



Protecting What's Mine (Men of Maddox Security #1)

Author: *Logan Chance*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Bound by duty. Driven by passion. Unstoppable in love.

Ranger Cole is used to high-stakes missions, but babysitting a scientist's daughter for a week? That's a new kind of challenge. Tory's smart, sassy, and completely off-limits. From the moment Ranger locks eyes with her, the tension is undeniable—and not just because someone's out to get her.

Between late-night stakeouts and heated banter, keeping Tory safe starts feeling personal. And the more time they spend together, the more sparks fly. Until it's not just Tory's safety Ranger's worried about, but his own heart. Can Ranger keep his emotions in check while protecting the one person he's not supposed to fall for? Or will Tory prove to be the mission that changes everything?

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

The blue water of the Atlantic Ocean waves at me as I stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows in the Maddox Security conference room, waiting impatiently for the guys I work with to arrive for our monthly meeting. The room is perched high above the bustling streets of downtown Saint Pierce, offering a panoramic view of the city and the vast ocean beyond. Dean Maddox owns the entire twentieth floor of this sleek sky rise. The view is stunning, but my attention is on the ticking clock. I'm a man who doesn't like to be kept waiting.

Dean is very particular about keeping a schedule, and so am I. Punctuality is a virtue in our line of work, where precision and timing can mean the difference between success and failure. My patience wears thin as I tap my fingers on the polished mahogany table, the rhythmic sound echoing in the spacious, modern room.

I glance at my watch for the third time in five minutes, the ticking seconds feeling like an eternity. The soft hum of the air conditioning does little to soothe my growing frustration. My thoughts drift between the ocean outside and the urgency of the tasks that lie ahead.

The door finally creaks open, and Lincoln trickles in, his casual demeanor clashing with the urgency I feel. I suppress a sigh and straighten in my chair, ready to dive into the agenda. Dean strides in after him, his presence commanding the room. He takes his seat at the head of the table.

"What's taking so long?" I ask, resting my forearms on the glossy, polished conference room table, its surface so reflective I can almost see my own impatience

staring back at me.

The room is large, too large, for a group of six men. The high ceilings and expansive floor space amplify the emptiness. Dean once said it takes this much space to hold all our personalities, and I guess that's true.

Lincoln, the only other one here besides our boss, Dean, glances at the world time clock on the wall, its multiple faces displaying times from London to Tokyo. "They're only two minutes late."

"But still late," I say, arching a brow and feeling the familiar annoyance prickling at the edge of my patience.

"The other guys are on their way up," Dean says from his seat at the head of the table. He sits with an air of authority, his eyes flicking to the wall of televisions surveilling every nook and cranny of the building. Each screen shows a different angle, capturing the continuous activity within our fortress. "Patience is a virtue, Ranger."

I lean back, stretching my legs under the table, and cross my boots at the ankle. The chair creaks slightly, the only sound in the otherwise silent room. "Mhm. I've been told," I mutter, my tone a mix of resignation and stubbornness. My eyes wander back to the ocean view.

The silence stretches on, the weight of our anticipation palpable. Every second feels like an eternity, each tick of the clock a reminder of the punctuality I value.

I've known Dean for years, worked here for years as well, so he knows I'm just busting his balls. We go way back. With a military background, it was only right that I joined his team as a security specialist after I retired. Maddox Security is one of the largest security companies in the world. I use the term 'security' lightly because sometimes we're asked to do more than protect; sometimes, we're enforcers,

investigators, and even rescuers.

The hours are great. The work is always busy, with no two days ever the same. And I like the men I work with... even if they're late. They're like family to me. I don't have a lot of family, so I appreciate them. I'm the type of man who keeps his circle small, preferring quality over quantity. When you do what we do, you surround yourself with people you can trust implicitly.

Lincoln's blue eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head with a wry smile. He's a quiet guy, for the most part, always sitting back, watching instead of speaking. He's got a way of assessing a situation with just a glance, a skill that's saved our asses more than once.

Unlike Boone.

Speak of the devil. He's next to arrive. Boone defines mountain man—burly and bearded, with a presence that fills the room. His steps are heavy and purposeful. He does outstanding work, the kind you can always rely on when things get tough.

We've all got our strengths, so I see why Dean has all of us on his payroll. Each of us brings something unique to the table.

"I'm here, the meeting can begin now," Boone jokes, his deep voice rumbling through the room. He scrubs a hand over his beard as he takes a seat and casts his brown eyes over at me. "Heard about your sister."

I nod. "It's fine."

It's really not fine. She was in love with a man she thought she trusted, but he turned out to be somebody he wasn't. The betrayal hit hard, leaving her heartbroken and me seething with a protective anger. We've always looked out for each other, and seeing

her hurt cuts deeper than any wound I've ever had in combat.

"If you need me to knock a motherfucker out, just say the word," Boone offers, his voice tinged with a mix of seriousness and dark humor.

I grin. "I'll let you know."

I already asked Greta if I could pummel him with my fist when she caught him cheating on her, but she said no. However, she didn't say Boone couldn't. Greta is a non-confrontational woman, always looking to avoid conflict. Me, I love a good fight. Sometimes, people say I seek it out. And they might be right. There's something about the rush of adrenaline and the clear-cut resolution that appeals to me.

Lincoln turns toward us, his curiosity piqued. "Knock who out?"

While Lincoln, Dean, and Boone listen intently, I explain the story of my sister finding her guy tied to their bed with his assistant riding him like a cowgirl.

"Damn," Boone says, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's pretty harsh. She wore Greta's cowboy boots?"

"Yep. And Greta's been devastated ever since she kicked him out. I tried to warn her not to get wrapped up in the love bullshit, but she never listens."

"Love isn't all bad," Dean says with a slight lift of his lips, his tone softening.

He's the exception to the rule. There's no denying the happiness in his silvery eyes. He met his girl, Sophia, on a job, and she's been smitten with him ever since. The way he talks about her, the way his eyes light up, you can tell she's changed his world.

“I’m surprised you’re even here today,” Boone says to Dean with a smirk. “I thought that’s why your sister was helping run things so you could traipse around the globe, holding hands with Sophia.”

Dean doesn’t bat an eye at his teasing. “Isabel’s doing a terrific job, but I wanted to hand out today’s assignments.” He smooths a hand down his red tie and winks. “Sophia will get a reward later for our time apart.”

Dean launches into the sordid tale of his happily ever after, recounting the details with a mix of amusement and nostalgia. I already know how they pretended to be married to enter the world of Humphrey Hollingsworth, infiltrating the circles of one of the most notorious men we’ve ever encountered. I’ve heard of Humphrey’s late-night parties and the lascivious activities that take place. Not my scene. Not Dean’s scene either, so I know it must have been a shock to bring along a woman he barely knew.

As Dean talks, I find myself half-listening, my thoughts drifting back to Greta and the mess she’s in. Love may not be all bad, as Dean claims, but it sure as hell isn’t easy. And sometimes, it’s downright painful. That’s why I’ve vowed never to fall in love.

“Actually, the pretending to be in a relationship goes along the same lines as the job I’m giving Asher today.” Dean shuffles through the papers on the table, the rustling sound adding to the anticipation in the room.

The door opens, and Orion Locke walks in with a deep frown etched on his face. I’ve known Orion for years, and he’s been an angry bastard the entire time. His presence is imposing, with his tall, muscular frame and perpetually brooding expression.

“Why do you have the meetings so early in the morning?” His dark eyes appear tired, shadows under them suggesting lack of sleep.

“It’s nine a.m. I wouldn’t call that early,” Dean says, his tone firm yet understanding.

Orion slides into a chair with a heavy sigh, his movements slow and deliberate.

“Someone had a rough night,” Boone comments, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

Orion only grunts in response, a typical reaction for him when he’s not in the mood to engage.

Asher is the last to arrive. He’s younger than the rest of us, fresh-faced and eager to prove himself. As the newest employee on the team, he’s still learning the ropes but shows a lot of promise. He rushes into a seat and stares at Dean, waiting for the meeting to begin, his eyes wide with anticipation.

“Thanks for being here,” Dean begins, his voice carrying a tone of gratitude. “I know the past year hasn’t been easy with me searching for Bishop. I’d like to thank all of you for the hand you played in finding him.” He shuffles through the papers in front of him once more. “Hopefully, we can finally have some peace.”

I nod, knowing although I wasn’t much help in taking down Bishop Blackstone, I helped keep things running smoothly for Maddox Security. It was a team effort, and every role played was crucial.

“I know Isabel has been helping a ton, and I’m lucky to have such an awesome sister,” Dean says, his voice softening with pride. Lincoln and Dean share a look before Dean continues, “I have some assignments that need urgent attention, and I wanted to hand out each one personally.”

I shift in my seat, always leery about what assignment he’ll toss my way.

“Ranger, I’ll start with you first. The G20 Summit Meeting is soon, and this is Tory Ann Malser,” he says, handing me a file. “She’s yours to protect.”

I take the file, flipping it open to see a picture of a young woman with striking features and a poised demeanor. Tory .

Dean’s gaze meets mine, his expression serious. “This assignment is critical. The G20 Summit attracts a lot of attention, and not all of it good. Your job is to ensure her safety at all times.”

I nod, the weight of the responsibility settling in. Protecting someone at a high-profile event like the G20 Summit requires precision, vigilance, and a keen sense of awareness.

I stare into the wild blue eyes of the blonde woman in the photo. “Is she attending the summit?”

Dean shakes his head, his gray eyes meeting mine with a serious gaze. “No, she isn’t. Her father is Fredrick Malser, a world-renowned scientist. He’ll be a keynote speaker and will have his own personal security watching over him.”

“Why not have his security watch over his daughter?”

Dean leans back in his chair, fingers tapping thoughtfully on the polished surface of the table. “Fredrick has received death threats about speaking at the Summit, and he doesn’t trust some members of his own security detail. He wants his daughter kept under the radar. We need to ensure her safety without attracting attention.”

I glance at the photo again as Dean continues giving me instructions. Tory’s expression in the picture is composed, her features betraying none of the potential danger surrounding her. “You’ll take her to the safe house near the ocean and hold

her until the Summit is over.”

I scan Tory’s details, noting she’s studying to be a scientist, following in her father’s footsteps. This should be a straightforward job. “Sounds good.”

Dean’s focus shifts to Orion, who sits with a brooding expression. “Orion, you’ve got the daughter of socialite Minnie Green. She’s got an ex-boyfriend stalking her, and her mother wants security to follow her to-and-from work.”

“Ex-boyfriend?” Orion scoffs, his voice carrying a hint of restrained anger. “Can’t I just scare the shit out of him, make him think twice, and call it a day?”

Dean hands a folder to Orion, his expression stern. “It’s not that simple. We need to ensure she’s safe without escalating the situation.”

Orion opens the folder, his eyes narrowing as he studies the contents. He sucks in a breath before speaking again, his voice quieter this time. “It never is.” He fixates a little longer on the picture inside his folder, his jaw clenched with determination.

“Lincoln already has his assignment,” Dean states, his voice steady and commanding. They share another look, a silent communication that speaks volumes. It must be some hush-hush undercover operation or something equally critical.

“Boone, here’s your assignment.” Dean hands a file to Boone. “I briefed you on it last week.”

Boone opens the file, his brows furrowing slightly as he studies the contents. “Wow,” he mutters under his breath. “Who’s this?”

“Name’s Aubree Ryan, and she’s got a stalker too. We’re still in the dark about the identity, but she needs to get out of Nashville.”

Boone nods decisively. “I’ll take her to my cabin nearby. It’s remote, secure.”

I focus back on the file in my hand while Dean continues, detailing Asher’s assignment of pretending to be engaged to the woman he’s protecting. As I stare into the blue eyes of Tory in her photograph, I’m struck by her striking beauty. Questions swirl in my mind.

Why did her father bring her to Saint Pierce? Why not leave her at home while he attends the Summit Meeting?

“I want everyone to know I’m here if you need anything,” Dean says, snapping me back to the present moment.

We all grunt our acknowledgement, each absorbed in our thoughts and tasks. My assignment seems straightforward, and I don’t anticipate serious complications. What concerns me most is her beauty and the unexpected attraction I feel toward her photo. But I never mix business and pleasure. In fact, it’s been a long time since I mixed anything and pleasure together. Love is a risk I refuse to take. Can you blame me? Dean is the exception in my world, the only one who has found lasting happiness. My parents, my sister, my friends—they’ve all stumbled in the realm of love, and I’m not willing to gamble.

I hate risk.

My approach is always calculated, every move measured. So despite Tory’s allure, I won’t let temptation cloud my judgment.

We file out of the room, except for Asher, whom Dean asks to stay behind for further instructions.

“We all need to catch up soon,” Boone says in the lobby, his voice echoing in the

spacious corridor. “It was fun last time. Maybe once I’m done protecting this girl from her ex, we can have a guy’s poker night.”

It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve hung out with the guys, and Boone’s suggestion resonates. “I’m down with that,” I chime in, a smile tugging at my lips.

They all laugh. They remember who won all the money last time.

Me.

“What’s so funny? I’d love to take more of your money,” I quip.

“No, I’m not playing poker with this guy again,” Lincoln says, shaking his head with mock seriousness. “Besides, I don’t know when I’ll be free, because my job isn’t an easy one.”

I slap Lincoln on the shoulder playfully. “I figured when Dean pulled you aside before everyone else, it was something serious.”

Lincoln sighs, a shadow crossing his features. “It’s Isabel. She’s been receiving threats.”

“Who’s behind it?” Boone asks, his tone now serious.

Lincoln shrugs, frustration evident. “Not sure yet. Dean has some leads. I’m just supposed to keep Isabel safe while he investigates.”

“Good luck with that. She can’t be too thrilled about being watched,” Orion comments, his expression sympathetic.

At that moment, the distinctive sound of Isabel Maddox’s heels clicking down the

tiled hallway interrupts our conversation. We glance at each other and scatter toward the elevator, leaving Lincoln to deal with Isabel on his own.

“I’m out of here,” I announce to no one in particular as I press the elevator button, its soft ding announcing its arrival. “I’ve got a beauty to protect.”

As I step into the elevator, my thoughts drift back to Tory and the task ahead. I’m sure it won’t be easy to protect someone who’s already having some sort of weird effect on me, but it’s the job. Somebody’s gotta do it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

“We’re leaving here in five minutes,” my father announces from the plush sitting area of our hotel suite, his voice clipped and precise, as always. He doesn’t even glance up from his tablet, where streams of complex data scroll across the screen.

I push my red-rimmed glasses further up my nose, torn away from my reading. The paragraph on behavioral epigenetics had been enthralling—exploring how historical traumas like the Holocaust or China’s Cultural Revolution might influence inherited DNA. Amazing stuff. No, seriously.

“I’m coming,” I call back reluctantly, my voice tinged with resignation. With a heavy sigh, I toss the Epigenetics textbook into my leather tote, its well-worn edges disappearing into the abyss alongside a clutter of highlighters, sticky notes, and half-filled notebooks.

For a brief moment, I close my eyes and imagine the quiet comfort of a university library, where the muted rustle of pages and the gentle hum of distant whispers create a cocoon of focus. I crave the sanctity of a secluded corner, surrounded by towering bookshelves, where time dissolves into the thrill of discovery. But my reality is a far cry from the college life I once dreamed of. Instead of lecture halls and lively campus debates, I have private tutors—an obligatory luxury bestowed upon me as the daughter of the world’s most eminent scientist.

I did, however, go to a real high school. An experience I wouldn’t let my father take away from me. I’d wanted to be normal, although once in high school I realized how far from normal I truly was. While other girls my age cared about football and

shopping at the mall, I was nose-deep in my science textbooks studying molecular biology and quantum physics.

My father, Dr. Frederick Malser, is a walking encyclopedia with an impressive array of accolades: Nobel Prize, Abel Prize, Turing Award, and a dozen others whose names I can never quite recall. His brilliance has inspired reverence from nations and the envy of academic peers. Some call him the smartest man alive. I call him Dad .

Living with someone of his stature is both a privilege and a constraint. It means I've grown up with front-row seats to groundbreaking research, endless intellectual stimulation, and a life of extraordinary experiences. But it also means my days are dictated by his rigorous schedule, my own aspirations often taking a backseat. Most of the time, I can appreciate the opportunity to immerse myself in learning. But there are moments, like now, when the weight of his shadow presses heavily on me, suffocating the vibrant independence I long for.

With a pang of frustration, I zip up my bag and head toward the bathroom, hastily gathering my toiletries. My reflection stares back at me from the mirror—faint dark circles under my eyes from late-night reading, a loose braid falling over one shoulder. I don't look like the jet-setting daughter of a celebrated scientist; I look like a tired twenty-two-year-old with too many thoughts and too few outlets.

"I'm not sure why I have to be babysat," I mutter as I re-enter the living area, adjusting the strap of my bag on my shoulder. My father looks up then, his brow furrowing ever so slightly. It's his version of disapproval, though he rarely expresses it outright.

"It's not babysitting," he says, his tone firm but not unkind. "It's exposure. You're lucky to have these opportunities."

I bite back a retort, sinking into the couch opposite him. He doesn't understand—or

maybe he does and chooses to ignore it. Traveling the globe, attending conferences, and witnessing breakthroughs firsthand might be thrilling to him, but to me, it often feels like gilded captivity.

“I’ve told you already,” my father says, his voice carrying a hint of exasperation as he leans back in the armchair. “This is a significant event, and there are people who don’t want me speaking at the Summit.”

The G20 Summit, an exclusive gathering of global leaders, innovators, and policymakers, is indeed a prestigious affair. Just thinking about it stirs an ache of longing in me. It’s a reminder of my strange limbo—I’m a researcher in all but name, contributing to my father’s groundbreaking projects without official recognition or compensation. To the world, I am invisible, a nameless cog in the machinery of his genius.

I slump back further into the plush leather couch, letting out an exaggerated sigh, and toss my legs onto the mahogany coffee table in front of me. The ornate table, polished to a mirror finish, reflects the restless energy in my posture. “Who?” I ask, my voice tinged with a mix of curiosity and disbelief. “Who are these people so desperate to stop your appearance?”

My father glances at me over the rim of his glasses, his expression both tired and resigned. “Some group who doesn’t want science interfering with food,” he replies, shrugging as if to downplay the gravity of the opposition.

I sit up straighter, my brow furrowing. “But don’t they realize you’re developing technologies that could feed millions? That this could solve world hunger?” My voice rises, carrying the passion I feel every time we talk about his work. I’ve seen the data, run the calculations, even helped refine the models. The potential impact is staggering—life-changing for so many.

He takes off his glasses with a practiced motion and begins meticulously cleaning the lenses with a soft cloth. The small, deliberate action feels like a metaphor for his approach to life—methodical, precise, and unwavering, even in the face of resistance. “They fear what they don’t understand,” he says after a moment, his tone almost wistful. “That’s why I need to present my data in a way that even a two-year-old can grasp. Simplify the science so it’s not intimidating.”

I cross my arms, leaning back into the couch with a huff. “Well, I think your speech is brilliant,” I say firmly, as though my approval carries the weight of the Nobel committee.

A rare smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, that familiar crooked half-smile I’ve come to associate with his rare moments of pride. “Thanks, peanut. You’ve always been my biggest supporter.”

I laugh softly, the sound breaking the tension. “Well, I’m smart too, remember? And I can take care of myself. I don’t need a babysitter.”

He gives me a pointed look, his smile fading into something more serious. “It’s not about babysitting, you know that.”

But the words hang between us, unspoken: It’s just the two of us. It always has been.

I flash him a grin. “Besides,” I add, “I’ll bet you anything your speech is so good even the people protesting you will want to take notes.”

He chuckles softly, shaking his head as he puts his glasses back on. “Maybe. But I’m not taking any chances.”

As he picks up his tablet and begins scrolling through his presentation notes again, I lean back on the couch, studying him. Despite the weariness in his features, there’s

still a spark of determination in his eyes. He's carried the weight of the world's expectations for as long as I've known him, and yet, he never falters.

It's inspiring. And infuriating.

While other young women my age chatter over coffee about weekend plans or the latest gossip, I'm deep in research papers, conferences, and lab work. At twenty-two, I boast a Master's in Molecular Biology and am neck-deep in my PhD research. Few can match my academic achievements, and I take pride in that. Socially inept? Perhaps. I wouldn't know. My understanding of normal human behavior is cobbled together from TikTok videos and predictable rom-coms. Relationships, small talk, or even casual friendships seem like foreign concepts to me. But in science, I excel. Corny as it sounds, my passion for it consumes me—it's my purpose, my identity, and, occasionally, my escape.

"You can bring your jewelry and make some of your creations," my father says absentmindedly, fiddling with the knot of his tie as he paces near the window of our suite. His gaze is distant, already halfway through his mental checklist for the day.

The mention of jewelry tugs at something warm inside me. It's one of the rare activities we bond over—creating intricate pieces, a hobby we both enjoy but rarely have time for. Rising from my seat, I step closer to him and tug at the tie, straightening it with the ease of someone who's done this a hundred times before. His collar is slightly wrinkled, and I smooth it down, my hands working on autopilot.

"I plan on it," I reply, my voice soft but tinged with an underlying frustration. As much as I love these shared moments, his comment is a reminder of how confined my world still is. "I just want to know when you'll trust me enough to be on my own."

His expression tightens, and for a brief moment, he looks at me—not the brilliant scientist, not his capable assistant, but as his daughter. "We can discuss that later," he

says firmly, though there's an edge of evasion in his tone that I know too well.

I finish the Windsor knot with practiced precision and drop my hands. "I'd like to talk about it now," I insist, unable to keep the hint of impatience from creeping into my voice.

"Tory Ann Malser, end of discussion," he declares, his tone final as he turns away, effectively shutting me down. It's a tactic he's mastered—a wall of silence that leaves no room for negotiation.

I cross my arms, my frustration simmering just beneath the surface. "Technically, we haven't even started discussing anything," I mutter, my retort half-directed at his retreating back. But as usual, my words bounce off the impenetrable barrier he's built around this topic.

Letting out a quiet sigh, I gather my bags and sling them over my shoulder, the weight of them almost comforting in its familiarity. Striding purposefully toward the door, I toss a glance over my shoulder. "Ready to go meet... this caregiver?" My tone is sharp, masking the vulnerability beneath.

My father, briefcase in hand, sighs audibly but nods. He follows me out of the suite without another word. As we step into the hotel lobby, the shift from air-conditioned coolness to the oppressive heat of Saint Pierce's balmy breeze hits me like a wall. The sticky humidity clings to my skin, making the air feel heavier than it should. Even in September, the sun here feels merciless, as if it's determined to melt everything in its path.

We cross the parking lot, the asphalt shimmering with heat waves. My father's pristine Buick stands out in the lot, its sleek black exterior polished to a mirror-like finish, gleaming under the unforgiving sun. It's a car that matches his image—flawless, composed, and unyielding. Sliding into the passenger seat, I

immediately regret it as the leather sears against my legs. The heat seems to cling to everything, including my hastily thrown-together ponytail, which does little to keep the sweat from dampening my neck.

The air inside the car is stifling, and I quickly fumble to roll down the window, craving even the faintest breeze. My father settles in beside me, his movements brisk and methodical as he adjusts the rearview mirror. As the engine hums to life, I stare out at the tropical scenery, my thoughts swirling between the familiar tug of duty and an unshakable longing for independence.

The initially warm air conditioning blasts into my face, a rush of heat before the cool relief kicks in. I lean closer to the vent, letting the promise of cold air wash over me as I press my damp palms to my thighs. Outside, the relentless sun continues to blaze, turning everything into a hazy mirage of sweltering humidity.

“I wish you wouldn’t think of this man as just a babysitter,” my father remarks suddenly, his voice slicing through the tense silence. His words pull me out of my thoughts, and I swivel my head to look at him, frowning. It takes a moment for the weight of what he’s said to sink in. This man?

“A man?” I ask, my tone sharper than I intend. Surprise ripples through me. My father rarely introduces anyone new into our tightly controlled, carefully curated circle.

“Yes,” he confirms with a curt nod, his expression unreadable, though his fingers drum lightly against the steering wheel. “He’s a professional security specialist. Someone I trust implicitly to ensure your safety while I’m occupied.”

The idea settles uneasily in my chest. I’ve never been alone with a man before. My past “caretakers” have always been women—usually the type with ambitions of becoming the next Mrs. Malser. Not that I could blame them. It wasn’t just my

father's good looks, though he's undeniably handsome for his age, with his sharp features and perpetually crisp appearance. It was his notoriety, his power, his money. They all wanted to be part of the world he commands with effortless authority.

"What man?" I ask again, this time barely above a whisper. A million questions whirl in my mind, each more frantic than the last. Who is he? What does he look like? Is he armed?

"I hired a security company," my father explains, his tone measured as if anticipating my reaction. "One of the best in the world. There'll be a man assigned to keep you safe."

I sit up straighter in my seat, my pulse quickening. "How serious are these threats?" My voice trembles slightly, and I curse myself for letting the fear show. My eyes fix on him, watching the subtle tension in his jaw, the way his shoulders seem locked in place, the telltale signs of a man under immense pressure.

"It's nothing to be alarmed about," he replies, his voice carefully even. He tugs at his tie—an uncharacteristic gesture for someone so composed. "Everything will be fine."

I narrow my eyes, studying him like I'm trying to decipher a code. "I don't believe you," I say finally, my words soft but heavy with suspicion. My father isn't a man prone to unnecessary precautions. If he's gone to the lengths of hiring one of the best security companies in the world, the danger must be real.

He slows to a stop at a red light and turns his weary green eyes toward me. They seem older somehow, filled with an exhaustion that goes beyond sleepless nights. "I promise, everything will be okay," he says softly. "This company comes highly recommended by a colleague."

I lean back into the seat, attempting to mimic the ease I want to feel. But anxiety

blooms in my chest and spreads outward, a dull ache creeping into my limbs. A heaviness lodges itself in the pit of my stomach, refusing to dissipate. “What about you?” I ask, my voice barely audible. “Will you have security too?”

“Yes,” he replies as the light turns green and the car rolls forward. “There’s top-level security at these meetings.”

His reassurance does little to fully calm me, but I exhale a shallow breath of relief, releasing some of the tension coiled tightly between my shoulder blades. “You’ll call me every night,” I say, trying to cling to some sense of normalcy in all of this.

His lips curl into a smile, a rare and gentle one that momentarily softens the lines of his face. “And every morning too,” he promises.

His words help, if only a little. I let my gaze wander out the window, fixing on the endless stretch of turquoise ocean in the distance. The frothy white waves crash against the shore with rhythmic certainty, a soothing lullaby against the chaos in my mind. The sun, impossibly bright, reflects off the water, casting sparkling shards of light that dance across the horizon.

Traffic thickens as we approach the heart of Saint Pierce, a bustling city that manages to blend its tropical charm with urban chaos. Brightly colored storefronts blur past, interspersed with palm trees swaying lazily in the warm breeze. I should feel calmer now, surrounded by this paradise, but my thoughts remain restless, circling back to the unknown man who will soon become a part of my life.

For the first time, I wonder what it will feel like to share my space with someone so unfamiliar. To have my world—small and isolated as it is—disrupted.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my voice tinged with curiosity and a hint of apprehension as I glance at my father.

“We’re meeting him at a building downtown,” he replies matter-of-factly, his focus fixed on the road ahead.

“Does he have a name?” I press, hoping for some detail that will make this feel less surreal.

“Ranger Cole,” my father says, his tone clipped and professional. It’s the same tone he uses when discussing lab protocols or presenting at conferences. He has a way of boiling people down to their function, forgetting they’re human first.

I let the name roll around in my mind, imagining what kind of person would be attached to it. Ranger Cole . It sounds rugged, like a character ripped from an action movie. But reality rarely matches imagination. I’m sure he’ll be some middle-aged, overweight man with a clipboard and a power trip. It’s fine—I have enough jewelry supplies in my bag to keep me occupied for hours. And my textbooks.

As we pull into the back lot of a towering glass building that seems to kiss the sky, my palms begin to sweat. My father shifts the car into park, and before he can even open his door, a figure steps into view.

Not just any figure.

A man.

A towering man.

He’s dressed in a tight black T-shirt that hugs his broad shoulders and impossibly defined chest, paired with fitted black jeans that make him look like he walked out of a tactical gear catalog. His arms are massive, bulging under the hem of his sleeves, each muscle defined like it was sculpted in marble.

He lifts a single finger in a commanding gesture, motioning for me to stay in the car. The motion is fluid, confident, and sends a clear message— wait . My breath catches as my gaze trails upward, from his rock-solid chest to his sculpted jaw, dusted with scruff that looks as sharp as it does effortless. Then, I meet his eyes—dark, penetrating, and assessing me with an intensity that makes me freeze.

Is this the man?

This isn't a man. This is a gorgeous freak of nature , a genetic anomaly that defies science and logic. He shouldn't exist. Every biological rule I've studied seems inadequate in explaining how someone could look like this .

My father steps out of the car, his usual reserved demeanor firmly in place, and shakes hands with him. They exchange a few words I can't quite hear through the closed window, but my father's nod in my direction makes it clear what's coming next.

I can't stay with this man. Alone.

He's not what I pictured when my father said security . I was expecting a mall cop with a chip on his shoulder—not someone who looks like he moonlights as a superhero.

My father gestures toward me, beckoning me to exit the car. "Tory Ann, come here. I want you to meet Ranger Cole. He'll be keeping you safe."

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry as I pull the door handle and step out. My legs feel like jelly beneath me, every step toward him shaky and uncertain. His presence seems to pull all the oxygen out of the air, leaving me light-headed.

When I finally stop in front of him, his dark eyes lock onto mine, sending a shiver

down my spine. Up close, he's even more overwhelming—his sheer size, the effortless way he carries himself, the faint scent of something clean and masculine lingering in the air.

I extend my hand, hesitant and unsure, and his swallows mine completely. His grip is firm but not crushing, his skin warm and rough against my own. The moment our hands touch, it's like a lightning bolt shoots up my arm, electrifying every nerve in my body.

There aren't enough gigawatts in the world to measure the energy coursing through me.

"Miss Malser," he says, his voice a deep rumble that resonates in my chest.

I manage a shaky nod, my words stuck somewhere in my throat. My father continues speaking, but his voice fades into the background, eclipsed by the overwhelming presence of Ranger Cole.

I don't know how I'm supposed to survive being alone with this man. Not when every cell in my body seems hyper-aware of him, as if he's rewired my biology in an instant.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

The woman standing before me is nothing short of a dream. A pure, untouchable vision. Her silky blonde hair cascades down her shoulders in waves that catch the sunlight, making her look like she's stepped out of some ethereal painting. Her big, baby-blue eyes lock onto mine as she places her tiny hand in mine. Her touch is warm, delicate. Innocent.

The sheer contrast between her softness and the hard edges of my world makes something primal stir deep inside me. I fight the urge to growl as her fingers brush against my calloused palm. My grip tightens slightly—not enough to hurt her, but enough to let her know I'm here. Solid. Strong. Hers. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

Her father's voice drifts into my consciousness, but I barely hear him as he introduces us. Fredrick Malser. A genius in his field, but all I care about is the angel he's entrusted to me.

Tory. Her name tastes sweet even in my thoughts.

And already, I want her. I want to scoop her into my arms, take her to the safe house, and claim her in every way imaginable. I want to erase the doubt in her eyes and replace it with trust—trust in me. But I'm not a fool. I've been in this business long enough to know better.

This is a job.

I must remain professional.

At least for now.

But the moment this job is over, the moment she's safe, she will be mine.

"I'll keep her safe, sir," I say, my voice firm and steady as I look her father in the eye. My words aren't just a promise—they're an oath, and I don't make those lightly.

Fredrick nods, satisfied, and we get to work transferring Tory's belongings from their car to my truck. She has more bags than I anticipated—small, feminine things that don't take up much space but somehow feel significant. Each one feels like a glimpse into her life, into the things she values. I tuck them carefully into the back of the truck, securing them as if they contain treasures.

When the last bag is loaded, I turn to see Tory hugging her father. The sight stirs something unexpected in me—a pang of emotion I quickly suppress. I don't have room for sentimentality in this line of work, but watching her cling to him, seeing the protective way he pats her back, reminds me why I do this. Why I keep people like her safe.

But it's not just about duty. Not this time.

When she pulls away from him, there's a vulnerability in her expression that makes my chest tighten. She's trusting me now. Trusting me to keep her safe.

I stride over to the passenger door and pull it open, holding out my hand to help her in. She hesitates for the briefest moment before taking it, and the contact sends a jolt of electricity up my arm. I steady her as she climbs into the seat, her body moving with a natural grace that only makes her more captivating.

"You ready?" I ask, my voice a little gruffer than I intended. I'm already struggling to keep the edge out of it, to keep from letting her see how much she's affecting me.

She turns those impossibly blue eyes on me, studying me in a way that feels almost too intimate. It's as if she's peeling back the layers, trying to figure out who I am and whether I'm worthy of her trust.

"I am," she says softly, her voice carrying a quiet strength beneath the nerves.

I nod, closing the door behind her and circling to the driver's side. As I settle into the seat and start the engine, I glance her way again. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap, her posture straight but not stiff. She's trying to be brave, but I can sense the tension in her.

She doesn't know it yet, but she's safe with me. Safer than she's ever been. And by the time this is over, she'll know it too.

She'll know she belongs with me.

Her father fades into the distance in the rearview mirror as I navigate the city streets, heading toward the safe house. Tory sits quietly at first, staring out the windshield, her delicate fingers gripping the strap of her small backpack-purse. She hugs it to her chest—her glorious chest—and I quickly snap my gaze back to the road.

I force myself to focus. The thoughts swirling in my mind are anything but professional, and I can't afford to let them linger. There will be time for that later—after the mission. Once I've ensured she's safe, I'll allow myself to consider how much I want her, how much I want to claim her in every way. But not now. Not yet.

The streets are bustling with midday traffic, and I take several intentional detours, weaving through back roads and making random turns to ensure we aren't being followed. It's standard protocol, though I'm aware it's adding unnecessary time to the drive. What should've been a quick twenty-minute trip has stretched into over an hour.

To her credit, Tory doesn't complain. Instead, she fills the time by talking—endlessly.

It's not mindless chatter, either. She launches into her life story with an enthusiasm that catches me off guard. She talks about her studies, her love for molecular biology, the intricate jewelry pieces she designs in her spare time. There's something charming about the way her words tumble out in a steady stream, her voice light and animated. I find myself captivated by her energy, the way her hands occasionally gesture as she emphasizes a point.

She's adorable. And I'm not being sarcastic.

"We don't have a tail," she finally says when I merge onto the highway after one last detour. There's a playful edge to her voice, as if she's been humoring me this whole time.

I glance at her briefly, smirking. "Better safe than sorry."

Her intelligence isn't lost on me. She knew exactly what I was doing from the start, and she didn't even need to ask.

"You probably think this is beneath you," she says after a moment, twisting in her seat to face me more fully. Her tone shifts, quieter now, with an edge of vulnerability. "Watching over some science nerd."

I glance at her again, longer this time, meeting her wide blue eyes. "I take all my jobs seriously," I say firmly. "If your life is in danger, then that's serious enough for me."

Her lips part slightly, and she tilts her head, studying me. "I'm more worried about my father," she says, her voice soft. "Do you think anyone would even bother coming after me?"

I frown, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. “I think it’s more than that.”

The file I reviewed before this assignment was clear—her father’s work has ruffled some powerful feathers, and a group opposing his appearance at the Summit has been making waves. If they’re as determined as the intelligence suggests, targeting Tory could be their way of silencing him.

“You do?” she asks, her voice trembling slightly.

She hugs her backpack even closer, her fingers absentmindedly picking at the strap. Her bottom lip catches between her teeth, and I have to fight back a groan at the sight. That lip is going to be the death of me if she keeps worrying it like that.

“Yes,” I say, my voice low. “I think there’s more to this than your father’s overprotectiveness.”

Her brows knit together, and she looks away, her gaze falling to the dashboard. I can see the unease settling into her features, the weight of what I’ve just implied.

“Do you really think someone would try to hurt me just to get to him?” she asks, barely above a whisper.

I glance at her again, this time softening my tone. “It’s a possibility,” I admit. “And it’s my job to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

She nods, her throat working as she swallows. The conversation dies down after that, the weight of my words hanging heavy in the air. She turns back toward the windshield, hugging her backpack like a lifeline, and I let the silence stretch, giving her space to process.

But as I drive, I can’t help stealing glances at her. There’s a quiet strength in the way

she carries herself, even when she's unsure. And damn if it doesn't make me want to protect her even more—not just because it's my job, but because I need to.

She doesn't know it yet, but I'll keep her safe with my life. Whatever it takes.

I don't want to make her more afraid than she already is, so I try to lighten the mood. “So, what do you like to eat for breakfast?” My tone is casual, but my focus remains split between the road ahead and the subtle tension in her posture.

Dean had assured me the safe house was stocked with all the essentials, but if she wants something specific, I'll make it happen. Small comforts matter, especially when someone's world has been upended.

“Blueberry pancakes are my favorite,” she says, her voice softening slightly. “Although, I'll eat anything you have.”

“We can make blueberry pancakes,” I reply, already calculating how quickly we can grab what we need.

She laughs, a sound that catches me off guard. It's soft and sultry, with an underlying sweetness that hits me somewhere deep. “No, seriously, it's okay. I'll eat anything. As long as it's not moving, I'm up for it.”

I glance at her briefly, a small smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. “I appreciate a woman who likes to eat.”

Her laughter fades, and the car falls into a comfortable silence as I pull off the interstate, the glowing sign of a nearby grocery store coming into view. I don't detect anything suspicious, no cars trailing us or anyone lingering where they shouldn't, but my guard never drops.

After parking the truck, I shut off the engine and swivel slightly in my seat to face her. “When we’re in the store, you stick close to me. No wandering off.” My voice is firm, leaving no room for negotiation.

She nods quickly. “Okay.”

I watch as she opens her door and slides out of the truck, her movements fluid but cautious. She’s trying to act nonchalant, but I can tell she’s uneasy, her head turning just slightly as she takes in her surroundings.

I step out as well, scanning the parking lot one last time before motioning for her to follow me. My hand hovers near the small of her back as we walk, not quite touching but close enough that she’ll know I’m there.

Inside the store, the bright fluorescent lights and cheery holiday music feel like a stark contrast to the unease simmering beneath the surface. I grab a cart and keep a steady pace as we navigate the aisles, my eyes darting between her and the people around us. Most are harmless—parents wrangling kids, an elderly couple debating which cereal to buy—but I don’t take chances.

Tory walks beside me, her fingers lightly brushing the edge of the cart as if grounding herself. “Do you always do this?” she asks, glancing up at me with those big blue eyes.

“Do what?”

“Look at everyone like they might be a threat.”

Her observation is sharper than I expected, and I let out a low chuckle. “It’s part of the job. Being prepared for anything.”

Her lips press into a thoughtful line, and she doesn't push further, her attention shifting to the shelves lined with pancake mix and syrup. I grab a box of her beloved pancake mix and toss it into the cart, along with a few other staples.

When we pass the bakery section, her gaze lingers on the display of muffins, and I catch the faintest flicker of longing. Without a word, I grab a pack of blueberry muffins and add them to the cart.

"You didn't have to do that," she murmurs, her cheeks turning pink.

"Figured you might want a snack before breakfast," I reply casually, though the sight of her blushing makes something tighten in my chest.

As we approach the checkout, I remain hyper-aware of our surroundings, scanning the area for anything out of place. It's a routine I've perfected over years in this line of work, but with Tory, it feels different. More personal.

Once we're back in the truck and on the road again, I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She's quiet, her hands resting on her backpack, but there's a softness to her expression now, a trace of gratitude or maybe even trust.

I'm positive we weren't followed, but I still won't let my guard down. Not here. Not ever. And especially not with Tory.

The crazy part is, she's already more than a job to me. I don't know how or when it happened—maybe the moment I saw her, or maybe it's been building since she started talking about her life with that mix of passion and vulnerability. Either way, I know this isn't just about protecting her anymore.

It's about keeping her safe because she matters—to me. More than she probably ever will realize.

By the time we arrive at the safe house, the sun hangs lower in the sky, casting a golden glow over the ocean that stretches endlessly behind the property. The house itself is impressive—a sprawling structure perched on a bluff, its white stucco walls and terracotta roof blending perfectly with the tropical surroundings. Palm trees sway gently in the breeze, framing the house like a postcard.

“Wow,” she breathes, her voice laced with awe as she steps out of the truck. Her big blue eyes widen, taking in the grand facade of the house and the shimmering ocean beyond it.

Not as wow as her.

I grab her bags from the back of the truck, slinging them over my shoulder before motioning for her to follow me. “This is home for now,” I say, leading the way up the stone steps and unlocking the front door.

Inside, the cool air greets us, and her footsteps echo softly against the tiled floors of the expansive foyer. The space opens into a great room, its design modern but inviting, with long white couches flanking a glass coffee table. The back wall is made entirely of sliding glass doors, revealing a lanai that overlooks the ocean. Beyond it, the waves crash rhythmically against the shore, the sound soothing yet powerful.

Her gaze bounces from the furniture to the view, her lips parting slightly. “This is beautiful,” she says, her voice tinged with disbelief, as if she can’t quite process the elegance of the place.

“So are you.” The words sit on the tip of my tongue, but I clamp my jaw shut and force myself to look away before I say something I can’t take back. Instead, I head toward the hallway, my boots scuffing lightly against the tiled floor. “Come on,” I call over my shoulder. “I’ll show you your room.”

She follows me down the hallway, her steps hesitant as she takes in the artwork lining the walls and the subtle scent of salt lingering in the air. When we reach the master bedroom, I push the door open and set her bags down on the massive king-sized bed. The room is just as impressive as the rest of the house, with white furnishings accented by pops of blue and yellow. Large windows frame another breathtaking view of the ocean, and the en-suite bathroom is visible through an open door, its marble finishes gleaming.

“I figure you can have the master,” I tell her, gesturing to the room.

“Oh, I don’t need the master,” she protests, shaking her head as her eyes dart around the space. Her fingers brush over the edge of the bedspread, her touch light and tentative. “This is too much. Really.”

“Nonsense,” I reply, crossing my arms and leaning against the doorframe. “You need to be comfortable.”

Comfortable. With me. On top of you. Screaming my name until the walls shake.

I shake my head sharply, forcing those thoughts out before they spiral further. My gaze falls on her again, and I’m struck by how perfectly she fits here—her golden hair catching the soft afternoon light, her curves accentuated by the way she stands, slightly unsure of herself but utterly captivating.

This is going to be torture. Pure, unrelenting torture.

“You sure this is okay?” she asks, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“It’s more than okay,” I say, my voice gruffer than I intend. “This is your space for however long we’re here.”

I turn toward the doorway, needing to put some distance between us before my control snaps. “I’ll be down the hall if you need anything,” I add, my back to her. “Get settled in. I’ll start dinner in a bit.”

As I leave the room, I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath, trying desperately to focus on the task at hand. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t shake the image of her in that room, her soft curves against the stark white of the bedding.

I hope this time goes by quickly because every second in this house with her is a battle against my own desires. And I’m not sure how long I can keep winning.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

No one ever tells you that having a security guard while your life is in peril is a lot like being in prison. Sure, I'm not locked up—technically, I can go outside, stroll along the lanai, or even take a dip in the pool. But there's always one condition: I have to stick close to Ranger.

And therein lies the problem.

I want to stick close to him. Too close.

It's only been one day in this safe house, and I'm already losing my mind. Not because I feel trapped, but because he's here. Everything about him—the way his dark, unreadable eyes flick over me when he thinks I'm not looking, the way his broad shoulders seem to fill every doorway, the quiet confidence in his movements—makes it impossible to focus on anything else.

Right now, I'm sitting on the cozy white sofa in the living room, my jewelry supplies spread out on the glass coffee table in front of me. A crystal pendant rests cool and smooth against my fingertips, the soft light from the windows catching the stone's facets and throwing tiny rainbows onto the table. Usually, working on jewelry is my escape. It calms me, grounds me, lets me channel my restless energy into something creative.

But not today. Not with Ranger in the room.

He's leaning casually against the doorframe, his large frame nearly blocking out the

hallway behind him. His arms are crossed over his chest, the fabric of his black T-shirt pulling taut over his biceps, and his gaze is locked on me with an intensity that sets every nerve in my body on edge.

He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to. His presence alone commands the entire room.

I try to focus on the pendant, picking up a tiny silver clasp with trembling fingers, but my hands feel clumsy and uncoordinated. Normally, this would be second nature, but under his watchful eyes, I can't seem to do anything right.

Why does he have to look at me like that? Like he's studying me, trying to figure me out, peeling back the layers I've spent years building to keep people at arm's length.

The worst part is, I want him to.

I sneak a glance up at him, hoping he's turned his attention elsewhere, but no—he's still watching me. His dark eyes are locked on mine, and for a moment, I can't breathe. My cheeks burn, and I quickly look away, pretending to focus on the necklace again.

This is ridiculous. I've always been composed, confident in my own quiet way. But one day with Ranger, and I feel like a nervous wreck. My pulse races every time he's near, my thoughts scatter the moment he speaks, and the way his voice rumbles through the air? It's like he's rewiring my entire nervous system.

I grip the clasp tighter, trying to steady my hands, but it's no use. The truth is, I don't feel like myself around him. I feel... exposed. Vulnerable in a way I've never felt before.

And the craziest part? I don't hate it.

I glance up at him again, just for a second, and catch him shifting slightly, leaning one shoulder against the frame. His gaze softens—not by much, but enough to make my heart skip a beat. It’s like he knows exactly what he’s doing to me, and he’s giving me just enough room to flail without drowning.

But it’s not just his presence that’s messing with me. It’s the way he makes me feel seen, like I’m more than just the overly protected, science-obsessed daughter of my father. Like I’m not invisible.

I take a deep breath, setting the clasp and pliers down and lean back into the cushions. The crystal pendant gleams on the table in front of me, unfinished, but I can’t bring myself to care. Not when Ranger is standing there, a living, breathing distraction I can’t seem to shake.

The thought makes my cheeks heat all over again, and I drop my gaze to the pendant, pretending to examine it like it’s the most fascinating thing I’ve ever seen. But the truth is, there’s only one thing on my mind.

I try to keep my head down, pretend I don’t notice the way his gaze feels like it’s burning through me, but it’s no use. My pulse races, my hands tremble slightly as I think about it.

This is new.

This feeling is new.

Yes, I’m a virgin. Overprotective father, remember? But I’ve experimented. And that’s all it ever was—experimentation. I’ve kissed boys. Practiced might be a better word for it. Chris Henderson, my old lab partner, was the closest thing I ever had to a boyfriend, and even that was more about science than anything else.

I used to tell my dad I was off to study with Chris, which wasn't a lie. We studied everything . Including making out.

We'd analyze each kiss, break down the specifics like it was part of a biology project. Which muscles were involved, the mechanics of head tilts, even the chemical reactions happening in our brains. We tried each step together like we were dissecting a frog in a high school lab.

It was weird. Too clinical.

There's definitely science involved in attraction—hormones, neurotransmitters, pheromones—but what's happening to me now? This isn't clinical. This is chaotic, consuming, uncontrollable. Every time Ranger so much as glances my way, my stomach flips like I'm on the edge of a roller coaster. Butterflies? Oh, no. This is a swarm .

I've never felt this way before. Not even close.

Every time his dark, smoldering eyes lock onto mine, I lose the ability to breathe. My thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind, leaving me speechless and flushed. It's embarrassing how obvious it must be.

What's worse is, I think he knows.

Ranger is nothing like Chris or any guy I've ever known. Chris was awkward, scrawny, and sweet in a way that made him feel safe. Ranger, on the other hand, is pure danger wrapped in a body so perfect it defies reason. He's tall, broad, and muscled in a way that seems impossible. His voice is deep, a rumble that makes me shiver every time he speaks, and when he's close, the air seems to shift, charged with something electric.

And it's not just the way he looks. It's the way he moves, the way he watches me, the way his mere presence fills the room. There's a confidence about him, a quiet strength that makes me feel simultaneously safe and completely unraveled.

I try to distract myself, to focus on the necklace I'm making, but my hands shake too much to keep going. I set the pendant down on the coffee table and let out a soft sigh.

Ranger shifts slightly in the doorway, his gaze never leaving me.

I bite my bottom lip, trying to steady the fluttering in my chest. If just one look from him does this to me, how am I supposed to survive being around him every day?

The logical part of my brain knows I should focus on staying safe, on getting through this ordeal without letting my emotions—or my hormones—get in the way. But every time Ranger is near, logic goes out the window.

And for the first time in my life, I don't want to analyze it. I just want to feel it. I return to my work, focusing on the pendant.

He must think I'm a twit, the way I mumble random, nonsensical things every time he looks at me. Every time his dark eyes flick in my direction, I lose my train of thought, babbling about crystals or some obscure scientific concept no one cares about.

Let's face it—Ranger isn't interested in science girls like me. He's probably traveled the world, experienced more than I can even imagine. He's had women—countless women—fall at his feet, because any man who looks like that is bound to.

He's tall, but not intimidatingly so. Just over six feet, the perfect height that doesn't make him tower like a skyscraper but still makes him feel solid, unshakable. His body isn't overdone—he's not one of those beefed-up bodybuilder types who can barely

move—but his muscles are hard, compact, and powerful. He's built for action, for taking down threats with precision.

Then there's his jaw, strong and sharp, framing an enviable set of lips. Full, perfectly shaped lips that I can't stop staring at, no matter how hard I try. Lips that I know—just know—would know exactly what to do with me. Unlike Chris Henderson's mouth, which had all the finesse of a science experiment gone wrong, I'm sure Ranger's would be devastatingly skilled.

Not that I'd know what to do in return.

But looks aren't everything, right? Personality is an important scientific factor. And wouldn't you know, Ranger's got that too. He's funny, with a dry sense of humor that sneaks up on you. He's patient—at least with me—and he's caring in a way that feels genuine, not forced.

I enjoy being around him. Crave it, actually.

I peek up from my work to find him sitting on the sofa now, a book in his large hands. At some point, he moved from the doorway, his quiet strength filling the room without a word. He's leaned back, legs spread slightly, completely at ease, as if the plush couch was made for him. His fingers are wrapped around the spine of the book, his thumb tracing a slow, deliberate line along the edge as he reads.

The ache that settles low in my belly is immediate and undeniable. I can't stop imagining those big hands of his, strong and rough, working their way over my skin with the same careful precision. I clench my thighs together, trying to banish the thought, but it lingers, hot and unwelcome.

It would be a novel experience, that's for sure. Chris Henderson's awkward fumbling in the name of "experimentation" no longer counts in my mind. This... this would be

something entirely different.

I bite my lip, focusing intently on the Tanzanite crystal in my hand. My fingers tremble slightly as I try to attach a delicate metal clasp, the motion far more challenging than it should be with my current state of mind.

My gaze flicks up to him again, just for a second. He's still engrossed in his book, his brow furrowed slightly in concentration, his mouth pressed into a thin line. The way the muscles in his forearm shift as he turns the page shouldn't be attractive, but somehow it is.

God, I'm a mess.

I force myself to look back down at my work, my face heating with embarrassment. He's completely focused, oblivious to the effect he has on me, and yet I feel like my every thought is written on my face.

I just need to finish this necklace. Focus on the work. But even as I try, my mind keeps drifting back to the man sitting just a few feet away—the man who's quickly becoming the center of my very distracted universe.

“That's cool you make jewelry,” Ranger says, his deep voice pulling me out of my concentration. I glance up to find him putting his book down on the side table, his dark eyes locking on mine with a kind of intensity that makes my stomach flutter.

I smile shyly, setting down the Tanzanite crystal in my hand. “Thanks. When I was younger, I used to get bored traipsing across the globe with my father.” I twirl the edge of my necklace chain between my fingers, suddenly self-conscious under his gaze.

Ranger shifts in his seat, leaning forward slightly, his elbows resting on his knees.

“Are you bored now?” His question feels loaded, as if he’s not just asking about the moment but about something deeper.

“No, I’m okay,” I reply, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to entertain me or anything.” I set my stones on the coffee table, hoping to keep my hands busy before I do something stupid—like reach out and touch him.

The way the late afternoon sunlight filters through the glass doors behind him only adds to the effect, making him look like a Greek god descended straight from heaven.

“What if I want to entertain you?” he asks, his tone low and teasing, his lips curling into a faint smirk.

My eyes widen slightly, and I feel the heat rushing to my cheeks. “Oh?” I manage, my voice higher than I intended. “And how would you do that?”

Say by kissing me, I think desperately, though I know better than to hope for it. Ranger isn’t thinking about me like that. He’s probably imagining some harmless distraction—a board game or a cheesy card trick. Something light and silly.

But then he rubs his hand over the scruff on his jaw, the slow motion drawing my attention to those maddeningly perfect lips. “I can think of a few things,” he murmurs, his eyes holding mine for a beat too long.

My mouth opens to respond, but no sound comes out. My brain stumbles over itself, caught somewhere between Did he mean that the way it sounded? and Stop being ridiculous, Tory.

He lets the silence linger for a moment before rescuing me. “Let’s go for a walk on the beach,” he suggests, his voice steady and calm, as though he hadn’t just set my

imagination spinning.

I nod quickly, standing from the couch and heading toward the door. “Okay, sure.” My voice is a little too eager, but I don’t care. I move toward my shoes, which are neatly placed by the door, ready to slip them on.

“You don’t need shoes for the beach,” he says, his tone amused.

“Oh, um... I knew that,” I stammer, hesitating with one shoe in my hand. Great, I think bitterly. Just add that to the list of reasons why I feel like the biggest idiot on the planet.

I can recite the entire periodic table from memory. I can identify the molecular structure of dozens of compounds without blinking. But sometimes, when it comes to the simplest, most human things, I feel hopelessly out of my depth.

I set the shoe down awkwardly, turning to face him. He’s already waiting by the sliding glass doors, his posture relaxed, but his eyes are sharp, watching me like he sees more than I’m willing to let on.

He slides the door open, stepping onto the lanai, the ocean breeze immediately rushing in to fill the space. I follow him out, the warm sand already calling to my toes, the rhythmic crash of the waves soothing and electric all at once.

As we step off the deck and onto the beach, I glance over at him, the salty air tugging at his dark hair. There’s something about him—something grounded yet untouchable—that makes me feel like I’m walking beside a storm. Calm on the surface, but powerful just beneath.

“I enjoy coming onto the beach at this time of day,” Ranger says, his deep voice blending with the rhythmic crash of the waves. “The sun’s not scorching hot, and

there's a nice breeze off the Atlantic."

I smile up at him, feeling the soft sand shift beneath my toes. "I rarely go out much," I admit, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

He glances down at me, his expression thoughtful. "It's always good to get outside and breathe in some fresh air," he says, sounding eerily like my father.

"I know," I reply with a small shrug. "I sit outside to read sometimes."

His lips curve into a slight smile, one that makes my stomach do a little flip. "What do you like to read?"

"Right now, I'm reading about epigenetics."

"Epi-what?" He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that seems to reverberate through my entire body. I blush, the heat creeping up my neck as I process how his voice can have such an effect on me.

"It's nothing," I mumble, feeling self-conscious about my nerdy interests.

He stops walking suddenly, turning to face me. The movement is so abrupt that I nearly bump into him. His dark eyes lock onto mine, his gaze steady and piercing. "Don't do that," he says, his tone firm but not harsh.

"Do what?" I ask, blinking up at him, caught off guard by the intensity in his voice.

"Downplay that you're probably the smartest woman on the planet."

His words hit me like a bolt of electricity, but it's not just what he says—it's the way he says it. The slight growl in his voice when he calls me a woman sends a shiver

down my spine, igniting something deep within me that I don't fully understand.

I can feel my cheeks burning now, not because of the compliment—I've been called smart before—but because of the way he said it. Like it was undeniable. Like it was something to be proud of. And the way his eyes linger on me... it's almost as if he sees me as more than just someone to protect.

"Thank you," I manage to say, my voice softer than I intended. A small, shy smile tugs at my lips as I add, "I am kind of smart."

Ranger's lips twitch, his almost-smile making my heart skip a beat. "Kind of?" he teases, his tone lighter now. "You're reading about... what's it called again? Epigenetics? I can't even pronounce it."

I laugh softly, the tension between us easing just a little. "It's just about how environmental factors can influence DNA. Like how trauma or diet can affect gene expression and be passed down to future generations."

He raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "So you're telling me what my great-grandparents ate could be affecting me right now?"

"Exactly," I say, feeling a spark of excitement that someone is actually interested in what I'm passionate about. "It's fascinating when you think about it. Our DNA isn't just fixed—it's a living, evolving part of who we are."

Ranger tilts his head slightly, studying me with an expression I can't quite read. "And you just sit around and casually think about this kind of stuff, huh?"

I shrug again, biting back a smile. "It's what I love."

"Well, I think it's impressive," he says, his voice dropping a little, making my heart

flutter all over again. “I think you’re impressive.”

For a moment, I don’t know what to say. The words hang in the air between us, heavy with meaning, and I feel like the world has slowed down. The sound of the waves fades into the background, and all I can focus on is him—his eyes, his voice, the way he makes me feel seen in a way I never have before.

“Thank you,” I say again, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nods, the corner of his mouth curving into that faint, almost-smile of his, and we continue walking down the beach. But as we move, the warmth of his words stays with me, curling around my heart like a soft, comforting blanket. And for the first time in a long time, I feel not so invisible after all.

After a few minutes of walking, he stops with a quick laugh, a rich, warm sound that feels like it vibrates through me, and his dark eyes light up as they roam over my face. There’s something different in his expression—softer, maybe, but no less intense. It sends a flutter through my chest, and I can’t help but smile back.

“I have to admit something to you,” he says, his voice quieter now, like he’s sharing a secret meant only for me.

“Okay,” I reply, my curiosity piqued.

He rubs the back of his neck, a subtle gesture that makes him seem almost boyish despite his towering presence. The vulnerability in that small movement is unexpected and wildly attractive. Why is that so hot?

“You’re a little intimidating,” he confesses, his lips curving into a sheepish grin.

My jaw drops, and I blink up at him in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? You’re

intimidating.”

He tilts his head slightly, his brows furrowing as if he genuinely doesn’t understand. “How am I intimidating?”

I let out a soft laugh, my nerves bubbling over as I step a little closer. The warmth radiating from him is magnetic, drawing me in despite the million reasons I should keep my distance. My hand hesitates for just a moment before I reach out, my fingers brushing the fabric of his sleeve.

“How are you not?” I ask, running my hand up the hard curve of his arm. His muscles are solid beneath my touch, and I swear I feel the faintest tremor as I move my hand upward. “All these muscles,” I say, my voice softer now, almost reverent. “You are enormous.”

His breath hitches slightly, but he doesn’t move, doesn’t stop me as my hand roams higher, over his shoulder and across the broad expanse of his chest. His pectorals flex beneath my palm, and the motion sends a thrill racing through me.

My cheeks flush hot as my thoughts betray me, veering into territory I’ve never dared tread before. What else about him is big? The question strikes like lightning, and before I can stop myself, my eyes flick downward, settling on the buckle of his pants.

I linger there for a second too long, my imagination running wild, before I snap my gaze back up to his face.

His dark eyes are locked on mine, the intensity in them even stronger now. His jaw tightens slightly, and there’s something unreadable in his expression—something that makes my breath catch.

“Careful, Tory,” he says, his voice low and edged with warning. But there’s

something else in it too, something that makes my stomach flip.

“I—” I start, but the words die in my throat. I’m frozen, caught between embarrassment and something far more dangerous.

His gaze dips to my lips for the briefest moment before returning to my eyes. “You think I’m intimidating?” he asks, his tone softer now, almost teasing.

“Yes,” I whisper, my heart pounding so loudly I’m sure he can hear it.

His hand moves, slow and deliberate, reaching up to gently brush a strand of hair away from my face. His fingers linger near my cheek, the warmth of his touch sending a shiver down my spine.

“You’re the one who’s dangerous,” he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine. “You don’t even realize it, do you?”

I shake my head slightly, my breath hitching. “What do you mean?”

He leans in, just a fraction, and my pulse skyrockets. “You’re not just smart, Tory. You’re stunning . And that combination? That’s what makes you dangerous.”

I’m completely undone. My thoughts scatter, leaving nothing but the overwhelming presence of him, his closeness, his voice, and the way he’s looking at me like I’m the only thing that matters.

And in this moment, I think maybe I don’t mind being dangerous. Not if it means this. Not if it means him.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

Holy fuck. I can't believe I'm standing so close to her, feeling the soft, tentative brush of her hand as it roams over me. Her touch is light, almost hesitant, but it sets my body on fire, igniting something I can't control. My heart hammers wildly in my chest, like a caged beast threatening to break free.

She blinks up at me with those big, innocent eyes, her lips parted slightly as if she's about to say something but can't quite find the words. Her hand moves higher, grazing over my biceps, then my chest, and my breath catches. I've been touched before—plenty of times—but not like this. Never like this.

“Are you intimidated by big things?” The question tumbles out of my mouth before I can stop it, my voice rougher than I intended.

I can't believe I'm asking her this. It's reckless, crossing a line I swore I wouldn't cross. But to hell with it. The moment I saw her picture, I knew she'd be trouble for me. The kind of trouble you don't walk away from.

It's not just physical. Sure, her beauty is enough to bring a man to his knees, but it's more than that. She's got this quiet brilliance about her, this way of looking at the world that's so different from anyone I've ever known. It draws me in, makes me want to know more, to see everything through her eyes.

She's not like other women I've known in the past. She's not about shallow conversations or fleeting connections. She's deep, real, and utterly fascinating—a lethal combination.

But it's not just admiration. Just being around her makes me feel different. Grounded and electrified all at once. I know, without a doubt, that I could make something with this woman. Something real. Something lasting. If she'd let me. If she could see what I see.

Her hand pauses on my chest, and I feel her swallow, her throat working as she struggles to find her voice.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her voice barely audible. Her hand pulls away, and the loss of her touch feels like a blow. "I shouldn't be touching you," she whispers, ignoring my question.

"I'm enjoying it," I say, my voice low, steady. I don't even think about the words—they just come out, raw and honest.

Her eyes widen slightly, and she stares at me like she's not sure if she heard me right. "You are?"

I nod, stepping just a fraction closer, my hand lifting as if it has a mind of its own. I hesitate for a moment, then gently place it over hers, pressing her palm back against my chest. "Yeah, I am."

She looks down at where our hands meet, her fingers trembling slightly beneath mine. "I don't... I don't know why I did that," she says, her voice shaky but genuine.

"I do," I say softly, tilting her chin up with my free hand so she's looking at me again. Her breath catches, and I swear I can feel the electricity sparking in the space between us. "You feel it too, don't you?"

Her lips part, and for a second, I think she might say yes. But instead, she looks away, her lashes fluttering as if she's trying to hide. "I don't know," she whispers.

I let out a low chuckle, but there's no humor in it. Just frustration, longing, and a burning desire to make her see what's so damn clear to me. "I think you do."

Her gaze snaps back to mine, and for the briefest moment, the world around us seems to fade away. It's just her and me, standing so close I can feel the heat radiating off her skin.

If she'd never stop touching me like this, I'd spend the rest of my life making her happy. Hell, I'd devote myself to her, body and soul. All she has to do is let me in.

I raise my hand, the roughness of my fingertips grazing her soft skin as I trace a slow line down the frame of her face. My finger pauses just beneath her chin, tilting it up slightly so her wide, trusting eyes meet mine. The setting feels like something out of a dream—the sun dipping low in a sky painted with hues of pink and gold, the waves lapping gently in the distance. The soft sea breeze carries the scent of salt and possibility. It makes me braver than I should be.

My pulse thunders as I lean in, my eyes dropping to her ruby-red lips. They're parted slightly, tempting me, daring me.

She closes her eyes, her breath hitching, and I know I've crossed the point of no return.

I move in all the way, capturing her mouth with mine. The moment our lips touch, it's like a dam breaking. She responds instantly, her kiss needy, almost desperate, as though she's been waiting for this moment as long as I have. Her hands fly up around my neck, pulling me closer, and I wrap my arms tightly around her waist, anchoring her to me.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue sliding along hers, and everything else fades away—the sound of the waves, the cool breeze, even the sand beneath our feet. It's just her, her

warmth, her taste, her everything .

A growl rumbles deep within my chest, raw and primal, as she melts into me. Her fingers thread through my hair, and it's like she's cast some kind of spell over me, her touch igniting sensations I didn't know I was capable of feeling.

Electric shocks shoot down my spine, and I tighten my hold on her, pressing her against me. My body reacts instinctively—heat pooling low, my dick throbbing to life as she molds herself to me.

My hands slide down to her backside, my palms pressing firmly against the curves of her ass. Fuck, she feels so good. The soft warmth of her body under my touch, the way she gasps softly into my mouth—it's enough to drive me insane.

Reluctantly, I break the kiss, needing to catch my breath. My forehead rests against hers for a moment as we both try to steady ourselves, the air between us charged and heavy. Her blue eyes meet mine, wide and filled with something I can't quite put into words—vulnerability, desire, maybe even trust.

“Do you kiss all the women you protect?” she whispers, her voice shaky but teasing, her lips still slightly swollen from the kiss.

I let out a low chuckle, my hand brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. “No,” I murmur, my voice rough with emotion. “Just the one who's worth breaking every damn rule for.”

Her cheeks flush, and a soft smile tugs at her lips, but there's still a hint of uncertainty in her gaze, like she's waiting for me to take this back, to retreat.

I don't.

Instead, I tighten my hold on her, my thumb gently brushing against the curve of her jaw. “You don’t know what you’ve done to me, Tory,” I say, my voice low and serious. “I told myself I wouldn’t cross this line, but you... you make it impossible not to.”

Her lips part slightly, but no words come out. She just stares at me, and I swear I can see the exact moment her walls start to crack.

“Tell me to stop,” I say softly, searching her eyes. “If this is too much, if you don’t want this, tell me now, and I’ll walk away.”

But she doesn’t say a word. Instead, her hands tighten around my neck, pulling me closer, her eyes shining with a mix of determination and something deeper.

“I don’t want you to stop,” she whispers, and the words hit me like a punch to the chest.

I kiss her again, slower this time, savoring every second, every taste. Whatever comes next, I know one thing for certain—I’m never letting her go.

But reality comes crashing back in. I shouldn’t be doing this.

Fuck. I step away and run my fingers through my hair. “No, we can’t...” I broke the one major rule I have for protecting someone. Never mix business and pleasure.

I couldn’t help myself, but still. I should have drawn a stronger line. One with more definition and boundaries.

I shouldn’t have touched her.

It was just too hard to resist.

“We should probably head back,” she says, moving away from me and back toward the house.

“Tory, wait,” I call after her. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. I never let that happen with the people I’m protecting. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she says with a small smile. “We’ll just pretend it never happened.”

Oh, but it happened. It fucking happened. And there’s no way I can pretend it didn’t, no matter how hard I try.

I grab *The Hound of The Baskervilles* from the coffee table, my favorite Sherlock Holmes book, and settle into the armchair across from her. I find my place from earlier and let the familiar, suspenseful prose pull me back in.

The room is quiet except for the occasional clink of her tools against metal and the soft rustling of the pages as I turn them. It’s a peaceful kind of silence, the kind that feels natural, not forced. I like this between us—her working on the sofa, me reading in the chair. It’s a glimpse of what a future could look like with her, and the thought surprises me.

But I like it.

I really like it.

I catch myself glancing at her more often than I should, watching the way her brow furrows in concentration, the way she tilts her head slightly as she examines her work. The way the light catches in her hair and makes it shine like gold.

I set my book down on the small end table beside me, the story suddenly unable to hold my attention. My thoughts are too focused on her, on us, and on the quiet

comfort of this moment.

I lean forward slightly, resting my elbows on my knees as I decide to ask her something that's been nagging at me. "What is your father discussing that people wouldn't like?"

Tory sets her jewelry tools and the piece she's working on down carefully, turning to face me. "Ways to use modern technology to feed people," she says simply, like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"What's so bad about that?" I ask, genuinely curious.

She sighs, her shoulders rising and falling with the motion. "People usually fear what they don't understand."

No truer words have been spoken. I nod, letting that sink in. "I guess that makes sense."

"They feel it will make the food harmful," she continues, her voice tinged with frustration, "but if they'd just listen to my father, they'd see he naturally synthesized plant reproduction."

"That sounds complicated," I say, a small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth.

"It is," she admits with a faint laugh. "But it's also brilliant because it would mean more food at a quicker pace. We could feed a lot of starving people in the world."

The passion in her voice is unmistakable, and it makes me smile. She's not just brilliant; she cares deeply. About people. About the world. It's rare, and it makes her even more incredible in my eyes. "I hope so," I say honestly, and I mean it.

For a moment, she studies me, her gaze searching my face as if trying to figure something out. Finally, she asks, “What about you? What’s your family like?”

The question catches me off guard. I wasn’t expecting her to turn the conversation to me, and for a second, I’m not sure how to respond.

I lean back in the chair, my hands resting on my thighs as I think about how much—or how little—to say. “It’s just me and my sister now,” I start, keeping my voice even. “Our parents passed away when we were younger.”

Her face softens, her blue eyes filling with a quiet sympathy that makes my chest tighten. “I’m sorry,” she says softly.

“It was a long time ago,” I reply, brushing it off like I always do. “My sister and I looked out for each other, though. I try to see her when I can.”

“That must be nice,” she says, and there’s something wistful in her tone.

“It is,” I admit. “But my job keeps me busy, so it doesn’t happen as often as I’d like.”

She nods, her fingers absentmindedly fiddling with the chain of her necklace. “I can’t imagine what it’s like, having siblings. It’s just me and my dad. He’s always been so protective, which I appreciate, but…” She trails off, her eyes flicking to the floor.

“But sometimes it feels like too much,” I finish for her, and her head snaps up, her eyes wide.

“Exactly,” she says, a small smile tugging at her lips. “It’s like you’re reading my mind.”

I chuckle softly. “Maybe I am.”

The tension in the room shifts, softening into something warmer, something deeper. For the first time, it feels like we're not just two people thrown together by circumstance but like we're truly getting to know each other.

And I realize, sitting here with her in this quiet moment, that I don't want this to end. I don't want her to leave once the job is done.

I want more moments like this. With her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

I head to the bedroom after saying goodnight to Ranger, the soft creak of the floorboards beneath my feet the only sound in the quiet house. My body is exhausted, but my mind feels like it's running a marathon I can't keep up with.

The room feels larger and emptier than it did earlier, as though the air itself is holding its breath. I change into a pair of soft sleep shorts and an oversized T-shirt, pulling my hair into a messy ponytail before slipping into bed. The sheets are cool against my skin, but even as I sink into the plush mattress, I know sleep won't come easily.

Ranger is still here, somewhere down the hall, probably reading or checking the locks like he always does. And for some reason, that knowledge is a comfort. I feel him here, even when I can't see him—this steady, quiet presence that makes everything seem just a little bit safer, calmer.

Reaching for my phone on the nightstand, I dial my father's number. It rings three times before he picks up, his voice brisk but not unkind. "Tory. How are you, sweetheart?"

I smile faintly, the sound of his voice familiar and grounding. "I'm okay, Dad. How's everything going with the Summit?"

"It's fine. We're finalizing the agenda for tomorrow." He sounds tired—he always does when he's this deep into his work—but there's an edge of worry in his tone, one I recognize instantly. "Are you staying close to your security detail?"

My heart skips a beat at the word security , a dull ache settling in my chest. I hesitate for a second before answering. “Yes, Dad. Ranger’s... really good at his job.”

“That’s good to hear,” he replies with obvious relief. “I trust him to keep you safe.”

Safe. That’s what this is about. That’s all Ranger is here for—keeping me safe. It shouldn’t bother me, but it does. Because Ranger isn’t just a bodyguard to me anymore. He’s something else. Something I can’t quite define.

“Everything’s fine here,” I assure him, forcing lightness into my tone. “You don’t need to worry about me. Focus on your work.”

“You know I’ll always worry about you, Tory,” he says softly. “Call me tomorrow, all right?”

“I will. Goodnight, Dad.”

“Goodnight.”

The line goes dead, and I set my phone back on the nightstand, staring up at the ceiling as the quiet of the room settles around me like a heavy blanket.

I should feel relieved that my father is okay, that everything is going according to plan. Soon, this will all be over, and I’ll be back with him, back to my normal life of research, routine, and solitude.

But the thought leaves me hollow.

Because that means leaving Ranger behind.

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. I’ll have to say goodbye to him. To the

man who's made me feel more alive in the short time I've known him than I've felt in years. To the man who kissed me so thoroughly, so completely, I can still feel the ghost of his lips on mine.

No one has ever kissed me like that before. No one has ever looked at me like he does, like I'm more than just a quiet, overprotected science nerd.

I shift beneath the covers, rolling onto my side and hugging the pillow closer to me. The ache in my chest deepens, spreading to every limb like a slow burn. I miss him, and he's not even far away. He's just down the hall, but the distance feels like miles.

I close my eyes, willing myself to sleep, but all I see is him—Ranger leaning against the doorway, his arms crossed, watching me with that quiet intensity that makes my pulse stumble. Ranger kissing me, his mouth warm and demanding, like he couldn't get enough of me.

I want more of that. I crave it in a way I don't understand, a way that terrifies me.

What am I doing? I've spent my whole life grounded in logic, in facts, in certainty. And now, this man—a man who's only supposed to be a protector—has unraveled me completely. I toss onto my other side, frustration bubbling up in my chest.

He's so different from anyone I've ever known. Where I'm cautious, Ranger is steady. Where I overthink everything, Ranger seems to act on instinct, like he trusts himself without question. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't second-guess.

And I envy that. I envy him.

But more than that, I want to be close to him again. I want to feel his warmth, the strength in his touch, the quiet way he makes me feel seen.

My breathing slows as I lay still, my heart thudding softly against the pillow. What if I never feel this again? What if I go back to my life and forget what it's like to be kissed like that? To be looked at like I matter?

Stop, I scold myself. This can't be real. It's not practical. Men like Ranger don't fall for women like me. He's here to do a job, and when it's done, he'll move on. That's how this works.

But what if... what if it doesn't have to end like that?

I groan and press my face into the pillow, feeling utterly ridiculous. I've known him for like a day—one full day—and I'm already falling apart over him. That's not like me. It's not logical.

And yet, here I am, wide awake at midnight, longing for him like some kind of lovesick teenager.

Maybe it's the way he sees me, or maybe it's the fact that I feel safe with him—truly safe—for the first time in forever. Or maybe it's because when he looks at me, I forget how small I've always felt. I forget the shadows, the doubt, the fear.

I squeeze my eyes shut and roll onto my back again, staring up at the ceiling. The silence in the room feels louder now, as though the walls themselves are echoing my thoughts.

I'm tempted to get up, to go find him, just to hear his voice, to know he's still here. But I don't. I can't. I'm not brave enough for that.

Instead, I lay there, tangled in my sheets, my mind a whirlwind of questions I don't have answers for. What is this all? Is it real?

Don't be stupid, I tell myself. He kissed you. And it wasn't just a kiss. It was fire and lightning and everything I never knew I wanted.

I close my eyes, my heart aching in a way I don't know how to soothe. For now, I'll let myself hold onto the memory of it—the way his lips felt, the sound of his voice when he murmured my name, the way he made me feel like I wasn't invisible.

And I wonder—when this is all over, when I go back to my father's world and Ranger goes back to his—will I ever feel that again?

I don't know the answer, but the thought leaves me hollow.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

The morning sun streams through the curtains, golden light spilling into the safe house like a silent promise. I'm up before her, of course, moving quietly through the kitchen to make coffee and toss a few pancakes. For the first time in a long time, I don't feel the usual edge of tension in the pit of my stomach. It's still there—I don't drop my guard—but having Tory here, bumbling around with her crystals and shy smiles, makes the weight a little easier to bear.

When she emerges from the bedroom, her hair a little wild from sleep and her glasses perched on her nose, it takes every ounce of my self-control not to stare. She's in yoga pants and an oversized hoodie, looking comfortable but somehow still impossibly beautiful.

"Morning," she says through a yawn, blinking at me like I'm the most surprising thing she's seen all day.

"Morning," I reply, setting a mug of coffee in front of her. "Breakfast is ready. Eat up."

She smiles sleepily, and I find myself smiling back. It's a dangerous habit, this thing she's doing to me. I should stop it, but I don't want to. "You made me pancakes?"

I smile. "I know you like them."

Her cheeks tinge pink as she slices into the pancakes. "Thank you," she whispers before taking a bite.

Once we've eaten, I make a suggestion. "There's a boardwalk nearby, runs along the beach. We could walk there if you're up for it."

She looks up from her empty plate, curiosity sparking in her blue eyes. "A boardwalk? What's there?"

"Shops, food stalls, and a craft fair," I say, watching her closely. "Figured you might like it. We've been cooped up here for two days. A little fresh air won't hurt."

Her lips quirk up into a smile. "You just want me to stop distracting you while you read Sherlock Holmes."

"Maybe," I say with a smirk. "But I'm thinking you need a distraction too. Something besides tinkering with crystals all day."

She narrows her eyes playfully. "It's not tinkering . I'm crafting. It's a science."

"Whatever you say, Einstein."

She rolls her eyes but laughs. "Fine. Let's go."

Before we leave, I step closer, meeting her gaze seriously. "Stay close to me. It's probably nothing, but I'm not taking any chances with you."

She nods, her expression softening as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Okay, Ranger. I promise I won't wander off."

The boardwalk isn't far, just a ten-minute walk along the soft, packed sand. The breeze off the Atlantic is cool and salty, tugging at Tory's hair as we make our way there. She keeps pace with me, the sound of the waves filling the comfortable silence between us.

“See?” I say, gesturing ahead as the wooden slats of the boardwalk come into view.
“Not too far.”

“Convenient,” she replies, looking around as if taking in every detail. Her voice carries a lightness that makes me glad we came. “You know, I haven’t been to a beachside boardwalk since I was a kid.”

“Then it’s long overdue.”

The boardwalk is already buzzing with life when we arrive. People mill about, strolling with ice cream cones or stopping to browse the small booths of the craft fair. Colorful stalls line the edges, displaying handmade goods—paintings, candles, scarves, and jewelry. Tory’s face lights up, and I swear she looks like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Come on,” she says, tugging on my sleeve before realizing what she’s done. She drops her hand quickly, cheeks flushing. “Uh, I mean... let’s look around.”

I chuckle, letting her take the lead. “You’re the boss.”

She stops at a booth where a woman is selling handmade jewelry—delicate pieces made from sea glass and driftwood, strung together in intricate patterns. Tory’s eyes practically sparkle as she runs her fingers over a sea glass pendant.

“These are beautiful,” she murmurs, clearly impressed.

The vendor, a woman in her fifties with short gray hair, smiles warmly. “Thank you, dear. I make every piece by hand. Been doing it for over twenty years.”

“That’s incredible,” Tory says. “I’ve been making jewelry, too, but I’ve never thought about selling it.”

“You should,” the woman replies, her tone encouraging. “It’s a labor of love, but it’s worth it. People will pay for something that’s made with care.”

I chime in, crossing my arms as I glance at Tory. “She’s being modest. She’s got a knack for it. I’ve seen her pieces—they’re amazing.”

Tory shoots me a look, equal parts surprised and flustered. “You’ve barely seen my stuff!”

“Doesn’t mean I’m wrong,” I reply, smirking. “You could make a killing if you wanted to.”

The vendor nods in agreement. “He’s right. Start with a stall at a market like this, and go from there.”

Tory smiles shyly, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Maybe someday.”

We move on, and as we walk, I notice Tory glancing over at me every now and then, her expression thoughtful.

“What?” I ask finally, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re... supportive,” she says, like she’s surprised by it. “I didn’t expect that.”

I scoff lightly. “What, you think I’m just a muscle-bound meathead?”

“No,” she says quickly, then adds with a teasing grin, “but you do have a lot of muscles.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help laughing. “Glad you noticed. Makes every push up worth it.”

We keep walking, stopping occasionally to look at booths or grab something to eat. I buy her a lemonade from a stand and try to steal a sip of it when she's not looking, earning myself a playful glare.

"Hey!" she protests, snatching the cup back.

I smirk. "Tastes better when it's stolen."

"Neanderthal," she mutters under her breath, but she's smiling as she takes a sip.

Somewhere between the lemonade and a guy playing acoustic guitar near the edge of the boardwalk, her hand brushes against mine. It's unintentional—at first—but neither of us pulls away. I glance down at her, and she looks up at me, wide-eyed and blushing.

"Here," I say quietly, slipping my hand into hers. It's small and warm in my palm, and it feels so right I can't believe I haven't done it sooner. "Easier to keep track of you this way."

She doesn't argue, though the blush creeps up her cheeks, and I know she's trying not to smile.

"Sure," she says softly. "For safety."

"Exactly," I reply, grinning as we keep walking, hand in hand.

And for the first time in years, I feel like I'm not just guarding someone—I'm living .

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

The little diner sits at the end of the boardwalk, tucked between a surf shop and a bait-and-tackle store. It's the kind of place with neon signs buzzing in the window, scuffed linoleum floors, and the smell of sizzling bacon lingering in the air no matter what time of day it is. In other words, it's perfect.

"Hungry?" Ranger asks, his voice low and rumble as he holds the door open for me.

I glance up at him—this towering wall of muscle who somehow feels safer than anyone I've ever known—and smile. "Starving. You've walked me halfway across the coast."

He smirks. "You're still standing, aren't you?"

"Barely," I shoot back playfully, stepping inside.

The bell above the door jingles, and the waitress—a middle-aged woman with a kind smile and a nametag that reads Linda —greet us with a bright, "Sit anywhere you like, hon!"

We settle into a booth by the window. Ranger slides in across from me, the vinyl creaking under his weight. It's ridiculous how good he looks even here, in a tiny hole-in-the-wall diner. He makes everything around him look smaller, like he doesn't belong in a place so ordinary.

"What are you getting?" he asks, flipping open the menu like he's done this a million

times before.

“Pancakes,” I reply without hesitation. “With extra syrup.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You and your pancakes.”

“What can I say? I’m consistent.” I grin, closing my menu. “And you?”

“Burger. Always the burger,” he replies, then sets the menu aside. “Gotta keep these muscles enormous, remember?”

I laugh softly, a sound I didn’t know I needed to hear from myself today. Being with Ranger makes everything feel lighter, as if I’ve stepped out of my own overthinking mind for once and into a world where it’s okay to just be .

Linda comes by with her notepad, and we place our orders. “Pancakes for the lady, and a burger for the gentleman. How do you want it cooked, sweetie?” Linda asks with a smile.

“Medium,” Ranger says with a nod.

Linda smiles and scribbles it down. “You two make a cute couple.”

I nearly choke on air. “Oh! We’re not—we’re just...”

Ranger smirks at my flustered explanation, clearly amused. “Just hungry,” he finishes for me.

Linda chuckles and winks at me. “Right. Well, I’ll get that started for ya.”

As soon as she leaves, I drop my face into my hands and groan. “Why does everyone

think we're a couple?"

"Maybe because we look good together," Ranger replies casually, leaning back against the booth and crossing his arms.

I peek at him through my fingers. "You're impossible."

He shrugs, the smirk still lingering on his lips. "Just saying. Linda's got good taste."

I roll my eyes but can't help smiling as I sit back in my seat. The energy between us feels easy, natural. For someone like me—someone who's spent most of her life feeling awkward in social settings—it's a strange but welcome change.

The food arrives quicker than I expect. Linda sets down a plate of fluffy pancakes dripping with syrup in front of me and a burger the size of my head in front of Ranger. "Enjoy, darlin'."

I dig in immediately, the sweet, buttery taste of the pancakes making me hum with happiness. "Oh my God. These are so good."

Ranger's halfway through his burger already, and he raises an eyebrow. "You always make noises when you eat?"

I glare at him, my cheeks heating. "Only when it's really good food."

"You're a food critic's dream."

"Better than a Neanderthal inhaling a burger," I fire back, pointing my fork at him.

He grins, his dark eyes lighting up with something warm that makes my heart do this weird flip. "Fair point."

We eat and chat—about nothing and everything. He asks me about how I got into jewelry-making, and I explain how I started collecting crystals on trips with my dad, turning them into something beautiful when I needed a creative outlet. In return, he tells me stories about growing up with his sister, about getting into trouble as kids and how he always played protector.

“I guess it makes sense that you do this now,” I say, gesturing toward him with my fork.

“What, eat burgers?”

“No,” I laugh. “Protect people. You’re good at it.”

His expression softens slightly, and he gives me a small, almost shy smile. “Thanks, Tory.”

The moment hangs there, quiet and meaningful, until the sound of the diner door opening pulls me out of it. I glance up instinctively. A group of guys enters—four of them—laughing loudly and clapping each other on the back as they make their way toward a table a few booths down from ours.

Immediately, the energy shifts.

I don’t know if it’s instinct or if I’ve just been around Ranger long enough to pick up on his vibe, but I feel it. His shoulders go a little stiffer, his gaze sharpens, and the lightness that was just between us evaporates.

“What is it?” I ask quietly.

He doesn’t look at me. His eyes stay fixed on the group of guys, watching them like a hawk. “Nothing. Just... keep eating.”

But I can't. I feel their eyes on me. The occasional burst of laughter from their table makes me shrink back against the booth, and I know Ranger feels it too because his jaw tightens.

One of the guys—tall, scruffy, and wearing a tank top that shows off his sunburned shoulders—glances over at me, then leans toward his friend and mutters something. They both snicker, and my skin crawls.

Ranger notices. Of course, he does.

“They’re just being idiots,” I whisper, trying to play it off. “It’s fine.”

He doesn’t respond. His hands are on the table now, fingers drumming a slow, deliberate rhythm against the wood.

I take a sip of my water and try to focus on anything else, but I can feel their eyes still darting my way. Finally, I hear one of them—Tank Top—say it loud enough for me to hear.

“Hey, sweetheart, you lost? You look like you belong on a runway, not in this place.”

I freeze. My hand stops halfway to my glass.

Before I can even react, Ranger is already turning his head.

Slowly, his dark eyes lock onto the guy like a predator finding its prey. The smile that flashes across his face is anything but friendly.

“Don’t,” Ranger says, his voice low, steady, and dangerous. It sends a chill down my spine.

Tank Top looks taken aback for half a second before puffing out his chest. “Relax, man. Just making conversation.”

“You’re done talking,” Ranger replies, sliding out of the booth and rising to his full, imposing height. The guys at the table go quiet as Ranger steps closer, his calm demeanor far more terrifying than any shouting could be.

“Hey, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Tank Top mutters, suddenly not so brave.

Ranger doesn’t say another word. He just stands there, his presence alone enough to send the message: Don’t fuck with her.

After a tense beat, the guy looks away, mumbling something to his friends. They all drop their gazes, suddenly very interested in their menus.

Ranger turns back to me, his face unreadable, and holds out his hand. “Let’s go.”

I don’t argue. I slip my hand into his, letting him pull me to my feet. He drops a few bills on the table to cover the meal, then leads me toward the door without another glance at the group of guys.

The moment we step outside, the cool breeze hits me, and I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. Ranger still has my hand in his, his grip firm and reassuring.

“Are you okay?” he asks, glancing down at me.

I nod quickly. “Yeah. Thank you. You didn’t have to—”

“Yes, I did,” he says firmly. “They weren’t going to stop.”

Something about the way he says it—so certain, so protective—makes my chest

tighten. His gaze still scans the area like he's looking for more threats, and as much as I want to pretend I don't need protecting, I can't help but feel grateful that he's here. That he's him.

I look up at him and smile softly. "For the record, I really liked those pancakes."

He glances down at me, the corner of his mouth twitching. "For the record, I really liked scaring the shit out of those guys."

I laugh, and just like that, the tension melts away. With Ranger, I know I'm safe. And for the first time in my life, I think maybe being protected doesn't feel so bad.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

The sun hangs low on the horizon as we leave the diner behind, its orange and pink glow painting the sky like a masterpiece. The air has cooled, the heat of the day fading into something softer, gentler. Tory's hand is still in mine, and for once, I don't let go. I tell myself it's because I want to keep her close, that I'm just doing my job, but I know the truth.

I like this. I like her hand in mine, her warmth tethering me to the moment, to her.

Neither of us says much as we make our way back along the beach path, the sound of the waves filling the silence like a quiet lullaby. It's the kind of calm that gets inside you, makes you feel peaceful even when your mind is a mess.

I glance down at her as we walk. She's looking straight ahead, her lips curved into the smallest of smiles. She's wearing that simple white sundress she picked for today, and her hair is loose, dancing in the breeze like golden silk. I don't know how she does it—how she makes everything around her seem softer, brighter—just by existing.

As we near the house, she slows down and tugs lightly on my hand. "Can we stop for a minute?"

I nod, following her lead as she veers toward the beach. We step off the boardwalk and onto the cool, packed sand. The ocean stretches out before us, endless and dark now, the last slivers of daylight glinting off the waves.

We stand side by side, close enough that her shoulder brushes mine, and stare out at the water. The wind tugs at her hair, carrying the salty scent of the sea, and I close my eyes for a moment, taking it in.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, breaking the silence.

“It is.” I open my eyes and look at her instead of the water, because no view could ever compete with the one beside me. “Peaceful.”

She sighs softly, wrapping her arms around herself, though I’m not sure if it’s the chill or the weight of something on her mind. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever find peace like this.”

Her words catch me off guard, and I tilt my head toward her. “What do you mean?”

She glances up at me, those blue eyes of hers deep and reflective, like she’s looking straight into my soul. “It’s hard to explain,” she says softly. “Growing up with my dad, it was always about work. Research. Innovation. My life was science, but it never felt like mine . I’ve spent so long trying to be someone he can be proud of, I don’t even know what it means to be proud of myself .”

Her voice cracks slightly on the last word, and something in my chest tightens.

“I don’t think he realizes it,” she continues, staring back at the waves. “He doesn’t mean to... I don’t know... overshadow me. But sometimes it feels like I don’t exist outside of his world.”

I don’t know what to say at first. I’ve never met anyone like Tory—someone so brilliant and full of life, yet so unsure of her place in the world. I take a breath and let my words come naturally.

“You’re wrong, you know,” I say, my voice steady.

She looks up at me, surprised. “What?”

“You do exist outside of him. Outside of anyone.” I hold her gaze, wanting her to hear me—really hear me. “Your father might be proud of you, and he should be, but you’re more than his shadow. You’re... you . You’re smart. Kind. Talented.” I gesture toward the delicate bracelet she’s wearing, one I watched her finish yesterday. “You take little pieces of the world and turn them into something beautiful. That’s not something anyone can teach. That’s you.”

Her lips part, and for a moment, she doesn’t say anything. A faint blush creeps up her cheeks, and she hugs her arms tighter to herself. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever said something like that to me.”

“Well, it’s true,” I reply simply. “You just need to see it for yourself.”

She smiles faintly, like she doesn’t quite believe me but wants to. “What about you?” she asks, turning the question on me. “What makes you proud of yourself?”

The question surprises me, and I shift slightly, shoving my hands into my pockets. “I don’t know,” I admit. “I’ve spent so much time protecting other people, I’ve never really thought about myself. As long as the job’s done and they’re safe, that’s enough for me.”

“That’s not enough,” she says quietly, her voice soft but firm. “You deserve more than that.”

I look at her, this woman who’s known me for such a short time yet somehow sees straight through me. Her words linger, sinking into parts of me I didn’t know were hollow.

“Maybe,” I murmur.

She steps closer, her shoulder brushing against mine again, and her voice drops to a whisper. “You’re more than just a protector, Ranger.”

Her words settle over me like a weight, and for the first time in a long time, I don’t feel empty.

We stand there for a while longer, neither of us speaking, just listening to the waves crash and the breeze sweep through the quiet night. Finally, she sighs and glances toward the house. “I should call my dad. He’ll worry if I don’t check in.”

“Go ahead,” I say softly, stepping aside so she can head inside. “I’ll wait out here.”

She hesitates, her gaze lingering on me like she wants to say something more, but then she nods. “I’ll be quick.”

I watch her disappear up the wooden stairs and into the house, the glow of the interior lights spilling out onto the beach.

I lean against the railing of the lanai, my eyes fixed on the dark horizon as I wait for her to finish. The conversation we just had replays in my head, every word, every glance, every breath.

I’ve spent my life believing that attachments are dangerous—that they make you vulnerable. But Tory isn’t a weakness. She’s a light. And for the first time, I find myself wanting something more. Something real.

The screen door creaks open behind me, and I turn to see her stepping out onto the lanai. Her hair is slightly windblown, her glasses perched low on her nose, and she looks softer somehow.

“Everything okay?” I ask, my voice low.

She nods, smiling faintly. “Yeah. My dad’s fine. He’s still working, as usual.”

I push off the railing and take a step toward her. “Good.”

She stops a few feet in front of me, her hands fidgeting with the hem of her sundress. “Thank you for earlier,” she says quietly, her eyes lifting to meet mine. “For saying what you did.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I reply, stepping closer until there’s barely any space between us. “I just told you the truth.”

She looks up at me, her blue eyes shining in the dim light, and I know I’m done for. I reach out, cupping her chin gently in my hand, tilting her face up toward mine.

“Ranger...” she whispers, her voice unsure but her gaze steady.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” I admit, my voice rough. “You’ve been in my head since the moment I saw you.”

She swallows hard, her lips parting slightly as her breath hitches.

I don’t wait. I close the space between us, brushing my lips against hers softly at first, testing. Her response is immediate—her hands come up, grabbing the front of my shirt, pulling me closer. I deepen the kiss, tilting my head as her mouth opens for me, and the world falls away.

She tastes like sugar and salt, sweet and wild, and I lose myself completely. My hands slide around her waist, holding her tightly against me, needing to feel her, to know she’s real. Her fingers grip my shirt like she’s afraid I’ll disappear, and I kiss

her harder, pouring every unspoken word, every buried emotion into her.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless, our foreheads pressed together.

"Ranger," she whispers, her voice trembling.

I slide my thumb over her cheek, my heart pounding harder than it ever has. "I don't know what this is, Tory," I murmur, "but I know I don't want it to end."

She looks up at me, her eyes full of something I can't name but desperately want to hold onto.

"Me either," she says softly.

I smile faintly, pressing a kiss to her forehead before pulling her into my arms. And for the first time in my life, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

I want to feel him again—his lips on mine, his hands holding me close—but I don't want to assume. What if I'm reading this all wrong? What if this is just him being kind, protective, doing his job?

Sure, he's said things to me over the past two days, things that have made my heart race and my pulse stumble. The way he looks at me sometimes, like I'm the only person in the room, it feels real . Too real. And that terrifies me.

Could a man like Ranger—strong, confident, so sure of himself—really fall for someone like me? Someone who's spent most of her life buried in textbooks and lab work, someone who struggles to say what she feels without fumbling for the right words? It doesn't seem possible.

Men like him don't fall for women like me. They fall for women who are bold and fearless, women who aren't afraid to take what they want. I'm not like that. I'm careful. I think everything through, analyze it from every angle. Love isn't supposed to just happen , right? It's supposed to follow logic and reason, building slowly like a careful experiment.

But nothing about Ranger feels careful or logical. He's like a storm—powerful, unpredictable, impossible to ignore. He makes me feel things I don't know how to process, things that don't fit into the neat boxes I've spent my life constructing.

And yet, here I am, hoping, wanting . Wondering if maybe—just maybe—he feels it too. Wondering if all those little moments were real, or if I'm just imagining them.

When he calls me brilliant, when he says I'm more than I think I am, it makes me believe I could be someone different. Someone who's brave enough to take a risk. Someone who could deserve a man like him.

But is it real? Can it be real? Or am I just setting myself up to fall?

His eyes meet mine. "Tory, I..."

I don't know what he's going to say, but I feel it too. I nod, my hands gripping onto him like a lifeline. "Don't let me go," I tell him and he wraps his strong arms around me, holding me tight.

"I won't. I've got you." He leans in, capturing my lips once more with his. He deepens the kiss, and I nearly melt into him.

Is this real life?

"I need you," he utters against my mouth. "So badly." It's like a prayer, a request. One he's not sure I'll fulfill, but for the first time in my life I've never felt more ready to go all the way with a man.

Wrapped in each other's arms we finagle our way into the house, bumping into walls and laughing as we do. Until finally, Ranger lifts me into his arms and carries me into the back bedroom. He sets me down, and I suck in a deep breath.

I glance over at the bed. "I should mention I've never done anything like this before. There was this one guy, Chris, but we only ever really kissed, and..." I realize I'm rambling and I blink up at Ranger.

"I'm going to need his full name and social security number."

I laugh, and give him a little nudge with my hand when I realize he's not joking. "He was nothing compared to you," I whisper, gazing into his eyes.

"Nobody compares to you," he says reverently, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me closer. His lips meet mine in the most tender kiss.

It makes my head swirl with thoughts of am I really doing this?

I am. I'm ready.

Ranger sucks in a deep breath, his eyes meeting mine after he's broken the kiss. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

I nod, my eyes most likely displaying my eagerness. "Yes, I want this. I want you."

He wraps a protective hand around the back of my neck, tilting my head, and capturing my lips in a brutal kiss. He swipes his tongue across my bottom lip, begging for me to open my mouth, and I do. For him, I open.

For him I'd do anything.

Together we work at removing each other's clothes, until I'm standing before him in nothing but my white lacy-bra and panties.

"Damn," he whispers. He inches closer, wearing nothing but black boxer-briefs, and I can see the outline of his dick through the cotton material.

It's huge. He hooks both his thumbs into the corner of his underwear and slides them down his legs, fisting his hardening cock in one hand once he steps out of them.

I was right. The thing is a monster.

Ranger must notice my apprehension because he stalls. “I won’t hurt you.”

I nod over and over. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I’ve just never done this before, and I’m sure there’s going to be some pain, and...” I’m rambling again, and Ranger inches closer, placing both hands on my face, bringing my gaze to meet his.

“I won’t hurt you, Tory. I’m going to go slow, even if it takes all night.”

I blink. “Okay. Thank you.” I realize in this moment that Ranger is more than a protector, he’s somebody I can always trust to put my needs and feelings first.

He kisses me again, and his hand roams across my collarbone, to the strap of my bra. He flicks it off my shoulder, and reaches around to unhook my bra.

As soon as he does, he removes the bra and lets it fall to the floor. He steps back so he can get a good look at me, and I don’t feel shy like I thought I would. I think it’s because of the way he stares at me. Like I’m some prized treasure.

It makes me feel valued. It makes me feel like I could get used to a man like Ranger.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

“Lie on the bed,” I tell her, knowing if I don’t take it slowly that this whole thing could end before it even begins.

I won’t hurt her, but there’s only so much a man can handle before he breaks loose and loses control.

Tory’s wearing these lacy pair of white panties that make my mouth fucking water. I want to taste her, and I fist my cock because it’s becoming increasingly painful with every breath I take.

She does as I ask, and lays on the bed, her eyes watching my movements with need. “You’re so big. I’ve never actually seen a real one in person before, but I feel like you’re a lot bigger than the anatomy books I’ve studied...” she snaps her mouth shut, “sorry.”

She has this habit of rambling when she’s nervous, and it’s probably one of the things I like most about her. I grin at her, and run my hand along the smooth ridge of my dick.

“I’m bigger than most,” I say, my eyes never leaving hers.

She glances back down at me, and nods. “Oh, okay. I’ll shut up now.”

I crack another grin. “I don’t want you to shut up,” the bed dips as I climb onto it, “ever.”

She gives me a soft smile before she sucks in a deep breath. I trace my hand over her silky skin, starting at her ankle and moving slowly up to her knee. I grip her thighs with both hands, parting her legs for me. I settle between them, and lower onto my torso.

“What are you doing?” She asks as she tries to sit up, but I’m still holding onto the backside of her thighs.

“I need to feel how wet you are.”

“Oh,” she relaxes a bit, “you can touch me.”

“No, I need to feel how wet you are with my tongue.”

Her eyes register her shock as she blinks at me. “Oh,” is all she says as she closes her eyes and leans back.

I take this moment to let my eyes roam over her body. She’s breathtaking, and her panty-clad pussy is so close to my face I can almost feel the warmth from it. I run my nose along the panel of her panties, and she nearly bucks off the bed.

Damn. She’s so responsive to my touch, and I’ve barely done anything at all.

“I’m going to get rid of these. They’re just in my way.”

Her eyes snap open as she watches me remove her panties. Like a good girl. I nearly growl as her pussy comes into view. Fuck. As if my cock can’t get any harder, it somehow does. The need to fuck her deep and hard into the mattress overcomes me, but I take a deep breath and calm myself down.

I promised her I wouldn’t hurt her, and I don’t plan on breaking that promise to her

anytime soon. I swipe my tongue through her wetness, and she moans out into the stillness of the room.

“Oh god, Ranger.”

I smile up at her. “You like that, huh?”

She nods. “Yes, very much.”

“Then allow me,” I say as I lower back down to her center. She flings her body back, squeezing her eyes shut as her arms cover her face.

And then I get to work on making her see stars. I swipe my tongue once more through her wetness, ending at her clit where I spend a lot more of my attention. I nibble and suck the bundle of nerves into my mouth while my hands squeeze her ass.

I continue sucking and licking, nibbling and tasting, as I eat her out. The sounds that fill the room are like a symphony of pleasure. Like she’s blissed the fuck out.

Her fingers fly through my hair as she grips and tugs me closer. Every sound she makes turns me on to a point I can barely contain it. I’m about to lose control and buck up into her, but I keep working her pussy with my tongue.

I run a finger through her slit, pushing my thumb along her clit as I push one finger inside her. Fuck, she’s tight.

I wasn’t expecting her to be this tight. I mean, let’s be real here. I’ve never been with a virgin before. Not even when I was one. So, the complete tightness is something new to me.

I glance up at her as I push my finger in a bit deeper. “You’re taking me so deep.”

She grinds her little body against my hand, and my cock throbs uncontrollably. If I don't fuck her soon, I might just come from the act of eating her out alone. I press down harder against her clit, and she holds onto me harder.

"I'm about to come," she calls out, and my chest fills with pride.

She rides out the first waves of her orgasm as I continue to lick and lap at her wetness. She tastes so fucking good. The kind of good I don't ever want to give up.

If you know what I mean.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

Oh god. I can't believe this is happening. Ranger just made me come all over his tongue. There's a sentence I never thought I'd ever say, but here I am, saying it.

Ranger braces his body along his arm as he props himself up. "You're fucking perfect," he whispers after I calm down from my most recent orgasm.

An orgasm, might I add, that was the best thing I've ever experienced in my life.

"I'm not perfect," I tell him, wishing more than anything I could be perfect for him.

He smiles, his dark eyes focusing on me. "You are to me." He moves over me, his body between my legs. He peppers kisses along my neck as he moves against me.

He fists his dick with one hand, rubbing it over me. It's so big, and I tense at first.

"I've got you," he whispers against the shell of my ear. "We'll go as slow as you need to."

I nod, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. "Okay, I trust you."

His eyes meet mine. "You don't know what those words just did to me."

I trace my hand down his handsome face. "What did they do?"

He leans down, nipping at my bottom lip with his teeth. "Made my heart do this

weird spasm thing in my chest.”

“Maybe you’re having a heart attack.”

He laughs, bracing himself up on both elbows, smoothing his hands over my hair.
“I’m not having a heart attack. I’m falling for you.”

My eyes widen at his words, and now I feel as though I’m the one having the heart attack. “Oh,” I whisper.

“Breathe,” he tells me, as he moves himself to where he’s guiding his dick toward my entrance. “Keep breathing and let me know if I hurt you.”

“I will.”

He pushes the tip of it inside me, and it’s not as painful as I imagined it would be. Instead I feel full. Like every part of myself is being claimed by this beast of a man. A man too gorgeous for his own good.

“Ah,” I moan out, my body not really sure if it’s in pain or pleasure. The two go so hand-in-hand, that I can’t even tell right now.

“You okay?” Ranger says, his body stilling inside me.

“I just need a minute,” I say, gazing up at him.

“Just breathe. You’re doing so fucking good handling my thick cock,” he tells me, and his dirty talk does something to me. Makes my body more responsive.

I thrust up, just a little, and he cracks a smirk.

“You like being talked dirty to, don’t you?”

I bite my bottom lip. “Yeah,” I whisper.

He pushes a bit deeper inside me as his grip on my hip tightens. “Tory, you’re so fucking tight. Too tight. Might not fit.” He pushes a bit deeper, and is met with resistance. His eyes meet mine. “This may sting a little,” he says, and then he punches his hips forward, taking my virginity along with him.

“Ah,” I moan out again, and his body stills once more.

“You’re doing so good, baby. So fucking good.” He begins moving on top of me, his hips rocking into me as his dick digs deeper.

I spread my legs and wrap them around his back, locking my ankles. “Something’s happening,” I say, my body meeting each of his thrusts. “I’m starting to feel like I could come again.” That’s impossible, right?

I’ve always heard women talk about how having double orgasms, or orgasms so close to one another is a rarity, but here I am... about to come. My body builds and builds as Ranger increases his speed.

“You feel so good, Tory. Fuck , your pussy is so goddamn tight.” He keeps his lips close as his hands dig into my flesh, marking me as he keeps pushing his dick in and out, over and over again.

I hold onto him, not wanting to let him go. It’s too good, and I squeeze my eyes shut as he moves one hand between our body and comes into contact with my clit. “So good,” I moan, my body so close to reaching its climax. “Don’t stop.”

“Won’t stop. Couldn’t even if I tried,” he growls out, his body pumping into me a bit

harder now. He repositions our bodies slightly so he can dig in deeper, and the feeling nearly causes my orgasm to slam into me.

“Ah, Ranger. I’m so close.”

He’s busy with his hands, one thumb pushing against my clit as his other hand keeps my body in position. He grips my ass, hard, and my body finally topples over the cliff.

“I’m coming,” I shout out, and I dig my nails into his back.

“I’m about to lose control,” he grunts out. “ Fuck. I can’t hold back, Tory, please .”

“Do it,” I tell him, and his eyes meet mine as he rams into me harder and harder. I just hold on as tight as I can as he loses control on top of me.

It’s a turn on that I’ve brought this man to losing control. Seriously, everything about this moment is something I’ll never forget.

Another minute, and he’s slamming into me, cursing out my name as he tells me he’s coming. At the last second, he pulls out, shooting his ribbons of white cum all over my torso. It’s hot, and completely him, and I love every second of it.

After he’s done, he gazes down at me. “You look good with my seed all over you.”

I swipe my finger through it, and bring the finger to my mouth. I suck, and Ranger’s eyes roll into the back of his head as his dick throbs in his hand.

“You keep doing shit like that and I’m going to have to fuck you all over again.”

I smile, sucking my finger deeper into my mouth. “Promise?”

The smell of something sweet and buttery pulls me out of sleep, lingering in the air like an invitation. I blink my eyes open slowly, the morning light filtering through the sheer curtains in soft, golden beams. For a moment, I don't know where I am, the sheets warm and unfamiliar around me, but then it all comes rushing back.

Ranger.

Last night.

A blush rises to my cheeks as I stretch lazily, muscles I didn't know existed reminding me of the way he held me, the way he kissed me. I feel warm just thinking about it, a giddy flutter swirling in my chest. I shift onto my side, a sleepy smile pulling at my lips as I listen to the faint clinking of pans and the soft hum of the ocean outside.

He's in the kitchen. Making breakfast.

The man who held me like I was something precious last night is now flipping pancakes. I can't help but smile at the thought as I slip out of bed, pulling on a pair of sleep shorts and an old oversized T-shirt before padding barefoot across the cool hardwood floor.

When I reach the kitchen, I pause in the doorway, leaning against the frame as I take in the scene before me. Ranger stands at the stove, his back to me, spatula in hand as he flips a perfect pancake onto a growing stack on a plate. He's wearing a plain black T-shirt that hugs his broad shoulders and sweats that hang low on his hips. He looks relaxed—more relaxed than I think I've ever seen him.

"Pancakes?" I ask softly, announcing myself.

He glances over his shoulder, and a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, warm and

teasing. “Good morning to you too, Einstein. Sleep well?”

I bite back a grin as I step further into the kitchen. “Very well, thanks to you.”

He arches a brow, his smile turning wicked, and I immediately feel heat creep up my neck. Why did I say that?

“You’re welcome,” he replies, voice low and smug.

I roll my eyes and slide onto one of the stools at the counter, pretending my face isn’t currently the color of a tomato. “So, pancakes, huh? I thought you were strictly a burger guy.”

“I’m a lot of things,” he replies cryptically, flipping another pancake with ease before setting the pan aside and moving to stand in front of me. He grabs the syrup bottle, setting it next to the plate of golden, fluffy pancakes. “I figured I’d make you something you like.”

My heart does that little flutter again, and I look up at him, surprised by how much that simple gesture means. “Thank you.”

His eyes soften as he looks at me, his expression so unguarded it makes me want to hold onto the moment forever. “You’re welcome.”

He slides the plate toward me, along with a fork, and I don’t hesitate to dig in. The pancakes are perfect—light, buttery, and dripping with syrup. I let out an involuntary hum of appreciation, and I swear I see Ranger’s lips twitch like he’s holding back a laugh.

“Good?” he asks.

I nod, my mouth full. “Better than the diner’s,” I manage, pointing my fork at him.

“High praise,” he says, smirking.

We lapse into a comfortable silence as I eat, but the quiet doesn’t feel heavy. It’s just... easy, like being with him always seems to be. When I’m halfway through my pancakes, I glance up at him. He’s leaning against the counter across from me, arms crossed, watching me with that quiet intensity that makes my pulse flutter.

“So, what are we doing today?” I ask, trying to sound casual even though my nerves seem to fire up under his gaze.

Ranger tilts his head slightly, as if considering. “I’ve got a little bit of work to do this morning,” he says, his voice low and even. “But after that?” He leans closer, placing his hands on the counter and locking his dark eyes with mine. “I’d like to stay in bed with you all day.”

My heart stutters, and I drop my fork onto the plate with a clatter. “Oh,” I manage, my voice suddenly small.

He grins, clearly pleased with himself, and stands up straight again. “What do you think about that?”

I recover quickly—or at least try to. “Well, that depends. What kind of work are we talking about?” I ask, forcing my voice to sound steady. “Does this ‘work’ have anything to do with my dad?”

His smile fades slightly, and he nods, his expression growing more serious. “Yeah. I need to check in with Dean, make sure there haven’t been any threats.”

“Against my father,” I say softly, pushing my plate aside. “Or against me?”

He exhales, running a hand through his dark hair. “It’s precautionary. Nothing to worry about.”

“But you’re worried,” I point out, watching him carefully.

Ranger doesn’t deny it. Instead, he comes around the counter, stopping in front of me. He rests his hands on the edge of the counter on either side of me, caging me in gently. “It’s my job to worry,” he says, his voice low. “And I’m going to keep you safe, Tory. Always.”

His words hit me straight in the chest, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. He says it so simply, so fiercely, like there’s no question about it. And that’s what Ranger is—steady, unshakable, dependable in a way that I didn’t know I needed.

I look up into his eyes, my voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you.”

He stares at me for a long moment, something unreadable flickering behind his dark eyes. Then he straightens up and takes a step back, his lips curving into a small smile. “Go get dressed. We’ll figure out the rest of the day after I check in with Dean.”

I nod, sliding off the stool and brushing past him to head to my room. But even as I close the door behind me and lean against it, my heart is still pounding.

Stay in bed with me all day.

I press a hand to my chest, feeling the thud of my heartbeat, and let out a slow breath. I don’t know what’s happening between us, not really, but I know one thing—I don’t want it to stop.

I want to hold onto this, whatever this is. I want him.

And for the first time in my life, I think I might be brave enough to admit that.

Ranger

The safe house is quiet as I head into the small back office, leaving Tory to finish getting ready. I close the door behind me and let out a breath, running a hand through my hair before pulling out my phone to call Dean. The room is sparse—a wooden desk, a single chair, a landline phone that no one uses—but it serves its purpose. I settle into the chair, elbows on the desk as I dial Dean’s number.

The call connects after a few rings, and Dean’s gruff voice comes through the line. “Ranger. About time you checked in.”

“I told you I’d call this morning,” I reply evenly, though the hint of impatience in his voice sets me on edge. “What’s going on?”

Dean doesn’t waste time. “There’s been chatter. More than usual. Something about the Summit. We’ve intercepted talk about a group who doesn’t like Malser’s message or his methods. They’re radical and unpredictable, and I’m starting to think they may escalate.”

The words aren’t easy to hear. “You think they’re planning something against him?”

“Possibly,” Dean says, his tone grave. “But here’s the thing—it’s not just Malser they’re targeting anymore. There’s mention of family, people close to him. If this group’s serious enough to stop him from speaking, they might go after the daughter to send a message.”

My jaw tightens, and I grip the phone harder. “Tory.”

Dean exhales on the other end, the sound like static. “That’s why I need to check in with you. Is she okay? Have there been any issues?”

“No,” I say quickly. “No issues.” My voice comes out sharp, clipped. I know Dean hears the edge in it, but I don’t care. My mind is already running a mile a minute, playing out every scenario.

“Good,” Dean says. “But stay sharp. If the chatter’s picking up, it means we’re getting close to something. I don’t want any surprises.”

“Understood.” I pause, pressing the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. “What’s being done to protect Malser at the Summit? Is he covered?”

“He’s got top-level security surrounding him, but it’s still a risk,” Dean says. “They’ll be watching closely for anything out of the ordinary. Your job is Tory. You keep her safe no matter what. Got it?”

“Yeah,” I say quietly, the weight of those words settling heavily on my chest.

Dean pauses before speaking again, his tone softer. “You good, Ranger? You sound... distracted.”

Distracted. That’s one word for it.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

There’s a beat of silence, and I know Dean’s not buying it. “You’re not getting too close, are you?”

I don’t respond right away, but the guilt churns in my stomach like a stone. Dean knows me too well. I have rules—rules I’ve always lived by to keep a job clean, to

keep my focus sharp. And rule number one? Never get personally involved with a client.

Except that's exactly what I've done.

Dean doesn't push, but his next words are pointed. "Remember why you're there, Ranger. She's not just some girl. She's a target."

"I know," I say through clenched teeth.

"Good," Dean replies. "I'll keep you updated. Check in later."

I hang up without another word, my grip on the phone tightening before I drop it onto the desk with a quiet thud. The silence in the room feels suffocating, pressing in on me from all sides. I stare at the wall, my thoughts racing, guilt swirling like a storm in my chest.

You're not getting too close, are you?

The words echo in my head, taunting me. I've spent years on this job—years following the rules, keeping my walls up, and shutting people out. That's how you survive in this business. You don't make attachments. You don't let emotions cloud your judgment.

But Tory...

I press my palms against my face, breathing in deeply before letting it out in a slow exhale. Last night flashes in my mind—her lips on mine, her body soft and warm in my arms, the way she whispered my name like it meant something. Like I meant something.

I shouldn't have let it happen. I knew better. I've spent my entire life building walls to keep things like this out, to keep my focus on the job. But Tory is different. She's not just some assignment. She's brilliant and awkward, beautiful and honest. Being around her makes me forget everything I'm supposed to be.

And the worst part? I don't want to stop.

I drag a hand through my hair and stand up, pacing the length of the small room. Dean's right—I can't lose sight of why I'm here. Tory's life is in my hands, and the moment I let my guard down, I risk everything. I need to focus. I need to keep my distance.

But when I think about staying away from her, it feels impossible. The way she looks at me, the way she trusts me so completely, makes me feel like I'm a better man than I am. She sees me as someone strong, someone she can rely on. And that's a feeling I don't want to let go of.

I stop pacing and brace my hands on the back of the chair, staring down at the scratched wood of the desk.

You're not getting too close.

I already am.

When I leave the office, Tory is sitting at the kitchen table, her hair still damp from the shower and her glasses perched low on her nose as she fiddles with a crystal pendant. She looks up as I step into the room, and her smile is so soft, so genuine, it hits me square in the chest.

"Everything okay?" she asks, tilting her head slightly.

I nod, trying to shake off the weight of the conversation with Dean. “Yeah. Just had to check in with Dean.”

She studies me for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Does it have anything to do with my dad?”

There’s no point lying to her—not when she’s smart enough to see through it. “There’s been some chatter,” I admit, leaning back against the counter and crossing my arms. “Nothing confirmed, but Dean’s being cautious. He thinks this group might try to take action.”

Her face falls slightly, and she sets the pendant down, her fingers curling into her palm. “Against my dad?”

“Maybe.” I pause, choosing my next words carefully. “Or against you.”

She looks up sharply, her blue eyes widening. “Me?”

“It’s just a possibility,” I say quickly, pushing off the counter and moving closer to her. “It’s my job to make sure you’re safe, Tory. That’s all that matters right now.”

She watches me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. “Do you think something will happen?”

I crouch down in front of her so we’re eye to eye, my hands resting on my knees. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” I say softly, my voice steady and sure. “You have my word.”

Her eyes search mine, like she’s looking for reassurance, for answers I don’t fully have. “Okay,” she whispers finally.

I nod and stand, trying to ignore the pull I feel toward her as she watches me. I need to keep things professional, to put some distance between us, but even as I tell myself that, I know it's already too late.

Tory isn't just another job. She's already gotten under my skin, and no matter how much I fight it, I can't stop myself from caring about her.

More than I should.

More than I ever thought I could.

Tory

The house feels quieter than usual as the day begins to slip away, the sun casting long golden shadows across the floor. I'm perched in the living room with my knees tucked up to my chest, staring blankly at the untouched book sitting beside me. I haven't been able to focus for hours—not since Ranger's phone call with Dean earlier.

Something shifted after that conversation.

Ranger hasn't been himself since he stepped out of that back office. He's been distant, quieter than usual, and every time I catch him looking at me, he glances away like he's trying not to be caught.

Did Dean find out about us? About what happened last night?

I don't know how he could know, but the thought burrows under my skin, gnawing at me. I hate this strange tension between us—this invisible wall Ranger's suddenly thrown up.

I let out a frustrated breath and toss the book onto the coffee table. I can't sit here and stew in silence all evening. My chest feels too tight, my thoughts spiraling into places I don't want to go. I need to clear my head, and I know exactly how to do it.

The hot tub.

The safe house has a massive one out on the back lanai, overlooking the ocean. It's

perfect—private, secluded, and quiet. A soak in bubbling, steaming water sounds like the ideal escape right now.

With that plan in mind, I stand and head for my room, closing the door softly behind me. I dig through my suitcase until I find my bikini—a simple black two-piece that’s functional and comfortable but, admittedly, fits me well. As I pull it on, I catch my reflection in the mirror and pause.

Maybe it’s the frustration boiling inside me. Maybe it’s the way Ranger’s been distant all day, like he’s trying to keep himself in check. But suddenly, I want to see him squirm.

I grab a loose, sheer cover-up and slip it over my bikini before tying my hair up into a high bun. With a final glance at the mirror, I take a deep breath and walk back out into the main room.

Ranger is standing near the kitchen, a glass of water in his hand as he stares out the window, his back to me. The light from the setting sun pours in, casting an amber glow over his strong shoulders, making him look even more untouchable.

I should just slip past him quietly. I should ignore him like he’s been ignoring me.

But I don’t.

“Heading to the hot tub,” I announce, my voice light and casual as I waltz past him, my bare feet padding softly against the tile.

Ranger turns at the sound of my voice, and I catch the moment he spots me out of the corner of my eye. He freezes—like, completely freezes—his jaw going slack as his eyes drag over me in stunned silence.

The glass of water in his hand might as well be invisible because he's not paying it, or anything else, the slightest bit of attention.

His gaze moves slowly, taking me in piece by piece—from the curve of my bare shoulders, down the slope of my waist, to the tie of the sheer fabric swishing around my thighs. When his eyes snap back up to mine, they're dark and intense, his expression completely dumbfounded.

Good. Let him squirm.

I smirk faintly, pausing in the doorway as if I don't feel his gaze searing through me. "You know, if you're done brooding, you're welcome to join me," I say sweetly, then turn and slip out onto the lanai without waiting for a response.

The evening air is cool against my skin as I step out onto the deck, but the hot tub bubbles invitingly, steam rising in soft curls into the darkening sky. I shrug off the cover-up, draping it over one of the lounge chairs before climbing into the water.

The instant warmth is blissful, and I sink in with a sigh, letting the jets work their magic on my tense muscles. The sound of the ocean waves crashing in the distance blends with the quiet hum of the jets, and for the first time today, I feel myself begin to relax.

But only for a minute.

Because I hear the door open behind me, followed by heavy footsteps.

I fight to keep my expression neutral as Ranger steps onto the lanai, his tall frame silhouetted against the glow spilling from the house. He's changed into swim trunks—a dark pair that sits low on his hips—and a plain black T-shirt that clings to his chest.

My mouth goes dry.

“You’re joining me after all,” I say, trying to sound casual even as my heart skips a beat.

He doesn’t answer right away. He just stands there, his dark eyes locked on me as if he’s still trying to figure out how to breathe. Then, without a word, he tugs the T-shirt over his head and tosses it onto the chair beside my cover-up.

I swallow hard.

Oh.

I’ve seen Ranger’s strength before—I’ve felt it when he holds me, when his hands roam over my body—but seeing him now, stripped down and raw, is something else entirely. He’s all muscle, lean and powerful, every inch of him carved like he was made to drive women insane.

“Hot tub’s big enough for two, right?” he asks finally, his voice low and rough as he steps closer.

“Maybe,” I murmur, sinking a little deeper into the water to hide the flush creeping up my neck.

Ranger climbs into the tub, settling across from me, his gaze never leaving mine. For a long moment, neither of us says anything. The air feels thick and charged, the space between us crackling with something unspoken.

Finally, I break the silence, folding my arms on the edge of the tub and leaning forward slightly. “I thought you were ignoring me all day.”

His brow furrows slightly, and he shifts, leaning back against the wall of the tub. “I wasn’t ignoring you.”

“Yes, you were.”

He doesn’t deny it, which only makes my chest ache more. “I had things to think about,” he admits finally.

“Like what?” I press. “Dean?”

His gaze sharpens, and for a moment, I think he’s going to brush me off again. But instead, he sighs and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “Dean and I... we’re just making sure things stay quiet. That there’s no threat.”

“To my father,” I say softly. “Or to me?”

Ranger’s expression darkens, his gaze flickering to me like he hates hearing it out loud. “Yeah.”

I watch him carefully, searching his face for something—anything—that will explain why he’s pulling away from me. “Is that what this is about?” I ask. “The threat?”

“No,” he says quickly, his voice rough. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

He looks at me, and for a moment, I see something crack through the armor he’s so carefully built—guilt, longing, fear. “You,” he says quietly. “It’s you.”

The words hit me like a jolt, and I blink at him, stunned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m breaking every rule I’ve ever set for myself.” He leans forward slightly, his dark eyes pinning me in place. “I’m supposed to protect you. That’s it. That’s the job. But I can’t stop thinking about you. About touching you. About—”

He cuts himself off, his jaw tight as if he’s said too much.

My heart pounds so hard I’m sure he can hear it. “Ranger...”

“I don’t regret last night,” he says softly, his voice low and steady. “But I can’t let myself lose focus. Because if I do, and something happens to you, I’ll never forgive myself.”

The raw honesty in his voice takes my breath away, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at him. I see it now—the way he’s been wrestling with himself, torn between who he is and who he wants to be when he’s with me.

I move closer without even thinking, the water swirling softly around us. “You’re not going to lose focus,” I whisper. “And nothing’s going to happen to me, Ranger. I trust you.”

His eyes soften, and I see the wall between us start to crumble. I stop just inches away from him, the steam rising between us like a curtain. Slowly, he lifts a hand, brushing a strand of damp hair from my face.

“You shouldn’t trust me,” he says quietly, his thumb grazing my cheek.

“But I do.”

His gaze drops to my lips, and for a second, I think he’s going to pull away. But then he leans in, closing the space between us, and his mouth captures mine in a kiss that steals the breath from my lungs.

It's soft at first, careful, but then his hand moves to the back of my neck, tilting my head as he deepens the kiss. Heat floods through me, and I press closer, my fingers curling into his bare shoulders as if to keep myself from floating away.

Everything else fades—the setting sun, the ocean waves, the bubbling water. It's just him and me, tangled in this moment, this feeling that's too big for me to name.

When he finally pulls back, his forehead rests against mine, his breathing ragged.

“I'm already in too deep,” he murmurs, almost to himself.

I close my eyes, my heart pounding. “Me too.”

Ranger

My heart hammers in my chest as I look into Tory's soft blue eyes, the kind of eyes that make a man forget how to breathe. She's absolutely breathtaking, her face illuminated by the faint glow of the stars above, and for the life of me, I can't look away. In this moment—just her, me, and the quiet night—I'm completely undone.

"I need you," I whisper against her lips.

She straddles my lap, her hands resting on my shoulders as her eyes gaze up at me. "I want it."

I press my lips against hers and she moans into my mouth. "I've never felt anything like this before, Tory."

"Me either."

I grip her ass with both hands, moving her body over mine. "Too much clothing," I say, lifting her up for two seconds so I can remove my swim trunks in a flash.

Tory watches with rapt fascination, and moves her hands to take off her bikini but instead, I growl at her.

"Don't you dare."

"What?" She asks with a little shrug of her shoulder.

“You can’t expect me to not want to undress you.”

She stops what she’s doing and gives me the prettiest fucking smile I’ve ever seen from her. My movements are slow as I remove the top of her bikini. I take my time with her tits, letting their perfect fullness rest in each hand. I thumb over each nipple, and bring my mouth down over one, and then the other.

She moans, holding me at the back of the neck. “Oh, Ranger,” she whispers as I keep toying with her breasts.

I roam my hands over her body, letting them slip beneath the bottoms of her bikini, and I slide them down her long legs. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

She smiles down at me as I sit here and remove her clothing. When she steps out of the bottoms, I reposition her to where she’s once again straddling my lap. Right where I want her.

“You belong here,” I tell her before kissing her.

She grinds her body against mine, and my cock comes to life. Let’s face it, it’s been semi-hard all day. And when she breezed past me earlier in her little bikini, I nearly lost it.

I grip her hair in my hands, holding it back as I claim her lips. “I need to be deep inside you, Tory.”

“Yes, please,” she begs, and rocks against me once more. She leans back, her eyes glancing at my cock between us. “I want to touch it first.”

I lean back a little, completely turned on at the idea of her hands on me. “You can touch it anytime you want.”

She wraps her hand around it, slowly stroking it as she does. I roll my eyes into the back of my head as my mouth falls open.

Fuck. I wasn't expecting her touch to be so damn soft.

"Like this?" She keeps stroking it, her pinky circling the underside of the tip on every pass.

It's so fucking good.

"Yeah, just like that. You handle my cock so good."

She flicks her gaze to meet mine. "I like when you talk like that."

"Yeah?"

She licks her suckable lips, and I imagine her working my cock between them.

"Yeah." Her cheeks tinge pink, and I dig my fingers into the flesh of her ass.

"I've got plenty of dirty things to say to you when you've got my cock in your hand, and you're working it as good as you are."

"You like it?"

I nearly growl at her question. "Oh yeah, I love having your fingers wrapped around my dick."

She keeps stroking me, her focus adamant on getting me to come. But little does she know I won't be coming this way, oh fuck no. I want to be deep inside her when I come.

“Are you on the pill?” I ask her.

She blinks. “No, I’m not.”

Fuck. “I didn’t bring any condoms.” I wish I had, but then again, why would I? I’ve never been this careless on a job before. But the thought of not coming inside her has me ready to burst at the seams.

“Oh,” she whispers. “We could always go and buy some.”

I lean in, capturing her lips with mine and kiss her. She makes my chest warm, a feeling I’ve never experienced before. When I break the kiss, I say, “I need to fuck you now. I can’t waste time going to the store.”

This makes her laugh. “We have all night.”

I dig my fingers deeper into the flesh of her ass. “And I plan on keeping you busy all damn night, Tory.” I reposition her body so I’m sliding inside her.

She rides me like a good girl, and I bring her closer, closing my mouth of one of her breasts. I suck on her nipple, as she grinds against me.

She feels too good.

I could get used to this.

I keep fucking her, letting her ride me at the pace she sets. A little slower, but seriously, so fucking good.

“Oh, Ranger,” she whispers against my ear, and I move one hand up her body, tracing her spine, and ending in her long, blonde hair. I tilt her head back, trailing kisses up

the column of her throat. “Talk dirty to me.”

“Yeah?” I nip at her soft skin. “You like it when I talk dirty?”

“Yes, oh, please.” The water of the hot tub splashes with each upward thrust I make.

“You handle my cock so well. Like such a good girl. This pussy was made for me.” And hell, I believe it was. I’ve never been handled this well in my life, and the fact I’m the first man to ever enter her turns me on too much.

The sensation feels too real, and I pull out of her, missing her warmth immediately.

“Did I do something wrong?” She blinks up at me.

“You’re doing everything so damn right.” I reposition her, leaning her over the edge of the hot tub so I can enter her from behind. Her ass is out of the water, and I stand with one foot on the seat and slam my hardness into her.

“Oh my god,” she shouts out.

I go a little slower, letting her acclimate to my size. I don’t want to hurt her. I promised her I wouldn’t. And I intend to keep every promise I ever make to this stunning woman. Forever.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

I've never been so completely out of control in all my life. And I love it. I crave this feeling, and probably will for the rest of my time on this earth.

“Handle this dick like a good girl,” Ranger says, pounding his dick deep inside me.

I thought it would hurt, but it doesn't. It makes me feel like maybe we were made for each other. I mean, crazier things have happened, right?

“Oh god,” I shout out, my hands braced on the edge of the hot tub. I glance at him over my shoulder and it's the most glorious sight.

Ranger's all man—tough and brawn—his focus solely on me. His large hands wrap around my hips as he keeps pushing into me. “No god here, sweetheart, only me. Your man .”

The sound of him calling himself my man turns me on. His hand wraps around my body, his fingers finding my clit. He pushes against it, hard and rough, and I lean my head back against him, moaning out.

“Come all over me. I'm so close, and I still need to pull out, but I'm not pulling out until you coat my cock with your release.”

“I'm so close,” I groan, my body like a spark ready to ignite. My heartbeat drums in my ears as the feeling of Ranger's fingers toying with my clit consume me. “ So close. ”

And then it happens. I squeeze my eyes shut as I scream out his name, “Oh god, Ranger. Fuuuck .” My body comes alive, spasming around his thickness.

With his other hand, he moves it up my body, settling around my throat. “Now who’s got the dirty mouth?”

I smile, my body calming slightly.

Ranger pulls completely out of me. “Sit down and suck this cock.”

I immediately do as told, and next thing I know he’s feeding his dick to me, pushing past my open lips. I suck him in as far as I can go, letting my tongue swirl around the tip.

I place my hands on his thick thighs as he rocks back and forth, gently, his hands sweeping my hair into a ponytail. He grips it, moving my head in tune with him.

I gaze up at him, and the look he’s giving me makes my chest squeeze tight. Wow. This man is gorgeous. The look of pure lust hangs heavy in his eyes, and I keep sucking, wanting to taste his release.

“I’m so fucking close,” he tells me.

I give his dick all my focus as I pick up speed, not wanting him to remove it from my mouth until I’ve sucked every last drop from him. His body clenches, his thigh muscles tensing underneath my palm, and then the warm liquid hits the back of my throat. I swallow, and gaze up at him.

He’s glorious.

His eyes are shut, his mouth hanging open slightly as he comes. His whole body

shudders, and his grip on my hair tightens. He grunts naughty words through his release. Which cause my core to pulse with need.

Who have I become?

The morning sun filters through the windows, casting soft, golden light across the living room. I'm seated cross-legged on the floor, sorting through my collection of crystals and beads, but my thoughts are miles away.

Ranger.

I glance toward the kitchen, where he's leaning casually against the counter, coffee mug in hand. He's still in his sleep-rumpled T-shirt and sweatpants, his dark hair slightly mussed. It's almost unfair how effortlessly good he looks.

I try to focus on the crystals in front of me, but my thoughts keep circling back to him. I've spent my whole life surrounded by logic and reason, by the steady, unchanging world of science. But Ranger? He's none of those things. He's a storm—unpredictable and overwhelming, but in the best possible way.

And the thought of going back to my regular life after this? It feels impossible.

How am I supposed to return to days filled with lab work and quiet solitude, knowing what it feels like to have Ranger by my side? To see the way he looks at me like I'm the only thing that matters?

"Whatcha working on?" His voice breaks through my thoughts, and I look up to see him strolling toward me, his coffee still in hand.

"Just organizing," I reply, holding up a small, shimmering crystal. "Trying to decide what to work with next."

He crouches beside me, his presence grounding and magnetic all at once. “You think you could teach me?”

I blink at him, surprised. “Teach you?”

“Yeah,” he says, his lips twitching into a small smile. “I’ve been watching you mess with these crystals and wires for days, and I’m curious. Think I’ve got what it takes to make something?”

I laugh softly, the idea of Ranger making jewelry both amusing and oddly endearing. “Sure,” I say, scooting over to make room for him. “Let’s see if you’ve got any hidden artistic talent.”

We spend the next hour on the floor, surrounded by beads, wire, and tools. I show him how to wrap wire around a crystal, how to secure the ends, and how to create a simple clasp. His big hands are surprisingly steady as he works, and he follows my instructions with a focus that makes me smile.

“Not bad,” I say, examining his first attempt—a slightly lopsided pendant. “It’s a little crooked, but for a beginner, it’s pretty good.”

“Lopsided has character,” he quips, and I laugh again, shaking my head.

As we work, the conversation flows easily. We talk about nothing and everything—favorite foods, childhood memories, even embarrassing moments. I learn that he once fell off a bike during a middle school race and refused to cry in front of his friends, and he learns that I once accidentally spilled sulfuric acid on a lab coat during a high school chemistry experiment.

“Science nerd problems,” I say with a grin, and he chuckles, his laugh low and warm.

By the time we're done, I've decided to make something for him—a simple bracelet using dark, smooth stones and a leather cord. He watches quietly as I thread the stones onto the cord, tying the ends into a secure knot.

“Here,” I say, holding it out to him. “For you.”

He takes it, his expression unreadable as he examines the bracelet. “You made this for me?”

I nod, suddenly self-conscious. “Yeah. I mean, it's nothing fancy, but...”

“It's perfect,” he says, his voice soft. He slides it onto his wrist, the leather fitting snugly against his skin. “Thank you, Tory.”

The way he says my name makes my heart stutter, and I look away, focusing on tidying up the scattered beads and tools. “You're welcome.”

Later that evening, we settle onto the couch to watch a movie. The safe house has a decent collection of DVDs, and we pick an old action flick that Ranger insists is a classic.

“Get comfortable,” he says as he grabs the remote, and I take his advice, curling up against the armrest with a blanket draped over my legs.

But when he sits down beside me, leaving a gap between us, I hesitate. For a moment, I consider staying where I am, keeping things light and casual.

But I don't want casual. Not with him.

I shift closer, sliding under his arm, and he doesn't hesitate to pull me against him, his warmth wrapping around me like a second blanket.

“Better?” he murmurs, his voice low in my ear.

“Much,” I reply, resting my head against his chest.

The movie plays in the background, but I barely register it. I’m too focused on the steady beat of Ranger’s heart beneath my ear, the way his hand rests lightly on my hip, his thumb drawing slow, lazy circles against my side.

I don’t know what’s going to happen when this job is over. I don’t know if Ranger feels what I feel, or if he’s already bracing himself to move on.

But for now, in this quiet moment, I let myself be close to him. I let myself hope.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

The bracelet on my wrist is simple—dark stones strung on a leather cord, knotted just right—but it feels heavier than it should, like it's carrying more weight than its size suggests. Tory made this for me. No one's ever made me anything before, let alone something like this.

I glance down at her as we sit on the couch, her small frame tucked under my arm. She's focused on the movie, her head resting against my chest, but all I can think about is her. The bracelet. The way she smiled when she handed it to me, her cheeks pink and her fingers fidgeting like she wasn't sure I'd even want it.

I want more than the bracelet. I want her .

It hits me like a damn freight train. I've spent years convincing myself that attachments are dangerous, that getting close to someone will only end badly. But Tory has broken down every wall I've built, without even trying.

She belongs in my life.

I glance down at the bracelet again, the leather snug against my skin, and I know it's true. I don't just want her in my life—I want her in it forever.

The thought should scare me. Hell, it should send me running for the hills. But instead, it settles deep in my chest, warm and steady.

The movie drones on, the action flick's explosions and gunfire fading into

background noise. I shift slightly, tightening my arm around Tory, and she tilts her head up to look at me, her blue eyes soft and questioning.

“What?” she asks, her lips curving into a small, teasing smile.

I shake my head, unable to keep my own smile from forming. “Nothing. Just thinking.”

“About?”

I lift my hand, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. “About how lucky I am.”

Her cheeks flush, and she lets out a soft laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, my gaze dropping to her lips. “But it’s true.”

She doesn’t reply, but the way her breath catches, the way her eyes soften as they meet mine—it’s enough to undo me.

I lean down slowly, giving her every chance to stop me, but she doesn’t. Her eyes flutter shut, her lips parting slightly, and I close the distance, pressing my mouth to hers.

The kiss starts soft, gentle, but it doesn’t stay that way for long. She shifts in my arms, her hands sliding up to tangle in my hair, and I lose whatever control I thought I had.

My grip tightens on her waist, pulling her closer until she’s practically in my lap. Her lips move against mine, warm and eager, and when her tongue brushes against mine, I groan low in my throat.

“Tory,” I murmur against her mouth, my voice rough with need.

She doesn’t answer, just presses closer, her body fitting perfectly against mine. Her hands slide from my hair to my shoulders, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt like she’s afraid I’ll pull away.

I’m not going anywhere.

My hands roam her back, tracing the curve of her spine, and when my fingers brush the bare skin just under the hem of her shirt, she shivers. The sound she makes—a soft, breathy sigh—is enough to drive me insane.

I break the kiss, pressing my forehead against hers as I try to catch my breath. Her eyes are half-lidded, her lips swollen and pink, and I swear I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.

“Ranger,” she whispers, her voice trembling slightly.

“Yeah?”

Her hands slide down to rest on my chest, her touch warm even through the fabric of my shirt. “I don’t know what’s happening between us, but…” She hesitates, her gaze searching mine.

“But what?” I prompt, brushing my thumb over her cheek.

“I don’t want it to stop.”

Her words hit me like a damn hammer, and I can’t hold back anymore. I capture her mouth in another searing kiss, my hands gripping her hips as I pull her fully into my lap. She gasps against my lips, her hands sliding under my shirt to press against my

bare skin, and every inch of me comes alive.

The heat between us is electric, overwhelming, but it's more than just physical. It's her—her laugh, her smile, the way she looks at me like I'm more than just some guy who's here to protect her.

I pull back just enough to look at her, my breath ragged. "You're incredible, you know that?"

She laughs softly, her fingers trailing over my chest. "You might've mentioned it once or twice."

I grin, leaning in to kiss her again, but this time it's slower, deeper, like I'm trying to memorize every detail of her.

I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, or the next day, or when this job is over. But I know one thing for certain—Tory Ann Malser has changed everything.

And I'm never letting her go.

She rocks her hips against me once more, and my breathing picks up. "Ranger," she moans again, and I kiss her until we're both breathless.

I remove her shirt in a flash, resting my eyes on her bare chest. She's beautiful. She rocks once more against my hardening cock, and I groan as I suck one of her breasts into my open mouth.

I reposition her, to lay her down on the couch as I remove her night pants from her body. I'm greeted by little black panties, and I growl at the sight.

She pushes at the edges of my shirt, removing it from my body. I help her, pushing

my own sweatpants down my legs as I move to position myself between her legs.

“I need my cock to fill you up.”

She reaches for me. “I want it,” she moans, and I lean back to memorize this moment.

My woman. Needy for me.

She bites her plump lower lip into her mouth, and I tsk her.

“That’s mine to bite,” I say, leaning over her body ready to lay claim. I suck her bottom lip between my teeth, nibbling just enough to illicit a moan from her.

She holds onto me like a lifeline, and it causes this weird possessiveness to take over. Her legs wrap around my back, and I grab onto the flesh of her ass.

“These panties need to be obliterated.”

She giggles lightly, and the sound goes straight to my cock. “Do it, then.”

I lean back, grabbing the side of her panties and giving it a quick yank, ripping it right at the seam. I do it on the other side, and then in the middle...obliterating them.

The shredded material falls to the floor, and she sighs. “Those were such a nice pair.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh lightly. “In a few minutes you won’t even miss them.”

She holds onto me, her smile wide. “Promise?”

“I promise you, Tory.” I settle my body between her legs, letting the tip of my cock find her center. I want to slam deep inside her, but don’t want her to be too sore. So,

gently, I nudge inside her, filling her up completely.

“Ah, Ranger,” she calls out.

“I love hearing my name on your lips.” It fills my chest up with a warmth I never knew I needed. It’s a sound I could get used to.

Forever.

I move my cock in and out of her, slowly at first, but then picking up speed as I go. Her soft moans and groans grow louder with each thrust of my hip until she’s calling out my name.

“That’s right,” I tell her. “Who’s making you feel so good?”

“You are, oh my god.” She squeezes onto me tighter, her body rocking along with mine.

We find a rhythm, and together we make love in the heat of the night. She’s definitely not somebody I’m willing to give up any time soon.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

Everything about Ranger's touch is perfect. I never thought I'd be the type of woman to fall recklessly head over heels for a man like Ranger... but I have.

I so have.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but people don't really fall in love this quickly, do they? Of course not.

It's the heat of the moment causing my brain to short circuit. I smile, holding Ranger closer.

He grunts and groans close to my ear as he pushes his dick in and out of me, causing my body to feel lighter and lighter as he does. I'm so close to my orgasm I can almost feel it.

I squeeze my eyes shut, open my mouth, and my toes begin to curl. "Ah, Ranger."

"Come all over me," he demands, and it's like my body knows to obey him, because I do.

At that exact moment.

Like Ranger's got the blueprint to my body.

I think maybe he does.

My legs squeeze tighter around him as my orgasm crashes all through me, making me see stars behind my closed eyelids. He follows right after me, chasing his own orgasm. He pulls out in just the nick of time, and shoots his load all over my tummy. It's sort of sexy how he looks as he comes. Like he's nearly out of control.

I don't know what it is about this man that turns me on, but seriously, it's like everything he does. We lay together after he cleans me up, and he pulls me closer to him.

Sometime later we make it to the bed, and go for another round, and I find myself falling even harder.

Every day, my feelings for Ranger grow stronger. It's not just his presence or the way he looks at me like I'm something rare and precious—it's the way he makes me feel safe. The way he listens to me, really listens, and makes me laugh when I don't even realize I need it.

We head to the little diner again today, the one we visited the other day. It feels like a small slice of normalcy in the midst of everything else, and I like the idea of sharing pancakes with Ranger again, just the two of us.

The sun is bright as we walk along the boardwalk, the salty breeze tugging at my hair. Ranger keeps pace beside me, his hand brushing against mine occasionally. Every time it happens, my heart skips a little.

When we step inside the diner, the familiar jingling bell above the door greets us, and Linda waves from behind the counter. I smile, feeling a sense of ease settle over me.

But then I see them.

The same group of guys from the other day, sitting at a booth near the back. They're

loud and obnoxious, just like before, and as soon as we walk in, their attention snaps to me.

My stomach twists uncomfortably, and I instinctively move closer to Ranger. He notices immediately, his eyes narrowing as he follows my gaze.

“It’s them,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

Ranger’s jaw tightens, and his posture shifts, becoming more rigid, more alert. “Don’t worry,” he says softly, his voice low and steady. “I’ve got you.”

We sit at a booth near the front, far from where the guys are, but I can feel their eyes on me. It’s like a weight pressing against my back, making it hard to relax.

“They’re staring,” I say, keeping my gaze fixed on the menu in front of me.

Ranger doesn’t even look over at them. “Let them stare,” he replies calmly, his tone laced with something that sends a shiver down my spine.

Linda comes over to take our order, and I manage to smile and thank her, but my appetite is gone. Ranger notices, of course—he notices everything—and his hand brushes against mine under the table, a silent reminder that he’s here.

We eat quickly, and when we leave, I’m relieved to step back into the open air. The breeze feels cooler now, refreshing against my skin.

But my relief is short-lived.

As we walk along the path back to the safe house, I glance over my shoulder and freeze. The guys are following us.

“Ranger,” I whisper, my voice tight with panic.

“I know they’re there,” he says, always aware. He looks bigger somehow, more imposing, like a man who’s ready for a fight.

“I wish they’d leave us alone.”

“Stay close to me,” Ranger says firmly, his hand brushing against my back as he positions himself slightly behind me.

We keep walking, but the guys don’t stop. They keep a few paces behind us, laughing and talking loudly, their presence impossible to ignore. My heart pounds, the fear creeping up my spine like icy fingers.

Finally, Ranger stops and turns to face them, his body a wall of calm, controlled strength. “Is there a reason you’re following us?” he asks, his voice low and steady, but there’s an edge to it that sends chills through me.

The guys hesitate, their bravado faltering under Ranger’s glare. Tank Top, the loudest of the group, steps forward, his hands raised defensively. “Hey, man, we’re just walking. No harm, no foul.”

“You’ve been staring at her since we walked into the diner,” Ranger says, his tone sharper now. “And now you’re following us. That doesn’t look like ‘just walking’ to me.”

Tank Top glances back at his friends, clearly unsure of what to do. “We weren’t gonna do anything, all right? Just messing around.”

“Don’t,” Ranger says, his voice dropping to a dangerous level. “Don’t mess with her. Don’t follow her. Don’t even look at her again.”

The air is thick with tension, and for a moment, I think Tank Top might say something stupid. But then Ranger takes a small step forward, and his sheer presence alone seems to be enough.

“Got it,” Tank Top mutters, backing up quickly. “We’re leaving.”

The group stumbles away, their earlier arrogance replaced with nervous energy. I let out a shaky breath, my heart still pounding as Ranger snaps a picture of them with his phone. He turns back to me.

“You okay?” he asks, his dark eyes scanning my face.

I nod, my voice caught in my throat.

“Good,” he says, his voice softening. “Let’s get you home.”

We walk the rest of the way in silence, his hand resting lightly on my back the entire time. When we step inside the safe house, I finally let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Ranger turns to face me, his expression serious but calm. “You don’t have to be scared, Tory. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “But it’s still scary.”

He steps closer, his hands resting gently on my shoulders. “Listen to me,” he says, his dark eyes locking onto mine. “I will always keep you safe. Always.”

His words are a promise, and for the first time since the diner, I feel the tension in my chest begin to ease. I trust him. Completely.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He smiles faintly, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “You don’t have to thank me, Tory. Keeping you safe isn’t just my job—it’s what I want to do.”

And in that moment, I know that no matter what happens, Ranger will always be there for me. And somehow, that makes everything else feel a little less terrifying.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

Once we're back at the house, Tory heads straight for the living room, clutching her book like it's a lifeline. She offers me a soft smile before settling into the corner of the couch, tucking her legs underneath her. I know she's trying to seem calm, but the tension in her shoulders tells me otherwise.

I head to the small office in the back of the house, shutting the door behind me before pulling out my phone. My jaw tightens as I open the photos I snapped earlier—the guys from the diner, their faces clear in the frame. Tank Top and his buddies might've acted harmless, but I don't trust them as far as I can throw them.

I forward the pictures to Dean, adding a quick message:

Need a full check on these guys. Followed us from the diner. Probably nothing, but I want to be sure.

It's only a few minutes before my phone buzzes with his reply:

Will get on it. Any issues with Tory?

I shake my head, even though he can't see me, and type back:

No. She's fine. Just didn't like the way they were watching her.

Almost immediately, my phone buzzes again, this time with an incoming call. Dean.

I answer on the first ring. “Talk to me.”

“Got your picture,” Dean says, his voice low and steady. “I’ll run it through our systems, but they look like your run-of-the-mill idiots. Still, I’ll check.”

“They followed us all the way to the boardwalk,” I reply, my tone sharp. “Idiots or not, they’re watching her. I don’t like it.”

“Noted,” Dean says. “I’ll let you know as soon as I have anything.”

There’s a brief pause, and then he adds, “How’s it going otherwise? Tory okay?”

“She’s fine,” I say automatically, though my gut twists at the memory of her nervous glance over her shoulder earlier. “Worried about her dad, but she’s holding up.”

Dean sighs. “Things are heating up over here. Chatter’s picking up, and brAVO team’s already in motion. We’re doing everything we can to lock it down, but it’s a pressure cooker. Something’s gotta give.”

“Define ‘something,’” I demand, my voice hard.

“Could be nothing,” Dean says, though his tone doesn’t match the words. “Could be a demonstration, or it could be worse. That’s why brAVO’s on-site. If it goes sideways, they’re ready to act.”

I don’t like it. Not one bit. The idea of something happening at the G20 Summit with Tory’s father right in the middle of it—it sets my teeth on edge.

“What about Malser?” I ask. “How’s his security?”

“Locked down tight,” Dean assures me. “He’s got the best of the best. But you know

how these things go. The wrong person gets through, and it's chaos."

My grip on the phone tightens. "Keep me updated. I don't care what time it is—if something happens, I want to know."

"You'll be the first call," Dean promises. "Just keep Tory safe. She's your priority."

"Always," I reply firmly.

We end the call, and I sit there for a moment, staring at the screen. The unease in my gut hasn't eased. If anything, it's worse.

After a deep breath, I push to my feet and head back into the main part of the house. I find Tory in the living room, her book open in her lap, but she's not reading. Her phone is in her hand, her thumb swiping across the screen, and her brows are furrowed in frustration.

"What's wrong?" I ask, stepping closer.

She looks up, and the worry in her eyes hits me like a punch to the chest. "I've been trying to call my dad," she says softly. "I can't get through. It just keeps going to voicemail."

I sit down beside her, resting a hand on her knee. "He's probably busy. These Summits are chaos—they've got a million moving pieces."

"I know," she whispers, her voice trembling slightly. "But I just... I need to hear his voice, you know? Just to know he's okay."

I hate seeing her like this—her usual calm and steady demeanor replaced by uncertainty and fear. I squeeze her knee gently, trying to offer some kind of

reassurance.

“He’s okay, Tory,” I say firmly. “Dean’s got eyes on everything, and your dad’s surrounded by top-level security. They won’t let anything happen to him.”

She nods, but the worry doesn’t leave her face. “I just hate not knowing. Not being able to do anything.”

“I get it,” I say softly. And I do. I know what it feels like to be powerless, to watch from the sidelines while the people you care about are in danger. “But you don’t have to carry this alone. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the tension in her shoulders seems to ease. “Thank you,” she says quietly.

I nod, my hand lingering on her knee for a moment longer before I pull away. “If you want, we can try calling again in a little while.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs. “That’s a good idea.”

I lean back against the couch, watching her as she sets her phone aside and picks up her book again. She doesn’t start reading, though—her fingers just trace the edge of the pages absentmindedly.

I don’t know what’s coming, but I know one thing for sure: no matter what happens, I’ll keep Tory safe. Even if it means putting myself in the line of fire to do it.

Tory

I sit on the couch, my book open in my lap, but the words blur together, meaningless. My phone rests beside me, mocking me with its silence. I've tried calling my dad at least a dozen times today, and each time it's gone straight to voicemail. I know he's probably busy, that these Summits are hectic and demanding, but knowing doesn't stop the worry twisting in my stomach.

I just need to hear his voice, to know he's okay.

The sound of pots clinking in the kitchen pulls me out of my thoughts, and I glance toward the open doorway. Ranger's there, moving with an ease and focus that seems second nature to him. He's chopping vegetables now, the rhythmic sound of the knife on the cutting board oddly soothing.

He's been so steady through all of this, always knowing the right thing to say, the right thing to do. I don't know how he manages to stay so calm when everything feels so uncertain.

"Smells good," I call softly, trying to distract myself from the ache in my chest.

Ranger glances over his shoulder, his lips curving into a small smile. "It'll taste even better."

I can't help but smile back, though it feels faint. His presence is a comfort, even when my thoughts threaten to spiral.

“Come on,” he says, motioning me over. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

I set my book aside and make my way into the kitchen, leaning against the counter as he tosses a handful of diced vegetables into a sizzling pan. The aroma of garlic and herbs fills the air, and for the first time today, I feel a hint of my appetite returning.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I say softly.

He shrugs, his focus on the stove. “Figured you could use something to take your mind off things.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, my voice barely audible.

He turns to face me then, his dark eyes steady and reassuring. “I talked to Dean,” he says, and my breath catches. “He assured me everything is running smoothly at the Summit. Your dad’s fine, Tory. He’s surrounded by top-level security, and Dean’s got his team keeping a close eye on everything.”

The tension in my chest eases slightly at his words, though not completely. “Are you sure?”

Ranger nods, his voice firm. “I wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t. Dean’s on top of it, and your dad is one of the most important people there. No one’s taking any chances.”

I take a deep breath, letting his words sink in. He wouldn’t lie to me. I know that much.

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling some of the weight lift from my shoulders. “Thank you.”

He smiles faintly, turning back to the stove to finish plating the food. A few minutes later, we’re sitting at the small kitchen table, a steaming plate of chicken and

vegetable stir-fry in front of me.

“It looks amazing,” I say, and I mean it. The colors are vibrant, and the aroma is enough to make my stomach growl.

“Dig in,” Ranger says, nodding toward my plate.

I take a bite, and the flavors burst in my mouth—savory and perfectly seasoned. “This is really good,” I say, looking up at him.

He smirks, a hint of pride in his expression. “Glad you think so. I wasn’t sure if it’d measure up to your fancy science meals.”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “Science meals? You mean takeout and microwavable pasta?”

“Exactly,” he says, his smirk widening.

We fall into an easy rhythm as we eat, the earlier tension slowly fading. The conversation shifts to lighter topics—our favorite movies, favorite foods, even a debate about whether pineapple belongs on pizza. (He’s firmly against it; I’m a staunch defender.)

By the time we finish dinner, I feel lighter, calmer. The worry is still there, but it’s not as suffocating.

“Thanks for this,” I say as I set my fork down.

Ranger leans back in his chair, his dark eyes watching me carefully. “Anytime.”

I help clear the table.

“You don’t have to help. I can take care of this,” Ranger says, taking the plate from my hands.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind helping.”

He deposits the plates into the sink and takes hold of my hands. “Tory, I don’t know what’s happening between us, but I don’t want this to end.”

I smile wide. “Me either.”

He pushes me against the kitchen counter and kisses me. My eyes drift shut as he trails kisses down my neck. I’m completely in the moment with him.

He leans back, staring at me. “You’re so beautiful.”

I blush. I feel like telling him he’s the epitome of male beauty, but I lean up, claiming his lips with my own. Because that’s what I want to do right now. Claim him. I want this man to be mine, and only mine.

I want him inside me, so once I finish kissing him, I lower my night pants. He watches as I lift my t-shirt over my head and fling it to the floor.

“So fucking needy,” he says right before kissing me once more, removing my clothing as he does.

It’s so crazy. We’re right here in the middle of the kitchen, but I no longer care when his body comes in contact with mine.

He repositions me, so my chest is against the cool granite countertop. He slaps my ass as he spreads my legs. “I hope you know I’m never letting you go.”

And I hope he means every word. Because I don't think I can ever let this man go, either.

"You're mine. From now until forever. You are mine ." He sinks his dick inside me, pushing slowly as I take him all the way in.

It feels better than the times before, mainly because I know what to expect now, but more so because of the words he's said to me. I am his.

And I want to prove it to him.

I lean my head back, wanting his lips on my own. But he doesn't give me what I want. Instead, he teases me, kissing down my neck and to the back of my ear.

"Tell me what you want, sweetheart," he says as he thrusts deeper into me.

"A kiss," I moan out.

He murmurs against the shell of my ear, "Is that it? Just a simple kiss?"

I nod, and he wraps his fingers into my hair until he closes his hands into a fist and tugs gently. "Please."

He leans, breathing me in. "You're being such a good girl, making me want to come all over your ass. I guess I can reward you." He kisses me, his tongue going nearly all the way down my throat. I moan out as soon as he breaks the kiss.

He ramps up his speed, rocking his body into me harder. He controls my movements and leans my head down, and I place my cheek on the cool counter.

The sounds of our love-making echo throughout the kitchen, and my body takes

flight. I'm no longer thinking about tomorrow or the future. I'm only thinking about my body's fire right now. How there's a current pulsing through my veins and I want to reach that pinnacle moment where everything comes crashing back down to earth. And I want to reach it with Ranger. I want him to be the man who drives me higher and higher. My heartbeat races so fast I may keel over and die, but I no longer care, because I feel like I'm flying.

My body builds and my core tightens. "Yes, oh god, yes," I scream out.

Ranger goes faster, groaning out strings of curses that would make a sailor blush.

I have to say it turns me on in the most wicked of ways. I love the filth that possesses him when he's turned on. I love the control he loses when he scans my naked body.

It's like he's seen nothing so sexy, and it makes me want to do anything for him.

"Come all over me, sweetheart," he groans out.

He reaches around with one hand and rubs my clit, and it makes me go temporarily insane. My body bucks beneath him and I reach my orgasm just before he reaches his. He pulls out, releasing all over me once more. I'm beginning to love it.

"What are you doing to me?" he mutters, and I'm not sure if he meant for me to hear that. It was low, like it escaped him before he could stuff it back in.

"The same thing you're doing to me," I breathe out.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

This woman is doing something to me I can't quite comprehend. Making me break rules I never thought I would.

I kiss the back of her shoulder before leaving her to find a towel. I clean her up quickly and Tory leans off the counter, picking up her clothes. We clean up the kitchen together, and when we're done we settle on the couch together.

"So, do the crystals have a special meaning, or are they just crystals?" I ask, picking up what looks like a pink rock.

"That's a rose quartz, and the crystals emit an energy."

"What energy does this one emit?" I turn the crystal over in my hand, trying to feel this energy she speaks of.

"Universal love. It gives off feelings of love, acceptance, and caring."

Normally, I'd laugh off this type of talk, but the way her eyes sparkle like sapphires makes me want to take what she says as gospel. I've never known anything about crystals, and she's also one of the smartest women on the planet, so perhaps there is some merit to this thing. I close my fist around the rock, trying to channel the energy into my body.

I sit there, staring at the small crystal in my hand, waiting for... something. Anything. But nothing happens.

“Does it take a bit of time?” I ask, my tone teasing but curious.

Tory glances up at me from her seat on the couch, her expression soft and thoughtful. “It’s not a magic crystal,” she says with a small smile, her voice gentle but sure. “I think when people know the meaning of the crystals, it opens them up to allowing just that into their lives. Like, when they wear a pink crystal, it’s not the crystal itself doing anything—it’s them. It makes them more open, more willing to accept love into their world.”

Her words hit me harder than I expect, settling deep in my chest like a stone dropped into still water. More open to love.

It’s not just what she says, but the way she says it—with so much quiet certainty, like she knows exactly what she’s talking about. Like she believes it.

I stare at her, the warmth in her blue eyes, the way her fingers trace the edges of the crystal in her lap. She’s not just talking about anyone wearing a pink crystal. She’s talking about herself.

And maybe... maybe she’s talking about me too.

Before I even realize what I’m doing, I lean forward, cupping her face gently in my hands. Her skin is soft and warm under my touch, and her eyes widen slightly as I tilt her chin up.

“Tory,” I murmur, my voice low and rough, the words catching in my throat. “I want to be with you.”

I close the distance before she can respond, capturing her lips with mine in a kiss that’s slow and deep, filled with every emotion I’ve been holding back. Her hands slide up to rest on my arms, her fingers curling against my skin, and for a moment,

the world fades away.

When I pull back, her eyes are wide, her cheeks flushed. Her lips part slightly, and she stares at me like she can't quite believe what she just heard.

"You... you want to be with me?" she whispers, her voice trembling.

I nod, brushing my thumb over her cheek. "I do."

A smile spreads across her face, small at first, but then it grows, lighting up her entire expression. Her blue eyes shimmer with unshed tears as she whispers back, "I want that too."

"Say it again," I say, my voice thick with emotion.

"I want to be with you too," she says, her voice steadier this time.

"Again," I whisper, leaning closer, desperate to hear it.

"I want to be with you," she repeats, her hands sliding up to rest on my chest, right over my heart.

My heart feels like it might explode in my chest, each beat hammering against her touch. I press my forehead against hers, my eyes closing as I let the meaning of her words sink in.

She keeps saying it, over and over, each time softer, sweeter, like she's weaving the words into my very soul.

And with every repetition, I know one thing for certain—this woman has changed everything. She's not just in my life now; she is my life. My heart, my world, my

future.

I don't know what tomorrow holds, but as long as I have her, I'll face anything.

The morning light filters into the room, but it doesn't feel like morning. It feels heavy, like the calm before a storm. Tory lies curled against me, her breathing soft and steady, but I can feel the tension humming just beneath the surface. It matches the knot that's been twisting in my gut since last night.

"It's getting late," I murmur, running my hand gently along her arm. "We should get up."

She stirs, letting out a sleepy groan as she stretches. "It's still early," she mumbles, her voice thick with sleep.

I glance at the clock and sit up, scrubbing a hand over my face. "It's almost noon," I tell her, but my words feel hollow as another thought crashes into me.

Something's wrong.

Her father hasn't called.

"Tory," I say, my voice sharper than I intend. "Your father hasn't called. He didn't call last night either."

Her head snaps up, and the sleepiness vanishes from her eyes in an instant. "Where's my phone?" she asks, already sliding out from under the covers and scanning the room.

Good question. Where's my phone?

I slide out of bed, padding through the living room and into the kitchen. Shit. “Fourteen missed calls from Dean,” I whisper into the air.

I head back into the bedroom as I hit send to call Dean. I hold the phone to my ear, waiting, the ringing stretching longer than it should. Finally, Dean picks up, his voice sharp and agitated.

“Ranger, where the hell have you been?” he barks.

“What’s going on?” I snap back, the tension in my chest coiling tighter.

“It’s the Summit,” Dean says, his tone clipped. “Malser’s gone missing. His team lost contact with him late last night, and no one’s been able to reach him since.”

The words slam into me like a freight train. Missing? Malser’s missing ?

“What do you mean he’s missing?” I demand, my voice low and dangerous.

“His security detail found no signs of anything in his hotel suite,” Dean explains. “Bravo team’s already on it, but we’ve got no solid leads yet. Whoever did this knew what they were doing.”

I glance at Tory, who’s watching me with wide, terrified eyes. “What about Tory?” I ask, my voice sharp. “If they’ve taken him—”

“Exactly,” Dean interrupts. “She’s the next logical target. I need you to move her. Now. That location’s been compromised; you’ve been there too long. We can’t take any chances.”

My mind is already racing, running through contingency plans and exit strategies. “What about her father?” I ask, my tone grim.

“Bravo’s combing through everything—footage, communications, witnesses. We’re doing everything we can to find him, but these guys are good. It’s going to take time.”

“Time we don’t have,” I growl.

“Get her out, Ranger,” Dean orders, his voice hard. “And keep her safe.”

“I will,” I say, ending the call without another word.

The silence in the room is deafening as I lower the phone. Tory’s standing at the foot of the bed, clutching her phone like it’s a lifeline. Her blue eyes are wide, her face pale, and I can see the panic starting to creep in.

“What did Dean say about finding my father?” she whispers.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady. “They’re trying to locate him now.”

The color drains from her face, and she sinks onto the edge of the bed, her hands trembling. “What?” she breathes. “How?”

I crouch in front of her, resting my hands on her knees. “I’m not sure,” I say carefully. “Dean’s team is on it, and I trust them. But right now, we need to move.”

Her breath comes in short, shaky bursts, and I can see the fear threatening to overwhelm her. “Move?”

“This location might be compromised,” I explain. “If they took your dad, they might come after you next. We’re not staying here another minute.”

She nods slowly, her hands curling into fists against her thighs. “Okay,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

I stand, grabbing my phone and weapon, my movements quick and efficient. “Pack your stuff,” I tell her. “I’ll handle the rest.”

She moves to the dresser, her hands shaking as she pulls out clothes and stuffs them into a bag. I watch her for a moment, my chest tightening at the sight of her trying to hold it together.

“Tory,” I say softly, stepping closer. She looks up at me, her blue eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“I can’t lose him,” she whispers, her voice breaking.

“You won’t,” I say firmly, resting a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll find him. But right now, I need you to trust me.”

She nods, her lip trembling as she zips up the bag. “I do,” she says quietly.

“Good,” I reply, my voice steady. “Because I’m not letting anything happen to you. Not now. Not ever.”

She looks at me for a long moment, her fear giving way to something else—something like hope. And for the first time since the phone call, I feel like we might actually have a chance.

But only if we move fast.

Tory

We leave the house in a hurry, my heart pounding so loudly it feels like it might drown out the sound of our footsteps. Ranger's hand is firm on the small of my back, guiding me toward the truck he's pulled up to the front door. His movements are quick and precise, his jaw tight, his eyes scanning the area like a hawk.

"Ranger," I whisper, my voice trembling as I climb into the passenger seat. "What if they've already found him? What if—"

"Stop," he interrupts gently but firmly, closing the driver's door and starting the engine in one fluid motion. His dark eyes flick to me, steady and reassuring. "Your father's strong. He's got people working around the clock to find him. And I'm here to keep you safe. Nothing's going to happen to you. I promise."

I nod, swallowing hard, trying to cling to his words. But the knot in my stomach won't go away. I glance out the window as we pull onto the highway, the familiar landscape slipping away behind us.

The car ride is silent, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Ranger's hands grip the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles white, but his eyes are focused on the road. Every so often, his gaze flicks to the rearview mirror, checking for anyone following us.

After what feels like hours, we pull into a gas station. The bright overhead lights are almost jarring after the darkness of the highway, casting long shadows on the pavement.

“I’ll fill up,” Ranger says, turning off the engine. “Do you need anything?”

“I need the restroom,” I reply, my voice still shaky.

He nods, his eyes locking onto mine. “Go ahead, but don’t take too long. I’ll be right here.”

I step out of the truck, clutching my phone tightly in my hand as I head toward the gas station convenience store. The cool night air bites at my skin, and I wrap my arms around myself, glancing back at Ranger. He’s standing by the pump, his sharp gaze following my every step.

I feel a small flicker of relief knowing he’s watching me. I’m safe.

The bell above the door jingles as I step inside, the harsh fluorescent lights making the interior feel sterile and cold. I spot the restroom sign in the corner and hurry toward it, eager to get this over with so we can get back on the road.

The restroom is small but clean enough, and I take a moment to splash cold water on my face, trying to calm my nerves. My reflection stares back at me from the mirror, wide-eyed and pale.

“You’re okay,” I whisper to myself. “You’re okay.”

But the moment I step out of the restroom, something feels wrong. The air feels heavy, the store too quiet. I glance toward the door leading back outside, and my breath catches in my throat.

A hand clamps over my mouth before I can scream, and strong arms wrap around me, dragging me backward. My phone slips from my fingers, clattering to the floor as I kick and thrash against my captor, but it’s no use.

“Shut up,” a voice hisses in my ear, low and menacing.

Panic floods me as I’m dragged out a side door I didn’t even notice before. My heart pounds in my chest, and I try to scream for Ranger, but the sound is muffled by something shoved into my mouth.

The cold night air hits my skin as I’m forced toward a van parked on the side of the building. The back doors are flung open, and I’m tossed inside like a sack of potatoes.

I scramble to sit up, my eyes darting wildly around the dark interior. That’s when I see them.

My blood runs cold.

It’s the same guys from the diner.

Tank Top is there, his cocky smirk illuminated by the dim light overhead. The others are close behind him, their faces twisted into cruel grins.

“Well, well,” Tank Top drawls, crossing his arms as he looks down at me. “I bet you never expected to ever see us again, huh?”

I try to scream, try to kick or fight, but one of them pins me down, his grip like iron on my shoulders. Tears sting my eyes as fear floods every inch of my body.

Ranger.

He’ll realize I’m gone. He has to.

But for now, I’m alone, trapped in a van with the very men I’d been so desperate to avoid. And all I can do is pray Ranger finds me before it’s too late.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

Something feels wrong.

It's not anything I can put my finger on—just a cold knot settling deep in my gut after I watched Tory walk into the gas station. I keep my eyes on the entrance, leaning against the truck with my arms crossed, scanning the lot for anything out of place.

She's only been inside for a few minutes, but every second feels like an eternity.

Then I see it.

A black van parked on the far edge of the lot, engine running. The windows are dark, but I can feel the tension rolling off it. My heart slams in my chest, and every instinct I've honed over the years kicks into overdrive.

"Tory," I mutter under my breath, already moving toward the gas station entrance.

Before I can make it halfway there, the van lurches forward, tires screeching as it peels out of the lot.

No.

My stomach drops, and I break into a sprint, my eyes locking onto the van as it speeds down the road. The driver comes into view.

Tank Top Man.

“Tory!” I yell, but it’s useless. She’s not here. She’s in that van.

I dive back into the truck, my hands shaking with adrenaline as I start the engine. The tires squeal as I pull out of the lot, my foot slamming the gas pedal to the floor.

I know they have her.

The van weaves through traffic ahead of me, trying to blend in, but it’s too late. I’ve got them in my sights, and I’m not letting them out of it.

“Tory,” I growl under my breath, gripping the wheel so tightly my knuckles turn white. “I’m coming for you.”

The van takes a sharp turn onto a side road, and I follow, the truck roaring as I push it harder. My mind races through every possibility, every scenario, but one thought overrides them all:

I will get her back.

No matter what it takes.

I follow them now, my headlights off, staying just far enough behind to avoid detection. The road is dark and mostly empty, which makes tailing them without being noticed trickier than I’d like. My phone buzzes in the center console, and I grab it, keeping one hand on the wheel.

“Dean,” I bark, answering without pleasantries. “The photos you sent us of those guys are tied to Earth’s Bounty.”

“That eco-extremist group? Makes sense. They’ve been quiet for a while, but this kind of move fits their profile.” I press the gas harder. “I’m on their tail,” I say, my

eyes locked on the van ahead. “They’ve got Tory.”

Dean swears under his breath. “Tell me everything.”

I relay the story of how Tory was taken at the gas station, and Dean curses more as I tell him how they tossed her into an unmarked van, and I’m hot on their tracks.

“They’re young, reckless, and stupid,” I growl. “But I need to know where they’re taking her—and I think they’ll lead me to Malser.”

“Do not lose that van,” Dean orders.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I snap.

Dean exhales sharply. “Earth’s Bounty has a compound not far from Saint Pierce. Rural area, lots of land, good for keeping people hidden. Bravo’s already been deployed. We’ll have eyes in the air soon, and I’ll send their coordinates once we confirm the location.”

“I’m closing in,” I say, glancing at the speedometer. The van takes an unexpected turn down a narrow dirt road, and I slow my truck, keeping enough distance to stay out of sight.

“Ranger,” Dean says, his tone more urgent now. “Do not engage. Let Bravo handle this.”

“I’ll do what I need to do,” I reply, my jaw tightening.

“Damn it, Ranger, don’t go lone wolf on me!”

“Dean,” I cut him off, my voice like steel. “If we wait too long, Tory and her father

could both be dead. I won't let that happen."

The road twists and turns, trees closing in on either side, until the van finally slows and pulls into a hidden driveway. A set of gates looms ahead, just visible in the moonlight, and I pull off to the side of the road, killing my engine.

"They're here," I say quietly. "The compound."

"I've got Bravo en route," Dean says quickly. "Give them time to get into position."

"There's no time," I growl, my hand already reaching for the weapon holstered at my side. "They've got Tory, Dean. By the time your team gets here, it could be too late."

"Ranger—"

"I'm not waiting," I say firmly, ending the call before he can argue further.

I step out of the truck, the cool night air sharp against my skin as I move toward the compound. My heart pounds in my chest, but my mind is clear, focused.

They took Tory.

They made it personal.

And they're going to regret it.

As I approach the gates, my phone buzzes again in my pocket. I pull it out, already knowing it's Dean.

"Don't do this, Ranger," he warns, his voice low and tense. "Bravo's minutes away. Let them handle it."

“Every second we wait is a second they could hurt her—or worse,” I reply, my voice cold and steady. “I’m not standing here while she’s in there.”

“Ranger, think about this—”

“I have,” I say, cutting him off. “And I’m going in.”

I end the call, sliding my phone back into my pocket as I move closer to the gates. My grip tightens on my weapon, my senses sharp as adrenaline courses through my veins.

Tory’s in there.

And I’m getting her out.

Tory

The van comes to a jarring stop, and I'm thrown sideways, my shoulder slamming into the wall. Pain radiates through me, but it's nothing compared to the fear twisting in my chest. The men in the front laugh, their voices low and cruel, and I press myself into the corner, desperate to disappear.

"Let's go," one of them snaps, yanking open the back doors.

I'm dragged out, my feet scraping against the rough gravel as they haul me toward a large, looming building. It's dark and cold, the air thick with the smell of damp wood and diesel. My heart pounds in my chest as I struggle against their grip, but it's no use.

Inside, the space is cavernous and dimly lit, the air heavy with dust. I'm shoved forward, stumbling until my knees hit the concrete floor. My breath catches in my throat when I see him.

My father.

He's tied to a chair in the center of the room, his face pale but determined. His glasses are crooked, and there's a cut above his eyebrow, but he looks up at me with a spark of defiance in his eyes.

"Tory," he breathes, his voice trembling.

"Dad!" I cry, tears streaming down my face.

Before I can move toward him, they grab me again, forcing me into a chair beside him. The ropes bite into my wrists and ankles as they tie me down, and my heart races with terror.

“Leave her alone,” my father says sharply, his voice stronger now. “She has nothing to do with this.”

Tank Top steps forward, his smirk infuriatingly smug. “Oh, she’s got everything to do with this, Doc. She’s leverage. Motivation. Insurance.”

He crouches down in front of my father, his grin widening. “You see, we’re not here to hurt anyone. But people need to know the truth. Science and food shouldn’t mix. You’re playing God, and it’s time the world sees the danger you’re putting them in.”

“This is absurd,” my father snaps. “What I’m doing will save millions of lives—starving people, children—”

“You’re poisoning them,” Tank Top interrupts, his voice rising. “And we’re going to make sure everyone knows it.”

He straightens, pacing in front of us like a self-proclaimed prophet. “We’re making a video,” he announces to the room. “You’re going to tell the world exactly what you’ve been doing. And we’re going to show them why it’s wrong.”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head. “You can’t do this.”

“Oh, we can,” Tank Top says, his grin darkening as he looks at me.

Terror grips me, and I glance at my father. He’s watching me, his eyes filled with guilt and fear, and it breaks something inside me. I can’t let them hurt him—or use him to spread their lies.

The room fills with movement as the men prepare for their so-called broadcast, dragging out cameras and equipment. My mind races, searching for a way out, but the ropes are too tight, and my voice feels small and useless.

And then, like a thunderclap, the door bursts open.

The men scatter, shouting in panic as Ranger storms in, his presence commanding and unyielding. His weapon moves with precision, dropping two of them before they can even react.

“Ranger!” I scream, relief flooding through me like a tidal wave.

Tank Top grabs a gun from a nearby table, his hands trembling as he points it at Ranger. The room goes still, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

But Ranger doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t even blink. Instead, he laughs—a low, dangerous sound that sends chills down my spine.

“Go ahead,” he says, his voice steady and cold. “Pull the trigger. But know this—I’m not leaving without the woman I love.”

My heart stops. Did he just...

Tank Top hesitates, his grip on the gun faltering. He looks at Ranger, then at me, and I see the fear creeping into his eyes.

“You’re bluffing,” Tank Top says, but his voice lacks conviction.

Ranger takes a step forward, his weapon trained on the man. “Try me.”

The room is electric, the air crackling with unspoken tension. My heart pounds in my

chest, but for the first time since this nightmare began, I feel hope.

Because Ranger is here.

And he's not leaving without me.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Ranger

My finger hovers on the trigger, my weapon trained on Tank Top as he shifts nervously, the barrel of his own gun trembling in my direction. Every fiber of my being is screaming at me to end this—to take the shot and get Tory out of here.

But then, the sound of boots and authoritative shouts fills the compound. The Bravo team bursts in, their movements swift and efficient as they secure the room. Guns are trained on the remaining Earth's Bounty members, and I lower my weapon just enough to let them take over.

“Drop it!” one of the Bravo team yells, and Tank Top freezes. He hesitates for a moment too long, and one of the operatives knocks the gun from his hand, shoving him to the ground and cuffing him in one smooth motion.

The tension in the room evaporates in an instant, replaced by the controlled chaos of Bravo securing the scene.

I waste no time.

“Tory!” I shout, rushing across the room.

She looks up at me, her blue eyes wide and shimmering with unshed tears. Her father is tied up beside her, his face pale but determined. I grab my Kershaw knife from my pocket, cutting through the ropes binding her wrists and ankles first. She collapses into my arms the second she's free, her body trembling against mine.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur, holding her tightly. My heart feels like it might burst as I press my lips to the top of her head. “You’re safe now.”

“I knew you’d come,” she whispers, her voice muffled against my chest.

I pull back just enough to look at her, cupping her face in my hands. “Always,” I say, my voice raw.

I turn to her father, quickly cutting him loose. He stands shakily, his expression a mix of relief and gratitude. “Are you okay, sir?” I ask, steadying him as he wobbles slightly.

“I am now,” he says, his voice hoarse. He looks at Tory, his gaze softening, and then his eyes flick to me, and for a moment, we just look at each other. Then he nods, his expression somber but genuine. “Thank you,” he says simply. “You saved us.”

I nod back, unable to find the right words.

“I should tell you something,” Tory says, her voice soft but steady. She looks at her father, her hands still clutching his. “I’ve fallen in love with him.”

Her father’s brows lift in surprise, but after a moment, he smiles faintly. “Well,” he says, his voice warming, “if anyone’s going to keep you safe, I suppose it’s him.”

Before I can respond, paramedics rush in, ushering Tory and her father to a corner of the room for medical evaluations. I hover close, watching as they’re checked over. Tory keeps glancing back at me, her eyes never straying far, and I give her a small nod to let her know I’m not going anywhere.

A familiar voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Ranger.”

I turn to see Dean walking into the room, his expression unreadable as he surveys the scene. “Nice work,” he says, his tone clipped but approving.

“They’re all secured?” I ask, nodding toward the Earth’s Bounty members now in cuffs and surrounded by Bravo team operatives.

“Every last one of them,” Dean confirms. “The merry band of idiots are headed straight to federal custody. And with the evidence we’ve collected here, they won’t see the light of day for a long time.”

“Good,” I say, the weight in my chest easing slightly.

Dean’s gaze shifts to Tory and her father, his expression softening just a fraction. “They okay?”

“They will be,” I reply.

Dean claps a hand on my shoulder. “You did good, Ranger. Real good.”

I nod, but my focus is already back on Tory. She finishes with the paramedics and walks toward me, her steps unsteady but determined.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight again,” she says, her voice trembling slightly as she reaches me.

I pull her into my arms, holding her close. “You won’t have to,” I promise, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

The chaos around us fades into the background as I hold her, my world narrowing to

just this moment. She's safe. Her father's safe.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel like I've found something worth holding onto.

Forever.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

Tory

Life has changed in ways I never could have imagined since I met Ranger. Sitting at my worktable, I carefully string tiny crystals onto a delicate silver chain, the sunlight streaming through the window and making the stones sparkle. It's peaceful here, a perfect balance between the life I had before and the one I'm building now.

My dad and I are still close. He's traveling and calls every other day to check on me. I still help him as much as I can, diving into data analysis or proofing his presentations, but now it's on my terms. I'm no longer tethered to his world twenty-four-seven, and he's more than happy about that. He says every time we talk how grateful he is that I've found someone to love—someone who brings out the best in me.

And Ranger... Ranger is everything.

I glance over at the small picture on my desk. It's of the two of us on the beach, his arm around me, my head tilted against his shoulder. We both look so happy, so in love. And we are.

I smile to myself, thinking about our plans. I'll be moving in with him soon, officially trading in my dad's little apartment for the cozy beach house he's made into a home. It feels right—like every piece of my life is finally falling into place.

It's not just my personal life that's blossoming, either. My jewelry business is finally taking off. What started as a hobby to pass the time has become something bigger than I ever thought it could be. People actually want to buy my designs, and the little

online shop I opened has been busier than I ever expected.

The thought fills me with pride. Every time someone purchases a piece, it's like a little reminder that I'm capable of creating something beautiful—something meaningful.

I finish the necklace and hold it up to the light, admiring the way the crystals catch the sun. It's simple but elegant, and I can't wait to send it off to its new owner.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I glance at the screen to see a text from Ranger.

Can't wait to see you tonight. Burgers on the grill?

I laugh softly, my heart doing that little flutter it always does when I think of him.

Perfect

I reply, setting the phone down and leaning back in my chair.

Life isn't perfect, but it's pretty damn close. I have my dad, my jewelry, and the love of my life. And for the first time, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Happy. Fulfilled. Loved.

And I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

The warm breeze carries the smell of grilling burgers, mingling with the salty scent of the ocean. I sit on the porch of Ranger's beach house, a glass of iced tea in my hand, watching as he mans the grill with that calm, steady confidence that somehow still makes my stomach flutter.

This is our life now—simple, peaceful, and full of love. No more chaos, no more danger. Just us.

“Smells good,” I call out, leaning back with a contented sigh.

Ranger glances over his shoulder, flashing me one of those rare, crooked smiles that always makes my heart skip. “Better taste good too,” he says, flipping a burger with practiced ease.

“It will,” I reply, grinning. “You’re practically a pro at this now.”

“Only because you keep coming over,” he teases, his voice warm.

I take a sip of my tea, watching the way the sun catches the edges of his dark hair. He invited me over tonight, like he does most nights now, and it feels more like home here than anywhere else ever has.

The days of constantly worrying about my father’s work or being dragged from one corner of the globe to another feel like a lifetime ago.

This is where I belong. With Ranger.

He walks over, and I stand up.

I wrap my arms around his neck, leaning into him as the swing sways gently behind us. “You’re lucky everything worked out,” I say, my voice soft but teasing.

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” he murmurs, his hands settling on my waist. “I’m really good at what I do.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You really are.” I think about how close we came to never

seeing each other ever again. How the Earth's Bounty Group almost got away with kidnapping my father and me.

We stand there for a moment, the world around us fading into the background. His arms are my safe place, his steady heartbeat the rhythm that keeps me grounded.

"Ranger," I say softly, tilting my head to look up at him.

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

His smile is small but full of meaning, and he presses his forehead against mine. "I love you too, Tory Ann. Always."

The grill sizzles in the background, the ocean waves providing a soothing soundtrack to our quiet moment. I never imagined my life would lead me here—to this man, to this love—but now I can't imagine it any other way.

It's not perfect, but it's ours. And that's all I've ever wanted.

I couldn't be happier if I tried.

The smell of sizzling burgers and grilled veggies fills the air as Dean and his wife, Sophia, step onto the porch, carrying a bottle of wine and a plate of homemade brownies. After Ranger introduces us, Sophia hands me the plate of brownies.

"It's so nice to meet you," she says.

"You too. I've heard so much about you." I beam, and motion for her to take a seat on the porch swing. "And these look amazing. I'll never say no to chocolate."

Dean follows Ranger to the grill, his casual stance betrayed by the constant scan of his surroundings. I guess it's second nature to him, just like it is to Ranger.

"How're the other guys holding up?" Ranger asks as he flips the last burger and sets the spatula down.

Dean rubs the back of his neck, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Few hiccups here and there. Asher's in over his head pretending to be some heiress' fiancé. Boone's babysitting some pizzeria owner who's apparently feistier than she looks."

"And Orion?" Ranger asks, handing Dean a beer. "What's his situation?"

At that, Dean laughs, shaking his head. "Orion's got his hands full with not just his asset but her damn bird, too. He called me last week, sounding completely defeated."

Sophia chimes in from her seat, laughing. "A bird? What kind of bird?"

"A big one," Dean says, chuckling. "He said it's some exotic thing with an attitude. Jeb, I think it's called. Woke him up at five in the morning by landing on his head and squawking that it was hungry."

Ranger nearly chokes on his drink, and I double over laughing.

Sophia wipes a tear from her eye. "I can't imagine him dealing with that."

"Oh, he's dealing with it, all right," Dean says with a smirk. "Said the bird's more demanding than his client."

The laughter carries through the evening, lightening the mood and reminding me of how far we've all come. It feels good to be surrounded by people who understand what we've been through and still manage to find joy in the little things.

As the sun dips lower, casting the porch in a warm golden glow, Ranger wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me closer. His touch is comforting, grounding me in the moment.

Dean raises his beer in a mock toast. “Here’s to new beginnings, happy endings, and no more birds waking us up at ungodly hours.”

We all laugh, clinking glasses, and for a moment, everything feels perfect.

Later, as the stars begin to dot the night sky, Ranger and I sit side by side on the porch swing, my head resting against his shoulder. The soft murmur of conversation and the distant sound of waves create a peaceful backdrop, and I can’t help but smile.

“You happy?” he asks, his voice low and warm.

I turn to look at him, my heart swelling with emotion. “More than I ever thought I could be.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead, his arms tightening around me. “Good. Because I plan on keeping you this happy for the rest of your life.”

I laugh softly, the sound mingling with the night air. “You’d better.”

“Scout’s honor,” he says, holding up three fingers in mock sincerity.

And as we sit there, wrapped in each other’s arms, I realize that this is it. My happily ever after. It’s not perfect, and it’s certainly not what I ever expected—but it’s ours. And that makes it better than anything I could’ve dreamed.

Thank you so much for reading Tory and Ranger’s love story.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:10 am

The sun dips low on the horizon as I pull into the driveway, the familiar sight of our beach house coming into view. I cut the engine and sit for a moment, letting the hum of the truck fade into the background. It's been a few weeks, this latest security detail taking more out of me than I expected, but knowing I'm home now—knowing she's here—makes everything else melt away.

I grab my bag from the passenger seat and head up the front steps. The salty ocean breeze brushes past me, bringing with it the faint, mouthwatering scent of something cooking inside. I can't help but smile.

"Tory?" I call as I open the door, stepping into the warm glow of the living room.

"In the kitchen!" she shouts back, her voice light and happy.

I drop my bag by the door and head toward her, the tension from the job already fading with each step. When I reach the kitchen, the sight of her stops me dead in my tracks.

She's standing at the stove, stirring something in a pot, her blonde hair swept up into a messy bun. She's wearing one of my oversized T-shirts, and it falls just below her thighs, giving me a view of those long legs that still make my mouth go dry.

"Hey, you," she says, turning to smile at me, her eyes bright and full of warmth. "You're back early."

"Missed you," I say simply, closing the distance between us and wrapping my arms around her waist from behind. I bury my face in her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of

her. She smells like home.

She laughs softly, leaning back into me. “Missed you too. How was the job?”

“Same as always,” I murmur against her skin, pressing a kiss to the curve of her neck. “But I couldn’t wait to get back here.”

She tilts her head slightly, giving me better access, and I take full advantage, trailing slow kisses along her neck, my hands tightening around her waist.

“Ranger,” she whispers, a hint of a laugh in her voice. “Dinner’s going to burn if you keep that up.”

I chuckle, pulling back reluctantly. “Fine. But I’m not done with you.”

Her eyes sparkle as she turns in my arms, looping her hands around my neck. “Promise?”

I grin, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “You can count on it.”

We finish cooking together, the easy rhythm of our relationship falling back into place as if I never left. She stirs while I chop, and we talk about everything and nothing—how her jewelry business is booming, how my last job went, and how we’re thinking about adopting a dog once things settle down.

By the time we sit down to eat, the sky outside has turned a deep shade of purple, the first stars twinkling faintly above the horizon. The meal is simple but perfect—grilled fish, roasted vegetables, and a sparkling water she poured just before I walked in.

“So,” she says, swirling her water glass thoughtfully, “how long are you home this time?”

I lean back in my chair, watching her, memorizing every detail of her face. “As long as you’ll have me.”

Her lips twitch into a smile. “Forever sounds about right.”

After dinner, we move to the couch, the sounds of the ocean drifting in through the open windows. Tory curls up beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her, holding her close.

“This feels right,” she murmurs, tracing small circles on my chest with her finger.

“It does,” I agree, pressing a kiss to her hair.

For a while, we sit in comfortable silence, the only sounds are the soft crash of waves and the occasional creak of the house as it settles. But there’s something in her silence tonight, something thoughtful, almost hesitant.

“Tory,” I say softly, tilting her chin up so she’s looking at me. “What’s on your mind?”

She bites her lip, a nervous habit I’ve come to know well, and suddenly, I feel my heart rate kick up a notch.

“Ranger,” she says quietly, her eyes searching mine. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I nod, waiting, my hand resting lightly on her waist.

She takes a deep breath, her fingers tightening slightly on my shirt. “I’m pregnant.”

The words hang in the air between us, and for a moment, time seems to stop. My

mind spins, processing what she just said, but all I can focus on is the way her eyes are shining with a mixture of hope and fear.

“You’re pregnant,” I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper.

She nods, chewing on her bottom lip nervously. “I found out a few days ago. I wanted to tell you right away, but you were still on the job, and I didn’t want to—”

I cut her off by pulling her into a kiss, deep and slow, pouring every ounce of love and emotion I feel into it. When I finally pull back, I rest my forehead against hers, both of us breathing hard.

“You have no idea how happy you just made me,” I murmur, brushing my thumb over her cheek.

Her eyes widen slightly. “Really?”

“Really,” I say, smiling. “I love you, Tory. And I already love this baby.”

Relief washes over her face, and she laughs softly, a sound that fills me with nothing but pure joy. “I love you too, Ranger.”

We sit there for a while longer, wrapped up in each other, talking quietly about the future. About how we’ll turn the guest room into a nursery, about names we like, and about how our life is about to change in the best way possible.

Later, as we lie in bed, her head resting on my chest and her hand over her stomach, I can’t help but think about how far we’ve come. From the chaos of those early days to this—our quiet, happy life.

And now, we’re about to start the greatest adventure of all. Together. Forever.

Chapter One

Orion

I smack the snooze button again, the soft thud of it echoing in my dimly lit room. Seriously, who in their right mind thinks nine a.m. meetings are a good idea? Certainly not me. My body feels like lead, weighed down by the exhaustion from yet another late night spent indulging in my secret obsession—magic tricks.

Yeah, I'd never admit it to anyone, but there's something about the sleight of hand, the illusion, that captivates me. The precision, the control, the art of misdirection—it's a hidden talent of mine, one that I've spent countless hours perfecting. Under the cover of night, when the world is asleep, I'm up, practicing card tricks like it's my own little secret superpower. And, if I do say so myself, I'm damn good at it.

My fingers have a natural agility. They move with a kind of fluidity over the cards, shuffling and flipping them effortlessly. It's not just a party trick; it's skill, discipline, finesse. Few people can handle a deck the way I do—making cards disappear, pulling them out of thin air, or leaving an audience baffled when the ace of spades appears tucked neatly behind their ear. It's exhilarating.

The alarm shrieks again, more demanding this time, yanking me out of my daydream. I groan, throwing my rumpled blue blanket to the floor in frustration. Fine, I'm getting up. I rub my eyes, the clock flashing an accusatory 8:20 a.m. Ten minutes to get out the door—fantastic.

I leap out of bed and stumble through my morning routine like a man possessed. A wrinkled t-shirt is the first thing I grab from the pile of semi-clean clothes on the chair in the corner of my room. Not ideal, but it'll have to do. At least Dean, my boss, doesn't believe in suits and ties for these meetings. It's one of the few things I appreciate about him.

Dean's obsession with holding early-morning meetings has always puzzled me. He's one of those "stick to a schedule" types, convinced that knocking out meetings at the crack of dawn somehow frees up the rest of the day for productivity. Maybe for him, but for me? I'd prefer an extra hour of sleep.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, a text from Boone popping up. "Don't be late. You know Dean will notice." Great, just what I need. As if the anxiety about the meeting wasn't enough, I now have Boone in my ear reminding me of Dean's eagle-eye for tardiness. I throw on some jeans, grab my keys, and dash out the door, hoping I can make it downtown in record time.

As I race down the stairs, my mind drifts back to the deck of cards sitting on my desk. I'm already thinking about what new trick I'll try tonight. Maybe something a little more daring. Maybe, just maybe, I'll get brave enough to show someone—after all, what's the point of mastering an art if you never perform? But for now, I have to survive another one of Dean's early meetings.

Dean Maddox, the head of one of the world's largest security firms—though calling it a "security company" hardly does it justice—has a reputation for taking on the most challenging cases, the ones other firms shy away from. His relentless pursuit of an adversary has become something of a personal mission. It's also how he met his future bride, Sophia. They had to pretend to be married for a case, and somewhere along the way, Dean fell hopelessly in love with her. Their unconventional love story is one for the books, but right now, I need to focus on making it to that early meeting.

I race across town in my old Jeep, tires screeching as I speed through the traffic

lights. Bursting into the conference room, I'm a groggy mess, barely able to keep my eyes open.

"Why do you schedule these meetings so early in the morning?" I grumble, collapsing into the nearest chair, feeling the day's fatigue settle heavily over me.

Dean, Boone, Ranger, and Lincoln turn to look at me, their expressions a mix of curiosity and amusement. It's as if I'm some peculiar artifact they can't quite place. Maybe they've never been this tired before.

"It's nine a.m. I wouldn't exactly call that early," Dean chuckles, his gray eyes twinkling with mirth.

"Someone had a rough night," Boone observes, his grin widening as he leans back in his chair.

If only he knew. I let out a groan and rest my head on my arms, desperately trying to stay awake while I wait for the last person to arrive.

A few minutes later, Asher strides into the room, clearly apologetic. "Sorry I'm late," he says, offering Dean a sheepish smile.

"Thanks for being here, everyone," Dean begins, flipping through a stack of papers with practiced efficiency. "I know the past couple of months have been challenging with my search for Bishop. I want to extend my gratitude to each of you for your invaluable contributions in locating him."

As Dean speaks, I stifle another yawn, wishing more than anything for this meeting to be over so I can crawl back into bed and catch up on some much-needed sleep. The room's early morning light feels harsh, and the comfort of my bed seems like a distant dream.

“I know Isabel has been a tremendous help, and I’m incredibly lucky to have such an awesome sister,” Dean says, his tone filled with genuine appreciation. He glances at Lincoln, who’s watching attentively, before continuing, “Now, I have some assignments that have come up, and I want to assign each one.”

I force myself to focus, mentally kicking myself for not grabbing a coffee before the meeting. If only I had gotten up a bit earlier, I might have had the chance.

“Ranger, let’s start with you,” Dean says, sliding a thick file across the polished wooden desk. “The G-Summit Meeting is this weekend, and this is Tory Ann.”

Ranger picks up the file and begins flipping through the papers, his brow furrowing in concentration. “Is she attending the summit?”

“No, she’s not,” Dean replies, shaking his head. “Her father, the world-renowned scientist Frederick Malser, will be a keynote speaker. He’ll be there, and he’ll have his own personal security detail looking after him.”

Ranger looks up, curiosity piqued. “Why not have his own security team watch over his daughter as well?”

“Frederick has received several threats regarding his speech at the Summit,” Dean explains, his voice steady. “He’s adamant about keeping his daughter’s presence in town a secret. He wants everything to remain under the radar and is even hesitant about some members of his own security team.”

The room falls silent as everyone absorbs the information. I shift in my seat, mentally reviewing my to-do list. This is going to be a long day, but at least it’s starting to take shape.

“That sucks,” Ranger mutters, glancing down at the file in his hands with a frown.

“You’ll take her to the safe house near South Beach and keep her there until the Summit is over,” Dean instructs, his tone brooking no argument.

I let my gaze drift out of the conference room window, where the morning sun casts shimmering reflections over the ocean. The rhythmic pull of the waves lulls me into a semi-trance, momentarily pulling me away from the meeting’s intensity.

“Orion,” Dean continues, snapping me back to attention, “She’s the daughter of socialite Minnie Green. She’s been dealing with a persistent ex-boyfriend who’s been stalking her. Her mother insists on having security for her while she’s traveling to and from work.”

I shake my head, trying to clear the fog that seems to be enveloping my brain. I wish I could just shake off the exhaustion and focus.

“Ex-boyfriend?” I ask, my voice tinged with frustration. “Can’t I just take him out back, scare him half to death, and call it a day?” I reach for the file Dean slides toward me.

“It’s not that simple,” Dean replies, his expression serious.

I flip open the folder, and my breath catches. The photo inside nearly leaves me speechless. It never is, I mutter under my breath, staring at the striking green eyes gazing up at me from the picture. Damn. I’ve never seen anyone so stunningly beautiful in all my life. Her eyes are a mesmerizing shade of emerald, framed by thick lashes that curl just right, almost too perfect to be real. They seem to shimmer with a life of their own, pulling me in, and for a second, I forget where I am.

Her face, delicately sculpted like something out of a Renaissance painting, is all sharp cheekbones and soft curves. Her skin looks impossibly smooth, glowing with a warmth that contrasts against the cool, professional nature of the headshot. Full lips, perfectly balanced in shape and color, curve into a subtle, confident smile that seems

to challenge the world around her. She's magnetic, effortlessly radiant, the kind of woman who'd turn heads wherever she went without even trying.

Despite my best efforts to focus on Dean as he assigns tasks to Boone, my gaze keeps drifting back to Briar Green's photo. There's something about her that's impossible to ignore, a quiet intensity in her beauty that leaves an indelible mark. Even in a simple photograph, she radiates an energy that seems to leap off the page—an undeniable pull, as if she could see right through the camera and straight into my soul.

I hate to admit it, but I can understand why her ex-boyfriend can't let go. Briar's presence in the photo is magnetic, her beauty almost ethereal.

Dean's voice cuts through my thoughts, "I want everyone to know I'm here if you need anything." His words pull me abruptly from my fixation on Briar.

I force myself to refocus on her file, skimming through details about her job at the Miami Zoo, where she works with birds. I'm not the type to fall for someone at the mere sight of a photograph. Yet, as I stare at Briar, something within me shifts. A primal urge begins to stir. A rush of molten lava surges through my veins. A fierce, possessive rage ignites in my gut, compelling me to protect this woman with every ounce of my being. It's as if my body has decided on its own that her safety is now my responsibility, no matter what.

I glance at the name of the ex-boyfriend, Jason Baker, and an intense wave of hatred washes over me. It's not just dislike; I feel a deep, visceral anger, and I silently hope that by the end of this job, I'll have the chance to confront him one-on-one and make him understand just how much I despise him.

My thoughts shift abruptly as I read through the rest of the file. I'll also be spending time alone with Briar. I scan her address and the contact number for her parents. They want me to meet her at her job and then bring her to my place. My place?

The meeting wraps up, and I grab the file, heading out of the room with it clutched tightly in my hands.

“Asher, can you hang back a minute?” Dean calls out as I shut the door behind me.

Boone, still in high spirits, turns to the group. “We all need to catch up soon. It was a blast last time.”

My foggy brain struggles to reconcile the idea of a fun night with the guys and the serious task of protecting Briar. I just stand there, half-listening as my friends chat about planning another get-together.

“Maybe once I’m done with this assignment, we can do a guys’ poker night,” I suggest, trying to sound casual.

“I’m down with that,” Ranger replies, his trademark cocky attitude evident in his voice. “Of course, I want to play again.”

I can’t help but smile slightly at his enthusiasm. It seems that even amidst all this tension and responsibility, there’s still room for a bit of camaraderie. But for now, my focus is entirely on Briar and the job ahead.

Mother fucker stole all our money last time we had a poker night. I still remember losing three hundred bucks to that card shark. It was a painful lesson in gambling, but it was also the moment I decided to take cards more seriously. I never imagined that my obsession would lead me down the path to magic.

Ranger’s laughter cuts through my thoughts. “I’d love some more free money,” he jokes, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“No way. I’m not playing poker with this guy again,” Lincoln mutters, barely above a whisper. Lincoln’s the giant silent type—one of those stoic figures who keeps to

himself. I don't know him well, and honestly, neither does anyone else. "Besides, my job isn't exactly a walk in the park."

Ranger gives Lincoln a friendly slap on the shoulder, his grin widening. "I figured as much when Dean brought you in before everyone else. Must be a tough gig."

Lincoln merely nods, his expression unreadable. I can't help but appreciate the camaraderie among the group, even if it's tinged with a bit of competitive edge and unspoken tension.

Lincoln sighs deeply. "It's Isabel. She's being threatened."

That jolts me fully awake. Isabel is like family to us—one of the guys, really. We'd all put our lives on the line to protect her, just as we would for each other.

"Who's behind it?" Boone asks, his voice tight with the same fury I'm feeling.

Lincoln shrugs, his face a mask of frustration. "Not sure yet. Dean's got some leads. My job is to keep Isabel safe while he sorts it out."

"Good luck with that," I say with a forced laugh. "I'm sure she's thrilled about this."

Just then, the sharp click of Isabel's heels echoes through the hallway. The sound sets my nerves on edge. I imagine her frustration at being shielded, and I'm not keen on sticking around for the inevitable confrontation.

I quickly hit the elevator button, eager to escape before the real fireworks start. I've got to get to the Miami Zoo and focus on my own assignment.