



Protecting Vera (Loved by the SEAL #2)

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Description: Vera's ex wants to control her, going so far as to burn down her apartment building. She needs a place to hide, and her best friend has the perfect place for her—her brother's house in California. Vera has no idea what she's getting into, but her best friend's brother being hot wasn't something she bargained for.

Ben "Hop" Marchant doesn't plan on ever dating again. He owes his sister, Frizz, so he opens his house to her best friend, not expecting to fall for the sweet and sexy Vera. With her life at risk, he can't ask her to leave, but how can he survive being this close to her?

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CHAPTER ONE

Vera Adams wiped the soot from her face, horrified that the fire could be her fault. She hadn't set it or done anything to make something in her apartment catch fire, but this felt like something Logan would do.

She ran her thumb over the rough spot on her wrist, thinking back to a month ago when Logan had taken her out into the country, past the lake, and walked her into a wooded area. A shiver worked through her, thinking about how terrified she'd been. Bugs had crawled over her arms and legs and even her face. She'd cried and yelled out, praying Logan would come back to get her. He hadn't.

At some point, maybe midnight, maybe later, she'd started pulling at the ropes tying her to the tree. The skin on her wrists had been rubbed raw during her escape. Walking back into town, she'd been cold, and then the rain started, chilling her to the bone. The only thing the rain had been good for was giving her water, taking away her dehydration.

Of course, no one believed that it had been Logan Conley who'd forced her into his car, then driven her out into the forest and tied her to the tree. She'd been lucky she hadn't died. What made it worse was the police had stopped, not to help, but to arrest her. When she told her story, they'd threatened to press charges against her, and not Logan because his family was a pillar of the community.

The humiliation had been almost as piercing as the pain of freeing herself from the tree. Luckily, Frizz, her longtime friend from college whose name was really Caroline, had answered her phone and come to her rescue.

Now, sitting across from her building that had gone up in flames, she had little doubt this was Logan's work. If she pressed that narrative, the cops just might arrest her since Logan could do no wrong.

She needed an escape. Logan had terrorized her too much over the last year. Staying with Justin and Frizz would be dangerous, even though Logan didn't really know Frizz. Vera had to find somewhere far away from Logan. Someplace he would never look.

Her phone rang, and she glanced down, seeing it was Frizz. She wanted to be upbeat, but she couldn't fake it.

"Vera, tell me you weren't at home? I saw a post about it on social media."

"Ugh. I was here. My computer is gone, all my clothes, but I'm only a little singed." She ran her fingers through her short hair, thinking Logan had done her a favor when he'd whacked off her hair when he'd taken her captive last month. He'd meant to humiliate her, but after crying and throwing a fit, she'd gone to the salon to get it fixed. The woman who usually cut her hair did a marvelous job fixing it and pointed out all the positives, like her dead ends were gone, and they could take the time to really get it into a style she liked.

On the positive side, at least she hadn't had to worry about her hair catching fire and going up in flames when Logan tried to burn her like the witch he said she was. She rolled her eyes, pushing away the anger simmering below the surface. She'd learned long ago that if she cared about the torture Logan inflicted on her, he would get even meaner.

"I'm coming to get you," Frizz said.

"Better not. I know the asshole is out there watching. I'm going to go to a hotel, and

then I have to figure out a place where I can hide.”

“Wait. I have an idea. But I wonder...”

“What?”

“Do you think Logan put a tracker on your phone and computers? He just always knows where you are.”

The thought hadn’t entered her mind, but maybe he had. It would explain so much. “I don’t know. He could have. It would have been easy for him to do it before we broke up. I trusted him back then. God, was I stupid.”

“Not stupid. You didn’t know.”

“Hell, I might as well toss this phone and pick up a new one. I just need this to stop. He’s going to push it too far and kill me one of these days.”

“Jesus, don’t say that. Get rid of your phone and when you get a new one, call me. I’ll give you my idea then. Start fresh with everything.”

She sighed as she watched the firemen try to put out the fire. She hoped people got their pets out. This was past ridiculous. “Starting fresh won’t be a problem now. My computer, my apartment, my clothes, all of it, even my car, are gone.”

“I’m sorry. It sucks, but maybe this is the clean break you need. If he put tracking devices on your stuff, he can’t track you now.”

“I hate it, but yeah, I think you’re right.”

She ended the call, then exported her contact list and emailed it to herself. Everything

else was in the cloud. She would set up service with another carrier, wiping everything clean. Maybe she could escape Logan and start fresh somewhere else. It sucked that she had to leave the only place she'd ever lived outside of going to the university, but dramatic bastards required drastic actions, and this had gone way past dramatic.

CHAPTER TWO

Hop wasn't jealous of Trip. The man deserved to find the love of his life. Love wasn't in the cards for Hop. He'd tried, and it had turned sour before the honeymoon was even half over. His ex had been sleeping around, betraying him every single day of their relationship, and he hadn't even known. When he found out, it had crushed him. He vowed to never get involved again.

Now, if he wanted something, he picked up women at bars. Being with someone once was enough. If a woman wanted a second date, he said no. He wasn't a dick about it, but he never actually dated anyone. Some women didn't believe him when he said he wasn't into dating, but he never broke the vow he'd made to himself once the divorce was finalized. He would never get involved again. The price was too steep, and he couldn't afford another broken heart.

He'd stayed out late after Trip's wedding, making his way home close to four in the morning. His grandmother had passed away recently, leaving him her house that wasn't too far away from where most of the SEALs lived in Riverton. His sister had received a house in Texas, which wasn't too far from where she and her husband, Justin, lived. It had worked out well for both of them.

Every day, Hop lifted up thanks to his grandmother for keeping both houses to give to them. She'd been a spitfire ahead of her time and had never backed down. When he'd told her he was going into the Navy, she'd promised him her house if he stayed in for more than five years. Becoming a SEAL had made her so happy for him. She'd always been in his corner, the same for Frizz. They'd been lucky.

Having a mortgage-free house made a huge difference in his life. He thought about getting a roommate since there was an extra bedroom, but on mornings like today, he liked having the place to himself.

Way too early, his phone rang. He thought about letting it go to voicemail, but it was his sister. She'd saved his life after his not-so-lovely marriage, so he answered because he still owed her.

"What's up, Frizz?" His sister's name was Caroline, but she had brown curly hair that went super frizzy in the humidity. She no longer got upset at the nickname, which made him love her even more.

"I need a favor. It's big, and if you say no, that's okay, but I'd owe you big time."

Hop sat up, wiping his hand over his face. Frizz sounded serious, much more serious than she usually sounded. "What do you need?"

"Do you remember Vera?"

"No."

"She was my roommate in college."

"I don't think I met her."

"Yeah, you were deployed then."

"What do you need from me? I stayed out late partying, and I'd like to go back to sleep." He could almost hear Frizz rolling her eyes as she sighed.

"This is a huge favor. She needs a place to stay, somewhere her ex can't find her. A

place he would never think to look. She works from home, so she doesn't need to get a job out there. She just needs to lie low until he moves on to someone else."

Hop swung his feet over the side of his bed and blew out a huge breath. "Really? This is the favor you call in? I mean, it's huge, but I do owe you my life. Just a sec." He put the phone on mute as he used the bathroom, then brushed his teeth. He clicked off the mute button and sighed again. "Can you send me more details? She knows I'm not an option for a relationship, right?"

"She's sworn off men. Also, you aren't her type. She won't be a bother. She's an excellent cook, and she likes to clean. It would be just a few months until he gives up and decides to pester someone else."

"Jesus, Frizz. I guess it's okay. Send me her information, and I'll call you later. She isn't some crazy stalker type herself, right?"

"She isn't. She just made a bad choice when it came to guys. You know how that is."

The reminder of his failed marriage hit him hard. "Ouch. You vouch for her?"

"Yes, dear brother. She was the good roommate who helped me get my spending and drinking under control."

"Oh, that was Vera?"

"Yeah. Mom met her. She talked about her all the time."

"Okay, if you trust her, I'll trust you."

"Thank you, Ben. You're a lifesaver."

He chuckled. “So are you.”

They were both quiet for a moment as the past washed over them. That night, he’d been so close to letting it all go, and Frizz had talked him into facing the future and choosing life. He didn’t admit to others how close he’d come to losing it because his ex had cheated and left him. He really felt like a total loser back then. Frizz had built him back up, helping him see he had value. When he’d been ready to quit BUDs, he’d remembered his promise to Frizz. He owed her everything and couldn’t give up on something he’d wanted so very badly.

They’d been close growing up. Having only their mom around meant they had to pitch in more than their friends. After that night, they’d grown even closer. If Frizz trusted Vera, he would, too.

“I’ll call you about the details later,” Frizz said before she ended the call.

He sighed, realizing he was up for the day. The house needed a deep clean, so he guessed that was next on his agenda. At least he had a place where Vera could stay. He just hoped he didn’t live to regret this act of kindness.

CHAPTER THREE

Vera liked Frizz's idea, but she wasn't sure she really wanted to live with a stranger, and though Ben was Frizz's brother, he was a stranger. She had few options. She could move to a different state, but with her name on a lease or mortgage, Logan would find her.

If she lived with Frizz's brother, she wouldn't have her name attached to the address. And California was far enough away. She felt like this could be her best escape plan.

The one thing that convinced her Logan had set the fire was her car being totaled. He knew the location of her parking spot. No one else would have targeted her car. The cops didn't seem to think it had anything to do with her, so she'd decided not to tell them anything about Logan. She figured they would just turn around and blame her for the fire like they'd tried to do with being tied to the tree in the woods.

This had to be her last week of living in the hotel. Seven days after the fire was long enough, and the insurance company had agreed to pay. She would have money deposited into her account in less than a month, and she could buy a car in California.

Was California really where she wanted to live? She needed to think about it. Maybe she could just stay in Texas. What if she was being paranoid? The fire could have been a coincidence. She reached up and touched her hair. That wasn't a coincidence. Logan had chopped off her long, curly brown hair and then tied her to that tree. What would he do next?

She'd been stuck at the hotel, not even going out for dinner, for way too long. She

needed to get out and talk to someone other than people from work or she would lose her mind. No one at work knew her apartment had burned down, and she guessed that was okay, but a part of her wanted to tell someone. The bar across the street wasn't the place to drop the news that her place had burned down, but it did seem like a good place to get something to eat. After finishing her emails, she headed out, ready to get some fresh air and clear her head. Being cooped up wasn't good for her.

She ordered a glass of wine and a salad with shrimp. Since the fire, she hadn't really worked out or eaten healthy. Not that she was into organic or clean eating like some people she knew, but she did appreciate eating vegetables.

It sucked that her place had burned. She would have to buy everything new. She enjoyed shopping as much as the next woman, but the thought of having to restock her entire apartment depressed her.

She took another sip of wine, wondering if she was overthinking everything. Was it ridiculous to run away to California? She could spend the next few days looking for an apartment in Austin. She had almost convinced herself to stay in Texas when the door to the restaurant opened, and Logan waltzed in. His gaze landed on her, and his lips turned up in an evil grin.

Her blood seemed to freeze, and breathing became difficult. How had he known where she was eating? Did he have someone watching the hotel? That had to be it. She had to leave, but if he had someone watching her, he would know where she'd gone. She needed a way to get out of town that wouldn't alert him that she'd left.

She signaled the waitress for the check but learned Logan had already paid for her meal. That scared the shit out of her. The man would never leave her alone. She had to get free, or she would die because of him.

It was close to bedtime when Hop's phone rang. He saw it was Frizz. The woman

Frizz had told him about hadn't shown up yet, but maybe this was his sister telling him she wasn't going to come to California.

"Hey, Frizz. What's up?"

"My friend, she doesn't know how to escape without being tracked. She's been holed up in a hotel for the last week after the fire, then last night, she finally left the hotel to go eat at the restaurant across the street. Her ex showed up. How can she get away without him knowing she's in California?"

Hop thought about her words, trying to digest everything. "Fire, what fire?"

"Her apartment building burned down. She is sure it was him because the person also torched her car."

Worry for his sister exploded. "She's not with you, right?"

"No, she won't come to see me. Says she doesn't want Logan to know we're friends. Logan might know I exist, but he hasn't ever met me."

"Okay, um, let me think. Send me the details of where she is, and then everything you know about him. It might be tomorrow afternoon or later before I get back to you. Just tell her to hang tight and stay inside the hotel."

"Thank you. I'll tell her."

"Stay safe, Frizz. I need you to stay alive."

"I will. Love you."

"Love you, bye."

The email from Frizz came through, and he read the details. He grabbed his computer, searching for information on the guy. The dude seemed average at best. His father had money, but it wasn't crazy money like people here in California.

Hop switched to another site he used to search for information and found that the guy had no arrest records, which surprised him. He wondered if his daddy had the police in his pocket. Probably.

He needed to come up with a way for Vera to get out of town without being tracked. This man seemed to know people in the small town where they lived and used his connections to create havoc and chaos.

He needed sleep, so he turned off everything and headed to bed, letting his mind work on the problem during the night. The next morning after their workout, he was sitting at his desk, his mind going over everything when Trip came in, his eyes narrowed before he gave Hop a chin lift.

“You look worried.”

Hop shook his head. “No. I mean, kind of. My sister's friend is having some issues. Her ex is causing problems. He burned down her apartment. This is after he abducted her and tied her up in the woods. She got free then, but the police didn't believe her. It's one of those issues where the daddy is rich and the boy is worthless.”

“What are they asking you to do?”

“She wanted to leave town. She's coming out here to live in my place until she gets her life together. But he keeps following her. She needs to get out of town without anyone knowing where she went.”

The rest of his team had come in and were standing around, listening to his problems.

No one spoke for a long moment. He wasn't sure they could figure it out. She might just be stuck with him knowing where she lived and have to deal with it.

“What area?”

“Between Austin and San Antonio. It's not a huge town, small enough for him to keep track of her.”

Bud leaned in, putting his hands on Hop's desk. “Where does Frizz live now?”

“She's closer to Austin.”

“She's safe, right?” Rider asked.

“Yeah. She's safe.” At least, he hoped she was. If that bastard hurt Frizz, he would go ballistic.

“Who do we know in that area?” Q asked.

Zip's lips twisted up. “He's not living there now, but he's in the area.”

“Who?” Rider asked.

“Tex. He may be able to arrange something. He knows those Delta guys and a bunch of Army Rangers and other guys. He's connected.”

“Do you have his number?” Rider asked.

Zip shrugged. “I can ask Wolf to contact him. He lives down the street from me. I'll call him and ask.”

“Thank you. I’ll send a note to my sister and tell her we might have a solution.”

Bud gave him a chin lift. “Tell Frizz we said hi.”

Hop chuckled. “Sure. I will.”

The guys had met Frizz when she’d come to visit a few months ago. They’d thought she was a hoot. Plus, she told ridiculous stories about him, and they loved that. Now, he just had to find a way to save Frizz’s friend because if he waited too long, Frizz would do something crazy and put herself in danger.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vera wasn't sure she liked the plan that had been set up. She was meeting a man at the local Walmart. They were going to leave in his vehicle, which was a rental, so they didn't think Logan could track it. Then, they would drive to another location, and she would switch to another car. But that one, she would have to be in the trunk.

It was weird that they would put her in the trunk and drive. Like who did shit like that? But they were getting her out of Texas, helping her escape the madman hell bent on destroying her.

Though she worried about the plan, she caught the taxi at eleven that morning like they had arranged. She only had a backpack since everything else had been destroyed in the fire. The donated clothes she'd been wearing didn't fit well, and she thought it best to leave them for someone else to use. Besides, she could pick up new clothes in California.

Once in Walmart, she headed to the gardening section like they'd told her. She saw a man standing near the hoses, which was where she'd been directed to go. The man had dark hair and dark eyes that narrowed as she moved closer. He wasn't old, but he wasn't as young as Logan's friends. She had a feeling she could trust him, like a calm washing over her.

"Vera?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm Vera."

“You can call me Tex. We’re going out this way.”

She followed him toward the back of the store. “We’re not going out the front?”

“No, ma’am. If you see someone you recognize, you need to tell me.”

“I will.” She glanced around, searching for Logan or one of his buddies. So far, it seemed like no one was following her.

They slipped out the back of the store, where a car sat waiting for them. “Get in the back and get low. I know you may want to look where we’re going, but you can’t.”

“Yes, sir.”

She slid into the back seat and lay down, tears forming in her eyes. Could this really work? Worry made breathing difficult, but she vowed to stay calm.

“I’ll turn the temperature low, but you need to cover up with that blanket. The guys in trucks will be able to see into the back, and we can’t have anyone knowing you’re back there.”

She covered her body and head, noticing that her hands were shaking. The car eased forward, and then they turned out onto the street. Tex drove for a bit before he stopped. Worry filled her until they took off again, then stopped. It seemed longer than stoplights, but she wasn’t sure.

After what seemed like forever, Tex spoke. “We’re almost there. I’ve made a few stops to make sure no one was following me.”

“Thank you.” She forced herself to calm down. There was no reason to panic. This guy, Tex, was keeping her safe. There was no way she could have gotten out of there

without help from this man.

Finally, the vehicle rolled to a stop, and the engine cut off. Her heart started beating faster, and she worried that Logan had followed.

“Vera, you’re switching to a new vehicle. This may be scary because you’ll be in the trunk. We think that’s the safest way for you to get out without being seen.”

“Can I uncover my head?”

“Yes, you can sit up. The other guy is here. He’s going to drive you to Waco. You’ll be put on a bus. The bus is your best bet because they won’t take your name. No one will expect you to leave from Waco. Once he feels like it’s safe, he’ll pull off and let you into the front of the car, but we need to make sure you really are safe.”

She didn’t want one of Logan’s friends seeing her. Having him tracking her, knowing where she always was had freaked her out. “I can ride the whole way in the trunk.”

“Okay. I’ll tell him. And Vera, stay safe. I’ll keep up with your progress. I’m in contact with Hop. He’ll know where you are the whole way.”

Tex opened the door for her and she stepped out, glancing around, noticing they were in an industrial garage that was closed. She drew in a shaky breath, and Tex’s lips quirked up in a smile.

“I know this is scary. Hopefully, this will get you where you need to go. Here.” He handed her a small item. “Usually, we sew them into clothing, but you don’t have time right now. It’s a tracker. If something happens and he gets ahold of you, we’ll know where you are. Stay safe.”

Her hand went to her hair, but there was nothing to brush behind her ear. She’d

forgotten for a moment that Logan had chopped it off. Sadness hit, but she pushed it away. She wouldn't be sad about losing the dead ends of her hair or having to go with a new style. She looked good with short hair, and that was that. Even if it took convincing herself of that fact, she wouldn't let Logan win by being depressed about losing her long hair. "Thank you. This means the world to me."

The man from the new car got out and came over. He was big, very muscular, and looked scary. Then he smiled and shook Tex's hand.

"It's good to see you, man." The guy turned to her. "Call me Whisper. I'm taking you to Waco. I have a light in the trunk and a button for you to push to talk to me. I have AC set up to keep you cool enough. You can change the temperature if you need to."

The situation overwhelmed her. "Wow."

Whisper chuckled. "I don't do this often, but we've had to do it enough times. I have a good setup."

"Thank you. I don't know what I would do without your help. How can I repay you?"

They both shook their head. "When family needs us, we answer the call. Just be safe. That's repayment enough."

She didn't know what to say. For a moment, she wondered if these guys were real or if she'd dreamt it up. But no, she was awake, and this was happening. She might just be able to escape Logan with help from these men. "Thank you."

Whisper popped the trunk of his car, and she drew in a slow breath. There was a pillow and blanket and a few other things to make her more comfortable. She thanked Tex again, then climbed in.

The drive seemed to pass much quicker than getting from Walmart to the garage where she'd switched cars. She might have fallen asleep for a bit because when Whisper spoke over the speaker in the trunk, she jerked like she'd just woken up.

"We're getting closer. I'm going to slow. There is a button next to the back seat. If you press it, one side will fold down. You can crawl through, so it looks like you're just getting out of the back seat when you get out."

"Thank you."

She moved, making sure she had her backpack close. Minutes after she left the trunk, they pulled up at the bus stop.

"I've had a car trailing us. The spotter didn't see Logan or anyone else following. I'm certain you're safe. You don't have a phone he can track?"

"No, sir. I tossed that after the fire."

Whisper shook his head. "I hope this gets you some freedom."

"Thank you. I really appreciate what you're doing."

"I'm glad to help. Like Tex said, we help family."

She nodded, unsure what else to say. He handed her an envelope, and her eyebrows shot up as confusion filled her.

"What's this?"

"Your ticket. Hop will be there when you arrive."

“Hop?”

“Um, Ben. We call him Hop. He’ll be there.”

“Again, thank you. I owe you all my life.”

“You’re welcome, and it’s all good. You deserve to have peace. Take care.”

She waved one final time and headed into the station. It looked like she had an hour to kill. The last thing she wanted was to be found here by either someone taking a photo, or one of Logan’s friends coming in, so she hid in the bathroom. When women came in, she worked on her makeup, not that she wore much, but it gave her an excuse for being in the bathroom.

She couldn’t believe this was her life. How had she gotten to this point where she was hiding in a bus station bathroom. Logan had bullied her for the last time. She would be free of him just as soon as she left Texas. There wasn’t any way he would find her in California. She knew that meant she had to stay off social media, but she could do it.

Logan didn’t show up before she loaded on the bus. She could breathe a little easier now that she knew she would really escape him. Still, worry filtered in, taunting her with the idea that she would never be free from that bastard. Logan could find her if he looked hard enough.

The hotel where Vera was staying had cameras, and he knew they were monitored. One of his buddies did some work there and found out the hard way that they had someone watching the feeds. If he entered the hotel, they would have a record of him being there. He should have acted when he saw her at the restaurant.

Maybe there was another way to get back at her. She’d walked away from him, and

that wasn't okay. She had no right to end it with him. Who did she think she was walking away?

Logan swung back by the hotel where Vera was staying, thinking of a way to get her room number. Maybe he could burn down the hotel. But the hotel's video surveillance would pick him up. He was pushing his luck.

His friends in the police force would forgive him for being a little rough with Vera. They all knew what a bitch she was. But another building going up in flames would be difficult for them to excuse. Not that anyone knew he'd burned down the apartment building, but a few of his buddies suspected.

Taking out the hotel would get his name on a list. He had to find her, though. Maybe she would show up in the next few days. And then, he would do more than just chain her to a tree or burn her out of an apartment. He would make sure she never escaped from him again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Worry filled Hop as the bus emptied, but he didn't see anyone who fit Vera's description. He was about to give up when a woman with very short hair stepped from the bus, her gaze flashing from one side to the other. She looked very nervous.

He moved to her, trying to seem friendly but not overly friendly. "Vera?" he asked when he was close.

She nodded and tried to tuck her hair behind her ear, but it was too short. "Um, yes. I'm Vera. You're Ben—uh, Hop."

He couldn't help the smile. "That's me."

"Thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Besides, my sister asked, so of course. She vouched for you, too."

Vera chuckled and rolled her eyes. "She's very trusting. I once had to stop her from bringing home a homeless dude when we were in college."

He stopped walking as worry for Frizz increased. "You don't think your ex will go after her?"

Vera shook her head. "No, Frizz lives within the city limits of Austin. The police there don't like Logan. I thought about moving there, but it's expensive, and he would still be able to keep track of me. Moving here will make it impossible for him

to find me. At least, I hope so.”

“It should be very difficult as long as you don’t post on social media.”

She shook her head as she deposited her bag in the back seat of his car. She slid into the front seat, looking a little nervous. He needed to find out more about her social media habits. Just being on social media would open her up to being found.

“Social media makes it very easy for people to locate you.”

She sighed. “My phone is gone, and my computer, too. I’ll have to buy a new one and download everything from the cloud. I don’t plan on going back to social media, at least not for a long while. Not that I posted much on there in the first place. I kept everything private, but I know he could have been spying using someone else’s profile.”

“Before you connect your device to the cloud, I want one of my friends to set you up so you can’t be tracked.”

She turned to him, her eyes narrowed. “What does that include?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but Thario is good. He can make sure you aren’t tracked.”

“Okay. I’ll do whatever you think is best. Logan has done a lot to try to destroy me. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to track me with my computer or phone.”

“Have you changed all your passwords?”

“I need to. It’s exhausting thinking about everything he has done and what I have to do to counter his actions.”

“Hopefully, this will be a new start for you.”

She nodded but didn't say anything. With the Navy, he'd moved multiple times and was used to it. Being a SEAL meant he would probably stay in Coronado, but he could be sent to Hawaii or Virginia. It was something military people learned to deal with. Your local restaurants and bars would change, along with the people you hung out with, but you'd find people. It was one reason military people learned to stick to friendships with other military members. Sometimes those friends came back around after another move and it was like old times again. Since he was a SEAL, it was all different now.

He hoped Vera could adapt once the fear subsided. Adapting to the changes wasn't easy for some people. He always found people he could hang with wherever he went because military people moved around, and there were always new people in the location. With her not being military, it might be more difficult for her to adapt.

Awkwardness twisted through him when they arrived at his place. Frizz had promised that Vera was good, that she had been a great roommate. Now was the proving time, and he hoped it went well. The last thing he wanted to do was live with a person who was difficult. He couldn't do that. She would have to adjust or leave.

CHAPTER SIX

Vera was thankful that this man had allowed her to move in with him, but the weird feeling that settled around her needed to go away. This was Frizz's brother, not really a stranger, but he was a total stranger to her.

He showed her the room she would occupy, which wasn't huge, but it would do. There was a full-sized bed, so she at least had a place to sleep.

"Um, so the computer thing. I bought a tablet, but now I'm afraid to turn it on."

"Let me call Thario and see if he can meet with us tonight."

"Are you sure? I don't want to be a bother."

Ben chuckled and shook his head. "Thario likes helping people. Freshen up, and I'll let you know what he says."

"Thank you."

She used the restroom down the hall. It wasn't big, but there was a shower stall that didn't look like it had been used recently, which meant Ben had his own bathroom. She was thankful she wouldn't have to share a bathroom with him. He was too good looking and the awkwardness of being in the same space had hit her. If she had to see him in a towel, or just fresh out of a shower, it would make it even more awkward.

Five minutes later, Ben knocked on her door. She opened it, hoping they could take

care of the tablet tonight.

“Thario said to come on over. Are you okay with going now?”

She nodded. “Let me grab my tablet.”

Ben stepped away, and she followed a moment later. The reality of moving here was hitting, and she felt weird, like maybe she’d made a mistake. She didn’t know these people, and she was living with a strange guy. But he was Frizz’s brother, and it seemed like he wanted to help.

They were in the car and she wasn’t sure she’d understood the man’s name who was going to help her. “So the guy helping, what is his name?”

“It’s Thario. That’s his nickname. He was a SEAL, and he was a horrible flirt. Well, more than a flirt. He liked picking up women. And Lothario was too long, so he got the name Thario. He’s different now.”

“Why now?”

“He was on a mission, and it didn’t go well. He lost his legs. I don’t know exactly how bad his injuries were, but he changed.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say. There were military bases around where she used to live, but she didn’t hang out in the same places they did. She’d known a few people who’d joined the military, but she had little knowledge of their lives.

“His dog is nice but big. He won’t hurt you, so just be cool with him.”

The car stopped in front of a one-story bungalow. A man was on the porch with a dog. Vera saw the wheelchair and swallowed. She hated bugging people, and she

hoped she wasn't disturbing him too much.

They were out of the car, and the dog came out to meet Ben. "Hop, good to see you," Thario called from the porch.

"Hey, Thario, this is Vera. Vera, Thario, and the dog's name is Frog."

Frog was at her side, sniffing her knee and legs. The dog glanced up at her and she reached down, scratching his head. The dog pranced around excitedly before moving back to stand beside the man in the wheelchair.

Thario reached out to shake her hand. "It's good to meet you, Vera. He likes you. You must be a good person."

Heat filled her face. "Um, nice to meet you. And I don't know. I'd like to think I am good, but I've had my issues."

"Well, a guy stalking you isn't your issue. I don't know the whole situation, but I looked up the dude after Hop called. On paper, he looks good, but he was mentioned in a post on Reddit that was deleted."

She narrowed her gaze. "Deleted?"

"Yes. I have special tools that get me access to interesting information. A woman made a post a few years ago about him stalking her. She isn't alive now."

Vera felt like her heart stopped. She hadn't known about the stalking or that someone had died. "What?"

"The brakes on her car failed, and it plunged into a lake. Her car wasn't discovered for a few years. Any evidence on her body was gone. They ruled it an accident. Just

one more sad statistic of brake failure and a car rolling into deep water.”

“That sounds suspicious as fuck,” Ben said.

Thario nodded. “I know Hop has expressed his thoughts on social media, but if you can stay off the socials, it would be very helpful.”

She drew in a shaky breath. “I won’t log back in.”

They were inside now, and Thario held out his hand. “Okay, let me see your tablet. I just need a few minutes to take a look.”

“When I get my computer and phone, will you help me with that?”

“Absolutely. I love doing this. It keeps me busy. Gives me purpose.”

Vera wasn’t sure what to say. She hadn’t ever known someone who’d been injured like Thario, but she also didn’t want to treat him differently than she would anyone else. “I really appreciate your help. I didn’t know what to do after the fire. Frizz told me to ditch my phone, so I’ve been operating with this cheap thing I bought at the grocery store.”

“So you think he set the apartment fire?” Thario asked as he started typing away on her tablet.

“Yes. I know he did. It’s not worth arguing with the cops. When he tied me up out in the woods, the cops didn’t want to listen. I told them who it was, but they said they had no proof, and Logan was able to get an alibi for that time.”

Thario looked up from the tablet and met her gaze. “I found your police report. The notes from the police officers were disturbing. I’m glad you moved away from there.

If you decide to move back to Texas, don't live there."

Again, his words shocked her. "What did they say?"

Thario shrugged. "That you were mentally disturbed. They weren't kind."

Ben put his hand on her shoulder. "We know it's lies. You'll be safe here."

Thario nodded as he handed her the tablet. "Yes, you'll be safe here. And you're all set. There is no tracking software or applications on here. Be careful what you click on inside emails. I know you're smart enough to know that but be extra careful. And yes, I'll help you with your computer or anything else."

"I really appreciate it." Her emotions rose, and she swiped at her eyes and the tears that threatened to fall. "I don't know why I'm so emotional."

"It's okay." Ben squeezed her shoulder, and she glanced back, meeting his gaze. His brown eyes were similar to Frizz's, but there was something else in his depths that held her attention. "What you went through was stressful."

She nodded, wishing she wasn't so close to crying. When she was back in Texas, she'd held it together, but now she felt like she was close to falling apart.

Laughter spilled out as she tried to cover the sadness and worry. She was a mess, and exhaustion hit her hard, making her feel worse.

"Sorry. I'm a mess. I promise the next time I come over here, I won't be crying."

Thario chuckled. "After the explosion, when reality hit, I cried so much. I hated it. Guys aren't supposed to cry, but I learned that emotions are healthy. You should be upset, and it's okay to express your emotions."

Frog came over and licked her hand. She sat on the couch and wrapped her arms around the dog, giving him a hug. It felt good to have the dog close, loving on her. After a moment, she felt better. Before Frog left her side, he licked her cheek then headed back to Thario's side.

"Your dog is great."

Thario nodded. "Yeah. He's a good one. I didn't think it would make that much difference, but he does. He keeps me even."

"I'm glad you have him." She owed these guys so much. She didn't know how she would ever repay them.

On the way back to Ben's place, she was lost in thought. She'd known the police hadn't believed her, but they'd disparaged her. She should have left town after that incident.

Ben cleared his throat before he spoke. "I have to be at the base early in the morning. I usually end up getting home a little after three, sometimes four. There is food in the refrigerator. Eat anything you like. Over the next week, we can work out food buying and how we'll deal with storage and stuff."

"I can't thank you enough."

"I'm happy to help."

She glanced toward him, then away. Feelings rose, and she had to force them down. Ben was just helping her because of Frizz. There wasn't a special connection between them, and there wouldn't be.

In a few months, she would have to move out. Maybe she would stay somewhere

close, or maybe she would move to Oregon or somewhere else. One thing for certain, she could never go back to Texas, at least not for a few decades. Hopefully, Logan would give up and stop looking for her. If he didn't, she wasn't sure what she would do.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first night with Vera sleeping just down the short hall felt weird. He thought it was just having someone new in his space. He'd lived alone for so long that having someone sleeping down the hall from him was just odd.

On Saturday morning, after six days of living with Vera, he woke with an insane hard-on and jerked off before he even left his room for coffee. It wasn't her, it was him. Though he thought she was attractive, the hard-on wasn't tied to her, it couldn't be.

Too many weeks had passed since he'd been with a woman, and he needed to do something about it. His body wasn't responding to her being close. It was just simple biology. Maybe he would go out tonight and pick up someone. That should help.

After his run, he stepped inside, and the scent of bacon and other breakfast foods hit hard. He groaned as hunger took over.

"I made extra. I hope you don't mind."

"Heck no. That smells amazing. Let me hit the shower real fast."

"Sure. I can start the eggs when I hear the water stop."

"Thanks."

The mention of her being able to hear the water stop made him think about jerking

off. Had she heard him doing that? She was very quiet. He wasn't sure, but he thought she showered while he was at work. When he came home in the afternoon, she was usually still working. He thought about asking her about her work but didn't want to get too close. If he started asking her about her life, she might think they would become more than friends. She wasn't here to date him, and he didn't want her getting the impression he liked her.

When he'd heard that she'd taken a shared ride to buy a computer and then ended up at Thario's place in the middle of the afternoon, he'd felt weird, disturbed. He convinced himself it wasn't jealousy. He'd just wanted to see Thario. That was all.

That Thario used to be a total flirt had nothing to do with his reaction to thinking about Vera alone with the man. No, he'd felt that pang because he had missed seeing Frog. It had nothing at all to do with the way his heart sped up when she walked into the room. His reaction to her coming into a room was because he was surprised to have someone living with him. There was absolutely nothing to his feelings at all.

At least she was independent enough he didn't have to drive her around. Though, he hoped to spend some time with her today since it was Saturday. He just wanted to get to know her, nothing more. He wasn't interested in dating her because he wasn't interested in dating anyone.

No question, Ben was hot. He worked out, went for runs, and stayed physically fit. When she looked at him, attraction fired hot. But she wouldn't go there. He was Frizz's brother and totally off-limits.

There was a knock on the door before the shower stopped and she flipped off the burner on the bacon before stepping away from the stove. She opened the door and three men with beards or scruff stared down at her.

"Hey, Vera, is Hop here?"

“Hop—oh, you mean Ben. I forget people call him that. Um?—”

She heard the door open behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder, seeing Ben in shorts but no shirt. Heat raced up her chest to her neck and face as she stared at the expanse of his muscled pecs and evident six-pack.

Ben smiled and waved them in. “Come on in, guys. I’m running late.”

“Holy shit, that smells good. Can we help?”

Vera had made enough for the two of them but hadn’t made extra. She was about to say something when the guys moved to the kitchen and took over.

“Sit down, Vera, and rest. Let us finish cooking. I’m Q, just the letter, nothing more.”

“Oh, you all cook?”

They all looked at her like she had a screw loose. “Of course, we cook. I’m Zip.” The man was tall, with thick hair and a beard. He would be the type of guy she would shy away from based on the men she’d grown up around in Texas.

“Q and Zip,” she said as she looked at them and raised her eyebrows.

“And I’m Bud.” Bud wasn’t as tall as the other two, but he had a nice smile and less facial hair.

“I can help with breakfast.” She didn’t want Ben to regret having her live with him.

Zip waved her off. “Rest. I know the last few weeks have been stressful for you. I talked to Thario the other day. He says you’re taking his advice and staying well hidden.”

She was a little surprised they'd all talked about her. "How much do you all know about my situation?"

Ben took a seat next to her. "These guys are on my team. I trust them with my life. They know because I asked their advice. They are good guys and won't let anyone know you're here."

His words made sense, but they were unexpected. "Oh."

Ben's soulful brown eyes met hers and held. "We deal with a lot of crap in our jobs. We've seen much worse."

Anger rose, and she said the words before thinking. "Worse than him chaining me to a tree and then chopping off my hair?"

Ben took her hand and squeezed. "What he did was fucked up. No question, you're very strong. We've seen people just give up, though they only had like two miles left. They could have walked to safety, and they didn't. None of us believe what you went through wasn't terrible, but we aren't going to judge you. You're a survivor and that's amazing."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be angry. I'm just still dealing with some emotions from it all."

Zip pointed the fork he was holding at her. "Totally understandable. The one time I was captured and held it pissed me off. When I got free, I set fire to their compound. I was so pissed."

His words threw her off. What did he mean captured? "Oh, wow."

Q chuckled. "I remember hearing about that. The place exploded, and that's how the

helicopters found you. Vera, what you went through was awful. Don't let anyone discount that."

Bud nodded as he flipped the pancake on the griddle. "We've seen bad shit. It sucks when stuff like that happens."

Zip turned off the burner under the bacon and plated the final pieces. "Do you think he would have come back out to get you?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. It had been around twenty-four hours. I was so thirsty. Luckily it started raining. I was cold, but the rain meant water."

"Fuck, that's awful. And the cops did nothing?" Q asked.

She shrugged as anger built. "Nothing. They decided I was the problem."

"Well, you're safe here with us." Zip set the bacon on the table. "It's time to eat."

She hadn't expected Ben's friends, but she felt better after talking to them. They had seen a lot. A part of her felt bad about having to stay at Ben's place. She'd had thoughts that maybe she was blowing everything out of proportion, so she'd reacted to their words.

They ate and talked but they were talking about work and she didn't understand everything because they were using acronyms and it sounded like they were talking in code.

After they finished, she got up to clean, but the guys took care of cleaning, and she only had to wash her own plate.

Ben turned to her. "We're planning on going to the beach for a few hours. Do you

want to join us?”

Her lips screwed up to the side. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“You could wear shorts. It’s not too hot, and Ellis will have an umbrella.”

Confusion filled her. “Ellis?”

Ben nodded. “Yeah, she’s with Trip. She’s really nice.”

She had no reason to say no, and honestly, getting out of the house would be nice. “Okay. I’ll go.” She could read something on her phone or maybe take a nap. “Do we need to pack any food or drinks?”

Q shook his head. “We’ve got you covered.”

Ben flashed a smile. “Go change into shorts and come on. We’ll have fun. We can stop and pick up some flip-flops for you. There’s a store on the way. It will be fast.”

She shrugged. “You’ve sold me on it.” Excitement built as she changed clothes. They were on the road in minutes, her sitting in the back of Q’s car between Ben and Bud. The guys seemed to have accepted her. They weren’t flirting with her, which she appreciated. They weren’t trying to treat her like one of the guys, but the tension wasn’t there either, except with Ben. But he wasn’t flirting with her either. Just sometimes, she swore she caught him looking at her, though it wasn’t too awkward now.

Maybe there was something there, or maybe not. She wasn’t sure, but if he made a move, she wouldn’t have a problem with it. No, she would welcome his interest, which honestly shocked her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The beach looked busy. Worry filled her but Ben bumped her shoulder. “He’s still in Texas. We have someone keeping tabs on him. You’re fine.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“It’s a retired military guy. He’s not following Logan, but he lives near there and is just picking up conversations. Tex talked to the dude on Wednesday, and the guy said he would happily support the efforts to collect intelligence on Logan. He says it gives him something fun to do.”

“Wow. I had no idea anyone was watching him.”

“I was going to talk to you about it this weekend. I’ve been late from work a couple of times, and I wanted to see if the guy would stick with it. He will. He was military intelligence. He thinks it’s fun. He also set up an alert, so he knows if the guy books an airline ticket.”

She shook her head. “Is that legal?”

Ben shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t want to get any of you in trouble.”

“Trust me, we’ll be fine.”

She nodded, hoping she wasn't too big of a bother for them. "Thank you. I don't know how I'll ever pay you all back."

"Honestly, the retired guys love this stuff."

"It's just weird. I spent so much time alone. I've never had people looking after me."

A couple seemed to be heading their way. "Is that Ellis?"

Ben lifted his chin. "Yes. Ellis and Trip."

"Hey, Hop, this must be Vera," Trip said.

Ellis shook her hand. "I'm Ellis. It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too."

"Time for fun," Ben said as he came up behind them.

They made their way to the volleyball nets, and she glanced around, taking in the atmosphere. The place was busy, but everyone seemed to be happy and minding their own business. She'd never been to see the Pacific Ocean, so excitement filled her as she stood there watching the waves roll in. In Texas, the waves weren't this high unless a storm was rolling in. A couple came over while Trip was setting up the umbrella. Ellis hugged the woman, and for a second, Vera wasn't sure she was going to be introduced. She felt awkward because she didn't know how much to explain her situation.

"And this is Vera. Vera, I'd like you to meet Remi."

"Remi. Nice to meet you." She shook the woman's hand, really studying her. She

looked amazingly down to earth, someone Vera thought she would be friends with if they'd met in college.

“Hi, Vera. Are you new here?”

“Yes. Actually, I've never seen the Pacific Ocean before. So I feel like a dork staring at the big waves.”

Remi snorted. “I feel like a dork all the time. Want to walk down and put your feet in?”

Vera glanced back at Hop, wondering if she should. “Um, I think it's okay. Let me tell Hop.”

She moved to the guys, and Hop flashed a smile as she came over. “I'm going to put my feet in the water.”

Hop glanced around, his gaze taking in the people. “You don't see anyone you know, do you?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

“Put on the ball cap and sunglasses.”

“Sure.”

Since she didn't have long hair anymore, it was easy to stuff her hair under the hat. When she got back to the women, they both smiled.

“Ready?” Remi asked.

“Sure.”

Ellis flashed a smile. “I’m going to stay here. I went for a jog with Trip this morning, and I’m exhausted.”

Remi chuckled. “There is no way I’m going running with Kevlar. And if you see me running, you know it’s bad, and you should run, too.”

Vera laughed as she followed behind Remi, catching up with her quickly. Remi glanced over at her and smiled. Remi’s hair blew in the wind and went straight into your mouth. She rolled her eyes as she pulled the hair out of her mouth.

“It’s nice that you can put all your hair up in that cap.”

Vera lifted her hand to brush her hair back, but it wasn’t there. “Um, yeah.”

Remi reached out and put her hand on Vera’s arm. “I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

Vera shook her head. She didn’t want to offend this woman who was being nice. “No. You didn’t say anything wrong. My ex did some horrible things. That’s one reason I’m here. One of the horrible things he did was chop off all my hair. It used to be almost to my butt.”

Remi stopped walking, horror written all over her face. “He what?”

Vera blew out a breath and held out her wrists. Vera ran her thumb over the rough scars, shaking her head.

“He took me out to the middle of nowhere and tied me to a tree. While tied up, he chopped off my hair. It was awful.”

“Oh, Vera, I’m so sorry. That really sucks.”

“I’m here now because Ben’s sister, or do you know him by Hop?”

“Hop is how I know him.”

“I was roommates with Frizz, his sister, in college. She set this up.”

“Well, I’m glad you made it here. And this is the Pacific.”

Vera yelled as the cold water ran up over her feet. They both laughed, and she screeched again as the water rolled up higher, hitting her mid-calf.

“Wow, that’s cold.”

Remi was laughing with her, and Vera realized she felt free. She could do this. Having Ben and his friends in her life would get her through the most difficult parts of it all.

“Hey, Remi!” a man with a scruffy beard and big muscles called out behind them.

“Oh, that’s Kevlar, my man.”

Vera chuckled. “He looks...fierce, big.”

“He’s a big ol’ teddy bear. I’m happy with him.”

“That’s good.”

“We should get back. We’re having dinner out tonight.”

Vera took off her sandals and walked back up the beach with Remi. When they got to Kevlar, Remi introduced them. Kevlar shook her hand, his smile friendly.

“It’s nice to meet you. Hop is a good man. He’ll keep you safe.”

She shrugged, wondering how many people knew about what had happened. “He’s good. I’m glad I know his sister. Otherwise, I’m not sure I’d know where to go.”

“Well, you’ll be safe here. We’ll make sure of it.”

She nodded, unsure what to say. It was odd that so many of these guys seemed to really want to help. They were really good people, but she guessed that was something about the Navy. Or maybe guys like Ben, people who wanted to help, tended to like the same types of jobs. She said goodbye to Remi and Kevlar, then took a seat next to Ellis.

“The water is cold.”

Ellis chuckled. “It is. It probably would have felt good on my feet, but I was too tired to walk more.” They watched the guys play, and Ellis turned to her. “Have you been with Hop for long?”

Her stomach tightened as desire pumped through her. It made her sad that she couldn’t say she was with him. “Oh, I’m not with him. I just live there.”

“Really?”

“Um, yeah. My ex did some stuff, and I needed a place to stay. I know Ben—well, Hop’s sister. She was my college roommate.”

“You weren’t in California before, right?”

“No, I was in Texas. You really haven’t heard about this?”

Ellis chuckled. “Those men keep secrets locked up tight. I won’t say anything. I know being in bad situations really sucks. My ex put a tracker on my car. He caused a lot of problems. It’s how I met Trip, so I guess it all turned out okay in the end.”

“Oh, wow. That sucks.”

“Yeah, ex-boyfriends can be assholes.”

“I didn’t date Logan for that long. Like six months, and then I left him. He kept upping the pain he inflicted. He’s the one who cut my hair off. It used to be long.”

Ellis reached out and squeezed her hand. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m alive. He couldn’t kill me. He tried, but I survived.”

“I’m so glad you did because I think we’re going to become friends.”

Vera smiled, realizing that it would be good to have a friend out here. Ellis seemed like a good person, and she could see a friendship developing between them. She was glad she’d met Remi, too. Maybe moving to California would really be good for her.

The guys started playing volleyball against another group of guys. There was one guy out there with them she didn’t know, but Ellis helped her with their names. By the end of the game, she knew who each of Ben’s friends were.

As the guys were wrapping up their game, Vera headed over to the bathrooms. She finished quickly and had just stepped out of the bathroom when her new flip-flop broke. She groaned loudly, and a few people stared at her.

She bent, picking up the now useless shoe and inspecting it. There was no way to salvage the thing. Living here, she needed to invest in some decent sandals.

Once she stepped out of the shade, the burning on her feet was so bad she jumped back into the shade. It had been years since she'd walked outside barefoot, and her feet were tender. There was no way she would make it back to the umbrella.

She inspected her shoe again, not seeing any way to fix it. She was stuck unless she just made a run for it. It would hurt, but she could run fast-ish and hopefully not damage the bottom of her feet too badly.

In her head, she gave herself a countdown, getting ready to make a dash for it, when Ben called to her from across the lot.

“Hey, what’s up?”

She shielded her eyes, making sure he was really calling to her. He'd taken off his shirt, which should have been illegal. His body was honed to perfection. He had a light dusting of dark hair across his pecs that ran down the center of his body then got real dark right above the waistband of his shorts. She was staring. Not good. As an afterthought, she raised her hand holding the broken flip flop and waved it. “It broke.”

“Stay there.”

He jogged over and pulled on his shirt just before he got to her. She wasn't sure she could take her eyes off the broad expanse of his chest if he hadn't put on his shirt. After a quick shake of her head, she met his gaze, forcing herself not to rake her gaze down his body. He was way too good-looking. She'd done okay for the most part, ignoring how hot he was, but she was starting to have difficulty not noticing.

“Let me see.”

She handed him her flip flops, and he shook his head. “Yeah. That’s blown out. Maybe we can fix it.” He shoved the flip flops into his pocket then turned. “Jump on, and I’ll carry you.”

The gasp that escaped her lips made him turn back around with his eyebrows raised.

“I’m too heavy.”

He threw back his head, laughter spilling out. “I have to carry those guys with my pack on. Trust me, you are not heavy.”

“Are you sure?”

He tilted his head and gave her a look that spoke volumes. She shrugged and circled her finger in the air, telling him to turn around.

When he bent, she jumped up, and he caught her around her thighs, lifting her up so she could hold on around his neck.

“You good?”

She nodded then spoke. Her voice came out low and breathy. “Yeah, I’m good.” But she wasn’t sure she would ever be good again after being pressed up against him, almost skin to skin.

The masculine scent of his skin mixed with the fresh salt air made her want to lick up the column of his neck just to taste him. She forced herself to think of something else as he jogged back across the lot and over to the beach umbrella, where everyone was milling around.

Heat rose up her neck to her face. What would these guys and Ellis think of her? She really wasn't trying to hit on Ben and make him carry her so that her body was pressed so close against his that she would never forget what he felt like. Her shoe had broken, but she feared this looked like a setup. The last thing she wanted was for them to think she was trying to force Ben into a relationship.

If she didn't tame her reactions to him, she would end up on the streets. Her living in his house was just a favor for his sister, and she needed to respect that. Though the skin-to-skin contact with him was driving her insane with need. She was only here because of that favor and not because he wanted her. She needed to keep that in mind, and not his ridiculously sexy body or the super sweet way he treated her.

CHAPTER NINE

Having Vera on his back, her breasts pressing against him, her legs wrapped around him, was near maddening. If she wasn't his sister's friend, he would have already hit on her. But she wasn't living with him for that. She needed help because some jerk had decided it was open season on her, and she didn't need his lust, too.

Once they were back with the group, he set her down close to the umbrella, and she stepped into the shade. He caught the way her eyes flew to his face and then away. He'd messed up. She was going through some bad shit, and he'd pushed too hard. The last thing she needed was another guy trying things with her.

He pulled her flip flops out of his pocket and held them up. "Anyone have anything to fix these?"

Q held out his hand, taking the shoes from him. "I have duct tape. It won't look pretty, but it will hold for the rest of the day."

"Thank you, Q. That will help so much."

Q flashed a wide grin and took off to his car. Vera chatted with Ellis while Q took care of her shoe. Hop was next to Q, helping hold the shoe. The two times Vera glanced over at him, she jerked her gaze away so fast he wondered if she was mad at him.

This was why he didn't date, and he needed to remember this feeling. Vera was here because she needed help, not him.

He could fight this and win. There was no reason for Vera to feel awkward around him. He wasn't some hormonal teenager, and he could handle his shit, even if it meant he walked away from her after she moved out.

Vera enjoyed spending time at the beach with Ben and his friends. Since they'd called him Hop all day, she was getting used to thinking of him as Hop and not Ben.

They had both showered and were sitting at the table, eating leftovers from something he'd cooked earlier in the week. "How did you get the nickname Hop?"

His lips curved up slightly, and he shook his head. "You really want to know?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Of course. I wouldn't have asked otherwise. I know why you gave Caroline the name Frizz. That's obvious. But Hop, what is that about?"

"I had just started BUDs. It's intense. You don't stop. Sure, you eat and sleep some, and all the other stuff that you have to do to survive, but it's this endless phase of working your ass off, and not getting enough of things you need to be human. It strips you down."

"Dang, I had no idea."

He shrugged. "It is what it is. Anyway, I hadn't slept more than ten minutes, and we were outside when I saw a bug crawling toward us. We weren't in formation yet, and I started hopping. I didn't want the bug to get on me. It wasn't the most rational reaction, but it's what I did. Then everyone else started hopping. Our trainer stepped outside and saw all of us hopping around. He laughed his ass off. It could have gone wrong for me. You can't be afraid of bugs or snakes or other stuff like that."

A shiver slid down her spine. "I would never make it. I hate bugs. When I was tied to that tree, and they were crawling all over me—" A shiver worked through her. "I

don't even want to think about it."

His lips curved up a little, and she wanted to lean in and kiss him. They weren't dating, and forcing a connection with him would be wrong. She'd left Logan a while ago, but she didn't need to start up with another guy.

"Yeah, being a SEAL means you get put into gross situations. There were a few times I had to shut down the ick factor for bugs and just do it. The worst is operating in rainforests. There are so many creepy crawlies." His whole body shook as revulsion filled his face. "I can't even think about it."

She shook her head as she fought to suppress another shiver. "Oh, can't, just can't think about it."

His chuckle warmed her. "Neither can I. I was thinking about getting food at the commissary this week. Mostly meat and a few other items. You don't eat much compared to me. How about I buy food, and you can pay me like a third or better, a quarter of the cost? That sounds about right."

"I could just buy my stuff at the grocery store nearby."

"Meat is much cheaper on base."

She thought about it for a moment. "I guess that would be good."

"Yeah, I'd say you eat about a quarter of what I do. So I'll buy the meat, and we'll see how it goes."

She appreciated him picking up groceries, but she wanted to do a few things for herself. "I think I need to buy a car."

“Do you want something used or new?”

“I don’t know. I think I’d rather not spend a bunch of money. My last car was four years old when I got it, so it was cheaper. I don’t look forward to having a monthly bill again.”

“Yeah, that part of new cars sucks.”

She picked up her plate and took it to the sink, rinsing it off before putting it in the dishwasher. It was late, and she wanted to catch up on email, so she didn’t have a lot to conquer on Monday.

“I’m headed to my room to do a little work. Thank you for inviting me out today.”

“Sure. It was fun. I’m glad you had a chance to meet Ellis and Remi. They are both really nice.”

Vera nodded. “They are.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Have a good night’s sleep.”

“You, too.”

Spending the day with Hop had been interesting. She enjoyed his company, and his friends were so different from anything she’d experienced before. They were kind and sweet and didn’t get weird around her. None of them had hit on her. It had been refreshing.

After doing her email, she read for a little while and then headed to bed. She wasn’t sure how long she’d slept for when something woke her out of a dead sleep. Confusion filled her, and she stumbled out of bed, searching for the lamp beside her

bed. Her hand hit something, and the lamp tilted. Before the lamp fell off the table, she caught it, making sure it was sitting up.

The noise intensified, and she moved to the door, pulling it open. Right then, she saw a figure and screamed. The person reached out their hand, clamping down on her arm.

“Vera, it’s me,” Hop whispered.

“Oh God, what is that noise?”

“Not sure. But we don’t have electricity now.”

“I noticed that. Is the whole block out?”

“I think?—”

Something like an explosion sounded, cutting her off. She jumped, landing so her body pressed up against his. Fear slid through her. His arms tightened around her, making her feel better. And then she realized his chest was bare. Her thin tank top didn’t do much to cover her, and neither did her underwear.

Her cheek brushed over his pec, and she gasped as she tilted her head up just as he looked down. Their lips were close, almost touching. His breath on her cheeks and his hands on her back made her nipples tighten.

A siren sounded outside, the lights from the emergency equipment illuminating their space enough that she could see the desire in his eyes. The heat in his gaze was unmistakable, and she wanted it. She wanted to get even closer to him, to find out what his hands actually felt like on her body.

He cleared his throat and stepped back. “I should see what’s going on.”

A tinge of disappointment slid through her, but it wasn’t the time to explore whatever she felt when she’d been pressed up against his body.

She nodded, stepping away from him. With the lights outside, she could make out the color of his underwear. Which meant he could see her panties.

Her cheeks heated as she made her way back to her room. She shouldn’t be so embarrassed, but she couldn’t get over how she’d reacted to his touch.

She pulled on shorts and a T-shirt over her tank. Her shoes were in the closet at the front of the house, so she headed into the den and slid on her socks and shoes.

Once outside, she found Hop standing on the front lawn, his arms crossed over his chest. He was wearing a t-shirt and shorts now, which was probably better than him going out in his underwear. The street was filled with emergency responders and their vehicles.

“What happened?” she asked as she moved to stand beside him.

“Looks like a house down the block had an issue. We probably shouldn’t be out here for long. The wind is blowing the other way, but still, whatever is in that smoke could be toxic.”

She glanced around, noticing that most of the police officers and firemen didn’t currently have any masks on. She’d never been this close to a fire before and certainly never this close to an explosion. “How far down is their house?”

“Next block. Looks like it’s about five or six houses in.”

“Did you know them?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t know anyone on that part of the street. If it’s the house I think it is, they moved in last year. I always thought they looked sketchy. Like, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a drug house. Maybe it’s not the house I’m thinking about. If it’s a drug house, we might be evacuated.”

“Shit. We should probably go back in before the wind shifts.”

“Yeah. You’re right. That smoke could be very toxic.”

They headed inside, her going in before him. The lights were still off, so she stopped, having to think about where the chair was. Hop almost ran into her, and he reached out and grabbed her shoulder. His hand on her was almost too much. She drew in a ragged breath, trying to stay calm.

“Sorry. I don’t feel comfortable walking without a light.”

“Yeah, I get that. I left my phone in my room.”

“Same.”

She took a step just as he did. She mis-stepped and almost fell. Hop grabbed her arm, steadying her. She ended up facing him as she stumbled another step closer, her hands landing on his chest.

Her gaze swung up just as he glanced down. This time, she didn’t want to pull away, but kissing him would be wrong. They were only pressed up against each other because they were stumbling around in the dark. He wouldn’t have pulled her into a hug if the sun was up and they were just hanging out together. The darkness hid their expressions, but it couldn’t hide the desire she felt flowing off him. His hands

lingered on her as his fingers caressed her side, then her back. The sound of him sniffing her hair sent tingles down her spine. They were so close she could feel his breath on her neck.

She expected him to back away, but he didn't move, and neither did she. It felt good being only inches from him. He squeezed her arm, and she wished he would do more. But that was dangerous. She needed this place to live. She could find an apartment, but then her name would be on the lease. She didn't want Logan to know where she was, and having her name attached to an address was scary.

A siren sounded outside on the street, and that was her sign to back away. He cleared his throat and then stepped back. That was her cue to go back to her bedroom and ignore the desire floating in the air.

"If they make us evacuate, I'll wake you up. I think it's safe to go to bed."

She nodded. "Thank you. I should sleep some more. At least it's Sunday, and I can take a nap."

"Yeah. We can nap tomorrow."

She didn't think he realized what he'd implied. But had he actually implied anything? She was reading too much into it. They were both tired, and he'd just meant they could both take naps but not together.

It would be irrational to think they would nap together. Just the thought of him holding her while they slept was almost too much. Once back in her bed, she stretched out, pulling the sheet up to her neck, trying hard to push the desire down. Getting all worked up over Hop wouldn't be good for her. She needed to keep her head on straight and not fall into the trap of thinking he wanted something to do with her when he was just being nice. They weren't going to be together. She was only

here because he was doing a favor for his sister. That was all.

CHAPTER TEN

Hop didn't move closer to the hall leading to the bedrooms though he needed to grab his phone. If he took another step closer to Vera, he might just end up walking into her room and asking if she wanted to do something more than just talking.

She needed help, not a horny guy. He would keep his desire to himself and keep helping her stay safe. Besides, his needs weren't important. He could relieve the pressure with his hand in the shower.

After a few deep breaths, he grabbed his phone and checked outside. The fire was out, but the area stank. It would take at least a few days for the air to clear, especially if it had been the house he suspected of being a drug house.

He eventually headed to bed, sleeping late. When he woke, he could hear Vera in the kitchen. The scent of coffee hung in the air, and his ceiling fan was on. The electricity had turned on at some point.

His cock was hard. No doubt touching Vera last night played a part in how turned-on he was. There was no way he could go into the kitchen with his dick like this. He would have to hop in the shower before he got his coffee.

As quietly as he could, he jacked off, trying not to think of Vera, but she was all that kept going through his mind. After the shower, he dressed and pushed his desire down. When he stepped into the kitchen, he tried to act natural, but he felt anything but natural.

She glanced over, her smile faltering for a moment before she spoke. “That was wild last night. I’ve never been that close to a fire or explosions. At least the electricity is on.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m glad that’s back on. Sadly, I have been that close to fires and explosions. And yes, explosions are scary if you’re not used to them.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she cocked her head to the side. “Did you have a reaction to the explosions last night?”

He shrugged, at first trying to play it off like he had it all together, then he shook his head. “I don’t really talk about it much. But yeah, when it was all going down last night, it took me a moment to remember where I was. It was only a moment, but there were a few seconds where I reached for my gun, thinking I needed to jump into action.”

She grabbed the coffee mug for him and filled it. “Here.” Her gaze held his. “That has to be difficult. But I guess you have to be prepared.”

He nodded. “I do. And yes, it can be bad. Fourth of July sucks, and sometimes New Year’s Eve, but I can deal with it.”

“That’s good that you can deal with it. Honestly, when I woke up, I was scared. I’m glad you were here. I probably would have freaked out if I’d been alone. I didn’t step outside this morning, but I looked out the window and there is still one firetruck down the street.”

“They need to keep an eye on the building. You know, make sure it doesn’t flame up again.” He sipped the coffee, thinking it tasted amazing. His phone buzzed, and he saw a text from Q in their group chat. Word had gotten out about the fire. Now, all the guys were texting. He sent a note back, telling them they were safe and that the

fire had been down one block from him.

After he set his phone down, he thought about dinner. “I was contemplating grilling today. Do you like burgers?”

“Of course. I love burgers. I haven’t grilled in ages.”

“Are you okay if I cook the burgers at about three in the afternoon?”

She glanced at the clock on the microwave and shrugged. “We are eating late, more like brunch this morning. I’ll be ready for lunch at three.”

“Awesome. I need to work out. I have some ground beef thawing in the fridge. I’ll pick up a tomato and some lettuce at the store on my way back.”

“I could go to the store.”

“No, it’s not necessary. I’ll run by on my way back from working out.”

“I really should get a car.”

“I might know someone who wants to sell their car. I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you. I just need to make sure it will work. I’m not picky.”

He nodded. “I won’t let you buy something bad. I’ll be back in a bit.”

She said goodbye and headed to her room. He fought the urge to watch her walk away. They’d handled the conversation fairly well. The desire he’d felt last night and again this morning had died down enough it wasn’t sitting heavy between them. He hadn’t gone out to find another woman, and honestly he didn’t want anyone else. He

felt like he was playing a dangerous game.

Maybe he'd misread the situation. She might not have wanted anything from him. It could have just been her fear that had her holding onto him in the dark. Then again, the way she'd looked up at him had been charged with potential. The desire in her eyes had been very obvious and he'd wanted to act on it. He needed a distraction, and hopefully getting in a good workout would help to take his mind off the way she'd felt in his arms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vera was proud that she hadn't thrown herself at Hop when he'd stepped into the kitchen this morning. He was so sexy, but he hadn't invited her to live with him because he wanted her. She was in his space because she had nowhere else to go.

She spent the morning catching up with email, placing the outgoing messages in a queue that would go out in the morning at eight Eastern time. She'd learned early that other employees were upset when she sent emails on the weekend. She didn't expect them to respond, but they couldn't understand why she liked catching up on work on the weekends so during the week, she could do things like spend thirty minutes doing yoga in the middle of the day and not feel bad about it.

While she was in the middle of a yoga session, she heard Hop come in. She almost abandoned her session and headed into the kitchen to help him put the groceries away, but that was an impulse from her old self. Logan demanded that she serve him at all times. If she even tried to do anything for herself, he got angry. Hop didn't seem like the kind of guy to get angry about stuff like her doing yoga instead of going into the kitchen to put up groceries that he could put up on his own.

After her yoga and shower, she headed into the main room. It was close to two, and she found Hop reading an article. He glanced up, his lips spreading into a warm smile.

"I made up the meat, so the patties are in the refrigerator, just waiting for me to cook."

“I’m looking forward to having burgers.”

“I met up with a group of SEALs, and we did a huge workout this morning. I’m probably going to eat two burgers.”

“If you’re hungry, we could go ahead and cook. I could eat.”

He glanced at the tablet he was reading on, then back at her. “Okay. I’m good with that. I’ll get the grill heated.”

“I can cut the tomato and wash lettuce.”

“Cool.”

She worked in the kitchen while he was outside grilling. The window over the sink looked out into the backyard right where the grill was set up, making it impossible to not stare as he cooked the burgers. She needed to talk to someone about the crush she had on Hop. Frizz was the last person she needed to tell. Maybe she could talk to Ellis or Remi so she could get over this crush.

He was doing her a favor, and he didn’t need her doing something stupid like falling for him. She had to find a way to pull back so she didn’t embarrass herself.

Hop had to find a way to keep busy on the weekends. He’d spent too much time with Vera over the last few days. They weren’t dating and weren’t going to date. She was here because her life was in danger. The least he could do was respect her and not hit on her.

After they ate, they cleaned the kitchen, which didn’t take long since she’d cleaned as she worked in the kitchen. He noticed that at some point she’d dusted so he didn’t even need to do his weekly clean up routine.

“I’m going to take a nap.”

She nodded. “I’ll be quiet.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I can sleep anywhere. You don’t have to change anything you were planning on doing.”

“Oh. I guess that’s a military thing.”

“Yeah. I have to be able to drop off anywhere.”

“That’s interesting. I’ll see you later. I might go for a walk.”

“Take your phone and call if you need anything.”

She nodded. “I will.”

He woke, not hearing Vera. Maybe she was taking a nap. He rolled over and checked the time, seeing he’d slept for about two hours. The nap had been decent, giving him plenty of rest.

When he opened his bedroom door, he didn’t hear anyone else in the house. Where was Vera?

Panic rose as he stepped into the hall and had a good look into her room. It was empty. He grabbed his phone, not seeing any notifications.

He was ready to go searching for her when he noticed her outside in the backyard. She was on the phone, a worried look on her face. He stepped out, fearing what she had to say.

She glanced up and frowned as she held up her finger. He moved closer and heard the words that made him freeze.

“Frizz, Ben just stepped out. You need to tell him.”

Hop closed his eyes, praying that his sister was safe. “What happened?”

“Hey, Benny, it’s not bad.”

He sighed as frustration built. He squeezed his fists tight so he didn’t yell. “Just tell me.”

Vera winced and reached out, squeezing his arm. He tried to let go of the stress and just listen but worry had him.

“I was out at a mall, and that shit, Logan, recognized me.”

“Fuck!” He wanted to shake off Vera’s hold, but he knew she was trying to keep him grounded, so he didn’t yell at Frizz.

“I was smart. He doesn’t know my real name. I took off, not giving him a chance to snap a photo of me. I made sure all my social media were set to private, I don’t have any photos of myself visible to the public. I’m smart, Benny, I’m not out there letting people see my life.”

He drew in a slow breath and then counted to four before releasing it. Being angry and throwing a fit wouldn’t help anyone.

“How many cameras do you have on your house?”

“Just the one.”

“Get another one for the backyard. Also, your alarm should be set even if you’re home.”

Frizz sighed, and he knew she was probably rolling her eyes. “I know, Benny.”

“I need you to stay safe.”

“I took a shared ride to a hotel and had my friends get my car. I was smart. He didn’t get my license plate or anything. He doesn’t know where I live.”

“Don’t go back to that mall. Maybe you and Justin should take a vacation or something. There’s the cabin in Colorado.”

Frizz sighed. “Maybe. I don’t know if it has internet.”

“It probably doesn’t, but this guy is dangerous. If he figures out where you live, he could cause some real problems.”

“I know. And I’ll be careful. Justin isn’t happy, and he might be willing to leave.”

“I’ll call him later.”

“Please don’t. We are safe now. The jerk doesn’t know who we are or where we live.”

“Get the other camera for the back.”

“I will. And don’t worry.”

A bark of laughter escaped his lips. “Frizz, of course I’m going to worry about you.”

“I’ll keep you updated. But we’re okay for now.”

He sighed heavily. “Okay. But be vigilant. He’s probably going to start hanging around the mall area, looking for you.”

“Well, it was a mall across town, so he’s going to have a hard time finding me. I’ve gotta go. I’ll call on Wednesday.”

“Bye. I’ll chat with you later,” Vera said before the call ended.

He ran his hand over his face as fear and worry collided. Vera had pocketed her phone and headed inside, leaving him alone. He hated that his sister was in danger. He needed to find someone in that area who could help, but there were few Navy guys in Austin. He might have to rely on retired SEALs. It sucked that Frizz had to deal with this.

Once inside, he heard Vera in her room. He made his way down the hall to her door, seeing her taking items out of her drawers.

“What are you doing?”

She glanced up, and he could see that her eyes were shiny, like she might cry. “I have to go back. I can’t have him looking for Frizz.”

He moved before he had time to think about his actions. His hands were on Vera’s shoulders, forcing her to face him.

“No. You can’t go back. Frizz and Justin can go to the cabin. If you head back to Texas, you could end up dead. The police aren’t doing anything to protect you there. We’ll figure something out.”

She lifted her hands and shook her head. “What can we do?”

He pressed his lips together, trying to calm his racing heart. “The less you know, the better. Trust me, we’ll figure something out.”

She shook her head. “I can’t let you do something that could get you in trouble.”

His smile was automatic, and he might have laughed a little. “If we do something, no one will figure out who did it.”

She narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. “How does that work?”

“Like I said, it’s best you don’t know. I should have done something when you showed up. I thought getting you out would stop him, but obviously, he’s not the type of guy who is smart.”

With Frizz at risk and this Logan guy not giving up, he had to do something to stop him. He didn’t want to break the law, but sometimes extreme measures were necessary. Some guys learned lessons quickly, but this Logan creep seemed like the type of man who wouldn’t ever learn.

Logan couldn’t believe he’d seen Vera’s friend. God, if he could only remember her name. The woman had some stupid name, like a nickname, but he didn’t remember it. He would have to spend time in this shitty mall looking for her. She would return, he knew it. Women were stupid, and they liked to shop. She would forget he’d been here and show up.

He couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen Vera. Where had she disappeared to? He’d watched her hotel for a while but never seen her leave. What had happened?

Burning her out of her apartment had been a mistake. Before the fire, he’d been able

to track her with the software he'd put on her phone and computer. Now, he had no clue where she was.

He hoped she was miserable. When he found her, he would make sure she never left him again. They would have to move somewhere else to live. He couldn't have her yelling for help and someone hearing. They would need space. Maybe he could find a ranch or somewhere in the mountains.

People were nosy. Stupid people at the apartment had told someone that he'd set the fire. They didn't have proof, just someone saying he'd done it. He'd deflected the questions from the detective, and acted like he had no clue what the guy was talking about. He was sure the heat would die down, but he had to be smart. Holding Vera in an apartment wouldn't work.

What was worse, his dad wanted him to get a job and start working to earn money. His old man said he had to have experience if he wanted to take over the company when he died. Stupid prick, it wasn't like it was hard what his dad did. He could probably do it with his eyes closed. Maybe he would help his dad along on the path to dying and get the money now. Then, he could buy a ranch house and keep Vera locked up for his pleasure. He needed more time, though, and he had to find her first. She was around here somewhere. He just didn't know where.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vera hated that Frizz had run into Logan. She wished there was a way to make Logan stop. The guy was a menace. He was dangerous, and Frizz didn't need the pressure. Guilt hit hard. She wanted to help Frizz, but other than giving herself up to Logan, she had no way to help.

Her worry didn't dissipate over the week, even after talking to Frizz on Wednesday and knowing she was safe didn't alleviate her fear. By Friday afternoon, she was barely able to concentrate enough to finish work. When Hop stepped in, she was on edge.

He seemed happy, and that made her even more edgy. She headed into her room, hiding so she didn't say something she would regret. When she went out to grab something to eat, he was in the kitchen, reading something on his tablet.

"Oh, hey. How are you?"

She blew out a frustrated breath, trying to decide if she should just say fine or tell him. He must have figured something was wrong because he got up and came over to her.

"What's going on?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Everything. You seem like you're not worried about Frizz, and I'm freaking out. I don't know if I should stay here or head back to Texas so Logan stops targeting her."

He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. The heat from his simple touch was too much. She didn't want to feel desire for him, but it was there, rising up as he rubbed her back.

"It's going to be okay. I talked to a guy who lives in Texas. He understands the situation and knows how to handle it."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means she'll be safe."

"But what if?—"

His finger landed on her lips, quieting her. Heat exploded through her, making it hard to do anything other than stare into his warm brown eyes. Her brain turned to mush, and she swayed closer.

Heat flared between them, and for a second, she thought he was going to turn away. It would have been the smart thing for both of them. They shouldn't be doing this. But that didn't stop her when he leaned in so he was less than an inch away from her face. He gave her time to step back or turn away. She didn't.

Then his lips brushed over hers, and it was like all the tension leaked out, making her weak. Her fingers were on his chest, then she slid them around to the sides of his body, her hands shaking along with the rest of her.

His arms wrapped around her, and he pulled her closer as she tilted her head. She opened for him, their tongues sliding together, twisting in a dance that spoke of promises their bodies would deliver.

The feel of him up close, his hands on her back, her butt, her head overwhelmed her.

Her nipples hardened as heat built inside. The insanely intimate closeness she felt with him pushed her to the edge.

When he palmed her butt cheek and applied pressure, drawing her to him, she lifted her leg, curling it around his body. The pressure in her core changed. She wasn't going to last if he pressed against her again.

He was positioned just right so she could feel the hard ridge in his pants. His cock ground against her pussy. The friction of his body against hers made all of her nerves tingle. She couldn't hold back and came hard.

She pulled out of the kiss, gasping as her body pulsed. Hop held still as she came. Embarrassment hit, but then she met his gaze, and he cupped her cheek.

“That was amazing. I've wanted to kiss you for a while.”

Shock pulsed through her. “But why? I'm nothing.”

It was his time to laugh. “You're joking, right? You're so freaking sexy.”

She shook her head, unable to take in what he was saying. “No, I'm not. You are.”

“Trust me, Vera, you're very desirable. I've had a hard time keeping my hands off you.”

A shiver snaked through her, and he held her tighter. “You really find me attractive?”

“Yes. You're very sexy. I've had to stop myself from doing something like this multiple times.”

She met his gaze again. “What exactly are we doing?”

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't usually make commitments."

His words made her take a step back. "No commitments?"

His eyes changed, going softer. "I don't want to let you go. I don't understand. I've never felt like this with anyone else before. But you have to know, I'm a Navy SEAL. Our jobs are demanding. Very demanding."

She nodded. "I get that."

"I could be gone for weeks or months at a time."

"I don't need someone constantly around."

He took a step back, and she thought she was losing her opportunity before she even had a chance. She wanted to beg him to stay close, make promises she didn't even understand, just to have him in her arms. He held up one hand, silently begging her to listen.

"Before we go any deeper, I want to make sure you get that I could be called out at any time. I might miss your birthday or Christmas. I'll be deployed at some point, which will be six months to a year. If I get called in, I have to go. I can't just stay home because you have something going on or I have something going on. Military guys miss the births of children, they miss funerals, they miss big events. It is just the way the military is."

"It sounds stressful for you."

His bark of laughter was unexpected. "No, not as stressful as it is for the families left at home. I've seen a lot of guys get screwed over because their partner can't be chill about the SEALs leaving. And yes, when we get the call, we want to go. It's what we

spend our lives training for. But that doesn't mean we also don't love coming home."

She thought about his words, contemplating what it would mean to be with him. She shook her head and saw the light die a little in his eyes.

"Hold on. Let me say this. I don't think I need constant attention. I understand that I'd have to be flexible, but being flexible isn't difficult. I mean, I know that means you could end up being gone when we have plans, but we can also be careful with plans."

"It's tough on those left at home. You end up doing everything on your own."

She reached for his hand, and he wove their fingers together. She took a step closer, her gaze staying on his face.

"You want to know what's important to me?"

"What?"

"That you'll never hit me or trap me in a closet or try to harm me. If I walk away, you'll let me go and won't try to kill me. Being left alone on Christmas won't be hard. We can celebrate holidays on any day of the week in any month of the year."

He reached up and ran his thumb over her cheek. "I swear, I'll never do any of that stuff to you. It makes me mad that he—" Hop huffed out a breath. "I'm big, and I know I'm strong, but with that comes the responsibility of never attacking, always walking away to cool off if I get mad. I mean, the officers I have to deal with sometimes are assholes. There is no way I would survive if I told them what I thought about them. I'm saying this to get across that I won't react or fly off the handle. I'll always respect you and your body."

She cupped his cheek, loving how he tilted his head to lean into her touch. “I think we can make this work.”

“You’ve been here for a couple of weeks, so we know a little about each other.”

“I feel like I know you better than I did when I showed up.”

“That’s good, but we need to know each other even better. I know we’re both turned on.”

Heat rose up her neck. “Oh goodness, I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why? You’re fucking hot, and I’m highly turned on. I want you so much. And if we do eventually end up in bed, it’s going to be amazing.”

His words had her turned on, though she’d just had an orgasm from rubbing up against him. She wanted more of what his body promised. “By the time we do make it to bed together, it’s going to be molten.”

“I like the idea of molten.” His heated gaze raked over her body. “Yeah, we’re going to be very hot when we do take the next step.”

She bit her lower lip, trying not to think about sex but knowing all she wanted was to strip down and see what he felt like stretched out underneath or on top of her. “So what should we do?”

“Let’s eat dinner, then watch a movie.”

“Not something sexy. Maybe action or comedy.”

His deep chuckle vibrated right through her. It seemed like everything he did turned

her on. She wanted this to work.

“Yeah, watching something super sexy wouldn’t be good for either of us.”

She shook her head, wishing they were further into their journey, but she was glad they were taking the time to get to know each other. For this to last, they needed more than just wishing to make it work.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hop had never really had a girlfriend like this. At least not once he was an adult. High school didn't really count, not like this. He'd learned early on that dating while in the Navy was too much. The women he went out with started sleeping around when he deployed and that always ruined the fun. It was easier to never commit. But with Vera, he wanted more, he wanted commitment.

They made dinner and were watching the movie when a knock sounded on the door. He stopped the movie, then grabbed his phone, checking to see if anyone had texted. His phone was clear of notifications. Maybe it was a neighbor.

"Who do you think that is?" Vera asked.

"Not sure. Let me see."

Vera pulled her feet up and wrapped her arms around her knees. He hated what she'd gone through to get here. Before opening the door, he thought about grabbing his Glock, but he didn't.

He pulled the door open, surprised to see a police officer. "Hello."

"Sorry to bother you. We're just out asking questions. The house that burned down last week, did you know the person who lived there?"

He shook his head. "No, sir. I knew they moved in last year, and that's all I know."

“You remember them moving in?”

He nodded. “I don’t like surprises. I don’t know everyone in the area, but I do keep up with when people move out or sell their houses. I might miss a few, but I try to keep up with who my neighbors are.”

“Oh, but you didn’t know this guy.”

He shook his head. “No, sir. I never met him.”

“Did you see anything the night of the fire or the week leading up to the fire?”

He thought back over the time. “No, I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“What about anyone else living here? Do they know him?”

Hop made a quick decision, deciding not to document that Vera lived here. The last thing they needed was for some cop to put her name into the system.

“No, sir. No one else lives here.”

The officer nodded. “Okay, if you think of anything, call the station.”

“Sure will.”

He shut the door then turned to Vera and shrugged. He moved to her before speaking and even then, he spoke quietly. “I didn’t want him writing your name down.”

She nodded. “I was wondering. Thank you. You’re right, it would be bad for him to document my name associated with this property.” A shiver worked through her, and he put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “It would suck if Logan

figured out I lived here.”

“It would, and I want to protect you from that.”

“Thank you.” She sighed against him. “I wonder why they were asking if anyone knew him.”

“They asked if I saw something suspicious. That tells me that something happened. That fire was either deliberately set, or the person who lived there was murdered before the fire started.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah, but life is harsh, and people do crazy stuff.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, that’s why I’m here.”

“You know that better than anyone else.” An overwhelming feeling of protectiveness rose up, and he pulled her onto his lap, running his nose in her short hair. He drew in a deep breath, drinking her in. The thought of her being trapped out in the forest or in a burning building made him feel helpless.

She adjusted and straddled his lap. Their gazes met and held. The intensity wasn’t going down. Instead, it ramped up.

Vera leaned in and brushed her lips over his. He couldn’t hold back. He needed to do more than just kiss her a few times. He wanted to feel her, to touch and taste her.

“I want you,” he growled as he stood, holding onto her so her legs wrapped around his waist. “If you don’t want this, say so now.”

Her breath hitched, and she held tighter onto him. “Yeah, I want you. I want to feel you up against me and then inside me.”

He groaned. “We should wait.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want to.”

He carried her into his bedroom and lowered her slowly to the bed. He was between her legs, only their clothes separating them, his cock grinding against her center. It was hot, and he was going to lose it if he had to wait.

He slid his hand down her torso, loving every sexy curve on her body. He cupped her hip before moving his hand to her center. She was hot, and he needed her wet and ready for his cock. He wasn’t so dumb to think he was bigger than she’d ever had, but he wasn’t small. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

He popped the button on her shorts and slid the zipper down, anticipation filling him. She shoved off her shorts, and with his help, she pushed them low. He glanced down and saw her pink panties.

“Such a pretty present for me to unwrap.”

Her shiver caused him to shiver. He helped her pull her top over her head, revealing a green lace bra. He ran one finger over the edge. Her skin felt like silk and absolutely perfect. He wanted her, but he also wanted to give her a chance to say no.

“If you want me to stop, just say so. I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I want this. I want you.” Her voice was breathy and sexy as hell, making him harder.

His balls pulled up tight, and he knew he wasn't going to last if he didn't slide into her. He had never been this hot for anyone, and he loved it. He didn't want to scare her, but he was beginning to fall in love with her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vera thought she might combust lying on his bed in just her underwear. He knew how to make her feel good. She needed more of him.

He'd asked if she wanted to stop, and that was the last thing on her mind. To speed things up, she tugged up his shirt, needing to feel his bare skin.

"I need you." Her voice came out in almost a croak.

No question, if he didn't want this, there was nothing she could do to make him get naked or have sex with her. He was so powerful, and his muscles were strong.

With his shirt finally off, she traced his muscles, running her hands over his soft skin that had a light dusting of hair that got darker below his belly button. She wanted to see how he looked with his pants off.

The desire to kiss his body hit, and she pushed at his shoulder. Of course, she wasn't going to force him to move, but he rolled off her, and she moved to straddle his body before lowering and licking over his nipple. He hissed, and his hands wrapped around her waist.

"Oh God, if you do that again, I'm going to come."

She sat up, studying him. "I think both of us are ready to blow."

"I really am."

Her lips tipped up, and she moved to run her fingers over the waistband of his shorts, causing him to gasp. She chuckled and tugged at his shorts. “These need to go.”

He moved fast, slipping out from under her. He shoved his pants low and removed his underwear. Her gaze was drawn to his cock. He was big and thick. She wanted to lick and suck him, but they were both ready to come. If she wrapped her lips around him, he would come down her throat. They had time for that later.

Her eyes traveled up his body to his face, taking in his serious look. She swallowed, trying to keep calm as all of her was shaking with anticipation. He was so good looking, sexy. That he was kind to her was the icing on the cake.

“I want you,” he whispered.

She popped the clasp on her bra and let it drop to the bed before she shoved her underwear off and tossed it to the floor. All it would take was one touch from him and she would be on fire. She dropped to the mattress, her gaze staying on him. He licked his lips as he moved closer.

She reached for him. “I need you.”

Hop grabbed a condom and rolled it on. When he moved to cover her with his body, a shiver rocked through her.

He positioned himself between her legs but hesitated. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. Before he slid in, he rubbed his cock over her folds, grazing against her clit. The pressure sent a lighting bolt of pleasure straight through her. She might have let go a scream. All she knew was Ben chuckled as he did it again. She was already on the edge of her orgasm, and when he did it a third time, she couldn’t hold back. Pleasure slid through her as she came. Ben moved, sliding in, filling her with his

cock. He held still as she pulsed around him, loving how it felt to have him inside her.

After she was almost done pulsing, he slid in slowly, letting her adjust. The way he moved intoxicated her. It felt like poetry in motion. His hips pumping slowly was drawing out another orgasm from her. It amazed her that he could make her come without a vibrator or using his fingers on her clit.

His sliding in felt so good. She could hardly even keep her thoughts together as he pumped in. It was all about Ben being above her, taking over everything in her field of view so that every movement brought her pleasure.

“So good. I’m going to come.” She held on, clutching him tight as he drew out another orgasm from her.

“Oh shit. So good,” Ben gasped as he pulled his hips back before slamming them in again. His hips sped up, and he slammed into her twice before he stilled above her.

They were both gasping as they clung to each other. He didn’t pull back, and she realized he was still hard as he began pumping his hips again.

“I need to get another condom if we’re continuing.”

She met his gaze. “You’re still hard?”

He nodded.

“But you came, right?”

“Yeah. You turn me on.”

She shrugged. “New condom then. I’d love to keep going.”

The sex with Ben was better than she'd ever experienced. It was absolutely life-changing. Could they actually make a relationship together? If this was her only time with Ben, she would be sad. She was falling hard for him. His work would get in the way, and she accepted it because being with Ben was worth the inconvenience of him leaving to go on missions.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hop had fallen hard for Vera. No question, he wanted her in his life for a long time. Now they just had to get through the intricacies of building a relationship. The next two weeks went by too fast. They got to know each other outside the bedroom, though they spent a lot of time together between the sheets.

It was late on Wednesday night, and he was about ready to take Vera by the hand and lead her into the bedroom, when his phone buzzed. He picked up the device and looked at it as a call came in. His heart sank, but this was life as a Navy SEAL.

Vera stepped in from the kitchen, her expression falling as she saw the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Not wrong. But I got a text. I have to go.”

The way her face fell made his heart squeeze. She shook off the look almost immediately and smiled as she stepped closer to him, wrapping her arms around him before squeezing him tight for a few seconds.

“What can I do to get you out the door faster?”

“Let me hold you for another minute.”

“I’m yours.”

He drew in a deep breath, breathing her in. She smelled of vanilla, citrus, maybe

some cinnamon, and some scent that was all her own. He wanted to remember what she felt like in his arms.

He'd held on too long and needed to get moving. When he stepped back, Vera was trying to smile, but he could see the tears gathering in her eyes.

"I know you'll be fine." Her voice shook a little as she spoke.

"I will be. This is my job, and I'm good at it."

"I'll be here when you get back."

He grabbed his things, making sure he had everything he needed in his go bag. He still had over an hour, so he pulled her close, hugging her to him.

"I'll miss you." He leaned back and met her gaze. "Maybe it's not fair for me to say this now. I should have said it last week or even before then. Vera, I've fallen in love with you."

Her lips spread into a wobbly smile. "Ben, I love you so much."

Her words filled his heart. They clung to each other for a few more minutes. He had to go, and he didn't want to leave her, but this was his life.

"I'll be home before you know it."

She nodded, then squeezed his arm. "I'll be waiting."

Walking out of his house and heading to base was one of the toughest things he'd ever done. When he showed up at the base, he was surprised to see Kevlar there.

Hop glanced around, seeing that it was more than just Kevlar. Safe was there, too.

“What’s up?”

“We were called in, too. Looks like we’re all going on this one.”

Hop shrugged. “Must be big.”

Right then Rider stepped in. “The high value target we’ve been gathering intel on just popped off. He flew into Colombia and we’re heading down there to bring him home.”

“Oh, crap. So we didn’t know he was going there?” Hop asked.

“It was a surprise for many. That’s why we’re all going in.”

The rest of the guys on Kevlar’s team showed up along with his team members. It wasn’t totally unheard of having two teams go in for a target, but it had been a while since he’d gone out with a team this big.

They were briefed and learned that Kevlar’s team was in the lead. They would follow and be backup. That was easier in some respects, and much more difficult because the responsibility of watching someone else’s back was intense.

“It’s time to head out,” Rider said as he grabbed his bag.

Before leaving, he sent Vera a quick note, telling her he loved her. Leaving on a mission so soon after getting involved with Vera was weird. Trip, Kevlar, and Safe weren’t having a difficult time leaving so he shouldn’t either. He wondered if it was only him. Could he keep his position on a SEAL team? What if he couldn’t adjust to the pressure of leaving his family behind?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vera tried to sleep, but she couldn't drop off. Close to eleven she picked up her phone and saw that Ellis had sent her a text. She sent back a note to Ellis asking her if she was available on Friday evening.

Her phone rang seconds later, and she answered. "Hey, Ellis. What's up?"

"I'm feeling sorry for myself. I got a note from Remi. Kevlar's team is going, too."

"Oh. Is that normal?"

"I don't know. But Remi asked if we wanted to get together this weekend."

"I'm sure Ben, well Hop, wouldn't mind if we got together here. We have the extra room, and the couch pulls out into a sleeper."

"Oh, let me text Remi and Wren if that's okay."

"I haven't met Wren yet."

"She's nice. I've met her once. She is with Safe."

"Oh, not sure I remember who he is."

"You may not have met him. But I know they'd appreciate spending time together with the guys gone."

“Sure. It would be great.”

“Awesome. I’ll send you a note in the morning. I’m finally feeling good enough to get some sleep.”

“Sounds good. I’ll chat with you tomorrow.”

Vera ended the call and realized she was tired, too. Talking to Ellis had helped. This weekend, she could have the women over and then the weekend wouldn’t seem so long. She wished Frizz lived closer. So far, nothing bad had happened to Frizz. She’d been worried that Logan would keep after her, but he hadn’t shown up here in California or at Frizz’s place in Austin. Maybe her ex was done trying to get back at her, and she could relax.

Hop tried to sleep on the plane but worry had him. Trip came over and sat next to him. They both grunted but didn’t say much for a while.

“You doing okay?” Trip finally asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m worried about Vera.”

“Same, but for Ellis. I hate leaving.”

Kevlar took a seat beside Hop. “Missing your woman?”

“Yeah. How do you do it?”

He shrugged. “I know she’s smart. And I’ll be home in a few weeks. The first time out was tough, but I know she’s solid.”

Hop nodded. “I worry about her ex.”

Kevlar nodded. “It has been a while, right?”

Hop shrugged. “It has. Maybe he’s given up. We haven’t heard anything in a few weeks.”

“I’m sure your woman will be fine. We have guys at home who will keep up with things going on.”

Trip tapped his leg. “She’ll be good. Ellis said she would check in on Vera. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Hop nodded as he tried to push thoughts of Vera to the back of his mind. He was a SEAL, and that took all of his concentration. She would be okay. She had to be. He trusted her to seek help if she needed something.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Vera threw back her head, laughter spilling out so hard she almost couldn't breathe. Remi had said something so funny they were all having issues catching their breaths.

"Wait," Wren said. "You mean the guy actually threw a taco at you?"

Remi nodded. "Yes. And he didn't even know I was the creator of Pecky. He just got angry because I wasn't paying attention to him, and I had my headphones in."

Ellis held onto her sides, tears leaking down her cheeks as she snorted out another laugh. "I can't imagine what you thought as the taco flew at you."

Remi shook her head. "Tacos aren't really that aerodynamic. The lettuce flew off before the shell and meat crashed to the ground about two feet from me." She shrugged. "At least he missed."

"And they banned him, right?" Vera asked.

"Oh yeah. He can't get tacos from the shop down the street. They have a photo of him up behind the register telling their employees not to serve him."

Ellis stood and headed over to the kitchen to pour up more wine. "Can you imagine being so mad at a stranger for not centering you in their life?"

Remi shrugged. "Right. Few people recognize me because I look nothing like Pecky, so I'm not used to people wanting to talk to me in public."

That really tickled Ellis, and she had to sit at the kitchen table as laughter spilled out. Vera stepped into the kitchen and emptied the bottle of wine into her glass. “Looks like we took down one bottle.”

Wren stepped in and filled her glass with water. “Thank you for hosting us here.”

Vera nodded. “Of course.”

Wren flashed a quick smile. “After what happened, I’m glad we are locked in your house, and we’re all spending the night.”

Remi came over to Wren and gave her a hug. “We look after each other. This is nicer than sitting at a bar. I mean, I like going out sometimes, but I really like this. We can dance around, and no one hits on us.”

Vera nodded. “Yeah, I like that part. After Logan, I didn’t think I would ever date again.”

Ellis’s eyebrows shot up. “So, are you and Hop really together now?”

Vera shrugged. “I mean, yeah.”

All the women smiled like they knew some secret, and she guessed they did. She’d never been with a guy who knew his way around her body as well as Hop knew. Maybe SEALs got secret training in everything.

Laughter bubbled up at that thought. That wasn’t a thing, but she was glad Hop had learned from someone how to move and touch so it brought her pleasure.

Ellis drank most of her glass of wine and tried to stand then plopped back down on the chair. “I need to lie down.”

“You and Wren can take the bed in the guest room,” Remi said.

“Are you sure?” Wren asked.

Remi nodded. “Yes. I’m not tired yet.”

Wren yawned. “I’m exhausted. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“We’ll be quiet out here,” Vera said as she helped Ellis to the bathroom. It was funny to her that she used to sleep in what was now the guest room. She was secure in her relationship with Ben, though they’d both decided to wait to tell Frizz when she came for a visit next month.

It took Ellis and Wren about fifteen minutes to get to bed. She was almost ready for sleep when Remi stretched and yawned. Their eyes met, and they both giggled quietly. Maybe it was the wine or the fact they were both in basically the same situation. Their men were gone for some random amount of time, and they had no idea where they were headed.

Vera had to ask. “How are you with Kevlar being gone?”

Remi shrugged. “He’s smart and strong, and I know he can handle really bad situations. Have you heard how we met?”

Vera shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“I went on a trip to Hawaii. Kevlar happened to be there, and we ended up on the same snorkeling trip. Well, he went diving, and I was snorkeling at the surface. The boat took off without us. I was about to panic when he surfaced. We were in the ocean for hours. The boat came back out to make sure we were dead. He shared his air with me. One of his friends came out and found us. He’s very good at what he

does.”

Shock filled Vera. “Why did they leave you?”

Remi tilted her glass and drank the last of her wine. “Sadly, it was one of the SEALs who was jealous of Kevlar’s success, and the jerk paid to kill him.”

“Oh God. You don’t think?—”

“The guys on both of their teams are good. Kevlar trusts all the men who work with Hop. He knows them well. And the guys on Kevlar’s team are golden now.”

“Damn, that’s wild. I guess it’s similar to Logan betraying me. Betrayal sucks.”

Remi nodded. “It does.”

Vera trusted Ben, but she still worried about his safety. Maybe she would get used to it, eventually. Freaking out about something that had happened in the past to someone else wouldn’t help her get through Ben being gone. She could do this because being alone for weeks at a time was a part of being with the man she loved.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Vera missed Ben terribly, but she was making it through okay. She didn't allow her sadness to get out of control, and she didn't watch the news because anything negative made her sad and worried.

To keep her mind off Ben being gone, she focused on work. On Tuesday evening, she received a request for her to travel for work. It would take her to Austin. She thought about telling her boss she couldn't but what was the likelihood of her running into Logan? He wouldn't know that she'd gone back to Texas.

She thought about calling Ellis and telling her, but she decided against it. She could do this without any problems.

Her flight was set for Wednesday morning. She was visiting a customer site, providing some technical expertise during a sales visit. They could have arranged a video visit, but the customer wanted to meet with her. She was known for being good at her job. Many customers praised her ability to make them feel good about the product and services they were buying. She knew word got around, and she was proud of her ability to make customers feel better, but sometimes she wished they didn't want her in person.

When she landed in Austin, she called Frizz to see if she wanted to meet up for dinner. To say Frizz was shocked would be an understatement.

“What in the hell are you doing back in Texas?” Frizz exclaimed.

“Work.”

“Shit. You should have told them you couldn’t travel. What does Ben say?”

“He’s away at the moment.”

“You mean my brother doesn’t know you’re out here? What about another SEAL? Do they know where you are?”

Guilt filled her. These guys had done a lot to get her out of Texas. “Frizz, I have to work. I know you don’t agree with me?—”

“No, it’s not that. I just care about your safety.”

“He won’t even know I’m here. I’m staying at a hotel close to the meeting, going to the meeting tomorrow, then flying home in the evening. I won’t even be here long enough to go visit my old haunts.”

Frizz blew out a breath. “Let me figure out what Justin is up to. I’d like to meet you for dinner.”

“I’ll text you the hotel information. It’s not far from where you two are.”

“Okay, but I’m angry you’re here. I do want to see you, but I’m mad.”

“I understand. Logan won’t even know I’m here. He’s an idiot.”

“Sure, but he’s an idiot who has tried to kill you more than once.”

“I’ll text you the address now. My ride just showed up.”

“God, girl. You’re standing outside at the airport. You need to be more careful.”

“Love you, Frizz. I’ll see you later.”

She sent the address for her hotel once she was in the back of the car. The ride to the hotel wasn’t too long, and she checked in, glad to be in her room and safe.

Frizz sent back a text, telling her they would be there close to six. She was looking forward to seeing her friend. Vera spent the next few hours checking her email and catching up on work she’d missed while flying. When Frizz texted that she and Justin had just pulled into the lot, Vera let out a yelp of excitement and headed down to the lobby.

They picked one of the restaurants they could walk to. The weather wasn’t too hot since it wasn’t the middle of summer, and Vera welcomed the exercise after sitting on a plane.

“Your brother looks nothing like you,” Vera said as they sat down.

Frizz rolled her eyes. “We have the same nose, but no, he doesn’t look like me.”

“How have you been?” Justin asked.

She shrugged. “I honestly like living there. It’s not bad.”

Justin chuckled. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with Hop being close. I mean, that guy makes me think about switching teams.”

Frizz gasped. “It’s my brother.”

Heat ran up Vera’s neck to her face. Frizz had no idea she was sleeping in Ben’s bed.

What would she think? Would she be mad about them getting together? They weren't hooking up. The relationship was serious. It wasn't just something she was playing at.

Frizz's laughter died, and she grew serious. "Wait. Why is your face red, and why won't you look me in the eye?"

Vera shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Frizz's mouth hung open as she stared. Justin laughed more.

Justin held out a flat palm. "I called it."

Vera pointed between them as Frizz pulled money from her purse. "What's this about?"

Frizz's lips pressed together. "He bet me you'd hook up with Ben, and I said that Ben wasn't your type."

Vera bit her lower lip, not sure how much she wanted to tell her friend what had gone on between them. Justin seemed to be enjoying himself, though. Frizz didn't seem mad about her being with Ben.

Frizz rolled her eyes again. "Let me guess. You two aren't just hooking up."

Vera shook her head. "Not hooking up."

"Jesus. I'm going to kill you both if you break each other's hearts."

Now, it was Vera's turn to laugh. "You are too much. You know I won't break his heart."

“I need a drink.”

The waiter came over just then, and they placed their orders for food and drink before turning back to their discussion. They talked about California and the differences from living in Texas. Frizz and Justin were looking forward to their visit, and Vera was glad they were coming.

Living with Frizz in college had made them lifelong friends. She was sad that life had gotten in the way, and they hadn't dined together as much as they should have. Now that she was living in California, she would need to spend more time nurturing their friendship. Frizz was too good of a person to stay on the periphery.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hop thought they had a good handle on the actions they would take. Still, because he was watching Kevlar's team, he wanted to make sure everything happened on schedule. The last thing he wanted was for something to go wrong.

"You ready?" Rider asked.

"Yes. Just making sure I know everything."

Rider nodded. "I get it. Stay in the zone."

They moved out about ten minutes later. After they set up and watched for a few hours, he kept his eyes on Kevlar and Safe as they entered the building. He could see Smiley and Preacher to his left. The other two were being watched by Bud and Zip.

Hop wanted to be in the action. Sitting back was hard when his life was about action. But this was his task for this mission. The guys had to make their way into the compound and down to the level where their target was staying. The operation would take at least thirty minutes to an hour. His job was to make sure nothing came to interrupt them.

"Clear," Bud said.

Trip and Q gave their status update. Everything seemed quiet, as if the mission would go off without a hitch. He could stand to have an easy mission. But like most things in SEAL teams, it didn't stay easy.

Hop saw the guy first. He was coming up behind Rider. “Rider, about fifty yards behind you. I’ve got him in my sights.”

“Well, shit,” Bud said. “Twenty yards behind Q.”

“Ambush. Prepare,” Rider said over coms. They would have to keep a path open so they could all escape.

Hop didn’t like this at all. They had combative at the back and in the building in front of them. Hopefully, Kevlar’s team could take care of the people in the building while their team stopped the people heading their way.

The first shot struck something behind Hop. It was close. He fired, taking out the man behind him. The guy near Rider was down. That’s when Hop saw two more men approaching. The enemy was coming up on them fast. An explosion rocked the ground, and for a moment, Hop worried about his buddies. Then, everyone checked in. All the guys on his team were good.

“What’s going on out there?” Kevlar asked over coms.

Rider replied. “Just a little shit storm brewing.”

“We have the HVT.”

“Can you wait a few for the dust to settle?”

“Um, not sure that’s advisable.”

“Got it.”

Hop saw the guy setting up to launch another rocket-propelled grenade. “I see the

problem, and I'm taking him out." He lined up his shot and fired, dropping the guy on the RPG. "Southeast quadrant is where most of them are."

"That's what I'm seeing," Q said.

Kevlar grunted. "Get it taken care of."

Hop took off toward the southeast area, where Q said he would meet him. They had to take everyone close to the RPG out. It would take them a few minutes to get to the building and take down the guys going in.

He saw someone pick up the RPG launcher, and he paused long enough to fire. His shot had been taken quickly, and he didn't hit the guy holding the launcher. Instead, he hit the launcher. The explosion rocked him so hard that he had to drop to one knee.

"Shit, what was that?" Rider asked.

"Took it out," Hop said.

Trip chuckled. "Good shot."

"Lucky shot," he said.

They were in the clear now, and Kevlar's team was bringing up the HVT. Q called for the chopper. They would hit the exfil point in about ten minutes. All they had to do was get there.

He was going home. The target would be dropped in the CIA's lap, and he would be their problem.

Kevlar's team came out of the building with the target half walking, half being

dragged. They were about ten, maybe twenty feet away when a bullet whizzed past Hop, making him drop and spin around. They were under heavy fire and would have to deal with it. More shots were fired, putting them at even more risk. He didn't want this to be the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Vera's meeting finished early, and she headed to the airport. Seeing Frizz was great. She really loved that woman, and Justin was such a good husband to her. It made her happy to see her friend so happy. If things kept going well, they would be family.

After grabbing food and a glass of wine, she walked to her gate, ready for the plane to load. Thankfully, business travel didn't happen too often, so she wasn't stuck in airports all the time. It sucked that she had to arrive so early for a plane that could very well be late.

She enjoyed people watching, but not at the airport. The waiting seemed insufferable because for a plane holding two hundred passengers, the airport lounge only held about sixty people. Multiply that by fifteen to twenty gates, and the entire situation was out of control.

Another plane landed and pulled to a gate not too far away when the agents at her gate started calling for her plane to load. Because she'd flown so much when she'd first started working, she had permanent status on the airline, so she boarded in an early group.

The area was packed, so she had to fight her way through the groups of people congregating close to the gate just to get to a spot where she could show the airline worker her boarding pass.

With the pass scanned, she turned to enter the door that would take her down the ramp to the plane. As she turned, she heard someone call her name. Without

hesitation, she spun, shocked to see Logan standing off to the side, his eyes narrowed.

Fear shot straight through her. She moved fast, heading down the gangway, praying Logan wasn't on this flight. She was sitting in row eight, right behind first class. All the seats in first class had been full, so everyone who boarded had to pass beside her except for the few people in the two rows between her row and first. The plane wasn't huge since this was a connecting flight to Phoenix so she didn't have long to wait before the boarding doors closed.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Logan wasn't on this flight. He must have been walking through the airport when he'd seen her. A shiver snaked through her. She'd been in the same place as he'd been. He could have done anything. Luckily, he hadn't been close to her. She didn't want to think about how bad it could have been if he'd found her earlier, like while she'd been eating.

When she'd first made arrangements for this trip, she'd been upset that she had to fly to Phoenix before catching a flight to San Diego. Now she was thankful Logan didn't have information about her final destination.

Through the first part of the flight her stomach twisted in knots. About the midway point, she decided to head back to the bathroom and check each seat for Logan. When she was almost at the back, she saw a guy who looked like her ex, but when he raised his head and met her gaze, she realized it wasn't him.

She entered the tiny cubicle they called a bathroom and let the tears flow. She'd messed up, but there was hope. Logan didn't know she was flying into San Diego. He'd think she lived in Phoenix. She could live with him thinking she was in another city in a totally different state from where she lived.

Logan was shocked. He'd seen Vera in the airport. She'd been loading a plane to Phoenix. At the time he'd seen her, he hadn't known the flight was going to Phoenix,

but he sure as heck had looked at the board as soon as she disappeared down the gangway.

His first instinct was to follow her, but with airport security being what it was, there was no way he could talk himself out of the shit storm he would stir up if he raced after her. He was having a hard enough time convincing the detective investigating the fire at the apartment complex that he had nothing to do with it. Supposedly, they had evidence. He'd called the dude's bluff, and of course, the guy had nothing to show him.

Now, he would need to head to Phoenix. But he was working for his father now, which sucked. He'd just come back from a trip to Lubbock. What a piece of shit town. He needed a shower to wash the stink off his body. The people out there were insane. He thought people from Austin were crazy, but Lubbock was weird.

He would find a way to take a break and head to Phoenix. His dad couldn't force him to work all the time. He knew the jerk would eventually back down. Right now, he was having to do some menial jobs, running down people late on paying their bills. He did like the way he could boss old farts around. When managers saw him show up on their doorsteps, they made the mistake of thinking he was a pushover. He only had to punch one of them in his dealings to get them to pay, but it had felt good. That was the best thing about his job. He could flex his muscles, and no one called him out.

He would have to figure out where Vera was in Phoenix. Surely, there had to be a way to track her down. He didn't have a photo of her with short hair, at least not one he could flash at people and discover if they'd seen her. Soon enough, he would be reunited with her, and she would never escape him again.

Worry still hounded her when she got home. It was sad that she felt relief because she hadn't heard from Hop. He would be angry. She might even get kicked out. But what could she have done? She had to work, and her company had wanted her to travel.

Pushing back might have kept her from traveling, but it could have caused problems at work.

Sleep wouldn't come so she got up and vacuumed and dusted before cleaning the kitchen. When she finished, she dropped to the couch and stretched out. She woke to the sound of the front door opening. The scream ripped from her mouth as she fumbled to sit and stand at the same time. She ended up on the floor, staring up at Hop, who looked shocked and worried.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he set down his bags.

Tears slid down her face as she half crawled her way to standing and flung herself into his arms. She clung to him, the tears coming hard as the stress of her mistake leaked out. She'd screwed up so much, and he was going to hate her.

"Hey, hey. Is everything okay?"

She nodded, then shook her head, all the while sobbing against his chest. What was wrong with her? She could handle her shit usually, but not today. Maybe she couldn't handle things, and that was why she was here in California. But Logan trying to kill her wasn't shit easily handled.

Before Logan, she had a good life, a thriving career, and good friends. She hadn't realized it at the time, but he'd alienated her from all her close friends. Frizz had always been someone special in her life, but they'd grown apart enough they didn't get together as often as they had before. Logan not seeing her with Frizz had been the only thing that saved her relationship with Frizz.

She'd been stupid to call Frizz and put her in danger. It had been great seeing her friend and Justin, too. They'd laughed and had such a good time catching up. But still, it hadn't been worth the danger she could have created for Frizz. She needed to

be more careful. Seeing Logan at the airport had scared the crap out of her.

Hop pushed her to arm's length, worry filling his gaze. "Did something happen?"

She closed her eyes, unable to look him in the face. She had to tell him, but she didn't want to. If she could hide from him, she would. But he was home, and she hadn't come up with a good way to tell him about the huge mistake she'd made. Now, she would have to live with the consequences of her actions.

"I'm so sorry."

He hugged her close as another sob cut through her. She had screwed up so badly. "What happened?" He sounded so calm, but he was going to be pissed. "Let's sit down and we can talk."

She settled on the couch beside him, drawing her knees up to her chest. If she hugged her knees tight enough, she might be able to protect herself from the worst of it.

"I made a huge mistake."

Hop sighed, and she heard a world of disappointment in that sigh. Anger about her actions and embarrassment filled her.

"What happened?"

She shook her head, thinking about getting up to pace, but she tightened her hold on her legs.

"There was a presentation at work. I wanted to do it virtually, but they wanted me there."

“Where did you go?” His voice was so flat shame filled her.

She stood, worry filling her as she paced in front of the couch. Hop stood and moved so he was blocking her path. His hands were on her shoulders, forcing her to face him. He lifted her chin so she had to meet his gaze.

Compassion filled his eyes. “Tell me.”

It hurt to think that she’d screwed up so much. “Don’t be mad.”

“Where?”

“It was Texas.”

His eyes bugged, and he let go a heavy breath as his expression went from anger to blank. “Where in Texas?”

“Austin.”

His lips thinned, and she could tell he was seconds away from losing his cool. But somehow, he held it together.

“Does he know where you are now?”

She shook her head. “I flew through Phoenix on the way back. That’s when he saw me.”

“How?”

She shrugged. “I was getting on the plane back, and he must have landed there earlier. I didn’t see him on the plane, so he didn’t fly into Phoenix. I checked.”

Hop pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. She'd messed up so badly, and she hated what she'd done.

"I'm sorry."

Hop held up one hand. "No. It's okay."

"No, it's not. I fucked up. I could have screwed up everything. I could have gotten Frizz hurt and?—"

"Frizz? Wait, what about Frizz?"

Her lungs felt tight as guilt filled her. What had she done?

"Tell me!"

She closed her eyes, trying to stop the tears. "We ate dinner together. But Logan wasn't close. It was across town, and it wasn't close to anywhere Logan would have gone."

"Jesus."

She had screwed up so badly. She should leave. She turned and headed to the bedroom, ready to pack and get out of his place. She could imagine him hating her forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hop couldn't believe Vera had traveled back to Texas. Maybe she didn't understand how terrible her situation could be. He needed more information.

"Wait." He followed after her, grabbing her shoulder.

She didn't turn around as another sob shook her shoulders. His heart squeezed. Maybe she'd done them a favor.

"Tell me exactly what happened when Logan saw you."

She sniffed and then wrapped her arms tighter around her body and stood with her head down. "I'd just scanned my boarding pass, and I heard him call my name. I turned. There he was. He looked pissed. I got on the plane, and I watched for him."

"How certain are you that he didn't get on the plane?"

"Very. I was in the eighth row. All the first-class seats were filled when I got on. I watched everyone board. Then I walked to the back of the plane in the middle of the flight, looking at each person, making sure he wasn't there."

"And he wasn't?"

She shook her head. "No, he wasn't. I'm so sorry I screwed up."

He pulled her close, not liking how stiff she felt in his arms. "This actually helps."

“How does it help?”

“Well, we know whatever we’re doing to watch him isn’t helping.”

“How does that help?”

“We know he isn’t over this fixation he has on you. And you saw him in the airport. I need to check my email, but I don’t think anyone noticed. I mean, we weren’t paying anyone to watch him, and it has been a while. Whoever was keeping an eye on him, they must have stopped. But we can’t expect someone to keep doing stuff like watching Logan for months without compensation. We need to do better.”

“I’m sorry I screwed up.”

He cupped her cheek. “You didn’t screw up.”

“But I shouldn’t have gone.”

He shrugged, not sure she was right on that account. “How long are you supposed to live under this cloud? Maybe tell your boss about everything so they understand you can’t go to Texas, but I don’t know what that will do to your job. You might need to start looking for something around here.”

She shook her head. “Any job will require travel. At least with this job, I know how much travel is needed.”

“How much?”

“Not so much now. It’s rare. This account is problematic. I should have pushed back.”

“Maybe. I should have made sure you knew to call someone. We could have made sure where you were going was safe. It’s my fault, not yours.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not. I screwed up.”

Hop wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Fear for her filled him. The bastard was still after her, and they needed a new way to track him. He had an idea but wasn’t sure it would work. First, he needed to make sure Vera knew he loved her.

“I know you’re hurting. I get that you feel you messed up. I love you. Even though you should have told someone. I don’t know who. We need to find someone.”

“You aren’t going to kick me out?”

He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. “No. I need you in my life. We’ll figure this out. This Logan guy is dangerous, and we need to keep track of him. I said I would protect you, and I didn’t do a good enough job of it.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“Going forward, we can both be more careful.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held on. He held her, wishing she hadn’t traveled, but he should have prepared for this. He’d slipped up, which wasn’t okay. He was a SEAL and should have known she would need to travel, but he hadn’t even thought about it. It was up to him to keep her safe, and he failed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Vera couldn't believe Ben forgave her. She thought for sure he would yell and scream, but he'd only raised his voice once, and he hadn't really been that loud. It was so different from what she knew in past relationships.

She leaned back and met his gaze. "You're so nice."

He shook his head. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't yell at me." A look of disappointment crossed his face, and she wondered if she'd said something wrong.

"You deserve to be treated well. Whoever made you feel like you deserved to be yelled at was wrong."

"I feel awful about it."

"I know. And I feel awful that I didn't set up something to help you so you wouldn't be alone if you traveled to Texas for work. We could have come up with a disguise or made sure he wouldn't run into you. We need to take precautions if you travel again."

She nodded. He was right. She needed to really think about her safety. She couldn't just go anywhere, not until Logan gave up. Maybe he wouldn't give up. Could she stay lost from him forever?

Ben trailed his fingers over her shoulders and down her arms. A shiver snaked

through her. She met his gaze, seeing the heat in his depths. She needed to feel him pressed against her body.

She pulled at her shirt, tugging it up, then over her head. She'd ditched her bra before she'd fallen asleep, so she stood in front of him naked from the waist up.

His gaze raked over her body before he moved his hands to cup her breasts. His thumbs ran over her nipples, sending a shot of pleasure through her. Heat shot straight to her pussy, and she moaned as he pinched her nipples.

"Do you want more?"

"God, yes. I need you. I need to feel you inside me. I want you, Ben."

His lips were on hers as he dragged her closer. She reached for his pants, tugging at the button and then unzipping his pants. It only took him about five seconds to shove his pants low and tug off her shorts. He lifted her and helped her wrap her legs around his waist before he lowered her, and his cock slid in.

She clung to him as he pumped her on his cock, filling her so well she cried out with pleasure. He didn't have to do much for her orgasm to hit. Pleasure pulsed through her as she clung to him.

He pumped her on his cock, his body shaking as he held off on his orgasm. She cried out again as another shot of pleasure ripped right through her.

His cock felt so huge inside her. Then he shouted her name as he held her close, his muscles tensing. When he pulled out, panic filled his face. Worry hit hard.

"What's wrong?"

“No condom.”

“It’s okay. I have an IUD.”

He blew out a breath, relief filling his face. “Sorry. I don’t want to not have kids with you, but?—”

Laughter spilled from her. “I don’t want any surprises either. That’s why I have the device. I don’t want any swimmers getting to eggs and doing their thing.”

They headed in to shower. When they were almost done, she met his gaze. “So, kids. You want some?”

He lifted one shoulder. “Maybe. I don’t know. They are a lot of work. Even with the military benefits, it’s expensive. There’s this one guy in the regular Navy, not a SEAL, who has five kids. He got a vasectomy last year, and his wife got her tubes tied. They both talk about how expensive it is and how they are barely making it. But five is a lot.”

“Yeah, that is a lot. The expense thing is daunting. I mean, I may want kids, but there’s also the time thing. I don’t know if I’ll have time to give. The worst thing in the world would be to have kids and then not spend time with them.”

He nodded and shut off the water. They dried, and he yawned.

“Did you get any sleep?” she asked.

“A little on the flight back. I was honestly worried about you.”

“You should take a nap.”

“First, I need to take care of something.”

“What?”

“Finding someone to track Logan. We need to know if he buys a plane ticket or uses his credit card to drive out here.”

She wrapped her hair in a towel and turned to face him. “Is that legal?”

He shrugged. “Laws are bendable.”

Laughter bubbled up. “You are too much. For people like me, laws are never bendable. No one helped me.”

“Well, you have me on your side now. I’ll make sure we keep you safe. I know I promised that before?—”

“But I went off and messed that up.”

“Hey, you didn’t mess anything up. If anything, he thinks you’re in Phoenix, and we can keep track of him better.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“We’ll get Thario to up his tracking of Logan.”

“Oh gosh, it’s been a while since I’ve talked to him. I should have called.”

“Let’s call him now.”

She nodded, feeling guilty for not going to see or talk to Thario recently. When Ben

got Thario on the phone, she was surprised the guy sounded genuinely happy to hear from her.

“Of course, I’ll do more digging on Logan. I should have done it before. Now that we know the guy is still a problem, we’ll make sure to keep an eye on him.”

Vera breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Any time.”

“We want you to come over for lunch or dinner this weekend. And, of course, Frog is welcome.”

“Thank you. I’ll send you a text about when I can. And Vera, don’t hesitate to call. I want to help.”

“I can’t thank you enough. You’re a good friend.”

“Same back at you. I’ll see you all this weekend.”

They ended the call, and she felt better. She should have called Thario before her business trip. She didn’t want to be a bother, but she was getting the idea that she wasn’t a bother at all. Ben and his friends were really good people. They accepted her, and Ben really loved her. It wasn’t some fake version of love, but true love where he wanted good things for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Hop called Frizz to make sure she was okay. He was glad Frizz and Justin were visiting soon. He needed to make sure his sister was really okay. It worried him that she was still in Texas and Logan was a problem.

When Thario showed up, Frog was excited to see them and pranced around the house, finally sitting beside Thario after he'd licked his and Vera's face.

"Your dog is funny," Hop said as he pulled the steaks from the refrigerator so he could grill them.

Thario put his hand on Frog's head, smiling at the dog as he looked up to Thario. "Frog is a good boy. I never thought I would be able to have a dog. I love him."

Hop nodded. "Yeah, I get that. I don't think I'll ever have one."

Vera shook her head. "You're such a good dog dad. Why would you never have a dog?"

"Time," Thario said.

"We travel too much," Hop said.

"Oh, I never thought about that."

"Yeah, it's too hard to have a pet that you have to leave behind."

“Oh, yeah. That would be bad.”

“I don’t have to worry about that now. Frog is the best. So I guess the trade-off is worth it.”

Vera’s mouth hung open. “Really?”

Thario shrugged. “I didn’t appreciate what I had. I was a little shit and didn’t appreciate anything. I may not have legs, but I’m happier now. It doesn’t make sense, but it does.”

“I’m glad you’re happier.”

Hop grabbed the plate with the meat and opened the door to the backyard. “I’m going to put the meat on the grill.”

“Want any help?” Thario asked.

“I got it. You and Vera chat.”

“Sure thing, brother.”

He should have asked Thario to hang out with them earlier. There were things he needed to do better. First, he really needed to make sure Vera knew who to contact if things went bad. He could see Vera and Thario laughing inside, and his heart squeezed.

Being a SEAL opened a world to him he never would have known about. He was a better person because of his training. He could keep Vera safe. He knew that now. He would just have to work harder and get her the resources she needed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Life with Ben was great. She'd fallen in love with him, and it only got better. Every day seemed like the best. They'd had a few arguments, but even those weren't too serious. Ben really listened to her and didn't just override her concerns with some bullshit macho crap about being in charge. He really wanted her in his life.

Frizz and Justin's flight was set to arrive at two in the afternoon. She'd taken Ben to work that morning, so she had the car and could pick them up. He was getting a ride home with one of the guys who didn't live too far away.

Vera was excited to see Frizz and spend some time with her. She knew Ben and Frizz wanted to spend time together, but on the days Ben had to work, she would be showing Frizz and Justin around.

She thought it a little weird that she hadn't done much in town. She hadn't been to the zoo or the park or anything touristy. Of course, she was living here like she was a local instead of a transplant. Then again, she'd been busy with work and still hadn't bought a car. She had the money but didn't want her name on anything Logan could track down. He didn't have the resources she had, but still, it worried her. Thario kept her up to date with Logan's movements. So far, he hadn't hopped a plane, but he wasn't letting up on his investigation.

When she arrived at the airport, Frizz texted her that they were coming out. She dropped into the pickup line, sending back a note that she was about twenty cars back and she would be there soon.

Excitement pinged through her. When she finally saw Frizz and Justin, her heart almost skipped a beat she was so excited.

The hugs had to be quick while Justin threw their suitcases into the back of the vehicle. Soon, they were back on the freeway heading to Ben's house.

Vera knew her smile was ridiculous, but she couldn't help it. "I guess you know where we live?"

"Obviously. It was Nana's California house."

"There's a house in Colorado, right? How did Nana get so many houses?"

"Nana liked men, but she didn't sleep with just anyone. When Nana found someone, she made them give her stuff. No stuff, no nookie."

"Wow. And you knew this as a kid?"

"Heck no. I didn't find out until she died, and I took over her house in Texas. There were notebooks filled with stories. She once dated an Arabian prince, and she dated a few movie stars. That's how she got the house in San Diego. The place was an actor's escape home, you know, where he went when he wanted to escape publicity. He left it to her when he died."

"Wow. That's wild."

"Yes. She got the house in Colorado in the same way. Just had some guy leave her the house when he died. The one in Texas was bought for her when the guy was still living. She also had a house in Florida but sold it to pay for a caretaker in her final years."

“Wow. I’m impressed with her.”

“She was one of a kind. The best.”

“Sounds like it. I’m happy you’re here. Ben will be happy to see you.”

“So you don’t call him Hop?”

Vera chuckled. “Sometimes. But Hop isn’t the sexiest name.”

Frizz waved her hands and made a face. “Oh God, shhh. Don’t say that in front of me.”

Vera loved having Frizz around. She and Ben may not last, but at least she knew her friendship with Frizz would be good.

When Ben got home, he pulled Frizz into a long hug. It was good to see Frizz and Ben together. She was glad her crap with Logan hadn’t hurt Frizz. Maybe Frizz and Justin could move away from Texas for a while. She agreed with Ben that Colorado would be better. She would bring it up with Frizz later. For now, they would enjoy their time together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ben loved having Frizz and Justin here. It was awesome that he and his sister got along so well. He knew not all families enjoyed happy relationships, but he was happy they were friends.

They were at the beach, enjoying the day, when he saw Kevlar and Remi. They came over to say hello.

“Hey, Remi, Kevlar. This is Frizz, my sister, and Justin, her husband.”

Kevlar shook their hands first, then Remi. “It’s good to meet you,” Kevlar said.

“Hi, nice to meet you. Are you here for a visit?” Remi asked.

Frizz nodded. “Yes. We live in Texas. So you’re the one who writes—draws Pecky, right?”

Remi smiled and laughed. “Yes. Did Hop tell you about it?”

“He sure did. The last birthday gift he sent was covered in Pecky paper.”

Remi snorted out a laugh. “That’s great.”

“We both love it. Justin searches for it every evening after dinner to see the latest. It’s great.”

“Thank you. I love my job.”

Frizz nodded. “That’s good. I’m happy where I’m at, but I wouldn’t say I love it.”

“What are you two up to this weekend?” Hop asked.

Kevlar shrugged. “Just enjoying each other’s company.”

Hop put his arm around Vera and glanced down at her, thankful they were together.

“That’s nice.”

“You all have a good weekend,” Kevlar said as he waved.

“It was nice meeting you,” Remi added before they walked away.

His life was good. He had great friends and a good family. He was in love with Vera, and he felt like they would have a great life together.

They had been at the beach for a few hours and were about to wrap it up when his phone buzzed. It was a note from Thario stating that Logan was in play.

Justin stepped close, a worried look on his face. “Hey, what’s up?”

Hop’s eyes slid to watch Frizz and Vera, who were just coming back from getting their feet wet. Worry and fear twisted together.

“Thario sent a note. Says Logan is in play.”

“What does that mean?” Justin asked.

“Not sure. I need to find out. I don’t want Frizz or Vera knowing until we leave the

beach.”

“I’ll intercept. Talk to your friend and find out what’s up.”

He nodded as he texted Thario, asking what it meant. His phone rang, and he answered, watching Frizz and Vera, making sure they were far enough away that they couldn’t hear him.

“Hey, what’s up?” Hop asked.

“He bought a plane ticket to Phoenix.”

“Okay. Only to Phoenix?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think it means?”

“You all need to be careful. I wouldn’t panic but watch yourself. He’s still looking.”

“This bastard needs to go away.”

“I know, and you know, but I don’t think it has come to letting anyone else know.”

Hop grunted. His buddy was right. It hadn’t come to that yet. Would it come to that? He needed to protect Vera, but there were laws in the USA that limited what he could do. But if the bastard got close, he would end the jerk.

“I’ll keep my eyes on him and tell you if anything else happens. Just make sure to keep Vera and Frizz safe.”

“I will. Are you coming over tomorrow for lunch?” Hop asked.

“I wouldn’t miss meeting Frizz. I’ll be there.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Stay safe.”

“We will. Thank you.”

Vera and Frizz walked over, followed by Justin. He thought he was doing a good job hiding his worry, but Vera narrowed her eyes and frowned. She didn’t say anything, but he figured she would quiz him later.

For now, what mattered was keeping his family safe. The bastard wasn’t close yet, but he would have to keep watch and make sure Logan had no way of finding them. Living in hiding wasn’t sustainable. There had to be something they could do, but the police where Vera used to live wouldn’t bring charges against the jerk, which meant there were limited options available. He would just have to keep doing what they were doing and hope that if Logan came looking for Vera, they would be ready for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Vera hated Logan's obsession with her. When Ben told her about Logan flying into Phoenix, she almost suggested that she go there and confront him. She was tired of hiding, and tired of having her friends in danger. She wanted to be able to live without constantly looking over her shoulder.

"I hate this."

Ben held her, kissing the top of her head. "I know. I hate it for you. I think we should tell Frizz and Justin now before they go to bed. That way, they can sleep the anger off."

"They should stay in Colorado."

"Hey, why should we stay in Colorado?" Frizz asked from the doorway of their bedroom.

Vera sighed and turned to face her. "Logan is looking for me in Phoenix. He isn't giving up. He's going to keep looking for me. I feel like there is nothing I can do to get rid of him."

Frizz stepped into the room and pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this prick."

Vera shook her head. "No, I'm sorry you're dealing with him. It isn't fair that you and Justin have to go to Colorado."

“Why are we going to Colorado?” Justin asked as he stepped into the room.

“The bastard is looking in Phoenix,” Ben said.

Justin’s eyebrows shot up. “But why does that mean we have to go to Colorado?”

Worry filled Vera. “What if he comes looking for you all? You’d be in danger in Texas.”

Justin’s lips curled into a snarl. “I’d like to see him try.”

“He’s dangerous,” Vera said.

Frizz tapped her husband on the shoulder. “He did set her building on fire. And look at her wrists. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill us.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t mind meeting him on a level playing field.”

Ben shook his head. “You know he wouldn’t do that. He would make sure whatever situation you were walking into was weighted for him. He’s a bastard, and there isn’t an easy way to deal with him. You need to keep Frizz safe.”

Justin ran his hand down his face. “I know. It just pisses me off. It makes me mad that we have to run away.”

Ben nodded. “Thario will be here tomorrow. He will give us an update on where Logan is. Maybe he isn’t looking for you. Maybe he’s going there on business.”

Vera didn’t like the threat hanging over their heads. She hated that her mess had become Frizz’s mess. Justin was right, she hated having to run away. But she’d found something great when she’d run. It wasn’t fair that Frizz was being affected by this. If

she could keep her friends safe, she would.

Logan's father had sent him to Phoenix for business, but while he was in the city, he planned to flash Vera's photo around and ask if anyone had seen her. He only had a good photo of her with long hair, but it would have to do.

He checked into his hotel, ready to go out and start canvassing the town for Vera. He would start at the mall and then head to a few bars. Someone had to have seen her. He pulled up the maps application on his phone and stared at the screen as he zoomed out to find the edge of the city.

Shock coursed through him. Why hadn't anyone told him how huge Phoenix was? There was no way he would ever find her. The city stretched out on all sides, filling in almost all the space between the mountains. How would he find Vera here?

He pulled up a list of malls and was overwhelmed. There were so many places. How could there be so many places to shop? This was supposed to be easy. He needed contacts in this place, but no one knew him.

He was here to get this location of his dad's business back in line. They'd missed a payment. That wasn't acceptable, and he had to convince them they needed to pay now or their license would be pulled. He thought the threat had no meat behind it. He wanted to tell the licensed extensions to fall in line or else, but his dad wanted him to keep it civil. Logan thought it was ridiculous to fly all the way out here for something that could have been a phone call, but he'd come thinking he could kill two birds with one stone. Now he knew that wasn't realistic.

Finding Vera here would be impossible. Unless he could convince the people who work at the extension to look for Vera for him. The benefit would be he would have someone working for him here while he went home to Texas. But his father might find out. The man would be pissed. His dad wanted him to forget Vera and

concentrate on work. But he wouldn't let Vera win. She had to pay for the damage she'd done.

He struck out asking if people had seen her at the two malls he'd gone to. The bartender at the one place he showed up told him to leave. Said his story sounded sus and he wouldn't help him do something illegal.

Anger pumped through him as he left. The asshole had said something about him sounding like a human trafficker. What was that about? He was just looking for a woman. Why did that guy have to get weird about it?

The next morning he headed to the shop, ready to get the people in charge of this location in line. They needed to be shown who was boss. He wouldn't follow his dad's lead and be wimpy. These people needed to learn who was in charge.

He stepped into the place, and the door chimed loudly throughout the shop. The sound of metal clanking in the back area stopped, and then a huge hulk of a man stepped into the office, wiping his hands on a rag.

Logan swallowed, trying to come up with words to speak. If he pissed off this guy, he might end up in a dumpster. He'd seen that movie before and didn't need the pain.

He cleared his throat and tried for a smile before he explained why he was there. For a second, Logan thought the guy was going to hit him.

The man spat on the ground and shook his head. "Tell your dad I ain't paying nothing. I'll take the name off the shop before I pay that slimy bastard."

Logan hadn't encountered anyone who hadn't apologized for being late on a payment. This guy was scary, and he didn't want to get into a fight. His father would have to count this as a loss. The man would never be intimidated by Logan. This

wasn't a successful visit, and his father would be pissed. He had no way of making this guy pay up what he owed, and he certainly couldn't ask him to look for Vera. His plans were falling apart. He wasn't used to being told no or having to give up.

He drove away from the business, a hollow feeling inside. No one turned him down or told him no. He should go back there and show that guy who was boss. Fear slid through him, and he rejected the thought in an instant. Instead, he focused on getting to the airport. It was like a block had gone up in his mind, shielding him from the full reality that he was nothing when it came to anything outside his tiny Texas town.

The only way to get his power back was to find Vera and make her his. She'd started his downfall, and she would pay. There wasn't any other option.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Vera missed having Frizz around. She wished they lived closer to each other so they could see each other at least once a month. It would be at least half a year before they ended up together again.

Ben had a busy week ahead. His chain of command had informed him that they should expect to have a lot of late days. She planned on getting caught up on work and maybe get ahead. She needed to do some planning for a future product release but hadn't had time. This would give her the extra hours.

On Monday and Tuesday, she was already asleep when Ben came home. She actually saw him on Wednesday, though he came home late and left early on Thursday. When he called on Thursday afternoon and told her he had to stay late at work and might not be home until Friday morning, she decided she needed to get out of the house and be around people.

She called her friends and asked if they wanted to meet for drinks that evening, and Remi and Ellis said yes. They planned to meet at Aces bar, but she needed to get out before then, so she headed to a coffee shop to sit and work amongst other people just for a change of scenery.

The coffee shop she picked had a delicious quiche that made her wonder what she'd done to find food so good. If she could have eaten another slice, she would have bought one. The food was so good she didn't start work until she finished eating. She vowed to come back for lunch or brunch. She figured Ben would enjoy how this tasted.

After the quiche, she worked for a few hours until it was time to head to Aces. She thought about using a shared ride, but the bar wasn't too far. Before she stepped out, she checked her texts, making sure Thario hadn't texted anything about Logan leaving Texas. Her notifications were clear, so she headed out and walked the three blocks to Aces.

The weather in San Diego was so good, she didn't mind walking so much. Eventually she would buy a car, but she enjoyed being able to take walks without feeling like she was melting. Moving to San Diego had worked out much better than she'd expected. She loved the area and had found love with a man. Everything seemed to be going her way.

Logan couldn't believe his eyes. He'd come out of the shop, and there she was, walking down the street. He stayed in the shadows of the alcove, hoping she didn't look his way. How the heck had he found her after almost giving up?

Nothing he'd done had gotten him close to Vera, and yet here she was, walking down the street in front of the crappy shop he'd had to visit today to collect money owed to his dad. What were the chances?

After she passed, he stepped out and followed, deciding that alerting her to his presence would only make her run. She turned down the next block and stopped outside a bar. He checked the name, Aces. He watched as she hugged two women before they entered the building together. She would be there for a while based on how they were acting. He decided to go get his car and then sit outside Aces bar and wait for her to come out.

This was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. So what if he was hungry or needed to piss? He could pee in the cup he'd gotten when he'd ordered a burger earlier. This had to be a sign. He would make her pay now that he'd found her.

Seeing Remi and Ellis made her day. Both Kevlar and Trip had to stay late, so they were both appreciative that she'd called to get together. The bar wasn't busy, and she guessed it was because a lot of the guys were still at base.

"I do sometimes wonder what they are doing when they stay late," Ellis said.

Vera nodded. "I didn't like them being gone last time. But I'm trying to get used to it."

Remi took a sip of her drink and nodded. "Yeah. I get that, but you'll get used to it. It's nice when they are home, though."

Ellis nodded. "I do love them being home."

"It's good to hear that I'll get more used to it. I guess I don't really mind it, but I really do like having Ben home."

Both Ellis and Remi replied with, "Same." The guys were great. And Ben went out of his way to be attentive when he was around. He really was a good partner, much better than she'd ever had before.

Remi smiled, and her eyes sparkled brightly. "So, what are you all doing when they get leave this year?"

Vera cocked her head to the side. "Leave?"

Ellis nodded. "Yeah. This year they've done so much extra time. Trip has six weeks."

Vera shook her head. "We haven't even talked about it."

"It is a few months away for Kevlar and his team."

Ellis opened her phone and clicked on the calendar. “It’s six months from now for Trip and Hop, so it will be a while. But we’re saving up money to go to one of those resorts in the Caribbean.”

Remi clapped her hands. “Oh, that sounds exciting.”

Ellis laughed, a smile covering her whole face. “We deserve some fun.”

“You do.”

Vera narrowed her gaze. “Gosh. I hadn’t realized they get so much time off. I don’t have that much vacation.”

“Most of the guys don’t go on vacations for that length of time. They do projects at home, like building fences or putting up sheds in their backyard. Some do intense yard work, others go camping together.”

Vera didn’t know what Ben thought about the time. Maybe he hadn’t discussed it with her because they hadn’t really been together for long. She hoped their relationship was strong enough that he wanted to spend time with her. She wanted to be with him.

Ellis reached over and took her hand. “You shouldn’t worry about it. Trip didn’t tell me for a while, and someone was talking about it. He said he forgot about the time off because, before me, it wasn’t really special for him. It was just time he didn’t have much to do.”

“Yeah, some of the guys hate it. They want to work. Kevlar told me he enjoys his time off more with me in the picture. I mean, he did go to Hawaii alone, so he likes doing things alone to a point, but he made me feel really special when he told me how nice it was to travel with me.”

Ellis nodded. “I sometimes can’t believe how much Trip likes having me around. I never thought any guy would want me this much.”

Remi nodded. “They are great guys.”

Vera took a sip of her drink and nodded. “I really like being with Ben. I can’t believe there are guys like him.”

Remi and Ellis nodded. They really were lucky to have found such good guys. She finished her drink, knowing she probably should head home before the sun went down.

“I’m also glad dating Ben has allowed me to meet you both. I like that I have friends out here, and I’ve only been in California for a few weeks.”

They both nodded, but Ellis spoke. “I’ve lived here a while, but it’s always nice to have new friends.”

Remi squeezed Vera’s arm. “That’s true. It’s always good to have some great friends like you two.”

Ellis checked her phone. “I should head home. I don’t want to be out too late after dark.”

Remi stood. “I need to head home, too.”

“Thank you for showing up.” Vera hugged both Remi and Ellis as they gathered their things and called for a shared ride.

Vera arranged her ride, thinking tonight she would take a bath and watch a movie. She needed more time to unwind and relax. Maybe she would watch a rom com and

enjoy some alone time.

She stepped out of the bar, waving goodbye to her friends as their ride arrived. She watched the screen of her phone, seeing that her car was only a block away.

A strange feeling slid down her back, like maybe someone was watching. She glanced around, trying not to look too obvious as she searched for something off. There was nothing she could see. No one was around watching her. She needed to stop being so paranoid. Logan wasn't close. If he'd left Texas, they would know about it. Thario would have told her. A panicked thought hit. But what if there wasn't a record of him leaving? What if he slipped out without any notifications pinging them? She needed to stay vigilant, or disaster would happen.

Logan couldn't believe his luck. Vera was leaving alone. He pulled out behind the car she'd gotten into. She was stupid. She had no idea she was being followed. She was making this so easy.

He felt like a real gangster or a private investigator following after the car she was in. When the car pulled over in front of a one-story bungalow, he memorized which one and drove down the block, slowing to watch her in the rearview mirror. She entered the house and turned on the light on the porch. Was she waiting for anyone else?

Since he knew where she lived, he headed to a fast-food joint to get his hunger taken care of. He would go back later to get her. He could use the tire iron on anyone else in the house. He would have her, and nothing would stop him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After her bath, Vera headed into the den, trying to shake the weird feeling that had hit after leaving the bar. What was up with her? She'd had a great time with her friends, but something had felt off. Maybe it was just her missing Ben.

The movie didn't totally take her mind off the weirdness, but exhaustion hit, and she was ready for bed. After making sure the place was locked up, she headed to her room and read for twenty minutes before turning off the lights.

The house was almost too quiet without Ben there. The other nights, she hadn't had issues sleeping. Something just felt odd, like the sounds from outside weren't normal, though she knew she was making that up.

After a few minutes of tossing and turning, she got up and headed to the kitchen for something that would help her sleep. She poured some milk into a mug and put it into the microwave when she swore she heard something outside.

Her stomach twisted tight, and she flipped on the lights in the back and looked out the window. She didn't see anything, but still, she felt odd.

She decided to send Thario a note, asking if Logan had traveled. Her phone rang almost immediately, and she answered when she saw it was Thario calling.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

She felt bad texting him so late. "Um, I didn't wake you, did I?"

“No, and if you’re worried about something, I’d rather wake up and make sure you’re okay.”

“It’s probably nothing, but I feel weird. Like I’m being watched.”

“Have you checked outside?”

“Well, I thought I heard something out back and checked there. Let me go look out front.”

“Turn off all the lights inside first.”

“Okay.”

“Try to not disturb the blinds as you peek out.”

“Okay.” She felt like a broken record but worry and fear had her muscles tight. She didn’t want someone spying on her. If it was Logan, she would freak out. Hell, if it wasn’t Logan, she would freaking die. There was no way she could have picked up a second stalker, and if she had, it would mean she had shit luck.

“Are you looking out the window?” Thario’s question made her move faster to the window.

“Sorry. I’m scared and moving slow.”

“I’m looking for information about him. I’ve had alerts set up for him, and I’ve been checking. I don’t think he went anywhere. I can’t find...” Thario trailed off as she glanced out the window.

At first, she saw nothing. There were cars parked on the street, but there were always

cars parked on the street. It didn't seem like anyone was in the cars. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just as she was about to tell Thario she saw nothing, she swore someone moved out from behind one of the cars in front of her neighbor's house. Before she could utter a word, Thario spoke.

"Shit. It looks like he might have flown out on a private jet with one of his dad's friends. He could be in California."

"Someone is outside. They are moving toward the house."

"Oh, crap. I'm calling the police. Go hide."

Vera couldn't believe Logan was here, and they hadn't caught his movements. She didn't blame Thario. Who would have thought he would fly out here on a private jet? As far as she knew, he'd never been on a private jet before.

She raced into the bedroom, trying to come up with a place to hide. Maybe she should run outside, but she had no place to go. All her friends lived blocks away. She hadn't made friends with the neighbors since moving in, and she regretted it. She would die here in this house, all because Logan couldn't accept that she had ended their relationship almost a year ago.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hop blew out a sigh of relief. The day had been so freaking long he'd wanted to rip his hair out while they were deep in the weeds of planning. But now they were done, and he could breathe easier.

"Yo, Hop," Zip called to him. "You headed home or going to grab breakfast?"

"Home. I'm too tired. I'll see you all on Sunday."

"That's a date," Q called out.

Rider stretched and moaned. "I'm ready to get some sleep."

Trip nodded. "Same."

Hop got into his car and pulled out, waving to his buddies as he took off. He'd checked maps and saw that the freeways were shut down. Good thing he didn't have to take them to get home.

Work had been wild this week. They'd been at it for so long today and he was so exhausted, all he wanted to do was drop into bed and sleep for days.

He didn't have to go to work in the morning, and he was excited to see Vera. He hoped she wasn't upset that he would be spending the day at home instead of heading to base. She shouldn't be.

She'd texted while he'd been in his meetings, telling him that she loved him. He liked that they had such a great relationship. She'd been so understanding about him working late the entire week. It didn't happen all the time, but some weeks were worse than others.

He was almost home, about to pull onto his street when his phone rang. He wasn't expecting any calls since it was close to four in the morning. But Thario was calling, and he answered with a smile on his face.

"Thario, my man."

"I fucked up. Logan traveled private. I've called the cops, but they are about ten to fifteen minutes away because of that wreck that happened at midnight. I checked the tracking device you wear and saw you were almost home."

"I'm pulling onto the street now. Text my team and Kevlar's team. See if anyone is close by."

"Got it. Call me if you need anything more."

Hop had cut the lights as he'd turned onto the street so when the call ended and he stopped his car two houses down, he knew no one had seen him. He immediately reached for his piece he stored under the seat. He'd almost not installed the device that would only unlock with his thumb print, but he'd pushed away his thoughts that he was being paranoid and placed the holder, praying he never needed it.

Now he was glad he had the gun in arm's reach. He grabbed a set of zip strips from his glove box and made sure the lights were off in his car before he opened the door. He didn't need Logan alerted to his location. He didn't trust the guy and didn't want to end up painting a target all over himself with light.

He had his earpiece in, so when Thario called back, he answered fast but didn't say anything. Thario was used to this kind of behavior from people he called, so he just started speaking.

"She's in the closet, your room. The doors are locked. She thinks someone just entered the house."

"I'm going in," Hop whispered.

"Be smart."

He grunted as he moved to the door, seeing that it was already open. Hop paused, taking a deep breath as he listened for any movement inside. The table beside the couch scraped on the floor as someone ran into it. He knew where the person was. They weren't close to the bedroom door.

Hop stepped into the house, moving silently as he edged closer to the bastard who wanted to hurt Vera. He could hear the asshole bang into the chair they had positioned near the couch.

"Fuck," the dude grunted, allowing Hop to move even closer.

He could reach out and grab the guy, but he wanted to do more than grab him. Hop needed to knock him out. The neighbor across the street turned on their front porch light, allowing Hop to see the outline of the intruder.

The bastard was only about two feet away from him. Hop was ready to move when the guy turned around. He screamed and Hop jumped into action. But the guy ducked then raced across the room.

The bedroom door opened right then. Vera stood in the doorway and flipped on the

light. What was she doing? Logan scurried over to her, grabbing her leg and pulling her to him. Anger slid through him as he watched the bastard tug Vera so hard she dropped to her knees.

Vera hated hiding. She was tired of running from Logan. He had tried to ruin her life, but she was done with cowering in fear. This had to be over now. She wanted to fuck him up but wasn't sure how.

When she heard him running into furniture, she knew she would beat him. She'd found a huge flashlight in the closet and wrapped her hands around it. Her stomach tightened as she stepped out into the bedroom. Fear made her almost turn around and hide back in the closet, but she would never stop him if she didn't confront him.

Vera inched closer to the door, worry filling her. What if Logan wanted to kill her here? If he had a gun, she would be dead as soon as she opened the door. She couldn't hide from him any longer. She had to stop the bastard.

She pulled open the door, her heart thundering. She spied something moving, but it wasn't one huge form moving in the den. It looked like two people. Vera reached for the light, flipping it on.

The sight of Logan crawling on the floor with Ben standing behind him shocked her. Logan moved fast, scurrying to her. His arms wrapped around her legs, and then he pushed, knocking her on her ass.

She saw Ben shove his gun into his waistband. She didn't want Ben to get hurt, so she raised the flashlight and slammed it against Logan's head. He grunted and let go. Logan met her gaze, hurt in his eyes.

"Ouch," Logan said as he rubbed his head.

Ben moved fast, knocking Logan to the ground and knocking him out. She worried that Ben would get hurt, but he had zip strips on Logan's wrists in seconds.

When Ben looked up and met her gaze, tears filled her eyes. She moved to him, and he met her halfway, hugging her tight.

"Good God, woman, I thought I was going to lose you when you opened that door."

"I couldn't let him win. He's made me hide too many times. I had to face him and force him to understand he won't win again."

His lips were on her neck as he held her close. "Don't ever put yourself in danger like that again. Please. I understand that you have to face your fears, but he could have hurt you."

She leaned back and met his gaze. "I couldn't keep running."

Their lips came together in a hard kiss that promised more later. She sank against him, drinking him in. Logan was making noise behind her, but she didn't care. He couldn't hurt her now. Ben had immobilized Logan. He would end up in jail here in California. Maybe out here there would be justice.

A police siren sounded outside, and Ben ended the kiss. "They aren't going to like that I have a gun. I need to put it into a drawer. Just a second."

She watched as Ben removed the ammunition from his gun and stored it in a drawer. Logan was waking up, but he wasn't making sense yet. Ben turned on the lights, making it easier for the police to see once they stepped inside.

The table beside the couch and another chair were knocked askew, but it didn't look like much had been damaged, other than the entry door. Logan had broken the lock

by kicking in the door. That would have to be fixed.

An officer was at the door, stating that he was coming in. Ben was beside her, placing himself so Logan couldn't get to her. She felt so much love for Ben. He kept her safe. Maybe it had been wrong for her to come out to the den and face Logan, but she had to do something. She couldn't hide anymore. Logan had to be gotten rid of, even if she had to do something scary.

A few of Ben's friends showed up, but since the police had Logan in custody, they took off after they knew she was okay. They were asked questions and then more questions but were allowed to stay at home and make arrangements to talk to detectives later in the day.

One of the officers called his brother, who was a handyman. The guy came over and fixed the door frame so they could sleep and not worry about someone else breaking in that night. They would need to replace the door, but that could be done later. For now, they were safe enough.

After a few hours of sleep, she woke and moved to get out of bed, but Ben pulled her back to him. She knew he was mad that she'd put herself in Logan's path, but she had to do something to get rid of him.

"I know you're mad at me."

He shook his head. "Not at you. I'm angry you didn't think enough of yourself to keep safe."

She shook her head. "No, that's not quite what happened. I thought enough of myself to make it stop. I didn't want him bugging me anymore."

Ben kissed her nose and then her chin before trailing kisses down her neck. "I need

you in my life.” He pulled up her shirt, staring down at her for a long moment before he lowered and circled his tongue around one nipple, then the other.

She moaned and arched up to meet his mouth. “More.”

A chuckle escaped his lips before he flicked the tip of his tongue over one nipple and then the other. “I should make you beg for it.”

“I need you.”

“And I need you. That’s why I’m not going to spend hours torturing you. But soon, I’m going to tease you until you scream my name.” He moved fast so his face was between her legs, tonguing her clit though her panties were still in place.

She moved to push them lower, but he captured her hands and held them in place as he continued to drive her crazy. After a moment, he yanked down her panties and then placed his mouth on her, sucking her clit. She cried out as she arched up. His mouth on her was too much, and she came hard.

He didn’t wait and moved between her legs, sinking in, filling her all the way with his thick cock.

“I want you forever,” Ben whispered as he pumped in.

“Yes,” she cried out, wanting it all with Ben. She wanted the good times and the bad. She wanted him with her forever. They were special together, and she knew they would last.

This man was exactly what she’d been searching for her whole life. He completed her, giving her the love and kindness she needed.

“I plan to hold you to that. You’re mine, and I’m yours.”

She lifted her hips, meeting his thrusts. He groaned and pulled out before pumping in again. His composure was cracking, but he pumped in a few more times before stilling above her.

The look on his face was filled with love. No question, they both wanted the same things in life. They would work out all the details, but they loved each other, and that mattered more than anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:48 am

Zip tossed back the last of his beer and stood, disillusionment filled him and settled with the disappointed burning in his belly. When he was younger, he vowed to never settle down, but seeing how happy both Trip and Hop were, along with their buddies Kevlar, Safe, and Blink, made him want something more. But getting involved with someone brought complications he couldn't afford.

The unsettled feeling that rose up inside when he felt tied down always got him to walk away, even when the woman was great. He'd learned over the years to never allow anyone to think he wanted more with them than a one-night stand. Going back for more made women think they were important, and he'd been burned and couldn't go back.

His last long-term girlfriend had ended in disaster shortly before he joined the Navy. Heck, she might have been the reason he joined. Joining up had been a great decision, but he couldn't deal with another unsettling relationship.

He headed back to the bathrooms and was about to enter the gents' when the door for the ladies' opened and a woman poked her head out. Their gazes met and panic filled her face for a second then it was gone.

What was that about? He took care of business, and while washing his hands, he heard a faint yell. It wasn't a scream from a guy, though. That shout was from a woman.

He stepped out into the hall, trying to figure out where the noise had come from. No one seemed excited in the main room of the bar, and it didn't look like anything was happening up there.

Maybe one of the waitresses had shouted something. He wasn't sold on that conclusion, though. But he didn't know what was going on, and it wasn't his business anyway.

He was about to head out when something banged hard against the other side of the ladies' room door. Zip stalled, waiting for the door to open. Nothing happened.

When he heard a muffled yell he knew he had to go in. On missions, he didn't hesitate when entering women-only spaces. Here in the US, he knew he could get in trouble, but there was a problem, and he didn't like what he was hearing.

"Coming in!" he yelled as he pushed the door open.

The sound of struggling grew louder. He stepped in, taking in the woman on the ground and the man on top of her. The jerk punched her, but lucky for her, he hadn't gotten a good wind-up.

Zip moved fast, hauling the guy off the woman. He had one hand on the dude as he yanked the door open and shoved him out into the hall. His stepping into the women's room had garnered attention because the jerk he'd pulled off the woman ran into two big guys. Confusion filled their faces, and Zip pointed at them.

"Don't let him get away. He was punching a woman in here."

"What the fuck is going on?" the manager and part-time bartender yelled as she squeezed past the two big guys holding the jerk against the wall.

"He was beating this woman. Have you called for an ambulance?"

The woman shook her head. "Fuck. I don't need this kind of shit."

Neither did he, but here he was dealing with it. He stepped into the bathroom with the

manager and froze as he stared down into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

**

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