



# River (THE GOLDEN TEAM #1)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** The Warrior

River Channing is every inch the hero—an ex-Special Forces operative with a body honed for danger and eyes that burn through Kats every defense. His presence is intoxicating, a heady mix of confidence and raw magnetism that makes her pulse race and her thoughts spiral. But River is more than just a warrior; he’s a man with his own demons that haunt him.

The Enigma

Kat McDonald, the Golden Team’s enigmatic assistant, is a woman River can’t seem to resist, no matter how many rules he’s made to prevent this exact situation. She’s a tantalizing mystery, her every look, every whispered word pulling him in deeper. She’s off-limits, married...or so he thinks. She’s a woman with secrets, haunted by a past that she can’t shake.

The Challenge

Now, the lines between duty and desire are blurring, and as dangers close in, River’s prepared to risk everything to keep her safe. This isn’t just attraction...it’s survival. And for Kat, he’ll break any rule.

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

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River

I glanced over at Kat as she diligently typed away on her iPad. “Are you already working?” I inquired.

She raised her head, and those beautiful silver eyes met mine. Her hair, usually in a bun on top of her head, was down for the first time in the two years she’d been part of our team. I was surprised to see the long braid down her back.

She looked stunning. Her skin was flawless, and her lips—well, I shouldn’t be thinking about them, but I was. Her husband was one lucky bastard. My eyes wandered down her body, just like they always did when I had the chance.

I couldn’t help but blurt out, “What color is your hair?”

Instantly, I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. Why the fuck did I ask that?

Kat took a deep breath, something she always seemed to do whenever I entered the room, like she was preparing herself. “I’m writing up notes from this morning’s meeting. My hair is dark brown—sable, to be exact,” she replied. “Why do you ask? You’ve known me for two years, and it’s always been this color.” She narrowed her eyes at me .

I stammered, cursing myself for being an idiot. “No reason, just curious,” I mumbled.

She raised her eyebrows, an expression she often wore in response to my strange comments, then returned her attention to the iPad.

I wanted to reach over and touch her skin to see if it was as soft as it looked. I was starting to lose it with Kat being this close to me. I shouldn't have sat down next to her. The plane seemed closed in with her this close.

I was losing it, sitting this close to her. I shouldn't have chosen the seat next to her, especially with all these empty seats around. What was wrong with me? Did I enjoy torturing myself? Apparently, I did. Her scent was driving me wild. I was grateful for the stack of papers in my lap—otherwise, it would've been obvious how aroused I was.

I hoped I didn't have to fire her, but she's too damn hot. She radiated sex appeal, and for the past two years, I'd done everything in my power to ignore it. I took out my phone and began making notes about the fire in Texas.

As former Army Special Forces personnel, my team and I work together to save lives. Sometimes, we help put out Dereck fires. Because of our experience handling these situations overseas, we are called upon to assist within the United States.

It's a difficult job, but the relief on people's faces when we arrive to contain the fires makes it worthwhile. I glanced over at Kat, who seemed a little antsy; stealing glances at me every so often.

Our business was primarily high-security; we went overseas to rescue soldiers caught up in saving the lives of other soldiers.

We are all Army Special Forces, and we are all the best at what we do. That's why we are constantly called upon to handle the most dangerous missions.

As soon as we landed, I sensed Kat had something important to say. “Just spit it out,” I said, glancing over at her.

“These fires are dangerous,” she began, her voice edged with concern. “I know you’ve dealt with them before, but I have to say it anyway. The fire needs to be capped before anyone dies. As long as the oil spills, it’ll keep burning. We should also call in another team to handle the fire moving toward town. That way, we don’t have to split up.”

She twisted her hands together like she was nervous. “Not that I’m trying to tell you how to do your job,” she whispered.

I was puzzled about why she needed to tell me something I’d already taken care of. Was she concerned about our team working on this fire? We were well aware of the dangers. She never ceased to amaze me with her knowledge.

“It sounds like you are telling us what to do. But I’m sure you don’t mean it that way. Tell me what you know about these fires?” I asked.

Kat bit her lower lip, a habit of hers that I found more and more distracting. I couldn’t help but stare at her lips—soft, inviting, and never chapped.

I wanted more than anything to suck that bottom lip into my mouth. My eyes stared at it as my cock grew hard. It was a habit of hers that I found enticing, and I’d rather not dwell on it any longer. Damn it. I needed to focus.

“I know a lot about these fires. They’re the kind of fires my dad and brothers deal with,” she replied. I used to work with my father and brothers here in Texas.”

I felt a jolt of surprise. Why do I feel like I am learning more about her than ever before? “So you have a dad? Of course, you do. That was a dumb question. Sorry. So,

you come from a firefighting family? Makes sense. Where are they now?"

"My family is spread out across the country. My parents and a couple of brothers live in Texas," she muttered as she stood up to get off the plane. The rest of our team followed suit, and we exited the company plane.

I noticed Kat walking in front of me. Instead of her usual work attire of skirts, dresses, and high heels, she was wearing tight jeans and a silk blouse. Today, she wore cowboy boots like she was used to wearing them.

"I wouldn't be surprised if my dad and brothers were already there at the site waiting for you guys," Kat muttered, though I heard her.

"What? Your family still fights these fires?" I asked, surprised. She was walking fast, as if to hurry and get away from me.

"I haven't been home in three years. But to answer your question, yes, they do. I doubt they would ever quit. It gets in your blood and won't leave. My family thinks they are the only ones who can put these fires out. Calling your team was a big deal for them."

Did I just see her wipe away a tear? I must be mistaken. Kat Mellows isn't the type to get emotional like some women I know. She's always composed, speaking only when necessary and never letting her emotions take over. That's one of the reasons I didn't want to lose her as our assistant. She was perfect.

I have to admit, I was curious to see if her family would be waiting for us—especially after three years apart. I sensed Kat's nervousness as we arrived at the site of the burning oil rig .

One thing I couldn't wrap my head around: why had her husband let her come with

us? She comes with us at least two out of eight times if it's safe for her. I know it's her job, but still—look at her. She's a knockout. He must trust her completely.

When we pulled into the site of the burning derrick, I saw men everywhere, covered in oil, rushing around. Kat ran toward a group of men standing too close to the rig.

“Kat!” I shouted after her, unsure if she heard me or just chose to ignore me. One of the men hurried to meet her while the others turned around. The first guy picked her up in a tight hug, and Kat wrapped her arms around him. The others soon followed, taking turns embracing her. I even saw a few of them wipe away tears.

Were these men Kat's family? I must be slipping in my own rules, not finding out about my employee's personal lives. Why did I not know about them? They looked at us and approached us. By now, Kat was covered in black oil, from those hugs she got.

“Daddy, these are my bosses. Let me introduce you to some of the Golden Team,” Kat said, gesturing to us. “This is River Channing, Gage Archer, Tag Harris, and Faron Lightfoot. Guys, this is my dad, Jason McDonald, and my brothers, Junior and Thomas.”

We shook hands with Kat's family, and I wondered if they found it strange that she had been away from them for three years. They all huddled around her, probably wondering why she was with us while her husband wasn't present.

“I'm glad you made it. This fire is starting to spread. Two other wells have gone up in flames. I know someone is starting the fires. Have you dealt with fires like these before?” Kat's dad inquired .

“Yes, we put them out in Iraq and Kuwait. We'll get our gear together. Where are our sleeping quarters?” I asked.

He pointed over at the trailers located far enough away from the fire. “That trailer over there. Kat will go home with us. Her mother will be excited to see her.”

I looked down at Kat and couldn’t help but ask. “I brought you here to work. Are you coming back?”

“Of course I am. Why would you even ask that?” Kat responded, slightly irritated.

“Hell, I don’t know. For one thing, you are full of surprises on this trip. Why don’t you get cleaned up and get that oil off of you, and then you can inspect the damage from the monitoring station.”

When she mentioned she had experience working on derrick fires and could handle the monitoring systems, it caught us off guard.

“I’ll just get oil all over me again, so I’ll check everything right now,” Kat replied. As she walked away, she suddenly turned. “River,” she said my name so softly I almost couldn’t hear her.

I turned toward her. “Yeah.”

“If you feel more pressure than usual, back far away, or that devil will grab you and devour you. If you sense anything under your feet, run. Don’t stop for anything,” she cautioned. Then she looked at the others. “This is for all of you. Don’t try to be brave if you feel the earth shake; just run.”

“Kat, you don’t have to worry. I won’t let that devil get me,” I assured her before turning to my team, “Let’s dress up.” Fifteen minutes later, we were back with all of our gear on. I noticed Kat’s family walking toward us. Her dad walked next to me.

“If you feel that pressure building like a volcano’s about to erupt, don’t wait. Don’t

even talk it over—just run,” he cautioned.

“Kat told me the same thing,” I acknowledged.

“That doesn’t surprise me. How long has Kat worked with your team?”

“Two years. I didn’t even know she was from Texas. I noticed a Southern accent but thought she might’ve been from Georgia.”

I must have hired her without looking over her resume. Wait, Gideon is the one who hired her. I was out of town, and she was already there when I returned to work.

“She was born and raised in Texas. Her mama is from Georgia, so our little girl gets all her Southern charm from her mama. We’ve missed Katrina so much. She called us weekly, so we knew she was alright,” I wondered what he was talking about.

“But when I saw her running toward us, I almost had a heart attack. She was so sad when she had to leave. We knew she needed that time, and then she would return to us.”

Since I had no idea what he was talking about, I decided not to question him. It was none of my business. I felt someone watching me, and I turned my head to see Kat standing in the doorway of the building, watching us. My phone pinged, and there was a message from Kat.

I looked at the guys. They also had a message. “If it feels off, it is off, so run like when that bear chased you guys.” Kat’s message read. We gave her a thumbs-up and resumed walking. We continued working into the night.

Throughout the night, we traded shifts. Kat had gone home with her dad, but I hoped she’d come back. We needed her—she was the best assistant we’d ever had. Not that



I'd admit I didn't want to lose her because I liked having her around.

The thick black smoke blotted out most of the rising sun as dawn broke. Around six in the morning, I spotted Kat returning with her dad, carrying trays of food. She must've stayed up all night cooking. She set up a table and loaded it with food, then filled an ice chest with bottles of water.

"I was curious to see if you would return," I remarked.

"Why wouldn't I? You're my team, and I love my job," Kat responded.

"We don't typically find ourselves in the midst of a derrick fire." I pointed out,

"I know, that's precisely why I love my job. I never know what to expect."

I grabbed a ham and cheese sandwich and a bottle of water. Then I turned around. "Kat, I don't want you anywhere around the burning derricks. They could erupt at any moment."

"I understand. I won't go near the fire," she assured me.

I nodded and returned to work, instructing the others to take a break and eat. We worked tirelessly throughout the day and extinguished two of the fires. While I was carrying a large piece of steel, I heard a bullet whiz past my ear. I dropped to the ground and shouted for the others to take cover.

I watched in shock as Kat's father was hit and sent flying backward to the ground. As I rushed to him, I saw Kat come running toward us, armed with a gun.

What the fuck is she doing. "Kat, get back inside," I shouted. "Damn it, Kat, get back inside. Someone is firing shots out here."

She completely disregarded my orders and reached her father, checking the severity of his injuries. When I reached her, I shielded her with my body. She was so focused on caring for her father that she didn't even notice my presence. I picked her dad up and ran with him to the office.

I was seething with anger at Kat, and I knew if I looked at her, I might lose control. She cut away his shirt and treated him as though she worked the front lines in a warzone. When one of her brothers opened the door, her gun was raised faster than mine.

Who the hell is this woman?

Junior stood there, not moving, until she lowered her weapon. "What the fuck happened out there. Who was shooting a gun at us, and why was someone shooting a gun at us? How's Dad?" he asked.

"He'll be okay, but we must get him to the hospital. I'll take him," Kat replied.

"Kat, what the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"What do you mean?" she asked, avoiding my gaze.

"Look at me! Why are you so experienced in this kind of situation? Were you in the war? Damn it, Kat, look at me!"

"Yes, I served as a medic in Afghanistan and Iraq. Didn't I tell you that?" she said. "I'm sorry I don't have time to explain it right now. I need to get my father to the hospital."

"No, you didn't mention anything about serving in Afghanistan, or anywhere else for that matter. Were you in the Army?"

“No, I was not in the Army. I’m a Marine, Lieutenant Katrina McDonald.”

Finally, she paused long enough to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry, River. I’m uncomfortable discussing my life over there. I’m a private person. I promise I’ll explain everything to you when I return.”

I carried her dad to their vehicle, who was awake by now and asking questions. “Kat, I want you to stay here. Jason can take me. My guess is someone doesn’t want us to extinguish the fires.”

I was confused. What the hell was going on? Kat clearly had a lot more to tell us.

“Daddy, I want to go with you.”

I’d heard enough. “Did you forget there is a fucking crazy man out there with a gun? So your married name must be Mellows?”

She didn’t say yes or no about her last name. “No, I didn’t forget about the man with the gun. I’ll be careful. I’m always careful.”

“That’s a damn lie. You weren’t careful when you ran out in the open to check on your dad. I don’t want you to take any more risks with your life.”

I wished I could keep her close and safe, but I didn’t have that right. “You should stay in town with your mom until we catch whoever’s shooting at us.”

“I agree with River. You’re staying in town,” her father said.

“Daddy, I’m not going to argue with either of you.”

He laid down on the back seat, and she drove off. Why did I have a feeling she would

be back soon?"

"She'll be right back," Junior said, as he started to walk away.

Am I just now finding out a crazy woman worked in our office? Where is the quiet Mrs. Mellows we were used to seeing? I caught up with Junior. "Why do you think she'll be back?"

"Because Kat considers all of you her responsibility. She would never leave you to handle these fires alone. That's just how she is."

"But I gave her an order."

He walked away, chuckling. Sure enough, two hours later, Kat returned. She avoided me and spent the rest of the day in the office.

We stayed for three more days until we heard they had apprehended the people responsible for starting the fires. One of them was the shooter. His accomplices told the police they didn't want anything to do with the shooting. They were part of some radical group who believed burning oil derricks would end oil production. People are bizarre sometimes, I thought. I hoped they stayed locked up for good.

It took three weeks to extinguish all the fires, but sadly, two firefighters lost their lives in the process. The town was saved, and the fires were out.

"Has anyone seen Kat?"

"She left with her brothers," someone replied.

"Did she mention where she was going?"

“She said she would see us at the hotel.”

“Where’s the hotel?”

“It’s in town. Kat gave me all the information we needed. She mentioned you wanted to talk with her, but she couldn’t spare the time today. She had to visit her husband’s family and she wasn’t thrilled about doing that.”

“In fact, she looked pretty upset. Her mom insisted she visit since her in-laws are getting older. I’m surprised you didn’t hear her talking to herself, convincing herself she had to go. She was speaking loud enough for anyone to hear.”

I had completely forgotten about her husband. What was wrong with me? Kat was driving me fucking insane. Being in close quarters with her for an entire month had been the most challenging month of my life, that close and not being able to touch her.

She worked as hard as we did, never complaining. I yearned to hold her in my arms and make love to her .

I feared I couldn’t work closely with her without wanting her in my bed. She’s a married woman. River, remember that! I would never sleep with a married woman, and I doubted she would ever cheat on her husband.

“I have never seen her like this,” Gage remarked, shaking his head. “She seems more human now. If she’s upset, she won’t stop talking. I don’t think she likes her in-laws.

“She told me they never liked her; they wanted her husband to marry someone who lived in Kansas. They were upset he married Kat,” Tag said.

“They clearly don’t know her. If they did, they’d love her,” Why the hell did I say

that? The group went quiet.

“Have you guys noticed Mrs. Mellows and Kat McDonald are two completely different people?” I asked to change the subject.

“Yeah,” they all agreed, just as I expected.

Around eight that night, I saw Kat walking across the parking lot toward us. We were in the restaurant that was connected to the motel, seated on the patio. She looked so sad. I knew she had been crying, and I was ready to kill whoever made her this unhappy.

Gage stood and motioned for her to join us. “How was your visit with your in-laws?” he asked. I didn’t say anything. All I wanted to do was hold her. She looked like she was on the verge of tears, and her eyes were already welling up.

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Kat

The moment I entered her home, I realized it was a mistake. My mother-in-law burst into tears, and I was transported back to the day I lost everything. She still held me responsible for Alex's death, as if I wanted my husband to die.

I had tried to warn him to run, but he tripped. My poor husband—always tripping over his own two feet—stumbled, and the explosion took him.

I could never forget that day. The oil derrick explosion that took my husband and our unborn child. The pain was unbearable, and I had to leave town to escape the endless condolences and pity that only deepened my grief. My friends meant well, but their visits and constant talk about the tragedy just made it worse.

We all felt the ground rumble that day. I screamed for Alex to run, but he fell. When I turned to go back for him, my brother grabbed me and carried me away. Alex was gone before we could reach him.

I lost our baby that night, too. In a single, devastating moment, I lost everything I loved. And his mother still held me responsible.

I held my baby in my arms when I miscarried. I was six months pregnant. The hospital tried taking my baby from me, and then my mom was there helping me. Together, we cleaned my baby and wrapped him in a blue blanket. Both of us cried until we had no tears left.

We buried him with his father. Afterward, I tried to stay in town, but the constant flow of people offering their condolences became too much. If I could have gone to Mars, I would have. Anything to escape the suffocating grief.

Leaving was hard on my family, but staying would have swallowed me whole. A month later, I sold my home and hit the road.

My family didn't want me to go and begged me to stay. Jason wanted to go with me. They didn't believe I would stay away, so I promised to call them every Sunday, which I faithfully did. I missed them terribly, but I was afraid that returning home would resurrect all that pain, and I was right.

When I found this job with the former Army Special Forces, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I kept to myself, and so did they. I said I was married because I didn't want any of them asking me out—not that they would; all of them had plenty of women stopping by. As it turned out, their number one rule was not to date coworkers, which suited me perfectly.

I thought I'd never have to deal with oil derricks again, so when I heard we were coming here, I convinced myself I could handle it. I was wrong. The moment I visited my in-laws, everything came rushing back .

Now, here I am with my team, and it felt like my world was crumbling. My pain was suffocating me. I couldn't breathe from the pain in my chest. All I could see were memories of Alex and my baby. I needed to leave. I glanced at the guys sitting at the table, attempting to tell them I had to go, but the words wouldn't come out. Instead, I broke down and cried.

River pulled me closer to him and put his arm around me. He always smelled so good. "Tell me why you are so upset," River said.



I shook my head, unable to speak.

“Can’t you see she’s too upset to talk?” Gage said, trying to calm me as he wiped away my tears with a napkin, trying to comfort me.

“Someone must have said something to hurt her feelings. Kat never acts like this,” Tag said, sounding frustrated. “Tell us who hurt your feelings. Was it your in-laws?”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. The guys were all watching me, concern written on their faces. I couldn’t bring myself to look at River, though. I knew those intense blue eyes of his were fixed on me. He slid his beer over, and I took a big gulp.

“I never talk about this because it destroys my soul every time,” I knew tears were still streaming from my eyes. “Today, I went to see my in-laws at their house, and she still blames me,” I managed to say before covering my face and crying. “I held my baby in my arms...” I paused and lifted my head, noticing my parents approaching our table.

“Mama, I told you she would bring it up again. She still blames me. She’s a mean, hateful woman, and I’ll never speak to her again.”

My Dad pulled me up, took me in his arms, and rocked me like a child until I calmed down. Finally, I turned and looked at River. “River, I lied to Gideon when he hired me. I said I didn’t have any mental problems, but as you can see, I have lots of them.”

“What is going on with you?” River asked, his frustration showing. “I would never have asked you to accompany us here if I knew this would happen. Where the hell is your husband? Why can’t he tell his fucking mother to keep her fucking mouth shut.”

I knew River wanted to hit something. I’ve seen him from the work area I had at work, and when he became angry, he would go out back and punch the punching bag.

I dreaded telling him about Alex.

“My husband is dead, and so is my baby. The night my husband died, I miscarried my little boy. That was three years ago. I was doing pretty well until I visited Alex’s mother. She’s a mean woman.” The guys were staring at me like I said something horrible.

“Well, she is.”

“Katrina is right. I can only blame myself for telling her to visit that bitch. Wait until I get my hands on her. I’m sorry, sweetheart,” my mom said, wiping my face off.

I looked at Kat’s mother; she was as beautiful as her daughter and madder than hell.

“Mama, it’s not your fault. I’m thirty-one. I knew what would happen, and I still went.” I looked around the table, and the guys were still watching me. “What?”

River looked angry. “You said you were married.”

“Are you mad because my husband died?”

“No, I’m mad that you lied about being married.”

“Are you going to fire me?”

“I don’t want to fire you, but damn it, do you realize your marriage helped you keep this job. ”

“Why?”

“Because there is that damn rule that coworkers can’t date. You’re too attractive; I

won't be able to keep my hands to myself. Knowing you had a husband, I kept my hands to myself."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, that's silly. I'm sure you'll have no trouble keeping your hands to yourself. All you have to do is call up one of those dozens of women you always go out with."

"River, just don't ask her out," Gage suggested.

"It's not that simple. I've been fighting the urge every damn day. I wanted to bring her into my office and strip those hot skirts off her. Now that I don't have to resist that urge, we won't last a week working together."

"What are they talking about?" Mom asked, looking at me.

"I don't know. I think River is going to fire me because my husband is dead."

"No, I'm not going to fire you because of that. It's because..." River hesitated and glanced around the table. "Our plane leaves at six in the morning. I expect all of you to be ready by five. Kat, that includes you."

Tag looked like he wanted to argue about something. "We have our private plane; why does the time matter?"

"Because that's the time we arranged with the airport." He got up and walked away.

"We'll vote to ensure he doesn't fire you," Gage said. I'm so sorry you went through all that pain.

"Thank you," I glanced at River's spot. "He didn't even eat," I noted, watching him walk toward the rooms. What is his room number?"

“Number twelve. ”

“When we order ours, I’ll have them deliver a meal to his room.”

“Sweetheart, have you considered moving back here to where your family is? We miss you so much,” Mom said.

“I miss you too, Mom, but I don’t want to live here anymore. It causes me too much pain. I love living in California. I love my job. You don’t have to worry about River firing me.”

“Well, then we will come and visit you in California.”

“That will be nice,” I replied, though my mind was on River, worrying that he would indeed fire me.

Sure, I noticed how attractive he was; all the Special Forces were incredibly good-looking. But River had those mesmerizing eyes that seemed to devour me with every glance.

I used to condemn myself because I wanted to be one of those women he was always with—the ones who came to the office and draped themselves all over him.

I wanted his hands on me like they were on those women. At least it wasn’t only one woman, proving he wasn’t serious about any of them. Maybe this wasn’t going to work out.

I was sure if River was going to fire me, he would have said something before we boarded the plane this morning. My eyes were swollen from crying most of the night, but I was relieved I still had my job.

“Kat, can I speak to you for a moment?”

I turned toward River as I stepped onto the plane. “Of course. Should we take a seat, or do you have something to say before I sit down?”

“Let’s sit,” River replied. Once we were seated, he reached over and took my hand. “I want to apologize for what I said earlier. I didn’t mean to imply I’d fire you because of your husband’s death. I’m truly sorry for the pain you’ve endured. Losing your husband and child in one day must have been unbearable.”

His words were filled with genuine regret. “I can’t even fathom how you’ve managed to cope with the loss of your husband and your baby son. You don’t have to worry about your job or me. I was just speaking out of turn because I couldn’t stand seeing you so upset.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, grateful for his kindness.

“Could you tell me more about your husband?” he asked gently.

The others gathered around, listening as I shared about Alex. “Alex was originally from Kansas. He transferred to our high school in the tenth grade, and I was in the ninth. We became fast friends, and I fell in love with him over time.

I guess it could have been puppy love at first, but my love grew stronger when we married. He asked me to marry him when I was in college. I had plans for my life. I told Alex that I intended to join the Marines when I left college; he was upset because he wanted me with him. But I wasn’t going to change the plans I’ve always had since I was little.

“I served in the Marines for four years until I was shot twice, which brought me home. Otherwise, I would’ve stayed longer—I wanted to help more people.”

“I told Alex we could still get married while I was in the Marines, but he wanted to wait until I got out. I believe it was his mother who kept pushing him to wait. She had hopes that Alex would change his mind.”

I paused for a moment, collecting myself. “Alex was working for my family at the time. We got married soon after I returned from Afghanistan, and not long after, I found out I was pregnant.”

I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of those memories. “The first time I felt my baby move, I was terrified, but I wanted to feel that sensation again. My love for my son was overwhelming. When I lost him... it broke me in ways I never thought possible.”

I wiped away my tears, but they continued to flow. “I miscarried my baby when I was at the hospital because I started having severe cramps. When I looked at him, he was perfect. He looked like a peacefully sleeping baby.”

“The nurses tried to take him away from me, and I knew it was irrational, but that was my baby. I couldn’t bear the thought of him being buried in a cold, dark hole. My mother helped me clean him, and I wanted to see every inch of his beautiful body. His image will forever be etched in my memory.”

I turned to River and noticed the compassion in his eyes. Sharing my memories of Alex and our son felt like a tremendous weight lifted off my shoulders.

“I’m sorry I didn’t open up about my family earlier. Somehow, I thought that by not mentioning them, none of this pain would ever happen again. I just let it build up inside of me.”

River gently cupped my cheek and kissed me. It wasn’t a romantic kiss—more the kiss of a friend offering comfort—but I still wanted to savor it. I wondered if he’d

notice if I licked my lips or closed my eyes. Looking into his eyes made me want to moan out loud, but I held back.

“Kat, listen to me,” he said, his voice steady. “You’re one of the strongest women I’ve ever known. I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through, but you must move on from this pain. If you keep crying like this, you’ll make yourself sick. It’s okay to mourn them, to feel the ache in your heart. But it’s over. You have to move forward.”

I nodded, unable to form words. My mind was still reeling from the kiss. His arm was still around me, and I don’t think he even realized he’d stood up and come over to comfort me.

3

River

It was obvious to all of us that Kat's pain was mainly from the loss of her baby. Seeing the grief etched on her face, I wouldn't have been surprised if a few of us guys had shed a tear. Her voice carried the weight of her sorrow as she shared her story, the torment in her words evident.

"I'll see everyone in the office tomorrow," I said as we all headed toward our vehicles. "Does anyone need a ride?"

"I do," Tag replied. "I got dropped off."

That night, I couldn't sleep. My mind was consumed with thoughts of Kat. Would she ever be the same after what we'd been through in Texas? I wasn't sure. I was anxious to see how she'd be moving forward.

We lived in the small coastal town of Carlsbad, California, where people knew each other from bumping into them at grocery stores or restaurants. But it hit me—I had never seen Kat out at any of those places. Did she go out with friends? Did she have a social life outside of work?

I knew what I wanted to do after leaving the Army Special Forces. I had trained in Carlsbad for my smoke jumping certificate and had fallen in love with the town. When my buddies left the Special Forces, they moved here, too. It was the perfect place for us and the work we did. You just had to hide from the three elderly women



matchmakers, who tried to set everyone who was single up.

I was going through emails when the others started trickling into the office.

Then Kat walked in, wearing her usual high heels and skirt. For some reason, I felt a bit disappointed. But then she smiled, and it changed everything.

“I forgot to ask you guys if I need to wear heels every day,” she said playfully. “I was thinking maybe I could wear them on Tuesdays and Thursdays. What do you think?”

“You can wear whatever you want, as long as it’s clean and not all wrinkled,” Gage said with a grin.

I couldn’t find the words to speak. Her smile was so beautiful. Did she ever smile like this before Texas? It hit me—I had never seen her smile like this before the trip. I turned and headed to my office, needing a moment to process everything.

Five minutes later, Kat walked in and sat down.

“Tell me what’s bothering you,” she said, her voice soft but direct.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. Sorry if I’m a little grumpy.”

“You’re not grumpy. You haven’t even said anything to me yet,” she teased. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

I fumbled for words. “Today... well,” I paused, my brain blank. “Can you start by going through the emails? We can take it easy for the next few days. I’m sure you know what you need to do, so I’ll leave you to it.”

“River, please let me know if my being here is causing you stress,” she said, her tone

serious .

“No, it’s not stressing me out. Actually, I think I’m going to take the day off.”

Kat chuckled. “You never take the day off.”

“Kat, I’m fine. And just so you know, you can wear whatever you’re comfortable in. You don’t need to ask. We always assumed you liked wearing heels and those sexy dresses.”

“You think my dresses are sexy?” she asked with a playful grin.

“Don’t you? But let’s not discuss how sexy your dresses are.”

“Agreed,” she said, smiling.

With that, I stood up and walked past her. I needed a moment to regain my composure. I passed by the others, heading toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Gage called out from his office.

“I’m taking the day off,” I said over my shoulder.

Everyone paused what they were doing and stared at me. “But you asked us to be here this morning. We thought you had something important to tell us,” Gage said, clearly puzzled.

“No, nothing important,” I replied with a forced smile. “Actually, I think we should all take a couple of days off.”

Gage chuckled and grabbed his jacket. “See you in a couple of days, then. Who’s up

for breakfast?”

I paused, listening to hear if Kat was going with them. Then I heard her say, “Not today. I’ve got to tackle these emails. I’ll call if something comes up.”

“All right, but it’s your loss. We’re heading to the pancake house,” Gage said as he walked outside. All of our phones were hooked up to our main line so we wouldn’t miss an urgent message.

“The pancake house? My jeans are already snug. Oh, what the heck. Count me in,” Kat said with a laugh. “I’ll come back and work later. What’s a little more snug? Their waffles are worth it. Strawberry waffles will be my punishment for indulging.”

I met up with them at the pancake house, and they didn’t seem too surprised to see me. We walked in together, and I found myself walking behind Kat.

“Did you hear me talking about the strawberry waffles?” Kat teased.

“No, I’m here for the blueberry pancakes. I’ll share some of mine with you if you share yours with me,” I said with a chuckle.

“Deal,” she replied, smiling at me. “They put the best-whipped cream on their waffles. You should tell them you want to try it on your pancakes,” she said, smiling.

Breakfast turned out to be a great idea, but I couldn’t help noticing how many men were watching Kat as we made our way to the table.

I walked beside her, guiding her through the restaurant. Don’t ask me why, but I felt the urge to claim her somehow. I rested my hand on her lower back, silently letting those guys know she wasn’t available. Not that she was actually taken. I didn’t even know why I did that.

Kat seemed oblivious to all the attention, including mine. I wasn't sure if she even noticed the way those men looked at her. We were almost done with breakfast when two guys approached our table, grinning as they neared Kat.

"Hey, Kat! We weren't sure it was you. We've never seen you with your hair up. How are you? The surf's up today—are you hitting the waves?"

"Hey, Josh, Mitch," Kat greeted, introducing us. "These are my bosses: River, Gage, Tag, and Gideon. Josh and Mitch are champion surfers. I'm not sure if I'll make it out there today, but it's great to see you. "

"Always a pleasure to see you, Kat. Maybe tomorrow? The waves are supposed to be just as good."

"Absolutely. I'll see you tomorrow," she replied, still smiling ten minutes later.

"Why are you grinning like that?" I asked.

"You should've seen your faces when Josh and Mitch asked if I'd be surfing," she laughed. "It was hilarious."

We all chuckled.

To be honest, I was glad Kat hadn't been this outgoing before our trip to Texas. If she had been, I don't think I'd have been able to resist her, and I would've had to fire her since we don't date coworkers.

Yeah, I know it's a stupid rule, but I put it in place because of a bad experience I had during college. I dated a coworker, and when things got serious for her but not for me, breaking up made everything uncomfortable.

Her laughter sent a charge straight to my cock, and I knew I had to keep my distance.

“You’re full of surprises, Kat,” Gage said, shaking his head. “First, we see you running with a gun, then we find out you were a medic in the Marines, and now two surfers are asking if you’re going to catch some big waves.”

“I’ve been surfing since I was five,” Kat explained. “My mom taught all of us kids how to surf. She was Miss Georgia Peach in college, and the pageants helped her pay her tuition. Mom didn’t like doing beauty pageants, but it was her way of affording college.”

“She’s just as beautiful as you,” I said, immediately regretting it. I got up and walked toward the register to pay the tab, trying to shake off the awkwardness. When I glanced back, Kat was smiling at me.

“Thanks for breakfast, River,” everyone said as they joined me at the register .

“I’m heading back to the office,” Kat said, strolling out of the diner.

“Who’s up for watching the surfers in the morning?” Tag asked, watching Kat through the window.

“I am,” we all said in unison, chuckling as we headed to our vehicles.

I decided to visit a couple of my Special Forces buddies who’d bought a house together on the beach. They planned to sell it eventually and make a decent profit. When I pulled into the driveway, Raven followed behind me.

“What are you doing not working?” he teased. “I’ve never known you to take a day off unless you had food poisoning. Remember when your secretary dragged you to the hospital in her tiny car?”

“What’s the emergency?” he asked, smiling.

“First of all, Kat isn’t our secretary—she’s our assistant. She knows more about smoke jumping than any of us, and she was a medic in Afghanistan and Iraq. Plus, she was a lieutenant in the Marines. Second, I decided we all needed a couple of days off after putting out fires in Texas for a month. And...”

“Here it comes.”

“Don’t be a smartass. Can you see the surfers from your back deck? Didn’t you say this place gets good waves?”

“Yeah, we can see the surfers. This is the place to go to watch the surfers. Since when have you been interested in surfers?”

“Since Kat’s going to be surfing with her friends tomorrow.”

“Did I mention I’ll be joining your team next month? I’m officially done with the service.”

“It’s about damn time! What about Oliver? Is he going to join us? I haven’t spoken to him since he left the Special Forces.”

“He’s away right now, but he’s planning to. He’ll be back soon. So, I’ll be putting out more oil derrick fires. I wasn’t crazy about that in Kuwait.”

“We don’t do it often, but you need to be certified for it when we do. Where’s Oliver now?”

“He went back to Virginia. His dad’s really sick, and they have hospice at home. His sister’s struggling since their mother passed away two months ago.”

“That’s tough. Doesn’t he have a couple of younger brothers?”

“One of his brothers died from fentanyl poisoning last year while away at college. His other brother lives in Hawaii, but I think he’s going home to help with their dad.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.”

After spending a few hours catching up with Raven, I headed home. Walking through the front door, I realized how cold and empty the house felt. It wasn’t cozy or welcoming like Raven’s beachfront place. I had just bought this house and hadn’t furnished it beyond the bedroom.

Deciding to change that, I spent the evening ordering new furniture for the living room and picking out a few paintings. I didn’t have to leave home; I did it all online. I also ordered some things for the spare bedroom and kitchen. By the end of the day, everything was on its way, including some throw pillows and a large area rug. I even remembered the deck and ordered furniture for it as well.

I was excited about these changes and couldn’t wait to see how they’d transform my space. Next on the list are some houseplants.

## Page 4

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4

River

We were all sitting on Raven's back deck when we saw surfers showing up further down the beach. They all wore black wetsuits, so it was hard to tell who was who until she came walking down the beach.

It was already around four, and Gage asked Kat what time she surfs, so we didn't show up early in the morning. I noticed the waves were high, and I could only hope that Kat knew what she was doing.

Her hair was in a long braid, her wetsuit was half on, and she was wearing a white one-piece bathing suit under it. She walked with some other women dressed similarly to her. My body reacted. My cock became hard in an instant.

She carried a surfboard larger than herself, and I observed her gracefully placing it on the sand before she started pulling up her wetsuit. My gaze shifted to the guys on the deck, wondering if they had also noticed her presence.

"Damn, I forgot how hot she was. I'm going to ask her out," Raven said, keeping his eyes glued on Kat.

"We can't date co-workers," Tag said .

"I don't work with you guys yet."



“She’s married,” I blurted out before I even thought about it. I knew Raven had a way with women—they all loved him. Hell no, he wasn’t getting close to Kat. The guys looked at me, then shrugged. They also knew Raven.

Everyone watched as she ventured out into the turbulent waves with four other surfers, and the entire ocean seemed to mirror the wild conditions. Glancing out at the waves, I felt uneasy. They looked like they could swallow her up, but she kept pushing herself further out.

We were all good swimmers, which was a condition for becoming an Army Special Force member. We had to be the best at everything we did, so we were used to all the dangers of the ocean and on the ground. We are the Golden Team and the best at what we do.

It’s just that Kat looked so tiny out there with those damn huge waves. I jumped up and walked to the railing, wanting to see if I could see where she was.

“There she is,” Tag said, standing next to me. “She’s still going further than the others; she knows where the big waves are. She’s going to try and ride it in. Her friends from the restaurant are going out with her.”

“I hope to fuck she knows what she’s doing,” I stated, “What do you think?” I asked Gage as he stood looking out at the deep blue ocean where Kat McDonald was waiting to catch a wave. She looks like a dark speck in the sea. I couldn’t see her features; she was so far out.

“I think she’s going to do it,” Gage said. Look how confident she is. She sits there daring the sea to send her the largest wave it has.”

“I think she’s so damn awesome and beautiful, sitting out there where the sharks live like she hasn’t a care in the world. Only we know the real Kat.” I said, and I could

have bitten my tongue off when Gage looked over at me.

Tag grabbed a pair of goggles from a table to see better. “I’m waiting to see if she can ride that wave in; it looks pretty big. I can’t imagine that she will make it in. How could she control that surfboard? It’s way bigger than she is.”

“Here she comes,” Gage said; we stood there with our breaths held, watching Kat as she rode the wave in.

I held my breath, so scared I wanted to shout at her and ask her what the fuck she was doing, risking her life just to stand and ride a fucking monstrous wave to the shore. I bet it was as exhilarating as it looked. Is that why she did it? Was it for the excitement and the thrill of not knowing what would happen?

“She’s going to do it,” I shouted as we watched her riding the wave in; I could see the smile on her face. “What’s that?” I asked as I saw another surfer cutting right in front of her; he was going to hit her.

I jumped the eight feet off the deck and took off running. The guys were right behind me. I heard shouting on the beach as others saw what we saw.

The surfboard hit her; I saw it so clearly that I knew where she went down. I jumped into the wave, swimming hard. I’m glad I was a damn good swimmer.

I had to reach Kat in time. I kept diving under and saw Tag swimming next to me. Another dive under, and I had her.

She was bleeding a little, and I prayed there were no sharks in the area. Tag grabbed the surfboard, and we put Kat on it. Both of us pushed her to shore .

The others were waiting for us as we reached the shore. I checked Kat’s

injuries—she'd need stitches on her shoulder. The other surfboard must have had hit her pretty damn hard, judging by the cut. She also had a significant bump on her head, and I was more worried about that than anything else.

Kat opened her eyes; I knew she wasn't focusing on my face. She smiled and whispered the name Conner before closing her eyes again.

"Let's get her to the hospital," I said, picking her up and carrying her to Tag's vehicle.

Gage grabbed our things and followed behind me. "She must have been thinking of her baby boy. Kat said his name was Conner. I hope she doesn't start crying again. It's so hard watching her cry and not being able to make the pain go away," Gage said.

"If you don't stop yapping, I'll start crying," Tag joked. I heard a faint chuckle and glanced down—Kat's eyes were still closed, but she had a smile on her face.

"Are you awake?" I whispered, but she didn't respond, her smile lingering as we drove.

She didn't say anything, but her smile stayed on her face. When we pulled into the hospital's emergency room, they had a bed outside waiting for her. The guys must have called ahead.

They rushed inside, and we followed. A nurse turned to us and held up her hand. "You all have to wait in the waiting room," she said firmly.

"She's my wife," I said, surprising myself more than anyone else. "I'm going with her. "

“All right, but only the husband. The rest of you will have to stay in the waiting room.”

I followed them inside, still a little shocked at my own words. I helped remove her wetsuit, and as the doctor examined her, he noticed a few scars on her thigh and back. “These look like bullet wounds,” he remarked.

“Kat was a medic in Afghanistan and Iraq; she was sent back to the States when she was shot in the back.”

A nurse handed me a green hospital shirt to wear, and that’s when I realized I was shirtless, wearing wet swimming trunks.

“Why don’t you sit down somewhere? You’re making everyone nervous with a body like that and standing here like you will kill anyone who does something wrong,” the nurse teased.

“Sorry,” I said. Kat opened her eyes and smiled at me. “River, I’m going to be fine; stop worrying. Can you give me a ride home? I don’t think I can drive; whenever I open my eyes, I feel like I’m going to vomit,” she said, closing her eyes.

The nurse looked at me and pointed two fingers at her eyes and then at me, telling me she was watching me.

“Why do you surf those huge waves? They are fucking dangerous,” I said, watching her closely.

“I wonder who the kid who cut me off was. That’s against the surfing rules. He’ll be lucky if they let him back on the beach.”

She didn’t say anything else. I assumed she went back to sleep as the doctor

examined her head. The damage was mostly on her shoulder and the back of her head. “I’ll have to stitch up her shoulder, so I’m going to give her a pain shot so she won’t feel anything.”

Kat opened her eyes and looked at me. “Once, when I was out surfing alone, I was so far out there all by myself, where only stupid people go. I started to paddle back to shore when I realized how far out I was. For some odd reason, I stopped and sat straight up on my board, looking around.” She stopped talking and had a faraway look in her eyes.

She looked at me. “Something told me to look around, and I felt like I would see a shark. I was almost afraid to turn my head. That’s when I saw something black in the ocean not far from me. I thought it was a seal, but it was a boy with a wet suit on,” she took a deep breath.

“He kept going under, and I dove in so many times before I got hold of his leg. My arms were killing me, but I pushed him up on my board and started doing CPR. I was so scared. Some lifeguards met me on the beach. They said they had been hunting for him for six hours.”

“That was a miracle for that boy,” I replied.

“Yeah. He lost his board—he didn’t have it secured to his ankle. He was only eleven, and his name was Conner. When he told me his name, it shook me to my core. My legs went weak, and I almost fell on my face,” she wiped her eyes.

“His parents were crying on the beach, and the ambulance was way down the beach. They never would have found him. I could never figure out how I ended up in that part of the ocean because when I started that morning, I was two miles down the beach,” she whispered.

The doctor and I looked at each other. “I remember that boy. His parents tried finding you, but you didn’t come to the hospital,” the doctor said.

“That’s when I met Josh and Mitch, and before I knew it, they had me out there catching waves with them. It helped me at the time—the bigger the wave, the better.”

“But now,” I asked .

“Now, I don’t need that kind of excitement to take my thoughts away anymore,” she replied as the nurse returned.

“You have a concussion. Do you have anyone who can stay with you for the night? You need to be woken up every hour.”

“Here is a prescription for her. It needs to be filled; it’s the ointment for her shoulder,” the doctor said.

“I’ll stay with her,” I said before thinking about it. I took the prescription, and the nurse pushed her into a wheelchair, wearing a hospital gown. I carried her wetsuit. We went to the waiting room, and I handed the prescription to the guys to get filled.

Kat looked at me, smiling. “You don’t have to wake me up. I’ll set my alarm. Thank you anyway. That is so sweet. I won’t tell anyone that you are the sweetest man I know. They wouldn’t believe me anyway,” She grinned as she looked at the nurse.

“I’ll find you some scrubs to wear home.”

“Thank you,” Kat said.

We had Tag drop us off at my vehicle. I left my vehicle at Raven’s, and Gage drove Kat’s vehicle to her house to drop it off. I noticed her board was already tied to her

little car.

The guys got out and made sure it wouldn't fly off. Gage squeezed inside, trying to adjust the seat so he had some room, but he looked like a sardine squeezed in there.

I heard everyone chuckle as Gage drove away. "Would you mind if we stopped at my place so I could change and grab a few things?" I asked.

"No, I don't mind at all," Kat said, smiling.

"You seem different since we went to Texas," I remarked.

"I feel different; I believe going there and facing all that pain has helped me greatly. I missed my family, and telling you and the others about my life helped me more than I ever thought it would."

"How are you feeling?" I asked, glancing at her.

"I'm a little tired, but I'll be fine by tomorrow. I can set my alarm to wake me every hour. I'm sure you have loads of things to do."

"Kat, that will not be happening. I only have to wake you every hour. I'll call in Chinese food for dinner."

"Yummy, the ocean always makes me hungry, but I feel a little queasy. I'm not sure I can eat anything."

5

Kat

I wondered if I had made my bed this morning if the dishes were done, and whether my apartment was messy. I would be so embarrassed if it were a mess. But it's probably fine; I usually keep it clean since I'm the only one who lives there. Still, why does River have to come home with me? I hope I didn't do anything stupid.

What if the concussion made me say something ridiculous, like telling him he smells good? Or admitting that when his gaze lands on me, I turn to mush and have to pinch myself just to stay focused on what he's saying? Oh my God, what if I blurted out that he makes my panties wet and that I even bring an extra pair to work because of it?

Why couldn't Gage or Tag have taken me home instead? It's hard enough being around River when the guys are there but being alone with him makes it almost impossible not to reach out and touch him.

River is all man, always frowning, especially when he looks at me. He has a small scar along his jawline from a fight he got into when he was sixteen. The other guy slashed him with a broken bottle. It's barely visible, but I've seen him so often that I noticed it. I asked Gage about it, and he told me the whole story.

When River carried me, I wanted to press my lips to his neck. That's how pathetic I am. My infatuation started about six months after I joined The Golden Team. River had just returned from a mission in Afghanistan, still wearing his Army fatigues. He



stopped by to let the team know he was back.

When he saw me, he paused mid-sentence and grinned like he wanted to taste me. And believe me; I wanted him to taste me, too—all of me. I even stood up, and his gaze locked onto mine until Gage stepped between us, introducing me as the new assistant and telling him I was married. I saw the disappointment in River's eyes.

We pulled up to some imposing gates. River entered a code, and they swung open, letting us drive inside. "I didn't know these condos were here," I said, looking around. "This is beautiful. It's right on the beach. Is this a private beach?"

"Yes, I believe it is. I just bought the place a few months ago, so I'm still getting familiar with the community. But there are a lot of perks."

"I still have a lot to do with my place, so ignore how empty it is," he said. "I've ordered a bunch of things and new furniture that should arrive in a couple of weeks. Right now, it's pretty bare except for my bedroom furniture."

"I'm sure it's beautiful, even empty."

"It is. The ocean is right out the back door, and my neighbor is Gage. That's the only problem," River laughed. "But I'm actually grateful he told me about this place. He's lived here for three years. I like living next door to Gage; he's a great cook."

"That sounds like fun. Gage really is a great cook. He's always bringing us food," I said, squinting as my head throbbed.

"Does your head hurt?" River asked.

"Yes, it does a little. I'm feeling dizzy. Maybe I'll take a couple of aspirin when we get inside," I said, feeling nauseous. As we pulled into his driveway, I saw Gage

walking over and opening my door.

As I turned to get out, I vomited, unable to hold my head up. Gage jumped out of the way just in time. I was throwing up seawater, and it felt like it was shredding my throat with glass. "I'm sorry," I mumbled to Gage. River scooped me up and carried me into his house, straight to the master bathroom.

"How are you feeling?"

"Would it be okay if I took a shower? I think it might help," I said, tears streaming from my eyes.

He turned on the water and set a towel on the counter. "Do you need help?"

"Thank you, but I can manage." I stripped out of my clothes and stepped under the spray of water. I shampooed my hair and then got out, wrapping the towel around me. I had to hold onto the towel bar because I felt like I might pass out. I made it as far as his bed before I knew I couldn't go any further. Maybe if I rest for a moment, I thought, climbing into River's enormous bed. I wasn't sure I could get in, feeling as sick as I did.

I heard him calling my name. "Kat, you need to wake up. The doctor said I have to wake you every hour," he said, brushing my hair out of my eyes.

"What? I went to sleep? I don't even remember getting home," I said, my head pounding.

"You fell asleep in my bed," he said, handing me a glass of water and the aspirin I hadn't taken earlier.

"I'm so sorry. You don't even have a sofa to sleep on," I said, feeling guilty.

“That’s fine. I’ve managed,” he said, gently moving my hair out of my eyes. I closed my eyes again, not realizing that he climbed into bed beside me and fell asleep too.

6

River

I lay down next to Kat, just as I had been doing all night. It was tough being this close without touching her. This was the first time I'd ever had a woman in my bed—usually, I was in theirs.

I didn't bring women into my home, but having Kat here felt right. I knew how much I wanted her, but I wouldn't let that happen. Her hair was a wild mess, and I tried to push it away from her face. She must have forgotten to put the scrubs back on because she was wearing nothing but a small towel, which was hanging off the bed.

When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me. I glanced at the clock. "I forgot to wake you."

She smiled. "I'm the one who should apologize. I crawled into your bed and passed out. I'm like Goldilocks."

I chuckled. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel so much better. Thank you for taking care of me."

"You're welcome. Would you like some breakfast?" I asked.

"No, thank you. I need to get home and put on my own clothes," she said, smiling .

“So, will you keep chasing those big waves?” I asked, hoping she would say no.

“It would have been nice if I hadn’t gotten cut off. I don’t usually go after those big waves, so it was a surprise, and I was a little nervous when I saw it coming. I think I’ll stick to sunbathing on the beach for a while,” she explained, her eyes widening as she realized she wasn’t wearing anything.

“I think that’s a good idea. I’ll drive you home, but first, I’ll give you some privacy to get ready,” I said, thinking it was time for things to return to the way they were before Texas. I’d keep dating the long list of women I always did, and Kat could do whatever she wanted to do.

I didn’t want to get involved with Kat; sleeping with her would ruin our working relationship. She was too good of an assistant to lose, and I’d rather have her where I could keep an eye on her to make sure she was safe.

When we pulled up to her duplex, I was surprised by all the flowers around her yard and front porch. As we walked into her home, I noticed more plants inside. I loved it. The house was light and airy, decorated perfectly for the beach, which was only two blocks away.

“You have a green thumb,” I said, looking around.

“Yeah, it comes naturally. My mom taught me how to garden, and I have a raised garden in my backyard. My Mom was a hands-on mother. She stayed home to care for us kids. My brothers all know how to garden and cook. This is the best weather for growing all kinds of plants. Gage comes over to get his vegetables from here. If you ever need fresh veggies or fruit, you can take some anytime you want.”

I turned quickly, instinctively blocking Kat, when I heard a noise behind me. Two senior citizens stood there, looking at Kat.

“I knew something happened when you didn’t come home yesterday,” the plump, tiny woman said, hurrying over to Kat and completely ignoring me. She couldn’t have been more than four and a half feet tall, though that might be an exaggeration. “I can tell you were at the hospital by your clothes. Sit down and tell us everything.”

Her husband, or whoever he was, stopped in front of me. He was the exact opposite of her—tall, about six and a half feet, and skinny as a rail. “Who are you, and why is Kat with you?”

“Jack and Myrtle, this is one of my bosses, River Channing. River, these are my wonderful neighbors, Jack and Myrtle Freemont. Let’s have a cup of tea, and I’ll explain what happened,” Kat said.

“I already know what happened. You were the one who rode that big wave and got cut off by the other surfer. We heard about it, and when you didn’t come home last night, I told Myrtle it must have been Kat who got hurt,” Jack explained.

“When that man brought your car home yesterday evening, I asked him about it, and he told us everything. We’re glad to see you’re okay.”

“I’m fine; I just have a few stitches on my shoulder and a bump on my head. But thinking back to when I saw that boy on the surfboard, he didn’t know I was there, and his eyes were as big as saucers when he saw me. I don’t want anyone kicking him off the beach.”

I cleared my throat, and Kat glanced at me, smiling. “Come and sit down; we’ll have tea and cookies.”

“No, thank you. I have to get going. I’ll see you in the morning. If you don’t feel up to it, take another day off.”

“Another day? This is day three. Believe me, I’ll be at work in the morning,” she said, walking me to the door. “Thank you for taking care of me. ”

“You’re welcome.” I smiled as I closed the door, hearing Myrtle tell Kat not to let me go.

On my way home, I stopped by Lowe’s and bought a bunch of houseplants—mostly big ones, but also some smaller ones for the kitchen and bathroom. I even got one for my front entrance. Since it was still early, I went home and sat on my deck, watching the waves. I heard Gage walking over, and he handed me a cup of coffee. We sat there in silence until Gage finally spoke up.

“You’ve got it bad, brother. What are you going to do?”

“I’m not going to do anything. Everything will go on as it always has. I’ve had it bad for Kat since the moment I saw her, and I’ve been doing fine. Nothing is going to change just because I know her husband has been dead for over three years,” I said, trying to convince myself that I have to stay away from Kat.

“You can keep telling yourself that and see how long it lasts.”

I stood up. “I’m heading into the office. Are you coming, or are you taking another day off?”

“I’ll ride with you,” Gage said, standing up. He picked up our cups and took them inside his house before meeting me at my truck. “So, how was she this morning?”

“She felt bad for falling asleep in my bed, but she’s much better. I’m sure she’s working in her garden right now.”

“That reminds me, can we stop by her house and pick up some vegetables on the way

home?”

“No, you can go there after you get home. I’m distancing myself from our beautiful assistant. I need to get back to dating my usual string of women, as Kat calls them,” I said, pulling into the parking lot.

The first vehicle I saw was Kat’s. “I told her to take the day off, but she never listens.”

“She likes to stay busy; we all know that. I’m sure she’ll be fine. Let’s not upset her,” Gage replied.

“Why would you think I’ll upset her?” I said, shaking my head. Everyone was concerned Kat would start crying again.

“Because you look angry. She wouldn’t be here if she weren’t feeling well,” Gage said.

“I am angry. I don’t want her working after what happened yesterday,” I said, taking a deep breath. I didn’t want to walk in there angry, so I let Gage go in first. Then, I forced a smile before entering the building.

As soon as I walked inside, chaos greeted me. Puppies ran everywhere, and Kat and Tag were trying to catch them. I knew she hadn’t come here to work because she was wearing cut-off blue jeans that barely covered her beautiful ass. How the hell did she get that all-over tan?

“Stop!” I shouted, and everything halted, even the puppies. “Who do these belong to?”

“After you left, I heard someone outside. It was a dog catcher looking for these



puppies. He said he had their mother and took her to the pound. I had no idea where the puppies were until I went out back to pick some vegetables for Gage.”

She looked at Gage. “I put your vegetables in your office.” Gage gave her a thumbs up. “These babies were all hiding under my porch,” Kat explained breathlessly.

Her thick and wild hair hung down her back and over her shoulders. I wanted to run my fingers through it and pull her closer. Her scent was intoxicating, and I felt another hard-on coming on. Her face was flushed from running around, and I worried she might have a fever. I gently took her chin and felt her forehead. It didn’t feel hot.

“Did you just check to see if I had a fever?” she whispered, her sweet breath fanning my face before she grinned .

“Yes, your face is pink and sweaty,” I explained.

“That’s because I’ve been chasing these puppies. I had to drive my car with six crazy puppies jumping and peeing on my seats.” She glanced down at the floor, and there was that grin again. She couldn’t hide it before I saw it.

That’s when I noticed she was wearing house shoes. Then I looked down at my boots and saw a puppy sitting on my foot—or rather, peeing on it. I reached down and picked her up. She was cute, but I didn’t have time for puppies. Did I?

“Why did you bring them here?” I asked.

“I don’t want the dog catcher to take them. I’m going to get their mother out of the pound, and I wondered if these babies could stay here with you until I get back.”

“Is that poop in the corner?” I asked, noticing the mess.

“Bad doggy. You can’t potty in the office.”

“Kat, the pound won’t hurt the animals. They’ll find good homes for them. Dog pounds aren’t like they used to be. I know they make sure the animals are well cared for here in Carlsbad.”

“But the family will be separated,” she said.

“That’s what happens with dogs. You don’t think they find one home for all of them, do you?” I asked frowning.

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but now that you mention it, I guess you’re right. They’ll all go to different homes if they go to the pound. That’s why I will get their mommy so they can stay together.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to gather up the puppies. I held two while Gage and Tag took care of the others.

“They can live with me,” she said, her chin quivering. And damn, she wasn’t wearing a bra .

“Do you plan to go to the pound dressed like this?” I asked, pointing to her outfit.

She looked down and realized she was wearing pink furry house shoes. “I didn’t have time to change. Damn, can you go get the mama dog for me?” She pleaded, with those beautiful eyes gazing into mine.

“No. First, they keep the animals for three days before letting them be adopted. Second, I once dated the woman who runs the shelter, and I don’t want to see her again.”

“Why am I not surprised? Fine, I’ll take the puppies to the pound myself. Can you at least help me get them to my car?”

“If you think I didn’t hear the first part of your sentence, you’re sadly mistaken. I heard all of it.” There was that grin again. I wondered what she’d do if I leaned down and kissed her. Then her bottom lip slipped into her mouth, making her look nervous.

My gut clenched, and something inside me snapped. I did what I said I’d never do: I leaned in and took that bottom lip between my teeth, ready to drop the puppies before Gage took them from me. With my arms free, I wrapped them around Kat and pulled her as close as I could. I plundered her mouth, biting her plump bottom lip before sliding my tongue into the sweetness of her mouth.

I’ve kissed a lot of women in my life, but knowing I was kissing Kat right now nearly pushed me over the edge.

She let out a hot, sexy moan and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. I cupped her ass with one hand, feeling her cheek through those short shorts, while my other hand tangled in her hair, pulling her head back to deepen the kiss until I heard her whimper.

Kat’s hands slipped under my shirt, and her nails trailed down to the top of my jeans. I felt her hand moving lower. I had to stop this right now.

“You taste so damn good,” I murmured against her ear. “I wish we could finish this, sweetheart, but this is as far as it goes. We work together, and it’s against the rules.”

“Fine, then you take the puppies to their mommy,” she said, leaving me standing there with a hard-on.

“Do you want me to throw some ice water on you?” Gage said, stepping out of his

office.

“No, I’m taking that job in Iran. I’m getting those men out of there, and I’ll take two guys with me. I’ll be in my office working out the plan.”

“What about the puppies?”

“Can you please take them to the animal shelter? I was serious when I said I didn’t want to see the woman who runs the place.”

“Yeah, I’ll take them, but I’m going with you to Iran.”

“Okay, I’ll write down your name. I might step out of the office. I need to apologize to Kat for that... attack.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. She might not want you to apologize.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, heading into my office and shutting the door. Ten minutes later, I was pounding the punching bag, planning everything out in my head for what we’d do once we got to Iran. All I could think of was how soft Kat’s skin was.

7

Kat

I held my hand over my mouth; I licked my lips, and I could still taste him. My body craved release, and I was sure River needed it, too. I chuckled as I drove my little car home. I knew a few things about making love. Alex didn't have much experience, but he did understand that I needed an orgasm just as much as he did—because I told him.

I finally gathered the courage to ask one of my married friends about having an orgasm. She told me everything I wanted to know and even more than I needed to know. So, I told Alex that he needed to please me, just as he did himself. Sex wasn't a big deal for Alex, my poor, sweet Alex.

For a long time, I never thought I would get over blaming myself for his death. But after talking with Myrtle, who's a psychologist, I began to understand. She helped me realize that his mother had planted that guilt in my head. I wasn't to blame for his or my baby's death.

I hoped someone had taken care of those puppies. Maybe I'd visit the animal shelter and adopt one, but which one? I knew they'd all jump around, wanting to come home with me, and I wasn't sure what to do. I knew they were happy to see their mother again.

I'm going to be so embarrassed facing the guys tomorrow. I would have let River drag me into his office and do anything he wanted. I've dreamed of that kiss for two

years; he was even better than I imagined.

I've never been kissed like that before, and I didn't want the feeling to fade. I almost climaxed right there when his hand touched my ass. Did I really run my hands under his shirt? I might have even scratched his back and slipped my fingers inside his waistband.

I headed to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and stayed there for a while. I thought I heard someone at the front door, but I figured if it was important, they'd come back.

I slipped on my new dress when I got out of the shower. I had a date—a blind date. I was supposed to meet someone downtown at the Mexican restaurant. I didn't really want to go, but I couldn't find the guy's phone number to cancel.

I looked in the mirror. The dress was a little short, but not too short. I walked through the house, making sure everything was locked up. When I opened the door, I jumped.

"What are you doing?" I asked River, who was sitting on my front steps.

"I wanted to apologize for kissing you the—wait, are you going somewhere?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're all dressed up. Is that a new dress? Don't you think it's a little too short?"

"I have a date."

"You're going on a date with another man while my kiss is still on your lips? "

"It's a blind date, and no, your kiss isn't still on my lips. I showered and washed my

lips,” I lied. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stop and chat. I’m already running late for my lunch date.”

“Do you always dress like this for a lunch date?”

“This is my first lunch date, so I wasn’t sure what to wear.” River took my hand and pulled me inside. I jerked my hand away. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to help you find something more appropriate to wear—something better suited for a lunch date,” he said, walking around until he found my room. He pulled me to the closet and stood there, looking at my clothes.

Then he looked at me and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I just know I don’t want you to be with another man. I’ll leave,” he said, heading back outside. He paused at the door and looked at me. “I’m off to Iran. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“When will that be?” I asked.

“As soon as we rescue who we’re going after. Hopefully, not too long,” he said, his gaze lingering on me. “You’re beautiful. Have fun on your lunch date. You deserve to enjoy yourself.”

“I don’t want to date anyone,” I said, stepping closer to him. “Be careful in Iran. Who’s going with you?”

“Gideon and Gage. I’ll keep in touch,” he said, walking to his truck. I kicked off my heels and followed him barefoot.

“River, thank you for coming over. If you need me over there, call. I know a lot about Iran, and I’m a medic.”

“Goodbye, Katrina McDonald. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“Bye, River Channing. I’ll call Gage and Gideon to say goodbye to them, too.” I wanted to tell him I’d miss him. He turned back to me, bent down, and kissed me .

“I might have to fire you,” he whispered. I nodded because I understood. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

I took off the dress and put on some sweats. Then I called Myrtle and asked her to contact my blind date and tell him I was in a relationship.

I didn’t want anyone’s lips on mine except River’s. After that, I went out to pull weeds from my garden. I felt wonderful. I didn’t even care if I got fired. I daydreamed about those lips on mine. What is the matter with me? I’m acting like a child.

Three weeks later, I was a raving madwoman. We hadn’t heard from River in two weeks. Everyone was off on a mission except Farron Lightfoot and me. Farron had just returned from a job in Thailand, where he contracted an infection while wading through dirty river water.

“You can’t go because of your infection. What if it spreads up your leg? You nearly died from this. Do you want to risk that?” I demanded.

“All right, we’ll wait until the antibiotics take effect. We’ll go in two days if we haven’t heard from them by then. But I’m still not convinced you should go. I’ll be making the plans.”

“I told you, I was a medic in the Marines. I’ve been in wars, I’ve been shot twice, and I can take care of myself and anyone with me.”



“You don’t have to stay with me. I’m not a child.”

“I know I don’t, but I want to. Tell me about yourself,” I said, smiling. Trying to get his mind off of going overseas.

“You know all there is to know about me. I’m an open book. Tell me about the fires in Texas.”

I told him about my family there and how I saw all of them. I talked about Alex and Conner, my husband and baby, who died. He was in shock when I finished speaking.

“I don’t know what to say. God, I’m so sorry. That must have been a nightmare for you. Is that why you seem different?”

“Do I seem different?”

“Well, I’ve never seen you in jeans before. You seem more relaxed—except when it comes to River and the guys. They might just be unable to call. Plus, I’ve never known you to talk so much.”

“Yes, I am more relaxed. Plus, I found out I don’t have to wear high heels every day if I don’t want to. I’m going to take care of a few things. You can stay at my place while you recover. I don’t want you getting worse.”

“Kat, I’m also a medic; we all are. So you don’t have to worry. I’m not going to let myself get sicker. I want to learn as much about our missing team as you do. I hope they aren’t locked up somewhere.”

“I know.” I glanced at Farron, who was half-American Indian. He was handsome, with his black hair tied back with a piece of rawhide and a chiseled jaw. He was muscular and tall, like the rest of the guys. His dark brown eyes could stop you in

your tracks when he was angry.

I saw him angry once when we were all in Japan. We went there to find two missing girls. Their father thought his ex-wife's father had kidnapped them, so he hired our team to find his daughters. It took four days, and the man who had them had beaten them. Farron slammed his fist into the man's jaw so hard that I heard the bone break. Then he beat the man senseless. No one said a word because the man had beaten both girls. I hoped he died from that beating.

“Are you ready to leave? ”

“Yes, I'm ready. I'll stay at your place because I do feel weak. But I don't want you waiting on me.”

“Can I at least cook enough food for two people?” I asked with a slight chuckle.

“Yes, that would be fine. I might even have a sandwich before dinner.”

“That's great. I made chicken salad yesterday. It makes a delicious sandwich.”

“I love chicken salad sandwiches.”

8

River

I couldn't believe we were in this predicament. First, Gideon gets shot, and now we've been holed up in this damn tunnel for a week. Our point man was dead, and someone else had taken his place, pretending to be him.

We see more of the Iranian Army every time we try to leave. I just hoped Kat wasn't doing anything reckless because our phones were dead. Lately, she had been surprising all of us to the point where we never knew what she might do next.

"How's your wound?" I asked Gideon.

"It's fine. I can run whenever we get the chance. I'm tired of this fucking tunnel," he said, running his fingers through his hair. "I need a shower or at least a pond to rinse off all this sweat and grime."

"We have to find those missing Army Rangers. Cooper Allen and Neal Grinnell have been missing for over a month. We'll also need to refill our canteens soon. And yeah, you're right—you do smell pretty bad," I said, walking away with a laugh. I even heard him chuckle.

"I don't see any signs of movement out there. Do you think we can make a run for it? There are three of us; we can easily take down ten guys," Gage said. "They'll find this cave soon. I don't want to be inside when they do."

“Let’s wait until dark, and then we’ll move. I want to try to find out if the Rangers are still alive. What were they even doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Gage said.

Once the sun went down, it was pitch black outside except for the stars. “Let’s go,” I said, and we ran along the cliff. The temperature had cooled enough that we could run without overheating.

After a couple of hours, we spotted lights ahead. I raised my hand to signal a stop as a large jeep with two occupants approached.

“We’ll take the jeep from these two,” I whispered. We were dressed like Iranians, so we were surprised when they pointed guns at us. The two occupants glanced at each other, and then I heard a familiar chuckle.

“Fuck, what the hell are you doing here?” I asked, pulling her from the jeep.

“I’m here because three members of our team were missing. It’s been three weeks since we last heard from you, and we were worried you were locked up somewhere or worse. We had no idea why you couldn’t call,” she explained.

She stepped back, and I frowned. “Why are you backing away from me? You don’t think I’m going to hurt you, do you?” I growled.

“No, I’m just trying to escape your smell,” she said.

We chuckled, knowing exactly how bad we all smelled. “I’m taking the first shower,” I said as we climbed into the jeep.

“You three can ride in the back. We’ll take you to where we’re staying so you can all

shower. Now, where the hell have you been?" Faron demanded.

"We've been stuck in a damn tunnel; you couldn't even call it a cave because you couldn't stand up in there; we were waiting for the Iranian Army to clear out. How did you know where we were?"

"Kat knows a lot of people here. When she was here before, they told me she helped everyone, not just Americans. She saved a lot of lives," Faron explained.

"I did what any of you would have done. I also found out that the Army Rangers are being held in the central prison. They've been beaten because they tried to escape," Kat added. "I think, from what I heard, they'll need to be carried out of there."

"Faron, Kat, thanks for showing up. A couple of kids spotted us running in their backyard, and they shouted for help. We took a vehicle and ditched it in another part of the city. Then we hitched a ride on the back of a truck and ended up out here when the driver spotted us."

"I'm just glad you're all alive," Kat said. I was still pissed that she had come to Iran. I'd say something about it after I had a shower.

"We have food. One of my friends brought us something to eat, and plenty was left over. I'll heat it up while you shower," Kat said.

"I can't believe how easy it was to find you guys. Have you ever seen the inside of that prison?" Kat asked.

"No, I haven't," I said, and the others echoed what I said. "How the hell are we going to get into that prison?"

"Kat knows someone who works there. She said she'd try to talk to them. Have you

guys noticed how much Kat has changed? I know you've been with us on missions before," Farron said, "but usually, you sit quietly until one of us asks a question. Now you talk non-stop," Faron said.

I didn't like the thought of Kat getting her feelings hurt, so I looked at her, and she just rolled her eyes before looking at Farron.

"Please tell me what I said when I talked non-stop. That's not true, Faron, and you know it."

"I'm playing with you, sweetheart. Did you forget I'm the teaser of the group? I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I guess I did forget," she said, giving him the eye.

I'll have to set Faron straight on one thing: he does not ever call what is mine, sweetheart, with that look in his eyes like he wanted her.

We drove for another thirty minutes, and Kat turned around and looked at me. "I feel that something is off. Usually, when I get that feeling, something is off."

"Faron, turn here and turn the lights off. Can you see enough to drive on this road? Now turn around, and we'll see if anyone shows up. We waited until the first headlights showed up, then we drove away.

"They were waiting for us to show ourselves before they came back, hoping to surprise us," I said, looking around. "Here comes more. Can we get the fuck out of here without them knowing about it?"

"It's a good thing we showed up when we did," Faron said. "I can drive without headlights. I'm used to doing things in the dark."

It took us over an hour to get to where we were going. I showered while the food was heating. “This smells good,” I said, smelling the food. “I was getting tired of granola bars and jerky.”

We sat around the table eating. “Where is the prison located?” I asked, looking at each of them. Kat put some homemade tortillas on the table, and we dipped them into our soup.

“It’s on the outskirts of town. It’s a small prison. I heard they hold all the foreigners there. It is heavily armed with guards told to shoot first,” Kat said, taking a bite of her food.

“Other countries have tried to rescue their people, but they were shot before they had a chance of getting close to the entrance,” Kat explained. I still couldn’t get over the change in her. How did she keep quiet for two years? I always knew she was brilliant, but now she showed us how smart she was.

“So, how are we going to get in there?” I asked. “if they shoot first, then we will all be shot.”

“They are going to poison their evening meal,” Faron said.

“How are they going to do that?” I asked, grabbing another tortilla.

“The cook wants to go home with us; he has family in Chicago. He is going to poison the guard’s food for us. We will show up there tomorrow night dressed as guards. We’ll open the prison so everyone can get out. And rescue our guys,” Faron said.

“It sounds easy, but what if it’s a trap?” I asked.

“If it’s a trap, then we will all be dead,” Faron said.

I glanced at Kat. “I want you to stay out of this. If it’s a trap, I want you to get the hell out of here as soon as possible.”

“I’ll be waiting with the vehicle. How did you think you would get out of there?”

Gideon will wait with the vehicle. I don’t want you anywhere near that fucking prison. Kat, when I give you an order, you will listen to me. I want you to stay here.”

“If I stay here, you would have to come back through town to pick me up. That doesn’t make any sense. I’ll wait in the jeep with Gideon.”

I sighed and nodded. Of course, she was right; I just didn’t want her close to that prison. “We need to get some sleep. I’ll take the first watch,” I said, stretching.

“I’ll take the watch. I’ve had sleep. You three need it more than me,” Faron volunteered.

We waited an hour after the guard's meal the next night before heading out. I was still nervous about all of these plans. I never trusted people making plans that I wasn’t involved in. So, as we snuck around the back of the prison to make sure no guards were walking on the walls, we heard others talking inside.

Gage helped me onto the wall, and I saw the prisoners talking. “You need to get out of here before someone finds out what happened,” I said. “Do you know where the Americans are?”

“They are chained to the wall of their cells. All the guards have the same keys, so any key will fit.”

“Can you point me in the right direction?” I asked as Gage, and then Faron jumped from the wall.



That building they are in is to the left. There are other prisoners chained to the walls. How long before they wake up?"

"They're not going to wake up."

"Okay, I'll help." He ran to a guard twenty feet from us and grabbed some keys. We did the same when we saw the guard lying on the ground. It took twenty minutes before we came upon the two Army Rangers. They each had to be carried out. They were unconscious, and it looked like a knife was used on them.

When we got to the Jeep, Kat started working on them. She poured alcohol on their knife wounds. Then she poured water on their face; one woke up swinging. Unfortunately, Kat got a punch in her eye before she had time to duck out of the way of the arm swinging.

I could see her eye was already swelling. "Gage, you'll have to finish for Kat," I looked at her, knowing that was painful. I've had plenty of black eyes in my time. I handed her a wet cloth, and she put it over her eye.

"I'm thankful you two came for us. We'd still be walking," I explained.

9

Kat

Why was he ignoring me? Maybe he didn't want a relationship with me after all. It would be breaking the rules. I decided to act like nothing had happened. We'd been home for two weeks, and while River worked, I did everything I usually did, only speaking when asked a question.

But when Gage brought me a little German Shepherd puppy, I couldn't hold back my tears. Then, the whole team walked in with their puppies. We had all of them, and Farron even had the mother.

"I swear to God, I love you guys. This is so beautiful. I went back to the shelter to get a puppy, but they told me they'd all been adopted. You adopted all of them."

"River adopted all of them," Gage said. "He went to pick up the one that peed on his boots and decided to get the whole litter. So now we have to teach our puppies not to pee or poop in our homes. I'm not a fan of potty training puppies."

I chuckled, knowing how much Gage likes to keep his place spotless. Hopefully, potty training won't take too long. Maybe River does want to be with me if he adopted all the puppies and their mother. His door was closed, so I'd thank him later.

But just five minutes later, Miss Hot-Ass Charlotte walked in and went straight to River's office. I heard them laughing, then silence. Thirty minutes later, they walked out of his office and out the front door together.

Gage went to the door. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” River said, and my heart shattered.

Why can’t I have a happy life? I worked and ignored the guys, knowing they were watching me. Finally, I finished up and stood, picking up my puppy. I walked to Gage’s office. “I’m off to the pet store,” I said with a smile. I wondered if he could tell it was a fake smile.

“I need to do that too. So, what do I need to buy?” Gage asked.

I shook my head. “I’m going to ask one of the workers. I only had one dog when I was little; he was already grown. I need to find out about the food and everything else. I’ll also need to get a dog bed. I imagine there are a ton of things I’ll need,” I said, babbling away. I forced myself to shut up.

“Kat, are you alright? I thought maybe you and River would get together after that kiss before we went to Iran.”

“No, we’re not together,” I said quickly. “Oh yeah, I need to buy a leash to take her on walks. I also have to pick out a name. Have you named your puppy?” There I go again, babbling like an idiot.

“My puppy’s name is Rex because he’s going to be massive one day, and I wanted to give him a big dog’s name.”

“I think Rex is a perfect name. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. ”

“Okay, see you tomorrow. I might even see you at the pet store.”

I nodded and left. I went to the pet store and bought so much stuff that it barely fit in

my little Cooper. It's a small car, but I love it.

I refused to think about what River and Charlotte were doing. I thought he was done with her months ago. I refused to get all worked up over River. He never said anything to me about wanting to be with just me.

Everything was in my head. River never once said he wanted me. It was just that one hot kiss. I have to stop imagining things. Just because I've wanted him for so long doesn't mean he's wanted me. Besides, it's against the rules. So screw him, if he ever kisses me again, I'll bust his lip.

I loved my puppy. She was so good about going potty in the backyard. I decided to take her for a walk on her new leash. I should have gotten a puppy years ago.

I laughed more than I walked. My little girl kept getting tangled up in the leash. I almost tripped before realizing I needed to keep the leash away from my legs.

I called my mom and told her about Penny—I loved that name for her. I took pictures and sent them to my family. I was getting ready for bed when my phone rang. When I answered, it was a voice from the past.

“Captain Jackson, what are you doing?”

“I'm in a pickle. I need your help with something we might get thrown in the brig for.”

“What is it?”

“I just found out Janelle had a child. Her mother called me. My daughter's name is Sierra Jackson. Janelle died, and her father wants to marry my daughter to an old man. I have to save her. She's my daughter. Steven is going with me, and I'm sure

we'll have more help. I'm hoping to get in and out in three days," Joel explained.

"It's been a long time since I've been to Afghanistan," I said, picturing the city where Janelle lived with her family. I haven't been back there since I was shot in the back. I knew that place inside out, but I'm sure it's changed. The Taliban has taken over the entire place. They would kill an American on the spot—or hold them prisoner for ransom and do all kinds of horrible things to them," I was almost raped and murdered when I was in that country.

"You know that place better than anyone. The Taliban will kill my daughter if they find out who her father is. Did you know Janelle was pregnant?"

"No, but it doesn't surprise me that she didn't tell you. She thought you didn't love her."

"It wasn't that—I wanted to marry her. It was her who didn't love me. I wanted her to go to America with me. She didn't want to leave her mother. She never said anything about a baby. I do know her father was a bastard back then, too."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tuesday morning."

"That's in two days."

"Yep. What do you say?"

"Of course, I'll help you save your daughter. Where do you want me to meet you?"

"We'll pick you up at five on Tuesday morning. You might not want to tell anyone where you're going."

“I’ll just say I’m taking vacation time. Do you know where I live?”

“Yes, you’re about sixty miles from me. Steven will be at my place tonight. We’ll see you soon. Don’t worry about what to pack; I’ve got everything you’ll need. Goodnight, Lieutenant McDonald.”

“Please, call me Kat.”

“Okay, Kat, and you can call me Joel.”

After hanging up, I started thinking about poor Janelle. I wonder how she died. There’s no telling, given that she lived in a country run by those murderous Taliban. They killed so many of my friends. They probably stoned her for having a child without being married. I remember her father was a horrible man.

I needed to do this to get away from River and determine if I needed to leave this job. I couldn’t keep working for the Golden Team and loving River—it was too hard, especially after that kiss. After we rescued Joel’s daughter, I could use the rest of my two weeks off to decide what I wanted to do.

I had to find a sitter for Penny. Who could I ask? Maybe Myrtle and Jack would watch her for me. It was only for a few days.

Myrtle agreed to watch Penny, so I headed to work. Thanking my lucky stars, Myrtle and her match-making friends have stopped trying to match me up with a man. The first thing I did was tell the guys I was taking two weeks off. I didn’t tell them where I was going; I knew they’d get upset and try to stop me.

“Where are you going on your vacation? Is this the first time you’ve taken a vacation?” Tag asked.

“Yeah, this will be my first regular vacation. I usually take a few days at a time.”

“Where are you going?” Tag pressed.

“I’m going to visit an old friend.”

“That should be fun. Where does she live?”

“She lives out of the country. I’ll visit her for a week, then spend the rest of the time with my family. ”

“I know you’ll have a great time, and that’s what counts. What country does she live in? And what are you going to do about your puppy?”

“I named her Penny. Isn’t that a great name? She’s going to stay with Myrtle, my neighbor. I should have asked if I could bring her today—I didn’t want to leave her alone.”

“We all brought our dogs because they’re too young to stay home alone. I set up a large area in the back on the grass where they can all play together,” Gage said.

“Oh, good,” I said, heading to my desk. I wondered where River was. I set Penny’s bed and kennel beside my desk. Then, I let her outside with the other puppies.

Gage walked over. “River just called. He’s not coming in today.”

“Okay, thanks for letting me know,” I said, continuing to type, wishing the day would hurry and be over. I knew where River was—I’m not stupid. He’s with that skinny-ass model.

Fine, I’ll have to find a new job. He can have all his women. I don’t want a man

who's with another woman when I thought he had feelings for me. He said he might have to fire me. Wouldn't you think that meant he wanted me?



10

River

I felt like crap letting Kat think I was with Charlotte. When Charlotte showed up, I thought her timing was perfect, so I walked her to her vehicle and told her I wasn't interested, explaining that I was in a relationship. She thought I was playing hard to get. And she draped her arms around me. It took a little more talking to convince her I was serious.

I walked my puppy outside and looked around. "Where's Kat?" I asked as I stepped into Gage's office.

"She's on vacation. Kat took two weeks off. I'm surprised you even want to know. I mean, you kissed her like you were ready to strip her, then ignored her and left with that skinny woman who laughs like a damn hyena."

"Do you have something to say?"

"I thought I just said it. Okay, yeah, I do have something to say. You hurt Kat yesterday. I was surprised you'd do that to her."

I ran my hands through my hair, turned around, and sat in the chair across from him. "I feel like shit for that. It's just that when Charlotte showed up, I thought it was perfect timing. I walked her to her car, then got in mine. I wasn't with her."

"Why the hell was it perfect timing? That doesn't make sense," Gage argued.

“I didn’t want to start something with Kat that might cause her to leave when things ended.”

“Why would it end? You might be together forever. You won’t know until you take the risk and tell her. Take her out for dinner. Take it slow. See if you want to be with her or if it’s just something you’ve built up in your head.”

“It’s not just in my head. I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anyone. But I’ll have to wait until she gets back from her vacation. Where did she go?”

“She said she was visiting a friend in another country.”

“What country?”

“She didn’t say. Now that I think about it, she changed the subject when I asked. I guess she didn’t want us to know where she was going.”

I frowned and shook my head. “Hmm, I think you are right. She didn’t want us to know where she was going.”

“Why wouldn’t she want us to know where she was going?” Gage asked.

“I don’t know. Something feels off. Did she take her puppy?”

“Why would she take her puppy to another country? No, her neighbor is watching Penny,” Gage said as his phone rang, pulling us back to work.

Four days later, I had to leave the country to help a man who was being held in Russia. They wanted to lock him up for spying, and since I knew him and knew he’d never spy, I didn’t hesitate to help—especially with all the shit going on between Russia and Ukraine right now.

I crossed into Ukraine and decided to get a vehicle to drive as close to the Russian side as possible. Along the way, I saw a kid pulling all his gaming equipment in a little red wagon, trying to escape the war. He had to navigate around rubble from bombed-out buildings. Poor kid—all he wanted was to play his game. Why do these fuckers always start wars?

I shook my head, thinking about all the kids who were going to die, just wanting to go home and play.

I crossed into Russia from the Ukrainian side and was supposed to meet Drew five miles in. But when I looked around, I saw soldiers everywhere—Russian soldiers, boys who couldn't be more than sixteen.

They didn't look like they wanted to fight any more than the Ukrainian boys did. I waved to them, but they didn't respond. They didn't want to cross into Ukraine and kill their friends. I shook my head and kept driving.

My thoughts turned to Kat. I hoped she'd be home when I got back. I needed to talk to her. Something felt wrong, and the feeling wouldn't leave me.

I drove a few more miles before spotting a building. I parked behind it and saw a group of older men carrying guns. I kept walking, listening to their conversation, understanding everything they said. They thought I was Ukrainian.

"I'm American. I'm not Ukrainian. I'm friendly." But before I could say more, someone shot me in the leg, and bullets flew around me. The impact knocked me to the ground, and I returned fire. I didn't want to shoot them, but I had no choice. It was them or me. I had to save myself.

I took down all three and quickly scanned the area. Before anyone else spotted me, I needed to find a place to take care of my leg. I couldn't believe they shot me. I should

have been more careful; they were at least in their eighties. Here I was, thinking they didn't want to fight, and I got shot.

I hobbled behind a small shed and pulled my pants down to examine the wound. At least the bullet went straight through, but there was a lot of blood.

I grabbed a water bottle from my backpack and poured it over the wound. Damn, that hurt. Then I pulled out a T-shirt, tore it in half, and wrapped it around my leg. I needed to find Drew and get this looked at.

I couldn't sit there moaning about my injury. I took out my phone and called Drew. It rang twice before he answered. "Where are you?"

"I'm in a building with a bunch of graffiti. It used to be a mattress warehouse. Where are you?"

"I'm not far from those buildings. I've been shot in the leg."

"Damn! Are we going to get shot trying to leave?"

"Not by those guys. My car isn't far away. I need you to come outside so I can see you."

"Hang on... do you see me?"

"No."

"I'll walk down the street. Do you see me now?"

"Stay close to the buildings. I see you. Do you see the green shed?"

“Yes.”

“I’m behind it.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“What the hell happened?” Drew said, looking at my leg.

“I saw some soldiers and waved to them. I told them I was American because they were getting agitated that I was on this side of the border. Then they shot me. I didn’t want to kill anyone, but I had no choice,” I explained.

“Let’s see if we can get out of here,” Drew said

“How did you get away from the people who were after you?”

“A woman I know told them I went the other way. So I’ve got very little time left before they find me. Can you walk?” Drew asked.

“Yes, help me up. I don’t want to get caught helping you leave the country.”

Standing on my leg hurt like hell, but I had to push through the pain to reach my car. Drew put his arm around me, and we jogged as fast as my leg would allow. I saw men running toward us.

“Is that the men who’s after you?” I asked.

“Yes, I think it is. Where’s your car?”

“Behind this building.”

I got in the driver's seat, fighting the urge to scream from the pain as we crossed the border into Ukraine. All I wanted was to get back to America as soon as possible.

We got stuck in Ukraine for a few days. I ended up in the hospital, helping with the incoming wounded. So many kids came in, and I wanted to kill those bastards responsible for the terror they were going through. When the boy with the wagon was carried in, I might have shed a tear.

I took his name and put it in my pocket. He was maybe fourteen. When he opened his eyes, he looked terrified.

"Hey, I'm going to fix you up. I'm not a doctor but an Army Special Forces medic," I reassured him.

"I saw you pulling a wagon a few days ago. What happened to it?" I asked.

"The bomb got it. I worked hard to buy my Xbox and games, and now I don't even have a home."

"Where's your family?"

"In Poland, with my grandma. I said I'd help fight the Russians—some of them are my cousins and friends. I should have gone to Poland with my family."

"I'll take you to Poland when I leave. You'll be here for a couple of days. Why don't you get some rest?"

As I was leaving the hospital, a bomb exploded in the building across the street. I ran to help the survivors, knowing there were many people inside. I spotted Drew, live-streaming the war for his podcast.

He caught me on video as I ran to help. I saw a baby sitting amid the broken cement chunks, debris swirling in the air. I picked her up, and she smiled at me. This sweet baby who was just bombed smiled at me. I kissed her and turned around as Drew was videoing us.

Then I heard a woman screaming for her baby. I turned, and she saw me. She was so relieved that her baby was alive that she collapsed. I walked over and handed her the baby, noticing a deep cut on her leg running from her knee to her ankle. I picked them both up and carried them into the hospital.

I didn't know Drew had recorded everything until Gage arrived in Ukraine.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I saw you on TV. You haven't contacted anyone, and I noticed you're limping. What happened to your leg?"

"I got shot. It still hasn't healed. Let's grab some water and sit for a while."

"Kat's neighbor came by."

"Why did she come by?" I asked, a sinking feeling in my gut.

"She said Kat told her she'd be back in three days, but it's been eleven. She's worried because Kat went to Afghanistan to rescue a little girl. She said two men showed up dressed in fatigues with guns, and Kat was dressed the same."

"What? Kat went to Afghanistan, and now she's missing? When did she tell you this?"

"Two days ago."

“And you’re just now telling me?”

“You don’t have a phone. If I hadn’t seen Drew’s podcast, I still wouldn’t know where you are,” Gage said.

“We have to get her out of there.”

“Tag and Gideon are there right now, searching for her. The little girl is her captain's daughter. Gideon said the Taliban are swarming like army ants. They have no idea where she could be.”

I went looking for Drew and told him I was leaving. He wanted to stay, to show the people what was happening in Ukraine.

“I’ll leave you the car. I’m going to take the boy to his grandma. I’ll see you around. Be careful—bombs are falling everywhere.”

“I will be. I’ll see you around.”



11

Kat

I felt sick to my stomach. I hated this place. Memories flashed back of my friends being blown up and everyone running for the plane. It hadn't changed at all, except now the Taliban were everywhere. Damn, I didn't know there were this many of them. I saw one grab a girl and pull her down an alley.

Fucker. I wanted to kill every one of them. Why were they allowed to take girls in an alley and rape them? Without thinking, I turned to follow them down the alley, but Steven grabbed my arm and stopped me.

I pulled my arm free, knowing I couldn't go after these bastards. We had to act like we belonged here, which meant I had to play the role of a submissive woman who listened to her husband—one who never looked a man in the eye and always did as she was told.

“Lieutenant, you can't try to save anyone, or they'll kill us. Let's get the Captain's daughter and get the hell out of here. Damn, I feel like I'm in a pit full of rattlesnakes. Are we almost there? ”

“Yes, just a couple more blocks. We have to be careful. If the husband is home, he's a snake in the grass—always trying to please the Taliban. Even when we were here before, he tried to kill us.”

We walked until I saw the house. “Here we are. Let me knock. I can speak their

language,” I said, stepping closer to the door. When it opened, it was Janelle’s mother. I quickly looked around.

“Kat, what are you doing here? My husband will be home soon.”

“I came with Joel Jackson to get his daughter,” I explained.

“Hurry, come in. Sierra, come here.” A little girl appeared. She was small for her age, but I saw her father when I looked into her green eyes.

I opened the door wider, and Joel stepped inside. “Hello, sweetheart, I’m your Daddy. Cover her head so no one sees her.”

“I’m going with you,” Janelle’s mother said.

“Cover yourself. We can’t be spotted. We have to hurry. Where’s your husband?”

“He went to talk to the man buying Sierra for his wife.”

I knew Joel would kill the man if he had the chance, so I pushed everyone out the door. I looked around for Steven and saw him in a jeep. Good, I’d hoped he’d find one. We jumped inside and sped off but hadn’t even made it out of town when we saw them coming for us.

“Let me out. I’ll slow them down,” I said, my only thought being to safely get Sierra and her grandmother out of there. I knew the husband would kill his wife, and no one would do anything to him.

“Joel, take over; I’ll help Kat,” Steven said. “Go to the plane. If we’re not there in ten minutes, leave. ”

“No, I won’t leave you.”

“Think of your daughter,” Steven shouted.

Steven and I ran behind a building as the men in the jeeps pursued Joel. I shot their tires, and the vehicle swerved before crashing into a building. We darted down alleys with men hot on our heels. A door suddenly opened, and someone motioned for us to come inside.

I didn’t hesitate. We were dead if we stayed outside, and hopefully not dead if we went in. We stopped and looked around. A woman stood there, watching us. She motioned for us to follow her.

We walked upstairs and into another room, where she tapped a board, and it slid open. There was a hidden area, a tiny space barely big enough for two people. I looked at Steven—his broad shoulders and tall frame barely fit. He grinned.

We squeezed inside, and she shut the wall. “I hope she lets us out soon,” I said, sliding down the wall. I sat down, and Steven followed. I never liked tight spaces.

“She’ll probably wait until it’s dark. We have at least four hours. So, tell me what you’ve been doing since I last saw you?” he asked.

“How long has it been? Five years?”

“At least five.”

“I got married, then lost my husband and my baby boy on the same night. Now, I work for the Golden Team.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard.”

“Yeah, it was. I disappeared for three years. It’s something I’ll never fully get over.”

“So, the Golden Team. How’s that?”

“I love my job. I go around the world with them. I didn’t tell them I was coming here. If they knew, they’d probably be here by now. I told them I needed a two-week vacation. No use upsetting them. So, what have you been up to?”

“My life is what you see. I volunteer to rescue Americans in other countries. Sometimes, even in America,” Steven said. I noticed a sadness in his eyes.

“How’s your family? I sometimes see Jason in the news, always with a different beautiful woman on his arm.”

“Yes, Jason is running for Senate.”

“What about Michael? What’s he doing these days?”

“Michael was killed three months ago.”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“I believe he was set up. It’s something I’m still investigating. Michael was too smart to die the way they said he did. Jason is ready to go to Russia and kill all of them. Do you remember how he always talked things out? Well, with Michael’s disappearance, he’s different. I had to almost hold him down. He wanted to go to Russia and accuse them of kidnapping Michael.”

“Tell me.”

“Michael fell in love. The woman he loved was a lying bitch—dangerous too. I tried

to warn him, but he wouldn't listen. Her name is Sasha Petrov. She's a spy. I told Michael, but he refused to believe me."

"He went away with Sasha to Russia. I warned him she'd use him, make him work for them because he was a famous scientist. He got mad at me; that was the last time I saw him."

"Did you see his body after he died?"

"No. Sasha claimed tigers mutilated his body. She said he was cremated. I don't believe a word she says."

"I agree—it sounds suspicious. What are you doing about it?"

"I've got some people over there trying to find out what was happening before he died. He was there for a month, and I called him every day during that last week. I think she told me he was dead because I was about to visit them."

"Let me know if I can help. They probably have him locked up somewhere. He wouldn't be the first scientist they've kidnapped. But they knew they had to separate him from you and your brothers because they knew you'd figure it out."

"So, you think he's alive?"

"Yes, I do. You should talk to the Golden Team about it. You know them—you're a former Army Special Forces guy, like them. Ever run into them?"

"Just once. Faron dated my girlfriend when I was overseas. The best thing that ever happened to me."

"That doesn't sound like Faron. He'd never date another man's woman. He must not

have known she was yours.”

“Maybe not. He looked surprised when I confronted him. I probably should’ve thanked him instead of punching him.”

“I bet he hit you back.”

“Yeah, he did—then he laughed.”

A few hours later, the woman opened the wall. “You must go.” We grabbed our backpacks.

“Thank you,” I said, taking her hand.

“Lieutenant Kat, you saved my daughter’s life. You are my friend. Stay safe. These men are horrible, and they enjoy causing pain to women. Be careful,” she said.

We stayed close to the wall as we made our way out of town. I could feel it in my bones—we were being hunted.

We were still hiding two days later, the Taliban close on our heels.

“We have to make a run for it,” Steven said. “If they see us and start shooting, I want you to keep running. If I get hit, don’t stop.”

“Will you stop running if I get shot?” I asked.

“I can carry you. You can’t lift me. I’m not arguing—just keep running.”

“Let’s go.”

We were almost out of town when they spotted us. Bullets started flying, but we kept running. I felt a bullet hit me, then another. I turned and saw Steven go down. I aimed and fired, hitting one of the men. Steven turned and shot the other.

I helped him into a nearby building. Inside, I noticed the people watching us. A man rushed over, checking Steven, then me.

“Both of you need to be in a hospital. They’ll be here soon, you can’t stay inside. They’ll kill you if they haven’t already. You need to leave right now.”

I watched them leave, forcing myself to concentrate. I needed to hide Steven and then go for help. Where could I hide him? I saw a door and checked—it was a small closet.

I dragged Steven over and got him inside, then cleaned the floor. Blood kept appearing, and I wiped it up again and again before realizing it was mine. I was losing too much blood.

“Kat, where are you?”

“Steven, don’t say anything,” I whispered. “I’m hiding you in this closet. Stay quiet, no matter what you hear.”

“Go. Get out now. They know we’re in here. Get out before it’s too late.”

“Promise not to say anything, and I’ll leave,” I pleaded.

My head was spinning. I piled more boxes on top of Steven, then left. I had to get help before I passed out from blood loss. I stayed close to the wall, trying to stay awake. Where was I going to find help?

Maybe Captain Jackson would come back for us. I just needed a little rest. I knew it was over when I slid to the ground and blacked out.



12

River

“This whole place is hunting for them,” I muttered, looking around. It had been a while since I’d been back to this hellhole. I glanced at the guys. “Where do we start?”

“Hell, if I know,” Gage replied.

“If she’s alive, she’s got to be somewhere in town. There are more places for her to hide there.” We took off walking and soon spotted the jeep with Gideon and Tag. He raised his arm as we approached, and I spoke before climbing inside. “Have you found her?”

“No, but we know they’re after her. This entire place is on the hunt. Some guy claimed they took his wife and granddaughter at gunpoint. We know that’s a fucking lie, but we played along like we were just two Taliban men on the street.”

“We have to hurry before the sun goes down. How the hell did we end up here? We had the best assistant, and now she’s turned into a damn mercenary? What is she thinking?” I demanded, more to myself than anyone else. “Why would she come here without telling anyone? Didn’t she realize how dangerous it would be? ”

“How do we know she hasn’t done this before?” Gage asked.

“She has taken days off before. She could be doing this every time she has time off,” Gage suggested. “It shocks me that she would come here alone.”

“We get that, Gage; you keep saying how surprised you are,” I said, wanting to shut him up.

We searched all night and found nothing. Early the next day, we ran into a man I recognized—someone who had helped us before.

“Henry, how have you been? Have you seen an American woman around here?” I asked.

“Hey, River, it’s been a while. Yes, I saw her with another man. Both were shot—she had two bullet wounds, and he had three that I saw. I’d be surprised if they’re still alive.”

My heart stopped. I wanted to roar with anger. She’s mine, I wanted to shout. I will kill anyone who touches what is mine. My hands were shaking, so I hid them behind my back.

“The Taliban were close to finding them. I tried to spread the word that they were at the other end of town to buy them some time. Be careful—the Taliban are everywhere.”

“We know, we’ve seen them. Where did you see Kat?” I asked urgently.

“Keep going straight, and when you see a building with an ‘X’ on it, they were there.”

“Thanks.” We hurried to the building, guns drawn, ready to shoot if anyone surprised us. I saw blood on the floor—someone had lost a lot of blood. I had to take deep breaths as I walked to a door, fearing what I might find.

When I opened the door, I saw empty boxes and then a pool of blood. I threw the

boxes aside and found Steven. I felt for a pulse, and he jerked slightly. “Where’s Kat?” I demanded.

“Kat,” he mumbled before blacking out again.

“Someone, check on this guy,” I said before running outside to search the area. Kat had to be nearby.

I spotted something on the ground and sprinted toward it. “Kat, thank God I found you.” I checked for a pulse—she barely had one. After assessing her injuries, I carried her back into the building.

“I’ve got her! Grab that guy, and let’s get out of here.” I held her in my lap until we reached the plane, then we loaded them both in. As soon as we were in, we took off. Tag carried Steven while I cut Kat’s clothes off to assess her wounds.

Her pants were soaked with dried blood; they were stuck to her skin. I poured water on them, and they came away from her skin. I cut off her top and saw where a bullet had hit her right in the shoulder—she must have lost a lot of blood.

“I have to remove one bullet; the other one went through. Tag, give me a hand. Grab my bag so I can disinfect her wounds. Gage, how’s it going over there?”

“He has three bullet wounds. Two went through, but one is still in there. I’ll have to take it out myself. I hope he doesn’t wake up.”

“I’m already awake. Just take the damn thing out,” Steven murmured. I glanced over as Gage started to cut, and Steven passed out.

I worked on Kat for two hours. The bullet was out, but I had to get the cloth from her shirt out of the wounds. She was all sewn up but still didn’t open her eyes. When we

landed in Germany, they were both rushed to the hospital .

The guys went home, and I sat in her room. Three days later, Steven walked in.

“How is she?” he asked.

“She’ll wake up soon. The doctor said her brainwaves show she’s coming around. Has Kat done this before?”

“Done what?”

“Try to rescue someone.”

“Not that I know of. It was the little girl that drove her to help this time. Joel knew Kat was familiar with the area. The grandmother recognized her immediately. That’s why she decided to go with Joel.”

“What happened to Joel? He didn’t come back for you.”

“I don’t know what happened to him. I’m sorry I let her get shot. Will you tell her for me? I have to leave today.”

“You had nothing to do with her getting shot. She knew what she was getting into when she volunteered. But I’ll tell her. Take care of yourself. Don’t come here alone again.”

“I’ll remember that. I will be calling the Golden Team to help us find my brother Michael. If that’s okay.”

“Of course. Tell me about your brother,” I said. He told me about his missing brother and the Russian woman.

“They are probably drugging him. If he’s smart, he’ll figure that out and hide the pill in his mouth. I’ll tell everyone about Michael, and we can investigate everything before we meet with you and your brother Jason.”

“Two days later, Kat woke up. I was sitting next to her when she suddenly jerked and looked around.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital in Germany.”

“Germany,” she repeated, her brain working to catch up. “Oh my God, Steven—I put him in the closet before I went for help, but I didn’t make it far. How did you get here? Are my vacation days up? ”

“The Golden Team rescued you after your neighbor came to us. You were late getting back, and she was worried. And yes, your vacation days are up. Steven has gone home. He said he’s sorry he let you get shot.”

“I couldn’t call because my phone died. I’m sorry for causing so much trouble. You don’t have to stay with me. Did you call my family?”

“I wanted to, but I didn’t. I knew you’d live and figured you wouldn’t want me calling them.”

“Thank you for not calling them.”

“Tell me, what made you decide to go to Afghanistan to rescue a little girl? Especially when they hate us there.”

“I thought Captain Jackson had it more planned out. When we got there, I realized he

was using me to navigate because I knew the area. By then, we were already there, so I took him to the town center where the girl was. I thought we had more backup—that was my mistake. I assumed we had backup, but I was never told we did.”

I knew Captain Jack was going to get a visit from me. “I don’t understand why he never came back for you.”

“Yeah, I have a problem with that too,” she said as her eyes began to close, signaling she was about to sleep.

Damn, I wanted to wring her neck. At the same time, I wanted to pull her into my arms and never let her go. From now on, we will be open with each other. I should have never let her think I was with Charlotte. Even taking the next day off work, I knew she would think I was still with Charlotte. Is that why she left? Was she so angry at me that she didn’t care what happened?

That was something I was ashamed of—letting her believe I would kiss her like that and then leave with someone else.

13

Kat

I was running from all these Taliban who wanted me dead, and they were going to hang me where everyone would be sure to see me. I looked around for Brenda, but she was gone. I stopped; I had to go back for her.

I saw her lying dead on the street, and the men were kicking her. I screamed, and they shot me. I couldn't stop crying. Brenda is dead. When arms wrapped around me, I hung on to them. It took a while before I realized it was a dream. I wiped my face off with the sheet and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I was dreaming about my friend Brenda. The last time I was in Afghanistan, they murdered Brenda. When I went back to get her, the men were standing around, kicking her and spitting on her. I screamed, and they shot me, but I got away. Brenda didn't have that chance."

"Hush, I have you now. Everything is going to be alright. I know how that country is. I've had the same nightmares. It'll be okay. I'm staying right here with you."

"Will you please lay with me for a while?" I wouldn't lay back down until he laid with me. It felt so safe and cozy with River beside me; I finally slept without any dreams.

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by heat, and an arm was across me. I smiled, remembering River was here. His arm tightened.

“I have to get Penny. She won’t even know me.”

“You get to go home today; you’ll see her soon. I need to talk to you about something. When Charlotte came into the office, I didn’t know she was coming over, but I thought that would be the perfect time for you to think something was going on between us.”

“I walked her to her car and then got in mine. Nothing is going on between us. In my stupid head, I thought if you and I got together, then when we broke up, you would quit the job, and I wouldn’t see you anymore.”

“Why did you think we’d break up,” I whispered, turning towards him. “I would never break up with you. I waited too long to be yours and for you to be mine,” I said, looking into his eyes. He kissed my forehead, my nose, and then my lips.

“How about we do this? I’ll take you to dinner in three days at my house.

“Are you going to cook dinner?” I asked.

“Sure, I’m a good cook. I’ll grill the steaks, And you can make the salad. How does that sound?”

“Sounds perfect,” I said. I was kissing his chin.

“Are you two going to stay in bed all day, or are we going home?”

Both of us chuckled as Gage walked around the door.

“So, does this mean you two are a thing?”

“Yes, she is mine,” I said



“And he is mine, Kat agreed. No more skinny models are allowed in the Golden Team offices unless one of the others is dating them.”

“And no more surfers are allowed to come and pick you up.”

“That only happened one time.”

“One time was too many; it won’t happen again. If you want to go surfing, I’ll take you. If you want to go out to eat, I’ll take you,” I kissed her softly.

“It’s a deal. Let’s go home,” Kat said, cuddling next to me.

“If you want to go home, you’ll have to stop cuddling. Or else I’ll embarrass myself trying to get out of this bed.”

I heard her chuckle again. “Sorry.”

“I’m happy we got all that out of the way. You are mine, and I will cherish you every day. Will you promise you won’t run off to these dangerous countries without me knowing?”

“If you are there when I’m going, then sure, I’ll tell you. But if you are gone and I need to leave, I’ll call you when I can. You know I don’t go often; I go when I need to help someone. Maybe once a year. You are constantly off saving someone. Perhaps I can start going with the Team more.”

“I can’t get over the so put together Kat Mellows with this Kat,” Gage replied.

I looked at him and smiled. I forgot he was here.

14

River

She was mine, and there was no way in hell I was letting her out of my sight. She didn't know it yet, but she was going home with me. Our first stop was to get our puppies. When we arrived at Jack and Myrtle's house, Myrtle had tears in her eyes; she did not want to give Penny up.

"Myrtle, I want you to have Penny; she will be your guard dog. I know how attached you and Jack are to her. I'm going to stay with River for a while, and I will see you in a few days."

"You can share my dog with me," River said.

"What's your dog's name?"

"Her name is Sissy."

"Sissy, does she like that name?"

She loves that name. Don't try to change her name."

I would never do that. She's had the name for weeks now. Why would I try to change her name? I'm sure I'll get used to Sissy."

We pulled up into my driveway. I took Sissy out of the back seat and walked into the

house. Kat stopped and clapped her hands .

“This is beautiful. Look at all of your plants. I love the furniture you picked out. It’s absolutely gorgeous,” she said, looking around. Kat looked at me and smiled. “So does this mean we are sharing a bed tonight?” she asked.

“We share a bed every night, sweetheart. Let’s get your things and put them in my room. From now on, this will be our room. I don’t want you going back to your house. Can you give us a try and see how long you can live with me?

“River, why don’t we wait before we do that? We just got together; we haven’t even slept together yet.”

“That’s not true. You slept in my bed one night, And I slept in the hospital bed with you almost every night.”

She looked at me like she was gonna start crying. “That is so sweet. Thank you for sleeping with me there. I remember hearing you talk but didn’t know what you were saying. Your voice made me feel safe. Let’s go to bed.”

“You want to go to bed right now?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you’re up to making love?”

“I waited a long time for this. I want you to know I haven’t had sex with anyone except my husband. So you may have to teach me a few things.”

“I’ll teach you everything. Once we start, it’ll be a while before we stop. I’ve also waited a long time for this.” I picked her up and carried her to our room from now on.

I slowly undressed her, kissing each wound she had on her body. I sucked a nipple in my mouth and let my teeth graze it. She arched her back and made a noise in her throat that had my cock harder than it's ever been.

"Take your clothes off," she whispered into my ear. I stood as naked as she was. She looked at my body, and her hand reached for my cock. I growled before I threw her on the bed .

"We won't have a lot of foreplay, sweetheart; I can't wait much longer. Next time, we'll have more foreplay," I said against her lips.

Her scent surrounded me, and my blood pounded in my ears. I devoured her mouth. She was as hungry for me as I was for her. My tongue plunged between her lips, and unreserved passion met me head-on. My hands went through her hair as I pulled her lips closer to mine if that was possible.

Hunger surged inside us when we landed on the bed. I was careful not to crush her body with mine. I held myself over her.

"No, I want to feel all of your body touching mine," she whispered.

I lowered my body to hers, and the touch of her hands, so warm on my skin, sent sensations straight to my dick.

My hand slipped between her thighs, and she cried out on a half sob of pleasure as I touched delicate, warm flesh.

I knew I couldn't hold on much longer; I had to have her right now. I raised up, she spread her legs, and I pushed my hard erection inside her.

She was tight as I entered her, and then she raised her hips, and I pushed deep inside

her. All I could feel was her touch. All I knew was the heat and the need that moved through my body.

I have never felt like this with any other woman. We made love throughout the night, and when Kat woke up, I lay on my side, watching her.

She smiled, “Was I snoring?”

“No,” I replied and smiled. You’re beautiful. Do you want to shower with me?”

“Yes, I would love to shower with you.”

Kat stretched and held her head out for me to pull her out of bed. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her as I led us to the shower, our bare bodies wrapped around each other

I didn’t know her body could be so sensitive. Just a little touch from me and her body would orgasm. She cried happy tears of fulfillment. I kissed her everywhere when she cried tears of satisfaction. I tried to calm her tears.

My heart expanded in my chest with love for Kat. I wouldn’t speak my love out loud. I didn’t want to chase her away.

I took Sissy out to use the bathroom and then made breakfast. By the time we got around to eating, the eggs were cold.

“Are we going into the office today?”

“I am, but I want you to rest. You went through a lot while you were gone, and I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“What do you think would happen to me? I sit at the desk, answer the phone, write things up, and check the email. That’s not going to hurt me, right?”

“If you don’t want me to go in, you’ll have to drop me off so I can get my car. I have to get a new phone. I don’t know what happened to mine.”

“The bag is in my car; maybe your phone’s in there.”

“How did you get my backpack? I don't even know where I lost it.”

“It was in that closet where Steven was hiding.”

“That’s right, I forgot I put him in that closet. How is the little girl?”

“I talked to Joel last night while you were sleeping. He was on his way back to get you and stopped in Germany. Someone said that he was human trafficking, and he was arrested. ”

“Why was he arrested?”

“They saw a little girl getting on his plane. It took three days for him to prove that it was his daughter. He heard we were there to get you and Steven out by then.

“So that's why he didn't come back and get us. That’s a big relief. I was starting to get pissed off because he never showed back up.”

“Yeah, that’s why I called him. I was angry that he would leave you there.”

“I’m going to get dressed, and I’m going to work with you. Please don’t argue about it. I feel great; I’m just a little sore, but that might not move from the bullet wounds that might be from us being awake all night making love.”

I chuckled. I couldn't help but think the same thing. Okay, sweetheart, you win. It probably was from us staying awake all night making love, plus this morning. Just thinking about it makes me want to go back to bed.

"Me too," she said, pulling her tee shirt over her head and walking down the hallway. I reached her before she got ten feet from me, and I carried her the rest of the way to our bed.

Two hours later, we were staring at each other. "I've never had this happen when making love before," she whispered. "I'm not saying anything mean against my husband. It's just that I was the only woman he ever made love with like he was the only one I've ever made love with."

"We've only just begun, sweetheart; I have lots more to show you," I said, kissing her.

"I can't wait to try everything with you," she said, her eyes drifting shut.

15

Kat

I stretched and opened my eyes, smiling because, finally, I was where I belonged. I wanted to scream my love for River, but I knew that would scare him, so I kept it to myself. I showered and dressed and dug through my bag for my phone.

“Yes,” I said out loud, pulling out my phone and plugging it in. Then I walked Sissy outside to use the bathroom.

I wish Myrtle and Jack hadn’t become so attached to Penny, but as Jack said, they feel safer with her in the house because she barks when she hears something. I called Sissy, and we walked back inside. River stood there with Penny in his arms.

“How did you get them to give her up?”

“I convinced them they needed a smaller dog who wouldn’t chew everything up. I went back to the shelter and got them a Chihuahua. And they loved her. They said it would be easier for her to go places with them.”

“River Channing, I swear you better be careful, or I’ll fall in love with you.” He tilted his head back and laughed.

I cuddled Penny close, not realizing that tears rolled down my cheeks. River pulled me to him and kissed me. I will do anything for you if it makes you happy.”



“Why are you home so early? You always leave work at six like I always do.”

“That’s because you were there. Only men are there, asking me a million questions about you. So tomorrow, you can return to work, so they’ll leave me alone.”

“Good, I miss work.”

“I brought Mexican food. Are you hungry?”

“Yes. I’m glad you’re home early. What’s going on at work?”

“Gideon and Cyclone are going to Africa. Have you ever met Matt Grey? He’s with the Army Rangers Special Ops?”

“Yes, I met him when we were in Maine, and that girl was kidnapped. Matt Grey came by where we were and took Farron with him.”

“He’s over there; he said the kids are being used as sex slaves, and some American politicians are involved. He can’t prove it, but we know he’s right.”

“That angers me so much; I can’t believe people would do that. How can they use children like that? Bastards! Fuckers! Sorry.” I saw him looking at me, and I looked down and smiled; I was wearing his shirt. I could smell his scent on it, so I put it on.

“Do you want to take it off me?” I asked, already breathless.

“Hell yeah,” his hands went under the shirt, and he now knew I didn’t have panties on. He picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

16

River

I gently lowered myself to her. My chest rubbed against her breast as I leaned over her to make sure I had condoms. It was good that I stopped and bought a box of them. They were stacked up next to my gun on the bedside table.

Shivers cascaded down her arms and legs when I began to nuzzle the side of her neck. Her breath was sweet and warm against my skin, and when she kissed my ear, I felt a jolt of longing down to my toes.

“This was a great idea,” she whispered as she tilted her head to give me better access. She reached up, caressed my neck, and tugged on my hair. I knew she wanted me to kiss her. She loved kissing, and so did I.

“Want me to stop?”

“No.” She reached up and kissed my chin. “No, I want you to kiss me.”

I knew she wished she would have kept quiet because now she was worried I’d stop touching her. When she tightened her hold on me, I knew she wanted me to make love to her .

“Kat.” My voice was a rough whisper against her skin.

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“I’m going to make love every chance I get.”

“Good, I was going to tell you the same thing.”

I didn’t move. I waited for Kat to make up her mind about what she wanted me to do. It seemed as if any worry about the consequences of our actions flew from her thoughts. There was only room for me. She stared into my eyes and pulled me to her.

It was all the encouragement I needed. My mouth settled on hers in a kiss that was warm and undemanding. But soon, it wasn’t enough for me. One taste of her sweet mouth made me crave more.

My tongue swept inside and rubbed against hers. I took my time leisurely exploring her mouth until that wasn’t enough. I tightened my hold on her, and the kiss deepened.

With a groan, I lifted my head. “Tell me what you want,” I whispered into her ear.

“I want all of you.”

I was eager and hot, as though it was my first time. I knew how to please a woman—but this was different. This was Kat. The need to be with her made me ache. I wanted to make sure she enjoyed everything.

Kat wasn’t shy with me or hesitant. She stroked my back, my shoulders, my arms. I could feel her heart pounding, and when I touched her breast, she arched against me and moaned softly.

Her legs moved restlessly against mine. I kissed the side of her neck and slowly moved lower, taking my time, teasing and tormenting her the entire time. My tongue gently tickled her collarbone, and at last, when I reached her breast, I felt her tighten

around me.

I began to drive her out of her mind slowly. I had no idea her breast was so sensitive, and I enjoyed every moment as she lost a bit more control with each stroke of my tongue. I moved down; my plan was to make her wild. My tongue explored every inch of her stomach as I made my way down her body. When my hands cupped her cheeks, I lifted her so my tongue could explore her folds.

She shouted my name over and over as she orgasmed again and again. My tongue was buried between her thighs. All I could think was to please my lady.

I couldn't last much longer. My erection was painful. It needed release. I crawled back up her slick body, taking a nipple in my mouth on the way.

I took a deep, shuddering breath and passionately kissed her. My hands actually trembled. I kissed her again—hard, quick, and then pulled away. I was reaching for a condom.

She gazed into my eyes, her gaze locked on mine. My hands moved to her waist as I rolled her closer to me. I moved between her thighs and stretched. The feel of her made me forget to breathe.

My hands caressed her back, my touch feather-light until I kissed her again. Her touch quickly became more frantic. She clutched my shoulders, demanding that I stop tormenting her.

“River.” I wasn't sure if she shouted my name or sighed it. My hands had moved between her thighs, and I was driving her out of her mind. I knew just where to touch and exactly how much pressure to exert. She writhed in my arms, pleading for me to come to her.

I was desperate to feel every inch of her, to wrap myself in her warmth. Her breathing became more labored, and that excited me even more. I knew she wanted me to finish and stop tormenting her.

I delayed as long as I could to give her as much pleasure as she was giving me. Her response made it impossible to wait any longer. I knew she was ready.

My mouth covered hers, and I moved between her thighs and slowly sank into her liquid heat. She was so tight, so hot, I groaned from the sheer bliss. I stayed utterly still inside her, panting as I whispered her name.

She cried out my name. The ecstasy was overwhelming. Each time we made love was like the first time.

I breathed her name.

Kat wasn't content to let me catch my breath. I knew she wanted me to give her release again. She lifted her knees to take me in deeper and wrapped her legs around my waist.

Oh, how she wanted to please me, make me as crazed as she was. She bit my shoulder, kissed my mouth, and moved to my neck.

She was panting now. I pulled back and thrust deep, and tears came to her eyes. I was staggered by the intensity of the feelings gathering inside me. My movements became more powerful, more all-consuming, and more demanding.

Even in the throes of making love, I had always been able to control my actions to set my pace. But I couldn't control anything right now. I thrust into her again and again, powerless to slow down.

She was as passionate as me—tension built within her, ready to burst with the need for release.

I watched as wave after wave of sensation poured over her. I thought she might cry.

I kissed her, then buried my face in her neck, slow to recover. “Damn, sweetheart, you are killing me,” I whispered.

I rolled to my side and pulled her with me. I held her and stroked her, my touch tender now. Neither of us spoke, and both were content for the moment. The minutes ticked by, and she fell asleep in my arms.

She woke up once, and her hand touched me, but I didn’t tell her I was awake. She went back to sleep quickly.

I was in the kitchen heating our Mexican dinner when she walked in. She must have just gotten out of the shower. It looked like she had hastily braided her hair. She stopped and looked at me.

“Hi,” I said, smiling.

“Hi,” she said, approaching me; I wrapped her in my arms. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving,” she said, and her stomach growled. We both chuckled. “Me too,” I said, kissing her.

“After we eat, can you take me to get my car? I don’t want to ride to work with you,” She said, taking a bite of food.

“Why.”

“Because I don’t want the guys watching our every move, it will be hard enough going into your office and not locking the door. But for them to wait and see if I do is different. So I will drive myself. And one wisecrack from them, I’ll have to show them my martial arts moves.”

“So you want to walk into my office and lock the door?”

“Yes.”

“Knock, knock,” Gage came in through the back door. “Kat, how are you feeling?”

“I feel fine. I’m returning to work tomorrow.”

We smiled as he walked over, got a plate of Mexican food, and sat down with us. “I had a call from Cyclone, and he’s thinking someone else needs to go there as well. He said that another Army Ranger was shot.”

“What? Which one?”

“Kash Walker.”

“How bad is he,” I asked .

“They’re bringing him home for surgery. His brother-in-law Jason is a Navy Seal; he’s with him now. When Emily and Kash got together, she was raising her younger siblings. So Jason is like his son because he calls him his son.”

“Matt said they have lots of kids there. He said they are all nationalities, and he must be taking them from everywhere.”

“It’s so sad that there are people like that; it’s scary. Their mind is so warped,” Kat

said.

“So, are you two a couple now?” Gage asked.

We ignored him. “What are you up to these days? Are you still dating that woman with the blinking problem? Poor thing. That has to be so annoying blinking like that. Or are those thick false eyelashes she wears the cause of that?” Kat asked.

“Okay, I won’t ask any questions. I’m just saying that if I knew, you would break the no-dating-your-co-worker rule. I would have asked Kat out long ago, and she would be at my house instead of yours.”

I looked at Kat, and we burst into laughter.

“I was going to bring over a lemon cream pie that I made,” he said with a grin.

“We would love some pie. Why don’t we have it on the deck, and the puppies can play together?”

Gage stood and looked around, then sat back down. His puppy was sleeping with Penny and Sissy.



17

River

“No,” I said for the tenth time.

“You can’t just say no. You have to give me a reason.”

“I gave you a reason. We need you here running the office. I’m going to shut this fucking child sex ring down.”

“Okay, I’ll take care of everything here. But if you need me, call. I like having you around. Don’t worry, though. I won’t start getting clingy. I hate clingy people. I had this friend once—so clingy with her boyfriend that she never let him go anywhere without her. Even when she came over to see me, he was always with her.”

“Sweetheart, I like having you around, too. You are never clingy; don’t worry about that. I would never think that.” My bag was packed, and I zipped it shut. Farron and Raven were waiting for me. I pulled Kat close, kissing her until we needed to breathe. She wrapped her arms around my neck, whispering, “Come back to me.”

“I will, sweetheart, I promise.” I set her down, realizing I’d lifted her without thinking. Her legs had been wrapped around my waist. I kissed her again. “I’ve got to go. ”

“I know. Be careful.” She let me go. I couldn’t look back; if I did, I might not be able to leave.

“So what is the plan? Who shot Kash Walker?” I asked as we drove out of the gates.

“It’s the fucking gangs there. They’ve taken over, and the authorities are in their pockets. Not all of them, but the higher-ups. The local government lost control. A man named Omari runs the show now, and they’re taking kids in broad daylight.”

“What about the families? What do they do?” I asked.

“If the families try to stop them, they get shot in the head,” Raven replied, his tone cold.

“I’m not going over there to do the police’s job. I’m going there to help the kids and kill the bastards who hurt them,” I said, my voice hard.

Leaving Kat behind was brutal. I hated it. I should have told her I loved her before I left. I love her more than anything. I don’t want to scare her, but I hope she feels the same way. Next time I see her, I’ll tell her.

We landed in Johannesburg, and Cyclone picked us up. After a two hour drive we stopped at the building where we were staying.

Matt Grey approached. “Thank God you’re here. We have to wipe this gang out. If they keep operating, it’s only going to get worse. Omari’s already sent men to other communities to capture more women and kids.”

“Where’s Omari based? Why not blow his compound up,” Raven asked. “I was here a year ago, and they were trying to get this bastard.”

“He uses children as shields, keeping the older girls in his compound for the visiting men. If we can extract them, we can destroy the compound—with him inside,” Matt explained .

“When Kash saw what was happening, he knew something was off. That’s when we got involved. He went to the government, but it was clear they were profiting from this mess just by how they talked to him,”

“Typical,” I muttered. People turn a blind eye when there’s money involved.”

“This is our building; you can put your stuff on any of those beds there,” Cyclone said, waving his arm. It’s just a cot, but at least it’s not the floor.”

I dropped my gear. “It’s scorching and humid here. We need a plan—something better than just reacting when they snatch a kid. We have to take Omari out; otherwise, this won’t end.”

Matt walked us into another room, laying out maps. “Here’s what we’ve got. The compound is deep in the jungle, about three miles from here.”

I looked down at the paper, which showed where all the buildings were and where Omari’s compound was located.

“Yes, we are on the jungle's edge; his compound is ten miles from here,” Gideon explained. “Cyclone and I scouted it, The place is rigged with cameras throughout the jungle. The only way in is to blend in—we have to become the jungle.”

“How the hell do we become the jungle?” I raised an eyebrow.

“We have to make a cover around our body and move slowly. The only way we can do this is to move the kids.” Cyclone said. “I’ve seen this place, and there are so many guards. There are too many guards to get close without some kind of distraction.”

“Are there any honest cops left?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Gideon said. “But we don’t know who they are. They all claim to be the good guys, but we can’t trust them. No tipping them off.”

I looked at the team. “How are the kids supposed to know we’re there to help? What if they panic, when they see us dressed like the jungle and take off screaming?”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said. “Let’s walk around so I can get a sense of things,” I said.

After checking out the surroundings, we noticed people weren’t thrilled with us patrolling, even though we were cleaning up their communities. They lived in clapboard huts they built themselves, and kids ran freely everywhere. Didn’t they realize their children were at risk?

“Do you think they know we are here?” Raven asked.

“I think they know every move we make. Whatever we do must be done at night,” I replied. If we looked closely enough, I’m sure we would see someone watching us,” I said. “Let’s continue this walk at night. I want to get a good look at the compound.”

“How will we check out the compound with all those cameras?” Raven asked.

“The jungle’s thick with trees. With our camouflage, we’ll blend in, stand against the trees, and they won’t spot us. Listen,” I said, locking eyes with each member of the team. “We’re the best at what we do. We’ll handle this. I need to wrap this up before anyone tries to pull Kat into a mission.”

“I’m about to fall asleep on my feet.” Raven said.

“Me too. Let’s get some shut-eye. We’ll be awake all night.”

I jolted awake, and Raven handed me coffee. You look like you need it more than I

do. Did you have a nightmare?" Raven asked .

"I think so. I could've sworn I heard Kat screaming my name. I guess it was a bad dream. Is it dark out?"

"Not quite, but it will be soon. So, you and Kat—what's the story there?" Cyclone asked. "It's been a while since I've been home, and I'm sorta out of the loop."

"Yeah, we're a thing now. I don't want to talk about Kat. That dream was unsettling. What time is it in California?"

Cyclone looked at his watch. I didn't know why I didn't just look at mine. "It's two in the morning, in Carlsbad, California."

"What do we have to eat?" I asked.

"Not much. I made a pot of stew earlier. It's heating up now. We have no bread. There isn't a lot of food in this area, so we should avoid meat unless we know where it comes from."

"When the stew was ready, the team discussed our plan while we ate. "I put together more camouflage," Cyclone said, dragging four jungle outfits into the room.

"Are they flexible enough?" I asked, inspecting one. It fit snugly around my torso, but I could still move freely.

"This is perfect," I said. "As long as we move slowly, they won't notice us. Who's coming on the mission?"

"It'll be you, me, Matt and Raven. Gideon and Farron will stay out front, pretending they're just hanging around while we slip out the back."

“Is everyone ready?” I asked. I made sure we had water first. We put on our Jungle jackets and left by the back door. The humidity was suffocating, and the air felt heavy as we moved closer to the compound. It seemed to take longer than it should have, and we were as close to the compound as we would get tonight.

18

River

We scoped out the compound's entrances and exits and found three possible entry points. As we moved, I noticed something and signaled the others to stop. A man appeared, walking out of a door hidden in the wall—one we hadn't seen before. He looked around, then took off running, passing right by us. No one moved or even breathed until he disappeared, and then we quietly returned to camp.

We stayed quiet until we got inside the building, when I turned to Cyclone. "Who the hell was that? He ran right past us and didn't see any of us. How many little jungle jackets can we make before nightfall?"

"Enough," Cyclone replied, calm as ever. I always wondered how his Delta Force name stuck. Beau Allan—Cyclone—was deadly to his enemies, but with his family, he was a different man.

"Good. Tomorrow night, we're getting those kids out. We'll go for the older girls, too. Everyone's going, so make as many jungle jackets as possible. We'll all help," I said.

I couldn't shake that damn dream. It constantly nagged at my brain. I needed to get back home as soon as possible. As we walked out of the jungle, we picked up branches and leaves, anything that could help with our camouflage.

"We need to find a way to let the kids know we're coming. Once we get them out,

we're blowing that compound, Omari, and as many of his men as we can," I said as we slowly made our way back.

As soon as we returned to our room, I grabbed my phone and tried calling Kat, but there was no answer. So I called Gage.

"Hello, I'm surprised you would call me at this time of day."

"It's daytime where you are. Why would you be surprised?"

"Isn't it the middle of the night there?" I heard him chuckle.

"I tried calling Kat. Is she in the office?"

"No, she is packing up her house. I'm taking care of everything here."

"Oh, that's a relief. I'll talk to all of you later," I said and hung up.

Two seconds later, he called back. "Why did you say that was a relief?"

"It was nothing. I had a bad dream," I said before hanging up again. Okay, now I can focus and push that damn dream out of my head.

We were making more jungle jackets when the door opened. We all looked up. A man stood there, dressed like the Nigerian gang members.

"Look, I know you guys are here to save the women and children, but I don't want you fucking with my reason for being here. "

"Who are you?" I asked.



“Navy SEAL, Rush Turner,” he replied, shaking our hands. “These people have my friend's kid in that damn compound. I promised to get him out, and I’m doing it—along with the others.”

“That’s a big promise, you made,” I said.

“I didn’t think, I just said I’d do it,” Rush admitted/.

“Okay, do the kids know you are going to rescue them? How many children are there?” I asked.

“There are twenty-three kids and eight older girls in another building. I tried warning them that I’d be back, but Joey said one of the girls told the soldiers everything. I don’t know who the informant is,” Rush said, taking off his cloth headcover and running a hand through his blond hair.

“We’ll have to find out who she is. I wonder where the others are. I heard they had kidnapped hundreds of women and children,” I asked.

“They’re being held nearby, on the seller’s block. Twice a week, they sell about twenty of them. The men inspect them first, degrading them as much as possible. It’s disgusting—they force the women to walk up there naked. They make them walk up there naked. It’s horrible.”

“We need to rescue the kids at the compound and the others near here. If we don't, they’ll retaliate by going straight to the second group. We’ll need a couple of large covered trucks, and we’ll blow the compound up as soon as the kids are out,” Cyclone said.

“I agree,” Rush nodded. “We need to do it at the same time. I’ll go to the compound and get Joey—that’s a promise I’m keeping.”

“Do we have explosives ready?” I asked.

“Yes, everything we need is here,” Cyclone confirmed. “Let’s meet with the Rangers in the morning and finalize the plan.”

“That’s a good idea. They’ll come after us, so we need to get the hell out of here as soon as we’re done,” I said. “They’ll know it was us, and if Omari’s not dead, he’ll keep this going. We have to make sure he’s gone before we leave.”

The next night, we had a plan. The Rangers went to the nearby buildings to rescue those women and children while we headed for the compound. Cyclone had set up the explosives, rigged to go off with the push of a button.

It felt like the people knew something was about to happen. The clapboard houses were empty, and no one was around. They all disappeared for the day and into the night. We headed to the compound carrying our little jungle jackets for the children. I prayed that everything worked out how we wanted it to.

As we neared the compound, something felt off. The place was wide open, completely different from the other night. Men were laughing, and we spotted Rush, the Navy SEAL, walking past us, disguised like the others. He stepped through the open gate.

“Okay, are we ready? When we see Rush's signal, we’ll get the kids,” I said.

We waited for about thirty minutes before we saw the signal. The kids were coming through a side door. We hurried over and put on their jungle jackets.

“Hold hands,” I instructed the children. I turned to Rush, who was holding a small boy's hand. “Did you see any of the girls?”

“Yes, they are coming. They said men were coming for them, Rush said.

“Take the kids to safety. Gideon and I will get the girls,” I said, walking close to the wall. “Cyclone, push the button ten minutes even if we’re not back.”

Gideon and I moved close to the wall, slipping inside the compound. I spotted the girls, and one of them spotted us. They were all crying, holding hands. Suddenly, an explosion went off, and they ran toward us. We barely made it out before the compound blew up.

We ran as fast as we could, the kids in front of us, Cyclone leading the way. It was a long trek, and the little ones were struggling. Some of the guys picked up the smallest children, and a few girls helped carry others. Three miles was a lot for undernourished kids.

19

Kat

When I heard my front door open, I knew I should have locked it; I could hear it from my room. When the puppies started barking, I put them in the closet and grabbed my gun from my nightstand drawer. First, I pushed the button on my digital recorder—no more than two seconds passed before my bedroom door was kicked open.

I pointed my gun at one guy while the other one threw his knife. It landed in my arm, which held the weapon. My gun fired but missed its mark. I couldn't remove the knife before the man reached me. He slugged me in the face.

That's all I remembered until I woke up later that day. I was chained to a wall in the back of a moving eighteen-wheeler. I didn't even know what time it was because it was pitch black inside, and when I tried to scream, I couldn't open my mouth. It was taped shut.

"I felt my heart accelerate, and when panic kicked in, I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself. I breathed through my nose for a few minutes before I could reason with my mind. I wanted to scream for help.

I had to get away from these men. I had no idea who kidnapped me. My face and arm were killing me, and I remembered the knife in my arm. I heard the chain when I tried to raise my arm. River, I know you can't hear me, but I promise to do everything possible to escape these men. I love you! I'm sorry for not telling you to your face.

Tears fell from my eyes. I couldn't help it; I was so scared. These guys want to sell me or kill me. But if they wanted me dead, they would have killed me in my room.

I shut my eyes and tried to make a plan, but I fell asleep. When I opened my eyes, the truck had stopped. I listened and could hear a noise, but I didn't know what it was. What was that noise? He was filling the tank with diesel. There was nothing I could do; I couldn't even scream.

I desperately needed to pee. What was I going to do? I tried to get to the waistband of my pants to pull them down. I was able to get on my knees and tried everything I could. Finally, I was able to put my hands in front of me. I reached my waist and pulled my sweats down.

Why am I here? I know they singled me out. What have I done to these people? I tried to remember what they looked like, not their clothes. They were dressed as cable guys, but their nationality was Arab, and their speech gave them away. Why would they be angry at me? I'm a medic; I help whoever needs it.

When I woke up again, my stomach growled. It must have been three or four days since I've been here. The truck was stopped, and then I tried screaming as I felt the trailer being lifted off the ground swinging, and then it dropped. I was knocked out when my head hit the side of the trailer.

When I woke up again, I knew what was happening because I heard the ship's horn. I was out at sea in the trailer. They were taking me to another country.

Was I alone in this trailer? Or were there other women here with me? I couldn't hear anything. I turned and, with my foot, felt for the side of the trailer and kicked it.

Nothing, no other sound, came back to me. I must be alone. How long will it take me to reach my destination? I needed water. The bright sun woke me next. Someone was

inside the trailer.

“I will take the tape from your mouth and give you water and fruit. I see you were able to get your hands in front of you. You are not allowed to speak, not one word. I will put the tape back on and leave with the water and food. I’ll give you thirty minutes to eat your fruit, and then I will return to tape your mouth shut.”

I knew he was serious, but he wasn’t one of the men who had taken me. I didn’t say a word. He dropped the food in my lap and left. “I drank a small amount of water And then took a bite of the kiwi. I didn’t care that it wasn’t peeled. There was no telling when I would be fed again.

Was River hunting for me? Did he find the recorder? Maybe those men said something after they slugged me and knocked me out. I hoped he would find me soon.

20

River

When we reached the rendezvous point, two large covered trucks were waiting. We put the kids in one truck with some of the women. Then we collected our things and jumped in the jeep, guarding the two trucks.

As we drove, enemy jeeps tried to run us off the road. We fired back, and the Army Rangers returned fire from the back of the truck. A bullet whizzed past my head, and I spotted a man on the roadside aiming at us. I shot him, but not before he hit me in the leg.

“Take this,” I said, handing my gun to Raven as I quickly wrapped my belt around my leg. Blood was pouring out.

“We need to slow the bleeding,” Cyclone shouted. He pushed me down and tightened the belt.

“Damn, does it have to be this tight?”

“Yes. Look at your pants. You’re losing too much blood,” he said, taking off his shirt and pressing it against the wound. “We’re still half a day from the hospital. You won’t make it if we don’t stop the bleeding.”

I felt myself fading. “Raven, call Kat. I need to tell her I love her,” I said, my voice weak .

“Why don’t you wait until you see her?” Raven said.

“What if I don’t see her? Just call her,” I demanded.

Raven dialed the number. “Fuck. Gage, is Kat there?” Raven asked.

“No, she’s probably still packing up her house. What’s going on?”

I grabbed the phone. “Did Kat call and tell you she was taking the day off?”

“No. Why?”

“I’ve been shot in the leg, and it’s bleeding badly. Did you try calling Kat?”

“Yes, but it goes straight to voice mail.”

“Get in your fucking car and see where she is. I told you about my dream. Take Tag with you. Call me as soon as you arrive at her house.”

Kat always called if she was going to be even five minutes late. Something was wrong, I looked at Cyclone. “You can’t let me die. I have to save Kat. I should have listened to my gut—I knew I heard her screaming for me.”

“You don’t know that. Let’s wait for Gage to call us back,” Raven said.

I already knew what was coming. When the phone rang, I couldn’t even breathe, much less talk.

“Answer it, Raven,” I said weakly.

Raven answered, his expression darkening. “Tell me,” he said.



“Her place is trashed,” Gage said, his voice tense. “Tag’s checking all the rooms. There’s a note. It says, ‘You got mine, so I got yours.’”

“What does that even mean? Does it say who it’s from?” I shouted.

“No, I guess they wanted you to figure that out. If you are who they are talking about,” Gage replied, his voice coming through the speaker.

“Gage, find her. If I don’t make it, you have to save her.”

“Why the hell is he talking like he’s dying?” Gage asked.

“Because we don’t know what will happen to him, we are far away...”

River interrupted. “Why is he still talking? He needs to be talking to the neighbors. Have him check the videos where I live to see if anyone followed Kat when she left the condos that morning,” River demanded.

“I’ll call you later. Here are some more jeeps. Do they have guns?”

“No, they don’t have guns. They’re crying. That’s Rush’s friend and his wife,” I said as the truck came to a stop. Rush jumped out and carried Joey to his parents. By then, they were all in tears.

Rush motioned to his friend, who approached and glanced at my leg. “Follow him,” Rush said. “He’s a doctor. He’ll fix you up. This is where we part ways. I’m heading back to base. Thanks for all your help. The Rangers will handle getting everyone to safety.”

We followed the doctor to his clinic, but I was already fading fast. I passed out before we arrived, completely unaware of what was happening with Kat.

I woke up three days later.

Raven was in the room when I opened my eyes. It took a few moments for my brain to catch up. “How long have I been out?”

“Three days,” Raven replied, meeting my gaze.

“Have they found her?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

“The neighbors went over when they heard the dogs crying. Kat must’ve locked them in a closet to keep them safe. They found blood, but we don’t know whose it is. Remember, Kat’s a Marine lieutenant. She knows how to handle herself in situations like this.”

“She’s a medic, not a soldier in combat situations. That doesn’t mean she knows what to do here. Help me up. We’ve got to find her. Where are the others?”

“They went to help find Kat. Gage said he saw a car parked outside the condo’s gate the morning she disappeared. They followed her when she left. The car was stolen, and there were no fingerprints,” Raven explained.

“Damn it. Help me stand. I’m so dizzy,” I muttered, trying to push myself up. Just then, the doctor walked into the room.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“I have to go. Thank you for keeping me alive, but I can’t stay here,” I said, feeling the room spin. I closed my eyes, trying to stay upright.

“You lost a lot of blood. You’re lucky Raven’s blood matched yours. But you need to be very careful. If you put weight on that leg, you’ll tear the stitches and risk

infection.”

“The woman I love has been kidnapped by someone who wants me dead,” I said, gritting my teeth. “They’re threatening to kill her. I can’t just stay here.”

“At least stay off your leg as much as possible. I’ll be praying you find her.”

“Thanks for saving my life. I’ll be careful,” I promised, even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to follow his advice.

21

### RIVER

I had a splitting headache and desperately needed sleep. I walked into Kat's bedroom and sat on her bed. I looked around the room, and that's when I spotted the little recorder on the floor in the corner. With a groan, I had to push myself off the bed. My leg fucking hurt, but I ignored the pain.

I picked it up and returned to her bed; I lay back on her pillow, her scent still lingering.

Then I looked at the digital recorder and turned it on. I was about to turn it off when I heard a gunshot followed by the sound of men speaking in a foreign language. My heart raced. I immediately called Cyclone, it seemed to take forever before he answered. "Tell me what they are saying," I demanded.

"What?" he replied, confused.

"Just listen!" I shouted, playing the recording—first the gunshot, then those bastards' voices. I could hear the dogs barking in the background. "What are they saying?"

Cyclone paused, listening intently. "It says, 'Stuff her in the bag and let's get the fuck out of here before the boss wants us as damaged as she does this woman. Where did you get the recorder?'"

"It was in the corner of Kat's room. What language is that?"

“It’s Arabic, but it could be from several countries. We need to think about who you’ve pissed off.”

“Wait, did they say her? It’s a woman they’re talking about?”

“Yes, they said she. Think—did a woman come after you when someone in her family died?” Cyclone asked.

I hung up the phone and lay back, my mind racing. Then I shot upright and called Cyclone back.

“Where are you?”

“I’m in Turkey guarding two ten-year-old princesses,” he replied.

“For how long?”

“Until tomorrow.”

“I think I know who might be behind this. Remember when we were in that small country near Egypt, trying to stop the mutilation that was happening there? I killed the leader of that criminal gang, and his wife screamed at me, told me not to turn my back because she always wins.”

“God, that was four years ago. Do you think they’ve taken Kat to Egypt or somewhere nearby?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out. Call me when you finish your job. I’ll call Raven and Gage to join me.”

“There are so many criminals who want to become leaders. I think she took over her

husband's spot. She must be dangerous. Their men usually don't let women lead. They believe women aren't worth as much as a slimy slug," I said.

"Yeah, I hope that's not the case," Cyclone said.

I called Gage and Raven and told them I would meet them at the airport. I took the recorder with me, hoping we might recognize the voice if we heard it again. After packing my bag, I headed out.

We met at the airport, and I explained to them what was happening.

"I remember that woman. Raven said. "She came at you with a knife, planning to kill you right then and there. It's hard to believe those bastards would let her take charge."

"Let me see the recorder," Gage said as we boarded the plane. He turned it on and listened closely.

"Do you think they shot her?" Raven asked.

"I think she tried to shoot them, but something stopped her from hitting her target," I replied.

"Something like a knife. One of them might have thrown a knife at her and hit her hand or something," Gage speculated. "Fuck, what the hell is going on. I thought we could go to the border and take her from the cartel. This is damn right insane. How could they get an American woman from here to Egypt?"

"If they put her on a freight ship, it's possible," Raven said.

"That's it," I said. "They could've used a freight ship. We need to check the nearest

shipping ports and see if anyone's sticking close to a particular vessel."

"We'll need to blend in," Gage added.

I pulled out my laptop and searched for the nearest port. "This is where we will go," I said, pointing to the location on the map. I looked around. "Who's flying the plane?"

"Oliver is. He joined us a few days ago. You were busy, or I would have called you," Gage said.

"I'm glad he's with us," I noticed him glance at my leg, and I looked down. "Damn, why does this leg have to slow me down now? It's holding me back from what I need to do."

"You've been doing everything you can," Gage reassured me. Even if your leg were fine, there's nothing more you could do. Do you want me to wrap it for you?" he offered.

"No, I can handle it," I replied, heading to the back of the plane to rewrap my leg. I felt like I was losing. I didn't want anything to happen to Kat, and I couldn't imagine what she was going through, and it was tearing me apart.

I made my way to the cockpit and sat next to Oliver.

"Hey, I'm glad you joined us. I'm sorry about your Dad and the hell your family has been going through," I said.

"Thanks," Oliver replied. Do you want to fill me in on the situation?"

Oliver had always been a great listener—larger than any of us, with a heart of gold. He had a way of making you feel comfortable like you could talk to him about

anything.

His entire being made you relax and keep talking.

“So you’re in love with the beautiful Kat Mellows,” Oliver said. “We’ll get the bastards who took her. If the message said ‘damage’ her, not ‘kill her,’ then she’s still alive. So we will focus on that. If we don’t find her at the docks, we’ll rent a helicopter and track them down.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said, taking a deep breath. “So she’s alive. We’ll find her. Thanks for the reminder.” I paused. “Damn, I still say you should have been a psychiatrist. You could get a mob boss to spill his guts.” Oliver chuckled.

“How’s your leg?”

“It’s a pain in the ass. I lost three days—three valuable days I could’ve spent hunting for her. I could’ve found her before they put her on a damn ship.”

“You don’t know that,” Oliver said. The team was searching for her while you were unconscious. You are lucky to be alive. From what I heard, it’s a good thing the Navy SEAL was there since it was his friend who saved your life. Cyclone said there was no way you would have lived until they reached the hospital.”

“Yeah, I was fortunate; he was a doctor. He’s moving his family to America,” I said.

“That’s a smart move,” Oliver said.



22

Kat

My body was desperate for water. I didn't know how long they had kept me in here without it—three or four days, maybe? The last time the guy came by felt like ages ago. I didn't even know what day it was anymore. I was starting to feel delirious from lack of water.

The last time I had water, I saved it, only taking small sips, thinking it would be wise to ration it for the next day. But that bastard knew what I was doing. When he came back, he took it from me.

The door opened, and another man entered. He unchained me from the wall and yanked me close.

“We’re going to set you free, little kitty Kat. The boss wants you set free,” he sneered. The only catch is you’ll be set free in the middle of the ocean. You’ll have to find your own way out of the deep blue sea.”

“You can’t just leave me out here,” I said, panicked. As we exited the freight container, I realized I was right. I was on a ship, and it was night, and there was a storm. “I won’t last twenty minutes out there alone!”

He unchained me from the wall and yanked me close. “I’m going to put you in a raft. The boss doesn’t have to know about that.”

“The waves will flip that raft over within an hour. Look at the water! Please don’t do this. Why would a stranger want me dead?”

“It’s not you. She wants your boyfriend dead. When he realizes she did this to you, he will come after her and walk straight into her trap.”

“Can’t you say you did this and let me return home?”

“No, Don’t ask again. You should be happy I’m giving you water and the raft. Now move.”

He shoved me forward, and I moved as fast as I could, tripping over the damn chain still attached to my ankle. He kicked me hard when I fell. I tried to trip him, and he reached down, grabbed my hair, and yanked me back up.

“You shouldn’t have done that bitch. Now you’ve pissed me off. You’re not getting any water.”

“That’s not fair! Wouldn’t you try to escape if you could? Who would go meekly to their death? Where is the captain? Is he allowing this to happen on his ship?”

“The captain’s asleep. He doesn’t know you’re here. This is how we traffic a lot of women and children. We put them in freights and send them to our contacts in another country. We never get caught.”

“Are you telling me this because you know I’m going to die?”

“Yeah, I don’t see how you could survive it alone. I’ll give you three bottles of water because I had a sister. Her husband killed her. I wasn’t there to save her, but I made sure to kill her husband. I’ll also take the chains from your wrist, and ankles.

I looked around, desperately searching for something—anything. I saw the small yellow raft and knew it wouldn't keep me alive for long. Then I spotted the life jackets. I silently grabbed two jackets as he handed me the water and jerky, hoping he wouldn't notice.

He turned to lower the raft and shouted for me to hold on. While he wasn't looking, I quickly stuffed the life jackets behind me, glad they were all yellow. As he tossed his coat to me, it landed on one of the jackets. I prayed he wouldn't see it.

I was shaking with fear. It was dark, and the ocean was wild. What if the ship ran over me? When I hit the water, I screamed; I had never been this terrified in my life. God, I have to survive. If I die, that woman will kill River, too, and whoever is with him.

I did not doubt that River was searching for me. Because I knew he loved me as much as I loved him. Please, God, don't let this evil woman win.

The raft rocked violently in the waves. I hurried to put on one of the life jackets, strapping the second one around my waist, I took a drink of water And a bite of jerky; I didn't want to think about what it was made of or where it's been. I didn't give a damn. I was going to survive.

Hours later, I was vomiting. I didn't know if it was the rocking or the jerky; I was just glad when it stopped. The ocean calmed somewhat when the sun came up, and I fell asleep.

When I woke, it was scorching hot. I grabbed the coat, ducked it into the ocean to remove some of the smell, and then let it dry. I ate half a jerky and two drinks of water. I needed something to help me move this yellow tub. If I see something floating by, I'll grab it.

Three days passed, I felt like I was floating in circles. All I could see was endless water. I was too afraid to eat or drink more than once a day, worried that I'd run out of supplies .

Out of nowhere, I saw giant whales swimming next to me. I was in awe of their size. One of them swam beneath me, nudging the raft. Fear gripped me—what if they tipped me over? Then, a baby whale appeared and spit three fish into my raft before swimming away.

I looked up at the sky. “Thank you,” I shouted.

I glanced at the fish, unsure of how to eat them. I used the buckle in my belt to peel back the skin to access the meat. I never thought I would ever be in a raft in the middle of the ocean, eating raw fish that a baby whale gave me. But I would do what I could to survive.

23

River

We were standing on the docks when the freight ship, the same one that had left San Diego, finally pulled in. I counted five crates being unloaded. As soon as they touched the ground, we made our move. Two men disembarked, scanning the area like they were waiting for someone.

I didn't waste time. I walked straight up to them. "Where is she?" I demanded. They played dumb, pretending they had no idea what I was talking about, but I could tell they were lying. I glanced at Cyclone. "Open every crate."

Gage and I had already disarmed the men, each of us holding one under control. As Cyclone pried open the second freight container, Oliver called out to me. I rushed over—it was empty, but a single house shoe lay in the corner. It was hers. My stomach twisted, and my anger flared. Clenching the shoe in my hand, I delivered a hard punch to the man's gut.

"You've got two seconds to tell me where she is!?" I yelled in his face. The fool tried to back away, but Gage tightened his grip.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the man protested, but I knocked his front teeth out with another punch before he could finish. I turned to Gage. "You and Raven—find the captain before he leaves this dock."

As I looked back, Cyclone approached. "Found this in his pocket," he said, holding

out his hand. “Had to break his fingers to get it.”

In his palm was Kat’s wedding ring. She hadn’t worn it since we found out her husband died—it had to have been taken from her bedroom. My blood boiled. “Kill him,” I said coldly.

The man started babbling, desperate. “It wasn’t me! Amon threw her overboard. I didn’t want her dead, but our leader...she ordered it. Said the lady was a trap for you.”

Just then, Gage shoved the captain into the freight container. “What’s going on here?” the captain demanded.

“These two kidnapped my wife,” I growled. “They kept her chained in this container since you left San Diego, then threw her into the ocean. How much did they pay you to look the other way?”

The captain shook his head, wide-eyed. “I didn’t know what they were doing. They paid for their passage, and that’s all I knew. But I did notice one of our life rafts went missing.”

I turned to Amon. He was sweating now. “I was supposed to kill her,” he stammered. “But I lowered her down in a raft instead.”

“When did you lower her in the raft?” I demanded.

“Four days ago.”

The captain's face went pale. “Four days ago?” he asked. “She won’t survive out there. A raft that small—she’s as good as dead. The waves would’ve flipped it in no time.”

“Thanks for your help, Captain. The authorities will want to hear your story,” I said. “You’re free to return to your ship.”

As soon as the captain was out of earshot, Cyclone ended the man's life he was holding. I stared at the knife in my hand—Amon’s knife—and without hesitation, I plunged it into him.

“We need to find her. Where could she be?” I demanded, my voice breaking with urgency. “We need a helicopter.”

“I’ve already called for one,” Oliver replied. “It’s coming from the American Embassy. Should be here in an hour. What do we do with these bodies?”

“Lock them in the freight. Let them rot in hell.”

By the time we gathered the captain’s route details, the chopper had arrived, its blades thumping overhead. A line dropped, and one by one, we were pulled up. Once inside, I handed the coordinates to the pilot. He glanced back at me and grinned.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you guys,” he said. “Who’re we picking up?”

I finally recognized him. “Roland—it’s been too long.”

“We’re looking for Katrina McDonald. She was kidnapped and thrown overboard,” I explained. As I spoke, Roland relayed the information to the base. I told him about them kidnapping Kat.

“That woman’s dead.” He muttered grimly. “She was targeted by men who followed her husband. Now their new leader’s taken control.

After a moment, Roland added, We’re still waiting on a response from command.

What about the men who threw her overboard?"

"They're dead," I replied flatly.

Roland nodded.

"How far can we go before we need to refuel?" I asked .

"We can hit one of the Navy ships en route," he said.

"It had been eight hours, and we saw no sign of anything. It was dark, and we landed on another ship to refuel and wait for daylight. We all walked to the mess hall to eat, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything in days."

When daylight came, I was waiting by the copter. "Did you sleep at all," Gage asked.

"Yeah, a couple of hours," I didn't tell him it was two hours of nightmares about finding Kat dead.



24

Kat

I was so sick that I lost control of the raft. A wave, massive and unforgiving, hit me with such force that survival seemed impossible. I'd be dead if I hadn't been wearing my life jacket. The wave threw me hundreds of feet into the air, away from the raft.

Instinctively, I clutched my life jacket, trying to keep it secure when I hit the water. It felt like falling off a building. The impact was agonizing. The pain was so intense I vomited, and for a moment, I wondered if something inside me had broken.

But there was no time to check. I couldn't afford to let go of the life jackets. Without them, I would've drowned. I knew it, without a doubt. The water had pushed me so far under when I hit the surface that, without those life jackets, I wouldn't have made it back up. I was grateful I'd taken two.

I managed to save only one water bottle, and the wave had ripped off my pants, leaving me without my jerky. But at least I still had my underwear. Small miracles, I guess. I rationed the water, telling myself I only drank a sip a day. At least, that's what I thought I was doing .

Delirium started to set in. It felt like I'd been drifting for weeks, though I knew that couldn't be true—if it were, I'd be dead by now.

I woke with a jolt. It was dark, and I could feel something massive swimming beside me. My heart pounded. I was too terrified to move, barely daring to breathe. But I

realized there was nothing I could do if it attacked. If this was the end, I had no way to stop it. I shut my eyes and prayed.

When I woke again, tears were streaming down my face. I must've cried in my sleep because I couldn't stop. Then I noticed—the water was calm. I looked around and saw dolphins swimming all around me. One swam close and brushed against me. Desperate, I grabbed onto its fin, and it pulled me through the water, faster than I could have ever gone on my own.

I held on until I saw a small island on the horizon. The dolphin took me as close to the island as he could. Letting go, I swam and crawled my way to the sandy shore. Exhausted, I turned back to see the dolphins flipping playfully in the water. I waved, wanting to kiss every single one of them.

I tried to stand, but my legs were too weak. So, I lay back down and closed my eyes, thanking God for sending those dolphins.

When I finally sat up, I knew I had to find fresh water. I wandered across the flat part of the island, but it was the second day that I realized I'd have to climb the mountain to find what I needed.

So, I started walking. At least the ground was soft beneath my feet, almost like a jungle. If there were animals on this island, they'd need drinkable water too. As I walked, I spotted a coconut tree, with several coconuts lying on the ground.

My heart soared. I picked one up, shook it, and searched for a sharp rock. I hammered the coconut for what felt like forever before I finally made a small hole. Lifting it to my lips, I drank the coconut water greedily.

Once I drained it, I kept pounding on the coconut until it cracked. I worked at it until I could break it open completely. Scraping at the meat with a rock, I ate what I could.

I've never liked coconut, but right now, it tastes like heaven.

I could still see the beach from where I sat, but I stayed in the shade. There was a fallen tree to sit on, and I had plenty of coconuts. Maybe there are banana trees here, too.

25

River

We found the raft, but it was turned upside down. Still, I had them lower me into the water to check underneath. Nothing. I screamed in frustration, the urge to cry overwhelming me. But then I thought of Kat—a fighter who had survived so many terrible things and fought her way back every single time.

The guys watched me as I was pulled back into the helicopter. “We’re not giving up,” I said firmly. “Kat’s a fighter. She’s still out here, waiting for me to find her. I can feel it. We have to keep searching.”

“I can keep going until they order me to turn back,” Roland said. “When that time comes, I have no choice.”

“It’s been eight days since they tossed her overboard,” Gage chimed in. “We don’t know when the raft flipped, but if it didn’t happen before that storm four days ago, it definitely did then. She’s out there on her own now. We’ll follow the current.”

As night fell, the copter turned to head back to the ship for the evening. Another night for Kat to be alone. I knew she had to be scared to death. I glanced down at the water and noticed dolphins leaping out of the waves. They had been following us all day, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were trying to tell me something.

“Wait,” I said suddenly, catching everyone’s attention.

“What is it?” Oliver asked.

“Those dolphins,” I pointed. “They’ve been following us this entire time. I think they’re trying to tell me something.”

At first, the others were skeptical, but after watching the dolphins for a while, they started to agree. “Lower me into the water,” I said. “I’m going to swim with the dolphins.”

“It’s getting really dark out there,” Roland warned. “We won’t be able to see you. How will we follow you if you’re wrong?”

“If it gets too dark, shine the spotlight on me. If you don’t feel safe, head back to the ship.”

Not a chance,” Raven cut in. “No man—or woman—gets left behind on our team. We’re the best, and if you say she’s out there, then we believe you. We’ll follow you and the dolphins.”

Roland nodded. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I jumped into the freezing water, and the dolphins stayed by my side. One of them brushed against me, and I grabbed onto its fin. It felt like a dream as they surrounded me, pulling me through the water.

After hours in the water, I worried about the helicopter’s fuel. The light moved away from me briefly before circling back, and then I spotted something—an island in the distance. The dolphin carried me as close as possible, and I swam the rest of the way.

Once I reached the shore, I ran, calling out Kat’s name. The helicopter must have seen something because the spotlight moved toward the foliage. I kept shouting, and

then I heard it—her voice calling my name .

My legs almost gave out when I saw her running down the hill toward me. I rushed to her, scooping her up into my arms. She was crying, and for the first time in years, I let myself cry too. My mouth found hers, and we kissed until we needed to breathe.

“I knew you’d find me,” she whispered.

“Sweetheart, I love you so much. I would’ve never stopped searching for you,” I murmured against her lips.

“River, I love you too. I’m ready to go home.”

“Let’s go,” I said, holding her close as we made our way to the open clearing. The guys were shouting as they lowered the rope. I held Kat tightly as we were hoisted into the helicopter.

“River,” she whispered, her voice a mix of exhaustion and humor, “I lost my pants in the ocean. All I have on are my panties.”

I chuckled softly. “I’ll cover you up once we get inside. Just relax. I’ve got you now, and I’ll take care of everything. I can’t wait to hear the story of what you’ve been through.”

Once we were pulled inside, everyone was reaching out to touch Kat, hugging her.

“Damn, Kat, how did you survive all this time?” Gage asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I grabbed two life jackets before that bastard lowered the raft. If I hadn’t done that, I would have died,” she said with a tired smile. “And God sent me some dolphins—and

a baby whale, who dropped a few fish into the raft for me.”

I wrapped her in a blanket, and she rested her head on my shoulder. “I knew you’d find me. We’re a team, and we love each other,” she whispered. “But I’m starving.”

Gage dug into a bag and handed her a sandwich. “Here, eat this.”

She smiled as she took it. “This bread smells heavenly. Thank you. Can you make some of your street tacos when we get home? She said, looking at Gage.”

As we flew back toward the ship, the helicopter began sputtering. “Hold on, everyone!” Roland shouted. “I’ll try to rock this thing to squeeze out more fuel.”

For some crazy reason, we all laughed, the weight of the situation finally lifting. We were so damn happy we just let it out as Roland skillfully landed on the ship. Cheers erupted from the servicemen on the deck when they saw Kat.

26

River

We'd been home for a week, and Kat was still anxious about me going back to work. Today, she said she was ready, so she came into the office, trying to act like everything was fine.

"It's good to have you back, Kat," Gage said as he glanced at her.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I was gone so long," she replied, sitting at her desk.

"You've got nothing to apologize for," Gage said before I could speak.

She checked on me every ten minutes for the first seven days, ensuring she knew where I was. Today, she came out to the deck where Gage and I sat talking about our next job. The moment I saw her face, I knew something was wrong. I'd sensed it for the past week.

I stood up and wrapped my arms around her. "Tell me what's wrong."

Gage quietly stood up and gave us space.

"You know how much I love you," Kat began. "I love you more than my own life, but... I've lost myself. I need to find who I am again. If I don't, I'm afraid I'll become someone I won't recognize. I'm not someone who needs to be with you twenty-four-seven. I have to go away and figure this out on my own."



“No, sweetheart, you don’t need to go anywhere. You can find yourself right here,” I pleaded.

“I know, but I really need to fix myself. I’ll be back, I promise. I’m not staying away for good. I just need to regain my strength inside my head. I know that sounds stupid, and it doesn’t make sense. But it’s how I feel.

“You are strong! You can get better here. I’ll help you. Please listen to me. I love you, and I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve already made arrangements. When you see me again, I’ll be the Katrina McDonald you fell in love with. Right now, I’m not that person. Everyone is afraid to say anything to me—they’re all scared I’ll break down and cry. I’ll be back when I’m better. I can’t stand the idea of you having to babysit me. I don’t even like myself right now.”

“When will you be back?” I asked, my voice strained.

“I don’t know.”

“If you’re not back soon, I’ll come after you.”

“Just give me time to find my backbone again. I love you.” She kissed me, called for Penny, and picked up her suitcase. Then she walked out the door.

“I think she needs this,” Gage said, handing me a beer. “I’ve noticed how different she’s been.”

“The thing is, Kat doesn’t really know what she needs right now. But I do know she has to face being alone. Maybe this will help her.”

“Where’s she going?” he asked.

“Damn it, I forgot to ask.” I grabbed my phone and called her, but then I heard her phone ringing inside the house. She’d left it behind.

“Looks like I might as well take that mission in Iran. There’s no point in staying here. I’ve got a feeling Kat will be gone for at least a month, maybe longer. I don’t want to sit around wondering when she’ll come back. I’m guessing she’s gone to her family.”

“She doesn’t seem like the ‘run-to-mama’ type,” Gage replied.

“You’re right. I should have asked. Can you keep Sissy until her dog sitter picks her up?”

“Sure, tell her to get Sissy at my place. I want to talk to her about watching my dog, too.”

Three days later, I was in Iran, working to find a missing Navy SEAL. Oliver and I watched as some of the Iranian army passed by. We’d been told they were holding him in one of their prisons and planned to execute him sometime this week.

We didn’t have time to waste. If we were going to save him, we had to act now. That’s why we were dressed as members of the Iranian army, blending in with the soldiers. This was our third prison in two weeks, but we’d overheard someone say he was here.

This was my second time deployed since Kat left two months ago. I called Gage to see if she had returned, but he said no. Raven had moved into her house temporarily and considered buying a condo where we lived. I pushed thoughts of Kat out of my mind and focused on the mission.

The first thing I noticed was that the soldiers were drawing straws to decide who would be part of the firing squad for the American prisoner. They picked five soldiers, and to my surprise, Oliver was one of them. We exchanged a quick look, unsure of our next move. Then, they handed him a gun.

It was happening right now. I knew Oliver was as shocked as I was. We followed the men as they led us outside to the clearing, where the Navy SEAL was supposed to be standing against the wall. But when we arrived, the place was in chaos—guards were running everywhere, and the Navy SEAL had disappeared.

I glanced at Oliver and nodded for us to leave. We moved quickly, trying to make our way out of the area unnoticed. Then I saw her. She was grinning at me, and before I could react, she winked. She was pushing a man in a wheelchair through the gate and heading toward a jeep. Without hesitation, Oliver and I jumped into the back of the jeep as it passed by.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, surprised.

“I missed you too,” she teased. “I’m here to help this sick soldier get home.”

I heard a weak chuckle from the soldier. “Where are we going?” I asked her.

“To the plane,” she replied. “I’m glad you showed up. I hadn’t exactly planned that far ahead.”

“You’re coming home with me,” I said, my tone firm. “Wait, are you the Navy SEAL who was about to face the firing squad?” I asked the man.

“Yeah. Let’s lose these people. I can’t fight—I haven’t eaten in a week. The guards thought telling me they’ve been poisoning my food would be funny,” he muttered.

I turned to Kat. “How are you doing?”

“I’m starting to feel like myself again,” she said. “I was heading home after helping this soldier. ”

I leaned over and kissed her on the head. “Let me drive. We need to stay off the main roads—they’ll be looking for him soon.” She pulled over and slid out of the driver’s seat, and I stole a quick kiss as she got out.

“I missed you, Kat. More than you’ll ever know.”

“I missed you too,” she said, her voice soft.

The soldier chuckled again.

“You two can catch up later. By the way, Kat, I missed you too,” Oliver said, smiling. Just a heads-up—your files at work might be a little messed up now.”

She shrugged. “That’s fine. I’ll just be happy to get home.”

“How did you end up here?” Oliver asked.

“It’s a long story,” Kat began. “I’ve been helping medics in a neighboring country. I was about to head home when I overheard two guys talking about an American Navy SEAL being held prisoner here. They thought it was hilarious that the Iranians were poisoning him before putting him in front of a firing squad.”

“So, I decided to make a detour and rescue him,” she said casually. By the way, I need to stop and get Penny. I rented a room, and she’s there.”

I shook my head, listening to her. “Damn it, Kat. I hoped you’d stop running off to all

these countries.”

She smiled. “I have. This was the last time.”

“Good,” I replied, relieved.

27

Kat

I knew it would take time to recover from being kidnapped and stranded in the middle of a roaring ocean, all alone. But I never imagined it would make me fear every shadow. This wasn't the woman River had fallen in love with—I could feel myself doubting everything. I needed to fix myself. That's why I left the country and began working with medics overseas.

The moment I landed and saw the eastern garb, I knew this was the path to healing. At first, I hesitated to step off the plane, but after a deep breath, I lifted my head high and stepped into the world of the same people who had once kidnapped me.

I became so busy that I didn't have time to be scared. There weren't enough medical staff here, and chaos was everywhere. I was on my feet for sixteen, sometimes twenty, hours a day. By the time I collapsed into bed, I'd sleep until I was called to help again. All while Penny followed my every footstep .

I worked alongside medics from around the world, trying to keep both soldiers and civilians in this war-torn place alive. The locals hated the American military—yet, even when we were saving their lives, their hatred lingered.

During this time, I met a doctor from California. She wasn't in the military, but she volunteered here because, as she said, "No one else will."

I stayed for two months, working alongside her. But eventually, I began to feel

unwell. Suspecting I might be pregnant—and missing River terribly—I decided it was time to go home.

“I’m lucky I overheard them talking about that soldier, or I would’ve missed River and had no way to get home,” I said to anyone listening in the vehicle.

I smiled, catching River’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He smiled back, and my heart swelled with love for him. I blew him a kiss, and he caught it. God, I love this man.

“How were you planning on leaving?” Oliver asked, his voice gentle. I liked talking to him—he never interrupted, always listening intently.

“I hadn’t figured that out yet,” I admitted with a small smile. “I thought about hiding out for a while, then making my way to some friends I know here. But I kept worrying about Penny—I didn’t want her to think I’d forgotten her. Don’t forget we have to get Penny.”

“I’m glad we found you when we did,” River said. “The Iranian army could’ve gotten to you first.”

“Don’t even say that,” I whispered, knowing how true it was. “If I hadn’t stolen their prisoner, all three of you would be dead by now.”

“She’s right,” Oliver agreed. “We’ve been lucky so far. Let’s lay low until nightfall. ”

We parked the jeep in a hidden spot, and almost immediately, the Navy SEAL began vomiting.

“It’s good you’re getting that poison out of your system,” I said, trying to reassure him.

“It was those raw eggs you made me swallow,” he muttered, turning to vomit again.

I watched as Oliver and River covered our tire tracks. Nightfall was approaching, and all I could think about was getting home and finding a doctor for the baby.

River came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. I turned to hug him back, feeling his warmth.

“So, you decided to face your problems head-on?” he asked softly.

“I didn’t have a choice. But I’m glad you’re here. I missed you so much. It feels good being with you again.”

“Kat, look at me,” River said, cupping my face gently. “I love you. If you have a problem, we’ll handle it together. Please don’t run away from me again. I didn’t know if you were gone for a year or if I’d ever see you again. You left your phone on the kitchen counter—I had no way to reach you.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t disappear like that again.”

“If it were me who did that, wouldn’t you be worried? From now on, we talk things through. Together, we’ll find a way to fix whatever comes our way.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his words. “Yes. We’ll always do that. I love you and am so sorry for putting you through this. I promise—I won’t do it again.”

“Good,” he said softly, resting his forehead against mine. “Let’s rest for a while before we move. By the way, how did you manage to get into the prison?”

“I told them a disease was spreading fast through the area, and I needed to check the prisoners to make sure they weren’t infected.”



River chuckled, a proud smile tugging at his lips. “That was brilliant.”

“I thought so,” I grinned.

28

River

Kat insisted on driving herself to work, so I left early. When she walked in wearing that tight skirt, her hair swept up off her shoulders, I couldn't help but smile. She grinned and winked at me, sending a jolt of desire through me.

The day was busy, and Kat left for a doctor's appointment early. When I asked why, she said it was just a routine checkup. I never went to the doctor, but I figured women did things differently.

When I got home, she was in the kitchen, barefoot but still wearing that tight outfit, cooking spaghetti and salad. I walked straight up to her, my lips finding hers instantly. My hunger wasn't just for food—I was starving to be with her.

"Turn off the stove, sweetheart. We're going to bed, and we can eat later." She smiled, turned off the pasta, and I swept her up in my arms, carrying her to our bedroom. "I've always wanted to undress you after seeing you in those sexy clothes at work."

She laughed. "I guess I'll have to wear them more often—maybe even around the house."

I chuckled as I started to undress her. She was so beautiful, and I loved her more than anything. I'd already decided—I was going to ask her to marry me. But I didn't want to rush her. "I love you so much, Kat."

“I love you, too,” she said, pulling my shirt over my head. We stripped each other down as we made our way to the bed. I unzipped her skirt, letting it fall to the floor, eager to see all of her. She was just as eager, tugging at my pants with a playful determination.

We laughed as we tumbled onto the bed, and I pulled her beneath me, kissing her deeply. The laughter gave way to passion as I unclasped her bra and slid her panties off, kissing my way down her body.

I loved hearing those soft sounds escape her lips, knowing exactly what she needed. She ran her fingers through my hair, her breath catching when my tongue touched her, a cry of longing escaping her.

I teased her until she begged for more, my fingers rubbing her gently as I gave her what she wanted. When her body trembled in release, I stripped off the rest of my clothes and entered her, making love to her as the sunset.

When she finally slept, I slipped out of bed to finish cooking dinner. A little while later, she walked into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around me from behind. “I love you,” she whispered. “Not just because you make me have multiple orgasms, but because I’ve loved you for the last two years.”

I smiled and kissed her. “I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you sitting at your desk,” I said, kissing her again. “Now sit—dinner’s ready.”

We sat together at the table, relaxed, enjoying each other's company. We didn’t need to fill the silence with conversation; just being together was enough. As we ate, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring I’d bought three months ago.

“Sweetheart,” I said softly, and she looked up at me with a smile. But when she saw the small box, her eyes filled with tears. I opened it and took the ring out. “Will you

give me the honor of becoming my wife? I promise to love you for eternity. I want to spend my life with you, never without you. Please say yes.”

Tears streamed down her face as she nodded. “Yes, yes, yes! I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want eternity with you.” She threw her arms around me, kissing me passionately. “We’re going to have such a beautiful life together.”

I pulled her close, my heart swelling with joy. “You’ve made me the happiest man alive,” I said, kissing her again. She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“And you’ve made me the happiest woman on earth. I can’t wait to marry you.” I grinned, lifting her off the floor and tossing her over my shoulder, carrying her back to bed. We made love all night, lost in each other.

Later, as I lay beside her, I suddenly remembered her doctor’s appointment. “What did the doctor say?”

She smiled and looked into my eyes. “She said I’m pregnant.”

“What?” I stared at her, hardly believing it.

“We’re having a baby,” she said, her voice trembling before she broke into tears. I pulled her into my arms, holding her tight.

“I’ve always wanted to be a father. I’m so happy. Are we allowed to keep making love all the time?” I teased, kissing her face gently.

“Yes,” she chuckled. “We can make love as much as we want. ”

“How far along are you?”

“Three months.”

I knew she was thinking about the baby she had lost before. I kissed her forehead gently. “I’m going to make sure you and our baby are taken care of. Nothing will happen to either of you. Let’s get married this weekend.”

Her eyes lit up. “This weekend? I need to call my family! It’s Tuesday—yes, yes, let’s do it!” She bounced excitedly on the bed.

“I’ll call my family tomorrow. My brother Neal is a pastor—he can marry us. I’ll call him tonight. He’ll find someone to cover for him on Sunday. We’re going to be so happy.”

Tears welled up in her eyes again. “Sweetheart, why are you crying?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I keep thinking about how I couldn’t protect Conner. What if I can’t keep this baby safe either?”

I held her face gently. “Kat, listen to me. It wasn’t your fault that your husband and baby died. We don’t always understand why things happen, but we do know one thing: you’re going to be an amazing mother. Our child will be loved so much because you’re her mommy.”

“Her?” she asked, smiling softly. “How do you know it’s a girl?”

“I don’t,” I admitted with a grin. “But I’d love to have a baby girl who looks just like her mommy. Our family is going to be full of love.”

She snuggled into me, her eyes still tinged with sadness, but a new hope blossomed there. She soon drifted off to sleep in my arms.

29

Kat

I stood next to River as my brother married us, surrounded by family, and friends, all of them thrilled not just for our wedding but also for the baby on the way. Gage had already claimed the title of primary babysitter, and we still laughed about it.

The day was perfect for a wedding. I glanced at River standing beside me, and at the same moment, he looked over, smiled, and kissed me—again. I think we hit ten kisses before my brother could finally pronounce us husband and wife.

Deep down, I knew this was where I was meant to be. I was blessed to be marrying the man I loved more than anything. When Neal finally said, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” River scooped me up in his arms. His lips crashed into mine, and the kiss deepened as everyone around us cheered. I threw my head back and laughed when he pulled away, his eyes twinkling with joy.

“My wedding gift to you,” I whispered, grinning at him, “is that we’re having twins.”

River laughed, throwing his head back in delight. “Damn, woman, you make me so happy.”

Gage raised his beer and clapped his hands. “To River and Kat—this is one mission that doesn’t involve stealth, camouflage, or breaching doors, but it still demands precision and patience. Congratulations, you two! Mission accomplished. Now may

your marriage be like a covert op: low on drama, high on success, and nobody gets left behind!”

Everyone cheered, and we laughed. Tag stood up next, clapping his hands.

“River, my man, you’ve survived countless missions, but now you’re entering the most high-stakes operation of all—marriage! Just remember, Kat is your primary objective, and the only extraction plan is ‘happy wife, happy life.’ Here’s to your forever mission—may it be filled with love, laughter, and tactical support!”

Raven followed, raising his glass. “River, we’ve always had your back in every combat zone, but from today on, Kat’s got it for life. Kat, good luck—you’re now the official team leader of this guy! Remember, the Golden Team never leaves a man behind... unless it’s on dish duty. Cheers to a lifetime of teamwork, laughter, and figuring out who’s really in charge!”

I laughed along with the rest of the crowd. Then I saw River’s sister stand up. It was my first time meeting his family, and they’d surprised me—every one of them a hugger. River had one sister and his parents, all of whom welcomed me warmly. His sister was a knockout, something I overheard Gage say when he first saw her. River had already warned everyone to stay away from her, but at twenty-eight, she was more than capable of making her own decisions .

“Well, well, well,” she started, a playful grin on her face. “River, my dear brother, I never thought I’d see the day when you’d willingly sign up for a lifelong mission that requires actual communication and feelings. Kat, you’re clearly braver than anyone here for signing up too—and with him! You’ve got the patience of Special Forces, girl.

“But seriously, Kat, you’ve done the impossible. You not only captured his heart but also managed to tame the wild, stubborn ‘I-don’t-need-anyone’ River. And River,

you've found someone who doesn't just tolerate your quirks but actually loves you for them.

"To both of you—may your love be as strong as River's stubborn streak and as beautiful as Kat's heart. May you continue to find adventure together, laugh through the chaos, and always, always remember who's really in charge... spoiler alert: it's not you, River!

Cheers to love, laughter, and a lifetime of happiness!"

Her speech had everyone laughing, and when the music started, Gage asked her to dance. We watched as he twirled her around the floor. "Has Gage met Winnie before?" I asked River.

"Yes, but she was still in college then. I made him promise not to date my sister."

"Why?"

"Because she's my sister," River said with a smile, pulling me into a hug.

"You're such a sweet brother. Now, let's dance, husband." A slow song began, and he pulled me close. As we danced, I noticed River freeze. I followed his gaze and saw Gage slow dancing with Winnie—so close a dime couldn't have fit between them. Winnie's eyes were closed, and Gage's arms tightened around her .

River tensed, and I gently touched his face. "It's just a dance. Let's focus on telling our parents we're having twins."

He took a deep breath and nodded. Together, we walked over to where our parents sat chatting. "We have news," River said, grinning. "We're having twins."



“What? Twins?!” Both of our mothers jumped up, hugging us as tears of joy streamed down their faces. Our fathers followed with hugs of their own. My dad kissed my cheek and shook hands with River.

“We’re so happy for you both,” my dad said. “Twins run in our family, you know.”

I laughed at River’s surprised expression, then he smiled and took my hand, pulling me back onto the dance floor. “We’re leaving after this dance,” he whispered. “It’s our wedding night, and I have plans for you. Once those babies arrive, we’ll be too exhausted to make love all night.”

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him. “I’ve got a few surprises for you too. I read this book, and... well, I’ll show you later.”

**KEEP READING**

### GIDEON

I had a whole week to fish. I stopped at the bait store in the little village of Starbury, which was also the name of the small grocery store, and everything else you needed to buy. There were only two stores in town: an old movie theater, a hamburger stand, and a gas station. Grandpa left me the cabin, where I lived with him my entire life. I loved fishing with Grandpa; he could sit and fish all day and only say two words.

I heard a child scream and turned around. A little girl ran across the street while a man further down the street chased after her. I turned and looked at the woman at the counter, and then Bear jumped out the window of my truck. “Wilma, I’m going to leave these here.” I set my stuff on the counter and went outside.

“Bear, sit,” I said; he didn’t want to, but he sat.

When the girl ran past me, I caught her. She kicked and screamed .

“Shhh, I want you to be quiet. I’m going to help you.” I took her inside, and Bear followed. Wilma hid her behind the counter. I could hear her sniffing. I looked around and saw Bear with the girl. I stepped outside.

When the man ran up to me, he stopped. “I lost my daughter; have you seen her? She has blonde hair and green eyes.”

“No, but I’ll call the police,” I said, pretending to call nine-one-one.

“No, don’t bother with the cops. I’ll find her myself.”

“I already called, and they’ll be here any minute.”

I saw him looking around, and then he ran across the street. “They’ll be here any minute now. Where should I send them?” I shouted at him. He didn’t answer; he just kept running.

I walked back into the store and bent to speak to the girl. She looked to be about seven. “What’s going on?”

“That man took me from my mom, and I have to call her. She’s going to be scared to death. She’s always scared to death ever since my Daddy died.”

“Here, we’ll use my phone. What is your Mom’s number?”

“Let me see your phone,” she said, crying, and wiping her sleeve across her face. She took my phone out of my hand, she was looking through my contacts, and I felt she was hunting for the name Mom in them. “I can’t find her name anywhere,” she said, becoming upset. He’ll come back here and get me.”

“Do you know where you live? If you tell me where you live and give me your Mom’s name, maybe we can find her phone number,” I said.

“He’s coming back,” Wilma said, glancing out the window. Bear growled. That’s when we heard the sirens. Someone must have called the police about something. “Now he’s running away. Are you going to find her mommy? If so, I would get the heck out of here.”

I looked at the girl, who was shaking in her shoes. “Do you know where your Mom is?”

“She was at the motel, and that man hit her in the face and grabbed me. Maybe he killed her,” she said, her eyes huge in her face. She was crying so hard she started hiccupping.

“I wouldn’t worry about your Mom being dead. I’m sure if he hit her once in the face, it didn’t kill her. It might have knocked her out. What’s her name?”

“Her real name or her fake name?” I looked at the girl. Her mother had a fake name, and I wondered why. This sounded like it was more than just someone kidnapping a young girl. I had a feeling I wouldn’t get much fishing done this week.

I looked at Wilma. “We can’t tell anyone about this girl. Something fishy is going on,” I’ve known Wilma since I was a baby. I’ve lived here with Grandpa my entire life, and she knew everything there was to know about me. She knew I’d take care of this girl.

Everyone in town has known me since my mother dropped me off with my Pop; my grandma died years before that. Pop died last year at the age of ninety-two. I would give anything to see him again.

“Gideon, take her where that man can’t find her,” Wilma said, looking at the girl. Do you have a fake name too?”

“Yes, my fake name is Tina Turner. My Mom laughed when she named me. She said I was a famous singer.”

I chuckled. “What’s your real name? ”

My name is Haley Reeves. My Mama is Riley Reeves. Her fake name is Ava Turner. We’ve been hiding from my Grandfather. We lived with him when my Dad died. My Grandpa won’t let us leave; he’s everyone’s big boss.”

“If my Mom were a man, she would beat him up; he always slaps her when she argues with him. He’s very, very mean. You don’t want to make him mad, or he will kill you.”

I shook my head when Wilma was going to ask her a question. “How about we get out of here before he comes back? Wilma, this doesn’t go any further than the three of us. If her Mom happens to come here, have her call me. We’ll be looking for her.”

I paid for my food and fishing supplies, and then we left. Bear sat with Haley in the back seat. I made sure no one was outside. I needed my computer, it was packed in my bag. “Do you know what your Dad’s name was?” I asked.

“Yeah, my Dad’s name was Gavin; he didn’t have a fake name.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I’m hungry. What is your dog’s name?”

“His name is Bear. How about we go to my cabin, and I cook us something.”

“I’m not supposed to go anywhere with strangers.”

“My name is Gideon Archer, so now we are not strangers. We need to find your Mom. So she can be safe. Tell me about your Grandpa.”

“We never knew Grandpa until he made us move into his house. When he came to our house, mama said we were staying where we were, and he hit her. He’s a bad man,” she said.

As soon as we arrived at the cabin, I opened the windows and doors. Then, I started the fire and cooked us some bacon and eggs. After dinner, we fished. I was surprised

Haley could fish. She was the first one to catch a fish. She even advised me what to fish with instead of worms.

“I don’t want to eat my fish; I always let them go,” she said, looking at her fish.

“That’s what we will do. We’ll let them go. Where did you learn so much about fishing?”

“From my Mom. She used to fish all the time and win trophies, too. She hasn’t fished since we went to Grandpa’s.”

After she went to sleep, I took out my computer and looked up Gavin Reeves; I had a feeling it wouldn’t be good. Gavin’s father, Jonah Reeves, ran the cartel in Chicago. Gavin moved away from him when he was eighteen. He married Riley Dean, and they lived in Oklahoma. They had one daughter, Haley Reeves. Gavin was shot and killed as he and his wife were having dinner.

I wonder who killed Gavin. Wow, so she’s trying to get them away from the cartel boss, and he’s trying to take her daughter from her. I picked up my phone and called River.

“I thought you were on vacation,” River said.

“I am on vacation, but I ran into a little girl who was running from a man. Her grandpa is Jonah Reeves; he’s high up in the cartel in Chicago. “We have to make sure the guy doesn’t get Haley.”

“How did you manage all this on your first vacation day?”

“She was running across the street screaming. I hope he doesn’t go back and get her mother. Could you check to see if you can find Ava Turner, her fake name, or Riley

Reeves? I have to find Haley's mom before they kill her."

"Gideon, it's a miracle that you found that girl when you did. Does she know where her mother was when that man showed up?"

"She said they were at a motel. I have a feeling the mom will return to the grandfather's home and demand her daughter back. She won't know I have her with me."

"Why don't I get the girl and bring her here, and then you can find her mom? I'll bring Kat with me. We'll take a road trip. I wonder what state Haley and her mom were in when he took her."

"I don't know, but I'll have to go to Chicago to see if Haley's mother is there. It would be great if you could pick Haley up. Can you get here early in the morning?"

"Yes, we'll see you in the morning."

"Great. I'll see you then," I said before hanging up. I decided to stay up for a while to make sure no one came sniffing around. I slept on the rocker on the front porch. Bear slept with Haley.

I had breakfast and coffee made when River and Kat showed up. I didn't say anything about her being as big as a house. She still had two months to go before the twins were here.

"Hi, let's have breakfast, and you can meet Haley."

"It's beautiful here," Kat said. She stretched her back as she looked around.

We walked inside, and Haley was talking to Bear. He sat and listened as if he

understood her every word.

“Haley, this is River and Kat. You’ll stay with them while I find your mom and bring her home to you.”

“We can’t go home because Grandpa will find us, and he’ll beat my Mom up again,” she said with a quiver in her voice.

“You don’t have to go home. You can stay with me. But right now you can stay with River and Kat. I’ll bring your Mom to you.”

“Do you have a dog?” She asked, looking at Kat.

“Yes, we have two. Their names are Penny and Sissy. They will love playing with you,” Kat said.

“I can’t stay very long because my Mom will miss me something awful.”

“You can stay with us until Gideon finds your Mommy and brings her to you,” Kat said.

Haley looked at me, and I knew she was scared. “Kat is going to have two babies. Maybe she will let you feel them moving,” I said.

“Oh, how exciting! My grandpa’s cook is having a baby. We weren’t allowed to speak to her, but we would have if Grandpa hadn’t been in the room. He’s a stupid, mean old man.”

“You no longer have to worry about him; the Golden Team is now your guardian,” I said, giving her some breakfast.



“I need to find Riley before she confronts the grandpa,” I said after breakfast as I walked them to the door. Make sure Haley isn’t seen in the back seat. You might want to go to Walmart or Target and get her some clothes when you get home.”

“Don’t worry about Haley; we will take good care of her. Come on, sweetie, we need to let Gideon find your Mom. Here are all the papers on everything you wanted me to dig up. Kat said, handing over the papers.

Haley ran over and hugged me. “Thank you for saving me, Gideon. Can you please hurry and bring my Mom to me?”

“I’ll do everything possible to bring her to you quickly, sweetheart. ”

“The first thing I would do is go to her Grandpa’s house. If it were me, that’s where I would go looking for Haley,” Kat said.

“I will go there first,” I said, not saying that’s where I was planning to go. Since the baby was almost here, her emotions were more tender—at least, that’s what River told all of us—because he didn’t want to see her crying.

31

Riley

When the door was kicked in, I knew they found us. Before I could move, the man slugged me in the face. When I woke up, the cops were there, and Haley was gone. I had to go back to that bastard's house and get Haley.

I'm surprised they didn't kill me. I could only hope these police weren't bought off like the ones I called in Chicago.

I explained what happened, and they thought I should hire someone to help me. How would I do that with Jonah having control of my money? I was just an ordinary girl who happened to be great at fishing. Fishing was my bread and butter.

Fishing has saved me from a life of hell. Even when I was young, I loved fishing. Now, I make money fishing, or I did until the devil took me to his house.

I was born and raised in Farmington, Oklahoma. I was in foster care most of my life, so I fished to escape my group homes. I lived in the same town near a large lake, and after doing my chores, I walked to the lake and fished.

No one cared where I went or what I did as long as my work was done. As soon as I turned eighteen, I was alone, which was fine with me. I've felt alone all my life until I married Gavin. The people didn't want you because the government didn't pay once you turned eighteen.

I entered some fishing contests and won most of them. I fished off the bank when the other fishermen went on their boats. I knew right where to fish because I knew this lake.

I had one friend, Charlie. He was an old man who fished as much as I did. When he couldn't drive anymore, he gave me his old truck and boat. I was in seventh heaven. The truck had a camper on the back, and I fixed it up and stayed there most of the time. It had everything I needed.

Fishing contests helped me pay for books in junior college. I went two years before I met Gavin Reeves. He told me he had no family. Now I knew why he told me that. Who wanted to admit that the devil was your father?

We were married, and we were happy. Haley was born when I was twenty-four; she brought me so much joy. We were celebrating our sixth anniversary when a man walked into the restaurant and shot Gavin, and then he left. Gavin lived long enough to tell me to take Haley and hide.

After I stopped screaming, I was in shock; I couldn't believe someone had killed Gavin for no reason. He never did anything to anyone. It was hard explaining to Haley that her daddy was never coming home because he was now in heaven.

I packed us up and moved close to where I grew up. I had money; I was surprised that Gavin had as much money as he did. He never spent a penny of it. We were married for six years, and he never told me about having money. We lived from paycheck to paycheck.

When that man showed up at our house, I knew why Gavin had told me to hide. His father came into our home and demanded that we live with him. When I said no, he slapped me so hard it knocked me down, and my ear was bleeding. Haley started crying. I was scared that he would hit her.

“You will be beaten if you don’t listen to what I say. I’m nothing like that wimpy son of mine. If my granddaughter didn’t need her mother, I would kill you right now.”

Right then, I knew he would kill me when Haley was old enough to do everything for herself. “Did you kill Gavin?” That’s when the bastard slugged me, and I fell. Haley was screaming at him to leave me alone. Before I could get up, he picked her up and spanked her.

“You get your fucking hands off my daughter. Do you hear me? Put her down,” I screamed as I charged him. By now, Haley was crying uncontrollably. I grabbed Haley’s arms and pulled her away from him. “I will kill you if you ever touch her again.”

Every time we tried to escape, he beat me. I swore one day we would make it. This time, we stayed hidden for two months before they found us. We were in California, far from Chicago, how did he find us? Now, it was up to me to get my daughter.

It seemed to take forever before I was back in Chicago. I took a taxi until I was a mile from his house; I bought a red wig and oversized glasses and waited until dark before going to his house. Someone grabbed me from behind. I slammed my head into his chin and stomped on his foot.

“Stop,” a low voice growled into my ear. “I’m here to help you. Your daughter is with my friends.”

I stopped instantly and turned around. The man bent his head and took my hand. “Stay with me,” he said. His voice was low; I could barely hear him. We walked down the road for twenty minutes before he opened a truck door. “Get in. ”

I didn’t know if I was making a mistake, but I had to trust someone. I was tired of being with evil people who only wanted me dead. So, I got in the truck. And there

was a massive German Shepherd in the back seat. “Tell me where my daughter is?”

“She’s with my friends. We need to get out of here. When we get to a safe place, we’ll talk. That’s Bear. He and your daughter are close friends,” he said, ignoring me for the rest of the ride until we hit the freeway. He kept looking in the rearview mirror.

“Enough of being quiet. I want to talk to my daughter right now. Or I’m going to jump out of this truck.”

“So, you’re going to kill yourself if I don’t start talking. That’s not smart.”

“You don’t know what the fuck I’ve been through the last two years. Waiting for that bastard to kill me. Where is my daughter?”

“She’s safe with my friends. Haley got away from the man who took her, and I hid her in the store I was at. Then I took her home with me and called my friends to take her with them while I found you. She thought for sure her grandpa would kill you.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She thought the man who hit you might have killed you too. She told me about the fake names and the real names. She was worried because she said her grandpa beat you to death.”

“Call River,” I said out loud.

“Hello,”

“River, I have Haley’s mom.”

“Thank God, even I was starting to worry.”

“Where’s Haley?”

She’s playing on the beach with the dogs and Kat. Let me get her for you.” It got quiet. And then we heard River talking to Haley.

“He let her play on the beach with dogs and a cat? What if she got swept away by the tide?”

“The dogs and Kat. Kat is River’s wife.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, sweetie, your mom is on the phone.”

“Mommy,” Haley said and started crying and had to stop talking. “I thought Grandpa killed you.”

“Baby, we will never worry about Grandpa hurting us again. We will move far away from him. I will make sure he never finds us. I’ll see you soon, sweetie. Mommy loves you.” She looked over at me. “Where is she?”

“She’s in California. We will drive there. It’s too dangerous for us to fly. I haven’t slept in a few days. We have to get a room in the next town.”

“I can drive; I don’t want to stop. I need to see my daughter.”

“How long has it been since you’ve slept?”

“What does that have to do with anything? I’m not sleepy.”

“I am sleepy and can’t sleep when someone else is driving.”

“Are you saying that because I’m a woman?”

“Hell no! I’m saying it because I’m always the one who drives.”

“That’s crazy. I assure you I can drive as well as you can. I’ve been driving since I was sixteen. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m probably a better driver than you are.”

I chuckled. “I doubt that. I had to investigate your father-in-law to find his address. And some things about Gavin came up. Who shot him?”

“His fucker of a father had him killed because Gavin left home at eighteen and refused to speak to him. Gavin never told me about his family. His father told me everything about the family. I’m sure he’s angry because Haley got away from that guy. She is so smart. I’ve taught Haley street smarts.”

“Yes, I noticed that about her.”

I started shaking, and then I began to cry. I cried until he started patting my back; I tried to talk to make him understand why I was crying. I was crying because my baby was safe. She was alive, and so was I. That bastard didn’t kill me and take my daughter away from me.

The dog in the back seat licked my cheek. I chuckled before I reached back and hugged him. “Thank you, Bear. I needed that kiss.” I sniffed, and then he handed me some tissues. I blew my nose. “I guess I am pretty tired. Maybe I do need some sleep. Could we stop at a Walmart? I need some clothes and a few other things.”

“You can’t use any cards and throw your phone out the window and into the water as we go over the bridge. They might be able to track your phone. I’ll lend you the

money for whatever you need.”

“Thank you. I guess that’s how he always found us; he tracks my card, maybe even my phone. That’s why Gavin didn’t spend any of his money. He knew his dad would trace it. I don’t know why I never thought that before. He took my money, and then he gave me a card.”



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We stopped, and Riley bought some things she needed. We drove for two more hours before we stopped and got a room. They had one room left, and it was a king, so we took it. I figured I would sleep like a log.

“You don’t have to worry about me trying anything; I could fall asleep standing up. The bed is big. You’ll have your side, and I have my side,” I said, yawning.

“Fine, I trust you. I will sleep soundly myself.”

We had stopped at Subway and got some food earlier, so we ate our sandwiches.

Then we climbed into bed; it took me a little longer than usual to go to sleep for one thing: after Riley showered, she walked out of the bathroom looking like a different woman. She did have a black eye, from that bastard hitting her.

She had been wearing an ugly red wig, and now her short blonde curls bounced around her head. She removed the fake glasses; her eyes were emerald green. The woman was beautiful. She had on some comfy pajamas she got from Target.

I lay there for about an hour before I slept, and when I woke up, I was hard, and my leg was thrown over Riley’s body, and my hand was under her shirt, holding a perfect-sized breast. My eyes flew open, and I jumped out of bed.

“God, I’m sorry. I swear I had no idea what my body did in its sleep.”

She must have woken up at the same time as me. She looked confused, and then she looked down at her breast; both of us saw her nipples harden.

She grabbed some clothes and walked into the bathroom. I hurried and dressed before picking up my things and walking to the truck. I walked Bear so he could do his thing. I looked around and didn't see anyone suspicious. When I returned to the room, Riley was picking up her things.

"Are we ready?" she asked.

"Yep," we walked outside and got into the truck. We drove until ten, and I had to stop and get something to eat. I pulled into the pancake house. When I got out, I called River and handed the phone to Riley. "Do you want pancakes?"

"Yes, please."

I watched her talking through the window as I waited for our table. She would laugh and, at the same time, wipe her eyes dry. I couldn't imagine the horror she went through living with that man—a man who killed his own son. I knew he would kill Riley the next time he set eyes on her.

I was on my way to our table when Riley stepped inside. "Thank you. I loved talking to Haley; she sounded so happy. She hasn't been happy since Jonah forced us to move in with him."

"She told me that he beats you?" I said, watching her.

"Yeah, that won't happen again. The next time I see Jonah Reeves, I'll have a gun. "

"You should stay away from him," I said.

"He won't let us stay away from him."

"That's why you need to stay with me. He will never know where you are?"

“I don’t know you; I can’t just move in with a stranger.”

“Sure you can, plus I’m gone most of the time.”

“Why are you gone most of the time?”

“My work takes me away. I was on vacation when I saw Haley running. I have a cabin my grandfather left me. I go there to fish.”

“I love fishing,” she said with a sigh.

“Have you ever fished in the ocean?”

“Yes, I went deep sea fishing when I was sixteen. The boat captain let me go for free if I cleaned the boat. Believe me, I got the wrong deal on that one. Two people on the boat couldn’t stop vomiting. It was nasty.”

“One was in the little cabin we had for sitting in, so you can imagine no one went down there. The other one locked herself in the bathroom. She wouldn’t unlock the door for anyone. I did catch some good fish. When I took it to the people I lived with, they were happy.”

“Why did you live with other people?”

“I was in the foster system since I was eight. These foster parents had a home in Florida; that’s where I went deep sea fishing.”

“Eight, how many times were you moved to other homes?”

“Seventeen times, I was sent to different homes. They didn’t like me because I would tell them when the foster daddy tried to touch me. I would even call the cops. The one thing my mom always told me was when someone tries to touch you, scream and

never let anyone, man or woman, touch your privates. ”

“What happened to your Mom?”

“She died from fentanyl poisoning. Her boyfriend said she didn’t know she was taking fentanyl. I think he probably gave it to her. She thought she was taking a pill for anxiety. A lot of good that did me. I was left all alone. So they put me in the system.”

“What about your Dad?”

“I don’t know if I even had a Dad.”

I shook my head and told her some stuff about my life. “When I was nine months old, my mom dropped me off at my Grandpa’s and never returned. I was so much better with my grandpa.” I said.

“Did she die?”

“I don’t know. She never came back.”

“You didn’t look for her when you grew up?”

“No, I didn’t want someone in my life that didn’t want me in theirs.”

“Yeah, I would never be that parent. If I have to kill Jonah, I will.”

“Did you tell the police what you knew?”

“Yeah, they were under his pay. I didn’t know which ones were good and which ones were bad. So I stopped calling them.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, how much further do we have?”

“A couple of days. Haley is safe. River and Kat are great people. They work with me.”

“What do you do?”

“We have a high-security business. We rescue people in other countries, guard them, and keep them safe. We also help with Derick fires. People call us because we helped put them out overseas. We are all former Army Special Forces. Kat is our assistant, and she is also a medic. So you don’t have to worry about Haley. She’s in safe hands.”

“Thank you again. Maybe I could hire your company to guard us.”

“We are already guarding you. The moment I took Haley under my wing was the moment I became your guardian. I will take care of everything for you. You don’t have to worry about Jonah Reeves ever again.”

I looked at him. Haley and I have a guardian angel. “You’re going to guard us.”

“Yes. Did you think I would leave you to face that bastard alone? I would never do that.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

She was quiet for the next hour. “Do you need to stop for anything?” I asked.

“No, thank you. But if you stop for gas, I’ll have a Pepsi and a chocolate bar,” she said with a chuckle.

“Do you have a sweet tooth?”

“Only when I’m nervous. What about you?”

“No, I don’t eat many sweets. One of my co-workers is a great cook. Sometimes, he brings a lemon cream pie to work, and I eat most of it.”

“I like pies too.”

“Tell me about your life growing up.”

“My life has always been boring. I lived in the same town growing up. The lake was the only good thing about living in Farmington, Oklahoma. We had a great lake. I started fishing there when I was little,” she wiped her hand across her eyes. I wondered if she was crying.

One of my foster brothers stole me a fishing pole and a bunch of fishing tackle. I know it’s terrible to steal, but that’s the best gift I’ve ever had. I guess he knew I needed something.”

“No one told you to stay away from the lake?”

“Most of the foster moms didn’t care where you went as long as you were home by bedtime. If you weren’t home by then, you were locked out.”

“They would lock you out.”

“Yeah. I had one couple who couldn’t have kids. They were so nice to me. They bought me clothes, and she would take me to have a pedicure and manicure. I loved

living with them. I was there for almost a year. I was ten, and they said they would adopt me. I was so happy, but she got pregnant. And they sent me back to the group home. My heart was broken for the longest time, and then I smartened up.

“That pisses me off. Why didn’t they keep you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened when you turned eighteen and the money stopped?”

“I camped out at the lake and started participating in fishing contests for money. I knew the lake; I knew where the fish were and how deep in the water they went. I won almost all the contests. But I didn’t have a boat. Eventually, the guys started following me and throwing their line in where I went.”

“When I turned nineteen, an old fisherman I always fished with said he was too old to fish and gave me his truck and boat. That’s when the fishing contest became real. I picked that old man up every morning, so we fished together. When he died, I missed him. He was only the second person up to then that I missed when they were no longer in my life.

“When did you meet Gavin?”

“I had already met him, but we didn’t start dating until I was twenty. We married not long after that, and when I was twenty-four, we had Haley.

“Gavin told me he had no family, so when he was shot, he told me to get Haley and hide. I didn’t know what he was talking about until his father arrived at our house.”

“Wow, I’m glad I saw Haley running and screaming for help.”

“Yes, thank God. He beat me because I said we were staying at our home. He hit my

baby. I hate him. He was ready to kill me. He was waiting until Haley was old enough to care for herself, and then he was going to kill me. One of the people who worked for him told me I needed to leave before it was too late.”