



Rescuing Baylee (Nightshade #3)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Detective Landon Hunter didn't want or need entanglements, but something about Baylee Mitchell tugs at him when he sees her in the hallway of his apartment building. She wears a vicious scar on her beautiful face like a badge, and it spikes his anger. Who injured her like that?

When he responds to a mass shooting at a hospital, he doesn't expect to find his neighbor is the hero of the night. She protected everyone in the emergency department, despite the danger to herself.

He's intrigued, but she gives him the cold shoulder.

Baylee Mitchell has lived through hell, and it's taken her a long time to recover. The detective assigned to her case reminds her that she is more than just a nurse. She's also a woman. She's tamped down that side of herself for a long time, though, and it's a shock when it comes roaring back to life.

But danger lurks in the shadows, threatening to engulf them both. Landon and Baylee must survive an enemy bent on revenge. As well as their own demons...

Total Pages (Source): 18

CHAPTER ONE

PREQUEL

2nd Lt. Baylee Mitchell, Afghanistan, July 2012

Baylee hated the fear that flooded her system every time she heard something outside Forward Operating Base Nightshade. There was steady gunfire and the occasional explosion, and her response system was so overwrought. It had been going on for hours. Days. She'd lost track of exactly how long it had been. She just went from surgery to surgery, doing her best to save lives.

After a while, you became numb to the danger you were in the middle of. Afghanistan was rife with angry men with guns, and there were conflicts almost daily right now. But in the past week, US forces, the Marines on their base, had been losing ground. The fighting was getting closer to the base, and her anxiety had ratcheted up until it was at a fever pitch. She tried to present a strong face, especially to the patients, but it was getting harder.

It was especially hard because she knew people came to her in the hopes that she could cheer them up. She had that kind of friendly, welcoming personality. She just didn't have a lot more cheer in her. This place was hell.

Olivia passed through her line of sight, headed for the scrub station. Baylee followed her, bumping playfully into her hip when she stopped at the sink. Olivia gave her a tired smile, and she realized they were all on edge. Baylee scrounged a smile up for her, but it faded when she saw the tears in her friend's eyes. "Oh, honey," she said,

drawing Olivia in for a hug. She must have lost another one.

They were both feeling the effects of being on-duty twenty hours a day and feeling like they were losing. It was demoralizing to work so hard for so little reward. The only comfort she took was that she was with her friends. Yes, Olivia was technically her boss, but Baylee knew they were more to each other than that. They were sounding boards and therapists to each other, and they'd promised to never sugar-coat things. "I think we're in trouble, Liv," she whispered.

Baylee saw the agreement in Liv's expression.

The explosion of sound suddenly got louder, and Baylee somehow knew that this one had hit inside the Hesco Bastions. Inside their hospital. She ran toward the east, waving dust away from her face. The alarm blared overhead, confirming her fears. She bolted to the recovery tent, the direction of the sound, and stared in horror.

Men, her patients, were burning. The heavy-duty tent was burning around and over them. Moving fast, she ran to the nearest gurney, unlocked the wheels and started pulling it out of the tent, away from the fire. Olivia was right behind her.

"Turn off the oxygen," Olivia screamed.

Oh, God. They could blow themselves up with all the compressed gasses in here.

Baylee slammed the gurney into the hall, pushing it toward one of the orderlies, then she turned and ran back into the recovery tent. Rex, another nurse, and Olivia were trying to smother the flames on one of the patients. Baylee grabbed another gurney and shoved it through the door, her legs straining.

She'd been so tired before, but now adrenaline was coursing through her veins. They had to save these men.

Olivia was pushing a gurney toward her, but Rex grabbed her arm. “I need help,” he cried, and Liv turned toward him. Oh, shit. One of the Marines were rousing and trying to pull his ventilator tube out. “I’ll take this one,” Baylee told Liv. “You help Rex.”

They got all the men out of the tent and into the hallway and the surgery, but it was packed. Colonel Trent came through and started directing, easing the overflow, but Baylee could see the worry in the man’s eyes. Why was he even here? It was usually the major in here directing the troops. She motioned for Olivia to look at him, and she nodded, her hazel eyes just as worried. “I know,” she murmured.

For two more hours, the assault continued. Baylee cared for her patients as best she could, considering the circumstances. There were no surgeries going on right this minute, but plenty of first aid. They were taking turns breathing for one man, because the ventilators had been damaged in the tent. The Marines were trying to clean one up to get it usable again, but Baylee didn’t have a lot of hope for it.

Then, suddenly, the attack stopped. She looked at Liv, who seemed just as stunned. Rex was pushing a guy in a wheelchair down the hallway, and he stopped, head cocked, as he listened.

This had been a long attack, more than twenty-four hours, and the sudden loss of sound was as off-putting as the attack. But, as the minutes stretched on, she dared to hope that they would have a chance to catch their breath. Or maybe the Taliban had decided to stop. “Do you think we beat them and they’re giving up?” she asked her friend.

Olivia shook her head. “Doubtful. I have a feeling they’re resupplying troops and reloading.”

Damn. Baylee had hoped for more encouraging words, but Olivia stood by their no

sugar-coating rule. She always would. It was one of the many reasons Baylee admired her so much. The tiny woman was a workhorse, and one of the best nurses she'd ever seen work. And she had personal ethics like no one else. Baylee really looked up to and admired her.

It was Liv and one of the surgeon's turns for a break. Baylee watched them leave the ward, aching with her own tiredness. A few more hours and it would be her turn.

"You doing okay?" Rex asked, hunkering down beside her. She was organizing a mess of instruments that had been scattered in the melee. Once she had them sorted, she would see if she would find a working autoclave to sterilize them. They would need them.

"I'm okay," she said, pushing some hair behind her ear. It was coming down from the knot. Taking a few seconds, she redid the messy bun. At least it was out of her face now.

Rex must have seen the lie, because he wrapped a thick arm around her shoulders, and they just sat there, sharing touch for a few minutes. It did Baylee's heart good that he was concerned for her.

Rex was their only male nurse, and the third part of their friend group, and he kicked ass. They called him a lot if the patient was being difficult, or they needed to move one. He was always ready to help.

Baylee had seen his personality shrinking, though. The constant barrage was hard on them all, but it really seemed to affect Rex.

They were all going to need therapy when they got out of this fucking country.

The cease-fire held for a few hours, long enough that Baylee could take a bit of a

break from caring for patients. She sank against a wall and tilted her head back, falling into a weird, alert doze.

Then the bombing started again, even closer this time, and she knew they were in trouble. Rex ran into the room. “They’ve broken through.”

Baylee was stunned, and she didn’t know what to do. When Olivia ran into the surgery, her eyes wild, Baylee grabbed onto her. They hunkered against the wall, arms clasped around each other and over their heads as the bombing intensified.

Then the Taliban broke into the hospital, and all hell broke loose.

Baylee screamed and knew, absolutely knew, she was going to die, but there was nothing they could do. They were medical personnel. They didn’t generally carry guns in the hospital, though they’d all been through the same training. The Marines were their protection on the base.

She squinted her eyes open as gunfire ripped through the surgical ward. “No,” she screamed, but it didn’t matter. The Taliban fired wildly, shooting the men on the gurneys. Men they’d worked on for hours, sometimes days, died within seconds at the hands of the terrorists. Baylee waited for bullets to tear through her own body, but they didn’t. For some reason, they left the medical personnel alone.

Then the weapons fire slowed. Her ears rang from hearing it in the enclosed ward, and she wondered if it would ever come back.

Baylee lifted her head and wanted to scream at the carnage. She was a nurse. She was used to blood. But not like this. It sprayed the walls and pooled across the floor. She and Liv were going to be sitting in a puddle soon, as a pool of crimson rolled toward her.

Then two men were jerking them up. “Are you medical,” one demanded, his English almost perfect. She nodded, blinking, her eyes flooding with tears as they shoved her into a room. Liv was right behind her, and they clutched at each other.

Baylee was in shock. Her ears were still ringing, and she felt light-headed. The fear that beat at her was debilitating. She’d never been as in fear for her life as she was at that moment. Two masked Taliban stood at the door of their room, guns toward them, just waiting for a reason to shoot them. Her gaze flicked to the dead Marines in the corner.

“Why do you cry?” one of the armed men asked. “They were dying anyway.”

Baylee couldn’t keep her mouth shut. “You bastards,” she hissed. “These men were all injured, and you slaughtered them. I suppose you think that makes you big men.”

The English speaker grinned at her and in a flash, he struck out, slamming her in the mouth with the butt of his gun. Baylee felt her nose break and blood gush, and she went down in blinding pain. For several long seconds she couldn’t make heads or tails of her world, it was so topsy turvy. She gagged on the blood in her throat and spit on the floor, something she never, ever would have done in her life. Olivia found a cloth to blot at her lips.

“You’re okay,” she whispered.

The men forced them against the wall, and that was where they stayed, for hours. Baylee’s lip was split so badly it probably needed stitches. It felt like it was the size of a tennis ball, and the one time she touched it, she almost screamed in renewed pain. Liv blotted it clean, but that was all she could do while the Taliban were in charge.

Outside their surgery room, there was still the occasional spate of gunfire. Baylee had

a feeling they were killing off the dying men. She wanted to sob and scream at the injustice of it all, the sheer audacity, but she couldn't.

Olivia was quivering against her. Or maybe that was her quivering. It didn't matter. They were both so scared.

Then she realized the men were torturing the remaining Marines. There was no mistaking the sound of flesh striking flesh. And when they were done, there was usually a single gunshot that seemed to echo through her heart. Every time there was a shot, Baylee assumed they had killed another serviceman.

Then they started bringing Marines in to be patched up. She and Olivia fell into their rhythm, bandaging and repairing what they could, sometimes adding a few stitches. When they were done, the armed men would take the injured out to torture them all over again.

Then they dragged Rex in, and Baylee almost cried. Rex was their big protector. He was there for them all.

"What did you do," she hissed, as they helped him onto the gurney.

Rex grinned, but it didn't have the bravado it used to. "I was trying to be a hero."

There was a bullet hole through his shoulder, but the more dangerous wound was in his thigh. Blood was pooling on the gurney beneath him, and Olivia held heavy bandages to the leg. Baylee injected him with a heavy dose of pain killer. "Do you know what's going on?" she whispered.

He nodded tightly. "Staged attack, across the country. This is the anniversary of most of the troops moving in, years ago after September 11th, and they wanted to send a message."

Baylee shook her head. This was so ridiculous. She hated the war, and she hated fighting. She'd joined the Army to have her education paid for, not to take part in so much death.

Olivia was looking at the thigh wound. "I think the bullet's still in there, Rex. Gonna have to dig it out. Pump some local in right there, Bay," Olivia directed, pointing.

Baylee injected as much as she thought was safe, then wiped down the area. After a few seconds, Olivia slipped a gloved finger into the wound, obviously feeling for the bullet. Baylee cringed at the thought of Olivia nicking herself on the metal. And the cross-contamination. But what choice did they have?

"Found it," she murmured.

Baylee handed her the long forceps she needed and watched as Olivia pulled the bullet out, dropping it to the tray beside her. Then she stuck her finger in again. "It didn't break the bone. You're lucky."

Baylee was working on his shoulder. There was an entrance and an exit wound, and she quickly stitched them both up. "It's enough to hold it together."

"Thanks, girls," he said, looking at them each. "I'll be back for you if I can."

The Taliban guards jerked him off the table and marched him out. Baylee cringed, praying she would see her friend again.

A little while later, they brought Trent in. Baylee barely recognized the man. He'd been shot through the thigh and the abdomen, and he had the pallor of death. He'd been beaten with something, his face a mask of blood, and she thought he had a concussion.

“We need a doctor for him,” Baylee said, turning to face the man who spoke such perfect English. The man’s brown eyes were hard and cold. “He has a concussion probably and we aren’t able to stop the bleeding in his leg. We need a surgeon for that.”

“Put a bandage on it. He doesn’t have to live long.”

“Why are you doing this,” Olivia asked. “We’re trying to help your people.”

The man’s face closed down and fury darkened his eyes as he towered over diminutive Olivia. “No, you are trying to undermine a culture that has been in place for thousands of years. You have no business being here. You have no business bringing your ways to our country.”

“And yet, you have obviously benefitted from our ways,” Olivia said, lifting her chin. “I can’t even hear an accent in your voice. Obviously, you’ve been educated by...”

The man snarled into Olivia’s face. The fist came from out of nowhere and slammed into Olivia’s face. Baylee watched her crumple to the floor, unconscious. The man turned and stalked away.

Baylee half-carried Olivia back to the side of the room, where they’d been sitting. There was a growing swath of purple on her cheek. Baylee grabbed an ice pack, activated it, and propped Liv’s head on the floor on a bundled towel. Then she sat with her, waiting for her to wake.

Several times, the Taliban brought in injured. Baylee did as much as she could for them on her own, but she knew everything she did was for naught. As soon as they left the room, the men were tortured again, and it made her sick.

The terrorists at the door watched her every move, speaking softly between

themselves in Pashtun, and she didn't like the feeling of their gazes on her. It crept her out, and she knew, without a doubt, that she was in danger. At one point, she asked if she could go down the hallway to the bathroom, but the men laughed and motioned for her to go in the corner. Then they laughed again when they saw how uncomfortable the thought made her.

Her face flaming, Baylee went back to Olivia. She didn't want to pee her pants, but she would wait as long as possible.

Then Olivia began to rouse. Baylee brushed her short blond hair away from her face. "Oh, thank God you're awake. You've been out for hours."

"Trent," Olivia asked.

Baylee shook her head. "They carried him out. I doubt he's still alive."

The way the bullets had been flying, she doubted very many of the men they worked on would survive. Olivia must have seen how much that hurt, because she gripped Baylee's arm as a tear slipped down her cheek.

"We did what we could for him. For them."

"I know," she said, swiping the tears away.

Olivia moved to sit up, and Baylee gave her a hand. "I have to pee," Olivia said.

"I already asked. We have to go in the corner."

She watched Olivia sway as she pushed to her feet. "Remind me not to piss him off again. I have a concussion."

Yeah, she'd thought so. "I'll try."

Olivia asked about the other prisoners, but Baylee shook her head. "I can't think about it," she said firmly. "They might just be in another room."

Olivia crossed the room to the corner. She motioned for Baylee to grab a metal trash can. "I can grab a sheet and hold it up while you go."

Olivia nodded, and that's what they did. Then they swapped places. Baylee had just sat on the can and started to relieve herself when the guards moved in, ripping the sheet from Olivia's hands and shoving her to the floor. Baylee felt her face go hot, but she finished her business, then swept her pants up as quick as she could. How mortifying.

The men were leering at her, obviously letting her know she'd done something wrong. One man reached out and gripped her ass. Instinctively, Baylee slapped his hand away, and as soon as she did it, she knew she was in trouble. Fury washed over his face, and he hit her in the mouth, in the same spot she'd been struck before. Her mind blanked out with blinding pain, but she didn't go down. She staggered, trying to absorb the hit. Then she looked up at the man defiantly. He would not take her down.

Then he slapped her again, and it was hard enough that it spun her around. Quicker than she could respond to, he'd woven his arms through hers, pulling her elbows behind her back until they touched. Then he shoved her across the room to the gurney and flattened her across it. Baylee screamed and fought, kicking out with her legs, but the strong, wiry man had the leverage on her.

Olivia yelled out behind her, and she knew her friend had probably tried to help, but she was already injured. It would be up to Baylee to rescue herself.

Cold fear rippled down her spine as the man fumbled with her arms, then with his

other hand, pushed her scrub pants down over her ass. She felt him fumbling behind her, knew he was unfastening his own pants, and she fought as hard as she could. Impotent fury hazed her vision. Rearing back, she smacked her head into his face, and she knew she dazed him for a second, but not long enough. He paused for a moment and laid over top of her, and suddenly the glint of a knife was in her peripheral vision. The terrorist reached around her neck to her left side, and she felt the point of the knife cut into her skin at her temple. Then it swept down her cheek and trailed down her neck.

Baylee had never felt that amount of pain before, and she screamed, and screamed again. Her vision dimmed. In the tiny, rational part of her brain that was unblinded by fear and pain, she knew he was cutting her to distract her from what he was doing behind her, and it worked. Her mind retreated into itself, too scared to register everything that was going on. All she felt was pain and humiliation, and extreme, overwhelming futile, helpless, anger.

Baylee imagined being back on the farm where she'd grown up. She and her sister had milked cows and goats and had chores to do, but it had been the most beautiful place on earth to her. It had broken her heart to leave when she was in junior high, but her dad had gotten relocated to Texas.

She'd gone back to the farm as often as she could until her grandparents had died, and the farm had been sold. On that last trip, she'd climbed the hill behind the house and sat in the wildflowers, letting the sun warm her sad heart. It had been idyllic and perfect.

The men switched, and she felt another cut across her face, then a blinding streak of fire down her arm. She screamed out, but they just shoved against her harder, pressing her head to the gurney. They wanted her to cry out. Blood was pooling beneath her cheek and obscuring her vision. They had cut her eyebrow that time, and she couldn't blink the blood away fast enough. The sheet had absorbed what it could

and was spreading, but there was nothing she could do. They still had her arms behind her back. The first man was laughing, and he reached out to squeeze her breast painfully as the second man used her.

She thought a third man joined them, because there was more laughter, and words spoken in Pashtun that she didn't recognize. She thought the third man used her as well, but she wasn't sure, because her mind was hazing in and out, and she struggled to keep hold of her dream. Some part of her was planning her retribution, though. Even pressed to the gurney, she could see the knife they'd used to cut her. It was less than two feet away from her face, her own blood glinting on the blade, obviously left there as a threat.

The third man finished, slapping her ass as he pulled away. The three of them were laughing as he walked out the door, thanking them for the good time, and her face flamed. They hadn't even bothered to close the door.

Pain radiated through her like a drumbeat, and the men were talking amongst themselves, laughing occasionally. One of them kept rubbing her ass, and the other man cut a hank of her blond hair to tuck into his pocket. A trophy for the hard work they'd put in. Baylee could feel their seed dripping out of her body, and the anger built.

As soon as they let go of her arms, she curled them forward on the gurney, praying the blood flow would return before they thought to retrieve the knife. She sniffled against the mattress, pretending to be withdrawn, because that was what they expected. The two men were so used to rape that they had worked out a system.

As soon as she could clench her fist without needles in her skin, she started doing a check of the rest of her body. Her legs were fine. They would hold her when she needed them. Her pants were down around her feet, though. She would have to be careful not to trip. Her face throbbed with its own heartbeat, but it would not stop her.

She tried to blink away the blood in her eye, but it continued to flow.

Drawing in two great big gulps of air, she jerked up off the gurney. Grabbing the knife, she spun to the right, slashing at neck height. She hit the second man as perfectly as she could have wanted, his throat slicing cleanly. Blood sprayed, and he slapped his hands over his throat, his eyes wide as he stumbled away. But she knew he was a dead man walking. The first man, the one that had started it all, moved in from her right, and Baylee knew she had microseconds. Pushing with both feet, she jumped toward him, her knife hand stabbing into the soft skin of his gut. Then she pressed up as hard as she could. Even as his fists beat at her head and shoulders, she dug the knife in as hard as she could. They crashed to the floor, and Baylee withdrew the knife and stabbed again under his armpit. She hit bone, so she drew back and stabbed again.

The man's struggles were slowing, and she knew she had to have hit something vital with her first strike. He was gasping for breath, wheezing, and she knew one lung was gone. But she continued to plunge the knife in, over and over again, until his hands dropped away, and he quieted.

She pushed away from him quickly, disgusted to even be touching him. She dropped the knife to the floor and looked at herself. She was like something out of a horror movie.

Olivia was on the floor a few feet away, unconscious. Baylee knew her friend needed help, but she had to care for herself first. She had to get them off her body.

Not even caring that the door was standing wide open to anyone who walked through the hall, she stripped off her clothes as she walked across the room. There were scrubs in the laundry bag. Yes, they were dirty and someone else had worn them, but at that point, she didn't care as long as she got the men off of her. She returned to the trash can they'd peed in and did her best to clean up, using bandages.

Her cheek was bleeding steadily, and it felt so weird. Like she had flaps hanging, or something. She knew she didn't, but it was open to the air, and it needed closed. She taped a couple of thick bandages to her face, hissing with pain as she tried to pull the sides together. The cut through her eyebrow had stopped bleeding, but she took a minute to wet a bandage with saline and wipe her eye clear. Then she dressed in the dirty scrubs, pulling the string tight around her waist.

Taking a steadying breath, then another, Baylee looked at the men she'd killed. She felt nothing for them. At some point, she might feel regret for taking two lives, because it was diametrically opposed to everything she did in life, but that point wasn't right now. If her luck held, no one would even notice them. She went to the door and peered out, but she couldn't see anything. Carefully, she pushed the door mostly closed.

Now that they were a little bit safer, she had to check on Olivia. Before she did, though, she grabbed the weapons the men had been carrying and hauled them over. And she found the man who had cut her hair. She grabbed the hank from his breast pocket and stuffed it in her own pocket. She still felt very exposed, but she went to Olivia and kneeled beside her. The woman was out cold. Fear lancing through Baylee's heart, she checked Liv's pupils. Yes, definitely a concussion. Had they punched her again. She scanned her body and gasped.

"Oh, no," she breathed.

Olivia's right leg was bent at a terrible angle, and there was a puddle of blood beneath her. Baylee hadn't realized it was Olivia's blood. Leaning over, she gasped. Olivia had a compound fracture of the lower leg, and it was leaking a steady stream of blood. Baylee scrambled to her feet, lurching for bandages. In her mind, though, she knew something more drastic would have to be done.

"No, bandages first. Get the bleeding stopped. Then reassess."

But the bleeding didn't stop. With the way the break was positioned, Baylee had a feeling the anterior tibial artery had been severed. Tears flowed then, because she knew she had a heart ripping decision to make. If they were literally in a working hospital, there was a chance they could save Liv's leg, but they weren't. They were hostages with little to no hope of rescue, and Liv's leg was a ticking time bomb. If she didn't repair it herself, she was going to have to put a tourniquet on it.

She started an IV, knowing Liv would need fluids. And she added as much pain medication as she thought was safe.

Baylee stood for a minute, more torn than she'd ever been before. It was hard to think through the pain throbbing through her body. Olivia would die if she did nothing. Baylee had never done surgery before, but she'd seen it done and assisted hundreds of times. Did she have the ability to do it herself?

"I have to try," she whispered. She grabbed a surgical tray, setting it close to their little nest, then she stacked items around her, within reach, blocking the view from the door. She set one weapon down by Olivia's feet, also within reach if someone came in. Then she got to work.

The artery was shredded, though, and she knew it was a lost cause. Olivia was losing even more blood, and Baylee knew she was at a crossroads. If she didn't tourniquet Liv's leg, she would die. There was no doubt in her mind. Knowing that she would forever be impacting Liv's future, she put the tourniquet on her lower leg, tightening it down until the bleeding stopped.

Baylee bandaged the fracture as well as she could. She'd just finished when the bombing started up again.

Olivia jerked, but didn't wake. Baylee sat on the floor next to Liv, her eyes going to the tourniquet on her leg again and again. Without a doubt, this decision bothered her

more than killing her rapists.

The bombing continued, and she didn't understand why it was even happening. Were the American forces fighting back? Whatever the reason, no one entered the room looking for care. Maybe they'd killed everyone they'd been torturing.

Terrible thoughts roamed through her mind, and she worried that Liv would never wake. A few times she roused a little, usually when the bomb blasts went off, but she stayed unconscious. The bombing seemed to get closer and closer, and then there was weapons fire. Some of it sounded like it was right outside the hospital.

Then, more than two hours after she'd been injured, Olivia opened her eyes.

"I didn't think you'd wake up," Baylee cried, holding her hand.

"W-what's going on," Olivia asked.

"I didn't think you were going to come back to me. Do you know where you are?"

Olivia snorted and shifted, then gasped in pain. "Yeah, I think so. Is the Taliban still here?"

"Kind of," Baylee whispered.

Olivia looked confused for a moment, then her expression cleared. "Wait, they..." She sat up, looking at the IV tube in her arm, then back at Baylee. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, but you've been out for hours. I had to do it, Olivia. I had to."

Then, shocking Baylee to the core, she broke down into great, gulping sobs. Olivia wrapped her arms around her shoulders, trying to comfort her.

“What, honey? What did you do?”

Then Olivia looked down her body, and Baylee knew she saw her leg.

“I’m so sorry,” Baylee said, shaking her head. “You have a double compound fracture of your lower right leg, just above the ankle. By the time t-they...” Baylee’s voice stuttered and stopped, and she took a breath. “By the time they finished, and I found you, you had gone into shock from blood loss. I had to stop the flow of blood.”

Olivia turned and looked at her for a long moment, then pulled her into her arms. Then they both wept. Olivia was the first to gain control. She pushed Baylee back.

“You did what you had to do, Baylee. Look at me. Let me see your face,” Olivia told her softly. “What did they do to you?”

Baylee untaped the pad, and Olivia gasped softly. Baylee knew it had to be bad for the stoic Liv to react that way.

“We have to stitch this closed. As soon as possible.”

Olivia glanced around, obviously noting the bodies on the floor. When she looked at Baylee, she shrugged, her eyes chilling. “They weren’t watching. I grabbed the knife and cut one’s throat with a wild swing when I turned around and shoved it in the gut of the other with the same knife. They left their guns on the floor when they, well...”

Baylee glanced away, not wanting to see recrimination in Liv’s eyes.

“Look at me,” the older woman snapped. Baylee glanced up at the sharp words, her eyes wide. “You did what you needed to do. There is no shame in that. And there’s no shame in protecting yourself. I’m proud of everything you’ve done.”

Another blast rocked the building, and they braced their arms over their heads.

“Get me a suture kit,” Liv said. “And some local. Why are these blasts going off?”

“Not sure,” Baylee said, moving carefully to the far cabinet. “It started about an hour ago. Just random blasts. The Taliban have been running around like crazy, trying to figure out who it is.”

Baylee handed her the suture kit, and a couple of vials of local anesthetic, then took a minute to drag her attackers over to the corner, where several other bodies lay. Then she flung a sheet over the pile and returned to push the gurney toward Olivia. She placed an aluminum room partition on top of the gurney to shelter them from some of the falling debris.

“How do you want me, boss?”

Baylee forced some humor, and Olivia responded. “Lay down and rest your head here, baby. I’m not a surgeon, but I’ve done my fair share of scrub hemming. We’ll get you pulled together in no time.”

Baylee gritted her teeth in pain, even with the local. But Liv stitched her up, slowly. Baylee knew she was struggling to stay vertical, though. She’d pumped as much pain medicine as she could into Liv, but it had to be creeping back in.

“Thank you for putting the strap below the knee,” Olivia murmured. “It will make it easier to fit a prosthetic.”

Baylee gasped at the words, and tears immediately rolled from the corners of her eyes, burning as it hit her cut skin. “I’m so sorry, Olivia.”

Olivia tied off the last stitch, looking down into her eyes. “We’re going to survive

this, one way or another. Now, did you have a cut on the back of your arm as well? It was dripping.”

Olivia patched her up, even as the bombing continued. There was a spate of gunfire, then it sounded like a group of men yelling Pashtun that they needed to evacuate before they were killed. Then running boot steps were coming closer. “They’re coming this way.”

In unison, they lifted the weapons to their shoulders and aimed down the barrels. They had no ear protection in and she had no idea how many bullets were in the enemy weapon, but she would run the fucker dry.

A soldier burst into the room and Baylee squeezed the trigger, then Olivia. They shot several of the Taliban as they rolled through the door, and Baylee felt not a single microgram of remorse. The terrorists had killed so many good people.

As the weapon clicked empty, she pushed out of their barricade. Crossing to the dead men in the doorway, she tossed her weapon away, then grabbed up one of the Taliban weapons. She looked at the men on the floor, and she caught a flash of dirty blue and white fabric. It flashed in her mind, and she felt a surge of satisfaction. He had been number three.

Fuck them all.

There was a rustle of boots down the hallway, and Baylee lifted her weapon again, praying she had enough bullets to protect her and Olivia. She’d just started to squeeze the trigger when Olivia screamed at her to stop.

The man standing in the doorway was obviously American. He wore American gear, and he held up his hands to them, grinning. “I’m American. Thought you all might want to get out of here.”

Baylee dropped the enemy weapon as two more Americans came into the room. She stumbled toward the first man. “You have to help Olivia. You have to get her out of here.”

The first man seemed to be the one in charge, and he turned toward Olivia. Baylee slumped, leaning against the door jamb. One of the soldiers said something to her, but she was kind of in a fog. Her body was throbbing with pain, and she wasn’t even sure she would be able to walk out of here under her own steam.

“Baylee,” Olivia called. “Go check on our people.”

Baylee straightened and turned to do what her supervisor had told her to do, finding some last reserve of energy. When she walked into the hallway, though, nausea churned. There were bodies everywhere. There were several American soldiers—were they SEALs? — moving dead Taliban out of the way so they could deal with the few living left. Baylee walked through a hallway of dead people, seeing indicators of the people she’d known. That looked like Myrna’s hair, and that bandanna had been what Charles wore when he was on duty to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

Desperately, she looked for someone alive that she could help, and she spotted one doctor. He was moaning on the floor, and Baylee dropped down beside him to treat the gunshot wound through his gut.

Baylee lost herself in bloody, gritty work. Olivia was placed onto a stretcher, and a big medic worked on her for a while. He pumped several syringes of fluid into her IV bag, and when the helicopters arrived, Olivia was the first one out the door.

Baylee wanted to go to her friend to tell her she was sorry again, but she was whisked away. That was okay. Olivia needed care as soon as she could get it.

More relief arrived on the helicopters, and Baylee found herself gently nudged out of

the way. Then the big medic was there, smiling gently down at her. There was a long scar running down the man's face, and she stared for a long time. That was how she was going to look.

"Baylee," the man said. "My name is Truck. I thank you for everything you've done, but I think it's time you got care now. Can you sit down?"

Baylee dropped to the lowered gurney the man positioned behind her, then he crouched down in front of her. "Will Olivia be okay?" she asked, her voice rough and raw.

Truck nodded as he removed the bandage from her face. "I think she will be. The last thing she said to me, though, was that she wanted you cared for. You've done a lot to care for the people here, Baylee, and now it's our turn to help you. Okay?"

Tears stung her eyes, and she nodded, exhaustion washing over her. She slumped on the gurney, and when Truck nudged her to lay down, she didn't fight him. The hard mattress felt good under her abused body.

Abused. Used. Suddenly, the emotions she'd been cramming down inside burst out of her, and she sobbed. Curling on her side, she pulled her legs up, gasping as she dragged in air and fought not to scream. Truck stayed by her side, and he seemed to sense that she wouldn't want him to hold or comfort her. Instead, he talked softly to her, telling her that she did everything exactly the way he would have done it. And that he wished he could have shot the fuckers for her again. He praised what she'd done, and it was weirdly what she needed. When she reached out to him, he gripped her hand so tightly that she thought it was going to break, but it was exactly the stability she needed in that storm.

CHAPTER TWO

Baylee's anxiety was screeching at her, but she tamped it down. She had a job to do, and she would do it well.

Man, she hated full-moon nights.

When the call went out that there was a squad inbound with a 30 weeks' pregnant gunshot victim, probably the J aina of a gang member, they all went onto high alert. They had built a pediatric emergency trauma response team for situations just like this, and Baylee was proud to see them all shift into their temporary roles as they headed downstairs to save a mother and child.

The emergency department of Dell-Seton Medical Center was bustling when they hurried in. The city was in the middle of a spike in gang activity, and all the hospitals in the area had been reeling from overcrowding, in addition to dealing with a nationwide nursing shortage. Baylee could tell as soon as she walked in that they needed help, and she sent her nurses to do what they could until the squad got there with their patients. She found the bay where they would treat them and checked the pediatric supplies herself. She wasn't down here very often, and it was prudent to re-familiarize herself with the set-up. Dr. Mendez, the Emergency OB, was on her way in. Hopefully, she would arrive before the squad.

Baylee rearranged a few things, then stopped in the bathroom real quick. The night had already been busy, and she hadn't yet had a minute to herself. That was good, though. She'd taken this shift deliberately tonight, because she hadn't wanted to think about the date. It was the anniversary of the Rebellion, and the media was going

crazy with coverage of all the celebrations. They'd beaten back the Taliban eleven years ago today, though it had been the greatest loss of American forces in the past twenty years.

Baylee was intimately aware of the date, and she wished she'd been able to call Rex and Olivia, but she hadn't had a chance. She'd sent a message, promising to call in a couple of days. She had hoped that by working tonight, she would be too busy to think about the date, and mostly, she had been.

It was so hard to see the most painful, traumatic day of her life celebrated.

She washed her hands, glancing up at the mirror. It had taken her years to get used to the scars on her face. The deepest, most obvious one started at her temple, ran down through the middle of her cheek, over her jawbone and down her neck. It had silvered with time, but still immediately drew people's attention. The second scar traced through her left eyebrow and across the bridge of her nose, nicking her right cheek. One of the plastic surgeons had told her that the angle they had cut her at had been lucky, because she could have very easily lost an eye.

Baylee had never felt lucky, in that respect, but it wasn't worth arguing with them about.

She'd gotten used to the reactions of people meeting her for the first time. It was why she loved working with babies and kids. They didn't care what had happened to her, only how they were treated in the moment. They took everything at face value, so to speak, and if they had questions, they asked. She had no problem answering their curiosity.

It was the people that gave her sidelong glances or whispered about her behind their hands that bothered her. In her mind, even eleven years later, Baylee just knew they were talking about her. Even after years of counseling, she still worried about what

other people thought. She tried to be upbeat, but it was hard sometimes.

Maybe that was why her neighbor bothered her. She'd lived in the same apartment for years, so she knew a lot of the people in the building, by face if not by name. When the new guy had moved in down the hall, the entire building had been wondering who he was, Baylee included. Now, she could care less. She'd had enough of his dark, scowling looks. Every time he looked at her, it was like she'd crapped in his Cheerios, or something. Fuck him.

Man, he was pretty though. Tall enough for her to have to look up, he had thick, dark hair. He was muscular enough to look like he could be useful. And he had the most striking navy-blue eyes she'd ever seen, with thick dark lashes. She sighed, putting him out of her thoughts.

Tightening her ponytail, she headed out of the bathroom. If possible, the ED was in even more chaos. Within seconds, she found a team to help and lost herself in the bustle.

"Pediatric trauma team, squad arrives in thirty seconds," the intercom said, and Baylee ducked out, heading toward the front doors. Jaylynn joined her, and they met Dr. Mendez on the sidewalk. "You guys ready," Mendez asked, adjusting her mask on her face.

"Yes, ma'am," Baylee said quickly.

Leona joined them, then, the big Black woman calm despite the excitement swirling around her. Baylee loved the woman's energy, and she was so glad Leona was on their team. She'd been a pediatric nurse for more than thirty years, and it seemed like she'd literally seen everything under the sun. Baylee would trust Leona's advice over anyone else's in the hospital, including most of the doctors.

The Austin night was balmy, but heat lightning rippled the air. Maybe that's what had spiked the aggression of the night. She could hear the bus coming, and she tugged at her gloves, trying to prepare for everything.

The ambulance screeched to a stop, and the medics jumped out. She recognized the team. They were a good pair, and they'd give their all for the patients. Abby started reeling off information as soon as she opened the door.

"We have Catalina Hernandez, 23, GSW to the abdomen. Caught in a crossfire. Family says she's about thirty weeks, but they didn't know if she'd been receiving prenatal care. BP keeps bottoming out, and we have a steady fetal heartbeat. Abdomen is distended and leaking clear fluid."

"Jaylynn, check on the surgical suites," Mendez said. "This is going to be an emergency C-section."

They went to work on the mother. The woman wasn't very old, but her belly was very pronounced. Baylee wondered if she wasn't a little further along than thirty weeks.

Once they got her in the bay, they cut away her clothes and started hooking her up to machines. There was a lot of blood on the gurney, but it was pale, as if it was mixed with amniotic fluid. Baylee positioned the fetal heart monitor around the woman's belly, finding the baby's heartbeat on the first position. "There you are little man."

Dr. Mendez called for an ultrasound. That would check for fluid in the abdomen, as well as the fluid around the baby. It might even spot the bullet, because there didn't seem to be an exit wound.

Jaylynn rushed back in. "All three operating bays are in use, Mendez."

“Fuck,” the woman muttered. “I don’t want to rush them, but let them know we have a gunshot victim, and we won’t know the status of the fetus until we get him out.”

Jaylynn disappeared again. Baylee doubted that it would do any good. C-sections took a while, and there were no trimming corners.

“Fetal heartbeat is steady,” she said.

Just then, the mother’s heartbeat stuttered. Another nurse, Rosalee, rushed in to offer help.

“She has something else going on,” Mendez muttered. “Look for a second wound. Rose, intubate her.”

They moved, checking every limb. Rose dropped the head of the bed and slid the tube expertly down the woman’s throat to breathe for her.

“Here,” Leona said, moving the woman’s arm. “She must have caught it when she was running.”

There was a tiny, bloody hole in the woman’s right side, up in her armpit. It crossed into her chest, and there was no exit wound. That was really, really bad. Too much vital stuff up there.

“She must be bleeding into her chest.” Mendez moved the ultrasound wand higher.

Then the mother’s heartbeat stuttered again. And stopped.

“Baylee, get that monitor off. Leona, I need the crash cart.”

Baylee quickly took the electronic fetal monitor off and watched as Mendez tried to

save the woman's life with the defibrillator. But no matter what she did, the young mother's heart never picked up again.

"Jaylynn, call upstairs. I have three minutes to get this baby out and I would prefer to do it in an actual operating room."

Nothing they did seemed to be right, though. There was no operating room to be had. And the other OBs were all occupied. This kid was going to have a hell of a time coming into the world.

"Go get an incubator. I think they still have one in storage B," Baylee said to Jaylynn, and the younger woman took off running again.

Dr. Mendez did everything perfectly, even though the cards were stacked against them. Baylee retrieved the c-section kit from the storage unit, draped a sterile cloth over the operating field, and started setting out instruments. As soon as the doctor cut into the woman's abdomen, bloody fluid gushed out. Mendez moved quickly. The mother was gone, and this baby was now their priority.

The little boy that she lifted up was good-sized, again, Baylee thought, probably more than thirty weeks. But he had a blue tinge to his skin, and he was unresponsive.

Mendez turned to place him into the incubator Jaylynn had just arrived with. Baylee stood at the mother's side for a moment, unsure exactly what to do. Normally, the NICU team would take the baby and the surgeon would repair the mother. This had not been a normal case though.

"Baylee, where's the bulb syringe?"

Baylee scrambled to the cart and snatched it from the drawer, handing it over. Mendez pulled a bunch of gunk from the baby's airway, and he gave a weak cry.

Almost immediately, his skin started to pinken up. There was blood leaking from somewhere, though. It was staining the blanket beneath him. Baylee grabbed a cloth and started cleaning him up, stimulating his response. She found the bullet hole in his chubby little arm, and she pointed it out to the doctor. Mendez manipulated the limb.

“Doesn’t seem to be broken. It’s just a flesh wound, I believe. This little man is incredibly lucky.”

Baylee wasn’t so sure about that. He’d been injured in a gang fight and lost his mother in the span of an hour.

Leona bandaged his little arm, and they cleaned him up the rest of the way. He would have to go to the NICU for a while to be sure he was breathing okay, but he seemed to be holding his own.

She dared to share a grin with Leona across the incubator.

That was when the gunfire started.

CHAPTER THREE

With memories of the Rebellion so close at hand, Baylee didn't believe what she heard at first. It had to be a flashback. An incredibly realistic one. More realistic than any other one she'd had before.

Then people began screaming, and three more shots echoed through the closed confines of the emergency department.

Baylee hit the deck, scrambling for cover. There was no cover, though, only concealment. The entire ED department was separated by privacy curtains. There was a central horseshoe shaped nurse's desk which was the command center, and a few offices along the side of the room for the supervisors, and it was all circled with beds. She peered under the edge of the blue curtain. Feet were running helter-skelter as people realized they had nothing to hide behind.

Then a man's voice rang out, screaming Spanish. It was kind of garbled, though, like he was crying.

She scanned the floor and spied a dark uniformed older man lying on the floor near the entrance to the ED. Hank the security guard blinked at her as she met his eyes, then they fluttered shut. Her heart sank as she watched him breathe his last breath. Hank had been a great guy, and he'd saved them several times from irate patients and relatives. She glanced down his body. His weapon was still in the holster. He hadn't even had a chance to draw it out.

She heard the voice again, and she thought he said Catalina. Oh, God, he was looking

for their patient.

The woman who had just died.

She watched the man's feet. He wore black tennis shoes and was moving toward the far side of the room. As she listened, she heard him start swiping curtains back. People screamed, scared they were going to be shot.

Then she heard the ED supervisor's voice. Dr. Grant was a good guy, though a little too cocky for his own good. He ordered the man to put the gun down, but the man responded with gunfire. Several nurses screamed, and she knew Dr. Grant was down.

Baylee scanned the area, praying she saw more security guard's feet, or cop feet, but she didn't. She also didn't see the gang member's feet. They'd disappeared on the other side of the central nurse's counter.

Before she could second-guess herself, she crawled the fifteen feet across the floor to old Hank. "Sorry, buddy," she whispered, and very carefully pulled the man's sidearm.

What the fuck was she doing?

She looked up into the eyes of women she knew. Several of them were sobbing, hands clasped over their mouths to muffle the sound. They were hiding in the center of the horseshoe shaped counter, pinned down because they didn't know where the gunman was. All he had to do was lean over the counter and he would see them. Kill them.

Adrenalin was pounding through her veins, and she checked the weapon. She pulled the slide back enough to make sure there was one in the chamber. It had a full mag in it and was ready to fire. Leaning out, she tried to catch a glimpse of the gunman. She

could still hear curtains being swept back, and people crying out. It sounded like he was working his way back around, toward Catalina's body.

Baylee's heart thundered in her ears, and she had to fight away images of another surgical room, with other injured and dead people sprawled across the floor.

"Sir, are you looking for Catalina Hernandez?"

Baylee could have screamed at Dr. Mendez. What the hell was she doing?

"Where is my Catalina?" the man said, rushing toward the short woman.

Baylee could see him now. Hispanic, with dark hair and eyes, he looked ragged, his eyes full of tears. Blood coated his front, and he was staggering, like he was nursing a gunshot wound.

Dr. Mendez held her hand out toward the curtained off area. Baylee was glad to see that the others were gone. Even the baby was out of the incubator, and she wondered where they'd gone. They were beyond her line of sight. That was all that mattered. She had a perfect view of the scene taking place in the room, though, with Mendez off to the left a little. If she had to draw down on the gunman, she could do it.

The man neared the bed, his gun hand falling to his side. Baylee watched to see if he would set it down, but he didn't. He cried out as he caught sight of the woman on the bed. Baylee had draped her belly with cloth, but blood had seeped through. They hadn't even had a chance to close her up.

The man cupped Catalina's face, crying, and he looked down her body. "Why aren't you working on her," he demanded.

Dr. Mendez took a step closer to the room. "She had two gunshot wounds. One

through the abdomen and the second one higher, through her chest. I believe that wound is the one that killed her, going through her heart. I'm so sorry for your loss."

She didn't say anything about the baby, and Baylee wondered if he thought the baby died as well. Her heart ached for the man for a moment, until he turned and faced Mendez. "I don't believe you. I think you gave up on her as soon as you realized she was a Tango."

Baylee hadn't seen any tattoos on the woman, but she hadn't really been looking for them. Her gaze focused on the man's forearm, and she could see the Tango Blast ink. The gang had a heavy presence in the Austin area, and with any violence that spiked up, they always proclaimed to be protecting their home turf. The gang traffic kept the hospitals busy.

"No, we didn't," Mendez said softly. "I swear to you, we did everything we could to save her."

The gun wavered, and Baylee wondered if the guy would pass out before she had to shoot him. She could hope.

"Where's the baby?" he demanded.

"Up in surgery. He was hit while in Catalina's womb."

The gang member blinked. And then the baby cried.

His gun hand had been lowering, but as soon as he heard the cry of the baby, he advanced toward the doctor, his face furious. As unflappable as Dr. Mendez was, she didn't want to die. Crying out, she held both hands up, as if to stop the bullets from hitting her as the man drew down.

“You lied to me. Where is he?”

Baylee knew she had no more time. Bracing her right arm against the side of the counter, she lined up the sights and squeezed the trigger, praying the gun worked correctly. Two shots struck the gang member center mass, and he looked down at himself, disbelief in his expression. Time seemed to stop as Baylee let up on the trigger, waiting to see if she needed to fire more. After three long, heart-ripping seconds, the gang member slowly sank to his knees and toppled over, the gun still clutched tight in his hand.

Baylee came out from behind the nurse’s counter and secured the man’s weapon. Then she looked at Dr. Mendez. “Are you okay, doc?”

The woman, normally unflappable, looked pale. Her hands shook as she ran them over her face, and tears dripped down her cheeks. “Yes, Baylee, I’m fine. Did you shoot that man?”

“I did,” she said, voice grim.

“Thank you.”

Baylee looked down at the man, then knelt down to check for vitals. He was gone.

The baby boy wailing in the background seemed to sense that he was now an orphan.

Detective Landon Hunter walked into an incredible crime scene. He’d been in the emergency room of Dell-Seton many times for suspect interviews and the like, but he never expected to see it like this. Spattered with blood and injured people. As well as the dead.

The 911 call had come in twenty-five minutes ago that a gunman had charged into the

department and started shooting people up, looking for his Jaina . His gang wife. She'd been caught in a Capirucha gang crossfire, and Chino Vega, male, Hispanic, twenty-seven years old, had followed her to the hospital. He'd shot seven people in the emergency department, killing three, in his search for his woman. He'd finally been taken out by a retired Army lieutenant.

Landon had seen many things in his career, but this was a lot. The crime scene was fucked, because the doctors and nurses were actively working on the injured. In the crime scene. There was no preserving anything here.

Luckily, he had a lot of witnesses. And he probably had video. He spotted the medical examiner leaning over Vega's body. "What can you tell me, Simpson?"

The man looked up at him, shaking his head. "Seems pretty cut and dried, detective. He already had a bullet wound in his gut before he staggered in here. He was a dead man walking, trying to do as much damage as he could before he left this world. The guy that shot him put two in his heart, and he went quick. Excellent shooting, if you ask me."

Hunter looked over the body. There were two gunshot wounds directly over the man's heart, one inch apart. Further down his gut there was another wound. Obviously, Mr. Vega had been injured in the same shootout the woman had been. He'd been shot in two separate incidents.

"Crime scene techs have already bagged the weapons."

"Where is the vet?"

"Couldn't tell you," Simpson said, turning back to the body.

Hunter glanced around, trying to figure out who was in charge of the medical

department. Several people were talking with a shorter, dark-haired woman, and she motioned toward the ceiling, like she was giving orders to move people upstairs. He crossed to her.

“Are you in charge?” he asked.

The woman huffed out a resigned breath as she turned. “Yes, for the moment. What do you need?”

“I’m Detective Landon Hunter. I need the person who took out the gang member.”

The woman blinked and nodded over her shoulder. “She’s over there. Baylee saved all our lives, so you’d better not give her a hard time about it.”

Baylee? Was their shooter a woman? “Baylee what?”

“Mitchell. She’s a nurse on the peds floor, but she’s also part of our emergency pediatric trauma team.”

Hunter jotted down the name and title, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

“And you are?”

“Dr. Lillian Mendez. The Tango Blast member was just about to shoot me when Baylee took him out. Security is getting you a copy of the security footage now.”

Dr. Mendez explained her version of what happened. It was early in the investigation, but it sounded like this Mitchell had saved the day. Or night, as it were.

Several people joined Mendez in their appreciation for Mitchell.

“I knew she’d been in the Army, but I had no idea she could do all that,” one nurse said, shaking her head.

“I need to speak with her,” Hunter said. “Can you direct me?”

The nurse pointed toward one of the cleaner bays. “She’s the taller one with the ponytail.”

Hunter headed in that direction, but he paused as he caught sight of the woman’s lean back in blue scrubs. It suddenly hit him why he knew her name. The old woman downstairs in his new apartment building gushed about her like she was better than sliced bread. He knew exactly who she was, because he’d seen her in his apartment building so many times. He recognized the floppy ponytail of honey-blond hair and her shapely hips. And he’d wondered about her. Actually, he’d wondered about what she’d gone through to give her the incredible scar that ran down her face. It had faded with time, but it had to have been a devastating injury. And every time he saw her, he felt incredible anger for whoever had done it to her.

Hunter forced his feet to move, determined to remain objective even though his heartbeat had spiked.

“Baylee Mitchell?” he said, and she turned.

Hunter didn’t like being surprised by anything, but he felt a punch to the gut when her gaze met his. The woman had the prettiest moss green eyes he’d ever seen, even though they seemed a little cool right at this moment. Detached. He recognized the look. He’d seen it often enough in the guys he worked with, and even in his own face. It was the look of a person that had done something drastic and was now struggling with the repercussions.

She blinked and forced a slight smile. “Can I help you?” She tilted her head. “Wait,

you look familiar. Aren't you my neighbor? The new guy down the hall."

He gave her a single, tight nod. "I'm Detective Landon Hunter. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

She glanced around the chaos and tipped her head. "Over here."

She led him to an empty office and settled into a chair. There was blood on the knees of her scrubs, like she'd gone down to try to help the man she'd shot. As soon as she sat, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts, but she didn't relax.

Landon cleared his throat. "I know this is a chaotic scene, but I need you to tell me what happened."

Baylee took a deep breath, and he could see she was getting her thoughts in order. She didn't fidget like she'd done anything wrong. From everything he'd heard, she'd done everything right, but he needed her perspective.

He allowed himself to look at her face, though, and despite himself, his anger stirred again. The scar was faded, but it was still a devastating mark that traveled down the length of her face. For the first time, he noticed the other scar that crossed over the bridge of her nose and went up through her eyebrow. He wanted to ask her how she'd been injured, but that was way beyond the scope of this investigation.

"Catalina Hernandez came in with two gun-shot wounds, one through her abdomen and one high in her chest," she said, matter-of-factly, her voice steady and low. "In spite of our care, she expired on the table. We had to do an emergency C-section to rescue the baby, who also has a gunshot wound, through the arm. We were caring for the baby when Mr. Vega entered, shooting the security guard first thing. He continued to fire randomly, hitting several more bystanders. Killing Dr. Grant."

Her gaze flickered, and she looked down at her lap. Hunter wondered if she'd known the people injured.

“Then he moved through the department, screaming for her. If anyone approached him, he shot them. When Mr. Vega was on the opposite side of the nursing counter, I scrambled across to H-Hank, the security guard, and took his weapon. We usually only have one guard down here. We should have had more tonight, because it was a full-moon.”

Her voice faded away for a moment, and he let her have her time. The stumble over the guard's name was the only fumble. She must have known him and liked him. Then she refocused. “The guy circled back around. That was when Dr. Mendez caught his attention and showed him his woman. The nurses had snuck the baby into another bay. Dr. Mendez told Vega that he'd gone upstairs. But then he heard the baby cry out, and he got mad. He lifted his weapon, and I knew Dr. Mendez was dead if I didn't do something. So, I shot him.”

“How many times?”

“Twice. In the heart. It was quick. He already had a wound through his lower belly, though. I haven't heard, but he was probably already dying.”

Hunter nodded. “The ME called him a dead man walking. He had nothing to lose by coming in and shooting the place up. How did you know you could fire the security guard's weapon?”

She shrugged lightly. “All Glocks are the same, for the most part.”

They were indeed. It was why the company sold so many weapons to law enforcement. The mags were interchangeable and the weapons themselves were almost idiot-proof. They were literally point and shoot. It was what Austin PD, and

he himself, carried.

“And you have experience shooting?”

“I was in the Army for six years. And I was deployed for most of that time.”

Hunter looked at her, and before his brain could throttle his mouth, he asked her, “Is that where you got the scars?”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “Yes.”

Hunter appreciated her sass. He gave her a small smile.

Anger surged in Baylee’s gut at that smile, and she wanted to kick the big, handsome guy in the balls. She’d had such high hopes that the dude in the apartment down the hall from her would be cool, but every time she saw him, it was like he was fixated on her face.

And now that she’d met the man, he still seemed to be fixated. Why was he asking about her scar in the middle of this fiasco?

Mrs. Traeger, the lady who owned the apartment building they lived in, kept telling her he seemed like a nice man, but Baylee wasn’t getting that.

“Had you ever met Mr. Vega before?” the big detective asked.

“No.”

“Do you have any gang affiliations?”

She snorted. “No.”

“Do you know of any relatives of Mr. Vega?”

“No. When they brought the mother in, they said something about her family. But I know nothing of his family.”

“Okay. Can I get your legal information?”

Baylee reeled it off. “If we’re done, I need to get back to work. We’re down a doctor and a nurse.”

The detective nodded, but he stepped in front of the door before he opened it and met her eyes. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but it looks like this was a clean shoot. You did what you had to do.”

Some of the starch eased out of her spine, and Baylee nodded. “Thank you for that.”

It did help, knowing that he seconded her decision to take the gang member’s life. And other people had said the same thing. Once Hank had been murdered, no one else had stepped up. If Baylee hadn’t, she had a feeling more people would have died.

She didn’t say anything as she crossed through the doorway, brushing against his front. Tingles leaped through her, and for a moment, she glanced up at him. He was staring at her, but, for the first time, his deep navy-blue eyes were soft. He understood what she’d gone through. For a split second, she had the terrible urge to burrow into his arms. Then she straightened her spine and walked out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Baylee was so tired. But she was so hyped up at the same time. It reminded her of being bombarded on Nightshade. It had been never-ending, the fear and anxiety. She tried to be upbeat and encouraging, but it weighed on her, smothered her.

Two hours later, she was still feeling the same. They'd lost an incredible young nurse, and the doctor had been with the hospital for fifteen years. She hadn't worked with him personally, but she'd heard great things about him. There had also been a civilian killed.

The emergency was beginning to ease. For the rest of the night, they'd shunted all emergent cases to a neighboring hospital, while Dell-Seton recovered. Luckily, there was a great hospital network around them, and they'd all stepped up to take the overflow.

"Baylee," someone said.

Baylee blinked and looked down. Dr. Mendez was looking up at her with raised eyebrows. Had she been calling her name? "Yes, ma'am."

"I want you to go home. There's no more you can do here. Your shift is covered, and I don't want to see you in the peds wing for at least one week."

Baylee frowned, her mouth falling open. "I don't know," she started, but Mendez waved a hand.

“I’m telling you to take some time off. You need it. You’re not still in the army, and I’m sure you never expected to have to do anything like this again. I want you to go home, cuddle your cat, and relax. Get your head on straight.”

“I’m actually better than you think I am,” she said softly.

Mendez reached out and gripped her arm. “Good. But I still want you to take some time off. You never take vacation, and you’re here helping way more than the others. I know we have a shortage, but you need to take some time for you, so you don’t burn out.”

As soon as she spoke the words, Baylee could feel the weight of the night upon her. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll take time off, but if you get into a pinch, I’ll be around.”

Dr. Mendez shook her head. “No. We will not call you. You’re going to take this time off. Maybe you can hang out with the cop that’s been eyeing you all night.”

For a moment, her heart stuttered, but she snorted the doctor’s words away. “He’s just watching me to make sure I’m not cracked and about to go postal on anyone else.”

“Well, regardless, I want you to take some time for yourself. And Baylee,” Dr. Mendez looked up into her face. Her voice had gone raspy, and her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you. I don’t know what my kids would have done...”

Knowing it was not standard protocol, she reached out and hugged Dr. Mendez. The woman clung to her for a long minute before stepping back. “Thank you,” she said again, and turned away.

With a last glance at the wrecked emergency department, Baylee headed upstairs to get her things, though it felt so weird to be leaving the scene of the emergency.

Mendez was right, though. She needed to get out of here.

The girls upstairs would be worried about her, but she didn't really want to talk to any of them right then. So, she slid into the locker room, grabbed her stuff, and left down the back stairwell. Her car was in the back of the quiet lot. Night had come and gone, and dawn was lightening the sky.

As she pulled up to her apartment building, Baylee looked for the black Dodge Charger the neighbor usually drove, but it wasn't there. He would probably be buried in paperwork for the next week. Why hadn't she realized that was an unmarked cop car?

Siggy seemed to sense that something was different tonight, because as soon as she walked in the door, he curled around her legs, meowing pitifully. Baylee dropped her crap and sank down onto the floor with him, stroking his cream-colored fur, and he looked up at her with his crossed blue eyes, meowing softly. That was when the tears came.

She'd grown a lot in the past eleven years, and she hated weakness, but sometimes a person just needed a good cry. Siggy curled in her arms as she bowed over him, lost in sobs. When she'd come back from Afghanistan, she'd taken leave, and it seemed like she'd cried every day. She'd been in a funk for a long time, trying to come to terms with what had happened to her. Olivia had finally talked her into going to a counselor, and it didn't take him long to diagnose her with PTSD.

She was a survivor, though. Laying down and wallowing in her lost life wasn't her way. She'd learned to cope with what had happened to her over there, and she would do it again. The only regret she had was being responsible for taking Olivia's leg.

Setting the cat down, she headed to the kitchen. She needed to do something with her hands. The first thing she needed to do was take a shower. Once she remembered she

had the gunman's blood on her, she had an immediate need to get rid of it.

As she passed through the hallway, she bounced on one foot, ripping her clothes off. She stuffed them in the washer and threw detergent in. Then she headed to the bathroom. The water was barely warm as she stepped in, but that didn't stop her. She scrubbed until her skin was raw and lathered her long hair twice.

When she stepped out of the shower, she felt better in more ways than one. Her counselor would probably have a lot to say, but whatever. She wasn't a serial killer, or anything. Quite the opposite, actually. Usually, she loved people. Little people, especially.

Baylee headed into the kitchen. When she got home, she'd wanted to cook something, but the urge had passed. The heat from the shower had made her somnolent, and tiredness weighed her down. The anxiety was still there, though. Reaching into her bedside table, she retrieved her personal weapon, a Glock 42. It was just a little .380, but it made her feel secure. She set it very carefully on top of the table, in the same place she did every night.

Then she crashed, exhausted.

The dreams left her alone for most of the day and she slept hard, though it wasn't her normal sleeping schedule. Then, toward afternoon, flashes of gunfire and spraying blood semi-roused her. Raised voices and strobes of emergency lights. Faces of people she'd loved and served with and lost.

Baylee bolted awake to the sound of someone banging on her door, her heart racing. for a second it had sounded like gunfire again. Blinking blearily, she wondered what time it was. She glanced at the window, but she'd drawn the light-blocking curtains before she'd gone to bed. Her phone was probably out in the kitchen, because she didn't remember bringing it in here.

There was another round of pounding on her door. “What the hell,” she grumbled, rolling out of bed. She grabbed her gun.

Tugging her t-shirt into place and scraping her fingers through her wild hair, she padded out to the front door and peered through the security hole. She got a view of a guy’s chest, but she thought she knew who it was. She cracked the door open and peeked through the security chain. “Can I help you, Detective?”

The detective forced a slight smile. “I just wanted to check on you, see how you were doing after last night.”

Baylee appreciated that he’d taken the time. He’d never spoken to her in the building before, though. “I’m fine. Thank you for asking. I was sleeping,” she said, voice aggravated.

The detective winced a little, glancing behind him for a moment. “Sorry about that. Listen, you mind if I come in for a minute?”

Baylee considered him for a second, wondering why he needed to come in. It had been a long time since she’d had any kind of male in her apartment, and she wasn’t sure she wanted him in her space. And she certainly wasn’t dressed for company.

“It’ll just take a minute, I promise,” he said, his deep voice soft. “I need to talk about the case.”

“Wait a minute,” she said.

She slammed the door in his face, not caring if it was rude. Why was he banging on her door at... she glanced at the clock. Oh, it was three in the afternoon. Had she really slept that entire time?

Baylee headed back to her room and pulled a pair of jeans from the drawer. She also took the time to pull a bra on. Then, picking up her Glock again, she went back out to the door and opened it up enough for him to step in. Baylee shifted the weapon behind her hip but held it tight.

Detective Hunter was a big man, broad and tall enough to make her look up. Twelve hours after she'd come home, she was pretty sure he was still in the clothes she'd seen him in last night. He'd probably worked the crime scene all night and today. His dark brown hair was a little ruffled, like he'd run his hands through the almost-curls a few times, and there was dark stubble on his jaw.

He stepped inside the door but didn't move any further. Baylee closed the door behind him, then shifted down the hallway a few feet. Color burned her cheeks as he glanced down her body.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said again, shifting on his feet. His deep navy eyes were tired. "But I wanted to let you know that it's a bit of a circus at the hospital. The shooting made the national news, obviously, and things have heated up. I suggest you take the day off or something."

Baylee shrugged lightly. "I'm off for the week."

The detective blinked and frowned. "Did they punish you for what you did?"

She shook her head again. "No. But my boss thought I needed some time off."

He eyed her.

"Do you think you need time off?"

Baylee wasn't sure she wanted to answer that.

“I’m okay,” she said simply.

The cop had hard, intelligent eyes, like he’d seen a lot of shit, and he seemed to measure her. “Okay. It’s obvious you can protect yourself,” he said, glancing down toward her hip. Obviously, he thought she had a weapon.

“You have no idea,” she said, smiling slightly. “Thank you for checking on me, Detective Hunter.”

Baylee tried not to be too rude, but she wanted him to leave. Too bad the man didn’t seem to get the message.

“Call me Landon, please,” he said, and he held out his hand.

Baylee didn’t want to shake his hand, and it was weird anyway. They’d already met. Besides, he was asking for her gun hand. “I’m good,” she said, stepping back. Then she waited.

Landon cocked his head at her, giving her a probing look before he dropped his hand and reached for the door. “If you need anything, I’m just down the hallway.”

He pulled the door open and stepped out but paused. “Sorry I woke you.”

“No big deal,” she said, and closed the door behind him as he stepped out, snapping the locks. She sagged against the wood, her breathing erratic. She didn’t know if it was memories of the night before, or what, but he spiked her heartbeat.

Maybe it was because he was so damn good-looking, a little voice whispered as his footsteps faded down the hallway. Even after working a long shift, the guy was dangerously hot. After feeling numb all night, he actually woke something up in her, making her aware.

No, it wasn't him. She wouldn't let it be. Stalking into the bedroom, she set her gun on her nightstand, shucked her pants and went back to bed.

Landon stared at the door for a long moment, wondering what the hell he'd done to have such a cold reception. Had he pissed Baylee Mitchell off last night when he'd interviewed her? He didn't think so. It had seemed like she'd been a little shocky. It was what had prompted him to come check on her today.

Even though she'd been in the Army, it didn't make it any easier to kill a man, he didn't think. He didn't know what her experience was, but most people didn't react well to that kind of situation.

Hadn't her boss said she was a pediatric nurse? That was kids and babies. Weren't baby nurses supposed to be super kind and welcoming, or something? Nurturing. Maybe that was the word he was looking for.

Baylee was definitely not that today. There was a sharp edge to her personality. It was obvious he'd woken her up. Maybe she just wasn't a morning person.

He had no idea, but the entire scene had frustrated him. There was something intriguing about Baylee Mitchell and he wanted to know her. He wanted to hear her stories and see her smile. That was what was frustrating to him. She'd smiled at him several times over the past few months, but now that she knew he was a cop, she didn't. Was that it?

Landon headed back to his apartment, wondering why he'd even bothered contacting her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Baylee didn't like being idle. Her life was her job, taking care of little people. It was what gave her satisfaction.

Being off work was hard. She loved her weekends, of course, but now that she'd been told she couldn't go to work, she wanted to even more. Why was that? Within twelve hours of being home, she was looking for something to do.

There was laundry. Always. The cupboard beside the stove needed cleaned out. She'd found several expired food items recently. There was probably some online training she needed to catch up on if she felt like getting on her laptop.

None of those appealed to her.

She was feeling a little guilty about the way she'd treated the detective yesterday. It wasn't his fault she was prickly about men in her space. In her mind, she knew he probably would never do anything to her, but she'd been naïve before. There was no way she ever expected to be attacked the way she had been on the base in Afghanistan. And she refused to be caught flat-footed again.

Plus, with everything that happened the night before, and it being the anniversary of the Rebellion, it hadn't been a good day to meet in any conceivable way.

Maybe she needed to give the man the benefit of the doubt and apologize.

Ugh. She hated it when she felt like she was in the wrong, but the scene from the day

before rankled at her. The man had been checking on her, being nice. She'd been raised to be polite and friendly, and she hated going against the grain. Maybe she would try to talk to him, or something. She could ask him about any updates.

Updates about what? You killed the guy that shot up the hospital. That was more than likely the end of the situation. No pun.

Maybe she would make some cookies or something. She rolled her eyes at herself. How trite was that? Maybe a loaf of bread, instead. Striding into the kitchen, she went through her cupboards, looking for ingredients. Well, she had the makings for cookies, but she doubted she had enough flour for bread. So, cookies it was.

Baylee set the butter out to soften and decided she needed to do some chores while she waited for that to happen. Digging the Swiffer from the closet, she added a new pad and started through the apartment. Siggy didn't shed a lot, but there was enough hair on the hardwood floor that she eventually needed to replace the pad.

"Jeez, cat," she grumbled, chasing him from the living room with the Swiffer. "Are you stress-shedding, or what?"

Siggy stalked down the hallway to her bedroom, his dark tail in the air, and Baylee snorted. Damned cat had more attitude than he knew what to do with. As soon as she'd seen his battle-scarred face at the shelter, she'd known he was the one that needed to go home with her. Siggy was older, but the shelter worker had assured her that Siamese tended to live long lives. It didn't matter to Baylee. She'd fallen in love as soon as she'd seen him, and he'd ruled her life for the past five years, she thought, laughing.

After she cleaned the floors, she dusted with a damp cloth. She looked at the streaks of dirt on the rag when she was done. Yeah, it had been a while since she'd cleaned. Heading into her bedroom, she stripped her bedsheets and threw them into the washer

to get started, then she put away the stack of clean clothes on her dresser she'd been avoiding. Why were socks such a pain in the ass? They were all the same brand of white, yet they all looked different.

Stopping in the kitchen, she checked the butter. Softer, but not quite ready. In desperation, she grabbed her Kindle. Maybe she would read for a while.

Baylee sank into her armchair and waded through the saved books in her library. Nothing sounded appealing, though.

Heck with it. Maybe she just needed to get out of the house.

Slipping her old tennis shoes on, she grabbed her keys and pocketed them, then locked the door behind her as she went out. There was a small courtyard in the back for the residents of the building, and she'd kind of taken over the raised flower beds. Mrs. Traeger, the building supervisor, loved it, because it meant she didn't have to get up and down anymore.

"My old knees appreciate you, dear," she said, laughing and she squeezed Baylee's forearm years ago when she'd asked.

Digging in the dirt always appealed to Baylee, surely because of the way she'd grown up. Dad had been career military, but Mom was a homebody. They'd divorced when she was young. She and her mother had lived on her grandparent's dairy farm in Ohio for most of her life, and it had been a wonderland for a child. There were kittens to play with and calves to bottle feed, a stock pond to play in on sweltering days. Yes, there was a lot of work, too. The cattle needed milked twice a day, morning and night, without fail. She learned to get up early and go to bed early because the cows needed attention. There were no long vacations.

Baylee could drive anything mechanical she was put on, though, so when her

mother's brothers converged during hay season, Baylee was the designated driver of the hay wagons. The men would stack the bales, and she would drive, then they would return to her grandmother's house to stack the hay in the barn and eat a monster meal, replacing all the calories they'd burned. And when it was time to do hay on her uncles' farms, everyone would converge there and do the same thing. It was a life built on cooperation and hard work, and she'd loved it.

As she let herself into the courtyard, she stopped to take a deep breath. The sun was easing toward the horizon and the heat was easing, so it was the perfect time to weed. Baylee made her way over to the first raised brick-walled bed, sitting on the edge to lean in to pull the interlopers. The roses were blooming like crazy, and the hostas were so full, even though she forgot to water them more often than not. With a small hand trowel, she began carefully extracting the bad stuff - dandelions, crabgrass, and patches of clover. It had been several weeks since she'd done this, and it seemed like every flavor of weed had sprouted in her flowers.

Then she moved to the section where she'd planted vegetables. The dirt was thick and dark, and moist. The soaker hose was still working. She weeded through the plants, careful not to uproot anything edible. She plucked a few tomatoes from the vine, setting them on the brick edge, and tossed several that bugs had gotten into. Snipping the flowers from the basil plants, she leaned in to breathe deeply. She needed to get down here more often now that the veggies were coming in. The stress in her shoulders had eased and her head was no longer pounding.

Sometimes it was hard to allocate the time. It seemed like the more shifts she worked, the more they needed her. Pediatrics wasn't an easy floor. It was why she'd left Texas Children's hospital. Being a pediatric oncology nurse had been one of the most fulfilling jobs she'd ever done, but it had also been the absolute hardest. Baylee knew that her soft heart was too empathetic to work there. Every patient struggle had affected her, to the point that she had nightmares about failing her patients, and depression had dogged at her. Her counselor had called it 'compassion fatigue' and

had suggested a critical decision about her career.

Baylee had recognized that there was a chance she would burn out if she stayed there. As much as she wanted to help her tiny patients, she was aware that she had to take care of herself as well. So, a few months ago, she'd transferred into Dell-Seton's pediatric team, away from oncology. Only a few weeks in, she knew she'd found her home.

And the work had been diverse, like being on the emergency peds trauma team. That wasn't a place she'd ever expected to be, but she certainly had the qualifications for. And so far, her sleep schedule had evened out, and her depression seemed to have eased. She would never be perfect, not after her history in Afghanistan, but she was trying to be the best version of herself she could be.

Stupid psychobabble. The words had seeped into her skin, she supposed.

Turning, she sank down onto the side of the brick wall, brushing dirt from her hands.

Last night, when she'd aimed and fired the gun, she hadn't even hesitated. For a second, she'd flashed back to FOB Nightshade, and what she'd done there. Despite all the counseling she'd done, her counselor still hadn't managed to drag any regret out of Baylee for killing people. She honestly didn't feel the need to feel regret in taking those lives. There was only one thing she regretted doing over there, and it would haunt her for the rest of her life. Even as she thought about it, her throat tightened with emotion and her heartbeat picked up.

From out of nowhere, a sleek, dark dog shoved her head between Baylee's dirty hands. "Oh, hello," she said, laughing softly.

Baylee ruffled the dog's fur, curious where it had come from. Most of the dogs in the building knew her and came to her, but this one was different. She glanced up. There

were two people standing at the opening of the courtyard. One was the detective that put her on edge, and the other was a striking woman with dark hair, leaning heavily on a cane.

The dog sat before Baylee, looking up with a happy, tongue-lolling expression. Baylee laughed, stroking his ears. Or her ears. She glanced down quickly. His.

“I’m sorry about that,” the woman said, moving toward them. “Gunnar, go do your business.”

The dog gave Baylee a lick on the hands, and she snorted again, then he moved away to water a clump of grass in the yard. The dog wore a black emotional support vest.

Baylee glanced at the woman, and realized she was being stared at as well. Meh, happened a lot. She forced a smile. “He’s a cutie.”

The woman cocked her head. “I think he is, but it’s curious that he came to you. He’s better trained than that, and he knows not to interact with the public when he’s working.”

Baylee shrugged, brushing her hands together. “Dogs and kids like me,” she said simply, and it was the truth.

Detective Hunter stopped a few feet away, as if he knew she didn’t want him close.

The woman smiled, quirking a brow. “Apparently.”

“Cass, this is Baylee Mitchell, the woman I was telling you about. Ms. Mitchell, this is Cass Moran.”

Baylee thought it was curious he didn’t expand on the woman’s name any further.

Partner? Girlfriend? She nodded at the woman. “Nice to meet you.” She glanced at the detective. “You were talking about me, hm?”

He winced a little. “Just getting some advice. Cass used to work in the gang suppression unit. She consults now, when we need her to.”

Baylee looked at the woman a little more closely. Yes, she could see the experience written there in her eyes. Had she been injured in the line of duty? Was she still a cop?

“Sounds like you did a good thing taking that guy out,” Cass told her.

Baylee shrugged. “Thank you.”

Cass narrowed her eyes at Baylee. “You need to be aware that the Tango Blast tends to be a retaliatory group. You should keep an eye out for any suspicious characters in the area.”

Baylee quirked a brow. “Have you heard something specific?”

The former detective shook her head. “I just know these guys. They’re an unregimented prison group, kind of flying by the seat of the pants of whoever is in charge. And we believe that was Chino Vega. They’re probably scrambling for dominance right now. And if there’s any chance they can make a name for themselves on the streets, they will.”

Baylee huffed out a breath. “Not sure what kind of name they’d make themselves taking out a nurse.”

“A combat decorated veteran,” Detective Hunter corrected, his eyes direct, “who took out a suspected member and leader of one of the most dangerous gangs in Austin.”

Baylee grimaced. “Regardless, Detective, I don’t think they’ll come after me.”

“The Tango Blast and the Texas Syndicate have been in a turf war for the past two weeks, with the Latin Kings nipping at their heels,” Cass said. “Culminating in what you saw last night. What you didn’t see were the fourteen other men shot and taken to other area hospitals over the past three nights.”

“Okay, that’s bad,” Baylee agreed, “but I don’t think it will come back on me.”

The detective was frowning as he looked at her. Even as she watched, he crossed his arms like a disapproving parent, but he didn’t say anything.

Baylee admired his restraint.

“I’ll be careful. I promise,” she said, giving him a sideways look.

He just stared at her, and she felt a moment of insecurity. Was he looking at her scar? It was kind of hard to miss, running down her face the way it did. She held his stare until he blinked and grimaced, looking away.

Baylee had learned a long time ago that when you pointed out a person’s bad habits, sometimes it was enough to make them change their ways.

“Has anyone talked to his family?” she asked.

“I spoke to his mother,” Cass said, huffing out a breath. “She wasn’t surprised, but she wasn’t happy, either.”

“I’m sure not,” she murmured.

They saw the results of gang violence in the hospital all the time. Even in the

pediatrics wing. It seemed like the most innocent were always the ones who paid. She'd seen more than a dozen accidental child shooting victims over her career. And more than a few family breakups over the incidents.

Baylee sighed. There was no good answer to remedy everything. She just had to keep her head down and help the ones she could.

"Well, I need to get going," Cass said, looking between them. "Gunnar."

The dog returned to her side, and she took up the leash. "Baylee, it was nice meeting you. Stay safe. Landon, I'll talk to you later."

"Later, Cass," he said with a slight wave.

Baylee turned back to the veggie bed, needing something to do with her hands. Hunter was still behind her, and she wasn't sure why he was staying.

"Do you keep all of these up?" he asked, after the silence had lengthened.

She glanced around. "For the most part. It's not always easy to get the time down here, but I try."

"The flowers look nice," he said, kind of lamely, she thought. She gave him a look from the corner of her eye.

"Thanks, Detective."

"Call me Landon, please."

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:37 am

CHAPTER SIX

Baylee turned back and started weeding again, hoping he would get the hint. She wasn't sure she wanted to be more familiar with him.

"Listen," he said eventually, "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you before."

Sighing, Baylee swiveled around on the ledge. Obviously, he wasn't going to go away until she heard whatever he had to say.

The man had his arms crossed again, and she wondered if he stood that way a lot or if it was just when he was with her. Seemed like she frustrated him a little.

"You have no obligation to talk to me," she murmured. "I understand not wanting to be social."

Maybe he would get the gigantic hint she'd just dropped. The two of them had invaded her Zen time. But how Zen was it if the emotional support dog she didn't know was reacting to her wild emotions?

"It's not that I didn't want to talk to you. It's that I didn't want to get pissed when I talked to you."

Yep, that was it. Baylee stood and began gathering her tools, tossing them in the bucket she carried them in. "Well, we can't have you getting pissed, then. I'll get out of your way."

Landon reached out and grabbed her elbow, and Baylee spun on him, the tools flying. Fists up, her body tensed in preparation for a fight. Immediately, he let go and held his palms up in a non-threatening manner. “Please, stop,” he said, voice low. There was a frown on his face, and he’d lowered his head slightly toward her, “and listen just a minute.”

Baylee went still, but she was still tense. And her heart was racing.

“I’m very sorry I grabbed your arm,” he said softly, his eyes showing his regret. “That’s exactly what I shouldn’t have done, I know. It was instinctive. I didn’t want you to storm off before I could say what I needed to.”

Baylee crossed her arms beneath her breasts, wishing she’d left when they first arrived. She’d shown him too much with that reaction. “So, get on with it.”

Emotion twisted his handsome face, and his eyes had gone dark.

“I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry for not being personable. But every time I look at you and see that scar on your beautiful face, I know someone did that to you. It’s not from a wreck. Those are healed knife cuts. I can tell the difference. And the anger that fires in me is more than I can articulate. I’m sorry if you felt like I was snubbing you or something. I really wasn’t. I knew I would say something inappropriate if I opened my mouth, though.”

Baylee stared at him for a long moment, shocked. She wondered if she could trust his words. Most of the time she went through her day not even thinking about the scars on her face, at least until she encountered people. The scars were shocking to people—she knew that— but she’d never had anyone say something like that.

Maybe he wasn’t the dick she suspected he was. “Fine. I appreciate the clarification.”

He straightened, his hands going into the pockets of his jeans. “I tend to get angry when women are abused. It’s why I became a cop. My dad used to whale on my mother daily. And if she wasn’t around, he would move on to us kids. I have a little brother and two sisters. It took us a long time to get out of that situation.”

“I’m sorry,” she said simply.

It was a story she’d seen a lot, and she supposed she understood the anger.

He shrugged, looking out over the grass. “Nothing for you to be sorry about. It wasn’t your issue.”

It was interesting to her that he was opening up to her on a personal level. Maybe she needed to extend an olive branch. Hell, she’d already decided she’d been bitchy to him and had planned to make him cookies. “We see a lot of abused kids come through pediatrics. There are more safeguards in place now than there used to be.”

He nodded lightly, hands still clenched in his pockets. “I am aware. And I use them every chance I get.”

She smiled slightly, appreciating that he felt that way, and advocated for the ones with no voices.

“How did you make it out?” she asked, curious, very aware that she was being a little invasive. But then, he’d offered the personal knowledge first.

He looked at her for a long moment, the setting sun glinting off the blue of his eyes, then he glanced away, as if he didn’t want her to see his eyes. “He hit my mother so hard one day that I heard her jaw break. Then he moved on to us kids. It only stopped because my older sister hit him in the back of his head with my baseball bat.”

A smile quirked her lips. "I think I would like your sister."

A slow, answering grin spread his full lips. "Yeah, you probably would, actually. You both have that take-no-prisoners kind of mentality. Warrior women."

Baylee glanced away. "Sometimes you have to take care of yourself."

He bent down enough to catch her eye. "I'm not criticizing. I know as well as anyone a person has to do everything in their power to be safe."

She nodded, running her hands down her pants. It was hard not to be defensive, but it sounded like he really did understand. She sank back down onto the side of the raised bed. "So, did your sister get in trouble?"

He settled beside her on the edge of the brick, a few inches of space between them. "Nope. The cops knew what went on in the house, and once he got out of the hospital, they put him in jail for a long time. We all had injuries, so it was easy to document. Mom had her jaw wired shut for three months. Once she healed, we moved and they divorced. He died in prison serving another DV charge about five years later."

"Wow," she breathed, glancing at him. "I'm glad you made it out okay."

He jerked his shoulders in a shrug. "We had no other choice."

"Is your mom still living?"

"Oh, yeah," he grinned, planting his elbows on his knees. "She lives outside of Amarillo and watches my sister's kids. We all get together every few months."

Baylee smiled, appreciating that he had that kind of family. It made her a little homesick. Her family was a long way away, up in Ohio.

“Well,” she said slowly. “Just to clarify, this wasn’t exactly a domestic violence situation.” She waved lightly at her face. “I was attacked in Afghanistan by Taliban.”

Hunter glanced at her sharply. “Fuck,” he breathed. “But, you’re a nurse...”

“Yeah. I was on Nightshade.”

That shut him up. There had been enough interviews, documentaries, books, and even a couple of TV series done about the attack, and it was common knowledge how horrific it had been. Baylee had been approached several times with book deals and the like. Sadly, the survivor list from FOB Nightshade was significantly smaller than the killed in action, and it was easy enough to look up who had been there.

As the years went by, the interest waned a little, but then three years ago there had been a push to make the date a national holiday. All the sensation and hype had surged. And this year there had been even more attention because of the anniversary. She’d gotten multiple invitations for everything under the sun, because they wanted to ‘recognize’ the survivors.

They didn’t understand that Baylee would literally do anything to forget that day.

She jerked when a warm hand closed over her fist. Blinking, she looked at the man beside her. “Sorry, I kind of get lost in it sometimes.”

“I think I would too if I’d gone through that,” he said softly. “No worries. Seriously. I think I understand you a little better now.”

Baylee suddenly felt exposed, but she appreciated him taking her hand. It had brought her back. She didn’t know this man well, though, and it was a little awkward. With a squeeze, she let his hand go.

The sun had faded well below the horizon. “I should go in. I need a shower after working out here.”

Landon stood with her, and even with the space between them, something about him affected her. Maybe it was because she understood why he was a protector now. She looked at his broad shoulders and again felt the urge to burrow into his arms.

“All the hype about the anniversary must be hard for you,” he murmured softly.

Emotion tightened her throat at his understanding, and she had to glance away. “Yes,” she said simply.

“Gunnar is an emotional support dog trained to respond to PTSD. Cass got him a year ago, after she’d been shot. He must have sensed that you were struggling.”

She smiled sadly and took a deep breath before meeting his gaze. “Yes. Perhaps. Night, Landon.”

“Night, Baylee.”

Landon watched Baylee walk away, and he felt... unsettled. Intrigued. Angry. There was a whole gamut of emotions running through him about the woman, and he couldn’t untangle them.

Baylee had to be one of the strongest women he’d ever met. And he knew a lot of strong women. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and protect her from the world.

Nightshade. Fuck... that was a whole new level of fucked up. He’d seen the coverage on the event and 60 Minutes had recently done an in-depth investigation into what had gone on, so he thought he knew some of the details.

If Baylee had been there, she'd seen things no one should ever have to see. Were the knife cuts to her face from torture? They had to be.

One of his greatest regrets in life was not serving in the military. At the time he'd graduated high school, he'd been taking care of his family and working a part-time job to bring in money. He couldn't even think about leaving his mother and siblings alone.

Veterans had saved their country more times than he even knew, and he appreciated the fuck out of those that had committed the time and grit to do it. A lot of his friends were vets, so he had some insight into the ways they thought.

As he remembered her scars, though, he knew some had given a lot more than others.

Baylee Mitchell held an appeal to him he didn't want to acknowledge. Despite, or perhaps because of, the scars, she had a natural beauty to her that drew his gaze repeatedly. Strong and competent, she knew what to do in an emergent situation. When he'd talked to her supervisor, the woman had flat out told him that Baylee was indispensable in the pediatrics department. And here at his apartment, he'd heard over and over how great she was from the other residents.

No one person could be that perfect, could they?

His mind drifted back to Nightshade. The name alone sent shivers down his spine. The mere mention of it conjured up images of chaos and devastation. Even though the Army had published pictures and video of the aftermath, he couldn't imagine what Baylee had endured there, what horrors she had witnessed. The thought made his stomach churn with a mixture of anger and sorrow. The videos had mostly been a blur because they hadn't wanted to show all the bloodstains.

But amidst the somber thoughts, there was a flicker of something else—admiration.

Despite everything she had been through, Baylee had emerged from the depths of hell with her spirit intact. She was a survivor, a warrior in her own right, and Landon couldn't help but feel drawn to that strength.

As he pondered over his conflicting emotions, a voice interrupted his thoughts. It was his neighbor, Mrs. Jenkins, her gentle tone breaking through the silence of the courtyard.

“Landon, dear, are you alright?” she asked, concern evident in her voice.

Landon forced a small smile, masking the turmoil brewing within him. “I'm fine, Mrs. Jenkins. Just lost in thought.”

She nodded understandingly, her eyes lingering on him for a moment longer before she continued on her way. Alone once more, Landon let out a heavy sigh, his mind still swirling with questions and uncertainties.

Baylee Mitchell was a puzzle he couldn't quite solve, a mystery he couldn't resist unraveling. And as much as he tried to deny it, he knew deep down that she had already made an indelible mark on his life—one that he couldn't ignore.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Baylee attacked the cookie recipe with a vengeance. She needed something in-depth to take her mind off what talking with Landon had dug up.

She knew it was only a distraction, though. Eventually, she would have to deal with it. Just like she always did.

Her counselor said that she was able to counsel herself as well as he did, so Baylee let herself think about the past couple of days as she mixed chocolate chips into her batter.

Again, she felt no regret about taking the gang banger's life, though she did regret making the baby an orphan. But then, maybe the baby would be better off without that kind of influence in his life.

She hadn't even hesitated when it had been time to act. That was one thing the Army was good at: preparing their soldiers. It had been years since she'd been in the Army, but that training still held hard.

If she was presented with the same situation, she would repeat the same actions, too. She would like to think she had saved lives. No, she knew she had. Even if there were repercussions from her actions, she would be content in knowing she had done everything she could to save her friends and coworkers.

She needed to put it aside and get on with her life.

Baylee slid the first tray of cookies into the oven and took a bite of the batter. Mmm... cookie batter made everything better.

After an hour, she had a delectable pile of cookies spread along her counter. They needed to cool for a while before she packaged them up, then she was going to go try to improve her image.

An hour later, she stood before her neighbor's door. It was quiet beyond, and there was a very good chance he wasn't even in there. He could have been called out to a crime or something. Her pulse jumped at the thought of seeing him again, and she took a deep breath. It was just a guy, she told herself firmly. An incredibly attractive guy, granted. A guy that was tall enough and big enough to make her feel feminine and want to be protected.

As soon as she knocked, she heard movement beyond. A shadow moved beneath the door, and she smiled at the peep hole, praying he didn't see her the nervous flush she could feel moving up her cheeks.

Landon Hunter pulled the door open, looking a little ruffled. His dark hair was mussed in the back, like he'd been laying down or something. He tilted his head curiously when he saw her.

Baylee forced a smile.

"I realized I left a little abruptly, earlier, and that I haven't been especially friendly to you. I apologize for that. At the very least, we're neighbors, and it's nice to know who's living down the hall."

She thrust the square plastic container toward him. He took the offering, tilting it up to look through the side. "Are those cookies," he asked curiously.

“Yes. I tend to bake when I have things on my mind. My neighbors usually benefit.”

She shrugged lightly, a little embarrassed to be standing there now.

“So, you’re the one that makes this place smell like a bakery,” he murmured, one dark brow raised.

Baylee winced a little. “Yes. Probably. Mrs. Traeger loves it when I bake. She got sick last year and lost a lot of weight, so if I can cook her something that she likes to eat, I do. I have another container just like that for her,” she said, motioning to the box in his hands.

“So, if I get sick, you’ll make me more?”

There was an avaricious glint in his eyes that made Baylee smile. “No,” she laughed. “You don’t have to get sick for that. I’ll bring you more. Assuming you like them.”

“Oh,” he said slowly, “I more than like them. Mrs. Traeger gave me two when I first moved in here, and I haven’t forgotten them. I wondered who the baker was.”

Baylee felt her cheeks turn pink again, and she had to glance away. “It’s a secret obsession of mine. And an outlet for my energy.”

Landon’s blue eyes darkened, and a smile quirked his lips. “I’d be happy to be an outlet for your energy.”

Baylee blinked, unsure she’d heard what she thought she did. Then a flush of heat rolled through her, from the top of her head to her toes. Holy hell, had he really said that? And did he mean what she thought he meant?

His gaze never wavered, affirming that he’d meant what she thought. Despite her

embarrassment, she felt a smile quirk her lips. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she murmured, then had to turn away.

“Baylee,” he called, and she turned back, lifting a brow.

“Thank you.”

She dipped her chin once, and walked away, conscious that he was watching her all the way down the hall. She let herself into her apartment, and when she looked back, he was still watching her. With a slight smile, she slipped away.

Once she disappeared, Landon looked down at the box in his hand. He was aware that it was a peace offering, and he appreciated that. It gave him even more insight into Baylee’s psyche. Even though she’d been cool, no, chilly, in the way she had interacted with him, she wasn’t that way normally. He was sure she’d drawn in to protect her own emotions after a traumatic event. But she was working her way through them. He had a feeling she was used to working through difficult emotions. She was a nurse who worked with kids, and he knew she had seen and done sad things.

And then there was Nightshade. And what had been done to her. She’d been dealing with both of those situations when he’d interacted with her.

All night he’d been thinking about what she’d told him, and he’d been motivated to go research the attack. There wasn’t a lot of footage on Nightshade itself. At least, not until after the attack. Though the Rebellion had been a country-wide attack on Americans, Nightshade and one other FOB had been the only ones actually overrun, probably because they’d been so remote, and reinforcements hadn’t gotten there for so long. The American services there had had to protect themselves.

It was no wonder Baylee had gone off on that guy. It hadn’t been reckless by any

means. Just deliberate. As her training had prepared her.

She was a hell of a woman.

Landon scrolled through videos on YouTube, but he eventually turned it off. There were a few stories about the survivors, but overall, it was pretty depressing what had happened there.

He cracked open the plastic container, inhaling deeply. “Wow,” he murmured, retrieving a cookie. Then he forced himself to put the container on the counter and walk away.

The next morning, he headed to work. As he passed her door, he half wondered what Baylee was doing. As early as it was, she was probably still curled up in bed, looking as delectable as her cookies, her dark honey blond hair a mess, her stunning green eyes half-lidded. Most mornings, he would wait until he heard her door open and close, and then he would follow her out of the building. She had beautifully rounded hips that had inspired more than one fantasy.

He would like to ask her out, but that really wasn’t an option right now. She was involved in a case he was working, and he knew his bosses would frown at any interaction other than professional. At least until all the details were buttoned up.

Any time there was a mass shooting like this, there was a ton of paperwork. And follow-up interviews. Hours of watching surveillance video.

Landon arrived at the precinct early, the morning air still crisp. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts about Baylee and the hospital shooting. He couldn’t shake the image of her, both strong and vulnerable, navigating through her trauma with a grace that amazed him.

As he entered the building, Detective Morgan Clay, his current partner, was already at his desk, poring over a stack of files. Morgan was a diligent cop, and he looked up as Landon approached. “Morning, Hunter. Ready for another round of interviews?”

“Yeah,” Landon replied, dropping his bag beside his chair. “I don’t feel like it’s going to change anything, but we’ll talk to everyone. I don’t think she’ll get charges out of this.”

Morgan shook his head, making a face. “No way. I’ve been reviewing the surveillance footage again. It’s clear Mitchell’s actions saved a lot of lives. It was obvious the shooter was looking for someone specific.”

Landon’s brow furrowed. “Yeah, his woman.”

“He seemed pretty out of it. Like he couldn’t focus.”

“Well, he was gut shot. Probably had a lot of things going on in his head. He was amped up from the shooting...”

They delved into the investigation. The morning was dedicated to reviewing witness statements, piecing together the events of the shooting. Each account highlighted Baylee’s bravery and quick thinking.

Around midday, Landon’s phone buzzed with a new message. He glanced at the screen and saw it was from an unknown number. “Need to see you about the shooting in the hospital. Park on 5th, 1 PM, in front of the soldier statue.”

Landon’s pulse quickened. He showed the message to Morgan. “What do you think?”

Morgan frowned. “Could be a lead. Or a trap. Want me to follow along?”

Landon thought about it. “Nah. They may not show if they see more than one cop.”

“Be careful, then.”

Landon nodded. “I’ll check it out. Keep digging into the shooter’s background while I’m gone.”

He left the precinct and headed to the designated park, arriving a few minutes before one. He scanned the area, looking for anything unusual. As he walked, he spotted a figure slouched on a bench, their face obscured by a hood. It was the only bench in front of the Stephen Austin statue.

Approaching cautiously, Landon sat at the other end of the bench, not looking at the other person. “You messaged me?”

The figure glanced up, revealing a young Hispanic man with a nervous expression. “Yes, Detective. I need to talk to you about the hospital shooting.”

Landon’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the kid’s face. “Who are you?”

“You can call me Haze. I knew the shooter. We were part of the same family.”

Landon’s heart raced. “The Tango Blast?”

“Yes,” the boy hissed softly. “You need to know, the woman that took out Chino is in trouble.”

Landon’s mind reeled. “Why do you say that? What do you know?”

The kid looked around nervously. “It’s complicated. But we have eyes on the inside, and they fingered her.”

Landon felt a chill run down his spine. “Why are you telling me this?”

Haze didn’t say anything for a long minute. Then he glanced up, and Landon could see something painful in his expression. “Because Catalina was my sister. And Chino fucked her over, bad.”

Landon’s mind raced. “Again, why are you telling me this?”

“Because I didn’t sign up for this mess,” Haze said, desperation in his eyes. “I was going to school and getting good grades. Then Cat hooked up with Chino, and they needed me. I thought we were fighting against the Texas Syndicate, or MS-13, because they were trying to take us over. But it’s gotten crazy. Now, we’re targeting innocent people.” He shook his head again, glancing at Landon, then away. “Chino has two brothers. One’s a BG but the other has standing, and he wants to avenge his brother’s death. When I found out what the plan was, I couldn’t go through with it. But the others won’t stop until they’ve taken her out.”

Landon took a deep breath, trying to process the information. BG was baby gangster. “You need to come in with me. We can protect you, but I need everything you know.”

Haze shook his head. “No fuckin’ way! I’m risking enough just being here today.”

Landon’s thoughts were a whirlwind. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together, but there were still so many questions. He knew one thing for certain: Baylee was in an incredible amount of danger.

“You have my number,” he said eventually. “If you need help, or get more info, call me.”

Then the kid was gone.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

If they knew Baylee’s name, they probably had enough information to track her down. He took off, dialing Morgan as he went. He needed to get home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Baylee's nerves were zinging today, and she didn't know why. Was it because this was the first time she'd been out since the shooting? Or was her gut trying to tell her something?

Tired of being in her apartment, she'd showered and gotten dressed, then headed out the door. It was Saturday, and the Barton Creek farmer's market was going on. She needed some fresh veggies.

As she wandered the stalls looking at the wares, she got the feeling she was being watched. Baylee was used to that. People watched her all the time. This feeling persisted, though, all through the market. From beneath her lashes, she looked around.

That was when she saw the detective. He was sitting at an outdoor seating area, watching her as he sipped from a bottle of water. The man was too big to hide, so he hadn't even tried. His long legs were spread in that way men did, and he was slouched in the tiny little wrought-iron chair.

The man was delectable and for the first time in a long time, she registered the desire to be with a man.

Baylee knew she should be upset with him for following her, because that's obviously what he'd done, but she was actually kind of happy to see him. What were the chances of running into each other in a city the size of Austin? Slim to none.

But there was another part of her that was hyper aware that he sent butterflies fluttering in her tummy. Wading through the pedestrian traffic, she crossed over to him, clasping her arms in front of herself. “Detective,” she said.

“Landon,” he corrected. “Hello, Baylee. Find anything good?”

She held up her cloth grocery bag. “Some fresh strawberries, and some Thai basil to plant in the flower bed.”

“Nice,” he said, smiling up at her.

“What’s going on?”

He cocked his dark head at her. “What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t be following me unless there was something going on. Something with the gang.”

He motioned for her to take the seat opposite him. “I knew you were a sharp cookie. Yeah, there’s been a development.”

His bright eyes were kind, but now that she was this close, she could see the worry in them. She sank down onto the bench and waited.

“I talked to a gang informant earlier, and Chino Vega’s brothers want vengeance. It’s how the gangs run. And somebody in the hospital outed you.”

Baylee felt her mouth drop open. “Someone told them I was the one that took him out?”

Landon nodded his head once, and her stomach fell. Who could have done that? She

knew a lot of the people down there, and she'd saved them.

"Do you think it was someone that works at the hospital?" The thought of one of her own nurses selling her out nauseated her.

He shrugged lightly. "Could have been one of the people in the waiting room, or one of the patients. It could have been anybody with a phone. The informant said they had a grainy picture of you. And a description of a woman with a scar down her face."

Baylee scowled, shaking her head. "That kind of narrows it down, huh? Doesn't matter that he was killing innocent people. They have to get revenge so they can be all macho."

Why did men have to be such dicks? She glanced around, suddenly very aware of how open it was around her. Somebody could shoot her from hundreds of yards away. No, these were gangsters. They would want to be close.

"So, what do I do?" she asked, feeling lost.

Landon leaned toward her a little. "I've got my partner working on getting a team to watch your place. I also have Cass asking around. Quietly. She has a lot of CIs. Right now, though? I suggest you go home and let us try to track the brothers down."

Baylee shook her head, suddenly angry. She glanced around herself, looking for gang bangers. But Austin had a large Hispanic population, and there was little to no chance she'd be able to pick them out of this crowd.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and she knew it was because of her internal alarm system. It had never let her down before. She turned her head, scanning the crowd. At first, she didn't see anything. Then she noticed a glint of dark hair moving through the crowd behind her. It wasn't definitive, but she thought it might have been

someone watching her, then moving away to not be seen.

Something must have shown on her face, because Landon turned to look as well. “What is it?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

He dropped his head, catching her eyes. “Hey, if you think you saw something, you probably did. Let’s get out of here.”

Baylee blinked at his closeness, and she drew in a breath. It smelled of sandalwood, something she’d noticed him wearing. She wasn’t sure if it was deodorant or soap, but it teased at her senses. It spiked something in her belly, and she was very aware of how close they were.

Then he took her hand in his and tugged her from the chair. Baylee was more than happy to go, and she followed him through the crowd, her fingers tangled with his. Yes, she knew she was in danger, but that didn’t keep her from not registering other things. Landon was strong and decisive, and he cut through the crowd like he meant to keep her safe at all costs, his broad shoulders angled to protect her. She couldn’t see the weapon in his waistband, but he had to be wearing one.

Man, her emotions were in a jumble. Determined to protect herself, she scanned the area, looking for anything out of the ordinary. She had her own weapon in her cross-body bag, and she knew she could get to it fairly quickly. Her anxiety had ridden her hard this morning, and she hadn’t been able to leave without her protection.

It was quiet all the way back to her car. When she caught sight of her vehicle, though, she gasped. Red spray paint decorated the windshield and along the body panels. Killer, it said. There was no gang symbol, but it was easy enough to work out who had done it.

Baylee felt the blood drain from her face, and she clenched her jaw. Shock rippled through her, and flashes of the men she'd killed. Even years later, she could still see their faces. This vandal had no idea how close to the mark they'd hit.

It took her an incredibly long time to catch her breath. By that time, Landon was already tugging her away from her car. On down the line, he pushed her into the passenger side of the black sedan he drove. Then he circled around the front of the car, climbed in, and cranked the ignition. He screamed out of the lot, sending two oncoming cars into a flurry of honking.

Baylee didn't say anything for several minutes.

"Are you okay?" Landon asked her.

She flicked a glance at him. His strong hands held the steering wheel in a death grip, and she didn't like seeing him on-edge. "Yeah, I'm fine. Do you think you can call a tow company to take my car to a paint place? I'll call insurance when I get home."

"Yeah, I can do that." He paused. "I think I need to take you somewhere other than home."

Baylee cringed, because she'd kind of been thinking the same thing. There were a lot of innocent people in her building, and she didn't want any of them being caught in her mess. "I know," she said, and she hated that her voice wavered. Turning her head, she looked out the window again.

She felt him cup her shoulder in his hand, and it took everything in her not to lean into his touch. Eventually, he drew away and called the police department.

Landon filled his boss in on what happened, and he also told her about the CI that had come forward. Baylee turned to watch him speak, listening as he related the details of

the meeting. It explained why he'd been shadowing her.

Chino Vega's brothers were after her for revenge. After she'd shot their crazy brother, who was shooting innocent people. How was that even fair? What was their reasoning behind coming after her?

Once he hung up the phone, she shook her head. "I just don't understand why they're after me."

"It's cocky male gang bullshit," Landon growled, "and you're caught in the middle of it."

"What, exactly, am I supposed to do?" she said, exasperated. "Go into hiding indefinitely? I can't do that. I have a job, and people that rely on me."

"I know you do, Baylee, and I'm so sorry this has happened to you. For the next couple of nights, we're going to a safe house."

She turned to him incredulously. "I don't have any clothes. Or anything," she cried.

Landon winced, and she could see in his expression that he felt bad for her. "I know. We'll make do or I'll run to the store for you. At this moment, you need to go underground. For your safety and everyone else in the building."

Baylee crossed her arms over her chest and clenched her teeth. Anger was moving in, and she seriously hoped she would get the chance to watch the brothers go down.

She clamped her mouth shut and watched out the window as he drove them into the suburbs. When he eventually pulled into a very plain tan vinyl ranch house, she wasn't surprised. The place was a boring box in a long line of other boring boxes.

Once Landon parked, she slipped out of the car and followed him up the front walk. He typed a 5 number code into the deadbolt keypad on the door, and let them in.

Yeah, it was just as boring inside as outside.

Baylee looked around, feeling totally out of her element. “I have to get stuff from my apartment. And somebody needs to watch my cat.”

Landon looked at her as he closed and locked the door. “Didn’t know you had a cat.”

Baylee walked into the room. Overstuffed couch, a recliner, all in shades of brown. There were a few decorations on the walls, but nothing spectacular. Looked like garage sale rejects. She moved into the kitchen. Same uninspired look and feel to the place. She opened the fridge. “We may have to split the bottle of water,” she said, swinging the door shut.

“My partner Morgan will be bringing some groceries in a couple of hours.”

“I thought Cass was your partner,” she said, moving into the doorway.

“No, Cass was my partner years ago, before she went to gangs. She trained me to be a detective.”

Baylee’s brows quirked. They’d seemed very chummy. She wondered what else she’d trained him on.

She shook her head at herself. Why was she even thinking about that? It was none of her business if he was in a relationship with his former partner.

She glanced at him. Even he was looking around the space, his lip slightly curled with disgust. “Hopefully, we won’t have to be here long.”

Sighing, she wandered through the rest of the house.

There were two bedrooms and a bath upstairs. And only one actual bed. Somebody was going to be sleeping on the couch.

Even more restless than she was before, she headed back downstairs. “Do they have TV at least?”

Landon grabbed the remote from the coffee table and hit the power button. The screen came on, but it cycled through to a blue screen and stayed there.

Oh, this was going to be a lot of fun.

Landon hadn’t been in this safe house before. It was new. The county had bought it at a foreclosure sale. The code had worked on the front door, but it was obvious nothing else in here was working. He cringed as he looked at Baylee. She was trying to be okay with everything, but he could tell she was on edge. He had taken her out of her comfort zone and dropped her into a damn prison.

“Hopefully we won’t have to be here long,” he said again, aware he was stuck in a loop.

Baylee shrugged at him and dropped to the corner of the couch. “At least I have my phone. I am going to need some stuff from my apartment, though.”

Yeah, he was too. “I’ll run over in the morning and get you a few things, if you don’t mind giving me your keys.”

She looked at him, blinking, then looked down at her lap. Her mouth had tightened, highlighting the scar on her lip. She did not like the idea of him invading her space.

Landon seemed to sense her reluctance. “I’m sorry, Baylee, but we’re going to have to get used to each other pretty quickly. Obviously, they were following you at the farmer’s market. You’re in danger, and I wouldn’t be putting you, us, through this if I didn’t believe it needed to happen.”

Sighing, she nodded. “I know. I just wonder what the end point will be, though? I can’t stay here indefinitely.”

“The end point will be when they’re in custody,” he said shortly. “The gang task force is looking for them now.”

Baylee nodded, but he could tell she wasn’t happy about the situation. Personally, he was a little excited to be here with her. After seeing her in the apartment and wondering about her, it was nice to have some face time to get to know her.

She pushed her hair behind her shoulder. “And if you don’t get them? How long am I supposed to stay here?”

He shook his head. “I can’t answer that.”

And he wished he could. If only to ease that look in her eyes.

Baylee wandered off to look out the back slider doors, her arms crossed over her middle. “I need to call my boss, at the very least.”

“That’s not a problem. Considering you were acting in the best interests of the hospital, I think they’ll be willing to give you as much time off as you need.”

“Maybe,” she sighed. “I might go lay down for a while. Do you mind if I take the bed for now?”

He shook his head. “The bed is yours. I’ll sleep down here.”

She eyed the medium-sized couch. “We’ll argue about it later,” she said, and tromped up the stairs.

Landon found himself grinning despite the situation they were in. Baylee Mitchell had spunk and heart, and though she’d been knocked for a loop, he had a feeling she would rally and be ready to kick ass in no time.

Maybe she would let him share the bed with her.

Baylee kicked off her shoes and flopped to the bed. And immediately regretted it. The mattress had to be the hardest mattress she’d ever laid upon! What the heck!

She rolled over onto her back and stared up at the water-stained ceiling. How the hell had her life gone to shit so quickly? She wanted to text Rex and Olivia, but she didn’t want to worry them. Olivia had been settling into a new position at her work, and Rex was getting ready to get married in a few weeks.

Crap, surely it wouldn’t last that long?

Anyway, this was her issue, and she would deal with it. Landon would help her.

It was startling to her how quickly she’d come to trust his word. But then, it was hard to argue when you saw your car vandalized for the world to see. What would they have done if he hadn’t been there with her? Would they have tried to take her out then?

Landon seemed to be a good cop, and she would just have to trust the system. In the meantime, she’d have to stay occupied in this hellhole and not drool over him.

The man was delectable. She'd always had a thing for dark-haired men, and the fact that he was taller than her made it even better. And she got the feeling from the way he looked at her that he was just as interested in her. It was hard to even imagine starting a relationship under these circumstances. Once the case was over, they probably wouldn't even see each other again.

Only in the hallway of the apartment building.

Every day. When they both left for work. And she would feel his eyes on her ass.

Sigh...

Siggy was going to be so mad at her for not being there with him. She never left him alone any longer than she had to, and if she was here for a few days or more, he was probably going to rip up her couch or something. He definitely had attitude, and he would make her pay for not being there for him .

Spoiled ass cat...

Thinking about Siggy calmed her, and within a few minutes, her eyes were sagging.

When she woke, she heard voices murmuring downstairs. Rolling from the bed with a groan, she slipped her tennis shoes on, scraped a hand through her mussed hair and headed downstairs.

There was a handsome, black-haired man downstairs. His thick dark hair was longer and pulled back into a braid, making her think Native American, and bright hazel eyes smiled when he looked up at Baylee. There was consideration in those eyes as well, and experience.

Landon gave her a long, slow look when she came down the stairs, and Baylee felt it

all the way down her body. Well, that was interesting.

“I’m Baylee,” she said, approaching Landon’s partner.

“Morgan Clay. Nice to meet you.”

Baylee nodded and drew back, letting Morgan look at her scars. The guy was a lot more direct than other people Baylee had met, and she was sure it was because he was a cop. He’d probably seen a lot of heinous things. Hopefully, her scars weren’t too high on his list.

“I brought you some food and magazines. Hunter said there was no TV or anything.” Morgan motioned to several bags on the kitchen table. “I’m not sure what you liked, so I got you a variety.”

Baylee’s stomach grumbled as she looked through the bags. Several meal ideas popped into her head, and she gave Morgan a grateful smile. “I appreciate this. If nothing else, I can cook.”

Morgan gave her a light shrug. “I can’t take credit for it. I had one of the admin ladies that has a family order stuff for me to pick up. I’ll let her know you approve. If there’s anything else you need, you can let Landon know and we’ll get it to you.”

Baylee nodded, her excitement tempered. There was a lot of food here. She would still have to be stuck in this house for the foreseeable future. “Any word on the brothers?”

Morgan glanced at Landon as if for permission, and he nodded. “Nothing concrete,” he said, “just some rumors. There were some traffic cams near your car, and we can see a figure going by it, but we can’t see their face. We assume they were the ones that damaged your car.”

Baylee pursed her lips. "I felt like someone was watching me there."

Morgan nodded. "There was probably a lookout and a second person to do the crime. That's usually how they work."

Who would have ever thought she'd need to know how a gang worked? Yeah, they dealt with them all the time in the hospital, but they'd never had a reason to explore the mechanics.

Maybe that was her bad for being naïve. But would knowing how it worked have changed what she did the other night? No, probably not.

"Right now, the Tango Blast is under a lot of pressure. They're about to be taken over by another gang, so dealing with you should not be their focus." Morgan shrugged lightly. "But then, macho crap takes precedence all the time."

Baylee snorted. "Yes, true." She looked through the bags again. "Thank you for the supplies."

"No problem," Morgan said, smiling slightly. He turned to Landon. "I have a call in to a friend of mine, and if I hear back from him, I'll let you know."

"Roger that," he said. "Keep an eye out," he warned as he opened the door for him to leave.

Morgan gave him a jaunty salute. "Always, boss man!"

Landon closed the door behind his partner and slid home all the locks. Baylee watched him go through the process and felt like she was going to suffocate in the closed off brown room.

Do something with yourself. Turning, she grabbed the bags. It was a little early, but she would start making some dinner.

CHAPTER NINE

Landon sat on the not-so-fresh smelling couch and listened to Baylee move around in the kitchen. He did not know what she was doing, but he hoped she was making them something to eat. It had been a while since he'd eaten anything, and there had been nothing in the fridge to snack on.

He could have cooked them something, but he'd seen her face light up as she looked down into the plastic bags. Being staked out was hard to do, and she'd certainly never been trained for it. At least he was used to being bored when he needed to be.

His eyes drifted shut and he kicked his heels out a little further on the carpet, then folded his hands over his stomach. Hearing the little clinks and sounds in the kitchen was kind of relaxing.

Landon wasn't sure at first what woke him, but he took a deep breath and stretched. Oh, man, it had to have been the smell. Garlic and herbs, and crusty bread. Following his nose, he pushed up from the couch and wandered to the kitchen doorway.

Baylee stood leaning over a pan of garlic bread in the open oven. A few tendrils of hair curled near her cheeks from the steam, and there was a satisfied look on her face. Landon smiled despite himself.

"Okay," he rumbled. "That smells amazing."

Moving into the kitchen, he leaned to look over her shoulder. "Is that fettucine? With chicken breasts?"

A broad smile on her face, Baylee nodded. “Blackened chicken breasts. And broccoli. And garlic bread.”

“Oh, man,” he groaned, resting a hand on her shoulder to lean even deeper over the steaming pan of creamy noodles. “That looks and smells amazing.”

Baylee had stiffened under his touch, then seemed to relax. “Well, if you grab a plate, we can eat some of it. I waited a little while because you seemed to be sleeping so well, but I was hungry.”

Landon looked at her, surprised. “You delayed dinner for me to sleep?”

She shrugged lightly and pulled away from his hand, going to a cupboard to retrieve a couple of plates. “It was no big deal. I just made the brownies first.”

Landon looked around. “You made brownies,” he asked, scanning the counter.

Baylee laughed at his search. “Yes. We’ll have those after.”

Landon helped her retrieve plates and insisted she go first. Baylee made a plate and set it on the table, then retrieved two glasses. “What would you like to drink? We have water or water.”

Landon snorted. “Guess I’ll have water, then. Thank you.”

He piled food onto his own plate, then grabbed a couple of pieces of garlic bread. His mouth was literally watering as he sat down in the chair across from her. The tiny table was more apartment size than house size, but it would hold his food long enough to eat.

Twirling noodles around the tines of his fork, he blew for just a second before taking

a huge, slurping bite. She shoved a paper towel at him, laughing as Alfredo sauce dripped down his chin. Landon grinned and took the towel, happy that he could make her laugh. “This is amazing,” he mumbled around the mouthful of food.

“I think you’re just hungry,” Baylee said, golden brow cocked.

Landon shook his head. “No, it’s good.”

He plowed through the first plate, then filled his plate again. Her eyes widened as she watched him methodically demolish the food.

“You don’t understand,” he said, wiping his tattered napkin over his face when he was done. “Cops have to make do with anything we can get. Some of us can cook if we have to, but usually we don’t have time. When I was out on the road, it never failed that you would stop at some fast-food joint, order your food, and you’d get a call. You can tell dispatch you’re going on lunch or break or whatever, but Austin never rests. You would have to try to inhale your food before you get to the call.”

“I get it,” she nodded. “Nurses are the same sometimes. Some days, the floor is quiet. Other days, it’s like someone is testing you or something and every emergency you can imagine happens. And with the nurse shortage the past few years, it’s been even worse.”

“How long have you been in pediatrics?”

Landon leaned back in his chair, his gut full. He folded his hands across his hips and watched her talk. Her eyes turned careful as she thought about his question.

“I wasn’t always in pediatrics. I was a regular RN in the Army. After I got out, I found a job in San Antonio. I...” she paused, looking down at her hands. “I struggled getting back into civilian life, and I had to take some time off. I flew home to Ohio

and kind of withdrew from the world for a while.”

“I can’t even imagine what you went through on Nightshade.”

Her mouth quirked, and she looked away, into the middle distance. “Yeah. Very few people can.”

Landon waited for her to continue, but it seemed like she’d gotten a little lost. “So,” he said, interrupting her reverie, “you went home. Did you find what you needed there?”

Her pretty green eyes refocused, and she smiled. He loved the smile because it was natural and easy, making crease lines at the corners of her eyes and lifting her cheeks. “Yes. I went back to the basics. I helped my grandparents on the farm and forgot about nursing for a while. It gave my brain a chance to reset. Then I had a little nephew get sick, and it was while visiting him in the hospital I got the bug to be in pediatrics. I went back to school for a while on the Army’s dime and refocused. I was in pediatric oncology for a while, but it’s a hard specialization, for emotional reasons. I underestimated how hard it would be dealing with terminally ill children. I already have my own struggles, so I switched to regular pediatric nursing at Dell-Seton. I’ve only been there a little while, but I love every minute of it.”

She gave him a chagrined smile, like she was ashamed that she’d given up the harder job, and he didn’t like that look. “I don’t think anyone would blame you for prioritizing your mental health.”

She sighed, looking out the window, but she still seemed down. “It seems like that’s all I do, is prioritize my mental health.”

He nodded. “And you should. I know you’re a fantastic nurse, but after what you’ve been through, you’re allowed to be a little broken. The military is great about training

their people to be machines, but they don't take the same care in reintegrating them into civilian life or caring for their mental health."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I learned a long time ago to use my own healthcare, rather than go through the VA."

Landon nodded. "I have a few buddies that do the same. There are a lot of cops that used to be military. I don't know of any of them that came back completely unscathed, if you know what I mean."

She nodded. "Yeah, I get that."

She still looked down, and he didn't like the thought that she felt guilt for taking care of herself. "So, what do you do on the farm? I'm a Texas boy. Explain the appeal of Ohio."

She snorted, her lips tugging up at one side. "Well, it used to be a dairy farm. My grandparents milked cows for almost forty years. Then they let the dairy go and switched fully to beef, with my parents buying in to help out. We all built fence, moved cattle, doctored them. You name it, I probably did it. Delivered some babies in the middle of winter."

"Seriously?" he laughed.

Baylee nodded. "Oh, yeah. Cows are not smart animals, and we had this one heifer that decided to wander off and have her calf in a mud pit in the middle of January..."

Landon watched her talk about life on the farm, her eyes bright with humor as she related stories. He peppered in questions to keep her talking. It was obvious she loved being there, and with her family. "Why did you come back to Texas?"

She gave him a considering look. “Well, my parents had taken over from my grandparents, and they went into semi-retirement. Sold off a bunch of cattle. And I had a community of friends down here that I’d served with. I love my family, but they don’t always understand what we did over there. It was important to me to be near my friends that did understand when I went back into nursing. Rex and Olivia are both within an hour of here, if I need them.”

“They were with you on Nightshade?”

She nodded, her eyes going distant. “Olivia and I went through boot camp together, and Rex joined us later. We just always seemed to be together, and they are my best friends.”

“Have you told them about what you’ve been going through?”

Sighing, she shook her head. “Not yet. I was kind of waiting for things to resolve themselves, if you know what I mean.”

“That makes sense. So, you settle into your new life here, things are going well, and then a gang banger rolls through your doors and fucks things up.”

She snorted wryly. “Yup. Doesn’t it figure?” She huffed out a breath. “Ready for a brownie?”

Landon blinked and grinned. “Well, yeah...”

Pushing up from the table, she crossed to the microwave and pulled a square dish out. She cut the confection into 9 pieces and pulled one out, setting it on a paper towel, then a second piece. Even though he was full from dinner, he took a huge bite of the brownie when she set it in front of him.

“Oh, man...” he sighed. “That’s fantastic. It’s still warm.”

She shrugged lightly. “It’s just a box mix.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s good and you made it.”

They chewed for a few minutes, enjoying the chocolate. In the past three days, he’d eaten more chocolate than he had in a long time. Suddenly, he frowned and let out a curse.

“What?” she asked.

“The rest of my cookies are sitting on the counter at home,” he grouched, making her laugh.

“I’ll make you more. So, tell me about being a cop,” she said, popping the last bite of brownie into her mouth.

Landon stared at her mouth, knowing that she now tasted of chocolate. He looked down at the table, trying not to get too lost in thinking about her. What had she asked? Oh, about being a cop.

Yeah, he supposed it was fair. He shrugged. “It seemed like a natural thing to do when I was old enough. They helped us out when I was a kid, and I wanted to make sure other kids didn’t have to deal with the same thing I did. I know there’s no way I can save them all, but I do what I can. And I love putting away the bad guys,” he said, grinning.

“Seems like kind of a never-ending job.”

He nodded, tossing the last piece of brownie in his mouth. “It is, but so is nursing.

Right? You just try to do what good you can and move on to the next person.”

“Yeah,” she sighed.

Reaching out, she started cleaning up the dishes, but Landon took them from her hands. “You cooked. I’ll wash up. Why don’t you go through those magazines, or something?”

Baylee blinked, then put her hands up, relinquishing control of the dishes to him. She wandered over to the bags Morgan had brought and sifted through them, pulling a couple of magazines out. As the hot water heated in the sink, Landon watched her leave the kitchen, three magazines in her hands.

He really didn’t mind doing the dishes. Mouth pursed, he looked for a plastic container to put the leftover noodles in, but he didn’t find anything other than plastic bags. It was a little messy, but he got a quart bag loaded with Alfredo noodles and in the fridge. He had no problem eating leftovers that good.

Baylee was a fantastic cook, and he wanted to make it easier for her to cook more, he thought with a grin.

“What are you smiling at?”

Landon hadn’t even heard her come back into the kitchen. She peered around him at the bag of noodles and giggled. Then she smacked a hand over her mouth, like she was surprised that the sound had come from her own mouth.

“You put them in a bag?” she snickered.

“Hey,” he said, enjoying seeing her laughing. “It was all they had in this damn house.”

She was shaking her head, and he really wanted to lean down and drop a kiss to her lips.

What the hell...

They were on a stakeout. She was in a huge amount of danger. But he wanted to kiss her pink lips and taste her laughter.

This was such a bad idea...

CHAPTER TEN

Baylee felt the tension seep between them, and she realized she was holding her breath. Landon was staring at her mouth, and she understood what men were thinking when they telegraphed their actions like that. Normally, she would pull away, but some... feminine curiosity made her tilt up her chin and wait to see what he would do. His proximity was tantalizing...

For a timeless moment, he didn't do anything, just stared at her mouth, then something slid over his expression, and he carefully, very deliberately, lowered his mouth to hers. He was giving her time to pull away. Baylee held her breath as his firm lips pressed against hers in a very dominant, masculine way. Landon was a very masculine man, and she knew in her heart that he would approach being with a woman the same way. She doubted he would let the woman pay for anything or walk on the street side of the sidewalk. He had strong women in his life, and he seemed to have been raised to be a protector. It was ingrained in him.

So, she let herself sink into his kiss. He tasted of chocolate with a hint of garlic, and it should have been bad. But it really, really wasn't. Shifting forward a bit, she let her body brush against his, and it was more than good. It was intoxicating. When she tilted her head, one of his hands cupped her jaw, and for a second, she worried about him touching the scar, but she forced the thought away. She just wanted to feel ...

Baylee didn't want the kiss to end. He drew back ever so slowly, their breaths mingling, and it took everything in her to open her hands to let him go. She hadn't even realized she'd curled her fists into his dark t-shirt.

Landon's expression changed, though, like he'd just remembered she was a victim, or something, and he straightened.

Baylee tried not to be hurt. She couldn't blame him for pulling back. They were not in any kind of position to start something. But that tiny, delicate, feminine kindle of interest had sparked. Turning, her face burning, she went back into the living room, grabbing the magazines she'd been flipping through.

Why was she embarrassed? Landon Hunter was here to do a job. Yes, when men and women were in close proximity, tensions could ramp up and things could happen. Kisses could happen. More could happen. But he'd just shown her he had enough integrity to remember he was here for a purpose.

She needed to get a hold of her emotions. It was a little hard, though, being in this crappy yet weirdly homey environment. Lines were blurring and defenses could fall.

A thrill went through her at the thought of truly letting her layers of defenses down, and she wondered if it was fear or excitement.

She needed to remember who she was, and the amount of baggage she carried with her. Being with any man would be an extreme challenge.

She thought about her last boyfriend. With her history from Nightshade, it had taken her a long time and a lot of therapy to be able to open up to a man a few years after she'd returned stateside. Chase had been a decent guy. A firefighter in San Antonio, he'd been big and reserved and one of the sweetest men she'd ever met. Looking back, he had been the perfect man to help her find her sexuality again. No, they hadn't set the sheets on fire, but Chase had been so patient, letting her explore and find her way as she fought to regain her sense of self. He'd never pushed her, always letting her set the parameters of their physical relationship, and he'd had the perfect temperament. Non-threatening. Exactly what she needed.

They'd parted ways amicably, and they still texted occasionally. He was in a steady relationship with a fellow firefighter now, though, and even though she liked him, she let the distance build between them. He deserved a strong, committed relationship without entanglements from previous hookups. The last time she'd talked to him, he'd admitted that he thought he was in love, and she truly hoped he could hang onto that.

And maybe that was why she was feeling the pull toward Landon. It had been a few years since she'd been in a relationship, and she wasn't immune to the tick of her own needs. She was in her early thirties, and working with the kids in pediatrics made her hunger for her own family.

She just had a lot of roadblocks. Shaking her head, she laughed lightly at herself. She was her own worst enemy when it came to building relationships.

Most men were obvious in their motivations. She'd heard a saying once that men needed a place to have sex, and women needed a reason. It had stuck with her that most men's motivation in interacting with her was to get into her pants. And sometimes the scars on her face seemed to drive a morbid fascination that immediately set off her inner warning alarm. Those men she pulled back from completely. She was very aware how quickly those motivations could turn dangerous.

Landon presented a new conundrum for her. For the first time in a long time, she was interested in a guy. And he seemed interested in her.

If only they weren't in this crazy situation...

Baylee went through the magazines, learning more than she ever wanted to about celebrities in Hollywood. There was a cheaper paper on the bottom of the stack, and the title made her laugh. Four-legged baby runs away from hospital.

Right...

Restless, she got up from the hard couch and moved to the window. She peered through the crack between the curtains. There were a couple of kids across the street, playing with a skateboard and a homemade ramp, it looked like. They kept moving things around on the ground, then stacking a board on top of it. The bigger kid would then try to ride his skateboard up and over the ramp.

Baylee watched as they wrecked time after time. Eventually, they kicked their temporary ramp to the side and headed into the house. Another neighbor was mowing his lawn, with a teenage boy weed eating along behind him. A third neighbor was working on an old truck in the driveway.

By the time they left, she would know everyone's habits.

The sun was setting now, and she itched to go outside and breathe some fresh air. The back yard was fenced. Maybe that would be okay.

Landon was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, his phone in his hand. He was frowning, and a frisson of fear shivered through her. "What?"

He sighed, his mouth pulling to one side like he didn't want to tell her. "Our apartment building was just shot up."

Baylee gasped. "Are you serious? Was anyone hurt?"

He shook his head, crossing the room to her. "No one was hurt. It was just a drive-by. Three bullets struck the building, one shattering a window. Everyone is safe, though."

She wasn't even aware when he reached out and gripped her shoulders. He leaned down to look directly in her eyes. "Baylee. Everyone is okay."

Then he tugged her in for a hug.

Baylee usually tried to keep physical distance from people. Kids were the only exception. But when Landon pulled her into his arms, it didn't set off the same kind of alarms she normally had. Instead, she sagged into him, letting him support her for a few precious seconds.

He seemed to appreciate the contact as well. It was his home, too. Eventually, she drew back enough to look up into his face.

"Mrs. Traeger is in the front. Was it her window shattered?"

He nodded, a spark of humor lighting his eyes. "She found it when she got home from the Golden Sixties at the senior center."

Baylee snorted, envisioning the short, older woman. The senior center was the hub of her social circle, so she was there a lot. Baylee was very glad she hadn't been home when they'd shot it up. If Mrs. Traeger had been hurt even indirectly because of her actions, Baylee would never forgive herself.

"Hey, it was just a ploy," Landon said, squeezing her shoulders. "They can't find you right now, so I'm sure they have the place being watched. It's a ploy to draw you out."

She nodded, knowing he was right. "My cat is still there. Is my apartment okay?"

"Morgan sent an off-duty cop through the building. Your door looks secure."

Her shoulders dropped with relief, though she was still worried. Siggy meant everything to her. "I have to get my cat."

Landon knew what she was going to say. “I know. We’ll get him and bring him back here when we get a chance.”

“I don’t even know if he would come to you. He’s a well-documented hide and seek champion.”

Landon grinned, his white teeth flashing, and it made her heart stutter.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m a good observer,” he said softly. “I’ll find him.”

She cocked a brow and gave him a skeptical look. “I don’t know. He’s pretty good.”

Landon winked at her and gave her a confident nod. “I’ll get him. No worries.”

Baylee drew back a little, appreciating that he’d lightened the atmosphere after the bad news. “If you think they’re watching the apartment building, wouldn’t it be a good time to find them?”

Landon nodded, propping his hands on his hips. “The gang suppression unit are aware of what’s going on, but this group, or Tango, is hard to pin down. Chino Vega was kind of the leader of the group, but now that he’s dead, I’m sure things are in turmoil. For the past couple of years, he’s been fighting against the Texas Syndicate taking over his Tango. And maybe his brother Hector will pull the group into line.”

“Not until he gets his revenge on me, though, apparently.”

Landon’s silence spoke volumes, and Baylee felt a knot of tension coil tighter in her chest. The thought that Hector Vega or his younger brother Luis might derail her comfortable life made her stomach churn. She could handle stress and trauma in peds, but this was a different kind of danger—one she couldn’t predict or control.

“We’ll stay one step ahead of them,” Landon said, his voice steady and reassuring. “You’re safe here, Baylee. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Baylee wanted to believe him, but the fear lingered, gnawing at the edges of her resolve. She bit her lip, her thoughts drifting back to the apartment building and the people who lived there. She’d grown close to some of the tenants, like Mrs. Traeger, and the idea that they might be in danger because of her actions weighed heavily on her.

“What if they try again?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if someone gets hurt?”

Landon’s expression softened, and he reached out to gently brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “We’re going to keep a close watch on the building and the area. If they make another move, we’ll be ready.”

Baylee nodded, though the worry didn’t entirely dissipate. “And Siggy?”

“We’ll get Siggy,” Landon promised. “Tonight, if we can. I’ll go with Morgan and a couple of officers, and we’ll make sure the coast is clear before we go in. We’ll get your cat out safely.”

The way Landon spoke with such certainty and calm helped ease some of her anxiety. She knew she couldn’t let fear paralyze her, not when there were people counting on her to stay strong. Still, the thought of Landon going into a potentially dangerous situation for her sake made her stomach twist.

“I don’t want you getting hurt because of me,” she said quietly.

Landon’s eyes softened further, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Baylee, this is my job. Protecting people is what I do. And right now, that means

protecting you—and your cat. We’ll be careful, I promise.”

She managed a small smile, appreciating his attempt to reassure her, but the weight of the situation still pressed on her. “Thank you, Landon. I just... I’m not used to relying on other people.”

His hand was still resting on her shoulder, a comforting presence. “You don’t have to do this alone. We’ll get through it together.”

Baylee looked into his eyes, finding a steadiness there that she clung to. She was used to being the one in control, the one who took care of others. But right now, she was learning to lean on someone else, and maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

The look in his eyes made her think of Nightshade, years ago. When the Deltas had moved in and rescued them, there’d been one guy, Truck, who had had the same look in his eyes. He’d reassured her that everything would work out, and it had.

“Okay,” she said finally, her voice firmer. “Let’s get through this.”

Landon gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze before stepping back. “First things first. We’ll check in with Morgan and see if they’ve found anything. Then we’ll make a plan to get Siggy out.”

As they moved into the living room, Baylee felt a strange sense of comfort in Landon’s presence. Despite the chaos and fear swirling around them, she felt safer knowing he was there, watching out for her. The evening light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the room, and for a moment, she allowed herself to breathe, to trust that things would be okay.

Landon’s phone buzzed again, and he glanced at it, his expression turning serious. “Morgan’s got a lead. Looks like they’ve identified a vehicle that was near the

apartment building when the shots were fired. They're checking it out now."

Baylee's heart skipped a beat. "Do you think they'll find them?"

"Maybe," Landon said, his voice cautious but hopeful. "If we're lucky, this could give us a break in the case."

She nodded, trying to push aside the fear. "I hope so."

Landon's gaze lingered on her for a moment before he spoke again. "Why don't you try to relax a bit? I'll update you as soon as we know more."

Baylee hesitated, then nodded. "Okay. I'll try."

As Landon turned to head back into the kitchen to make some calls, Baylee walked to the window, looking out at the darkening sky. The sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving the world bathed in twilight. Despite the uncertainty and the danger lurking out there, she felt a flicker of tentative hope.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Landon didn't like seeing the worry and fear in Baylee's tightly held expression. And it wasn't even fear for herself. It was fear for others in her life that may be affected.

Hell, she'd even been worried about him. He appreciated the sentiment. It had been a long time since anyone had worried about him.

Morgan texted that they had a plate from a surveillance video. There was a convenience store down the street that caught a gray Dodge Hellcat accelerating at speed away from the apartment building seconds after the shots had been fired. They were tracking down the car now.

Landon hated being out of the loop, but that was the way this was playing out. He sent a message to the night-shift sergeant, requesting back-up a few hours from now so that he could get Baylee's cat. Porter texted him back that it wouldn't be a problem and set a time and location to meet.

He relayed that info to his partner. If they worked this right, maybe they could snag a bad guy.

Landon's fingers hovered over his phone, but his thoughts were on Baylee. The look in her eyes lingered in his mind, a mixture of vulnerability and determination that tugged at something deep inside him. He wasn't used to this—someone worrying about him, someone caring beyond the badge and the job. It was both unsettling and strangely addictive.

And the kiss... it had been a long time since he'd been shook, and the touch of Baylee's so-soft lips on his had sent shockwaves through his gut. Women came and went, but he avoided entanglements. He'd been a bachelor for a long time, by choice. There was a niggling fear in the back of his brain that he would follow in his father's footsteps. He knew the statistics. Some studies said that abuse victims were more likely to be abusers. That was enough to make him leery of being in a committed relationship.

Landon didn't know what to do. Baylee was the first woman that made him think he could maybe be in a relationship long term.

He couldn't think about this right now, half-hard and aching. Work.

As he sent the details to Morgan about the backup for retrieving Baylee's freaking cat, he caught sight of her standing by the window, her silhouette framed by the glow of the streetlights outside. She was lost in thought, probably going over every possible worst-case scenario in her mind. He knew that feeling all too well.

He cleared his throat to catch her attention. "Morgan's tracking down the car now," he said, trying to keep his tone light. "They've got a plate, so it's just a matter of time."

Baylee turned to face him, her expression shifting from worry to something closer to relief. "That's good. I just hope they find whoever's behind this before anyone else gets hurt."

"They will," Landon assured her. "And Porter's arranged for some backup tonight. I'll head over to your apartment in a few hours and get Siggy out of there. We'll be in and out quickly."

Baylee nodded, but he could see the tension still in her shoulders. "Thank you,

Landon. I know it's just a cat, but... he's all I've got. That's why I think I need to go with you."

Landon blinked. "Um, yeah, I don't think so."

Baylee walked toward him, her chin lifting. "Siggy isn't used to people, especially men. He was abused and dumped in a shelter, and he was on the streets for a long time. I can almost guarantee you he won't come to you. I need to go."

Landon debated her words. On the one hand, he would be taking her exactly where the gang-bangers wanted her. On the other hand, she would be left here alone, and what would she do if he wasn't watching her?

The thought of her in danger made his gut clench. "Not a good idea, Baylee."

She shrugged and gave him a look. "If you don't take me, I'll just get an Uber, and then I'll be out on the street without anybody to look out for me."

Anger stirred in his gut. "This isn't a joking matter. These guys basically have a hit out on you."

She snorted softly. "Well, believe it or not, I have been taking care of myself for a very long time."

He hadn't asked her outright, but he assumed she still had her weapon stashed somewhere. And honestly, it was one reason he thought he could safely leave her alone here. He'd call in a marked car to do sweeps through the neighborhood, of course, but he knew she could take care of herself.

Landon sighed, knowing that he was going to give in. "Fine, but you have to do exactly as I tell you to do. Understand?"

She grinned, nodding quickly. “Of course.”

She seemed to relax a little at his words, and he felt a warmth spread through him at the sight. There was something about her, something that made him want to protect her, to ease her burdens. It wasn’t just the job—this was personal. The lines were blurring, and he wasn’t happy about it.

“Why don’t you try to get some rest before we head out? You’ve been standing here a long time.” Landon suggested, glancing at the clock. “We’ve got a few hours. I’ll keep an eye on things and let you know if anything changes.”

Baylee hesitated, clearly torn between her exhaustion and the urge to stay vigilant. But eventually, she nodded. “Okay. Maybe just for a little while.”

As she made her way to the bedroom, Landon watched her go, feeling a strange sense of responsibility settle over him. He wasn’t just a cop on a case anymore. He was someone she trusted, and that meant something. It meant everything.

Once she was out of sight, Landon pulled out his phone and dialed Morgan. He answered on the second ring.

“Hey, what’s the latest?” Landon asked, keeping his voice low.

“We’re tracking the Hellcat,” Morgan replied. “It’s registered to a Consuela Ortiz, Chino’s mother. She’s been on our radar for harboring, but this is the first time we’ve had something concrete to connect her to the gang’s recent activities.”

Landon felt a surge of anger. “So, it’s probably Hector, then, that shot the place up. I have a feeling he’s the one pulling the strings for the gang, now.”

“Looks like it,” Morgan confirmed. “Yeah, I’m working with Detective Mills in

gangs, and that's what he thinks, too. Although he's heard some grumbling on the street about the way the Vegas deal with things. He's keeping tabs on him, but he's slippery. We need more than just the car to tie him to the shooting."

"We'll get it," Landon said, his voice hard. "What about tonight? We're heading over to Baylee's apartment to get her cat, and she's insisting upon going with me. Any sign of them watching the place?"

"Not yet," Morgan said. "But we'll be nearby, just in case. If Hector's involved, he might be unpredictable."

Landon clenched his jaw. "We'll be ready."

"You know it's not a good idea to take her, right? I shouldn't have to tell you that."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. She'll stay with me, and honestly, she knows how to take care of herself. I'll text you in a bit."

After hanging up, he stood in the quiet living room, his thoughts racing. Hector Vega was a dangerous man, and if he was gunning for Baylee, things could escalate quickly. But Landon wasn't about to let anything happen to her. Not on his watch.

He checked the time again. A couple more hours before they had to move. He took a deep breath, trying to steady the adrenaline coursing through him. This wasn't just about protecting a witness anymore. Baylee had become more than that to him, and he couldn't let her down.

He walked back to the kitchen and leaned against the counter by the sink, staring out into the night. His phone buzzed again—another update from Morgan about the car's movements—but his thoughts kept drifting back to Baylee.

He couldn't help but wonder how things would be different if they'd met under other circumstances. But then, what were the ideal circumstances to meet the woman you... really wanted? His mind had almost veered in a different direction, and he'd had to drag it back.

For now, he had to focus on keeping her safe. Anything beyond that would have to wait.

The hours passed slowly, each minute ticking by with agonizing slowness. Finally, it was time. Landon knocked softly on the bedroom door. "Baylee? It's time to go."

She emerged a moment later, looking more rested but still tense. Her long blond hair was in a tight braid hanging over her shoulder. "Okay. Let's get Siggy."

Landon gave her a reassuring smile, holding his fist out for her to bump. "We've got this."

Nodding, she bumped his fist and followed him into the night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Landon drove Baylee through the quiet streets, the darkness of the night wrapping around them like a cloak. The air was thick with anticipation, every shadow seeming to hold a threat just out of sight. Landon was hyper-aware of his surroundings, his instincts honed by years on the job, but tonight felt different. Tonight, the stakes were higher. And he was cussing himself for taking a victim directly into possible danger. He'd messaged his lieutenant to let her know what was going on, and he'd gotten her blessing, but it still went against his training and every one of his protective instincts to take Baylee out.

For a damned cat...

Hopefully, they could sneak in and out and no one would be the wiser. She could get her cat and pack a quick bag of essentials, and they would be gone, letting the gang suppression unit deal with the Vegas.

A block away from the apartment building, they pulled alongside a parked Austin PD car. They were under the cover of a large oak tree. Landon rolled down his window and turned off the engine of his car.

"Hey, Porter."

"Hey, Hunter. I've been here about thirty minutes, and I haven't seen anything. Two of the undercover guys are walking the street, and I have another marked unit about a block on the opposite side. If you have any problems, we're close."

Hunter nodded. "I appreciate this. I'll let you know when we're gone."

Porter shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We were just dispatched here for the night, till Gangs lets us go."

Hunter snorted. "Sorry, dude. Could be a boring night."

"Yeah," the sergeant sighed, "but that's why we get paid the big bucks. Right?"

Hunter laughed. Cops were not paid big bucks by any means. "Right," he drawled. "Still on for the softball game next weekend?"

"You know it," Porter laughed.

Hunter started the car, rolled up the window, and pulled away.

"He seems like a nice guy," Baylee said.

Landon glanced at her. "He is. The upper brass have tried to promote him off the street several times, but he loves running out here. And he's a good supervisor, so they let him. Watch for anything out of the ordinary, okay? Keep your head on a swivel."

"Roger that," she said, but she didn't even need the instruction. As soon as they'd pulled onto the street, her awareness had crept up. She knew someone, or several someones, had been watching her, and she knew that her life was literally in danger.

She was also aware of the undercurrents in the conversation between the two men. Were they hoping they would see the gang bangers? She was presenting them with the perfect opportunity to catch them.

They went quiet as he pulled into the alley behind the apartment building. This was mostly a storage area, though there were a few parking spots. Landon backed into one and turned off the car, then he looked around for a few long, heart pounding seconds.

“Do you have your keys?”

She nodded, patting her cross-body bag.

“Then let’s go.”

They stepped out of the car, the night air cool against their skin. The apartment building loomed ahead, dark and quiet, but Baylee’s senses were on high alert. She scanned the area, looking for anything out of place, but everything seemed normal. Too normal, perhaps.

With a protective hand at the base of her spine, he escorted her into the building. They crept past Mrs. Traeger’s apartment on the ground floor and jogged up the stairs to the second floor. At her door, Landon took her keys from her and went in first. She watched as he went through the entire apartment, his gun out as he checked the shadows. She followed along, quietly. Everything was just as she’d left it. No signs of forced entry or disturbance.

The apartment wasn’t huge, so it was easy enough to check. He stopped in the living room. “It’s clear.”

Baylee heard the buzz of a cell phone, and he pulled it from his pocket. He read the text, then turned the phone so that she could read it as well.

We’ve got eyes on Hector. He’s at a known hangout several blocks away. Looks like you’re clear for now but stay sharp.

Landon sent a quick acknowledgment and then turned to Baylee. “We’re clear, but let’s not take any chances. Get your bag packed and find the cat.”

Turning to the kitchen, she poured some cat food into his bowl and started calling for Siggy. He crept out of the dark, meowing pitifully. Crouching, she scratched him on the head for a few seconds. “Oh, buddy. You’re fine. Eat some food and then we’re going to go for a ride.”

Baylee left Siggy eating his food and eyeing Landon malevolently.

“Do you need a bag?”

Indecision crossed his face, and he glanced toward her door. “No, get your stuff and we’ll stop at my apartment on the way out.”

She nodded, moving quickly. She would let Siggy eat his food and then she would grab him on the way out. He hated his cat carrier, so as soon as she pulled it out of the hallway closet, he would know something was up and probably bolt. Cat carrier usually equaled vet, so he would be upset.

Baylee moved toward the bedroom, grabbing a backpack from the hall closet. She started stuffing things inside. She packed enough panties for a week, then a few changes of clothes, some cash. Then she grabbed a spare mag for her Glock and a box of rounds. Hopefully, she wouldn’t need any of this.

Moving to the bathroom, she grabbed her essentials and dropped them into her makeup bag, then she stashed it in her backpack. Pausing, she looked around the bedroom. Was there anything else she needed? She didn’t think so.

Moving back out to the living room, she closed her laptop and put in the protective sleeve, then slid it down into the backpack sleeve. Then she wrapped the charger,

using a Velcro tab to keep the cord looped. Glancing around, she tried to imagine what she might need, but her mind was a little chaotic. Anything else?

No, she didn't think so.

She set the zipped backpack at the door and walked toward Siggy. He'd guarded his food, but he hadn't eaten much because he'd been glaring at Landon. She grabbed a cloth grocery sack and packed his dry food, then several cans of wet. She would have to find a box lid or something he could use as a litter box at the house.

Reaching her hand around his belly, she gave him some loves, then moved to the hallway closet. Before he could argue, she'd dropped him down into the crate she'd opened when she'd grabbed her backpack. He gave a howl of indignation, then went quiet as she closed the door and righted the cage. He was just going to have to be pissed at her.

Landon snorted at the cat's predicament. Before he could say something, his phone buzzed again, this time with a call from Morgan. He answered quickly. "Morgan, what's up?"

His partner's voice was tense. "We've got a problem. Hector left the hangout about three minutes ago. We've lost him on the GPS."

Landon's heart sank. "He could be headed this way."

"Exactly. We're spreading out, but you need to get out of there now, Hunter. Don't take any chances."

Landon glanced at Baylee, who was holding the cat carrier close, her eyes widening in alarm as she overheard Morgan's words. "We're on our way out," he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

He ended the call and turned to Baylee. “We need to move. Now.”

Baylee didn’t hesitate. She grabbed the sack of cat food and the backpack she’d left by the door and hurried after Landon, the carrier clutched securely in her arms. They moved quickly, retracing their steps through the hallway and down the stairs. Every sound seemed amplified in the silence of the night, every creak of the floorboards a potential threat.

As they reached the side door, Landon peered outside, scanning the area for any signs of danger. The street was still empty, but he knew that could change at any moment. “Stay close,” he whispered to Baylee, leading her out the door.

They made their way back to the car, moving swiftly but carefully. As they reached the vehicle, Landon’s instincts screamed at him to hurry. He opened the door for Baylee, who quickly slid into the passenger seat. He took the cat carrier from her and positioned it on the floor behind her seat. “He’ll be secure there.”

Just as Landon rounded the car to get in on the driver’s side, the distant roar of an engine reached his ears. His heart raced as he glanced up, seeing headlights approaching rapidly from down the street, bouncing through the potholes in the alley.

“Get down!” Landon shouted, diving into the car and slamming the door shut just as the gray Hellcat came into view.

The car screeched to a halt just a few feet away, revving the engine, its tires leaving marks on the pavement. For a split second, the world seemed to freeze, the tension in the air so thick it was suffocating. Then, in a flash, Landon started the engine and threw the car into drive, peeling out of the parking spot with a burst of speed. Baylee could have sworn she heard pops of gunfire as they sped away.

Baylee gasped, clutching the dash as the car sped back down the street. The Hellcat’s

engine roared again, and Landon could see it giving chase in the rearview mirror.

“Hold on!” Landon barked, spinning the wheel and slamming on the brakes to swing the car around in a tight arc. The tires screeched in protest, but the maneuver worked, and they were now speeding down the street, the Hellcat in hot pursuit.

Landon’s focus narrowed to the road ahead, his mind racing as he tried to think of a way to lose their pursuers. They had the advantage of knowing the area, but the Hellcat was faster, more powerful. He needed to out-think them, not outrun them.

He reached for the mic on the dash. “D-78 to shift sergeant zone 3. Porter!”

“Go ahead.”

“We’re coming your way. The Dodge is chasing us. I’d appreciate some intervention.”

“Gotcha!”

They tore through the streets, weaving between parked cars and dodging late-night traffic, but they couldn’t shake the Dodge. Baylee hadn’t made a sound, leaving him to concentrate on his evasive maneuvers. She grunted once, then was quiet again. She looked back when she heard the Austin PD car pull in behind the Dodge, blue lights flashing and the siren screaming, and he could see by her face that she was relieved. Landon suddenly decelerated and cranked the wheel, sliding into an alley just wide enough to squeeze through. Then he veered sharply to the right again, the car jolting as it jumped the curb and slid into another narrow alley.

The Hellcat roared past the entrance, unable to stop in time, and continued down the street, the APD cruiser chasing him. A second cruiser flashed by seconds later.

Landon slowed down, navigating carefully through the tight space. His heart was pounding in his chest, the adrenaline making his hands tremble slightly on the wheel. He glanced over at Baylee, who was pale but composed, her eyes wide with fear but also determination.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice rough with tension.

Baylee nodded, her grip on the dash loosening slightly. “Yeah. I’m okay. You?”

“I’m fine,” Landon replied, though the truth was he felt anything but fine. The reality of how close they had just come to danger was hitting him hard, but he couldn’t afford to dwell on it. Not yet.

They reached the end of the alley and eased back onto the main road. The Hellcat was nowhere in sight, and for now, it seemed they had lost their pursuers. But Landon knew it was only a matter of time before they regrouped.

“We need to get to a safe place,” Landon said, his voice tight. “I’ll call Morgan and have him send backup to meet us.”

Baylee nodded, her eyes still scanning the darkness outside. “Landon... thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Landon’s heart skipped a beat at her words, but he forced himself to stay focused. “We’ll get through this, Baylee. I promise.”

As he drove them toward safety, the tension in the car slowly began to ease, but the threat of what lay ahead still loomed large. And he was more determined than ever to protect Baylee, no matter what it took.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Landon drove them through the dark streets, taking a circuitous route to ensure they weren't being followed as they headed back to the boring, safe house. The adrenaline was still coursing through his veins from the chase, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Baylee was silent beside him, her arms wrapped protectively around the cat carrier. Siggy had been unnervingly quiet throughout the whole ordeal, so a few minutes ago she'd pulled the carrier up onto her lap to check on him.

"Siggy is old," she said, her voice subdued. "He was old when I adopted him from the shelter after I got back from Ohio. I don't want him getting too stressed out."

"You don't have to explain. I don't know many cats who have been in car chases. He probably needs some attention."

She snorted out a laugh, her expression lightening. "True."

Landon stole a glance at her - she was staring through the door of the carrier, tension in the lines around her eyes. Her long, honey-blond hair had fallen free of the braid a little, and he wanted to reach out and stroke it, but he refrained.

Finally, they pulled into the driveway of the safe house. Landon killed the engine and they just sat there for a moment, the silence thick around them. He studied the darkened windows, scanning for any signs of trouble, before letting out a slow breath.

“We’re clear,” he said gruffly. “Let’s get you inside.”

Baylee gave a small nod, not looking at him. Landon got out first, instinctively checking the surroundings again, before gesturing for her to follow. They hurried up the front walk, and he quickly keyed in the code to unlock the door.

The instant they stepped inside, some of the tension seemed to bleed out of Baylee’s shoulders. She set the cat carrier down and immediately moved to close the curtains over the windows. Landon watched her with a pang - she shouldn’t have to live like this, constantly on guard.

Once they had the house secured, an awkward silence fell between them. Landon cleared his throat.

“I’ll let the team know we’re here.” He pulled out his phone to send a message to Morgan about their arrival.

Baylee didn’t respond right away. When he glanced up, she was studying him closely, that intense look in her green eyes that always made his breath catch. Then, to his surprise, she crossed the room in two strides and threw her arms around him.

Landon froze for an instant before instinctively returning the embrace. She was trembling slightly against him, and he tightened his arms, trying to reassure her that she was safe now. Her familiar vanilla scent enveloped him, and he had to resist the urge to bury his face in her hair.

After a long moment, Baylee pulled back, swiping at the moisture in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said simply, her voice thick with emotion. “I don’t know how to repay you for everything...”

“You don’t have to,” Landon said gruffly, tamping down the feelings that her hug had

stirred inside him. “It’s my job to protect you.”

She held his gaze for a beat longer before giving a small nod and turning away. Landon watched her bend down in front of the cage. She had been through so much, more than anyone should have to endure.

Pushing aside the tangled mix of emotions, he focused on the practical next steps. He quickly fired off the delayed text to Morgan with their update and instructions for him to call if Hector or Luis was apprehended. Then he moved methodically through the safe house, double checking all the locks and ensuring all entrances were secured.

By the time he finished his sweep, Baylee had returned with Siggy, having let the disgruntled cat out of his carrier. She settled on the couch, gently stroking his fur as he eyed his new surroundings warily. Landon couldn’t help a small smile at the sight - her first instinct was still to take care of her pet, even after everything.

He took a seat in the armchair across from her. “Are you okay? I know that had to be a little scary for you.”

Baylee nodded, not looking up from Siggy. “I’m fine, honestly. That was low-key compared to some things I’ve done,” she said, flashing him a grin.

Landon admired her resilience. “Well, I’m going to have to make our dates more exciting, then,” he laughed.

Baylee’s eyes widened, and her cheeks went pink. That was when he realized what he’d said.

“Oh, I didn’t mean...”

“That’s okay,” she waved a hand at him. “I knew you didn’t mean date date.”

Her voice was small, tired. Landon hated hearing that vulnerability, that strain of insecurity. He clenched his fists, wishing he could take away all of that.

Baylee was more than just a case. Even before the shooting, he'd been very aware of her in the hallway of the apartment building. And seeing her go to work. Catching the hint of vanilla that he now associated with her. He'd wanted to approach her before everything went to hell and they were thrust into this forced proximity. And he didn't want her to think that he was only interested in her because of their proximity.

"I want to take you out on a real date when this is all finished," he said, before his better sense could curb his tongue.

Her bright eyes flashed to his in surprise, and she gave him a tired smile. "You don't have to say that," she murmured.

He cocked his head at her. "You're so confident in everything you do, yet you blush when I say I want to date you. Why is that?"

She stroked the cat for a moment, then lifted her chin. "Because most men are just curious about the scars. Let me ease that curiosity for you. They're only on my face and the back of my left arm. Nowhere else."

Landon scowled. "Have you seriously been asked that?"

She barked out a bitter laugh. "And more."

"Well, let me clear something up, then. I don't care about your scars. You're an interesting, beautiful woman, and I'm attracted to you. I want to take you out when this is all over," he repeated.

Baylee looked down at the cat, shaking her head. "It's not a good idea, Landon. I

appreciate the thought, but it wouldn't work."

"Why not? I was interested in you before the shooting, and now that I know you and admire you personally, why wouldn't I want to date you?"

She shook her head again, and he was starting to get frustrated. "You're not in a relationship with someone already, are you?"

She barked out another bitter laugh. "No."

"Then why won't you go out with me?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Listen, you're a great guy, but it just wouldn't work with us. I have a lot of... history."

He cocked his head. What the heck did that mean? "Okay. Everyone has history. That's part of the fun of dating someone new, is learning about them."

Looking heartsick, she clutched the cat to her, making him grunt. Her eyes had gone distant, and Landon worried that she was lost in her mind. Then she refocused on him. Her chin went up and her eyes cooled, and his stomach clenched. He had a feeling she was about to tell him something bad. "I'm damaged goods, Landon. I wasn't just attacked when I was at Nightshade. I was raped. By three men. They're the ones who cut me."

For a second, he didn't understand the words she'd spoken. Then he blinked, replaying what she'd said. Raped?

Landon was gripped with a sense of fury so deep, it pushed him up out of the chair. His throat was tight, and his heart was racing, and he felt like his head was going to explode. There was an actual haze of red over his vision. He'd never believed perps

when they said they saw red. Looking down, he realized his fists were clenched into hammers, and he was quivering, dying to pound them into something. He couldn't open his mouth to say anything, because his jaw was clenched so tight.

Never in his life had he felt such inarticulate violence toward another person. Toward three other persons.

Then he looked at Baylee, sitting on the couch, clutching her cat. Her face was desolate, pale, and it struck him that every time she had to tell someone about her past, she was being re-victimized. She had the look of a woman who was resigned to being alone the rest of her life because no man wanted to be with her because she'd been raped. Then he thought about the other things she'd talked about. The scars, and the men being fascinated by them.

He drew in a deep breath, and then another, and before he could second-think his actions, he crossed the short space to the couch and crouched in front of her. Reaching out, praying it wouldn't freak her out, he rested one hand on her knee and looked up into her face. She seemed surprised, her eyes wide and swimming with tears. Did she expect him to reject her for this? He had to drag her back. "What's your favorite food?"

She blinked, and a tear drifted down her cheek. She shouldered it away, still clutching the cat. "Japanese," she whispered.

"The first thing we do when we get out of here is we go to this great little hibachi place I know. It's small, but I know the owners. And the food is out of this world."

She stared at him for a long moment, as if to test his sincerity.

"Baylee," he continued. "I'm so sorry that happened to you. No one deserves to go through that trauma." A remnant of his victim training came back to him. Reaching

out, he slowly squeezed her hand. “Thank you for trusting me enough to share this. I can’t imagine how hard that must be.”

Baylee’s eyes shimmered with tears, but she squeezed his hand back. “I didn’t tell you to make you feel sorry for me. I just...don’t want you to have unrealistic expectations if we get involved.”

Landon shook his head. “I don’t see you as damaged goods at all. Your strength and resilience are admirable. You have got to be the most kick ass woman I’ve ever met, and I’ve known a few. I’ll respect whatever boundaries you need, on your timeline.”

He hesitated, feeling like he needed to be honest. “Full disclosure. I’m not sure if I can be in a long-term relationship. I’ve had a few here and there, but they were mostly short-term. I,” he stalled out, then took a deep breath. “My dad wasn’t a great role model, and I worry that I will carry on his legacy.”

Baylee frowned and shook her head. “I don’t see it, Landon. You’re too much of a care giver.”

He wasn’t sure about that. “Well, please know, if we take things slowly and you’re open to it, I’d very much like to pursue something more with you when you’re ready. You’re the first woman I’ve ever said that to. You deserve to feel valued and safe.”

Baylee’s lip trembled slightly as she studied his sincere expression. She gave a small nod. “It means everything that you’ll be patient. Thank you, Landon.”

The two sat in silence for a moment, a profound understanding and acceptance passing between them. Landon made no promises, no demands - only the quiet offer of his care and support, however Baylee needed it.

But he couldn’t help but ask, “Are they dead?”

Baylee barked out a laugh, and her expression took on an edge. “Yes, they are. All three. I killed them myself.”

The breath he took then was lighter, easier, and one side of his mouth tipped up in a grin. He held his fist out to her, and she bumped his knuckles, her mouth spreading.

“Hell, yeah,” he breathed.

Landon knew he was getting in too deep, treading dangerous waters by letting his feelings for this woman grow past professional regard. But looking at her now, metaphorically bruised and battered from her ordeals yet still radiating an inner strength, he knew there was no going back.

Baylee took a quivering breath. She hated telling people what had happened to her, but she understood that sometimes, the other person was working against demons that they didn’t know about. She’d learned a long time ago that if she told people what had happened to her, they understood her better.

Her boss at work knew. A few friends. And Mrs. Traeger knew, just in case she had a medical emergency. Baylee could count on one hand how many people she’d told, and it wasn’t very many. It wasn’t the type of thing that came up in normal conversation.

She’d told three men in her lifetime. One, Chase, had been cool, but the other two had looked at her differently after she’d told them, and the vibe in their relationship had changed. Baylee had withdrawn from them, and they hadn’t protested.

It was a little shocking, this situation they were in. She’d gotten used to men being out for themselves, always. Why was he so different?

And now Landon knew. God, had she only known the man, like, three days? That

was a new speed record for baring her soul.

Something about Landon, though, drew her. Yes, he appealed to her on a physical level, but there was something in his eyes that told her he was on her side. Yes, he had to be here for his job right this second. That wasn't what she meant.

There was an intensity in his expression when he looked at her, like everything she said was important to him. And he never made her feel like she was just a scarred woman. It was like he didn't even care about her scars. The way he looked at her made her toes curl. And the way he kissed her...

He confounded her.

Reaching out, she rested a hand on his cheek. "Thanks for saying that, Landon."

"I mean it," he said, covering her hand with his own and turning his head to press a kiss to the center of her palm.

Baylee drew back her hand. It was tingling from the warmth of his mouth.

His phone beeped on the end table, and, with a final squeeze of her hand, he stood up from her to cross to it.

Baylee was glad that she'd told him about being raped. If anybody could understand why she was the way she was, surely it would be a cop. And she appreciated what he'd told her about his fears.

The professional facade had broken, though, and he'd looked supremely pissed when she'd told him about the attack. At first, she'd thought it was at her, then she'd realized he was mad for her. Not at her. And it made her own emotion swell. He looked like he would go to war for her, and she appreciated it more than she could

say.

And it didn't seem to have turned him off.

She would give him some time and see if anything changed between them. And when it did, she would make the break and move on.

Make the break. They weren't even anything yet, and she was already thinking about leaving. She'd been on this merry-go-round before, though.

Shaking her head, she took a deep breath. Siggy looked up at her, his crossed eyes making her smile. "You understand me, don't you buddy," she whispered.

Landon turned, scowling, and Baylee knew it wasn't good news.

"Well, they lost the car on the freeway."

Baylee huffed out a breath. Damn. She'd been hoping that they would catch at least one of the brothers that were after her. It could never be that easy...

"Okay." She left it at that. Weariness settled onto her shoulders. "I need some sleep. I remade the bed upstairs. You take that and I'll take the couch."

Landon gave her a dark look. "You're joking, right? There's no way I'm taking the only bed. I'll sleep right here in the recliner. I need to be downstairs. If they break in, it will be down here."

Baylee didn't like it, but she understood his reasoning. "Okay. If you need anything, just yell. I'll probably hear you. I'm a light sleeper."

Landon flicked a hand. "I may slip upstairs for a shower in a bit, but everything else I

need is down here. Sleep good, Baylee,” he said softly.

She gave him a slight smile as she walked past him, the cat in her arms. “You too, Landon.”

For a second, she had the urge to pause as she passed him, as if for a kiss. Then she moved on, grabbing her backpack as she headed up the stairs.

“Baylee,” he said.

She paused, looking back at him.

He gave her a wink. “Keep that gun beside you.”

She snorted and nodded, continuing up the stairs.

Siggy settled into the bed like he owned it, and she took her toiletries into the bathroom to freshen up. She brushed her teeth and stared at herself in the mirror. Usually, she forgot about her scars until she looked in the mirror and tried to put makeup on, or one of the kids’ parents looked at her weird. Ninety-nine percent of them had the manners to move on, but every once in a while, there was a stinker.

She didn’t mind when the kids asked what happened. They were genuinely curious, and sometimes her history gave them a common ground to connect on. She would tell them she got injured in the war, and that was usually enough, and then they would compare scars. They accepted her for her sense of fun and her kindness, not her outward appearance.

Baylee went through her nightly ritual and turned for the uncomfortable bed. She slid into the sheets and groaned, her mind still racing with everything that had happened that day. She’d been in a freaking car chase! Looking back, though, she’d been

confident in Landon't ability to get them out of it. He hadn't hesitated, and he'd driven more competently than she ever could have.

In that respect, she was thankful that she was here with him, under his protection. Under Austin PD's protection.

Turning on her side, she drew Siggy close. "You had more excitement today than you've had in a long time, too, huh, old man?"

He snuffled at her and let her pull him into the curve of her body. She could tell he needed the closeness, too, tonight.

Hopefully, something would change tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Landon was bored out of his mind.

He was still kind of amped up from the night's events, and he didn't really have a release for the energy. Normally, on nights like this, he'd stop by the gym on the way home from work. Or if he was really desperate, he'd go for a jog. Not his preferred method to burn off energy, but it worked in a pinch.

Every time he thought about what Baylee had told him, his blood pressure crept up.

Nightshade had happened years ago. So, the fact that she was still dealing with the aftereffects what had been done to her, eleven years later, pissed him off on her behalf. Baylee seemed to have a kind heart, and she definitely had a hopeful personality. The thought of someone laying their hands on her...

Sitting back in the chair, he took a deep breath. There was nothing he could do about those men or what happened to her. What he could do was support her now, in any way he could.

Was he turned off that she'd been raped? Hell, no. He only worried about how it affected her now. Was she able to have sex without being traumatized? Did she even want to have sex? He'd caught a few looks from her that made him think she was interested in him. And the sensual tension was definitely there, on both sides, he thought. The kiss had knocked him on his ass.

Could he realistically deal with a woman that had been attacked that way? For several

minutes, he thought about the question, and he eventually decided she was worth trying for.

It would just have to be up to her to make the moves. Which would be hard for him, because he was usually the aggressor in most relationships.

Aggressor. That word had just taken on a very different connotation.

He would have to take it slow and not let his libido get out of hand.

Landon slept a little, but it wasn't a comfortable sleep. The chair wasn't meant for sleeping, per se. So, he moved to the couch. It was even worse. This place was not built for comfort.

By six, he was up and moving around. The place did have a coffeemaker, which he desperately needed today.

When Baylee walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, she gave him a sidelong glance. "You all right?"

"Yeah," he growled, pulling the cup from the coffee machine. Luckily, creamer had been on Morgan's list, and he poured some in, liberally. He needed something to sweeten his mood today.

"I'm sorry. I think you should take the bed tonight. I didn't sleep well either."

Landon glanced at her. There were bags beneath her pretty eyes, and lines grooved around her mouth. "Why didn't you sleep?"

She gave him a wry smile as she opened the fridge. "Well, I kind of have a list."

Yeah, she probably did.

“Well, is there anything I can ease from your mind?”

She’d grabbed the carton of eggs to set on the counter, and her back was to him. “Not really.”

Landon wasn’t sure he believed her answer. Moving to the counter beside her, he leaned down enough to catch her gaze. “That didn’t sound very convincing.”

She shook her head, her hands pausing. “I think... I think yesterday was a lot. Between the anxiety of being here, and then telling you about the rape, it’s been a little overwhelming. A lot overwhelming, if I’m honest.”

“I understand that,” he said, reaching out to tug on the end of some of her hair. It was down right now, and he looked at the long lengths. “Why do you wear this up in that messy ponytail?”

Her eyes flicked down as he let her hair drift through his fingers. “Because it’s easy. And I don’t care what anyone thinks about it. When I went back home, I cut most of it off. It’s taken years to grow this long.”

“It’s beautiful,” he said simply. “The color especially.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking down at the egg carton. “I thought I would scramble some eggs.”

“You don’t have to cook for me,” he said, tilting his head to catch her eye again.

“I know, but I like to have something to do with my hands.”

“Okay. While you cook, why don’t you talk to me about what else you’re worried about.”

She huffed out a breath, pulling a bowl from the cupboard. Then she reached for a fork from the silverware drawer and started cracking eggs into the bowl. “Well, technically, I’m supposed to go back to work in three days, and I don’t know if this will all be over by then. There are two funerals that I really feel like I should be at…”

Her voice trailed away, and her eyes filled with tears. Landon set his coffee cup down. “I’m gonna hug you. Is that okay?”

Nodding, she let him wrap his arms around her, and he pulled her tight, their hips leaning against the counter. “You know there’s nothing you could have done to save them, right? You did more than any average citizen could ever be expected to do.”

“I know,” she breathed, “it’s just hard.”

He held her for a few minutes, stroking a hand down her back and across her shoulders. The silence stretched for a few minutes, but he was content not to move. She was a very nice armful. It was obvious she was hurting, though. “When I was on the road, I had a buddy work one of my shifts. My sister was coming in and we were going to a ball game. Anyway, my buddy works my shift and gets this roadside assistance call.”

Baylee drew back a little to look up at him. Landon had only told this story once before, to Cass when she’d been his partner.

“It was just some random call,” he shrugged. “Old people needed help with a tire. He was helping them when a guy doing ninety slammed into the ass end of his cruiser. It slammed into the broken-down vehicle, and my buddy was hit. He didn’t even make it to the hospital. Tony died on the side of the road.”

“I’m so sorry, Landon,” Baylee breathed, and she rested a hand on his chest.

Taking a deep breath, he looked down at her. “You can’t second-guess your actions over and over again. There’s no sense in it. It could have just as easily have been me, kneeling in the road, changing their tire when that truck hit. When fate says it’s your time, I don’t think it matters what you’re doing or where you are. That’s it. It took me a long time to get over feeling like I’d killed him.”

Baylee drew back, her eyes concerned and her face pale. “You know you can’t think like that.”

Landon gave her a pointed look. “It’s easy to tell someone that, but it’s really hard to put into practice. We’ve both dealt with situations like this.”

She was silent for a long minute, then she glanced up at him. “It was really hard when I came back from Nightshade,” she said, her eyes going distant. “There were ninety-six people stationed on Nightshade, including forty-one injured Marines. By the time it was all over, thirty-two of us survived.”

Landon remembered reading those numbers when he’d been researching Nightshade.

“The guilt that we felt was... massive. Of the thirty-eight that came home, six have taken their own lives because they can’t live with the survivor’s guilt anymore.”

A sudden flash of fear hit him, and he scanned her face. “You don’t feel like that, do you?”

She shook her head immediately and gave him strong eye-contact. “I wouldn’t do that. I was one of the lucky ones. My two best friends and I made it through together. I don’t have guilt for surviving. And I don’t think Olivia or Rex do either. They’re both in amazing relationships now, and I don’t see hardly any markers for depression.

Actually, Olivia just had a baby.”

A beautiful smile flashed across her face. Her relationship with her friends was obviously very important to her.

“Good,” he said, voice firm. “Hang onto your friendship.”

“Oh, we do,” she said, her expression the most lighthearted he’d ever seen it. “I talk to Olivia weekly, and Rex almost as often. We survived hell together, and I’ll never let them go.”

Landon grinned at the bull-headed look on her face, and he couldn’t resist dropping a kiss to her lips. “You’re cute when you get tenacious like that.”

Snorting, she pulled away and reached for the eggs again. “Whatever,” she said.

Landon paused her movements with his hand on her own. He waited until she looked at him. “I’m serious, Baylee. I know you don’t want to think someone could overlook your scars to think you’re cute, but I guarantee you, I do.”

Her lips clamped tight, but she nodded. “Thank you. It may take a while to sink into my brain, but I appreciate you telling me that.”

Landon moved back a little to give her space to move around, but he stayed in the kitchen while they talked about inconsequential things. She fried up some sausage patties, sending the scent through the house. Even Siggy stalked in to see what smelled so good.

“So, what’s his story,” Landon asked, looking at the beat-up old cat.

Baylee giggled, and his gaze snapped up. Okay, that was the cutest fucking sound. It

made him want to laugh with her. It made him want to make her laugh more.

“He’s at least twelve, the shelter said. But Siamese and Siamese mixes can live into their twenties. They pulled him off the street and thought he would be adopted quickly, because of his coloring. He’s a dick, though, and he’d been returned three times by the time I got him. I think he recognized a kindred spirit.”

She made a vague motion with her hand to her face, and Landon almost growled at her not to do that. He needed to quit with the gut-reaction shit. It would take a while to build up her self-confidence.

And he didn’t think she meant it in a denigrating way. She was scarred. It was just the way she was, and she’d resigned herself to it. “Can I ask an indelicate question?”

“Yes,” she said slowly, like she regretted giving him permission.

“Have you thought about plastic surgery? I’m not saying you should, at all. I think you’re beautiful. But for your sake, and the way people deal with you?”

Her mouth quirked, and she turned to face him, leaning back against the counter again. “I’ve thought about it. A lot. But the people that matter to me don’t care what I look like. And the scars... they’re part of me, now. I’m not averse to having them minimized, but down the road maybe.”

Landon nodded, taking in her words. He wondered if she didn’t keep them as a reflection of how she felt inside.

“Thank you for answering.”

“I don’t mind curiosity. That’s why I like working with the kids so much. They just ask, rather than whispering and being snide.”

Turning, she went back to scrambling the eggs.

The phone rang, and Landon turned to pick it up from the table. “Yeah, Morgan?”

He listened for a moment, and his eyes flicked to Baylee. “Well, isn’t that interesting. Okay. Right. Yes, definitely.”

He pushed the button to end the call and slipped the phone into his pocket.

“Hector is missing. They found the car abandoned a few blocks away from his mother’s house. The keys are in it, as well as his phone.”

Baylee’s eyes went wide. “That seems suspicious.”

“I know,” he said, voice calm. “Morgan is canvassing the area.”

His phone rang again less than a minute later, and he pulled it from his pocket. “Yeah, Morgan?” His brows shot into his hairline. “You’re joking?”

He listened to him talk for a few seconds. “Okay, keep me posted.”

Baylee’s hands were clutched in front of her. “What’s going on?”

Landon cocked his head, obviously thinking. “They found Hector’s body in the dumpster behind his mother’s house. Killed Mexican Mafia style. Stabbed to death.”

Her mouth dropped open. “No way.”

Landon shook his head, more than a little shocked at the direction the case had just taken. “He’s sending me a note that was attached to the body.” His phone beeped with an incoming message, and he pulled it up. “Tell the pretty nurse she did us a

favor, and now we did her one. Don't worry about Luis. ”

Baylee blinked, her brows almost to her hairline. Landon was feeling the same shock.

“So, does that mean all this is over?” she waved a hand at the house.

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “Let's see what Morgan figures out.”

Baylee turned back to the stove and finished the eggs, setting two plates at the table. She'd cut up her strawberries from the farmer's market as well, and they ate in silence. Landon didn't know how to feel about the information that Hector was dead. He hadn't even seen the man or spoken to him. Luis was even more of a ghost to him. He'd seen mug shots, of course, but that was it.

He ate his eggs and berries, stealing glances at Baylee. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, frowning. “It just seems abrupt.”

“Yes. Well, we're not out of the woods, yet.”

They finished breakfast, and Landon washed up the plates, setting them in the dish drainer. Then he paced. Baylee sat on the uncomfortable couch and stroked the cat. “What did they mean, I did them a favor?”

Landon sighed. “Well, Chino Vega may have aspired to be bigger than he was. Tango Blast has a lot of members in Austin, but there are other gangs trying to take over. Maybe they planned to take him out, and you helped them. Gangs and gang members sometimes have a weird value system.”

“And maybe they didn't want Hector in there at all.”

“Well,” he said, leaning back against the chair, “the Vega family was making a lot of noise and drawing a lot of attention to them. They don’t want that. They prefer their operations to fly under the radar. Shooting up a hospital and chasing cops around the city isn’t doing that.”

Baylee frowned, and he could understand why she was at a loss. This operation had taken on a life of its own, and now, suddenly, it seemed like it was going to be tied up in a neat little bloody bow.

It was too easy. Even when the information rolled in, he was going to look at it with an extra-critical eye.

Baylee pushed her plate aside. “So, if they did put a stop to the hit they had on me, what do we do?”

Sighing, he shrugged. “I have as many questions as you do right now, but I think we go home.”

“Can we take their word that they’re done with me?”

He huffed out a breath. “I wish I could answer you. I don’t know, honestly. What we would probably do is keep a few people posted on you for a while, just to make sure there are no more incidents. We listen to the chatter on the street. And we go back to real life.”

Baylee frowned. “It seems too easy.”

He winced. “I know. We just need more information.”

They got that information an hour later when Cass knocked on the front door. Landon gave her a shoulder hug as she came in, Gunnar at her side.

Siggy hissed at the dog, but the dog didn't even seem to notice the cat. Cass let him go and he immediately went to Baylee for scratches. Landon chuckled as the cat streaked up the stairs.

Cass looked tired. Knowing her, she'd been up for days tracking down leads and talking to her informants. The woman had been the best partner he'd ever had, and he appreciated the extra work she'd put in on this case.

"Have a seat," he said, waving her to the couch.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Baylee said. "We have water or water."

Cass laughed, her voice raspy. "I'll take a bottle of water. Thank you."

Baylee retrieved the bottle, handing it off before sitting on the opposite end of the couch. "So, is it real?"

"The murder? Yes. The note? Yes. The message? Yes. It all seems legit."

Landon eased out a breath. His former partner was one of the few people he'd trust the word of. "So, you think we could go home?"

She held up a cautioning hand. "Give it a few hours and let them finish the murder investigation. I think we'll know more later today."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It seemed very weird walking into her silent apartment later that day.

Austin PD had officially given them the all-clear to return home. Multiple sources had reported that Hector's death was the culmination of a power grab gone wrong. It had started with his brother Chino going to war with another local gang for territory. Chino's woman had been killed, and Chino had lashed out in a very public way.

When Chino's brother tried to avenge his death, he'd made even more of a spectacle, and it had been nipped in the bud.

Landon had messaged a CI that had contacted him early in the investigation, and 'Haze' had confirmed that they had been given a hands-off order.

They thought it was the Mexican Mafia that had taken care of business and calmed things down. Even though they were a smaller group, they were strong and cunning, always looking for a way to advance their territory.

Baylee let Siggy out of his cat carrier and filled his bowl with food. He would probably hide for a while.

Wandering through her own space, she carried the backpack through the hallway. Stopping, she loaded the washer with dirty clothes, but didn't start it yet. It wasn't a full load.

When she'd asked Landon about attending the funeral of the nurse and doctor that

had been killed, he'd shrugged and nodded. "If they've removed the hit, I think you're safe enough. Let me get cleaned up and I'll take you. The viewing hours are three to seven, right? I'll be back about five, and I'll drive you over."

That gave her a couple of hours to get ready.

Baylee wandered through the rest of her space. Landon had already checked it, but she just wanted to make sure herself. Everything looked in its place. No one had been in here, that she could tell. She set her .380 on the bedside table and headed into the bathroom for her shower.

When she was done, she sank down onto the side of her bed, groaning at the feel of her own mattress. She hadn't slept well at all since she'd been gone. Maybe she would lay down just for a few minutes.

Baylee woke to someone pounding on her door. She looked down at herself. She hadn't even pulled panties on before she'd laid down. Glancing at the clock, she cringed. She certainly hadn't meant to sleep for three hours.

Landon pounded on her door again. "Coming," she called, cinching the towel around her and jogging down the hall. He was probably a little freaked out that she hadn't answered.

Baylee pulled the door open, looking up into Landon's concerned face. "Sorry, sorry... I sat on my bed after the shower and realized how tired I was. Give me just a few minutes."

Landon stepped in, closed the door, and leaned against it, smiling slightly. He was wearing a gray suit jacket over slacks, and his dark hair was combed tight to his head. The stubble that had been on his jaw was gone, and he smelled like an expensive department store. Baylee grew warm as she realized how tiny the towel actually was.

She hadn't even hesitated to let him in, though. That spoke to how much she trusted him, she supposed.

"You take your time, darlin'. I'm enjoying the show."

Laughing lightly and blushing hard, Baylee turned to head back down the hallway. But she realized she went a lot slower. And maybe her hips swayed a little. And she didn't mind him watching.

After she closed the bedroom door, she leaned against it for a minute to catch her breath. Landon Hunter made her pulse race and her body flush, and she really wanted to take time with him. Now that they were out of the crazy situation, maybe he would take some time with her.

They arrived at the funeral home a little later than she wanted, but it was better than not arriving at all. The parking lot was packed, and there was a cop directing traffic through the mess. Baylee hadn't known Elise Walker well, but it was important for her to be here to pay her respects. Dr. Grant's service was at the same time, across town, so she'd decided to attend his graveside service tomorrow. She wondered if Catalina had had a service. And not for the first time, she wondered where the baby had gone.

They walked into the funeral home and stood in line to talk to the family. Baylee acknowledged a few people and talked to Dr. Mendez as she was leaving. But she didn't really want to be social, here. It was time to honor a dedicated nurse's life.

It took them an hour and a half to get through the line and back out to the car. Landon's hand rested on her back most of the way, and she appreciated his support. They were quiet as they headed home.

"You're not feeling guilty about her death, are you?" he asked, his voice rumbling. He

accelerated smoothly through the Austin evening.

Baylee glanced at him. “No, not really. I know it was Chino Vega’s fault she died.”

“Okay. Just making sure. You had nothing to do with it. I’m glad you see that.”

“I don’t need to take on any more guilt than I already have,” she murmured.

“I get it.” He paused. “Wasn’t that your boss you were talking to?”

“Yes, it was. She still wants me to work out my week off, so I’ll go back in a few days. It’s crazy to think how fast time has gone by. A lot has happened in a week.”

“It really has. Do you have any reservations about going back?”

She shook her head, glancing at him. “I think I’ll be fine. The ED isn’t my normal assignment. I’m usually a few floors up. I’ll be happy to get back to my kids. We have a few long-term patients that I miss.”

Smiling, she tilted her head to him. “We have this one little girl that is absolutely the sweetest. Tory has a blood disease, so she’s in and out a lot. And we have another little girl that was in a car crash several weeks ago. Multiple broken bones, along with head trauma. She can’t even speak yet, but she responds to us.”

Landon cocked a smile at her. “Sounds like you really love your job.”

“I do,” she said softly. “I tend to get really attached to them though. Which can be heartbreaking sometimes. They don’t all make it.”

Baylee was surprised when Landon reached out and gripped her hand, resting it on her thigh. It was an unexpected, thoughtful thing to do, and her throat tightened with

emotion.

When one of her patients died, sometimes she would call Olivia and they would talk about it. Olivia had her own demons to deal with, though, and Baylee didn't always feel like she had the right to add to them. And since she'd gotten together with Connor, and had the new baby, Baylee hadn't always felt like she could take time from their relationship. They'd been together a year, now, and they were doing so good. Baylee loved Connor and felt like he was the perfect match for her friend.

Rex was in an amazing relationship, too. Lauren was also a cop, which she thought was kind of ironic. They were getting married at Lauren's farm in a few weeks.

Baylee was very thankful that Liv and Rex had found love, but she was a little envious. It was hard being the fifth wheel when they all managed to get together.

Seems like they'd all fallen for first responders.

Leave it to her to be the last and the most difficult. Then she realized what she'd thought. Had she started to fall for Landon Hunter?

She was kind of amazed that he was still here. She'd expected some kind of withdrawal after she told him about being raped, but he'd only shown her support. And she didn't think he had any ulterior motives.

And the way he looked at her...

She looked down at his hand, held in her own. His fingers were long and strong, and there was a dusting of dark hair peeking from beneath his shirt cuff. She wanted those fingers to stroke her skin and mould her body. She wanted those fingers to cup her face as he kissed her again. It had been a long time since she'd felt a connection to someone this strong, and she was scared how out of control she felt when she was

around him.

In a way, she was disappointed not to be stuck in that terrible brown house with him. Maybe if they'd been there a little longer, things would have progressed more.

No, it wouldn't have worked in a forced situation. They both needed air to breathe, and space to retreat, and the ability to make decisions freely. So, he needed to know that she wanted him.

The thought of going to bed with Landon Hunter was exciting to her. Did she have the gumption to tell him that?

They drove back to the apartment building, his hand holding hers the entire way. When they got out of the car, he escorted her inside. There was a cool breeze blowing, which was nice, but it made his scent swirl around her. They walked upstairs, and Baylee was suddenly worried that he was going to see her inside and disappear. "Did you maybe want to grab some dinner?" she asked, a little breathless.

A smile spread across his mouth. "I would love to. I didn't know if you'd be up for it, or not."

"There's this great little Chinese place that delivers..."

"The Red Dragon?" he asked, and she grinned, nodding. "I love that place. Sold!"

Baylee closed the door behind him as he stepped in and secured all the locks. Then she turned to lean against the door and look at him. She had the wild thought that maybe she was holding him inside, and it was almost enough to make her giggle.

Landon grinned at the look on her face and tilted his head. "What are you thinking?"

She shrugged lightly. “I just had the thought that you’re trapped now, in my lair.”

He snorted, glancing down at Siggy, who had stalked up to look at them. “With your protective dragon...” He reached out to stroke her hair. She’d left it down, and it curled slightly in the heat. “And you look like a princess with all this hair. I know it was a somber day, but I thought you looked beautiful.”

Baylee felt the blush creep up her cheeks, but she lifted her chin. “Thank you for saying that.”

When Landon lowered his head to her, she could have moved away, but she really didn’t want to. Instead, she reached up to touch his freshly shaved jaw, running her fingers over the texture of his skin. And she leaned up to meet his kiss.

As soon as his lips touched hers, Baylee felt like she was falling. She held onto Landon, knowing he would never let her stumble. His strong arms wrapped around her, and he pulled her close as he kissed her. His hands clutched at her, and it set off a chain reaction inside her. His fingers squeezed and her body responded.

She’d known that this coming, this connection. It had been building for a long time. Even when she’d thought he was aggravated with her as they passed in the hallway, there had been an awareness there. And the closer they’d gotten over the past few days had only cemented that connection.

Landon tilted his head and made this sound in his throat that set something in her body quivering. She wanted to hear that sound again.

Drawing back enough to look up at him, she took a deep breath for courage. “I know you were here for the case, but I’m hoping you’ll stay for me, at least a little longer. I really like you, Landon, and I think we could be good together.”

He gave her a rakish smile. "I know we'd be good together, but I'm willing to take it slowly. You're worth waiting for."

Baylee made a bit of a face. "And what if I don't want to wait?"

Immediately, the tension between them ratcheted up. There was a quiver in his shoulders as he cupped her face to kiss her again. "Tell me clearly, Baylee, so there's no confusion." There was a rasp to his voice that hadn't been there before.

She drew back and looked him in the eyes. "Take me to bed, Landon Hunter, and make love to me."

The words were barely out of her mouth before he was swinging her up into his arms. Baylee squealed, because it wasn't a sensation she'd felt before. She was a solid girl, and it showed how very strong Landon was that he could do this. He strode down the hallway with her in his arms, angled through the doorway and set her very carefully to the mattress. Then he moved around to the opposite side of the bed and laid down, facing her, completely clothed. The room was semi-dark, but she could see the shine of his eyes in the light from the bathroom.

"We're still going to take it slow," he rumbled, "because with the way I feel right now, I could do something to spook you, and I wouldn't mean to. I've wanted you for a long time, Baylee Mitchell."

She smiled softly at him. "I've wanted you for a long time, too. And just to be clear, I've been in relationships with men before, and I enjoy sex. But the trust has to be there first. I trust you, Landon. More than I've ever trusted anyone."

They moved toward each other, and they met in a culmination of need. Now that they'd committed to being together, the restraint had all been torn away. Baylee started unbuttoning Landon's shirt while he ripped off the tie and tossed it aside.

Sitting up, Baylee stripped off her blouse. She reached for the clasp of her bra, but Landon shook his head. “No, don’t take that off, yet. I want to do that,” he said, grinning.

Baylee laughed and reclined back against the pillows, stretching her arms above her head. Landon rolled off the bed, shucking his dress pants and shirt. Baylee stared as his broad body was exposed. Her heart skipped a beat as he turned to look at her. Landon Hunter had an incredible body. His abs were tight, and there was a dark trail of hair running from his chest to his waistband. Her eyes lingered there, on the bulge beneath the cotton. Oh, goodness...

“You are so incredibly beautiful,” he said softly, shaking his head. Then he crawled across the bed to her.

Baylee wasn’t sure about beautiful part, but she wouldn’t disagree right now. She’d been thinking the same thing about him.

Landon leaned on his elbow beside her, one hand reaching out to smooth up her stomach. His fingers teased at the edge of her no-nonsense bra, but they didn’t breach the barrier.

Leaning down, he began to press teasing little kisses to her skin, along the edges of the bra cups. Baylee could feel how hard her nipples were, and yet, he avoided them, instead working around the cups. She wriggled, wrapping her arm around his shoulders as he leaned into her.

Then he snagged a finger into the bra cup, and swept it back and forth, just barely brushing at her areola. Baylee gasped, her fingernails digging into his shoulder as he leaned down and pressed the gentlest of kisses to the tip of her nipple. Then he leaned across and did the same to the other one.

“Please, Landon,” she gasped, and she wasn’t sure exactly what she wanted him to do. Maybe that she just wanted him to do more.

Landon responded by licking the tip of her nipple through the cotton of the cup, then lightly nipping at it. His hips shifted against her, grinding his hardness into her.

Then both of his hands were gliding behind her back. Quicker than she expected, he’d unfastened her bra and was slipping it off her shoulders.

“Oh, Baylee,” he breathed, and he immediately took one of her nipples into the hot heat of his mouth.

Baylee groaned, her hands clutching at him as Landon worshipped her breasts. She stroked down his shoulders and the length of his back, her hips shifting with need. His own hips were doing a subtle grind, and she could feel her body loosening, preparing for him.

Landon pulled back, breathing heavily. “I need to slow down a little,” he said, laughing softly. “You’ve got me so on edge.”

“That’s your fault,” she said, smiling up at him.

“I can’t help it. I’ve been dreaming of doing this with you, to you, for so long...”

He took her mouth in a wet, sinking kiss, until he pulled away again.

He seemed to be content to explore her everywhere. Baylee had kicked her shoes off as soon as she’d walked in the door, but she still wore her cotton skirt. Landon ran his hand down around over her hip, and he started inching the skirt hem down with his fingers.

His mouth quirked to the side as he teased her. “This dress is very pretty, but I was wondering how difficult it would be to take it off you. Or maybe just shove it up and let you wrap your legs around me.”

Baylee’s heartbeat picked up at the imagery. “We can still do that,” she said, but he shook his head.

“Nah, maybe next time. Your scrubs are just as sexy. Walking behind you down the hallway, watching your ass, used to make my morning.” He shook his head at her.

Baylee barked out a laugh. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “I was very aware of you before I met you,” he admitted. “And now that I know you, the need is overwhelming, because I know the woman you are.”

Baylee glanced down his body, and it was very apparent he was happy to be there, rubbing on her. He hadn’t taken his boxers off yet, instead choosing to tease her.

Besides the physical, his words touched her heart. All that time, she thought he’d been pissed at her or something.

“You were just as intriguing to me,” she said softly, reaching up to fondle the hair at the back of his neck. She wanted to touch him all over and explore him like he was doing her. She was being a little indulgent, though, letting him explore and tease. She loved to feel fingers on her skin. Maybe because she didn’t let it happen very often. Her lovers were few and far between, and it had been a long time since the last one.

When a person lived alone and had no significant other, they forgot what it was like to be touched. Sometimes, the need to touch another living person was so strong. She’d heard it called skin hunger before, and that was so right. Landon touched her now like he couldn’t get enough of her. And Baylee was loving it. Yes, there was a

sensual throb in her core, but his hand was appeasing a different kind of want.

She shivered as the waistband of the skirt tightened.

“Lift your hips,” he said softly, then shifted down the bed. She did as he told her, and the skirt was tossed away. Then his hand was gliding up her ankle and calf. He paused to circle her knee, and she shivered.

Landon chuckled, tickling her lightly there. “I’ve never known a knee pit to be an erogenous zone,” he murmured.

“It is when you haven’t been touched there in a while,” she said breathlessly.

He lingered for a moment before he began pressing kisses up her thighs. “You have an amazing shape, and your skin is so beautiful.”

Baylee reached down, stroking her hand up his thigh. It was bristly with dark hair, so she teased at it with her fingertips. She was truly torn, right then. She wanted him to move higher so that she could touch him, but she was loving that he was taking the time to explore her.

His touch went away for a second, then she felt him stroke his fingers across the waistband of her panties. “Can I pull these off?”

She nodded quickly and lifted her hips for him to pull them away like the skirt.

“Oh, Baylee,” he breathed, and she felt his breath at her hipbone. He pressed kisses across her belly to the other side, and his outside hand swept up her left thigh to hold onto her hip. Baylee hadn’t even realized she was shifting her hips back and forth when he kissed her.

Then his fingers were teasing at the curls between her thighs. For a second, Baylee cringed. She was au natural down there, and she wondered if she should have shaved at some point.

When, she wasn't sure, but...

Her mind derailed as Landon ran a finger down through her curls and into the wetness beyond. Then he stroked up around her clit, and she lost all sense of everything except that focused point of pleasure. She rocked her left thigh out to give him better access, and he took advantage of it.

"I'm going to shift between your thighs, Baylee," he told her, his voice so deep and firm.

"Okay," she panted.

Then he was between her legs, pressing them wide, his tongue replacing his fingers. Baylee cried out, the pleasure so sharp it sent her spinning. She tried to wriggle away from the focused attention, but Landon wedged his arms beneath her thighs to keep her still as he rocked her world. Within seconds, Baylee could feel the building heat of an orgasm, and she gave herself up to the feeling. Landon knew exactly how to pleasure a woman, and she gave him that power over her.

And when the climax hit her, it was so vibrant. Colors exploded beneath her eyelids, and she knew she had to have screamed.

Landon teased at her gently for a few more seconds before pulling away slightly. It took Baylee a moment to catch her breath, and when her eyes fluttered open, she found Landon grinning down at her. "I think you needed that," he said softly.

"You have no idea," Baylee breathed.

Her hands were sore, and she realized she had them clenched around the iron headboard. Letting go, she wrapped her arms around Landon's shoulders. He kissed her, and she could feel his dick resting at the entrance to her body. Naturally, easily, Baylee spread her thighs for him, and he pushed inside.

Baylee's body was still throbbing from the orgasm, and as she accepted his length, she knew there was more to come. He started to rock into her, and that heat built again.

Landon peppered her with kisses, and his hands seemed to be everywhere. But he was moving so carefully within her, and Baylee knew he was trying to be conscientious of her history. His shoulders shook as he tried to hold himself back.

"Landon, I need you to move harder," she said, reaching down to grasp his hips in her hands. "Please," she gasped.

"If it's too much, let me know," he rasped as he kissed her neck, and she nodded.

"I will," she promised.

Immediately, he shoved into her, and she felt him hit bottom. Oh, God, she was so full, now. But it was perfect. He arched into her again, and again, his rhythm picking up speed, until her second orgasm slammed into her. She cried out, her body tightening around him, and she felt the orgasm hit Landon as well. He arched and cried out, his body quaking as he strained over her. Then he collapsed, and his weight on her was so perfect. She pressed kisses to his sweaty jaw and everywhere she could reach, her hands running up and down his back.

"Give me just a second," he breathed into her neck. "I don't think I can move."

Baylee snorted softly and tightened her arms and body around him. "I don't want you

to move,” she whispered.

Landon sagged into her even more, and they floated in a sensual haze. Eventually, he moved, though, pulling his hips away carefully. Baylee watched him. He’d put a condom on at some point, and she hadn’t even been aware. Landon sat at the edge of the bed for a moment before walking into the bathroom to dispose of the prophylactic.

When he returned to the bedroom, he pulled on his boxers before crawling into bed. Baylee took a moment to use the bathroom herself, then walked back in. When he lifted the sheet for her to climb under with him, smiling softly, her heart stuttered. After everything she’d gone through, he’d cared for her like no one ever had, and she knew she was falling in love. Had fallen in love.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he took her into his arms.

She knew what he was asking. “I’m perfect,” she said, and it was true.

There had been no flashbacks or even thoughts of what had happened to her eleven years ago, and she was so appreciative of that. “For a long time,” she whispered, “everything I did reminded me of the rape. Colors, scents, a hint of an accent. It took a lot of intensive therapy for me to even talk about it. And it took me years to even enter into a relationship where I could think about sex. With you, though, there was no hesitation. I thank you for taking the time with me, though.”

He shook his head, his eyes narrowed with tiredness. “I didn’t do it for you. I did it for me. Your body pleases me immensely, and as soon as I get some sleep, I’ll show you again.”

He gave her a rakish grin and pulled her tight. It was a little warm under the sheet, but Baylee didn’t care. Closing her eyes, she let herself appreciate being held so close.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Landon was in trouble.

They'd made love twice last night, and it hadn't even begun to satisfy him. Baylee was... like no other woman he'd ever met. She was giving and warm, spicy, and so damn smart. There had to be something off, or something she did wrong, some quirk he hadn't seen yet. She couldn't be as perfect as he thought. Right?

Man, she had literally rocked his world last night. He'd tried to be careful of her, and he was glad he'd taken the time, because she seemed to be okay today. He'd never been with a woman who had been assaulted before, so he didn't know about her triggers. He'd gone to bed with her, knowing that at some point he might have to stop what he was doing immediately, if she freaked. And he was totally okay with that. The night had been more special than he could have imagined, though, and he was getting excited just thinking about it.

This was not the place to do that. They were at the graveside service for Dr. William Grant, former head of the emergency department of Dell-Seton hospital. And even though they'd gotten the strange promise on the dead body that they weren't coming after Baylee anymore, Landon wasn't going to trust the gang bangers. He would stand back and survey and watch out for everyone here. Morgan was stationed at the front of the cemetery with a couple of marked cars, and Cass was circulating through the huge crowd.

Dr. Grant had been a vital part of the hospital, and it looked like about two hundred people had shown up to honor him. It was standing room only. There were about

thirty chairs positioned at the front of the service for close family and friends. Everyone else had to stand. Before he'd joined the staff at Dell-Seton, Grant had been in the Navy, so the military contingent was here as well. His coffin was in still in the hearse, though. Obviously, the funeral staff were waiting for the crowd to sort out.

Landon surveyed the area. It was a beautiful day in Austin, and a breeze had moved in to ease some of the heat. Which was good, because with that many people crowded around the gravesite, both sitting and standing, it would have been a lot.

For a while, it was hard to see Baylee. She stood with several other women, nurses, he assumed, before a younger man in a suit escorted her toward the front of the service and into a chair. The family must have requested she be closer, or something. He wasn't sure how services like this worked. He could tell by Baylee's expression, and the heightened color in her cheeks, that she didn't like the special attention.

Landon moved around the crowd. There was a bit of a slope to the area, so it was easy enough for him to take a little higher elevation so that he could monitor Baylee. She'd been positioned at the end of an aisle, near an older man in a dark suit, and they seemed to be chatting.

The service was about to start, and he glanced around the crowd, watching for trouble.

Baylee didn't like being singled out, so, when the attendant came to get her, she almost didn't go. She wasn't sure why the family wanted her seated near them, because she certainly hadn't done Dr. Grant any good. Maybe if she'd acted sooner...

Whatever the reason, she wasn't going to argue or put up a fuss, so she followed the man across the fake green grass carpet to the third aisle from the front. Smiling, the attendant removed the 'reserved' sign and motioned for her to sit. Baylee sat down, brushing against the older man beside her. "Sorry," she said, smoothing down her

dark skirt and crossing her legs.

“It is no problem,” the man said, his voice deep and tinged with an accent. He shifted a little to give her more room. “I don’t think they knew how many people would show up to pay their respects.”

“Yes, I don’t think so either,” she said, and leaned against the back of the chair. She looked for Landon and spotted him on the far rise. He wore a dark suit, sunglasses, and his hands were folded in front of himself. He’d gelled his dark hair today, making it look wet, and she wanted to run her fingers through it.

Last night had been amazing, and her body felt the effects of being loved so thoroughly. She was a little achy, down low, but certainly not enough that she wouldn’t make love with him again today, if they got the chance. Her breasts tingled as she thought about the way he had cared for her last night. They hadn’t made any promises to each other, or voiced anything about the future, but that was okay for now.

This morning he’d gone home to shower and change, and it had been so quiet in the apartment after he’d left. She’d taken her own shower and gotten ready for the eleven-a.m. service. Even though she’d known he was coming to pick her up, it still startled her when he knocked on the door at ten o’clock. It took about thirty minutes to get to the cemetery, so they needed to leave soon.

When he entered the apartment, though, he’d very naturally leaned down and dropped a kiss to her lips. Then he’d paused and spent a little more time kissing her. Neither one of them cared that the door was standing wide open, and anyone could have seen them. They were too lost in each other to even realize.

As she looked at him, he gave her a lopsided smile. It was enough to make her tummy flip, and she grinned back at him. Then she remembered where they were, and

she sobered.

“He’s a handsome man,” the older Hispanic gentleman murmured beside her, drawing her attention. He nodded his chin up the hill, toward Landon.

“Yes, he is,” she sighed, glancing back at Landon.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

Baylee cocked her head. Was he? “It’s complicated,” she said eventually.

The man made a forward motion with his hand. “Did you know Dr. Grant,” he asked softly.

Baylee glanced around. The service was about to start, but there were still people getting settled and talking. “Not exactly. He was just an acquaintance.”

The older man twisted in his chair a little, looking at her. His gaze settled on her scar, tracing it from end to end, and something softened in his expression. “My grandmother’s grandmother was a soldadera . She fought in the Mexican Revolution, and stories of her heroism have been passed down through my family for generations. You have the look of a soldadera, with your fierce eyes and scar.”

Baylee winced a little. She wasn’t sure what to say to that. “Thank you.”

The man reached over and patted her hand. “Don’t ever be ashamed of your scars, mija . We all have them, and they mark your courage.” He reached up, pointing at his own widow-peaked hairline. There was a long line of scar that cut through his thick salt and pepper hair. It looked like it ran all the way around to the back of his head. “I received this when I first took over mi familia . But I survived and made them great.”

The laugh lines near his eyes deepened with a smile, and Baylee found herself responding. He seemed like a nice old guy, and he appeared to be here alone. Dr. Grant hadn't been Hispanic, so the man must be a friend of the family, or maybe someone he'd worked with. He held an old-fashioned black fedora hat on his lap.

"You are the one who took out the attacker, yes?"

He gave her a searching look, and she took a deep breath. More than one person had tried to talk to her about that already today. The old man was looking at her, his brows raised, and she felt like she needed to answer him. "Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Did you know he was a gang member?"

"We suspected he was, because of the woman he was looking for."

"Well," the man said with a heavy sigh, settling the hat on his head. "Sometimes, the young have more machismo than sense. You saved a lot of people." The old man held out his hand, and Baylee took it, automatically. He leaned in toward her, his dark eyes gaining an intensity that hadn't been there before. "You are a jewel, Ms. Mitchell, and I want to assure you that no one will be coming after you. Chino Vega was a walking dead man. You just corrected him before I had a chance to."

Baylee blinked, wondering if she'd heard what she thought she heard. Frowning, she tried to pull her hand back, but the old man held it more firmly now.

"Don't be alarmed," he admonished, smiling at her lightly. Now, though, she could see the hint of threat. "If I had wanted to kill you, I could have done it a long time ago. Even in the middle of this grieving crowd. This is my way of proving to you that you are safe. I have no need to kill you. None of my Syndicate will kill you. I give you my word. Chino Vega and his Tango were a thorn in my side, and you rectified the situation for me. And I rectified the situation with Hector for you. Luis," he made

a face, “Luis is young, and I will take him in hand. I promise you that.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

Baylee’s heart was racing, and she tried to look for Landon, but the old man had positioned himself directly in her line of sight. To the side, the funeral director stood up to draw everyone’s attention. The hearse doors were opening, and the ushers were removing the coffin.

“And now, I have to go,” the man said, glancing toward the front. “Please, I came to pay my respects to the family, but maybe you can do that for me. I know your police friend is watching, but it’s in his best interest if you don’t react when I leave. Have a wonderful day, soldadera Mitchell.” He started to turn away but paused. “Oh, and your car is taken care of. It will be in your driveway when you get home.”

Finally, he let go of her hand, stood up, and faded into the crowd.

Landon felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and he pulled it out, then swiped open the message from Cass.

One of my informants says the head of the Texas Syndicate is going to be here . He’s not sure why.

Fear raced through him, and he searched for Baylee. He could see the edge of her dress, but her face was blocked by the old man beside her. The old Hispanic man.

Landon started moving, fear filling his heart. Everything was probably all right, but he needed to see her. He needed to see her face and make sure she was all right.

People were moving to the right, and he really didn’t want to disrupt a funeral, but he would if it meant keeping her safe. Then the crowd cleared, and he saw her. She was

standing and looking straight at him. Even from this distance, he could see the fear in her wide eyes and open mouth. But she shook her head at him adamantly and made a halting motion with her hands. Then, very carefully, she smoothed her skirt and sat back down in her chair.

Everything in him screamed to move forward, but she seemed to be okay. There was no sense causing a scene if he didn't have to. Despite the pounding drive to keep her safe, he waited.

Landon was sure the service was beautiful, but he was only peripherally aware of it. All his attention was on Baylee and making sure she stayed safe. She sat perfectly straight in her chair, the seat beside her now empty. The crowd had gone still for the ceremony, and there was no one moving anywhere else in the cemetery that he could see. He typed Cass a message that something had happened, but that Baylee seemed okay. They would meet up after the service.

As soon as the crowd disbursed, he waded through to Baylee and took her elbow in his hand. "What happened," he hissed.

Her eyes met his for a long moment. "Not here," she said.

They walked out of the cemetery and went straight to his car, on the far access road. The line of attendee cars moved slowly through the manicured grounds as they left. As soon as they reached his car, he took her into his arms.

Baylee sagged into him, and he could feel the slightest quiver shaking her body.

Landon breathed in her hair, resting his jaw on top of her head. It was totally unprofessional, and if anyone saw them, he would have some serious explaining to do, but he felt like they were pretty secluded. He held her for a long minute, before drawing back enough to kiss her. She cupped his cheeks in her hands and rested her

face against his own as she breathed.

“What happened,” he asked again.

She drew back enough to look up at him, and she related the conversation with the old man. As he listened to the details, his blood chilled. He glanced around, but he knew he wouldn’t see anyone. “Get in the car,” he growled.

Landon secured her inside the vehicle, then circled and got in. Before he took off, he sent Cass and Morgan a message to meet up at the station. “I’m going to need you to do an official statement, Baylee.”

She nodded, drawing the seatbelt across herself. “I thought you would.”

Landon secured his own belt and waded into the traffic, leaving the cemetery. He clasped Baylee’s hand on her thigh and didn’t let her go as they drove.

“It was strange,” she murmured. “He reminded me of my grandfather, and he seemed to have a genuine kindness. But then this switch flipped, and I could tell no one around him mattered, just the safety of his family. And he would have disposed of me without hesitation if I was a threat.”

Landon glanced at her. Baylee had been through a lot in her life, but he could tell that the interaction had shaken her. “You’re okay,” he told her firmly. “If he gave you his protection, no one will touch you.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“I have an idea,” he said, sighing. “The Texas Syndicate and the Tango Blast gangs have been fighting over territory for a long time. I don’t think Chino Vega was a big player, but I think he was one domino in one crew. You knocked him down, and they

knocked the next two down. More territory for them.”

Baylee shook her head. “It’s so crazy. To look at him you never would have thought…”

They confirmed the man’s identity as soon as they got to the station and into Cass’s office. She listened intently to Baylee’s description. “Only one man with a scar like that,” she said, and tapped into her computer.

When she pulled up a picture, Baylee nodded. “That’s him.”

“Roberto Ramirez was a long-time criminal,” Cass said. “He’s been in and out of prison many times, but in the past twenty years, he’d cleaned up his act. Now he just runs the Texas Syndicate, absorbing territory as his soldiers fight. He has a pretty big family now, and he’s a grandfather several times over.”

“He said he got the scar when he took over his family,” Baylee said.

“Yeah, he perpetrated a coup. We believe he killed his own father to take over the position, although it’s never been confirmed.” Cass grimaced, her pale eyes narrowing. “Most of what we know is hearsay, but we know he’s been the leader for a long time. And Hunter is right. If he promised you protection, no one will touch you. He could have killed you ten times over sitting beside you at the cemetery. I think you’re safe to resume your life.”

Baylee sagged in her chair, and Landon gave her a smile. She reached out and took his hand, which surprised him. It seemed to surprise Cass and Morgan as well, but they didn’t say anything.

They walked out of the station half an hour later, after she’d written her statement. Landon would add it to the case file, and his investigation would be complete. Once

he debriefed his lieutenant, he would move on to the next case.

There was no moving on from Baylee, though.

They drove home, neither one of them saying much. It had been a crazy day, and they were each dealing with the information they'd learned.

"So, that means you're off the case," Baylee said, stroking her fingers over the back of his hand. It seemed so natural now when he drove to just rest his hand on her thigh.

"Yes. It actually means the case has been closed. It seems weird to take the word of a gangster, but they do have a strange honor they live life by. I feel like you're as safe as you can be."

She nodded, resting her head against the seat back. Her face was flushed, but the AC was pumping out good, cool air. They would cool down in a minute.

"I mean," she said softly, "I've gotten used to seeing you every day. I might go through withdrawal."

Landon slanted her a grin. "Oh, really? Well, we can't have that, can we? Maybe you need to bring me cookies every day."

Baylee laughed, her eyes glinting, and something cracked in his heart. After everything that had been thrown at her recently and throughout her life, she still found a way to smile and give back to people. He needed that kind of light in his life.

"I don't want to go back to just passing you in the hallway," he said. "Your ass is great, but I want to be snuggled up in bed with it, not watching it walk away from me."

Her expression softened. “I don’t want to just pass you in the hallway, either. Let’s play it by ear and see where it takes us.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Baylee laughed and flopped down into her overstuffed chair, swiping the bar on the phone. “Where the hell have you been, woman? I’ve been calling you and you never returned my messages.”

“Well, it’s been kind of busy, here. Jessamy brought something viral home from the sitter’s the other day, and then baby Nicole got it, and we ended up in the hospital with her for a couple of days. Two of Connor’s men were out with the same thing, so he couldn’t take off... Life has been a bitch recently,” she finished, huffing out a breath.

“They’re okay now, though?”

“Yes, they’re completely recovered, though it was a scary couple of days. What’s been going on with you?”

“Oh, you know,” Baylee said. “Same old, same old. Well, not exactly.” She recapped the past week for Olivia. There was silence on the other end of the line from her, and Baylee worried she’d overloaded her former lieutenant.

“I’m gobsmacked,” Olivia said eventually. “I mean, I heard about the shooting. The whole country did. But I didn’t connect the dots that it was you. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, and she knew in her heart she meant it. “Like you said, it was touch and go for a couple of days.”

“And tell me about the detective. Your voice goes all soft and mushy when you say his name.”

Baylee cringed. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Oh, yes, it does,” she laughed. “Believe me. So, what’s the story?”

Baylee sighed. This had been why she’d called Olivia. “I am totally and completely in love, Liv, and it scares the crap out of me.”

“Why does it scare the crap out of you?”

“Because it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. My tummy flips when I see him, and I lose all my common sense. Last night we were necking in the car until one of my older neighbors caught us. I need to know if it’s real, or some proximity induced fantasy.”

Olivia was laughing even harder on the other end of the line, and Baylee wished she was here in person. She could really use a Liv hug.

“This is the guy I bitched about before,” she said. “The one that was so handsome but seemed like he was mad at me. Hallway guy.”

“Oh, no way! And did you figure out why he was so mad at you?”

She sighed. “He wasn’t mad at me. He was mad for me, because he knew my scars were man made. He said that every time he saw me, he wanted to kill whoever had marked my beautiful face.”

“Oh, hun,” Olivia said, her voice soft. “And did you tell him how you got the scars?”

“I did. And I told him I had killed the men who did it to me. He gave me a fist bump,” she laughed.

Liv snorted. “Sounds like our kind of guy. And how is the sex?”

A wash of heat rolled through her body as she thought about making love with Landon, and it must have taken her longer to respond than she’d thought, because Olivia was cackling on the other end of the line. Baylee felt her cheeks heat, though there was no one there to see it.

“Stop it,” she admonished her friend, but she was laughing too. “It’s really, really good, okay? I told him about my past, and he takes so much time with me. It’s pretty amazing, actually.”

“Then I would say not to look a gift horse in the mouth,” Olivia said firmly. “If he’s this amazing, and he wants to be with you, let him be with you. Enjoy your time together. If anyone needs a happy-ever-after, Baylee, it’s you. After everything you’ve been through, you deserve it. You deserve him.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she nodded to herself. She hadn’t said she loved him yet, but it had been on the tip of her tongue so many times. The next time she saw him, she would tell him her feelings. They were supposed to go out tonight, so maybe it was time.

“Is he coming to Rex’s wedding in a couple of weeks?”

Baylee frowned. “I haven’t really asked him yet.”

“Well, you’d better get on that. You know we’re going to interrogate him, make sure he’s good enough for you.”

Baylee laughed, but she knew the joke was semi-truthful. When Olivia had first gotten with Connor, she and Rex had given him a thorough screening. And when Rex had gotten with Lauren, his love, Baylee and Olivia had taken her out for a girls' night to make sure she was the right one for their friend. Their significant others had passed the tests with flying colors, and she had a feeling Landon would as well.

The thought of the three friends being together, all with their own loves, made Baylee's throat tighten with emotion.

"Can you believe it Liv? After everything we've gone through."

"I know," Olivia said just as softly. "I thank my stars every day that we made it out to live this life. I love you, Baylee, and I can't wait to see you."

"I can't wait to see you. Give those babies a kiss for me. Later, Liv."

"I will. Later, Bay."

Siggy stalked up to her and sat in front of her feet. Leaning forward, Baylee scratched him under the chin. She was feeling a little weepy right now, but it was a good kind of weepy. It always reaffirmed what she was thinking when she spoke to Olivia.

She glanced at the time on her phone. She needed to get ready for her date.

Landon sighed as he jogged up the steps in the apartment building, tiredness dragging at him. This hadn't been how the night was supposed to go.

He hesitated at Baylee's door, wondering if she was pissed at him. They were supposed to have gone out tonight. They had reservations and everything, but he'd been called out to a B&E. And it had been a chaotic mess. Morgan was still at the station, doing paperwork, and it was past nine o'clock.

Tonight was supposed to be their first real, official date since the shooting. Baylee had returned to work today, and she'd seemed understanding when he'd texted her, but he needed to see her face, just to be sure.

He knocked on her door.

Landon heard footsteps beyond, then the sounds of the locks clicking open. Baylee opened the door and gave him a broad smile. Her golden hair was hanging loose around her, and she was the most beautiful thing he'd seen all day.

"I'm sorry," he said, stepping forward.

"Don't worry about it," she admonished, leaning in to meet him.

Landon took her mouth in a hard, needy kiss. They'd been together almost every day for the past week, and he'd felt her absence sharply today. They couldn't be together all the time, he knew that. They had jobs and lives and other people that counted on them, but she was becoming an integral part of his happiness.

Baylee met him just as hard, her hands curling into his suit jacket as she pulled him inside. Landon slammed the door shut behind them, then wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off her feet.

Baylee pulled away from the kiss, laughing, her bright green eyes shining. "Put me down before you hurt yourself."

He set her on her feet, but he didn't release her. Landon shook his head, feeling his tiredness wash away. "I don't ever want to let you go," he said, and her expression softened.

"I missed you today," she said.

“I missed you today,” he repeated, frowning. “And I’m sorry about the date. We got a late call-out, and we had to go.”

She shrugged lightly. “I’m not worried about it. Honestly, I was kind of tired after work.”

“Tell me about it,” he said, and he led her in to the couch. They settled together, her hand holding his.

“It was okay. There was a little awkwardness. I think people were expecting me to be fragile or something.”

Landon quirked a brow at her. “They obviously don’t know you very well, Warrior Woman.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “Yeah, some of them I haven’t known long. I found myself kind of getting frustrated with them, though. The kids were the highlight of my return. They acted like they hadn’t seen me for a month, rather than a week. And they knew nothing about the shooting, which was nice.”

“Good. They don’t need to know about that kind of stuff.”

She shook her head. “How was your day?”

“Not bad, at least until the end. I finished up some paperwork on a couple of cases that had been waiting for me to get back.”

“The week was kind of surreal, wasn’t it?” she asked softly. “I look back at it and can’t believe everything that happened.”

Landon ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I get what you’re saying. It was definitely

out of my normal too. I mean, I met this amazing woman, and took a cat on a high-speed chase, avoided being killed by a gang patriarch...”

They laughed, and Baylee shifted, leaning up to kiss him again. Landon tugged at her, and she moved further, straddling his hips. Immediately, he was hard as a rock beneath her, his tiredness forgotten. Baylee looked down at him, her mossy green eyes going soft with need. Landon loved that look because it was just for him. And he never wanted to lose that look.

“I love you, Baylee,” he said, and then felt a moment of pure fear. Had he really said that out loud? He definitely hadn’t planned to say it.

Baylee went still above him. Then her eyes filled with tears, and she leaned down to kiss him again.

“I love you, too,” she said, peppering kisses along his mouth and jaw. Then she drew back. “Are you sure? It’s only been a week. And a crazy week, at that, like you said...”

Landon covered her mouth with a finger. He wasn’t surprised she was leery. “I’m sure. Hell, I was half in love with you before I even knew you. Between people singing your praises and your lovely ass, I was already set up to fall.”

And that’s exactly what he’d done. Fallen. Hard and fast.

“I talked to my friend Olivia earlier, and I told her I loved you. She said not to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Landon quirked his brows. “I’ve never met Olivia, but I completely agree with her assessment.”

He kissed her again and ran his hands up under her sweatshirt. He needed her skin against his.

Baylee must have felt the same way, because she slid off his lap to strip. Landon shoved his pants and underwear down enough to release his aching cock. He wrapped a fist around himself as he watched Baylee toss her clothes away. God, she was the most stunning woman he'd ever met. Her body was perfect to him, for him, and he never wanted to let her go.

With a daring look in her eyes, she straddled him again, this time sinking deep over his length. Landon shifted his hips a little closer to the cushion edge, wrapping his hands around her hips. She was so wet and ready.

Bracing her hands on his chest, she started to move. The curtain of her hair hung over one shoulder, and she looked like a goddess. Her hair swung in time with her movements, and he caught the scent of vanilla.

Baylee groaned, her head rocking back on her neck as she rode him. Landon sat up enough to take her breast in his mouth, tonguing her nipple hard. Then he drew it into his mouth and sucked.

Gasping, she gripped his head in her hands, but she didn't push him away. "Yes, please," she panted, her movements slowing a little as she savored what he was doing to her. Landon moved to her other breast and did the same thing, and he felt her pussy ripple around his cock.

Landon knew he was on a very short timeline because he could feel his own orgasm building, so he leaned back against the couch again. Then he started pushing and pulling her hips with his hands. He rocked her back and forth, taking some of that control away from her, and gliding her clit over his hardness at the top of the stroke. He adjusted in tiny increments as he watched her face, and within just a few strokes,

she screamed out, her shoulders going back as she gave herself up to the pleasure.

Landon's fragile control disintegrated. With a hoarse shout, he arched up into her again and again, emptying himself.

She rolled forward and collapsed against his chest. "I love you, Landon."

"I love you, Baylee."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:38 am

The bride wore a soft blush colored dress. It was a little unconventional, but now that Baylee had seen the venue, she understood why she'd chosen the color.

They were outside of San Antonio, and it was a dry, late summer looking into fall. The vegetation of the area had turned golden. It wasn't peak color, yet, but that short span of time in between, a transition time.

They were on Lauren's property, on the back property line. It was a beautiful little forested area with a rock stream cutting through, and Baylee could tell they'd done a lot of work back here, clearing brush to get ready for the wedding. She'd been here before for Rex's birthday celebration a few months ago. When she'd heard they were doing an outdoor wedding, she'd been a little leery, but it was truly beautiful.

They were sitting on old church pews, and there were little bundles of pampas grass in a range of colors decorating the ends of the pews, as well as a rustic arch where Rex and Lauren would take their vows. Lauren had chosen a range of fall colors, and they fit into the environment perfectly. Baylee could see the shine of glass twinkle lights in the trees that would come on when the sun went down for the reception.

"This little spot is just magical," Baylee whispered, leaning into Landon's shoulder.

He nodded, reclining back against the pew. The seating was filling up, and the ceremony would start within the next ten minutes. There was an interesting mix of people walking in. When she saw several members from the Delta team, along with their wives, she teared up a little. Truck she had seen before, because he hung out with Rex regularly.

“Are you okay?” Landon whispered.

She nodded, but she couldn’t say anything right then. Once she got a hold of her emotions, she leaned into him. “Most of the group that walked in are the Delta team that rescued us from Nightshade.”

Brows raised, he glanced over the men, and she knew he understood what dangerous characters they were. She had told Landon about that night from beginning to end. It was strange talking to someone about it other than her counselor, but once she was done, and had answered all his questions, a strange sense of calm had settled over her. Landon had simply taken her in his arms and held her for a very long time. Then he’d told her what an amazing human being she was, to have survived that and come out with her psyche intact.

Landon finally understood that being responsible for Olivia’s leg amputation was more traumatizing than the rape and killing the men who had done it.

“I don’t know Olivia,” he’d said, “but I have a feeling she’s told you that you did the right thing. I would lose both legs if it meant I would live to come home.”

She had sobbed then and let him cradle her as she released years of grief and heartache.

That night had changed something in her. She felt lighter in her skin, and more open with people.

Landon had changed, too. He was still leery about following in his dad’s abusive footsteps, but she thought the fear had receded a little.

“You’d never hit a woman like that,” Baylee had argued. “let alone a child. It’s not in you, Landon.”

He didn't seem entirely convinced, but he was committed to trying to be his best for her. It made her love him all the harder.

Landon still had his stuff at his apartment, but he ate, slept and made love to her at her apartment. He'd all but moved in. Mrs. Traeger had cackled when she'd caught them exiting the apartment together, but she'd winked at them, too.

They pulled into the driveway right after Olivia and Connor, who had just unloaded the kids. Olivia was in a flowing dress, laughing and smiling as she swung the baby carrier out of the car like a pro. Connor got Jessamy out on the other side, and they waited as a family as Baylee walked toward them. As she looked at a beaming Olivia, Baylee finally felt at peace with her own actions that day so many years ago. She hugged Olivia for a long time, and her friend seemed to sense that something had happened. "We'll talk later," she whispered, and Baylee nodded.

Landon had hugged Olivia like a long-lost friend, and Baylee could tell that he and Connor had hit it off as well. When big, muscle-y Rex had come out onto the porch, Landon had sized him up. Then he'd bumped Connor's shoulder. "I think we can take him," he'd said, and they'd all laughed.

There was a sense of rightness as Baylee watched Landon interact with her very best friends. A sense of everything being settled in the world. In that perfect little wooded glade, she watched Lauren walk down the aisle, and didn't even try to stop the tears. Big, gruff Rex wiped away his own tears as he vowed to love and protect Lauren and her son, and the kiss was so poignant.

One of these days, she would be the one walking down the aisle, and she was sure she would cry even more then.

They had all been through hell. And they'd all carried the physical and emotional scars from that time. It was so gratifying to see them moving on, though, and letting that painful past go.

There were great things ahead for them.