percent genuine. “It is.” He nodded. “Almost as cool as running into you again after all this time.”

Scottie held his gaze as it darkened with an unmistakable blaze. It was the same way he used to look at her back when they were dating. A look that revealed exactly what the man wanted.

It’s me. He wants...me.

Wrong. He’d wanted her. Past tense.

Very, very past tense.

It had been...what? Fourteen years since they’d seen each other? The man was probably married with five kids by now.

In a subconscious move, Scottie’s gaze was pulled to Chase’s left hand. Hope she had no business feeling seeped into her soul when she found his ring finger void of any jewelry.

No ring doesn’t necessarily mean no wife.

It also didn’t mean Chase wasn’t seeing someone on the regular. Not that it should matter to her one way or the other. Because it didn’t.

Not anymore.

They'd been kids when she'd left him standing in the rain with nothing more than a final kiss and a heartbreaking goodbye. It had been a different time. A different life. And now...

"So...private security, huh?" She began the conversation again. "Sloane talks about you guys a lot."

"Sure hope what she's shared was positive."

"And if it's not?" She played along with his little game because...God, she'd missed him.

"Then I'd say, your boss was either referring to a different team, or she's been grossly misled."

"Misled about what?"

Scottie and Chase both turned as the woman in question entered the spacious kitchen. Sloane Richardson was forty-five, though, she could easily pass for forty.

Tall. Blonde. Intelligent blue eyes that had seen far too much violence in her lifetime. Horrible, inexcusable treatment against those she strived daily to help. And unless Scottie's instincts were way off kilter, she had a strong suspicion her boss had felt more than her fair share of that same type of violence herself.

"There's the woman in charge." Chase smiled Sloane's way. "Good to see you again, Sloane."

Scottie felt the tips of her short, clean nails digging into her palms as her hands hung at her sides.

Uh...jealous much?

She nearly choked at the thought. Of course, she wasn't jealous. Why on earth would she be? It wasn't like she had some sort of unending claim on Chase just because they were boyfriend and girlfriend back in high school.

They'd both lived an entire lifetime since then, for crying out loud.

They were different people now. Or at least, she was. Hell, they didn't even know each other anymore. A fact that was proven just now when she learned that he was no longer serving as a Navy SEAL.

The Navy left me.

Her heart had inexplicably hurt for Chase when he'd uttered those four words. There was a story there, and it was one Scottie longed to hear. Not that she had the right to that or any other story regarding Chase's life without her.

After all, she was the one to leave him.

The truth was, between losing her mom and having to leave everyone and everything she'd ever known and loved behind, she hadn't felt as if there'd been any other choice. A clean break was what had been best for them both, or so she'd thought. Unfortunately for Scottie, her heartbroken teenage brain hadn't considered a scenario where moving on without Chase would be impossible.

Even now, her personal life still left, well, everything to be desired. As for her professional life, her dream of becoming a famed professional chef had gone up in smoke faster than a forgotten souffle. But as her mom had always used to say...

Have patience, Scottie girl. Everything happens for a reason.

So far, she had yet to understand the reason behind any of the awful, heartbreaking things that had happened in her life. But whatever it was, it had led her here, where she prepared the best, most delicious food she could for women who'd experienced things far worse than her.

Speaking of food...

"Excuse me for a minute. I need to check on what I still have cooking."

Scottie didn't wait for a response from either one before spinning on her heels and heading back over to the stove. After a few stirs and lifted lids, she found everything almost ready. She set about transferring the dishes she'd been preparing into several disposable foil pans for transport.

Sloane and Chase continued their conversation while Scottie did what she did best. She also may have done a bit of eavesdropping at the same time.

"I heard you were looking for me," her boss told Chase.

"I was," he confirmed. "I dropped off the last of the donated items for the auction, but I know you probably still have a lot to get done before tonight, so I thought I'd offer a couple of extra hands."

Okay, so that was a really sweet gesture. It was also one more bit of proof that at least some of the old Chase was still in there.

"I won't say no," Sloane chuckled. "Since you're already in here...and you've met our amazing chef, Scottie?—"

"Oh, Scottie and I..." Chase glanced her way. "We already knew each other."

“Really?” Sloane’s surprise was obvious.

“Grew up together back in Texas,” he continued sharing. “Same class and everything. Until?—”

“Until I moved to Ohio to live with my grandparents,” Scottie finished for him.

She wasn’t trying to be rude but rather prevent him from dredging up the painful reason behind her sudden move.

Sloane shook her head with a smile. “Wow. It truly is a small world, isn’t it? Oh, Chase. I started to say, since you’re here...and you offered...I really could use your help.”

“Name it.”

“The volunteer who was supposed to transport the food from here to the event center just called. His van broke down halfway here, and while road service is on its way, he said it could be another hour before he makes it here.”

“Say no more.” Chase didn’t so much as hesitate. “Just point me in the right direction, and I’ll load up whatever you need.”

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. That’s why I’m here.”

“In that case, as soon as Scottie finishes with what she’s doing over there, she can show you what’s ready to go. I’m not sure where you parked, but there’s a door right back there.” She pointed to a steel door near the room’s far back corner. “You should be able to back right up to it. When you’re ready to head out, just exit the parking lot

the same way you came in.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“That’s a huge load off my mind, so thank you.”

“Wait.” Scottie looked up from what she was doing to look directly at Sloane. “Does your guy know how to set up the food warmers at the center?” Her gaze bounced from her boss to Chase and then back to her boss. “If they’re not set at the proper temps, the food could ruin before the fundraiser even starts.”

“Crap.” Sloane blew out a breath. “I didn’t think about that.”

“What if you went with me?” Chase turned his gaze directly to Scottie’s. “I can drive, we both unload and then you can make sure the warmers are set up how you want them. Easy peasy.”

Easy peasy?

Easy for you to say.

Riding alone in a van with the only man she’d ever loved—the same man who still starred in all her very best dreams—would be anything but easy. But she could suck it up and do this. For the shelter and Sloane.

For the women who have had no other choice but to come here.

“Uh...sure.” Scottie nodded. “Of course. Just give me like...five more minutes to finish this up.”

“See?” Chase looked back at Sloane. “Crisis averted.”

“Thank you so much.” The woman in charge slid her gaze in Scottie’s direction. “Both of you. Just make sure to leave yourselves plenty of time to get ready, as well. Tonight’s gala may be on the smaller side, but it’s the most important night of the year for the shelter. The donors who will be in attendance are well-known and highly respected throughout the community.”

Scottie snorted a little. “Not to mention, they have more money than any of us would know what to do with.”

“That, too.” Sloane grinned. After a quick glimpse of her watch, the other woman clapped her hands together and nodded. “Okay, then. If you two have the food covered, I’m going to go make a call and check on the decorations. If everything on the center’s end has gone according to plan, they should be finished by now.”

“Go,” Scottie ordered her boss with a smile. “We’ve got this.”

“Thanks again, guys.” The shelter’s director turned to leave. With a blind wave as she walked, Sloane offered a parting, “If I don’t see you before, I’ll see you tonight!”

“See ya!” Scottie hollered back.

A second later, she found herself alone in the kitchen with Chase once more.

“Well,” she said, securing a large foil lid on the last remaining pan. “This stuff’s ready if you want to go grab the van.”

Chase gave her a friendly salute. “On it, boss.”

Scottie couldn’t help but reward him with a smile.

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Later that evening...

“Hey, Scottie!” Natalie Hayes emerged through the event center’s swinging kitchen doors.

Looking even prettier than she had earlier in the day, the CPA-turned-activist had her hair curled, her natural beauty highlighted with a bit of makeup, and she was wearing a gorgeous silver gown with an empire waist.

“Hey! Oh, my gosh. I love your dress.”

“Really? Thanks. I love yours, too.” The other woman smiled as she smoothed the shimmery satin covering her rounded midsection. “There weren’t many options to choose from, thanks to this little fella.”

“You’re having a boy?”

Natalie chuckled. “Oh, I have no idea. I go back and forth between calling our growing bundle a him or her.”

“Which are you hoping for?”

“Honestly?” Maternal love filled her dark gaze. “It doesn’t matter to us at all. I know it sounds cliché, but as long as our baby is healthy, we don’t care either way. I do , however, need more of those little cheesecake things.” Natalie arched a brow before

adding, “STAT.”

“Already?” Scottie abandoned the platter of salmon appetizer bites she’d been carefully arranging to walk toward the woman she’d met earlier that morning. A woman who, from what Sloane had said during their initial introductions, was instrumental in starting up the private security firm Chase worked for.

Chase.

Aaaand just like that, the man’s handsome face filled her mind’s eye. Again.

The truth was, Chase had pretty much consumed her every thought ever since their unexpected reunion. Minus a few moments of clarity when tonight’s gala took center stage, of course. But mostly, she’d thought of little else besides the mouthwatering man she’d known as a boy.

Scottie had hoped to ask him more about, well, everything, on the drive here to deliver the food. Unfortunately, Chase had received a work-related phone call that hadn’t ended until they were less than a block from their destination.

Once they’d arrived, their time together had morphed into a whirlwind of unloading the trays and placing them into either the walk-in cooler or the multiple warmers, depending on what the items were.

When they’d finished, Scottie had been so lost in her mental list of last-minute to-dos for the fundraiser she’d barely said two words to him the entire ride back. Now he was somewhere standing guard—while wearing a tux, no less—and probably looking even more delicious than the food she painstakingly created.

“I swear, I can’t seem to get enough of those little cheesecake things. And given the rate at which they’re vanishing, I’m not the only one. You really outdid yourself.”

Scottie ignored the imagined picture of Chase Boyer in a tuxedo and focused on the other woman in the room. “Thank you. I’m glad they turned out okay.”

“Okay?” Natalie’s pretty brown eyes grew incredulous. “Girl, those tiny bites of heaven are disappearing faster than my waistline,” the pregnant woman joked.

A soft chuckle shook Scottie’s shoulders. “I suppose that’s better than no one wanting to eat them at all.”

Natalie leaned her backside against the edge of a nearby counter. “Trust me. I bet, even without my help, you won’t have a single one left by the time the band starts playing.”

Shoot! The band!

She glanced down at her watch. “When is that again? I’m supposed to have the remnants of the main course items cleared off the buffet table before the dancing starts.”

“You have time.” The kind woman flashed her a sweet smile. “The dance portion of the night isn’t supposed to start for another fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Scottie’s exclamation escaped with an exhale of relief. And then, “I swear, I’m not usually this high-strung. It’s just...I know how important this event is for Sloane and the shelter, and with this being my first year on staff...I don’t know.” She blew out a breath. “I guess I’m just afraid of messing something up.”

Natalie’s pretty expression softened. “Well take a deep breath and try to relax because, from what I’ve tasted, you’re an amazing chef. And from the comments I’ve heard in passing, everyone out there would agree.”

A sense of pride began to ease some of her fired-up nerves. The sweet woman's reminder was one she hadn't realized she needed but apparently had.

Because she was a good chef. Great, even. And, though Scottie no longer cooked or baked for the attention or the accolades, it was still nice to hear when people enjoyed her culinary creations.

The real reward in this new endeavor, however, was getting to spend her days cooking for women who were less fortunate than her. If she could offer them even a small slice of peace and comfort while they were residents of Liberty House, then as far as Scottie was concerned, that was better than any televised award she could ever receive.

Funny how some things change.

Growing up, she'd always imagined herself a star. It had been her dream to make a name for herself. To host her very own cooking show and eventually become a household name known across the globe for her delectable talents.

That had once been her dream. But Scottie knew all too well that not all dreams come true. At least she was lucky enough to still be alive...and still be able to make a living doing what she loved most.

At least you're finally safe.

"Do you need any help?" Natalie spoke up again. "I might move a bit slow, and I'll definitely waddle, but I have two free hands."

"I appreciate the offer, but I've got it." Scottie's low heels clicked across the tiled floor as she made her way over to the cooler with the cheesecake bites. "Thanks, though."

“Of course.”

Opening the walk-in cooler, Scottie bent down and slid over a nearby milk crate to use as a makeshift doorstep. She entered the frigid space and went straight to the extra stash of desserts. Just as she was reaching for one of the filled trays, a man’s voice sounded from somewhere outside the propped-open door.

“There you are.” The voice rumbled. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Deep. Masculine. A tone laced with affection.

With a large, metal baking sheet balanced carefully in her hands, Scottie exited the cooler. Her focus split between the numerous tiny cheesecakes she prayed she didn’t drop...and the man who’d just planted a short, sweet kiss on Natalie’s lips.

Tall. Short brown hair. Hazel eyes. A strong jaw that was clean-shaven. And when his greenish-brown stare turned her way, the man she assumed was Natalie’s husband flashed a friendly smile.

“Hey. You must be Scottie.”

“That’s me.” She sat the heavy tray down on the room’s stainless steel island, assuming Natalie had mentioned her at some point.

“This is my husband, Logan.” To the man next to her, Natalie practically gushed as she told him, “Isn’t Scottie seriously the most brilliant chef you’ve ever met?” A slight frown lowered her dark brown brows. “Wait. Have you and the guys even had a chance to eat yet?”

The pointed brow Logan gave his wife was as playful as the man’s crooked grin.

“We’re on the clock, Nat. We can grab something on the way home.”

“But that’s not for another hour. By then, everything will either be eaten or packed up to take back to the shelter.”

Before she realized it, Scottie heard herself offer, “I could put some to-go plates together for you and the others.” When both Natalie and Logan turned her way, she quickly added, “I was getting ready to take the main course down, anyway, so?—”

“That’s really nice of you to offer, Scottie.” Logan’s friendly smile softened his sharp features. “But I don’t want you having to do extra work just for us. Besides. The guys and I are used to having to wait for food.”

“It’s not any extra work,” she rebutted. “And honestly, I would feel a whole lot better knowing you and”— Chase —“your team had something better in your stomachs than a greasy mystery-meat burger from a late-night drive-thru.”

Heat threatened to creep into her cheeks from how close she came to uttering Chase’s name, but thankfully, Natalie jumped back into the conversation before she or her husband could notice.

“See?” The other woman wrapped her arms around Logan’s midsection. “I’m not the only one who understands the importance of good nutrition.”

For a moment, Logan just stood there, staring down at his wife. The look on his face was more than a little telling.

That stare...those eyes...they were made for one person and one person only. And that was the adorable woman currently wrapped in his tuxedo-clad arms.

“I’m not going to win this one, am I?” Logan presumed.

Natalie shook her head with a chuckle. “Nope.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” He leaned down and kissed his wife on the forehead. “Okay, Scottie. You heard the woman. If there’s also enough food left to take back to the shelter, feel free to put together whatever you think the guys and I would like. If you’re as good as my wife and Chase both claim, I know we’re in good hands.”

Scottie froze, her heart kicking against the inside of her ribs. Her lids closed and then opened in a taken-aback blink. Chase had mentioned her to his teammate?

Oh, God. What else did he say about me?

She suddenly wanted to know everything her high school sweetheart had shared. Even more than that, there were other more important questions bombarding the forefront of her mind. Things like...

What was the grown-up version of Chase like? Why did he leave the Navy? Is he happy?

Is he single?

Lucky for her, Natalie spoke up before any of those words could fall from Scottie’s stunned lips.

“Chase?” The other woman’s expression twisted with confusion. “Wait...you know Chase?”

“They’re childhood friends,” Logan answered for her as his gaze met hers once more. “Boyer said you two were pretty tight back in the day, but then you lost touch over the years.”

Childhood friends.

They'd been more than that. A lot more. To her, anyway. Though she'd led him to believe something other than the truth. For Scottie, what she and Chase had together, once upon a time had meant...everything.

He was my everything.

But that was ages ago, and they'd both been love-crazed kids. They hadn't spoken since, and he'd almost certainly moved on. She most definitely had.

Yeah? If you're so sure you feel nothing for the man, why does his revised version of what you two shared hurt so damn much?

The internal demand for self-reflection took her so off-guard she barely managed to school her expression in time for Natalie's boisterous exclamation.

"Seriously?" Shock widened the other woman's eyes. "That's so cool! I mean, what are the odds that the two of you end up in the same city, working the same benefit gala, after all these years?"

Apparently not as astronomical as one would think.

"I know, right?" Scottie chuckled nervously. "I'm not sure who was more surprised, him or me."

Oh, it was definitely you.

"All I know is that Boyer hasn't stopped talking about you and your cooking since," Logan revealed. "Makes me look forward to tonight's to-go meal even more." The handsome man gave his watch a quick peek. "I'd better get back out there before

Sloane fires me for shirking my responsibilities.”

Natalie assured him with an affectionate voice and a pointed brow. “You, my dear, are a lot of things, however, a shirker isn’t one of them. But yes, while I don’t think Sloane would fire one of her best volunteers, you probably should get back out there, just in case. If for no other reason than to keep in the woman’s good graces so we can hopefully sample more of Scottie’s yummy creations in the future.”

Scottie smiled, and before she could keep from it, she heard herself say, “I’m happy to cook for you and the team any time.”

Wait, what? No, no, no! That came out wrong and was not at all what I meant to say!

Natalie and Logan. Scottie meant to say she’d cook for Natalie and Logan any time. Not the team! Why she’d tossed the others into the mix, she hadn’t the slightest inkling of an idea.

Mmmm...I’m pretty sure you have more than an inkling.

Her back teeth ground tightly together as she imagined her fist flying through the air to throat-punch her annoying inner self. But picking a fight with her subconscious wasn’t going to fix the problem.

“Speaking of not getting fired, I should get going with these. Here...” Scottie quickly chose two of the paper-lined mini desserts from one of the two trays and held them out for the adorable couple to take.

Natalie didn’t so much as hesitate to snag one of the bites from her hand. “Far be it from me to turn down perfection.” When her husband snickered, the other woman shot him a playful glare. “No, seriously, Logan. You have to try it.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Logan grabbed the other one. Removing the small, accorded paper liner, he popped the tiny cheesecake in his mouth. His eyes grew wide, and he moaned with pleasure. “Oh, man.” His strong jaw worked as he chewed. “That’s delicious.”

“Told ya.” Natalie gloated.

A beam of pride outshone Scottie’s earlier, self-induced anxiety. “I’ll set a few aside for you to take home.”

“Thanks, Scottie.” The other woman rested a friendly hand on Scottie’s bare arm. “You’re the best. And...you’re right. We should all get back out there and do what we came here to do. For me, that means mingling to help spread the word about what an incredible facility Sloane runs. And if I don’t leave this kitchen now, I’ll probably end up locking myself in that cooler and finishing off the rest of whatever you have in there.”

“Baby still hungry?” Logan teased.

“The baby has great taste.” Natalie rose onto her tiptoes and kissed her husband square on the lips. “Just like me.”

Scottie couldn’t keep the smile from lifting the corners of her mouth. The expectant parents were so obviously in love. Despite having just met them, it was plain as day the two belonged together. Like two pieces of a puzzle, Natalie and Logan seemed to complete each other perfectly.

I had that once.

Logan held the swinging door open for Scottie as she exited the kitchen, clutching the tray tightly in her hands while simultaneously brushing away the useless thought.

With every cautious step she took, she prayed that she wouldn't slip or trip in the low, navy blue heels that perfectly matched her shin-length cocktail dress.

Since breaking away from the always-watchful eyes of the paparazzi, her wardrobe mostly consisted of jeans, t-shirts, tanks, and hoodies. But given how important tonight was for the shelter, she'd wanted to blend in with the crowd.

And maybe look good for Chase at the same time?

While Natalie and Logan went one way, Scottie veered toward the buffet set-up on her left. Natalie hadn't been wrong. The main course food was nearly gone, and the desserts she'd already set out were just as scarce.

Glad she'd gone ahead and made extras, just in case, she began making her mental selections of dishes and desserts to put together for Logan and the team. Setting the tray down, she retrieved a pair of disposable gloves from one of the dress's two hidden pockets and began stretching them over her hands, one at a time.

Protected from the spread of germs, Scottie carefully began arranging the mini cheesecakes on the decorative platters already in place. When she was finished, she picked up the empty trays, spun around to head back to the kitchen, and...

Nearly ran smack dab into Chase.

"Whoa!" He reflexively threw his hands up and backed up a step to prevent a collision.

At the same time, Scottie let out a little cry of surprise as she stopped just short of jamming a tray square into his chest. It was a broad, masculine chest that made the air in her lungs freeze, and her lower belly fluttered with need.

Chase Boyer in jeans and a T-shirt was hard enough to handle. But put the man in a tuxedo, and...

Helllooo suit porn.

“Everything okay?”

“Huh?” She blinked herself out of her own head. “Oh. Yeah. I, um...I-I was just refilling the desserts before I start putting the other stuff away.”

“The food all looks and smells incredible, Scottie. Not that I’m surprised.” Those piercing blue eyes slid from the remnants on the table back to her. “I gotta say, it doesn’t hold a candle to you, though. You look beautiful, Scottie. That dress is...”

As his eyes fell slowly down the length of her body, Scottie blurted out a disparaging “Plain.”

What? The dress was plain. It was one of the reasons she loved it so much. Plain. Simple. Classy.

Apparently Chase disagreed.

“There are a lot of words rolling through my head right now, sugar, and I can assure you, plain is not one of them.”

Sugar?

Her heart thumped with a happiness she hated to feel. That was the nickname he’d given her when they’d been high school sweethearts. He’d told her once, way back in the day, that he’d chosen to call her sugar because she was sweet, and she loved to bake.

Scottie flashed him a blushing smile. “Thanks. You, uh...you look really nice, too.”

A potted plant looks nice, dumbass. The man looks good enough to eat.

“What, this old thing?” Chase dramatically waved her compliment away. “It was just collecting dust in the back of my closet, and I figured...when in Rome, right?”

That last part filled her chest with a wave of warmth she hadn’t expected. That saying...when in Rome...it was one they’d used countless times in the past. Whenever they were together and wanted to try something out of the ordinary, they’d look at each other, give a little shrug, and say...

When in Rome.

Scottie’s smile grew a bit more. “Well, I have to say, the look suits you. No pun intended, of course.”

“Of course.” His boyish smile sparkled all the way up to his eyes. “I guess we both still clean up good, huh?”

“I guess so.”

He stood there with his hands in his pants pockets, looking like the sexiest version of James Bond she could imagine, and she couldn’t think of anything else to say. Several awkward seconds passed as she continued to stare, that smile of hers still frozen in place while she held the empty baking sheets between them.

Say something. Say anything. Just...speak!

“I’m putting together some to-go plates for you and the guys,” she finally managed to announce. “So if there’s anything specific you’d like, just let me know and I’ll?—”

“I trust you, Scottie,” Chase rumbled low. “Whatever you choose, I have no doubt it’ll be amazing.”

I trust you.

There was a time when those words meant something so much more.

“Okay, then.” She cleared her throat with the same frozen smile. “Just don’t forget to come to the kitchen before you leave. Oh, and will you let the rest of the guys know, too?”

“Absolutely. And listen...” He began stumbling a bit over his words. “I was hoping...I mean, you know...only if you wanted to...but I was thinking maybe sometime you and I could?—”

“Hey, Boyer!” Another man in a tuxedo joined them. “The auction is just about to end, and Sloane asked if we’d help pass out the items to the winners as they’re announced. I figured it was better than standing around with our thumbs up our?—”

“Scottie, I’d like you to meet Jason Lucas.” Chase returned the man’s interruption in order to make introductions. “He’s our team’s resident tech guru. You can call him Lucky.”

“Nice to meet you, Lucky.” Scottie dipped her chin to greet the other member of the team. “I’d shake your hand, but...”

“That’s okay.” The handsome brunette flashed her a grin. “You’ve got your hands full. But hey...Boyer here told us you’re the genius behind the food. I have a confession to make...” Eyes nearly as blue as Chase’s locked on hers as Lucky leaned in and dropped his voice. “I may or may not have stolen a few of those fruit tart thingies a bit ago. Now, that’s not an admission of guilt,

however...hypothetically, if I had been the one to sneak by and snag a handful of tarts, I'd be sure to tell the chef...bravo."

"Thanks." Scottie huffed out a soft chuckle. "I'll be sure to put some in with the to-go plates I'm putting together for your team. You know...hypothetically, of course."

"We get to take some of this home?" Lucky swung his gaze to Chase's before bringing it back around to her. "Awesome! Thank you."

"Don't mention it. There's still plenty left over in the kitchen, and I figured it's the least I can do, what with you guys volunteering your time for the shelter and all."

"Damn, Boyer. You were right." Lucky put a hand on one of Chase's broad shoulders. "She is awesome!"

Chase had told this man she was awesome? That was surprising, to say the least. Especially when the last time she'd seen him, she'd all but told him he didn't mean that much to her.

"Anywaaay ..." Chase appeared slightly embarrassed. "We should probably get back to it. I'll come see you when we're done?"

Having posed that last bit as a question, Scottie answered him with a quick nod. "I'll either be out here cleaning up or in the kitchen."

"Sounds good. See you in a bit."

The wink Chase gave her as he and his friend turned to leave sent her pulse racing. She'd never had such a visceral reaction to any other man. Only him. And as she watched him and Lucky make their way through the well-dressed crowd toward the small stage, Scottie couldn't help but wish for the millionth time things had turned

out differently.

“Thank you all so much for coming tonight.” Sloane’s microphoned voice quieted those in attendance.

Scottie blinked herself back to the present, realizing she’d just been standing there, holding two empty baking sheets, and staring after a man who would never be hers. Turning, she started to head back to the kitchen when another man caught her attention.

He was standing across the room, away from the rest of the crowd. And unlike the others around her, his attention wasn’t on the woman speaking on stage. Instead, he was looking directly at her.

There was no smile on his face. No casual look of the typical party goer. Instead, the guy’s face was stone-cold solid. Unmoving and emotionless. And from the way he was staring back at her...

It’s almost as if he knows who I am.

The man lifted something black he’d been holding in his hand. Scottie’s heart pounded hard in her chest, this time for a very different reason than Chase’s wink. Before she even had time to react, a bright white light flashed, and that’s when she knew...

It’s a camera.

The man, whoever he was, had just taken her picture.

Three days later...

“Okay, boys! I’m here, which means the party can officially begin.” Lucky entered the team’s war room with his usual dramatic flair while Chase and the others sat around the conference table and waited. With his attention solely on the team, the tech genius asked no one in particular, “Seriously, though...what’s the big emergency? SECNAV decide to grace us with his virtual presence again, or did we sign some big-name client I don’t know about?”

“Neither.” Chase was the first to speak up. But before he could expand on his response, a deep, commanding voice intervened from a few feet away.

“The decision was mine, Mr. Lucas.” Naval Secretary Michael C. Webb spoke from his place behind where Lucky stood. “I decided it would be best to have this conversation in person, rather than from the other side of the screen.”

Like a deer caught in a set of bright, shiny headlights, Lucky’s brows shot up in surprise as he spun around to face the source of the comment. Chase inwardly groaned, barely resisting the urge to shake his head at his teammate’s most recent foot-in-mouth display.

“Uh...hey, Boss!” Lucky chuckled nervously before rushing into a rambling barrage of CYA. “You do know I was just kidding about the whole ‘gracing us with your presence’ thing, right? I mean...” Another huffed laugh. “I knew you were there the whole time. Spotted you the second I walked into the room, in fact.”

Webb approached Lucky with an outstretched hand and a look that said he wasn't buying the man's story for a second. "Of course you did." A hint of a smile softened the powerful man's stoic expression. "Glad to see some things never change. Good to see you again, Lucky. Been too long."

"Right back atcha, Boss."

A salt-and-pepper brow rose high above one of Webb's dark brown eyes. "You know, one of these days, you're gonna have to stop calling me that."

"Never." The two parted hands before Lucky turned and took his usual seat at the table. "So seriously. What's going on? Must be important for you to fly all this way."

The man's words matched Chase's thoughts exactly. No way the Secretary of the United States Navy drops everything to fly from D.C. to Seattle without having a damn good reason.

And Chase's gut had a pretty good idea of what that reason was. Or at least what the man's unexpected trip here was about.

Maybe we're finally going to get some answers.

As if reading his mind, Archer Nash chimed in from across the table.

"This about Hunt?" The dark-haired explosives expert fixed his gaze on Webb's.

A familiar weight settled in Chase's chest at the mention of their fallen brother. Hunter Garrison had been one of the finest SEALs to have ever served. And the man was an even better friend.

We won't stop until we uncover the truth about what happened that day, Hunt. You

have my word.

“As a matter of fact”—Secretary Webb answered Archer’s question—“that’s exactly why I’m here. But if it’s all the same to you, gentlemen, I’d rather wait until Hayes gets here to go over what we’ve uncover?—”

“Sorry I’m late.” Logan Hayes rushed into the secured room. “Nat was having contractions, and we thought?—”

“Contractions?” Chase spun his cushy leather chair around to face his friend. “But she’s not due until?—”

“It was a false alarm.” Logan raised a palm, cutting Chase’s concern off at the pass. “Just a case of Braxton Hicks. From what they told us in her birthing class, they tend to start any time after the 20 th week and can even mimic the real thing before stopping altogether. Especially when the mother’s only a few weeks out, like Nat. The body’s way of preparing for birth, she said.”

“And Nat?” Archer inquired about the man’s wife.

“Oh, she’s perfectly fine now. But damn...” Logan raked his fingers through his short brown hair. “For a minute there, I thought for sure that was it.”

Poor guy looked as frazzled as he sounded. Very un- Logan like.

Typically the former SEAL leader was as cool as a cucumber. The only time Chase had ever seen the guy this flustered was back when he was trying to figure things out with Nat. The whole will they-won’t they dance those two did was one for the books, for sure.

In the end, the couple was able to get past the guilt of Natalie having been married to

Hunter at the time of his death. Like Chase's grandmother used to say...

Love is love, and the heart takes no prisoners.

Scottie's smiling face filled his mind's eye. His lips twitched, and he started to smile but became refocused when Webb finally got to the reason for the locked-door meeting.

"We found Farzad Akimi." The man's intelligent stare swept across every man at the table.

Every muscle in Chase's body locked down tight at the name. Farzad Akimi was a trusted CIA asset who'd gone missing several months back. From what his team had been told, the young Afghani man had intel on what really happened the day they lost Hunter...including those who'd been involved.

Before Akimi went MIA, Webb had contacted the team to inform them of the man's claims. From what Webb had shared, Akimi had supposedly overheard a conversation about the ambush that ended Hunter's life...and Chase's and the others' Naval careers.

It was reported that Akimi became paranoid, willing to do whatever it took to free himself from the dangers of being a spy. Which apparently included pulling a pretty convincing disappearing act by vanishing into thin air.

Even Lucky, who was literally the most intelligent human being Chase knew, hadn't been able to pick up a lead as to the man's whereabouts. It seemed, for all intents and purposes, that Farzad Akimi had floated away with the wind.

Along with our hope of finally getting justice for Hunter.

“About fucking time you found him,” Van grumbled from the far end of the table.

Chase and the others looked at their perpetually grumpy teammate, not at all surprised by the guy’s attitude. Donovan “Van” Braddock was a surly bastard of the highest regard. But what he lacked in bedside manner, the tall, dark, and muscular former SEAL made up for in skill.

And despite Van’s Herculean effort to portray the contrary, Chase knew deep, deep down, the guy’s heart was every bit as big as the rest of theirs. Not that Van would ever dare show it.

“Braddock, let’s you and I make a deal, shall we?” Webb zeroed in on Van. “Maybe let’s bypass the bullshit back-and-forth dance we typically do and just get to what matters.”

“What matters is it’s been over three goddamn years since our team got ambushed on that fucking mountain...three years since we were forced to watch Hunt die ...and we’re still no closer to identifying the son of a bitch who sold our asses out. And before you say there’s no proof that’s what happened, we all know the only way those assholes knew we’d be there was if someone tipped them off.”

Chase couldn’t argue with the man’s claim. The mission three years ago should have been a simple in and out. A fact-finding op designed to confirm a man named Jamal Hassan Muhammad was in Kandahar, as had been reported.

That was it. See the man. Take a few photos. Report back to SECNAV. The. Fucking. End. Only that hadn’t been the way their story had ended.

They may have climbed that mountain together as a six-man team. But fate had forced them to fly back home in silence, watching over the body of their murdered brother and wondering how the hell it had gone so wrong.

“I know exactly how long it’s been, Van,” Webb shot back, resting his meaty hands on his belted hips. “And there hasn’t been a single fucking day that’s gone by since that I haven’t thought about what happened to you men.” He swallowed hard. “Or to Hunter. Which is why I thought you all deserved to hear the news in person.”

“You said you found Akimi.” Chase brought the conversation full circle. “He finally decide to come out of hiding long enough to give up the sons of bitches who tried like hell to kill us all that day?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Webb picked up the small remote resting on the table before him. With the push of a button, he powered on the large ass screen mounted on the wall behind him.

The gruesome image that appeared would turn even the most hardened man’s stomach.

“Jesus,” Archer muttered beneath his breath.

Chase cringed, and Lucky blew out a frustrated breath.

“Son of a bitch,” Van growled, leaning back into his chair with a frustrated huff. Lifting his hands to the top of his head, he locked his fingers together and scowled.

Though Chase wanted nothing more than to look away from the still image of Akimi’s tortured corpse, he forced himself to study the picture with an operator’s eye.

“He didn’t go down easy,” he noted.

Even from here, it was easy to see the poor man’s fingers had all been broken. Every fingernail pulled from its delicate bed.

In a subconscious move, he curled his own fingers into a set of twin fists as he leaned in, resting his forearms on the table's smooth surface. He'd take a bullet any day over having to withstand that shit.

Akimi withstood it. For a little while, at least.

“The doc who examined his body upon return to the States said every major bone in the man's body had been broken, along with most of the smaller ones,” Webb explained. “Whoever did this knocked out all but four of Akimi's teeth, they ruptured his spleen, cut him, burned him...and there was water present in his lungs, along with other physical evidence leading her to believe he was also waterboarded.”

It was Logan who spoke up next. “Hang on...you said, ‘whoever did this’. So you don't know who killed him?”

“We have a suspect, and so far, the evidence from the scene is pretty?—”

“Here we go again.” Van threw up his hands in frustration.

“Van...” Archer shook his head in an attempt to stave off the frustrated man's impending rage.

It didn't work.

It never worked.

Because when Van got pissed...

“Another fucking dead end. Literally! ” He gestured toward the dead asset still frozen on the screen. “Why even come here, Webb? What...you get your rocks off jerking us around like this? Is that it?”

“Van!” Logan jumped in with a more authoritative voice.

But Van didn’t hear him. Or rather, he ignored their teammate’s warning and continued with his rant directed at Webb.

“You know what? Fuck this and fuck you! I’m done.” He pushed himself angrily to his feet, his wheeled chair rolling back several feet from the forceful move as the pissed-off former SEAL began rounding the table on his way to the door.

“Well, I’m not.” Webb looked and sounded as cool as a cucumber as followed Van’s furious movements. “We may have lost Akimi, but we gained something else. Or rather, someone else.”

Van’s angry steps faltered to a stop as an expression of confusion fell over Chase’s face.

“What do you mean you gained someone else?” he demanded.

“You have another asset who knows something?” Lucky piggybacked off Chase’s question.

Every member of Eagle’s Nest turned their attention to Webb, who slid his hardened gaze directly to Van’s.

“We know someone who was there when Akimi was murdered,” the larger than life man explained. “And I used the word ‘suspect’ because we’re still putting all the evidence together before making an official call.”

The room grew silent, the air surrounding them becoming thick with tension.

Much like Chase, Archer leaned in, his elbows resting against the table in front of

him. “That’s great and all but knowing the identity of whoever killed your asset doesn’t exactly do much to help us with our goal.”

“It does when the suspected killer has a direct connection to your team.”

Chase and the others all shared a collective what the fuck glance before Logan took control of their side of the conversation.

“How the hell is he connected to us?”

“That’s the thing.” Webb clicked another button on the remote. “The person we believe is responsible for Akimi’s ruthless torture and subsequent death a few weeks ago—the person we suspect of leaking intel about your team’s presence on that mountain years earlier—isn’t a he.”

The macabre image of Farzad Akimi’s brutally murdered body vanished, and with one more push with his thumb, another image appeared.

Long, black hair. Dark, soulful eyes. Flawless olive complexion with cheekbones some women paid thousands to achieve.

“Whoa.” Lucky’s blue eyes widened with male appreciation.

Chase couldn’t argue with the man’s one-word assessment. “You know her?”

“No, but the old me sure would’ve loved the chance to get to know her. Back in the day, of course.” The computer whiz quickly changed his tune. “You know...before Ellie.”

Chase and a few of the others snickered beneath their breaths. Regardless of Lucky’s shared appreciation for the attractive woman on the screen, every man in that room

knew the guy's eyes, heart—and every other body part—belonged exclusively to his new wife.

And what the hell is the deal with that? A guy like Lucky can land a forever kind of love, but I can't?

The unspoken thought came from left field, leaving Chase suddenly feeling out of sorts. To make matters worse, his mind conjured up a mental image of another woman altogether. One he'd unexpectedly reconnected with just three days prior.

Scottie.

Seeing his high school sweetheart again, after all these years, had definitely been a shock to his entire system. A surprising, wonderful, confusing shock. And when he saw her in that dress the other night...

So fucking gorgeous.

The woman had literally taken his breath away when he'd first spotted her in that off-the-shoulder number she'd worn to the shelter's benefit auction. And for the entire last half of the evening, Chase had found himself imagining what it would be like to slide the blue satiny dress down her body, uncovering the woman's mouthwatering curves as he leaned in and pressed his lips to her?—

"She looks familiar," Logan's musings about the woman's projected image sliced through Chase's inappropriate thoughts. "Who is she?"

Get your head in the game, dipshit!

Pulling in a slow, deep breath through his nose, he released it at the same, steady pace. His subconscious was right. This wasn't the time to fantasize about the one who

got away.

But even as he forced himself to focus solely on the conversation at hand, he couldn't help but acknowledge that, as pretty as the exotic woman on the screen was, she didn't hold a candle to a very grown-up Scottie.

"Her name is Kaamisha Dawari," Webb answered Van's question. "She's a thirty-four-year-old grad student-turned-terrorist."

Back then, females were still allowed to pursue a higher education. Today, not so much.

"She's a terrorist?" Chase blinked in surprise.

He knew as well as anyone that there wasn't a cut-and-paste look for those who possessed a hateful thirst for blood. But damn. Going after a terrorist as pretty as the woman in Webb's picture would definitely be a team first.

Archer's doubt was more than a little obvious as he continued staring at the woman's picture. "You really think she's the one who tortured and killed your asset?"

"Akimi may not have died directly by her hands, but we have every reason to believe Dawari is the one responsible. We're exhausting every measure to confirm this, of course. But at the very least, we know for a fact she was present at the time of his death."

Van's tone was still as gruff as ever when he finally spoke up once again. "How do you know 'for a fact' that this woman was there?"

"DNA." Webb didn't so much as hesitate in his response. He pressed the remote again, bringing up a second, smaller image overlaying the top right corner of the

screen.

Chase squinted a bit in an attempt to make out what he was seeing. “Is that...a hair?”

Sure looked like it. Long. Black. Specs of what appeared to be blood on several areas along the single strand.

“Not just any hair.” Webb pointed a meaty finger at the woman in the picture. “It’s Kaamisha Dawari’s, and it was found partially embedded in one of Akimi’s wounds. Only way that happens is if?—”

“She was there.” Archer nodded slowly. “Of course, she also could have found him right after. Maybe she found his body and attempted medical aid.”

“Trust me.” Webb was already shaking his head. “Dawari’s up to her eyebrows in this shit.”

“Hang on.” Logan returned the conversation all the way back to the beginning. “Say you’re right, and Kaamisha Dawari is the killer. Why would someone like her want a CIA asset dead?”

“Pretty sure you just answered your own question.” Lucky scoffed. “The guy was a U.S. sanctioned spy, after all.”

“Lucky isn’t wrong,” Webb interjected. “The running theory is that Dawari somehow found out Akimi was working as a CIA asset, and she tortured him for information before green-lighting his execution.”

“Information on what?” Van tore his attention away from the screen, letting it land on Webb.

“On you.”

The entire room grew silent as Webb pressed the remote once more. Dawari’s face, along with the evidentiary image of her hair, vanished. Another picture in its place.

Like many from Chase’s SEAL Team days, this particular image was already cemented deep within his memories. The aftermath of a senseless feud that ended in destruction and death.

It was a place and time every member of Eagle’s Nest Securities recognized instantly. And though it had been three years since they’d stepped foot in Afghanistan, one look at that picture and it felt like fucking yesterday.

“Kandahar, Afghanistan,” Webb announced unnecessarily. “As I’m sure you all remember, this was taken by your team three years ago during your first mission to confirm Jamal Hassan Muhammad’s whereabouts.”

Oh, yeah. They remembered.

It was two weeks before their return trip to the same region. Two weeks before Hunter was killed.

At the time, Muhammad had been the Taliban’s top division commander. The U.S. had been after him for years, so when word came through the wire that Muhammad was in Kandahar, the plan to confirm the murdering asshole’s whereabouts was quickly put into place.

As members of the now-disbanded Black Squadron One—the classified Tier 1 team of operators for the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU—they’d been tasked with going in, snapping a few pictures of Muhammad, and getting the hell out.

So Chase and the others went to Kandahar as ordered. When the time came, they settled in along the street near the restaurant where the Taliban leader's meeting with another terrorist higher-up was to take place. And then...they waited.

But Muhammad never showed.

Instead, he sent three of his well-known associates to take his place. Ten minutes later, the two groups of terrorist assholes exited the restaurant before getting into an argument that resulted in guns being drawn and bullets flying.

Chase and his team had immediately taken cover, unable to return fire without risking the innocent civilians in the area. A few short minutes later, the shooting was over, and the downtown street of Kandahar was littered with bodies.

In the end, Muhammad's men and the pricks they'd gone there to meet had all shot each other dead. As for Chase and his team, they'd survived, but...

Total mission failure.

"You gonna get to the point of this little walk down memory lane sometime soon, or do we get three guesses?" Van crossed his arms at his chest as he stared straight back at Webb.

Webb's dark eyes didn't so much as flinch. "You remember the civilian who was caught in the crossfire that day?"

"I remember." Lucky sat up a little straighter. "Middle-aged. Dark hair. She and her mahram exited the restaurant shortly before the first shots rang out."

"That's right." Archer nodded in agreement.

“Whole point of a mahram in their culture is so the unmarried male can watch over the females.” A haunted look filled Logan’s eyes as he gave a slow, steady nod. “But he let her walk out that door first. Totally unprotected. He survived, but she didn’t.”

“No,” Webb concurred. “Unfortunately, she did not. She was preceded in death by her husband, but they had a daughter.”

“Let me guess,” Chase put the pieces together quickly. “Her name’s Kaamisha, and?—”

“She blamed us for her mother’s death.” Logan seemed to read Chase’s mind.

Webb gave his head a solemn nod. “According to the chatter we’ve been hearing, yes. Three years ago, in the two weeks after her mother was killed, Kaamisha Dawari tipped off the Taliban to the fact that your team was returning to the area, effectively setting you all up to die.”

Several seconds passed as the team processed the bomb Webb just dropped. Needing to recap—to make sure he understood what the powerful man was saying—Chase went back over what they'd just learned.

“Okay, so let me see if I’ve got this straight.” His gaze swept the room before landing on Webb. “We go to Kandahar on a surveillance-only mission, during which two separate Taliban groups opened fire on each other, and an innocent woman was caught in the crossfire. The woman’s daughter, this...Kaamisha person...gets the wrong intel, and thinks it’s our fault her mother died. She somehow finds out we’re coming back to the area two weeks later and manages to convince enemy forces to slaughter us on her behalf. Is that what you’re saying?”

He held the man’s stare and waited for confirmation.

The nod Webb gave matched the certainty in the man’s eyes. “As far-fetched as it sounds, the intel and evidence we’ve gathered so far points to that very scenario.”

“Bullshit,” Van growled from where he still stood. With his arms crossed tightly at his broad chest, the man looked even more pissed off than normal.

Can’t say I blame you on this one, big guy.

“It’s not bullshit, Braddock,” Webb argued. “You’re familiar with the kind of screening that’s done with incoming intel. We’re also still looking into Dawari’s known contacts, and I have techs scrubbing her background and electronic footprint

with a fine-toothed comb. We may not have the names of all those involved yet, but we will. I just need you boys to know that everything we've received up to this point...it's as solid as it gets."

Chase turned his focus to the woman on the screen. She was standing in front of what appeared to be a university building, and she was smiling.

Big. Bright. Toothy smile. One that lit up her eyes in a way that almost shouted innocence.

Sure doesn't look like a cold-blooded killer to me.

"NCIS proved the bullet that killed that woman came from one of the terrorists' weapons. Not ours," Archer pointed out. "That's who she should blame."

"I know that, and you know that," Webb acknowledged. "Hell, even the president knows that. But you've seen enough grief during your years in service to know it affects everyone differently. Especially when a loved one is lost in such a sudden and violent manner." His gaze shifted back to Van's. "They look for someone— anyone—to blame. And sometimes, in their tormented desperation, that blame shifts in the wrong direction."

The room grew quiet once more before Lucky chimed back in. "So in the two weeks between her mother's death and our return to Afghanistan, this Dawari woman somehow finds out when and where we'll be, puts herself in bed with the fucking Taliban, sets us up to die, and then just...walks away?"

"Dude." Chase shot Lucky a look. "You basically just repeated what I said."

"Sorry. You start talking, and my ears just sort of shut down, all on their own."

“Hardy-har, asshole.” He flipped the jerk the bird.

“Well, you were both right.” Logan rejoined the conversation, bypassing their juvenile ribbing altogether. “We lost Hunter that day, but the rest of us managed to walk away. Yet, in three years’ time, she hasn’t tried coming after us again.” He glanced around at Chase and the others. “Why not?”

Chase met his former team lead’s stare. “Maybe one of us was all she needed. An eye for an eye and all that.”

“My thoughts exactly, Mr. Boyer.” Webb slid his hands into his pockets and widened his stance. “According to the most current intel, there have been no other threats made toward you or your team, nor are there any active plans for further retribution. But you men wanted answers, and you damn well deserve them. Now, I get that this isn’t a confession, and we still have to locate her, but I wanted to look you all in the eye and deliver the news in person.” His gaze slid back to Van’s. “That’s why I’m here.”

Holy shit. They finally had an answer. After three years of non-stop anguish, heartache, and countless sleepless nights, Chase and the team finally knew the identity of the person behind Hunter’s death.

Now we just have to catch the murderous bitch and bring her to the States where she can stand trial for acts of terror...and murder.

“You’re still going after her, right?” Lucky asked their former boss’s boss. “I mean, now that you know who she is, you’re not letting this go. Right?” He scooted closer to the table, resting his elbows on its smooth surface. “Because if that woman recently had someone torture a CIA asset for intel on our team, then it sure as shit doesn’t seem like she’s done with us to me.”

“I won’t give up until Dawari is either behind bars or dead, Mr. Lucas.” Webb nodded. “Once we have enough evidence for a solid conviction, I can officially put a team on the ground to locate and bring her in. But JAG is going to need more than conjecture and chatter to build their case, and since this investigation is completely off-books and under the radar, it’s going to take some time.”

The deep grunt coming from Van expressed not only his, but the entire team’s frustration. After all this time, they finally had the name and face of the person responsible for the loss of an American hero, as well as their careers. And now they were being asked to wait.

Again.

A familiar pang of loss and regret filled Chase’s core. Not a day passed by that he didn’t think of their fallen brother. And every time Hunt’s memory drove through his mind, so did the rising urge to find those responsible and end them.

We aren’t stopping, Hunter. We’re still here. Still fighting for the justice you deserve.

“So that’s it?” Lucky asked the man in charge of the Department of the Navy.

Webb met his stare before giving his chin a single dip. “For now. But rest assured, this is nowhere near the end. I have an entire team of operatives and assets working on this.”

“Off the books, of course.” Van reiterated the man’s recent point with an edge of attitude.

“It’s either off the books or not at all, Braddock. Your call.” When no one said otherwise, Webb presumably took their silence as permission to continue their search for justice. “For now, gentlemen, I’d take this as a win. Our biggest obstacle has been

finding out the who. Now that we have that answer, the rest should fall into place. I know asking you to sit on your hands and wait...again...is a lot. But given the walls we've already hit with this mess, if I were you, I'd take this one as a win."

"Hunt's dead," Van bit back. "No one fucking wins."

"You're right. Regardless, I will continue fighting for at least a sliver of peace for you and your teammates."

The look on Webb's lined face said the man meant those words to his very core.

"Thank you," Chase offered quietly. "For coming all this way and for...not giving up."

"Kaamisha Dawari came after one of my teams." A flash of anger filled Webb's hardened gaze. "She may not have fired the bullet that killed Hunt, but as far as I'm concerned, she may as well have."

I couldn't agree more.

After a few more comments and final parting words, Secretary Webb said his goodbyes and left. Chase and the others followed suit, exiting the war room with a renewed weight pushing down on their shoulders.

It was almost as if the closer they got to answers, the heavier Chase's sense of dread became. Which made no sense, given how badly he and the others needed to close this chapter of their lives.

For their sake and Natalie's. And for Hunter's memory.

"You've got walk-ins today, right?" Lucky asked as the two men made their way

down the long hallway.

“Yep.” Chase approached his office door.

Since opening their doors, the members of Eagle’s Nest Securities alternated the duty of handling clients who showed up to the office without an appointment. A necessity with businesses like theirs because, as they’d seen far too often, the need for personal protection didn’t always come with advanced warning.

Crazy exes and stalkers tended to enjoy the element of surprise.

Once the firm was up and running, Chase and the others—including Natalie, who was instrumental in the start-up of Eagle’s Nest after surviving her own harrowing experience with violence—all voted to ensure one of the five-man team was available for consults during regular office hours.

Today, that job fell to him.

“Good, because my day’s jam-packed. Between paperwork from that last job, back-to-back-to-back appointments with both current and potentially new clients, and now looking into that Dawari chick, I’ll be lucky to make it home in time for dinner.”

“Call Ellie,” Chase suggested the guy call his wife. “I bet she’d be more than happy to bring something to the office.”

“I would, but she and Cassie are prepping for trial.” Lucky also mentioned Archer’s wife.

Cassie and Archer got married last year after Archer was assigned to protect the attorney from an unknown killer. Though Cass damn near died from two gunshot wounds before help could arrive, Arch and Lucky had thankfully gotten to the scene

in time to save her life.

Now, just like Logan and Nat...and Lucky and Ellie...Archer and Cass were living a life of married bliss. Leaving Chase and Van as the only two single men on the team.

Three down, two to go.

The thought nearly left him snorting in amusement. The day Donovan Braddock got married would be the day Chase started believing pigs could fly.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Lucky followed him into his office. “Maybe you could shoot that friend of yours a text.”

He frowned. “What friend?”

“The chef. You know...the one who works for Sloane over at Fisher House. What’s her name? Scarlett or Scout or?”

“Scottie,” Chase clarified. “Her name is Scottie, and no. I’m not going to interrupt her at work just to see if she’ll drop what she’s doing to bring you some food.”

“Well, I didn’t mean she had to come here right now . I just thought, you know, because that food was fucking amazing the other night, your girl might still have some leftovers at the shelter she needs to get rid of.”

“And you’re so generously offering to keep the food from going to waste, is that it?”

“Of course.” Lucky blinked, keeping a straight face as he gave one shoulder a small shrug. “I’m nothing if not thoughtful.”

Chase did laugh, then. “Thoughtful. Right.”

“My wife seems to think I am.”

“Only because if you weren’t, she’d kick your ass.”

Lucky appeared to consider this a moment. “You’re probably right. Regardless...if you aren’t going to text Scottie on my behalf, you should at least do it on your own.”

His footsteps faltered a few feet from his desk. Stopping mid-stride, Chase turned and faced his friend. “Mine?”

“Sure.” The other man took it upon himself to plop his ass into one of the two black leather chairs facing the desk. With an ankle crossed over one knee, Lucky looked up at him with an unabashed grin. “It’s pretty obvious you have the hots for her.”

It is?

“First of all, I’m pretty sure no one says that anymore.” Chase resumed his steps and rounded his desk before taking a seat in his larger, more comfortable chair. “And second, Scottie and I were kids the last time I saw her. We don’t even really know each other anymore.”

“Okay, but you two were a thing back in the day, right?”

“In high school, sure. But hell, Lucky...that was like fourteen years ago.”

“So?”

“Sooo ...I don’t even know if she’s single.”

And he refused to admit to this man—or even himself—just how hopeful he was that Scottie didn’t have that special someone in her life.

“Let’s say she is,” his teammate countered. “What then?”

What then, indeed?

“Look, Jason.” Chase chose to use the man’s given name. “I get that you found The One with Ellie, and I’m really happy for you both. Truly, I am. But just because Scottie and I were close back a decade and a half ago that doesn’t mean anything’s going to happen between us now.”

“But you’re interested in her.”

It wasn’t a question, but rather a statement. And Chase couldn’t even be mad about it, because he’d pretty much walked himself right into its path.

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“You mean, other than the previously mentioned fourteen years of zero contact?” He arched a knowing brow. “Okay, how about the fact that when her mom died Scottie’s sophomore year, she was forced to move halfway across the country to live with her grandparents?”

Lucky frowned. “Damn. That’s rough.” He waited a beat to ask, “What about her dad?”

“Asshole split when she was a baby.” And oddly enough, Chase still felt the urge to track down the chickenshit bastard and beat his ass. “Look, the truth is, Scottie and I have both lived totally separate lives for as long as we’ve been adults.”

“Guess it’s a good thing you two live in the same city again.” His teammate pushed

himself to his feet. “Sure makes getting to know each other again a lot easier when you can do it in person.”

“Who said anything about?—”

“Oh, please. I saw the way you were ogling over her the other night. And don’t waste your breath trying to deny it.”

“Well, I am going to deny it because I’ve never ogled over a woman in my life.”

It wasn’t technically a lie. His days of ogling Scottie had taken place when they were teenagers, which meant his adolescent eyes had seen a young lady. Not a full-grown woman like the one she’d so magnificently turned into.

“I’m serious, brother. You were looking at her the same way I look at Ellie. I know this, because it’s the same way Logan looks at Nat, and Archer looks at?—”

“I get it, asshole,” Chase grumbled low.

“For your sake, I hope you do. Life’s really fucking short, Chase.” Lucky walked across the office toward the opened door. “You know that as well as the rest of us. Besides...one dinner between two old friends...what’s the worst that could happen?”

The other man turned and disappeared into the shadows of the hallway. Five minutes later, Chase was still sitting there, staring at his open doorway, still contemplating what Lucky had said.

Maybe the man was right. Scottie did act pretty damn happy to see him that day in the shelter’s kitchen. And when he’d asked for her number later on—while he and the guys had been in the kitchen, grabbing the to-go meals she’d generously put together for them—she’d given him the digits without hesitation.

But that had been days ago, and he still hadn't reached out to her. Mainly for fear of coming off too needy or desperate. He wasn't either of those things. He fucking wasn't.

At least he hadn't been before unexpectedly running into the woman he'd once had plans to marry. But now?—

Fuck it.

Chase pulled his phone from his pocket and typed out a quick text...

Chase: Hey! How's it going? It was great seeing you the other day!

He sent the message, sat back in his chair, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Several tortuously long minutes later, his phone finally dinged with an incoming message...

Scottie: Hey, Chase! Sorry. In the middle of baking tonight's casserole dinner. It was great seeing you, too!

When it was clear she wasn't adding more, Chase decided to go for it. After all, what's the worst that could happen?

Uh...she could say thanks but no thanks. Or worse, she could accept the invitation and then reveal she's married with six kids, a dog, and two rabbits.

Okay, so maybe the rabbits were a bit too much, but still. After all this time, it was quite plausible that Scottie had no interest in revisiting that time in her life.

Double fuck it.

Chase took a deep breath, typed out a second message, and sent it her way before he could talk himself out of it...

Chase: You have plans for tonight? If not, u want to grab some food and catch up?

Another long stretch passed before she finally put him out of his misery...

Scottie: Sure! I can be out of here by six-thirty. Need an hour after that to clean up. If that's not too late, pick a place and time, and I can meet you there.

His heart kicked against his ribs as a hefty dose of excitement coursed through his veins. Moving his thumbs across his screen at warp speed, Chase hurriedly typed back...

Chase: Caterina's @ 8?

Caterina's Cucina wasn't the fanciest Italian restaurant in town. But, in his opinion, anyway, it was the best. And unless things had changed since the last time he and Scottie had hung out, Italian was her favorite.

Scottie: See you at 8!:)

Relief made its presence known in the form of a long exhale. He studied the makeshift smiley face she'd sent with that last text, and just like that, the weight that had been pressing down on him earlier was all but gone.

She'd always had the power to do that. To ease whatever ailed him simply by being there. No matter what it was, Scottie had an innate ability to make him feel as if everything was going to be okay. Even at the tender age of sixteen.

Guess some things do stay the same.

Whether anything else between them had remained the same was yet to be revealed. But Chase figured, if he were lucky, they could at least resume the close friendship they'd once shared.

And as far as he was concerned, that was a damn good place to start.

6

Fourteen years ago...

“So that’s it? You’re breaking up with me? Just like that?”

Scottie’s broken heart ached so badly she thought it might literally rip in two. “It’s not just like that, Chase.” She hugged herself and shook her head. “And it’s not like I’m moving to the next town over. It’s Ohio, for crying out loud!”

She was moving to Ohio. With grandparents she loved but only saw once a year...if that. And chances were, she and Chase would never see each other again.

“We can make it work, sugar,” he uttered the adorable nickname he’d given her. “We can still talk on the phone every night after school, and I can fly there like every other month or something. We’ll spend the entire weekend together when I come to see you.”

God, she wanted that. More than anything, she wanted to keep the one good thing still left in her life. But fate was a hurtful, hateful bitch, and as hard as she’d tried to find one, Scottie couldn’t come up with a practical, realistic way to make it work.

So here she was, staring up at the boy she’d so desperately wanted to be with for the rest of her life, doing her damndest to pretend as if her entire world wasn’t crumbling beneath her feet.

With her grandmother’s advice rolling through her grief-stricken head, Scottie

continued her efforts to make a clean break and never look back. This way, Chase could be free to go on with his life.

And maybe...just maybe...she'd figure out a way to survive this new, gut-wrenching reality.

“Even if you weren’t leaving for the Navy in May, which you are, you can’t afford to buy a plane ticket to and from Ohio six times a year. Lord knows I can’t, either. And my grandparents aren’t going to let their sixteen-year-old granddaughter fly halfway across the country to see a boy who’s going to be heading off to boot camp soon, anyway.”

The pain reflected in Chase’s amazing blue eyes cut through her soul like a long, sharp blade.

“Is that what this is really about?” His Adam’s apple slid up and down with a hard swallow. “Me going into the Navy?”

Shock reverberated throughout her entire system. “What? No! I’ve always supported your dream of becoming a SEAL. You know that. I just...”

“What, Scottlynn? You just what?”

“I just don’t see us staying together. Not anymore. Not like this. And I need to...”

She wanted to tell him she needed to be sure he wasn’t tied down by her—or worse, by a misplaced sense of guilt or obligation to make sure she didn’t break under the pressure of having recently lost her mother to cancer.

Instead, Scottie looked deep into those soul-stealing eyes and lied to her boyfriend for the very first time...

“I need to be able to move on with my new life.” Her swallow was audible. “I mean...” She licked her desert-dry lips. “I haven’t even had time to breathe since my mom’s funeral, and now I’m moving in two days, and I just...” Scottie forced herself to say the words. “I can’t start over with the baggage of my life constantly weighing me down.”

There. She’d done it. She’d uttered those awful, hurtful words. And Chase...

He was just standing there, his tortured gaze slicing straight through her. Tears welled in her own eyes, blurring his handsome image. But she refused to let them fall.

Not when she was this close. Not when it seemed she’d finally convinced him she was wiping her hands clean of what they’d shared.

Young love, her mother had called it. She hadn’t been wrong. But while sixteen was technically young, it didn’t negate her from the ability to know and understand what true love felt like. What it looked like.

Chase. It looked like Chase. But now...

“I get it,” he muttered low. “But for the record, I really wish things could have turned out differently.”

He had no idea how many nights she’d lain awake, wishing for a different set of cards than the ones she’d been dealt.

“I’m sorry, Chase. Really, I am.”

So very sorry.

“Me, too.” His smile seemed forced. “You take care of yourself up there in Ohio, you

hear? And don't forget about your dreams. Not ever. You can still make it big as a chef. Promise me you'll keep working toward that goal, no matter what."

"No matter what," she whispered a promise she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep.

Chase looked down at her a few seconds longer. The love and understanding in his blue eyes was nearly enough to destroy her resolve, and for a moment, she reconsidered her decision to end things between them. But then ? —

"Let yourself be happy, sugar." He leaned in and pressed his lips to the center of her forehead. "That's all I've ever wanted for you. And if you ever need anything...I'll be here. Always."

It wasn't until he got into his truck and drove away that she gave her tears permission to fall.

A loud honking sound tore through the painful memory, yanking Scottie back into the present. Glancing through her windshield, she realized the once-red light had turned to green.

From the incessant honking still coming from the truck behind her, she assumed it had been that way for at least a few seconds.

"Sorry!" She lifted a hand and waved to the annoyed driver as she pressed the gas pedal down with the ball of her foot.

Less than two minutes later, Scottie was pulling into an available parking spot around the corner from where she and Chase were supposed to meet. Her stomach rolled with nerves as she cut the ignition.

Not wanting to talk herself out of it, she checked her reflection in the rearview before

exiting her car. Once the doors were locked, she stepped onto the sidewalk and made her way to the restaurant's gorgeous entrance.

The elaborate wooden door opened before she could reach for the handle. A young woman greeted her with a smile.

"Welcome to Catalina's." She held the door steady.

"Thank you." Scottie stepped inside, and almost instantly, her senses were reawakened by a deep, appreciative inhale.

Savory aromas surrounded her, the mixture of garlic and herbs making her tastebuds stand up and take notice. She did a quick, visual search for Chase while also taking in the restaurant's beautiful ambiance.

Low lighting, exposed brick, magnificent archways, and several elegant, vintage-style crystal chandeliers gave the establishment a genuine, old-world feel. Blood red linens covered the round tables. The dark wooden chairs spaced around them accentuated the tablecloths' deep, rich color.

The walls surrounding her were adorned with paintings and sketches of various places and landmarks in Italy. From what she'd read online, those same images had been hanging there since the family-run establishment first opened over three decades ago.

"Can I help you?"

Scottie blinked, realizing a second woman—this one standing patiently behind a stained podium—was speaking to her.

"Oh, hi!" She flashed the young woman a smile as she stepped forward. "I'm

supposed to be meeting someone.”

“What’s their name? I’ll see if they’ve checked in.”

“Chase Boyer.”

Recognition shone behind the twenty-something’s eyes. “Mr. Boyer, of course!” She stepped out from behind the podium. “Follow me.”

An unexpected rush of jealousy seeped in, throwing Scottie off to the point she nearly stumbled over her own feet. It was obvious this girl knew Chase by the way she’d instantly perked up from just hearing his name.

Question was, did she know him because he was a frequent patron of the restaurant, or...or was it something more?

No, the question is...why do you even care?

Her inner voice was right. The man was free and clear to date—or do whatever with—whomever he chose. Of course, he was. It was ridiculous to think otherwise.

Regardless, there was still a part of her that hated the idea of some pretty young thing eyeing Chase. And worse, she understood why.

Even now, after all these years, she was still totally and completely hung up on the guy. Always had been.

Always will be.

“Right this way.”

Scottie followed the other woman around an arched wall and into another section of the restaurant. With each step she took, the more convinced she became that this was a bad idea.

A really, really bad idea.

From the moment she'd first read Chase's texted invitation to dinner, Scottie had told herself a night out with an old friend would be fine. Fun, even.

Old friend. Old flame. Same difference, right?

But now...

The knot of dread growing in her gut said otherwise. But just as Scottie was about to chicken out and make a run for it, she spotted him.

Sitting alone at a table in the back corner of the room, Chase looked straight at her—straight through her—and his lips instantly curved at the corners. Her pulse raced, and just like that, all the second-guessing about coming tonight vanished with one glimpse of the sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Hey!" He stood to greet her.

Still a true gentleman, I see.

A tall, muscular, too-tempting-for-his-own-good gentleman.

Seriously, couldn't he have lost all his hair and gained eighty pounds of beer gut by now? Sure would make this evening a whole lot easier.

Unfortunately for her, Chase hadn't lost his thick, luscious hair. And any weight he'd

gained since high school was pure muscle. A fact that was obvious despite the man's dark jeans, cowboy boots, and button-up shirt.

He quickly moved around the table just in time to pull out her chair.

"Thank you." Scottie rewarded him with a smile.

Did my voice just quiver? I'm pretty sure it quivered.

"You're welcome."

The light, woodsy scent of his cologne caught her attention as he returned to his seat. Like the man himself, it was intoxicating. So much so that Scottie didn't even realize several seconds had passed with her just sitting there, staring back at him like an idiot.

Not until a large, leather-bound menu was placed on the table in front of her, that is.

"Would you like a glass of wine to start?" The woman who'd seated them asked.

"Yes, please!" Scottie's answer was a tad too energetic. Okay, seriously...you need to chill the heck out. Drawing in what she hoped was an indiscernible deep breath, Scottie mentally gathered herself and tried again. "I mean, I'll take a glass of Moscato. If you have it."

"Excellent choice. And for you?" The young woman turned her smile toward Chase.

"I'll pass on the wine, but a nice, cold beer sounds good." He grinned. "Whatever's on tap is fine."

"One wine, and one beer. I'll get those for you right away." She nodded. "And just so

you're aware, tonight's Chef's Special is Cacio e pepe with a slice of freshly made garlic bread, Caesar salad, and a side of seasonal fruit. I'll give you both a moment to review the menu while I get your drinks."

"Thank you," Chase offered kindly.

A moment later, they were semi-hidden away in the shadows of their little corner...alone.

Scottie picked up the menu, if for no other reason than to give her hands something to do. "Sorry I was late." She forced herself to act as normal as possible. "There was a problem with one of the ovens at the shelter, and Sloane had already left for the day, so I had to wait for the repair guy to come take a look."

"It's okay. I haven't been waiting long."

She had. The truth was, she'd been waiting for the chance to talk to him like this again—to really talk—for what felt like forever. Waiting. Dreading. Hoping. Praying.

It was like a never-ending rollercoaster of conflicting thoughts and emotions. And despite the years between them, the tormenting ride was still refusing to let her go.

"What's going on with the oven?" Chase's masculine rumble effectively ended her near-fall down Painful Memory Lane.

"Oh, um...nothing major, thank goodness." Scottie cleared the nerves from her throat. "The broiler element went out, is all. Luckily, the appliance place we use promised to have a new one delivered and installed by tomorrow afternoon."

"That's good news."

“It is,” she agreed. “I use the broiler a lot, so it’s a huge relief knowing we won’t have to wait weeks or months before it’s fixed.”

Almost immediately, the conversation fell into an uncomfortable lull. Both she and Chase filled the few seconds’ worth of time by silently sipping on their ice-cold waters.

Desperate to say something—anything—to avoid sitting in the deafening silence, she heard herself asking him?—

“So, why did you leave the Navy?”

Scottie’s lips clamped shut, and she rolled them in to keep from outwardly cursing. She had no intention of asking him something so personal right out of the gate. And if the heaviness filling her gut wasn’t enough, the look that had just flashed across Chase’s gorgeous grown face certainly did the trick.

“It, uh...” He sat back in his chair, giving his head the slightest of shakes. “It wasn’t exactly my choice.”

The brief conversation they’d previously shared at the shelter came rushing back. Though she couldn’t remember every word the man had spoken—she’d been too busy soaking in the sight of him after all this time—Scottie did recall him mentioning something about the Navy leaving him...not the other way around.

And here she’d gone and asked the man to share why he was presumably forced out of the only career she’d ever known him to desire.

Smooth, Scottie. Really freaking smooth.

“I-I’m sorry,” she hurriedly apologized. “I should never have?—”

“Nah, it’s okay.” He blew it off. “The way it happened wasn’t, that’s for damn sure. But I’m good talking about it. With you.”

That last part was added almost as a condition. As if she’d just been invited into a very select group.

“What...happened?” Scottie hesitated only slightly in her speech.

“My team got sent to Afghanistan. A quick in and out. At least, that’s what it was supposed to be. Long story short, we got ambushed, lost one of our teammates in the process, and the rest of us were forced out to appease the powers that be. But hey, at least they were nice enough to give us honorable discharges. So there’s that.”

She sucked in a breath, her lips parting with a fallen jaw. “Oh my gosh, Chase. That’s...that’s awful!”

Being a Navy SEAL was all he’d ever wanted. Knowing that dream had been stolen from him...at the same time that he and his teammates lost one of their own...

Here, I thought I’d been through a lot.

“Losing our Tridents was one thing, but losing Hunt...” His tortured gaze slid her way. “Hunter Garrison. That was his name, and...damn, he was one helluva guy.” A sad smile lifted his lips at the corners. “Believe it or not, Hunt and Natalie were married when he was killed.”

Natalie?

“Wait...are you talking about the Natalie I know? The one from your security firm that helped out with the benefit?”

“The very same.”

“And you and your teammates...you’re all okay with that?”

Chase laughed. “Seems kinda weird, right? But really, it’s not. Probably because, before Hunt was killed, he and Logan were best friends. When he was alive, the guy loved Natalie more than life itself. But if there’s anyone else out there Hunter would’ve wanted to see her settle down with, it’s Logan. Especially after the way Logan helped save Natalie’s life a while back.”

Scottie frowned. “What do you mean he saved her life?”

“That’s another long story. But the short of it is, Nat’s boss was a crooked bastard who was in bed with two bigger, richer, and more powerful crooked bastards. Nat figured out what they were up to, and they tried to kill her for it.”

“Oh my god!” Scottie felt her eyes grow wide from the man’s unexpected revelation. “That poor woman.”

She couldn’t imagine someone wanting to harm the sweet mother-to-be, let alone kill her. And after losing her husband in battle, no less.

“It was definitely a scary time, that’s for sure. Natalie’s like the team’s honorary little sister and one of the sweetest women I’ve ever known. She definitely didn’t deserve all the shit life rained down on her.”

No, Scottie couldn’t imagine she did.

“She seems to be in a good place now, though,” Scottie commented softly.

“Oh yeah. She and Logan are deliriously happy, especially since they found out Nat’s

pregnant. And I don't know if you know this, but Logan and Natalie are the ones who originally came up with the idea to start up Eagle's Nest Securities."

"Really?"

"Yep. The whole thing came about when the team reunited to help protect Natalie from those scumbags. Once that was cleared up, they recruited Lucky and me, as well as Archer and Van—our other two teammates." His brown brows dipped inward. "I don't think you've met them yet, have you?"

"No. Not yet."

"You will."

The grin Chase flashed her was filled with the same cocky confidence she remembered. But his words brought with them a promise that she'd be spending more time with him and his team.

Scottie's pulse raced at the thought of seeing Chase again after tonight. She both loved and hated the idea.

Mostly, she loved it.

"It's incredible, what you do," she stated as matter of fact. "I mean..." She gave her lips a quick swipe of her tongue. "You may not be taking orders from Uncle Sam anymore, but it seems to me, you're honoring Hunter's memory by using the training and skills you learned in the Navy to continue protecting the innocent. Like the women at the shelter," she mused. "Some of them have shared the horrific stories of how they came to be there, and I..." Her shoulders fell with a sigh. "Trust me. Having someone like you in your corner when it seems like there's no way out...that means everything."

An odd expression etched a few lines in Chase's furrowed brow, but if he picked up on the personal sentiment behind her statement, he never let on.

"That's why we do it." Chase took a sip of his water and swallowed. "Oh, and I'm sure you'd eventually hear their stories at some point, too, so I'll go ahead and tell you now that we also saved Archer's and Lucky's wives from a couple of maniacs a while back."

Surprise rippled through her. "Seriously?"

"Separate incidents and two completely different assholes, but yeah. I think it's safe to say me and the guys have kept ourselves busy since relocating to Seattle."

That's one way to put it.

A natural pause in conversation ensued, and Scottie used the moment to process all she'd learned. Over the course of the past several years, Chase had reached his life's goal of becoming a Navy SEAL, only to tragically—and unfairly—be forced out of the military.

After, the surviving members of their team got back together and formed what was now a highly successful private security firm.

Don't forget the part where three of his teammates married the women who'd previously been under their protection.

For real, though. If Scottie didn't know better, she'd think being in imminent peril was a pre-requisite for dating an Eagle's Nest operative. Not that she was in the market for one of those.

Are you sure about that?

“You mentioned Logan, Lucky, and Archer are married. What about you? You ever get married?”

Hers was a question that should have been asked long before meeting the man for dinner. But Scottie had been too shocked and—admittedly—excited to see him again after all this time that she couldn’t bring herself to ask before now.

“Nah, not yet. You?”

She shook her head. “Someday, maybe.”

If the right guy were to come along...

The corners of his lips twitched, and there was a glimmer in his eyes she couldn’t quite read. “You ever come close?”

“Honestly, I’ve been too busy the last few years to even attempt to have a social life.”

It was true. First, there was culinary school. In the middle of that, Scottie got the idea for her social media food vlogs, which grew an audience larger than any she’d ever imagined for herself.

Fast-forward a few years—past several kitchen jobs and a couple of sous chef positions—and she was selected to appear on the cooking show. Of course, this was the catalyst that brought a stalker straight to her.

Kind of hard to trust a guy enough to be alone with him after that.

“I hear that.” He chuckled low, responding to navigating life with a jam-packed schedule. “Probably why Logan and the others married women connected to the firm. It seems that the only time we meet new people is through work.”

It made sense, now that she thought about it.

“So there’s no rule about dating clients?”

The same sideways smirk he used to wear back in the day appeared on his handsome face. And, like always, she felt her heart do a little flip.

“Just one of the many great things about working for ourselves is there’s no Big Brother pressing his bureaucratic thumb down on us the whole time. That being said, it’s not like Logan and the others purposely hooked up with the women they were protecting. It just sort of...happened.”

“Here you are.” Their server finally returned with their drinks. “One Moscato for the lady, and for the gentleman...” She sat Chase’s tall glass of beer in front of him.

“Thanks.” Scottie smiled up at the young woman.

Chase drew in a short sip of his amber brew before setting his glass back down with a smile. “That’s really good. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” The other woman held Chase’s gaze. “Have you had enough time to look at the menu, or do you need a few more moments?”

From where he sat across from her, Chase turned his head and glanced Scottie’s way. “Uh...I think we need a few more minutes.” He seemed to read her apologetic expression correctly.

“No worries.” Their server held her smile steady. “I’ll give you more time to choose.”

After perusing the menu to avoid further delaying their orders, she and Chase quickly decided on their meal choices before returning to their previous conversation.

“Okay, so let me see if I have this all straight.” She picked up right where they’d left off. “Aside from you, there’s Lucky and Logan, who I met the other night. And then you also have two other men on your?—”

“Archer Knox and Donovan Braddock,” he finished for her. “But Braddock goes by Van.”

Archer and Van. Got it.

Five former SEALs still putting it all on the line for the greater good. She couldn’t think of a more commendable way to honor their fallen teammate.

“You know, it’s pretty cool that you guys still get to work together, even if it’s not with the Navy.”

Another smile lifted a set of lips that, even after all this time, she’d almost swear she could still taste. “It’s very cool, actually. A definite change from active duty, but it all worked out in the end. So far, anyway.”

Despite not being allowed to continue as a SEAL, Chase seemed pretty content working for Eagle’s Nest. Happy, even.

And that made her happy as well.

“What about you?”

Lost in her thoughts, it took Scottie a few seconds to realize he’d just spoken to her again.

“What about me?” Her brows dipped low.

“Well...” He rested his elbows on the table and sighed. “We’ve been talking about me from the minute you sat down. You know why I left the Navy and what I’ve been doing since. Hell, you’ve even met three of my closest friends. All I know about you is where you work and the fact that you’re single. I mean, for all I know, there could be half-a-dozen little Scotties runnin’ around out there somewhere.”

A shoulder-shaking laugh parted her upturned lips. But the humor in his teasing comment was almost instantly overpowered by the reality of her upcoming response.

“No little Scotties,” she revealed without letting her expression fall.

No husband. No kids. No real life outside of the shelter.

At only thirty, it wasn’t as if her biological clock was approaching its final hours. And Scottie had never held the belief that women needed a man to truly be happy.

Even so, she couldn’t deny the bottomless hole carved deep inside her heart the night she’d walked away. A hollow crevice that, no matter how hard she’d tried, was still very much there.

“See? Now we’re gettin’ somewhere.” Chase’s grin was proof he was unaware of her most recent thoughts. “Okay, so last I knew, you were enrolled in some fancy culinary school in Cincinnati.”

“That was like twelve years ago, Chase.” She chuckled softly. “But yes. I went there right after graduation. I worked a few jobs here and there between classes to save money. Mostly fast-food and local diners. That sort of thing. But then I started vlogging the dishes I’d make for myself at home, and before I knew it, I had a bunch of followers, and...things sort of took off from there.”

“Vlogging?”

“Yeah, it’s like blogging but with videos instead of just?—”

“No, I know what vlogging is.” Humor shimmered in mesmerizing eyes. “I’m just trying to picture you in front of a lens. You used to be so camera-shy.”

A rush of emotions swept over her. On the one hand, she was secretly thrilled that he even remembered that about her. That he remembered anything about her, really. But on the other, it was just one more reminder of the precious moments that had been casualties of life’s cruel game.

“I never would’ve imagined putting myself out there like that, either. But in this day and age, social media is the fastest way to get noticed. And as much as I disliked the possible perception of being a sell-out, I also knew if I didn’t roll with the ever-changing trends, I’d get left behind.”

“So, how’d you go from being a social media influencer to working for Sloane at the shelter?”

It was the question she’d dreaded answering from the moment he’d unexpectedly reappeared in her life. But she would’ve been a fool to think the subject of what brought her to Seattle wouldn’t come up. And while she’d briefly considered making up a happier story to explain what had led her to move to this part of the country, Scottie ultimately decided to go with the truth.

“About a year and a half ago, I was contacted by an agent with a television production company. Apparently, she’d stumbled across my social media accounts and thought I’d make a good contestant on an up-and-coming reality cooking show.”

“No kidding?” His lips spread into a wide, toothy grin. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too...at the time.”

“Uh, oh.” Chase settled back into his chair, his expression turning a bit more serious. “I take it things didn’t go as planned?”

“Not exactly.” Not even close. “It started out great, but?—”

“Sorry it took me so long to get back to you.” Their server reappeared out of nowhere. “Did you decide what to order?”

Thankful for the temporary respite, Scottie eagerly expressed her desire for the risotto with seared scallops. Chase, on the other hand, went with a sixteen-ounce ribeye, roasted potatoes, and sauteed and stuffed mushrooms. And when the young woman left with their orders in hand, he wasted no time picking up where their conversation had left off.

“So...did you do it?” His gorgeous stare held hers. “Did you do the show?”

“I did.” She reached for her glass of sparkling white wine, tipping its delicate rim to her lips. An onslaught of sweet, tiny bubbles burst against her tongue as she tipped her head back just enough for a modest taste.

Delicious.

“Did you win?”

Scottie shook her head, her smile becoming forced in the process. “Everybody said I was a shoo-in, but I, um...” She paused, pulling her bottom lip nervously between her teeth. “I ended up dropping out before the end of the season.”

Before he could ask why—because the question was already forming in his curious gaze—she quickly shared the bare bones of what happened...

She'd been the victim of a violent stalker. The sick bastard broke into her hotel room and put a gun to her head. He shot her bodyguard, got shot himself, and thankfully ended up getting arrested.

By the time Scottie was finished with the summarized version of the terrifying events, Chase's expression had turned as hard as stone.

"Here you are..." The young woman approached the table with a steaming plate of delectable-looking food held securely in each hand.

Chase waited patiently, resuming the conversation the minute their server was gone.

"Where is he now?" A muscle in his strong jaw twitched with the grinding of his teeth.

"Locked up in a state-run institution for the criminally insane." She picked up her fork with the pretense of eating a meal she no longer found appetizing. "The judge gave him two options. Spend the next twenty-five years in a psychiatric hospital...or prison." Her throat worked to push down the painful memories. "He chose the hospital, and I chose to get as far away from the spotlight as possible."

And now he knew everything.

Chase sat there, ignoring his food and staring past her with a look so deadly he was almost unrecognizable. The lengthy moment of silence took Scottie's anxiety level to a near-boiling point.

Just when she thought he'd gone totally catatonic, her dinner date brought a hand to his face, rubbing the dark scruff covering his jaw.

"Jesus, Scottie." Regret he had no reason feeling warred with the anger in his

sapphire stare. “I’m so sorry you went through that. I...I had no idea.”

“Of course, you didn’t.” She rightfully dismissed his remorse. “No one did. That’s how the network wanted it. The network...the guy’s family ...” A wealthy family intent on keeping the shame of what he’d done a secret. “And frankly, after that night, that’s exactly how I wanted it, too.”

What she’d really wanted was to disappear. Find a new city. New state. New life.

Her dreams of being rich and famous had been shattered by the reality of how vulnerable she’d been as someone exposed to the public eye. It was a lesson she’d learned hard and fast, but one Scottie knew she’d never ever forget.

No amount of money and fame was worth risking one’s physical safety. Not to her, anyway.

So, she’d picked a new city. She’d chosen a new state. And now, months later, Scottie was finally settling into a life where she could cultivate her passion in a safe and welcoming environment. One where she could give back by helping those far less fortunate than her.

“It’s no wonder you’re hiding out at the shelter.”

Chase’s unexpected comment left Scottie recoiling in surprise. “Who says I’m hiding out?” Her defensive tone was unmistakable.

“It may have been a few years since we’ve seen each other, but I know you, sugar. Becoming a famous chef was always your dream.”

There went that sweet as hell nickname again. She really needed to put a stop to that. But first?—

“Most dreams don’t come true, Chase,” she candidly reminded him. “You should know that as well as anyone. And contrary to what you might think, I’m not hiding out.” She wasn’t. “In the beginning, sure. But not now.”

Not anymore.

“Easy, sweetheart. That wasn’t a dig, and it sure as hell wasn’t meant as an insult. All I meant was that it made sense, you packin’ up and getting away from it all.”

A wave of guilt nearly knocked her out of her seat.

“You’re right,” Scottie offered softly. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m still trying to convince myself that I’m no longer scared of a man who can’t hurt me.”

“You don’t ever have to apologize for defending yourself, Scottie,” he rumbled low. “Not to me. As for the other, you’re right. He can’t hurt you. And now that you’re here, I’ll make damn sure no one else hurts you, either.”

Their eyes locked, and she couldn’t have torn her gaze from his if she’d wanted to. And she really, really didn’t want to.

All too soon, Chase broke the magnetic spell with a blink and quick shake of his head. “So the son of a bitch gets arrested and thrown into the state hospital, and you wind up here. I can’t believe the story hasn’t leaked.”

“The network sprang into action right after the attack. Their attorneys worked their big-money magic, doing everything they could to manage the media fall-out. Including paying the handful of guests and hotel staff who’d witnessed the aftermath for the videos and images they’d taken while waiting for authorities to arrive. The network also paid for those same people’s silence.”

“They had them all sign NDAs,” he surmised correctly.

“They were afraid the negative press would impact the show’s high ratings.”

Chase scoffed. “Of course, they were.”

The roll of his heart-stopping gaze lifted her spirits enough for a genuine smile to form. After giving the food on their plates some attention, Scottie filled him in on more details of her story.

“That same night, I told the network I was done. They tried changing my mind. Attempted to bribe me with money, sponsorships...stuff like that. And they assured me I would be perfectly safe while on set, and that they’d assign two new bodyguards to watch me in my free time. Plus, with the guy in police custody, there was no cause for concern, right? That’s what they kept telling me.”

“But you didn’t believe them.”

Her head slowly slid from side to side. “Logically, I knew they were right. The guy plead out, and was locked up tight with no possibility of being released anytime soon. But still, I just...I couldn’t stand the thought of having all those cameras on me again, you know? The thought of not knowing whether someone else was out there watching me. Waiting in the dark...” She set her fork down, using the black cloth napkin resting in her lap to wipe the corner of her mouth. “That man may not have killed me, but my dream of being in the spotlight died the second I found him standing in my hotel room with that gun.”

“How did you end up working at the shelter?”

“Sloane put out an ad for a head chef on this one employment search app I’d been using. Seattle was far enough from California to give me the space I needed, and I

figured a shelter for battered women was as safe a place to work as anywhere else.” She remembered how she’d felt during those first few days at Liberty House. “It’s different for me now, though.”

“Different how?”

“I used to think I had to find fame and fortune to consider myself a success. But the truth is, doing what I do, providing three good, healthy, delicious meals for those staying at the shelter...that’s already been a far greater reward than any of the attention or accolades I received while on the show. Sure, the money I make working for a not-for-profit isn’t nearly as much as if I were the head chef at a fancy restaurant, but it’s enough to cover my bills and keep my cabinets and fridge full.”

“Sounds like you have everything you need.”

It did, didn’t it? Except...

Scottie held his stare, and in a soft almost-whisper, she responded with a quietly spoken, “Almost.”

7

Almost.

The word had been rolling around through Chase's brain since the damn thing fell from Scottie's soft, luscious lips. Throughout the rest of dinner. During coffee and dessert. Even as they sat across from one another, sharing more lighthearted stories during their separated pasts, it was impossible to ignore.

Almost.

Her whispered response could have meant any number of things. Maybe she didn't like working at the shelter as much as she'd let on. Could be as simple as she didn't like where she lived or the car that she drove.

But when Scottie's soft whisper had reached his ears, Chase could have sworn it was solely meant for him. As if he was the one who could turn "almost" into...

Everything.

His chest grew tight with thoughts from their uncomfortable past. A past that very well may predict his future.

The need to clear the air between them—to finally address the giant elephant that had been skulking around them throughout the entire evening—was suddenly stronger than ever. And Chase refused to waste any more time living a life without this woman being a part of it.

If she wasn't interested in him romantically, so be it. For him, Scottie had always been the one that got away. When he dreamed of a future, it was always her face filling his sights. When he imagined his life ten, twenty years from now, she was always the one he saw standing by his side.

Yeah, he was only thirty, and yes, they'd only recently reconnected. But Chase had always been of the mindset that if he saw something he wanted, he went after it.

The Navy. BUD/S. DEVGRU. Eagle's Nest.

Every success he'd achieved was because he'd fought tooth and nail to reach his goal. His one and only personal defeat was losing Scottie.

She was a regret he still lived with every day of his life. And the shitty thing was, he had no one to blame but himself.

I didn't fight for her back then, but I'm damn sure going to fight for her now.

But first...

"Listen, Scottie." He spoke up while escorting her down the sidewalk to her car. "I'm sorry I didn't do a better job of staying in touch with you."

"I didn't give you much of a choice in the matter, Chase." Scottie turned to look up at him. "And if anything, I'm the one who owes you the apology. The way I ended things?—"

"You were barely sixteen," he reminded her. "You'd just gone through one of the most traumatic life events anyone can. And hell, it wasn't as if you had a choice. Even back then, I understood why you had to go with your grandparents instead of staying in Texas."

The stubborn woman was already shaking her head.

“It doesn’t matter,” Scottie rebutted his claim. “Moving away from you may not have been my decision, but the way I acted that last time we were together...” Her swallow was audible. “That was unforgivable.”

“No.” A stern response. “It wasn’t.”

As if he hadn’t said a word, Scottie continued with an admission she apparently thought he was owed.

“I tried so hard to pretend I didn’t care. That my heart wasn’t being ripped out of my chest piece by jagged piece while I stood there, staring straight into those amazing eyes of yours as I lied through my teeth.”

The sadness in her eyes tugged at Chase’s heart. As for the other...

Scottie didn’t lie. Not ever. It was one of the billion reasons he’d fallen for her so quickly. She was good. Kind. And honest to the core.

But his curiosity got the better of him, so he cocked his head to the side and asked her, “What did you lie about?”

“Everything,” she murmured softly. A flash of guilt filled Scottie’s green gaze before she turned and focused on the sidewalk up ahead. “I made it seem as if I believed we never had a chance. That we’d end up breaking up once you left for the Navy no matter what. But...” The waves of her sandy blonde hair slid back and forth across her sweated shoulders. “The truth is, if my mom hadn’t gotten sick...” A quick lick of her lips. “If she hadn’t died and I’d been able to stay...I would have done everything humanly possible to keep us together.”

“I know.”

“I would have waited for you while you went to boot camp,” she confessed, presumably not having heard what he’d just said. “I would’ve saved every penny I had, and after graduation, I would have moved to wherever you were stationed. I would have made a home for us while you were on missions with your team, and if the job moved you...” She brought her mesmerizing stare back to his. “I wouldn’t have hesitated to follow you to the ends of the earth.”

Ah, Scottie.

Needing to make sure she heard him this time, Chase spoke a tad more forcefully when he told her again, “I know you would have, sweetheart.”

The confusion spreading across her beautiful face would have been comical if its mere presence wasn’t breaking his damn heart. “You...do?”

“Of course, I do. Knew it back then, too. That’s why I didn’t push you more that night. I understood what was really going on. Not at first, I’ll admit. But it didn’t take long to figure it out. I knew in my heart that, no matter what you said, you loved me as much as I loved you.”

Those incredible eyes of hers grew wide. Lips he longed to taste—again—parted ever so slightly with the woman’s sharp intake of air. Unshed tears shimmered in the beams of a nearby streetlamp standing guard a few feet away.

“Y-you never said anything.” More tears formed, and as one began to fall, Scottie quickly reached up and swiped it away. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“I knew going to Ohio with your grandparents was the best thing for you back then.” It sucked balls, and sliced his teenage heart in two, but he got it. “Your grandparents

loved you, and I knew they'd do everything they could to help you work through your grief. I knew they'd be there for you when I couldn't." He took a step toward her. "Knowing you were safe...that you had someone in your corner and that you'd be taken care of..." Another step. "In that moment, that was what mattered the most."

Scottie blinked at the moisture filling her eyes, the greens darkening with a visible wave of emotion. "But you..." Her voice cracked. "You let me walk away so easily."

Chase intensified his stare as he brought a hand to one side of her gorgeous face. The hitch in Scottie's breath reached his ears the moment his palm made contact with her flawless skin.

But the doubt in her eyes was still there. Still gnawing at his gut. There was a time when she would have believed anything he told her. A time when she used to trust him.

Trust me now, sweetheart. I need you to believe me now.

"Letting you walk away from me that day was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do," he confessed.

Those pretty eyes of hers gave a cute-as-hell roll. "You were a Navy SEAL, Chase. I'm willing to bet you faced worse things in the military than your high school girlfriend dumping you out of some misguided sense of grief."

He barked out a laugh because...how could he not?

Still as adorably cynical as ever.

"I've faced some shit, absolutely," he admitted. "But losing you..."

His body inched closer to hers, hints of warm vanilla and lavender filling the air with a passing breeze. Chase smiled to himself, grateful to know some things hadn't changed.

"I really am sorry, Chase." She reached up and covered the back of his hand with hers. "I was a total wreck back then. But you...you were the only thing holding me together. When my mom got sick, at the end, during her funeral..." Her voice grew thick as a few tears fell freely from the corners of her eyes. "You were there through it all. Right by my side. The only sign I was given that everything would eventually be okay. And then I?—"

"Was forced to move to Ohio," he finished for her.

"I didn't want to go," she whispered softly. "I wanted to stay with you."

"You needed to be with your family."

Scottie shook her head from side to side. "I needed you."

"I know, sugar." The intensity in his gaze softened. "I needed you, too."

Still do.

"Chase..."

His focus dropped as her chin lifted. Those full, tempting lips parted in a seductive, inviting way. Not intentionally, he didn't think. Even as a hot as hell teenage girl, the woman had never seemed to see what he saw when he looked at her.

What everyone saw.

“Beautiful,” Chase uttered low. He leaned in, bringing his own lips closer, the desire to kiss her erasing everything else around them.

The buildings. The car-lined street behind her. The scattered few passing by.

All of it vanished the moment he realized...

She wants to kiss me, too.

Chase leaned in closer. Scottie rose onto her tiptoes. He pressed his lips to hers, his lids slowly beginning to fall shut. And then?—

Movement caught his attention from one of the cars parked across the street. Though he wasn't sure what it was at first, it was out of place enough to make him pull away.

What the...

He zeroed in on the dark-colored sedan. Or rather, the man inside.

“Chase?” Concern laced Scottie's soft tone. “What is it? What are you?—”

His hand dropped from her face to her shoulder, the gentle yet firm move preventing her from following his line of sight. With his expression schooled and his attention split between the car and her, Chase looked down at Scottie and forced his lips to smile.

“Don't look, but there's a man sitting in a car across the street, and it looks as if he's...watching us.”

“Seriously?” Her eyes widened with alarm. “Are you sure? Maybe he's just passing the time while he waits for someone.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

For some reason, his gut didn't think so. He wasn't even sure why the stranger had caught his attention the way he had. Not until...

There!

The asshole lifted what looked to be a camera, its lens pointing straight in his direction. Though Chase didn't see a flash or the man's fingers move, it sure looked as if the asshole was taking his picture.

Son of a ? —

“Stay here.” He released the protective grip he'd had on Scottie's shoulder, stepping around her toward the edge of the sidewalk's curb.

“Wait!” She spun around. “Where are you going?”

“To find out what the guy finds so damn interesting.”

He had a pretty good idea why someone would be watching him, and he'd be damned if he was going to sit back and become a target. Or worse...Scottie.

“Hey!” Chase did a quick check both ways before marching his infuriated ass across the quiet street. “Hold up! I want to talk to you.”

The chickenshit wasted no time dropping the camera in the passenger seat and firing up his car's engine.

Shit.

“Come on, now. Don’t do that.” Chase shook his head, his booted feet covering a good distance of pavement through a series of long, purposeful steps. “You’re so interested in me, why don’t you stay here and talk to me like a man?”

When the car was shoved into gear, Chase knew his time with the dickhead was limited. He also had a feeling he knew why the man was determined not to engage.

“Did the person who hired you to find me order you not to make contact? Is that why you’re leaving? She tell you to keep your distance? Report back what you find?” he asked, referring to Kaamisha Dawari, the woman who’d had her men torture Webb’s CIA asset.

A woman they now believed was responsible for Hunter’s death.

He couldn’t deny the timing. First, they learn about the possible target still on their backs, and now there was this asshole...

It was all far too coincidental for his liking.

“How much is she paying you, huh?” Chase demanded as he grew closer to the man in the car. “Trust me, buddy. Whatever it is, it ain’t worth it.”

Rather than answer or engage in any sort of verbal confrontation, the man kept his eyes forward. Turning the wheel, he pressed on the gas, sending the front end of the car out from the one it had been parked behind.

Only a few important features were visible as the asshole spun his tires and took off down the road. Chase instantly began a mental catalog of everything he could see.

Mid-thirties. Tanned skin. Short, dark beard. Dark hair. Dark eyes.

Chase also caught the car's license plate, though he expected it was probably a fake...

AMF0984.

With those important details locked away, he brought his attention back to Scottie.

“What the heck was—” she started to join him.

“Wait there!” he hollered over to her, raising a palm to stop her. “I’ll come to you.”

She listened and waited, though he could tell by the way she was biting her upper lip that her patience was rapidly wearing thin. Chase picked up the pace, deciding to jog the rest of the way.

“What was that all about?” She swung her gaze in the direction of the vanishing car.

“Don’t know.” He rejoined her near the sidewalk’s edge.

But I’m damn sure going to find out.

“I couldn’t see the man’s face from here,” she shared. “Do you...did you know him?”

“Never seen him before in my life.”

Fear flashed in her gaze as she brought her gorgeous stare back to his. “Are you sure he was watching us? Maybe he was just looking around at the same time we...you know...kissed.”

Shit. Not only had he spooked the asshole, but he’d also frightened her in the process.

Smooth, douchebag.

But fuck. When the guy pointed that damn camera in their direction, Chase had instantly connected the son of a bitch to the woman who may or may not be coming after the team. Given the facts as he knew them—and the timing of it all—he had no choice but to assume the Dawari woman had sent him.

Now he wasn't so certain.

The guy hadn't shot at him or even attempted to harm them in any way. Of course, if Kaamisha Dawari did send him, the job could easily have been a simple fact-finding mission.

Another possibility—the most likely scenario—was that Scottie was right. They'd been standing in the open, unabashedly kissing in front of God and everyone, and maybe...

Maybe my dumb ass overreacted.

"You're right." Chase did his best to put Scottie's mind at ease. "I'm sure it was nothing. It's just...when I thought he was purposely watching us, I got a little?—"

"Overprotective?"

His lips twitched at the urge to grin. Scottie used to accuse him of that very thing back in high school. But hell, who could blame him? She was the prettiest girl in school, and every horny asshole with a dick wanted her for themselves.

But she'd been his, which meant it was his job to keep her safe. And he hadn't shied away from letting every one of those immature bastards know it.

“Sorry.” He smirked. “Occupational hazard, I guess. But listen, I’m parked at the end of the block.” He pointed to his truck parked just before the nearest intersection. “See that black pickup on the end? That’s me.”

“Okay...” She let the word dangle in the air.

“I want you to get into your car and head that way. I’ll get behind you and follow you to your place.”

Scottie’s eyes flew to his, the confusion there unmistakable.

“Follow me? Why?”

“To be safe.” Chase gave one shoulder a quick shrug.

“I thought you just said there wasn’t anything to worry about.”

There’d better fucking not be.

“There isn’t.”

“It’s a really sweet offer, Chase, but is that really necessary?”

“Probably not, but it’ll sure make me feel better.”

Scottie’s gaze narrowed as she continued staring up at him. “You’re going to follow me no matter what, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“And there’s no way of talking you out of it, is there?”

“Nope.”

She held her stance a beat longer.

“Fine.” Scottie released a relenting sigh. “I guess it’s your time to waste.”

Lifting a slow hand toward her face, Chase used his knuckles to gently caress her cheek. With his eyes soaking in hers, he said, “Making sure you’re safe is never a waste of time.” Not fucking ever. “Now go.” He let that hand drop back to his side. “And don’t forget to buckle up.”

Scottie shook her head with a smile as she sidestepped him and headed for her car. From over her shoulder, she hollered a teasing, “Still as bossy as ever, I see.”

To which he responded, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The two laughed as she climbed into the safety of her vehicle and he continued toward his own. A noticeable warmth filled Chase’s chest, and he couldn’t help but smile wide.

The sweet. The sassy. The laughter.

Just like old times, it was almost as if no time at all had passed between them. And yet, it had been a lifetime too long.

Never, ever again.

He had no way of knowing what was going on inside Scottie’s brain regarding the two of them picking up where they’d left off, but he hoped to find out soon enough.

As far as he was concerned, God had brought her back into his life for a reason. And

from the way she'd looked up at him in those final seconds just before they'd kissed, it wasn't so they could continue on only as friends.

He had enough good friends in his life. The fucking best a guy could ask for. Until a few days ago, that had been enough. But now...

Now I'm ready for more.

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Scottie stood beneath the soft, warm glow of her porch light, staring up at Chase, who had insisted on walking her to her door.

“Thank you.” She smiled.

God, he looked good. Better than good.

Much, much better.

“No problem.” That crooked grin of his made her heart swell. “You know, really...following you here was as much for me as it was you.”

“Oh, yeah?” She sensed a teasing tone.

A short lock of brown hair slid over his forehead when Chase gave her a confident nod. “Now that I know you made it home okay, I won’t spend all night wondering. And lord knows, I need my beauty sleep.” He winked. “Speaking of homes...” His gaze took in the front of her little house. “Your place is really nice. Looks like a decent neighborhood, too.”

“It is,” Scottie confirmed. She glanced down the darkened street at the homes of those she’d wave to in passing, but most of whom she still had yet to meet. “That’s one of the big reasons I chose to buy in this area. It’s quiet here. Peaceful.”

Safe.

“I’m glad you had the means to get away and start over. Not everyone gets that chance.”

“I was lucky in that aspect,” she agreed. “My grandparents lived very modestly but were wealthier than I ever knew. When my grandfather passed, everything went to my grandmother. My mom was an only child, and I was their only grandchild, so when Grandma died?—”

“It all went to you.”

Scottie nodded, her chest growing a bit tight as the memory of losing her only remaining family member came rushing back. “Minus what it took to buy myself a decent car, I put the rest in savings. It’s the only way I was able to afford being on the show.”

“I can see that.” Chase seemed to understand. “Probably tough to schedule work around appearing on a weekly television show.”

“It would have been. I mean, they put me up in a hotel, and everything, but...” Don’t go there, Scottie. Do not go there. “Anyway, while I was there, I fell in love with the west coast. After everything happened, I knew I needed to get far away from Hollywood and all that came with it, but I also wanted to stay on this side of the country. So, I decided to go north.”

“I’m really glad you did.”

“Me, too.”

Scottie found herself frozen in place beneath the intensity in his eyes, and her pulse raced from the sound of his sexy male rumble.

Time stood still, as it had earlier, when they'd stood on the sidewalk under the moon. When he'd stood there staring at her as if nothing else existed.

Right before he kissed her.

It had been exactly how she remembered, while at the same time feeling so very different. Soft, yet rugged. Familiar, yet new. An innocent lingering, as if he'd been contemplating more.

The perfect first-in-fourteen-years kiss.

I want him to kiss me again.

Was she crazy to be feeling this way about a man she'd only ever known as a teenage boy? Young love was one thing, but this wasn't high school. And they sure as hell weren't a couple of naïve kids.

Seconds passed as more questions and doubts began rolling through her mind, but Scottie found herself dismissing them all almost as quickly as they formed. The fact that she wasn't a kid only pushed her closer to the truth.

She was older and a shit ton wiser.

If she'd learned anything from her terrifying past, it was that life was a fragile, delicate gift. One that didn't last forever, and once it was gone...

It's gone forever.

"Thanks again for dinner." She let her smile grow, praying Chase hadn't noticed her momentary mental absence. "The food was fantastic."

“And the company?” Chase cocked his head, sliding both of his strong hands into the pockets of his jeans. “How was that?”

She remembered those hands. Strong. Comforting. Protective.

Taking a daring step forward, Scottie decided to play along. “The company?” She shrugged. “It was okay, I guess.”

Chase winced dramatically. “Just okay? Damn. I’d better step up my game next time we go out.”

Her heart pounded with a hope she couldn’t help but possess.

“There’s going to be a next time?”

“Well, sure.” It was his turn to shrug. “You didn’t really think I’d let you get away with just one dinner, did you?”

As friends...or more?

Scottie moved closer, her focus locked onto him and nothing else. “So you’re saying you want to do this again?”

“Sweetheart, I’d have dinner with you every night if I could.”

Every night?

“I’ve missed you, Chase,” she admitted aloud. “So much.”

“Ah, Scottie.” He leaned in. “I’ve missed you, too.”

He pressed his lips to hers and lowered his hands to her hips. Chase gently pulled her body flush with his, and Scottie moaned with the parting of her lips.

His tongue invaded her mouth, joining with hers in an erotic dance of slow, sensual licks and tantalizing swirls. A deep, primal growl reverberated from his rock-hard chest to hers as Chase took the kiss deeper.

His hold grew tighter. Passionate to the point of possession. He tasted of chocolate and something that had always been uniquely Chase.

Scottie let herself become lost in his warm embrace, unable to keep herself from wondering if maybe—just maybe —her greatest wish would finally come true. But before she could let herself believe that it had, Chase ended the kiss far too soon.

“I’d say I’m sorry, but I’d be lying.”

His voice was rough and winded. Proof he was every bit as affected by the kiss as Scottie.

Running the tip of her tongue along her lips, she rolled them inward to savor the remnants of his taste. “I’m not sorry either,” she admitted. “Surprised but not sorry.”

“Why surprised?”

The question made her laugh. “Where do I start? I’m surprised that you’re here. That we’re both here in Seattle. Both still...single. But mostly...” Scottie’s voice grew quiet. “Mostly, I’m surprised you don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you.” He shot her a pointed stare. “Not ever.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“Come on, now.” Chase reached up and tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear. “As far as I’m concerned, the past is just that. The past. Personally, I’m much more interested in the present...and the future.”

The future.

Scottie hadn’t given hers much thought lately. She’d been too busy settling into her new reality.

Maybe it’s time to let all that shit go. Start actually living this new life you’ve worked so hard to build. Otherwise, what’s the point?

Her inner voice was right on the money. She knew this but even so?—

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“Nothing to be scared of, sugar.” He shook his head slowly. “Not when you have me.”

“Do I?” She searched his heated gaze. “Do I have you?”

Scottie held her breath and waited, half-expecting him to start back peddling or hedge. Instead, the surprising man doubled down on his conviction by taking her mouth in his.

Hard and fast right out of the gate, this kiss was very different than those that came before. It was deeper. More meaningful. An unspoken promise of things to come.

Breaking away with a sharp inhale, Chase ended the passionate exchange as suddenly as it began.

“You need to know...” His broad chest rose and fell with a set of heaving breaths. “This wasn’t part of tonight’s plan.” Another breath. “It really was just supposed to be two friends reconnecting.”

“But?” Scottie held his gaze, her own chest rising and falling as she fought to catch her breath.

“But I can’t stand here, looking into those gorgeous green eyes of yours again after all this time, and keep pretending I don’t still want more.”

“Chase...”

“We can take it as slow as you want,” he proposed. “We can go on dates. Get to know each other again. We’ll do whatever you want. And if you don’t want this...if you don’t still lay in bed at night and wonder what could have been...then just say that, and I’ll walk away right now.”

“Chase—”

“But if you do wonder...” He framed her face with both hands, staring so deep into her longing gaze, she could feel him touching her soul. “If you want to give this thing between us another try, then?—”

Scottie didn’t give him the chance to say another needless word. She simply filled her fists with the front of his shirt, rose high onto her tiptoes, and this time...

She kissed him.

One week later...

“Hi, Scottie.” Sloane entered the shelter’s kitchen.

“You’re still here? I thought you already left for the day.”

Dressed in jeans and a casual button-up blouse, the woman’s signature long, blonde ponytail swayed from side-to-side as she made her way further into the room.

“I started to, but we got a new intake at the last-minute, so I stayed to make sure she got settled in okay. How’s the oven holding up? Broiler working okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Scottie sent her boss a smile.

She’d been doing that more lately. A lot more. To herself and others. At the birds’ songs she heard singing with the swirls of the passing breeze. At absolutely nothing at all.

Scottie smiled so much the last few days, it was a wonder her mouth wasn’t aching from the strain. But it wasn’t, because this is what life was supposed to be like. Or so she’d heard.

There could only be one explanation given for the sudden shift in her outlook on the future. One very specific person who solely shouldered the glorious blame. A man who’d reappeared at a time—and place—she’d least expected.

Chase.

Thanks to him, the last week had been one of the best of her life. They’d spent more time together. Talked more about their years spent apart. Laughed more when remembering humorous juvenile memories. And when the laughter eventually died down, they’d shared the most amazing kisses.

But that was as far as Chase had taken things with her. Deep, sensual kisses that left her toes curling, her heart full, and her sex aching with insatiable need.

Scottie understood why the man wanted to take things slow. Contrary to Chase's outspoken desire to not waste any more time, the sweet, big-hearted man was also clearly fearful of pushing this new chapter of theirs too quickly.

She'd agreed at the time because the last thing either of them wanted was to screw up the second chance they'd been blessed with. But now...

Now I'm ready to finally take things to the next level.

"Hey, listen." Sloane rested a hip against the massive stainless steel island beside her. "Allison Gallo's husband is at it again."

A low groan escaped the back of Scottie's throat as a pit of dread balled up in her stomach. "You've got to be kidding me. Doesn't that guy ever quit?"

"Apparently not." Anger flashed across the other woman's blue gaze.

Scottie gladly shared in her boss's disdain for Tommy Gallo. As far as she was concerned, the man—if you could even call him that—was the lowest of the low.

He was rich. Well-connected. An abusive narcissist with a greater-than-God complex.

As if those stellar characteristics weren't enough, the guy was also a drunk. And when Gallo drank, he fancied himself as both invincible and above the law.

Sadly, it seemed he was both.

Every shelter in the city was familiar with his face. Every cop on the street knew his name. But it was true what they say about the rich buying their way out of trouble.

She just prayed that trouble never found Allison Gallo or her daughter ever again.

“From what I was told,” Sloane continued, “Gallo’s been making his rounds again. Showing up at other shelters demanding they tell him where to find Allison and her little girl.”

Not again.

Fear for the other woman and her child ran its way through Scottie’s veins. Allison became a resident of Liberty House shortly before Scottie’s arrival and had remained here with her six-year-old daughter, Madeline, until a few short days ago.

But aside from the staff and other residents, no one else knew she’d been staying there. Not unless Allison, herself, had shared that information with someone outside the shelter’s walls.

It was a condition of both working for and living in Liberty House. Total confidentiality was a must. For both the safety of the staff and residents and the future of the amazing work the shelter did to help those in need.

“You don’t think he’ll come here again, do you?” Scottie asked.

She would’ve thought Gallow would have learned his lesson after the last time he showed his face. The man had causing a scene and making a fool of himself.

The police were called, and Gallo had been ordered to leave the property. What happened to the man after that, however, she had no idea.

“I seriously doubt he’d be that stupid, but with abusive assholes like that, you never know. Just be careful and stay alert. The residents are all aware, and Gallo’s on both Hank’s and Bruce’s radars, as well.”

The shelter’s two security guards were both former military and up to the task.

“Okay,” Scottie acknowledged the information her boss had shared. “Anything else I need to know before I head out for the night, too?”

“Nothing I can think of. Oh, there was one other thing I wanted to say, though.” Sloane’s blue gaze shimmered with a touch of mischief. “It’s been really nice seeing you so happy lately. I’m gonna take a stab and say it has something to do with a certain Eagle’s Nest operative?”

It has everything to do with him.

“Maybe.” She didn’t bother trying to play dumb.

Sloane had seen Chase when he’d stopped by to surprise her with coffee yesterday morning. The other woman may or may not have also witnessed the tail-end of the appreciative kiss Scottie had given him for his troubles.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m happy for you. You deserve it.”

“Thank you.” She smiled back at her boss. “You deserve it, too, you know?”

But the other woman quickly brushed the sentiment away. “Been there, tried that. Let’s just say it didn’t work out. But hey...I’m still a sucker for a good old-fashioned, once-in-a-lifetime romance. Or in your case, twice in a lifetime.”

Scottie chuckled at the playful grin and wagging brows Sloane was sending her way. “Yes, well...things didn’t exactly go as planned for me and Chase the first time around, either, so we’re taking it slow.”

“Well, from what I know of the man, Chase is one of the good ones.” The other woman pushed herself away from the commercial-grade island. “Anyway, I will quit meddling in your personal life and be on my way.” Turning to leave, Sloane paused

as she approached the large, black trashcan positioned by the back door. “Do me a favor, and make sure Bruce takes that out tonight, would ya? Trash day is tomorrow, and I’d prefer not to have the dumpster out back stinking to high heaven for another week.”

“I’ll tell him.” Scottie smiled. “Have a good night, Boss.”

“You, too!”

Once again alone in her stainless steel haven, Scottie got right back to work finishing up her evening duties. The final remaining dishes were washed, dried, and put back in their rightful place. The counters were wiped clean.

She was at the back of the room, having just grabbed the broom and dustpan, when the phone in her back pocket began to ring. Balancing the broom against the counter’s edge, she clipped the dustpan to its handle before pulling her cell free.

Scottie’s lips instantly curved upward when she saw the name displayed across her screen.

“Hey, you.” She answered the call before the third ring.

“Hey, yourself. You busy?”

“Just finishing things up for the night. What about you?”

“The client meeting we had ran long, but I’m finally out of the office, and I’m starving .”

“Guess it’s a good thing you know someone who can cook,” she teased.

“As a matter of fact, that’s the other reason I called. I know we’d planned on having dinner at your place, but what would you think about me just picking you up and taking you out, instead? That way, we’d get to eat sooner, and you’d get the night off from slaving over a hot stove. It’s a win-win, really.”

Any night spent with Chase was a win in her book.

“That sounds great, except...” Scottie glanced down at her attire of jeans, a plain gray t-shirt, and sneakers. “I’m not exactly dressed for someplace fancy.”

“Who said anything about fancy?” His tone was incredulous to the core. “I was thinking something simple, like a nice, juicy cheeseburger and fries. We can eat inside, and then I’ll bring you back to your car and we can either go to your place or mine. Or, if you’re sick of seeing me, I can drop you off at your car and see myself home.”

“I mean, you are a lot to deal with, but I think I can suffer through another night in your company.”

“Ha, ha,” Chase’s sarcasm came through loud and clear. “You want me to swing around to the back when I get there?”

“Sounds good.

His sexy rumble filled the phone’s speaker once more as he ended the conversation with a deep, “See you in ten.”

“See you then.”

Scottie ended the call with a smile, wasting no time putting the broom and mop to work. When she was finished, she put them back where they belonged before giving

her watch a quick glance.

Eight minutes had passed since she and Chase got off the phone, which meant he'd be here any moment. Catching a glimpse of the trash can that was still full, she remembered what Sloane had said about making sure it got taken outside.

With a spin of her heels, she started to leave the kitchen in search of Bruce. But midway to the door, she changed her mind.

It made no sense to go ask him to stop whatever he was doing to come take out a bag of trash she was perfectly capable of carrying out herself. Especially when she was already going out that way, anyway.

Scottie did an about-face and headed straight for the trash. One heaving pull later, the bag was freed from the can, its top edges tied snugly together to prevent the contents from spilling on the way out.

Grabbing her jacket and purse, she flipped off the kitchen lights and opened the door. With her hip, she kept the door propped open while squeezing the full, extra-large bag between the front of her body and the doorjamb.

Scottie grunted as she carefully let the bag fall the few inches to the pavement below. Once the door was securely shut behind her, she grabbed the knot at the top of the bag and heaved it over her shoulder.

She smiled, fancying herself as Santa on her way to the dumpster. A soft chuckle whispered free as she thought about how horrifying her younger self would have been had Santa filled her stockings with trash instead of chocolate and candy canes.

The sound of a vehicle parking somewhere nearby reached Scottie's ears, and the smile on her face grew wide. A quick glance at her watch let her know Chase was

right on time, and she was more than ready to greet him with a kiss.

Kiss. Cheeseburger and fries. Shower.

That was her new plan, and she intended to carry it out in that order.

And after?

Her lower belly tightened with anticipation. Because after she'd refueled her body and washed the day away, Scottie was finally going to make her move.

Chase was being a gentlemen, of that she had no doubt, but she didn't need a gentleman. Not tonight, anyway. Tonight she needed...

Him.

Still lost in her thoughts of all the gloriously naughty things she wanted to do to that man, Scottie tossed the bag up before twisting and tilting her body to the side, letting the bag slide over her shoulder and into the nearly full dumpster.

Not bothering with the lid—it wouldn't have shut regardless—she was still lost in her own thoughts when an angry male voice sounded from behind.

“Where is she?”

Not Chase.

With a gasp, Scottie spun back around, her stomach filling with dread when she saw the face of the man standing before her.

Tommy Gallo.

He was maybe two yards away, and he looked like he'd come ready for a fight. Dressed in a pair of black suit pants and a white button-up shirt that was only halfway tucked in, the man's slightly slurred words and swayed movements gave away the fact that he was drunk.

"Mr. Gallo." She did her best to remain calm as she raced to come up with a plan. "This area is for employees only. You're not allowed back here."

How was he able to get back here?

"I asked you a question!" The infuriated man marched a few steps toward her. "Tell me where my wife is!"

"I don't know." It was the God's honest truth, not that she expected him to believe her.

But even if Scottie did know Allison Gallo's location, there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell she'd ever give it to him.

"Liar!" Tommy spoke through a set of clenched teeth. "I know you know her. And I know you and that cunt boss of yours helped her escape!"

Uh, no...she hadn't. Sloane had helped the man's terrified wife, of course. That was what Sloane did.

"Mr. Gallo, I swear to you, I have absolutely no idea where your wife or daughter are." Not that the jerk had even mentioned the precious little girl. "Now please. You need to leave or I'll have no choice but to call the police."

"Bullshit!"

He barreled toward her so quickly, Scottie nearly stumbled backward as she attempted to retreat. “Mr. Gallo, no!”

She put a hand up to stop him, hurriedly sidestepping the dumpster to avoid a collision. It wasn’t enough.

Before she could react further, Tommy Gallo grabbed Scottie by the shoulders. Using a tight, painful hold, he kept his meaty grip in place to swing her body sideways and then push backward...not stopping until he had her entire back pressed against the nearest exterior wall.

“Ah!” Scottie cried out as the back of her head and shoulders met the unforgiving brick. Pain flashed through her skull, and she winced from the impact.

“That’s right, you little bitch.” His rancid, liquor-laced breath nearly made her gag. “You have no idea how connected I am. Now you’re going to tell me where you’ve hidden my wife. And if you don’t, I swear to God, I’m going to?”

“Take your fucking hands off her!”

Chase?

Scottie looked past the terrifying image before her to find Chase standing behind Tommy. A gun was in his hand; its barrel pressed squarely against the back of Tommy’s head. The look on his face was chilling, the glare he was giving the bastard still holding her against her will positively lethal.

I’ve never seen this side of him before.

The Chase she knew was sweet. Funny. Laid-back. But this version of the man who’d once been crowned prom king of their high school...

He looked like he was out for blood.

“Swear to Christ, if I have to tell you one more time to let her go...”

Tommy released his hold and put his hands out to the side.

“Good call. Now you’re going to stand there until I tell you to move, understand?” When a scowling Tommy remained silent, Chase shoved the gun harder against the other man’s head as he yelled, “Do. You. Understand?”

“Yeah, I fucking understand!” Tommy shouted back.

Sliding his rage-filled gaze in Scottie’s direction, Chase’s expression softened slightly as he asked, “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head, her movements jerky from adrenaline and fear. “N-no.”

Her head was pounding, and she probably had a decent knot growing somewhere on the back of her head, but considering how badly the situation could have ended, Scottie considered herself to be lucky as hell.

“Call nine-one-one,” Chase ordered her briskly.

She immediately began digging in her purse for her phone. At the same time, the door to the kitchen flew open, and Bruce—the nighttime guard—came rushing out.

“Scottie?” The fifty-something Army veteran spotted her. “What’s going on...” He stopped dead in his tracks when he caught sight of Chase. Or rather, Chase’s gun. “What the fuck?”

“He’s okay!” Scottie abandoned her search to wave him away from going after

Chase. “He works for Eagle’s Nest.” She pointed to Tommy. “H-he’s the one who attacked me.”

Bruce’s brown eyes widened slightly before narrowing an angry glare in Tommy’s direction. The second his gaze landed on the abusive jerk, he reached for the pair of shiny silver cuffs always dangling from his hip.

Knowing Bruce and Chase could keep Tommy under control, Scottie resumed her efforts to find her phone. Reaching back into her purse, she finally found the right pocket housing the device.

She pulled it free, and as directed, she quickly dialed nine-one-one.

“Guess you didn’t learn your lesson the last time you were here, did you, Gallo?” Bruce yanked the jerk’s hands behind his back before securing him like a pro.

It was the first time since Tommy appeared that Scottie felt like she could truly breathe.

Thank you, God!

While she spoke to the emergency operator, relaying the nature of the emergency and the shelter’s address, Chase remained near Bruce to presumably give the other man backup.

Patting Tommy down like a pro, Bruce began searching Tommy for any possible weapons. At first, Scottie assumed he had none, but then?—

“Gun,” Bruce unceremoniously announced.

Her heart dropped when she saw him pull a black pistol free from the waistband of

Tommy's jeans.

No wonder he'd left half of his shirt untucked. He was using the loose flannel to conceal a freaking gun!

Scottie's spine stiffened, every muscle in her body tightening with a renewed sense of fear. Her mind soon became filled with a barrage of what-ifs.

What if he'd pulled that gun? What if he'd shot her? What if he'd seen Chase sooner and somehow managed to shoot him instead?

Flashbacks from the last time a man pulled a gun on her came rushing to the surface. Suddenly, Scottie wanted to get away from there. To be as far away from the crazed abuser as was humanly possible.

She hugged herself, her lungs working overtime with short bursts of breaths. Her body started to shake, every subtle noise causing her to flinch. And it wasn't until Chase practically yelled her name that she even realized he had moved.

"Scottlynn!" He used her given name—and a gentle hand on one shoulder—to finally catch her attention. "Are. You. Okay?"

Blinking several times, Scottie gave her head a slight shake to put the awful memories out of her mind. With her vision clear, and her consciousness back in the present, she took in the alarming expression covering Chase's handsome face.

"I...I-I'm okay," she stuttered badly.

Sure, she'd probably be sore tomorrow, but otherwise, she was physically fine. Emotionally, however...

Yeah, I'm gonna need a few more minutes to work on that.

"Come here." He pulled her in for a tight hug.

His body became a blanket of safety. A comforting warmth she'd so desperately needed. It was in that moment of security and protection when Scottie fully accepted the danger to her was over.

She wrapped her arms around Chase, her fists filling with the back of his shirt and holding onto him as if he were her lifeline. And then, with her body flush with his and her cheek pressed against his chest...

Scottie began to cry.

9

“Was it the same guy from the other night?”

Chase paced along an invisible line running through the middle of Scottie’s cozy living room. While she showered upstairs, he filled Lucky in on what had transpired at the shelter two hours before.

“No,” he answered Lucky without hesitation. “That guy was thinner and had darker skin.”

Too bad that was about all he’d seen of the man.

“Still pisses me off that I couldn’t get more for you on that front,” Lucky offered sincerely. “Bastard was smart, I’ll give him that. Parking in just the right spot to avoid the streetlights and then using a phony license plate on a non-descript vehicle...turning onto a street with no CCTV...”

“Kind of sounds like something a pro would do,” Chase mused.

“You still think it was one of Dawari’s men?”

“No way to know for sure, but who else could it be? You checked that same night and confirmed that Scottie’s stalker...what was his name?”

“Dustin McVey.”

“Right.” Chase remembered. “So you confirmed McVey was still safely locked away inside that mental institution in SoCal, and I know for a fact the asshole from tonight wasn’t him. The only thing that makes sense is maybe Webb was wrong and Dawari is still targeting us.”

“That’s my thought, too,” Lucky agreed. “Of course, we’ve pissed off a lot of people since we signed up for this whole Eagle’s Nest gig. Could be someone from one of the cases the firm’s already taken on.”

“Problem is, without more to go on, we’re basically stuck with what we know. Which, at this point, is jack shit.”

The good news was Chase hadn’t seen the guy from the car since that night outside the restaurant. And he’d damn sure been looking, too.

Everywhere he fucking went.

“I don’t suppose Scottie has any thoughts as to who he was?” Lucky asked after a brief pause in conversation.

“She didn’t see him. Not really. And I didn’t tell her about him taking our picture. Didn’t want to worry her unnecessarily, you know?”

“Makes sense,” Lucky agreed. “Don’t want to freak her out for no reason.”

My thoughts exactly.

Though the man from the car had definitely been acting suspiciously, it was possible Chase had simply overreacted. Perhaps the guy hadn’t really been watching them at all, but rather his unusual demeanor was a direct result of Chase’s alpha male behavior.

Either way, it had been over a week since the strange interaction had occurred, and there'd been nothing more on that front since. So his focus tonight needed to remain one hundred percent on Scottie and making sure she really was okay.

"All right, so if tonight's shining star wasn't the same guy from the other night or Dustin McVey, who was he?" Lucky didn't let him even try to articulate an answer before jumping back in with an added, "More importantly, why the hell did he go after Scottie?"

"That, I do know," Chase sounded as confident as he felt. "Name's Tommy Gallo. Apparently, his wife and daughter are former residents of the shelter, and the abusive prick thought he could force Scottie into telling him their current address."

"Jesus." Lucky blew out a breath. "Does Scottie even know where the wife and kid moved to once they left the shelter?"

"She doesn't have a clue, but she wouldn't have told him, regardless. Scottie said the woman and her daughter were at the shelter one day and the next...they were gone."

A slight pause filled the phone's speakers before the other man spoke up again.

"You know...rumor has it Sloane runs some sort of underground relocation system out of Liberty House. Maybe that's what happened here."

"Underground system?" Chase frowned. "You mean she does stuff like gives them new names?"

"New names, new town, new jobs..." Lucky trailed off. "Basically, she's like WITSEC but without all the bureaucratic bullshit."

An underground relocation system designed to help abused women start a new life

away from torment and fear? Damn. Chase felt even more respect for Sloane than before. And that was saying something.

“Anyway, Gallo’s behind bars, and from what Knox said before he left the scene, the guy won’t be getting out any time soon.”

Travis Knox was a detective with the SPD who, over the course of the past year, had proven himself not only an asset to Eagle’s Nest but also a trusted ally. It was pure luck that he responded to tonight’s call, but Chase had to admit he was damn happy to know Knox was the one handling the case.

“No bail?” Lucky sounded surprised.

“It’s not a done deal until he’s arraigned in the morning, but Travis doesn’t think it’ll happen.” The decorated detective had better be right. “Said even without Gallo’s priors, the man admitted to intentionally cutting the power to the shelter’s security gate, which, is programmed to automatically open in the case of a power outage to prevent the residents from being unable to leave in an emergency. So he’s not only being charged with trespassing and assault but also destruction of private property.”

“Well, I guess, at the very least, you know he’s locked up for tonight. Hopefully that will bring Scottie a small sense of comfort. Speaking of...how’s your girl doing with all this?”

“She says she’s fine.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“Would you, given her history?” Chase referred to Scottie’s past dealings with her stalker.

He'd shared that part of Scottie's past with his teammate solely for the purpose of ensuring her safety from any and all possible threats.

"Probably not, but you can't force her to talk about it if she isn't ready."

"I know." He fucking hated it, but he knew. "She did agree to let me sleep on her couch tonight. I'm hoping she'll sleep better knowing she isn't alone."

Lucky waited for a beat before offering up some unsolicited advice. "From my experience when all that shit went down with Ellie...the best thing you can do for her now is to just be there. Make her feel safe and listen if and when she is ready to talk."

Chase's mouth lifted in a sideways smirk, remembering how hard and fast the other man had fallen for the woman who was now his wife. And how over-the-top protective Lucky had become when it became clear Ellie had a target on her back.

"Look at you, getting smart in your old age."

"Bitch, please." Lucky scoffed. "I've always been smart. Hell, everyone knows I'm the brains of this whole operation."

It was funny because it was true. Still, Chase couldn't resist giving the tech genius a hard time.

"Whatever makes you sleep at night, brother."

"Oh, I sleep just fine, trust me. Especially with my sexy wife lying next to me wearing nothing but a?—"

"La, la, la, la, I'm not listening!" Chase loudly interrupted the man's moment of oversharing. "Christ, man. I do not need to know what your wife wears...or doesn't

wear...to bed.”

Lucky’s sudden laughter filled the phone’s speaker, instantly easing some of the tightness in Chase’s chest. Which, he assumed, had been the man’s goal.

“Hey, listen.” He became serious once again. “Thanks for looking into all this for me. I’m sure the guy in the car was probably nothing, but just in case, you should probably?—”

“Watch my six,” Lucky finished for him. “Don’t worry, brother. I will. Just make sure you watch yours, too, you hear?”

“Always do.”

Chase ended the call and set his phone down on a nearby end table. The sound of soft footfalls moving somewhere up above him reached his ears. It wasn’t long before Scottie appeared at the bottom of the carpeted stairs.

Barefoot and fresh out of the shower, she’d dressed in a pair of loose, light gray athletic-style shorts and an oversized t-shirt with what appeared to be a faded rock band’s logo on the front. Her hair was still damp, the thick strands hanging loosely around her neck and shoulders, and her face was completely void of makeup.

She looked younger, somehow. More like the teenage girl he remembered. Yet there was a sort of wisdom shining in her gorgeous green eyes. Knowledge only those who’d been licked by the fires of violence and evil possessed.

He hated that for her. Fucking hated it. But as much as he wished he could, Chase knew re-writing the past was an impossible feat.

All he could do now was focus on the present, and the woman currently staring back

at him from a few feet away.

“Hey.” Chase walked toward her. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a magnet for psycho jerks.”

Her smile was small, but at least what was there didn’t look forced.

“You hungry?”

She moved closer, crossing her arms at her front. “Not really.”

“Thirsty?”

Scottie shook her head but said nothing.

Sensing she needed something else, Chase stopped walking and held out his arms.

“Come here,” he offered softly.

And then, he waited.

His heart filled, and his worry lessened when she obeyed the soft order, willingly moving into his welcoming embrace. A stretch of time went past, but he wasn’t counting the seconds or minutes ticking by.

Instead, Chase relished in the bittersweet moment. He hated the reason for his presence in her home, but was thankful she was allowing him to offer comfort the best way he knew how.

“You’re safe with me.” He kissed the top of her head. Resting his cheek against her cool, damp hair, he closed his eyes and savored the stolen moment.

“I know.” Scottie’s voice was slightly muffled as she spoke with her head tucked neatly beneath his chin. “I don’t think I ever thanked you for tonight.”

She was snuggled up close with her cheek against his chest and her arms wrapped tightly around his waist. Holding her like this felt natural. Right. But as much as he wished he could keep her wrapped in the warmth and safety of his embrace, Chase slowly began to pull himself away.

“Look at me,” he whispered, not fully breaking his hold. When Scottie did as he’d asked, he stared deep into her eyes and told her, “You don’t ever have to thank me for that.” A curt shake of his head. “Not ever. Got it?”

“Got it.” She nodded, her weary gaze shimmering with unshed tears. “I’m so glad you were there. I wasn’t even supposed to be the one taking out the trash, but I was already heading out that way anyway, and it seemed silly to waste time searching for Bruce when I could just as easily toss it in the dumpster myself while I was waiting for you, and?—”

“Hey.” Chase cut her nervous rambling short. “Not a damn thing that happened tonight was your fault. Tommy Gallo cut the power to the gate, which he’s since admitted to doing. And then the son of a bitch forced his way onto the property and assaulted you.”

It took everything in him not to reimagine those infuriating moments, but allowing Scottie to see how pissed he still was—or how badly he wanted to race to the police precinct and talk Knox into letting him have five minutes alone with the fucker—wasn’t going to do her any good.

“Are you hungry?” She switched topics, toying with one of the buttons on the front of his shirt.

“Not really.”

When he'd first left the office, he'd been positively starving. But after seeing the woman he loved getting attacked by an abusive prick, Chase's appetite was pretty much non-existent.

The woman you love? Don't you mean...loved? As in past tense?

He soaked in the sight of her freshly washed face and those eyes that had always pulled him in, and he realized...

I still love her.

It was probably why he had yet to settle down. Thirty was still young, he knew. And sure, he'd played the field now and then, just as she probably had, too.

But in that moment, Chase realized his lack of desire to pursue a life-long relationship had less to do with his age and more to do with the woman in his arms.

“I lied before,” she whispered softly.

“About?”

Scottie held his gaze a beat longer before lifting up onto her tiptoes and pressing her lips to his. “I am hungry,” she kissed him again. “Just not for food.”

“Scottie, I don't think?—”

“Good.” Her interruption confused him until, “I don't want you to think. And I don't want to think, either. Not about Tommy Gallo or Dustin McVey...” She feathered her lips against his in a tantalizing way. “I don't want to think about anything at all. For

once, all I want to do is feel.”

Chase ignored the massive hard-on growing behind his zipper as he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “You have no idea how much I want that, too. But?—”

“No.” Her tone grew stronger. More confident. “No buts.”

“You’ve had a helluva night, Scottie.”

“I’m aware.” She didn’t so much as flinch. “It’s not the first traumatic evening I’ve experienced, and in comparison to the first, this was nothing.”

“That man put his hands on you.” The muscles in his jaw twitched with the clenching of his teeth. “You have a fucking knot on the back of your head from where he?—”

“I know exactly what it’s from, and I understand why you’re upset.”

“Upset?” He dropped his hold and took several steps backward. “Sweetheart, ‘upset’ isn’t even close to how I’m feeling right now.” Chase ran a hand over his face to keep the disturbing flashes from tonight at bay. “But more than that, I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” She took a step toward him.

“You’re not fine. You’re?—”

“Fine,” she reiterated sharply.

The bite in her tone was admittedly a welcomed one. It also reminded him of how strong she used to be. How strong she still was.

Strong. Resilient. Amazing.

The woman was all those things and more. And she was still walking toward him. Each of her bare, padded footsteps chipping away at his resolve to keep taking things slow.

Sex isn't what she needs tonight, dickhead. No matter how much you want this, you can't ? —

"I know what you're thinking," Scottie's sweet voice broke through his internal thoughts. "But you're wrong."

"Yeah?" He arched a single brow. "What am I thinking?"

Other than the fact that I'd love nothing more than to strip you down and make you mine.

"You think if we sleep together, you'd be taking advantage of the situation."

Damn, she was good.

"Tell me how that's wrong."

"For starters, I know what Tommy Gallo did to me wasn't personal." Another step closer. "He's an abusive drunk who came at me the way he did because I'm the one who happened to be outside when he got there. Not like Dustin McVey, who specifically sought me out to fulfill some sick, twisted fantasy."

"Doesn't mean you're not allowed to be upset."

"I know that." She continued closing the distance between them. "And I had my

moment of tears, but that's over." Scottie stopped inches from where he stood. "When I left California, I swore I was done letting the shitty parts of my life dictate how I live the rest of it. Same goes for tonight."

"Scottie—"

"Do you want me, Chase?"

The woman's blunt question took him by surprise, but he wouldn't lie. "Pretty sure you know I do."

"Do I?" She reached for the same button from before, rolling the plastic disk between her thumb and forefinger as if she were contemplating its release.

"I want you" he rumbled the admission. "I've always wanted you."

He never wanted her to doubt that. Not fucking ever.

"I want you, too, Chase." She brought her other hand to his chest and popped that button free. "I wanted you back in high school." Another button came loose. "After I left." The taunting woman pulled the hem of his collared shirt free from the khaki pants he'd worn to work before continuing her efforts to release the rest of the buttons. "In fact, there hasn't been a time in my life I can ever remember not wanting you."

The two halves of his shirt fell from her hands as she brought her palms to his bare chest. Chase sucked in a breath, his heart pounding beneath her electrifying touch.

"Scottie..."

That was it. That was all he managed to say. And yet, it felt like...

Everything .

“Make love to me, Chase.” Her hands moved lower, her torturous fingertips tracing the curves of his six-pack as they went. “We’ve waited long enough, don’t you think?”

He’d tried. He really, really had. But he wasn’t a fucking saint.

Tonight was a shitstorm of anger and fear, but still mild compared to other scenes he’d witnessed in the past. All because he happened to show up at the exact right moment. If he hadn’t...

I could have lost her.

And what would he have done then? Nothing, that’s what. He would have done absolutely nothing , because if that had happened...if Tommy Gallo had pulled that fucking gun and used it to hurt Scottie...there wouldn’t have been a damn thing he could’ve done.

He would’ve put the son of a bitch down where he stood. Absofuckinglutely, he would have. But that wouldn’t have brought Scottie back. She’d still be gone.

She’s here now.

Chase reached out with one hand, using the front of her shirt to pull her body flush with his. “You sure about this, sugar?”

“Surer than I’ve ever been about anything else in my life.”

He didn’t wait. Not a single second longer. She’d assured him she was okay, and he could tell she wanted him as much as he did her.

With his next breath, Chase slammed his mouth against hers. Scottie opened for him, the tips of their tongues meeting again in an impassioned explosion of pleasure. And when she reached a hand behind his neck to fill her fist with his hair, he knew she was right.

I've waited long enough.

10

Scottie yelped in surprise when Chase scooped her up into his arms as if she were as light as a feather. On reflex, she threw her other arm up, locking it with the one behind his neck to keep from falling.

“Chase! What are you?—”

“Need a bed.” He marched toward the stairs leading up to the home’s two bedrooms.

“Uh...there’s a perfectly good couch behind you.”

“Our first time will not be on a fucking couch. Gonna need more room than that for what I want to do to you.”

The grin he gave sparked a fire of need between her thighs.

Oh, my.

Butterflies swirled deep inside her belly. It wasn’t as if she was a virgin, and she was certain he wasn’t one, either. Former Navy SEAL aside, a man like Chase Boyer would’ve had several lovers by this stage in his life.

How could he not?

Scottie didn’t fault him for having a past any more than she’d expect him to fault her. Like she’d told him, she refused to let the past dictate the future. Or in this case, the

very exciting, very sensual present.

“Which one’s yours?” he asked as he began carrying her up the stairs.

“Left.” She pointed at her open bedroom door.

Chase remained focused on the steps he was taking, which only made her smile more. He’d always looked out for her when they were younger. Always. It seemed as if that admirable characteristic of his had withstood the test of time.

His actions tonight were all the proof she needed. His actions and his words...

You’re safe with me.

Scottie had never doubted that to be true. Even so, that knowledge still hadn’t kept her heart from swelling when he’d uttered those comforting words.

Chase would always do whatever he could to keep her safe. It was simply the way he was built. And now that they’d had time to reconnect on a deeper level, she finally understood.

Why he’d let her go so easily that night so long ago. Why he’d removed himself from her life so completely. And somewhere in the midst of her sudden epiphanic clarity, Scottie finally understood why she’d felt the need to do the same with him.

But that was over and done with. Buried in the past where it belonged. The only thing she planned to focus on now was living in the moment. It was, after all, the only time anyone was ever guaranteed.

Chase crossed the threshold and entered her bedroom, turning his body sideways to accommodate her dangling legs. Scottie had the fleeting thought that she was glad

she'd shaved earlier while taking a shower.

Shaved. Cried. Rinse. Repeat.

Okay, so maybe she'd let a few tears fall. But not many, and her pity party hadn't lasted long. She was done with those. Done giving Dustin McVey—or any other asshole who liked hurting women—that kind of power over her life.

“You can give me the nickel tour later,” Chase rumbled as he carefully lowered her to her feet. “For now, all I need is right here, in this room.”

Scottie nearly lifted the back of her hand to her head and sighed like one of those overly dramatic female movie characters from back in the day. She didn't, of course, but the temptation was real.

Everything about the sexy man was tempting, from his thick, luscious hair to his six-pack and beyond. And very soon, she'd be giving in to the temptation.

Finally, after all these years, Scottie was going to live out her greatest fantasy. So many nights, she'd dreamed of this very thing.

Reuniting with Chase. Falling right back into the way they had been before her life was so tragically turned upside down. Only this was so much better than every Chase-fueled fantasy all rolled into one.

And we're just getting started.

Chase fisted a loose portion of her shirt, gently pulling her closer and taking her mouth in his. There was no sense of urgency in his kiss. He moved slowly, taking his time in a way that drove Scottie wild with need.

At the same time, she felt as if she could spend the entire night doing nothing more than this and still be perfectly content. It helped that Chase was an incredible kisser. He always had been. Only now...

Now, he's even better.

His hands moved lower to the hem of her baggy shirt. She'd considered putting on something nicer. Prettier. But the shirt and shorts were too comfy to pass up.

Now that her wildest dream was about to come true, Scottie was glad she'd gone the simplistic route. Especially when she felt Chase begin lifting the bottom of her shirt higher and higher.

And higher.

She lifted her arms high above her head to aid him in his task. Anticipation had every nerve ending in her body firing on all cylinders, leaving her skin hypersensitive to each and every touch.

The slight brush of his fingertips against her exposed belly. The way he paused to tease the bottom swells of her bare breasts with the backs of his knuckles. Every point of contact was like a bolt of lightning to her system, adding to the already-heightened anticipation of what Scottie knew was about to transpire.

Chase pulled back, ending the kiss so he could pull the shirt up over her head. He tossed it to the side, not bothering to see where it landed. Instead, his eyes immediately returned to hers.

They lowered. First to her mouth and then...lower.

"Christ, you're beautiful," he practically growled.

Rather than wait for him to make the move himself, Scottie took his hand in hers and slowly placed it over one of her breasts. Her breath hissed as he moved in closer.

The fingers on that same hand finding her nipple hard enough to cut through glass. He brought his free hand to the remaining breast, giving it the same glorious attention as its twin.

Scottie closed her eyes, her head tilting slightly to one side. When the pleasure from that alone threatened to become too much, she looked at him once again.

“You’re overdressed,” she purred.

“Am I?”

With a nod, she reached up and began sliding Chase’s opened shirt off his broad shoulders. He dropped his hands to allow the shirt to fall free from his arms.

A whisper of a sound filled the room as the cotton garment landed around his booted feet. When she realized he was still wearing his shoes, Scottie was hit with an idea. A wonderfully sinful idea.

She took a step to the right, seamlessly turning them both so his back was to the bed instead of hers.

“Why are you?—”

“Shhh...” She knelt down before him.

“Scottie, you don’t have to?—”

“Take off your boots?” She looked up at him with a smirk. Working to unlace one,

she shrugged a bare shoulder and said, “I know. But you have to admit”—she moved on to the next boot—“you’ll probably be much more comfortable doing this without them.”

A deep chuckle filled the air around them as he allowed her to remove first one boot and then the other. Reaching down, Chase hastily removed his socks. But when he reached for the waistband of her shorts, Scottie put the next stage of her plan in motion.

“Ah, ah, ah...” She waved her index finger back and forth with a shake of her head.

Before he could respond, Scottie put both of her palms square across his chest and gave the mouthwatering man a gentle push. The unexpected move took Chase off guard, throwing him off balance enough for her to ensure he fell the rest of the way down.

“Hey!” The mattress bounced beneath his weight. “What was that for?”

“That?” Scottie put a knee on the mattress and began crawling her way up the length of his muscular body. “That was for free.”

He chuckled at her silly joke, the deep sound reached deep inside to places only he had ever touched.

She straddled him, leaning down for another kiss. A low moan filled the base of her throat, from both the kiss and the massive bulge pressing against her sex from behind the man’s zipper.

They’d made out in high school, of course. Plenty of times, if she were being honest. But they’d never had sex. Never even saw each other naked, as a matter of fact.

But now...

His hands began to wander, sliding up and tracing the length of her spine. While he took his time exploring her back with his fingertips, Scottie tore her lips from his to move lower.

She pressed a trail of tiny kisses across his chin. Along his rugged jawline. Down the side of his neck and back up to his ear.

Chase moaned when she pulled the soft lobe between her teeth, his head falling back onto the mattress giving her even better access than before. Scottie gave the delicate flesh a playful nibble before moving her attention elsewhere.

The juncture where his neck and shoulders met. That little dip at the base of his throat.

Scottie moved her mouth—and body—lower still, stopping briefly at each of his nipples. They stood erect, as if to beg for her attention. A request she was more than happy to oblige.

Keeping her touch light, she ran the pads of her fingers over the one on his left. Scottie took her time, tracing the flat disk around it before leaning in and encircling it with her lips.

Chase's sharp inhale was impossible to miss, and the more she played, the rougher his breaths became. When she felt as though he'd had enough, she decided to move on by letting the tip of her tongue trace the impressive line separating the two halves of his incredibly sculpted abs.

With every lick of her tongue and every touch of her hands, Scottie was more and more convinced the man was positively perfect. He could've been etched out of

stone; he was so fit and firm. And yet, when he ran his hands along her body, he was as gentle as the passing breeze.

She reached the waistband of his khaki pants and went straight for his belt. Sliding the leather strap from the simple, silver buckle, she kept her eyes on his until it broke free.

Next came the button at the top of his pants. After that, she started with the zipper. Slowly, carefully, the metal teeth began to separate one by one.

Her anticipation climbed to an all-time high as the backs of her knuckles brushed over his steely bulge. But just as the zipper nearly reached the home stretch, Scottie was suddenly and unexpectedly flipped over onto her back.

“Chase!” she squealed, surprised by the move that left her lying flat against the mattress...under him.

The plush comforter she loved was a cushion to her tender head, and the man hovering above her kept his weight from crushing her by balancing himself with his arms.

Chase didn't look the least bit remorseful for having interrupted her erotic forward progress. Instead, his heated gaze held her frozen in place as she waited for him to make his next move.

The man hovering above her didn't appear remorseful in the least. Instead, his heated gaze held her hostage as she waited for him to make his next move.

“My turn.” His voice was low. Deep. And the look in his eyes as he brought his mouth to one of her breasts was positively wicked.

Scottie gasped as he took her wanton nipple between his lips. The hot, wet torture left her eyes falling shut and her head falling to the side.

Filling her hands with his hair, Scottie gave herself over to him fully. A gift to the only man she'd ever truly wanted. An offering to the only man she'd ever loved.

"Chase..." she breathed his name like a prayer.

In reality, he was the answer to her prayers.

Her every wish granted. The second chance she'd come to believe would never be granted. A blessing Scottie couldn't deny.

The beating of her heart increased in power and speed. Her breaths came in shorter, shallower spurts as the talented man continued treasuring the offering she'd been more than willing to give.

As Chase continued sucking, licking, and teasing her with his tongue, he gave the other nipple equally exquisite—and utterly maddening—attention with his hand. Her back arched high off the mattress, her body's way of begging for more.

Rather than rush in his delivery of pleasure, he moved on slowly, creating a trail of kisses down her belly and beyond.

When he reached the waistband of her shorts, Chase didn't miss a single beat before dipping his fingers between the elastic and her skin. Scottie felt her body tremble from the overwhelming emotions racing through her.

Excitement. Nervousness. A touch of fear and...desire.

She lifted her pelvis from the mattress as he began pushing her shorts down over her

hips. Her lungs stuttered with their effort to fill themselves with air.

His touch was so electrifying against her skin it was almost too much to bear. And when Chase stood from the bed, pulling her shorts free and tossing them to the side, Scottie continued to lay perfectly still, soaking in the glorious view.

Without a word, he leaned down and grabbed the thin scrap of white lace running along her hips. The panties were gone seconds later, leaving her fully and unabashedly exposed.

“Jesus, Scottie,” he whispered as if he were in awe.

The way he was looking at her made Scottie feel so incredibly special. Beautiful. Wanted. And...

Loved?

Not a single doubt existed about the way she felt for Chase. Scottie also knew with everything in her heart that, at one time, he’d loved her, too.

But that was another time. Another life. And while her feelings for him had never truly gone away, she wasn’t naïve enough to assume he felt the same.

He cared about her. She’d be a fool to think otherwise. But love ...

Movement tore her from her thoughts in time to see Chase pulling his zipper the rest of the way down. Thankful she hadn’t missed the delectable moment, Scottie watched and waited while he removed his pants and his boxer briefs together in one fell swoop.

His cock sprang forward, the sight stealing her ability to breathe.

Oh, my!

To say Chase was a blessed man would be a massive understatement. The man was long, hard, and ready.

Scottie started to move, to reach out and touch the temptation before her. But the frustratingly handsome man clearly had plans of his own.

Chase wrapped both hands around her ankles and pulled her to the edge of the mattress. He dropped to his knees, sliding his hands from her ankles to her thighs. When he gave a gentle push, she was happy to oblige.

Accommodating his unspoken request, Scottie spread her legs open, giving him the access she knew he needed. An appreciative rumble sounded from deep within half a second before Chase took her with his mouth.

“Ah!” she cried out, despite having anticipated the intimate contact.

His lips were hot. His tongue was wet. Put them both together, and...

She. Was. Lost.

Oh, god!

Scottie’s moan was loud, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She was too busy floating on a cloud of euphoria, lost in a sea of unimaginable sexual pleasure.

He teased and toyed with her swollen and sensitive clit. Chase used his fingers with the expertise of a god, pulling every ounce of pleasure her body had within it to give.

His tongue swirled around the tiny bundle of nerves. His fingers—first one and then

another—entered her greedy core.

Moving the digits in and out of her body at a slow, steady pace, he took his time showing her how a moment like this should feel. The experiences in her past had been fine and even fun. But being with Chase...like this...was so very different.

Because it was more.

More passion. More pleasure. More emotionally driven desire.

Even before tonight, no other man had ever compared. And while Scottie knew the moment was far from over, one thing was already abundantly clear.

I belong to him.

He owned her, heart and soul, even if he had no idea. She was his and always would be, regardless of whether he felt the same.

“Oh, yeah,” she panted. “Oh, god! Please...don’t stop!”

His fingers were like magical pistons thrusting in and out of her wet, needy core. Chase added more pressure with his tongue and his lips, expertly working her clit to begin building the path to her ultimate pleasure.

Scottie could hear how wet she was but didn’t care. Her only focus was on trying not to pass out from his sensual rapture. Chase continued playing her with perfection as if he knew her own body better than she ever had.

And when the pressure heightened to unprecedented levels, Scottie fisted his hair and begged him for mercy.

“Please, Chase,” she pleaded past her heaving breaths. “I’m so close...I’m going to...”

Release struck, and suddenly, Scottie felt as if she were flying. Soaring to new heights while blinding flashes of colors and lights filled her orgasmic vision.

Her entire body stiffened, her back arching high off the bed. It was almost as if she’d been struck by lightning. Electrified by a climactic explosion so powerful, so all-consuming, it felt like what she envisioned to be an out-of-body experience.

Scottie wasn’t sure how much time passed before Chase slid his fingers free. She wasn’t even sure she was still on planet Earth at this point, but neither of those things mattered. Because the second she became enveloped in his masculine warmth, she knew.

This is exactly where I’m meant to be.

“Fucking beautiful.” The deep, almost roughened resonance in his voice pulled her back from wherever his spell had taken her.

Her eyes opened, and she looked up at him. Her heart felt as though it would burst when she caught sight of the look in his gorgeous blue eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” she told him.

He was beautiful, inside and out. One of the best examples of God’s work in the flesh. A good, sweet, selfless man. A patriot.

My hero.

“Shit!” Chase exclaimed, his entire demeanor changing on a dime.

“What’s wrong?”

“Condom.” He gave a frustrated shake of his head. “I don’t have one. I wasn’t expecting us to...”

“Have sex?” Scottie snickered, relieved he hadn’t changed his mind about being with her. “I thought SEALs were like Boy Scouts. You know...always prepared?”

The playful glare filling his gaze only made her laugh harder.

“I am prepared,” he informed her. “My SIG’s right over there.” He motioned with a tilt of his head.

The gun. He’s talking about his gun.

An all-too-recent memory rolled past. Chase standing behind Tommy Gallo. His black pistol shoved against the back of the other man’s head.

Don’t go there, Scottie. Not now.

“That’s not what I meant,” she teased, pushing the other thought out of her mind. “But it’s okay. I’m on the pill. And I haven’t been with anyone in over a year.”

Surprise flickered past his widened gaze. But then his expression softened, and the corners of those delicious lips curved as he admitted, “It’s been several months for me, and I promise I used a condom. I’ve always used them.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Every time.”

“Me, too,” she promised.

Was it bad that she was secretly giddy over the fact that she’d be the first to know

what it felt like to make love to Chase Boyer without a single thing between them? Scottie didn't think so.

"If you aren't comfortable with this, we can stop—"

She kissed him to shut him up. "I trust you, Chase."

With my life.

A flurry of emotions filled his entrancing stare. His lips pressed against hers once more before he told her, "I trust you, too, sugar."

Now that they had that covered...

Scottie held his gaze, sliding a hand between their bodies. Chase hissed in a sharp breath when she found him hard and hot. The tiny bead of moisture on the tip was a sign that he was more than ready.

She aligned his body with hers. Their eyes remained locked with one another's.

Chase eased his hips forward, entering her slowly. Inch by careful inch, he allowed her body time to adjust to his size. It took a few tries, but when he became fully seated, Scottie felt as if she'd finally found the one place she truly belonged.

His guttural moan echoed off the bedroom walls as his hips thrust forward and back in an unhurried rhythm. It didn't take long, however, for him to pick up the pace. And when he did...

"God, baby." He spoke between thrusts. "You feel...so...good."

"So do you," she panted, finding it harder and harder to breathe.

Not because he was going too fast or crushing her with his weight. It was the overwhelming emotions swarming her entire being as she and Chase continued making love.

She bent her legs more, allowing his cock room to slide in deeper. Chase slid a hand down the outside of one of her thighs, hooking the back of her knee and hoisting it higher.

Scottie cried out when he tilted his hips just so. The internal sensation from the move was so intense, she wasn't entirely certain she'd survive.

Their bodies continued moving as one, bringing them closer and closer to the release they so desperately craved. She let her head fall back, her eyes shutting from the pressure building within.

And when she came a second time, Scottie called out his name.

She quivered and shook as her second climax of the night burst free, sizzling through every nerve ending her body possessed. Chase's movements shifted, then. They became rougher and a bit uneven.

His breathing shallowed as tiny beads of sweat began to bead across his forehead. When he found his own release, he closed his eyes, releasing a guttural moan.

Hours later, after a shared shower and a quick bite to refuel, they lay curled together beneath the covers. Their bodies fit together like two pieces of the perfect puzzle. The other half she'd always known was missing.

She'd give anything to spend every night exactly like this. Wrapped in the warmth and safety of Chase's arms. And the last thought whispering through her mind as she drifted off into a peaceful sleep...

I don't ever want to be without him again.

11

Two weeks later...

“Uh... helloooo . Earth to Chase...”

Chase blinked, looking up from his desk to find Lucky standing in his office doorway. The expression on the man’s face said he’d been trying to catch Chase’s attention for a while.

“Sorry, what?” He gave his teammate his full and undivided attention.

In typical Lucky fashion, the cocky bastard strolled into the room like he owned the place, plopping his ass down in the chair positioned directly across from Chase’s.

“You good?” The other man’s crystal blue eyes searched his.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Better than good. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just noticed you seemed a little off lately, and I wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

Chase frowned, confused by both Lucky’s concern and out in left-field assessment. “Off how?”

“Dude, you’ve been as distracted as a dog on a squirrel farm. Every time I’ve seen you the last couple of weeks, it’s like you’ve got your head lost up in the clouds.”

His lips parted with the reflex to make up an excuse or lie, but the truth was, he had been distracted. In a big, big way.

“Sorry,” he apologized, rolling his office chair a few inches closer to his desk. “I guess I’ve just had a lot on my mind.”

Lucky nodded. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with your recent reunion with a certain high school sweetheart, now, would it?”

It has everything to do with her.

When Chase refrained from saying those same words aloud—or any at all, for that matter—his friend took his silence for what it was. An admission of guilt.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Lucky flashed a knowing grin. “I’m guessing things between you two are going well?”

They were better than well. Things between him and Scottie were...

Fucking perfect.

Chase stopped the smile from forming on his lips a half-a-second too late. Before he could even attempt a lame-ass excuse the man probably wouldn’t buy anyway, the smartass was right there, waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce.

“Ah ha!” The computer genius sat up straighter in his chair. Pointing a finger toward Chase, he exclaimed a confident, “I knew it! What did I tell you?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific in your questioning, Oh Wise One.”

“Whatever. Cut the bullshit, Boyer. I knew you two were going to hook back up

again.”

After a moment’s pause, Chase responded sternly, “Yeah, well...if you came here looking for all the sordid details, you’ve come to the wrong place.”

It was one thing to let his friend in on the fact that he and Scottie were back together. Revealing intimate details of the personal, private moments they’d shared in the sanctity of her bed, however...

Yeah, that’s not fucking happening.

“So something definitely happened.” Lucky smirked. “Otherwise, there wouldn’t be any details for you to have to worry about.”

Damn. He’d walked his ass right into that one.

Knowing his friend was like a dog with a bone, Chase relented and gave him the basics. “Fine. Scottie and I are...together.”

The other man’s goofy smile spread wide. “That’s awesome, Chase. Really. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. I’m...happy, too.”

“You should be. But...” Lucky’s dark brows gave a slight dip. “I’m sensing some hesitation. What’s up with that? You not into her as much as you thought you’d still be?”

“What?” His expression turned incredulous. “No, dickhead. It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just...” Chase sighed, falling back into his chair. “I’m all in, you know? I mean, I knew Scottie was the one the very first time we kissed. But then her mom got sick, and everything changed. She moved away, and...you already know about all that.” He gave a quick shake of his head. “Anyway, here we are, and I’m as all-in as ever.”

“But she’s not,” Lucky presumed.

“I don’t know what she is, to be honest.”

“You haven’t told her how you feel?”

“Not yet.”

It was Lucky’s turn to shoot him an are you an idiot look. “Why the hell not?”

“Because things between us are still so new. I don’t want to push her too far too fast and end up?—”

“Too fast?” Lucky’s boisterous laugh echoed off his office walls. “Dude, it’s been fourteen years. And that’s not even counting however long you two dated when you were kids. Trust me...” He sat up straight before sliding himself to the edge of his chair and resting his elbows on the top of Chase’s desk. “If things between you two have already fallen right back into place, that woman isn’t sitting around hoping you take your slow, sweet time.”

Chase stared at his friend from over the top of his computer screen. Waiting a beat, he let his lips curl into a grin. “Guess you really are the brains of this place.”

“I’ve been sayin’.” His teammate pushed himself off the desk and stretched his arms out to his sides. “About time someone recognizes they’re in the presence of

brilliance.”

“All right, all right.” Chase snorted as he rose to his feet. “Let’s not get carried away.”

The other man stood, the two friends meeting near the corner of the desk.

Returning to his previously serious tone, Chase offered Lucky his hand. “Thanks, man. I think you’re right.”

“Usually am.” Lucky took his hand and gave it a good, firm shake. “But seriously. Just talk to her. If she’s not in the same place yet, at least you’ll know. And if she is, the two of you can quit wasting time and start going after that life you had planned before everything turned to shit.”

He released his grip, and the two men walked across the carpeted floor to his office door. “I gotta say...” Chase stopped just shy of stepping out into the hall. “I never thought I’d be taking love life advice from the likes of you.”

“No offense taken, asshole.” Lucky shot him a teasing frown. But then, “Just kiddin’. To be honest, I never thought I’d be the one giving it. In all seriousness, though...” The former SEAL’s gaze intensified. “My life is a million times better with Ellie in it. And I know for a fact that Arch and Hayes would say the same about their women.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“Good. ’Cause you can ask any one of us how we felt when our women’s lives were on the line and we thought we might lose them forever...” He cleared the emotion from his throat. “That’s a special kind of hell you don’t ever want to experience. So if you think you and Scottie have what the rest of us have, don’t walk, brother. You fucking run to that woman the first chance you get. Like...today! You go to her, man

the hell up, and tell her how you feel.”

His friend’s impassioned speech left Chase blinking. It also left one hell of an impression.

He’s right. You need to talk to her. Let her know she’s your end game.

“Thanks, Lucky. I really appreciate?—”

“Heads up!” Archer gave Chase’s shoulder a slap as he walked by in haste. “Webb’s on in the war room. Hayes said it’s urgent.”

The expression on Lucky’s face hardened. At the same time, Chase felt the muscles along his spine grow tense.

It was the second unscheduled meeting with SECNAV in as many weeks. And with each new call, it seemed as if his team was finally getting closer to uncovering the truth.

He and Lucky fell in line behind Archer, walking the length of the hallway to the last door on the right. They waited while the team’s demolitions expert entered his personal security code, and one by one, the three government-trained operatives made their way into the soundproofed room.

The heavy, fireproof door snicked shut behind them. Three small beeps letting them know the electronic locks were in place once more. Chase’s attention immediately went to the conference table to his right, where Logan and Van were already seated.

“What’s going on?” He made his way to his usual spot at the table.

Logan tipped his head toward the giant screen mounted high on the wall and said,

“We’re about to find out.”

Right on cue, Webb’s oversized image appeared. The powerful man didn’t wait for Archer and Lucky to fully sit before diving right in with his reason for the call.

“I apologize for keeping you gentlemen late, but I thought you’d want to know...we found her.”

“Dawari?” Chase assumed. His gaze slid away from the screen for a quick scan of the others around him.

“Affirmative,” Webb confirmed. “Present intel shows Kaamisha Dawari, along with two of her most trusted lieutenants, has returned to Kandahar.”

Fucking Kandahar.

The city where it all began.

“How fitting.” Archer seemed to share Chase’s sentiment toward the second largest city in Afghanistan.

“Guess to finally reach the end of this thing”—he looked around the table—“we have to go back to the very beginning.”

“When?” All eyes turned to Logan.

It made sense that the man was worried about the timeline. His wife was due to have their first child in a couple more weeks.

“If this was a fully sanctioned job with government approval and support...two days. Sending you boys in off-book? It’s gonna take some time. Two, maybe three weeks.”

Van shot the man a deep scowl. “It’s going to take you three fucking weeks to drop us where you know our target is sitting right now? She could be a fucking ghost in three weeks.”

“I’m well aware, Mr. Braddock.” Secretary Webb met Van’s disapproving gaze. “But this isn’t Hollywood. I can’t just make one phone call and get the resources needed for a mission such as this. I have contacts to reach. Ones I know I can trust to keep this whole thing under wraps. Then there’s the matter of transportation to get you and your team out of the country and into enemy territory without raising any red flags. Not to mention securing a safehouse, weapons, ammo, wheels for once you’re there. So while I can appreciate the desire to capture Ms. Dawari and get justice for your friend, you’re only going to have one shot at this. We need to make it count.”

Webb wasn’t wrong to want to dot every redacted I and cross every whited-out T. Chase knew that. Everyone in the room knew it.

Including Van.

Though it was clear the grumpy medic wasn’t happy about the realization, Van let the argument go. Chase slid a glimpse in Logan’s direction to see how he was handling the choice he’d most likely have to make...

Go after the woman who stole Hunt’s life and ended their Naval careers or risk letting her get away to avoid missing the birth of his first child.

Chase knew what he’d do if it was him . And he had a pretty good feeling he knew what Logan’s choice would be, as well.

Family first.

It was a no-brainer for him. It was how he’d been raised. Logan, however...not so

much. Thankfully, the other man hadn't inherited his asshole father's abusive genes, instead sharing in the team's collective ideology that family was everything.

Theirs may not be a family made of blood, but that didn't matter. Every man in that room would give their lives willingly to save one of the team.

But even as that knowledge resonated with Chase, he also knew the married Eagle's Nest operatives would put their wives' well-being above all else. And he didn't blame them one fucking bit.

I'd be the same way if it was Scottie's life on the line.

The conversation he'd had with Lucky before Webb's call came rushing back. When they did get called up to go after Kaamisha Dawari, Chase was going to have to leave her behind.

He'd never had to do that before...leave a woman he loved behind for a mission. This time would be his first. As he and the others made their way out of the war room, Chase knew what he had to do.

They may have a couple of weeks before the call comes in to go, but he refused to wait that long to come clean. Scottie would know how he felt about her, not two weeks from now, but tonight.

It would require a quick stop at his apartment on the way to hers, but after that, Chase's intentions toward the sexy chef would be crystal clear. And if he was lucky and she somehow felt the same way, well...

I'll be the happiest man in the entire fucking world.

The pit stop at home took a bit longer than planned due to an accident a few miles

from the office. He also took the fastest shower known to man, sprayed an extra spritz of cologne, and combed his hair just so.

By the time he turned onto Scottie's street, the sun was almost set. He glanced down at the clock, mentally noting she'd texted him an hour ago, letting him know she was headed home from work.

Perfect timing.

Nerves swirled inside his gut at what he had planned. But nerves weren't the same as doubt, and Chase knew to the depths of his soul this was the path he was destined to take.

He drove past one block and then another. When he approached the block where Scottie's adorable house sat waiting, his mind was filled with thoughts of the future, but as his truck carried him closer, he noticed a car that had just parked several houses up ahead.

Dark sedan. Slightly crooked back license plate. It's embossed letters and numbers...

AMF0984.

Chase's grip on the steering wheel tightened to the point he thought it might break. He let his foot off the gas, flipped off his headlights, and pulled over in front of an unlit house.

Sliding down in his seat, he pulled out his phone, and used the camera's zoom to double-check the validity of his suspicion. Checking the screen, he used his thumbs to enlarge the image. His heart kicked against his ribs when he realized...

It's the same car.

The same car. Same phony license plate. And everything in him said the bastard hunched down behind the wheel was the same man who'd been watching them outside Catalina's.

But he wasn't outside a restaurant where anyone else could be. The asshole was parked one house down from Scottie's. And from the way he was sitting, hers was the house he appeared to be watching.

The fuck you are.

Chase turned off his ignition and unbuckled his seatbelt, releasing the latch on his console's main compartment. He lifted the leatherbound lid before retrieving his SIG P226 MK25.

Out of habit and training—because he always kept his gun loaded and ready to go—he dropped the mag to ensure it was full. Sliding back the chamber, he eyed the gold round already present, his ingrained weapons check completed in record time.

To avoid revealing his presence when opening his door, he reached up to the control panel for his truck's internal lights and switched them to off . After turning his cell to silent, he shoved the device back into his jeans' front pocket.

Chase turned and looked at what he could see of Scottie's house. The front porch light was shining bright, and he could see the small window above her kitchen sink. There was a low light coming through, and though it was hard to make out from this distance, he could've sworn he saw her shadow moving around inside.

Don't worry, sugar. I've got you.

Renewed anger toward the man watching her home ignited. How fucking dare he bring Scottie into whatever shitstorm the asshole was intent on stirring up.

He didn't give two shits if this guy did work for Kaamisha Dawari. He didn't care who he was or what his reasons were for staking out Scottie's beloved new home. The bastard was on Chase's turf now, and by God, he was putting an end to this shit right the fuck now.

Crawling over his truck's console and into the other seat, he slowly opened the passenger door. Once he was clear, he quietly pushed the door shut before crouching down on his way to the car parked a few feet away.

Chase used that and the other cars lined up between his truck and his target as cover as he cautiously made his way closer. The gun in his right hand was like an extension of his arm. A lethal addition he wasn't afraid to use.

He approached the man's illegally plated car. With his left hand pressed against the rear panel's cool metal, Chase kept himself balanced as he crept the final few inches.

When he made it to his mark, he glanced up at the car's passenger side view mirror. Thanks to the glow from the streetlamp a few yards behind him, Chase could tell the car's occupant was still looking the other way.

The passenger window was down, making his job that much easier. But something nagged within his rage-filled gut. Something he couldn't bring himself to ignore.

His first reaction had been the guy was possibly a pro. Hell, Lucky had thought so, too. But as Chase remained squatted, he realized a full minute had passed, and the asshole had yet to even realize he was there.

So...not a pro.

No. The chances of that were dwindling fast. That didn't mean, however, that the prick wasn't dangerous. The question was who that danger was headed for...and

why.

Time to find out.

Chase drew in a steady breath. He kept his finger off the trigger, just as he'd been trained. In his head, he counted down from three and then...

“Move a fucking muscle and it'll be the last thing you ever do.”

He stood at the man's passenger door. His SIG was pointed at the back of the man's head. His focus bouncing between the spot he knew his bullet would hit and the camera resting casually across the man's lap.

“W-what...what do you w-want?” The guy lifted his trembling hands slowly into the air. “I have m-money. It's not a lot, b-but?—”

“I don't want your fucking money, asshole,” Chase growled.

“Then w-what? If it's drugs you're after, y-you've got the wrong g-guy.”

That nagging feeling in his gut intensified. Something about this wasn't right. The guy didn't act anything like a pro. He was shaking from head-to-toe for Christ's sake.

Could be an act.

It very well could be a show. A performance to throw him off his game. But it wasn't going to work. Not when Scottie's safety might be in jeopardy.

“What I want”—Chase spoke slowly—“is for you to keep those hands right where they are. Now, I'm going to come around the front of your car, and then I'm going to open your door. On my command, you will get out of your car, and if you make a

single move that could be construed as a threat, I will put a bullet through your fucking brain. Tell me you understand.”

“I-I understand.”

“Good.”

Moving swiftly, he rounded the car’s front bumper. Chase kept his gun held tight and at the ready as he opened the door and stood to the side.

“Get out.”

The man started to reach for his camera, but Chase used his free hand to fist the guy’s black jacket and yank him out of the car.

“Hey! What are you?—”

“Don’t go reaching for shit, dumbass!” He kept his voice low but the command sharp as the man and his camera fell to the pavement below. “Link your fingers behind your head.”

The man didn’t fight back or disobey. He did what Chase said when Chase said it. And the man was still literally quivering in his boots.

“Who hired you to follow me?”

“I’m not f-following you,” the scared man claimed. “I don’t even know who you are!”

“Bullshit!” He squatted down and pressed the gun against the back of the man’s skull. “I saw you.”

“I swear!”

“Stop fucking lying!” The pressure behind the barrel was increased. “I was there, remember?”

“I’m not lying! I have no idea w-who you are!”

“Bullshit! I was standing on that fucking sidewalk when you?—”

“So was she!”

The man’s words sank in, his stomach filling with an overwhelming dread. Keeping his weapon held securely in place, he picked up the guy’s camera, immediately opening the bastard’s most recently captured images.

Scottie.

Chase scrolled through numerous images. They were of her. He was with her in a few, but every fucking picture was of her!

Outside her home. Walking in and out of the shelter. Getting into and out of her car. Pushing a grocery cart through the fucking store.

As he continued looking at the disgusting display of obsession, Chase realized the asshole had been watching her for at least the last several weeks.

What. The. Fuck?

His vision turned blood red, the fury rising within him unlike any he’d ever experienced. He wanted to kill the man right goddamn now. He wanted to curl his finger around his gun’s trigger, and he wanted to?—”

“I’m a reporter!” the man nearly shouted. “I-I mean Miss Cahill no harm. I’m just...I-I’m just working on a story for the Seattle Gazette! Check my ID if you don’t believe me!”

A...reporter?

Chase yanked the man’s bulging wallet free from his back pocket, flipping the leather flaps open. Tilting the plastic window housing the driver’s license, he checked out the guy’s name, address, and picture...

Levi Taylor.

The address was local, and the picture matched the man’s face. But that didn’t mean the ID was real, so he called the one person who could tell him for sure.

With the camera resting back on the pavement near Chase’s booted foot, he continued holding the gun on his prisoner while pulling his phone free. Lucky answered on the second ring.

“Tell me you didn’t fuck things up with your girl.”

“I need you to run a name.”

The seriousness in his tone must’ve resonated with his teammate, because Lucky’s response was a quick and serious, “Tell me what you need.”

After hurriedly catching the other man up on his current situation, Chase relayed the information Lucky needed to run the man’s background. After sending him a pic of the confiscated ID to confirm the name matched the photo, he did his best to keep his breathing steady while waiting for the results to come in.

“Okay, so it looks like your guy is a freelance reporter who’s lived in the city for the past eighteen years.” The sound of computer keys being pressed came through the speaker. “Guy’s got a long list of temporary contracts with several different news and media outlets around the city.”

“Can you tell who he’s working for now? He claims to be doing a story for the Gazette.”

A few clicks of the keyboard later and Lucky came back with, “Looks like he’s on their current list of pending freelance stories. His proposed story title is...oh, well shit. This might explain things.”

“What?” Chase kept his eyes on the man still lying face-down on the ground.

“The title he submitted to the Gazette’s employee system... ‘Social Media Dropouts: Where Are they, now?’” Lucky paused for a few more clicks. “Everything matches, brother. Guy has a few minor run-ins with the law. Mostly trespassing shit from being an overzealous reporter. Other than that and a few parking tickets, there’s nothing to suggest he means anyone any real harm.”

Chase wanted to believe Lucky’s intel. Any other time it wouldn’t even be a question. But this was Scottie’s safety they were talking about. And when it came to protecting her, he never could be too careful.

“Thanks, man,” he told Lucky. “I’ll check back in soon.”

“Sure thing, brother. Keep me posted.”

Ending the call, Chase returned his full attention to Taylor. “Why do you have fake plates on your car? And why the hell did you take off the way you did that night when I tried talking to you outside Catalina’s?”

“Why?” The man released a humorless laugh. “Look at you, man! You’ve got a fucking gun to my head! Of course, I took off!”

“And the license plates?”

“Same reason! Listen, man.” He paused to catch his breath. “I work freelance, okay? That means I have to take my stories wherever I can get them. But this job...I don’t exactly make a lot of friends doing what I do, if you catch my drift. Putting a fake plate on my car helps keep my identity safeguarded... usually. ”

Chase processed everything from start to finish. Putting all the pieces together like a slow-motion picture. By the time he was all caught up to the present moment, he realized...

He’s telling the truth.

“Get up.” He kept the gun pointed toward the man just in case.

But when Levi Taylor turned around, and Chase caught sight of the front of his khaki pants, it became quite obvious the man wasn’t a threat.

“Yeah, yeah, I pissed my pants.” Taylor looked more embarrassed than pissed. “Can I please have my wallet back so I can go?”

He tossed the man his wallet. Bent down and picked up the fancy-looking camera. Rather than hand the expensive equipment straight over to the slimy piece of shit, Chase first removed the camera’s memory card.

“Hey! You can’t?—”

“You’re lucky I don’t bust the fucking thing in half.” He shoved the camera against

the idiot's chest. "Now get the hell out of here, and don't even think about coming back."

"It's a public street, asshole. I can be here if I?—"

Chase grabbed the mouthy prick around his scrawny neck and swung him around, slamming his back up against his car. "If I see you anywhere near Scottie Cahill again, I will come after you. And next time, pissing yourself will be the least of your concerns."

With that, he lowered his gun, released his grip, and took a step back so the guy could leave. Taylor wasted no time jumping back into his car. Dumbass didn't bother with his seatbelt before peeling off and speeding away.

Chase closed his eyes and took a deep breath. And another. And...another.

Feeling more in control of his ramped-up emotions, he did a quick side-to-side check for any of Scottie's neighbors who could have possibly been watching the show. Luckily, there wasn't a single soul in sight.

Thankful for neighbors who keep to themselves, Chase went back to get his truck, parking it in Scottie's slightly inclined paved driveway. His adrenaline had every nerve-ending on edge, another reminder of how quickly their lives could turn.

He walked up to the door, tapped his knuckles against the stained wood, and when Scottie opened the door, looking like a freshly showered angel come to life, he couldn't keep from blurting out?—

"I love you."

Scottie blinked, her gorgeous green eyes growing wide with obvious shock. She

stuttered her response as she took a step backward “H-hi. And...um...w-what did you just say?”

Chase stepped over the threshold and into her home. With his eyes locked on hers, he blindly kicked the door shut behind him. And then he did what he’d been planning to do from the moment he left work to come here.

He hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her body flush with his. “I said...” He spun them around and carefully pressed her back against the recently closed door. “I love you.”

“Chase...” Moisture filled her confused, emotional stare.

Tell her everything.

“I’ve been in love with you for what feels like my whole life. Even when I tried to pretend I wasn’t, you were here.” He placed a palm over his heart. “You’ve always been here, Scottie.”

Fucking always.

She blinked again, a single tear escaping the corner of one eye. For a moment, he thought he’d totally fucked things up because she just stood there, not saying a word. But then Scottie brought a hand to his scruff-covered cheek and whispered back, “Oh, Chase. I’ve always loved you, too.” She blindly swiped another fallen tear away. “I never stopped.”

Thank you, God!

“I want forever with you, Scottie,” he stated bluntly. “Since high school, I’ve known this was where I should be. That you are the person I was meant to be with. Hell, I

can even prove it!”

A touch of humor flickered across her shimmering gaze as one side of her kissable lips curved upward. “You have proof that you want forever with me?” She chuckled.

Instead of laughing, Chase held her stare as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. But not just any ring...

“I bought this the day I signed my enlistment papers for the Navy.” He held up the small diamond ring.

“Y-you...what?” Those round eyes of hers grew wide as saucers. “Chase, you were barely eighteen.” Her face grew pale with the falling of her smile. “You enlisted the week before my mom died. That was...” She swallowed hard. “That was only two weeks before I?—”

“Left.” He nodded, his chest tightening from the memories of that night. “Yeah, I know.”

“Oh, Chase. I’m so?—”

His mouth covered hers before she could finish her sentence. “Don’t, sweetheart.” Chase kissed her again. “Don’t say you’re sorry. Things happened that were out of your control. Out of both of our controls. That’s all in the past. What I’m talking about...what I’m choosing to focus on...is our future.” He took her left hand in his while holding up the ring with his right. “This is the future I want, Scottie. You and me. Forever. I just need to know if you want that, too.”

Scottie’s lids fluttered quickly, her damp lashes releasing a slew of silver streaks racing down over her flawless cheeks. “Of course, I want that, Chase.” Her watery smile widened. “It’s what I’ve always wanted. More than anything else in the world.”

His heart swelled to the point he thought it would explode right out of his chest. “Then marry me, Scottie.” He slid the ring over her left ring finger, relieved she still wore the same size as before. “Say you’ll be mine for the rest of my life.”

“Yes.” Scottie threw her arms around his neck and slammed her mouth to his. “Yes, I’ll marry you. Because you’ve always been mine, Chase. And I’ve always, always been yours.”

He wasn’t sure who moved first and couldn’t give a shit less. The only thing Chase knew was one minute they were both professing their love, and the next...

They were naked.

Their clothes were strewn on the floor around them. Chase was holding Scottie securely in his arms. Her legs were wrapped tightly around his waist, and his raging hard cock was thrusting in and out of her welcoming heat.

When they said the words to each other again hours later, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind where they stood. He was hers. She was his. And no one was ever going to take her away from him again.

12

Two weeks later...

“Thank you all so much!” Natalie Hayes beamed from the front of her and Logan’s living room. “For coming, and for...” The mother-to-be scanned the recently unwrapped gifts strewn about the floor. “For all of this. You guys seriously spent way too much money on stuff for the baby.”

Scottie couldn’t help but to smile. Though they’d only known each other a short while, she’d come to really like Natalie. And from what she’d seen so far of Cassie and Ellie—the other two Eagle’s Nest wives—she was confident she was going to like them, too.

“No they didn’t,” Logan teasingly argued against his wife’s claim. “I know what these guys make. Trust me...they can afford it.”

Natalie laughed, her rounded belly jostling up and down to the beat of the joyful sound. “I know what they make, too, remember? I am the one who signs their paychecks, after all.”

“Fair point.” Logan nodded. “Still, our baby deserves the best. Besides, these gifts were given with love by our baby’s honorary uncles and aunts. We’re pretty much obligated to accept.”

“Obligated, huh?”

“Yep.” Logan leaned in and kissed his wife on the temple. “It’s in the rules.”

Natalie’s belly shook again with another round of laughter. “Since when do you...or any of the men in this room, for that matter...follow all the rules?”

“The woman does have a point,” Chase joined in the playful banter. His blue eyes slid past Archer, Lucky, and a sullen-looking Van. “Don’t know about y’all, but I’m gonna have fun watching Hayes attempt to become the disciplinarian.”

Scottie tried imagining Chase as a father. It wasn’t hard since she’d envisioned that very thing countless times in the past.

She as Chase’s wife. The two of them working together as lifelong partners. Raising the family she’d always dreamed of having.

Maybe some dreams do come true, after all.

“Nah, man.” Archer gave a quick shake of his head. “Hayes will be fine. Lucky’s the one facing a rude fuckin’ awakening if he and Ellie ever decide to give parenthood a try.” Archer slapped Lucky on the back of one shoulder. “Can you imagine this guy layin’ down the law with a cute little mini-Ellie staring up at him with her long, dark pigtails and big, blue, puppy dog eyes?”

“Whatever.” Lucky shrugged the other man’s hand away. “I’ll be a great dad.” His blue gaze landed on his beautiful wife. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

Ellie—the gorgeous brunette attorney Scottie had met just two hours before—gave a dramatic roll of her own striking blue eyes. “Archer’s right. When the time comes, you’re totally going to be the ‘fun’ parent, and I’m going to end up having to be the mean one.”

“Well...” Chase chimed back in. “I mean, you are a lawyer. Isn’t being mean a requirement?”

The room burst into laughter when both Ellie and Cassie lifted their hands simultaneously to give Chase the bird.

“I wouldn’t run that mouth of yours too much, pretty boy.” One of Ellie’s dark brow arched high. “You’ve already put a ring on your girl’s finger, and we all know what that means.”

“Yeah?” Chase challenged back. “And what’s that?”

“You know. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” He waved a hand in the air to cut her off. “But Scottie and I have only been engaged for like two weeks. You and Lucky—and Arch and Cass, for that matter—have been doin’ the whole ball-and-chain bit for a while, now. So, when it comes to babies, all I have to say is...you first.”

More laughter ensued as Cassie and Ellie began picking up the mess of torn paper, shiny bows, and long, untied ribbons. While they got to work on that, the guys began a casual meander toward what was left of the food.

Scottie knew she should pitch in and help Archer and Lucky’s wives, but for some reason, her feet couldn’t quite seem to move. Her chest tightened as she stood in place, her mind racing to decipher a deeper meaning behind Chase’s comment to Ellie.

You first.

What had he meant by that? Was it a simple joke whose intent stemmed solely from

jest? Or had Chase seriously meant he wasn't ready to become a father?

Until recently, Scottie had all but given up on the dream of getting married and having a family. The way her luck always ran in the wrong direction, she'd even started believing it was probably for the best.

But now...

"Oh!" Natalie's brown gaze widened as she brought a quick hand to her midsection. "I swear it felt like the baby just did a complete somersault."

The baby.

On reflex, Scottie slid a hidden glance in Chase's direction. He was standing in the open kitchen several feet away. His face was full of laughter and joy as he and his friends filled their plates with the finger foods and desserts she'd been more than happy to prepare for today's intimate celebration among friends.

Only as she stood in the home of the couple responsible for the conception of Eagle's Nest Securities, it didn't feel as if they were spending time with friends. Between the closeness and familiarity—as well as the lighthearted bantering—it felt a whole lot more like being with...

Family.

And suddenly, Scottie felt the overwhelming urge to be anywhere else.

"Hey Natalie?" She glanced over at the mother-to-be. "Where did you say your restroom is?"

The pretty CPA looked up from what she was doing and smiled. "Just down the hall."

She pointed to the area behind where Scottie stood. “Second door on the right.”

“Thanks. I just need a minute, and then I’ll come back and help with the clean-up.”

“Take your time, Scottie.” Cassie’s baby blues met hers as the gorgeous blonde held open a large black trash bag for Ellie. “There’s really not all that much picking up to do.”

“Cass is right.” Ellie tossed a large ball of wadded wrapping paper into the bag. “Besides, you busted your tail to create all that amazing food. I’d say you’ve done your fair share of the work.”

“Agreed.” Natalie flashed her a wide smile.

Doing her best to keep her expression schooled to avoid raising any suspicion, Scottie held her smile in place as best she could. The last thing she wanted was to make today’s celebration about herself by having a complete and total breakdown in the middle of the room.

Her issues would still be there tomorrow. Today’s focus needed to be on Natalie, Logan, and their unborn baby.

Baby.

“I-I’ll be right back.”

Not giving Natalie—or anyone else—the chance to pick up on the anxiety and nerves she was trying so desperately to keep hidden, Scottie spun around and headed down the hallway. Entering the spacious half-bath, she shut the door behind her, making sure it was locked.

Once she knew she was safe and away from prying eyes, she turned away from the door before pulling in the longest, deepest breath she could muster. A few seconds later, Scottie released it slowly as she made her way to the sink.

She placed her palms against the countertop's cool surface. Locking her elbows, she let her head fall between her tense shoulders, giving herself a moment to simply breathe.

That was it. That's all she did. She didn't think about babies or marriage. She just let herself...breathe. In and out, her lungs pushed and pulled the air inside the room as she worked to collect her spiraling thoughts.

A few minutes later, Scottie was still standing there, still focusing on little more than breathing, when a gentle knock sounded from the other side of the door.

"Hey, Scottie?" Natalie's soft, almost hushed voice came through. "You okay in there?"

Crap. Had she been hiding out longer than she'd realized? It hadn't seemed as if she'd been in the bathroom all that long, but the other woman's concern said otherwise.

Either way, Scottie knew she needed to respond quickly. Otherwise, Natalie would really start to worry and most likely bring Chase in to help figure out what was wrong.

"I'm good!" She hollered back quickly, turning on the water for good measure. After washing her hands needlessly, she dried them off and forced herself to open the door.

"Sorry." She flashed the other woman a smile. "I didn't mean to hog the bathroom for so long."

“Oh, I don’t need to pee.” Natalie shook her head with a grin. “Of course, give it five minutes, and that will probably change.”

Scottie chuckled nervously, knowing her new friend was attempting to joke around. “Right.” Another trembling laugh. “Because of the baby.”

The baby.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You seemed a little worried or...something during the shower.”

Or something.

“I’m fine,” Scottie rushed the lie. “Really. Everything’s fine.”

A knowing look fell over the other woman’s pretty face. In an awkward move, she squeezed her swollen belly past Scottie, entering the bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

“See? Now I know something’s up.” Natalie turned back around and faced her. “One ‘fine’ in a response is acceptable. Two or more is overkill, so come on. Spill it.”

Scottie’s heart gave a hard kick, and her already fired-up nerves getting a healthy new dose of adrenaline.

“I don’t...” She shook her head with a stutter. “I-I don’t know what you’re?—”

“Oh, that’s right.” The other woman said this as if it explained everything. “You fit in with us so well, I sometimes forget you’re still new to the group. Okay, so here’s how this works. You’re with Chase, and that makes you one of us.”

“One of you?”

“Yep.”

That was it. Nothing more.

“I don’t understand.”

“Then I’ll make it simple. You and Chase are getting married—which, by the way, we are all so freaking excited about—so that makes you an official member of the Eagle’s Nest family. Since family sticks together, your problems become our problems. And that’s not us being nosey or butting in. We’re here to help. I’m here to help. So...” When Scottie remained silent, Natalie went with a prodding, “Okay, so this is the part where you tell me what’s wrong, and then I do what I can to help.”

Tears rushed to the surface before Scottie could stop them, and though she did her damndest to keep them from falling, one fell from the corner of her eye. “Today’s supposed to be about you, Natalie.” She swiped the tear away. “Not me and my...issues.”

“Nonsense.” The other woman waddled over to the toilet, unceremoniously putting down the lid and taking a seat. “Listen, Scottie.” A sweet expression fell over Natalie’s pretty face. “I know we don’t know each other all that well, yet. But one thing you should know about me is I value the friends in my life. And with that comes trust.”

Scottie stared back at the other woman, confused. “You can trust me, Natalie.”

The mom-to-be simply chuckled and shook her head. “No, I know I can trust you. Both Chase and Sloane do, which is all the proof I need.”

“Then what are you?—”

“I’m trying to get you to see that you can trust me. I’m saying if you have something you want to get off of your chest but you aren’t ready to discuss it with Chase, you can tell me. And just so you know, I’m not the type of woman who’d run straight to Cass or Ellie to spill all the juicy tea. Nor will I say anything to Logan. Not unless I have your permission.” She rested a hand over her expanded midsection and sat back against the toilet’s porcelain tank. “I guess what I’m trying to say is, life or death situation aside, whatever you tell me will stay between us. You have my word on that.”

More tears threatened to fall, but thankfully, Scottie managed to keep them at bay. She wasn’t used to having girlfriends to turn to when she was worried or upset, but maybe it was time she gave that sort of thing a try.

“You won’t tell Chase?”

“Not unless your life or someone else’s depends on it, no. Or, of course, if you were to do something stupid like cheat on the sweet man. Then all bets are off.” Natalie’s lips curled into an unthreatening smile. “But you don’t exactly strike me as the cheating type, so?—”

“I love Chase with all my heart.” She made that point very clear. “I’d never do anything to hurt him. Not ever.”

“Then you and I will get along just fine. So, come on. Tell me what’s got you so worried.”

Scottie drew in a breath, releasing it slowly, before she gave her new friend the shocking news.

Here goes nothing.

“I, uh...” She swallowed past the giant knot in her throat. “I’m pretty sure I’m...pregnant.”

There. She’d done it. She’d said the words out loud.

“You’re what?” Moving faster than any woman that far along in their pregnancy should be able, Natalie practically jumped back up to her feet. Wrapping her arms around Scottie as best she could with the growing baby taking up space between them. The other woman sounded genuinely excited by the news. “Oh, my gosh! That’s such great news! Congratulations!”

But was it great news?

Scottie thought back to the first time she and Chase had sex. She’d told him she was on the pill, and that was the God’s honest truth. Somehow, the contraceptive must have failed.

And now...

Now, I have to figure out a way to tell him we’re going to have a baby.

“Wait...” Natalie pulled back and looked her in the eye. “Is this... not good news?”

“No, it is.” Scottie nodded. “At least, I think it is. It’s just that?—”

“Chase doesn’t know.”

She shook her head, rolling her lips nervously inward. “I’m planning on telling him today, once we get back to his place.” They had stayed there the last few nights. “The

thing is, we just got engaged like two weeks ago. Plus, I'm on the freaking pill! This..." Her throat worked to swallow down her nerves as her gaze fell to Natalie's rounded midsection. "This wasn't supposed to happen. Not so soon."

A flash of understanding lifted Natalie's mouth into a soft smile. "Sorry to be the one to tell you this, hun, but right now is the exact time this was supposed to happen. Otherwise, it wouldn't have."

The woman's words—along with her casual shrug—made it all seem so simple. But it wasn't simple. It seemed as if nothing in Scottie's life ever was.

"You know what I mean." She kept her voice low.

Natalie nodded. "I think I do. You're worried Chase won't be happy about the baby when you two haven't even had a chance to say your vows. But here's the thing, Scottie. You have no way of knowing for sure how he'll react until you tell him."

"That's the problem. I don't know how to tell him. Especially after what he said to Ellie about how we aren't even married yet, and?—"

"Oh, honey." Empathy shone brightly in her pretty brown gaze. "He was just giving her shit. You know how Chase likes to joke around."

"I do." Scottie nodded. "But this is huge, and every time I try to think of the best way to tell him, my mind draws a blank."

"You just have to say the words." The woman made it sound so easy. But then, "And I know that's easier said than done, but I also know Chase. He and I have been friends for several years, and I'm telling you...I have never seen him look at another woman the way he looks at you."

“I appreciate that, Natalie. I do, but?—”

“Nope. No buts.” She gave Scottie a pointed look. “Listen, if there’s one thing I’m absolutely certain of, it’s that Chase is one hundred percent, head over boots in love with you. And there isn’t a doubt in my mind that, planned or unplanned, he’s going to love the baby the two of you created together just as much. So don’t borrow trouble where there isn’t any. And maybe...don’t underestimate Chase.” Her smile spread a bit wider. “You never know...he may surprise you.”

Scottie opened her mouth—to say what, she wasn’t sure. But the door to the bathroom opened at that exact same moment, disrupting her chance to speak altogether.

“There you are.” Chase’s handsome, smiling face appeared. “We were all wondering where you two were hiding out.”

Scottie froze, unsure of what to say without flat-out lying. Natalie, thankfully, had absolutely no problem finding her voice.

“We weren’t hiding, thank you, very much. We were just participating in a little thing called girl talk. I’d tell you to try it sometime, but...well...you’re not a girl, so...”

Despite her heightened anxiety over her current situation, Scottie felt her mouth form a genuine smile. Yes, there was no question. She and Natalie were going to be great friends.

Chase’s eyes slid back to hers. “Well, I was just going to say I’m ready to head out when you are. No rush, though. I’d hate to interrupt your super-exclusive gossip session.”

His dramatic show of hand motions he added at the end made both women chuckle.

In the back of her mind, Scottie was thankful she'd held back the full-on crying session she'd been on the verge of experiencing a few minutes earlier.

The last thing she needed was to have Chase worried about her, too. Not here. Not when they'd all gathered to celebrate the impending birth of another couple's child.

But as soon as they got back to his place...

"I'm ready now," she told him.

She wasn't quite ready to reveal her greatest secret, but she would be. The minute they stepped inside his impressive apartment, Scottie would tell the man she loved he was going to be a dad.

Minutes later, after saying their goodbyes, she was buckled in the passenger seat of Chase's truck while he sat behind the wheel. With every mile they covered, the more nervous she became.

Like a script running on a loop in her head, she mentally went over what she planned to say. She'd become so lost in her thoughts, it wasn't until Chase reached over and rested a hand on the top of her thigh that Scottie even realized he'd been trying to get her attention.

"Hey."

Scottie's muscles tensed with surprise before she looked over at him with a widened stare. "Sorry, what?"

A frown dipped his brows in the center. "What's going on with you today? You okay?"

“Nothing’s going on.” It was an automatic response. “I’m fine.”

“Scottie...”

He said her name as if it were a warning. As if he knew she was holding something back.

You have no idea.

“Sorry. I guess I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?”

“It’s nothing,” she lied.

She hated lying to the man she loved, but dammit. She did not want to have this conversation in the cab of his truck. Especially while he was driving. Not when she had no idea how the man was going to react.

Thick, awkward silence filled the cab of his expensive truck as several blocks passed by her in a blur. From the corner of her eye, she could tell he was glancing her way. His focus on a constant swivel between her and the road ahead.

“Are you...” He started to speak up again as they neared a less populated part of the city. “If you’re having second thoughts about getting married?—”

“What?” She swung her gaze his way. “I’m not having second thoughts, Chase.” That was the last thing she wanted him to think. “I love you, and I want to marry you. That hasn’t changed.”

“Well, something has. You’ve been acting different all day. First this morning before

we left my place, and then at the baby shower...” He glanced over at her again. “I mean, I know it was your first time meeting some of my friends, but I can promise they all loved you.”

“I like them, too,” she admitted truthfully. “A lot. They’re all really nice.”

Another stretch of silence passed before he initiated the conversation again.

“If it’s not cold feet, and you don’t have a problem with my friends, then just tell me what it is that has you acting so distant.”

“Chase, please,” she practically begged, refusing to look him in the eye. “Can we finish talking about this when we get to your apartment? It’s only a few more blocks away, and I’d feel a lot more comfortable having this conversation someplace other than your truck.”

He didn’t respond at first. Didn’t look her way or utter a single word. Scottie knew she was screwing this whole thing up, but her thoughts and emotions were so scattered and overwhelming she was having a hard time trying to figure out how to fix it.

The truck jerked suddenly to the right. Scottie’s gaze shot up as Chase swerved into the abandoned parking lot of what used to be an old two-pump gas station.

He hit the brakes hard, the unexpected jolt sending her upper body slightly forward against her seatbelt.

“Chase, what are you?—”

“Something’s eating at your gut, and I can’t wait until we’re home to find out what it is.” He shoved the gearshift into park, turning in his seat to fully face her. “Please,

Sugar. Talk to me.”

Scottie’s focus returned to the knotted fingers resting in her lap.

“See?” His frustration became more than a little clear. “Dammit, you won’t even look at me.”

Scottie forced herself to meet his fiery gaze. From the look on his face, he wasn’t as much angry as he was worried. Of course, given her behavior, she understood why.

“I’m...scared.”

Chicken.

Chase’s tense expression fell with a worried frown. “Of what? Did something happen?” His face flattened. “Did that fucking reporter contact you after I specifically told him?—”

“Reporter?” She did look at him then. “What reporter?”

Giving his head a quick shake, Chase ignored the question by switching the subject of their focus back to her. “Tell me what you’re afraid of, Scottie.”

“I’m afraid of losing you...again.”

“Ah, sugar.” He reached up, putting a gentle hand to her cheek. “There’s nothing you can say that will ever send me running. Not unless...” A flash of fear crossed over him as his blue eyes searched hers. “I mean, there’s not...someone else. Is there?”

Yep. She had definitely screwed this whole thing up.

“No, Chase.” Scottie made sure that message was clear. “There’s no one else, and there will be no one else. Only you.” She covered his hand with hers, closing her eyes and leaning into his touch.

“Then tell me, sweetheart.” His thumb brushed across her skin with the lightest of touches. “Just say it. Whatever it is, I’ll be right here by your side. Always.”

Always.

Scottie thought back to what Natalie had said about not underestimating the man she loved. In keeping with that spirit, she opened her eyes and parted her lips, finally ready to tell him the news.

She turned to him, the words starting to fall from her lips. “Chase, I’m?—”

That’s when she saw it.

A big, black van was barreling through the intersection behind Chase. Its front end bounced as the front tires hit the parking lot’s edge.

“Chase, look out!”

Scottie shouted the warning, but it was too late. She was too late.

The van didn’t slow down or make any signs of stopping. She screamed as it slammed right into Chase’s truck. A flash of pain filled her skull and the world around her began to spin.

After that...nothing.

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Chase's head felt like it would literally explode. As he worked to peel his eyelids apart, his throbbing brain was working overtime through the pain to figure out why he felt like he'd been hit by a fucking truck.

He blinked several times to clear his blurred vision. A foggy haze he innately knew was from the deployment of his truck's airbags filled the entire cab. Bright red blood was smeared across the one in front of him. The white, life-saving pillow now deflated and half-hanging in his lap.

A wreck.

He'd been in a fucking wreck.

Looking through his busted windshield, Chase quickly realized where he was. Located a few blocks from his home, the gas station had sat empty and abandoned for as long as he'd lived in the city.

Which begged the question...why the hell was he here?

A flash of pain seared across the left side of his head, above his ear. He lifted a hand to the source, his fingertips encountering a warm, sticky liquid he immediately recognized as blood.

Well, shit.

Thinking he should get out to check on whoever was in the other car, Chase reached down to unlatch his seatbelt. But something caught his eye from the passenger floorboard, and suddenly all those slow-motion thoughts came rushing back in a barrage of fast-forwarded memories.

He'd been at Logan and Natalie's place. There'd been presents and laughing. The whole team had been there, and... A frown pulled at the cut still bleeding at the side of his head as Chase worked to remember the rest.

There'd been a conversation. A fairly tense one, if memory served. His attention returned to his passenger floorboard, and he realized the item that had caught his attention was...

A purse. It was laying on its side, several items having spilled out of the opened zipper and onto the all-weather mat. And just like that, he remembered everything.

Scottie had been in the truck with him. She'd seen the danger coming and had warned him by shouting his name.

Chase had turned his head, following her terrified line of sight just in time to see a white, full-size panel van slam into his side of the truck.

Everything went black after that. But now that he was fully awake...

A man's face filled his vision. Tanned skin. Dark hair. Short, dark beard.

It was the face of the man who'd been driving the van that had hit them. A man Chase recognized a fraction of a second before the intentional collision.

No!

“Scottie!” Chase shouted her name as loudly as he physically could. His voice was rough and strained from the pain, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “Scottie, where are you?”

He tried opening his door, desperate to get out of the truck and find her. But the damn thing was stuck, so he tried again. And again. And fucking again.

Ignoring the thunder rocketing through his skull, Chase swept as much of the outside area as he could see. The van was gone, and Scottie was nowhere to be seen.

“Scottlynn!” He winced, the panicked shout heightening the already incessant throbbing in his head.

Unwilling to just sit and hope for the best he opted to crawl out the other side, instead.

Chase twisted and turned, maneuvering his body as he clumsily made his way over the truck’s wide, leather-bound console. He landed shoulders first in the passenger seat. Used his booted feet to push off the other seat. And as he fell awkwardly out of the half-opened door, Chase was struck with the cruelest sense of déjà vu.

Only it wasn’t déjà vu, but rather a recent memory. One formed the night Chase had the chance to protect the woman he loved, but instead...

I let a psychopath walk free.

Dread consumed his entire body as he pushed himself up to his feet. Angrily swiping away the blood running into his eye, Chase didn’t pay attention to the damage that had been done to his truck.

His only thought—his only concern—was finding Scottie.

Spinning around slowly, he felt more lost than ever before. She wasn't there. No one was there. It was just him and the knowledge that the love of his life was gone.

Nausea filled Chase's gut as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. A few rings later, he was pacing with fury back and forth near his mangled truck when Lucky finally picked up the call.

"Hey, Boyer. Miss me alrea?—"

"He took her, Jason." Tears rushed to the surface as he used his teammate's given name. "He fucking took her!"

"Whoa hold up, brother." Lucky's tone grew serious. "Slow down a beat and take a breath. Who took who?"

"Scottie!" Chase practically shouted into the phone. "That son of a bitch reporter from the other night rammed my truck, and then he fucking took her!"

"Reporter?" There was a slight pause. "Oh, wait. Are you talking about Levi Taylor?"

"Yes, that's who I'm fucking talking about!"

Was the man not listening?

"Okay, first, tell me where you are so I can head that way."

Chase gave his friend the location before trying his best to explain. "We were on the way to my apartment. We..." He paused, unsure of how to describe it. "We got into a sort of serious conversation, so I pulled into the parking lot of this old gas station so I wouldn't be distracted behind the wheel."

A lot of fucking good that did.

In the background, Chase could hear Lucky telling Ellie what happened and that he had to go. The shock in the woman's voice traveled through the phone, reminding him of how dire the situation really was.

He had no idea why Levi Taylor had done what he'd done. Or where the bastard had taken her.

Worse, Chase didn't have the first clue behind the man's motive, which meant he was six steps behind. And Scottie...

Scottie's fate was completely unknown.

The fuck it is! You're going to get your head out of your ass and find her!

He blinked, shaking away the fear and doubt that had been filling his head. Now wasn't the time to be scared or freak the hell out. Now was the time for action.

"Get here as soon as you can," Chase told his friend. "I'll call in the rest of the team."

Without waiting for a response, he ended the call to immediately initiate another. By the time he'd contacted Logan, Archer, and Van, the fear he felt for Scottie had transformed into something more.

Something dark. Lethal. A deadly force he didn't attempt to deny.

The rules he always followed...the laws he'd never once considered breaking...none of those mattered anymore. For him, there wasn't a question. For him, there was only one goal he intended to reach.

And as Chase waited in that parking lot for his team to show up for their newest mission, he knew. He'd cross every fucking line in existence if it meant finding the woman he loved before it was too late.

Scottie laid on her side in the back of the dark panel van. Her wrists and ankles had been bound with plastic ties, and the right side of her head hurt. But the pounding headache was nothing compared to the pain cutting its way through her heart.

Another tear fell across her temple, joining the others that had gone before it on the van's cold, metal floor. Chase was hurt. She remembered that part clearly.

One minute, she was preparing to tell him she was pregnant. The next, Scottie saw that van—the one she was in now—heading straight for them.

She'd hollered out his name. Tried pulling him toward her to avoid taking the brunt of the hit. But then everything went dark.

Her respite, however, hadn't lasted long. Within minutes of hitting her head and being knocked unconscious, Scottie had been awoken with a start as the man who'd hit them began forcefully pulling her from Chase's truck.

All the while she'd been struggling to get free, Chase had remained unconscious and bleeding, slumped to the side behind the wheel of his truck.

He was hurt, and she'd been kidnapped by a man she didn't know. To make matters even worse, she had absolutely no idea why.

Chase's face filled her mind's eye once again, the imagined image creating a new surge of unshed tears. She'd tried so hard to warn him. Had shouted his name at the top of her lungs while trying to keep from being taken against her will.

She'd kicked and twisted her body like a madwoman, screaming like a banshee while doing everything she could to fend off her attacker. She remembered fighting tooth and nail—literally—to get free from the man's grip when a flash of pain had exploded at the back of her head.

The next thing Scottie knew, she was here. Tied up in the back of a creepy as hell van with a man whose plans couldn't possibly entail anything good.

Please, God. Please, let Chase be okay. Please let our baby be okay.

Scottie allowed a few more tears to fall as the silent prayer played over and over again inside her brain. Since regaining consciousness, she hadn't uttered a single sound to avoid alerting her captor to the fact that she was awake.

The last thing she wanted was to bring attention to herself while she lay there trying to come up with a plan of escape. Scottie knew if she let this man get her to wherever they were going, her chances of survival—of her baby's survival—were slim to freaking none.

I'll fight for you, little one. No matter what.

An instinctual need to protect the new life growing inside her was instant and stronger than any she'd ever known. It no longer mattered that the pregnancy wasn't planned. It didn't even matter whether Chase would be happy upon hearing the news.

Planned or not, she was going to be a mother. The test she'd taken—the one tucked away inside the purse that was somewhere in Chase's truck—was all the proof she needed.

And with that acceptance came a strange sense of peace. A knowing that she was willing to do whatever it took—even kill—to protect the life she and Chase had

created out of love. Because that's what mothers did.

They protected.

With every spin of the van's speeding wheels came a renewed determination to survive. Scottie looked to the doors across from where she lay. The windows in the vehicle's double doors were low enough she could partially see the outside.

From the trees that were currently blurring past, she was fairly certain her abductor had taken her out of the city. She had no idea where, but her gut said they were going north.

Away from her home. Away from Chase, and...away from their future.

Please let him be okay.

The sudden wave of emotion her internal prayer brought forth had Scottie sniffing before she thought better of it. The sound was soft and slight, but in the otherwise silent van...

"I was wondering when you'd wake up." The man behind the wheel spoke up.

She was positioned with her head on the floor directly behind his seat, preventing her from seeing his face as he talked.

"Good thing, too," her abductor continued. "Can't have you missing the best part."

The best part?

"W-who are you?" Scottie hated the shakiness in her voice.

“You don’t know me.” His tone grew darker. “But I know you.”

Her heart raced, her veins turning cold with an icy fear. But she forced it aside and continued her efforts to find out more.

“H-how?” She cleared the fear from her voice and tried again. “How do you know me?”

“I guess I misspoke. I should’ve said I know of you. Feels like I know you, though. Scottlynn...Jeanene...Cahill.” Her name came out slow and mocking. “A thirty-year-old has-been chef. The former frontrunner everyone knew was going to win that cooking contest you were on.”

She frowned, still confused by the man’s reasons for wanting to abduct her in broad daylight. “Were you a...fan of the show?”

“Fuck no.” The man’s deep chuckle made her want to vomit. “My brother, though...that dumbass never missed an episode.”

Okay, now he’d really lost her.

“Your brother?” Scottie asked as she began another visual search of the van’s open interior.

“Oh, yeah. It was all Dustin ever talked about.” The man paused. “ You were all he ever talked about.”

Dustin?

Shockwaves rolled throughout her system, and the world around her began to spin. Feeling as though she was going to be sick, Scottie forced herself to ask the question

she wasn't sure she wanted answered.

"You're Dustin McVey's...brother?"

"Technically, we were foster brothers. But that didn't matter. Not to him or me. Dustin and I shared a very special bond. We both realized early on that we were made from the same cloth."

Yeah, a sick and twisted cloth.

Her thoughts whirled in a swirling cloud of chaos as she fought to make sense of what had happened. Dustin McVey, the man who'd stalked her and then broke into her hotel room a year earlier, had been foster brothers with this man. And for some reason, the jerk felt the need to randomly kidnap her for...what?

"Is it money you want?" she had to ask.

Almost everything in life came down to money.

But the man simply laughed, the sound as cold and evil as any she'd heard, while he continued driving her closer to Hell.

"Money would be great, but no. That's not why you're here."

"Then why?" Scottie challenged back. "Why did you kidnap me? What..." She had to swallow before this next part. "What are you going to do to me?"

She was utterly terrified to hear his response, but she had to know. Scottie needed to know what this man's plan was for her so she could better figure out a way to thwart it.

“Funny thing about that,” the asshole spoke up again. “This...taking you...was never part of my life’s plan.”

“Then why?”

“Because my brother is dead!” he revealed angrily. “And it’s all your fault!”

Dizziness struck as Scottie processed what the vengeful man had just told her. He blamed her for Dustin McVey’s death?

“I-I didn’t even know he was dead!” she argued loudly.

I can’t believe no one from the prosecutor’s office called to tell me.

“He’s been gone a few weeks, now. Killed by another whack job at that horrible place they put him in. A place you put him in.”

Everything finally began to make sense. It was a sickeningly warped version of sense, but all the pieces were there.

McVey died by the hand of another patient in a place where he was forced to live for the next twenty-plus years...because of her. Only it wasn’t her fault.

It was his.

“Dustin was only in that place because he terrorized me,” she told him bluntly. “Your brother broke into my hotel room, shot my bodyguard, and would have abducted me just like you did if he hadn’t taken a bullet, too.”

“He wouldn’t have been in that place if you would have just gone with him when he asked, instead of fighting the love and affection my brother was trying to show you!”

Love and affection?

This guy was as looney as McVey.

He's also just as dangerous.

As he continued ranting on about how her stalker's blood was on her hands, Scottie used the man's distraction to try to find a way out of this mess.

First up, she needed to find something sharp enough to cut the ties binding her ankles and wrists, or at the very least, something heavy, like a flashlight or tire iron. Anything she could keep hidden away to use later...as a weapon.

But as she scanned the space around her with vigor, Scottie discovered the crazed man hadn't left anything to chance. Unlike the movies, the van's beveled floor was completely bare. She didn't see a toolbox or screwdriver. Nothing hung loosely from the curved metal walls.

Scottie's heart sank with a heavy, impending doom as her chances of escaping continued to dwindle with each mile they passed. There wasn't a single freaking thing she could see to help her break the plastic ties and escape. And if she couldn't fight back or at least try to run, her only other option was to give up.

No! I will not give up!

She'd made a promise to her and Chase's unborn baby, and Scottie was damn well going to keep it. The problem was she didn't know how.

"You want to know the best part of this whole thing?" The man behind the wheel tossed out the rhetorical question. "I almost didn't take the job."

“What job?”

“The shit-paying newspaper job I took to write about that benefit dinner the shelter you work for put on. I came damn close to skipping out, but when I saw you from across the room, I knew.”

A flash of a memory struck, and the final piece of the horrifying puzzle clicked into place. This was the man who’d been watching her as she and Chase talked near the buffet table the night of the benefit auction.

They’d been standing there, casually talking about getting together to catch up. Then Chase left with Lucky to fulfill the job for which they’d volunteered. And that’s when she’d seen him.

Scottie remembered glancing up and seeing the bright flash from a man’s camera. This man’s camera. He’d been standing across the room, watching her. And now...

“It was fate!” her abductor exclaimed. “I mean, what are the chances, right? But I saw you, and I immediately knew who you were. I saw you, and I knew exactly what Dustin would have wanted me to do.”

Did he really think fate had led this man to hurt Chase and kidnap her?

Sounds about right, given your close relationship with shitty, shitty luck.

But even as the negative thought drove through Scottie’s mind, she felt an instant denial. One that grew stronger, making her even more determined than before.

She didn’t care about luck. Not the good or the bad. She only cared about protecting her baby and making her way back to Chase...alive.

As Dustin McVey's psychotic foster brother kept talking about how it was fate that he'd found her, Scottie tuned him out and focused on doing anything and everything she could to survive.

Miles later, she'd all but given up hope. But when she laid her head back down in near defeat, she saw it.

There!

A few inches down from where her bound feet lay, a piece of metal jutted up from the van's floor. It was small and square in shape, and there was a small circle cut out in its center.

The metal piece was some sort of built-in base someone could use to secure a small hook, like a bungee cord.

Her eyes grew wide, but she didn't dare let the renewed hope coursing through her show. She had a chance—a real chance—to at least cut her ankles free.

Going painfully slow, Scottie slid her body lower. Inching her way closer to her only chance at freedom, she used her abductor's verbal rage to cover any sounds her movement made.

A few terrifying minutes later, she felt the sole of her slightly heeled boots strike paydirt. Scottie lifted her bound legs up just so, positioning the taut center of the plastic tie over the metal square's upper edge.

She moved her legs back and forth, praying the sawing motion would work as planned. The angle in which she was laying made it hard to see her progress. But when Scottie felt the hard plastic strip begin to loosen its hold, the hope she'd allowed herself to feel began to soar.

“Almost there!” The man driving announced as if it was wonderful news.

For him, it probably was.

The van’s wheels began to slow, and Scottie could tell they were preparing to turn. A quick glance out the windows showed more of the same kind of trees as before. Tall, thick, and seemingly never ending.

If she could get her ankles free and manage to make it out of the van without being caught, she might actually have a chance to get away.

A plan formed in her mind as the final threads of the woven plastic broke free. Scottie’s feet shot forcefully apart, and it took herculean strength to keep them from slamming down against the van’s metal floor.

She froze in place for fear the crazed man who’d taken her would see. He was still talking, though. Mostly about himself and McVey and how nothing in their screwed-up pasts had ever been their fault.

Glancing up, Scottie discovered her new position made it possible for her to see the guy’s rearview reflection. Not his full face, but she could see the man’s eyes, which was enough.

As long as he kept looking forward...

Unprecedented fear raced through her entire system as the wheels beneath her slowed to a near-stop. She couldn’t lay around and wait for them to reach what would, no doubt, be her life’s final destination. So instead, Scottie slid her body even lower, bringing her feet as close to the door as she could get.

The van began to turn, nearly stopping fully in the process, and she knew this was her

only chance. Her focus shot to the latch keeping the back doors secured, and she took precious seconds to visualize the plan.

Scottie gave one final glance upward, toward the rearview mirror. The man was watching the road ahead, oblivious to what she was about to do.

It was now or never, and though she'd never been more scared in her life, she knew...

I have to do this. For myself and my baby. For Chase and the future that's finally within our reach.

With those thoughts becoming her new mantra, she eyed the long, metal latch again. A countdown silently formed in her head, and when she got to one...

I love you, Chase.

Scottie used her core muscles to lift her legs high in the air. Without hesitation, she brought her feet back down as hard as she could, the heels of her boots slamming against the top part of the latch.

It slid down upon impact, and the two back doors flew open. The man behind the wheel shouted something loud as he brought the van to a sudden and harsh stop.

But he was too late. Scottie had already rolled herself toward the van's back bumper. She squeezed her eyes shut as she fell out of the vehicle, her body landing with a hard thud against the unforgiving pavement below.

“I had him.” Bile rushed to the base of Chase’s throat, but he managed to choke it back down. “I fucking had him!”

An animalistic growl filled the open air around him as he slammed his fist hard against the side of the bed of his truck. The black metal caved inward as if it were made of tin foil.

Chase didn’t feel the pain as the skin covering his knuckles split. He didn’t notice the bright red blood beginning to ooze from the cuts.

The only thing he felt was despair. The face behind the wheel of that fucking van was the only thing he could see.

“There was no way you could’ve known the asshole was going to pull this shit.” Archer stepped up beside him. “And beating yourself up...mentally or physically...isn’t going to help bring your girl back home. Trust me.”

“He’s right.” Lucky made his way from his car to where Chase and Archer stood. Obvious guilt seemed to fill the man’s bright blue gaze. “Besides, if there’s anyone to blame here, it’s me. I’m the one who ran the guy’s background.”

A deeply muttered curse sounded from behind them half-a-second before Van’s imposing form joined the small group. The look in the man’s dark eyes matched the deep scowl covering his tanned and rugged face.

“Levi Taylor,” he growled the reporter’s name. “That’s who you need to be pissed at. That’s the only person you should blame. Now, y’all can stand around here and keep pointing fingers at yourselves, or we can get to work trying to figure out why the asshole targeted Scottie.”

The group of private security specialists grew quiet as the truth in the man’s words sank in. Van was right. This wasn’t productive, and it damn sure wasn’t going to help bring Scottie back.

“Look deeper,” he turned to Lucky, who seemed to have shaken off some of his remorse as well. “There has to be a reason he went after her. Some sort of connection between the two.”

“Already on it.” He lifted the state-of-the-art tablet held securely in his hand. “I’m cross-referencing the two for anything they may have in common. If there is a connection between Scottie and this psycho, my program will find it. Trust me.”

“I do,” Chase didn’t hesitate to let his friend know.

He trusted Lucky with his life. And more importantly...with Scottie’s.

“I’m also collecting CCTV footage from all the cameras in the area, but there’s a shit ton in the city, so it’s going to take a bit for my program to locate and track that specific vehicle.”

“What about Dawari?” Archer mentioned Kaamisha Dawari as a possibility. “Could be this guy’s been ordered to use the women we love against us as a means of retaliation.”

“I don’t think so.” Chase shook his head. “When I first saw the prick watching us that night, I thought maybe. But if his beef was with the team, why not kill me?”

His head shook from side-to-side again, pacing the immediate area of the broken and weed-filled parking lot. “This was personal. He left me alive, because he didn’t give a shit about me. Scottie was his target.” And now the bastard has her in his fucking clutches. “He’s good, though, I’ll give him that. Not a professional but calculated.” The memory of the psycho pissing his pants in “fear” came rushing back. “He’s a damn good actor, and willing to do whatever it takes to get what he wants.”

“Apparently what the fucker wants is Scottie.” Logan joined the group after having been talking with the detectives on scene. To Chase he asked, “How you holdin’ up? You get that cut on your head checked out yet?”

He was definitely concussed and probably needed a couple dozen stitches. But as long as Scottie was still out there...

“I’m fine.”

The look on Logan’s worried face said he wasn’t buying it for a minute. Fortunately, the former SEAL also didn’t argue. If Chase had to guess, it was because Logan understood.

What he was feeling. Thinking. The all-consuming helplessness threatening to take over.

Logan, Archer, and even Lucky...they all knew what he was going through. It was a hell he didn’t wish on his worst enemy, and one Chase wasn’t sure he’d survive.

“Hey Boyer!”

They all turned to see Detective Travis Knox making his way over to where they all stood. Chase met him halfway. Technically, the man was assigned to homicide, but the department—namely, Knox—and the Eagle’s Nest group had an understanding.

We scratch his back, he helps us out when he can.

“You find something?” Chase asked, feeling as if his sanity was hanging on by a thread.

Regret filled the tall man’s light blue eyes. “Not yet. I was just letting you know the techs are finished processing your truck. As you know, with the airbags deployed, it’s not drivable.” He handed Chase a business card. “That’s a tow service I’ve used before. Oh, and I already spoke to the property’s owner, and he said there’s no rush in getting it moved.”

He took the card, shoving it into his jeans’ back pocket.

“If you do leave it here overnight”—Knox spoke up again—“be sure to take out anything personal before you go. Never know when some assholes will show up looking to steal whatever they can find.”

“Thanks, Travis.” Chase shook the decorated detective’s hand. “Appreciate it.”

“You sure you don’t want EMS to look at that cut?” The man’s gaze grew concerned. “I talked them into staying a little longer in case you changed your mind about accepting medical care.”

“I’m good.” He was far from fucking good, but whatever.

Time spent with the paramedics was time Scottie couldn’t afford for him to waste.

“I’ll call if anything new comes up,” Knox offered. “I trust you and your team will do the same.”

“Of course,” Logan answered for Chase and the others.

The man gave them all an appreciative nod before turning and walking away.

“Come on.” Lucky put a hand to Chase’s shoulder. “You work on getting your shit from your truck, and I’ll check on the programs I have running to see if anything’s popped up.”

Accepting that nothing more could be done until they had a bead on Scottie’s location, he followed Lucky’s suggestion and moved over to the still-opened front passenger door. His intentions were to get the paperwork from his glove box, but Chase froze mid-reach when he spotted the purse lying on the floorboard below.

He assumed the partially unzipped bag had been thrown to the floor on impact. Either that or when she was forced from the truck.

Chase carefully began gathering the items scattered about, putting them back inside her bag so she’d have her things when she returned.

A cherry ChapStick. Her set of keys. A small, round mirror. Her wallet.

The items blurred as a well of unshed tears rushed to the surface. But Chase blinked them away, refusing to give in to his fear for the woman he loved.

Something else caught his eye. Something made of white plastic that was sticking half-out from beneath the seat.

Chase reached down, pulling the item free. At first, he had no idea what the damn thing was. But then...

Oh, my god!

No way. No fucking way this was real.

But as he read the word displayed in the tiny, digital window, Chase knew inside his heart it was true.

Pregnant.

“Logan!”

Natalie’s shouted voice came from someplace behind where Chase remained frozen. She sounded alarmed, and winded. But he couldn’t seem to get his body to move enough to see what the woman wanted.

“Nat?” Logan sounded surprised to see his wife at the scene of the crime. “Sweetheart, what are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay?—”

“There’s something you need to know!” She sounded much closer now. “Something Chase needs to know. It’s about Scottie. It’s something she told me right before they left the shower.”

“Scottie’s pregnant,” Chase said the strange words aloud.

The woman he loved was pregnant. And there wasn’t a single doubt in his mind that the baby was his.

“H-how did you?—”

“This.” Chase interrupted Natalie, turning around to show her and the others what he’d found. “It must’ve fallen out of her purse when that man...”

His voice cracked, so he cleared it but said nothing more. At this point, what was there to say?

Scottie was pregnant, and she hadn't told him. And now she'd been kidnapped by a madman for reasons he still didn't understand, and he had no idea where she was, or even where to start looking.

Learning she was pregnant with his kid only made the desperation eating him alive inside that much worse.

Please, God. Please don't take them away from me! Not now. Not before we even have the chance to ? —

"She was going to tell you." Natalie spoke up again. "W-when you two got back to your apartment. She was afraid you wouldn't be happy, but I told her?—"

"Not happy?" Chase's eyes flew back up to his sweet friend's brown stare. "I love Scottie with everything I am. Sure, she said she was on the pill, but...these things still happen, you know? I mean, I get that none of that shit is a hundred percent. What I don't understand is how could she think I wouldn't be happy that we'd made a baby?"

Sympathy shone through Natalie's worried gaze. "You two only recently got engaged, and she was afraid you'd think it was too soon."

Too soon? He'd waited fourteen fucking years for this particular dream to come true. Everything he'd always wanted was finally within his grasp, but now...

I can't lose them. Not now. Not fucking ever!

Chase felt a strange sort of peace fall over him, and he realized what he needed to do. Come hell or high water, he would find her. He'd find Scottie, and then he'd bring her back home where she belonged.

They were going to get married, and then they were going to have a baby. In that fucking order. After that, Chase planned to spend the rest of his life protecting them with all he had.

Protecting and loving them both . With all his heart and soul.

I'll find you, sugar. If it's the last thing I fucking do, I will find you!

Scottie pushed her legs to go faster than ever before. Her muscles burned, and she nearly lost her footing more than once. But she didn't stop. She couldn't stop. If she did...

He's going to kill me.

A thin branch slapped against her cheek, but she pushed it aside with her still-bound hands and kept on running. In the back of her frantic mind was the worry she'd harmed the baby when she'd fallen out of the back of the van, but it was either fall and run, or stay and...

Die.

She wasn't dying. Not today. Not when she finally had so much to live for.

Her determination to survive pushed Scottie to move faster. Forced her legs to work harder. She had to put as much distance between her and the man who'd taken her as she could. After that, Scottie would worry about the fact that she'd most likely be lost in the middle of a freaking forest.

"Oh, Scottlynn..." The singsongy voice traveled to her through the trees.

Run faster!

As if Chase were right beside her, coaching her toward the way out of this mess, Scottie continued pushing her body to its limits. Continued racing as fast as she could through the trees.

Praying the shadows cast by their natural canopy would be enough to keep her hidden when the time came, she ignored the urge to stop and continued forging onward.

Please don't let him catch me! Please don't let me die!

The branches and leaves blocking her path began to blur with the silent, frantic prayer. But Scottie quickly blinked away the unshed tears, knowing they were a waste of energy she couldn't afford to lose.

"You can run, Scottie," the man shouted her name like a curse. "You can run all fucking night, but it won't matter. I'm going to find you, and when I do...I'm going to make you pay for taking the one person who ever cared about me away!"

There it was. The real reason this man wanted her dead.

For a brief moment in time, Scottie felt a splinter of empathy for the man intent on ending her life. Grief was something she understood all too well. Losing her mother, especially at such a young age, had been a massive blow no sixteen-year-old should ever feel.

While this man may not be reeling from the loss of a parent—or even that of a blood relative—it was clear her stalker's death had affected the mentally unstable man in a way that had sent him on a vindictive path to murder.

"Stop running from me, you stupid, fucking bitch!"

Any empathy she'd been feeling vanished in an instant with the rage-filled order. If

this guy thought she was going to just stop and give up, he was even crazier than she realized.

But her legs were growing weaker, and her heaving lungs were burning in their fight for more air. Scottie knew she couldn't keep going like this forever, which meant she needed to find a place to hide, and she needed to find it now.

Her panic-stricken gaze flew from left to right as she scanned her immediate area. A thick group of wide-trunked trees stood in the distance. If she could get there without the man seeing her...

Not allowing herself a second's worth of time to question or second-guess, Scottie veered off to her immediate right. Running straight for what she prayed would end up being her saving grace, she began closing the distance with surprising efficiency and ease.

She thought she was home-free. That her plan was going to work. However, all that rejuvenated hope vanished in an instant when the tip of her booted toe hit a fallen branch.

Scottie lost her footing and fell. The air was forced from her lungs with an oof .

For a brief moment, she was too stunned by the sudden fall to move. Seconds later, she heard the snap of a twig, and her fight or flight instinct kicked right back into gear.

Using her bound hands, she awkwardly pushed herself up to her feet. This time, when she resumed her previous path, Scottie was sure to pay closer attention to the ground she was covering.

Any delay in reaching her goal could be the difference between living and dying.

Another impact to her body could risk the life of the child she prayed was still safe within her womb.

Please be okay, little one. You and your daddy both have to be okay!

Another stick snapped, and Scottie knew she was cutting things close, so she cleared her mind of all distractions, focusing solely on her own survival.

The group of trees in her sights was only a few more yards away. She gave herself another final push, and within seconds, Scottie was there.

She sped around to the other side of the trees. Her feet slipped on a pile of leaves, and she had to throw out a hand to the nearest trunk to keep from falling.

Her heart raced to the point she feared it would literally explode, but she ignored the painful pounding in her chest and quickly tucked herself in the niche the combined trunks had naturally formed.

Scottie's hands flew to her mouth to keep from whimpering in fear. If this didn't work...if that man found her...she had no doubt she'd be murdered right here in these trees.

Chase can't find me like that. He can't live the rest of his life with that image in his head.

If the worst happened and she didn't survive, Chase would live each and every day believing her death was all his fault. Because that's the kind of man she loved.

He was a protector. A warrior. And if he survived that horrifying crash and was able, Scottie knew he and his team were already out there somewhere, doing everything in their power to find her.

He'd never stop looking, of that she was certain. Question was, would he make it to her in time to save her from a killer, or would the man she loved more than life itself be damned to a fate worse than death?

Nothing about what had happened had been Chase's fault. But as sure as Scottie knew that to be the God's honest truth, she also knew if the situation were reversed, she'd blame herself, too.

This was it. The next few seconds would determine the rest of her life.

She brought a hand to her flat belly, allowing only a few tears to fall. Then Scottie closed her eyes, held her breath, and waited for her killer to come.

“Levi Taylor owns a stretch of property north of the city,” Lucky announced. “It was originally set up in a trust under another man’s name—one with a completely different last name—which is why it took me so long to find it.”

The entire team had gathered at Chase’s apartment, since it was only a few blocks away from the scene of Scottie’s abduction. Logan had managed to talk Natalie into going back home after Archer and Lucky called their wives and asked them to go sit with the expectant woman so she wouldn’t be alone so close to her due date.

That was an hour ago, and they still had zero fucking leads...until now.

Chase immediately stopped pacing his living room floor, his attention shooting to the other man standing a few feet away.

“You’re sure it belongs to Taylor?”

“According to this, yeah.” Lucky nodded. “The guy’s foster dad left it to him after he died a few years back. It’s an undeveloped area within the forest near Swamp Creek. There aren’t any houses I can find, but current satellite images show an old shack not far from the creek’s bank.”

“Probably an old fishing shack,” Logan mused.

“That has to be it.” Chase held Lucky’s gaze. “That has to be where he’s taking her!”

“It fits,” Lucky agreed. “CCTV footage showed the van traveling in that direction before it cut off.”

“Then what the hell are we waiting for?” Chase turned and started for the door. “Let’s get our asses on the road and?—”

“Hold up, brother.” Archer didn’t budge from where he stood. “That’s a decent drive to make on a whim. If we’re wrong...”

The former SEAL didn’t finish the thought, but he didn’t have to. If they did this, if they drove to that piece of land, and Scottie wasn’t there...

There’s a damn good chance I’ll lose her forever.

Chase opened his mouth to respond, but Logan’s phone chose that same moment to start ringing. Their former team leader pulled the cell from his back pocket, giving the screen a quick glance before holding it up for all to see.

“It’s Knox,” he announced, referring to the Seattle detective helping them.

“Put it on speaker,” Chase told his friend.

With his phone held out for everyone to hear, Logan spoke to the detective on the team’s behalf.

“This is Hayes,” he answered the call. “You’re on speaker with me and the team.”

“We found the van.” Knox announced, bypassing a formal greeting. “Plates and front-end damage match. It’s definitely the same one that hit your truck.”

Chase’s heart flew into his throat. “Where?”

“Side road, just after a turn between Timber Creek and Swamp Creek. I’m sending Lucky the coordinates now.”

They found it!

“Swamp Creek?” The other man’s words sank in fully. To Lucky, he started to ask, “Didn’t you just say Taylor owned land near?—”

“Swamp Creek.” Lucky’s curt nod confirmed.

“And Scottie?” He marched closer to where Logan was standing. “What about?—”

“She wasn’t there.” The man’s words shattered Chase’s hopes. “The deputy that stumbled onto the scene said the van was empty when he got there. There was no sign of your girl or Taylor.”

Empty?

If no one was in the van, then...where the hell was Scottie?

“What else do you know?” Logan asked before Chase had the chance.

“Not much, since I got the call two minutes before I contacted you. The only other thing I do know is that the van was left in the middle of the road. Deputy Collins said it looked like it had been forced to make a sudden stop. Driver’s door and the back doors were left wide open, and the engine was still running.”

The fuck?

“She got away.” Van’s deep voice sounded for the first time in a while. “That’s the only thing that makes sense. Scottie got away, and Taylor ditched the van to go after

her.”

“The place is nothing but trees.” Lucky flipped the tablet in his hands around so they could see the satellite image of the area.

“If she did escape, those trees would’ve been her best chance at losing Taylor,” Van added. “It’s where I would’ve gone if I were her.”

“Tell your people to start searching those fucking trees now!” Chase ordered Knox despite having no authority over the man. “We’re on our way!” He and the others headed for the door to leave.

While they made their way across the apartment’s wood floor, Knox added a rushed “But...”

Chase opened the door, freezing when heard the ominous word. “But what?” he practically shouted into Logan’s phone.

The damn thing was silent several seconds before he heard the detective say, “It’s a big area, Boyer. And there’s only so much manpower available at a moment’s notice, by both county and city. I just think you need to prepare yourself for a less than favorable outcome.”

Meaning the chances of the authorities finding Scottie alive weren’t good.

“Fuck that,” he growled back. To his team, he added a sharp, “Let’s go.”

Knox’s people may not be able to find her, but I sure as fuck will.

“I’ll pull up real-time satellite images on the drive there,” Lucky offered as he and the others exited the apartment behind him. “Any luck, we’ll catch some movement and

be able to pinpoint her location.”

“You can hack into a satellite?” Logan questioned the man’s claim.

“Done it before.” Lucky shrugged.

“You have? ” Both Archer’s and Logan’s surprised voices filled the elevator as the men of Eagle’s Nest rushed to squeeze themselves inside the metal cart.

“When?” Archer sent an incredulous look in Lucky’s direction.

The computer genius slapped the button to take them to the building’s first floor. “You see, I’d tell you, but then I’d have to...well. You know.”

The conversation continued, but Chase’s frantic thoughts turned to Scottie. Was she okay? Had she been injured in the crash? Had that bastard, Taylor, hurt her?

His hands curled into a pair of white-knuckled fists at his sides as his heart ached to the point of physical pain. The woman he loved—the mother of the child they had created out of love—was somewhere out there in those fucking trees. Scared. Alone.

And she had no way of knowing he and his team were on their way to find her.

Please hang in there, sugar. I’m coming for you!

The group of five made it to their unmarked, full-sized SUV in record time. Van drove, while Chase took the front passenger seat. Archer, Lucky, and Logan all piled into the middle bench seat to save time.

They headed north, and Van pushed the vehicle as fast as it could safely go. Chase’s head pounded like a motherfucker, but his overwhelming worry for the woman he

loved made him feel as though he was losing his mind.

Needing to focus on something other than the very real possibility of losing both her and their unborn child, he forced himself to return to the team's earlier conversation.

"You said Levi Taylor was in the system as a kid?" Chase looked back at Lucky from over his shoulder.

"From the time he was four until he aged out, yeah," he confirmed.

Keeping his head down, the man focused on the tablet clutched tightly in his fists. With a tap of the glass, the image changed to split-screen.

One half still showed the aerial view of the trees near where the van was found. The other became filled with a slew of digital information.

"Says here, our guy bounced from home to home until he was twelve. Juvie records show an early indication of possible psychosis. Hurting and killing small animals. That sort of thing."

"Christ." Chase covered his rugged jaw with his hand and momentarily squeezed his eyes shut.

That was the kind of man they were dealing with? That was the kind of monster who had Scottie within his grasp?

"Tell me about it," Lucky shared his despair. "Whoa, wait. That's weird..." The man frowned. "All the trouble young Levi got himself into suddenly stopped shortly after he turned twelve."

"Any idea why?" Logan asked from his spot behind Van's seat.

“From what I can tell, that’s when the family welcomed a second foster kid. Another boy, two years younger than Taylor. His juvenile records are sealed, so it’ll take me a minute to see the specifics, but it looks like Taylor cleaned up his act when this other kid was just getting started. But then...Oh, shit.” Lucky’s expression flattened, then. His aqua blue eyes slid up to find Chase. “Pretty sure I just found the connection between Taylor and Scottie.”

“What is it?”

The brilliant man’s intense stare locked with his as he asked, “The name Dustin McVey ring a bell?”

Chase’s already nauseated gut tightened with dread. “You want to say that again?”

“McVey?” Archer looked around, waiting for more from no one in particular.

Logan gave the man a clueless shrug, as Chase began sharing what he knew.

“Dustin McVey is the twisted asshole who stalked Scottie before she moved to Seattle. Happened about a year ago. Scottie said McVey first saw her when she was a contestant on a reality cooking show. Apparently, the guy became obsessed and began terrorizing her to the point the studio hired a bodyguard to help keep her safe.”

“Jesus.” Logan shook his head in disbelief. “What happened?”

“He broke into her hotel room. Shot her bodyguard while trying to abduct Scottie.”

Joining in, Archer asked, “How’d she manage to get away?”

“Bodyguard got a shot off, too,” Chase explained. “Police were called, and McVey was arrested. Judge sentenced him to a twenty-five-year stint at a mental institution in

SoCal.”

“He still there?” Van’s black gaze bounced between the road in front of them and Chase.

Chase nodded. “Lucky double-checked the night I first caught Taylor watching us outside the restaura?—”

“Uh...hold that thought ...” Lucky cut through, catching the attention of everyone in the SUV. A beat later, they heard a frustrated, “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

The man’s uncharacteristic outburst threw new flames on Chase’s already frazzled nerves.

“What?” He stared back at the man sitting in the seat behind him. “What did you find?”

“When I first looked into McVey for you two weeks ago, the mental institution’s intake system showed the guy confirmed as a current resident.”

“Yeah...and?” Chase prodded, his patience non-fucking-existent at this point.

Before Lucky could respond, Van piped up with a cynical, “Let me guess. The asshole was either released or escaped, and the hospital failed to let the public know before now.”

It wouldn’t be the first time something like that happened. Hell, Lucky’s wife, Ellie, had recently dealt with that very scenario after a killer she’d once helped to convict escaped federal custody.

“McVey didn’t escape.” Lucky quickly shot down that possibility. “According to the updated records, the guy died a few weeks ago after being attacked by another patient.”

The ever-present dread in Chase’s gut swirled to the point he thought he might be sick. “That’s why Taylor went after Scottie. To him, she’s the reason McVey was in that place.” He swallowed against the rolling waves of fear. “To him, Scottie’s the reason?—”

“McVey died,” Van summed up their target’s most likely motive. The look on his tanned and rugged face said he agreed with the horrifying summation.

Just like that, everything finally clicked into place. They had the who. The why. And, though they still had to work hella fast to narrow it down, the where.

All that’s left now is to find my Scottie .

After that, Chase’s goal was simple. Once he had Scottie back in his arms, and he knew she was safe, he was going to make sure Levi Taylor didn’t lay a finger on her or anyone else.

Ever. Again.

Scottie ran, refusing to slow for even a second as she forcefully made her way through the forest’s thick foliage. Keeping her bound hands out in front of her, she pushed away the countless limbs and leaves creating a barrier between her and the non-existent path she was following.

The hiding place she’d found earlier had worked...until it didn’t. For what felt like the longest stretch of time, she’d kept herself curled into the smallest, most invisible ball she could manage.

Scottie had been so sure he'd see her. That he'd find her and drag her away to her death. She'd nearly cried out with terror knowing he was going to find and, ultimately, kill her.

After all, that was her abductor's end game.

In his eyes, her death would be his retribution for her stalker's murder. So-called justice for a man whose delusions about the two of them had nearly destroyed her sense of safety.

But since she had no plans of dying today, Scottie had done the only thing she could. When she heard the man hunting her growing closer to the cluster of trees where she'd been hiding, she'd picked up a nearby rock and thrown it in the opposite direction.

The redirection worked exactly as it had been designed. The kidnapper had assumed the noise had come from her, and he'd immediately turned and headed that way. Once he'd put several yards between them, Scottie had forced herself to move, once again going on the run.

And she was still running. Still terrified. Lost in a sea of seemingly endless trees as she desperately searched for a way out.

According to her watch, nearly an hour had passed since she'd last heard him in the distance. But still, she didn't stop. She couldn't stop.

Scottie did, however, allow herself to slow down. If she cramped up or lost all her steam, she risked having to stop altogether. Stopping would only put her at greater risk.

Her feet crossed over the forest's carpet of dead leaves, roots, and dirt. She hadn't

noticed it before, but now that she wasn't huffing and puffing quite so much, Scottie realized the air had grown a bit cooler. Thicker and damp.

She paused mid-step when she heard something different than before. A steady, rushing noise she hadn't heard before now. Something that sounded a lot like...

Water!

Hope flourished, and Scottie did stop. But only so she could try to get her bearings and find the direction of the source.

There!

To her right, Scottie noticed several chunks of daylight shining through the trees. There had to be a clearing there. A river or creek or...something to give her some sense of direction.

If she could get there and follow it downstream, she'd eventually make her way back to civilization. At least she prayed that was the case.

With no other choice but to follow that plan, she renewed her previous pace and took off running. Scottie watched her step as best she could while also focusing on her current path. In addition, she did her best to keep an eye out for the man who was after her.

He didn't strike her as the type to simply give up and walk away.

Stepping through the last of the foliage, she made it out onto the grassy bank of a small creek. It looked to be about fifteen feet wide, but there was no way to know its depth. Scottie was a decent swimmer, but decided to stick to her original plan of following the creek's southern path.

She turned and started to walk that way, praying it wouldn't take long to find someone who could help. For the first time in a while, Scottie let her mind wander back to Chase.

God, she hoped he was okay. He had to be. For her, there was no other choice.

The image of his still and bleeding form filled her mind's eye, and her chest grew tight with worry. Then she reminded herself of how strong Chase really was and the fact that he'd been a Navy freaking SEAL.

If anyone could be knocked down and get right back up again, it was him.

A sort of peace began to trickle its way in, and for a moment, Scottie truly believed she was going to be okay. But just as she was confident everything was going to work out in the end, something hard and strong slammed into her from behind.

The air was painfully forced from her lungs as the man she'd been running from tackled her to the ground. Their bodies twisted and turned, rolling together down the slope of a steeper section of the creek's soft bank.

Scottie screamed with all she had while trying to fight her way free. Her terror-stricken voice echoed loudly throughout the nearby trees.

Locked together, a literal battle to the death ensued. She continued screaming at the top of her lungs in hopes that someone somewhere would hear.

The man flipped her over onto her back. Scottie's legs shot out in several hard, vicious kicks. She dug her fingernails into any exposed skin she could find.

His hands. Neck. She even reached out and clawed at his face.

At one point, Scottie knew she'd at least caused him some pain, because he jerked his head back with a hiss. A twisted satisfaction filled her racing veins, and she couldn't help but inwardly grin.

"You stupid bitch!" The man punched the invisible smile from her face.

Scottie's head flew to the side as pain erupted within her skull. The unexpected blow left her on the precipice of unconsciousness, giving her attacker all the advantage he needed.

Through her blurred and fuzzy vision, she saw the man push himself up to his feet. He reached down, using the plastic ties still forcing her wrists together to aid in his effort to drag her away.

She did her best to fight him off, but he'd hit her damn hard. Still struggling to regain her full vision and strength, Scottie was unable to do anything but wait as the bastard forced her entire upper half into the cold and rolling creek.

Lying on her back, her lungs barely had time to capture any air before her head, shoulders, and chest were forced below the water's shallow surface.

Rocks from the creek's bed dug into her head and back, but the frigid temperature shocked her into a more alert state of mind.

Taking advantage of her renewed strength, she pushed against him enough to come up for a much deeper breath. Scottie pulled in as much life-saving oxygen as she could, her lips clamping shut half-a-second before she was shoved back under the water.

It became a sadistic dance between a killer and his victim. The push of pure evil versus the push for good to prevail.

In the end, she knew it was a fight she couldn't win. But she refused to give up. For herself and her baby. And for Chase and the future they'd been so very close to achieving.

I'm so sorry, Chase. God, I love you. So very, very much!

Her lungs burned with the need for oxygen she couldn't find, and she could feel herself growing weaker because of it. Scottie's legs refused to kick as hard as before, and her bound hands no longer pushed against the man intent on ending her life.

She felt them fall limply into the water. The efforts put forth by her legs and feet no longer effective in their efforts to help her break free.

This was it. This was how she was going to die. And as Scottie began to let herself become lost in the cloud of darkness surrounding her, she found herself thankful for the chance to at least live out her greatest and most precious dream.

Even if it were only for a fraction of time, she'd known what it was like to love. Truly love. And she'd been loved.

By her mother. Her grandparents. And though it hadn't been for nearly long enough...by Chase.

I...love...you...

The unspoken thought was the last thing to whisper through her fading mind when suddenly, the man holding her under the water was gone. At first, Scottie thought she'd crossed over to whatever was waiting for her on the other side, but then?—

A large hand fisted the front of her shirt and forcefully yanked her weakened form upward. Her head and shoulders broke the water's surface, and not a moment too

soon.

Scottie gasped and coughed, her mouth gaping like a fish out of water as she sucked in as much air as her starving lungs would allow. This went on for a handful of seconds before she managed to open her eyes to see what the hell had just happened.

It didn't take long to figure it out.

Van, Chase's teammate, was holding her steady with his hands on her shoulders. Concern filled the man's dark, almost black stare as he asked her if she was all right.

She opened her mouth again, to thank him for saving her life. But the sound of a large scuffle pulled her attention to her right, and Scottie's heart nearly stopped when she realized it was Chase.

He'd just rolled on top of the man who had damn near killed her. A murderous rage painted his handsome face red, while his fists pummeled her attacker over and over again.

He's going to kill him if he doesn't stop.

Lucky rushed over to her as Van used a knife to carefully cut her wrists free. "Oh, thank God! Are you okay?"

A million little pins and needles began poking her hands and fingers as the circulation in her extremities began restoring itself back to normal. Rather than answer the man's worried question, Scottie pushed herself to a stumbling stand.

Her legs trembled beneath her, and she swayed more than once, but she didn't stop until she was kneeling on the ground next to the man she loved.

“Chase,” she spoke softly, putting a hand on the back of his strained shoulder. “Stop. You’re going to kill him.”

He hit her kidnapper one more time.

“Chase!” Scottie said his name louder that time, needing to keep him from killing in her honor.

She didn’t want that for Chase, despite the crazed lunatic’s violent actions toward her. Mostly because she assumed he already had plenty of other ghosts from his SEAL days to contend with.

I can’t be the reason he adds another one to his collection.

“Ch-Chase,” she choked again, coughing to clear her strained throat before letting him know, “I’m okay!”

She was scared out of her wits, and the reality of how closely she’d come to death hadn’t fully sunk in. But for now, Scottie was alive. The rest, she’d deal with later.

Chase froze mid-swing, his wild gaze flying straight over to hers. He blinked, and it was then she realized he finally saw her.

“I got this, brother.” Logan took control of the jerk lying unconscious on the ground. “You take care of her.”

With her next breath, Scottie found herself being pulled into Chase’s arms.

“Jesus, baby!” His strong, comforting hold became impossibly tighter. “I thought I lost you forever!”

“I thought so, too.” Tears spilled over, falling in waves down her cold, wet cheeks. “H-how did you even?—”

He slammed his lips to hers in a kiss Scottie knew she’d remember for the rest of her days.

“I love you!” he blurted the second their mouths parted ways. “ Both of you. So fucking much!”

It wasn’t until he placed a gentle palm over her soaking wet belly that the last half of what he’d said finally sank in.

Scottie felt her heart kick the inside of her ribs.

“Y-you...know?” She swallowed hard, her throat scratchy and tender from her earlier screams.

“About the baby?” Emotion poured into the blues of his eyes. “Yeah, sugar. I know. And I get why you were afraid to tell me, but Scottie, I...” His strong voice cracked as his gaze shone with a well of unshed tears. “All I’ve ever wanted was to be with you. To marry you, and”—he glanced down a moment before his focus returned to where it was before—“to have a family with you.”

Fresh tears fell with the water dripping from her hair. “I’m not even sure...I mean, I fell from the back of that van, and then that m-man...” A giant knot formed at the base of her throat. “It’s so early, Chase. What if...what if I did something to hurt the baby?”

He kissed her again with all the gentleness and care of a man who treasured the woman he loved. “We were brought back together for a reason, Scottlynn.” He used her given name. “And if there’s one thing I’m sure of...especially after today...it’s

that you and I can handle anything that comes our way. As long as we're together."

God, she loved this man.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you the second I took the test."

"Shhh..." He brushed a few strands of her soaked hair away from her eyes before tucking them behind her ear. "Remember what I told you the night I proposed? No more letting the past steal whatever time we have left together." Chase leaned his forehead against hers. "From now on, from this moment forward, all we need to focus on is our future."

Our future.

Scottie had thought it had been lost to them both forever. But now...

A loud commotion stole her attention. She and Chase—along with the rest of the men on his team—looked up in time to see a slew of uniformed officers making their way through the tree line.

Their guns were in their hands. Their intense stares quickly assessing the situation. Logan motioned for the one closest to him to come over and cuff the man responsible for it all. And once he did, Scottie knew her nightmare was officially over.

Several minutes later, she was walking beside Chase, surrounded by the other four men on his team. Together, they were making their way back to the team's SUV, which was apparently parked much closer than the van in which she'd previously escaped.

Chase filled her in on what she didn't know about her kidnapper. The working theory was when ten-year-old Dustin McVey came to live with Levi Taylor's foster family,

Taylor—who was only twelve at the time—began grooming his new little brother as his sickening sidekick.

From what Chase and the others surmised, Taylor could control his mental instability far better than McVey. Which explained why Taylor had been able to hold a job and come off as a productive member of society while McVey ended up murdered in a state-run institution for the criminally insane.

In the end, they both lost their freedom. McVey having paid for his sins with his life. Taylor was already on his way to the King County Jail where he'd sit all alone in an eight-by-eight cell until he was either sent away to prison or a place like the one his foster brother spent his remaining days.

Either way, it was over. No matter where the asshole ended up, she was safe. All thanks to the man doing his best to hold back his anger over what she'd been put through, including the bruise she could already feel forming on her face.

"H-How did you guys even find me?" Scottie needed to know.

"That's another long story." Chase's mouth lifted into a heartwarming smile. "Basically, Lucky worked his tech magic, we figured out which part of the forest you were in, and Van broke every land speed record known to man to get us here."

"Thank you." She said the words to Chase before looking around at the others. "All of you. If you hadn't shown up when you did..."

Archer shot her a quick wink. "We're just glad it ended the way it did."

"Me, too," Scottie chuckled.

It seemed odd to be laughing and smiling at a time like this. But then she realized this

was the perfect time to smile. The best time to laugh. Because she was alive, and she and Chase were in love. And...she prayed...still expecting their very first child.

The black and tinted SUV came into sight as she and the team made their way out of the trees. They were only a few yards away when Logan's phone began to ring.

"It's Nat," he announced as he answered the call. "Hey, baby, we got her! Scottie's safe, and the man who took her is in police custody, so we're on our way back to the—" He stopped dead in his tracks, his hazel eyes growing wide with surprise. "What? When?" His expression went from surprise to concern. "Are Ellie and Cassie still with you?" A giant look of relief fell over the frantic man. "Okay, good. Have her and Ellie drive you to the hospital. I'll meet you there. And Nat?" The man waited a beat before adding a heartfelt, "I love you."

"The hospital?" Chase asked as soon as Logan ended the call. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I hope. Natalie's water just broke!" The man's lips spread into a wide, almost shell-shocked grin, his overwhelming excitement shining through as he hollered out, "Well, hot damn! We're gonna have ourselves a baby!"

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later...

“By the power vested in me by the state of Washington, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Chase slid his palms along the sides of Scottie’s face before sealing the vows they’d just spoken with a kiss. A slow, unhurried, probably-making-the-judge-blush kiss to start the beginning of the rest of their lives.

There’d been a time not long ago when he’d feared this moment would never come. But it had, and they were here, and now...

She’s my wife.

“Woo hoo!” Lucky cheered with a big, cheesy grin.

A round of joyful clapping and boisterous expressions of congratulations filled the judge’s chambers as Chase’s teammates—along with Natalie, Cassie, and Ellie—celebrated his and Scottie’s special day.

They hadn’t wanted a long engagement or a big, fancy wedding. Apart from the fact that it wasn’t really their style, after everything that had happened, both he and his gorgeous new bride had no desire to wait for their new future to start.

Too much time had already passed between them. Too much time had already been

wasted. For them, it wasn't about the dress, or the flowers, or how many guests were in attendance.

For Chase and Scottie, it was about...

Forever.

And since the judge who'd just married them had also recently sentenced Levi Taylor to life without the possibility of parole, they could start their new life with confidence, knowing the homicidal maniac would never, ever be able to hurt her again.

"Congratulations!" Cassie squealed from Archer's side. The pretty blonde lawyer practically threw herself in Scottie's arms.

"Thank you!" Scottie giggled.

"Congrats, brother." Logan was the first to shake Chase's hand.

Natalie stood behind her husband, talking and laughing with the bride and other Eagle's Nest wives. Her arms filled with her and Logan's adorable, infant son.

Garrison Logan Hayes.

Chase still got teary-eyed thinking of how the new parents had honored Hunter's memory by using their fallen teammate's last name as their son's first.

"Thanks, man." He shook Logan's hand with a wide, goofy grin. "It means a lot that you all were here."

"You kiddin'?" Lucky joined in the conversation. "We wouldn't miss the chance to welcome you into the club."

His brows dipped with confusion. “Club?”

“I believe you once called it the ‘Ball and Chain Club’,” the other man teased.

Chase’s shoulder’s shook with laughter as he recalled a previous conversation between he and Ellie.

“Happy to be a part of it, brother.” He grinned.

Archer quickly joined, followed by Van, who’d even worn a nice suit for the occasion. But as Chase accepted the gestures of brotherly love, he found his gaze continuously sliding back to the most beautiful woman in the room.

He was fairly certain the other married men in attendance thought the same thing when they looked at their own respective wives. But for Chase, there was only one woman in his sights.

From now until the end of his days.

“We need pictures!” Ellie reminded everyone before they got too caught up in the moment and left.

Judge Cannon was kind enough to play photographer for the day, and soon they had all the “traditional” pictures to commemorate the best day of Chase’s life.

Him in his navy-blue suit, white shirt, and matching blue tie. Scottie in a simple, ankle-length white dress and matching heels.

One side of her long, sandy-blonde hair pulled away from her face. A simple array of white flowers helped to keep it in place while she held a small, matching bouquet in her hands.

Never wanting to forget the incredible moment, Chase committed the way she looked to memory. When she caught him staring down at her, Scottie looked up at him and smiled. And all he could think was...

Fucking stunning.

“Here you go.” Judge Cannon started to hand Chase back his phone. But he stopped him by asking the man to take one more.

“Hang on!” He spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear. “I have an idea for one more pic. It’s a special one I don’t want to forget.”

“Special?” A look of bewilderment crossed over Scottie’s gorgeous green eyes.

He pulled his bride gently to his side, leaning down to place a soft kiss to her temple. “That’s right, sugar. I want to be sure to include all of us in this perfect day.”

Before she could ask what it was he was going on about, Chase reached into the inner vest pocket of his suit jacket, pulling out the small, square piece of shiny thin paper he’d been hiding.

“Chase...” Scottie looked up at him with more love than a man like him deserved.

“I don’t ever want our baby thinking they weren’t wanted, or that we weren’t over-the-moon excited about the idea of becoming parents.”

A collective “Ahhh...” came from the other ladies in the room as an onslaught of tears filled his wife’s amazing gaze.

“I’ll never understand how I got lucky enough to find you again.”

“Ah, sugar.” He used the back of his knuckles to brush a few fallen tears away. “Luck

had nothing to do with it. This is how it was always supposed to be.”

They kissed again because, well, they could. And then the entire group got back together for a final picture.

Chase and Scottie stood surrounded by their closest friends. Together, the bride and groom held the ultrasound image of their tiny, peanut-shaped bundle of joy.

Despite what he’d just told her, he couldn’t deny feeling like the luckiest man in the world. The fact that he was married to the best thing to ever happen to him...knowing they were going to be parents in a few short months...

Chase looked around at those who’d stood witness to his and Scottie’s unbreakable union, becoming struck once again with how blessed he truly was. He truly had it all.

The job. The friends. The girl.

And as he leaned in and kissed his wife in front of God and those around them, he secretly wished for their own precious baby girl. One with soft, blonde waves and beautiful green eyes. Just like her beautiful, sweet mother.

But deep down, boy or girl, it didn’t matter to him in the least. What mattered was the fact that Scottie was finally, officially his. And as long as she was by his side, Chase knew without a doubt...

The best is yet to come.

Kandahar, Afghanistan

Three weeks later...

Van sat in the shadows of the quaint little coffee shop in downtown Kandahar.

Watching. Waiting. And hoping like hell the intel his team had received wasn't a steaming pile of bullshit.

According to the information he and his team had been given, their target frequented the local establishment, using it as a neutral place to meet with men she'd hired to kill. But it had been three days, and so far, there was no sign of Kaamisha Dawari.

Just as he'd done the past three days, Van kept to himself, not talking to anyone else around him. He'd purposely chosen this seat, not only for the low lighting in this area of the coffee shop but also for its proximity to its entrance.

If the Dawari woman showed, he'd know it. But so far...

"It's been three days, Van." Logan's voice filled the tiny mic in his right ear. "Maybe we should call it and regroup when we have better intel."

He used the now-cooled cup of coffee in his hand to conceal his moving lips. "We're not fucking calling it," he spoke quietly as he took a small sip. "She'll show."

"Is that your Spidey senses telling you that, or do you know something we don't?" Lucky chimed in.

The grip on his glass tightened, but he kept control of his frustration toward his smartass teammate and his expression as casual as before. "I'm telling you; she'll be here."

He got that the other men were chomping at the bit to finish this thing once and for all so they could get back home to their wives. Hell, Logan and Nat's kid was only a few weeks old, and Chase and Scottie had barely been married a month.

But this wasn't about weddings or babies. This was about justice. For Hunter. For all of them. And he'd be damned if, after all this time, they packed up their shit and gave

up.

Not now. Not when they were this close to catching the bitch responsible for Hunt's death and the end of their careers as decorated SEALs.

"One more hour," he compromised. "She doesn't show up by then, we'll call it a night and regroup."

"One hour," Logan agreed. "Not a minute more."

Van settled back in his chair, prepared to spend the next sixty minutes hanging out in a place he was getting damn tired of seeing. While he sat here, trying not to look suspicious or like some creep, Logan and the others were living it up at a hotel two blocks over.

Thank God for satellite phones.

The thought took him off guard because, well, Van didn't believe there was a God. There'd been a time in his life when he did, but...not anymore.

Oh, he used to believe. Was even known to pray to the Big Guy on occasion. But that was before everything he'd ever cared about was ripped viciously away. Before Van truly understood the true evil that was ever-present in this fucked-up world.

If there was a God, He wouldn't have let Hunter die. If there was some higher being out there somewhere, looking over all those who were good and pure, then...

My wife and son would still be alive.

So, no. Van no longer counted on a supposed god for any sort of guidance. He hadn't for a long damn time.

Instead, he relied on his extensive training, experience, and instincts to survive. They'd gotten him this far, and he didn't see any reason to change course now.

The minutes ticked by as he sat waiting and hoping, but an hour later, there were still no signs of their target. True to his word, Van gave in, finally agreeing to call it a night.

They'd try again tomorrow. And the next day, if it was necessary. In fact, Van would park his happy ass in this same shadowed spot every day for the next fucking month, if that's what it took.

Because this mission wasn't like the others he and his SEAL brothers had taken on. This job was personal. A vendetta long-past overdue.

He started to get up, grabbing the half-empty cup he'd planned to toss on his way out. The door to the shop opened, and a woman walked inside.

Van froze, his heart slamming against the inside of his chest. It was her. The Dawari woman was standing less than ten feet from his table.

The woman who'd done more damage than she'd ever fucking know.

"She's here," he slowly sat back down, not wanting to draw attention to himself. "Our target just walked through the door."

Reaching up with his free hand, Van pulled the bill of his dark ballcap down a little more to help conceal his watchful eyes.

Archer's rumbled voice filled the mic in his ear. "You sure it's her?"

He studied the Afghani woman from the shadows.

She was dressed in a casual yet traditional garment accepted by the Taliban charge. The long dress was loose-fitting as it hung from its cinched waist, its cream-colored material flowing freely around her long legs.

The bust and sleeves were adorned with a simple pattern embroidered in threads of deep greens, orange, and brown, and she wore an olive-green hijab over her slicked-back hair.

Even from here, Van could see the dark, black strands of her hairline. Her sharp features, flawless skin, and round, intelligent eyes.

“It’s her,” he confirmed.

Logan shot back with a sharp, “We’re on our way now!”

But Van’s focus was still zeroed in on the woman absentmindedly glancing at those around her.

Beautiful.

He nearly recoiled in his seat at the unexpected thought. It was his second what-the-fuck moment of the night, and a reminder he needed to get his ass in the game and stay focused on his team’s objective.

The Dawari woman’s physical appearance only mattered in regard to making a positive I.D. He wasn’t supposed to notice her gorgeous, round eyes, flawless skin, or full, kissable lips.

Pretty or not, she was a fucking terrorist. A killer who’d arranged for the ambush that nearly killed his entire team. So, no. The fact that the woman they were after was even prettier in person than her pictures didn’t mean jack shit.

He was still going to catch her and bring her back to the United States. And Van still intended on finally making the ruthless bitch pay.

The pretty brunette with a heart made of stone stood casually while waiting in line to place her order. As if she was like any other woman on any given day. As if she wasn't someone capable of orchestrating a man's cold-blooded murder.

"We're in the car and headed your way," Logan informed him a few minutes later. "Any change we need to be aware of?"

"Nothing yet," Van responded quietly. "She just put in her order."

His gaze scanned the coffee shop's small seating area, wondering if he'd missed one of Dawari's men as they waited. But none of the people at the tables around him set off his radar.

And Van had studied every one of the terrorist bastard's faces to the point he knew he'd never forget.

"Her people aren't here," he shared with the men who were blocks away.

"Maybe she's early," Logan offered.

Anything was possible, he supposed.

He watched and waited, assuming she'd soon take a seat at one of the tables. Instead, when their target got the coffee she'd recently ordered, the woman turned around and walked right back out the door.

Fuck!

"She just left." Van got up, forcing himself to take slow, unhurried steps. "I'm going

to follow.”

“Be careful,” Logan advised. “We’ll be there in less than five.”

He tossed his unwanted cup in the trashcan near the door as he pulled it open and stepped out onto the sidewalk. It was early spring, so the temps were still fairly cool, especially at night.

Van didn’t notice the slight chill in the air, or the breeze that carried it past him as he moved. His sole focus was on the woman walking several feet up ahead.

Like any other major city around the world, nightlife in Kandahar was filled with cars, people, and lights. Van counted on the bustle of noise and activity surrounding him to help conceal his presence from the woman he was currently hunting.

Knowing his team was already en route to his location, he decided to close the distance between them a little more. People walked past, seeming to intentionally pretend he wasn’t there.

He got that a lot, people going out of their way to avoid him. Van knew what people saw when they looked at him. What they thought when their eyes met his.

Dark. Menacing. A killer.

It didn’t hurt his feelings or bother him in the least. He was a killer. One trained by Uncle Sam, himself. And he was really, really good at his fucking job.

Speaking of jobs...

The Dawari woman took a sharp right down an alleyway separating two of the city’s brick buildings. Van picked up the pace, unwilling to risk letting her get away.

“She just went north, through an alley.”

“Lucky’s got you on his radar, Van,” Chase joined in the conversation. “Don’t worry. We’ll be there in no time.”

He wasn’t worried. Worrying was a waste of energy and time. And since he and the others were equipped with state-of-the-art tracking devices, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind his team would find him if he veered off-course.

The woman vanished around the corner, and though he knew where she was, Van hated not having her in his sights. He picked up the pace, walking briskly down the busy sidewalk.

“She just went into the alley. I’m going after her.”

“Damn it, Braddock, just keep your ass where it is.” Logan’s disapproving voice grumbled. “We’re almost there.”

Fuck that.

He wasn’t risking losing her when they were this fucking close.

Ignoring his teammate’s order, he continued to follow his original plan. But just as he reached the alley’s dark entrance, a man pushing a wooden cart overflowing with fresh produce hit a crack in the sidewalk. The cart tipped toward the section of sidewalk in front of where Van was walking, its contents spilling directly in his path.

Melons, grapes, fresh figs, and more rolled out of the overturned cart, and Van had to do a quick side-step to avoid tripping. Letting loose with a string of muttered curses, he changed directions, deciding to go around the mess, rather than attempting to make his way through it.

The delay cost him seconds he didn't have to spare, so he pushed his legs into a swift, purposeful jog. He entered the alley expecting to see Kaamisha Dawari walking several yards up ahead, but she wasn't there. No one was there.

Just a handful of dumpsters and a few bags of trash.

"Fuck!" He bit the curse out harshly. "I don't see her."

"She has to be there," Archer suggested. "Since you're already there, and we're coming up on the alley now, you may as well keep going."

Keeping his eyes laser-focused on the shadows before him, Van walked in fast, wide strides. His intense gaze scanning every inch of the alley for the woman he couldn't wait to kill.

"We're coming up to your north, now," Logan let him know. "We'll park at the north end of the alley and wait. You can hop in with us, and we can?—"

The other man's words drifted away as a knife appeared at the base of Van's throat. Long and shiny from the brief glimpse of it that he'd seen, the lethal weapon stopped him cold in his tracks.

He stood still, not moving so much as an inch, though he wanted to kick his own ass. He'd been so busy looking for the woman they were after, he'd failed to cover his own back.

"Van?" Logan's voice filled his ear once again. "You good?"

Van wanted to tell his team what was going on, but he didn't. Not because he was scared of dying or afraid of getting cut, but because he was too focused on the woman holding the deadly blade.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Donovan Braddock,” the woman’s low, accented voice greeted him from behind.

“Guess I found you... Kaamisha,” he rumbled her name in an instinctual response.

A soft, breathy laugh blew across the back of his neck as warmth from her feminine form blanketed him from behind. And when she spoke again, the woman brought her lips closer to his ear. Her whispered words as ominous as any he’d ever heard.

“You and your team may have been looking for me, Navy SEAL. But guess what?” She pressed the razor-thin edge of the blade into the skin at his throat. “I have been looking for you, too.”