



Protecting Tessa (Special Forces: Operation Alpha) (Brotherhood Alliance #6)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Tessa Donnelly is living her dream as an event planner. But her life shatters when she discovers her seemingly perfect boyfriend isn't just a nightclub owner—he's an enforcer for the mob. Terrified, Tessa makes the difficult decision to expose him. When her actions put her life at risk, she's forced to run for her life and seeks refuge in a secluded cabin deep in the woods.

Ford McCallum, a former soldier, is haunted by the horrors of war. There's no family to come home to. He's seen too much and craves the solace of his secluded cabin. Working for the Brotherhood Alliance lets him use the skills learned in the service to help others, but peace is hard to find.

When danger follows Tessa, Ford and the Brotherhood Alliance step in. Will Tessa reclaim her shattered dreams and learn to trust again? Can Ford overcome his bitterness with life and protect the woman who reignites feelings he thought long buried? And can two damaged people let go of their past and find the happiness they deserve?

Total Pages (Source): 50

Ford McCallum inhaled a deep cleansing breath of crisp autumn air, letting it fill his lungs before releasing it. He took one last look at his family's home before getting into his truck.

The white Cape-Cod-style house with its green shutters was his sanctuary growing up, filled with the comforting aromas of his mother's cooking, the sweet smell of his father's cigar, and the creak of the porch swing on a summer's night as fireflies flickered.

Love and laughter once filled this place. Now it stood silent and dark.

So many happy first memories were made there—the swing set he and his dad built; working on fishing lures together; the birthday parties and holidays; his first car—a sweet Ford Mustang—bought with money he earned; his first kiss under the stars with his crush, Melody; his first sexual experience in the back seat of said Mustang, also with Melody; and finally graduating high school and following in his father's footsteps when he made his decision to join the Army.

Ford had sold the house and carefully packed up anything of sentimental value and placed it in the back of his truck. It wasn't much—a couple of photo albums, his father's watch and service medals, and his mother's wedding ring.

The rest of the furniture and clothes were donated to charity. There was no sense in holding on to the past. Another family would hopefully benefit.

The funeral had been intimate, just friends of his parents and a few close friends of his from the military under a gray sky with threatening dark thunderclouds.

Thankfully, it hadn't rained.

After the twenty-one-gun salute and presentation of the flag in honor of his father's military service, he left.

He had no relatives—both parents had been only children, just like him. Now they were together for eternity, buried in adjoining plots under a sprawling oak in the local cemetery.

Loss seemed to be a constant in his life. First, he lost his parents in a tragic car accident. Then he'd watched Pete, his best friend and brother—not by blood, but still—die in battle. He'd talked Pete into giving up college and joining the service with him. The weight of that never left him.

Now haunted by ghosts, he drove south toward Haywood Lake, Florida, the familiar mountains of his hometown giving way to vast farms and wide-open farmland and finally to palm trees and sunshine. Hopefully, the sunshine would chase away the dark shadows following him.

A while ago, an Army buddy mentioned that a group of veterans was providing protection services in the area. The idea intrigued him. It called on his sense of duty to protect the innocent.

Before the funeral, Ford got the job at the Brotherhood Alliance after a brief conversation with the director, Chase Maddox. He was thrilled to be working alongside men who had walked similar paths as he and to put to good use the skills he learned in the service.

The best part was living rent-free on campus in a cabin nestled among the trees, which allowed him to splurge on a more secluded place just outside of town, deep in the woods, where he could retreat when life got overwhelming.

The Brotherhood Alliance was a melting pot of backgrounds, yet united by shared experiences. They were a tight-knit group of men, all ex-military. Some had girlfriends, and some were married, a condition he hoped to avoid. The pain of loss was still too raw.

He, Zach Rodgers, and Titus Finch were single and lived on campus. He and Titus had started there at the same time but didn't spend much time together.

Not that it mattered now.

Titus had a woman and would be moving in with her. Ford had helped Emelia Wells move into her apartment above her bakery and then guarded her when she was threatened by her ex-boyfriend. Titus was one lucky man. Emelia was outgoing, funny, smart, a fabulous baker, and sexy. Although he'd never tell Titus that. Not if he wanted to keep his balls intact.

None of that mattered, though; he wasn't looking for a woman.

Eight Months Later

Ford sat at the long conference table in the command center. It was after work hours at Paws for Caring, so the few employees who worked there had gone home. Titus had just finished giving his update, and Chase turned to Ford.

"How about you, Ford?" Chase asked. "Any issues?"

Ford took his time answering. "No. I got the mom and kids out of their situation and

safely to the shelter. The director helped settle them in.”

“Any problem with the dad?” asked Chase.

“Nope.” Ford smirked. “He might have a case of swollen balls for a while. But yeah, he finally saw the light.”

Boy, that had been a stressful case.

He was always amazed how much trouble followed people who least deserved it.

The dad was drunk and thought he’d get away with striking his wife in front of his screaming kids, then threatening her with more of where that came from if she left him.

Ford intervened and got the dad in a chokehold while the woman took her kids and got in his truck. Then dad thought he was a tough guy. A well-placed knee to the guy’s balls was rewarding, especially when he curled up on the floor, crying like a baby. Ford left him in the apartment with a few choice threats and got the little family to safety.

The shelter in town was one of the Brotherhood’s pet projects. They did a lot of free protection work for women and the occasional man who were in fear for their safety. The Alliance just recently branched out and took on paying projects, which he liked better. Emotions weren’t necessary to safeguard a client, only expertise and focus.

In a couple of days, if he didn’t have an upcoming job, Ford planned to head out to his cabin. The stress of work and the constant camaraderie with the guys was getting overwhelming. He felt alone in his thoughts and the familiar weight of guilt and the past creeping in.

He needed to clear his head and refocus. Just him and the peace of the woods.
Although he'd learned the hard way peace never lasted.

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Tessa Donnelly thought she had it all—good friends, a wonderful job, and a caring, successful boyfriend.

The perfect life.

That illusion shattered when she discovered her boyfriend was something other than a loving, kind person.

And after he discovered she was recording him and her cover was blown.

And definitely after she realized the black SUV trailing behind her for miles was indeed following her and had been since she left Atlanta, Georgia.

How the hell did I end up in this mess?

Her heart raced in time with the windshield wipers, which were struggling to keep pace with the steady rain. Tessa clenched her fingers around the steering wheel, squeezing her knuckles white. She should have known that she couldn't outwit her douchebag ex-boyfriend and his best pal. It wasn't so long ago that she thought they were sophisticated and funny. Ha! What a fool she'd been.

She chanced another glimpse in the rearview mirror.

Damn . The SUV was still there, keeping pace. Not too close but never letting her get out of sight.

Tessa took a deep breath in, a slow breath out, then repeated. No luck. The nausea gurgling in her stomach threatened to erupt, but panic was not an option. Think! Damn it .

The narrow, rain-slick road buzzed with cars, their headlights blurring in the rain. Just enough traffic so the fool following her wouldn't have realized she saw him. But for how long?

How did her life spiral into this nightmare?

She was the good girl—the one who followed the rules. Was this her reward for trying to be an upstanding citizen—to be hunted like prey?

Her mind flashed back to the night she thought she was building her dream, until that dream became a nightmare.

Her heart raced. Was it only two months ago? It felt like another lifetime.

Tessa's fingers flew over her tablet, confirming the final details of her latest event. The hum of city traffic outside her office was just background noise. Inside, everything was organized, calm—well, not calm, but controlled.

Tonight's charity gala for the city's elite at Illusion—the hottest nightclub in town, owned by her boyfriend, Damien—was her biggest event yet. It was the perfect venue for her fledgling career as an event planner. All the top officials in town and their spouses would be there.

Tessa absentmindedly rubbed her ear, her finger tracing the diamond there. She'd gifted herself the earrings when she started her own business. Her mind was overwhelmed thinking about all the potential business she could garner—that is, if they liked what she put together.

Her assistant Amber held up two different mood boards. “Champagne tower or signature cocktails?” she asked.

“Hmmm. Cocktails,” Tessa replied. “Something everyone will remember.”

“Gotcha.” Amber nodded and walked back to her desk.

No doubt Amber would deliver something exceptional. She was a whiz at inventing unique drinks and menus for events.

Tessa leaned back in her chair, reflecting on how far she had come from working as a special events coordinator at a nonprofit agency to running her own events company.

Then she met the charismatic Damien, who encouraged her to branch out, offering his nightclub for her first official event.

How naive she had been with her head in the clouds and dollar signs in her eyes, thinking she was all that and a bag of chips. She’d been too eager, too trusting and never saw the evil lurking beneath.

A blaring car horn jolted her back to the present. Tessa’s heart nearly leaped out of her chest as she swerved to avoid a collision.

That life was gone. Now all she needed was a plan. Somewhere to hide. Maybe a cheap motel over the state line? Disappear for a while.

Tessa was clearly not involving her parents or friends—too dangerous.

Thankfully, Amber was out of harm’s way with her mother, who was recovering from surgery in another state. She was taking time off to help.

Her parents were on a cruise around the world. Hopefully, this situation would be resolved before their return.

But Tessa was alone—desperately alone—and needed help. Her biggest questions were where could she go and be safe? And who could she trust to help her?

She looked behind her again. Damn, Marty sped up. Tessa's chest tightened as she moved into the right-hand lane, her heart pounding.

Because no way was she going to die on this lonely road tonight and especially not by any fault of her own.

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Tessa drove on through the night. Her pulse was racing, and her palms were sweaty as she gripped the steering wheel. The hum of the engine did nothing to drown out the pounding of her heart.

She risked a glance in the rearview mirror.

Marty was still following her.

She hadn't shaken him. This was a game to him—a sick, twisted game of cat and mouse. He probably got off on it.

Tessa thought she'd lost him a while ago at the last turnoff. She took a chance to fill up with gas. However, within a half hour after pulling back on the highway, his headlights reappeared. Why doesn't he give up and turn around? Tessa knew the answer. Damien wanted her alive—he was going to torture her. He told her as much before she ran.

The road ahead was a ribbon of black. Thick trees bordered the highway like silent sentinels, seeming to close in on her. Every once in a while, she saw faint lights belonging to a building or a house, but Tessa never felt so alone. There were a few cars on the road and even several highway patrol cars. She thought about putting on her emergency blinkers and hoping they'd stop. But what if they didn't? Then what?

Turning on the radio was no comfort. She twisted the knob but only got static and a mournful country song. It depressed her even more.

Tears blurred her vision, but there was no time to cry or fall apart. Not now. Not when Marty was still chasing her.

Rain started falling, slowing traffic down. What to do?

Confused and disoriented, she had no clue where to go or which road to follow.

Tessa pressed harder on the gas. The roads were slick, and she felt the car skid slightly. Fog was thickening, and the rain was coming down harder. Up ahead, she could see flashing lights and a sign: Rest stop—1 mile ahead.

Her heart leapt—maybe someone would be there and she could call for help.

The turn appeared suddenly, and Tessa seized it, her tires slipping on the wet road. But as her headlights swept across the parking lot, it was empty. The store was closed.

Closed!

Her breath caught. Panic tightened her chest. What now? Should she attempt to get back on the highway? Or continue down the unknown road?

She glanced in the mirror again.

Marty was just getting off the highway and closing in. God no.

She had one chance.

Her breath catching in her throat, Tessa turned off her headlights and sped ahead down a pitch-black road, surrounded by shadows of trees in the fog and blinding rain. The rain beat harder against the windshield, and the darkness pressed in from all

sides. She was alone—almost.

The narrow road ahead was winding. There were no other cars. She kept the headlights off, praying nothing ran in front of the car or that she didn't hit a tree or worse. Her hands ached from gripping the wheel so tightly.

The road curved sharply, and her tires skidded again. The car fishtailed until she managed to straighten it out. Every muscle in her body was taut with fear. She kept glancing behind, but all she saw was black.

Her breath came in short, panicked gasps.

This had to end. She needed to lose Marty before she killed herself.

Tessa drove deeper into the woods. She glanced in the rearview mirror again but didn't see Marty. The road split ahead, and she veered left, praying it would take her somewhere remote. Somewhere Marty wouldn't think to follow.

Miles passed. Still no sign of Marty. Hopefully, she'd lost him. She didn't dare turn her headlights on, just in case.

Up ahead, she saw a faint flicker through the trees. A house? A cabin? A tent?

Tessa didn't care what it was as long as she could hide. She maneuvered down a gravel path that was barely wide enough for her car, the road nearly overgrown. She bounced over rocks and potholes as she drove up.

A cabin came into view, dark and hopefully uninhabited. There were no cars parked outside. Except for the porch light, no other lights were on.

She pulled around to the back of the cabin, driving over branches and into small

bushes before killing the engine.

Tessa sat in her car. Her breath came in ragged gasps.

She had no idea where she was. However, this was her last chance to hide, regroup and figure out her next move.

I think I lost Marty.

Grabbing her phone and purse, she climbed out of the car. The rain drenched her in an instant. Her shoes slipped on the wet grass, but she forced herself forward.

Reaching the porch, she stepped to the front door and banged on it, hoping and yet afraid someone would answer.

Silence.

Okay then. She took a deep breath. Tessa reached for the door handle. Locked—of course. Closing her eyes, she gave herself a pep talk. She couldn't drive anymore. She was exhausted.

She bit her lip and, in a moment of frustration, gave the door a swift kick. Stood there with her mouth open when the door swung in. It worked! Wow, for a fleeting second, Tessa felt like a ninja.

No time for that.

She hesitantly stepped inside, her nerves on edge, and cocked her head.

There was no dog, no alarm. It was just a secluded cabin in the woods. And so quiet, eerie almost. It didn't appear that anyone had been here recently.

Tessa ran back to her car to get her bag before hurrying inside. She dragged a chair over to secure the door, bracing it beneath the handle. Only then did she breathe a sigh of relief.

She was safe—for now. But even then, it was an illusion of safety.

Tessa turned slowly, looking around the small cabin. The dim light from the porch filtered through the window, throwing long shadows across the room. A stone fireplace dominated one corner, the faint scent of a previous fire lingering in the air. On the mantel was a collection of fishing lures and reels neatly lined up.

In front of it was a sofa, a couple of small tables, and a single chair. If there was a television, she didn't see it.

The kitchen was small but big enough to hold a two-person table. A few cabinets lined one wall, with a stove and refrigerator separated by a stainless-steel sink on the other. She tried the faucet. Cool water spilled out.

There was a door off the living room, and Tessa peeked in.

The bedroom contained a king-size bed covered with a dark duvet, a small side table with a lamp, and a closet—no room for anything else.

Across from the bedroom was a tiny bathroom, again with just the basics. Whoever lived here wasn't entertaining guests or worrying about creature comforts, that was for sure. But it had electricity and water, which was more than a lot of cabins had, and was empty, which was more than she hoped for.

She sank into the sofa in the dark, listening to the rain on the roof, her body coiled with tension. Occasionally, she'd peek outside into the black night. No headlights, no movement at all.

Tessa wanted to relax and hoped that she lost her tail. She must have, otherwise Marty would already be banging on the door.

Her heart was thumping. Then her stomach growled.

How long had it been since she ate?

Aside from the protein bar she consumed a few hours ago, she couldn't remember.

Probably yesterday's breakfast before everything went to hell. There had been no time to pack any food, and she didn't want to stop to buy anything.

Stumbling into the kitchen, she opened a cabinet. Then let out a deep breath. It was too dark to see anything. Maybe she could chance one light. Her stomach rumbled again.

On the wall was a light switch that she flipped on. A soft glow illuminated the area over the sink, allowing her to look in the cabinets. She rummaged through the first cabinet—plates, mugs, a couple of glasses, some silverware. The second one revealed staples like flour, sugar, and coffee. Her frustration grew as she opened another cabinet.

Score! A jar of peanut butter. Looking behind a row of dusty canned vegetables and fruit, she found a package of crackers, sealed and slightly crushed. Dinner.

Tessa brought her stash over to the sofa and placed everything on the coffee table. She tore open the package of crackers and picked up the butter knife she found to spread them with peanut butter. As she chewed, Tessa couldn't stop the terror swirling in her mind. When her belly was finally full, she lay down on the sofa and covered her eyes with her arm.

One month ago.

Tessa stood in the corner of the bustling nightclub, the floor humming with the beat of a popular band's music.

The men wore sleek tailored suits, and the women had on chic cocktail dresses and jewelry—lots of diamonds and gold jewelry.

The air was thick with the scent of expensive perfume and the sound of clinking glasses and laughter as the charity event hit its stride.

Hors d'oeuvres were passed around on silver trays by servers, while the tables were covered in black linens adorned with candles and floral centerpieces. They set up a silent auction in one corner featuring luxury vacations, pieces of art, and other items for people to bid on. Guests flowed through the dimly lit space, congratulating her on a job well done.

But something was off.

Damien was huddled in the far corner talking to Marty with his back to her. They were deep in a serious conversation. Damien was angry. He kept slicing the air with his hands. Tessa was curious.

Was something wrong with the event?

She could fix it, but he had to tell her what it was.

Tessa's chest tightened. As she approached, the two men went into Damien's office and closed the door. The music and laughter faded into the background as she raised her fist to knock on the door, but harsh voices stopped her.

“I don’t care that he has a family. Kill him,” Damien growled.

Tessa froze and shrank back into the shadows. Her pulse thundered in her chest. The happy chatter of the guests was in sharp contrast to the evil she sensed. What was Damien talking about? Why did he sound so dangerous? This wasn’t the man she shared dinners with, who kissed her goodbye each morning as he headed off to “business meetings.” Now she wondered if they were indeed business meetings or something else— something sinister .

Damn. It was quiet—too quiet.

Tessa jolted upright. Her heart pounded as she cocked her ears. A chill crept down her spine. The rain had stopped. The night was eerily silent.

She hadn’t meant to fall asleep and certainly hadn’t meant to relive her nightmare.

However, that was behind her. Today was another day. She was safe for the time being. Tessa yawned. Could she chance taking a nap in the bedroom?

She removed the chair hugging the door and brought in the small suitcase she’d hurriedly packed. After determining there was hot water, she chanced a shower, put on clean clothes and ate a few more crackers with peanut butter and felt almost human again.

Tessa didn’t dare turn on her phone. She had read that someone could track it. She didn’t think Damien could do that, but then again, she’d been wrong about him once, and look where that got her.

Glancing around the cabin, she found a few books on a shelf. They were a combination of mysteries, guns, hunting, a fishing guide and one on old Florida that seemed interesting. Reading would help fill her time.

The day went by slowly, and by evening, when darkness came, she finished the crackers and peanut butter and ignored her still empty stomach. Tomorrow, she'd have to leave and find some place else to stay. The respite had been nice, but who knew where Marty was? At least it wasn't raining anymore. The bed was comfortable, and she would have a good night's sleep.

Then she'd figure out her next move.

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Ford stood at the edge of the crowded bar, arms crossed over his chest, wishing he were anywhere except here. Titus and the gang decided to hit Lucky's Bar to blow off steam after an exceptionally busy week. He couldn't complain, though. The alternative was going to a baby shower—which he considered the kiss of death.

The women in their group were throwing the shower for Dani Ward-Barlow, Ryker's wife.

This would be their first child together. Dani was a widow and had a son, Jack, who Ryker had adopted. Lucky guy. Although marriage and kids weren't on Ford's bucket list.

Ryker was sitting in the corner, nursing a beer and laughing. Guess he wasn't too upset about not going to the shower.

This was Ford's first time in Lucky's. The bar was packed. Titus mentioned it was always this busy on a Saturday night. The air was thick with the smell of fried food, spilled beer, and sweat. He ran his fingers over the condensation on the glass in front of him. Wish I was home.

He usually passed on invitations to hang out. However, tonight was the anniversary of his parents' deaths, and he didn't want to be sitting alone with his memories in a cabin.

It'd been eight months since their passing, even longer for his friends in the service,

and the dull ache never went away. He thought the noise and chaos of the bar would distract him from the memories, but it only made him feel more disconnected.

The table the guys claimed was wedged in a corner. Titus was nearby laughing, and Zach was shouting something over the din.

“Got a table,” exclaimed Zach, gesturing toward the back room where the pool tables were located. “Who’s in?”

“Me,” said Finn Ryder. He turned and narrowed his eyes at Ford. Guess he was in too. Ford nodded and stood.

“What about you, Ryker?” asked Zach.

Ryker shook his head and chuckled as he raised his bottle in salute. “I’m just here for the beer.”

Titus clapped Ford on the back as they made their way through the tables and dancers. “This should be good. Best way to unwind.”

Unwind? Ford preferred to unwind in his cabin in the woods by himself, surrounded by the whisper of wind through the trees, the distant hoot of owls and staring at the night sky.

Peace. Quiet. Alone.

He sighed. Maybe one of these days, he’d feel more comfortable with people. But for one night, he could hold it together.

“Yeah,” he replied.

The guys passed by the long wooden bar where bartenders were making drinks. The clinking of glasses, the twang of a steel guitar piercing the air and the thud of boots as people swirled around the dance floor laughing made him sad. Everyone was moving forward while he was stuck in the past.

The noise lessened as they reached the pool tables. Ford picked up a cue. Focus on the game.

They divided into two teams. He and Titus were on one team against Zach and Finn on the other. The wager was small, but the competition would be fierce. Ford might not have wanted to play, but he also hated losing.

“Rack ’em,” Titus said with a grin. He set the balls in place and lined up his first shot. Ford watched the ball roll across the table. Striped ball in the corner pocket. Then Titus missed.

“Watch and learn, losers,” said Finn with a huge grin. He hit a solid ball into a side pocket and several balls more until he missed.

The game continued with good-natured ribbing until it was Ford’s turn. He rolled his shoulders, took stock of the eight ball and made the last shot. Bull’s-eye!

Finn and Zach groaned.

Titus clapped him on the back, grabbed the pot and divided it, giving half to Ford. He then turned to Finn and Zach. “Thanks, losers. This will just about cover our beer.”

They walked back into the bar. Ford looked longingly at the door.

“You look like you’re ready to bolt,” Titus said.

“Humph.” Ford sighed. “You know me.”

Titus nodded, but his brow furrowed. “Yeah, I do. But it’s good to be with people instead of being consumed by your thoughts.”

Ford hesitated. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to stay awhile.

He ended up staying later than he hoped. The guys ordered another round of drinks and kept things lively, joking with each other with half-serious taunts reminding Ford of days past when he did that with his team. It hurt to think about them, but that was the past. He was in the present with only the future to think about.

Ford genuinely liked and admired this group of men. Although he knew some of their stories, he knew little about Zach, who was still living in a cabin near his on the Brotherhood Alliance campus. He was sure Zach suffered from PTSD, and he also knew that the man was sweet on Melissa Doherty, who ran the Paws for Caring program.

Ford laughed more than he had in a long time. Although more was a misnomer. He laughed and joked a little.

Finally, the band gathered its instruments, and the crowd dispersed.

The guys stood. “Will we see you tomorrow?” Ryker asked Ford.

Ford nodded. Ryker asked the guys to help with an addition of two bedrooms to his house. Ford warmly welcomed the chance to work, hoping it would distract him from other matters.

The group parted as Ford stepped into the crisp night air. He exhaled slowly, letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding in.

The sadness in his chest hadn't quite disappeared. But for tonight, that was enough.

The shrill buzz of the alarm ripped Ford from a sound sleep. He groaned, rubbed a hand over his face, and squinted at his phone.

Damn. It was only 7a.m. How long had he slept?

It seemed like his head had just hit the pillow. As the fuzziness cleared, he realized he had just gone to bed. The guys left after 2a.m. when the bar shut down.

He stretched and got up. Ryker expected them at the house by eight, and if he didn't get his ass going, he'd never make in time. He hated being the last one anywhere.

First up—a little hair of the dog.

Ford chuckled darkly.

Why had he remembered that particular phrase? He thought for a minute.

Oh yeah. Pete had said it the week before he'd been killed. They had celebrated another team member's birthday and got absolutely shit-faced. The next morning, in a half-drunk stupor, they had thrown together whiskey, honey and cream. It didn't help, but it didn't make things worse.

Ford looked in his fridge and grimaced. No cream. No milk either. He checked the cupboard. There was no honey to be found. With a huge sigh, he cracked an egg into a shot glass of whiskey, added a dash of Tabasco—added another dash for good measure—and downed it. His stomach protested, and he almost gagged. Not doing that again. It was disgusting.

The shower was quick. The water was barely lukewarm when he turned it off. He

threw on his clothes. His truck rumbled to life as he pulled away from the campus. Ryker lived just outside town. Ford drove through familiar streets.

The neighborhood looked like a middle-class working neighborhood filled with small ranch houses and tidy yards. He knew Finn and Dexter Drum lived next door.

Several trucks had already parked on the street. He pulled up to the curb and got out.

Damn. Was he the last one to arrive?

Voices carried from the back of the house in the cool, crisp air. Fall in Florida was subtle, not much different from any other seasons, unlike where he came from, where the leaves were just starting to turn blood-red and canary-yellow, with pops of orange painting a kaleidoscope of color. He missed the vibrant colors.

Ford walked around back and noticed a fort, swing set and slide. There was also a large structure where Ryker worked in his spare time. He was a master woodworker.

“Hey, man,” Ryker called out, waving him over. “Grab a cup of coffee and pastry. Titus asked Emelia to bake something for us. We’ll get started as soon as the truck arrives with the rest of the wood.”

Well, he was in for a treat. Everything she made was delicious. Ford’s stomach growled in anticipation. Emilia Wells didn’t have her bakery in town anymore. She planned to teach baking and cooking from a barn on their property, but she frequently gave Titus baked goods to share.

He filled a mug with coffee, then selected a muffin bursting with apples that was still warm and sat in one of the chairs.

The guys ate in comfortable silence while Ford took a moment to survey what Ryker

had already framed out.

“Dad!”

Ford looked over at the small boy bounding out the back door wearing a tool belt almost as big as him, followed by a heavily pregnant Dani balancing a pot of coffee.

“Hey, guys, I brought more coffee,” said Dani.

Ryker rushed over, his brow furrowed in concern. “Let me take that, sweetheart. You shouldn’t be carrying heavy things.”

“Really?” Dani raised a brow. “How will little ol’ me ever hold a baby or make a meal?”

The guys burst into laughter.

Before Ryker could answer, the little boy tugged on Ryker’s shirt. “Can I help?”

“Hey, Jackster,” called out Finn from across the yard. “We were waiting for you.”

“Yay!” The little boy’s eyes lit up as he raced over to help him.

Ryker gave Finn a mock glare. “Next time, let me handle this.”

“What?” Finn shrugged. “It’s not like he didn’t help you build the fort or swing set.”

“True.”

Ford smiled to himself, remembering helping his dad as a kid. It made him sad that his parents would never have the joy of seeing a grandchild. Then he almost got teary

thinking about how lonely his life had become. Sometimes it was hard surrounded by the laughter and camaraderie of his friends.

“Hey, bud, you okay?” Zach slapped him on the back, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Damn. It wouldn’t be the first time he lied about that.

Thankfully, the rumble of a delivery truck announced the supplies had arrived and saved him from further conversation.

Ford threw himself into the work, losing track of time as the next few hours went by fast. The steady rhythm of hammers and the thwack and hiss of nail guns were interrupted only by the occasional joke or muttering when something didn’t go right. The addition began to take shape.

They took a break around noon. Ford wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Dani laid out a selection of sandwiches and drinks by herself, much to Ryker’s dismay. He’d offered to help, but she had just smiled and carried on.

Ford grabbed a ham and cheese sandwich and a soft drink. He sank into one of the lawn chairs with a sigh and stared at the open field behind Ryker’s house. The scent of fresh timber hung in the air. The sky was a cloudless blue, and for a minute Ford forgot everything and enjoyed the company and work.

After the break, they spent the afternoon putting in sheetrock and windows. By late afternoon he was beat, and thankfully Ryker called an end to the day.

Jack had gone inside a couple of hours ago to help his mom and most likely take a nap. Something Ford wished he could do.

They grabbed beers and sat around, admiring their work.

“Will this be finished in time for the baby?” Ford asked, taking a long swig of beer.

Ryker looked at the addition and nodded. “A couple more Saturdays and ... yeah.”

Ford heard car doors slamming and women’s voices shattering the peaceful moment. Dani came back outside carrying a bowl of pasta salad and set it down on the long picnic table.

Isabelle, Felicia, Naomi, and Emelia walked in carrying goodies.

Ford hadn’t seen Isabelle Zander, who was engaged to Will Blake, or her best friend and soon-to-be sister-in-law Felicia Montgomery, who was engaged to Isabelle’s brother, in a while. Colt and Will rushed over to help them set the food on the table.

Ford watched the men interact with their women.

This was a tight-knit group, very comfortable with one another, and not for the first time, he felt a pang of envy. When had he become the odd man out?

Not that any one person made him feel like that, but sometimes it hurt, even if he did prefer his own company.

He had no wife, no kids, no parents, no one to come home to at the end of a long day.

Ford actually enjoyed himself today, but the gnawing sense of loneliness never left. He wasn’t sure it ever would.

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Tessa was startled from her sleep, her heart hammering in her chest. Something was wrong.

What?

She held her breath and listened.

The rain had stopped. But then the distant echo of tires on the gravel lane stilled her heart.

Had Marty found her? Worse, had Damien?

The thought sent a fresh wave of terror through her.

She jumped out of bed. Her hand trembled as she grabbed her car keys and purse and slung the strap across her body. She had one chance to get out of here and escape.

Since early Sunday morning, she'd holed up in the cabin trying to relax. It didn't appear anyone used it much, considering how much dust had accumulated. Now as Monday night closed in, she hoped to spend one more night here and move on.

The feeling that she might be safe for a short time until she decided where to go and what to do gave her a little peace.

But now that illusion was shattered.

She listened as the tires crunched in front of the cabin, getting closer. Then the engine turned off.

Silence.

Had Damien's men found her? She was sure Marty hadn't followed her. If not them, then who? Her pulse quickened.

Tessa didn't dare look out the window.

The porch creaked.

Her heart was thumping so fast, she had a hard time catching her breath.

Tessa stood rigid by the door, out of sight from the window. She wanted to run, but the cabin only had that one door in or out. She looked around the living room for a weapon to defend herself.

The book on the sofa wouldn't help. Maybe a lamp? Too bulky. Then she remembered the frying pans in the kitchen. She darted to the kitchen and grabbed one, crab-walked back and positioned herself behind the door, the pan clutched tightly in her hands.

She wished she'd kept the chair blocking the door there.

Whoever was here was just standing by the door, barely breathing.

Bile slithered up her gut, and she swallowed hard.

No time to be sick. She had to save herself.

The door creaked open, slow and deliberate. Then silence.

Tessa gripped the pan so tightly her knuckles ached. She held her breath, praying whoever it was couldn't hear her wild heartbeat.

The person took another step in.

Summoning every last bit of courage, Tessa swung the frying pan with all her strength, hitting something solid.

“Fuck!” a man's voice. Not Marty's but unfamiliar.

The man grunted and stumbled forward. Tessa swung again. He crashed to the floor with a heavy thud, groaning in pain.

Without hesitation, she leapt over his prone body, not caring if he was dead or alive. Well, hopefully not dead. Killing people wasn't in her DNA.

She ran out of the cabin and rushed around to the back. With trembling hands, she unlocked her car door and shoved the key in the ignition.

Ford stirred with the biggest headache ever. What the fuck happened?

All he remembered was driving up to his cabin, which was about an hour's drive from Haywood Lake off the main thoroughfare, along a winding road and then onto an unpaved lane. He'd stopped at the Grab & Go. The little market always smelled musty and of fried foods, but it carried everything from food to fish bait to shotgun shells and condoms. He picked up some beer, burgers, bread, eggs, butter, and a couple of pre-made sandwiches. Easy peasy.

The gravel crunched under his tires as he arrived at the cabin. He'd stepped out of his

truck and breathed in the cool air, which smelled of fresh dirt and pine needles, and reached for the food he'd purchased. The woods surrounding his cabin were dark, and other than some scritches in the underbrush and hooting, it was quiet. Peaceful. He felt the tension in his body disappear.

But something wasn't right.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled—an instinct honed by years of military training. His gut tightened. Someone was here.

Ford stared at the cabin. The porch light was on as usual. The rest of the cabin was dark. But...

Placing the food back in the truck, he silently made his way to the front door. At first glance, things appeared fine, but something seemed odd. Ford bent over and realized the lock was broken.

Reaching for his gun, he cursed. Then remembered he'd packed it in his go-bag. Great.

No matter. He didn't need a gun. Whoever or whatever was in the cabin he could take out with his bare hands. Unless it was a bear. Then he'd run for the safety of his truck. His mama didn't raise a fool.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly opened the door, the hinges creaking. Darkness. He stood there for a moment, listening. Silence.

Taking one more step inside, he stared into the cabin.

And that's when it hit him—a swish of wind followed by a sharp pain. He stumbled forward. Then the pain struck again. And then he felt the hard floor and then brief

darkness.

Fuck this. Ford stood, groaned as he rubbed his head and listened. Whoever did this was going to wish they hadn't.

Click. Click.

The car wouldn't start. Panic gripped Tessa as she banged on the steering wheel in frustration. Tried the ignition again. Nothing. The battery was dead. Tears fell from her face.

She swallowed a sob. She had to get out of the car. And do what? Make a run into the woods? And expect to get out of here alive?

Before she could finish that thought, a shadow loomed beside the car. The door was yanked open.

She screamed, scrambling to get over to the passenger side, but strong hands grabbed her arm and not too gently pulled her out.

She kicked and thrashed at him, but he was too strong. When he avoided her kicks, she tried to bite his arm, hit him. But he wrapped his arms around her, trapping them to her side.

"Let me go, you beast." Tessa struggled as hard as she could, but she couldn't break the iron grip he had.

"Calm down," he murmured against her ear. "I'm not going to hurt you."

That's what they all say.

Tessa wanted to believe that—honestly, she did—and would have in another life, but not now. Especially not after Damien. Besides, how could she know Damien hadn't sent him?

"I'm not going back," she pleaded. "I promise not to say a word."

The man sighed, his grip loosening enough to just hold her arm. His brows furrowed. "Okaaay."

"Please don't hurt me."

Now his eyes flashed in anger. "Lady, do you think I would strike a woman? What do you take me for?"

He sounded insulted. Tessa shook her head. "I don't know you or what you're capable of."

The man sighed. "Look, I'm tired. It's late. Why don't you come back into the cabin and tell me what's going on?"

She glared at him. "How do I know that you're not a serial killer or that you're not going to hurt me?"

The man smirked. "If I were, you'd be dead already, especially with your mouth." Stepping back, he raised his hands. "I don't hurt women."

"Humph." Tessa didn't know what to make of this new situation. First, she had to somehow find out if this man worked for Damien and then figure out how to get away from the cabin.

He kept his hand on her arm as they slowly walked back to the cabin. The door was

still flung open. He tsked as he led her back into the cabin and closed the door.

“Sit.”

It wasn't an invitation as much as an order. Tessa perched stiffly on the edge of the chair and watched as the man took a moment to get himself under control and then sit on the sofa.

“Talk to me.”

He was a man of few words. Tessa would have laughed in any other situation.

She took a good look at him.

Tall, well, a lot taller than her five feet four. Dark hair cut short, chocolate-brown eyes that radiated anger. He had on a black T-shirt over powerful muscles with, oh my God, colorful tattoos going up each arm. Her mouth went dry.

Was he part of Damien's gang? Now that she thought about it, maybe not. Those men were slick and wore expensive suits.

He looked like someone who built things. Someone who protected. Still, she had to be careful about what she said.

“Well, since you're not saying much, let's start with why you're in my cabin.”

“Ummm.” Shit. What to say? “My car broke down, and I needed a place to stay.”

The man shook his head. “Let's try that again.”

Damn.

His jaw tightened. “First of all, my cabin is in the middle of nowhere. You must have thought your car would start, otherwise you would have run off into the woods instead of trying to start it. Then you struck me. If you weren’t afraid, you would have just told me what happened. Then you promised not to say something.”

He frowned and gestured with his hands. “So?”

Tessa took a deep breath but couldn’t stop her hands from trembling. Think!

The man sighed. “Okay. Let’s start with something simple. My name is Ford. What’s yours?”

For a moment, Tessa wondered if she should give him a made-up name, then decided not to. Deception was not her middle name, and she’d probably forget what name she gave him anyhow. Especially if it was Deception.

“Tessa.”

“So, Tessa, what’s going on here?”

She bit her lip. No way was she mentioning Damien and the mob. Hopefully, Ford wouldn’t kick her out of the cabin until her car was fixed and she had a plan. She hesitated. Should she tell him or lie? “I’m running away from my abusive boyfriend.”

Ford looked shocked, then angry. “Is he from here?”

Tessa shook her head. “No, he’s in Georgia.”

“Did he follow you?”

“Part of the way. I lost him coming to the cabin.”

Ford nodded to himself. "That's good."

Tessa went on a little more about this abusive boyfriend. No way in hell was she telling him more about Damien or Marty. First off, it was enough that she was on their radar, and second, she didn't want to involve anyone else. Damien would have no problem killing Ford as well as her.

He leaned back on the sofa and steepled his hands. Sighed. "Okay, here's the deal. How about you stay here for a day or so? We'll check your car tomorrow." He yawned and rubbed his face. "I'm beat."

Tessa felt a flicker of hope. He wasn't part of Damien's gang, so she had a day or so to get her shit together.

Ford stood. "I'm going to grab something from the truck. Can I trust you not to do something stupid like run away or attack me again?"

Tessa stared at the frying pan still on the floor. "Yes. I'm sorry about that."

Shaking his head, he picked up the frying pan and brought it back to the kitchen.

She sat there watching Ford step outside.

She had no choice but to stay, uncertain whether she was safer or in even more danger.

Ford's eyes narrowed as he watched Tessa. The woman was lying. That much was obvious. But the way her hands trembled—heck, her whole body tensed, and her eyes darted around the room like those of a cornered deer—she was running from more than an abusive boyfriend.

The words she blurted out when he grabbed her, “I promise not to say a word,” echoed in his mind. Why was that her first reaction and not “please don’t hurt me,” which came second, almost like an afterthought? It should have been the other way around.

So, the question was, who or what the hell was she running from?

Ford had a feeling Tessa would not be forthcoming. Having her tell him whoever or whatever spooked her would take time and trust—two things he didn’t have. Chase penciled him in for a job in a week. Hopefully, this problem could be resolved by then. If not ... well, maybe this wasn’t his problem. Besides, Ford could tell she didn’t trust him, and he sure wasn’t trusting her.

In the meantime, her car wasn’t running, and he hoped he could fix it. Although he sensed she was desperate to get out of here but that she was too scared to leave.

Since he had no place to be for the time being and Tessa might be in danger—heck, she was definitely in danger—having her stay here wouldn’t hurt. Even though it was a bad idea, he wouldn’t turn her away.

The peace and quiet he'd been hoping for would have to be put on the back burner. He was a protector first, and Tessa was most definitely frightened of someone or something. Until he figured out who or what, she was staying put.

Ford sighed, rubbing his hand through his hair. "Tessa," he said, his voice low, like he was calming a child, "how long have you been running?"

Tessa blinked a few times. One lie coming up.

She straightened in her seat, feigning nonchalance. "Oh, just a day or so," she said casually.

Ford raised a brow. "And this boyfriend of yours ... he lives in Georgia?"

Tessa clasped her arms tightly over her stomach, effectively shutting herself off. Her eyes flickered to the floor. "Yes."

"And you said he was following you?" Ford needed to know if he should be prepared for an angry man showing up at his door.

"For a while, but I lost him," she murmured.

Ford studied her a little more closely.

She was a pretty little thing. She stood around five feet three or four, petite, and he'd be surprised if she weighed over one hundred ten pounds. The worn jeans and sweater were hanging loosely on her, as if she missed a few meals. Her blond hair fell to her shoulders, and her eyes, those worried blue-as-the-sky eyes, drew him in.

She leaned back in the chair, going for casual, but Ford saw through it. She was terrified, and someone out there wanted to hurt her, and it was more than just an

abusive boyfriend.

Tessa wanted to trust Ford.

Honestly, she did.

However everything that happened with Damien had challenged her faith in men.

She hated how powerless she felt. Her car was dead. She had no place to go, no job, and very little money.

Now she was dependent upon a stranger, holed up in a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere.

How much could she trust him with her story? If she told him the truth, he'd probably run the other way. So, for now, she'd evade his questions, dancing around the truth for as long as she could.

Most importantly, she had to be careful.

Damien wasn't just a nightclub owner—he had connections, dangerous ones. He was friends with the police and who knew who else. Tessa wagered he had politicians in his pocket.

If Damien found out exactly how much she knew about his business, she was a dead woman walking.

An icy chill went down her spine as she suddenly thought about the recorder. Had she packed it?

Her heart started pounding. God, if she hadn't, Damien would get away with killing

people, stealing, selling drugs, money laundering, and who knew what else. It would be her word against his.

Her mind flitted over what she packed.

Yes!

She had thrown it in her suitcase.

Tessa glanced over at Ford, who was watching her.

Gosh, he was one sexy man. With his short dark hair, piercing brown eyes and chiseled jaw, he was fierce-looking and eye candy at the same time. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a protector. And that T-shirt he had on appeared to be covering up some serious abs.

Tessa shuddered. Now was not the time for her hormones to act up. Her life was on the line. And if Ford wasn't careful, his would be too.

Still, the situation was pressing hard on her chest. She couldn't do this alone, couldn't keep running forever. At some point, she'd have to stand up and fight for herself or she'd never be free, but this wasn't Ford's battle to fight. She couldn't drag him into it.

"Something heavy is on your mind. What?" the man in question asked.

Tessa forced a smirk. "Just thinking about my car, where I'm going to go next, how my life got so turned around and out of control." She shrugged as if the weight of the world wasn't on her shoulders. "You know, just the usual."

Ford's eyes softened. "I'm sorry you're going through this. Hopefully, this will

resolve soon.”

He leaned back on the sofa, and Tessa’s mind began to wander. Why was Ford out here alone? Did he have a wife? A girlfriend? Where did he work? Judging from his stance and demeanor, she’d bet he was ex-military and maybe in security or, worse, a cop.

Oh God, no. Please, not a cop. Weren’t they sworn to report anything suspicious? Tessa’s heart was pounding now. Hopefully, Ford wouldn’t ask her any more questions about this abusive boyfriend.

Damn, she was driving herself crazy, and now her stomach was growling. The crackers and peanut butter weren’t enough.

Ford narrowed his eyes. “I bet you’re hungry. I know I am. Usually, I don’t keep much food here. I stop and buy what I’d like to cook.” He stood up. “There’s food and sandwiches in the truck. I’ll be right back.”

Tessa leaned back in the chair, her muscles tense as she watched Ford leave. Only the sound of his boots crunching in the gravel broke the silence.

He seemed like an upstanding and trustworthy guy, but then again, so had Damien when they first met.

The thought twisted her gut. She shifted in the chair. Her stomach growled again. Food sounded really good right about now. Looking out into the darkness from the window, she briefly caught sight of a flicker of light before it disappeared.

Moments later, the door opened, bringing in a gust of cold air. Ford returned, carrying a duffle bag slung over one shoulder and bags of groceries in his other hand. He placed the duffle by the door and moved into the kitchen. She heard the faint rustle of

bags and soft clink of cans as he unpacked the food.

“I have turkey or ham subs. Which do you prefer?” he called out from the kitchen.

Tessa blinked, her mind sluggish for a moment. “Turkey,” she replied.

Ford emerged carrying two huge sandwiches on plates. He handed one to Tessa. “I gave you turkey, but if you’d rather have ham, we can switch.”

“Doesn’t matter. I like both.”

He nodded, put a plate and sandwich in front of her and sat across from her.

They ate in silence until Tessa placed her plate on the coffee table, amazed that she’d eaten the enormous sandwich. The savory turkey and crisp lettuce hit the spot.

Ford was on his second sandwich and gave her an easy grin.

He finished his last bite and placed his plate on top of hers. Opened his mouth to say something and hesitated.

“What?” she asked. She hugged her waist to keep her hands from trembling. Was he going to kick her out now?

Ford sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m beat, and you must be too. Unfortunately, there’s only one bedroom. Why don’t you use the bathroom and get ready for bed?”

Tessa froze. She hoped that Ford, whom she’d just met, wasn’t suggesting they sleep together. She barely knew him.

“Let me get my things. I’ll sleep on the sofa,” she said quickly, eyeing the narrow sofa. Ford was not a small man. No way would he fit on the sofa.

He shook his head and let out an amused grunt. “If you think you’re sleeping out here, you’re crazy. Take the bed. If someone tries to get in here, they will have to go through me.”

“But ...”

“No buts. I’ve slept in worse places than that couch,” he said, his tone final.

Tessa hesitated, searching for any sign of an ulterior motive. Seeing just exhaustion and determination on his face, she made her way to the bathroom.

When she came out, Ford was grabbing a blanket and pillow from the closet. He nodded at her. “Good night.”

Tessa lay on the bed. This wasn’t at all what she envisioned when she found the cabin. However, after meeting and talking to Ford, she felt safe, at least for one night.

Tessa woke up feeling refreshed and ... safe.

She stretched, taking a moment to observe her surroundings.

It wasn't quite dawn, but the sky had a soft glow about it. She saw tree branches blowing in the wind from her bed.

What a difference a day made. Knowing that someone had her back was just what she needed to sleep soundly.

However, she wasn't out of danger. She had to remember that.

Her stomach clenched as she thought about Damien and his thugs.

She thought Ford most likely could take on Damien's thugs hand-to-hand, but what if they were armed? She had seen no guns in the cabin. Tessa prayed that trouble wouldn't find its way to Ford's door. He didn't deserve her crazy.

She got out of bed, grabbed her toothbrush and paste, and headed to the bathroom.

Peeking into the living room, Tessa noticed Ford's feet draped over the end of the sofa, and she felt a moment of guilt. It must have been uncomfortable sleeping on it. He was softly snoring, and unlike the night before when she had seen his angry face, and then his worried face, today she saw a handsome face.

Tessa tiptoed to the bathroom and gently closed the door. She hurriedly brushed her teeth, not dwelling on the guilt that gnawed at her. Ford offered her refuge and safety without knowing how much danger followed her.

Noiselessly, she opened the door and slipped back into the bedroom, pulling out a change of underwear, jeans, and a long-sleeved shirt. She brushed her hair, pulled it into a ponytail, looked in the mirror and nodded. Presentable even with no makeup on.

Sighing, Tessa stepped out of the bedroom, wondering if she could make coffee without disturbing Ford.

Too late. He was already awake.

“Morning,” he said in a gravelly voice.

“I hope I didn’t wake you,” Tessa replied. “I was trying to be quiet.”

Ford smirked. “Sorry, but you’re about as quiet as a baby elephant.” When he noticed that she frowned, he quickly stated, “I didn’t mean an elephant. We were trained in the teams to sleep lightly, and I heard you moving around.”

Ford looked so upset when he said that. But it was just an expression. Tessa was certain he knew when she woke up.

“I knew what you meant,” she replied, smiling. “Sorry if I woke you.” She stepped into the kitchen. “I was going to make coffee. Want some?”

“Sounds good. There’s a pot in the cabinet.” He thought for a moment. “I bought milk, but I’m not sure I have any sugar.”

Tessa smiled. “No problem. I drink my coffee black, have for years. It’s just easier when you’re on the go.”

“Oh. What do you do?”

“Hmmm. I am, was, an event planner,” she replied.

Ford stood and joined her in the kitchen, sitting at the small table. “Tell me what that entails.”

“Well, I coordinate and manage all aspects of an event, making sure it works smoothly.”

“Interesting. What kinds of events?”

Tessa pulled out the coffeepot, turned on the faucet for water, and filled it up, adding the coffee grounds last. She turned on the gas stove and placed the pot on it.

“Fundraisers, weddings, parties.” She shrugged. “Anything that requires someone to run the event.”

“I guess I should know that,” said Ford. “The shelter in town that my company helps runs a couple of fundraisers a year. You must love parties.”

Tessa laughed. “I do love the parties my friends throw, but being in charge of one is nerve-wracking.”

“I bet you have great organizational and communication skills.” He stared at her. “Probably you think quickly and do a lot of last-minute problem solving.”

“Yup, that’s me. You left out budgeting and creativity.”

“How did you get into that field?” he asked.

“Oh, I worked at an organization for years and finally struck out on my own,” she replied.

“Why did you leave?”

Tessa took a deep breath. She wasn’t ready to share that information yet. “So,” she replied brightly. “Tell me what you do.”

Ford laughed. “Great job at avoidance. You’ll tell me, eventually.” He narrowed his eyes and leaned back into the chair. “I work in security at the Brotherhood Alliance. We provide security for those who can’t afford it as well as taking on paying clients.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes. After I got out of the service, I was floundering. The military is great, but the skills taught don’t always translate well into civilian life. Like you, I have to be quick-thinking and a problem-solver. Communication and attention to detail are important on the job. Plus”—he wagged his brows—“sometimes I even get to use my combat training.”

“Wow. That’s fascinating.” She heard the coffeepot bubbling and started to get up, but Ford beat her to the stove to turn off the gas. Then he reached into the cupboard and pulled out two mugs, which he filled and brought back to the table.

“Here you go. I have bread and cereal if you’re hungry.”

She shook her head. “This is fine for a while. I’ll have something a little later.” Tessa looked around the neat cabin. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No.” Ford thought for a moment. “I’d like to look at your car and see what’s wrong with it. If it needs a new battery, then that’s a trip into town.” He looked at his watch. “Although the Grab & Go won’t be open for another two hours. I noticed a lot of branches and a couple of trees are down. I plan on going out and chopping them up for firewood and kindling.” He cocked his head. “Still want to help?”

Tessa smirked. “What? You think I’ve never gotten my hands dirty? I grew up in the country helping my parents. My dad loved to split firewood.”

“Ah, a country girl as well as a big-shot event planner!” Ford finished his coffee and set his mug in the sink. “I’m going to wash up and change, then we can head out.” He frowned. “I have an extra pair of gloves, but they’re probably too big for your hands.”

“No worries. I’ll be fine.”

Ford left to change.

Tessa poured herself another cup of coffee and stared out the living room window. She let out a puff of air. It felt good to just relax for a moment and not think about anything else.

She hoped her car just needed a jump. The small amount of cash she had on hand would cover a battery, but she had to be careful. Speaking of careful, Tessa walked into the bedroom and picked up her purse and tucked the recorder in it. She was sure no one was out here in the wilderness, but this was all she had of her previous life. Her only link to the truth. So where could she hide it?

Ford walked in just then, startling Tessa. “Sorry, I need to get some clothes.” He frowned when he looked at her. “What’s wrong? Did something happen while I was in the bathroom?”

Tessa bit her lip and took a deep breath.

Did she want to trust him?

Could she trust him?

Damn, she had to trust him.

“I, um, I realize you’re in the middle of nowhere, but I don’t want to leave this around.” She lifted her purse up. “You never know. Is there someplace I can hide it so it’s safe?”

Ford furrowed his brow and stared at her purse. “Of course.” He walked to the closet and opened the door, fished around inside, and removed a panel. Behind it, there was another door with a lock. He pressed his thumb against a panel, and it opened.

“Wow.” Tessa glanced in. It was a small space, but one wall held just weapons. Guns, rifles, knives. She gulped. “Please tell me you’re not a serial killer.”

He laughed. “I promise. Since I’m not up here a lot, I didn’t want kids or anyone else finding loose weapons.” Ford looked in. “I like to shoot at a target sometimes. The rifles are for hunting season, and the knives—well, I just like knives.”

Ford held out his hand for her purse. “It’ll be safe in here.”

“Like Fort Knox safe?” She handed him her purse. “I know it seems silly, but everything I need is in there. All my cash, ID and a well, everything.”

Ford’s gaze sharpened as she stopped herself from revealing more.

He placed the purse inside, then securely locked the door and replaced the panel. “It’s

safe now.”

“Thank you.”

Tessa followed Ford back to the living room. He looked her up and down. “It’s chilly outside. Do you have a jacket?”

“In my car.”

“Grab it and meet me outside. I have a chain saw in the garage. We’ll take my truck to transport the wood back.”

“Deal,” Tessa replied.

Tessa left Ford to get what he needed out of the garage while she grabbed her jacket. It saddened her to see her new-to-her car deserted in the woods, covered in dirt and pine needles. Ford promised to look at it later. She hoped he remembered.

The crisp, cool air carried the scent of pine and damp earth, filling her lungs and her senses as she watched Ford loading the back of his truck with supplies.

“I brought a thermos of coffee and muffins since we didn’t eat breakfast,” he said, helping her into the truck.

He drove the truck down another narrow path into the woods, one Tessa hadn’t seen before. Of course, she’d arrived here at night and never left the cabin. Pale light filtered through the trees, and the path was rough. She was holding on to the “oh shit” bar as Ford expertly avoided the potholes. A few minutes in, he stopped in a clearing. “Out you go,” he said, parking the truck.

Tessa climbed out, ready to help Ford. He handed her a pair of gloves and an axe.

Lifting the chain saw, he headed over to a fallen tree.

“It’s so peaceful out here,” Tessa said, listening to birds chirping in the trees.

Ford nodded. “It is. But even out here, you need to be careful.”

Tessa shivered. His words brought Tessa back to reality. Safety, even in nature, was merely an illusion.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:47 am

10

Marty Hayes hung up the phone and hurled it across the car seat. He'd been in bumfuck Florida for the past three days with no sign of Tessa Donnelly.

He was surrounded by lakes, woods and small towns that some people would think charming, but all Marty saw was an endless stretch of swampy nothingness filled with insects, wild beasts, and mold interspersed with decrepit buildings.

He sneezed for the one-hundredth time. His allergies were going to be the death of him.

If he couldn't find Tessa soon, his life and Damien's weren't worth a damn, especially after Malina got through with them.

Malina! Now she was a wild woman. Just thinking about her sent a shiver down his spine.

Appearance-wise, she was intelligent, sophisticated and elegant. Underneath, she was sadistic and more than dangerous. She was tall and slender with hazel eyes, long black hair and a generous mouth that he imagined wrapped around his cock.

That is, before he remembered what happened to the last man who disappointed her in business.

Malina forced him, Damien and another associate to watch as she had the man castrated.

The guy fainted, but when he came to, she had his cock cut off and stuffed into his mouth. His screams were silenced, but the moans—oh God, those moans remained in his nightmares. So, he had to find Tessa. Marty really liked his balls and cock just where they were, thank you very much.

The tracker they had put on Tessa's car had stopped working in the relentless rain, leaving Marty at a dead end and frustrated.

Finally, just this morning, Damien called with a potential lead. Marty had been off by miles. He'd lost Tessa in the downpour after she turned off her headlights and apparently veered off onto a side road. Unfortunately, he didn't realize he lost her until he got to a small town and got a motel room.

This morning, when the rain stopped, he followed Damien's directions and turned his car down a muddy dirt road. Marty's pulse quickened in anticipation as he gripped the steering wheel tighter. Would he find Tessa? His orders were to kill her, but maybe he'd have some fun with her before that happened. She was a fine-looking woman.

The forest parted, revealing a small cabin.

However, he didn't see Tessa's car.

Had Damien made a mistake?

It didn't matter. Marty killed the engine and stepped out of the car, his shoes sinking slightly into the damp earth. He walked up to the porch. He flexed his fingers, thinking he might have to kick the door in. First, he tried opening it and realized the lock was busted. He smirked. Dollars to doughnuts, Tessa had broken in.

The door creaked as Marty cautiously opened it. He stepped inside, first reaching for

his gun. Silence.

Inside, it was as rustic as he expected.

Marty checked the bedroom first. His pulse jumped when he saw an open suitcase. Women's clothes! She had been here, but where was she now?

First, he had to find the recorder. The bitch took it with her when she fled, and they had no idea what was on it. Could be a lot, could be nothing, but Damien wasn't taking any chances.

Furious that he was stuck in Florida, Marty trashed the place, starting with Tessa's suitcase, ripping up a picture of her standing with her parents and smiling. Damn her. Every drawer, every cabinet was searched and emptied.

The bureau and closet held men's clothing, but Marty didn't think the guy was here. He upended the couch, smashed the plates in the kitchen, pulled the toilet away from the wall, and watched as the water flooded the place. Nothing. Damn her. Where could she have hidden it? And where was her car?

Marty stomped out of the cabin and glanced around. The car must be behind the cabin. He walked around back and bingo. He pulled out his knife and yanked the door open. In a frenzy, he proceeded to slice and dice everything in the car.

Nothing. There was no recorder. No Tessa.

If Tessa wasn't here, where was she? Maybe she walked into town. Although the nearest town was a few miles away.

He stomped back to his car and dialed Damien.

“The bitch isn’t here. I couldn’t find a recorder.”

Marty listened to Damien’s furious screams, then rolled his eyes before hanging up. Maybe he’d just wait here for her to turn up. No sense going back to that fleabag motel he was staying in.

Leaning against his car, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it while contemplating his life.

Things were going so well.

Damien had the club and his drug route. Cash was coming in, going out, and they had willing women at their disposal.

Why did Tessa have to ruin it?

Marty coughed. Damn. Time to give up these cancer sticks, but it was his only vice. Well, not his only vice. The other was he enjoyed hurting people, enjoyed hearing them beg for their lives as he was hurting them, but that wasn’t happening today.

The sound of a heavy truck echoed in the woods. Someone was coming. It wouldn’t be Tessa. Marty hurried to his car, turned it on and began driving down the long drive. He could see dust coming from around the corner, so he pulled off into a clearing in the woods. A huge tow truck passed him.

Time to get out of here before he was spotted. This wasn’t finished—not by a long shot.

Ford and Tessa arrived back at the cabin, having filled the back of his truck with wood. Tessa couldn't remember the last time she felt at peace in the woods. Tree branches were swaying in the wind, while birds chattered overhead. Even wiping the sweat from her brow felt peaceful, especially while ogling a handsome man with muscles.

They unloaded wood by the driveway edge, then Ford parked in front of his cabin and switched off the engine. He frowned and grabbed her arm. "Stay here."

"What's wrong?" Tessa glanced around frantically for the threat but saw none.

"Not sure," he muttered before opening the door and facing her. "Please stay in the truck."

Tessa's pulse quickened when she saw him draw a gun tucked behind his back. Where did he get that from? When did he put it there? She never noticed it when he was cutting down trees.

Ford approached the cabin cautiously and nudged the door open with the gun.

He peered in, then disappeared inside.

Tessa's heart pounded in desperation. Had Damien found her? What was going on in the house?

She waited a couple of minutes for Ford to come back. Fearing the worst, she got out and reached for the axe that was in the truck's bed.

As silently as she could, Tessa tossed the axe over her shoulder and crept up to the cabin. She could hear voices inside. With shaky hands, she opened the door and screamed.

Ford was standing in the middle of the cabin talking to a strange man. He spun around at her outcry, aiming his gun at her.

"I thought I told you to stay in the truck," he barked. He placed his gun behind his back, walked over to her and gently released her fingers from the axe. "Jesus. Give me that before you hurt yourself."

Tessa glanced around in stunned silence, unable to form any coherent words. The floor was flooded, the furniture was ruined, and there was devastation throughout.

"Oh, my God! What... what happened here?" she stammered, trying to make sense of the destruction. "Did a wild animal get in? Why is there so much water?"

Ford placed the axe on the sofa and gathered her into his arms. "Shhh. It's all right."

"All right?" she mumbled into his chest. "All right? Your cabin is destroyed."

He sighed into her hair and patted her back as she trembled in his arms. When she calmed down, he let her go.

"Why don't we take this outside?" said the strange man standing next to Ford.

Ford nodded, took Tessa's hand, and guided her outside.

“Tessa, this is my friend and co-worker Colt Zander. He owns a garage in town, and I asked him to come look at your car and tow it back to town if he couldn’t start it.”

She looked at the sandy-haired man, just as big and muscular as Ford. “Thank you. But ... what happened?”

Colt looked over at Ford and raised his brows. “Someone got into the house and destroyed it.”

Tessa’s mind reeled in disbelief. “Who would do such a thing? How do you know it was a person and not some wild animal looking for food?”

Colt cleared his throat. “Because animals don’t slice open car seats or destroy an entire car.”

“My car?” she screeched and ran around back.

The big tow truck was behind her car. Tessa wrenched open the door and gasped in horror.

Everything inside it was wrecked, and someone had sliced open every inch of the interior. Damien! It had to be him.

She anxiously scoured the woods looking for someone, something, anything. But there was nothing, just the sounds of nature.

Then reality hit her like a ton of bricks.

Tessa started crying—no, sobbing. Her car was the only mode of transportation she had, and there was no money for another one.

She felt completely powerless and helpless. Did she really run away for this to happen? And Ford. All he did was offer her a place to stay, and now his sweet cabin was destroyed.

Then she remembered her purse.

Had Ford's secret room been breached?

A sudden wave of fear washed over her as she darted past Ford and Colt, their voices fading into the background as she ran back into the house, slipping in the water until she reached the bedroom. Her heart hammered in her chest as she took in the destruction. She peered into the closet and saw clothes strewn around. Desperately, she yanked the fake panel out and reached for the door. She pushed and tugged, but the door wouldn't open.

Strong arms abruptly pulled her back, anchoring her into place. "Tessa! Tessa. Sweetheart, come out of here. No one breached the safe room. I checked when I came in."

Tessa couldn't shake the feeling of despair. Damien's reach from the shadows served as a chilling reminder that safety from him would always be impossible. Her eyes flickered to the safe room, wondering what would have happened if he—most likely Marty, since Damien never got his hands dirty—found the recorder. Found her.

"Come on, sweetheart, I'm taking you back to Haywood Lake. I think my company needs to get involved. This boyfriend of yours isn't going to stop." Ford led her back through the living room and outside where Colt was standing.

"I... I'm so sorry. I never meant to bring trouble your way." She couldn't look at Ford. Nothing in her life prepared her for this moment, this violence. She was blessed with great parents, really good friends, and a more than satisfying life. How did it

ever get to this point? Plus, Ford was definitely going to want to know about Damien and Marty.

“Listen, I need to get going. What do you want to do about Tessa’s car?” Colt asked.

She said, “Junk it,” just as Ford replied, “Tow it and we’ll get back to you.”

“Ford.” Tessa shook her head. “I don’t have the money to fix it up. Maybe I can get something for it.”

He took her hand and opened his mouth, but a loud crack echoed through the woods. They froze. Oh God, please don’t let it be Marty.

Colt and Ford pulled out their guns. Ford gestured for Tessa to stay put. Colt silently moved left. Ford went right. Her pulse spiked as fear swirled in her chest.

Time slowed. The men crept close to the woods. A sudden eruption from the bushes caused Tessa to jump.

It was a pig. A damn pig.

It halted, squealed in surprise, then retreated into the brush.

Ford and Colt put away their guns. They spoke for a minute, then shook hands. Colt waved goodbye to Tessa as he walked back to his tow truck.

“Tessa, come on, get in.” Ford opened the truck door and helped her in. “I need to run in and gather a couple of things, and I’ll be right back.”

She waited for Ford to come back.

The illusion of safety shattered, leaving her with the haunting knowledge that her life would never be secure.

Tessa was silent on the way to Haywood Lake, her gaze focused on the passing trees.

Ford heard her snuffle occasionally and wanted to say something, anything, to convince her that what happened wasn't her fault. He wanted to reach out and comfort her but held off. For sure, whoever destroyed his cabin was after Tessa and they were angry—furious, even. Visions of the destruction of his cabin played on repeat in his mind, and he was glad Tessa hadn't been alone in the cabin.

So who was this abusive boyfriend, and how did he locate her?

Ford's cabin was difficult to find. It was tucked away in a remote area. Tessa mentioned she lost her tail somewhere on the road, but had she?

Ford's eyes strayed to the rearview mirror, scanning for any sign of a tail. The road was empty. Colt was probably a half hour behind him, towing Tessa's car.

No matter. Ford was sure there was more to Tessa's story. As a security guard, he prided himself on being able to read people. Her evasive answers earlier set off alarms in his head.

When they reached the campus of the Brotherhood Alliance and settled into his cabin, they were going to have a serious talk. He wanted to bring the group in to protect her, but he first needed to hear her story—her complete story. Although he still wasn't sure she was ready to tell him.

The road widened as they approached Haywood Lake, and the sun glinted off the water's surface like diamonds. The town was filled with people shopping or enjoying a meal at one of the many coffee shops and bistros. The campus wasn't far now, and Ford felt a sense of relief washing over him.

After three miles, Ford turned right onto the campus, passed by Liam and Joy's house and the Brotherhood Alliance building. Today must be a slow day or Melissa wasn't teaching at Paws for Caring, because there were only a couple of cars parked in the lot. He continued on the dirt path to his cabin.

He noticed Tessa looking around, her curiosity evident, but clenching her waist in fear.

She was still scared. But fear had a way of making people hide the truth, and in this situation, the truth might be the difference between life and death.

Finally, he arrived at his cabin, the truck rumbling to a stop, and he got out. He walked around to the passenger side and helped Tessa out. Throughout the drive, she remained quiet, continuing to avoid his eyes.

"Tessa, look at me," he asked softly.

She shook her head, her ponytail swishing from side to side. Ford's chest tightened. She was still frightened. He gently cupped her chin and turned her face toward him. The look of despair and guilt that filled her blue eyes almost did him in.

"What happened isn't your fault," he said gently.

Tessa's lips parted. She thought for a moment. "Oh," she finally muttered. "So, if I hadn't broken into your cabin, some stranger would have found and destroyed it for shits and giggles?"

Ouch! Sarcasm. Tessa was feisty. He hadn't seen this side of her before.

Ford shrugged. "Regardless of who broke in, you're in danger, and I want to help."

"Ford, it's better if you just forget about me. Drop me in town so I can deal with my car." She let out a heavy sigh. "This problem is bigger than you and me, and I've already caused enough trouble."

"Damn it, woman."

Surprised blue eyes stared at him.

Ford had had enough of her self-pity.

Yes, he understood she was afraid. However, running away from a dangerous situation wouldn't solve anything.

"You may not know it," he explained, "but the best security firm around is in the building we just passed. The Brotherhood Alliance employs all ex-military personnel who are experts at their jobs. We can keep you safe and get to the bottom of whoever is targeting you."

"I can't ask you to do that," she replied, a flicker of panic in her eyes. "And most certainly, I can't pay you. For that matter, I'm not sure there's enough money in my purse to pay for auto repairs. Let's not forget everything I owned was ruined." She looked down at herself, and her voice broke. "I have the clothes on my back and my purse. That's it."

Ford exhaled, stepped forward, and pulled her into his arms. "Sweetheart, these are minor problems. We'll talk to Colt about your car, and as for everything else..." He leaned back, looking into her eyes. "My friends have great women, and I'm sure

they'll help you. You're not alone."

She trembled against his chest, and a quiet sob escaped her lips. Ford could feel the hot tears through his shirt.

He patted her back gently. "Tessa, it's gonna be okay," he murmured in her ear. "I promise."

Ford turned her around to face the cabin. "For now, you can stay in my cabin or in one of the other ones on the compound. Then we'll talk, and finally, I'll talk to my boss about how we can help." He released her arms. "Come on, let's get inside, and I'll make you some lunch."

Tessa nodded and stepped onto the porch. She turned to Ford. "Are you sure?"

He gave her a nod, one filled with more optimism than he felt, but he wouldn't let her see that. "I'm sure."

They walked into the cabin, and Tessa looked around. "This is beautiful. Did you design it?"

"God, no." He laughed. "When the cabins were built, we weren't sure who would stay here or for how long. They were designed for comfort and privacy. Why don't you have a seat in the living room? I'm starving, and you must be, too."

Tessa walked over and sat in a corner chair. "I could eat something." She frowned. "I think."

Ford stepped into the kitchen, looking at his meager food supply. He didn't stock up before he left. No sense buying food that would go bad. He opened the fridge. Empty except for some cheese. It passed the mold and sniff test. He scrounged around and

found some crackers, still sealed in plastic.

“Well, I have some things to snack on, but I’m going to order delivery until I can get to the store,” he said. “How about a pizza? Or something else?”

“Ha.” She gave him a small smile. “You’re talking to the woman who’s been living on crackers and peanut butter, and the only real food was the sub you gave me last night. I’m not picky. Anything is fine.”

He called for delivery and made small talk, giving her space. Ford wanted to reach out, tell her that she could trust him, but he didn’t want to push too hard. Tessa would tell him when she was ready.

Tessa leaned back into the chair and glanced around Ford’s cabin.

On the drive onto the campus, she’d noticed several other similar cabins all spaced apart for privacy. The cabin was bigger and nicer than her small apartment back in Georgia.

It had an open-floor plan that made it feel spacious, and Tessa assumed it was a one-bedroom.

From the small dining-room window, she saw a patio with a couple of chairs looking out into the woods. It looked peaceful.

Inside, Ford had all the basics—sofa, chairs, and a dining-room table—but no family pictures, nothing personal. She wondered if he had family and how long he’d lived here.

It was nice, but his other cabin was rustic, warm and personal.

Oh God. A tear dropped down her cheek.

She had brought her troubles to him, and now his little cabin was ruined. Damien wouldn't stop until he had destroyed everything she touched.

Her chest tightened.

She had to get out of here and go ... somewhere. No way was she bringing more destruction to him.

Jumping up and heading for the door, she startled Ford, who turned around with a plate in his hand.

He must have seen the crazy on her face.

"Tessa? Baby, what's wrong?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Her heart was pounding in her chest. "I ... I have to get out of here. He'll kill you too."

Ford's brows drew together in confusion. He set the plate down and crossed the room. His hand wrapped gently around her wrist.

"You're not leaving," he said, his voice low and confident. "No one is going to kill me or you or destroy anything else. You're safe here."

She shook her head frantically. "You don't understand. He won't stop until he gets me. I have to leave now."

"No. You don't. Nothing is going to happen to you here." Ford pulled her back from the door and guided her back to the sofa and sat beside her. He picked up her hand in

his, and his thumb gently circled it. “Why don’t you tell me what happened, and we’ll go from there?”

Tessa took a deep breath, hesitated. How could she explain what she’d gotten herself into without looking like one of those “too stupid to live” people?

“It happened at my very first really big event with my own company.” Her voice trembled. “My boyfriend ... ex-boyfriend Damien offered his nightclub, Illusion, as the venue, and everything was going great. That is, until I saw Damien and Marty, his best friend, talking in the corner and thought there was a problem. By the time I walked over, they were in Damien’s office. I was just about to knock on the door when I heard Damien tell Marty to kill someone or this Malina would hurt them.”

Ford’s face darkened. “You had no inkling that he was a criminal?”

She shook her head. “You’d think I’d be smarter about people. Damien was charming, very sweet to me. I never thought he was a criminal.”

“Is that why you ran?” Ford asked softly.

“Yes.”

Ford wrapped her in his arms. “You did the right thing.”

“I’m not sure it matters,” she whispered. “He won’t stop until he finds me.”

“Do you know who this Malina is?”

“Never heard her name before, but she sounds dangerous,” Tessa replied.

“What about the police? Did you contact them after you left?”

“No,” she admitted. “I just got out of Dodge, as they say, and drove until I couldn’t.” This was an abbreviated version of what happened. Tessa couldn’t face telling Ford the rest of it. It was too painful.

“Well, I’m happy you found my cabin.” Ford gave her a small smile.

Tessa scoffed. “I just bet you are.”

“Look, Tessa. Everything in the cabin can be replaced or fixed. My insurance will cover it,” he said. “I’m glad that you weren’t hurt.”

She closed her eyes. The situation was stressing her out, and then her stomach let out a huge growl.

“Okay then. Let’s get something in your stomach. The pizza will be here soon.” Ford stood. “I need to talk to my boss and get a plan in place.”

“Sounds good.” Tessa leaned back on the sofa. She didn’t want to spoil Ford’s plans, but there was no way his boss was going to want to get involved in this mess. It was too dangerous.

She stared out the window into the woods. For now, she was safe, but for how long?

After spending a few days feeling exhausted and vulnerable, Tessa woke up this morning to the sun's rays filtering through the window, feeling refreshed and safe.

As she stretched and got out of bed, she was grateful that Ford understood that the thought of staying alone in a strange cabin in an unfamiliar area made her uncomfortable. His sofa conveniently transformed into a queen-size bed. She'd offered to sleep on it, but he insisted she take the bedroom. She helped him change the sheets and then got ready for bed. All night, his lingering masculine scent on the pillows and blankets comforted her.

Now, however, she was in the middle of a huge conference table sitting next to Ford facing five very serious-looking men. The room was in the Brotherhood Alliance building. She couldn't help feeling intimidated by their intense stares and her stomach tightened.

They'd entered the room through a library that was warm and welcoming. Across from the table was a window with a view of the woods, but upon closer inspection, she realized it was a mural. Chase Maddox, the director, was at one end of the table with his IT guy sitting next to him. Across from her were three muscular men, and they weren't smiling. She wished Colt was here. He at least smiled.

Ford told her he had briefed Chase about her situation, the incident at his cabin, and that he inquired about protection for her.

Chase was interested but wanted to hear Tessa's side.

So far, their questions were simple to answer, but Tessa was waiting. No way would these ex-military men believe her flimsy story, especially not after Ford's cabin was destroyed.

Her heart thudded in her chest, and she nervously licked her lips. Six pairs of eyes watched her every move. Could they see her pulse racing?

"Drink this," said Ford as he handed her a bottle of water.

She grabbed the bottle and uncapped it and took a large gulp, grateful for the distraction. "Thanks."

"So, Tessa," began Chase as he stared at her intently. "I understand you're running from an abusive boyfriend and by some miracle found Ford's cabin."

Tessa nodded.

"And you're from Georgia?" asked Chase.

"Yes," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

The man Tessa thought was Will asked, "Why did you drive so far? There must be lots of places closer to hide. Couldn't you stay with a friend or family?"

Yes, Will, I could, but I didn't want to put them in danger. Her mind raced as she tried to come up with something that wouldn't raise suspicion. She absolutely wanted help but couldn't tell them the real reason why. It was too dangerous. "Um. My parents are on an around-the-world cruise, and I didn't want to bother my friends."

"Hmmm." Chase nodded and glanced over his shoulder at the IT guy. Dang, what was his name again? Oh, right. Dex.

Dex typed something on the computer and then turned his attention to Tessa. “Tessa Donnelly, 28 years old, single. No siblings. Resident of Atlanta, Georgia, and rents a one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of town. Owns her own business called Elegant Gatherings, established six months ago, no debt. The rent is paid for another month. The last party was held at Illusion, a nightclub owned by Damien Moretti. One full-time employee, Amber Pierson.”

“Is that accurate?” asked Chase.

“Yes.” God, could this get any worse? Tessa felt exposed and vulnerable as Dex laid out her information.

But then Dex raised a finger. “Just received an update. Your apartment was vandalized last night. The super reported it, and the police want to speak with you.”

Oh my God! Tessa gasped, and her mouth dropped open. They trashed her apartment? She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes in defeat. Would the torture ever stop?

She felt a warm hand reach for hers and give a little squeeze. Small comfort.

“Tessa,” Ford murmured. “We know he was more than an abusive boyfriend. Please tell us what is going on.”

Tessa felt tears threatening to flow as she looked into the men’s faces, knowing what she was about to reveal, but she couldn’t keep lying.

“I can’t,” she cried out. “They’ll kill you all.”

Tessa froze, her eyes darting from one man to the next. The room fell silent. Well, that was one way to surprise them. Bet they didn’t expect to hear that.

Silence.

Chase spoke first. “Tessa, no one is going to kill us or hurt you. Why don’t you tell us why you think that?” he asked softly.

Tessa bit her lip, and tears flowed down her cheeks. Ford pulled her closer to his side, ignoring the questioning looks from across the table.

Yes! She’s mine, he wanted to shout.

The thought hit him and was unexpected. When did that happen? He just met her. But something about her called to him. He admired her courage and quiet strength. The time they were together stacking wood, she never complained, just worked hard.

Tessa took a deep breath. “I’m an event planner. My big breakthrough was at my ex-boyfriend’s club, Illusion. Everything was going great. People were congratulating me on a successful event. I saw Damien—Damien Moretti—in the corner talking to his friend Marty.

“I worried something was wrong with the event,” said Tessa. “I could fix it, but I needed to know what the issue was.”

She swallowed hard. “As I made my way over, the two men slipped into Damien’s office and closed the door.”

Her heart was racing just remembering what happened.

“Go on,” encouraged Chase.

Tessa shuddered. “I was about to knock when I heard Damien tell Marty to kill someone. He said he didn’t care about the family, kill them too. Then he added

something about how if you stole from him, you should be prepared to die as well as your family.”

Tessa took a deep breath. Her gaze darted around the table. Were they judging her? Did they think she was too naive, too stupid to live? As Tessa looked around, all she saw in their eyes was compassion and anger. She knew the anger wasn't directed at her.

“I backed away from the door,” she continued. “But then Marty asked about me, said I was bound to figure it out. Damien said...” Her throat tightened. She couldn't go on. It was too painful.

“Tessa,” Ford said kindly. “Tell us what he said.”

Her hands curled into fists. “He said that me being involved in these events helped him cover his tracks.” Tessa closed her eyes for a moment, then forced them open. “He said if I got suspicious, I was expendable too.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Ford murmured, putting his arm around her shoulders. “You're safe now.”

She shook her head. “I may never be safe. He's dealing drugs and who knows what else. He mentioned the cops are looking at him. If that's the case, they're also looking at me.” Tessa shuddered. “I could go to jail. And then there's this Malina who even Damien is afraid of.”

Tessa placed her hands over her head and muttered. “What the hell did I get involved in?”

“Smart,” said Chase. “That's probably just the tip of the iceberg.”

The air was thick with tension as Tessa hung her head. She took a deep breath and looked up at the guys. “I decided whatever they were doing, I didn’t want to be involved in it, especially if they were murdering people. I went to the police...”

A collective moan went around the table. The men exchanged wary looks.

Ford squeezed her hand protectively.

“What happened next?” asked Will, his voice low and soft.

Tessa’s lips quivered. “The officer I spoke to was thrilled to have an inside contact and asked me to wear a wire. I didn’t know Damien was involved in criminal activities, but the officer did. I was terrified Damien would find the wire.” She paused, swallowing hard. “So, I recorded conversations.”

Tessa stopped and shook her head. “A couple days later, I accidentally left the recorder at my apartment. I was leaving to get it when Damien accused me of spying, screaming he was going to kill me. I escaped and ran home, grabbed some clothes and my purse and...” She looked at Ford. “I managed to lose Marty, who was following me, and ended up at Ford’s cabin.”

Ford’s jaw clenched with so many questions, but Titus beat him to it.

“I’m glad you got away,” said Titus, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “How did Damien discover you recorded him?”

Tessa licked her lips. “I learned he has an informant at the police station who is on his payroll and alerted him.”

“Did he mention anyone else?” said Chase. “Maybe a name?”

“No,” replied Tessa.

“What about the officer who helped you? Did you ever manage to give him the recording or follow up?” asked Chase.

“I ran before I could give it to him.” Tessa’s eyes widened, remembering. “Oh my! The recorder. I have it in my purse back at Ford’s cabin.”

“Good. Bring it down so Dex can go through it,” replied Chase. He leaned back in his chair and furrowed his brow. “Okay, here’s the plan. First, we get the recorder so Dex can go through it. Then we’ll contact the cop and see what he knows.” He looked around the group. “I think it is fair to say that we’ll protect Tessa.”

One by one, the men nodded.

Good. Ford let out the breath he’d been holding. This situation was so much worse than running from an abusive boyfriend. He was in awe of Tessa’s bravery.

But when she cried out, “They’ll kill you all,” her voice was raw with fear, and he was angry at whoever put that terror in her voice.

It was not at all what he expected to hear, and judging from the stunned looks from his friends around the table, neither had they.

The men were all ex-military and used to dealing with bad people. But threatening someone smaller and defenseless, especially if it was a woman, made them angry. This was what they trained for, why they banded together to provide protection, to take on battles others couldn’t fight alone.

“I can have Tessa stay at my cabin until this is resolved,” said Ford.

Tessa's hand was still in his. She turned to give him a small smile, a gesture of trust. But this was just the beginning. She was safe for now, but for how long?

Whoever was after her wasn't going to back down, but if they thought they could take on the Brotherhood, they were sadly mistaken.

14

The group decided to get together later, after Dex and Chase followed up on Tessa's story.

She and Ford walked back to his cabin, and Tessa inhaled, filling her lungs with the crisp pine-scented air. The sky was blue, the air was cool, and the birds were chirping. For the first time since she left Georgia, she felt safe, protected by a team of skilled security specialists.

But then reality hit as she mentally began checking off tasks: find a job, get her car fixed, buy some clothes, and look for a place to stay.

Tessa let out a deep sigh. All of her future plans required money, something she was seriously lacking.

"That was a heavy sigh," said Ford, glancing at her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing serious ... just worried about the future," she replied.

Ford leaned in and gently rested a hand on her shoulder. "You've got protection. Damien will never get to you, and the rest will fall into place."

As they stepped onto the small porch, Ford added, "I've asked some women to stop by and see you later."

Tessa smiled, then quickly frowned.

“What’s wrong now?” he asked.

“I don’t want anyone to potentially get hurt by knowing me,” she said softly.

He chuckled. “Not going to happen. First off, the guys are very protective of their women. And second, these women have been through their own challenges. They’re strong, and they’re more than ready to help someone new.”

As they entered the cabin, Ford sighed as he looked around. “You know, I’m starving, and I don’t have any food here. Let’s grab a bite and then go grocery shopping.”

Tessa’s stomach growled. “Sounds good.”

Ford grabbed his keys. “Let’s go.”

They drove a few miles into town, and he pulled into a parking space in front of the Red Rooster Diner.

“This place has amazing food,” he said as he got out and came around to help Tessa down from the truck.

The scents of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee filled the air. “Well, if the food is anything like what I’m smelling, I’m sure it’ll be good,” she replied.

Walking into the diner was a blast from the past. Catchy phrase, Tessa thought, but true. The decor was straight out of the 1950s. There were a few people sitting at the counter, and most of the booths were full, but she spotted an empty booth near the window.

She scooted into the red-leather seat in the booth and looked around. Three-tiered pie

holders held an assortment of pies—her favorite. Knickknacks and signs from other diners adorned the walls.

A petite, gray-haired woman came over and greeted Ford. “Haven’t seen you in a while, Ford.”

“Been busy, Margie,” replied Ford. He nodded at Tessa. “This is Tessa. She’s staying with me for a while.”

Tessa gave her a little wave. “Hi.”

“Welcome, Tessa. So, what will you two have this morning?”

Ford looked at Tessa and said, “If you’re hungry, go for the Big Wally. It’ll satisfy your every breakfast need.”

Tessa shrugged. It didn’t matter to her what she ate. She’d been snacking for days. “Sounds good.”

“Two Big Wallys, Margie. And coffee?” he looked over at Tessa, who nodded. “Two coffees, please.”

“On it.” Margie turned to place the order.

“I’m almost afraid to ask what a Big Wally is,” whispered Tessa.

“You’ll see.” Ford’s eyes twinkled.

Margie returned and placed two steaming cups of coffee down and left.

“Haywood Lake seems like a nice town,” Tessa said. “How long have you lived

here?”

Ford thought for a moment. “It’s been almost a year.”

“Were you in security before?”

He shook his head. “No, I was in the military. After I got out, I searched for a place to use the skills I learned, and someone mentioned the Brotherhood Alliance.”

“What does the Brotherhood do exactly?” Tessa knew they did security, but what kind?

Ford was about to answer when Margie brought over their breakfast and a pot of jam.

The plate was ginormous. Did Ford really think she could eat three slices of bacon, two sausage patties, a slice of ham and, oh God, three eggs over easy, two pancakes, home fries, plus toast?

“Who’s sharing this with us?” she quipped.

He chuckled. “Eat what you can. I’ll finish what you don’t.”

They ate, listening to oldies drifting from the radio, mixed with the clink of glasses and snippets of conversation from the other diners.

Ford took a bite of egg, swallowed and asked, “Tell me about your family.”

Tessa shrugged. “Oh, not much to tell.” She ran her finger around the rim of her glass. “Mom and Dad are on a round-the-world cruise. They’re probably leaving Hawaii for Tahiti right now.”

“Do they like to cruise?”

She laughed. “This is their first but something they always wanted to do.”

Ford nodded. “Siblings?”

“No.” Tessa thought about it for a minute. “I wish I had a couple, but that wasn’t in the cards for them.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said. “I’m an only child too.”

She studied him for a moment. “What about your parents? Do they live around here?”

Pain passed through his eyes. She could tell it hurt to talk about his parents. He was proud of them. He missed them still. “They passed away. Car accident.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that. Do you have other family?” she asked gently.

“Nope. At least not that I know of. My parents were only kids too.”

Tessa gave him a small smile. She wanted to say something. Instead she clinked her glass against his.

“To new friends,” she said.

“To new friends,” he echoed.

Before long, Ford finished everything on his plate and was sipping coffee. Scraping the last bit of pancake off her plate, Tessa realized she was hungrier than she had thought.

She leaned back, patting her stomach. “That was the best breakfast ever.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” said Ford.

“I don’t normally eat that much, but the past couple of days have been light on food.”

Ford grabbed the bill that Margie had placed on the table. “We’re about to fix that. Let me pay, and we’ll go to the grocery store.”

Tessa felt guilty for letting Ford pay after all he’d done for her, and now he was buying groceries too.

In another life, she would have protested and split the bill, but now, she only had the cash she left with, and that wasn’t very much.

Back home, she had a goodly sum in a savings account but thought Damien could probably track it or his police contact could. The only positive note was that it would accrue interest—not much, but still.

Two hours later, they arrived back at the cabin. She helped Ford bring in bags of food, more food than the two of them could consume in a week. She’d stopped looking at items because every time she did, Ford threw them in the carriage.

After unpacking the bags, Tessa made a pot of coffee and pulled out a box of pastries they’d stopped to buy at the Queen of Tarts. The owner, Giselle, was there and explained all the different pastries. And what a cute bakery it was.

In fact, the town of Haywood Lake was cute. There were canals, lakes, a lively downtown, a museum, bistros, restaurants, and an endless array of fun places to visit. Tessa could see herself settling here.

For sure, she could never go back to Atlanta for a couple of reasons. One, Damien was there and she wasn't safe. Two, her career was ruined. Once people found out about Damien's extracurricular activities, no one would want to hire her.

Just as they settled into the living room with coffee and pastries, they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Ford got up to open it, and four women came in holding boxes and bags.

"Tessa, meet Joy, Naomi, Emelia, and Isabelle," said Ford. "I asked Emelia to bring over whoever was available."

"Oh my." Tessa stood to welcome the women.

"I'm Joy Maddox," said a slender blond woman, nodding in her direction since her hands were holding a pot. "I live in the house at the end of the driveway with Liam, who's a deputy sheriff in town." She held up the container. "I brought homemade soup. Because," she said, her eyes twinkling, "soup makes everything okay."

Ford took the pot from Joy and placed it in the kitchen.

"Thank you," said Tessa. "I love homemade soup, and it smells yummy."

A tall, brown-haired woman stepped in. "I have pastries, and I'm Emelia. You've probably met my significant other, Titus." Emelia glanced over at the table. "Oh, I see you went to the Queen of Tarts. Giselle's pastries are great, but mine are better." Emelia smiled and placed an open box on the coffee table.

Tessa's mouth watered looking at the various pastries. There were assorted muffins and croissants.

“I’m Naomi, and I’m with Chase.” A woman with black hair and striking green eyes held up a bag. “He mentioned you might need clothes, so we went to the store and got the basics for you.” Naomi eyed her up and down. “You look about the same size as Joy, so they should work. If not, the receipt is in the bag, and you can exchange whatever doesn’t fit or isn’t your style.”

A tear formed in Tessa’s eye.

These women had no idea who she was, and yet they were welcoming her like old friends. She wanted to tell them to stay away for their own safety, but just for a moment, she could let herself lean on someone else.

“Hey, no crying here,” the last woman said with a laugh. She was about Tessa’s height with blond hair. She stepped forward with a bag of produce and a small box. “I’m Isabelle, and I’m with Will, who you met earlier. We grow and sell vegetables and meat, and I make soap.”

Isabelle handed the bag of vegetables to Ford and walked into the living room and opened a box with a Two Fishes logo on the label. “Here are our latest soaps: Smooth Operator, which will get you squeaky clean and feeling smooth, and Lathered in Love, for when you want to feel ‘hands on with your soap.’”

They all turned when Ford groaned from the kitchen. He turned a bright red and just shook his head. “On that note, I’m outta here—have fun, ladies.” He grabbed his keys and left.

The women laughed hysterically. “Isabelle, you are so bad,” said Joy.

“I know.” Isabelle grinned. “It’s the little things in life that make me smile. Ford is always so serious. It’s fun to try to make him laugh.”

“Well, sit,” said Tessa. “I believe we have dry white wine chilling and red Shiraz. Or I can make...” She grimaced. “I don’t know what I can make since I’ve only just got here.”

“Wine is good,” replied Naomi. “Red for me.”

“White for me,” chorused Isabelle, Joy, and Emelia.

Emelia jumped up. “Let me help.”

Good idea, since Tessa had no idea where Ford kept things.

In a matter of minutes, they opened the wine, carried it and the glasses to the coffee table. Tessa poured and handed a glass to each woman. “A toast is called for,” she said, lifting her glass. “Here’s to flavor, fragrance and feeling refreshed.”

“Perfect,” Joy chimed in, raising her glass. “Also, to new friends.”

New friends! Tessa loved that phrase. It felt like a gift of hope, reminding her that she missed her old friends and if she made her home here, hoped they would visit.

“So, how do you all know each other?” Tessa asked.

The women shared a look. What was going on?

“Well,” Joy started and leaned forward. “My brother is Chase, who you know runs the Paws for Caring campus and the Brotherhood Alliance. I live just at the end of the driveway.” She gestured toward the street. “I met Naomi when she came to live on campus, and now she’s my sister-in-law.”

“That must be nice to live so close to family,” said Tessa. “Mine are in Atlanta.”

“We heard you had a bit of trouble,” Emelia said gently.

Tessa’s heart skipped. She had to warn them not to get involved with her.

It was too dangerous for them, but before she could say anything, Isabelle placed her hand on Tessa’s and said, “You’re safe here with Ford and the guys. They’re trained in dangerous situations and to protect people. Every one of us has been in situations where the Brotherhood helped.”

Emelia nodded, glancing around at the other women. “We’ve all been through hard times, but you don’t have to go it alone.”

“That’s so true,” said Naomi. “If you ever need to talk, you’ve got friends here now.”

“And Ford,” exclaimed Isabelle. “Who knew that the ever-mysterious Ford would find a woman when he least expected to?”

Humph. “Ford had little choice since I broke into his cabin,” Tessa said, half jokingly. But now that she thought about it, had Ford brought her here because he didn’t know what to do with her or because of guilt?

The women laughed, and a feeling of warmth and friendship washed over Tessa. The conversation drifted to other subjects —favorite restaurants, areas to explore, and the best stores for clothes.

Tessa sipped her wine and looked at the women, who had a tight bond, and felt a sense of belonging—a hope for the future she hadn’t realized she was missing.

For now, that was enough. Tomorrow could hold its own challenges, but for tonight, this was what she needed.

15

S mooth Operator? Lathered in Love?

Ford almost choked on a piece of cheese when Isabelle announced the names of her soaps with a twinkle in her eye.

God, that woman had a knack for pushing his buttons.

She was both adorable and annoying. Isabelle had made it her mission since he arrived to make him laugh, and damn if she wasn't succeeding—but seriously?

Just what did the women think he and Tessa were up to?

They only just met, for crying out loud.

Not that he hadn't noticed that Tessa was sexy or smart. He liked her courage and spirit, but again, THEY JUST MET.

However, the idea of getting to know Tessa better was strong. But he wasn't taking her to bed or anywhere else until he neutralized the threat. Once the danger passed? Perhaps. Definitely. Maybe. But only if she wanted it too.

To escape the teasing and sounds of giggles, he got out of the cabin as quickly as he could and drove into town to grab a beer at Lucky's. Being by himself with just the murmur of conversations and clink of glass was a treat.

He couldn't deny Joy was a lifesaver. Ford never thought she could gather some of the girls together and bring over food and clothes on such short notice. Although that was what impressed him most about this group: They all came together to help one another.

Ford knew Tessa was struggling with her lack of clothing and money even though she hadn't complained once.

He wanted to help. He considered offering to buy her the basics but hesitated. They only just met, and he didn't want to overstep and make her feel uncomfortable. Still, the thought of her going without bothered him. He was grateful for the women's help.

Hell, what he knew about relationships could fit into a shot glass. He rubbed his hands over his head. Over the years, there were a lot of one-night stands that vanished in the morning, but no one made him want more. For some unknown reason, Tessa did.

He traced his finger over the cold beer glass. The thought of committing, really letting someone in, felt terrifying and a little thrilling. The wall he'd built around himself kept getting higher over the years, and yet his friends here kept gently knocking it down, involving him in their lives. Ford saw how happy the couples were, how they trusted each other.

Trust didn't come easy to him. It used to.

But that was before Pete died. Before he lost his parents.

He never questioned whether he'd be let down, deserted, until then. It was unrealistic to expect people to be around forever. But he trusted them to have his back, and while he knew shit happened, perhaps all it did was expose his insecurities. Maybe he needed to move past them.

His phone dinged. Chase texted him to get Tessa and come back to the command center to go over what they found. Ford chugged the last bit of beer, settled his tab and headed back.

It didn't take long, and as he approached his driveway, he noticed the cars were gone. Thankfully. He turned off his truck and stepped onto the porch. Ford hoped Tessa enjoyed herself, but he needed to stay focused. Ford wondered what Chase and Dex found out.

He opened the door and saw Tessa sitting in a chair, reading. "Hey. Did you have a good time?" he asked.

She looked over with a smile. "It felt so good to talk to other women, and I can't believe they brought food and clothes. I showered and changed. Now I feel like a new woman."

"I'm glad. Joy, well, all the women are good about things like that. However, I hate to burst your happy bubble, but Chase has information for us and asked that we meet him now."

Tessa frowned. "What do you think he found out?"

Ford shook his head. "We'll know when we get over there."

Tessa set her book down and followed him outside. It was nice out, and Ford suggested they walk down the dirt drive rather than drive.

He glanced over at Tessa. She had changed into a pair of skinny jeans that accentuated her slender body, sneakers and a bluish-green three-quarter-sleeved V-neck tee.

She'd pulled her blond hair back in a ponytail, looking more relaxed and sexy as all get-out.

"So." He cleared his throat awkwardly and asked, "Did you try the soap Isabelle brought over?" Why did he care? But the thought of leaning close to sniff her tempted him.

Tessa giggled. "You should have seen your face! Priceless. I think Isabelle gets her kicks teasing people."

"I know she does," he said, chuckling. "So, which one did you use?"

"Lathered in Love," she replied with a twinkle in her eye. "It's a blend of rosehip oil, cocoa butter and dried rose petals." She rubbed her wrist and held it up to him. "Want to smell?"

Oh God. He probably shouldn't... but hell, yes, he did. Leaning over, he inhaled the soft scent of rose and something else. Felt his cock stiffen and groaned softly. Looking up, he saw Tessa grinning.

"Nice, huh? I think she added some lavender as well."

"Yeah," he replied, his voice rougher than he intended. She was too distracting. He needed to focus, to remember why she was here. But it was getting harder to ignore how much he liked her.

Ford adjusted his pants discreetly as they approached the command center. There were several cars there, and he heard barking, so Melissa must have an obedience class.

They entered through Chase's office and into the conference room. As before, Chase,

Dex, Will and Titus were there, but now Colt was sitting at the table with a tense expression on his face.

“Hi,” said Tessa in a small voice.

“Take a seat, you two. We have an update,” said Chase. He waited for them to sit before speaking. “First off, the bad news.” He shook his head and paused. “Actually, it’s mostly bad news.”

Tessa groaned. Ford reached over for her hand, ignoring the looks Colt was giving him.

“Was there anything on the tape?” Ford asked.

Dex shook his head. “There were several conversations but nothing that pointed to any illegal activity.”

“I didn’t have a lot of time to record,” said Tessa. “Even so, I’m disappointed there wasn’t anything.”

“Yeah. We are too,” replied Chase. “We also tried to reach out to the cop you spoke to.”

Ford’s stomach dropped. Something terrible had happened.

“Apparently, he’s missing,” said Chase. “He resigned from the force and took off for parts unknown. No one has heard from him, nor can they reach him.”

Tessa moaned. “So, there is no one and nothing to collaborate my story. I’m still in danger.” She looked around frantically. “You all are in danger, too.” She stood abruptly. “I have to go.”

“Sit.” Chase didn’t raise his voice, but all the authority of an ex-SEAL was behind it. “You’re not going anywhere. We’ve handled threats like this before, and we’ll handle this one.”

She sank back into her chair, wringing her hands. Ford’s heart went out to her. She was an innocent, not the slimeballs and bullies the Brotherhood was used to.

“Tessa,” said Colt softly. “The one piece of good news, if you can call it that, is that I found a bug in your car. That’s how they tracked you to Ford’s cabin.”

Tessa’s eyes widened in terror. “When did they put that on my car?” She leaned back in the chair and sighed. “Well, at least ... at least you know I’m not lying.”

Chase frowned. “We never believed you were lying. But the cop disappearing is ... disturbing. He’s probably dead.”

“I went deeper into Damien Moretti’s background,” said Dex. “He has a reputation—a dangerous one. You were lucky to get away when you did.”

A thick silence had settled over the room. This wasn’t just about keeping Tessa safe anymore.

The Brotherhood had become entangled in a deadly game, and they’d make sure Moretti paid.

16

Tessa and Ford left the command center after the devastating news. Her mind was numb on the way back to the cabin. A tracker on her car? A cop vanishing and possibly dead? Could this get any worse?

She huffed. Of course it could. What was the saying? Oh, right— when you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas.

Why had she ever fallen for Damien?

Sure, he was handsome and fun. And she loved the attention he gave her.

How did she not see beneath the surface? You couldn't hide evil for long. How did she fail to notice that his business meetings were always late at night or how he never brought them up in conversation? Or how he kept her close to his side, away from her girlfriends. She wasn't stupid or naive. Tessa snorted. Well, maybe she was stupid to think he loved her.

Ford held her hand all the way back to the cabin, giving her concerned looks. He hadn't said a word, for which she was grateful.

After hearing what the guys told her, the one thing she knew for certain was that she had to leave.

Get away from the evil.

Get Damien away from the Brotherhood.

Whoever Damien was in business with meant business, and even though the Brotherhood was all ex-military, it didn't mean a thing. They could still bleed. They could still die.

But how? She had to get her hands on cash, get her car fixed, and get out of town. Far away from Ford and her new friends—like right now.

Before it was too late.

"I'd like to talk to Colt about my car," said Tessa. "I have no idea if it's going to cost a lot of money or if I have to junk it."

They stepped onto the porch, and Ford opened the cabin door. He turned to look at her, his brow furrowed. "I'll have Colt stop by," he said. "This has to be stressful for you, not knowing everything that's going on."

Tessa walked into the living room and sat in a chair. She rubbed her face with her hands. "Stressful doesn't begin to..." A tear trickled down her cheek, and she wiped it away. "I need to take control of my life, not have other people do it for me. This is my mess, and while I'm grateful for all your help, I've got to resolve it."

Ford handed her a glass of water and sat opposite Tessa. He was silent for a moment. "Look, Tessa," he finally said. "These people are dangerous."

"I know they're dangerous. God knows, I know." Tessa pulled her knees up to her chest. "But I don't expect your company to help me, plus I can't afford to pay you. I have to face this on my own."

He walked over and crouched in front of her. "Running isn't the answer. And you're

not alone. Please trust me and trust the Brotherhood to keep you safe and put an end to this.”

She bit her lip. Shaking her head, Tessa said, “Trusting you isn’t the problem. It’s trusting myself that I can get out of the mess without dragging anyone else into it.”

“Then let us help, sweetheart.” Ford’s hand reached out to clasp hers.

His touch seemed to ground her, and she nodded.

“Good girl.” Ford patted her knee and stood. “Let me call Colt. If he’s still here, maybe he can stop by and tell you what’s going on with your car.”

“Okay.”

Tessa stared out the window, her eyes barely recognizing the sunlight in the trees. Ford made the call, his voice low, and the soft murmur of the conversation barely registered with her. He returned, telling her that Colt was still at the command center and would stop by.

“Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?” he asked. “I’m making a pot of coffee if you want some later.”

“That would be nice. But no thanks to food. I’m still full from the snacks the girls brought.” She leaned back in the chair and watched Ford return to the kitchen. The savory scent of cold cuts and fresh bread wafted over as he placed the sandwiches and plates on the coffee table.

“Take one,” he said, indicating one of the sandwiches.

She shook her head, managing a small smile. Tessa was sure she’d hurl any food she

put in her stomach.

There was a knock on the door. Ford got up to open it. He stepped aside as Colt entered, his rugged face softened by a sympathetic smile. The two men settled on the sofa, and both men's eyes met hers.

"Tessa," Colt began. "I know this is stressful for you. The good news is that your car only needed the interior repaired, and it's already done."

"It's done?" A feeling of relief washed over her. "How much do I owe you?"

Colt gave her a small smile. "Nothing. We take care of our own here. I was able to get replacement seats out of an old wreck. They're black, not gray like you had, but they're in great condition. Once we cleaned everything up, the interior looks as good as new."

Nothing? Tessa was astounded, but not as much at knowing her car was okay. What did he mean, we take care of our own? Who did this for people they hardly knew? But since she didn't have much money, this was a godsend.

"I don't care about the color of the seats," she said. "Thank you so much. But... what happened to the tracker? Do I need to be concerned that Damien will keep coming after me?"

Colt shook his head. "I destroyed it."

Tessa exhaled. That was good news. However, the fact remained that she wasn't safe, and Tessa was unsure about what to do. Should she leave? Stay?

There were no good options nor any guarantee of safety.

Ford reached over, his hand brushing against hers. “Whatever you decide, we’re here for you. Please don’t do this alone.”

Tessa exhaled slowly. She took in her peaceful surroundings, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, and said, “I’ll let you help me, but there has to be something I can do in return.”

Colt tapped his leg with his fingers. He leaned forward. “Hmmm. The Brotherhood is sponsoring a fundraiser for the local shelter. Emelia will be baking desserts. Will and Isabelle are providing meat and vegetables from the farm and...”

“That’s a great idea,” Ford interjected. He looked at Tessa, his blue eyes hopeful. “You’re an event planner. This is right up your alley. We were kind of at a loss on how to proceed.”

Planning an event? Didn’t she just get into deep trouble doing that? Memories of Damien’s voice, filled with venom, sent a shiver down her spine.

However, Haywood Lake was far enough away from Atlanta that no one would know her history. And she did love planning parties. Would it, could it, be possible to start her career here?

Tessa only knew the town from brief glimpses while driving to Ford’s cabin. Haywood Lake was charming. It looked prosperous, quaint, and a little funky. There were shops with colorful awnings and bustling bistros. Ford mentioned that there were a couple of lakes and sightseeing boats through the canals. Emelia told her that there was a college in town and a museum with a permanent Tiffany collection that drew visitors from all over. And there were tons of activities and festivals. It sounded like the kind of place where she could rebuild her reputation and just maybe she didn’t have to leave.

Emelia had casually mentioned that she had an apartment over her former bakery for rent. The rent was reasonable, and it was right in the heart of town.

The women she met were more than happy to help her get clients when they heard she was an event planner. In fact, they invited her to go out with them this Saturday night to a bar and unwind.

For a few moments, Tessa felt like she had found a home. Maybe she didn't have to keep running. But her chest tightened, pulling her back to reality.

Damien and Marty weren't just her past—they were her present, and she couldn't shake the feeling of danger lurking in the shadows.

17

Men! They're like sheep—always needing a shepherd to guide them. Thank God they have me.

Malina Simone Cavelli Benedetto swirled the deep ruby liquid in her glass, took a sip of the 1982 Chateau Pétrus, savoring its complex full-bodied plummy finish lingering on her palate — a gift, as it were, from her father's wine cellar.

She glanced out the vast windows of her penthouse in downtown Atlanta. Dusk painted the skyline in hues of gold and gray, and the lights from hundreds of houses and streets twinkled like diamonds in the distance.

Her 4,000-square-foot apartment was sleek and modern. No gilded lamps or tables here. Nor were there any of the heavy damask chairs her father adored. It was just functional and stylish with the hint of luxury. No clutter. No photographs and no history. Nothing that would give away her past. It was a world apart from the pretentious house she grew up in, full of cigar smoke, secrets, and betrayal.

She swirled the wine in her glass and sniffed the bouquet of sweet plums, warm spices, and smoke. Smoke always reminded her of her emancipation from the narrow minds of men who thought women were soft and ruled by emotion.

No servants here, either. She learned the hard way that even the most loyal maids, cooks, and drivers gossiped. And gossip often led to rumors, and rumors led to betrayal.

Today marked five years since she lost her father and brothers and took over the Cavelli crime family—a feat no one saw coming—and branched out to Atlanta. Malina took another sip of wine, the crystal catching the last remnants of dusk outside her window, and smiled.

Too bad dear ol' dad insisted that while she was intelligent and cunning, no woman would ever sit at the head of the table. It didn't matter that Malina orchestrated several high-stakes deals and saved the family business. Women were supposed to stay home, spread their legs on command and have babies.

The thought made her snort. As if!

Malina didn't want or need a man in her life, let alone blood-sucking kids.

If she had an urge, she hired a high-priced escort—a man who looked spectacular naked and didn't require pillow talk. They fucked in a hotel room, neither one of them exchanging names.

But that was neither here nor there.

Dad, Nico, and Jimmy were dead. Killed by her own hands.

When one had access to the best poisons money could buy, it was easy. The chemist assured her it was undetectable. Too bad the chemist had to die, but she couldn't have her secret spilled by accident.

Malina had poured the wine for her father and brothers, watched as they sipped it, and then laughed when she told them what she'd done.

She watched as their bodies convulsed, as they clutched their throats in panic. Then she toasted their lifeless bodies and packed her bags, waited until the middle of the

night, lit the match, and left, never looking back.

She set her glass down on the marble counter and turned to stare at the view. The sky was dark, the city alive and pulsing.

It was hers for the taking.

The one lesson she learned early on was power was never given. You had to seize it.

She paid her dues, fought and killed for her seat at the table. And the lesson learned at her father's knee was once you took it, you never let anyone get close enough to take it back.

Her phone buzzed. Its shrill ringtone cut through the silence. She looked at the name on the screen. Damien. She smiled as she picked it up.

Hopefully, Damien had found Tessa Donnelly and was on his way back with the stupid woman he had trusted until she betrayed him.

She wasn't losing all that she fought for to go to jail because some little bitch was too curious and couldn't keep her mouth shut. The cop who took her statement learned that lesson the hard way.

Although assuming Damien could clean up the mess was proving to be a mistake.

The only thing he had going for him at this point was that he was loyal, but loyalty had its use until it didn't.

"Talk to me," she said. "Do you have her?"

The voice on the other end shook, and Malina smiled.

“N-not yet,” Damien stammered. Silence. “But we’re close. She’s in Haywood Lake, Florida. Marty is...”

Malina tsked. “I don’t want excuses. I want results.” She tapped her fingers on the counter. “Better yet, bring Marty home. I’ll take care of this myself.”

She hung up the phone, tossing it on the counter. Her fingers rubbed the gold and ruby pendant of a snake coiled around a dagger, a final gift from her father. As he lay gasping for breath, she’d ripped the elegantly woven chain from his neck, realizing the power was all hers from now on.

Tessa Donnelly thought she could betray them and disappear? Humph. She’d learn that no one escaped Malina Cavelli and lived to talk about it.

Malina sighed, shaking her head. Why was she constantly the one cleaning up the messes? Although flying back to Florida had its appeal—a homecoming of sorts. Maybe she’d visit the graves of her father and brothers and raise a glass of wine in mock tribute—a bitter toast to the past she burned but could never truly escape. Occasionally, she could still hear her father’s mocking voice. “Women are too emotional, too weak.”

Well, Malina wasn’t weak, nor was she emotional. She was at the head of the table now. The power was hers, and God help anyone who thought they could take what was hers.

18

Tessa never laughed so much in her life. Her sides ached from the nonstop jokes and silly antics of her friends. For a moment, the fear and tension that gripped her loosened its hold.

The girls were at Lucky's Bar. The music was loud; the drinks were cold. The air was heavy with the mingling scents of beer, sweat, perfume, and something fried.

Colored lights flickered across the crowded room, casting vibrant shadows on the walls and faces. The hum of conversations and the sharp clack of pool balls competed with the pulsating music. The atmosphere buzzed with energy.

It was a brief respite for what was becoming her ordinary. She was still on campus, trying to piece together her life.

There had been no other sightings of Marty or Damien.

The Brotherhood checked motels near Ford's cabin. They found someone who resembled Marty checking in and then out. So he was gone.

The discovery brought some relief but didn't erase the nagging suspicion that Damien was determined not to let her go.

His face still haunted her dreams.

Hell, sometimes even in the daytime.

The venom in his voice still reminded Tessa that Damien was a force to be reckoned with.

And then there was the mysterious Malina he worked for. Tessa had a feeling she was worse than Damien and Marty.

But every day there was a glimmer of hope, and she was feeling more confident that she was free of him. And if she was free of him, she needed to reclaim her life.

“Come on, Tessa,” yelled Joy. “Let’s dance.”

Joy grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the dance floor. The other girls joined in. They twirled and laughed until Tessa’s cheeks were flushed from the exercise and, to some extent, from the two frozen margaritas she’d consumed.

Finally, Tessa had enough. She worked her way back to the table, her legs shaking from exertion.

Emelia and Felicia Montgomery were chatting and watching her when she sat down.

“You okay, Tessa?” asked Felicia. Tessa had just met Isabelle’s future sister-in-law and really liked the quiet woman. She said little, but Tessa noticed she observed everything.

Tessa nodded.

“How are things working out with Ford?” asked Emelia. “Have you decided about what you want to do? Will you stay here or move back to Atlanta?”

Tessa hesitated. Could she share some of her story? Would the women think less of her? Although why would they? Nothing that happened was her fault. She wasn’t

ashamed of her past.

They were all strong women. Maybe they wouldn't have run away. Bah. Not going there.

Joy, Isabelle, and Naomi wandered back to the table and heard Felicia's question.

"Is everything all right?" Joy asked.

"Yes," replied Tessa. She took a long sip of what was left of her drink and placed the empty glass down. "I guess I'm just ... I'm trying to figure out what next."

"Can we help?" asked Naomi.

Tessa looked around the table at the women's expectant faces. They were all somehow connected to the Brotherhood, and for some reason, she wanted to be part of that, too.

"Well, there's more to my story than just breaking into Ford's cabin," she admitted. The musicians were taking a break, and Tessa felt like her voice carried throughout the room and everyone was staring at her.

The girls leaned in. "I just knew it," exclaimed Isabelle. "Are you running from an abusive boyfriend? A married man? Did you kill someone and you're on the lam?"

"Oh," Felicia huffed and swatted Isabelle's arm. "You are such a drama queen. Let the woman speak." She leaned over and squeezed Tessa's hand. "Nothing you can tell us will be repeated, and trust me..." She looked around the table. "We all have stories."

Tessa drew in a shaky breath. "I am an event planner. And Damien—the guy I was

dating—ran a nightclub and gave me my first really big break. Everything was perfect until I saw him and his friend Marty talking in the corner.”

She swallowed hard. “I thought something was wrong with the event, but when I finally got over there, they had moved to Damien’s office. I heard... I heard things I never thought I would. Damien is a drug dealer and hurts people.”

The women let out a sharp exhale.

“Tessa, that’s awful,” murmured Emelia. “Is that why you left?”

“Not exactly.” Tessa bit her lip and sighed. “I went to the police, and they suggested I wear a wire or record Damien.”

A large gasp went around the table.

“Damien found out and threatened to kill me. So, I ran.” She looked at her new friends. “And here I am, homeless, jobless and moneyless.” She threw up her hands. “Go me.”

For a moment, there was silence until Felicia spoke up. “You’re not alone here.”

Tessa cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

Felicia exchanged a glance with the other women before continuing. “We’ve all been through something. Isabelle and I were chased by a mob dealer who thought we stole money from him. Will and Colt rescued us.”

“Oh my!” exclaimed Tessa.

“I was stalked by my cousin’s boyfriend, who chased me into the woods and pulled a

gun on me. Liam helped rescue me,” said Joy.

Emelia gave a small smile. “I was kidnapped by someone who felt they should have my business. Titus saved me.”

“I had a psycho classmate who believed I belonged to him and kidnapped me, hiding me in a secret basement room.” Naomi nodded and said, “Chase was there for me.”

By the time they were finished, Tessa sat in stunned silence. Their confessions were not what she expected to hear. These women had faced adversity and won.

Now she understood the connection to the Brotherhood and why the women understood her plight.

“Gosh, I didn’t know. You’ve all been through so much,” Tessa said. “And you’ve all come out the other side stronger.”

“And so will you,” said Joy gently.

“Aren’t you afraid to just go out and have a good time at night without looking over your shoulder?” Tessa asked.

Isabelle chuckled. “Oh, sweetie, I guess you didn’t see Will and Colt in the other room playing pool. Ford didn’t want to be so obvious, so he asked them to keep watch. The guys are here tonight for you.” She leaned in as if telling a secret. “They think we don’t know they’re keeping an eye out for our safety.”

“Wait.” Tessa’s eyes widened. “They’re protecting me?”

“Of course,” said Naomi. “The Brotherhood takes its responsibility seriously. Until they feel you’re safe, someone will always be close by.”

Tessa glanced at the pool room. She took in a slow breath, relaxing slightly. “I guess it’s kinda nice knowing I’m not alone.”

“You’re never alone,” Felicia stated. “You have us. You have protection. You’re safe.”

The musicians had just started up again. Isabelle stood. “Come on, ladies. Let’s dance and have fun while the guys are doing their whole secret protector thing.”

“Absolutely,” said Joy.

The women giggled and danced for a couple of songs before coming back to the table and ordering drinks and appetizers.

“By the way,” Emelia continued. “Have you thought any more about the apartment? You know Titus’s gym is a block away, and he’s there all the time.”

“I’ve got to talk to Ford and see where we are,” said Tessa. “That sounds like a good start to getting my life back.”

“Plus,” said Isabelle, “you’re planning the shelter’s event, and I’m sure you’ll get business from that.”

Tessa leaned back in her chair, letting the chatter and laughter from her new friends cover her like a warm blanket. For a moment, the future looked almost rosy. If these women could overcome what they went through, she could too.

But until Damien was caught and the danger he posed was finally gone, the future remained a fragile dream.

For now, she would cling to the small sense of safety she had. It wasn’t much, but it

was a beginning.

Ford hung up the phone, a satisfied grin spread across his face. Finally, another one of his dreams was coming to fruition. The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air.

“Hey.” Tessa’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. She padded into the kitchen from the bedroom, barefoot and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Hey, yourself.” Ford glanced at Tessa, who looked a little worse for wear. “Tough night?”

“God. Yes,” she groaned. “But it was fun, and I really enjoyed being with the women.”

He took in her messy topknot and her sweet little boy shorts paired with an oversize top. She looked disheveled, but he decided Tessa looked adorable, no matter what. They’d been living together for several weeks and were feeling pretty comfortable with each other. She didn’t scream anymore or blush when she saw him in just a pair of lounge pants or his boxers.

“Is that fresh coffee?” she asked, drifting toward the counter.

“Why don’t you sit in the living room, and I’ll bring you a cup,” said Ford, stepping in front of her and gently steering her away from the counter. “You look like you’re going to fall over.”

“Thanks,” Tessa groaned. “I might have overdone the mimosas and dancing last night.”

Ford snorted. Might have?

Oh lordy, she definitely had, according to Will and Colt, who were keeping an eye on her and the other women last night.

Actually, asking whoever was available to watch out for Tessa was working out well, since he always volunteered when their women were in trouble. The guys stayed out of sight, so she and the other women never knew anyone was observing her. He wanted Tessa to feel as normal as possible and not be looking over her shoulder all the time.

He handed Tessa a cup of coffee. She took it, cradling it to her nose, and closed her eyes, inhaling the scent. “Hmmm.”

Ford froze for a minute and swallowed hard. Did Tessa know how sexy she was? His cock, straining to escape his pants, did. Did she know what she did to him? Soon he might get the chance to explore that with her but not yet. Not until she was safe. And most certainly not unless she wanted to.

He sat across from her with his own cup of coffee. “So,” he said, clearing his throat, hoping his voice sounded normal. “If you’re up to it, in a little while, I’d like to show you something in town.”

She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. “A surprise?”

Ford took a sip of coffee to hide the grin that threatened to break free. He nodded. “Something like that.”

“Okay, I’m intrigued,” she said. “I’ll finish my coffee and get dressed. Are you going to give me a hint?”

He leaned back in his chair. “Nope.”

“Fine,” she said in mock exasperation. She got up and placed her cup in the dishwasher. “I’ll take a quick shower and get dressed.”

Ford smiled at her. Living together was easy. She was interesting, funny and liked his friends.

A half hour later, Tessa returned, looked refreshed and dressed in jeans and an off-shoulder top. She’d swept her hair into a ponytail.

He grabbed his keys from the table. “Ready?”

“You bet. I can’t wait to see this surprise.”

The short drive to town passed in a blur. He pulled up to a small brick building on the edge of town, close to the lake. His heart pounded in anticipation.

Would she like it? Would Tessa understand how important this was to him? It wasn’t just a business venture, it was a step toward something bigger. A place where he could put down roots and belong to something more than just his past.

He turned off the truck and looked at Tessa. “We’re here.”

“Okaaaay.” She furrowed her brows and gave him a small smile. He hopped out and walked around to help her out of the truck. Her eyes were wide as she looked around the area. “This is a wonderful spot so close to the lake.”

“I hope so.”

Pulling a set of keys from his pocket, he opened the front door and held it open for her to walk inside.

Tessa stepped inside and took in the exposed wood beams, large-paned windows, and brick walls with a lake view. Ford’s heart was racing. He stood in the middle of the shop with the scent of freshly sanded wood lingering in the air. Would she like it? She did a 360. “This is amazing. What are you going to do here?”

“Well.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “This is a work in progress, but I’m opening an outdoor gear shop. Ryker is a woodworker and is building shelves and making hand-turned bowls from local wood. I have a guy who makes knives, really beautiful knives. And a couple of people who tie flies for fishing. I’ll stock high-end gear and offer guided fishing trips with experts.”

He laughed. “Isabelle is already concocting special soaps for the outdoor enthusiast.”

Tessa giggled. “Isabelle is a hoot.” She tilted her head, and then her eyes lit up with excitement. “This is your dream.”

He was amazed Tessa picked up on that dream. It was more than a dream. It was stability, setting down roots, healing.

“Yeah. I love working for the Brotherhood, but we don’t always have steady jobs. This will keep me busy when I’m here, and I’ll hire a couple of people to work here when I’m not around.”

“Oh, Ford,” she exclaimed. “This is so exciting. Can I help you with anything?”

“Well, I was hoping you could plan a grand opening.” He held his breath. Ford didn’t

want to ask; he didn't want Tessa to feel she had to do it.

She grinned and stepped closer, kissed him on the cheek. "I'd love to. Have you thought of a name yet?"

Ford paused. "I was thinking of 'GearUp.' It aligns with what I want to sell and fits with the shop's purpose."

Tessa clapped her hands and beamed. "It's perfect. When are you opening?"

"Humph. In a month or so." Ford thought that would be enough time to get all the gear in. His suppliers assured him that they would be ready. It was the perfect fit for him, as well. He loved to fish with his dad and learned how to tie flies and make lures when he was young. It was also about being safe in unknown areas and how to protect yourself from predators, things he learned in the military even though those predators were humans. It was called situational awareness.

"Oh." Tessa sighed.

"Oh?" Ford felt his throat tighten, afraid that this moment was about to burst. He leaned against the workbench.

She wrinkled her nose. "I want to help, really I do. You have been so wonderful to me. But..."

But?

But what? Ford's gut twisted as he watched Tessa hesitate. He couldn't imagine what she was going to say, but she needed to get it out quickly before it drove him mad.

"I have two scenarios going," she said finally, biting her lip. Her gaze darted around

the shop. “One is, I’m sure you’re more than ready to get me out of your hair and be able to sleep in your bed. Emelia mentioned her apartment over the bakery is available. And two...” She took a deep breath and let it out. “Two, when everything with Damien has come to an end, I might move back to Atlanta. I haven’t decided, so I’m conflicted.”

“Why?”

“Atlanta ... it’s where my family and some of my friends still are. It’s familiar.” She glanced at him. “But I love it here. I love the friends I’ve made, the new career I’ve set up for myself and ... and other things.”

Ford’s chest tightened. He wondered what the other things were.

He knew at some point Tessa would move out, but move away? That thought hadn’t crossed his mind.

She couldn’t leave.

Didn’t she know they had the beginning of something good?

Although if he really thought about it, how would she? Her kiss on his cheek was the first kiss they shared, and they didn’t even share it. He never reciprocated. Besides, when he kissed her, she would know he kissed her.

“There’s no rush,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “There’s plenty of room in the cabin, and the sofa bed’s comfortable.”

Tessa gave him a small smile. “You must want to get on with your life. Have a girlfriend over? Just chillax in your own home without me in the way.”

“My life is just perfect right now,” he said gruffly. “Actually, I rather enjoy having you around.”

He pushed off the workbench and stepped closer to her, his heart pounding in his chest. “For the record, I don’t have a girlfriend, but if I did...” Oh damn, could he just put it out there? Hopefully, Tessa wouldn’t run screaming away from him.

“If I did”—he glanced at Tessa—“I would want it to be you.”

There! He said it.

Tessa looked stunned. Crap. His stomach plummeted. Fuck, he ruined it. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

She nodded. “I see.” Looking down at the floor, she sought either inspiration or words that would allow her to gently refuse him.

Silence.

Ford hoped the floor would swallow him up. Like right now! He acted too fast. What a fool.

But then Tessa’s lips curled into a small, hesitant smile, and she whispered, “I’d like that.”

Oh, be still my beating heart. Did she actually say she wanted to pursue a relationship with him?

“So ... is that a yes?”

She nodded, her cheeks turning a sweet shade of pink. Ford’s heart soared.

Ford smiled. “If that’s the case, can I give you a proper kiss? Not a peck on the cheek but a full-blown dueling tongue kiss?”

Tessa laughed. “Oh, you sweet-talker, you!” She opened her arms, and Ford didn’t hesitate. He stepped in, pressing her to his chest.

His hands tilted her face upward. For a moment, he simply looked at her, memorizing every detail. The kiss started tenderly, his lips feathering hers. Tessa let out a soft moan, and Ford deepened it.

He felt her relax into him, her arms slipping around his neck. His tongue swept along her bottom lip and sought entrance. She opened her mouth, meeting his intensity with her own. Time seemed to fade until nothing existed but the two of them.

When they finally parted, Tessa’s cheeks were flushed. She smiled at him, a little shy. “I guess that qualifies as a proper kiss.”

Ford grinned. “That was just the beginning.”

Tessa laughed, and Ford knew that whatever came next, they’d face it together.

Tessa stood in the middle of Emelia's cozy apartment and glanced around. The space wasn't large but larger than her one-bedroom in Atlanta. And it was charming, with the sunlight streaming through the two large windows in the living room and the scent of cinnamon drifting up from the bakery.

Emelia had renovated it before buying a house with Titus, so everything was new, from the furniture to the appliances and dishes.

The walls were a soft gray with white woodwork except in the bedroom, which was painted pale pink with a glass chandelier over the bed. A chandelier! How romantic was that?

Ford had carried up a couple of small boxes that were stacked in the corner, containing all of her worldly possessions, which she would unpack later. The girls had brought food, the guys contributed wine and beer, and the atmosphere buzzed with conversation and laughter.

It was a housewarming party for Tessa, but to her, it felt like a fresh start.

If Ford was disappointed that she moved out of his cabin, he hadn't said anything, but Tessa knew deep down she had to do it.

She needed space to figure everything out, to rediscover herself. If they were going to have a relationship, having her own space, making her own money, put them on equal footing. She wasn't beholden to him, and he wasn't responsible for her.

Tessa had a feeling Ford would be here a lot. Besides, Titus was just a few stores away at his gym. If anything happened, he could be here in a heartbeat, something that Tessa found comforting.

Warm breath brushed her neck, sending a shiver down her spine. She turned to find herself enveloped in Ford's strong arms. He gave her a happy-to-see-you kiss that spoke volumes and gave her goosebumps. The girls let out a collective "Ohhh!" as the guys shouted, "Get a room!"

Ford chuckled. Ever since he confessed to wanting more with her, he'd been way more attentive and freer with his touches and kisses. They left her breathless and hoping that soon they would take their relationship to the next level.

Tessa was thrilled that he was bonding more with everyone, gradually letting them in.

Emelia had confided that Ford kept to himself, so the guys were clueless about his story but had been giving him room to feel comfortable.

She and Ford had a heart-to-heart the other night, and he opened up about the guilt he felt losing his best friend.

Pete had plans to go to college and become a vet. But Ford had convinced Pete it was a good idea to join the military. They would look out for each other. When Pete was injured, Ford was powerless to save him. The pain didn't end there. He talked about the loss of his parents. They had been his rock. He felt abandoned and alone.

Tessa's heart ached for him. She could see how GearUp was his way of forging forward and building a new life for himself. Like her, he was piecing together a new life one step at a time, learning to trust again.

"Tessa, the food is all arranged," said Isabelle, interrupting her thoughts. "The guys

are whining that they haven't eaten in days." She rolled her eyes and giggled. "Big babies. Should we let them eat, or do you want to wait?"

"Let's eat." Tessa laughed. "I don't want to be accused of starving the crew."

She looked over at the counter, which was filled with pasta salad, green salad, sandwiches of all kinds, chips, and Emelia's special brownies and apple and blueberry hand pies. Her stomach growled. "Guess I'm hungry too. Let's call them."

Tessa expected a stampede of hungry men, but to her surprise, they all stepped aside, letting the women go ahead of them before helping themselves. It was the one thing she observed about the group. The women came first in everything—except when it came to protection and safety. In that area, the men were in charge, their instincts and skills always at the ready to defend.

She and Ford lingered at the back of the line, content to watch.

Since it was a Saturday, most everyone showed up.

Finn and Ryker were away on a job, and Dani Ward-Barlow was home with her and Ryker's newborn baby girl.

Liam, a deputy sheriff in town, came with Joy, as he had the day off. Mallory Chapman owned a yoga studio in town, and Dawn Nailor, who was getting her master's degree, also made it. Tessa had met Joy's friends and gone out a couple of times with them. It was a fun and welcoming group.

Ford pulled out a chair for Tessa by Emelia and Titus, the latter working his way through a couple of sandwiches. "Sit," he said.

"Yes, sir!" she replied cheekily.

“Hmmm,” was all he said. There was a world of meaning in that reply. She felt the blush down to her neck.

Isabelle joined Ford and Tessa, balancing her plate in one hand and her drink in the other. “Any updates on the shelter fundraiser?” she asked. “I hear it’s going to be the event of the year.”

Tessa grinned. “It’s really coming together, and auction items are rolling in. So many people, including businesses in town, have been incredibly generous.”

“Anything fun on the list so far?” asked Emelia.

Tessa thought about it for a second. “Someone donated a weekend cabin retreat at the Pine Hollow Retreat. Ford’s donating handmade fishing lures he’s been working on plus a guided trip.” She nudged him playfully.

Ford shrugged. “It’s a win-win. Promoting the shop and supporting a good cause at the same time.”

“I totally agree,” said Tessa. “Mallory donated a month of yoga. One of the chefs in town donated a private dinner for eight. Oh, several restaurants offered dinner, and we have handmade jewelry.”

Emelia piped up, “Don’t forget I’m baking desserts for the dessert bar and Titus is giving away a gym membership.”

“How could I?” said Tessa. “I’m looking forward to your homemade treats. We’ll pair them with champagne. It’s going to be amazing.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Joy, who was listening. “It sounds awesome. Do you need more volunteers? Liam and I can help.” She looked at Liam. “That is, if he’s not working.

Otherwise, you'll get just me."

"Don't forget all the guys are helping," said Ford.

"And some of the deputies and firemen," said Liam.

Tessa felt overwhelmed by the support. She glanced at Ford, who squeezed her hand. "See?" he said. "You've got the entire group to help."

Her heart warmed with all the acceptance the guys and women were giving her. For the first time in a long while, she felt like she belonged.

But Tessa couldn't shake the feeling that something might go wrong.

What if someone caught hold of her name? What if Damien found out and came calling? Her chest tightened with fear.

She glanced at Ford. His presence was a source of comfort and grounded her. If danger came knocking, she hoped he would be ready—because she wasn't sure she would be.

Tessa stepped into the party room at the Fisherman's Wife, her breath catching at the transformed space. String lights twinkled overhead, casting a soft, golden glow over the two-top tables draped in glittering tablecloths. Centerpieces of pink and white flowers surrounded by flickering candles added a touch of charm. The room buzzed with energy. The smooth, sultry strains of a jazz quartet in the corner mingled with conversations and the laughter of patrons.

She was home! Every detail from the music to the menu was a testament to her meticulous planning. Tessa circulated around the room, clipboard in hand, making sure everything was perfect and running smoothly. And what a venue this was. The owners donated the space, which overlooked Haywood Lake. Everyone helped with decorations. A full moon was out, stars were twinkling, and her heart was full.

She looked for Ford, who stood near the bar with the other men of the Brotherhood Alliance. The dark suit and tie made him look handsome. The sound of him laughing with a patron, relaxed and carefree, made her heart sing.

Ford glanced at her and winked as their eyes met. Smiling, she made her way over to him, greeting guests along the way until she reached his side. Ford leaned over, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "You outdid yourself, Tessa. Everything looks terrific."

"Well, everyone pitched in." She smiled, gazing around the room. "It's perfect." She made small talk with several members of the Brotherhood Alliance before giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "Gotta go. Need to make sure everything is running smoothly."

As she moved away, Tessa noticed a small crowd gathering around the silent auction items and smiled. Those donations alone would bring in a goodly sum to support the shelter. In an hour, the live auction would start, and considering how many people were enthusiastic about being here, she knew the shelter's goal would be met and then some.

"Tessa Donnelly?"

Tessa turned toward the voice. The soft hum of the jazz quartet faded into the background. She saw a tall, elegant, dark-haired woman who exuded confidence standing nearby.

"Yes," Tessa replied, offering a polite smile while extending her hand. "And you are?"

"Simone Benedetto." The woman's handshake was firm. "This is a wonderful event," Simone continued as her dark eyes swept the room. "You must be pleased."

"Thank you. I'm happy the project is running smoothly and that the shelter will have the money to help more women and children."

A small, nagging doubt crept into her mind. Who was Simone Benedetto, and what did she want?

Simone smiled. "You've done a terrific job," she said, her gaze lingering on Tessa for a moment. Then she paused. "I'd like to talk to you more about some projects that you might find interesting and certainly would align with your talents."

Tessa's brow furrowed. Projects? Talents? She and Simone only just met. What did she know about her talents? "I don't have a business to call my own yet," she said with a light laugh. "I only agreed to help the shelter because I have event-planning

experience.”

“No matter,” said Simone, waving a dismissive hand. “You’re very talented, and I can help with your business too.”

Tessa’s heart skipped, her mind alive with possibilities.

Could she really restart her business?

The idea had been so distant after leaving Atlanta and Damien.

But why would a stranger help her? Although, having met many strangers who became friends offering kindness and support, maybe having another person in her corner would be fine.

The faint scent of Simone’s perfume of vanilla and spice lingered in the air, vying with the cardamon and cinnamon drifting from the dessert table, reminding Tessa to check on the food and champagne. “I’d like to talk to you more,” said Tessa. “Maybe later this week?”

“That would be perfect,” Simone said. She opened her purse and handed Tessa a business card. “I have a couple of events coming up and would welcome your thoughts.”

Tessa stood for a moment, watching Simone move around and greet people. This could be the opportunity she’d been waiting for since moving out of Ford’s cabin.

For the first time, she was optimistic that her future seemed a little brighter.

“I’d like to talk to you more...” Malina moved through the fundraiser, smiling to herself. Oh, they’d be talking all right, just not about fundraising or events. Although

she noticed a flicker of hesitation when she suggested they meet. Maybe Tessa wasn't as naive as she looked, but that just made the game even more fun.

After snagging a glass of champagne, Malina stood at the bar watching Tessa as she laughed with a couple of donors.

The bitch was happy now, although she had no idea how much danger she was in.

Malina turned her attention to the man who kissed her. Friend? No. They looked like they were something more. Boyfriend perhaps. It sure didn't take Tessa long to find another sucker. Malina wondered what this guy's story was.

He looked all muscles and was very serious. He was trouble; she could feel it in her gut. In fact, there were quite a few men here built like that. Could be that they were security guards. Hmmm. She'd have to explore that possibility. The one thing she didn't need was a security company, the police, or God forbid, the FBI looking into her business.

Her phone buzzed. As she pulled it out of her purse, she glanced at the ID and frowned.

"Any luck?" he asked.

Damn Damien. He screwed up, and now he was harassing her?

"It's under control," she snapped.

Hanging up, she slipped the phone back into her bag and gazed around the room. The event was certainly successful.

Malina sighed. While she had no qualms about selling drugs or hurting people who

got in her way, abusing women was a big no-no in her mind—unless, of course, one of them betrayed her.

Betrayal was an unforgivable sin in her book.

She'd had it with men who thought they could get away with bullying or striking a woman. That behavior disgusted her.

Malina had no idea how her mother put up with the bullshit her father and brothers believed in. She died when Malina was five.

All her father would ever say about her mother was that she knew her place. That phrase shaped Malina's resolve not to be a woman who cowered or accepted less than she deserved.

The event was winding down. Malina took one last look around. Tessa was coordinating the silent auction, and everyone's eyes were on her except for the boyfriend. He fixed his gaze at her, a small frown marring his good looks.

He wasn't just trouble, he was dangerous. And that meant she needed to be very careful.

Ford followed Tessa back to her apartment. The hum of the engine and soft jazz on the radio filled the space, creating a muted, almost soothing backdrop. Although he hadn't attended many nonprofit events—well, none, to tell the truth—he was sure this one was a success.

The evening was long but went smoothly. He mingled with a few patrons, talked to the guys from the Brotherhood and their women, and stole some moments with Tessa.

Tessa was in her element and had done an outstanding job pulling everything together, from the silent and live auction items to the program book with sponsors and setting ticket prices at \$250 a person.

Once the event ended and they added up the money raised, she estimated the shelter would get well over fifty thousand dollars.

The Brotherhood was in shock.

They originally hoped to make at least ten thousand dollars. What a difference a professional event planner made. Tessa was ecstatic. The patrons loved her. She was easy to work with, creative, and had an eye for perfection besides making the event fun.

After arriving at her apartment, Ford parked his truck in the lot behind the bakery and turned off the engine. He walked over to Tessa's car and opened her door. She

stepped out, and he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “What an extraordinary evening. You did a fabulous job, Tessa.”

She smiled. “It was great,” Tessa replied, cocking her head. “But I had lots of great help. Between your friends and the girls, I could never have done it alone.”

“Pffft. I don’t believe that,” he said. “You have a natural talent. I bet you’ll be the number one pick for anyone wanting to have an event.”

Tessa nodded and sighed. “I hope so. I really need to make some money. That woman Simone Benedetto approached me and asked if I would meet her to discuss some nonprofit projects she was working on.”

Ford thought back to Simone, who cornered Tessa. There was something about her that set him on edge, although he couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

“You’re quiet,” Tessa said, suddenly pulling him back from his thoughts.

“Humph. Just thinking about Simone,” Ford replied. “She seemed rather focused and was definitely interested in you. Did she give you any bad vibes?”

Tessa shook her head. “She seemed nice. I like the idea of working with nonprofits. I’ll talk to her, and if anything feels off, I don’t have to take the job.”

“True. It would be an excellent opportunity for you.” He blew out his breath. “I just worry about you. I want you to be safe.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “How can I not be safe when I have the best of the best from the Brotherhood Alliance watching my back?”

“Sweet-talking will get you nowhere,” he teased. “Please be careful. Come on, I’ll

walk you to your door.”

He helped Tessa down from the truck, then placed his suit jacket on the seat. It was a pleasant evening, and they strolled through the alley past Titus’s gym, PushYourLimits. The shops were darkened, but the alley was bright, with small trees and bushes lit with twinkling lights.

“Oh my, it looks like a fairyland,” exclaimed Tessa. Ford glanced around and agreed.

In the distance, he could hear laughter and muted conversations from one of the bars that was open. The scent of garlic and fried food wafted in the breeze, and his stomach rumbled.

“I’m starving. Do you want to hit the Thirsty Cock, grab a beer and something to eat?”

“Hmmm. That’s a great idea,” Tessa said. “I haven’t eaten all night. Let me drop off my purse and freshen up.”

She opened the bakery door and then the door that led to her apartment. Ford followed Tessa upstairs. The bakery was closed, but the scent of freshly baked bread lingered. He inhaled and thought that it would be difficult to live above the bakery and not gain a lot of weight.

“It smells like home,” he commented.

“I love the scents that waft up. Cinnamon, vanilla, bread ... it’s hard not to go down and order one of everything they bake.”

They reached her apartment, and Ford looked around. It was cozy, the space warm and inviting. Emelia had renovated it in muted tones, but Tessa had put her own

stamp on the room by adding colorful pillows. She tossed her purse on the table. "I'll be just a minute."

Ford nodded, sat down in a chair, and stared out at the dark night. His thoughts turned to how lucky he was that a different turn of events brought Tessa to Haywood Lake and to him.

"Ready?" Tessa walked back into the living room, having changed into dark jeans and a soft sweater. He rose from the chair, clearing his throat.

"I'm always ready," he said. "I was just thinking about how lucky Haywood Lake and I are that you found us."

Tessa chuckled as she grabbed her keys and purse. "I'm lucky I almost ran out of gas, otherwise I might have driven farther south and we never would have met." She stopped for a moment. "Although having your cabin trashed probably didn't endear me to you."

"What happened at the cabin isn't your fault. It's on whoever did it," Ford replied. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I'm just glad I met you."

"Me, too."

They walked downstairs, and Tessa locked up as they went along.

Out on the sidewalk, the scent of the bakery and fried food mingled with the crisp air.

Couples were strolling along the street, gazing into shop windows. Raucous laughter from a bar farther down the street competed with murmurs of conversation and the occasional clink of glasses. Despite its size, Haywood Lake had an energy that could rival any big city.

“Blueberry muffin,” Tessa said suddenly.

“What?”

Tessa laughed and pointed at the bakery. “Tomorrow morning, I’m getting one of the bakery’s famous blueberry muffins.”

“Okaaay.” Ford chuckled. “Sounds like a plan. Want me to stand guard so no one else gets one first?”

“Maybe,” she teased. “They sell out fast.”

It was a couple of blocks to the Thirsty Cock Ale House.

The huge rooster placard glowed garishly above the door. Its bright red and gold paint reflected off the huge glass windows. The sign was impossible to miss, and it was a landmark in the area.

More than one joke had been made about the bar’s name and countless selfies were taken in front of the rooster. Just like the town, it was a little quirky, and the locals barely gave it a glance.

“Subtle name,” Tessa said as they approached.

Ford smirked as he held the door open for her. “Hey, don’t judge. They have great food and a vast selection of craft beers.”

Inside, the alehouse buzzed with energy. The music was loud, the voices even louder.

Ford had been here several times before and always admired the gold tin patterned ceiling and the long wooden bar top with leather stools as well as their large

assortment of craft beers.

The bar was full, and the bartenders adroitly juggled waiting on customers and making drinks.

On one wall, an array of liquor was prominently displayed, while booths lined the opposite wall. It gave off an old-time speakeasy feeling that he liked. They claimed a quiet corner booth.

A server came over with menus and asked for their drink order.

“A lager for me,” he said, then looked at Tessa. “Tessa?”

“Hmmm. I think I’ll try the pumpkin ale,” she said.

The server nodded and left.

“So, what’re you in the mood for? They have great burgers and wings.” He looked at the menu. “And anything else you might like.”

Tessa relaxed in the seat and glanced at the menu, then started giggling. “Oh my God! The Big Clucker? Seriously?” She looked farther down the menu. “Hot Chick? For those who like their chicken with attitude. No way.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Ford asked cheekily.

Tessa couldn’t stop giggling.

When the server came back with their beer, she asked if they had decided on anything.

“I’ll have the Hot—” Tessa said. “Chick.” She covered her mouth with her hands and laughed.

“Well then, I’m going for the Big Clucker,” said Ford.

A huge laugh burst from Tessa’s mouth, and Ford rolled his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the server. “It’s just so…”

“Funny,” the server replied in a bored voice before she gave them a big smile. “I’ve heard it all. The owners think it’s cute.”

“Actually, it is,” Tessa said. “This is my first time here.”

“Welcome.”

“Oh, would you take a picture of us?” asked Tessa. The server nodded, and Tessa looked at Ford. “Okay?”

“Sure.”

Tessa handed her the phone.

“Smile.”

At the last minute, Ford leaned over and kissed Tessa just as their picture was snapped, and the server took several more for good measure.

“Here you go.” The server handed Tessa her phone and left to place their orders.

Ford sat back, watching as Tessa scrolled through the photos, smiling. “This one’s

perfect,” she said, tilting the phone toward him. They looked like a couple. In the image, her smile was frozen mid-giggle while Ford’s lips brushed her cheek.

“It’s not too bad,” he said with a shrug, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, giving him away.

She swirled her beer, taking another sip. Ford’s eyes followed her little pink tongue as she licked the foam from her lips. His cock hardened, and he shifted slightly in his seat, glad he was sitting down.

“You okay over there?” she asked teasingly.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “Just hungry and wondering when we’re going to get our food.”

“Sure, Ford.” Tessa smirked, setting her glass down. “Just thinking about food. Uh-uh, I get it.”

Before he could answer, the server returned, setting their plates down. “Enjoy,” she said, disappearing back into the crowd.

Tessa’s eyes widened as she picked up her spicy fried chicken sandwich with jalapeno slaw, pickles, and hot-honey glaze. “This is massive,” she said. “I’m not sure I can open my mouth that wide.”

He picked up his Big Clucker and took a bite. “Wow, they weren’t kidding when they said this was a half-pound burger.” It was topped with cheddar, bacon, lettuce, and tomato.

“What’s in the Cock Sauce?” she asked.

Ford took another bite. “It tastes like mayonnaise with garlic.”

“Oh. An aioli,” Tessa stated.

“I guess,” Ford replied. What did he know about aioli? It just tasted like garlic and mayonnaise.

They ate in easy silence, with the occasional murmur of approval. When they finally finished, Tessa dabbed her mouth with her napkin and leaned back with a satisfied sigh. “That was delicious. I couldn’t eat it every day, but it’s a nice treat.”

“Glad you liked it.” Ford was pleased she hadn’t ordered a small salad like some women did. He was surprised that for a slender woman, Tessa ate the whole sandwich.

They ordered a couple more beers, and as the evening wore on, Ford thought how easy it was to be with Tessa.

It seemed like another lifetime that he was keeping people at arm’s length. And now? Now he was getting involved in events, laughing with the guys and sharing a meal out with a woman. Not just any woman, though ... a woman he could see himself sharing a life with.

Tessa leaned back into the booth, closed her eyes, and sighed. Her body finally began to relax. The murmur of conversations and clinking of dishes filled the ale house.

It had been a long and exhausting day. The event had been a success and raised a substantial sum for the shelter. Relief and pride mingled as she replayed the day in her mind.

The whole time, Tessa's emotions ran the gamut from nervousness that something—everything—would go wrong. Then to euphoria as she mingled with attendees. Back to nerves, and curiosity—like who was Simone?

It wasn't unusual for her to pick up new jobs at events, but this was a little different.

She only knew a few people in Haywood Lake, and outside of her friends, most of the ones she knew had no idea she was an event planner.

For sure, it was a mystery. Her name was never mentioned, but maybe one of her friends told someone. However, if talking to Simone led to a few paying jobs, she would do it.

After hours of endless conversations, she was finally sharing a quiet meal with Ford. Their talk flowed easily, covering the event, the Brotherhood, and the food.

She'd even seen a different side to him tonight. He engaged and laughed more than

ever before.

“I’m stuffed,” Tessa said, rubbing her belly. “That Hot Chick...” She started giggling again. “That sandwich was delicious. Were you satisfied with your Big Clucker?”

Ford just shook his head. “You’re not going to let that go, are you?”

She wiped a tear from her eye and chuckled. “No.” But her laughter gave way to a huge yawn she couldn’t suppress.

Ford chuckled. “Come on, sleepyhead. Let me get the bill, and I’ll walk you home.” He glanced around for the server.

Tessa opened her mouth to protest, wanting to split the bill, but her funds had dwindled so fast she didn’t have the extra cash.

She sighed. “I’ll get the next meal.”

Ford’s brown eyes zeroed on her. “Tessa, if we are out together, I will always cover the bill. My father instilled that in me when I was little. My mom never paid when they went out. It was his way of showing respect.”

Tessa frowned. Was his mother afraid to spend money? Kept in the dark about finances? The thought unsettled her. That wasn’t the way she wanted a relationship to be.

“No,” Ford answered, interrupting her thoughts.

Had she asked that out loud?

He smirked. “No, you didn’t say anything,” he continued. “But you furrowed your

brow.” The server came over, and he asked for their check and handed her his credit card.

“My mother was in charge of everything in the house except paying in restaurants. That was one small way my dad could show how much he valued her. He used his own money to pay for our meals when we went out, separate from the household funds.”

“Well, then,” she said quietly, “thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But you never have to thank me.”

Ford signed the bill and stood, reaching for her hand. “Let’s get you home before you fall asleep.” He opened the door for her, then positioned himself beside her, nearer the street. Now that Tessa thought about it, that’s what all the guys in the Brotherhood did. It was respectful, but also, in their own way, they were protecting the ones they loved.

They stepped outside into a cooler but still pleasant night. The sound of laughter and conversations faded as they drew closer to Tessa’s apartment. The moon was bright and high overhead, and Tessa glanced up at Ford. He looked so strong and sure of himself. She felt safe.

Tessa had her keys out but lingered at the bakery door, glancing at Ford. He slipped his hands into his pockets, but his gaze was anything but casual as he looked at her.

Her heart pounded. The tiredness she felt at the bar slipped away. An unspoken question lingered in the air and a promise of a future.

“Do you want to come up?” she asked. Please say yes. Tessa wasn’t sure why it was so important that he said yes, but there was that spark again.

Ford raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

Tessa nodded. “Yes. I mean, if you want to.” She swallowed hard. “Unless you’re too tired.”

“I’m not that tired.” His lips curved into a knowing smile.

She opened the door to her apartment, and Ford followed her up the stairs. They stepped inside, and Tessa looked around. She was glad that she picked up this morning.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee or something stronger?” she asked.

“Coffee’s fine,” he replied, settling on the couch.

Tessa busied herself in the kitchen trying to ignore the sexy man sitting in her living room and the way her palms were sweating. It was so weird considering they shared a cabin for several weeks and she never felt like this.

She returned with two steaming mugs, handed one to Ford, and sat next to him on the couch. For a moment, neither spoke, the tension growing heavier with every passing second.

“Tessa,” Ford said, breaking the silence. “Why did you invite me up?”

Tessa turned to look at him, her face flushed. “Because I realized I didn’t want the night to end yet. I really like being around you.” She fidgeted with her hands. “And maybe ... maybe because I wanted to.”

Ford placed his cup on the table and repeated the action with her cup. He leaned over, wrapped his arms around her waist, before pressing his lips to hers. The kiss was soft

at first, but Tessa quickly deepened it. Ford gently pulled her onto his lap and continued kissing her. Finally, they broke apart, Ford's breath coming in uneven bursts. "You don't know how long I've wanted to do that," he murmured.

Tessa's heart skipped. She smiled. "I think I have some idea."

Ford rested his forehead against hers. "I'd love to continue kissing you, but I would prefer to take it to the bedroom."

"Hmmm." Tessa pretended to think about it for a nanosecond. "Then what are we waiting for?"

In one swift motion, Ford stood and cradled Tessa in his arms. She gasped as he carried her toward the bedroom and gently lowered her onto the edge of the bed, his intense gaze holding hers.

"I need to hear you to say the words before we go any further," he said, his voice low and rough.

Tessa reached up, brushing a hand on his cheek. "I want this. I want you."

That was all it took. Tessa's breath caught as he pulled her up into his arms, capturing her lips with his. The kiss escalated from tender to off-the-chart sexy. His hands slid to her back, slipping underneath her top to caress her shoulders. His touch ignited desires she couldn't contain.

Tessa tried to unzip his pants, but he murmured, "Not yet, sweetheart," in her ear.

His hands traveled to her front, slipping down her bra as he caressed her breasts before removing it and her top. Taking a step back, Ford let his eyes roam her body. "Beautiful." Then he leaned over and kissed each breast before crouching down,

tapping each leg so he could remove her shoes. With that accomplished, he unzipped her slacks and slid them down, leaving Tessa in nothing but her panties.

“Hmmm.” He looked her up and down and licked his lips. “Perfection. But let’s lose those panties.”

Tessa slowly removed her panties, making a show of it, and stood before him, feeling vulnerable yet sexy as his eyes devoured her body. Then he stepped closer to her. His lips trailed from her mouth to her neck, down to her breasts. His tongue swirled, nipped, flicked and caressed her nipples. Her legs trembled as she tried to pull him closer.

“Sweetheart,” he said, pulling away from her. “I’ve waited for this moment for a while. It’s going to take me time to get to know your body. So, lie down on the bed and trust me.”

Tessa tilted her head and murmured, “I will as soon as you take off your clothes so I can see you.”

In the blink of an eye, Ford was standing in front of her, gloriously naked. Tessa expected he would be built, but nothing prepared her for the muscular man in front of her. Broad shoulders, well-defined abs, and a happy trail that ended at oh my God—a pulsating, engorged cock pointed at her.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, her voice filled with awe. “Not too shabby.”

He arched a brow, and his eyes twinkled. “Glad to hear.”

Tessa giggled, but her laughter was short-lived as Ford followed her down onto the bed, capturing her lips once again. Then his hands began their exploration. His lips left a trail of heat from her mouth to her neck and lower as he acquainted himself

with every inch of her body. Moving back up, he teased one of her nipples while kneading and pinching the other. Tessa arched beneath him, a soft moan escaping from her lips.

“You’re so responsive,” he murmured, his breath hot against her skin. His lips continued tracing a path down her stomach. Tessa’s breath hitched as Ford paused between her thighs. His hands slid up her legs. “Spread for me, sweetheart.”

She opened her legs. “Beautiful.” He positioned himself in front of her pussy and lifted her knees. Then he leaned in and kissed and sucked her pussy until her body trembled and a mind-blowing orgasm overtook her.

He moved back up her body, his lips kissing each inch of her skin until he reached her lips, and she opened for him, tasting her own pleasure. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. “I want you; I need you,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Shit,” he exclaimed. “I need to grab a condom from my wallet.” He got up from the bed and put it on. Positioning himself between her thighs, he said, “I’ll go slow. If it’s too much, tell me. I need to know you’re okay.”

Tessa smiled. “I’ll be fine. Just do it already.”

“Impatient, are you?”

“Mmmm.”

In a slow, deliberate motion, Ford entered her, filling her completely, then stopped when she gasped. His forehead rested against hers.

“I’m fine,” she murmured.

“You’re perfect,” he replied. Then he moved, each thrust deeper. Tessa matched his pace, wrapping her legs around him to pull him closer.

“Harder,” she gasped.

Ford pulled out, held her legs up with his hands and thrust into her until she thought he couldn’t go any further. There was no stopping him as his movement got more frantic. Her heart pounded wildly.. She screamed Ford’s name as she came, and he followed her a moment later, his breath ragged in her ear.

Their bodies were tangled together as they clung to each other. Ford pulled out of her. His hand brushed her hair from her face and kissed her tenderly.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

Tessa could only nod and smile. “More than okay. That was incredible.”

They lay there for a few minutes until Ford shifted beside her. “Let me take care of this. I’ll be right back.”

Tessa closed her eyes, feeling satiated and spent. Sure, she’d had boyfriends before, but they didn’t come close to what Ford accomplished tonight. She had never experienced two consecutive orgasms before, and none were as intense as these.

Ford got back into bed and pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. They stayed wrapped in each other’s arms for a while until Ford rose again.

“Stay,” she said.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. Please.”

“Oh Tessa,” Ford replied. “You never have to say please. I want to stay. I want to wake up with you.” He nuzzled her neck. “I want to make love to you again.” Then he sighed. “But I only brought one condom.”

Tessa laughed. “I think we’ll come up with something to satisfy us.”

He shook his head. “You’re incorrigible.” He kissed her cheek. “Get some sleep. We’ve got all night, and I intend to make use of it.”

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she closed her eyes. She drifted off in Ford’s arms, feeling safe and cherished for the first time in weeks. But safety, she reminded herself, was an illusion. One wrong turn could shatter it.

Stupid woman. Tessa probably thought she was safe.

Malina pulled the hood of her jacket farther down her face. She stepped back into the shadows, her shoes making no sound. The glow from a nearby streetlight flickered and cast an uneven light over Tessa’s car. The darkness made the job easier.

She slipped the tracker from her pocket, its black casing cool against her fingers.

Crouching low, she had no trouble attaching it to the undercarriage of Tessa’s car, the magnet gripping the metal with a faint click, signifying that the device was locked into place. Malina smirked. If only all jobs went this smoothly.

Malina straightened and stared at the darkened windows of Tessa’s apartment. The woman had no idea her every move was hers to follow.

The one obstacle was the friend—no, boyfriend.

He was going to be a problem. Definitely a complication she hadn't anticipated. His eyes tracked Tessa's every move at the fundraiser. She'd caught him several times, even watching her as she made her way around.

He was protective of Tessa, and that made him dangerous. She overheard enough at the event to learn that he wasn't some random guy Tessa picked up. He worked security for the Brotherhood Alliance.

After checking with her contact back in Atlanta, she discovered they were all ex-military, highly trained, and enjoyed an excellent reputation.

Not that their reputation intimidated her. She'd faced worse. People always underestimated her, but brute strength meant nothing against cunning and planning. Malina smiled to herself. She was an expert at turning strength into a liability.

Pulling out her phone, careful to dim the screen, Malina saw the app was already open. A small notification slid down from the top of the screen: Tracker attached, device live. A pulsing red dot showed where Tessa's car was located.

She tapped the notification, and another alert notified her that the app was ready to track movement. Malina slipped the phone back into her pocket. She blew out the breath she was holding.

She stifled a yawn as she walked back to her car. The thrill of the game was only just beginning.

I t'd been a week since she and Ford made love, and the memory lingered like a warm touch. He stayed at her place for a couple of nights sharing flaky pastries from the bakery and fresh-brewed coffee before heading to work.

When she visited the Brotherhood campus to stay with him, the atmosphere was calmer, quieter, a reminder that she was safe. Their new relationship was off to a good start, and while Tessa was feeling cautiously optimistic about the future, a flicker of uncertainty nagged at her. Was it too good to be true? What if you couldn't fully escape your past? Was Damien gone from her life completely, or was he just biding his time?

Bah. She had a job to do and wasn't going to let the past dictate how she felt about the present.

Today marked the grand opening of GearUp, and Tessa's stomach was churning with nervous energy and excitement.

Ford had given her carte blanche on the event, from the food down to the open house activities.

She hoped he liked what she organized. Emelia was baking an array of nature-themed treats, including cookies shaped like fish and trees, as well as assorted cupcakes, some with orange and yellow frosting swirling like flames with pretzels forming a "campfire" and mini marshmallows; others designed as a moss-covered chocolate cupcake or topped with a tree; and, for the kid in everyone, chocolate s'more

cupcakes with marshmallow frosting topped with a mini graham cracker and a square of chocolate.

The menu featured homemade jerky from one of Ford's suppliers, trail mix platters, fruit skewers, and veggie cups with dressing, along with apple cider and lemonade.

There were several activities scheduled. Ford would be giving a lure demonstration, one of his employees would demonstrate outdoor skills, and his knife maker would be there crafting a knife, plus there would be a raffle for prizes like a handmade knife, gift cards, and fishing gear.

Tessa hadn't forgotten about the kids.

There was a fun photo spot set up with props featuring a fisherman, a moose, a bear, and a campsite, along with coloring books of outdoor scenes. She also hired a local bluegrass group for background music.

She stood in the shop and glanced around.

Everything was in place.

The musicians were setting up. Emelia's new assistant was arranging the dessert table. The caterers had already delivered the snacks, and Ford's friends were arriving to help wherever they were needed.

Ford was in a corner talking to Tom, the knife smith, who was setting up in another corner. He'd already laid down the materials and tools he needed: steel blanks, various pre-cut handle materials, and tools for grinding and shaping. He wanted to bring a portable propane forge to heat the steel, but she nixed the idea. So many things could go wrong with a crowd and children milling around. So, he suggested a final sharpening on a whetstone.

A clock at the back dinged 10 a.m. Tessa glanced out the window and saw a crowd already gathering.

“Relax.” Ford’s voice was firm and strong at her back. He put his hands around her waist and held her for a moment. “Tessa, everything will be fine. You did an outstanding job of putting everything together.”

“Fingers crossed it’s successful,” she said, relaxing into his arms.

He kissed her neck and released her. “Showtime.”

Tessa watched as Ford greeted the guests as they walked in, both oohing and aahing. He was in his element and watching him interact so easily made her happy. Made her think of a future filled with love—one they created together.

Several hours later, Ford stifled a yawn. He scanned the shop looking for Tessa, who was helping a little girl color.

The air buzzed with conversation and the faint twang of bluegrass music. He had no idea how Tessa came up with ideas like this or how she’d pulled off another successful event.

The cash register was ringing. Tom was giving another demonstration.

People were enjoying the refreshments and signing up for the raffle.

Kids were having a ball posing for pictures, and it reminded Ford of good times with his parents and Pete.

Damn.

“Why so glum, chum?” asked Finn, who had sidled up to him and forced him out of his negative thoughts.

“Just thinking.” He sighed. “My parents used to take me camping with my best friend. We’d have s’mores and tell tall tales around the fire, then go fishing the next day.”

“Good times, eh?” Finn replied.

Ford nodded. “Yeah. Until they weren’t.”

Finn gave him a light punch on the shoulder. “Memories may fade, but they shape us into who we are today. Look around you. This open house is unbelievable. Your friends are here. Your woman has created an event so remarkable that anyone stepping through that door will want to hire her.”

Your woman. Was she his woman? Their relationship was still new, but Ford hoped so. “Tessa’s done a fantastic job,” Ford agreed. “The kids are having a ball with the photo booth. Who would have imagined adding woodland animals, making it even more fun? And Emelia has outdone herself—the cupcakes are so creative.”

They stood in silence for a moment. “Well, I better go talk up the shop.” A burst of laughter pulled his attention to Tessa, who was chatting with a family. The sun catchers in the window infused her blond hair with coppery highlights, giving her an almost ethereal glow. Ford felt his chest tighten with something deeper that he didn’t have words for.

He made his way over, dodging kids racing toward the cupcake table. He reached Tessa just as she was finishing her conversation.

“Tessa,” he said, his voice low.

She turned to him, her eyes bright and a small smile lingering on her face that morphed into worry. “Everything all right?”

“Sweetheart, it’s better than all right.” He gazed around. “This is everything I hoped it would be, only better.”

Tessa gave him a big grin. “I’m glad. This is your dream, Ford. I’m just helping to bring it to life.”

He wanted to say more, but someone was calling his name from across the room.

“Duty calls.”

“Go.” She nodded. “This is your show, after all.”

Ford gave her a lingering look before turning away. This wasn’t just a grand opening for his shop. It was the beginning of something new, something bigger—something he wasn’t about to let go.

The opening was in full swing, and Tessa couldn't be happier. Every detail was going according to her plan, just as she envisioned it. Ford was mingling with customers. The customers were thrilled with the demonstrations, and the cash register was ringing. GearUp was off to a successful start.

She moved around the shop, stopping to help a little girl decide which color to use for the bear in her coloring book. Tessa's preference was black or brown—realistic—but the little girl wanted pink—a garish, bright pink—so pink it was. It didn't matter. The girl's parents were close by and delighted that there were kids' activities. She noticed a large shopping bag filled with fishing gear in the man's hand. It was perfect. Happy kids meant happy parents who lingered, and lingering parents led to sales. It was a win-win.

Glancing around the room, Tessa noticed Ford and Chase talking and laughing in the corner. Her heart filled with joy. Ford was coming out of his shell and definitely warming up to his teammates. The men and their girlfriends were in and out of the shop, helping when they could.

“Why, hello there,” said a familiar voice.

Tessa turned and saw Simone standing a few feet away, dressed impeccably in a tailored pantsuit with a flowery silk top that probably cost half a year's salary for Tessa.

“I thought you'd be behind this incredible opening.” She gestured expansively with

her arms. “It has the Tessa touch written all over it.”

Tessa laughed, caught off guard. “Thank you. Although I’ve never heard it described as the ‘Tessa touch’ before.”

“You have a gift,” Simone replied. “Any chance you can meet me for coffee next week? I want to get going on the couple of projects I mentioned to you.”

“Hmmm.” Tessa hesitated. “I don’t have my calendar with me. But I have your card, and I’ll call you after I check my schedule.”

“Perfect,” Simone murmured. “Well, I’ll let you go. I was in the area and saw the grand opening sign and couldn’t resist peeking in.” She lingered for a moment, then gracefully waved goodbye, disappearing into the crowd.

Tessa let out a slow breath. The woman was slick and polished, but there was an edge to her charm, and she wondered what truly drove Simone.

Shaking off the thought, she turned her attention to the shop and caught Ford’s questioning eyes locked on her.

For some reason, he was uncomfortable with Simone.

Was it justified?

Ford’s instincts were usually spot-on when it came to people.

Did he not trust Simone? There was no reason not to since he hadn’t met or talked to her before.

Tessa pushed down a flicker of unease and gave him a faint smile. Maybe Ford was

just being protective, or maybe he sensed something she couldn't see. Either way, the question lingered and was unanswered. She turned her focus to the shop and the crowd of people enjoying the opening.

Ford was in the middle of a conversation with Chase when he happened to glance over at Tessa.

Damn, that Simone woman was talking to her. How did she even find out about the opening, and why was she here?

He had a bad feeling about Simone. Something was off with her, but what?

However, Tessa was excited about the possibility of earning her own money doing something she loved. She deserved a chance at doing something she enjoyed, especially after all she'd been through.

Chase had a job he wanted Ford to take that would start in a few days and last a week, maybe a week and a half. He wondered if he could get Tessa to stay at the cabin on campus while he was gone. Titus was around during the day but not at night when she'd be alone.

Tessa caught his eye across the room, her brow furrowed as she cocked her head. He could see the tension building up. She must have realized he wasn't happy about Simone talking to her. He gave her a brief nod and got a small smile in return.

"You okay, man? You seem upset," Chase asked.

Ford rubbed the back of his neck as he looked over at Tessa once more. "It's nothing, really." He exhaled slowly. "Tessa has an opportunity to work with a new client that I'm concerned about."

“What don’t you like about her?” asked Chase. “It sounds like a perfect opportunity for Tessa to showcase her talents.”

Ford glanced back at Tessa, who was chatting with a couple of customers. “This woman approached Tessa at the shelter event. I don’t know her, but I’m getting weird vibes from her.”

“Give Dex her name, and he can check her out,” Chase replied.

“Good idea. I’ll have him run a background check.”

Chase nodded, then leaned in a bit closer. “Why don’t you ask Tessa to stay at your cabin while you’re gone? She would be safer there, and you wouldn’t have to worry.”

Ford thought about it for a moment. “That’s what I’m hoping. It would make me more comfortable leaving Tessa.”

He hoped Tessa would take the suggestion for what it was, not that he didn’t trust her or was overprotective.

Oh, hell yeah. Who was he kidding? He was overprotective. She had to understand that.

“Now I just have to convince her it’s a good idea. Maybe Naomi and Joy can visit.”

Chase grinned. “They love Tessa. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

One problem was almost solved. Ford looked back at Tessa, who was laughing, looking so ... normal. So happy.

But the one thing Ford learned in life was not to let his guard down.

The shop closed a couple of hours ago, and Ford was still riding high from the day.

He sat at a corner table with several of the guys in Lucky's Bar nursing a beer.

The band was taking a break, and the crowd had quieted down save for the clinking of glasses and murmur of conversation. The silence was welcome, even though his mind refused to slow down.

He wanted to spend the rest of the evening with Tessa, but she had begged off, claiming exhaustion. It had been a long day, and he understood that she was tired, but he missed her.

He'd followed her home, then up to her apartment, promising to see her later. The circles under her eyes were getting darker, and for a moment, he felt guilty that he even asked her to go with him. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and told him she was looking forward to it before she let out a huge yawn.

"Get some sleep, sweetheart," he murmured.

"I'll try to wait up for you," she replied, her hand lingering on his arm. "You have a key, right?" Tessa had given him a key a few days ago, especially since they were spending so much time at each other's place.

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded. "See you later."

The grand opening had been a huge success. People had signed up for his newsletter, bought gear, tried their luck at the raffle, and enjoyed the food.

All in all, it exceeded every expectation he dared to hope for.

And it was all thanks to Tessa, who had a way of knowing what people would enjoy and making everyone feel welcome and comfortable and always had a smile on her face.

Ford traced the condensation on his beer glass, his thoughts drifting to his brief conversation with Finn.

They spent a short time swapping stories about the past and the memories they couldn't shake, barely scratching the surface.

Ford realized the guilt he felt had lessened. He had never really talked to the guys about their time in the service and thought he was alone with his struggles.

He should have known better. Damn, he did know better.

How many times had he counseled young recruits consumed with guilt and reassured them that they weren't alone? But hearing it from another person who got it made all the difference.

The band struck up another set, and the atmosphere changed, charged with energy as couples got up to dance and voices got louder, punctuated by bursts of laughter. Chase, Finn, and Dex waved down the server and ordered another round of beer.

From the corner of his eye, Ford saw Liam and his friend Cody push through the door, dodging dancers to reach the table and sit down.

“The opening was a great event,” yelled Liam over the music. “I could only stay for half an hour, but the shop looked terrific, and everyone seemed to have a good time.”

Ford nodded, leaning back in his chair. “It went well.” He raised his glass. “No thanks to Tessa.”

The others laughed as they clinked glasses.

“She’s a pistol,” said Cody with a wide grin. “I watched her interact with everyone there.”

Ford’s grip on his mug tightened for a second as an unexpected feeling of jealousy slithered through his chest. Jealousy? Really? He stole a look at Cody. The guy was unattached, good-looking and a deputy sheriff. He carried himself with ease and authority. The kind of guy who some women were attracted to.

He took a slow sip of beer and reminded himself that Cody’s comment was harmless. Tessa was a social butterfly and gorgeous, but she wasn’t the kind of woman to play games. The comment still lingered in his mind.

“Hey, something on your mind?” asked Finn, nudging Ford’s arm.

Ford chuckled, shaking his head. “Nah. Just thinking about today.”

“Riiight,” Finn replied. “And I’m the Easter Bunny.” He looked around and lowered his voice. “There’ll always be someone who will try to make a move on your woman, but the men here ... at this table?” He shook his head. “They’ll protect her with their lives, but it’s hands off.”

Ford exhaled slowly. He knew that. His feeling of jealousy was irrational, but his relationship with Tessa was still new, so he guessed the feelings were too.

They stayed another hour before Chase stood, stretching. “I’m off. Naomi is waiting and...”

“Yeah, yeah. Naomi’s waiting for lover boy to come home,” teased Liam. The guys laughed.

Chase rolled his eyes. “You are so immature. No wonder you and Joy get along so well.”

“Oooh. Mic drop,” yelled Dex.

“Assholes,” Chase exclaimed. He did a head nod. “Oh Ford, don’t forget to give Dex the woman’s name.”

Finn had ordered wings, and their golden, crispy scent hit Ford’s nose before they reached the table, just as his stomach rumbled.

“Just in time,” he declared, placing a few on his plate.

Dex grabbed a couple of wings and looked over at Ford. “What woman?”

The table quieted as the men looked at Ford expectantly. He hesitated, didn’t want to bring it up right now. “Some woman who approached Tessa at the shelter event and stopped by today. Something about her that makes me uneasy. I’ll come by the command center and give you her name tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” Dex replied. “I’ll only be there in the morning.”

“No problem.” Ford took another swig of beer and placed another couple of wings on his plate. “This needs to stay between us, though. I don’t want Tessa to feel I’m hovering or being overprotective.”

Finn barked a laugh. “You? Overprotective? Nah.”

The table erupted in laughter. Ford sighed. That’s who and what they were. Overprotective of the ones they loved.

Loved? Damn. Did he just admit that he loved Tessa? So soon?

This created a new set of problems. Because love meant risk. Vulnerability. Because if he was in love with her, it was going to be difficult to rein in his overprotective side, but the thought of losing her was worse.

“ Please, Tessa, consider what I’m asking,” pleaded Ford. The rich scent of freshly brewed coffee lingered in the air. His hands were wrapped around the warm ceramic mug. Outside his cabin, the morning sky was gray, with darker rain clouds threatening to burst.

Tessa took a sip of her coffee and sighed. “I don’t know, Ford,” she said as she set the cup down. “It’s been weeks, and we haven’t heard or seen Damien or Marty. I bet they’ve forgotten about me.”

Ford’s jaw tightened as he sat back in his chair and studied her.

They had been talking about her moving into his cabin while he was away for several days, and Tessa kept pushing back.

He understood she liked her freedom. Although she really wasn’t free since she was usually with Ford or the girls, and if she was at her apartment during the day, Titus was a call away.

“Besides, I’m not helpless,” she replied. “The self-defense classes at the campus with the girls have been helpful, and I’m very aware of my circumstances. I feel safe.”

“Safety is an illusion.” Ford shook his head. “Bad things happen all the time when we least expect it. Do you think I go about my day without being conscious of my surroundings? Plus, I have training and muscles.” He made a fist and flexed his biceps.

Tessa laughed, which he hoped she would do, and it helped defuse the situation. She was getting more and more tense as evidenced by her rubbing her hands on her pants.

“I just ... I don’t want to give up what little freedom and privacy I have,” she said in a small voice. “Living here is important to me. I want to make it on my own.”

“Sweetheart.” Ford got up and sat next to her on the sofa. “You are making it on your own; in fact, you’re owning it. You put together two outstanding events. You have people who want to hire you. No one on the campus will bother you, but they will protect you. Please.” He took her hand in his. “Do it for me.”

“Hmmm.” Tessa looked down at their hands. “I’ll think about it.”

Ford arched a brow. “Sweetheart, I leave tomorrow. You need to decide. For my peace of mind.”

He watched as Tessa folded her arms, her expression stubborn. He admired her independence, but it didn’t ease the anxiety in his gut. She just didn’t see the danger the way he and the guys did. Guys like Damien didn’t just disappear.

“Fine,” she huffed. “But I’m not happy.” She gave a little pout before giving him a sweet smile. “It’ll be okay. I know some of the women will come over for company. Oh! I have that meeting with Simone in a couple of days.”

Simone!

Ford mentally rolled his eyes.

Dex had checked her out the other day and found nothing suspicious. In fact, Simone had a spotless reputation, owning several boutiques in Florida and a consultant business. Her social media presence showcased a philanthrope with interests in

empowering women. There were lots of pictures of events she had attended and accounts of money raised.

Ford still didn't like her and couldn't shake the feeling that something about her wasn't right. His instincts rarely failed him, but there was nothing that told him Tessa was in danger from her.

However, Dex said if they ever needed more information Tex could help out.

He remembered asking Dex who Tex was.

"Occasionally, when we need to dig deeper, we use an ex-SEAL that a couple of guys served with. John 'Tex' Keegan is a computer whiz and can dig up information people thought they buried," replied Dex.

"Should we ask him now?" asked Ford.

"Nah. Nothing in what I found suggests anything out of the ordinary. We try not to use him unless it's absolutely necessary. He works with the SEALs, the government and ... I think some covert organizations."

Wow. That was a lot to take in. Although thinking about it, Ford had heard a couple of the guys mention Tex in conversation. It never occurred to him how involved Tex was with his friends.

"Great. Now that we've settled that, I have a meeting on campus." He stood and pulled Tessa into his arms. After several minutes of intense kissing and tongue action, he pulled away. "I could do this all day," he said. "And more. But I really have to go. Talk to you later?"

She nodded as she licked her lips. Ford followed that sweet pink tongue and had to

adjust his pants before he left. “Tease.”

Tessa smirked and gave him a finger wave.

Tessa stretched, her arms reaching toward the ceiling as she gazed out the window. Tree branches swayed in the wind, and the sky was gray again.

She missed Ford, but at least his scent was still on the sheets and pillows comforting her. He’d been gone for two days, and she’d tried to fill her days with activities. Joy and Naomi visited since they lived on campus. Their cheerful conversation was a distraction from the quiet. Today she was meeting Simone to discuss the possibility of being hired to do a couple of events.

Ford said little about Simone. Tessa had a feeling he didn’t care for her. Although she got weird vibes from her, too. How and why Simone found out about the two events Tessa organized remained a mystery. All she knew was that she didn’t have to like Simone; she just needed to do a good job.

She got up from the bed and glanced at her phone. She smiled when she saw a message from Ford light up the screen and hit the call button.

“Good morning, sunshine, how’d you sleep?” His deep voice sent a shiver down her spine. Just hearing his voice made her miss him more.

“I slept fine,” she said. “But I miss having you in bed with me.”

Ford chuckled. “I’ll be home soon enough. I miss you too.”

Tessa heard the murmur of men’s voices in the background. “Uh-oh. I have to go. Duty calls. Love you!”

He hung up quickly.

Tessa stared at the phone, her heart racing. Did she hear him right?

Love you.

He never said that before. She wondered if he was using it as an expression or if he meant it. Theirs had been a fast relationship. Had it been too fast? Nah.

She always believed when you knew, you knew—and she knew.

Two hours later, Tessa was in her car on the way to meet Simone at the bakery. After parking, she checked into her apartment, making sure all was okay before walking downstairs to grab a table. Tessa darted to a window seat after greeting a server. She sat and stared out the window, watching passersby.

The scent of cinnamon and vanilla tickled her nose. The server set a cup of coffee in front of her and asked if she wanted anything else.

“No, but thank you,” she replied. “Maybe a little later.”

Tessa wrapped her hands around the warm cup and sniffed. There was nothing like the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. She sipped, enjoying the warmth, then cradled the cup.

“She doesn’t suspect a thing.”

A man’s voice carried over from a phone conversation a couple of tables over. Tessa’s heart raced. Was it Marty? Damien? She snuck a peek and noticed it was Evan, the bakery owner’s nephew, hunched over his phone.

Tessa froze. Was he talking about her? Was he connected to Malina somehow? She'd seen him a couple of times, and he always looked suspicious, whispering into the phone, glancing around, narrowing his eyes when he saw Tessa looking at him. Was she in danger?

"Good morning." A woman's voice disrupted Tessa's thoughts. She looked up and saw Simone standing over the table, looking sophisticated and pulled-together in a gray tailored pantsuit with a black top. She had pulled her hair back into a chignon.

"Oh!" Tessa gave a quick smile. "You startled me. I was lost in my thoughts."

Simone sat across from her. "I hope they were thoughts of my event," she said. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

A server approached Simone and asked if she wanted to order.

"Tea, please."

Tessa asked for a refill on her coffee. After the server walked away, she glanced at Simone. "So, why don't you tell me what kind of event this is, where it's going to be held and how I can help."

"It's a fundraiser for the local animal shelter," said Simone. "I have two locations I'm interested in. One is a barn outside of town that is perfect for the occasion. The other is a converted warehouse, also perfect."

"What a wonderful idea. What's your vision for this?"

Simone tapped her fingers on the table. "I'd like to do a silent auction and have people pledge donations for specific needs, food for the animals, medical care, and shelter repairs."

So many ideas raced through Tessa's brain. Silent auctions were always a good idea, and people loved helping animals. Plus, the newspapers loved a feel-good story.

"Maybe have a pledge level to attend with perks," Tessa suggested. "For example, general admission gets a thank-you with a photo of a shelter animal; next level, your name on a sponsor wall or a tote bag with a picture of a dog or cat, or ... with a premium level, you get a tour of the shelter with naming rights to an animal and recognition of a plaque displayed at the shelter."

"I love those ideas. We can refine them later, but that's a great starting point." Simone pulled out her phone. "I'm going to assume you're interested. Let's schedule a barn tour for you." She shrugged. "Maybe next week, one day?"

Tessa smiled. "I'm definitely interested. Next week will be perfect. It'll give me time to come up with more ideas."

"Great." Simone took another sip of her tea and looked at her watch. "I have to run. I'll send you directions."

She raised a finger, signaling for the check. When the server came over, she handed her the money and a tip. Tessa tried to protest, but Simone reminded her that she'd suggested the meeting.

Simone stood by the table, gathering her phone and purse. Tessa got up to hug her.

"This will be a great experience for both of us," said Simone. "I'll talk to you soon."

Tessa remained at the table with thoughts jumbling in her mind. Success as an event planner in Haywood Lake was within her grasp. She glanced around the bakery and noticed Evan had left. Which left her wondering who he was talking to and if it was about her. She'd keep her ears and eyes open. If he had ties to Damien, well, Ford

and the Brotherhood would have to get involved.

After showering and drying off, Tessa pulled her only dressy black dress from the closet. It was times like this that she wished she had brought more clothes with her, but time had been of the essence, and now she didn't have the money, so it would have to do.

Her racing heart left her uncertain whether her emotion stemmed from anticipation of seeing her friends or from nervousness.

Joy had invited her and several of the other women to karaoke at Redfish Lounge downtown.

She'd heard rumors of Joy's obsession with singing, even though she heard the woman couldn't carry a tune.

It would be fun to get together with the girls for a night out and unwind, but she missed Ford something terrible. His absence made the king-size bed and the cabin feel lonely and empty. Still, she promised to stay on campus, and that was that.

Tessa slipped into the dress and caught her reflection in the mirror. She turned left, then right, and nodded. Not too shabby. Her blond hair was pulled up in a ponytail, and she looked ... happy.

Now all she needed was to find a pair of black sandals and finish with some sparkle. Tessa looked on the dresser and found her gold necklace—perfect. After fixing her makeup and spritzing on some perfume, she was ready.

She called Ford, leaving a message she was out with friends. No sense in having him worry. She missed him, but he'd be back in a few days.

At seven thirty, there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find Naomi standing there.

"Ready?" asked Naomi. "Joy is hyperventilating in the car. She's so excited."

Tessa laughed, grabbing her small purse. "I guess. Although I'm with Joy on this. I can't carry a tune either."

"Perfect." Naomi smirked. "We'll put you two front and center."

Tessa settled into the back seat. "So who else is coming?" she asked.

"We're meeting Isabelle, Nicki, and Jessie West there," Joy replied, catching Tessa's eye in the rearview mirror. "I don't think you've met Jessie. She owns the Little Sprouts Nursery School in town."

"Hmmm." Tessa thought for a moment. "You're right. I haven't."

"Oh, you'll love her. Jessie is so much fun. I don't know how she still has energy left after chasing toddlers all day," said Joy. "But then, I've seen you in action, and you're like the Energizer bunny. The two of you will hit it off."

A short time later, Joy pulled into the parking lot behind the Redfish Lounge. They walked around to the front and joined a line that stretched toward the entrance.

"Wow. People get here early," said Tessa. After watching karaoke videos online a few times, she wondered about its appeal. There were some excellent singers who engaged the audience and a few that should never have gotten up.

Joy grinned. “Karaoke night’s the place to be!”

The line surged when the doors opened, and they were soon inside. Tessa blinked, taking in the room. It wasn’t what she’d expected. On the Internet, it seemed like everyone was in a rowdy bar with people laughing and talking in the background. The upscale interior in front of her was nothing like the videos. White tablecloths covered the tables, each with a single flickering candle in the center.

Muted neon lights glowed from the ceiling, adding an unexpected touch of sophistication.

“Wow!” said Tessa, looking around.

“Wait until they finish with the stage,” said Joy with a grin.

Tessa saw the raised platform at the far end of the lounge framed by glowing purple lights that pulsed in time with the low hum of music. A thick black velvet curtain hung behind it, giving the space a theatrical vibe. They placed a microphone front and center, and a sleek karaoke machine with a digital screen above it was set up on the side.

The room buzzed with lively chatter and bursts of laughter. The women settled at a large table near the back and ordered the evening’s specialty cocktails: Blush Crush and Purple Rain. They oohed and aahed when the electric pink frozen margaritas and shimmering purple cocktails arrived and raised their glasses.

“To a night of fun,” declared Joy.

“And bad singing!” declared Isabelle.

The women laughed and clinked glasses. Tessa’s first sip of her frozen margarita slid

down easily.

She glanced around the crowded restaurant, recognizing a couple of people from the shelter's fundraiser. One woman she talked to there waved in her direction.

Tessa looked over at the bar, and her stomach plummeted.

Evan!

What was he doing here? He didn't seem like the type to frequent karaoke night. The man buttoned his shirt up to his neck and wore a bow tie. But a dark thought took over her mind. Is he spying on me for Malina?

Her mouth went dry, and she felt a wave of panic.

Had he seen her?

As if sensing her stare, Evan casually looked in her direction. Their eyes met briefly before he turned away.

Tessa's pulse quickened. Is he watching me?

When she looked again, he was gone, leaving her unsettled.

"Tessa, you okay?" asked Isabelle. "You're not afraid of going up, are you?"

"What?" Tessa blinked and pulled herself together. "No, I'm fine."

Tessa shook her head, trying to let go of her tension. I bet it's just a coincidence he's here.

It wasn't long before the first singer stepped onto the stage and the crowd cheered. The next two singers were also terrific.

Then a guy stood up and fumbled a few notes, drawing playful boos from the audience, and Tessa's stomach clenched. She was going to be booed off the stage for sure. However, the man recovered, eliciting cheers from the crowd. Tessa leaned back in her chair and relaxed. It will be all right. Think positive thoughts.

The server returned to get their food order before it was their time to sing.

"Come on, Tessa," Joy said, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward the stage. "We're up."

The girls trouped up to the stage. Joy excitedly picked out the song, and they waited for the first line of the lyrics. The music blared through the speakers.

Oh no! She didn't. Tessa's stomach nosedived.

Joy grinned and belted out the first line of the iconic ABBA hit, slightly off-key but full of enthusiasm.

Why did she pick that song?

Not only did they need to sing, but they also had to dance, something Tessa wasn't prepared for. But ready or not...

The crowd went wild, clapping and singing along. Then Joy passed the mic to Tessa. Panic bloomed in her chest, and the spotlight fell on her.

Her voice wobbled as she sang, doing her best to channel the energy of the song.

Could the stage open up and swallow her?

Tessa had no time to be embarrassed because the other women took over to sing.

Thankfully, her time in the spotlight ended. She slipped toward the back of the group, hoping that no one could see her.

But no. There was more torture. Joy pointed at her and started twirling and swaying her hips and motioning for Tessa to follow her lead.

The women sang their hearts out. The crowd cheered and sang along. Several members of the audience got up to dance with them.

By the end of the song, Tessa was sweating, exhausted, and exhilarated. This was the most fun she ever had.

She realized karaoke wasn't about perfection but fun and the freedom to let loose.

"Oh my," she exclaimed after they finally arrived back at their table after getting multiple congratulations from the crowd on their way back. "That was..."

"Amazing," Joy exclaimed.

Tessa laughed. "Yeah, it was." She took a sip of her softening frozen margarita.

"You're a natural," said Isabelle. Tessa cocked an eyebrow. "Well, you have great dance moves," she clarified.

Before she could answer, the server arrived with their appetizers of mini pulled-pork sliders. The smoky aroma of hickory filled the air. Next came a platter of golden-fried popcorn shrimp and skewers of rosy, red cherry tomato and creamy mozzarella.

Tessa's stomach rumbled.

"Yum," exclaimed Jessie. Tessa enjoyed several small conversations with the vivacious brunette, her energy as infectious as her laugh.

They stayed for a couple of hours, eating, drinking, laughing, and only got up once more to sing. Despite her off-key voice, Tessa felt like a pro, grateful that dancing was not required for that song.

As they got ready to leave, Isabelle asked if Simone had contacted her.

"Yes, I'm going to meet her at a barn outside town to go over an event she planned for an animal shelter."

"Ooh. I want to come," said Joy. "You know Paws for Caring started because of my love of fostering dogs."

Tessa didn't know that and made a note to talk to Joy and find out more.

Nicki cleared her throat. "Don't forget, Petals to Go can provide floral arrangements. Just let me know."

Tessa hadn't thought about using Nicki for arrangements. "Good to know," she said.

"I'd love to come too," said Isabelle. "If it's an event where Will and I can have a farm-to-table dinner for the shelter, I'm in."

Tessa heard about their fundraising farm-to-table dinners and made another mental note to find out more about them from Isabelle.

The women walked out into a warm evening, the murmur of voices and laughter

behind them. After saying goodbye to Jessie, Isabelle, and Nicki, Joy drove them back to the campus. She was grateful for their company and volunteering to go with her the next day. But doubts began to sink in.

What if Simone didn't want to hire her? Or thought she wasn't capable of pulling the event off?

Tessa took a deep breath. She was being silly. Simone already said she'd hired her and had seen firsthand how capable she was.

Why was she so nervous?

It wasn't like she hadn't done an event multiple times. Tessa wished Ford were here. He knew how to calm her down.

The next morning, Tessa grabbed her purse and car keys. The sun was high, casting warm light through the trees. Everything felt right in the world.

She'd pick up Joy and then Isabelle and follow the directions Simone had texted her to the barn.

She got into her car, turned it on, and let out a huge breath. She'd spent half the previous night worrying about what Simone would think of her ideas. Then the rest of the night rehashing karaoke.

Bah. Enough worrying. She headed to the end of the drive. Joy was outside her house talking to Liam. She quickly kissed him goodbye and got into the car.

"Excited?" she asked.

"I guess," Tessa replied. Joy gave her a concerned look.

"Are you okay? This should be a piece of cake for you."

Tessa smiled. "It is. I'm always nervous with a new client." She turned right toward town to pick up Isabelle. Joy directed her the rest of the way.

Will and Isabelle lived outside town on a sweet farm. Joy told Tessa all about the farm, how Will built a barn just for Isabelle and Felicia to make their soaps, and the farm-to-table dinners.

Isabelle was sitting on the huge front porch, sipping coffee, when they pulled up. She popped into the back seat with a box in her hand. “Emelia dropped off some pastries last night. I thought you might need the extra energy.”

“What did she bring?” asked Joy. “Oh, I hope some of her blueberry hand pies.”

Isabelle shook her head. “No hand pies.” She opened the top, and Tessa could smell something cinnamony.

“Something smells yummy,” she said.

“You’d be right. Let’s see, I have almond croissants, cinnamon rolls and...” She squealed. “Lemon scones, my favorite.”

The girls made their selections and munched on sweet pastries as they drove down country roads shaded by live oak and pine trees. The barn, according to Simone, was a half hour outside town.

“I’m getting so nervous,” said Tessa. She’d finished a croissant and now wished she hadn’t. It churned in her stomach.

“You’ll be fine,” said Joy. She patted Tessa’s arm. “If things get awkward, I’ll just bombard her with stories of me fostering dogs.”

Isabelle leaned over the front seat. “I can distract her with ideas for a farm-to-table dinner or ... sexy soaps.”

“You two!” Tessa laughed, the tension in her chest easing. She was glad she brought them along but hoped the conversation wouldn’t head that way.

They’d been traveling for a while until, finally, Tessa spotted the mailbox shaped like

a barn and turned down a dirt road, her palms sweating in anticipation.

“Wow,” exclaimed Joy. “I’ve never seen this before.”

The outside of the barn was stunning, rustic but elegant. The wide wooden doors had giant summer wreaths on them, and ivy framed the doors.

Several cars were parked by the pond in front, and Tessa spotted Simone standing in front of one, tapping on her phone.

Tessa parked, and the three women were met by Simone. “Tessa, welcome. I’m glad you could make it.” She eyed Isabelle and Joy. “And you brought company.”

“Yes,” Tessa replied. “This is Joy and Isabelle. They’re part of my team.”

Simone arched a brow. “Team?”

Tessa’s heart sank.

Had she made a mistake bringing the girls with her? Simone was not happy, even though she recovered well.

Joy stepped forward with her hand out. “Yes. We’re here to help Tessa make this fundraiser unforgettable.”

Simone hesitated for a minute before shaking her hand and then Isabelle’s.

“Well then. Let’s hear what you have in mind,” said Simone.

Following Simone, the women walked toward the barn.

The wooden door creaked as Simone held it open and indicated that the women enter. A row of string lights stretched across the rafters of the barn. Dust motes swirled in the sunlight. Long wooden tables lined up against the walls, with chairs stacked in one corner. There was a raised platform at the far end, indicating a stage. Antique farm implements adorned the walls; a small bar occupied a corner.

It was so quiet inside that for a quick second, Tessa wondered where the other people were, since there were several cars in the parking lot. Stop it, she told herself. You're imagining things. They were probably workers or touring other parts of the property, she decided, and concentrated on what she saw.

"This is perfect," Tessa exclaimed. "I can already envision how we'll set it up."

Simone smiled. "I'm glad you like it. I do have that other venue, which would be perfect as well. It's a little smaller but newly renovated."

"I'd love to see it," Tessa replied, even though she loved the barn. No matter. If they didn't use the barn this time, she'd keep it in mind for another event.

Tessa's hands were sweating. This was it—the moment that could make or break her career. She hoped she was ready.

Simone watched the car pull in. Right on time! She liked that. But her satisfaction faded and her eyes narrowed when Tessa got out, followed by two other women. Her jaw tightened, but she forced herself to remain calm.

Damn. Why couldn't people follow the plan? Tessa was supposed to come alone—defenseless, weak. Instead, she brought not one but two friends, complicating what should have been a one-and-done operation. Now she needed to think quickly of a new scenario to get Tessa alone.

Her phone buzzed, and she looked down at the text from Damien. We're ready. Just give the word.

She sighed and texted back, Stand down. We have a complication. The perfect moment had passed.

Simone put her phone in her purse, gave what she thought was a welcoming smile, and strode toward the women.

Tessa kept rubbing her hands along her pants. She was nervous, but the other two? Well, they were excited and acted like they were on an adventure. Her plan to kidnap Tessa was put on the back burner. She couldn't do that with witnesses, and for sure, she didn't want to deal with additional people.

One blonde stepped up and mentioned they were here to make the fundraiser unforgettable.

Riiight! Like that was what was important. Simone nodded politely.

"This way." Her mind was racing as she led them toward the barn. She had to come up with a new plan. Separating Tessa from her friends wouldn't work, so she'd have to come up with something different and make sure Tessa came alone the next time.

The women walked into the barn, looked around, and nodded enthusiastically. "This is perfect," said Tessa, her eyes lit up.

"Great," Simone replied. She took a deep breath. This wasn't the end of anything. She had time on her side.

Mentioning the other location only whetted Tessa's imagination. Besides, it was perfect for what she had in mind.

Simone watched the three women leave the barn, their excited chatter fading.

The next time she got Tessa alone, there would be no escape. Tessa wouldn't even know what happened until it was too late. And she wouldn't be walking away—she wouldn't be walking out at all.

Two days later, Tessa was sitting in the bakery again. This time, she was meeting Emelia to discuss ideas and suggestions for the animal shelter event. The one thing she'd learned early on was to get the vendors on board early and have a plan.

She pushed open the bakery door, and the scent of cinnamon hit her, transporting her right back to her childhood, when her mother baked cinnamon bread. The smell never got old and enveloped her like a soft, comforting blanket.

"Over here!" Emelia's cheerful voice startled Tessa, who was still lost in thought.

"Oh, my. You surprised me," Tessa said, holding her hands over her heart as she spotted Emelia sitting at a small corner table by the window. "Every time I come into the bakery, scents remind me of something."

Emelia stood to give Tessa a hug. "I know. That's how I feel every day. It's like I'm surrounded by everything that I love."

Tessa settled into a chair, placing her purse on the seat beside her. The bakery was bustling with the hum of conversations and the soft clink of mugs on the table. Cool jazz played in the background while the morning sunlight poured through the glass windows.

The bakery filled with customers as they spent a few minutes catching up. The server came over, and they ordered coffee and the special of the day: raspberry crunch muffins.

Tessa turned to Emelia, who was already placing her notes on the table. “All right,” she said, “let’s make some magic happen.”

“Oh, do I have some great ideas,” said Emelia, whose eyes were sparkling with excitement. “I also met a caterer I think you’ll love. Mia Whitmore is new in town and owns Plated Perfection.” She pulled a business card from her purse. “Here’s her information.” Emelia handed the card to Tessa.

Plated Perfection, Beautiful Food, Timeless Memories.

Tessa looked at the logo of a stylized plate surrounded by floral vines in soft neutral tones in cream, gold, and dusty pink. The business card was both formal and rustic. Tessa knew she had found her caterer.

“Wow! I love her business card,” said Tessa. “Have you had her food?”

Emelia nodded. “She helped Isabelle and Will at their last farm-to-table dinner.”

“Great, I’ll contact her. So…” Tessa grinned. “What ideas do you have for the animal shelter event?”

“How about dog bone cookies? I can shape them like a dog bone and add a small label like ‘adopt, don’t shop’ or something else. Maybe cat face cake pops.”

“Oh, I like that!” exclaimed Tessa.

“Then I could add decorated cookies in animal shapes and cupcakes with animal faces.”

“Clever,” Tessa agreed, making a few notes. “Keep those in mind and…”

A low voice drifted across the bakery.

“I’ll deliver the package soon. ... It’ll be a surprise. I’ll get back to you tonight.”

Tessa froze. She slowly scanned the bakery, her hands gripping her coffee cup tighter.

There!

In a corner, Evan sat talking on his phone.

Package? Surprise? Deliver? Oh God. Was Evan talking about her? Her heart was racing. She couldn’t breathe.

Evan looked up, frowned at Tessa, and hung up.

“Tessa?” Emelia shook her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Tessa took a deep breath. “I can’t... I have...”

“You can’t what? I’m sorry, hon, but I’m not understanding you. Are you ill?”

Tessa shook her head. Before she could answer, a shadow fell over the table.

“Emelia!”

Both women looked up. A small smile played on Evan’s lips as he stood near the table. She tried to push her chair back to run, but her legs felt like lead. No way was he sending her back to Malina or Damien.

“Hey, Evan,” Emelia said brightly. “Everything okay?”

NO, Emelia, don't talk to him. Danger! Danger!

"Everything is great," he replied.

Emelia glanced at Tessa. "Oh Evan, have you met my friend Tessa?"

Evan glanced at Tessa. "Not officially, but I know you live upstairs and come here often."

Tessa couldn't speak, she just nodded.

"I was just calling a client." Evan pulled his phone out. "Speaking of which, Emelia, I know you've been interested in this old clock for your kitchen. I have a lead on it. Do you still want it?"

Tessa blinked. Clock?

"Oh, the old farmhouse clock?" Emelia looked at Tessa. "Evan is an antiques dealer and is always looking for unusual finds. Just last month, he found a full set of pink depression glass for a client."

Evan grinned. "That's true. And a Toby Jug for a client who wants to surprise his wife. People love surprises, right?"

Tessa forced a laugh. "Yeah. Surprises."

"Well, ladies. I have to leave." He looked at Tessa. "If you ever need help searching for something, let me know."

The two women watched Evan leave. Tessa breathed a sigh of relief. Her paranoia was getting the better of her if she thought everyone she met was out to get her.

Tessa left the bakery, the scent of lemon and sugar clinging to her clothes. The alleyway was quiet except for the sound of traffic on the main road. There were a few people shopping. She saw Titus leaning casually against the wall of his gym, arms crossed over his massive chest. Casual being the operative word for the guys in the Brotherhood. Nothing they did was by chance.

“Hey, Titus,” she said as she waved at him.

“Tessa,” he replied, scanning the area behind her. Emelia mentioned she was going to meet up with him later, so maybe he was on the lookout for her. Although for the past few weeks, the Brotherhood had eased off following her around since there had been no sightings of Marty or Damien or rumors about Malina. However, Tessa knew better than to believe quiet meant safe.

Ford would be home in two days, and she was looking forward to seeing him and getting her life back to normal. Well, normal could wait until after she jumped his bones.

Her apartment was calling her, and she desperately wanted to be in it.

The drive back to the cabin was pleasant, with a light wind swaying the pine trees. Sunlight streamed through the woods, and for the first time today, she relaxed. After realizing that Evan was not targeting her but was an antiques dealer, everything he said made sense.

She waved to Liam, who was just getting out of his cruiser, and drove down the gravel road.

The parking lot was full, so Melissa must have a training session going. Tessa pulled into the clearing by Ford's cabin and cut the engine. After getting out of the car, she unlocked the cabin door and walked in. The silence felt unnatural.

Alone with her thoughts, Tessa made herself a cup of tea, pulled out a couple of cookies she'd frozen and thawed, and sat in the living room planning her next moves. First up was a call to Mia Whitmore.

She'd be meeting Simone at the next venue in a day and wanted to understand what Mia could or could not do.

Tessa pulled out her phone and googled Plated Perfection.

Somehow, she wasn't surprised to see glowing reviews, especially after Emelia had recommended her.

The first picture to catch her eye was a small picture of Mia. She had shoulder-length honey-blond hair, an oval face, and a warm smile.

There was a romantic photo of a garden wedding with tiny lights strung above round tables with pastel tablecloths and rustic centerpieces. Another of a chic holiday event with a buffet of finger foods and another of a rustic event in an old barn with candlelit long wooden tables. Everything was perfect, not pretentious, and the food looked delicious.

"Wow. Emelia wasn't kidding," muttered Tessa. She dialed the phone number. It rang once. Twice. Then straight to voicemail. Tessa left a message, hoping to connect with Mia later in the day.

She already had Emelia on board, and if Mia agreed to help, this would elevate the event to something spectacular.

Tessa smiled. She could already envision the buzz of conversation, the tables of delicious and beautifully arranged food and desserts. Twinkling lights would set the perfect mood. It would be an event that would put her on the map. One that would seal her name as the event planner of the year.

Now she just had to wait for Mia to call back.

Tessa busied herself picking up around the cabin. Not that there was much to do, since she was the only one living there. She made a list of groceries Ford was out of and would pick them up after she met up with Simone.

She poured herself a cup of tea and sat on the sofa picking up a mystery novel she'd been reading. She was so engrossed in it that she almost didn't hear her phone ring right away. It was in the kitchen, and she jumped up to answer it, hoping it was Ford.

"Hello."

"Tessa? This is Mia Whitmore," a cheerful woman's voice said. "You called me earlier. How can I help you?"

Tessa explained how Emelia recommended her and about the event coming up. "Is there a chance you could come over today with sample menus?"

"Um. I'm kind of busy right now," Mia said.

Tessa was upset, but it had been the last minute. "Okay, I understand."

"Oh! I have an idea," Mia exclaimed. "I'm setting up for an event in two hours. Why

don't you stop by and you can see what I do?"

Tessa thought about that for a minute. It would be nice to get an idea of what Mia could do. She wasn't doing anything right now or tonight, so why not?

"Give me the address. I'll be there shortly."

"Yeah. Can't wait to meet you. Emelia has mentioned your name and suggested I contact you, so this is perfect," Mia gushed.

Tessa wrote the information and grabbed her car keys. Things were looking up.

Getting into her car, she pulled up the address Mia had given her. It was in part of the historic section of town, a part she hadn't explored yet.

After twenty minutes, she passed a small clubhouse and a sign that said, "Historic District." Driving through the stately streets, it was fun to see the various homes, which ranged from three-story mansions to sprawling ranch houses. Soon she arrived at the address and parked in front of a two-story Mediterranean-style stucco house, with red roof tiles and arched windows. Bougainvillea cascaded down one corner, its bright pink blossoms welcoming.

Tessa followed the sound of voices coming from the backyard.

As she turned the corner, her breath caught.

In front of her, a sprawling white party tent with a peaked top, windows, and open sides overlooked a manicured lawn and Haywood Lake. The open sides of the tent looked out over lush greenery and swaying palm trees, while sunlight danced on the rippling water in the distance.

Twinkling lights were strung across the ceiling, casting a romantic glow. She went inside and saw several round tables adorned with crisp white linens, small floral arrangements in pink, white and green, and votive candles. Woven mats covered the floor.

They'd set up a bar in one corner, decorated with garlands of greenery, and a harpist warmed up in another corner. It was incredibly beautiful.

On the opposite wall was a long buffet table where she thought she saw Mia.

"Tessa! Hi." A slender, blond woman waved enthusiastically and walked toward her. It was definitely Mia. She recognized her from her picture.

She greeted Tessa with a warm hug.

"Welcome. I'm so glad you made it." Mia looked around. "Let's sit over by the lake and you can tell me what you're looking for."

A pair of Adirondack chairs sat on the lawn overlooking the lake, and the two women sat.

"This is really special," Tessa said as she took it all in. "Do you often do outdoor events?"

Mia shrugged. "Occasionally. Although it's always easier doing an indoor venue."

"True. Anyhow, let me tell you what I have. It's an indoor event for the town's animal shelter, and we'll hold it in a party barn or similar location. Emelia is making desserts. If you're available, I'd like you to cater it."

"So you want something simple but elegant to impress?"

“Yes.”

Mia nodded thoughtfully and pulled out a small notebook from her apron pocket. “I think something along the line of what I’m serving today would be perfect, especially for high-end donors. First, I have hot and cold hors d’oeuvres. There are savory tartlets filled with goat cheese and caramelized onions, seared tuna bites served on a cucumber round with a dollop of wasabi, and roasted pear and brie crostini, as well as a grazing table with cheeses, olives, nuts, and spreads.”

“Yum!”

Mia smiled. “For the main course, I’m having a carving station with roasted chicken or beef tenderloin, a roasted vegetable tart for the vegetarians, garlic roasted potatoes and root veggies, and an artisan breadbasket.”

“I’m in!” teased Tessa. “Everything sounds perfect for this event.”

“I can adjust the menu so it fits into the theme.” Mia stood. “Come with me and you can sample some of the food. We’ve set up everything in the kitchen.”

“Great.” Tessa followed Mia into the house. The kitchen was larger than her apartment and Ford’s cabin, with every known stainless-steel appliance. The cabinets were off-white, black-veined white marble graced the countertops, and huge windows overlooked the backyard, letting in lots of natural light. It was spacious despite at least six people working in the kitchen.

Trays of appetizers were coming out of the oven. Mia picked up a small plate and placed a tartlet and crostini on it. She took out a few tuna on cucumber appetizers from the refrigerator and arranged them on the plate.

“Try these.” She handed the plate to Tessa.

Tessa took a bite of each, savoring the flavors, and moaned. “These are the best I’ve ever had.”

Mia grinned.

They talked for a few minutes, but Mia’s concentration was on the event. Tessa left after confirming that Mia would meet her at the event location the next day, now confident that the fundraiser would be a success with Mia and Emelia’s help.

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The next morning, Tessa jumped out of bed with a smile on her face. She and Ford enjoyed a lengthy chat last night. He shared that he would be home the next day, and she told him about meeting Mia and Simone. The only thing he asked was that she be careful.

Today she was meeting the two women to discuss logistics. After throwing on a pair of jeans and a top, she grabbed her leather notebook and car keys.

She programmed the address into her GPS. The building was in another area of Haywood Lake she'd never explored.

The scenery gradually turned from urban streets to rundown neighborhoods to revitalized buildings as she drove. It was an interesting contrast.

She parked in front of a red brick building with large industrial-size windows. Potted plants and trees flanked the double front doors. It was charming and welcoming.

As she looked around, Tessa realized there was plenty of parking, something that had been a problem for events in the past.

She spotted two cars. Good. Simone and Mia were here.

Pulling open one of the wooden doors, she walked into what was the main hall.

It was a large open space with exposed beams stretched across the ceiling. Someone

had painted colorful murals on the walls, adding an artsy touch.

Several round tables were scattered around the room. Tessa was already envisioning them draped with white linen, flickering candles and surrounded by happy guests.

“Tessa!” Simone called out, leaning in for a quick hug with Mia close behind.

“Isn’t this a great space?” exclaimed Simone. “Mia and I were just discussing some ideas she had for food.”

Tessa had to agree. She spotted a sleek bar along one wall with a polished wooden countertop. Leather sofas and armchairs filled a small lounge to the right. She could already imagine guests relaxing there. “This is perfect.”

“Well, let’s go back and check out the kitchen,” Simone suggested. She led them to another room off the main hall. The kitchen was a caterer’s dream—it was spacious, with all stainless-steel countertops and appliances. “Does this work for you, Mia?”

“It’s perfect. There’s plenty of space to work,” she replied.

“Good.” Simone nodded. “Let’s go to the lounge and discuss details.”

They took seats in the lounge, and Tessa pulled out her notebook. “First off, when is the event?”

Simone took a deep breath. “Well, that’s the thing…”

Tessa’s stomach dropped. It was never a good sign when a client said that.

“The fundraiser is in two weeks…”

Tessa gasped. Two weeks? No way was that happening.

Simone grinned. “Surprise.”

She leaned back in the chair. “It’s not as big a problem as you’d think. Originally it was scheduled two months from now. I reserved a historic house in the next town over. Unfortunately, it burned down. Then, as if that wasn’t bad enough, the caterer and event planner both pulled out.” She shook her head. “Can you believe that?”

Well, kinda, Simone. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Wish I was. But that’s not going to stop me, us, from putting on the best event ever. The shelter needs the money now, not later. This warehouse is available and perfect for the event. Most of the groundwork is done except for someone to coordinate the event and the food.”

Tessa’s mind was racing. She knew it was doable since she had nothing planned, and if everything was mostly arranged, she could work with that; however, Mia and Emelia might have other plans. “I’m available, but Mia...”

“What’s the date?” Mia asked, interrupting Tessa as she scrolled through her calendar.

“Friday the thirteenth.”

Of course it was.

Mia looked at her calendar. “Well, you’re in luck. I don’t have anything planned until the weekend.”

Simone clapped her hands. “See, I knew this would work out. We’ll be paying you

double your rate for being last minute.” She looked at both of them. “Does that help?”

“It does for me,” said Mia.

“Me, too,” Tessa agreed. Double pay? How does that not work?

“Perfect.” Simone stood. “I’ll put the details in the newspaper and contact all the donors. Tessa, I have a list of the donations for an auction that you can follow up on, and maybe you and Mia can put together a menu and just pass it by me?”

“Absolutely,” Tessa replied. Wow, this was going to be a busy two weeks, but if she could pull this off, she’d be more than an event planner. She’d be Tessa Donnelly, event planner extraordinaire. I can perform miracles .

After Simone left, Tessa and Mia remained at the venue.

“Wow, that was intense,” said Mia. “How long have you known Simone?”

“I met her a few weeks ago at an event for the local women’s shelter,” Tessa replied.

“Hmmm, she seems very capable but rather intense,” said Mia. “But that’s neither here nor there. We have a fundraiser to plan. Oh, I just want to mention that if Emelia isn’t free to bake, it’s not a problem for me.”

That was good news. Tessa made a mental note to touch base with Emelia.

She was psyched.

For the third time since moving, well, escaping to Haywood Lake, things were falling into place. She loved event planning, checking every detail, connecting with vendors

and having a successful event. Not to mention she had a handsome, hunky, protective boyfriend and relationships with new girlfriends.

She leaned back in the chair. This place was perfect. Tessa could already imagine the warehouse the night of the event, how she'd arrange the tables, the lighting, flowers, the clinking of glasses and the joy on the donors' faces.

But a flicker of doubt surfaced. A fire at the original venue? And then the event planner and caterer bailed? It was almost coincidental. She shook her head. Simone seemed genuine. Besides, who'd fake something like that?

Was it really that simple? Right now, it was. Or so she hoped.

Good Lord, the woman was clueless. Simone walked out of the main hall into a cloudy, breezy day, her heels clicking sharply against the pavement. How could Tessa believe both the event planner and caterer quit? That made no sense. Regarding the fire, well, let's just say it wasn't an accident. She had to make her plans in advance, and Tessa never would have accepted the position if she thought the story was fake.

A gust of wind whipped her hair into her face, the strands stinging her cheek. Betrayal. The word echoed in her mind.

Simone took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She needed to focus. Chess wasn't won by reacting; it was won by strategy. And she wasn't just a player—she was the queen. All the pieces on the board existed to serve and protect her.

She pressed the key fob to open the car door and got in.

Marty and Damien would arrive soon. They knew their roles, and this time if they messed up, well, there would be hell to pay. It took skill and thinking outside the box

to put this plan together.

Tessa would be too knee-deep in details at the event to see what was coming—flowers to order and arrange, menus to complete, timelines to adjust. All elements to consume her attention.

Simone had played this game before, and her father and brothers learned the hard way what it meant to underestimate her. That is, when they were still alive.

All the pieces were in place.

That was the beauty of the queen's gambit. Sometimes you had to sacrifice something to lure your opponent into a false sense of security.

Tessa believed she was clever by recording Damien's conversation, relying on the police to take action, and then coming here when everything fell apart.

Her lips curved into a smile. Underestimating the queen was the quickest way to lose. She didn't just play to win—she played to dominate, to destroy. Because the queen always won.

“Checkmate,” she whispered to herself.

Tessa busied herself around the cabin. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee lingered in the air. Her heart raced in anticipation. She kept glancing at her watch. In another hour, Ford would be home. She picked up the kitchen, not that there was anything to really pick up. Then she fluffed the pillows on the sofa, tidied the bathroom and finally stepped out to the back patio with a cup of coffee, the mug warm in her fingers as she took a slow sip.

Sunbeams filtered through the trees, casting golden shadows on the patio. Birds were singing. The air was crisp and clean. Tessa closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, agreeing with nature that all was well with the world.

The sound of tires crunching on gravel broke the silence. Her eyes snapped open, and she leaped up. Finally.

Her coffee sloshed over the rim of her mug. She placed the mug on the table and raced into the cabin before bolting out the front door, meeting him halfway as he stepped out of the truck. His broad shoulders and easy smile made her breath catch.

Without a second thought, she ran toward him and launched herself into his arms. The action knocked him slightly off balance, but he never let go. "I've missed you," she said, her voice muffled against his neck. His familiar woodsy and musky scent filled her senses.

"Mmmm. I could come home to this welcome anytime," he murmured. He leaned down, capturing her lips in a slow kiss.

She ran her fingers through his hair, kissed him like she'd missed him for a year. Without missing a beat, he carried her into the cabin and walked straight to the bedroom. He gently laid her on the bed and followed her down, his weight a warm comfort.

"I've been thinking about this ever since I left," he said as he slid his hands down her side. "I've missed you so much, and I can't wait to be in you."

Tessa smiled and nodded. He quickly removed his clothes, took a condom out of his wallet, and placed it on the bed. She tried to get up, but he gently pushed her back. "Stay still. I'm excited, but this is like unwrapping a gift at Christmas. I'm going to take my time and then make sure you're wet before I enjoy what's mine."

Oh my. Yes, please . Tessa mentally fanned herself. She needed this closeness. The thing she missed the most while he was gone was making love.

She watched Ford as he slowly removed her shoes and pants. He stared at her pussy and licked his lips, then shook his head. He motioned her to sit up and removed her top and bra before placing a sweet kiss on both breasts. Moving her panties aside, he inserted a finger into her pussy and groaned. "God, you're so wet."

Tessa bucked her hips. Ford was taking too long to enter her. She tried to reach for his cock, but he moved away. "Tessa, when I remove your panties, be prepared because I won't be able to stop myself."

"Tease," she said. "All talk and no action."

Ford smirked, rolled on the condom, and removed her panties before positioning himself over her. He pushed her thighs out and plunged in.

Ohhh. It felt so good. His cock filled her pussy, and it felt like he was pushing against

her womb. She started bucking against him, which just encouraged him to thrust faster and faster. The sensation was too much, and she screamed his name as he groaned hers.

When she finally came down from her orgasm, Ford was still inside her. “Welcome home,” she said.

“You’re going to be the death of me, woman,” he said, smiling. “Best welcome home ever.”

“Well, I am an overachiever,” she quipped.

“That’s one of the things I love about you,” he replied. Ford pulled out of her. “Stay here while I dispose of this.”

Tessa moaned. “I couldn’t move if I wanted to.”

Getting up, Ford tossed the condom in the trash before returning to bed to cuddle with her. They lay there for a while until his stomach rumbling broke the silence.

“I can make sandwiches if you’re hungry.”

“I hate to move, but I’m starving,” Ford said as he stood. “I wanted to get back to you as soon as possible, so I left before breakfast was served.”

Tessa’s heart swelled at his words, but she groaned as she stood and stretched, every muscle in her body relaxed. “Why don’t you shower? I’ll have everything ready for you when you’re finished.”

“A shower in my own bathroom sounds good,” he said, disappearing into the bathroom and turning on the water.

Tessa dressed, her body still tingling, and headed into the kitchen. The night before, she made a sweet potato and pumpkin soup, which she set on the stove. From the fridge, she gathered the Italian cold cuts, cheese, pesto, and ciabatta rolls she bought from the deli.

As she cut the rolls and spread pesto on each half and mozzarella, her thoughts drifted to yesterday's meeting.

There were still so many moving pieces she needed to address. Could she pull it off in such a short time? Simone had placed a lot of faith in her ability. Was it misplaced? A sliver of doubt crept into her mind, but she shook it off.

Concentrating on the sandwiches, she loaded them with salami, mortadella, pepperoni, and prosciutto. Then she slid them into the toaster oven to melt the cheese.

Ford came in dressed in jeans, barefoot and bare-chested. Tessa froze mid-action as she took in the sight of him with droplets of water glistening on his body and sighed. "You can't do that to me," she said. "You look too yummy."

He smirked. "Good. Because after I eat, I fully intend to eat you."

Her cheeks flushed. It was a good thing the toaster oven dinged, because Tessa knew her mouth was hanging open and she would have jumped his bones right then.

"Saved by the bell," she quipped.

Ford chuckled as he got bowls and plates from the cupboard. "You're going to need to build up your strength, sweetheart."

They teased each other as they ate the soup and sandwiches. Tessa told him how the meeting with Simone and Mia went. He listened intently and asked some thoughtful

questions and told her how proud she must feel and how proud he was of her.

His words warmed her heart. Then, after the soup was gone, after the sandwiches were consumed, and after placing the dishes in the dishwasher, Ford took her hand.

“Now,” he said, tugging her to the bedroom, “it’s time to keep my promise.

Tessa’s pulse quickened. This was how she wanted every homecoming to end.

The sky was a riot of dark gray and soft salmon as Ford and Tessa made their way to Emelia and Titus's house just outside town.

Neither of them had been to the house and were looking forward to seeing Emelia's new studio, where she would be giving cooking classes and making YouTube videos.

They followed a pretty tree-lined street past houses and farms until they arrived.

Pulling into the driveway, they saw a few people had already arrived. Ford killed the engine and reached for the bottle of wine they brought.

"What a charming house!" Tessa exclaimed. It was an older home painted a warm yellow with white trim. Light spilled from the windows, giving it a welcoming glow. Flowering bushes lined the walkway.

They knocked, but the door was open, so they followed the faint hum of voices and laughter to a massive wooden deck at the back of the house. They passed the living room with its brick fireplace dominating one wall and through a kitchen that Tessa imagined Emelia loved. Lots of room to move around. Polished stainless appliances and white cabinets stood in contrast to the dark granite countertops. Tessa could easily imagine Emelia bustling around in it. Tonight both green and pasta salads, potatoes, baked beans, and trays of appetizers filled the counters.

Ford placed a hand on her back, urging her forward. They stepped onto a huge wooden deck with twinkling string lights and a massive stone firepit surrounded by a

half dozen Adirondack chairs. It was a warm night, but Tessa could just imagine all the friends sitting around it, talking and laughing. The smoky scent of grilled food mingled with the smell of ... Tessa could only hope for some of Emelia's cinnamon buns. Dex was unpacking bottles of beer into an enormous cooler.

Before Tessa could take another step, a rush of warmth and a blur of fur collided with her. A wet tongue slathered her hand. Tessa laughed, startled.

"Leo!" shouted Emelia. "Sit."

The pup stopped and plopped onto his haunches in front of Tessa, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth. He cocked his head as if asking if he was a good boy.

Emelia hurried over, leash in hand.

"Sorry about that," Emelia said as she leaned over and secured a leash onto Leo's collar. "He doesn't get much company."

Tessa scooped down to ruffle his ears. "It's okay. He actually listens to you. The dogs I had when I was young were wild."

Emelia laughed. "Titus has been working with him, teaches him like a drill sergeant, plus I bring him to Paws for Caring sometimes."

"Looks like you have a new best friend." Ford's deep voice came up behind her, startling Tessa.

Tessa stood and turned, brushing her hands on her pants. "He's a cutie, all right."

"Should I be jealous?" Ford teased.

“Ha ha.” She rolled her eyes.

Ford handed the bottle of wine to Emelia. “Whatever is on the grill smells amazing and is making me hungry.”

“Oh, Titus has something for everyone,” Emelia gushed, taking the bottle of wine from Ford. “Let’s see.” She tapped her finger on her chin. “We have chicken, sausage, hamburgers and, for the vegetarians, of which I am not, veggie burgers.” She looked at Ford. “Why don’t you go over and see if he needs any help?”

“Good idea,” Ford replied, heading over to where the guys were hanging out.

Tessa watched him walk over and back-clap the guys. “Smart, Emelia,” Tessa said, smirking.

Emelia shrugged. “These guys hate small talk and like to feel macho. I guess grilling checks both boxes.”

Tessa nodded. Her gaze drifted to the corner, and she saw Isabelle, Felicia, and Naomi with their heads together, laughing.

“Dani and Joy will be here soon, and then we can eat,” said Emelia, taking Tessa’s hand and heading over.

“I can’t wait to see your work barn,” Tessa said. “Have you finished it?”

“Almost,” Emelia replied. “There’ll be a tour after dinner.”

The patio was designed with comfort in mind. Inviting brown rattan chairs with cream-colored cushions were thoughtfully arranged for intimate conversations. Two facing sectional sofas were in one corner, and a long wooden table flanked by twelve

rattan chairs and glowing candles was in another.

There was an outdoor kitchen next to the grill. Tessa was almost jealous. Not of Emelia and Titus and what they had but because she always hoped that she'd marry, have a house and a couple of rug rats running around.

While she and Ford had something special, Tessa wasn't sure either of them was ready to marry. Ford was slowly opening up after chasing his demons, and she had bad guys from her past chasing her.

When they reached the group, Tessa was greeted with hugs and kisses while Emelia poured herself and Tessa a glass of wine.

"We'll wait until the rest arrive before making a toast," Emelia said.

They didn't have to wait long. Dani and Ryker arrived first, with Joy and Liam right behind them. After some good-natured ribbing from the guys about why it took them so long, Dani and Joy joined the women while the guys chatted around the grill.

"To good friends and gatherings," said Emelia as she raised her glass high.

"Hear! Hear!" The women clinked glasses.

Emelia leaped to her feet. "I almost forgot about the appetizers. I'll be right back."

She disappeared into the house. It didn't take her long to return. Emelia passed a tray to the guys and brought over another. Tessa looked at the assortment, and her mouth watered.

"So what we have here," said Emelia, gesturing to each appetizer, "are smoked jalapeno poppers, cranberry brie bites, and bacon-wrapped dates."

“Yum,” exclaimed the women as they eagerly placed some on the small plates that were on the table. Tessa grabbed a popper. The heat from the smoked jalapeno filled with creamy cheese melted on her tongue.

“Emelia, I love what you’ve done with the patio,” Joy exclaimed as she glanced around at the twinkling lights. “The outdoor kitchen is new, right?”

“Yes. It was a gift from me to Titus, who loves to grill. This way, he doesn’t mess up my kitchen.” Emelia winked.

“Hmmm, I wonder if Will would like that for our farm-to-table dinners?” Isabelle mused.

“Probably,” replied Emelia. “Talk to Titus and find out what he likes and dislikes about it.”

Turning her attention to Tessa, Emelia asked, “I hear you and Mia got together and she’s doing the catering for the animal shelter event. Have you had a chance to taste her food?”

Tessa smiled. “Oh yes indeed! It’s fabulous. We still need to get together to finalize the menu.”

“It’s rather short notice, isn’t it?” asked Felicia, raising a brow.

Tessa blew out her breath. Dare she voice a concern about it? Why not? These women wouldn’t judge her for being worried.

“Well,” she began hesitantly. “Apparently, the original venue burned to the ground and the event planner and caterer bowed out. Scheduling problems.”

“Fire? Burned to the ground,” Joy repeated her words.

“Yeah,” Tessa said, trying to sound casual. She had googled it while waiting for Ford to come home. The headlines made her a little nervous. “Historic venue goes up in flames: Investigator suspects faulty electrical.” Then another, “Questions remain on fire.” And let’s not forget: “Chairman of shelter’s event makes no comment.”

Each article was vague, but together they painted an unsettling picture.

“Boy, that’s an omen,” Joy said. “Although I’m glad this new venue worked out. The animal shelter needs all the money they can raise. So many animals are being brought there.”

“Fire?”

Ford’s deep voice behind Tessa startled her. She hadn’t wanted to mention it to him because he’d worry—too late now.

She turned to find him just a foot away. “Um, yeah?”

His brows knitted together, but he didn’t press her further. Not yet anyway. Tessa sensed a serious conversation about this when they got home.

“Food’s on!” yelled Titus. Tessa was thankful for the interruption.

Tessa blew a sigh of relief and joined the others as they filled their plates. The rest of the evening was all laughter and fun, but the fire lingered in her mind.

No matter how hard she tried to relax, a gray cloud loomed over the event as she anticipated the upcoming conversation with Ford about the fire, hoping it wouldn’t spoil the event for her.

The day of the animal shelter fundraiser had finally arrived.

Tessa pulled on a pair of slacks and a short-sleeved top. She couldn't stop staring at the delicate rose quartz pendant that Ford had given her the night before. It was a stunning pale pink stone on a silver chain, and Ford mentioned the stone symbolized love. She couldn't wait to discuss that further with him.

It would look perfect with her outfit for the event—a V-neck, knee-length black dress with a floral overlay. The dress and matching heels were in a garment bag already packed in her car.

Ford had left earlier to change and promised to meet her there later.

Their discussion about the fire at the previous venue wasn't as bad as Tessa thought. He was worried and wanted to make sure everything was all right.

Locking her apartment, she walked down the busy alleyway, saying hello to a couple of shopkeepers on her way to her car. Passing PushYourLimits gym, Tessa waved to the receptionist, Sheila O'Connor, who always had a cheerful smile on her face. She'd spoken to the bubbly woman a couple of times and enjoyed talking to her.

Despite predictions of an afternoon thunderstorm, the sky remained clear. Tessa crossed her fingers that it would pass them by. She drove over, singing to her favorite playlist.

Could life get any better?

When she arrived at the venue, she noticed a couple of delivery vans and several cars parked near the entrance. She immediately recognized the Plated Perfection logo on one van. Good. Mia was here. She reached in the back seat for her garment bag and locked the car. Tessa smiled and waved as she saw Titus carrying platters of desserts on his way in; he nodded in return.

The leaves on the potted plants and trees flanking the double doors were lush and vibrant. Someone had placed strands of twinkling lights through the branches.

The entrance looked magical, and Tessa hoped the event-goers entering would feel the same way. Her heart was racing with excitement.

The past couple of weeks had been both stressful and exhilarating, but everything had just fallen into place. She hoped Simone would appreciate that.

Pushing open the wooden doors, she stepped into the main hall and stopped. It was transformed into a wonderland.

Pictures of adoptable dogs and cats were tacked to a bulletin board titled Meet Your New Best Friend with cute sayings underneath. Adoption details were printed next to each animal. It was a clever idea that came to her after meeting Emelia's dog, Leo, whose face was so expressive, she could almost read his mind.

Daisy, the beagle: "I'm sniffing out my forever home. Is it with you?"

Buddy, the black Newfoundland: "I've got you covered. Literally."

And from a pair of tabby kittens named Luna and Sunshine: "Double the trouble, double the love."

Tessa giggled. That was the cutest thing. Oh lordy, she wanted to adopt them all.

She glanced at the round tables draped with white linens placed around the main hall. Each adorned with votive candles and a floral centerpiece compliments of Nicki, owner of Petals to Go.

Every arrangement was topped with ribbon pet collars and small pictures of a cat or dog on a pick peeking out of the flowers.

Nicki had chosen gerbera daisies in yellow and hot pink. Tessa recognized the green ferns and silver eucalyptus, but what were the round globes of yellow? Were they Billy Buttons? They were cheerful and whimsical. She'd have to ask. Nicki had chosen well.

Making her way toward the kitchen, she heard Emelia laughing. Mia was giving directions to a volunteer. The rich aromas of freshly baked goods, fresh-brewed coffee, and earthy herbs mingled with the scent of the flowers.

She stepped into the kitchen, and the selection of food overwhelmed her, from the bruschetta topped with creamy ricotta and a drizzle of honey to a platter of crostini layered with arugula to the puff pastry tartlets with caramelized onions and goat cheese.

"You've really outdone yourself!" she exclaimed. Emelia was putting the finishing touches on a tray of bright yellow lemon bars and chocolate truffles dusted with cocoa powder.

"This looks stunning." Simone had come into the kitchen. "You've done a great job of pulling everything together in such a short time."

"Thanks," said Tessa. "Well, I better change. The event will start soon." She grabbed

her change of clothes and headed for the ladies' room. She finished applying mascara when she heard voices and laughter.

The first guests arrived. The harpist was playing a cheerful tune. Tessa rushed to the welcoming table, greeting the attendees as they signed in.

Several servers were already mingling with trays of appetizers and glasses of champagne. The event was off to a great start.

"Hey, beautiful." Ford's deep, rich voice whispered over her shoulder. She turned to look at him.

Oh, my!

Her heart fluttered. The Brotherhood had just walked in, but she could only see Ford in a tailored suit, his broad shoulders filling out his jacket, and she licked her lips.

"Don't," he murmured, his voice a low growl. "Otherwise, I'll have a hard-on all night."

Tessa laughed. "You look handsome," she replied, her pulse racing. "Keep that thought. I really have to mingle and make sure everything is running smoothly."

Ford smirked. "I'll be watching you." He stepped aside with a wink and joined several of his friends at the bar.

Tessa flitted around, checking on the food, the liquor, making small conversation, and watching the silent auction. As the evening progressed and the donation bids increased, she was confident that Simone would be delighted by the event's success.

Simone caught her eye and waved her over. "Tessa, there's a small problem I need

your help with.”

“Problem?” Tessa mentally groaned. Everything had been so perfect up until now.

“Just something minor out back,” Simone said, looping her arm through Tessa’s.

Tessa nodded. “Let’s go.”

Simone steered Tessa through the busy kitchen, weaving past servers, trays of food and kitchen help, toward another door near the back and nudged it open.

Tessa hesitated. It was not well lit, and she squinted to adjust her eyes. She took a step forward. “Is there another light?”

“On the back wall,” Simone replied. “Keep walking.”

Tessa yelped when she stubbed her toe on a bucket left in the hall. The hum of conversation and music faded behind them, replaced with the echo of their footsteps and the faint scent of cleaning supplies.

“What’s back here that needs my attention?” Tessa questioned.

Simone glanced over her shoulder. “You’ll see.”

Before she could ask again, a cool draft brushed Tessa’s skin. Her pulse quickened. The farther they moved from the kitchen, her unease grew. The hallway was too narrow, too isolated.

“Simone?” Tessa stopped suddenly, turning to glance at Simone.

Shadows played tricks on Simone’s features, softening her smile into something

sinister. “Don’t worry, Tessa. It’ll make sense soon.”

The hairs on the back of Tessa’s neck prickled. Something wasn’t right. But it was too late.

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Tessa's head throbbed. She blinked, but her vision remained blurred. Bile slithered up her gut as she realized the darkness wasn't her vision failing—there was a bag over her head.

Her breath came in tortured huffs, each inhale pulling rough, scratchy fabric against her skin. The musty smell mingled with the faint, sour tang of her own sweat. She tested the material with her tongue. Burlap.

Her mind scrambled for answers. Where the hell was she? And who took her?

The last thing she remembered was ... the fundraiser. Ford whispering in her ear. The event filled with laughter and the clinking of glasses. Then a dimly lit hall. Simone! Her laughing face appeared in Tessa's mind. Oh God, was Simone here too?

"Simone," she whispered. She swallowed hard and tried again. "Simone?"

Silence. No answer.

Was Simone all right? Was she even here?

Her pulse quickened as she tried to move her arms. Panic set in when she realized they were tied behind her back, the rope biting into her skin, scraping her wrists raw. She couldn't see. She couldn't move, and Tessa started hyperventilating until she forced herself to calm down.

Breathe. Think.

She inhaled slowly and strained her ears to listen. It was quiet—eerily so. Where am I?

For sure, she was no longer at the event.

Tessa shivered. A cold damp chill seeped into her skin; mildew tickled her nose.

Oh God, Ford! He must be frantic looking for her.

Her heart started racing. She was certain she was in some kind of empty building. She heard no footsteps, no noise, no cars going by. Had she been abandoned? Damien must have found her, but how?

It felt like hours since she'd been tied to the chair, but it probably wasn't.

The anticipation, Tessa decided, was much worse than the danger. She had no way to prepare herself.

She was alone with her spiraling thoughts.

She might have dozed off for a second when the sound of heavy boots echoed nearby, jolting her awake. Tessa froze.

A door creaked as it opened, allowing dim light to permeate the bag. Tessa swallowed her scream. Who was there? Were they going to kill her? Torture her?

There was a low murmur of voices as they approached. Tessa forced herself to stay still, even though her pulse roared in her ears. The footsteps stopped in front of her.

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice said, sending a cold chill down her spine. “Looks like our wayward bitch is awake.”

Tessa’s heart plummeted. The sudden chill in her body had nothing to do with the temperature in the room.

She knew that voice. And she knew nothing good was about to happen.

“Tessa sure knows how to throw a party,” exclaimed Dex, snagging another crostini from the silver tray the server was holding. After tossing it in his mouth, he reached for another one before the waiter chuckled and moved on to a different group.

Ford nodded absently. “Yeah. She sure is talented.” He glanced around the lively crowd, looking for Tessa. The air buzzed with laughter and excitement. The harpist played softly in the corner, but he couldn’t focus. It’d been a while since he last saw her. She was working the room, talking to donors and making sure everything was perfect. He was so proud of her. Another successful event. But where was she?

“I bet this raises a lot of money for the animal shelter,” Dex said, his voice muffled as he swallowed another appetizer. “Man, these are so good.”

“At the rate you’re consuming them, there’ll be nothing left for anyone else,” Ford teased.

Dex smirked and gestured toward the kitchen. “Have you looked in there? There’s enough food to feed an army.”

Before Ford could answer, Titus walked over with three bottles of beer and handed Dex and Ford one. “Cheers,” they said, clinking bottles. Ford took a long swig. The beer was cold going down his throat.

“I think Emelia and Mia outdid themselves,” said Titus, taking another swig of beer. “Tessa was so smart to have them cater this. But then, anything Emelia does is

perfect.”

“Biased much?” quipped Dex.

Titus punched him lightly on the shoulder. “Wiseass,” he muttered.

Ford smirked, shaking his head at the playful exchange. These guys. It was always the same, just good-natured ribbing. At least they kept things light, although his own unease about Tessa was beginning to worry him.

The event was winding down as the crowd murmured goodbye. Ford wondered where Tessa was, the knot in his stomach tightening. A sense of dread crept in. It wasn’t like her to miss this part of the event. Where was she?

Ford’s heart was racing, and he kept wiping his damp hands down his pants. He would not panic.

Repeat: He would not panic.

But where the hell was Tessa?

Unable to spot her, he went back to the kitchen, where the crew was washing dishes and cleaning up. Mia and Emelia were boxing up leftover food, the rich aroma of basil and cinnamon still lingering in the air.

Tessa had mentioned that they were giving leftovers to a shelter in town catering to the homeless.

God bless them. Ford’s heart swelled with pride that they thought of the less fortunate.

“Have either of you seen Tessa?” he asked, hoping they couldn’t hear the stress in his voice.

Mia looked up, her brow furrowed as she scanned her surroundings, seemingly searching for Tessa. “Not recently. Although I’ve been so busy, I could have missed her.”

“Same here,” said Emelia, brushing the hair from her face. “I’ve been in and out of the kitchen.” She thought for a moment. “I saw her talking to Simone a while ago. Check with her.”

Ford’s heart sank as he walked back to the main hall.

He spotted Simone in a corner, laughing with a donor, and when she finished her conversation, Ford walked over. “Simone, have you seen Tessa?” Her sequined top shimmered under the lights as she turned to him.

She paused, tilted her head. “I saw her earlier but not recently. Have you checked outside or in the kitchen?”

“She’s not in the kitchen. I’ll look outside.” Ford forced a smile.

Ford thanked her and headed to the parking lot. The cool late-afternoon air was a sharp contrast to the warmth of the party. Ford searched the area. There were still quite a few cars there, including Tessa’s. A faint prickling started at the back of his neck. He wasn’t panicking—yet.

Ford’s pulse quickened. He pulled out his phone and fired off a quick text. Where are you?

Nothing.

He dialed her phone but didn't hear it ring, and it went straight to voicemail.

Weird. Not like Tessa to not answer.

The knot in his gut tightened. Something wasn't right.

Walking back to the main hall, he spotted Chase and Liam by the bar.

"Have either of you seen Tessa?"

They shook their heads. "Why?" asked Liam, his brow cocked.

"I haven't seen her, and she's not answering her phone," Ford said.

"Let me talk to the guys. We can spread out to see if we spot her," said Chase, his expression serious. He glanced around the event. "There are still quite a few people here. We don't want anyone to panic. She may be in the back room searching for something."

Chase moved quickly, tapping the shoulders of the men in the Brotherhood scattered around the event and informing them of the situation. One by one, their gazes shifted to Ford, and they nodded before melting into the crowd.

Liam, Chase, and Ford walked through the kitchen but said nothing to Mia and Emelia, who looked at them curiously.

There were several doors, and they each took one. Ford's pulse thundered in his ears as he opened one door, stepping into a dimly lit hallway.

The faint scent of Tessa's perfume lingered in the air. She had been here.

The hall was cluttered with stacked chairs and boxes marked as event supplies as Ford carefully made his way around the mess. The stillness set his mind on edge.

No Tessa.

So where did she go? He looked around, his gut clenching tighter.

He moved forward, stepping around a toppled box. His shoe caught on something, and a faint glint of light on the floor caught his eye. The rose quartz necklace he'd given her was lying there. Ford's breath caught as he bent down to pick it up, his fingers trembling. The chain was broken as if yanked violently from her neck.

Fuck.

He clutched the necklace tight. A wave of dread and fear washed over him, followed by a surge of fury.

"Tessa!" he bellowed, his voice echoing in the empty hallway.

No answer.

Cold rage soared through his body. Someone had taken her.

The door to the room creaked open, letting in light from the kitchen. Chase and Liam entered.

"What happened?" asked Chase. "Did you find Tessa?"

Ford shook his head and held up the necklace. "She's gone." He closed his eyes and exhaled. "I gave this to her."

“Damn,” Liam said. “Okay, stand back and let’s look for clues.”

It didn’t take them long to find a scuff mark on the floor near a toppled box. “I bet Tessa was dragged out of here,” said Chase.

Ford slipped the necklace into his pocket. His jaw clenched so hard it ached. He couldn’t shake the image of the fear Tessa must have felt or the thought of her being hurt—or worse.

Whoever did this was going to regret it. Ford wouldn’t stop until he got Tessa safely back.

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She's gone .

Ford's mind was blank, his thoughts crashing and scattering as panic set in. Where was Tessa? Was she all right? Was she afraid?

Stupid! Of course, she was afraid. Christ, he was afraid.

Who could have taken her? Damien? Malina? His fists clenched as he paced the small hall. There had been no whispers, no actions, nothing to suggest they were still interested in Tessa. If not them, then who?

"This changes everything," said Liam, pulling Ford from his thoughts. "If she was kidnapped, we can't waste any time. I want to call in official backup, but..." He hesitated, glancing at Chase and Ford, a storm of indecision in his eyes.

"You do what you have to," replied Chase. "But you know the Brotherhood has more resources than the sheriff's department."

Liam exhaled sharply. "I know, and I don't like it. I can hold off for a while, but then I'll have to call it in. You have a small window here to do what you need to do."

Chase crossed his arms. "First thing is to figure out how and why she was taken. This took some planning. We need to know the reason for taking her."

"Mia, Emelia, and Simone claimed they hadn't seen Tessa in a while," said Ford. "I'll

talk to Simone again. She might remember something, anything. Oh God, if we can't find her, I don't know what..." He closed his eyes for a moment, then took a deep breath. "We just have to find her."

"We will, I promise," Chase said. "I'll gather the men and head back to the campus." He looked at Ford. "Come there when you're finished."

"I'll check around outside. Now that we know she's been taken, someone had to have driven her," said Liam. He glanced at Chase. "Keep me in the loop."

Chase nodded, and the men left.

That was the one thing that Ford liked about having the Brotherhood taking on paid cases. Their mission wasn't as private anymore, and Liam was privy to some of the information they could gather. It was a long cry from when no one outside the organization knew what they were capable of.

Ford found Simone near the bar, scanning the dwindling crowd. When she saw him, she frowned and took a step toward him.

"Any news? Did you find Tessa?" she asked anxiously.

His jaw clenched as he shook his head. "No." His voice trailed off as he struggled to keep his emotions in check.

"I'm so sorry." Simone reached out as if to touch his arm but pulled back. Her fingers moved instead to rub a gold and ruby pendant hanging from her neck—a snake coiled around a dagger. "I wish I could help more, but I noticed nothing out of the ordinary."

Ford narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure there wasn't anything unusual? Maybe

someone watching her? Something?" he begged.

Simone's hand froze on the pendant. She hesitated, as if searching her memory. "Well, it may mean nothing, but I saw Tessa talking to a man near the side exit a while ago. I didn't get a good look at him, though. I think he was tall." She looked him up and down. "Maybe your height with dark hair."

Ford's stomach dropped. "The side exit?" He looked around. "Where is it?"

"By the kitchen," Simone replied. "I don't believe Mia or Emelia were there, but maybe one of the waiters saw her."

"Thank you. If you remember anything, please call me."

"Of course," said Simone. "I hope you find her soon. I'm worried about her. "

So was he. But who was this tall, dark-haired man? It wouldn't be like he'd stand out in this crowd. Fuck, half the men in the Brotherhood were tall with dark hair. This was like finding a needle in the haystack. Except Tessa's life depended upon him finding her.

Simone watched as Ford stormed off. She took a slow sip of her sparkling water, her mind racing.

Too easy, she thought.

Mentioning a tall, dark-haired man was plausible but vague. There were quite a few of them at the event. Ford would be chasing windmills for a while.

Her hand brushed the cool surface of her pendant, the gold snake coiled around a dagger, its ruby eye gleaming. It was a silent reminder of the power she held.

She stepped into the kitchen, where Emelia and Mia were still packing up. She forced a slight tremble in her voice as she asked, “This is terrifying. You don’t think Tessa left on her own, do you?”

“Never,” exclaimed Emelia. “She is too professional to just leave.”

“Something happened to her,” said Mia. “I hope they find her soon.”

“So do I,” Simone replied. She turned to leave. “Let me know when you hear something.”

“Will do,” Emelia replied.

Simone stepped back into the main hall. The staff was cleaning up. The guests had left, and now it was her turn to disappear.

The cool night air wrapped around her as she melted into the shadows, her mind already planning the next steps.

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The men gathered at the command center. Time was of the essence, not only because Liam could only hold off for so long but because of the imminent danger Tessa was in.

The atmosphere was tense as Ford yanked out a chair and sat at the table. “What’ve you found so far?” he asked Dex, his voice sharp.

Dex let it go and merely shook his head. “Not much. Cameras show a black van pulling up by the door. Two men got?—”

“Who are they?” Ford interrupted. God, if he didn’t get an answer soon, he felt like he might explode.

Dex shot him a pointed look. “As I was saying,” he continued, “two men exited the van and entered the building. Their faces were hidden by hats. When they came out, Tessa was with them and had a burlap bag over her head, struggling to walk. They may have drugged her. I followed the van through town for a while, but then they disappeared.”

Fuck. Ford’s stomach twisted. This was worse than he thought. Who were these men? “The plates?”

Dex shook his head. “Too blurry to make out.”

Ford slammed his fist against the table. “Damn it. Where could they have taken

Tessa? And why?"

No one answered.

"Easy, Ford." Chase broke the silence. "It might help to ask Simone if she has any more information about the man Tessa was talking to. Ford, why don't you stop by where she's staying?"

Ford nodded. "Good idea. There has to be something—anything—to help us identify him." His eyes flicked back to Dex, whose fingers were flying across the keyboard. "Dex, did you uncover anything regarding the event's personnel?"

"Nothing. Everyone checks out clean."

Ford leaned back and blew out a breath. They were running out of leads and time.

"There has to be something we missed," Ford said as he raked a hand through his hair. "Keep digging."

"Not a problem," replied Dex. "I'm running a deeper background check on the attendees and referencing the vehicles in the area. If the van's been spotted before, I'll find it."

Chase stood. "We're not getting anywhere sitting around. Why don't we split up and head back to the venue? There might be something we missed."

The other men agreed.

"Great. I'll pay Simone a visit, and hopefully, she knows a little more," said Ford as he headed for the door.

Night had fallen by the time Ford pulled up in front of a small boutique hotel downtown.

A wrought-iron sign with the hotel's name swung gently in the breeze over the entrance. Bright flowers in boxes framed the windows as a splash of color in the night. He killed the engine and stepped out, glancing at the twinkling stars overhead, and he let out a heavy sigh.

Pushing open the glass door, he stepped into the small but welcoming lobby, with polished tile floors and vintage-style chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Floral arrangements were placed around, and the sweet, almost cloying scent of lilies and roses permeated the air.

A young woman stood behind the reception desk bent over a computer screen, her long braid hanging over one shoulder. She looked up when Ford approached.

"How can I help you?" she asked with a polite smile.

"I'm looking for Simone Benedetto. She's staying here."

The receptionist tapped a few keys and frowned. "I'm sorry, sir, she checked out a short time ago."

Ford's stomach dropped. No. She couldn't leave. "Did she leave a forwarding address or phone number?"

"I—" The receptionist looked at the computer. "No, I don't see that she did. She paid her bill and left in a hurry."

Ford cursed under his breath. This was too coincidental. "Did she say anything before she left? Like why was she leaving? Or did anyone come to see her?"

The woman shook her head. “Not that I know of. I’m sorry I don’t have more information.”

“Do you have security cameras in the lobby?” Ford knew he was brusque, but Tessa’s life was on the line.

“I don’t have access to them. I need the manager’s approval, and he’s not here right now. I’m sorry.”

He slapped the desk. “Thanks,” he muttered as he turned toward the door.

After leaving the hotel, Ford drove back to the command center. Dex was still at his computer.

“Can you hack into the security cameras at the hotel or the surrounding area?”

“Why?” Dex looked up, a small frown on his face.

“Simone left suddenly this evening, and I need to know where she went.”

“Give me a sec,” Dex said, already tapping on his keyboard.

Ford dropped into a chair and put his head in his hands. His mind raced with questions. Had someone scared Simone into leaving? Did she know something about Tessa’s abduction?

Or worse, was she involved somehow?

The clock was ticking, and they still were no closer to finding Tessa or getting answers.

Ford felt the weight of failure creeping closer. He'd promised to protect Tessa, and he failed.

"Got something," Dex exclaimed, pulling Ford out of his thoughts. Ford got up and stood behind him. Dex clicked through a series of grainy feeds from the hotel's exterior cameras.

"Here. Simone's car is parked out front." They watched the feed and saw Simone step out of the hotel, glancing around. She carried a small suitcase. Then she got into her silver sedan and headed down the street.

"Follow her," said Ford.

Dex switched feeds, tracking the sedan as it wove through downtown. "She's heading out of town."

They watched the car make a series of turns before turning onto a busy street, blending with the traffic.

Had they lost her?

Dex adjusted his focus. "Got her! She's passing Main Street now. No. Wait. Damn it, we lost her."

Ford slammed his fist on the table. "Fuck."

"Got to admit, she's good. Planned the traffic just right," said Dex.

"Did you get a plate number?"

Dex nodded. "Yes. I'll run it through traffic cams and see if she pops up somewhere

else. It'll take time. Although once she leaves town, cameras are spotty.”

Damn. Time was one thing they didn't have. They had to find Simone and fast. Ford was sure Simone knew more than she claimed. Every second wasted, the danger to Tessa grew.

40

It'd been hours since Tessa had any contact with Damien.

She still didn't understand what was happening. Her mind reeled with fear. Her wrists throbbed where the tight rope bit into her skin. The damp, musty air in the warehouse was suffocating her. She shivered, though the cold was only part of her suffering.

She had to pee but didn't want to ask to go to the bathroom. They'd probably say no and tell her to pee in her pants, which would be just as humiliating.

And where was Ford?

He had to know she was missing by now. How would the Brotherhood locate her?

The sound of the door creaking open made her flinch. Was she going to die now?

Damien strolled in, followed by Marty. "Comfy?" he asked, leaning comfortably against the wall, his cold eyes fixed on her.

She glared at him, refusing to take the bait.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, it'll all be over soon," he said with a smirk. "Malina has plans for you."

Oh, no. Tessa's stomach clenched. The mention of Malina's name made her blood run cold. "Damien, you don't have to do this," she said, her voice cracking.

He chuckled. "Save your breath, Tessa. No one crosses Malina and wins. I value my life too much."

The shrill ring of a phone shattered the silence. Damien pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen and frowned. "Fuck," he muttered before answering the call. "Yeah? You what? Another fire to put out? ... The shipment is missing? Damn. No problem. We're just waiting on you." His gaze slid back to Tessa, and he smirked. "Yes, she's comfortable. It's just one big party here. See you then."

Tessa cocked her head, trying to catch snippets of the conversation, but none of it made sense except for his "one big party." It was a party all right, just not for her.

He hung up and turned to Marty. "Malina's hung up on some kind of disaster. She won't be here for another day at the least."

"What are we supposed to do with her until then?" Marty jerked his thumb toward Tessa.

Damien chuckled. "Well, why don't we untie her and let her go?"

Tessa's ears perked up. Would they let her go? She sure didn't want to stick around for this Malina.

She must have looked too optimistic, because Marty and Damien looked at each other and started laughing.

"Sorry, sweetheart, but you're never getting out of here alive," said Damien. "The one thing Malina hates more than anything is betrayal. You should never have gone to that cop."

Marty stroked his chin. "Why don't we toss her in that small room? There's no

window, and it has a lock on the door. She won't be going anywhere, so we don't have to worry about her."

Damien nodded. He walked over, pulled a knife from his pocket and cut the bindings around her wrists. Tessa moaned as the blood rushed back to her hands.

He roughly pulled her up, dragging her out to a dimly lit hallway. They reached a small windowless room. He shoved her inside and slammed the door.

Her shoulders sagged as she looked around the room. Something, which Tessa prayed wasn't blood, stained the bare concrete walls. Someone had scratched the word "help" on it. The floor was cracked in places, with small puddles of water seeping through. The air was stale and musty, with dust motes dancing under the single flickering light. At least there would be no surprises from rodents or bugs.

Tessa tried to run and push the door open, but she was too weak. She heard a click and footsteps walking away. Great.

She looked around the room once more. It was mostly barren, with a stack of pallets in the corner and a broken, rusty chair. She wasn't expecting the Ritz, but still. It was worse than what she imagined. The only good thing was that she was alone. No Damien, no Marty and no Malina. At least for a while.

Her heart raced when she spotted a bucket in the corner. It was humiliating that she'd have to pee in a bucket, but the urgent need to relieve herself won. She wasted no time pulling up her dress, lowering her panties and peeing.

The relief was short-lived because now all there was to do was wait. Wait and imagine what was going to happen to her. Each thought was more terrifying than the last. How would they kill her? Tessa prayed it would be quick, like a bullet through her heart. However, she sensed Malina liked to hurt and torture people, taking her

time enjoying their screams. Tessa's stomach churned.

She wanted to believe she was strong, brave even, capable of withstanding a little pain, but for how long?

The only thing she knew was that she had to hold on. She had to believe that Ford and the Brotherhood would find her. Please hurry, she prayed, her heart racing.

41

“So Simone has disappeared,” Chase said grimly. The men had regathered at the command center, the tension thick in the air. After hours of interviewing the remaining staff cleaning the venue and combing through footage, they had no new leads. Dex’s surveillance hadn’t picked up where Simone had gone. Her license plate wasn’t showing up on any cameras yet.

“I think it’s time to get Tex involved,” said Chase. “Liam has only given us thirty-six hours before he officially reports this.”

Ford groaned and leaned back in his chair. Thirty-six hours? That wasn’t just time, it was an eternity. And Tessa is out there, somewhere, alone, and afraid, while I’m stuck here waiting for answers.

The only time they asked Tex for help was when things got desperate. Despite never meeting him, he knew of the man’s reputation as a genius with computers, access to places Ford never heard about, and that Tex was friends with Chase and a few others in the Brotherhood.

“Ah, just got a hit on a toll booth,” hollered Dex, his fingers flying across the keyboard. “Her car passed through just a short time ago. It looks like she’s heading toward Atlanta.”

“I wonder why?” asked Finn. “Could be just a coincidence.”

Ford huffed and shook his head. “I don’t believe in coincidences,” he snapped.

“Remember, she hired Tessa because the original venue had a fire,” Finn asked. “What if that fire wasn’t an accident? What if someone set it intentionally?”

“Good question,” said Chase, rubbing his jaw. “Dex, can you pull up the fire marshal’s name in that town? I know it’s late, but maybe he’ll answer the phone.”

Dex nodded, and within minutes, Chase had the fire marshal on the line asking him about the fire.

Ford tapped his fingers on the table, his frustration building up. We’re wasting time here. Every second Tessa is gone means she is deeper in trouble.

The team sat in silence, only hearing snippets of the conversation before Chase thanked the man and hung up. They looked at him expectantly.

“Okay. The fire marshal is calling it arson,” said Chase. “He said signs indicated someone used an accelerant and tampered with the security system. They’re still investigating.”

“Well, that answers that,” Ford declared. “We need to know more about Simone.”

Chase dialed Tex and put the phone on speaker. “My man, how are you?”

“Doing fine,” came Tex’s calm voice. “But you’re not calling to shoot the shit. What happened?”

Chase quickly explained the situation—Tessa missing, Simone’s sudden departure, the fire at the historic house and the team’s need for answers. “We need you to investigate Simone Benedetto’s background.

“I’m guessing this needed to be done yesterday?” Tex said.

“You know it. Anything you can do will be helpful,” said Chase, pacing the room.

“Got it.” The line went dead.

“Okay, now we wait,” said Chase, turning to the group. “Dex, keep tracking Simone’s car.”

The room fell silent. Ford was anxious to do something, anything, but he had to be patient. Although waiting wasn’t his strong suit.

The clock on the wall ticked louder with every passing minute. It was now 9p.m. The event ended at six. They were losing time.

It didn’t take Tex long to get back to them. The phone buzzed, and Chase put him on speakerphone. “I gotta say, I dug down as far as I could go. Simone seems on the up and up.”

Ford groaned. Another dead end. He’d hoped that Tex would have something for them.

“Listen, can you send me a picture of her?” asked Tex. “Sometimes facial recognition triggers other information.”

“Dex, do we have pictures from the event?” asked Chase.

Dex shook his head. “No. But I know Isabelle and Naomi were taking a lot of them. I’ll reach out to Isabelle if you’ll touch base with Naomi.”

“Tex, I’ll get back to you ASAP on that,” said Chase. He hung up the phone.

Dex was on the phone with Isabelle immediately. Ford only heard his end of the

conversation, but it sounded like she would email the pictures right over.

Chase had hung up the phone after talking with Naomi. “She’s going to look through her pictures to see if she has any of Simone and send them over.”

Within minutes, Dex’s computer pinged with incoming messages. “Ford, come here and help me pick out the best pictures to send to Tex,” Dex called out.

Ford stood behind Dex while they scrolled through the photos one by one. Pictures of a smiling Tessa standing next to Simone. Simone talking to guests.

Dex zoomed in on each, adjusting brightness and contrast. By the end, they had several really good shots of Simone.

“This one is good,” Ford said, pointing to an image of Simone with her face fully visible. He noticed the interesting pendant she wore. “She was rubbing that when we talked. I wonder if it has any significance?”

They sent several of the clearest shots to Tex. “Done.” Dex leaned back in his chair. “Now we wait.”

The wait was excruciating. The clock kept ticking.

Chase had ordered food to be delivered, which they devoured in silence. They were taking catnaps, not wanting to leave.

Ford stared at the clock on the wall. Eleven hours. Eleven hours had passed since Tessa vanished. Ford hoped Tex would find something soon that would help get Tessa back. It was already 5a.m.

Come on, Tex.

Just then, the phone rang, breaking the silence, and all eyes turned to it. Chase put it on speaker.

“You’re gonna want to hear this,” Tex said, his tone serious.

Ford’s heart thumped in his chest, a mixture of hope and dread washing over him. Hopefully, whatever Tex found would be the key to getting Tessa back.

Tex paused. “Simone isn’t who she says she is.”

42

Tessa huddled on one of the pallets in a corner of the room, her arms wrapped around herself in an attempt to stay warm.

The room was cold, and a chill was seeping into her bones.

She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them and checked her watch, an hour had passed. For a while, she heard the muffled voices of Marty and Damien, but that had been a couple of hours ago.

No, it was silent. Not exactly silent, since she heard water dripping and little feet scurrying around.

Thankfully, the mice, or rats, hadn't bothered her, but for how long? Her stomach growled, and her feet hurt. Somehow, in the chaos, she lost her shoes when they kidnapped her.

She had to get out of here.

Damien hadn't mentioned when Malina would arrive, but Tessa did not want to be here when she did. Somehow, she had to break out or protect herself. The question was how.

What could she use? The pallets? She'd tried to pull one apart before, but no luck. The damn things were heavy, and they must have used a ton of nails to secure them together.

The chair? Maybe. She got up and examined the rusty chair more closely. It was heavy, so there was no way she could swing it at someone. One arm was hanging, and she tugged at it. And tugged. “Come on.” She cursed. She tugged hard, and finally, a piece broke free, but it was too short. Tessa wasn’t sure how that would help her.

She looked around again. There were pipes running out of the room but no vent, so she couldn’t crawl through the ductwork. The room was a prison, with no tools in sight.

Tessa sat down on her crate in despair. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She was going to die here.

Giving herself a few minutes to cry and feel sorry for herself, Tessa took a deep, shuddering breath. She was not a quitter. She wouldn’t die a coward. Think!

Getting up, she searched the room again, looking for something—anything—that could help her. Walking over to the metal door, she inspected it closely. A light bulb went off.

The hinges were rusty. If the hinges were rusted, they would be weak. If they were weak, she might be able to force them loose. Now if she could find something to push up the hinge pin and open the door.

She scanned the room again. Her stomach clenched with tension. Nothing. No tools, no weapons, no box saying, “Open me.” Nothing.

She wasn’t giving up, however. Not now. Not ever.

Tessa got down on her hands and knees and peered under the pallets. Her hands sank into something cold and squishy, and she stifled a scream. A quick glance showed

only dust bunnies—lots of them, a few screws and nails, and several coins. Then her breath caught. Something gleamed way in the back ... could it be? Yes! A screwdriver!

She stretched her arm out, but it was too far away. Now the question was how to get that screwdriver. She carefully removed each pallet one by one into another stack while ignoring the pain and splinters. The exercise wore Tessa out. She was weak from being tied up and weak from hunger but determined to get free. When she finally moved the last pallet, she was able to grab the screwdriver and almost kissed it.

Tessa staggered to her feet and walked over to the door, pressing her ear against it to listen. Silence. No footsteps, no voices. Were Marty and Damien gone? Or waiting for her to escape? It didn't matter. It was now or never. She had to get free.

Tessa slid the screwdriver under the first hinge pin and pushed. And pushed. And pushed.

Nothing.

The pin didn't budge. She bit down a scream. Sweat dripped down her face as she adjusted her grip and tried again with every ounce of strength she had. Forcing back another scream, Tessa took a deep breath. She was going to get out of here or die trying. Taking another jab at it, she pushed up with all her strength.

The pin shifted. Just barely, but it was enough to encourage her to try again. The screwdriver dug painfully into her hand, but she wasn't stopping.

Inch by inch, she pushed until it popped out and fell to the ground with a metallic thump.

She froze, holding her breath, listening. Not hearing any sound on the other side, she repeated the action two more times. When the last pin dropped to the floor, she tested the door. Thank God the door was loose on its frame.

Her heart thundered. Now all she had to do was pop the door hinge up and get out.

The door let out a small creak as she eased it open. She stopped.

Not hearing a sound, she moved silently through the massive space, listening for anything out of the ordinary.

Her eyes darted to the chair Damien had tied her to, the rope now dangling uselessly. She hadn't noticed how huge and decrepit the warehouse was before—abandoned machinery, broken shelves leaning precariously and piles of who knew what scattered haphazardly around.

It was dimly lit by a flickering streetlight and the faint glow of the moon and shadows that seemed to shift and move.

She crept cautiously toward a large window. Peering out through the dirty glass, Tessa saw an empty parking lot except for a black van. It was probably Damien's, she guessed. She wondered where the two men were but wasn't going to spend a lot of time worrying about them. How to get out was her biggest priority.

Her heart raced as she noticed a door at the end of the room. Tessa wondered if it was connected to an alarm and then saw a faint red glow. Nope. Not going that way.

Then she spotted a double front door and ran toward it. Reaching the doors, she shoved one open and stepped outside into a muggy night. The humidity clung to her skin and clothes, but she didn't care. She was free.

Her first step onto a gravel path sent a stabbing pain through her foot. She almost screamed, remembering too late that she wasn't wearing shoes. Looking down, she saw that her feet were smeared with blood and dirt. No matter, she couldn't stop.

She had no idea where she was heading.

As she ran, she found herself in an abandoned industrial area. Surrounding her were buildings in various stages of decay, some boarded up; shattered windows; and graffiti—lots of graffiti. The air was ripe with rot and smelled faintly of sewage.

Where the hell was she?

Overgrown weeds pushed through cracks in the sidewalk. Somewhere in the distance, she heard the faint sounds of dogs barking and traffic. She passed several abandoned cars but kept running, only stepping on thorny weeds several times.

Tessa looked at her watch: 5 a.m. and all was not well, but the good news was, she was free and still alive. And she wasn't going to stop until she was safe.

43

“Y ou’re gonna want to hear this,” said Tex.

The tension in the room was immediate, as everyone had snapped awake when the phone rang. Ford’s stomach churned as he glanced at his watch: 5:30a.m.

It couldn’t be good news. Tessa had to be terrified. Ford hoped she knew that he would never stop looking for her.

“What’ve you got?” asked Chase.

“Simone Benedetto is really Malina Simone Cavelli Benedetto,” Tex replied.

Malina?

Ford’s pulse pounded, racing through his body so fast he thought he’d pass out. Malina, as in the woman Damien was afraid of? The woman who tortured people? This was worse than he thought.

“Explain,” said Chase.

“Malina took her middle name and her grandmother’s maiden name to create a social media cover that legitimized her and her charity work. It’s brilliant, actually. People wouldn’t look any further than what they saw.”

“Makes sense,” Dex said. “That’s what I saw when I checked, tons of events and

charities she was giving to.”

“Yeah. It is a great cover story that doesn’t raise any suspicion,” Tex continued. “However, I got curious when I saw the medallion around her neck. It’s not just jewelry. A snake coiled around a dagger symbolizes stealth and lethal intent and identifies her as head of the family. Her father used to wear the same one.”

Tex paused. “I also searched through old newspaper archives and found a photo from a party showing Malina with her family in Miami. No one else was tagged, just her. I got curious. So I started digging deeper into the family and found a picture of the Cavelli’s, tied to a law enforcement investigation. They are, were, an old Miami drug syndicate. Her father and brothers were famous for their brutality.”

Ford inhaled sharply. Whatever was coming was worse.

“It’s rumored that Malina poisoned them and set the house on fire to take over the family business. Officially, it was ruled an accident. But insiders said it was a power play.”

Ford felt like he’d been punched in the gut. How the hell was Tessa supposed to survive something like that?

Finn put his hand on Ford’s shoulder. “We’re going to get her back.” Ford wished he was as optimistic.

“It turns out she expanded the business in Miami and Atlanta and is still into drugs big-time,” added Tex.

“Why now?” Ford asked. “Why did she come here for Tessa? There isn’t anything on the tape recorder that could be used against her. Tessa’s never met her, never seen her. I don’t get it.” His mind raced as he tried to piece it all together.

“It’s a power play,” Tex replied. “A woman who kills her father and brothers in that type of family? I bet she is cunning and smart and they underestimated her. They overlooked her because she’s a female. Now she’s making a statement so no one makes that mistake again.”

Ford stood, unable to sit any longer. He started pacing, his body unable to stay still. He had to do something, anything, to save Tessa.

Then he stopped pacing and gripped the back of the chair, his knuckles white. “We need to find her. She’s going to kill Tessa.”

The men were silent. What could they say?

“There’s more.” Tex’s voice broke the silence. “I traced a series of financial transactions. Malina’s been moving money through shell corporations. One of those corporations owns property in Haywood Lake.”

“Haywood Lake?” Ford’s heart was hammering. She had to be close. Finally. What were the chances Tessa was there?

“It wasn’t easy to track. Too many layers of fake names and dummy accounts. But I found a transfer to a real estate trust. Then I pulled satellite images. It’s an abandoned warehouse just outside town. I’m sending you the schematics now.”

“Can you pull security feeds from the area?” asked Dex. “If not, I can try.”

“There are no cameras close by. I already checked,” Tex replied.

“Thanks, Tex, we owe you one,” said Chase.

Tex snorted. “You owe me nothing. Just get Ford’s woman back. And maybe you all

might want to think about putting trackers in jewelry or shoes since you guys keep losing women. It's embarrassing."

He hung up.

"Trackers?" asked Ford.

Chase shook his head. "That's a conversation for another time. Right now, we need to come up with a plan and get over to that building. We're bringing Tessa home alive if she's there."

Damn straight, thought Ford. He was ready to kick ass. If Tessa was in that warehouse, he'd tear it apart brick by brick. When he found her, he was never letting her go.

Tessa huddled behind a counter in an abandoned convenience store, the cracked linoleum pressing into her knees. She stopped thinking about her cut-up and bloodied feet a while ago. They were the least of her problems.

Her pulse roared in her ears as she glanced at her watch: 6a.m. She'd been hiding for an hour. It felt like an eternity.

The stale stench of rancid milk and old cigarettes made her stomach churn, but she forced herself to stay still. This store wasn't her first choice, but when she heard voices echoing down the street, she panicked. Uncertain if Damien and Marty or a gang lay in wait, she'd run in.

The door hung ajar, groaning on rusted hinges as she managed to close it more, although it didn't lock.

The floor was littered with old newspapers, greasy food wrappers, and other trash. In the corner there was a bundle of musty clothes chewed on by mice. Someone had been here at some point. She prayed whoever it was wouldn't come back.

Through the grimy window, the sky was streaks of orange and pink bleeding into a dark sky. Dawn was fast approaching, and she knew she needed to run before it got too light. Even though her heart was pounding, she felt fairly safe at the moment. I have to move. I can't stay here. But where else could she go?

Tessa hoped to find a cop or a taxi or beg someone for money to make a call, but

she'd come up empty.

It was as if Haywood Lake, assuming she was still in Haywood Lake, had forgotten this corner of the city and left it to rot.

Every instinct screamed at her to move, to run, but she was afraid of what waited outside. Her heart thudded; her breath was shallow and uneven. I can't wait any longer. When the sun comes up, I'm a sitting duck.

Summoning all the courage she had, Tessa slowly stood, every muscle trembling from exhaustion, ready to make her move.

Movement outside caused her to freeze mid-step. She dropped down behind the counter. Oh God, who was there? Panic clawed at her gut as she frantically scanned the floor for something, anything she could use to defend herself.

There, in the corner! She found shards of glass from a broken bottle. She snatched the largest one, holding it tightly against her chest even as the glass bit into her palm.

The footsteps grew louder. A shadow paused outside the door for a second, then the footsteps started to fade. She let out the breath she was holding and waited.

Minutes ticked by. She started to get up, her legs trembling beneath her. A soft creak cut through the air like a gunshot. Her eyes snapped to the door.

It was moving. She tried to duck down, but a familiar voice drawled, "You're only making it harder on yourself, sweetheart. Come out from behind that counter, and maybe I'll go easy on you."

Oh God, how did Damien find me? Her heart raced with terror. She grasped the shard tighter. No way was she letting him take her back to that warehouse.

“D-don’t hurt me,” she begged as she forced her legs to move. She stood and slowly stepped out from behind the counter.

Damien’s lips curled into a sneer. “You silly woman. Did you think you could get away from me?”

Her chest heaved, but she stepped closer to him. Patience. He extended his arm out to grab her.

Tessa surged forward, slashing the shard across his forearm, putting every ounce of strength she had left into the movement. The jagged glass tore through his flesh, and he roared in pain.

“You bitch!” he bellowed as he let his arm drop and blood began to seep on the floor.

Tessa didn’t wait but bolted out the door. She went to turn, thrilled she made it out, until a pair of arms locked around her waist from behind in a vise.

“Gotcha,” a voice whispered in her ear.

The men huddled around the table, the tension thick in the air as they finalized their strategy.

They only had one shot, a brief window to reach the warehouse and rescue Tessa before Malina could move her—or worse.

From the security footage they saw, they knew two men were there, presumably Damien and Marty. Dex wasn't able to track Malina after she passed into Georgia, so she was the wild card.

“We'll take three cars,” Chase said with a steady but urgent voice. “Ford, Dex and Finn in one. Zach and Titus in another. Will, Colt and I will follow. We'll cover all exits and coordinate the breach when we get there. No one gets out.”

“Let's gear up,” Chase said.

They moved swiftly to the hidden room off Chase's office. It contained all the firepower they needed. Rows of weapons were neatly arranged on the wall along with tactical gear: bulletproof vests, radios, and night-vision goggles.

They all put on bulletproof vests and radios. Ford grabbed a tactical shotgun, checking the chamber, while Dex loaded an M4 carbine suitable for close quarters. Finn, Zach, and the rest chose single pistols with a holstered backup, knives tucked into their pants.

“Everyone ready?” Chase asked, doing a final check of his weapons.

“Locked and loaded,” said Dex.

Thankfully, it was still early, and no one was in the building when they left.

“Let’s move,” said Chase.

They filed out of the building, each in their own thoughts as they climbed into the vehicles. Ford slid into the driver’s seat, gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. The warehouse was about thirty minutes away, and Ford’s mind was racing with fear and anxiety. He couldn’t wait to hold Tessa in his arms again. He couldn’t bear to think of the alternative.

He glanced at his watch. Six thirty. Over twelve hours since Tessa was kidnapped. Was she all right? Was she even still alive?

She had to be frightened, wondering if she’d get rescued. He only prayed that Damien and Marty hadn’t hurt her.

And hopefully, Malina wasn’t there, because things could be far worse. But if wishes were horses, blah blah.

Daylight was creeping in, the sky shifting from indigo and salmon to lighter shades of pink and orange. The cover of night was slipping, and the clock was ticking.

The rescue had to be fast, precise. Lives hung in the balance.

Tessa’s head lolled forward, her breathing shallow. The bruises on her face and arms were no longer painful, just numb.

After Marty grabbed her, her last memory was of Damien's fist slamming into her stomach for no reason other than cruelty. She'd passed out as Marty threw her over his shoulder.

And here she was. Tied to the same chair in the same warehouse she escaped from just a short time ago.

A chill ran down her spine. The surrounding air changed. She sensed fear, and it wasn't only coming from her. Marty and Damien were afraid, too.

A pair of high heels clicked on the concrete floor and stopped in front of her.

Louboutin's, if she had to guess. Shoes she'd never be able to afford, not that she wanted them. And dear lord, why was she focusing on shoes?

Because the alternative was worse. Tessa didn't want to look up. She knew who it was.

Malina.

And Tessa knew her luck had just run out.

"Tsk, ts. What a mess you've gotten yourself into." That voice. Oh God. She knew that voice.

Tessa slowly raised her head. Simone!

No. Malina. How could she not know?

How could she know? She'd never met or seen Malina ... Simone. Whatever the hell her name was.

“I’ll deal with you shortly, my pretty,” Malina said with a cruel smile as she ran her fingers down Tessa’s face. She flinched as nausea threaded its way up her gut.

She glanced over at Marty and Damien, who were looking nervous.

“Imagine my surprise when I arrived half an hour ago and found no Tessa, and you two were nowhere to be seen. For a moment, I thought the three of you had betrayed me and run off.”

“Never,” exclaimed Damien, his voice cracking.

“No? Then tell me how Tessa got away from you. She’s a lot smarter than the two of you, for sure.”

“Malina, we had her locked in a room,” said Marty, his voice shaking.

“My point exactly,” replied Malina. “She managed to escape from you from a locked room.”

“It wasn’t our fault the hinges were rusty,” Marty stammered.

“You two had one job. Kidnap Tessa and keep her alive until I got here.” She pointed her finger at the two men. “I’m so disappointed.”

Damien took a deep breath. “You’ll never be disappointed again, I promise.”

“Do you know what I despise most, Marty?” Malina’s lips curved into a cruel smile.

He swallowed hard. Tessa couldn’t help noticing he peed his pants.

“Excuses.”

Before either man could react, Malina pulled out a pistol from her jacket and fired two shots. Damien dropped instantly, a bullet to the brain. Marty staggered, clutching his stomach, as blood seeped between his fingers before he collapsed on the ground. Malina put another bullet in him. Silence.

Tessa screamed.

Malina crouched in front of Tessa. Tessa's body trembled uncontrollably as she struggled against her ties.

"Now, where were we?" Malina murmured as she trailed the barrel of her gun along Tessa's cheek. "Ah, yes. You are going to tell me what you told that cop. Just so you know, as I was slicing off his ears, he claimed you didn't tell him anything, but I didn't believe him."

Tessa shook her head and clenched her jaw. No way in hell was she going to give in to fear or tell Malina anything. She was going to hold on to some dignity as long as she could, which would probably be timed in nanoseconds, not minutes.

It wasn't as if Malina would believe anything she was told anyhow. On a table in the corner just steps away was an array of tools that would inflict pain. Tessa's heart was pounding.

"You'll talk," said Malina, turning toward the table and picking up a slim knife, making a show of testing the blade. "They always do."

Then she giggled as if it were the biggest joke yet.

Tessa struggled with her ties but to no avail.

Malina was holding the knife just steps away from Tessa. The gleam in her eyes told

Tessa everything she needed to know. Malina got off on inflicting pain, and this was going to hurt really bad. And in the end, she was going to die.

“Let’s start with your fingers, shall we?”

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Malina stepped closer, her eyes glittering with joy. Tessa's pulse thundered in her ears as Malina seductively slid the icy blade of a knife against her neck. Tessa's initial reaction was that it didn't hurt. For a fleeting second, she remembered when she'd sliced her finger on a kitchen knife. That hurt like hell and bled for hours.

Then reality hit her.

Her body started shaking. She felt dizzy, and something warm and sticky trickled down her neck. Its coppery tang filled her nostrils. Panic clawed up her throat. She tried to reel back and away from the bitch, but the ties held her in place.

"I'm going to have fun with you," Malina said cheerfully. Her smile widened. "Next, I'm going to..."

A deafening crash shattered the air, followed by the thud of heavy boots on the concrete floor.

Malina spun around, still holding the knife.

Tessa's heart surged with hope. Can it be? Am I safe?

The Brotherhood had arrived.

Malina turned just as Ford burst through first, his shotgun raised, eyes sweeping the room. Finn and Chase followed, fanning out with their weapons drawn, ready for

anything.

“Drop it, Malina,” Ford barked.

Malina hesitated, her hand tightening around the knife. Tessa’s breath caught. Was she going to fight?

She smirked. “Not a chance.”

Before she could make a move, Finn lunged, knocking the knife out of her hand. Malina snarled and came out swinging at him. But he was faster, slamming into her, knocking her to the ground.

More footsteps. Dex, Colt, and Will closed in, weapons raised.

“It’s over,” Finn growled.

Malina’s eyes darted around frantically, calculating her odds. In a sudden burst of motion, she reached for the discarded knife.

A single shot rang out.

Malina jerked, stumbling backward, tripping over Damien and Marty’s lifeless forms before she collapsed in a heap. Blood pooled beneath her as her body twitched once before going still.

Silence fell.

Chase exhaled, rolling his shoulders. “Well, that takes care of that.”

Tessa’s gaze landed on Damien and Marty’s bodies sprawled on the floor in pools of

blood.

“They’re dead,” Tessa croaked, surprised her voice even worked.

“Good,” replied Chase coldly. “Less for us to do.”

Ford’s focus snapped to Tessa. His shotgun hit the floor with a clatter. In a few swift steps, he was beside her, dropping to his knees as his hands flew to untie the ropes.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” he murmured. “You’re safe now.”

For the first time in what seemed forever, Tessa’s body sagged as relief flooded through her. He’s here. She was safe.

“You came,” she whispered.

“I will always come for you, sweetheart.” His eyes met hers, fierce and unyielding.

“No one gets away with hurting you ever.”

Ford scooped her up in his arms, holding her to his chest as he strode toward the exit.

“We’re getting you checked out,” he said.

The men’s voices faded into the background as the cool dawn air hit her skin.

“Good.” She closed her eyes, securely nestled in Ford’s arms.

Safe. Finally safe.

Kicking in the warehouse door was satisfying, but Ford didn’t stop. His heart was pounding like a drum as he burst through the door, scanning the room. Where is she?

The metallic stench of blood mixed with fear and death made his gut twist. Finally,

he spotted Tessa, tied to a chair, her face pale and bloodied, her eye swollen. She's alive!

"Drop it, Malina," he barked.

Malina hesitated, the knife still in her hand. She was cornered. Calculating. Dangerous.

He had his finger on his gun's trigger and had no problem with just shooting her, but his focus stayed on Tessa. His woman. The love of his life.

Behind him, Finn and Chase spread out. He trusted them to cover his back but kept his sights on Malina.

Then the rest of the team stormed in, fanning out around the room.

"They're dead," Tessa's sweet voice said, but Ford could hear the fear underneath.

Malina had done this. She had hurt his woman, the love of his life. White-hot rage surged through his body.

He could put a bullet between Malina's eyes and never feel guilty. But before he could, a shot rang out.

Finn took her down. Ford barely glanced at the woman bleeding out on the floor. She was nothing.

The only woman in the room he was concerned about was Tessa. His shotgun hit the ground as he dropped to his knees and swiftly untied her, trying hard not to focus on her bruised and bloody body, which made his stomach churn.

His fingers brushed against her skin, which was cold and clammy. She was going into shock. But when her gaze met his, she didn't flinch. She trusted him.

When the ropes fell away, he scooped her into his arms, her body limp against his, and he almost lost it.

He had to get her to the hospital. Malina was dead. Chase had already called Liam, and the police would be here soon.

All that mattered was that Tessa was safe, and he vowed to make damn sure she always stayed that way for the rest of her life.

47

Tessa sat at the edge of the hospital bed, the discharge papers in her trembling hand. Ford sat beside her, the chair pulled close, his body tense. He hadn't left her side all night.

The antiseptic smell of the room lingered and clung to everything. Thankfully, the knife wound on her face was superficial, the swelling around her eye already receding. The bruises would fade, and physically, all would be right in the world.

Except ...

Except for the trauma. The violence. The memories roared back and replayed every time she closed her eyes. She saw Malina's cruel smile, heard the deafening crack of the gun as Damien and Marty fell, smelled the metallic tang of blood and the sour vinegary scent of fear. It was going to take some time for that to go away.

Ford had slept in the uncomfortable vinyl chair next to her bed so she would feel safe.

And she did feel safe. Here and with Ford. But safety was an illusion.

The image of how callously Malina—she would never call her Simone again—shot Marty and Damien and didn't blink an eye scared her. She had never experienced that kind of violence before.

Ford said it would take a while to process it.

But would she ever feel safe without his strong presence? She glanced at him, guilt creeping in. He deserved someone stronger, someone who wouldn't flinch or duck when they heard a strange noise.

"You've never dealt with this kind of violence before," he said gently. "That's a good thing, but it would bother anyone. A good therapist can help you make sense of it all."

It hadn't bothered him as much, since being in the military had dulled the shock for him, so he said. For her, it was a turning point, a divide between the life she had known and her new world.

Today, after she was released, they were heading to his cabin on the campus. Away from the noise and memories.

Tessa needed to be surrounded by woods and the stillness of nature.

"Ready?" Ford's voice pulled her back to the present. He stood at the foot of the bed, holding a bundle of clothes Emelia had brought from her apartment.

Tessa nodded. She wasn't sure she was ready, but for now, just leaving the hospital was a good first step.

Ford watched as Tessa slid off the bed, her movements careful. She was fragile right now, and it wasn't because of her physical injuries.

He handed her the clothes Emelia had brought over. Her hands shook when she took them. She jumped at small noises from the hall and tried not to let him know she was afraid, but he knew better.

Ford had seen fear before. Hell, he'd lived it through the combat zone and missions

gone sideways.

This wasn't just fear. It was a loss of control, a betrayal, realizing the world wasn't as safe as she thought.

He was furious that even though Malina was dead, the damage she'd done to Tessa wouldn't be so easily erased. It would take time and patience to feel like herself again.

Tessa got dressed in the tiny bathroom while Ford gathered her discharge papers and the clothes she arrived in. Sleeping in the vinyl chair was uncomfortable, but he'd slept in worse places. He couldn't, wouldn't, leave her alone.

She emerged wearing a pair of leggings and a top, her face pale and exhausted.

"Come on, sweetheart. The nurse will be here with a wheelchair. I'll get the truck, and we'll blow this joint. Sound good?"

She gave him a small nod. When he pulled her in for a hug, she melted in his arms, and he held her until the nurse knocked at the door, indicating she was ready to transport Tessa to the front door.

The drive to the cabin was quiet, the silence filled only by the hum of the engine. Tessa stared out the window and said little. Her thoughts were racing.

The sun was high in the sky, the sky was brilliant blue, and tree branches swayed in the breeze. It should have been calming, but she was far from calm. She felt detached, like the world was happening to someone else.

She snuck a look at Ford. He hadn't said much, but she could feel his concern radiating off him.

A single tear dripped down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. He didn't deserve the woman she'd become. The broken woman who feared life, who flinched at every sound. She doubted her own strength.

She intended to ask him to take her back to her apartment and to continue living his life without her holding him back, but she couldn't find the words.

When they arrived at his cabin on the campus, he cut the engine and turned to her. "Let's get you inside," he said gently.

She stared at the cabin and nodded. It looked so peaceful. But peace and safety were an illusion that could be broken at any time.

Tessa sighed. He helped her out of the truck and onto the front porch.

Inside, the cabin was bright and sunny. The warmth enveloped her like a comforting blanket, and she took a deep breath. He led her to the couch and sat beside her.

"It's one day at a time, sweetheart," he said softly as he put his arm around her shoulder. "Try not to be so hard on yourself. You get stuck in the past, and that's not where you belong. I know it'll be hard, but you're stronger than you think."

Tessa rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. The storm inside her hadn't quieted yet, but with Ford beside her and the warmth surrounding her, for now, that was enough.

48

I t'd been two weeks since Tessa's kidnapping, and Ford was getting increasingly concerned about her mental health.

Sure, she laughed at the right moments and got up in the morning, not staying in bed. But she hadn't left the cabin except to go sit on the patio and stare into the woods. She claimed to find solace in nature, and Ford was happy she found it and wanted to believe it.

But ...

She was slowly withdrawing into herself. She often stared into the distance, distracted, silent. He was unsure how to help her overcome her sadness.

Before this happened, she was the happiest, strongest woman he knew.

She had escaped Marty and Damien, found a new life in Haywood Lake. Not only that, but she had rekindled her event-planning business and made friends. Life was good.

Until this.

The kidnapping, and the violence like she'd never seen before, had changed her.

But staying—no, hiding—in the cabin was not healthy, especially since she worked so hard to reclaim her life. He had to do something to bring her back. But what?

Ford looked at his watch. He had a meeting of the Brotherhood Alliance in half an hour. They were to go over new jobs and get an update on Malina and her operation.

He leaned over and kissed her head. “Hey, sweetheart, I have to go, but the meeting won’t take long,” he said softly. “Do you want me to call one of the girls and have her come over? I know Joy and Naomi could be here in minutes.”

She gave him a faint smile. “No,” she said in a small voice. “I’m fine. I’m just going to sit here and listen to the birds sing.”

Ford’s heart tightened. He had to do something.

“Okay then,” he said softly. “I won’t be long.”

“No worries, Ford,” she replied. “I love you. Thank you for taking care of me.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I love you too. You never need to thank me for anything.

She smiled again and turned back to the woods, her hands lying limply on her lap.

He watched her for a moment more, the feeling of helplessness and frustration gnawing at him. He understood trauma’s isolating grip and the self-protection that followed.

She had given him hope when he needed it most. Now it was his turn to do the same.

The yipping of dogs greeted Ford as he entered the building. Melissa had a training class going at Paws for Caring.

He peeked in and saw a half dozen dogs of all varieties being put through their paces with their owners. He waved to Joy, who was crouched beside a wriggling golden

retriever puppy, laughing as it tried to kiss her face.

He heard that Joy had always fostered dogs, and having this center to train foster dogs to become companions was her dream.

When she got together with Liam, she stopped fostering. He struggled with residual PTSD and a fear of dogs. Liam was better now, but Joy wasn't fostering dogs anymore, instead getting her kicks here.

Walking down the hallway, he waved hello to Jeannie Moone, the office manager, and Ava Curtis, Chase's right-hand person, who handled all the details of their legitimate business. He stepped into Chase's office and walked through the door to the command center. Chase and most of the guys were there, including Caleb Jennings, fresh from a monthlong mission.

"You're back!" exclaimed Ford as he shook Caleb's hand. "Ready to start work?"

Ford had met the six-foot-two, former Marine K9 handler when he started at the Brotherhood a while ago, and they immediately hit it off. Caleb grew up in Montana, loved animals, was a fly-fisherman and enjoyed the outdoors. He was thrilled when Ford hired him part-time to work at GearUp. And Ford was thrilled to have another outdoor enthusiast to work there.

He quickly greeted the other men before taking an empty seat next to Finn and Ryker. He hadn't seen Ryker since he was at his house, helping to build the addition.

"Hey man, how's that addition coming along?" he asked. "It must be done by now."

Ryker grinned. "It's done, and the baby is in it. Dani's happy. So, I'm happy."

"Great. If you ever need help again, let me know," Ford said. It had been fun helping

build the addition, but more important than that, he began bonding with the guys, which helped him get out of his funk. Tessa needed that.

“Settle down,” Chase said, knocking on the table. “We have a lot to go over, but first I’m sure you’re all interested in what happened to Malina’s gang.”

Ford had been curious, but it took the back seat to helping Tessa.

“Can’t wait to hear this,” said Finn.

“The skinny is that DEA and the FBI got involved,” Chase began. “Their focus shifted to identifying key members of the gang since Malina was dead. Charges include drug trafficking, money laundering, violent crimes and firearms violations. They’ll all be going to prison for a long time.”

“Good,” Ford responded.

They discussed upcoming assignments before leaving. Chase mentioned he wasn’t assigning Ford anything until Tessa was better, which he was grateful for.

Finn walked Ford out. “How’s Tessa doing?”

Ford sighed. “Not great. It’s been a challenge. I think she’s afraid to leave the cabin and isn’t connecting with anybody.”

“Man. That’s not good,” replied Finn, frowning. “Do you have any ideas on how to help her? You know, talking about it would be best. Is she seeing a therapist?”

“Not yet.”

“Naomi has experience. Actually all the women do. Why don’t you see if she’ll talk

to Tessa?”

Of course. Why hadn't he thought about Naomi? It made sense.

He didn't know her story. Chase had only hinted at the trauma she faced. But he knew she was getting her master's degree, specializing in women's issues and trauma.

“Also, the self-defense lessons were helpful to all the women,” Finn continued.

Ford knew that. Tessa had taken a couple but got busy. Maybe he'd take her shooting this afternoon.

Knowing that you could defend yourself was the key to getting self-confidence back, and he knew just who could encourage her to take that step. But would she see self-defense and shooting as empowerment or just more violence?

Ford walked back to his cabin with a renewed sense of purpose. He wrestled with the decision, torn between his problem-solving instincts and the need to let Tessa handle it. But in the end, all he could do was be there for her.

On his way over, he called Naomi for her advice. When he explained what he was thinking, Naomi thought it was a great idea and would come over as soon as possible.

When he arrived at the cabin, he stepped into the living room and silence.

His heart ached as he scanned the living room and noticed Tessa still sitting on the patio, staring into the woods. Ford made a cup of tea for her and grabbed a beer for himself. He walked out onto the patio and realized she hadn't moved.

"Sweetheart, have you been sitting here this whole time?" he asked, placing the tea on the table.

She nodded. "It's so peaceful out here," she murmured.

He sat in one of the chairs and took a swig of beer. "I've got news about Malina's gang. They were all arrested and facing long jail time."

"Good," was all she said.

Ford tried again. "Saw Caleb today," he said. She'd met him once before. "He's back and ready to start work."

“That’s nice,” she said.

He gestured to the tea. “Why don’t you drink some tea? I made it special for you.”

Tessa hesitated but finally reached for the cup and took a sip. “Thank you. It’s good.”

That was one positive step but still so far from the woman he’d fallen in love with. The woman who was so full of life. The woman who helped take his sadness away.

A knock on the door broke the moment, and Ford stood and walked inside to answer it.

Naomi was standing there. “Hey, Ford, I came as quickly as I could.”

He stepped back and gestured for her to come in. “Thank you. I don’t know if she’ll talk to you, but I sure hope so.”

“Trauma takes time, as you know,” she said with a reassuring smile. “But I get it.”

“She’s out on the patio.”

Ford watched Naomi walk out to the patio. He saw Tessa’s shocked look, but to his relief, she didn’t shut down or run away. Maybe, just maybe, Naomi could help her start the healing process.

The woods were so peaceful, Tessa felt she could sit out here forever and stare at the different shades of green that blended to create a tapestry of calm and listen to the birds singing, imagining herself in a faraway, safe world. Not alone, but hopefully Ford would be with her. She felt safe with him.

As he walked out onto the patio, she heard him ask if she had been sitting there all

along.

There was an undertone of disappointment in his voice, but there was no way she could explain how the quiet soothed her. How it prevented her from thinking about Malina and the violence.

“It’s peaceful out here,” she said.

Ford told her about Malina’s gang, and she was happy, but the news couldn’t undo what happened.

When he mentioned Caleb’s name, she had a hard time remembering who that was.

Then a brief memory of meeting Caleb and the sadness in his eyes and wondering what haunted him. It was similar to the look Ford had when she met him.

“Tessa?” A familiar voice pulled her back to the present.

Tessa turned her head and froze when she saw Naomi step out. Her chest tightened, and she started to panic. What is she doing here? Didn’t Naomi understand that she didn’t want to talk? Didn’t want to remember and relive her nightmare?

“Hi, sweetie,” Naomi said softly. “I thought it was time for a visit and maybe”—she hesitated—“have a little conversation.”

Tessa swallowed hard. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are,” replied Naomi as she took the seat Ford had vacated. “Tessa, Ford worries about you. We all do. I know the girls have shared some of their stories with you, and I know how hard it is to hold yourself together after something like this. Believe me, I do. I’ve been where you are.”

Tessa glanced at Naomi and saw the same hurt in her eyes that she felt.

“You have?”

Naomi nodded. “Different circumstances, but I know how hard it is when your world is turned upside down.

“A few years ago, I testified against a man who killed my best friend. I didn’t know it at the time, but his cousin blamed me for putting the man in jail. I’d moved to Tampa, and he followed Sam Knight when she came to talk to me. He found...”

Naomi paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “He found me and beat me so badly, I ended up in the hospital.”

Tessa’s breath caught. Oh God, that was not what she expected to hear. Such violence. “How ... how did you come back from that?”

“With lots of help. Sam and the KnightGuard Security team stepped in, and I stayed a year in Sam’s loft in Black Pointe, living with Victoria, one of her security experts, trying to get my life back. When I was ready, I moved here for a fresh start.”

Naomi stopped to look around before she continued. “But then a classmate of mine decided I was ‘his.’ He kidnapped me and locked me in a hidden room in his basement. I found out he’d killed his mother, and I thought for sure that was what was going to happen to me. So, I took a chance and escaped, but he caught me, beat me and handcuffed me to the bed.”

Tessa’s stomach churned. She didn’t think it could get any worse, but a second attempt.

“What happened?” she asked.

Naomi smiled faintly. “My friends happened. Joy ... and Chase. They didn’t give up on me. Chase found me and stayed by my side.” She leaned forward. “But the hardest part wasn’t the rescue. It was after.”

Tessa was confused. “After?”

“Yes, after. Facing the fear ... the anger. The part of me that felt weak and useless.” Naomi leaned forward. “Chase convinced me to talk with a therapist even though I didn’t want to. Joy included me in her girls’ outings and convinced me to take the self-defense classes offered here.”

“I took one or two,” Tessa confessed. “But I’m not sure I could handle the violence right now.”

“Oh sweetie, it’s not about the violence. It’s about control and empowerment. The world can be evil, and hiding your head in the sand isn’t going to make it go away.”

She reached over to touch Tessa’s arm. “You’ve already done the hardest part. You survived. Healing doesn’t mean forgetting but finding your strength again. Ford, your friends and I are here to help you, no matter how long it takes.”

Tears dripped down Tessa’s face, and she swiped them away, embarrassed. “I’m afraid.”

“I know, Tessa,” Naomi said softly. “But you are not alone. We’ve all been through some sort of trauma, and I know you can work through it and be strong again.”

Naomi left a few minutes later, and Tessa reflected on what she had told her.

She had heard some of Naomi’s story but never the brutal parts, and it made her wonder if the girls held back details on their own stories.

They all seemed to be happy and getting on with their lives.

Would it be? Could it be possible ... for me, too?

Tessa sat on the patio long after Naomi left. Hearing the raw details of her past made her realize she wasn't alone in her pain and fear.

Yes, the world was evil. She truly hadn't experienced that until she met Damien. But pretending evil didn't exist was foolish. It was about confronting reality and fear head-on.

Could she do that?

"Hey." Ford came out on the patio and sat beside her. "How'd it go?"

She took her time answering. "Naomi told me her story. I had no idea of the horrific details." Her voice trembled. "I am amazed she got through it and is stronger for it."

Ford reached over and took her hands in his. "You're strong too. When I think of the courage it took to escape from that warehouse, I'm in awe of you. It took guts and courage. Those qualities are still within you. They're just taking a break for a while."

She snorted. "I hope so."

"Tessa, I promise they are. Just remember, you're not alone. The women will help you. They've been through their own hell and came out stronger."

He paused. "I know you don't know the guys' stories, but trust me when I say we've all hit rock bottom where we didn't trust ourselves to get through it. We did it. You will too."

“I’m afraid. What if I fail?”

He gave her a small smile. “What if you don’t? But if you stumble, I’ll be right here to catch you.”

For the first time, Tessa felt a flicker of hope.

“Naomi suggested I should try the self-defense classes again.” She bit her lip and frowned. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Oh sweetheart,” said Ford. “You don’t have to decide now. Think about it.”

“I will.”

“One step at a time,” he said, squeezing her hand.

Tessa nodded. It would be nice to imagine her future beyond fear. Maybe Naomi was right. Healing didn’t mean forgetting. Maybe that would become part of her story, finding proof of strength instead of weakness in spite of the fear and pain.

And just maybe she could do that. She could do that.

50

Tessa paced outside of the training room at the Brotherhood Alliance building.

Her stomach was a tight knot of nerves. Ford had dropped her off on his way to do some errands.

Ford wanted to walk her in, but she promised him that she was all right. Now she wished he had, since she was standing alone in the hall and not sure if she could go through with it.

A group class had started already, and from inside, she heard grunts, groans, and the occasional thud against the mats coming from the room.

She had already greeted a couple of men from the Brotherhood, who were leading the class, and knew Joy and Naomi were there to support her. Yet her feet felt glued to the floor.

The door opened suddenly, and Caleb stepped out dressed in a black tee and black shorts. He gave her an easy smile. “I was wondering where you were. You’re not chickening out on me, are you?”

Tessa took in his tall, muscular frame and gulped. Was she ready for this?

She swallowed hard. “Nah. I’m just contemplating writing my will,” she quipped, hoping to lighten the moment.

Caleb chuckled. “Let’s hope you don’t need it. Ford will kill me if anything happens to you. Then I’ll need to write one.”

He held the door open for her and gestured for her to enter. Reluctantly, she stepped inside. The room looked just like she remembered, with equipment lining the walls and padded mats covering the floor. On the mats, six women and four instructors were practicing moves. Joy gave her a cheeky finger wave before Titus tossed her to the mat with a resounding thump.

Oh, God! Tessa gulped. But Joy bounced up laughing, and she and Titus went over the routine again.

“Why don’t we sit for a minute,” Caleb said, guiding her to a bench against the wall. “I know you’ve been here before, but I’d like to refresh your mind with a few basic techniques.” Tessa sank onto the bench, her stomach churning.

Caleb crouched in front of her. “I know this is a big step for you, but I want to help, not push. We’ll go at your own pace, and if anything is uncomfortable, tell me. We can adjust it or go on to something else. Okay?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“Great,” he said with an encouraging smile. “We’ll start simple.”

He stood and offered her his hand. She hesitated before taking it. They walked over to a mat, and he began by walking her through the basics—the stances, quick escape moves, how to break a wrist hold. Tessa focused on the movements. Caleb was patient and calm, making her feel safe.

“Are we okay so far?” he asked. “Ready to try?”

Tessa nodded, her confidence building slightly.

They started with the stance. Caleb explained it was the foundation of everything. “Being stable and grounded makes you feel in control.”

She mirrored his stance, and he adjusted her posture, explaining as he went.

“Perfect,” he said. “Let’s try practicing breaking a hold, and that’s probably enough for today.”

He showed her how to break a hold if someone grabbed her wrist, and they practiced a few times.

“You’re doing great,” he said. “How about we meet tomorrow early in the day? Paws for Caring doesn’t have a class in the morning, so we’ll have the area to ourselves.”

“That’ll be great.”

Caleb walked her out. She spotted Ford waiting in the hallway. His eyes lit up when he saw her.

“You need to practice more,” he said with a smile. “Caleb here still looks like a pretty boy.”

Caleb laughed. “Come see me later and we’ll see who’s the pretty boy.”

Tessa couldn’t help but laugh. Men!

Ford knew he’d never be able to thank Naomi or Tessa’s friends—heck, even the guys—for all their support.

After Naomi's talk with her, Tessa decided to take the big step and talk to a therapist.

She confided in him that she was tired of feeling afraid.

Committing to continue with the self-defense lessons was part of that decision, and Caleb had volunteered to coach her. He was experienced in self-defense and combat techniques. Plus, while Caleb was newish and quiet, he had a lot of empathy for people and would help put Tessa at ease.

There was no way that Ford could. He'd never be able to hurt her. Unfortunately, learning self-defense meant sometimes you got hurt.

When he suggested the idea of shooting lessons, even though she hesitated, she eventually said yes. Today, he intended to help her find a gun that suited her hand, and then they would go to the range on the outskirts of town. One of Chase's long-term goals was to build a gun range for the Brotherhood on the campus, but for now that was on the wish list.

Since the two women were similarly built, he asked Naomi which gun she used.

She suggested a Sig Sauer P365 or a Smith & Wesson M&P Shield EZ—both compact, easy to handle and reliable. Chase had helped her make the decision back then.

It was now up to Tessa to try each and decide for herself.

As for himself, he'd stick with his Glock19, a versatile handgun that never let him down. But today wasn't about him.

Tessa's determination to face her fears and empower herself made him proud, but he wasn't telling her that. She needed to be proud of her own accomplishments. As they

drove there, Ford hoped the range would give her the confidence and peace of mind she deserved.

Ford parked the truck in the gravel lot and glanced at Tessa. Her fingers were clenched around her purse, her knuckles white. He reached over, lightly touching her hand.

“We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready,” he said gently.

Tessa looked over at him, determination strong on her face. “I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

He nodded as he got out and grabbed the bag with their ammunition and guns.

The sounds of muted gunshots greeted them as they stepped inside. Ford had membership, so he signed them in, grabbed two sets of earplugs and safety glasses, and opened the door to the lanes. Several individuals were already shooting.

Ford handed her the two guns to try.

They met the instructor Ford had asked for, a no-nonsense woman who had been in the Army, to walk Tessa through the basics.

When Tessa was comfortable understanding gun safety and loading the gun, Ford showed her how to stand with the gun in her hands.

He stood behind her, adjusting her stance. “Feet shoulder-width apart, sweetheart, knees slightly bent,” he murmured.

She nodded and followed his instructions. He hung a fresh paper target on the clip and sent it about ten feet out.

Now he coached her through gripping the gun and aligning her sights. “When you’re ready, grip the gun tight, line up your sights and squeeze the trigger.”

Tessa nodded. The first shot was wide. She flinched at the sound. But her second shot was closer to the target. By the time she emptied the magazine, she turned to Ford with wide eyes.

“I hit it. I hit the target,” she whispered, almost disbelieving it.

Ford grinned. “You sure did.” He brought the target in, and they looked at her results. “Two in the chest,” he said.

“Hmmm.” She examined the target thoughtfully. “I’m aiming for the head next time.”

“Sounds good, but remember, a smaller target is a tougher shot. You have a better chance of hurting someone if you aim for a larger mass like the chest.”

As the session went on, Tessa grew more confident, and her grip steadied with every round. By the time she emptied the magazine again, she was grinning. “This is great. Knowing I can do this makes me feel safer.”

Ford’s chest tightened with pride. On the one hand, he hated that she needed to learn these things, but on the other, she was taking control of her life, and that was all that mattered.

“That’s the point, sweetheart,” he said softly. “You’re stronger than you think.”

They finished the ammunition Ford brought. He took a turn at the target, impressing Tessa with his accurate aim but telling her that it took years of practice, and he still practiced.

As they walked out to the truck, the late afternoon sun cast a golden light over the shooting range. Ford couldn't help but notice that her step was lighter today. She wasn't healed all the way, but he could see some of her confidence emerge. He would make damn sure she got there.

Tessa stopped suddenly and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Ford, thank you."

He turned to look at her fully. With the sunlight behind her, she looked like an angel. God, she was beautiful.

"Tessa, you never have to thank me."

"Yes, I do. You've been so patient. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Ford stepped closer, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You'd find a way," he said. "You are a strong woman, and I'll be beside you as you find your way back."

He helped her into the truck and walked around to the driver's side. He glanced at Tessa, who was staring out the window. She faced a difficult path, yet he was confident she would emerge stronger and more resilient, and he'd be there to support her.

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It'd been an intense couple of weeks of therapy, self-defense, and shooting, and Tessa was beginning to feel hopeful that her life was on the right track again.

Except for one thing.

She needed Ford.

They'd been sharing the same bed since she left the hospital, but he hadn't touched her.

She had been lost in her own mind, confused and wrestling with fear.

But now ... things were different. She was feeling better, stronger, and more certain of what she needed. What she wanted.

And she wanted him. Needed to feel that connection again.

So tonight, she was going to rectify that.

Ford stood by the table, picking up the dinner dishes. "How about dessert, Tessa? Emelia brought over that bourbon maple cream pie you love."

He looked so hopeful that it would please her. He was always pleasing her. But tonight, she didn't want pie. She wanted him. Tessa wiped her mouth with her napkin and let her eyes roam over him. God, he was handsome. So strong, virile. Her mouth watered. She could only hope he wanted her.

“Well,” she drawled and sighed. “I’d like dessert. But I was thinking of something else.”

Ford paused, frowning. “Whatever it is, I’ll get it.”

“Oh sweetie,” she said, licking her lips, watching as Ford followed her tongue and swallowed. “There’s nothing to get. I want you.”

He opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. She fought the urge to giggle. He recovered quickly, his brows furrowed in concern. “Tessa, I’m trying to give you space, time to heal.”

She rose from the table, stepped toward him, took the dishes from his hands and set them on the table. “I did. And I’m grateful for that. But Ford, I need you. I need to feel you inside me, and I need your lips on mine. I need to feel that connection again.”

His eyes softened as he searched her face. “Are you sure?”

“Surer than I’ve ever been,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him in for a kiss.

Their lips met in a kiss that was slow and tender. It quickly deepened as weeks of longing melted away. Tessa relaxed in his embrace, but in a sudden movement, his lips released hers and in one fell swoop, he slung her over his shoulders and carried her into the bedroom.

“Ford!” She laughed, gently pounding on his back.

“Hush, woman,” he replied, gently swatting her behind. “I need to concentrate. I have a lot of catching up to do.”

When they reached the bed, he lowered her down.

“I’ve missed you,” she murmured.

Ford cupped her face, his thumb brushing her cheek as he leaned down to place a kiss on her forehead. “Tessa, I’ve missed you too.” He placed a kiss on her forehead. “You’re my everything.” His eyes looked at her with all the love she felt in her heart.

Moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a soft, silvery glow over the bedroom. Tessa lay nestled in Ford’s muscular arms, wrapped securely around her, her head on his chest while his fingers absently traced patterns on her bare shoulder and touched the rose quartz necklace around her neck. She’d thought she lost it when she was kidnapped, but Ford had found it.

It was quiet.

But it was a quiet filled with love and contentment. However, Tessa’s mind was racing.

Tonight was perfect. They had reconnected, but more than that, he showed her the depth of his love and reminded her of who she was: strong, worthy and loved.

She shifted slightly, tracing her fingers on his soft chest hair. “Can’t sleep?” Ford murmured, his voice low and sexy.

“Not really,” she replied. “Just ... thinking.”

He opened his eyes to look at her. “About what?”

Tessa hesitated before pushing herself up onto her elbow. “You,” she whispered. “Us. I don’t want to waste another minute without knowing we’ll have this forever.”

Ford cocked his head, his hand stilling on her back. “What are you saying?”

Tessa bit her lip, her heart racing. “I’m saying ... asking ... will you marry me?”

Ford blinked, clearly off guard. Tessa’s heart sank. Too soon? Or maybe he didn’t want to marry her at all.

Then his lips curved into a slow, disbelieving smile. He sat up and reached over into the drawer of the bedside table.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Something I’ve wanted to do for weeks,” he said, pulling out a small box. He opened it to reveal a delicate gold ring with a pink quartz stone surrounded by small diamonds. The pink gem sparkled in the moonlight.

“I bought this for you before everything happened. I had the jeweler incorporate the diamonds from my mother’s ring. But then you needed time to heal, to find yourself again. I didn’t want to rush you.”

Tears welled in Tessa’s eyes as he took her hand. “Tessa, you are everything to me. You’re my heart, my strength, my future. I never expected you to beat me to it.” His gaze softened. “Tessa, love of my life, will you marry me, have my children, let me comfort and protect you?”

Tessa smiled. “Yes to all of that.”

He slid the ring onto her finger. “It’s rose quartz like the necklace I gave you. It’s the stone of healing and love.”

“It’s beautiful. And the fact that you incorporated your mother’s ring makes it even more special.” Tessa stared at the ring that represented his love. Tears cascaded down

her cheeks, but they were tears of joy, of hope, and of a future together.