



Protection for Asher (Safeguarded By The SEAL #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Christopher “Squat” Drake hadn’t seen Asher in years, but when his Uncle Bill said Asher was in trouble, he couldn’t let it go. They’d parted friends, but he’d always wondered what had happened to her.

Asher had only been looking for her best friend, Grace. She hadn’t meant to stumble into the trouble that awaited her. She never thought she would escape, and she didn’t think she would live. When Squat and his team find her, she is ready to give up hope.

Squat asks Asher to come for a visit and she knows he just meant as friends, but she can’t help falling for him.

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Asher Haller had gone way too deep in her search for her friend. When Grace had gone missing after a night out, the sheriff hadn't cared. No one seemed to think Grace ditching work and leaving her cat, Jorts, without food was a big deal, but Asher knew Grace wouldn't leave Jorts behind.

When she'd mentioned that she wanted to look for Grace, her friends at work had told her not to investigate. They told her to mind her own business, but who was minding Grace's business? Besides, what was she supposed to do? Just give up? Grace was missing, and no one was looking for her.

The sheriff had actually called Grace a runaway. Her friend had nothing to run from. She was an adult, had no children, and wasn't even in a long-term relationship. Grace was happy with her job and her life. She wouldn't have left Jorts behind. The cat was near perfect and Grace loved him.

After a few days of asking around, Asher found out that the party Grace had attended had been after hours at the Hoot and Hole.

Asher hadn't ever been into that bar, so she was a little nervous about going to the after party.

The Hoot and Hole was known as one of the rougher bars around town.

Good times were known to end with the police being called.

She wasn't into that kind of party scene.

Heck, she wasn't into any party scene. She liked curling up in her big chair at home and reading a thick book while drinking tea or hot cocoa.

On Friday nights, she would switch to wine, and if she was feeling adventurous, she would fix a cocktail.

The invitation to the after-hours party wasn't hard to get.

She'd dressed up, or thought she had, but she looked dull compared to the other women flitting around the room. Meeting new people was always awkward for her, and alcohol would help relax her, but she was sipping club soda to keep her wits about her. So far, she'd struck out.

After grabbing her second drink, she stood off to the side and let the wall prop her up as she studied the crowd.

Already, not even thirty minutes in, she'd committed some faux pas by asking a woman about Grace.

The weird looks she'd received had been enough to get her to walk away.

The second person she asked had told her to shut up or pay the price.

Asking what price seemed risky, instead she lurked on the outside of the action, trying to determine who she could trust enough to ask about Grace.

Her chance of finding information about Grace didn't look good.

After she'd been leaning against the wall for about ten minutes, a bulky guy came over with two drinks in his hands. The man didn't look like someone she wanted to encourage.

He tried to hand her one of the drinks, but she didn't take it. "What's a pretty girl like you doing over here by the wall?"

She smiled, though she wanted to tell the guy to go to hell. "Just looking for friends." The idea of coming here to find information about Grace had sounded great, but the reality of finding Grace was more difficult than she'd imagined.

"I'm your friend. Here." The guy shoved the drink at her again, forcing it into her hand. She took it so it didn't drop to the ground. "Drink up." The guy's smile sent a shiver down her spine.

"Thank you." No way would she drink anything some stranger offered her.

The guy leaned in closer, his smile spreading, making him look more evil than happy. "I don't think you're here to meet friends. You look like trouble."

His words caught her attention. Her gaze, which had been on the crowd, flashed to him. "I'm here to meet my friends. I'm not trouble. They're just running late."

"Is that why you were asking around about your other friend and where she was? You wanted to know if anyone had seen her." He leaned in closer so his lips were right beside her ear. "You know, it's not cool to lie."

She jerked away, worry filling her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His smile came back. This time, it was even slicker, almost macabre. "Drink up, sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart."

"If you don't drink that, you won't be anyone's sweetheart. Drink now."

She shook her head, and his hand wrapped around her wrist, forcing her hand holding the drink he'd given her to raise. He was strong, much stronger than her and the drink was at her lips. She should drop the drink.

“I don’t want to drink it.” Speaking had been a mistake. He took advantage of her open mouth and tilted the glass. She had to swallow or choke.

“You want to drink this because the alternative isn't something you want.” He leaned back and met her gaze, giving her a look that made her think he meant business. “Seriously, you need to drink up or else.”

She pretended to drink, but he was watching her, and pretending would only take her so far.

The dude tilted the glass more, and liquid slipped out from the corners of her mouth and ran down her chin to her neck and the front of her shirt.

Her eyes started to water, and she made the choice to let the drink spill on her as she stepped back.

Cold liquid flowed down the front of her shirt, and she let out a yelp that was ignored by others because someone had turned the music up.

This drink was exactly what she hadn't wanted.

Having strong alcohol on board would dull her senses.

Panic flared. Had they put drugs into her drink?

Drugs scared her. She needed to leave and fast.

Asher pushed away from the wall, but the guy stepped in front of her, blocking her path. She glanced up and met his gaze, not liking the menace she saw in his dark eyes. A shiver slid down her back, and she backed away from him. He moved closer, pinning her to the wall.

“Where do you think you are going?”

“I need to use the restroom.” She had to get the liquid, whatever she’d consumed of it, out of her body.

“I don’t think so.”

“But I—” His hand wrapped around her throat, pinning her against the wall, causing her head to slam into the hard surface. Pain flickered but didn't grow as he held her loosely, but not loose enough for her to get away.

“The only place you’re going is with me. You could have made this easy and finished the drink, but you didn’t. Now you’re going to be awake for it all.”

Asher’s chest tightened and she could barely get a breath in.

Fear swirled as she desperately searched for an exit.

She shouldn’t be here. Her friends had been right, she had no business coming to search for Grace.

She should have let the police take care of finding her friend, but she hadn’t trusted them.

Now she was in the same situation Grace had been in, and she knew no one would come looking for her.

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Christopher “Squat” Drake eyed the phone, unhappy to see his uncle’s name pop up on the display. He had to answer. Otherwise, he would hear about it from his parents for at least the next six months. The last thing he needed was guilt piled on to his already hectic life.

He punched the button to answer, glad his uncle wasn’t insisting on doing a video call. “Hello, Uncle Bill.”

“Christopher, it’s good to hear your voice.”

He couldn’t lie. It wasn’t good to hear from Bill.

The man had terrorized him when he’d been younger.

Shortness had no place in his family, and Bill had made sure to let Christopher know he had no place because he was short.

There were other things, but the crux of Bill terrorizing him had been because of his height.

Neither the Navy nor the SEALs he worked with cared how short he was.

All they cared about was how good he was at his job.

He had no issues keeping up with the taller guys.

Plus he could get into spots they couldn’t.

Every team he'd been a part of saw him as an asset, not a detriment.

He'd figured out how to access the obstacles course and make it his bitch.

He dominated in physical activity, and he kicked ass at swimming.

He was an all around fierce operator who got the job done.

"What do you need?" He tried to sound pleasant, but there was a little too much anger in his voice.

Bill was silent for a moment but didn't hang up. "You always were a little shit. Should have pushed you in that well when you were younger."

The open shaft had been on their land and should have been capped long before he'd been born.

They'd capped it after they saw some documentary about some kid who fell down a well.

He remembered Bill joking about shoving him in before they capped it.

It hadn't been funny then and it wasn't funny now.

Squat abandoned all pretenses of being kind. "What do you want?"

"Danny, your cousin, was at a party last week. Said he saw your ex, Asher, that little cu?—"

"Don't finish that thought. What was Asher up to?"

Bill let go of a loud huff. “The bitch was causing problems, so a couple of guys gave it right back. I don’t care for you at all.

I think you’re a piece of shit. Still don’t know why the Navy hasn’t sent you packing since you’re worthless, but I don’t think it’s right for women to end up in a situation like Asher is in now. ”

Worry for Asher overrode any anger he had toward Bill. “What situation is that?”

“Danny said they put her in the back of their car. Said they were going to sell her to a market they know about.”

Anger filled Squat. He knew the human trafficking markets existed because they’d shut down a few on missions.

He didn't have enough information about Asher and where she was.

Plus, Bill tended to lie. If he lived closer, he would jump at the chance to investigate, but he had no way of verifying what Bill was saying.

Plus, Bill had a habit of making wild accusations and then asking for money.

Maybe Asher had been taken, but she could be at home safe and sound.

“What do you want for this information?”

Bill gasped. “Is that any way to treat me? You are a little shit. I care about people. I’m not asking for anything for myself, but if you want the place where they are taking her, you should send me a thousand dollars.”

Squat threw up his hands. He knew that’s what this was about.

Who knew if Asher had even been taken? It had been years since he'd heard from her.

They'd been hot and heavy before he joined up.

They would have gotten married, but she didn't want to be tied down.

He hadn't blamed her, and they parted as friends.

Hearing that she was being sold to a human trafficking market pissed him off, but Bill asking for money pissed him off just as much.

He thought about hanging up, but he couldn't leave Asher swinging in the wind if he had a chance to save her.

Squat sat at his computer and sent a message to Thario, asking if he could open a messenger call with him so he could listen to the phone call with his uncle.

"You still there?" Bill asked.

"Yeah," Squat responded as he put his uncle on speakerphone after answering the messenger call from Thario. "Where is she?"

"That's not how this works," Bill grumbled. "I need that money."

"I can't trust you, Uncle Bill. I need to know where Asher is before I send you a thousand dollars. If the information you give me is good, I'll get you the money."

Again, Bill gasped like he wasn't the one who lied all the time. "How dare you question my integrity?"

Squat was surprised that Bill knew the word integrity and how to use it in a sentence. “You’ve burned me before. I need good information if you want me to send you money.”

“Fine. I’ll send you an email with everything I know. Get me my money, or you’ll regret it.”

“Sure, Bill.”

Squat saw the email pop up and ended the call with his uncle. “I hung up on him and forwarded the email to you. Thario, what can you come up with?”

“Um, just a...” The sound of keys clicking on the other end of the line was a small relief. Thario was a master at the computer. “I see that an Asher Haller was reported missing a few days ago but it looks like law enforcement isn’t taking it seriously.”

His stomach squeezed at Thario’s words. “That’s her. Shit, what is law enforcement saying about it?”

“Called her a run away. I’ll look into the area and see if there are any trafficking markets. I’ll send you a note with what I come up with.”

“Want me to come over to help?”

“Sure. Let yourself in.”

“Got it. And Thario, thank you.”

“Anytime, Squat. I live for things like this.”

Squat ended the call. He hated using Thario. The guy was amazing, but he also was

just a guy who had been through hell. He needed to spend more time with Thario other than just when they had emergencies.

Squat grabbed his phone and wallet before shoving his feet into his shoes. He hated that he doubted what Bill had said, but he hated the idea of Asher being traded in the sex markets even more. She wouldn't last long, and that wasn't the kind of death anyone should suffer.

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Squat stepped into Thario's place, anger and fear overriding the calm he usually felt. He couldn't believe his uncle had wanted money for the information. Actually, he could believe it. His family wasn't great and his uncle was the worst of them.

Frog greeted them, then moved back to Thario, who had turned to stare at him. "I found some stuff. You're not going to like it."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck. Asher is most likely no longer in the USA."

I know this might sound farfetched, but you know the score.

There have been fourteen women who have disappeared from that area in the last ten months.

They've all gone missing after one of those parties.

The sheriff's office called them runaways even though they were adults. A few of them have kids and families, but most were single without children, just like Asher."

Squat shook his head as he thought about her situation. "Is anyone looking into it? FBI or state police?"

"No. The women were seen as at risk and drug-influenced, so their disappearances weren't seen as important. Even women without history of drug abuse were labeled as drug users."

Squat squeezed his temples as anger flared. “I can’t believe this happened where I grew up. I mean, I know it wasn’t the best place, but hell. This is bad.”

Thario turned back to his computer. “No government agencies are currently investigating the string of disappearances.” He clicked a few keys before he turned back to meet Squat’s gaze.

“I’m sending the information about the women to a contact I made with the FBI. It won’t save Asher, but it might stop the activity, maybe. They are overworked, and there’s so much going on, so it may not result in any changes.”

Squat ran his fingers through his hair, tugging at the strands as frustration built. “Fuck. So she’s just lost?”

Thario shook his head. “I’m seeing if I can find anything. If I can find whoever took her and make a connection to one of the terrorist groups, then maybe there is hope. First off, we have to find her. If we can find her and make the connection, then maybe they’ll send someone in.”

“If. I fucking hate this.”

“Yeah. I do, too. I can help some people, but I can’t help everyone, and it’s the same with you. I know you know this woman, but?—”

Squat shook his head. “It just sucks. Fuck! Sorry. You’re right.” He blew out a breath as he fought for calm. “I know I can’t be everywhere all the time. I just can’t stand the thought of her going through this.”

Thario let go a heavy sigh, and Frog sat up, putting his chin on Thario’s knee. Squat watched as his buddy scratched his dog’s head as he stared at the computer screen in front of him.

There were no good answers or solutions. He was desperate to find her, but he had no authority to go track her down. Plus, he had his job and he couldn't just walk away from the Navy. It wasn't that kind of job.

After a moment, he closed his eyes and let go of a heavy sigh. "Tell me how I can help you."

"We need to do the dirty work of looking on the dark web for her. We may not find her, but we might get some evidence."

"Okay, I'm in. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

They searched for hours, not coming up with much.

There might be a location that he could learn if he wired someone money.

He wasn't going to wire money because it could be a scam.

If he could get boots on the ground, maybe he could find her.

But the question was, which ground? They had no clue where she was or where she was headed.

They were lost, and he had no hope of finding her.

They needed a location, and to get that, they needed more information. If the FBI took down the group in his hometown, maybe they could get something out of the local guys and find a lead on where to look. It was a stretch, but it was the best he had.

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Grady checked his account, seeing he was almost out of the money he'd made from the last sale.

How had he gone through so much cash? He needed to increase his business.

He needed to do more than one woman a month.

There was a business for it. The last one had been a surprise.

He hadn't expected someone to show up and start asking questions.

She'd almost ruined everything for him, but he'd turned it around and made a profit from it.

The door opened, and Bill stepped in, a smirk on his face. "That dumb bitch is going to net us more money."

Grady stared at the man, wondering what the hell he could be talking about. "What do you mean?"

Bill winked and flashed a huge smile. "I called my worthless nephew, and he's going to send me a thousand dollars."

Grady didn't know whether to pull out his gun or go get the paddle he used on his kids. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Right? Smart of me to do that. Stupid cuck doesn't even know how dumb he is."

Grady's anger rose so fast that his chair toppled over when he stood. He moved to Bill, slapping him across the face before he could think of anything else to do. He should have punched the guy, but his anger was too high to control and slapping was something he used on his bitches.

Bill rubbed his cheek, a hurt expression pinching his eyebrows together. "Hey, what's that for?"

"You idiot. You told him you were involved?"

Bill huffed. "Hell no. I made something up and told him to send me the money. He doesn't know we were involved."

Grady threw his hands up in the air. "Fucking nightmare, that's what you are. If he does any looking into us, I'm going to kill you myself."

Bill had the audacity to look shocked. "Hey, I'm doing us a favor. We'll get more money, and no one will know what we did."

Grady shook his head, not sure how he'd gotten roped in with an idiot like Bill. Over the last two years Bill had helped with all the girls. Bill hadn't blinked an eye when Grady had come to him with the business, and he hadn't ever gossiped about their little business venture.

But Bill was proving to be a ball and chain he couldn't afford.

The man had done some stupid stuff over the years, but this one took the cake.

Maybe it was time to eliminate Bill. First, he had to find out more about the asshole's nephew. If the guy looked like he would be trouble, Grady would have to shut that shit down fast. No one would miss Bill, not really. Sadly, there wasn't a market for

older, overweight men who were worthless.

He would just have to pop him in the woods, and hope nature took care of the body.

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Asher wasn't sure if she was better off today than she'd been the day before when she'd been trapped in the basement of some building.

Now she was in something that was metal that stank badly.

The floor was moving like she was on a ship.

At least she thought she was on a ship. It could be something else.

Would they feed her? They had when she'd been in the basement, but this was different. She was alone in this container, and they may not even check on her. Did the people on the ship know she was there? Were they aware there were humans being shipped to whatever port they were going to next?

She'd cried, screamed, bargained, prayed, and screamed again. Nothing helped. She would die in here.

Eventually, when her stomach cramped, and she felt like she might pass out from starvation and thirst, a loud bang followed by a horrendous squeak interrupted her thoughts. She jumped, then plastered herself against the side of the container.

Light spilled in, piercing the back of her eyes. She lifted her bound hands and slammed her eyes shut. It took a few seconds to crack open her eyes even a little. The pain was almost too much to bear, but she needed to see what was coming in after her.

“Ah, you're still with us. Good. I have water and food. There's a bucket over there.”

“I need light. Leave the door open.”

The man threw back his head, laughter spilling out. “You Americans are too funny. Look now because you'll be in the dark in a bit. You need to wash. Come with me.”

She stood on shaky legs, pain shooting up her left leg to her side. Had they beaten her? Maybe. Or was the pain from sitting for so long?

“Hurry.”

She shuffled over, trying not to cause too much pain to herself as she walked, but that was almost impossible.

The pain seemed to overshadow everything.

Once she was out of the container, she had to shield her eyes to keep the white brightness from overwhelming her.

It was like a bomb had exploded right in front of her, making it where she couldn't see anything.

“Shit, that's bright.”

The guy chuckled as he walked ahead of her. Once her eyes adjusted, she glanced around. They weren't on a huge boat, and she wasn't in one of those huge shipping containers. The space they'd had her in was small, like a walk-in closet or something.

“This isn't a huge ship.”

“Nope.”

She took a long look to the right, then the left, searching for land. There wasn't any. She could swim, but she didn't know which direction to go. They could be anywhere.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

The man stopped and turned to her. "It doesn't. Nothing matters other than doing what you're told. You'll be offloaded and shipped to who knows where. I don't care where you go or what happens. They pay me. That's all I care about."

Anger surged. "You're just going to let them do that? Where is your compassion?"

He shrugged. "I have none. This is your life now."

She glanced at the side of the boat. "I could jump and swim away."

Laughter was the last thing she expected. Her lips pressed together as anger built.

"Good luck, sweetie. Your hands are bound, or did you forget that? You won't get far, and then you'll be dead. Half of these guys aren't so bad. They will keep you on a short leash, but they provide rooms and food. Hell, some of you get to live in the lap of luxury. It might even be an upgrade."

His words sank in, making her heart ache. She was stuck. There was no easy escape. He was right. She wouldn't make it with her hands bound in front of her. It was either death or do what this guy wanted.

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Squat and Thario spent most of Saturday looking for Asher. As they were eating dinner, Apple called and asked what he was doing.

“I’m at Thario’s. We’re doing research on a human trafficking ring.”

“Why?”

Squat blew out a breath. “A friend is missing. I got word that she was taken by a trafficking ring, and we’re looking.”

“Dammit, you should have called.”

“Sorry, we were in the weeds of it and didn’t think to contact anyone else.”

“I’ll round up the gang. Have you all eaten?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll be there in a bit.”

“Thanks, man.”

He hung up and met Thario’s gaze. They hadn’t found much luck, and Thario looked dead serious.

“I’m glad they’re coming. They can help search. We’ll cover more information.”

Squat rubbed his forehead. "I'm going to go crazy with worry."

"You'll be okay because you have to be. We'll either find her or find the people who took her. Once we know who they are, you guys can make sure to deliver karma."

Squat nodded. "Karma would be good."

Less than thirty minutes later, the guys from his team began showing up. Having extra eyes helped get through more information. Though they hadn't found the exact group, they had been able to mark a few people off their list.

Going back to work on Monday was difficult. Thario promised to keep looking, but the search would slow down to a snail's pace. He needed to find Asher. He could imagine what was happening to her, and that was the problem. She had to be scared to death.

Looking for the people who'd taken her wasn't easy. The group was operating under every radar. They were hiding well, but eventually he would find them, and then they would pay the price of taking someone special to him.

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Asher didn't know how long it had been, but she'd gone from that basement to the smaller ship, to a larger ship, and then a truck.

She wasn't sure where she was, but it wasn't the USA.

They had given her enough food and water to keep her alive, but she'd lost weight.

She would kill for a fast-food burger and fries, maybe a milkshake, and some kind of dessert.

Heck, a home-cooked meal would be nice. Even cold soup from a can would be a welcome treat.

The vehicle she was in stopped and she was dragged out into a courtyard. She couldn't tell anything about the area because the sky was black as ink, and there was nothing she could see beyond the walls.

The man who drove the truck forced her to her knees. She wanted to punch him, but she didn't have an opportunity. A woman approached, her lips down in a frown.

"She's skinny."

"She's what I got."

"Fine. I'll make her into something someone wants. Come."

Asher wasn't going to do anything this woman told her to do. "No."

She hadn't seen that the woman was carrying anything, but suddenly Asher's cheek stung and the woman had the stick raised above her head.

"You do what we say or you'll regret it."

The man next to her twisted her arm so hard she was forced to stand. She looked up at him, anger swimming through her veins. She wanted to retaliate, but they had weapons and she didn't.

The woman led her inside, and the door shut behind her with a finality that chilled her bones. She was stripped and made to wash, before they gave her a dress that covered her, but was so rough it would eventually scratch her skin raw.

The woman in charge gave her a list of rules to follow and then she was led into a room and told to sleep.

She wanted to defy them, but exhaustion won.

The next morning she learned she wasn't the only woman being held.

She was the only one who made it into the bondage stocks that first day.

Her back ached by the time she was set free.

She received ten strikes across her bare bottom for whatever infraction she'd committed.

The days bled together as she received punishment after punishment. They were wearing her down. She hated the sting of the rod across her body. She didn't want to give in, but she couldn't keep fighting.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been here, but when the door opened, and she saw the woman who ran the place, she dropped to her knees, then lowered to a deep bow as she rolled her eyes.

Asher wanted to tell the woman to fuck off, but that would earn her time in the wooden stocks, which weren't a joke at all. Being bent at the hips and held in place with no relief for her knees or feet for hours at a time was hell.

This place was supposed to train them to be the perfect partner for the men who wanted a woman he could control. She couldn't imagine how weak the men were that they had to have a slave instead of a partner.

The woman in charge stopped in front of her, tapping her foot with impatience.

Asher wasn't a good student, and the punishment had been harsh for her.

The other women steered clear of her so they didn't get lumped in with her antics.

She didn't blame them, but that didn't mean she was even going to try to be a halfway decent student of this shitty school for slaves.

There were nine other women here with her. It blew her mind that the ten of them had been taken prisoner and were forced to become sex slaves.

How did this happen in today's world? She'd been snatched from a party after asking about Grace. Had her friend been here before her? Was she the slave of some stupid man now?

"Are you going to behave today?" the woman standing above her asked.

Asher wanted to spit on the woman's feet and tell her to go to hell, but she held her

anger in check and replied as sweetly as possible.

“Yes, mistress.”

The pain they inflicted with their beatings wasn't pleasant, but it hadn't totally persuaded her to give in.

Most of the women had capitulated on day one.

She guessed their lives hadn't been that great to begin with, so becoming a sex slave wasn't a big deal.

For her, it was a fate close to death. The only thing keeping her going was the thought of killing the man who bought her, and then she would escape this hellish existence.

Maybe it was ridiculous for her to think she could kill her captor.

She'd thought about killing the woman who ran this facility, but she hadn't been given a chance.

This organization ran like a well-oiled machine, and nothing had been left to chance.

They ate with their hands, no utensils. Every tool they were given was tracked obsessively.

When they brushed their teeth, they were given a toothbrush, which was taken away after they finished.

There was nothing that could be turned into a weapon, and she'd searched for one more than once.

“Up.”

The command was given with no warmth. This wasn't a place to discover yourself. This was the type of prison that crushed people.

“Come.”

She followed the woman out the door to the room where they would be given some sort of food that would be enough calories she wouldn't pass out when they started requiring her to do stuff.

Today was soup with a few pieces of shrimp and some vegetables.

The calories felt good going in, and she was glad there was an abundance of liquid.

Having extra liquid would keep her alive.

Some of the other women hated soup days, but she was happy about it.

She craved the extra hydration on days they ate only solid food.

After the meal, they were sent to language class.

They were learning a language she hadn't ever heard before.

Learning the language wasn't impossible, but she wasn't great at it.

A few of the women already knew two languages, but the new language they had to learn was creating difficulties for more than just her.

The sex classes were the worst. Not that they were having sex, but they were forced

to endure talking about it and being told what they would have to do. She wanted to tell them she would never do that, but talking back earned her punishments.

After class, she was pulled aside and brought into the office. She looked around for any weapon, like always, but there wasn't anything she could use. A man stepped in. His lips were already down in a frown before he saw her.

His gaze flicked over her almost dismissively. "She'll do."

Asher wanted to tell him to fuck off, but the woman who ran the place was right behind her and activated the stun gun. The sound was enough to silence Asher.

The man's nose wrinkled. "Is she not finished?"

"She's close. Your man will need to keep an eye on her. She needs strict discipline, but once she is fully trained, she will be very valuable."

Asher hated how they talked about her as if she wasn't even there. Her spine stiffened, and her shoulders straightened. The bastards shouldn't have a say in her life, but they were treating her like she was a dog.

The man moved to stand in front of her and lifted her shirt. She moved to bat his hand away. The punch he threw knocked her to the ground. Pain exploded through her, making her eyes water.

"I see what you mean," the man said.

"A few more weeks, and she'll be ready. I'll make sure. She's exactly what your man wants."

"Yes, she is. Don't break her too much. I know he will have fun punishing her."

“Yes, sir. We appreciate the trust he has in us. We always enjoy working with you.”

Asher watched the man walk out. She hadn't even gotten up off the floor. When the woman came over and poked her, telling her to get up, she tried to push up, but the pain was so much she had to close her eyes as her stomach threatened to spill its contents.

“You're a bad girl. Maybe more time in the stocks would teach you to obey.

You must obey and never do anything like that again.

You are not allowed to touch. It isn't your place.

Now, get up and go to your room. Think about what you've done, and tomorrow, I want to hear an apology from you.

That will set the tone for your punishment.

Asher stood on shaky legs, her head still throbbing as she followed behind one of the guards. The hallway swam in front of her as she tried to keep up.

She had three weeks before she was taken somewhere else. She wouldn't miss this place, but the new place could be worse. Her only regret leaving here would be that she wouldn't be given a chance to kill her nemesis before she was forced to leave.

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Squat couldn't believe a whole month passed since Asher had been taken.

He hated every second of her being gone.

They might have a lead, but the chances it was her were slim.

Thario knew a guy who lived in Dubai who said he would check out some information and get back to him, but Squat doubted this was the real deal.

Every day that passed lessened his hope.

He wasn't sure if he had any faith that she would be found alive anytime soon.

Everyone had been helping out, but now that they were a month into searching, the other guys were getting busy with their lives.

He knew life had to go on, but he wasn't ready to give up on Asher yet.

On Saturday morning he headed to Thario's place, knowing this would probably be the last time he spent the entire weekend searching for Asher.

Thario had other people he had to find. It wasn't fair for him to monopolize all his time.

He didn't want to admit it, but searching for Asher was probably a lost cause.

Thario sent him a note telling him to come in when he got there.

Squat called out when he entered the house and Frog came running over, his mouth open with his big teeth flashing.

If he didn't know Frog was his buddy, he would be scared of him.

Frog was a German Shepard who had come to live with Thario after the bomb went off that killed SEALs and changed Thario's life forever.

Now Frog was an integral part of his life and an incredibly sweet dog.

"Good morning, Frog. How are you doing?"

The dog sniffed Squat's hand, then turned around and took off back to Thario. Squat moved to the desk where he'd been working. Depression threatened to take him down, but he wouldn't give in yet.

"Hey, how's it going today?" Thario asked as he came in.

"Ugh. I don't know how long I can keep doing this. How about we go out for lunch today?"

"Sure. That would be fine. I don't have much on my plate right now other than what we're doing."

He spun in his chair and faced Thario. "I'm sorry I've been taking up so much time with this."

"No worries. It has been nice having someone else involved with searching."

"I should have been doing this before a friend went missing."

“No, man, you're good. Few people even know how to search. Look at how much you had to learn on the fly. I mean, you're doing great, but taking the time to teach you stuff would have derailed me before. This last month, you did a lot of learning on your own.”

He nodded. “I have. I just can't believe she is still missing.”

Thario blew out a breath. “It's not uncommon. Few women who go missing are ever found. If they've been missing for more than a few days it's almost impossible to find them.”

“Fuck.” Squat clenched his fists, anger at himself growing inside because he hadn't done more.

“Hey, I didn't say that to make you mad.

You just need to be aware of the realities.

There are thousands of women buried across the western part of the USA because shit like this has been going on for centuries and we fool ourselves into thinking we can find the lost people.

But the job is massive and it's hard work. ”

Squat shook his head. “It's all so depressing. Have you heard back from you dude in the FBI?”

Thario nodded. “It took a while, but he finally tied her disappearance to two people but they haven't arrested them yet.

The state police know about them and the FBI know, but even with that information,

it may take a while to get all the evidence in a line.

It sucks, but now they know about it.” Thario’s phone buzzed, and he picked it up.

“It’s a message from my guy in Dubai. He thinks he found something. ”

Squat moved to Thario, not wanting to be too obnoxious about staring at his phone screen but wanting to look. He waited patiently, though that was the last thing he felt. He needed to know what was going on.

Thario read through the notes on his phone and then nodded. “It’s good. He has information that the group is into trafficking narcotics and that they are involved in supplying funds to one of the terrorist organizations.

It wasn’t enough to move on, but it was something. “Okay, so what next?”

“The information will be fed to the military. We’ll get the CIA and some other organizations to listen. It will get out there and then hopefully someone will want to act.”

Squat blew out a breath. “This is good, right?”

“Yes. Very good. As long as the right people know, maybe something can happen.”

“How can we get the government to take this seriously and act on the information?”

Thario shrugged. “You know as well as I do that they may not act even if they have all the information.”

Squat drew in a deep breath. “What about going in on my own?”

Thario looked up from his phone, his eyebrows raised. “Dude, I know you’re strong, no disrespect, but get real.”

He squeezed his fists together, knowing Thario was right. “It’s a stupid idea.”

“I’ll send this information to everyone I can think of, even contacts in England and France. We’ll see if we can get interest in shutting them down. If the USA won’t go in, maybe France will.”

Squat ran his hands through his hair, frustration still hanging on tight. “Thank you.”

“You know as well as I do, even if the military goes in, that doesn’t mean that everyone liberated will come home alive.”

Squat nodded. He didn't want to think about Asher dying over there. She deserved better. Years had passed since the last time he'd seen her; she'd had other lovers and may even have someone waiting at home right now, but at this moment, that didn't matter. He just wanted her safe.

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Grady flinched when someone knocked at the door. He checked the camera feed, seeing it was Bill. The man was becoming as annoying as a pimple on his ass. He wanted to beat the shit out of Bill and dump him in a shallow grave, but the man had his uses.

From what Grady could tell, no one that Bill had spoken to had come looking for them yet. Maybe Bill trying to get money from his nephew was good.

“Has your nephew sent you the money?” he asked the second Bill stepped in.

“Not yet, but I know he will soon.”

Grady grunted. “What’s his excuse?”

“He said he hasn’t found her.”

“What kind of guy is he? Can we put some pressure on him and get him to do what we want?”

“Probably. He's a piece of shit. Heck, we can probably get more than a thousand from him. He's not smart. I'm surprised the Navy hasn't kicked him out. He's worthless as shit.”

“Maybe you should go out there and get him to pay up.”

Bill shook his head. “I don’t have no money to go out there. He’s in California.”

“Well, maybe you should find some money and go put some pressure on him.”

Bill scratched his chin as he stared at the ceiling. “Maybe.”

Grady had little faith in Bill. The man seemed to overestimate his abilities. He’d seen it more than once with the jerk. Something needed to change. He would have another party this week and grab another girl, maybe two. He wanted more money, and the easiest way to get it was human products.

Bill should never have gotten involved with Grady.

The man was crazy. Eventually, someone was going to realize he was abducting women and come after him.

Bill didn't want to be around when that happened.

Maybe he should go out to California. If he wasn't around here, then no one would figure out he was connected to the abductions.

Grady had pushed it too far, taking more than one girl a month. Bill had heard people around town start to raise questions about why so many women were leaving without telling anyone where they were going.

There were four people involved other than himself and Grady. If any of them talked, they would be fucked. He would need to save up money so he could leave because ultimately, he didn’t feel that he could trust anyone here.

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The blindfold absorbed the tears as they spilled from Asher's eyes. She'd graduated from the psychopath's school and was moving on to live in her master's compound. They'd put her in a box in the back of a truck and she was bumping around with each pothole hit.

Though she was leaving the terrible place she'd lived since being abducted, there was nothing to celebrate. All her senses were dulled from the torture she'd endured, but heading to the unknown had her feeling emotions again.

Everything was falling apart, and she felt like she might just shatter. Being strong had gotten her into this mess. No question, she never should have stuck her nose into what had happened with Grace.

The thought of Grace made her cry harder. Her friend had probably suffered the same fate as she suffered. They were both lost to the world of slavery and abuse. Grace might even be dead by now.

Freedom was a lost concept, something she would never have again.

Grace's cat, Jorts, would never see his favorite person again.

At least she'd arranged for someone else to watch Jorts until she moved into an apartment that would allow her to have a cat.

If she'd taken Jorts to her place, the cat probably would have starved.

Maybe Jorts would find a good home and be happy.

At least one of them would have a good life, even if it was only the cat.

The vehicle stopped, and the slam of the truck door made her jump. She didn't want to let them see her cry, but she wasn't sure she could be stable enough to stop the tears. Everything she'd ever feared in life now seemed a possibility.

The sound of wrenching metal signaled that this was her final destination. She would probably never leave this place. Fear exploded through her. This man could kill her today, or worse, start torturing her without letting her die.

The asshole who'd held her for the last month, or was it two months, she couldn't tell, had told her how the men would torture their slaves, taking them to the brink of death but never allowing them to pass away.

It would be days of terror after terror.

She didn't want to fear every second, but she knew herself well enough to know she would eventually say something or do something that would piss him off, and that would be the end of her.

She was released from the box, and a part of her wanted to take off running like a wild animal, but the blindfold was still in place and her hands were bound. She wouldn't last long if she couldn't see, and running would only get her more punishment.

"Nice." The voice was male and deep. He had an accent she wasn't familiar with.

Someone grabbed her arm, and she flinched. The grip tightened on her, forcing her to move forward. Why hadn't they removed the blindfold? And where was she? Was she even in the same country? They hadn't driven far, or she thought they hadn't.

No one had told her which country she was in, so even if she could run, where would she go? There were so many places on the planet where she would have few rights. If she got free, would she just become the prisoner of someone else who treated her even worse?

“Walk.”

The command was given harshly. Whoever the person was beside her they weren't nice. She wanted to pull away but stopped herself before she tried to jerk her arm from his grasp.

“Stop.”

Her foot dragged to a stop. The man holding her arm squeezed hard, and she tried to steady herself, but he jerked her back, and she lost her footing, dropping to her knees.

“Stand!”

She was pulled up harshly, and she tried to get her feet under her, but it was too hard to stand on her own. The man jerking her around was an asshole, and she wanted to retaliate, but she was at a huge disadvantage with the blindfold blocking her vision and her wrists bound together.

“You bitch!” The man kept talking, but it was a language she didn't understand.

“Kashim, don't be so harsh. Let me see her.”

The guy holding her arm released his grip. Then she felt another hand on her, but this one was lighter, the touch almost gentle. Hot breath on her face made her jerk back. Laughter floated around her, masculine but not harsh.

“Settle down, dove. I won’t hurt you. We’re going to have fun. You like fun, no?”

A shaky breath and a whimper was her only answer. His fingers ran over her face and down her neck. She tried to shutter her thoughts, but panic rose.

“You will be a nice addition to my stable.”

It sounded like the man turned and walked away. Then the guy with the harsh grip was back, shoving her in front of him, forcing her to keep walking.

This was her life now. She was some man’s property. Even if he was nice and said he wouldn’t hurt her, it didn’t mean she wasn’t in danger. Everything about her life since being captured was crap. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to survive.

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Squat woke to the sound of his phone going off. He groaned as he rolled over, picking it up off the charger on the nightstand. They were headed out. He had two hours, and they would be in the air.

He wouldn't even hope that they were being sent in to take out the criminal organization holding Asher. Another group would go in, maybe someone closer to the Middle East. Unless something had popped, and then maybe they were going over there.

He hadn't gone to Thario's on Saturday or Sunday.

It was the first weekend he'd stayed away.

Thario had joined his team for dinner, but talk hadn't turned to searching for Asher.

He felt like he was betraying her by not looking.

How long could he keep it up? Would he still be searching for her next year, in a decade?

He'd done what they could. At least all the guys told him he had. It wasn't enough, just like it wasn't enough for the hundreds of thousands of people who went missing around the world every year. There was too much pain and suffering, and no one gave a damn.

When he got back, he would sit down with Thario and learn as much as he could from him.

When he retired from the military, he would fill his days with helping the cause.

They needed more than just a few guys looking for missing people on the weekends.

More men and women needed to be active in stopping human trafficking.

It was dirty work, and he hated the things he'd seen.

But saving people took hard work, and it wasn't always pleasant.

At least he could be satisfied that they'd stopped a few trafficking rings.

The FBI and Homeland Security had been busy with information Thario had sent them.

Squat wouldn't call it a treasure trove, but it had been a lot of information they'd gathered on multiple people who haunted the dark web with their sick perversions.

When he arrived at the base, they loaded onto the transport and headed out. They hadn't been given information yet, so they could be headed anywhere. It didn't really matter. They would go in and do the work they were told to do and leave.

After getting some shuteye, he woke to find Griz and Shine awake and talking. He moved to sit next to them.

"Any idea where we're going?" Squat asked.

Griz shook his head. "Not yet."

"Is Sharp awake?"

Shine nodded. "He's back in the head."

Squat saw one of the officers coming their way. "Looks like we're about to get our marching orders."

Griz's lips thinned. "Great."

They were given a packet of information detailing their mission.

They would be operating in a nation they normally didn't enter.

He wasn't thrilled at that prospect. Getting out would be just as difficult as getting in.

If they were discovered, it would cause already hot tensions to rise even higher.

After the rundown, they were told they had an hour before landing.

They were headed to a carrier and would board rubber raiding rafts that would take them to land.

Then, they would start their mission. The target was a well-funded terrorist who was planning something big, and they wanted to stop him before he had a chance to act.

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Asher hated herself for not fighting more.

What could she do? She had no opportunity to escape.

It was a gilded prison that was bound to kill her.

Sure, the man who was holding her wasn't too terrible and the compound where he kept her was nice with beautiful furnishings and gardens, but she didn't want to be his prisoner.

The days and nights had bled together since being deposited at the jerk's doorstep. He kept her busy, gave her just enough food to survive, and let her sleep a few hours every day. There'd been no beatings, but she hated him.

She was supposed to call him Benji, but he didn't look like a Benji. He looked like an asshole. So far the sex had been mostly vanilla, with a few odd requests that required little from her. It wasn't as terrible as she'd been led to believe it would be, but still awful because she was his prisoner and didn't want to be with him.

Benji decided she behaved well enough to travel.

Since she was a novelty, he wanted to show her off, but because he said he couldn't trust her, she had a muzzle over her mouth, keeping her quiet.

Her wrists were bound in front of her, and her ankles had leather straps around them with a chain hobbling her.

She could walk, but she had to take short little steps.

Degrading and humiliating didn't even begin to describe how she felt.

The clothes, or lack thereof, barely covered her.

She was on display for all the men to see.

Her role this weekend was easy to understand.

She would be a toy for the men to play with.

Gone was her humanity and her dignity. She was a glorified sex doll, and anything she wanted or needed was second thought.

The first night, she was displayed like a piece of art. Before she was allowed to go to sleep, Benji came to her and described the things she would have to do the next day. He seemed excited at the prospect of what would happen to her when the other men took their turn with her.

Anger rose, but she held it in. She wanted to fight this bastard, but she was either under guard or bound, so she couldn't make a move. It was impossible to find any striking point, and if she did strike, they would knock her down so fast it might just kill her.

She slept okay and woke to find the plans had changed from what he'd told her the night before. They were headed to another compound, something outside of the city. Her natural curiosity had been squelched by the torture, so she didn't ask any questions as they loaded into cars and left the city. Because they blindfolded her when she was outside, she wasn't sure which city they were in or which country, for that matter. She figured it was somewhere in the Middle East, but she wasn't positive.

Because she didn't know where she was, if she found an escape, she would take it. She couldn't trust life wouldn't be worse outside Benji's compound.

One thing she'd learned from this whole thing was life could always get worse.

They drove for a few hours and Benji finally pulled off her blindfold. They were in an arid area and she could see mountains. Eventually the car slowed, and they drove toward a heavily guarded gate. Though the place looked nice, it was still a prison for her.

Squat saw the first of the vehicles pulling into the compound below. He'd been in the mountains for a few days just waiting for something to happen. They'd known the group would arrive at some point this week. He just hoped all the players were there so they could take them down.

Doing a strike on the compound would wipe out everyone in attendance, but the CIA wanted to have a chat with a couple of the people inside.

If it were up to him, he would wipe them off the face of the earth and then use their email and texts to piece together their plans.

But he was more smash-and-grab and less undercover operative.

Sharp had done some undercover work, but Squat wasn't sure he could.

They waited until nightfall to move. The moon being dark this week would help them immensely.

Moving in the pitch black of night sometimes gave him goosebumps.

He loved sneaking around like this, entering places he wasn't expected.

When it was a hit on a terrorist organization, it gave him even more pleasure.

He was almost at the compound when Sharp told them to hold up. He paused, pissed that they weren't moving forward. He wanted to make those guys pay.

“What's up?” Apple asked.

“Overwatch has one more vehicle coming up the road.”

The information from overwatch didn't really change the game, just gave them another target. He was glad Rider and his team were back home in Coronado looking out for them. He trusted Rider to keep them safe. If Rider said there was a car headed in, it was best to listen to him.

Squat watched as the car sped to the gates and entered, not seeing them at all. Of course, they were masters of shadows. They knew how to hide well and stay hidden. Few knew their tricks, and they sure as hell weren't going to tell anyone.

After the car stopped and the passengers got out, they were on the move again, heading to the property.

He pushed away all emotions, even the anger, and focused on the mission.

His job was to go in and neutralize the threats.

This was the dangerous part. They would experience resistance.

He'd done enough raids to know they would find someone with a gun and little sense.

He was at the door, which was unlocked like their inside man said it would be. When they had someone on the inside, they didn't know if they could trust them. But this

group was destabilizing the region and the world. Their informant understood how bad it was for this group to go unchecked.

Once inside, Squat went to the left and headed down the hall to a door that was shut. This was where things would get interesting. Once that door opened, pandemonium would erupt. He couldn't wait to take some people down and inflict pain on these bastards.

Asher hated the way the place felt. Everything was off from the weirdness that made her spine tingle, to the strange vibes she was getting from Benji.

He seemed jumpy, like he was ready at any moment to flee.

The other men in the group also seemed touchy, like they would bolt quickly if anything went wrong.

Every noise seemed to make Benji and the rest of the men flinch. The air felt strained, and she didn't dare relax. It was like someone teased that they had a secret, and most of the people in the room weren't allowed to know it.

A door opened and a man stepped into the room. He seemed to exude menace. The air seemed to grow thick with tension. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Benji stepped in front of her, which she was fine with. If she could walk out and go back to the car right then, she would have.

Eventually, the men relaxed a little. Menace Man said something and the rest the men laughed.

Then Benji started bragging about her, forcing her to walk amongst the men and allow them to touch her.

She was on the other end of the room from Benji when she heard something that sounded like fireworks.

She tilted her head to the side, listening as the noise grew louder.

All the men seemed to panic at once. This wasn't fireworks, it was gunfire.

Asher looked at Benji, seeing the panic on his face. She took a step toward him, but he turned and raced off, leaving her behind. The bastard had abandoned her. Maybe this would be her opportunity to escape.

She heard more gunfire and knew she would end up shot if she made herself a big target.

Instead of running like the men and some of the other women, she dropped to her knees and then lowered to the floor, curling into a tight ball on her side.

Though her hands were still bound in front of her, she was able to get the muzzle loose and force it off her mouth. Now, she could talk if she needed to.

The noise grew louder, and she pulled her legs tighter to her chest. She could still get shot or end up in an even worse situation, though it was hard to imagine anything worse than being a sex slave.

Today, Benji had made her go topless. The sheer fabric around her waist did little to cover her.

It was more like a hint of coverage. He liked seeing her uncomfortable and pushed to make her annoyed. If he got shot, she would celebrate.

Squat had taken down four combatants already, and had two more he was following

through the twisting hallways.

He could hear the rest of the guys doing their job by taking out the trash.

The man they were looking for hadn't been caught yet, but they only had about thirty percent of the compound cleared.

He moved through the labyrinth, clearing each room as he went.

Jay was behind him, and Griz was in the rear, making sure no one would come from behind with a surprise.

He'd just stepped into a large room with abandoned food and drinks when he saw movement on the floor to his right.

He studied the shape, seeing it was a half-naked woman.

"Movement. I'll check it out," he said over coms. Squat made a beeline to the woman huddled on the floor.

She had no top on, and the flimsy material around her waist did little to cover her.

He half expected her to speak something other than English, but when he was about five feet away, she spoke with a Southern American accent.

"Please don't shoot me."

He paused and glanced around before focusing on her again. "Hands. Let me see your hands."

She lifted her bound hands that were shaking like a leaf in the wind. "Help me."

Squat glanced around, checking on Jay. “We’re clearing the rooms. What do you know?”

“We just arrived. I was in a room with beds and a bathroom. I don't know where it was. The man who brought me here took off running, leaving me behind.”

“Lucky you. Follow behind me. Don’t do anything stupid. We’ll get you out, but only if you follow what we tell you to do.”

Asher had never been so happy to see anyone in her life, even if she couldn’t see the man’s face. He sounded like an American, so at least that was going for her.

Her legs ached, and her feet hurt. Her body felt old and used like she'd aged ten years in the last few months.

The beatings had slowed, but she still felt the sting of the last switch they'd used on her.

The men with guns were moving slowly, but her limping gait made it hard to keep up.

She paused when they paused and moved when they moved.

She didn't scream or cry when a man jumped out and fired his gun at them.

The man in front of her shot their attacker, taking him out.

They killed two more people as they wound through the dark hallways, none of it bothering her.

The guy in front of her paused, and she stopped. He glanced over his shoulder at her.

“You, stay right here. We're going to clear this room and then gather the survivors. If any other guys come around who look like me, you make sure they know you're an American.”

She nodded, unsure of how she could let them know she was an American.

“Okay.” Saying more wouldn't help. She let him go about his business and leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath for the first time in what seemed like months.

Would they take her home? She didn't want to be left here in this country, and she would say whatever she had to say to get these new men to take her with them.

It was maybe five minutes before all the guys in black, dressed like the man who'd found her, entered the room. They all glanced her way, but she held up her still bound hands, hoping they understood she wouldn't be any trouble.

“You, the woman standing against the wall,” one of them said.

She met his gaze, wondering what he wanted. The excitement of being rescued had turned to exhaustion. She hoped they didn't want much from her. “Yes?”

“A helicopter is on its way. You stick with us.”

She nodded. “I'll stick with you.”

They were talking amongst themselves, but exhaustion held her too tight to listen. It seemed like they were getting ready to leave, so she moved closer to them, keeping her arms over her chest because she was still mostly naked.

The men with the bug-eyed goggles all dressed in black weren't ogling her. They were basically ignoring her, chatting amongst themselves about a captive. Who had

they taken captive? Apparently, the guy was in the next room.

She heard a weird sound that was coming closer. It sounded like a loud engine. Was that the helicopter? Possibly.

One of the men, possibly the one who'd found her, turned to her. "Time to go."

She nodded and followed closely as they took off.

They had hauled two men up and forced them toward the helicopter.

When one of them tried to fight back, they were punched hard.

That shocked her, but she couldn't afford to stumble or fall behind.

They were jumping on the helicopter, which was a much bigger step than she'd expected, and there was no way she would be able to jump up.

Someone helped her into the helicopter, and she yelped as the bottom dropped out from underneath her. One of the men cut the binding off her wrists and then handed her a shirt. She pulled it on, and someone gave her something to cover her ears.

She sat in stunned silence as they flew away from the compound.

How had this all happened? Benji hadn't been planning on going the night before, but he'd changed his plans.

He'd only wanted to show her off. No one would have known to go there to rescue her.

She'd just been in the right place at the right time.

Her rescue had been a fluke, just by happenstance.

She should still be Benji's slave, but she had escaped.

What would happen to the other women at his compound?

There was no way to know. She closed her eyes, tears leaking down her face.

She'd survived, and maybe, just maybe, the horror was over.

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Squat studied the woman they'd rescued. She looked familiar, but he couldn't tell if it was Asher.

This woman weighed less, and she looked older than the girl he'd known.

Her skin was tight, and she had more wrinkles, but if he squinted, she might look a bit like the teenager he'd known.

She hadn't said her name, and he hadn't asked. She was an American, he'd determined that from her accent.

It was obvious from her lack of clothing and bound wrists that she was a sex slave.

It was too loud to ask questions now. She was the only woman they'd rescued from the compound. The others had either been used as shields or their masters had killed them. It was a sad state for all involved.

Later, after they were off the helicopter, he would get answers. She closed her eyes, and he watched her, taking in her softened features as she relaxed.

Whatever this woman had suffered, he knew it had been bad.

When she'd been mostly naked, he could easily see her ribs and the dark bruises on her back and arms. They'd starved her and tortured her.

She'd lived through hell. As a SEAL, they taught him how to deal with torture.

A civilian wouldn't know what to do or how to recover. She would need help.

The flight to the carrier took almost an hour.

When they landed, he and Jay took the first prisoner and forced the guy off the helicopter.

Sharp and Apple had the second guy. Someone helped the woman off as he glanced back.

She looked lost and confused. He wanted to help her, but he had to take care of business first. Later, after he'd showered, he would hunt her down.

Asher moved to a door and followed the guy who'd helped her off the helicopter until a woman stopped her.

"Hello, I'm Ensign Ray, I'm here to help you. Let's get you to medical and let them check you out."

She nodded. "Thank you. My name is Asher Haller."

"I'm glad we found you, Miss Haller. Once the doctor says you can eat, I'll get you something."

"Thank you."

Asher wanted to cry, but she'd already shed all the tears she could make. Living in a constant state of dehydration had dried her out. She knew from experience she could only cry once, maybe twice a day if that.

A door shut behind her, and she jumped. The woman with her put her hand on

Asher's arm, giving her a gentle squeeze.

“You’re safe here. There are four of us who will be helping you throughout your stay with us. You don’t have to worry about anyone coming after you. You’re free and technically on American soil because this is a Navy ship.”

She closed her eyes as a shudder ripped through her. The torture was over. She would go home. But she couldn't go back to her hometown. That's where she'd been when they'd taken her captive. The thought of moving overwhelmed her, but that was her only option.

“Come on, let's get you to medical, and then I'll find some food for you.”

She went along with Ensign Ray, thinking she would be lost if she had to go anywhere alone on this monstrosity. “How do you keep from getting lost?”

Laughter spilled from Ensign Ray's lips.

“I used to get lost so often, but you learn real fast. In addition to guiding guests along the halls, I run errands for the other officers, so I've been all over the ship. I made a lot of mistakes during the first week and had to ask for help. After a few people gave me absolutely wrong directions so I got even more lost, I set about mapping the space. Now I know it by heart.”

She nodded, trying to keep up with where they were going and where they turned. “So you’re my babysitter?”

The woman shrugged. “The politicians who visit need babysitters. You need a friend and someone to make sure you’re safe and cared for.”

Asher thought about the woman’s answer. “So you’ve done this before? Taken care

of other women who are like me?”

She nodded. “Yes, ma'am. I don't enjoy why you're here, but I really do like this part of the job. It means something more than the other parts of the job. Helping you navigate the first day of your freedom is special.”

Asher's throat grew thick as emotions rose. “How often do you have to do this?”

“Probably once a month. Sometimes more. You're doing good.”

Asher shook her head. “I don't feel like I am.”

“It's okay to feel lost. You'll get some liquid through an IV and get some medicine, those parts are easy and it will make you feel better.

I'm impressed that you're able to talk to me, which is really good.

Not everyone is able to make conversation.

The med bay will keep you for half a day, maybe more.

If they clear you for food, would you prefer hotdogs and hamburgers or do you feel like a meat and vegetable plate like chicken and vegetables? ”

“Honestly, a burger and fries would be great.”

“Awesome. I'll get you some food and something to drink. I'll be with you until fifteen hundred hours, and then Ensign Lighter will take over.”

A sliver of fear whispered through her. “Oh.”

“That’s three this afternoon. Ensign Lighter is really nice. She’s a good friend of mine. She likes this part of the job, too.”

Asher nodded. “I don’t even know what time it is.”

“It’s eleven hundred hours. So we have some time together. If you think of anything you need, I’m here for you.”

“Thank you.”

They were at the medical area and she was ushered into the room and given a gown to change into.

Time seemed to pass in jerks and starts.

She had an IV and had been given medicine to take care of STIs when Ensign Ray said she was headed out to get her food.

Just then a big man with a dark beard stepped into the room. His gaze found hers.

The ensign’s entire stance changed, and she looked at the man like she was very impressed. Asher watched as he spoke to Ensign Ray and it looked like he was trying to convince her of something. After a short moment, they both headed over to her bed.

“Asher, this is Squat. He was on the mission to rescue you. He wanted to speak to you. Are you okay with that?”

“You know me as Christopher Drake. We grew up and went to high school together.”

Asher gasped, and tears sprang to her eyes. “Oh shit, Christopher, is that really you?”

Ensign Ray stepped closer to her. "Are you okay with me leaving to get food?"

She met the woman's gaze and nodded. "Yes. Thank you. I trust Christopher, and I really appreciate you making sure I felt comfortable with him staying. Also, I'm hungry. It has been a while since I was allowed to eat."

Ensign Ray smiled and then shot a look at Christopher. "Behave."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be good. She's a good friend."

The ensign left and the doctor and nurses were busy doing something else, so they weren't alone, but it was close to being alone with him. She smiled when Christopher took her hand.

"Did you know to look for me?" Asher asked.

He leaned in, concern filling his eyes. "I didn't know we would find you on this mission. We came here to take down a group of terrorists. Finding you was not expected."

"What happened to the other women at the compound?"

Squat cleared his throat, shaking his head. "A few of the men used them as shields. A couple of hostiles shot the women before we got close. It wasn't a good scene. Two ran into the night. Hopefully, they escaped and are free now. From what we could tell, none of them were Americans."

Asher shook her head. "I guess I was lucky he left me and ran."

Squat squeezed her hand. "I'm glad we found you."

She met his gaze and held it. “We weren't supposed to be there. At least, I didn't think we were supposed to be there. I went to bed the night before, and he told me a different plan for the day. Then I woke up, and the plans were changed.”

“I’m so sorry you were thrown into that. It’s not fair.”

Her throat closed as more emotions flooded through her. The only thing that had saved her was luck. “What was the name Ensign Ray called you?”

“Squat. It’s what my friends call me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m short.”

Laughter came out in a harsh bark. “Sorry, didn’t mean to laugh. You are short, but that doesn’t matter. You’re one of the best people I’ve ever known.”

His lips tilted up for a second in a small smile. “Being short hasn’t hurt me in my job. I’ve figured out how to use it to my advantage.”

She stared at him, studying his eyes and face, taking in the small scar under his left eye and his crooked smile. “I appreciate you coming to rescue me. I know that’s not why you went in there, but thank you.”

“That’s why we do what we do. I’m glad you were there.”

“I never should have broken up with you.”

He shook his head. “We made decisions that were probably for the best. We both needed to grow. I’m a different man now. I needed to grow up and the years I’ve

been in the Navy have matured me a lot.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right. I was way too immature back then.”

Ensign Ray came back in with her food, and the scent nearly caused her to swoon. Squat moved a few steps back.

He held her gaze with an intensity that made her insides feel squishy. As Ray set the food on the table next to her, Squat lifted his eyebrows. “I’ll make sure you have my information. I want you to come visit me when you get back to the States. I live in San Diego. I want to see you.”

He turned and wrote something on a sheet of paper, giving it to a nurse before he left the room. The nurse came over and smiled as Asher took a bite of the burger.

“Well, that doesn’t happen every day. I’ll make sure to keep this with you. I’ll also make a copy to go in your file so if something happens and you lose this sheet of paper, you can ask the nurse to give it to you again.”

Asher swallowed her bite of burger. “We dated in high school. I’ve known him for years.”

The nurse smiled and nodded. “Have you seen him since then?”

She shook her head as she munched on a fry. “No. Not until today.”

“Well, that shows it was meant to be. I’ll make sure you have this when you leave.”

“Thank you.”

As she ate, she thought about Christopher, or Squat as he was called now, and why

they'd broken up.

She was glad they'd parted as friends. The last time she'd seen him, they'd said goodbye before he drove off to join the Navy.

He was right. If they'd stayed together, they would have screwed up. Maybe even screwed each other up.

The years since high school had given her some wisdom she needed.

Part of that had been learning from experience.

She'd dated, but none of the guys had worked out because she refused to give in to being in a mediocre relationship.

She wanted more. The question was, would anyone want her after this?

A shiver snaked through her. She'd been to hell, but could she come back from it?

She hadn't processed anything that had happened and wouldn't for a long while.

But going to visit Squat wouldn't be to build a relationship. It would be to heal.

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Ten days had passed since Asher had been rescued by Squat and his team. She'd learned he was on a SEAL team and had started looking up what that meant. She'd been impressed. He was a much better person than she was, and maybe she didn't deserve him.

Going home held no appeal, so she'd asked to be flown to San Diego.

She hadn't called or texted Squat until she was in the airport in North Carolina, just before the plane was set to take off.

She'd gotten his voicemail and told him what plane she was on and when she would get there.

She half-expected him to not be at the airport, but when she left the security zone, Squat was right there, waiting for her.

Neither of them said anything as he pulled her into a hug and held on. She cried against his shoulder, glad she'd made the decision to come and visit him. This felt right. Being in his arms made her breathe easier.

After a moment, he leaned back, his eyes searching hers.

“I have a spare bedroom. I want you to stay with me.

You'll be safe. I have an alarm installed, and friends who live close by. Danika and Sharp are down the block. Jay and Nichole are across the street. Shine and Rowan are close, too. The women will be there for you. They want to meet you but know you

need space to breathe before they jump in.”

She choked back the tears and nodded. “I’d love to meet them.”

“Good. Do you have a bag?”

She shook her head. “No. I didn’t go back home. I probably should have, but I couldn’t face that place.”

“Well, I have an update on that. But we can save that for later.”

“Thank you. I want to take a shower and rest.”

Squat had been a little shocked to get her message that she was on a plane to see him, but he was happy she’d taken him up on his offer. He kept his arm around her shoulder as they headed out to his car. They needed to find her some clothes. It seemed like she only had whatever was in her backpack.

“I live about twenty minutes away as long as the traffic isn’t bad. We can order you some clothes and have them delivered to the house.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to. And the women have offered to help out. Rowan was held captive by one of her patients. She had a hard time after that, but she’s doing better.”

She shook her head. “Wait, what?”

“I would usually let them tell their story, but I wanted you to know these women aren’t judgy. They are real people who have gone through some shit. They will accept you as you are.”

Asher stared out the side window, her silence a little worrying until she reached over and squeezed his knee. Her touch sent a thrill through him, but he didn't want to focus too much on how she made him feel. She was here for safety and healing, not to start a relationship with him.

"I really want to meet them. Thank you for inviting me here. I think this will be good."

He reached down and squeezed her hand. "It will be good."

They were at his house, and he moved fast to help her out of her side of the car. She chuckled as she took his hand.

"You always were like this."

"What?" he asked, faking shock.

She laughed more. "Always such a gentleman."

"I try to be. I was thinking we could order pizza. What do you think?"

"Yes! Pizza sounds great."

"Good. I'll order as soon as we get in. You can shower. I don't have women's underwear, but I have some sweats and a T-shirt you can wear."

"Thank you."

They stepped into the house and Asher paused, glancing around. There were few decorations on the wall, but he did have window coverings up. That made her feel better. After he turned off the alarm, he pulled out his phone and started placing the

order for pizza.

She met his gaze as he was ordering. "Sausage and black olives?"

"Of course. I know that was your favorite back then."

"Still is." She laughed. "I didn't change much where pizza is concerned, but I did change."

"I did, too. Let me show you to your room and the shower. Get comfortable. The pizza will be here and we can watch a comedy on TV and stuff our faces with good food."

She nodded. "Sounds good."

After undressing, she flipped on the shower and stepped in, waiting for the water to get warm.

It felt good to shower. She closed her eyes but opened them fast because the nightmares weren't only for the night.

Every moment was a walking terror she was learning to navigate.

Being here with Christopher was better than when she was alone.

One thing was for sure, she could never go back home.

She would have to find somewhere new to live, and that frightened her.

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Squat could tell Asher was having issues.

She jumped at every sound, and she sat with her arms wrapped around her body like she was protecting herself from something or someone.

He focused on moving slowly and speaking softly.

The last thing he wanted to do was upset her and have her suffer a flashback or something else bad that would set her progress back.

The TV show he picked out was a comedy he knew was mild. The subject matter wasn't serious, and the show didn't focus on a sexual relationship. Overall, it seemed like Asher enjoyed the evening. Close to nine, he said goodnight and headed to his bed.

A noise woke him, and he sat up, listening for more sounds. He heard someone moving around the kitchen. His first instinct was to grab his gun, but then he remembered Asher was staying with him.

Squat slowly crept from his bed and cracked open the door. Sure enough, Asher was in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. Squat closed his door and checked the time, seeing it was only twenty minutes before his alarm would go off.

There wasn't enough time to get back to sleep. After a quick shower, he stepped from his room, and Asher's head jerked up, her eyes wide.

“Oh goodness, did I wake you? I’m so sorry.”

He tried for a reassuring smile. “No worries. It was about time for me to get up anyway.”

“I don’t know what happened to my apartment or my stuff.”

“About that. My buddy, Thario, arranged to have your apartment packed up. Your stuff is in storage. We can have it shipped out here if you want to stay. It may take a few weeks, but your stuff is safe.”

“How?”

Squat poured himself a mug of coffee and then turned to face her. “He thinks of everything. When he learned about you, he asked if I thought that would be a good idea, so we did it.”

She shook her head. “I still don’t get how you even knew.”

“Bill called me. I guess I should send him the thousand dollars he wanted for information about you.”

Asher gasped. “What?”

“He said he had information about your whereabouts and wanted me to pay him a thousand dollars for it. Honestly, I would have paid a lot more to get you to safety.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. “Hell no, don’t give him a penny. He was in on it.”

Squat jerked back. “How do you know he was in on it?”

“Before they took me away, he was there. They tried to drug me, so I guess I

wouldn't have seen him, but I wouldn't finish the drink. Then they put me in a basement, and he came by. He knew I was there. I saw Bill, and he saw me.”

“Dammit. So my Uncle Bill was in on the abduction?”

She nodded. “Yeah, Bill was in the basement where they were holding me. He said something about making extra money.”

“Well fuck.”

“I’m guessing the extra money was something he planned to get from you.”

Disgust flashed through him. “Yeah. He never expected me to find you.”

“But you did find me.”

He nodded. “I did. You can't ever go back there—to our hometown.”

A shiver worked its way through her. “No, I can't, and I don't want to.”

“You’re safe here. I haven’t informed Bill that I found you. He won’t have any idea as long as you don’t contact anyone back home.”

She nodded. “There’s nothing for me back there.”

He moved to her and pulled her into a loose hug.

She stepped into the circle of his arms and put her head on his chest. Her shoulders rose with a sigh, then fell.

If he'd known she was coming here to San Diego, he would have taken a few days

off.

At least she was safe. No one knew where she was, and the area was relatively safe for her.

A knock sounded at his door, and he pulled out his phone to check the application for his doorbell camera. It was Rowan. She waved and flashed a smile.

“Rowan is here. I didn’t know she was coming over this morning, but she’s good. She is the psychologist who was abducted by a patient.”

Asher nodded as she chewed on her thumbnail. “Oh, yeah.”

He moved to the door and pulled it open. Rowan flashed a big smile then stepped in, giving him a brief hug before moving into the den.

Asher wasn’t sure what to do, but having this woman here made her feel a little better. At least she wouldn’t be alone while Squat was at work.

“Hello, Asher, I’m Rowan.”

She smiled, feeling unsure of herself as she moved closer to shake the woman’s hand. “Hi.”

Squat squeezed her shoulder. “I’m going to head into work. I’ll be back at three.”

Panic rose, but she pushed it down. She was safe here. “I’m good. I’ll be fine, and I won’t contact anyone back home.”

“I’m free all day,” Rowan said. “We can hang out and watch TV or read or whatever you need.”

Squat said goodbye and locked the door after he headed out. She was safe here. That was a hard concept to get hold of. Everything had been pain and fear for so long, but here with Squat she was okay.

Asher knew she needed to get used to being alone, though she was happy Rowan was here. “Thank you for coming over. I didn't know what I was going to do today. Being held captive screwed me up.”

Rowan nodded. “I get that. I don't know what Squat told you about my situation, but after getting free, it was hard to navigate life. I got spooked at a coffee shop and ran out. I feared the man who had taken me was following me. It was irrational, but in my mind, running made the most sense.”

Asher nodded. “I can see that. I just don't know what to do with myself.”

“Have you eaten breakfast?”

Asher shook her head. “No. I wasn't hungry earlier.”

“The guy who held me didn't provide food. He would leave, and I had nothing to eat.”

Asher nodded. “They controlled us by withholding food.”

Rowan moved to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “How about I make some breakfast? Eggs and it looks like he has some peppers and onion.”

“That sounds good.”

“Awesome. We can eat and talk, or we can turn on the TV and chill or read.”

Asher already felt better having Rowan there with her. “I really appreciate you coming by. I know you probably had something else planned for today.”

Rowan shrugged. “I know how difficult it is. No one really understood my fear. I had the training, but still, I had to stop everything and take time at a retreat to get my healing on track.”

Asher shook her head. “I don’t know how I would afford something like that.”

“Most of the places have grants. But you also have a lot of people here who are willing to help.”

“Thank you.”

“Sure.” Rowan chopped some vegetables and cracked the eggs into a bowl before turning on the stove.

Asher moved to the pantry. “He probably has bread somewhere. I could do some toast.”

“That would be great.”

Asher focused on making the toast while Rowan prepared the eggs. As the first two slices of bread were browning, she closed her eyes and drew in a slow breath. She was free. No one would keep food from her just to get her to obey. It was refreshing to be free.

“The eggs are almost done.”

She opened her eyes and saw that the toast looked good. The toaster popped up, and she jumped and then laughed. “I forgot how loud that is.”

Rowan chuckled. “You get used to everyday things, but it takes some time. I think it was about two months before I could use a toaster without jumping.”

“I feel so out of sorts. Like I'm wrong for making decisions. Should I be looking for someone else to make my decision?”

“Decisions were hard.” Rowan plated the eggs, and they moved to the table. “But they become easier as time passes.”

She nodded as she took a bite. Maybe she could recover without having to go somewhere special.

She didn't have the money and saw no way of getting any.

She'd been working in a grocery store before she'd been abducted, and she had no real savings to speak of. Her life hadn't been spectacular, but it had been hers.

They finished eating and cleaned off the table before they headed into the den. Rowan found a movie on the TV that kept her entertained for a few hours. After the movie ended, she yawned and stretched. Exhaustion seemed to be winning.

Rowan smiled. “You can nap. I'll be out here. I have articles I can read and emails I can catch up on.”

Asher nodded, relieved Rowan had suggested the nap. The exhaustion seemed ever present. Getting a few hours sleep helped. Rowan was still there, and the house smelled great.

“What is that scent?”

“I made brownies. I didn't know if you liked chocolate, but I figured it was a safe

bet.”

Asher took the plate with a brownie on it and sniffed deeply. “It smells great. And yes, I love chocolate.” She took a bite, savoring the great taste. “These are great. I didn’t think I would ever be allowed to eat chocolate again.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

She held out her arm, looking at how thin she was. “Before all this happened, I never ate too many sweets. I guess I’ve never had to pay too much attention to my weight either way, but they really starved me and now I’m skinny. It has been almost two weeks and I still haven’t put on weight.”

“Getting a handle on food was hard for me. I didn’t want to overeat, but I didn’t want to under eat either. I did hide food at first. Mainly prepackaged stuff. A little of that is okay, but when you’re stuffing pieces of chicken into your pockets, that’s where you need to worry.”

Asher wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know that I would ever do that.”

Rowan shrugged. “It’s something food insecure people do. I totally understand the thinking behind it. Not having enough food is frightening, but chicken can go bad. If you need to hide food, make sure it’s something sealed like a protein bar or something.

Asher nodded. “How do I keep from getting to that point?”

“I’d suggest a therapist.”

“I don’t think I can afford one.”

“I can help you find someone who will work with alternative means of payment. There are grants and charities that can help. I would rather be your friend than your therapist. I mean, I can help with small stuff. I can be a friend you can contact and someone to hang out with, but you need someone you can say anything to who will help you heal.”

Asher thought about what Rowan had said. “Yeah, I’d rather have you as a friend. I think that would be better.”

“The other women in our group want to meet you. I texted them while you were sleeping. They don't want to overwhelm you, but they do want to get to know you. Tomorrow is Friday, and Danika is free. She can come over and check in with you. That way, you won't be spending all day alone.”

Eventually, she would have to be able to deal with being alone, but she was glad there were people who wanted to help her acclimate to being free.

“I really appreciate you all helping me. I would be totally lost if I hadn’t come out here.”

Rowan squeezed her arm. “We’re glad we can help. Recovery is tough. But you can do it.”

She wasn’t sure she could. The things she saw when she closed her eyes haunted her. Maybe she would eventually heal, but it seemed like it would take a long time.

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Somehow, Squat was able to get through the day without checking his phone every few minutes. Worry for Asher had him on edge, but he didn't screw up too much while at work. Before he got into his car, Rowan texted, stating that she was leaving and that everything had gone well.

When he arrived home, he made sure to make enough noise that he didn't surprise Asher. She met him at the door and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him tight.

"I'm glad you're home."

He smiled to himself, liking how easy it was with her. They weren't in a relationship. This was just them being friends. He wouldn't mind them being more, but he didn't want to push her. She needed time to heal, and he would give her all the time she needed.

"Having Rowan here all day was great. Danika is coming tomorrow. I know I need to get used to being alone, but it was nice having someone else in the house."

After she let go, he set his things down and stepped into the kitchen for a glass of water. "I'm glad they're helping. And you have plenty of time to get used to being alone. You don't need to do more. You're handling everything very well."

She shrugged and looked down at the countertop. "Thank you. I have my moments."

"We all do. Therapy helps. You'll go through some rough patches, but then one day, you'll be better."

Her lips pressed together. “I don’t know what to do about a job.”

Squat shrugged. “You don’t have to jump into anything too quickly.”

“I know. I just don’t want to be a burden.”

He shook his head. “You won’t be. I know we haven’t seen each other in years. That doesn’t mean I’m not down to help you.”

She glanced down, and he took her hand, squeezing. She looked up and met his gaze. “For how long, though?”

“However long it takes.” Squat was serious. He wanted to help her for however long it took her to get her life back together. He bit his lower lip, wondering if he should ask the question, but he wanted to know. “Before I left, you had plans to go to college. Did you go?”

She shook her head. “No. I never could afford it.

My mom got sick, and I needed to stay home that first semester and take care of her.

She died, and my dad lost his job. I had to get a job, and then I was working so much I didn't have time to go to college.” She shrugged. “Life happened. What can I say?”

“Maybe this will give you time to take some classes.”

“But what about rent and all the other things that cost money?”

She looked so lost. Asher had been through hell. It would take time for her to get better. Now was the perfect time for her to slow down, and he could support her. Squat held her gaze as he spoke, wanting her to really understand he meant this.

“Live here. It won't cost you anything.”

“But—”

He squeezed her shoulder. “Just think about it. You don't have to go to college. There are plenty of jobs that don't require a college degree. You can take this time to figure out what you want to do. You could get a certificate for haircutting or welding. It could literally be anything.”

She breathed out a heavy sigh. “Thank you. I don't really know what to do. I was working at a grocery store, but that doesn't earn much money. I just know I can't ever go home.”

“You have time to think and figure it out. I'm here for you.”

She shook her head. “Never in my life did I think I would ever see you again. I wanted to, but I didn't know how to get in contact with you. That I'm here in your place... I can't believe it.”

His heart sped up at her words but he tamed his reaction. “Well, I'm glad you're here. I wish how you ended up here was different, but I'm glad you're here.”

Asher wanted to reply, but she didn't want to lead Squat on.

She was interested in having more than a friendship with him but didn't know how to get there.

Everything in her life was upside down, and she couldn't commit.

Maybe after she got some therapy and time granted her distance from the horrors she'd been subjected to, they could have something.

For now, she needed to concentrate on her future.

She had no idea what she wanted to study in college or if she even wanted to attempt college.

Before she'd graduated high school, she'd wanted to be a teacher, but now she saw how they were treated.

Being a teacher was the last thing she wanted.

Maybe something with nursing would be better.

The thing she liked most about working at the grocery store was the people.

Working in a doctor's office would be rewarding because she'd get to help people.

“Maybe I could do something in the medical field.”

“You’d be good at that. You were probably the brightest student in our school. And I know you are one of the most caring people I know.”

His words made her feel funny inside. She liked that he thought she was smart and compassionate.

She was just trying to be a good person when she showed that she cared about people.

It was easy to care, but she knew it was harder when you were expected to do something to help people.

Medical workers weren't miracle workers.

She'd seen plenty of over-extended nurses and doctors come into the grocery store after long shifts.

Some were jaded and angry about the medical system, which left many to deal with things on their own. Could she handle disappointing people?

“It has been a while since I studied anything. I guess I could go back to school.”

“I think you would be great at whatever you decided to pursue. It would give you time to process everything before going back to work.”

She nodded, thinking about what she would need to do to get any type of degree or certificate. “The thought of going back to school is scary.”

He held her hand, squeezing it gently. “I’m sure it is. But you’re strong.”

She barked out a scoff. “I’m not strong. I didn’t fight when they had me.”

He held both her shoulders as he held her gaze. Warmth flowed from him, but it also made her feel weird. “People in those situations like you were in give up. You didn’t die. Not everyone survives being taken captive. You did. You are strong, and you’re smart. You’re a survivor.”

“I wish I had as much faith in myself as you have in me. I don’t know what will happen.”

“We can never know what will happen. I’m here for you, and I know Danika, Rowan, and Nichole will be there for you, too. The guys on my team are here for you. You have lots of support.”

His words and his touch made her feel stronger. Coming here had absolutely been the

right decision. “Thank you. You don't know how much your support means to me.”

She wanted to pull Squat close for a kiss, but fear held her back.

He was being nice and hadn't once even tried anything with her.

She shouldn't be having any relationship thoughts about him.

Squat was just helping her acclimate back into life, that was all.

He wasn't looking for a relationship with her and she needed to remember that fact.

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Asher enjoyed Danika's company and was glad Nichole came over in the afternoon.

The three of them chatted about fun things to do in San Diego and where they liked to park when they went to the beach.

The San Diego area seemed like a fun place to live.

Once she felt more acclimated she was sure she would go out and do some of the stuff.

"I was talking to Squat last night, and he suggested I go back to school."

"What were you thinking of studying?" Nichole asked.

"Something in nursing. I like helping people."

Danika nodded. "That sounds great. I think it would be good for you. Plus, you have Squat's support. That helps a lot."

She shook her head. "I really don't know why he wants to help me."

Nichole chuckled. "He's a good man, and you're a good person."

Insecurity wove through her thoughts. She'd been through hell and had changed to the point she didn't know what kind of person she was. "I don't know that I'm that good of a person."

Danika threw back her head, laughter spilling out. “From what I've seen, you're really nice. You're a good person, and I'm glad you're here. I think we'll end up being friends.”

Danika sounded sincere. Everything that she'd gone through had done a number on her. She wanted to believe in herself, but it was hard. “Thank you. It's hard to have faith in myself.”

Both Danika and Nichole hugged her. She clung to them, thankful someone cared about her.

She missed Grace, but doubted she would ever find out what happened to her.

Having friends here in California would make this transition easier.

She knew she needed to find a therapist and work on her mental health, but having people to chat with and hang out with would help so much.

After a moment, she stepped back and wiped her eyes. “I think we'll be good friends. You've all been so nice.”

Nichole squeezed her arm. “I'm happy we get a chance to get to know you.”

Danika made some tea and they sat in the den, sipping hot tea and she listened to them talk about their lives. It was nice to hear normal talk, even if her life was still messed up.

Close to three, the women left. She told them it was okay for them to go, but being alone was weird.

She kept watch out the front window, stepping into the shadows when cars drove

past. She feared the unknown and starting classes at a university was a huge unknown.

In Squat's house, she felt safe, but she couldn't stay locked inside forever.

Would she be safe out there, going to school?

Panic rose at the thought of leaving the house, even if it was just to go to classes.

She drew in a deep breath, trying to calm herself.

No one was after her in California. She had to keep reminding herself that no one knew she'd flown out here. The people who had abducted her were states away, and none of them knew where she was. She hadn't contacted anyone back home.

The only person she wanted to contact was Grace, but she wasn't there.

She heard Squat's car pull up and forced the excitement down. Being happy he was home was normal, but being too happy would only set her up for disappointment. They weren't in a relationship, and nothing was developing between them.

Squat was excited to be home for the entire weekend. It was doubtful that he would be called out for a mission. Other teams were in the rotation and he would be free to spend the weekend with Asher.

"Hey, how was today?" Squat asked as he stepped in.

"Good. Danika and Nichole came over."

"That's great."

“They’re both so nice.”

He nodded as he stored his equipment. “They are. When we get together for picnics in the park, they are always nice.”

“Picnics?”

“Yeah. None of us have really big houses, and the six of us take up all the air in the room if we spend too much time inside. Parks, the beach, pools and stuff like that makes it easier for us to hang out.”

“That’s cool. They were all with you when you saved me, right?”

“They were.”

“I’d like to meet them and thank them.”

“Maybe we can get together this weekend. I know they’re happy we rescued you.”

She drew in a deep breath and shook her head as she let it go. “I never thought I would really be free. I thought I would die before I could escape.”

“I’m glad we found you.”

Her eyes looked glassy with moisture and he pulled her into a hug. “You’re safe now. It might have been luck that we found you, but you’re safe.”

Having Asher in his arms felt right. She had been through so much. He wanted to help her heal and that meant he had to hold back. He couldn’t rush this.

Asher closed her eyes and breathed in slowly as Squat held her. He was being so nice.

She loved how good his arms felt around her. Though she was attracted to him, she didn't need to force the issue. He was just being nice, nothing more. They weren't a couple, just good friends.

She stepped back and wiped away the tears. "You're such a good friend. I really appreciate you helping me with this. Having a place to stay while I recover is great. I can get back on my feet, and everything will be okay."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Exactly. Now then, how about dinner? What would you like? We can do chicken or burgers."

A smile spread over her face. "Burgers."

"Sounds great. Let me change, and I'll get the meat ready for the grill."

"I can chop up some vegetables and sauté them."

"Awesome. I think I have some fries in the freezer, we can heat those up to round out the meal."

"Yum. I'm looking forward to it."

Asher pulled out the vegetables and found the chopping block. Squat was back in the kitchen preparing the meat as she started chopping.

"I sent a text to the gang. On Sunday we can have a picnic. It will be very low-key and relaxed. We're not bringing anything. The other guys will take care of the food and stuff we need."

"Are you sure? I don't want to show up empty-handed."

“Next time, you can show your skills. This time, they just want to meet you.”

She wasn't sure how she felt about being basically useless. “I feel like I should do something.”

“Hey, you've been through a lot. You don't need the pressure of having to cook something.”

She nodded. “I get that. I just feel useless. I know I need to see someone. I need to find out about classes. I need a job. There just seems like a lot I need to do, but I don't like showing up without something.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I get that you feel like it's too much. But you don't have to do any of that stuff right away. It can wait, and the guys want you to heal. We can buy a few bags of chips if you feel you need to bring something, but no pressure.”

She let out a sigh. “Okay. No cooking anything. Thank you.”

“How about after we eat, we go for a walk at the beach and then watch a movie later?”

“Sure. That would be great. Being with you and doing normal stuff helps. I feel like I'm kind of normal when I spend time with you.”

“I'm glad it makes you feel better. You know, life can be hard in the best of times so make sure you give yourself a break.”

Squat finished making the burgers, and she chopped the vegetables before she put the fries in the oven. She got the vegetables ready just minutes before Squat came in with the burgers.

“Those vegetables look good.”

“Well, those burgers smell great. I’m ready for some food.”

“Let’s eat.”

They sat at his kitchen table and dug in. She took a bite of the burger, thinking it was amazing. Next, she tried the vegetables, and they tasted fine, but the fries tasted wrong. She couldn't swallow the bite and spit it out in a napkin.

“Something wrong?” Squat asked.

“The burger and vegetables are great, but the fries are wrong.”

“Let me try one.” Squat put a fry into his mouth and bit down but spit it out quickly.

“Oh, those are freezer burned. They must be very old. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think they were that bad but that is awful.”

Asher chuckled. “It’s okay. We have plenty with the burger and vegetables.”

He nodded. “I need to clean out that freezer. Who knows what else is in there that has gone bad.”

She laughed again. It felt good to laugh with him. After they cleaned up the dishes, they headed to the beach. The sun was setting, so it wasn't too hot as they walked along the water's edge. After they'd gone a few hundred yards, she stopped, and Squat stopped, too.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I was just thinking that everything is weird and I want life to be better. I know

it will take time, but I want to be back to myself. I mean, sometimes I'm okay, but other times I feel like I'm going to crack open."

"PTSD is a bitch. It can come at you hard."

"Do you think that's what's wrong with me?"

He squeezed her hand. "If you didn't have PTSD, I'd be worried. What you went through was terrible. Give it time. We'll make sure you get in with a therapist this next week."

"They are so expensive."

"Not necessarily. There are programs that will help you afford the therapist. It will all work out."

Her heart squeezed as hope started to seep in. "Thank you. I don't know what I would do without you and your friends."

"We're happy to help you. That's what friends are for."

She should be happy, but his words chiseled a hole in her soul. They really were just friends. She shouldn't expect more from him. He was just being nice and supportive like friends were.

Luckily, a whale breached right at that moment, distracting them both.

The last thing she wanted was for Squat to think she was disappointed with him.

His helping her was amazing, and she needed to act that way.

They hadn't been in a relationship in years, and she shouldn't expect anything from him.

Being able to start over here in San Diego with a ready-made friend circle was wonderful.

If she'd gone anywhere else in the world, she would have been totally alone.

Appreciating what she had was something the first therapist had said when she'd still been in a military hospital overseas before they'd shipped her home.

Life had changed, and some things would never be the same again, but that didn't mean she wouldn't have things to appreciate.

The ocean being so close that she could drive down here and see whales and dolphins was amazing.

The weather was a little warmer than she was used to, but it was nice.

The people were great, and she would be able to find a therapist and not have to pay too much money.

She could do this, and she had friends. It would be easy to recover and live here. She just needed to give it time.

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Squat enjoyed spending Saturday with Asher. He'd seen the disappointment in her eyes when they'd been talking about friendship, but he hadn't wanted to make a move yet. Maybe he'd misunderstood what that look had been about.

She was still dealing with the shock of everything that had happened to her. It wouldn't be fair to start something they couldn't keep going once she realized he wasn't what she wanted.

Squat knew he wasn't a prize. He might be strong, but he was short, and his job came first. He lived for the Navy.

The women he dated couldn't handle him leaving for weeks or months at a time.

He had secrets like all SEALs, but those were because of his job and had nothing to do with his personal life.

Not everyone understood that distinction.

He kept life compartmentalized, and there were compartments he could never share with someone he was with.

Would Asher understand that he was being secretive not because he found someone, but because the Navy had sent him information?

She could never have access to his phone so she could look through stuff.

He knew some women balked at not knowing their man's passwords or other

information.

He got it. Guys cheated. Hell, some SEALs even cheated, and when they were caught they got in trouble.

He would have to be careful with Asher, and move slowly.

If they rushed into things, both of them could end up hurt, but her more than him.

When they arrived at the park on Sunday, the other guys were there. Danika, Rowan, and Nichole met Asher and pulled her over to the seats they'd already arranged. He stepped over to the grill where the guys were standing around.

"How is Asher doing?" Sharp asked.

"She's good."

Jay angled his head toward the women. "We wanted to say hello, but we don't want to overwhelm her."

"She'll be fine, I think. She's handling everything really well."

"That's good," Apple said.

"Why don't you all come over? You can meet her officially."

"Sure."

Sharp picked up the spatula. "Let me flip the meat."

After Sharp flipped the meat, they all moved to where the women were sitting. Asher

stood, and he could see the hesitance in her stance. She looked almost afraid.

Squat moved to stand next to her. “These are the guys on my team. Sharp, Jay, Apple, Griz, and Shine.”

Tears filled her eyes as she moved to each man and gave them a hug, thanking them for rescuing her. When she stepped back, there wasn’t a dry eye in the bunch.

“We like these types of rescues,” Jay said.

Griz nodded. “Yeah. You’re alive, and that’s a good thing. We’re glad you made it home.”

“Thank you,” Asher said as she wiped her eyes.

Squat put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a quick hug. It was obvious she was trying not to lose it.

Sharp went back to the grill to check the meat, but the rest of the guys stayed close.

“I can’t express how thankful I am you all saved me. I don’t know how much longer I would have lasted.”

Sharp came back over, his expression serious. “You are strong. Most people fall apart after going through what you went through. You’re doing good.”

Asher wondered if these guys were just blowing smoke at her, but they seemed genuine. She felt okay, which surprised her. She’d been through hell and had come out on the other side without having too many problems. Some stuff was lurking under the surface, but when it hit, she could handle it.

Being at the park with these people made her feel safe.

She knew the women and could tell that if she stayed here in San Diego, they would end up friends even if nothing happened between herself and Squat.

These guys were all nice, and she imagined they would continue to be nice even if she was just Squat's friend.

"I don't always feel strong."

Griz nodded. "I don't either. Sometimes, after a bad mission, I lie in bed and cry."

Apple nodded. "Yeah, holding it all together all the time is a myth. There are times you just aren't going to have it together."

Asher blew out a harsh breath. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll go through cycles of falling apart."

"We'll be here for you when you do," Danika said.

Asher hugged her and then laughed. "Look at me getting all emotional. Thank you again."

The guys gave her another hug before going back to the grill to finish cooking the meat.

Squat made sure she got a burger and chips, and Danika brought her over a drink.

She was impressed that everyone was helping her so much.

When the guys got up and started tossing around a football, she turned to Nichole.

“Are they always like this?”

Nichole’s eyebrows shot up. “Like what?”

“So attentive? I’ve never in my life seen guys who cared for the people around them. Usually, they sit around and act like kings instead of partners involved in a relationship. Or at least they did where I grew up.”

All the women laughed and then nodded. Danika was the first to speak.

“They are doers. I mean, sometimes I fix meals and have a plate ready for Sharp, but he doesn’t like sitting still. If he’s home before me, he makes dinner. We work together on everything when he’s around.

He knows that all the errands and decisions fall to me when he’s away on a mission, so he likes to do more when he’s home. ”

“Shine is the same way,” Rowan said. “They like to keep busy.”

Asher shrugged. “It has been good with him helping so much. I just thought he was being nice to me because of what happened.”

Danika shrugged. “Maybe, but they are also really good guys who have a strong urge to care for the people in their lives.”

Asher nodded, even more convinced that there wouldn’t be any romantic connection between them. He was just being nice, and she could live with that. Though if she had a chance for more with Squat, she would jump at it.

After about twenty minutes, the guys stopped playing ball and came over to sit with them. She liked how the guys acted around their women. It was different from what

she'd grown up around and so much better. It was obvious the guys cared about the people around them.

When it was time to go, Squat helped the guys load up their cars, and then he helped her into the car. Being with these people was starting to heal her. She knew she needed to set up time with a therapist, but spending time with Squat's friends was good for her.

“That was nice,” she said as he took his seat in the car.

“It was. I like this crew. They're good people.

Most of the SEALs are. Like most things, there are a few bad guys, but for the most part, they are good.

If you stick around, you'll meet a lot of the guys.

I hang out with Wild's team, and Rider's team is great, too. There are some older guys who are retired who I still see from time to time.”

“You all are a tight-knit group.”

He nodded. “We are. When you go through stuff like we do, you become tight with those around you.”

She stared out the window as they drove. “I've never experienced anything like that.”

“It's rare. Close friendships need something to form a bond. The women are close because they end up leaning on each other when we are away on missions. Of course, not every woman married to a SEAL wants to be friends with the other wives. I guess everyone has their own preferences.”

“I get that. Danika, Nichole, and Rowan are good friends.”

“They are.”

They pulled into the driveway at his place, and she felt like she was putting too much pressure on him, so she changed the subject.

“I want to look into what I need to do for college.”

“Cool. I'll make sure you have access to my computer. You mentioned medical earlier. Do you have a specific program you want to do?”

“Not yet, but there are basics I could take. If I get those out of the way, it will give me time to figure everything else out.”

He opened the door, and they stepped in. She breathed a sigh of relief at being home. She'd felt safe when they'd been in the park but at some point after they left the park the pressure had started to build as fear took over. She needed to get her responses under control.

Squat moved past her and into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. “Yeah, that would be good. I'm glad you want to stay.”

“You are?” He was unaware of the pressure building inside of her. Maybe she needed a nap. That would help her regulate.

“I am. It's nice having you here. I like it. I hope you don't mind me saying that.”

She shook her head. “No, not at all. It's nice being here. I like spending time with you.”

“Good.”

She blew out a breath, trying to ease the pressure. “I think I need to take a nap.”

His gaze met hers, and he nodded. “That would be good. I need to read some stuff before work tomorrow.”

She turned to head upstairs but spun back. “Christopher, I really appreciate you being so kind to me. You don't have to, and I realize that.”

“Hey, of course, I'm here for you.” He moved to her and gave her a quick hug. “Now go get some sleep.”

She smiled and turned to head upstairs. The tightness in her chest eased a little more. There wasn't anything physically wrong with her but worry still ruled. She should feel better after spending the day at the park, but she felt odd. Like something was wrong and she couldn't get a hold on it.

She lay down and pulled the covers up over her head, blocking out the light. Sleep came fast, tumbling her into dreams. At first the dreams were slow but at some point it turned troubled but she couldn't claw her way out to the surface.

Squat checked the time, thinking Asher would probably want to wake up from a nap soon. She'd been asleep for more than two hours and might not sleep at night if she didn't wake. He thought about going up to her room to make sure she was awake but didn't want to scare her.

He stood and stretched just as a scream filtered down from upstairs. He took off, taking the steps two at a time, and burst into her room.

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Panic etched across her features as the scream intensified. He moved to the bed, keeping his voice calm.

“Hey, it’s me, Squat—Christopher. It’s okay. You’re safe.”

It took her a few minutes to calm down enough to stop screaming. Panic still filled her eyes, and her breathing was erratic.

“It’s okay, Asher. You’re safe.”

She clung to him, pulling him closer. After a moment, she climbed onto his lap and snuggled close. He held her, knowing it would take a long time for her to calm down.

Ten minutes passed before she finally sat up and slid off his lap. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

“You had a flashback. It’s okay. They happen. How about something to eat?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Your system took a hit. You need to get your blood sugar even and get everything else even.”

She nodded. “Okay. You know better than I would.”

Asher followed Squat downstairs, feeling stupid for reacting so badly to a dream. She moved to the refrigerator and pulled it open, not seeing anything that interested her.

“I’ll make eggs and toast. You’ll get carbs, protein, and fat. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

“Are you sure you have time? I can make it.”

He shook his head and waved her off. “Take a seat and relax.”

“But that’s all I’m doing. Relaxing.”

“No, you're recovering. It takes a lot to recover. Take a seat, drink some water, and I'll get you some food. Then everything will be better.”

She sat, watching him get everything from the refrigerator and start preparing it. Watching him work in the kitchen calmed her. She felt safe in his presence.

“I’ll put some cheese on your eggs.”

“Thank you. You’re doing more than you have to.”

“No, I’m not. I like taking care of you.”

Laughter bubbled up. “You’re funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“You're this big bad SEAL, and you're cooking me eggs.”

He grew serious. “I may be a big bad SEAL, but I'm still just a guy, and I care about

you.”

His words made her heart squeeze. He was being nice, that was all. She needed to stop falling for him every time he said something nice to her. He didn’t want a relationship with her. That wasn’t why she was here.

He set a plate in front of her. The eggs looked and smelled delicious. She took a bite and moaned. He sat across from her, his gaze steady as he watched her eat.

“Are you going to watch me?”

He nodded. “Yes. I’m going to watch you eat.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to.”

“Maybe. But I want to.”

“Why?”

Squat shrugged. “I don’t know. I like watching you.”

She set down her fork and narrowed her gaze. “What are you saying?”

Squat worried his lower lip with his teeth and then he shrugged. “We’ve known each other for a long time.”

She nodded. “We have.”

“I don’t want to press, and I don’t want to say anything that would throw you off or upset you, but I think it’s obvious.”

She held her breath, waiting for him to say more. Did he feel something, too? “What is obvious?”

“I’ve seen it in your eyes, and you’ve probably seen it in mine.”

She picked up her fork and toyed with the eggs, pushing them around the plate before taking a bite. “Are you saying you’re attracted to me?”

He reached across the table and took her hand.

“I’ve thought about you for years. I should have done something, like sent you a note or called you.

Something. I took the coward’s way out and just ignored the thoughts, sometimes thinking you’d be better off without me.

But yeah, I’m attracted to you. My feelings for you never died.

Sure, we broke up, and we lost touch, but Asher, you’ve always held a special place in my heart.”

She squeezed his hand, and his words sank in. Could he be for real? “I never stopped thinking about you.”

“I’m not going to press you for more. You need to heal, but maybe if we dated and took things slow...”

She shook her head as laughter slipped out. “I’m living here.”

“True. But that doesn’t mean you owe me anything.

If neither of us was into the other, we would just both live here as friends.

I've seen the look in your eyes, and earlier, when you were on my lap, I couldn't hide how I felt.

I don't want you surprised later if I say something or do something you weren't expecting. ”

Her eyebrows bunched together as her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

He thought she looked cute and his lips tipped up in a smile. “If I say something about how attracted I am to you, I don't want to shock you with that admission.”

“Oh.” She took a few more bites, then met his gaze again. “Was it that obvious that I was into you?”

Squat laughed. “Maybe. Was I that obvious?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I feel off, and I'm not good at reading cues right now.”

“Well, I'm glad you know how I feel about you. I like you a lot. I want to give us a chance. If you decide you don't want to be with me, it's cool. You can still live here.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Would that be weird?”

“Maybe, but I won't kick you out. We can make it work. You're a friend first. You'll always be my friend no matter what.”

She drew in a deep breath and let it go slowly. “You always were a good guy. When we were kids, well, eighteen, and broke up, you were so freaking classy about it. You knew how to not make it a big deal. Other high school couples ended up hating each

other and I never felt that way about you.”

He took her hand. “You were a big part of how smoothly it went. You were cool about it, too.”

“I tried to be. I’m glad we found each other again.”

He nodded. “I’m glad I found you.”

Her throat closed with emotions and she didn’t want to cry again so she got up and rinsed her plate. It looked like he was going to tell her she didn’t have to clean her plate, but she shook her head. “You have to let me start taking care of something.”

“I know. I just like doing things for you.”

“I’m sure there will be plenty of times we both get to do things for each other.”

He raised his hands. “Okay.”

She finished rinsing the plates and loading them into the dishwasher. “How about a walk and then we could watch a movie?”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Hanging out with Squat was comfortable and fun. He made everything seem easier. Sitting beside him on the couch while they watched the movie felt right.

It was almost time for bed, but they still hadn’t kissed. Would he kiss her? She didn’t want to make the first move, but she wanted to kiss him.

She yawned for the third time, and Squat shut off the TV. He pulled her up. “We

should get some sleep.”

She nodded, already missing the warmth of having him close. “Yeah, I’m tired.”

His hand was on her waist, and she glanced up, seeing desire swirling in his eyes. Stepping back and going up to bed was what she knew she should do. Instead, she leaned in and brushed her lips over his.

Squat froze as desire fired through him. All day, she'd been close, and he'd kept his desire under control, but as day turned to night, lust took over. He should have stepped away and stopped before something happened because Asher was in no condition to take this deeper.

When she pressed her lips against his a second time, he nearly lost it.

This time, he returned the kiss, drinking in the feel of her body against his.

She was skinny from her time in captivity, but her breasts pressing against him felt amazing.

He wanted to lift her shirt and feel her nipples against the palms of his hand as he cupped her breasts.

He wanted to touch and taste her, learn how she responded to him.

She moved even closer and brushed against his cock. Desire exploded through him. Air seemed almost impossible to take in as her fingers grazed the waistband of his pants. He was going to explode if she kept this up.

Asher loved being kissed by Squat. The way his lips were firm but not punishing turned her on.

When his tongue swiped at her lips, she opened.

The hint of a memory of kissing him from before hit and lust swirled deeper.

Of course, they'd fooled around when they'd been teens, but now she was experienced, and it would be different.

Panic hit as a memory surfaced. Revulsion rolled through her, but she pushed it away. She wasn't there. She was here in California. Christopher had his arms wrapped around her. He was the one lover she'd never fully gotten over. He was safe.

His hands on her waist brought her back to reality. Then he had one hand in her hair, holding her closer. She knew what was next, dropping to her knees and presenting her mouth for his pleasure. Panic swept over her.

Did she want Squat because she wanted him, or was this the training? Was she about to drop to her knees because she wanted to show this man how much she cared, or was fear of punishment the driving factor? She didn't know.

Squat wasn't kissing her. It had ended awkwardly, and it was her fault. Fear hit, and she had to turn away from him.

“Sorry.”

Then he was in front of her, not touching but still holding her attention. “No, that was my fault. I knew you weren’t ready.

She shook her head, wanting to get across her thoughts.

“I wanted you. I wanted you, okay. But then I didn't know if I wanted you or if it was conditioning. They forced us to—” A sob wrenched from her mouth, and she tried to

turn away, but his arms were around her, holding her loosely as he said comforting words.

It was all a swirl in her mind. She wanted him.

She really did, but they'd used pain and humiliation to control her, forcing her to do things she hadn't wanted to do.

Now, she didn't know what came from her own internal desires or what was a result of them programming her.

A sob escaped her lips. "I'm sorry."

"You do not have to apologize. I should because I pushed you."

She shook her head against his chest. "I just don't know what are my thoughts and what they programmed me to do."

He kissed the side of her head. "Asher, it's going to take time. We can do slow. We can stay just friends with no pressure?—"

She pulled back and met his gaze. "No. I need you. I want you. I just need a clear head, and doing this, kissing you and you touching me, I just got scared."

He held her face in his hands. "We are going to slow this down. And that's okay. I want you to know what's in your mind and not question your desire. I care about you. I want you to have peace. If that means we go really slow, then we go really slow. I can wait."

His words made her feel like he cared. She didn't want to be a cock tease, and she wasn't trying to be. She really wanted to be with him, but everything seemed too

much. Dealing with all the pressures was too much for her. Slowing down would give her time to get her mind straight.

“I wonder how long it will take for me to feel normal again.”

“You may not ever feel normal like you did before. Your life has changed, but that doesn’t mean that you won’t find a space where you feel good about what’s going on around you. And I want to be part of that.”

She nodded. “I want you to be a part of my healing and a part of my life.”

“I’d like that.” He kissed her on the forehead and then took her hand. “You were tired before we started. You must be exhausted now.”

She yawned and stretched. “I am. I need sleep.”

His smile warmed her. “Let’s get you upstairs and into bed.”

After brushing her teeth, she stepped out and found Squat in the hallway beside her bedroom door. He opened his arms, and she walked into them.

“Get a good night’s sleep.”

She squeezed him around the waist and stepped back so she didn't pull him closer. “Thank you. I think I will sleep well tonight.”

Squat took another step away from her so he didn't pull her to him.

They were both on the edge, teetering toward lust. It wouldn't take much to get him to say yes to sex, though he was committed to waiting.

Letting Asher have time to adjust to them being together would benefit them both in the long run.

Once downstairs, he grabbed his computer and moved to the couch, wondering if he should pull up some porn and jack off. He didn't need porn, though. Just thinking of Asher was enough to get him going.

His email dinged with a message before he could open a browser.

He groaned and clicked on his email, seeing a note from his command structure telling them they would probably be heading out in the next week.

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. It was bad timing but not the worst. It would really suck if they were sent out now.

At least he didn't have to wake Asher up to tell her he was leaving.

She would probably hate him being gone, but it couldn't be helped.

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Asher wasn't happy Squat was leaving, but it was his job. She understood exactly why he was needed in other countries. If he and his team hadn't traveled to take down the terrorists who were holding her, she would still be captive.

She wouldn't complain at all that he would be gone and leave her alone.

Being alone was scary. During the day while he was at work, she held it together, but having to spend a week or two alone would push her to the edge.

Maybe Nichole, Danika, and Rowan would allow her to bounce between sleeping at their houses.

If she had someone else to rely on, she could probably keep it together. Maybe they hated being alone, too.

Squat's house was safe. No one ever came to the door other than their friends.

None of the people in her past knew where she was.

No one would come looking for her here. Plus, Squat was taking her to Thario's place to meet him.

Thario was keeping track of everything going on with the people who'd abducted her in the first place. He would know if they had been arrested and he was trying to make sure they wouldn't find her.

She had to trust that the people in Squat's life would keep her safe even if Squat was

gone.

On Tuesday, after Squat got home from work, they headed to Thario's place.

Squat told her she didn't need to be nervous, but that didn't calm her.

Meeting new people was awkward, and now, after being abducted, she had the added pressure of the terrible things that happened to her.

She stepped from the car, and a huge dog bounded over, his tail wagging.

“Oh, who are you?” Asher asked as the dog sniffed her.

“That’s Frog,” the guy on the porch called out.

“Frog, what a handsome boy you are.” The dog took off running back to the porch. She could hear the man chatting with his dog, telling him he was a good boy.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Thario.”

She shook his hand when she made it to the porch. “Hi. I’m Asher. Your dog is sweet.”

“He’s good. He keeps me even.”

She narrowed her eyes as she stared at the guy. “What do you mean?”

“When I have bad days, flashbacks, and other stuff, he gets me out of my funk.”

She nodded, wondering if a dog would help her. Frog came over and nuzzled her hand, so she ran her fingers through his thick fur. The dog looked up at her, and she

swore he had a smile on his face.

She dropped low so her face was even with his. “Hey, Frog.”

The dog took the opportunity to lick her face and laughter spilled out as the ever present heaviness lifted from her. She could see how having a dog like Frog would help.

She couldn’t stop herself from giving Frog a hug. He gave a small bark and danced around as she stood. “I like him.”

“He likes you, too. Come in, and we can sit and chat. I ordered pizza, and it should be here soon.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Squat said.

“I’m hungry, and I figured you’d be hungry, too.”

“Thank you,” Asher said. “I forgot to eat lunch today.”

Squat shook his head. She knew he would be disappointed, but she was trying to be better about eating. Sometimes she just forgot to consume calories.

Frog ran out into the yard to do his business before following them inside. She glanced around and saw a two-person couch and a recliner. She sat on the couch, and Thario sat in the recliner. Squat dropped down beside her, and Frog came over and sat at her feet.

She ran her hand over his fur, liking how it calmed her. Thario and Squat talked about someone she hadn’t met, so she wasn’t paying that much attention when Thario asked her a question. Her head whipped up, and her gaze swung from Thario to Squat.

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“It’s okay,” Thario said. “I was just wondering what your plans were for when Squat is gone.”

“I talked to Danika and the other women. I’m going to rotate between staying at their house and sleeping at Squat’s house. I should only be alone once or twice a week. It won’t be that bad.”

“That’s good. You can call me if you need anything. I know PTSD can really screw you up.”

Asher shrugged. “It’s hard for me to think about having PTSD. I always thought only military types got that.”

Thario chuckled. “Common misconception. Trauma causes stress.

For some people, it isn’t a huge deal. For other people, it sucks.

There are some really good treatments that have lasting results.

Please don’t hesitate to ask for help. Before I got Frog, I’d let it get so bad it was difficult to come back from.”

She nodded, remembering how she’d reacted with Squat.

Reacting wasn’t good. She didn’t want to have long-term issues.

Squat had told her a little of what Thario had gone through, and she thought he had it much worse than what she’d been through.

It sucked that people were so awful to each other.

Life would be so much better if people were decent.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I thought I was doing really good, then something hit, and it made me wonder.”

Thario nodded. “When things are going great, I know something is around the corner.

It's not me being pessimistic. It's just acknowledging that when life is sailing along perfectly, and something happens, it can hit harder than it would if I was already having issues.

And shit is going to happen. That's just life.”

She nodded. “Yeah, something is always happening.”

Squat chuckled. “Ain’t that the truth.”

The doorbell rang, and Squat stood. “Is that the pizza?”

Thario nodded. “It should be.”

Hanging out with Thario was good for her. Thario and Squat talked about things that were clearly SEAL-related, but she didn't feel left out of the conversation. It was nice, just enjoying the evening with nothing expected from her.

When they left Thario’s place, she wasn't worried about Squat being gone for a while.

She had friends, and she could trust them to keep her safe.

Already, they'd gone above and beyond what they needed to do for her, and she knew they would show up and not leave her alone.

Because being alone felt very scary now.

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Asher cried when Squat left. At least she held the tears until he was gone. She hadn't wanted to make him feel bad about leaving to do his job, especially since his job had saved her. Still, she was sad he was gone.

An hour after Squat left, a knock sounded at her door. She checked the peephole, seeing Nichole. When she pulled the door open, Nichole looked like she was about to say something, instead her friend pulled her into a tight hug.

“We’re here for you.”

She relaxed into Nichole’s hug, and held onto her words. They were here for her. Asher wanted to be able to do this on her own, but she knew it was ridiculous to think she could. “Thank you for coming over. It hit me harder than I expected.”

Nichole stepped in and closed the door. “The first time Jay left, I cried so much. I never told anyone about that.”

Asher stepped into the kitchen and started warming water for tea. “I’m glad I have you all by my side. It makes this easier.”

“Of course. I mean, not everyone is into being buddy-buddy, but I've found some really good friends since moving here.”

“I hope we will become good friends.”

Nichole nodded. “I think we will. You seem to fit into our group well. I mean, you don’t have to be our friend, but it’s nice to have someone to talk to when the guys

want to hang out.”

Asher nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. You three are nice.”

Nichole laughed. “I’m sure some people don’t think so, but we try. Also, we understand. Sometimes life is harsh, and it’s hard to make friends. We’re lucky that we’re all chill and not into competing against each other. We celebrate each other’s victories and help each other when we’re down.”

Asher really felt Nichole's words. She'd had a hard time making and keeping friends after graduating high school. Grace had been her best friend. She had people at work she considered work friends, but they weren't the kind of friend who would drop plans and come help her.

When Grace disappeared, it had hurt deep.

Asher had gone searching for her because she hadn't wanted to lose such a good friend.

Now she felt shame because she'd almost forgotten about Grace after being abducted and going through the hell she'd suffered.

Grace was going through worse. A shiver slid through her.

Nichole’s eyebrows rose. “Everything okay?”

She shrugged. “I was just thinking about my friend, Grace. That’s the reason I was at that party where the guys took me. I was looking for Grace.”

“Oh, what happened to her?”

“No clue, but I think it was something similar to what I suffered. I should send a text to Thario and find out if he can get any information on her. It’s sad to say I kind of forgot to ask him to search for her.”

“Hey, you’ve been through a lot. It’s hard to remember everything important to you when you’re fighting for your life.”

Asher shrugged. “I know. I just feel bad.”

“How about we call him?”

“Right now?”

Nichole nodded. “Yes.”

“Oh, okay.” Asher didn’t usually call people unless she knew they wanted to hear from her.

Nichole pulled out her phone and called Thario, putting him on speaker. He answered on the second ring.

“Nichole, how are you?”

“Good. I’m with Asher, and she was wondering what happened to her friend, Grace.”

“Let me look.” Keyboard clicking mixed with the sound of Frog grumbling about something.

Asher wanted to ask what was up with Frog but held silent while he looked. She didn’t like being a bother, but Thario said he wanted to help. It took almost a minute before he spoke.

“From what I can gather, the men who took Asher also took her. They aren’t saying much. They’re in jail, awaiting trial, but they won’t give answers.”

“Dammit. I know she’s out there somewhere.”

Thario let out a heavy sigh. “Situations like yours, Asher, are a rarity. Sure, you are safe, but it could have gone much worse for you. Usually, people aren’t found. Instead, they are just gone.”

She shook her head. “It’s so hard to think about.”

“Hey, you’re safe and we’re going to keep you safe. Squat and his team may be out on a mission, but there are multiple SEALs and retirees who are keeping an eye on you. They may not know exactly what happened, but they know you were in danger, and you need to be kept safe.”

Asher closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Nichole’s hand on her shoulder grounded her. Her friends were looking out for her. She could do this.

“I’m going to let you both go and see if I can find out more. And Asher, if you want, we can have one of the guys do a drive-by.”

Heat rose as thoughts of her being way too needy increased. “I’m fine. Thank you for looking into Grace. I hope she can be found.”

“We’ll do what we can. But just understand that most people trafficked like you were don’t come home.”

She hated the odds. It was depressing to think that Grace was lost forever.

After the call ended, they sat on the couch, neither of them saying much.

The silence was comfortable. It was like Nichole really was her friend.

She hadn't known these women for long, but she'd really connected with Nichole, Rowan, and Danika.

"We should do something," Nichole said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I used to write in-depth articles, then I wrote a book, and I have another one coming out, but I feel like people don't really know what's going on. There are groups and some movies, but no one really pays attention after the initial hubbub."

Asher took a sip of her drink, thinking about what Nichole had said. "I wouldn't even know what to do."

Nichole's lips screwed up to the side. "Some of the best ideas start with having no idea how to conquer the problem."

Doing something would be good, but she could barely get through the day without almost falling apart. "I fear that if I try to do something big, I will fail."

"I get that." Nichole tapped her chin. "I'm just thinking. Nothing may come of it, but maybe there's something that can be done."

Asher's phone buzzed. "Oh, Danika is calling." She answered and put the phone on speaker. "Hey, Nichole is here with me."

"Good. I wondered if you'd all like to come over on Friday evening. We can order pizza and watch a movie, then you can all sleep over."

Asher met Nichole's gaze, and both of them smiled. "That would be great," Nichole said.

"Yes, I'd love it." It had been ages since she'd spent the night with girlfriends. She imagined this would be great and without all the angst she'd witnessed in her teenage sleepovers.

"I can make cookies," Asher offered.

"Sure. And we'll have cake, too."

Danika chuckled. "I'll have some vegetables."

Nichole threw back her head, laughing. "Too funny. We'll eat some vegetables, but we're also going to pig out on chips and sweets."

They all were laughing. "Sure," Danika said after a moment. "Rowan said the same thing."

"We'll have a blast. I'll see you all on Friday evening. Oh, Asher, you're spending the night here tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. I'll be there at six. If that's okay."

"It sure is. I can't wait to see you. You two have a good night tonight."

The call ended, and Asher felt a pang of guilt. "I hope you don't mind staying here tonight."

"Not at all. It's nice hanging out. So tomorrow is Danika, then Rowan on Thursday, and then we'll all be together on Friday."

“You all are going to save me.”

Nichole squeezed her hand. “I’m happy about that. You deserve good things.”

Asher scoffed. She wasn’t so sure about that, but she knew she didn’t deserve to be destroyed by some idiot man who wanted to make her pay because he was pissed she’d been asking questions about someone else he’d abducted.

She never would have ended up at that party if Grace hadn’t been taken, but if she’d been able to save her friend, she would do it again. Thoughts about Nichole’s proposal to help other women seeped into her thoughts. If doing something helped keep women safe, she would do it in a heartbeat.

There were no instructions on what they should do or how they could really help, but she could do something. Bite-size pieces spread out over time would make some difference, wouldn't it?

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Bill almost had enough money to leave and head to California.

So far, three of the guys involved in selling the women had been jailed, but Grady was still free.

The pressure seemed to grow the more time he spent in town.

If he had money, he would have left already.

One thing was for certain, he needed to get the hell out of this place.

Maybe he should just leave and forget about getting more money. He could live on the cheap for a while. Heck, it might even be fun. He'd get a tent and just sleep in the woods, eating food cooked on the campfire.

First, he needed to speak with Grady and see if he knew anything. Surely, the guys in lockup hadn't talked. They knew enough to keep each other safe. If one of them had talked, no doubt both he and Grady would be in jail.

He pulled up in front of Grady's house and glanced around, searching for anyone watching.

He didn't see anyone, but the hair on the back of his neck rose as fear seeped in.

Something felt off. He wasn't sure what it was, but something was in the air, making him think he would regret being at Grady's.

Bill put his truck in gear and took off, pulling around the corner. He positioned himself where he could see the front of Grady's place and cut the engine. Something wasn't right. Maybe it was him overreacting, but something was in the wrong place.

He was about to leave when he saw two cars pull up outside Grady's place. They were black with blacked-out windows. That didn't feel right.

Bill sank down in the seat, only staying high enough to peek over the dash to see what was going down. He watched as the doors of their car opened and men in black got out and headed to the front door. A few guys made their way around back, looking like they were going to break in.

When Bill noticed they all had guns, he knew this was a raid. He had to get out of town now. Grady was on his own. There wasn't anything he could do for him. He would make his way to California to see if he could get more money from his nephew. He knew for sure he couldn't stay in this town.

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Squat set up on a mountain overlooking the small compound.

The guy they were after was in the main building.

It would be easier to bomb the area and just call him dead, but they needed confirmation he was dead, so they weren't just going to bomb the crap out of the area.

Instead, they were going in for a close kill.

“I see movement,” Apple said over coms. Apple had set up about a mile south so he could see the other side of the compound.

“Nothing this side.” Sharp was on the opposite side from Apple, and Shine was opposite from him.

The entire compound was being watched. A long shot would do the trick, but they had to make sure it was the man they wanted to take out. If they got the wrong guy, it might send their target scurrying.

“Is it our guy?” Griz asked.

Apple grunted. “No.”

Squat blew out a breath. “Fuck. We’re going to have to go down there.”

“The moon will be dark tonight. Get ready. We’ll meet up at the arranged point thirty minutes after sunset and go in,” Sharp said.

“See you all in a few,” Apple said.

Squat checked the time and distance to the meetup. He had about an hour before he had to take off. Thoughts of Asher slid in, and he spent one minute thinking about her before he pushed the thoughts away and focused on the mission.

There were ten other people in the building with their target.

It wasn't the worst odds they'd dealt with, but they weren't great.

With the sabotage that had happened recently, they'd reduced the number of people who knew about their missions.

Until they found out what had been going on, they had to keep a tight hold on the people who knew what they were doing.

It was the only way for them to remain safe.

As the sun started to sink, Squat took off, making his way to their checkpoint. He saw Jay first, then the rest of the gang trickled in. They were ready to move out and take down the guy. He just hoped this went off without a hitch.

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Asher couldn't stop thinking about what Nichole had said about human trafficking. After Nichole left, she started searching information about the subject and the numbers were staggering. Helping seemed almost impossible. Knowing where to turn was so confusing.

She looked up degrees that would get her into an area of work that would help fight human trafficking. Becoming a social worker might be interesting. She could combine that with working with the police. They always needed people to help them work with victims.

Her phone rang, and she checked to see that it was Nichole. Hey, thank you for spending the night here with me last night. It helped."

"Sure. I enjoyed it. I was wondering if you'd like to meet with my editor and agent. They are going to be in town next week."

"Oh, why would they want to meet with me?"

"Because they were thinking about a book.

That's just what they do. They see opportunities and take them. I know it might be overwhelming, but putting a face on the issue is helpful. But I want to warn you, the book industry can also be manipulative. Sometimes, they want to make you into who they want you to be. You have to watch what you allow."

"I don't understand."

Nichole took a few seconds before she started speaking.

“Let me find the right words. You have to make sure your interests are represented. If something comes from this, you’ll have to have an advocate on your side.

Someone who can make sure you aren’t being taken advantage of.

Publishers are about money. You want to make sure they aren’t forcing something to take advantage of you. ”

“Okay.”

“Dollar signs are great, but sometimes it’s not worth it to tell your story.”

Asher nodded. “I get that. I don’t know if I’d be interested or not. I want to help people. I was looking at universities today. I wonder if I could be a police officer working with victims.”

“It’s possible. What degree were you looking into?”

“Social work, maybe.”

“That would be good. Victims need support.”

“I think I could do it. It would mean a lot to me to be able to help people.”

“I like that for you.”

Would Squat support her decision, or would he think the job was too difficult for her? It would be hard to work as a police officer. Maybe she was trying to take on too much. She couldn't even spend the night alone. She would have to get her life

together if she had any hope of ever helping anyone.

They ended the call, and she thought about what she and Nichole had discussed.

She felt paralyzed by the thoughts and got nothing done between the call and heading to Danika's place.

When she knocked on Danika's door, she was still in a bad mood.

The door opened and at first Danika was smiling, but then her eyebrows knit together and a frown replaced her smile.

"What's wrong?"

Asher waved her hand in front of her face and rolled her eyes. "Nothing. I'm being ridiculous."

"Well, come in and tell me so we can talk about it."

She stepped in and headed to the couch, placing her overnight bag on the floor beside her.

She sat back and met Danika's gaze. "I want to help other people, and I've been thinking about what I can do for work.

I mean, I know I don't have to decide right now, but Nichole and I were having a good talk about it, but now I don't know."

"What were you discussing?"

It was almost embarrassing to talk about it because now that she was thinking about

it, it was way too ambitious to think she could do it.

“I was thinking I could get a degree in social work and become a police officer. But I can’t even stay at home by myself.

There’s no way I could be a police officer. ”

“I think you would be great at working as a social worker in the police force.”

“But I?—”

Danika raised her hand, cutting off Asher's words.

“You can't judge how you'll do based on how you feel right now.

You haven't recovered, and it will take time to get there.

Plus, getting a degree takes time, and that's perfect because you need time. And once you have the degree, you could end up wanting to do something else.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“How about we forget reality and turn on some music and dance?”

“Dance?”

“Come on. We’ll pretend like we’re at some posh club in London.”

Asher burst out laughing. “I’ve never been to a club in London. Heck, I don’t really go to clubs here. I’m not a party person. But sure. Let’s have some fun.”

“Well, I have a dance playlist. We can bounce around and act like we're hot shit. I have lasagna in the oven, and we can stuff our faces after we dance.”

Asher shrugged. “Okay, I’m game.”

Danika moved the coffee table and turned on the music. They both started bouncing around, laughing as they wiggled to the music. It was fun to let loose and not worry about anyone else watching or looking to hit on her.

Breathing became easier. It was like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders as the music pulsed around her. Happiness bubbled up along with laughter. Dancing in Danika’s den was so freeing.

They kept moving for about an hour, and then they dropped to the couch, both of them out of breath. Danika cut the music, and the silence was shocking.

“Oh my, that was freaking amazing,” Asher said.

“I do that sometimes when I’m alone. It’s fun to just move with the music and not worry about what other people think.”

Asher let go a heavy sigh. “What will people think if they find out I was held by some guy who used me for sex and shared me with his friends?”

Danika moved to kneel in front of her and squeezed her hands.

“Anyone who thinks badly about you is an asshole.

And it's none of their business. No one, and I mean no one, has the right to that information from you.

You get to decide who to tell. Even doctors.

You don't have to tell doctors what happened. You get to decide who has information about your past.”

Asher pressed her lips together. “Do you really think it’s that easy?”

“I know it is. I go in for STI checks every year because of my past, but I don't tell the doctor or nurses what happened or how my ex shared me with his friends. They don't get that information. It's mine to tell.”

Asher nodded. “I probably should tell the therapist.”

“If that’s why you’re going, then yes.”

“I'd never really thought of it that way. I mean, all the guys know what happened because they were there when I was rescued, and I figured you all knew?—”

“I don’t know any details other than what you told us. Sharp told me nothing about what happened or that you were even rescued.”

“Damn. I didn’t realize they were that tight-lipped.”

“They are. There are things they do that we'll never know about, and that's okay. I know that Sharp is dedicated to me. He would never do anything to harm our relationship, even if I don't have any idea what he's doing when he's overseas.”

Asher nodded. “They’re very loyal.”

“They are.”

The timer for the lasagna rang. When Danika pulled it out of the oven, Asher's stomach rumbled. It smelled so good she wondered if she would be able to wait to plate the food.

"Yum! That smells so good."

"Thank you. It took a while to perfect the recipe. I enjoy cooking. I like finding recipes and making them better. It's always little things, like adding spices for my personal tastes."

"It smells like it will hit the spot for my personal taste."

"We just need to let it sit for a bit while I heat the vegetables."

Asher grabbed two plates for them while Danika heated the vegetables and some Italian bread. The food looked like a feast, and she would be lying if she said it didn't tempt her. No question, she wouldn't forget to eat if she had something like this for lunch.

Once seated, she leaned in and sniffed the food. It smelled like heaven. The first bite on her tongue brought forth a moan. She swallowed and then pointed her fork at Danika. "I usually don't make this much noise when eating, but this is the best lasagna I've ever had."

Danika blushed, her eyes twinkling. "Thank you. I'm glad I learned how to make it and get it right."

"Well, you did an excellent job at making it work."

They finished eating, and Asher wished she could eat more, but she was stuffed.

She helped Danika clean the kitchen, and then they watched a little TV before heading to bed.

As she pulled the covers up, she wondered how everything would work out.

An odd feeling of peace came over her. She could do this.

She had the support of a good man who cared about her.

It would take her a while to adjust, but she could do it.

She was excited for Squat to come home so she could tell him about her plans.

Life was moving forward, and she felt like she was moving with it. It seemed like nothing was in her way.

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Squat stood ready to breach the door. They hadn't heard anything from inside the building since they moved closer. He hoped it wasn't a trap. His senses were heightened, and he was ready for anything.

Sharp counted down, giving the go ahead. Griz blew the charges they'd set, and they tossed in two flash bangs. He rushed in, seeing someone coming at him from the left. He took them out then turned to take on the guy running down the hall toward them.

Squat saw someone running the opposite way down the hall. The other guys were dealing with their own problems, and it was up to him to catch them.

"I'm going after a runner," Squat said over coms before taking off down the hall. He was halfway down the hall when a door opened, and a guy stepped out with his weapon raised. Squat fired, but he felt the burn on his arm before the other guy dropped to the ground.

The burn turned to pain, and he had to pause and lean against the wall to catch his breath. The buzz in his ears picked up, and he closed his eyes to focus. His head swam, which he knew was a bad sign. If he passed out, he would be fucked.

"Squat, what's wrong?" Sharp's voice broke through.

"I'm still standing. I was hit. Give me a second."

"Fuck," Griz cursed.

"I see him," Jay said.

He glanced around, seeing Jay headed his way. "I'm okay."

"Bullshit," Griz said. "Get your ass in gear."

He pushed off the wall, grunting in pain. He wasn't dead. That was good. He wasn't even sure if the bullet actually hit him or if it just whizzed past.

The first two steps were difficult as the pain rose, and a roar developed in his ears. "Fucking sucks."

Jay was there, pulling him along behind him. He hated that he'd taken Jay out of the mix. They needed him to get the guy.

Jay wrapped his arm to slow the bleeding, and Squat pushed him away. "I'll stay behind this wall. I'm fine by myself. Go back in and help them."

"You sure?" Jay asked.

"Yeah. Go help them."

Squat settled behind the wall, listening to the guys on coms. They were clearing the rooms but hadn't found the guy they were looking for. Was this another ruined mission? How the fuck were they getting such bad intel? Where was the dysfunction?

"Place is clear. He wasn't here," Griz said over coms.

"Fuck. Squat, are you okay?" Sharp asked.

"I'm fine. I'm out here waiting for you all."

More cursing ensued as the guys did another sweep of the building, not finding

anything. It took a moment for them to finish their sweep, then Jay was beside him, helping him up.

“For a short guy, you sure as fuck are heavy.”

“All that muscle.”

Jay chuckled. “Sure. I think you’re just full of shit.”

“Probably. I’m fine. I can walk now. The initial pain is gone.”

“Jay and Shine, keep an eye on him,” Sharp said.

“Sure thing.”

They took off, heading in the direction where their ride would pick them up.

They made good time even with his injury.

Every step took them closer to escape. They were almost to the exfil point when all hell broke loose.

It was like someone knew every move they were making.

Gunfire erupted, and they only escaped being shot by dumb luck.

After the shooting slowed, Griz grunted. “How the fuck did they know where we were going?”

“Luck?” Apple asked.

“This is more than luck. This is someone telling our secrets. Someone knows our plans,” Squat said.

They couldn’t delve too deeply into the theory because they still had to escape this hellhole.

They could easily end up dead if they lost their focus.

Squat could fire his rifle, just not aim it well.

Luckily, he was with guys who were the best of the best. They held off the enemy well enough, but they weren’t getting out today.

Once they were in a mostly secure location, Shine began assessing his injuries. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Hold still. Let me get a good look at this.”

Squat tugged off his shirt, groaning as pain hit. He sat back, closing his eyes.

“You should have allowed me to cut it off,” Shine said.

He snorted. “I’ll be fine. Just sew me up.”

Shine began working, causing more pain as he cleaned the area. “It’s not that bad. You need a few stitches. You’re fucking lucky.”

“Yeah. Lucky,” Squat said.

“Could have blown your arm to bits. When we get back to civilization, you’ll need to get it cleaned out.”

He huffed out a breath. “Great.”

Shine shook his head and rubbed at the wound again with the cleaning scrub. Pain slid up Squat’s arm to his neck.

“Fuck, that hurts.”

Shine grunted. “Don’t get shot on missions.”

Squat rolled his eyes. “I’ll remember that next time.”

Shine chuckled. “I’m sure you will. Lucky you, you’re not dead. Would have fucking sucked, too, if you’d died.”

“Yeah, yeah. Would have sucked. I need some food.”

“Same.” Shine gave him two shots, one for pain and the other an antibiotic, then bandaged him up and patted his shoulder. “How does that feel?”

“Good enough.”

Squat grabbed an MRE from his pack and consumed it in a few bites. They had been truly fucked. He turned to Sharp. “Any idea what happened?”

Sharp’s lips thinned. “No fucking clue. Maybe we were too obvious, and they knew.”

Squat shook his head. “How would they know our exfil location? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Griz paced over, his frown deep. “Someone knows.”

Sharp blew out a breath. “I already lost one team because of this, I won't lose another. We're going to figure out what the hell is going on and put a stop to it. There is no way we're going to let this continue. They aren't just putting operations at risk. They are putting our country at risk.”

Griz stalked away, then spun back. “I'm in. When we get home, we need to set up a sting to get them to reveal who they are. Someone is operating as a double agent, and they're going to end up getting more people killed.”

Squat held up one hand. “I don't mean to put a damper on this, but first, we have to get out of here. Can we even call in exfil, or will they attack that position, too?”

Sharp threw up his hands. “Fuck. We're so fucked.”

Jay stood and adjusted his equipment. “We need to sleep in shifts. I'll go up top and take the first watch.”

Apple stood. “I'll join you. The rest of you get some sleep.”

Sharp tapped Griz on the shoulder. “Thanks, guys. The two of us will take the next watch.”

“That will leave me and Shine for the last,” Squat said.

“Only if you're doing okay. We can't have you passing out from pain.”

He grunted. “I'll be fine.” The pain had decreased, or maybe it was just the meds doing the talking.

They were in a shitty situation, and he didn't want to think about how bad it could get.

Someone on the inside was being a dick. They weren't screwing over every mission, but enough shit had gone bad in the last few years that he knew it had to be someone on the inside.

Now, they just had to find the person before they ended up dead.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Asher was glad her friends were willing to help her, but she also wanted to try standing on her own. So on Sunday night she was sleeping at Squat's place alone. It was scary, but she could do it.

At first, she had all the lights off, but it felt too dark. She turned on the lights in the kitchen first, then she turned on the lights on the stairs. It was too bright in her room, so she flicked off those lights and turned on the lights in the bathroom.

She drifted off but woke with her heart racing.

Though she wanted to figure out what had woken her up, she froze, trying not to move an inch.

If she stayed still, maybe she could tell if someone was inside the house.

After the roar in her ears calmed, she heard a radio blasting music. That had to have been what woke her.

Her phone said it was a little before midnight and she felt it.

No way had she gotten enough sleep. It sucked that one of their neighbors was being loud and woke her.

After she got her heart rate under control, she closed her eyes and tried to get back to sleep.

It must have worked because the next time she opened her eyes sunlight highlighted

the edge of the curtains.

Monday was here, which meant she needed to figure out where she wanted to go to college and what degree she really wanted to get. Though declaring a degree could wait until she was done with the basics, so she had time.

She checked in with Thario, glad to hear that nothing had changed. None of the people who had been in on her abduction knew where she was. The police hadn't arrested anyone else, but with the evidence pointing in their direction, they could be arrested at any time.

Instead of obsessing over when they would be arrested, Asher focused on searching for programs that would give her financial aid and get her the degree she wanted.

She spent most of the day looking and figured out that getting her associate's degree at one of the local community colleges would be the best option. It had been a while since she'd been excited about her future. It was nice to have something to look forward to.

By the time she finished filling out the application to get her associate's degree, it was dark outside. She'd spent the whole day alone and nothing bad had happened. When Rowan called her around six that evening she answered with a smile on her face.

"Hello, Rowan."

"Hey, so how was today?"

"Actually good."

"That's awesome. Do you want to come over here, or should I come to you tonight?"

“You know what? I think I can do another night alone. I know that may be pushing it, but I was okay last night.”

“Wow, that’s really good. You should be proud of yourself.”

Her smile grew wider. “I think I am. I mean, I know that's a small thing, but it's cool.”

Rowan laughed. “It’s not a small thing. You are discounting yourself. Staying alone all night is a big thing.”

Laughing with Rowan felt good. “I was so happy to wake up this morning with the sun shining in.”

“Well, if you’re staying alone tonight, how about we get together for breakfast in the morning?”

“Sure, that will be something to look forward to.”

“Good. I'll see you in the morning. Come to my place, and I'll make us something delicious.”

“I can’t wait.”

The call ended, and she sat with her phone in her hand for a long moment, thinking about what she'd accomplished.

She needed to keep moving forward with her future.

She checked her email and saw there was a response from the school where she'd applied.

They wanted her to upload documents that she didn't have.

They were at her old place in a town she could never go back to.

How could she get someone to send them to her without them figuring out where she lived?

A shiver slid through her. There was no way she could go back to that town, and there wasn't any way they could find out where she lived. She was stuck. If she didn't provide the college with her documents, she couldn't get a degree. She needed help.

Maybe she could fly home and sneak into town. No one had to know she was there. She tapped on her phone screen and opened the messenger application, sending a text to Thario, asking if she could ask a question. Her phone rang almost immediately. It was Thario.

“Hey, thank you for calling.”

“What can I help you with?”

“Gosh, I feel silly, but I was wondering, and I don't know. Maybe it's too much.”

“Hey, Asher, it's okay. Just ask.”

She blew out a breath. “I want to go to college. I need my birth certificate and some other documents. They are back at my house.”

“Oh, no. You can't go back there. Not yet. Squat's uncle is still free. If he sees you, he could come after you.”

“That would be bad.”

“Yes. Let me see what I can do.”

“I want to go to college so I can get a degree and do social work, but I don’t know how to get the documents.”

Thario grunted. “That’s cool. I’ll help you get them. Don’t worry about the documents and don’t go back there. Also no contacting them to have them send the documents to you. I’ll take care of it.”

“Are you sure? How will you get them without letting them know where I am?”

“I’ve built a network of people I trust. It might take a few days to get them sent to me, but I’ll arrange it.”

She appreciated what he was doing for her. She'd never had anyone like Squat's friends in her life. “Thank you. I won't contact them, and I won't travel there.”

“Good. I guess Squat is still gone?”

“Yes. But I was able to stay alone last night at his place, and I'm going to try it again.”

“That’s good. But there is no shame in needing someone. We aren’t islands.”

“Thank you for that reminder. I needed to hear it.”

“You're welcome. Now then, I need to get on retrieving your documents. And I'm glad you're planning on going to college. Whatever you decide to do, I know you'll do it to help people.”

She ended the call, glad she had a solution to the problem of getting her documents.

Now, she just had to get used to being alone.

Squat would be home soon, but his job called him out more than she'd expected.

It made sense, but still, she was realizing she would be alone a lot more than she'd first thought, but it wasn't a problem. She was strong and could do this.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

The pain in Squat's arm increased over the last few hours.

He didn't want to say anything, but he needed another shot.

He fucking hated this. Getting hurt wasn't cool.

It could totally derail everything for him.

He didn't want to stop being a SEAL. The injury wasn't terrible, but he'd known guys who had to leave for less.

Jay moved to sit beside him. "You're looking raw."

"I'm feeling some pain. I hate asking for another shot, but I need it."

Jay stood. "Let me grab you some meds. We need you operational even if you're not at your best."

He sat back, relieved that he wouldn't have to deal with the pain for too much longer. It only took Jay a few minutes to get the medicine for him. Relief only took a moment to hit after the shot had been given.

He let go a heavy sigh as the pain slid away. "Thanks, man. That feels better."

"I think Sharp said exfil would be here in a few hours. We're up next for watch."

"I'm ready."

Jay's eyebrows rose. "You sure? If the pain is distracting you, one of the other guys can watch."

Squat shook his head. "I'm good." He stood and stretched, being careful with the injury. With the pain gone, he wasn't so distracted. Watching for the enemy to attack wouldn't be too hard. It was doubtful they would get into hand-to-hand combat.

When it was time to switch out the watch, he took up a position looking to the north and east, relieving Griz. He settled in a position that would allow him to see without moving around too much.

Keeping watch was one of the more boring tasks they did. He had a mantra that helped him stay aware as he watched for anyone headed their way. The area was quiet, which he was thankful for. The last thing he wanted was to engage in combat again.

Squat felt like he was about to start making mistakes right when Sharp came around and told him it was time to go. He was happy to be leaving this area. Once they got to safety, they could start investigating who had betrayed them.

"I'm ready," Squat said as he walked over.

Sharp gave him a chin lift. "Let's head out."

The exfil location was a click away, and they ran into no opposition. They were in the helicopter and headed to a ship offshore. He closed his eyes and let down his guard, knowing it could be much worse. He'd almost lost it all.

He felt a tap on his arm and opened his eyes to see Apple pointing to his headset. Squat flipped his on and nodded.

“You good?”

Squat gave him a thumbs up. “Yeah, I’m good. Not too much pain.”

“I’m fucking grateful we didn’t lose you.”

“Same.”

Griz snorted. “Yeah, that would have sucked.”

Sharp's lips thinned, and he shook his head. “We have to fucking find the bastard who betrayed us.”

Shine grunted. “And once we do, we make them pay.”

Squat felt this one personally. Once he found out who was responsible for this sabotage, he would make them pay.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Asher woke with a start. Something or someone was making a noise downstairs. Fear filled her, and she reached for her phone, seeing a text from Squat. Shock pulsed through her, and she opened the application and saw that Squat had texted her that he was home.

She blinked at her phone, sleep fogging her brain. “Is he home?” It had to be him.

She threw back the covers but stumbled when she stood and had to reach out to steady herself, walking her hands along the wall until she was at the door. With a shaky hand, she pulled it open.

“Squat?” She called out.

“Hey, you’re up. Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

She moved to the top of the stairs. Her heart felt like it would burst when he moved to stand in her line of sight. She wanted to run down the stairs but felt she was off balance, so she carefully held onto the rail and moved down the steps.

He met her halfway and pulled her into his arms. He turned her so her back was against the wall of the stairwell. His gaze held hers, causing something funny to wiggle inside her chest.

“I missed you,” Squat whispered.

“I missed you so much.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and squeezed hard. He gasped, and she let go.

“You’re hurt.”

He shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t. You winced. What happened?”

Squat groaned as he let go and stepped back. He took her hand and led her downstairs. She was about to ask again when he turned and leaned against the kitchen counter.

“I was, well, kind of shot.”

Asher gasped and moved to him, tears filling her eyes. “You were what?”

“Luckily, it was a low-powered weapon, and it only grazed my arm.”

She pulled at his shirt, tugging it up. “I want to see how bad it is.”

He chuckled and rolled his eyes before pushing at her hands. “I think you just want to see me with my shirt off.”

She stepped back and frowned. “No. I want to see how bad it is.” The words were the truth until he had his shirt off. Heat crept up her neck to her face as she stared at his muscled torso.

His smile grew as he moved closer to her. “Your cheeks are pink.”

She spun and fanned herself. “Goodness.”

“I’m glad you think I’m cute.”

She turned back to him, taking in how sexy he was. With effort, she forced her gaze on his face. “Where were you shot?”

He stepped closer and cupped her face. “I’m fine. It hurts a little, but I’ll be okay.”

“Let me see.”

Before he turned, he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. “I missed you.”

His words and his lips on hers made her brain buzz. She hadn't ever felt anything like this before. She wanted more but knew they would have to take it slow. She still had issues with what had happened to her. She wanted to feel him up against her, but the idea of being intimate still scared her.

Squat removed the bandage, and she might have gasped. Her hands rose before she pulled back. She didn't want to cause more pain.

“Crap, that looks bad.”

“It hurts. It hurt worse after it first happened.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “The usual.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, you can't tell me. Anyone else get hurt?”

“Nope, just me.”

“Aren’t you special?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I think you are.”

“So you’re alone,” Squat tucked his chin and raised his eyebrows, looking absolutely adorable.

She nodded, feeling proud of herself. “I spent Friday and Saturday nights with one of the girls, but most nights, I was able to sleep here. I did freak out one night and ended up having to call Rowan in the middle of the night to come over.”

“Oh, that’s nice that she came. I’m glad they were willing to help.”

“It was fun, and I made some decisions.”

“Tell me.”

“I decided to go back and get my degree. I mean, it will take time. I'd said I'd wanted to do medical, but I think I want to maybe work for the police force in victim's support.”

“Oh, that’s good. I think you’d be great at it.”

His words felt good. That he believed in her made her think she could actually get a degree and become a police officer. “Do you really think so?”

He nodded. “When I first decided to become a SEAL, a lot of people told me not to go for it. I’m way shorter than any other SEAL. Some people actually laughed in my face.”

“Laughed at you. Are you serious?”

“Yes. I'm sure you'll face opposition. People will tell you all sorts of lies, they'll say things to discourage you, but I'm here to tell you I believe in you. I'll support you and encourage you. If you change your mind back to medical, I'll support you in that, too.”

She wrapped her arms around him, careful not to touch his injury. “Thank you.”

Squat sighed and rested his head against her. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Being in Asher's arms felt amazing. Though he knew there were no magical properties coming from her, he felt like she was healing him just with her touch. At least he felt better, and that was real.

She lifted her face to his, heat shining in her eyes. She ran her fingers over his jaw down to his neck. Desire was evident in her gaze. He didn't want to push too far, but he wanted her.

His lips found hers, and he kept the kiss light. When he pulled back, she nuzzled closer to him. “I don't want to press you into doing anything, but I want to hold you. Will you come to bed with me and let me hold you tonight?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I'd like that.”

“I need to take a quick shower.”

“Sure.” Excitement skittered through Asher. She wanted to do more, but her mind wasn't clear enough to have sex. The shower shut off, and she pulled the covers up higher. Thoughts of all the bad she'd experienced flitted through her mind. She shoved the bad thoughts away and focused on Squat.

He stepped out of the bathroom in only his underwear, and heat blasted through her.

She wanted to touch him, wanted to feel his body against hers, but she couldn't, not yet.

Maybe in a few weeks, after she spent more time talking to a therapist, she would feel better about getting intimate with him.

“You okay with this?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He slid into bed and then turned off the bedside lamp.

He wrapped his good arm around her, pulling her close.

She felt safe and protected with Squat holding her.

This was how it was supposed to be. She felt whole with him, like she could recover from all the bad that had happened with Squat being a part of her life.

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Squat woke with an incredibly hard cock nestled up against Asher's butt. She felt so good in his arms, and he wanted to sink into her, but he wouldn't betray her trust and doing anything more than rolling out of bed and leaving the room would be a betrayal.

He rolled to his back and then slid out from between the sheets, moving silently out of the room.

His arm where he'd gotten shot hurt a little, but the pain wasn't terrible.

He turned on the stove and pulled the eggs from the refrigerator.

He should have eaten before going to bed, but he'd been excited to see Asher.

"Hey, you woke up early," Asher said as she came into the room.

"Ah, I didn't mean to wake you up."

She stretched, looking incredibly sexy as she raised her arms over her head. "It's okay. I've been waking up early."

He moved to her and kissed her forehead. "You're cute." Her laughter made him feel lighter. The problems with work felt less weighty in her presence. If he couldn't recover enough to be a SEAL, she was worth living for. She fulfilled him in ways he'd never thought possible.

Asher leaned her hip against the counter, and he turned to her to find her staring at

him with raised eyebrows. “What?” he asked as he added more eggs to the pan.

“You look like you’re thinking about something.”

He chuckled. “I was thinking that I really like you. I want to build something with you.”

“I’m almost there. I think.”

“No need to rush.” Her laughter bubbling up made him smile. “What?”

“I felt your very hard cock pressing against my ass last night.”

Heat flashed through him, and he swallowed over the desire that hit when she mentioned his cock. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It was your natural reaction. Besides, it felt good, not weird.”

“Good. I’m glad you liked it.”

“I did.”

Before he did something stupid like push her to the wall and show her how hard her words had made him, Squat grabbed two plates from the cabinet and turned off the burner then plated the eggs. “Come sit with me and eat.”

She moved to the table and sat. “Thank you for making breakfast.”

He shrugged. “I woke up hungry.”

She met his gaze and pointed to his arm. “How’s the pain?”

“It’s okay. Not great, but okay. I have an appointment this morning and then this afternoon I need to meet with the guys. We have some shit to go over.”

She swallowed the eggs she’d just put in her mouth. “Do you need me to come to the doctor with you?”

He shrugged. “If you want.” Spending time with her would be great, but he didn’t want to force her to come with him.

“I’d like to go with you, even if just for moral support.”

Happiness filled him. “Thank you.”

After finishing breakfast, he showered and then dressed, all the while thinking it was great that Asher was here. He didn’t jack off in the shower, because he didn’t want her hearing him, but he would probably need to do that later tonight. He was in the den waiting to leave when Thario called.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked as he answered.

“I spoke with Sharp this morning.”

“Oh?”

“I’m looking at stuff, and I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“It’s a scratch.”

Thario chuckled. “I said that once, and it wasn’t a scratch.”

“It fucking hurt. I can’t imagine what you went through.”

“Yeah, but most of my pain receptors were overloaded, and I passed out. It fucking hurt, though.”

Squat shivered at the thought of losing a limb like Thario had. “We’re going to get whoever it was.”

“I’ll start looking on my end. Sharp gave me the information from your most recent mission. I’ll look into those players.”

“Thank you. You’re a good man, Thario.”

“Those pricks tried to end me. I want them to die.”

“Same. I’ll talk to you this afternoon.”

“The meeting later this afternoon is at my house. So when you finish at the doctor’s office, come on by.”

“Um, I’m probably going out for lunch with Asher first.”

“Ah, I don’t blame you. She’s a good one. Don’t let her get away.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Thario.”

“You do that.”

The call ended, and he turned to see Asher dressed and ready to go. “Thario, he’s a good guy. He’s getting my documents so I can go to college.”

“Nice. He is a good man.

“Now then, let me drive us. You seem to be favoring your arm.”

He shrugged. “I’m okay.”

“I’m sure you think you are. I’m driving.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Okay. You’re driving.” He handed her the keys and smiled. “Thank you for driving me.”

“You’re welcome.”

Asher was glad she could help Squat. He'd been so good to her, and she liked doing things for him.

It didn't take long to get to the doctor's office, and she went into the room with him.

At first, she felt weird going with him, but he didn't seem to mind her being in there.

They took X-rays and had him ready for the doctor in about thirty minutes.

When the doctor came in, he smiled at her before starting his exam of Squat’s arm. “So you were shot. Damn lucky you weren’t hit a few inches over.”

Squat squeezed her hand as worry filled him. “So what do you think?”

“I think this is going to be a bitch to rehabilitate.”

Squat’s eyes went wide as excitement filled his face. “So you think I can rehab and get back in the game.”

The doctor chuckled. “I think you will. You guys are like that. Your injury isn’t a

career killer. You'll have to work hard, but after the initial period where you heal, it will be better."

"That's good news."

The doctor chuckled again. "For you, but those around you could suffer. So when you're frustrated because it's not coming along fast enough, get over yourself and be nice."

He nodded, knowing the doctor was right. If he wasn't careful, he would mess up with Asher. No way would he want that.

"What's next?"

"The X-rays look good. The injury is not infected.

You have good mobility. I don't think I need to open you up.

Whatever they did overseas was good. Just keep up the work, and don't overdo it.

I'll see you back in eight weeks. I'll have the nurse set you up with a physical therapist to get your mobility even better."

He felt good about his future. "Awesome. Thank you."

Asher squeezed his hand. Her smile bolstered him. He knew she would help him get through this. He felt her support, and it filled him with hope. Now they just had to get the bastard who was trying to hurt them.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Asher was glad the doctor had delivered good news to Squat. She would help him however she could, but it sounded like it would be a lot of work to recover fully from his injury. He was strong, and she knew he could do it with work and time.

They stopped for lunch at a burger place and the waitress decided to flirt heavy with Squat though Asher was sitting across from him.

At first she thought Squat didn't notice or didn't care, but after the woman came back with their drinks, the wrong one for her, he was nice but didn't return her flirting.

When the waitress left their table, he moved to sit right beside Asher and threw his arm over her shoulder.

"You moved closer."

"Babe, I don't want anyone but you. You're all I need, and I don't like the disrespect of someone flirting with me. Being nice is one thing, but obviously flirting like she is doing is just gross."

She turned her head and met his gaze. "Thank you."

His lips gently brushed over hers, and a shiver slid right through her. His eyebrows shot up. "You okay?"

She nodded. She really was okay. She was falling in love with Squat. Maybe that was a mistake, but she couldn't help how wonderful he made her feel. "Yes. You make me feel good about myself."

“Good, because I have deep feelings for you, and I want you to know that I'm yours.”

She couldn't believe how lucky she was. She thought her life was over, but Squat saved her. She wanted to show him how much she appreciated him, but she wasn't ready to make love.

After lunch, he dropped her off at Sharp and Rowan's house and headed over to Thario's. Nichole and Danika showed up about thirty minutes later.

“Do you have any idea what the guys are doing?” Nichole asked.

She shrugged. “I think it has something to do with Squat being shot.”

“Wait, he was shot?” Rowan said.

“Yes. Just a graze on his arm.”

Rowan frowned. “Shine didn't tell me.”

Danika rolled her eyes. “Sharp didn't tell me, either.”

Nichole lifted her glass of water. “Probably because they didn't want you to worry. Maybe they would have told us, eventually. They did just get back.”

“The doctor told Squat he could probably recover, but that it would take work.”

Rowan turned to her. “So you saw the injury. How bad is it really?”

“It's about three inches long. He has stitches, and you can see a little dip in the muscle. I hugged him before I knew he was injured, and he flinched. I think it hurts him more than he's willing to admit.”

Danika chuckled. “They don’t like admitting they are injured. I think it would be easier to pull teeth from a snake than to get them to admit they hurt.”

Rowan nodded. “They are badassess, but yeah, they underemphasize injuries.”

Nichole shook her head as tears started to form in her eyes. “They all are good at what they do, but it’s scary.”

Danika hugged her. “Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

Nichole turned to Asher and pulled her into a hug. “I’m glad he is alive. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m okay. I mean, I think I am. I didn’t want to focus on him being shot, so I haven’t thought about it too much. But yeah, it’s some heavy stuff.”

Danika frowned. “Sharp hasn’t told me too much about how his team died. I mean, we all know Thario, and I’ve heard stories about his teammates who didn’t make it, but the event that killed them all, I don’t know everything. I wonder…”

“About what?” Nichole asked.

Danika shrugged and lifted her drink halfway to her mouth, then stopped. “They’re all going to Thario’s to talk about what happened. Why would they be going to Thario’s place? He isn’t in the Navy. He’s retired.”

Danika’s question stumped them all. Why would they be talking to Thario about this? Maybe there was more to the story of what happened to Squat.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Squat leaned back in his chair, unsure how to approach their problem. Thario hadn't found any direct connections to the mission he'd been on when he'd been blown up.

"So we have no way of knowing if it's connected?" Jay asked.

Thario shook his head. "No, we don't know."

"Maybe we could do some investigations on base," Apple said.

Thario nodded. "You need to be careful, though. You could lose your job."

"We could lose our lives." Jay's eyebrows shot up. "You, of all people, should understand that."

"Do you really think it's tied together?" Sharp asked.

Squat nodded. "I do."

"If, and I do mean if it is, that means someone in leadership is dirty," Griz said.

They all sat back, and silence filled the room.

Maybe they were way off base, but he didn't think so.

There were things that had happened in the last few years that were very unlucky.

"What if it wasn't bad luck that caused teams to fail? What if someone is purposely

making teams fail so they could advance their agenda?”

“But what agenda are they advancing?” Squat asked out loud.

Apple shrugged. Squat stood and paced to the end of the room. All eyes were on him, even Frog’s gaze stayed on him. He hated this. It threw them into chaos mode and they didn’t know where to hit to solve this problem.

“It's probably not random. Whoever is sabotaging missions isn't just picking random teams to try to destroy. I think it's much more pointed than that.”

“How many missions in the last few years have had things go wrong?” Shine asked.

Thario turned to his computer and started typing. “Let me see if I can...there we go.” Thario took a moment to read the screen. “I have evidence of four missions that had issues, not including our mission. Before that, there were two that same year, but before then, it was less than one a year.”

Sharp tapped the table. “Someone is fucking with us, and I want to find out who.”

“I’m with you,” Griz said.

“I think we can figure out how to look and be careful,” Jay said.

Shine nodded. “We need to really think about who we are talking to and where we look.”

Squat turned to Thario. “Before you left the Navy, were you into computers?”

Thario shook his head. “I knew a little, but not as much as I do now.”

“Any idea where we should look?” Jay asked.

Thario glanced over at Jay. “You’ll have to be very careful. Whoever is doing this will be monitoring their systems. I can start looking at financials for everyone in command.”

Griz lifted his hand. “How about we all start there? Let’s see if there is anyone in Navy command who has had a sudden influx of money.”

“Sure. We’ll work for a few hours today. When are you all expected back at base?” Thario asked.

“We have two days before we’re due back,” Squat said.

Thario wove his fingers together and stretched his hands overhead. “Okay, let's see what we can do during your time off.”

Jay took a seat at one of the computers. “It could be someone in command at another base.”

Squat grunted. “But how would they know which missions the SEALs are going on?”

Jay shrugged. “We can’t rule out anyone.”

Thario got the list of people who were in command in San Diego.

It included officers in the JAG office, to people in the criminal investigative department.

They had to look at every one. The number of people was daunting.

Griz thought they should rule out the lowest level, but Jay said not to discount anyone.

Sharp started scrolling through the lists of people they had to look at. “Fuck, it’s going to take months to go through everyone.”

Shine nodded. “We’d best start now.”

Thario started typing fast. “Let me see if I can get rid of a few. Anyone who joined the Navy after my injury can be scratched off.”

“Maybe,” Apple said.

“Why do you say that?”

Apple blew out a breath and turned to Thario. “What if it’s more than one person? What if someone is working with another person, or what if it’s just random people who are doing it?”

Sharp shook his head. “That would take too much coordination. I think it’s one person, maybe two at most. But two people would be risky.

They would have to have mutually assured destruction plans.

I couldn’t imagine doing something so terrible and having to make sure the other person has kept the secret. ”

“Yeah, that would be gut-churning. Imagine having to make sure someone else kept quiet about something so awful. It would eat you up inside,” Apple said.

“We all keep some pretty big secrets,” Griz said.

Squat nodded. “Yeah, but we can talk about it amongst ourselves, and if someone else finds out, it's not like we'll go to jail.

I mean, if we traveled to some countries in other parts of the world, there might be a regime that wants us dead, but it's not like what this person is doing. They're committing treason.”

“What they are doing is treason, right?” Apple asked.

“Yeah, it’s bad. Maybe sedition, but most likely treason,” Thario said.

Squat held Sharp's gaze. “Whoever is doing this will be very dangerous. They are going to want to keep their secret safe.”

They all nodded. This was dangerous, like all the missions they went out on. They could end up dead, and their family could be targeted. They had to be careful in searching so their target never knew what they were doing.

Squat ran a hand over his forehead as the pressure mounted. “We keep this between us only. We work on this here at Thario’s place. No searching on our own computers.”

Thario nodded. “Yeah, don't take the chance by searching on your own computer. If you do, it could tie back to you. And we don't want you in more danger than you already are. Everything here is run through a VPN. We're basically untraceable here.”

Squat hated that they had to do this, but not looking into who was sabotaging missions would put every SEAL and other military personnel at risk. Something had to be done to stop the attacks or more would die.

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Squat seemed distracted when he came home from Thario's place. She knew he probably couldn't talk about what they'd done, so she focused on making dinner with him and then the movie they watched together.

After the movie ended and before he got up, she moved to straddle his legs. His eyebrows rose. "Hey, you good with this?"

She leaned in close and whispered, "Yes."

Squat settled deeper into the couch, positioning her so her center was over his growing bulge. She rocked her hips, liking how good the pressure felt.

His hands were on her waist, then he slid them up so he cupped the sides of her breasts. She rocked her hips, and he let go of a gasp. The heat in his eyes made her even hotter. She wanted more with him. Could she hold it together if they got naked?

"I want to try something."

"Anything. Whatever you want."

"I want you. But I don't know if I can do it."

"However much you're good with, we'll do that."

She nodded as she reached down and pulled off her shirt. His gaze dipped to her bra-covered breasts, and he groaned.

He didn't pull her closer, and he didn't try to remove her bra. He was letting her set the pace. That was the only thing keeping her from getting spooked. If he had done anything aggressive, she knew she would have jerked away.

Asher removed her bra, and his eyes grew wide, but he didn't touch her. She reached for his right hand and lifted it to her breast. He moaned as his palm grazed over her nipple, sending shoots of pleasure through her.

"This okay?" Squat asked.

"Yes.

Squat didn't want to move too fast and scare Asher, but the pressure on his cock was going to make him blow sooner rather than later.

Her breasts looked perfect, and he wanted to lick and suck and play with them until she screamed his name as she came on his cock.

He wanted to feel every inch of her wrapped around him.

But he held back and let her direct how far they went and how fast they moved.

She paused and moved her hair, which had fallen over her breasts. He couldn't hold still and rocked his hips up. She moaned and arched her back as she moved against him.

"I want more," Asher groaned.

"How much more?" He sounded breathless, though all he'd been doing was sitting.

Asher stood and pulled at the button on her pants. She shoved them over her hips and

down her legs. Squat couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked so freaking amazing, and he wanted to pick her up and carry her to his bed and spend hours tasting and tempting her.

“Take off your pants.”

Squat moved so fast his arm hurt, making him wince. Asher froze, and he flashed a smile, trying to act like everything was okay.

“I'm good.”

“Your arm?”

He nodded. “It's okay. Just a little pain.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“Hell no. I want you. But I won't push for more than what you're comfortable with. You direct what happens.”

He had his pants off, and Asher was staring at his hard dick. When she licked her lips, he thought he might pass out or come.

“Jesus, you're so fucking sexy.”

Her nose curled up. “You think so?”

“Oh yeah. Don't doubt that at all.”

She moved closer, and he wanted to reach out and grab her, but she was in charge, and he was just going to sit back and let her make the moves.

Asher was nervous, but wanted this. Squat was good, and he wasn't making her do anything. She wanted to be with him. She straddled his legs again, kneeling on the couch as she moved into position.

With one hand, she reached between them and grasped his cock, rubbing it over her opening. Squat's groan vibrated through her. She wanted to feel him, so she lowered a few inches, letting him fill her. She held still for a moment, getting used to the feel of him at her entrance.

Slowly, she rose and watched his expression change. She loved how his eyes were half-hooded, and his lips parted. He looked so sexy.

She lowered again, and he groaned. As she rotated her hips, he gasped. It felt amazing having him inside her. A sliver of panic rose up, but she pushed it down. She'd wanted this. The past was strictly in the past, and those bastards couldn't do anything to her.

Asher lifted again and then lowered, sinking down hard on Squat's cock. He hit deep inside her, and she gasped as pleasure spread.

Squat reached between them and ran his thumb over her clit. "This okay?"

"Oh fuck, yes." Just the feel of his thumb on her was enough to almost get her there. She slowed her movements, and he kept up the pressure. She rose up one more time, and when she slid down his cock, the pleasure was too much. She came hard, gasping for breath as she clung to him.

Squat's hands tightened around her waist, and she expected him to move her, but he held her still. Then she felt him jerking under her. When his grip relaxed, she lifted her head and met his gaze.

“You came?”

“Yes. Just being with you like this was so freaking amazing. Asher, I’m falling hard for you. I know we don’t know each other that well, but?—”

“I’m falling for you, too.”

He pulled her down for a kiss. It was sloppy but perfect. When she sat up and met his gaze, she could see how much he cared.

“We should get up and wash off.”

She chuckled and stood on wobbly legs. He held her hand as he led her into the bathroom and turned on the water. She ducked out to her room and grabbed a hairband so she could pull her hair up.

When she stepped back into the bathroom, she marveled at how sexy he was. They’d known each other for so long and now they were back together. It was wild to her that they’d reconnected, and that they still had feelings for each other.

Once the water was warm, they stepped into the spray. “We never showered together before this,” Squat said.

She shook her head. “No, we were too goody goody back then.”

“We did have sex.”

She laughed. “It was awkward.”

He laughed as he grabbed the soap and began washing her body. “It wasn’t great. I mean, you were, but I wasn’t sure what I was doing back then.”

“We were both very awkward. I think we had sex twice.”

He nodded. “Yes, two times.”

She took the soap from him and lathered up her hands to wash him. “Thank you for going so slow.”

“Anything to help you.”

“Anything?”

He laughed. “What did you have in mind?”

She passed the soap back to him. “Maybe a slow exploration of your body. I want to learn you.”

His whole body shook as a shiver snaked through him. She raised her eyebrows as she stared at him. He shrugged. “What? You're very sexy, and having you explore my body would push me over the edge. I'm getting hard just thinking about it.”

Asher wanted to be bold and do something, but she'd already pressed herself today and wasn't sure she could do more. Would he be disappointed that she wasn't interested in another round of sex yet?

Squat noticed the change in her expression and held her face so she could look into his eyes.

“Hey, I know what we had already today was very special.

We aren't going to do more. I won't lie and say you don't turn me on, but that doesn't mean we have to act on it every time. Your comfort is more important.”

She sighed and leaned her forehead against his shoulder. “I trust you. I just don’t know that I can mentally go there again today.”

He kissed the side of her head. “I understand. Let’s finish washing and then get some food.”

After they were out of the shower and both of them were fully dressed, he could tell she was more relaxed.

She looked happy. They were moving forward.

She was doing better. If it took another week before they had sex again, that would be good.

Recovery took time, and she might even have a few setbacks.

They would deal with those as they came.

Work was another matter. They couldn’t deal with another set back, because that might get one of them killed. Finding out who was behind what had happened was top priority, but it would take time and expertise. Luckily they had the expertise, now they just needed to find the time.

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Asher was surprised when Squat came home on Wednesday night with her documents she needed to finish the application for college. “Wow, Thario really got them for me.”

Squat nodded. “He said he was careful. It was mailed to four different locations. The packages changed each time, and they made sure to mail from different cities than they received it. If anyone was tracking it, it would have been nearly impossible to keep up with where the documents went or who had them.”

“Wow, that’s intricate.”

“He said his network has done it for other women leaving abusive relationships.”

“That’s the kind of thing I’m interested in doing. Maybe doing social work isn’t the right thing.”

“You know, you could go spend time with Thario and learn what he’s doing.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t really know computers.”

“Nichole, Rowan, and Danika have all helped out from time to time. Thario is patient and good. Oh, but right now, he’s in the middle of something you can’t help with.”

“That’s why you all are over there, right?”

“It is.”

“You can’t talk about it, can you?”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t.”

She moved to him and put her hand on his chest. “I’ll help you however I can. If that means preparing dinner that you can eat later or preparing meals for you to take over to Thario’s that you all can eat when you’re over there searching, then that’s what I’ll do.”

He brushed his lips over hers, kissing her gently. “Thank you.”

“Thank you. How was today at work?”

He shrugged. “Loads of physical therapy. I’m working on it, but it’s going to take time.”

“I’m here if you need anything. What about a massage?”

He grunted. “Thank you for offering. They poked and prodded me so much today that I just need rest.”

“Okay, we’ll rest.”

After dinner, she logged on to the college’s site and uploaded her documents. She felt better about what she’d accomplished. There were a lot of classes she had to take before she decided what to focus on, so she had time. Everything was moving forward, and she felt good about it.

“Hey, looks like you got it uploaded,” Squat said as he stepped into the room.

“Yes. I feel good about this. It will take a while. I applied for a grant and some

financial aid. Hopefully, I'll get a grant."

"That would be great."

"Now that I have documents, I can maybe get a job. I need to earn money to pay for things."

Squat took her hand. "You know you don't have to."

She pulled in her lower lip and worried it. "I know. I can't sit still and do nothing. At first, I was okay, but now I'm starting to feel...not trapped, but I need to fill my time with something other than worry."

"I get that. There are a couple of stores close by, a restaurant not too far from here, some places like veterinarian clinics, and other places that need workers."

"I should go see what's in walking distance."

He nodded. "There are buses, too. But the stop is about a half mile away."

She sighed. "I wonder what happened with my car?"

"I think it was impounded. I can see if Thario can sell it. We should have thought about that earlier."

"It's okay. I know there was a lot to me coming here. I wish I could have just gone back there and got all of my things."

"Have you gotten access to your bank account?"

She blew out a breath. "I didn't know where to change my address to. I was afraid to

log into my bank's website. I just didn't know what to do."

"I think Thario can help with that. You could use one of his computers and see how much money you have in there."

She nodded. "I need to log in and take care of things. I feel like I need to bake him something. He's been so good to me."

Squat chuckled. "I know he would appreciate it. He skips meals when he's working on something."

"And he's busy now."

"Exactly."

"I'm going to bake him some bread, and I'll take it to him tomorrow."

"He'd like that. And thank you for being nice to my friends."

"Of course. They're good people."

He chuckled. "I think they are. But there are some terrorists who don't."

"Well, terrorists are stupid."

Laughter spilled from his lips. "Yeah, they are stupid."

She had a plan now and a way to make things happen. Squat and his friends had helped her so much and she wanted to help them.

She would make the bread for Thario and take it to him before lunch.

While she was there, she would ask him if she could learn how to help.

She knew he was busy with something to do with Squat getting shot, but surely, he had other things going on that she could help with.

She liked the idea of being helpful. Feeling productive would go a long way to helping her heal.

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Making the bread didn't take too long, and she texted Thario at ten asking if she could stop by. He replied almost immediately stating that he would love to see her. She called for a taxi and was at his house thirty minutes later.

When she walked in, Frog came over to meet her, wagging his tail. "How are you doing, good boy?"

Thario chuckled. "He smells whatever you brought over and thinks it's for him."

She chuckled. "I don't know how good olive and cheese bread would be for him. I also made regular wheat bread, too."

"You know you didn't have to."

"I know, but I wanted to thank you."

"So Squat called me and said you need to change your address with your bank and log in using my computer."

"Do you mind?"

"No, I'm happy you came over. It's nice to have people to talk to."

She nodded. "I get that. I think I need to get a job or something. I'm going a little stir-crazy sitting at home alone."

His laughter filled the room and Frog barked. "That was the hardest part for me.

Learning to be alone.”

“I think I’m ready to start working. I haven’t really found a therapist I like. I went to one, but we didn’t click. I’ve been doing some reading, and that has helped, but I know I need to find someone to see.”

“Yeah. It’s hard when you don’t click. I’ve had a few people I’ve worked with who weren’t the best fit. I hope you can find someone soon.”

“I will. Part of the issue is I don’t have much money.”

“Yeah, I get that part. The military pays for mine. That makes it easier.”

She nodded. “I’m trying a video session later in the week. The person is from New York, so maybe they’ll work out.”

“So let’s get you logged in at your bank while I eat some of that bread.”

“Sure.”

She pulled up the website for her bank and hesitated. Fear filled her as she thought about logging in.

“Do you remember your login information?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I just don’t want them to be able to trace me here. I can’t have anyone finding me.”

“It’s safe. I have all the computers set up so they can’t be traced back to this location.”

She drew in a deep breath and let it go slowly. “Okay. Let’s see what happened to my

bank account while I was gone.”

The login ID was easy, but the password took more than a few seconds to think about.

After a moment she figured it out and typed in the correct string of letters and numbers.

The screen changed, showing that she had some money, though not much in her account.

Most of the money was in her savings account.

“Well, that’s not enough to buy a car, but it’s enough I can at least buy some groceries without having to rely on Squat.”

“You know he doesn’t mind,” Thario said.

“I know, but I don't want to be the kind of person who uses someone. I like paying my own way. I mean, I know I won't be able to here in California, not for a long while, but I want to do as much as I can.”

“That’s admirable. I know you’ll be good at whatever you decide to do.”

“Thank you.”

“So your car. I called and got it out of the impound lot. I’m working on selling it.”

“Thank you.”

“Once I get the money, I’ll get it to you.”

“Thank you so much for all you’re doing to help me.”

“I enjoy doing it. You know, life is funny. I had a path, a good path, and it was all blown to hell.”

She shook her head as sadness hit. “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“It’s okay. This life is different, but I’ve found something I like doing, and I’m good at it. I get to help people get their lives back. It’s something good that I can do.”

“Speaking of what you do, once you have some time, I’d like to learn how I can help you. I’m not great with computers, but if you give me tasks, I can do them.”

“Oh, that would be awesome. The other women come around from time to time to help. It comes down to once a week someone is here helping me.”

“That’s great. I’d love to learn. After all that happened, I want to give back.”

“I think you’ll be great at helping because you want to do it. How about next week? We can set up a time.”

“Thank you.”

She left Thario’s place after giving Frog some belly rubs. Once again she wondered if she should get a dog. Animals were expensive, and she didn’t have a job. Maybe later, after she got a job and had some money coming in.

She felt good, not good enough to open her banking application on her phone, but good enough to head to the closest grocery store to her place and put in an application.

She could start moving forward instead of being stuck in place.

If she got this job, it wouldn't be her final destination, but it would go a long way to getting her where she wanted to go.

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Frustration ground at Squat. He'd been working on strength and mobility, but there was still just a little stitch when he tried to go heavy. He needed to be patient, but he wanted this phase of healing to be over.

"Hey, Squat, how is it going?" Apple called out as he entered the weight room.

"Like shit." He wiped the towel over his face. "Fuck, I need this damn arm to heal."

"Dude, it's only been a few weeks. You need to give it time. You know time is an important part of healing."

Squat rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know."

"So do it right."

Apple was right. He had to take the time to do this the right way. If he cheated himself on healing, he would be fucked for all time.

The door opened, and Trip's team came in. "Hey, Squat, how is that arm feeling?"

"Like shit."

"You think it will heal?" Hop asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. It's just going to take some time."

Zip came over and rubbed his shoulders. "You'll be back to fighting shape in no

time.”

“I will.”

Rider and Bud set up at the weight rack across from him, and Q came over to where he was working.

“Hey, Q, how's it going?”

“Good. You’re looking stronger than you were the first day you got back.”

“I feel stronger, but I also feel weak. I hate not being where I was before.”

Q chuckled. “I’d be crawling out of my skin, too. You’re doing good.”

“I have office duty later. It’s going to suck.”

“Oh dude, I feel ya. Don’t fall asleep. They get pissed when you do that.”

“I guess you’ve experienced that.”

“Yeah, I hated it when I was on desk duty. It's enough to keep me from getting injured.”

Squat laughed. “I sure as fuck didn’t jump in front of that bullet.”

Shine stepped over. “Oh, he sure as hell did. He said he was tired of the mission and wanted a break.”

Q threw back his head, and the rest of the guys joined him. “Yeah, that sounds about right for Squat. You know the shorts ones are always the lazy ones.”

Squat rolled his eyes. “That’s me.”

They were all laughing, and it felt good to be with his team and friends from other teams. He had a long way to go, but he could do it.

He wouldn't give in to the pain or the exhaustion.

He could recover from this injury and come back stronger than ever.

That's what his life had been about, coming back stronger when it seemed like he should give up. He wasn't the type of man to give up, not with being a SEAL and certainly not with Asher

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On Saturday morning Squat joined the guys for a run.

It felt good going out with his team. He didn't want to lose this yet.

Eventually he would be too old to keep up.

This injury made him think about how that would feel.

He liked being a SEAL, but he wasn't dumb enough to think he could stay a SEAL forever.

After the run, they headed to Sharp's house, where their women had made some food. The smell was amazing, and he found Asher with Nichole in the kitchen. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, noticing that she stiffened for a second before she relaxed.

"Hey, how are you?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm good." She spun in his arms and hugged him back. "Did you enjoy your run?"

"So much. It was good to be back out there."

She sighed and leaned against him. "I bet it was good."

"What did you make to eat?"

Asher's smile grew wide. "I made a vegetable breakfast pizza."

“And I made a quiche,” Nichole said.

Danika opened a plastic container. “I made muffins.”

“I want one,” Jay said.

Griz chuckled. “I think we all do.”

Rowan laughed. “I hope you all are hungry. I made an egg, potato, and sausage casserole.”

Apple took a bite from one of the muffins and moaned. “So good. You all are spoiling us.”

“Hardly,” Danika said.

“Yeah, we all wanted to eat this stuff, so we decided to use you all working out as an excuse to have some good food.”

“Asher made some of her good olive bread,” Nichole said.

“Nice,” Squat said.

Shine grunted. “I heard about that bread from Thario. He said it was amazing.”

Asher chuckled. “I enjoy making it. It’s calming.”

They started cutting into the bread, and it was gone in minutes. Asher pulled out another loaf.

“Luckily, I brought another loaf.”

“But we get some first,” Nichole said as she elbowed her way past the guys.

They all laughed and cut some bread, giving it to their women first before they grabbed more for their plates. The guys ate a lot of food, and she was glad they’d made so much.

Hanging out with the gang was refreshing. She loved these people, and she could say without hesitation that she’d fallen in love with Squat. It was refreshing to feel love, and not just anxiety. She knew Squat loved her back because he showed it in so many ways.

After they finished eating, the guys cleaned up and then started talking about when they were meeting at Thario's place.

Asher wanted to ask questions, but she knew they were talking about something they couldn’t reveal. Something had gone down on their last mission that was more than Squat getting shot. After they cleaned up, she left with Squat.

He showered then dressed in clean clothes before meeting her in the kitchen. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight.

“When do you think you’ll be home tonight?”

He kissed the end of her nose. “By ten.”

She nodded. “Good.”

He brushed his lips over hers and then rested his forehead against hers. “I want to spend all day with you, but this is important.”

“I know it is. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I know whatever happened

was bad. You have to do this.”

“Yes. I have to do this. It will make a difference.”

“Good. I’ll see you when you get home.” She cupped his cheek as she stared into his eyes. “I care deeply for you. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

His lips found hers, and she melted against him. The kiss made her heart speed up as she held onto him. When the kiss ended, he didn't pull away.

“I love you, Asher. I want us to be together for a long time.”

“Same. I like what we have now, but I know it will grow.” She gave him a peck on the cheek then stepped back. “I know you need to go.”

“I do. I’ll be back later.”

She watched him leave, then moved to the computer and started researching which classes she would need to take. She'd received an email back saying she'd been accepted to attend classes at the local community college, but now she needed to really think about what she wanted to do.

There were so many opportunities, and cutting it down to one thing was hard. She wanted to do more than just work, she wanted to have something in her life she had a passion for.

Her email pinged, and she pulled it up, seeing the most recent email didn’t have a subject. She didn’t recognize the email address, either. She clicked it, seeing big block letters on the screen that said, You’ve been warned. I’m coming for you .

Asher clicked the window closed and pushed her chair away from the desk.

Who had sent that? Was someone really coming for her, or was that spam?

She didn't want to bother Squat with a possibly fake email while they were busy.

She could talk to him about it later. She was safe, and no one was coming for her.

That had to have been a joke, not something real.

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Squat couldn't believe they hadn't found anything.

They'd gone through a few hundred officers, not finding any evidence they'd had any influx of money.

He didn't want to break into their email, because that would be another level of trust they would have to break, and if they were caught, it could get bad for them.

Thario knew how to keep their identities hidden, so they were safe. They weren't hacking into bank accounts yet, instead they were looking for extravagant purchases. They needed to catch a break.

Griz grunted, then stood, stretching. "Hell, I'm exhausted. This is taking forever."

Squat growled in frustration. "We need a break."

"Someone knows something," Sharp said. "We just have to find it."

Apple stood and moved to the kitchen. "Someone is spending money they don't have."

"Maybe we need to drive past their houses and see if someone is driving nicer cars than they can afford," Shine said.

Thario shook his head. "They'll have hidden it more than showing it off at their home."

Frustration slid through Squat. “Thario is right. They are hiding it better than that. They're doing all they can to keep it hidden. If we knew, but we don't. We don't have any idea who is betraying the SEAL teams. We need to do something before another mission goes really bad.”

“I don't want to lose another team,” Sharp said.

Thario nodded. “Those were good guys. I miss them every day.”

“What else can we do?” Apple asked.

“Don't ask around,” Griz said. “If wind gets back to them, we're fucked.”

“I hate going to work every day and having suspicions about one of the officers.”

Shine tapped the table. “Is there a reason other than money? Maybe someone is betraying us for another reason.”

“But the failures haven't all been in the same country or something that would benefit one specific regime. It has to be something more than them just betraying the country. They are getting paid.”

“I thought for sure it was Captain Nelson,” Apple said.

Griz let out a bark of laughter. “Nelson is a jerk, but I think he swings too tight to regulations. He is patriotic to the core.”

Sharp groaned and sat back at his computer, clicking through screens. “We'll find them.”

“And when we do, are we turning them over or taking care of them ourselves?”

Apple asked.

Thario chuckled. "I'd love to take care of them."

"No," Sharp said. "We need you safe. If you go after an officer, they could come after you. We need this to stick."

Sharp was right. He hated that they would have to turn the bastard in and let official channels take care of him.

They'd gone round and round about what they would do.

If they attacked the guy and didn't kill him, he could manufacture evidence against someone else.

It was safer to let the criminal investigative unit take care of it.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Squat woke on Sunday to the feel of Asher's lips wrapped around his cock. He reached down and palmed the back of her head as he pumped his hips up, trying not to be too aggressive.

Asher moaned around his cock and sucked down deeper as she cupped his balls. When she tugged on his balls, he thought he was going to lose it.

Her lips around him felt so good, so welcome. He wanted to pull her off and slide into her, but he didn't want to push her into doing anything she didn't want to.

Her tongue on the underside of his cock felt so good. He was going to blow soon. He tugged at her hair, and she popped off his cock and looked up at him from under the covers.

"What?"

"I'm going to come."

She smiled and lowered, licking all the way up his dick before sucking down on him again. He closed his eyes and threw his head back as good feelings slid through him. He came two seconds later, emptying his balls down her throat.

Asher sat up and straddled him, removing her shirt. "I liked that."

"I did, too."

He reached up and palmed her breasts, running his thumbs over her nipples. "How

does that feel?”

“Good. Very good.”

“I liked waking up that way, but you don’t ever have to do that.”

She stared down at him and bit her lower lip, looking sexier than ever. Having her astride him, her center grazing his cock with every movement, was getting him hard again. Would she want to have sex?

He didn’t have long to wonder as she moved fast, pulling off her underwear before straddling him again. Her pussy lips slid over his cock, leaving behind her slick. Sliding in would be easy. He liked that she got off on sucking him.

Asher reached between them and positioned Squat’s cock at her entrance. She lowered, and he slid in. He wasn’t fully hard, but he was getting there as she gently rocked and squeezed her pussy around him.

“So good,” Squat moaned.

“Do you like looking at my breasts like this?”

He nodded. “Yeah. So freaking beautiful.”

“I like riding you. It gives me control.”

“Oh yeah, I want you to have control.”

She put her hands on his pecs and rocked just a little, feeling him growing inside. “Do you like how slow we’re going?”

His breath was coming hard, and it seemed unfair that she seemed so in control. “Yeah. It’s awesome.”

Squat moved his hand so he could graze her clit with his thumb. Her desire grew as his thumb pressed on her clit, heightening her pleasure. She was going to come soon if he kept that up. It felt so good, and she didn’t want it to stop.

She gasped as his thumb found an incredibly sensitive spot. Pleasure blasted through her, and she gasped. Everything felt so good.

He was so big inside her, his cock filling her, his thumb grazing her clit, his other hand playing with her nipple. It was too much. She wanted to burst.

“Come for me, Asher,” Squat said.

His command was enough to push her over the edge. He held still underneath her as she came, squeezing his cock hard, making him gasp.

“So freaking good,” Squat ground out.

After her orgasm worked through her, he arched up, pumping his cock into her one more time. She dropped down on top of him, and his cock slipped out. He rolled her to her back, smiling down at her.

“We should shower.”

She nodded, and he scooped her up. She let out a screech and laughed as he carried her into the bathroom. She was still laughing when he set her in the tub and turned on the water.

“That’s probably cold.”

“Yeah, it is, but it’s not bad.”

After the water warmed, she stepped into the spray and began getting clean.

When she was almost done washing her hair, she remembered the email she’d received.

Worry filled her. She should have said something to Squat, but she’d been asleep when he’d come in and she hadn’t want to bother him at Thario’s house.

They were busy doing important stuff, and she didn’t want to be a problem.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I just remembered something.”

“What?”

“I got an email yesterday.” She rinsed off the last of the soap and traded places with Squat.

“What kind of email?”

“It was, well, I think it was threatening, kind of.”

Squat's expression changed in an instant, and his eyebrows pinched together.

“What?”

“It’s probably nothing. I didn’t want to disturb you yesterday.”

Squat finished rinsing his body and shut off the water. “I need to see that email.”

She dried quickly as her stomach twisted. She'd not really been worried before, but Squat's reaction made her question how she felt about it all. Maybe she should be more worried. Could this be an actual threat?

She pulled on her clothes, and Squat followed her out to the computer. With her email open, Squat leaned in close and stared at the screen.

"All caps and you don't know that email address?"

She shrugged. "No, I have no idea who sent it."

"I'm forwarding this to Thario. I don't like the idea of you being here alone today."

She grunted. "I hate having to watch over my shoulder all the time."

"Let's see what Thario says."

Squat's phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen, seeing that Thario was calling. "Yo, you got the email? I'm putting you on speakerphone," Squat asked as he tapped the phone screen.

"Yes. I did a quick and dirty search for the email address, and it wasn't anyone we thought was associated with the kidnapping. It seems to be a very bad marketing tactic used by some makeup company."

"What the hell?" Asher asked.

"Yeah, I don't think they thought it through, sending threatening emails to mostly women clients. That seems shortsighted. I'm seeing complaints from women on social media," Thario said.

Squat shook his head. “Hell, that's messed up,”

Asher shivered, feeling violated. “Why would someone be stupid enough to do that? I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I,” Squat said.

“Asher, don’t ever hesitate on sending me emails like this. I can look up this stuff fairly fast and then you’ll know if it’s something to worry about or something stupid like this.”

She blew out a breath. “Thank you, Thario. I just didn’t want to be a bother.”

“Trust me, you aren’t a bother.”

“Do you think I can come over on Monday and start learning how to search?”

“Sure,” Thario said. “Frog would love that.”

“Good. I look forward to seeing both of you,” Asher said.

“Thario, I’ll see you around two this afternoon,” Squat said.

“Good deal, buddy.”

The call ended, and Squat pulled her up and wrapped his arms around her. “I think you should hang out with someone today.”

She nodded. “I’ll send a text and see who isn’t busy.”

“Thank you. I’ll feel better knowing that you are at least with someone else.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I need to worry so much. No one knows where I am, but I feel better with people I know around.”

“Good. How about after breakfast we go for a walk or something?”

“I’d like that. I’m starving.”

They ate breakfast and then headed out for a walk. She'd texted her friends while Squat had been preparing the eggs and heard back from Nichole. She wanted Asher to come to her place. It was settled.

The guys were doing something with Thario again. She wished she knew what they were doing, but she didn’t need that information. If Squat thought she needed to know, he would tell her.

Trusting Squat was easy. He had shown over and over again that he put her first. She knew they had to separate and grow up to become what they were, but she wished they’d stayed together because then she would have had even more time with Squat.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Bill had almost made it to California. It was taking longer than he'd thought it would because he ran out of gas money, and he had to stop and get a job.

That had been harder than he'd thought. He ended up working as a day laborer, which hadn't netted him much.

At least the person had paid in cash. But with cash in hand, he ended up wasting more than a few hundred dollars at the bars.

Working as a day laborer had become a vicious cycle of getting money and spending it having fun.

He'd almost ended up staying in Texas. He'd had a hell of a time at the bars as he danced the night away with willing women. But he had a task he needed to complete. More than once, he'd wondered if it was worth it to track down Christopher and get money from him.

Maybe that ship had sailed, but he'd left home and didn't know what was happening with Grady and the rest of the gang.

There was no way Asher was still alive. He doubted she'd lasted a week. He wasn't positive exactly where they'd taken her or who had her, but she wasn't in a good place.

He chuckled as he thought about her being held captive by some guy who used her for his most deviant pleasures. If he thought he could get away with having a woman tied up in his home, he would find someone and use them until he got his fill. It had

been a while since he'd had sex.

Maybe he could stop in Vegas and see what those women had to offer.

It would mean he would have to find work so he could afford a woman, but he didn't mind working a little to find someone to sleep with.

It wouldn't be like what the guy who bought Asher had, but he could at least pay for a blowjob, maybe something more.

He pulled over and adjusted his path to head to Las Vegas.

He'd eventually find Christopher. It wasn't like his nephew was going anywhere.

Spending some time having fun would be worth it.

Then he could find Christopher and get some money from him.

After that, maybe he'd go home, or maybe he'd find somewhere out here to live.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Squat stared at the screen, wondering if he was reading it right. Could he have found a connection? He closed his eyes, clearing his mind.

“Hey, Squat, you tired?” Sharp asked.

He shook his head. “No. I think I found something.”

All activity stopped as everyone in the room turned to him. He glanced up, meeting their gaze.

“So you found the bastard who did this to me?” Thario asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. I need someone to check my work.”

“Tell us what you’ve got,” Sharp said.

Squat went into explaining the link he’d found between the shell company and Nelson. “I know we thought Nelson was innocent.”

“He sure as hell acts that way,” Shine said.

“So this is the account I found that is connected to him by this email address.”

All the guys were looking over his shoulder, leaning in close. He felt the heat of their breath on his neck and wanted to tell them to back off, but this was why they were there. If the connection was as solid as he thought it was, they could save people.

Thario was the first to head back to his computer and start typing furiously. Then Sharp and Jay moved away. He turned and met Shine's gaze.

"What do you think?"

Shine shrugged. "I don't want to be disappointed. I think this is it, but Nelson would be the easy answer."

Thario stopped typing. "I think it's him. I can connect this email to him and the email he used for the account Squat found. It looks like it really is him."

Jay leaned back in his chair. "I found the connection. It wasn't the email, it was a phone number."

Squat didn't want to get too excited, but he saw this as a huge win. "Shit, we've got him."

Sharp rubbed his jaw as he stared at his computer. "Now we just have to figure out how to get him arrested and get it to stick."

"Who are we going to tell?" Shine asked.

No one spoke for a long moment. It was their word against a captain. They had evidence, but it wasn't much. They shouldn't have access to information they shouldn't have.

Squat laced his fingers behind his head. "We need someone who will believe us."

"I could tell my friend at the FBI," Thario said.

Sharp shook his head. "That might work, but it could take a long time for it to go

through, and they may not even investigate.”

Griz didn't look happy. “We need fast action. They could kill off another team.”

Jay grunted. “We didn't die. That probably spoiled their plans.”

Griz stood and cracked his knuckles. “The next team could die. Heck, our teams don't even know someone is working to derail our missions. We have guys operating right now. They could end up dead because of this jerk. I say we go confront him right now.”

Sharp shook his head. “Slow down, Griz. We need a better plan than just confronting him. The shore patrol would have a field day with us.”

Jay nodded. “Yeah, he's a captain, and we're not.”

Apple grunted. “Sucks.”

“Who of the officers do we trust?” Sharp asked.

“With this?” Squat asked. “I don't know.”

“What about Admiral Dickinson?” Jay asked.

“Admiral Dickhead?” Griz shook his head. “Is that wise?”

Jay shrugged. “Well, Bancroft has retired. Dickhead is mean, but he's fair.”

Thario blew out a breath. “I don't know Dickinson well. He was in Virginia when I was active.”

“I was called into his office after I got back from our last mission,” Squat said.
“Maybe I can get him to listen.”

Sharp blew out a slow breath. “We’ve got to be careful. One wrong move and Nelson finds out.”

“I wish we could just go and take him out.”

Squat understood Jay’s wish. If they could just take the guy down without any flourish, it would be easier.

They could just go kill him and it would be over.

No one would ask questions, because it would be part of their mission.

Their oath did include protecting the USA from foreign and domestic enemies.

Nelson was an enemy who just happened to have power inside the USA.

“Which house does Admiral Dickinson live at on base?” Squat asked.

“He's the fourth house on the left.”

“Okay. I guess I’m headed over there.”

Griz held up one hand. “Nelson lives close to Dickinson.”

“Shit. I guess I’ll be careful about who sees me.”

Apple stood. “Want me to go with you?”

Squat narrowed his gaze as he stared at his buddy.

Having Apple with him would give him an advantage if Nelson came at him.

He was better but still favoring his arm.

Apple was strong, but Sharp had lost a team, and maybe he should be there.

But if Nelson saw them together going into the admiral's house, it might look suspicious.

“Yeah. I think the two of us going together would be good.”

Griz stood. “We need to be close. We should all head that way.”

Sharp nodded. “I agree. We should all be close.”

Thario decided he was going to go with the other guys. He and Frog rode with Jay and Shine. Squat let Apple drive as he went over what he would say to Admiral Dickinson. The man was known to be a hardass and may be pissed that he and Apple were showing up unannounced on the weekend.

They headed home and changed into their military uniform instead of wearing their civilian clothes. It was a matter of respect for the position. They approached Dickinson's house the long way around, not going past Nelson's place. “You ready?” Apple asked as he parked.

Squat nodded. “I think so.”

Apple stopped the car and cut the engine. “No backing out.”

“Can’t. The safety of all SEAL teams is too important.”

“If he doesn’t believe us, what do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know. Probably be disciplined harshly.”

Apple nodded. “Still worth it if it gets Nelson to stop.”

They had the evidence on a thumb drive and a computer they could use to show Dickinson what they’d found. This was make or break. If they explained it wrong, Dickinson would be pissed at them for stopping by.

He stepped from Apple's car, and the front door of Admiral Dickinson's house opened. Squat's left foot dragged a little as he hesitated, but he didn't slow for long. They had to get this solved or it could end disastrously for another team.

The person at the door was the admiral's wife. She waved. “Hello, boys. The admiral is finishing getting dressed. He'll be down. Would you like some tea or coffee?”

“Water would be nice, Mrs. Dickinson. Thank you,” Apple said.

“Now then, you aren’t the usual guys who show up on the weekend. So, come in and relax a little before the admiral comes downstairs.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” Squat said. He doubted he would be able to relax. He was at the admiral's house. He'd never once been into any of the officers’ houses. That seemed way too intimate.

A door opened upstairs, and then he heard someone running down the stairs. Mrs. Dickinson leaned out of the kitchen, a frown on her face. “Baxter, slow down. We have guests.”

The kid, about fifteen if he judged correctly, rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mom. Who are you two? You aren’t officers. Why are you here?”

“Baxter, you know better than to ask.”

“Jesus, Mom, I was just asking. It’s not like they have anything important to say. It’s probably just normal briefings like usual.”

Squat kept his expression neutral. The kid was wrong. They were not discussing normal stuff. This could probably end up getting them all in trouble.

Another door opened, and the admiral stepped out. He and Apple automatically came to attention. It was ingrained so deeply into their lives they couldn’t help it.

“At ease. Em texted me that you were here. You aren't the usual weekend crew for briefing. You're a SEAL. Squat, and...”

“It’s Apple, sir.”

“Yes. Apple. Why don't you two come into my office? Em, why don't you and Baxter go out to lunch.”

“Can’t, Dad. I’m headed to Luke’s for study group.”

“Okay, that will do.” Admiral Dickinson moved to his son and gave him a hug, kissing the top of his head. It was more affection than he thought the admiral was capable of, but it was his son, and if he had a kid, he would make sure the boy knew he was loved.

Dickinson turned to them, and his eyebrows lifted high. “So, gentlemen, to my office. I assume this isn't a social call.”

“Yes, sir, your office would be good.”

Squat turned to Mrs. Dickinson and flashed a smile. “Thank you, ma'am, for the water. I appreciate it.” Apple thanked her, too, before they both turned back to the admiral who was smiling at them.

“Come on, I'm sure whatever you two have is important if you're at my house on the weekend.” They followed after the admiral, but before they entered his office, he glanced over his shoulder. “I appreciate you being nice to my wife. Not everyone who comes here thanks her.”

“She deserves as much respect as I would give you, sir, maybe more.”

Dickinson threw back his head, and laughter spilled out. “You're right about that. She's had to put up with me for decades. We got together in high school, and somehow, she stuck with me, even when I was a dumb kid barely out of basic. She's the reason for my success.”

They were in Dickinson's office and Apple closed the door then moved to stand next to him. Dickinson took a seat, and they both stood at ease in front of his desk. Music started up in the main part of the house, which was probably a tactic the admiral's wife used to drown out their conversations.

“Okay, tell me why you're here.”

Squat blew out a breath. “There has been a rise in problems with missions. It's more than we expect from intelligence that isn't as solid as we think it should be.”

Dickinson pointed at Squat's arm. “You getting shot. Is that what you're talking about?”

“They knew we were there. The target we were supposed to be retrieving wasn’t there. There have been other missions that have gone wrong over the last few years. We’ve lost whole teams. Good men who were capable have been sacrificed because of bad intel.”

“And this wasn’t brought up in a meeting on base during the week because?”

Apple cleared his throat. “Sir, we think we know who it was. We have a trail of evidence linking someone to a bank account that has more money in it than I will ever earn in the military, even if I retire. The missions have been sabotaged, and this individual accepted payment for that action.”

Dickinson frowned and narrowed his gaze. “How solid is the evidence?”

“Very.”

“I know SEALs are very serious people. I’ve been around you all for the twenty-five years I’ve been in the Navy. Who is the person you believe all of this ties to?”

Squat drew in a slow breath, hating that he was here accusing an officer of a terrible crime. He hoped the admiral believed them. “It was Captain Nelson, sir.” The words felt weird coming out, but it was the truth and he would stick by what he said.

Dickinson picked up his phone and dialed someone.

Squat hoped it wasn't Nelson. “Beene, this is Admiral Dickinson. I need you to stop by my place.” The person on the other end said something, and Dickinson nodded.

“Yes, sir. Right now.” Dickinson ended the call and met their gaze.

“That was NCIS Division Chief Craig Beene.

He's headed our way. Why don't you tell me what you've got, and then we can explain it to Beene.”

“Yes, sir,” Squat said as he opened the laptop where he'd compiled the information. Dickinson was sharp, and he didn't have to explain anything twice. By the time Beene showed up, they'd gone through the basic evidence.

When Beene stepped into the office, Mrs. Dickinson stepped in and delivered a plate of cookies. “For you all.”

“Thank you, Em.”

Both he and Apple expressed their thanks before Mrs. Dickinson stepped out. Introductions were made, and they all moved to the round table in the corner of the office.

“Beene, I believe you'll want to hear what the boys have to say.”

“Okay, what's up?” Beene asked.

Squat began his explanation, telling the NCIS division chief what they'd found. The man sat back after the explanation and nodded. “I need to get my people on this.”

Dickinson shook his head, looking disgusted. “Do you think it really was Captain Nelson? He's headed out next Wednesday to take over a destroyer. I can't have him in charge of anything if this is real.”

Beene wiped his hand over his face. “We've had an investigation on the back burner. We didn't have all this evidence. We don't want to warn Nelson. If he gets wind of this, he could flee. He has the money to disappear, and we'd never find him.”

Admiral Dickinson stood. “Thank you two for bringing this to our attention. It sounds like we have a lot of moving parts to work through before Nelson ships out.”

“Yes, sir.” They were being dismissed, which Squat understood. This was now in the hands of NCIS. They would have to move it forward. He and his team had done all they could.

Squat and Apple shook Dickinson’s hand and said goodbye to Beene. Mrs. Dickinson was there with a plate of cookies for them to take.

“Oh, wow. Thank you. This is very generous of you.”

She smiled and patted him on his shoulder. “Baking keeps my anxiety at bay.”

He nodded. She must have lived an interesting life having military people show up at her house to discuss things important to national security.

He put his hand on the front door and cracked it open but turned to face Mrs. Dickinson before he stepped outside.

He opened his mouth, ready to say something to her, when gunfire erupted, shattering the window beside the door.

A shriek rose up, filling the hallway. Someone was shooting at them.

Were the bullets aimed at the admiral or them?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Squat glanced down, seeing blood on Mrs. Dickinson's face. He assessed quickly, and saw the blood was from a cut on her cheek. Also, she had a cut on her arm. Her injuries weren't bad, but if they stayed there in the doorway, it could get a lot worse.

Apple moved first, pulling Mrs. Dickinson away from the door and into the hallway. Squat ducked down, moving so he wasn't in the line of fire.

He heard the admiral and Beene moving behind him. He glanced back, seeing that the admiral had a handgun. Squat moved to him.

"That won't do much against the rifle. Take your wife to a room where she'll be safe."

"I guess Nelson found out," Dickinson said.

"Not sure who tipped him off, but something did." Squat met Dickinson's gaze. "You and Beene have to survive, so you can make sure this evidence is shown. I'm sure he's planned something to make sure this stays hidden."

"What will you do?" Beene asked.

"Stop him."

Apple was on the phone. Squat guessed he'd called the other guys. They were on base, but everything would be in lockdown mode.

"What are they doing?" Squat asked when Apple ended the call.

“The shore patrol is heading our way. We just need to keep him busy so he doesn’t kill anyone.”

Dickinson took his wife to another area of the house.

Before they left, he'd heard her tell her husband that she wasn't shot.

It was glass. Blood had dripped in the entryway, but it wasn't too much.

Squat glanced down and saw blood on his shirt.

He didn't feel bad like he had when he'd gotten shot, so he assumed the glass had gotten him.

“Apple, where are you?”

“Dickinson showed me where the rest of his guns were. I have a Glock,” Apple said.

“Okay, I don’t think we can do much damage with these handguns.”

Apple was where he could see him now. Their gazes met, and they acknowledged they were at a huge disadvantage. “The shooting seemed to have stopped.”

Apple nodded. “Yeah, but it's not safe to go out there now.”

Squat crawled on his elbows into the living room so he could take a glance out the front window. Apple was close but not quite at the window when someone started yelling.

“It’s lies. They’re telling lies about me. They’re the ones who are betraying the Navy.”

Squat wondered if this guy had thought out his tactic. It had to be Nelson, but he was acting like an idiot. Why would anyone believe him after he'd shot up the admiral's house? He'd made a stupid move that couldn't be reversed.

Squat had a good shot, but he didn't have time to open the window. If he knocked it out, the jerk would probably move.

"I'll shoot out the window, and then you can take your shot," Apple said.

Squat shook his head. "Too risky." He ducked down and crawled back over to the entryway. Nelson was still going on about something, not making any sense. He'd almost made it to the entrance when another shot rang out, this one shattering the glass above Apple.

"I can take that shot now," Apple said.

"Just a second. I'll fire from my position and roll. Then you can aim and take the shot." Squat got into position, seeing Nelson, but he didn't have as good of a shot. "Now."

Squat fired, striking Nelson's shoulder. He didn't stay in place long enough to see if Apple hit him. A scream rang out over the area.

"Did you get him?" Squat asked.

"I got him," Apple said. "He may not be dead, but he's down."

Squat blew out a breath in relief. Just then, he saw the shore patrol show up. "Took them long enough." He glanced at his phone and realized it had only been minutes since this all started. "Damn, I take that back. It has just been minutes."

“Fuck, felt longer,” Apple said.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Beene called out.

“He’s down. Apple shot him.”

Admiral Dickinson stepped out into the den. “Well, fuck, I guess everyone on base will know about this.”

Squat looked up at Dickinson, seeing a little blood on his clothes and face. “Is your wife okay?”

A look of panic crossed Dickinson’s face, and he nodded. “Yes, she’ll be fine. The cuts are small. Thank you for asking.”

“Looks like the paramedics are here,” Apple said. “I’ll get them to look at your wife.”

Dickinson’s phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket. “Yes, we’re okay. We need someone in here to look at my wife and a few other people. Just small cuts.”

“I can’t believe he revealed himself like this,” Dickinson said.

“He lived down the street, right, sir?” Squat asked.

Dickinson nodded. “Yes, three houses down on the other side of the street.”

“Do you think he was watching your place?”

Dickinson shrugged. “I don’t know. It makes me sick to think he could have killed us. It’s been a long while since I’ve faced anything like that, and Em never has. At least Baxter isn’t here.”

“Do you want me to go find him?” Apple asked.

Dickinson shook his head. “Em called him. He’s safe. He’s staying put for now.”

Squat wiped his hand over his face. “I don’t understand why people do stupid shit like this. Shooting at your house was uncalled for.”

“I’d say that I’m certain whatever evidence you all found was spot on.”

After he gave his statement to the NCIS officer, Squat and Apple wandered over to Nelson's house. They were outside, looking at the windows, when he saw something interesting.

“Hey, Apple, does that look like a camera pointed at the admiral’s house?”

Apple scratched his chin. “Maybe.”

“I think it is.” Squat got closer, and one of the NCIS guys stopped him.

“You can’t get any closer.”

Squat pointed to the upstairs window. “Does that look like a camera?”

The man turned and looked, then turned back to Squat. “It sure as hell does.”

“So he was watching the admiral’s house.”

The guy nodded. “Looks like it.”

“Shit. He was a real piece.”

It took more than thirty minutes for the scene to open up enough for the rest of their team to arrive.

Admiral Dickinson thanked them before they left.

He and Apple had an appointment to talk to Beene later in the week.

The NCIS would go through everything, figuring out if Nelson's attack had to do with the stuff they'd found.

They headed to Sharp's house to meet up with their women. The base was buzzing with people talking about the incident. Squat had already received four texts from other guys. The women would hear about it soon if they hadn't already heard.

They stepped into the house and Nichole glanced up from her phone. "Well shit, I was just about to call you. Someone just sent me a text about the shooting."

Jay moved to her and pulled her into a hug. "We're okay."

"If you're okay, why do Apple and Squat have blood on them?" Danika asked.

"Yeah, why?" Asher asked.

"I'm fine," Squat said. Asher moved to him, her hands raising before she hesitated. "I'm really okay."

"I can't believe you were shot at again," Asher said.

Squat pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "It's not usually this bad."

"Well, I think you need to stop being shot at."

They all laughed as he hugged her tighter. Hopefully, what they'd accomplished today would help.

“I think it will get better,” Thario said.

“Was this because of what you all were doing?” Asher asked.

They couldn't really say much, but he didn't want to keep Asher in the dark. “Somewhat.”

“Good. I hope this makes things better for you all.”

He buried his nose in her hair and breathed in, loving her sweet scent. “I'm ready to head home.”

She nodded against his chest. “Yes.”

They said their goodbyes, and the hugs and handshakes seemed to last a little longer.

Today had been wild. Over the years, there have been incidents at bases, but this one hit a little too close to home.

He was glad no one had been critically injured.

If the admiral's wife had been hit by that first bullet, it would have made everything much worse.

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Asher helped Squat clean up, wiping away the blood from his face and his arms. She put his shirt and pants into a soak to get out the blood.

He couldn't believe they'd had a combat situation at a US base.

Not because he believed it couldn't happen, but the military had done so much to improve conditions so this kind of thing didn't happen.

"Hey," Asher said as she cupped his cheeks. "How are you doing?"

He shrugged. "I'm okay."

"You were almost shot again."

"But I wasn't. I'm fine."

"You're way too cavalier about being shot at."

He nodded. "I can't get worked up about it. I think this guy wanted to kill the admiral in addition to us."

"That's awful. Does the admiral have a wife and children?"

"They have one son, but he wasn't at home. She was walking me out, standing right beside me when the first shot rang out."

"Damn. I bet she was so scared."

“I’m sure she was. It was shocking to be standing in their entrance and have the glass beside the door explode.”

“Shit. I’d be freaked out.”

“I’m glad he missed.”

Her laughter felt good to him. “Same.”

She leaned in and brushed her lips over his. Heat rose between them, and she pressed her lips against his again. The kiss deepened, and his hands tightened on her waist, pulling her closer.

She tugged at the waistband of his underwear, pushing them lower. He helped her get them off, then reached for the hem of her shirt. It felt good to be doing this together. The rake of his fingers over her flesh sent waves of heat through her.

She moaned against his lips, and he pulled up her shirt, then stepped back so he could remove it. He helped her remove her bra and underwear so she was naked in front of him. Her gaze slid up his body, taking in his hard cock and strong muscles. He looked absolutely delicious.

Asher reached between them and began stroking his cock, moving slowly so she didn't get him off too quickly. He cupped her breasts, then pinched one nipple, then the other, twisting it between his fingers. She closed her eyes as desire spiked.

“So good.”

“Get on the bed. I want to give you an orgasm you won’t forget.”

She nodded then moved to the bed, stretching out on the mattress.

Time had given her good distance from the horror she'd endured.

There was only a slight moment of fear that whispered through her as Squat climbed onto the mattress with her.

But she pushed it away, and focused on Squat being with her, not the terrible things she'd suffered.

She kept her eyes on him as he kissed his way up her thighs to her center. When his lips pressed against her slit, she let go of a heavy breath. Squat chuckled, then licked up her center, flicking his tongue over her clit.

“Oh yes.”

It was like Squat knew exactly where to touch and how to move to give her the most pleasure. She squirmed under him, and he eased up, but she wanted more. She opened her mouth to say something when he sucked her clit into his mouth.

Her fingers twisted in the sheets as she held onto the bed for dear life as if she would fall off it if Squat kept this up or if he stopped. She needed to come.

Then Squat slid his fingers into her, and it was enough to push her over the edge. She came hard and fast as pleasure rippled through her.

When she stopped pulsing around his fingers, he sat up and stared into her eyes. “You okay?”

She nodded. “That was good. I really liked it.”

“Good. Now I'm going to slide into you.”

“Yes, now.”

Squat lined up and pulled her knees up so he had a better angle. She held onto him, pulling him closer as he slid in. Being with Squat felt right. His body felt perfect against hers. She clung to him, needing even more.

Squat couldn't get over how good it felt to be with Asher.

It was more than physical. She turned him on in ways he'd never experienced before.

They were perfect for each other. Just like usual with her, he wouldn't last long.

He slowed, but even slowing and changing positions didn't stop the need consuming him.

“I can't last,” he grunted on his next thrust.

“Come for me, babe.”

Asher's command did him in. He emptied inside her, holding on tight as he came. Death had come for him today, but he'd avoided it again. This time with Asher was precious.

Asher's lips brushed over his cheek. “I love you so much.”

He pushed up to look into her eyes. “I love you. I want to be with you forever. Marry me.”

Her eyes widened, and then she nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. Because I'll never get enough of you.”

“I can’t get enough of you. You’ve brought me back from hell, saved me from a fate worse than death, and given me hope.”

“I want you to feel good about life. I want you to have happiness forever.”

“Same for you. I want you to have a good life. I don’t like that you were almost shot.”

He nodded. “I don't like it, either. Today could have gone much worse.” Being on base, in the admiral's house, he hadn't expected anyone to come at him.

But he should have known it was a possibility since he'd been targeting a criminal with power.

Tomorrow he would catch up on what happened with Nelson.

Right now, he didn't give a damn about the man. The only thing that mattered was Asher.

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Bill had finally gotten lucky in Vegas and won ten thousand dollars then lost half of it before evening. He walked away from the table with five thousand in his pocket. He figured it was time to get out of Vegas.

He'd gotten information on Christopher and saw it would take him about six hours with traffic to get to his nephew's house.

He needed sleep, so he found an empty lot and hunkered down for some shut-eye.

At four in the morning, he woke up because some idiot pulled into the lot and blasted music.

Tired of Vegas, he decided to head out. By morning, he would have more money in his pocket, and then he could find a cheap place to live.

With the money he had, he wouldn't even have to work.

When money got low, he could put the screws on his nephew or another idiot relative and get more money.

Maybe he could start his own network of traffickers.

He didn't have the specific contact information for the buyers, but he knew enough he could get it.

The drive into San Diego took him through some shit areas that were dry and dusty as his grandpa's cracked skin before he died. The old bastard had used a switch on him

so many times he got to where he liked the pain. Maybe he would keep a girl with him and teach her to like the switch.

The thought made him horny, so he stopped on the side of the road as the sun was rising and pulled up some porn. He was into the video when a police cruiser pulled up behind him. He shoved his dick back into his pants and covered up, trying to come up with a cover story of why he pulled over.

He rolled down his window and smiled as the officer approached. “Is there a problem, sir?” the officer asked.

“No, sir. I had to take a call, and I didn’t want to drive while I was on the phone.”

“Oh, that’s smart. Is the call over?”

“Yes, sir. It had just finished when you pulled up behind me. I was about to take off.”

“Okay, well drive safe today.”

The officer stepped away and Bill blew out a breath of relief. He would save his fantasies until later, once he was hidden away from prying eyes. He just needed to get his money from Christopher and then he would find a hotel to hunker down at for a while.

The rest of the drive he paid close attention to the traffic laws and made sure he didn’t attract the attention of police. San Diego wasn’t as bad as the rest of the area, and he stopped at a fast-food joint and ate breakfast.

The food wasn’t anything special. He missed the home-cooked meals he could weasel out of his neighbors. Those old women knew how to make a meal. Maybe he would go back home. Those people knew him.

Once he finished eating, his excitement exploded.

He was going to get some good money, and Christopher wouldn't know what hit him.

He pulled up out front of his house and cut the engine.

The door opened, and a woman stepped out.

What kind of skank would want to be with Christopher?

He was so short and such a loser. Who would want him?

He narrowed his gaze, really looking at the woman.

He recognized her. It was that bitch they'd taken from the party.

Asher, Christopher's ex. How the hell was she here?

They'd shipped her overseas, or he thought they had.

Maybe Christopher was in on the trafficking ring.

He reached for the door handle, determined to find out how this woman ended up here instead of where they'd sent her.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Asher found a job that would allow her to work twenty hours a week during the day while Squat was at the base. It was the perfect setup for her because she had time to take classes and get her degree.

Excitement filled her as she pulled on her work shirt, ready to head out for her first day. Recovering from the trauma she'd suffered was slow going, but she was getting there. Squat was a huge part of her recovery. She was better because of the love he'd shown her.

Asher stepped outside, heading to the bus stop close by.

Because Thario had helped get her old car sold, she now had enough money to buy a car, but she was waiting until she knew this job would work out for her.

She didn't want to end up having no money to fall back on if she needed extra cash for supplies for one of her classes.

She'd made it to the sidewalk when the slam of a car door drew her attention. She turned, spying someone she thought she recognized. Panic flashed through her. It was one of the men she'd seen in the basement when she'd been taken. It was Squat's uncle. He'd come for her.

Thario woke late, his head spinning. Frog seemed concerned when he coughed. Just what he needed, another round of illnesses. He hated being sick, but this time, it felt different, more like allergies rather than an illness.

He'd spent time helping his neighbor clean out her house yesterday, which had been a

mistake. She needed to hire someone. The dumpster out front of her house was already full, and they'd only gone through half the rooms.

He checked his email, seeing a note from one of the alerts he had set up. His heart picked up speed as he read the email, seeing that Squat's Uncle Bill had been spotted in Vegas. That was too close to them.

Maybe he should call, but something told him to head over. He grabbed his mug of coffee he'd poured up and tapped Frog on his head. "We're headed out."

Frog gave a little yip then followed him outside. They were halfway there when he put in a call to Squat, getting his voicemail. He left a message, telling Squat he was heading over to his house and he would call once he made sure Asher was okay.

Frog whined and Thario reached over, scratching his head. "It's okay, boy, we're just going to check on Asher. I'm sure everything is okay."

A scream rose up and escaped Asher's lips before she turned to run.

Bill called out, but his voice was lost in the wind.

She wasn't going to stop and find out what he wanted.

The man had seen her in that basement, and he hadn't even tried to help her.

He could have gone to the police and stopped this all, but he'd been in league with her abductors.

Bill was just as guilty as the rest of them.

She slowed as she approached the corner, looking for approaching traffic. The sound

of his footsteps was right behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and her feet wove off the sidewalk, tripping on a low bush.

One hand slapped the pavement, and the other landed in the trash.

She cried out as pain slid up her arm. She turned over, trying to scramble up, but Bill was right there.

His lips spread into an evil smile, and she tried crawling backward, but her left arm wouldn't work, and she was stuck at his feet, just waiting for him to attack.

Thario turned onto Squat's street and saw Asher running. Frog saw it, too. From the bark he let loose, the dog didn't like what he saw. Thario watched in horror as Asher fell. He sped to the curb, stopping as he watched the man tower over her.

He opened the door to his van, and Frog jumped out, heading straight for the man standing over Asher. He watched as Frog jumped up, wrapping his jaws around the man's arm. The guy seemed shocked and didn't react for a moment.

Thario scrambled out of his van, moving closer to Frog and the man being attacked. "Frog, release."

The man turned to him, anger shining in his eyes. Then he saw the guy ball up his fist, looking like he was going to hit Frog. He couldn't allow the asshole to hurt his dog.

Asher watched in horror at first, then fascination as Frog pulled the jerk, making him turn away from her.

What was Frog doing here? Then she saw Thario and knew he'd come to help.

It looked like the man was going to hit Frog, so Asher did the only thing she could.

She quickly lifted her leg, striking Bill between the legs with her shin.

His knees came together before he dropped to them, rolling to his side as Frog tugged on his arm one last time before letting go.

Thario stood above the man, anger shining in his eyes. “You okay, Asher?”

“Mostly. My arm hurts. I don’t know what I did to it.”

Thario nodded. “We’ll get that taken care of. Right now, I need you to call for the police.”

She grabbed her phone out of her pocket and dialed. They answered on the first ring, and she relayed what had happened. The guy promised they would dispatch someone immediately.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming call. It was Squat. She ended the call and answered, glad to hear her man’s voice.

“Asher, are you okay?”

“For the most part. Thario is here. He and Frog captured Bill.”

“Good. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.”

She sighed as relief filled her. She was safe. Bill would end up in jail and she was free to live her life.

The first of the sirens sounded and drew closer. Asher sat up, cringing as pain slid

through her. Thario didn't take his eyes off Bill, which she appreciated. Bill didn't seem happy, but she didn't give a shit what he wanted. Frog kept his attention on Bill, growling every time the man moved.

Bill looked from her to Thario, then back to her. "You bitch. How the hell did you escape? You were supposed to die overseas."

"Well, I didn't. And now I can testify against you, which I will gladly do."

A police car stopped behind Thario's van and the officers got out slowly as they took in the area. "What's going on?"

Asher grunted in pain as she tried to point at Bill. Her arm still wasn't useful so her pointing was rather wimpy. "He attacked me."

"The dog rescue you?" one of the officers called out.

"Yes."

The dog glanced over his shoulder and sat at the sight of the officers with their guns drawn. Thario scratched his head, and Frog whined.

"Is that a military dog?"

"Yes," Thario said. "We were pulling up as he was chasing Asher down the street. Frog, that's the dog's name, took him down."

"I want to sue for abuse!" Bill yelled, which caused Frog to growl.

The first officer moved to Bill and told him to lie face down on the ground. Bill tried arguing, but it wasn't any use. The cops weren't taking any flack from him.

An ambulance showed up and Bill was yelling at them to help him but the officers waved them off, telling them to attend to her first.

“So what hurts?” the EMT asked.

“My arm. It won’t work.”

“Well, I’m thinking you dislocated it, but we’ll get you to the ER and get you an X-ray. Then we’ll know for sure. I’m going to take your vitals before we take off.”

“Thank you.”

She could breathe easier now. Sure, when Bill had shown up, she’d been frightened, but knowing he was in police custody meant it was all almost over. No one would be free to hunt her down. She and Squat could live out their lives in peace.

Squat showed up right before the ambulance was ready to take her. He hopped in the back and rode with her to the hospital. She was thankful they’d found each other again.

The X-ray showed that her shoulder had been dislocated from the impact of her fall. There were no cracked or broken bones, which was good. It would take a few weeks, maybe a couple of months, for her to recover, but she would be okay.

“Let’s go home,” Asher said when Squat walked back into the room.

“Are they letting you go?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m free to leave.”

“Good. Let’s get you home.”

Her arm was in a sling for a few days, but she had survived.

One of Squat's teammates had driven his car to the hospital so they could get home.

On the way home, Squat drove her by her new work and she explained to the manager what had happened.

They understood, but wanted her on staff even though she couldn't start for a few more days. Everything was working out so well.

Once home, he helped her out of the car, and they headed in. He pulled her into a hug, and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"Thank you."

He kissed her forehead. "I'll always be here for you."

She leaned back and met his gaze. "Thank you. That means a lot to me. When we were younger and you left for the Navy, I knew I would always miss you. Finding you again is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Thank you."

"I feel like I should be thanking you for giving me another chance. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I love my job, and becoming a SEAL was life-changing, but Asher, you are my life. I would give it all up to be with you."

She brushed her lips over his. "Thankfully, you don't have to. I love you, and I'm proud of who you are and what you do. I know you being a SEAL means you'll be gone sometimes, but I know it is worth it. You're worth it."

He held her face between his hands and delivered a kiss that made her toes curl. She'd found him again, and this time, she would never have to let him go.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:50 am

Avery “Apple” Owens didn’t want to visit Tara in prison. What she’d done had embarrassed him, made him feel shame, and almost lost him the most important job he could have ever had. He was proud to be a SEAL, and Tara had almost ruined it for him.

He had a month off work and was heading to St. Louis to visit his parents for a few days before going camping in the Rockies. Studying the map, he figured out he would be near the prison where Tara was being held.

Heat filled him, and he jumped up, pushing away the idea of visiting Tara. He couldn’t do it. There was nothing she could tell him that would make him want to see her again.

He moved to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, groaning as soon as he realized he’d drank his last beer last night. He was flying out in the morning so his fridge was empty. He let go a heavy sigh and pulled out his phone, texting Jay, asking if he had any beer.

His phone rang a second later. “Hey, Apple, get your ass over here. We’re not flying out to Hawaii until next week.”

“Oh, cool. I’ll be there in a few.”

He’d had his issues with Nichole, but she’d turned out to be a great friend and an awesome addition to Jay’s life. He’d never seen his buddy so happy.

When he stepped into Jay’s house, Nichole narrowed her gaze. “Why aren’t you

happy? You have a month off work.”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

“Tell us,” Jay said as he handed over a beer.

He took a long pull from the bottle, then groaned. “I’m visiting my parents, then driving to the Rockies. I pass by Leavenworth.”

Jay’s eyebrows scrunched, and then he shook his head. “Oh, Tara.”

Nichole raised her eyebrows as her eyes opened wide. “I could interview her for you.”

Apple shook his head. “No. If I’m going to learn anything, I need to see her face to face.”

“What do you think she will tell you?”

He shook his head, disgust filling him. “No clue. I don’t really want to hear it.”

Nichole reached out and put her hand on his arm. “Then don’t go.”

She was right. He wouldn’t go. He didn’t need that drama in his life. He could drive right past Leavenworth and totally ignore the fact Tara was inside one of those cells. The desire to tell her she was a terrible person wouldn’t win. He could do this.

Five days later, he found himself sitting outside the prison. He had an appointment to see her at ten that morning. Anger and fear twisted through him. Something inside twisted so tight he had to know. It was that inner voice that made him do this.

When she entered the room and sat across from him, her smile did nothing for him.

What had he ever seen in her?

“Hello, Avery.”

“Tara. What do you want?”

It seemed like she chuckled, but he wasn't sure. “No warm reunion, I see.”

He said nothing, just stared at her. She had no idea what he'd been doing on the outside, and he wanted to keep her ignorant of his life.

“I'll get to it. I always felt guilty?—”

Apple snorted. She was a piece of work trying to act like she had a conscience.

“I know that's hard for you to understand, but I didn't feel guilty about the documents. What I felt guilty about was your girlfriend, the one I forced you to break up with. She came by your place one evening when you were out.”

Apple felt like the world was closing in on him. If Tara had done anything to Amelia, he would kill her. He glanced around, seeing that there were multiple guards in here watching the prisoners. No doubt, he would be in big trouble. But it would be worth it.

“What about Amelia?”

“She was pregnant with your kid. I told her you wouldn't want anything to do with a kid but that I would tell you. I didn't. I kept that from you to punish you.”

He blinked at Tara, anger rising fast. He squeezed his hands into tight fists, knowing that if he reacted, the guards would take him down fast.

“I shouldn’t have kept that from you. I don’t know if she kept the baby or not, but I wanted you to know.”

His hands shook and then it was almost his whole body as the rage built. One of the guards stepped over and put his hand on the table between them. The guy looked Apple in the eye, his frown deep.

“It’s not worth it. Just get up and leave.”

The rage inside was almost too much to handle. He stood stiffly, his muscles barely unclenching as he turned and strode away, leaving the room and Tara behind. When he made it outside to the car he’d rented, he let loose a primal scream.

He had to find Amelia. He couldn't make up for lost time, but he sure as fuck would make sure she had money.

God, how could he have been so stupid back then?

He'd loved Amelia, but she'd pulled away, and Tara swooped in.

He shouldn't have let Amelia go so easily, but he'd tried to respect her decision to back away.

Now, he regretted ever hooking up with Tara.

He'd fucked himself over so badly he never would get over it.

Read Protection For Amelia next.