



# Stolen Hearts (Black Heart Security #5)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** A wounded SEAL. The one who got away. And a secret that makes her a target.

After years of high-stakes missions, Navy SEAL Denver Malone returns to his family's Wyoming ranch hoping to find peace and time to heal from the aftereffects of a head injury—but instead, he finds Rhae Rivers, the one real regret in his life.

Now a therapist working with veterans on the Black Heart Ranch, Rhae never expected Denver to walk back into her life, let alone reignite the fire they once shared.

As old wounds resurface and sparks fly, Denver must confront the ghosts of his past—and the future he never saw coming. Because Rhae's been keeping a life-altering surprise that could change everything... but someone else knows her secret.

When a shadow from Rhae's past begins stalking her every move, Denver steps onto a new kind of battlefield—one where protecting the woman he loves means risking it all, including his heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

New York City, USA

The room was a cocoon, insulated from the world, where time had stretched and blurred over the past three days.

Denver Malone lay on his back, one arm draped over his eyes, the other resting on the curve of Rhae's hip. Her head nestled against his chest, fingers tracing idle patterns on his skin.

The ceiling fan rotated lazily above, its rhythmic creak the only sound accompanying the dim glow of the city lights filtering through the curtains. The silence between them was comfortable, yet charged, like the calm before a storm.

"Three days," Rhae murmured, her voice muffled against his chest.

"Mm-hmm." Denver's was a low rumble.

"We said one night."

He chuckled, but it was a sound devoid of humor. With Rhae, he existed in a different world than the one he walked in normally. The minute he stepped out that hotel room door, he returned to his SEAL team and became a ghost.

A dead man walking.

The moments he'd stolen with her were even riskier than they would be with a nameless woman picked up at a random bar.

It sure as hell would be less of an entanglement.

He smirked down at her. “Plans change.”

“Do they?” She lifted her head to look at him, her pale blue eyes—the color of a misty morning—searching his face in a way that made him take more notice.

He met her gaze, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them. “They did.”

They were dancing around each other. As always. What choice did they have when everything about these meetups was forbidden? Not only was he breaking the rules of his team, SEAL Team Blackout Charlie, by having a connection in his personal life...but Rhae was his therapist.

Or had been in the beginning. He was forced to see her five times after a mission went sideways. He thought it was going to be the worst experience ever, but after he fulfilled orders, he found ways to facilitate accidental meetups...that turned into dates...

That turned into three days spent in a hotel room.

Rhae sat up and slipped out of bed. She donned a silky robe and crossed the room to the window, peering out at the city that never slept.

Her sexy silhouette was illuminated by the neon lights below, casting her in a surreal glow, accentuating the blonde streaks in her hair that gave her a forever sun-kissed look that intruded on his dreams, and those pale blue eyes that had a way of piercing him far too deep.

And Christ, her long, toned legs had him aching hard for her all over again.

Denver sat up, the sheet pooling around his waist. “I should probably leave.”

She turned her head to face him, a sad smile on her lips as if she already knew what would happen. What always happened.

“You should probably stay.” Then she shook herself. “Never mind. That’s not how this works.”

He stood, crossing the room to her. “Why not?”

“Because we agreed. One night. No strings.”

“And yet, here we are, three days later.”

Three days and a lot of secrets neither could share. They danced around their personal lives more than they did the samba in the sheets.

She looked away, her hands slipping into the pockets of the robe. Rhae was the therapist, but he recognized the gesture for what it was —a shield against vulnerability.

“Rhae...”

“Don’t,” she interrupted, her voice trembling. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

He reached out, gently turning her to face him. “I’m not trying to make it harder. I just...I don’t want to let you go.”

Tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over. “Then don’t.”

He leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “I have to.”

She nodded, a single tear escaping down her cheek. “I know.”

They stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Her fingers bit into his chest, clinging to him like he was the last steady thing in her world.

His hands slid up her back, pressing her against him.

It would be so easy to say the words he kept locked behind his teeth, to confess that she wasn’t just some passing fling, that these three days had unraveled him in ways he couldn’t have predicted.

But he didn’t.

Because saying it would make it real, and making it real would make it impossible to walk away. And Denver Malone knew how to walk away. It was part of the job, part of survival.

But damn, it felt like he was leaving half his soul behind.

Outside, the city hummed with life, indifferent to their shared heartbreak. Inside, it felt like the world had narrowed to just the two of them, suspended in time, teetering on the edge of something that could have been everything.

“You should probably leave,” she whispered again, voice breaking.

Denver pressed his forehead to hers, inhaling the scent of her—jasmine and something uniquely Rhae. “I know.”

He lingered, his lips grazing hers, like a memory he was desperate to burn into his soul.

Finally, he stepped back, letting her slip from his grasp, watching as she retreated to the window once more, arms wrapped around herself like she could hold in all the things she wasn't saying.

Fuck.

Denver reached for her. With a gasp that sounded like a woman who'd been holding her breath, Rhae spun toward him, throwing herself into his arms.

He lifted her automatically and whirled for the bed. In five steps, they fell to the mattress with her sleek body pressed underneath him. Her legs parted, the robe falling away to give him total access. In one swift thrust, his stiff cock tunneled inside her.

Rhae cried out, fingertips digging into his shoulders, anchoring herself to him as their mouths collided with a desperation neither could ever admit to.

It was over fast—too fast. They lay entwined for long minutes, neither one of them speaking. What was there to say? If he was smart, this would be the last time he saw her.

The thought of her moving on with her life—without him—sent a sharp knife straight to his chest. He stared at the ceiling, fighting emotions he shouldn't, couldn't have.

There's no future in it.

Within minutes, he noticed how her body went lax with sleep and her breathing turned slow and rhythmic.

Denver slipped out of bed and found his jeans, pulling them on methodically, like each move was a nail sealing up his chest. He grabbed his shirt from the chair, drawing it over his shoulders before reaching for his boots.

His hands hesitated on the laces.

He could stay. He could forget everything else. It was just one choice. One decision.

But then he tied the knot, standing and straightening as if it took every ounce of strength he had left.

He looked at her one last time. Asleep on the bed in a pool of early morning sunlight. If this was the last he ever saw of Rhae, it was a damn good vision to etch into his memory.

He swallowed hard.

One last look. One final breath.

Then he walked out.

And didn't come back.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae glanced at the clock on her desk. Almost her infant daughter Navy's naptime.

The morning had been slow, a rarity around here. The veteran therapy and recovery program was situated on a busy, working ranch in the mountains of Wyoming. Nothing ever slowed down here...until her office door closed and one of the vets she worked with took a seat.

No one ever made an appointment, but somehow, it all worked. When she was hired, she never planned to make her door a revolving one, but the on-demand therapy seemed to be working.

There was no conflict, no chaos. Just a steady beat to life like the hum of the wind over the fields of the Black Heart Ranch where the program was situated.

The main building was a sprawling log structure with thick timber beams and floor-to-ceiling windows. It boasted all the modern amenities anybody could ask for even as it offered down-home charm.

A wide front porch stretched across the front with rocking chairs and thick wool blankets folded neatly over the backs. At most times of the day, Rhae could look out and see a vet or two out there, staring out at the cattle grazing in the nearby field or listening to a ball game on the radio.

Her young daughter enjoyed being outdoors as much as the men, and Rhae took her out every chance she could.

Through the window beside her desk, she could see a few guys tossing hay bales onto



a flatbed truck. As part of their therapy, they could pitch in as much or as little as they liked. No pressure around the Black Heart was one of her favorite things about living here too.

The men moved in sync, their movements practiced and efficient. Therapy didn't always look like talking.

Sometimes it was mending fences, running cattle or just standing at the fence rail while the sun sank behind the mountains.

Navy's coo broke the silence, and Rhae smiled.

Her daughter was nestled in the playpen beside her desk, chubby fists wrapped around a stuffed lion that had seen better days.

Rhae pushed away from her desk and walked over, scooping the little girl into her arms. Navy squealed with delight, her tiny hands reaching for Rhae's necklace.

"Almost time for your nap, sweet pea," Rhae whispered, brushing a short sprig of hair away from Navy's forehead.

A shadow moved in front of the doorway.

She smiled and glanced at the clock, even though she already knew what time it was. Like clockwork, every day, Kyle showed up. It was one of the only routines that held steady around her office.

Rhae turned, spotting the former Marine in the doorway. His hair was messy, probably from wrestling with the horses earlier, and his T-shirt sporting the Black Heart Ranch logo was dusty.

She smiled. “Hi, Kyle. You’re early.”

“Miss Rhae.” He dipped his head in greeting. “Figured I was in the area. Thought I’d help.” He stepped into the office, no invitation necessary. His boots thumped lightly on the gleaming wood floors as he crossed the room, arms already reaching out to take the baby.

Navy spotted him and leaned forward, chubby legs kicking in excitement.

Kyle was hardened to steel, and over the past year he’d spent on the ranch, the sun had etched weathered lines around his eyes to mix with the lines of strain he received in battle. But he’d been here long enough that he was part of the ranch, just as solid and safe.

She passed Navy into his arms, and he tucked the child close, smiling down at her. One of Navy’s hands splatted on his bearded cheek, and he chuckled.

“She doesn’t look very tired.” He moved to the long sofa to sit, positioning Navy in his lap, cradling her like she was much more fragile than she was.

Navy gurgled, tiny hands patting at his chest. Kyle chuckled, grabbing the bottle already set out in the warmer on the desk. He gave it a quick, practiced shake, tested it on his wrist, then offered it to Navy.

She latched on immediately, her eyes already drifting closed even as she sucked contentedly.

Rhae glided to the armchair opposite the sofa and sat down with a smile.

Kyle eyed her. “She wore you out already?” His big hand spread over Navy’s small back, and the baby’s soft sucking noises filled the room with a quiet comfort.

“It was a slow morning. I think Navy was as bored as I was.”

He tipped his head back, eyes fixed on the ceiling as if counting the wooden beams.  
“Slow’s good. Means everyone’s...managing.”

Managing. It wasn’t healing. It wasn’t whole. But it was something. A step. She’d take it.

“What did you work on this morning?” Her question got him talking about things she’d heard plenty of times before— mucking out stalls, feeding cattle and finally, inspecting ditches that carried runoff water from the mountain to ensure the fields weren’t flooded.

Navy gave a contented sigh, and Kyle chuckled. “I think she’s out.”

“Of course she is. I swear you’ve got magic hands.”

Suddenly, a loud, metallic clang rattled the window. Rhae froze, her gaze shooting to her daughter sleeping in the big Marine’s lap, then darted to Kyle’s face.

He was staring into space, expression harder than it had been when looking down at the baby.

Deep down, Rhae knew Kyle would never harm her child, but the first few months on the ranch, she had concerns about the men around Navy. Soon, she realized her fears were unfounded. Not one of the men in the program would harm a fine brown hair on Navy’s head.

The farm equipment outside clanked again.

Rhae picked up her notepad and pen and wrote some notes about Kyle’s behavior to

add to his file.

The man had heavy trauma and an official diagnosis of PTSD.

Loud noises were triggers, but he was far more relaxed than she'd ever seen him after a noise set him on edge.

He gently ran his fingers over Navy's back. "You know, I'm an uncle."

She tilted her head. "You never told me that."

He nodded. "I missed out on this stage. By the time I got off the street and...reconnected with my family... Well, when you can't even play with your nephew, then it's time to admit you may need some extra support."

"It took a lot of strength to reach out for that support. You should be proud that you took that step."

"I tried the VA first."

Kyle's injuries weren't visible. He had all his limbs, but he was still broken in ways that she could help with.

"They gave me drugs," he went on. "I took them for a while before I realized I didn't want to walk around in a haze.

The Black Heart is a much better place for me.

" He suddenly met her gaze directly, something he didn't always do or hold it for very long.

His glance drifted back down to Navy in his lap, her lips pursed around the bottle nipple, giving an occasional suck in her sleep.

“And I get to hang out with two pretty ladies. The best medicine ever.”

Navy’s body went totally slack in sleep. Kyle’s lips quirked at one corner. “My work here is done.”

Rhae knew the drill. She glided to her feet and moved over to take the baby from the vet. She offered him a kind smile of gratitude for putting her child down for her nap so easily.

As soon as she scooped the baby out of his arms, he stood, tugging the brim of the cowboy hat he wore. “I’ll be back tomorrow, Miss Rhae.”

She faced him, the baby curled up in her arms. “We’ll be here.”

His boot steps faded down the hall. When she eased Navy into her playpen for her nap, she heard a new step at the door. Straightening, she saw a woman standing there.

The tall woman could be a model for her beauty and poise. And the wide smile on her face was so genuine that Rhae couldn’t help but smile in return.

Willow Malone co-owned and ran the Black Heart Ranch with her brothers. Over the past months since Rhae came to work on the ranch, she’d come to think of Willow as a friend.

She paused in the doorway and looked down at her dusty boots. “I don’t want to track in any hay. We just finished loading the truck.”

“I saw.”

She glanced at the baby asleep in the playpen. “I thought you might like some lunch.”

Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food. She’d gotten a late start this morning and didn’t get a chance to grab breakfast from the dining hall.

“I’d love some lunch. Let me just grab the baby monitor.” She walked quietly to her desk and switched on the monitor that would broadcast every noise the baby made while she stepped out for a few minutes.

They each filled trays with soup and sandwiches. Willow picked up a dish of homemade chocolate pudding. “You need to try this. It’s Faye’s recipe.”

Faye was a fixture around the ranch. She seemed like she wasn’t quite an employee, not quite family.

While Rhae wasn’t sure of what to make of her, she knew one thing—every time she heard the words “Faye’s recipe,” she knew it was food she couldn’t turn down.

But her hips were warning her to step away from the pudding.

“I think I’ll have the fruit cup instead.”

“Suit yourself.” Willow placed two dishes of pudding on her tray.

She slanted a smile at her friend. She was undeniably beautiful, but completely genuine. She was too sweet to dislike, even for her metabolism.

“You work your calories off on the ranch. My job is sedentary,” she reminded Willow as they walked out onto the patio and took a seat at one of the tables.

Willow sat with a sigh.

“That sounds like a sigh of relief. Anything you want to talk about?”

Willow’s gray eyes centered on her. “Do you ever stop being a therapist?”

She gave her a small smile of apology. “Sorry. It’s ingrained in me to pick up on everyone’s mood and body language.”

Willow bypassed the soup and went straight for the pudding. “I needed to get out of the house. There’s a lot of testosterone.”

“Ah. Security business?” Besides the veterans’ program and the cattle ranch, the Malones also ran a security business. They all proved to be very good at security, considering they were all ex-military.

Her stomach gave a little dip, and she found herself looking at Willow’s gray eyes a little too long.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

“Yup. All my brothers are in the office, bickering like kids over a baseball bat.” She looked up at another woman moving their way with a tray.

Honor was one of the newer additions to the Malone crew, and she conducted art therapy with the vets, which meant she and Rhae crossed paths a lot.

Honor plunked into the seat across from Rhae and brushed a long wave of hair off her face. “I’m so glad you ladies are out here having lunch too. I need to steer clear of the house for a while.”

Rhae’s stomach performed that little dive once more. She didn’t have to ask why Honor and Willow needed space—she already knew.

The Malone men.

It wasn’t just about their towering frames or the way they moved through the world like they could bend it to their will. Or the way their guarded secrets were stitched into the fiber of their bones.

She swallowed a bite of food. “Sometimes a little distance is good.”

Honor laughed. “You sound like you have experience.”

She would keep her own counsel on the subject but offered her friend an easygoing smile. “You could say that.”

The wind freshened, bringing the scent of hay and the last of the summer



wildflowers. Rhae let the silence linger, knowing all too well that some things were better left unspoken...at least for now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver stared at the piles of disorganized files spread across the desk in the Black Heart Security office.

What a freakin' mess. Stacks of manila folders tilted like tiny skyscrapers, threatening to collapse with one wrong move.

Loose papers were scattered across the surface—incident reports, surveillance logs, equipment checklists—all jumbled together like someone had dumped out a puzzle and walked away.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, the tension there familiar and unyielding. Medical discharge was still fresh, biting like a winter wind.

He hadn't told his family about why he left the military yet. They all noticed that he looked thinner, rougher around the edges, but who the hell wouldn't after what he'd been through?

Luckily, nobody pushed. That was the beauty of coming back to his family and each sibling bearing their own scars—they knew better than to ask before he was ready.

His oldest brother Carson leaned back in his chair, one boot kicked up on the edge of the desk, inches from one of the file towers about to topple over. "Hell of a sight, huh?" He waved a hand at the clutter.

"Looks like a bomb went off." Denver sifted through a stack of recon reports that didn't seem to adhere to any system of organization. "You've really been running the

security agency solo?”

“Mostly.”

“What do our other brothers do?”

Carson rocked a bit in his chair. “Oaks manages the electronic monitoring for our clients. Surveillance cameras, data analysis to track movements for threats. Colt prefers to stay in the shadows.”

“Always has,” Denver said quietly, understanding his brother a lot better now that they were older.

Carson nodded. “He does a little of this and that. Performs scouting missions, manages schedules. That sort of thing.”

“And Gray?”

“He can fly in a pinch if our pilot isn’t available for some reason. He hasn’t been back long enough to really find a role. And Willow...she keeps me sane. But you know she’s mostly phones and travel details. I handle the rest. It’s...” Carson paused, searching for the right word. “A work in progress.”

Denver’s gaze dropped back to the mess. He could see the bones of an operation here, but it was scattered. No structure. No real chain of command. He picked up a notepad and pen, then listed all of the names of the men on the Black Heart Security team, which was only comprised of the Malone family.

There were enough of them to fill any gaps in the list of operations, but a few more team members would be helpful in the future.

Carson watched him, saying nothing as Denver worked on the list, writing in the roles his brother had just recited for him. But he knew his big brother was assessing him. Looking too deep. Seeing things.

“Who’s your client? What kind of services do they seek from the agency?” Denver asked.

Carson let his boot drop from the desk and hooked it over his opposite knee. “Well, we’ve got corporate clients. Protecting bigwigs, personal security for high-profile figures.”

Denver took notes while Carson continued.

“We’ve provided personal security for a couple celebrities and some political figures. There was also a time we acted as crowd control during a protest at the state capital.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“A little of this and that.”

Denver flicked his stare to his brother. “Do you hear yourself? You were in the military longer than the rest of us. You of all people should have a handle on how a team should be organized. The Black Heart Security Agency isn’t any different.”

Carson scrubbed a hand over his face. “Most of the time, I’m scrambling to organize the chaos and make sure nobody kills each other.”

Denver raised a brow.

“You have better ideas, I’d love to hear them.”

“I might.” His mind was already forming a new system, piecing things together and then reassembling them based off each of his brothers’ strengths and skill sets.

“The agency is your baby. So that would make you team leader. Point man.”

Carson leaned forward, his elbows hitting the desk with a thud. “Sounds right.”

“Recon specialist?” Denver continued .

“I’d say Colt,” Carson replied easily. “He’s sharp. Knows how to get in and out without raising hell.”

Denver nodded. He could see the makings of a team here, but it was loose. Too loose. “Surveillance?”

“Right now, that’s Oaks. But he spends a lot of time on the veterans program. It’s his passion project, and it’s understandable why.”

Denver met his brother’s gaze. “Why?”

“You don’t know...” Carson shook his head. “Why would you? You’ve been gone a while.”

A tightness formed around Denver’s lungs at the thought of what he’d put his family through when he signed those Blackout papers—and essentially his own death certificate. His siblings all believed him dead, killed in action.

Until Colt found him.

There was a lot they didn’t know about the past few years of his life, and a lot he didn’t know about them.

“His best buddy, his six.” Carson’s throat worked on a swallow.

Denver held his breath, waiting for it.

“He couldn’t handle things when he got out. He ended his own life.”

“Goddamn,” he muttered. Now he could see what fueled Oaks to help veterans.

Silence settled between Denver and Carson as they both processed it all.

Denver set the notepad down on the desk and crossed his arms. “You need structure. You need roles. Right now, this is a bunch of guys with guns and good intentions. If you want them to work like a team, they need to know their damn jobs.”

Carson grinned, tipping his chair back. “That’s why I asked you here.”

Denver snorted. “You asked the right guy.” He picked up a scribbled note, eyes catching on the scribbled name of the person who took the message: Willow .

“Where’s our baby sister? Why isn’t she in on this meeting?”

“Lunch with Rhae.”

The pen stilled in Denver’s hand. “Rhae?”

“Yeah, she’s the new therapist.”

His throat clamped at the word she.

Carson was still speaking. “Been with us about six months. Fantastic, really. The guys love her. She was more than qualified since she worked with the military

before.”

“Therapist...” It wasn’t a question, but Carson took it as one.

“Yep, we’ve got two. Bella, the other therapist, has been here for almost a year. It’s been good for the program to have two people specializing in different things and offering different services depending on what our vets require.”

Denver fought to keep his expression neutral, but his brain was backpedaling.

Rhae . The name echoed in his mind like a half-buried secret.

It can’t be her. Why would she be here?

“Does this Rhae have a last name?” He trained his voice into something deceptively casual. “Sunshine, maybe?”

Carson chuckled. “Cute. No, it’s Rivers. So still nature.”

Denver felt like he’d just taken another blow to the head. His mind swirled. His ears that never quit ringing rang louder.

Carson kept talking, dipping into stats and logistics concerning the success rate for the vets.

But Denver had already tuned out.

It couldn’t be her. Sure, Rhae wasn’t a common name, but it wasn’t like she’d trademarked it.

Still, the thought lodged itself stubbornly in his mind. He glanced out the window,

scanning the open field beyond the ranch house where the security office was situated for any sign of movement. As if he would look out and see her standing there...the beautiful woman who haunted his dreams.

Nothing. Just swaying grass and sunlight stretching long over the horizon.

He leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming restlessly against his thigh. “Rhae Rivers,” he murmured under his breath, tasting the name on his tongue.

It tasted like...happy moments.

And bittersweet loss.

It shouldn't matter. He shouldn't care.

But the question burned a hole straight through him—was she the same Rhae Rivers he knew?

He wasn't sure if he wanted the answer or not.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Two familiar raps on the doorframe drew Rhae's head up from the notes she was finishing up from her last patient. She abandoned her task immediately and pushed away from her desk.

"Crew. I was wondering if you'd stop by today."

The former pilot for the Air Force gave her a brief nod—his attention was all for Navy. Her daughter sat up on a colorful playmat next to Rhae's desk. The ball she played with had a spiny texture that she loved chewing when she was getting a new tooth.

Crew picked up on the squeak of her gums on the rubber. "She's cutting a new tooth?"

"Sounds that way. She was a bit fussy before I put her down for her nap. Come on in." She grabbed a fresh notebook and pen and drifted to the armchair while Crew took his usual spot on the floor with Navy.

As soon as her daughter's big eyes fell on the tough man, she dropped her toy. A stream of drool flooded out of her wide grin. Three little white teeth glinted in her smile.

With a low chuckle, Crew automatically reached for her. He pulled Navy into his lap and picked up her ball. Navy brought it right back to her mouth and began happily gnawing on it.

"How is your day so far?" Rhae prompted over the squeaks of Navy's gums on the



rubber.

Crew began to talk about his morning of tending to chores on the ranch. Rhae read between the words, hearing moments of frustration interspersed with a few peaceful times when he felt things were going his way...like things were inside his control.

“I ran into Gray and had a good talk.”

“How so?” She jotted down a few more notes on the topic.

To her, Gray Malone was a wild card. The brother had never crossed her threshold or sought her counsel in the short time since he returned to the ranch. However, she knew he was former Air Force too. A pilot like Crew. And they shared big losses in common.

“We set up a time to work on the letters. A bigger block of time to get more done.”

The letters were a big project Gray and Crew shared. Writing to the families of servicemen who perished after an aircraft carrier sank seemed to be helping both to make peace with their losses. Crew lost his copilot in a crash...and Gray lost every man on that ship.

Her stomach knotted at the thought of everything her patients struggled with on a daily basis...and those Malone brothers who didn't come to talk.

She touched the necklace at her throat. “How do you feel about that? Excited? Relieved? Worried?”

He shrugged. With Navy tucked in his lap, he reached for the building blocks she enjoyed and started stacking them in slow movements. Controlled. By the time he had three stacked, Navy stopped chewing to watch what he was doing.

He slid her to the floor in front of him. Immediately, she dropped her ball and swiped an arm at the blocks but didn't knock them over.

Rhae leaned in to keep watch. While none of the guys would ever intentionally hurt her child, she was still a protective momma bear.

Navy squealed in delight as the tower reached four blocks. One chubby arm waved in an arc toward the structure but she didn't make contact.

Six blocks. Seven.

Navy whipped out her arm and struck the tower. Blocks flew everywhere.

Crew went still.

Rhae perched on the edge of her seat.

Then Navy issued a big belly laugh, and she relaxed.

Crew grinned and did it all over again, building towers for Navy to knock down, talking all the while. When Navy lost interest, crawling a few feet away to get her ball, he glanced at his phone.

"I've taken up enough of your time."

"You don't have to go if you're not ready. Navy still has plenty of playtime left."

He smiled and pushed to his feet, limbs unfolding with grace despite his muscled bulk. She'd passed by the big, modern, indoor gym on occasion and had seen him in there working out. It showed. A lot.

He said his goodbyes to her and Navy and then slipped out of the office, leaving only the squeaky noise of her daughter cutting teeth.

Seeing that Navy was fine for a bit longer, Rhae pulled out her phone. Her daughter was nine months old, but her one-year checkup would be here before she knew it. That meant she had to plan.

She didn't keep a regular pediatrician. Even though the few doctors in the surrounding area were good, and she liked them, she didn't dare go to the same one twice.

"Hello."

The voice yanked her attention from the list of area wellness clinics, and she looked up to see Oaks Malone.

She blinked at him, lost in the rugged lines of his face, his body. Those gray eyes all the Malones shared.

Her gaze slid to her daughter, who was crawling toward the scattered blocks.

"Hi, Oaks. What's up?" She infused her voice with a casual note even though her heart was pattering faster at the interruption.

"I stopped by to update the security on your PC."

"Oh."

"Do you mind?"

She shook her head and got out of her seat to follow him to the desk. "Is there a

problem with security?”

He plunked down in her desk chair and drew the laptop toward him. “I’m going to hook you up with a VPN. In case you ever decide to go paperless.”

She filled her lungs with air. “I prefer having paper files.”

He nodded. “So you’ve said. I just want to give you options so you feel secure.”

“I like to make sure everyone’s privacy is safe.”

He didn’t shift his attention from the screen. “This will make sure everyone is safe.”

She stared at his profile. His features looked like some master had chiseled them from the very granite of the mountains that surrounded the Black Heart Ranch. All of the brothers were so good-looking. And Willow could be a model for her beauty. She had the height for it too.

Oaks didn’t stop in her office often, but the therapy program was his brainchild, and he liked to keep tabs on how everything was run.

He tapped at the keys. “Everything else okay?”

She took a few breaths to calm her heart, which began thumping faster. “With work? All good. Your family has been so easy to work with.”

Over the top of the laptop, their gazes met. “Nobody is bothering you?”

Her heart skipped. “What do you mean by bothering?”

“You’re pretty and single.”

Heat climbed her throat and she felt her cheeks burn.

“All the guys come in a lot. Anybody would enjoy spending time here,” he continued.

“That’s not why they’re here. It’s all very professional—on the up and up.”

“Good to hear that. Good,” he said almost to himself, as if she’d soothed one of his concerns.

“How is Shiloh? I heard a horse stepped on her toe.”

Oaks’s gray eyes met hers again. “She’s lucky. She was wearing hard boots and it’s only bruised.”

“Thank goodness. I wouldn’t know what to do if that happened to me. I haven’t spent much time around horses. Tell her I asked about her.”

“I’ll do that. What about you, Rhae?”

She straightened her spine, breaths coming in shallow pants. “What about me?”

“Are you getting enough support? As a single mom.”

Air trickled out of her lungs, hot with relief that he only wanted to know about her state of mind as a single mother.

“I barely get to mother alone. Believe me, I have a lot of help.”

His eyes crinkled with his smile, knowing exactly what she meant. “That’s great. All the guys seem so attentive when it comes to the baby.”

“It’s been such a beautiful thing.” The passion she felt about the men being so involved—and enamored—with her daughter seeped into her voice.

He tapped away at the keys a little more and then pushed the laptop back. He stood, eyeing her. “You know, if you want to get Navy started on a pony, there’s one here that would be so gentle.”

“A pony! She can’t even walk yet!”

“Willow was about her age when she first sat a horse. We wouldn’t walk her on the pony. Just dip her feet in the cowgirl life.” With a smile, he stood.

“I’ll think about it. Thank you. And thank you for hooking me up with a VPN.”

“No problem.” He crouched next to Navy on the floor.

For a moment, Rhae’s heart felt like it stopped.

Looking between the former SEAL and her infant daughter, her eyes clouded over with thoughts of all that she and Navy were missing out on.

He cradled Navy’s head in his big hand, eyes creased at the corners with his smile. “Be good for your momma,” he told Navy, then pushed to his feet and threw her a wave on his way out the door.

Navy rolled onto her back to play with her feet. Rhae looked on, fingers pressed to her lips.

Her gaze drifted to the window, her hand falling away as she took in the wide-open stretch of land beyond the therapy building.

Here, she was safe. Off the grid, just like she'd planned. No bills in her name. No presence on the internet. She was a ghost with a pulse.

It was a life lived in shadows, but shadows kept her breathing, kept Navy safe. No one knew her past, and she intended to keep it that way.

Because the minute someone started asking questions, the shadows wouldn't be enough to hide her anymore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver stared at the laptop screen, his fingers hovering just above the keyboard.

He couldn't even bring himself to type a single letter into that search bar. One press of a button could send him down a dark path of self-destruction.

He wasn't just a Navy SEAL. He was goddamn Blackout. The special ops team made him a ghost. Confidence had been driven into his bones, unshakeable. But now? Now all he did was question things: his skills, his instincts, his own damn mind.

He didn't know what would happen once he sank into the digital void and searched for traces of her.

Rhae.

When his medical discharge came down the line, she'd been the first person he wanted to talk to. Hell, she was the only person he wanted to see. But she'd vanished.

He'd looked for her, called in every favor he had, but it was as if she'd evaporated the second he'd left her in that hotel room. His hands curled into fists at the memory.

The office was too damn quiet. The kind of quiet that let thoughts creep in—thoughts of the way he left Charlie team. How he'd been discharged halfway through a mission to find a terrorist called Cypher.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Fuck. He'd fought the order to leave the team.

He raised hell, banged on his commanding officer's door, but some of the guys told him straight.

There wasn't a damn thing he could do. The series of head injuries had become an issue.

Regulations were regulations. No amount of stubbornness would change the fact that he couldn't run missions anymore.

But that didn't mean he didn't want to.

The cursor blinked back at him, taunting. He could search again. Just one more sweep of the records. But he knew where that led—another dead end.

He batted the lid of the laptop closed with a snap and pushed back from the desk, the legs of his chair scraping loudly against the wooden floor.

Rhae wasn't the only thing bothering him. He felt lost as hell these days.

Charlie team had promised to keep in touch.

Even though he knew they couldn't—national security and all that—damn if it didn't leave a hole in him wider than the Wyoming sky.

He ran a hand through his hair and grabbed his jacket, pulling it on as he strode out of

the house. The ranch stretched out before him, endless fields and towering pines, the smell of earth and leather thick in the air. He needed to move, to do something. Anything to drown out the silence.

His feet carried him toward the therapy office before his brain had caught up.

He just had to see. But if it was really Rhae— his Rhae—what would he do?

He stopped just outside the door, heart hammering in his chest. What the hell was he doing here?

If it wasn't her, all the better. He could use someone to talk to. Hell, he hadn't talked to anyone about anything real since his discharge.

Still, his hand rested on the doorknob, and before he could think better of it, he twisted and pushed inside.

The room was empty. He blinked at the neat sofa and chairs, the stacks of magazines, the smell of wildflowers hanging faintly in the air. He was about to back out when he turned and nearly ran straight into Willow.

“Looking for someone?” she asked, one brow arching.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I was gonna introduce myself to the therapist. Guess she stepped out.”

Willow's eyes lit up with understanding. “Rhae? She's with Oaks over at the barn. I can take you if you want.”

Rhae. His chest tightened.

“Rhae?” he echoed as if he hadn’t heard the name already.

Rhae, here on the Black Heart...and in his damn dreams.

“Yeah,” Willow said, already turning toward the exit. “Come on.”

He followed, legs moving on autopilot. The name rang in his ears, louder than the constant hum left by several concussions, rattling around with the memories he’d buried. It couldn’t be her. Rhae was...well, Rhae was gone. But hope was a wicked thing, and it clawed its way up his throat regardless.

They reached the barn, sunlight streaking across the fields, dappling the dirt in patches of gold. Willow pushed open the heavy wooden door, and he followed her inside.

He saw Oaks first, his broad-shouldered brother brushing down one of the horses, laughing at something just out of sight.

Then she stepped into view. Her back was to him, light brown hair spilling down her shoulders as she reached up to stroke the horse’s mane. She was laughing, the sound light and musical, and it hit him like a punch to the gut. He would know that laugh anywhere. Christ, he’d dreamed about it.

“Rhae!” Willow called out cheerfully.

Rhae turned, her smile still plastered on her face—until she saw him.

Denver couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. It was her.

She looked the same, yet somehow different. Her eyes were sharper, her frame leaner, but it was her. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words died on his

tongue.

That was when he saw her. The baby. She was perched on Rhae's hip, eyes wide and curious, tiny fingers wrapped around Rhae's necklace.

Denver's heart dropped into his boots.

Willow glanced between them. So did Oaks, oblivious to the train wreck barreling through his chest.

"Denver..." Willow's voice sounded far off. This time, it wasn't the ringing in his ears making her words quieter. His mind was reeling from the shock of seeing her. Of seeing her with a baby.

"This is Rhae," Willow went on in a tight voice. "And her daughter."

Her daughter. His throat closed up. His vision tunneled until all he saw was Rhae holding someone else's baby. She had moved on. Had a life. A family.

He didn't hear Willow's attempts at polite conversation. Everything was muffled, like he was underwater, drowning in the realization that Rhae had found happiness without him. She'd moved on. She'd had a baby with someone else. He barely managed a nod, his jaw locked tight.

Willow's voice faded into the background. Oaks watched him carefully, concern etching lines across his brow, but Denver couldn't take it. Couldn't stand there another second.

"I...I gotta go," he mumbled, barely aware of the words spilling from his lips. He turned on his heel and strode out of the barn, ignoring the weight of their stares.

His boots kicked up dirt as he marched back toward the ranch house, every step hammering the truth deeper into his chest.

The only thing worse than not knowing where she was...was knowing she'd had a baby with someone else.

And it was killing him.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae stood frozen, her hand stilling on Navy's back as she watched Denver disappear out the barn doors.

Dear god. He was here. Of all the places in the world, he was here.

She came here thinking she'd never see him again. And here he was.

The man she was in love with.

Her mouth opened, but the words wouldn't come. Her feet felt cemented to the barn floor, her mind blank except for the wild pounding of her heart.

Before she could even muster the courage to call out his name, he took off. Long strides that ate up the distance, boots stirring up dust behind him until he was nothing but a memory disappearing into sunlight.

Rhae's gaze snapped to Willow, searching her friend's face for some kind of explanation, some hint that she'd seen it too—that it hadn't just been a mirage.

Willow's eyes were as wide as saucers, but they weren't on her. They were locked on Navy, who was squirming in Rhae's arms, babbling nonsense and kicking tiny feet against her stomach.

"That was...weird." Oaks's voice cut through the silence, and he looked from Rhae to the barn doors. His brows were furrowed with concern. "Let me check on Denver. You'll be okay?"

Rhae nodded absently, hardly able to process his words. Oaks took off, heavy footsteps thudding away, leaving her alone with Willow and the thousand questions burning in her mind.

Willow didn't say anything for a long moment. She just stood there, studying Rhae with that sharp gaze she sometimes got when she was sizing up a situation. Rhae shifted Navy to her other hip, the baby reaching up to grab at her necklace again.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"Say something," she whispered, voice barely above a breath.

Willow blinked, the shock slowly fading from her face, replaced by something much more intense. "You never told me you had a relationship with my brother."

Rhae swallowed hard, fingers tightening on Navy's onesie. "What makes you think so?"

Willow's gaze flicked down to the baby in Rhae's arms. The answer was clear as day.

Navy had Denver's eyes, his dark hair, the same little dimple in her left cheek.

There was no denying it. In fact, Rhae was shocked nobody noticed before now, except...

she was a baby. Their eyes were known to change colors.

Rhae exhaled shakily, rubbing her temple as Navy began to fuss. Without a word, Willow stepped forward and reached out, hands gentle as she took the baby from Rhae's arms. Instinctively, Willow began bouncing her, murmuring low words that soothed Navy almost immediately.

Willow didn't look away from Rhae. Her eyes were softer now, but still demanding. "Care to explain?"

Rhae's shoulders slumped. She couldn't run anymore. Couldn't hide behind silence and excuses. Not with Willow staring at her like that.

"I was in love with him." The words tumbled out before she could second-guess herself.

Her voice cracked, but she kept going. "I never had a chance to tell him I was pregnant. He had a mission. I never heard from him. Decisions had to be made. For our child. I did the best thing I knew to do." The statements were all connected and yet somehow disjointed.

She took a shuddering breath, eyes dropping to the floor. I had to disappear...for my own reasons. She couldn't speak the words. To anyone. Not yet.

Willow's expression shifted, her hands still gently bouncing Navy, who was now playing with the ends of her hair. "You didn't hear from him for a long time," Willow murmured. "Neither did I. He never really told me what he did. I knew he was a SEAL, but there was more to it."

Rhae nodded, the ache in her chest intensifying.

"Were you ever going to tell us?"

Rhae laughed, the sound hollow. "How would that work? It's not like he ever announced we were a couple. So, I was supposed to show up and introduce you to Navy, and you'd just...take my word for it? Or we'd have DNA testing done? Then you would all think I was just here for a handout."



Rhae dropped her voice to a whisper. “I don’t need anything like that. I have money. I’m not after money.”

She just didn’t spend any of it. She couldn’t access her accounts without bringing trouble down on her head. Luckily, she didn’t need access to her bank account because the Black Heart Ranch covered all of her bills and what they didn’t, she paid for in cash.

Rhae swallowed, steadying her breath. “But I thought...if I could just ensure Navy had some relationship with her family...even if they didn’t know, that was enough for me.”

Willow’s eyes shimmered with something close to admiration. “I can respect that. I see why you kept it hidden. And we already love you guys, but now...” She looked down at Navy, wonder spreading across her features. “This is my niece .”

Her voice was barely a whisper, filled with awe. Rhae’s heart twisted painfully.

“When are you going to tell him?” Willow asked, eyes lifting back to Rhae.

Rhae swallowed hard. “First of all, I didn’t even know he was here. I thought...”

He was a dead man walking. Blackout. A lifer who would never walk away from his brotherhood. But he was here.

“Um...he didn’t even want to talk to me.” Her chest burned. “After that shock, I can’t blame him.”

Willow’s gaze softened.

“Willow, you may have to sit with this for a while—not say anything. Can I count on

you?”

She bounced the baby a little and nodded. But deep down, the ache to find him, to see him again...to compare Navy's face to his...was eating her alive.

Willow shifted Navy to her hip and grinned. In a cute baby voice, she said, “What do you think, Navy? Can Auntie Willow keep a secret?”

Rhae groaned, slapping a hand over her face. “So...no.”

Willow laughed, muted but genuine. “Don't wait too long. We're all going to want to claim her.”

Rhae's lips curved into a bittersweet smile. “I'll see what I can do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver pushed himself to walk faster, stretching each stride to a longer one. The urge to break into a run scalded him, but he forced it down. Buried it deep, just like everything else that had to do with Rhae.

Fuck. She really was here on the Black Heart. How?

The tap of boots on dry earth behind him alerted him that he wasn't going to have any time alone to think things through. Oaks caught up to him fast.

He wasn't surprised. Hell, nothing could surprise him anymore.

His older brother, second of the Malones, had always been Denver's champion. When they were little, he stuck up for Denver, stood up to their asshole father. Shielded him.

It was one of the feelings that drove Denver to join the military. He never wanted to be too weak to stand up for himself again.

He filled his lungs to the point of bursting and whirled to face Oaks.

His brother stopped in his tracks. “What’s up, bro? You okay?”

He balled his fists. “How did this happen?”

A crease appeared between Oaks’s brows. “How did what happen?”

“How did Rhae end up here?”

He blinked. “Oh. We posted on the Military Times for a therapist. She applied and was a perfect fit for the program and for the ranch too.”

The lump in his throat felt as if it was comprised of toxic waste and battery acid. It burned, just like the pit of his stomach when he thought about Rhae holding that baby in her arms.

Oaks went on, oblivious to him coming apart at the seams. “She was looking for stability, a long-term position. We liked her. We hired her.”

He made it sound so goddamn easy. Didn’t he know none of this was easy?

No. He didn’t. No one did.

“What about her husband?” The words were jagged shards slicing up his throat. He felt himself bleeding out.

Oaks shifted his weight and thumbed his hat in a gesture Denver remembered well

from their youth, one he saw whenever Oaks was ruffled or put on the spot.

“Do you know nothing about hiring people? We can’t ask whether or not she has a husband.”

The world stilled for him, narrowed to a laser point. “Have you seen him? Has he been around?”

Oaks shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

Denver clenched his jaw hard. “How long has she been here?”

“About six months. I don’t know her exact date of hire without looking at her file.”

“In all that time, no guy showed up to see her?” he pressed.

“Not that I’m aware of. I think someone would have mentioned a stranger coming to see our therapist, considering everyone on the ranch knows everyone else’s business. She’s barely left the property. Maybe twice, both for doctor appointments for Navy.”

“Navy?” He perked up at the name. “That’s what she named her daughter?”

“Cute, right?”

Of course. She must have had the baby with a military guy.

“She’s a therapist. If you have so many questions, you could go talk to her. I didn’t even know you knew each other.”

His stomach felt hollow. Why would she mention him?

He sliced his fingers through his hair. The longer strands of the civilian haircut shocked him a little less every day, but seeing Rhae again left him shaking inside.

Oaks watched him closely, concern spelled across his features.

“I need a minute.” Without another word, he turned and strode away. The animal inside him wanted to find a place to hide and lick his wounds—or drown them at the bottom of a bottle.

He rushed directly to the security office. Thank Christ, the house was still and silent, the office empty. Slamming the door behind him didn’t alleviate a damn bit of his frustration. He hurried to the desk and yanked the computer toward him.

Denver threw himself into searching for any and all information on Rhae. A black hole of searches led to nowhere. No mention of her. No photos. No baby announcements—goddamn, his heart hurt—and no smiling family portraits.

Just...nothing.

His jaw creaked with strain as he leaned back in the chair, rubbing his hands over his face.

Rhae had vanished off the face of the earth.

Eighteen months. Eighteen months he’d been looking for her, and never found a trace. Not in the usual databases, not in the deep-web crawlers he tapped into. And he knew how to find ghosts.

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Every avenue, he came up empty-handed. It wasn't possible.

Not unless she wanted it that way. Not unless she knew how to disappear.

He knew the signs. He'd done it himself more times than he could count.

Scrubbed records. Buried digital footprints.

Created walls so high not even the government's best could scale them.

That was what she'd done. Either she had paid someone to do the job for her, or she had performed a hell of a lot of research and managed to pull it off herself.

Either way, Rhae had covered her tracks, and she'd done it damn well.

His chest ached at the realization. She'd erased herself...and Navy.

Or had she?

He launched forward and set his fingers to the keys, furiously tapping out the searches and pathways that would—hopefully—end in a birth certificate.

During their time together, they avoided real talk that would reveal anything about themselves. He couldn't be compromised, and she was afraid she'd lose her job for being with a patient, even if she was no longer treating him.

But he knew her hometown where she grew up. He remembered it because he

remembered everything she ever said. But the location stuck out for how ironically close it was to the Blackout Charlie base.

It made sense that a single woman who was pregnant would go home where she felt safe to have her baby. But he couldn't recall her ever speaking of her family. Neither of them did.

When he located a hospital in her hometown, he worked on hacking the system. This wasn't a skill he used often. In fact, he was happy to teach his fellow brother-in-arms in Blackout all that he knew and hand off the baton.

Within minutes, he had a screen full of births in the hospital records. After a swift scan, he landed on four babies born with the last name of Rivers, but nothing on Rhae or Navy.

If that's even the baby's last name.

Again, that dark stab of jealousy struck, making his fingers twitch into fists.

Feeling like it was time to move on, he located a second smaller hospital outside the city limits. Nothing there either.

He shoved back in the chair, glaring at the screen. The baby could have been born in any city in any part of the world. It was like trying to locate that proverbial needle in the haystack.

"Dammit!" He was no quitter.

Maybe he didn't do a deep enough dive in the system. Knowing that Rhae managed to wipe herself out of the public eye led him to believe she did the same with her child.

Fuck, she has a child.

He ground his molars until his jaw popped and barreled on in his search. When he came up against a firewall, he paused only long enough to ensure his activity couldn't be traced before pushing on.

Suddenly, he was staring at sealed files. Then...

He was staring at Navy's birth certificate.

An animalistic noise rumbled in his chest.

And there was no father's name.

A light rap on the door made him jerk his gaze away from the screen. Without waiting for him to answer, Willow walked in. She moved straight to the desk and leaned one hip against it, staring at him unwaveringly.

His eyes slipped shut. "Do you know?"

"Know what?"

He looked at her. "Who the father of Rhae's baby is?"

She tipped her head, studying him. "I'm not at liberty to say."

He let out another growl and stabbed the keyboard, closing out all the windows and eliminating all trace that he had hacked those systems.

"You can't tell your own brother? Where's the loyalty?"



“My word matters.” Her comment fell between them like a lead weight, one that anchored to his feet and dragged him under the dark waters.

He dashed his hand over his face. “Great. So why are you here?”

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out some paper items. “When you were gone, I went through some of the family pictures. You know, the ones just stuffed in boxes.”

He stared at her blankly. “Who knew you had a masochistic streak.”

She set the photos on the desk in front of him. “Here’s a few of yours. Thought you might want them.”

“Sure, I’ll look through them,” he said offhandedly, mind already moving away from the conversation.

She planted a hand on the desk in front of him, demanding his attention. “You should look at them now.”

He snagged the photos and stared at the first one. “Wonderful.” Him in only a diaper. He flipped to the next. “Great.” Him wearing little cowboy boots—and a diaper. Then the next. “Fucking fantastic. Me in the bathtub with a washcloth over my wiener. Though I was a handsome little devil.”

“Yup . That’s you at nine months.”

He opened his mouth to speak...and snapped it shut again.

The date on Navy’s birth certificate wavered in his mind’s eye. The baby was also around nine months old.

Willow whipped out her phone. “And check out these pictures.” She tapped the screen with a fingertip. “This is my Navy album.”

“I don’t really feel like—” He started to wave her off, then jerked his stare back to hers. “You have a whole Navy album?”

She nodded, dark braid sliding over her shoulder.

“Uh-huh. She’s really damn cute.” Her thumb flicked over the screen, and she enlarged one of the photos of the baby sitting on the sun-drenched grass, her chubby fist filled with a tuft she’d just ripped out by the roots.

Navy’s cheeks were flushed, her little mouth parted in a toothless grin as if the act of destruction was the most delightful thing in the world.

Denver’s throat went dry. Christ, he could barely stand to look at the child. Yet he couldn’t tear his gaze away either. His chest felt like it was collapsing inward, every breath a jagged, impossible feat.

Navy. Rhae’s daughter. His mind snarled around the idea, clawing for purchase but sliding off, unable to fully grasp it. She was real. Right there in pixels and sunlight and tiny clenched fists.

A bad taste hit the back of his throat, bitter, unrelenting.

“Will you look at those gray eyes ?” Willow’s voice was reverent and entirely too knowing.

Denver’s hand shot out, snatching the phone from her grasp before he could think twice. He brought it closer, staring at Navy’s face until the world blurred around the edges.

Gray eyes. Not just gray—stormy, like slate washed clean by rain. Every Malone had eyes like that.

He swallowed, pulse thrumming in his ears.

Fingers shaking, he flicked through the images on Willow's phone, pausing at each one.

Navy laughing, Navy curled up in Rhae's arms, Navy swaddled in a blanket with a ridiculous bow stuck to her head.

His gaze snagged on one of her clutching a tiny stuffed lion, her expression so damn serious it almost broke him.

Everything clicked into place like tumblers on a lock. His knees felt unsteady, and he was glad he was sitting down.

His mind replayed every second he'd spent with Rhae, every kiss, every whispered promise. The ache in his gut expanded, gnawing through him until he thought he might shatter from the inside out.

"Denver." Willow's voice was mild now, like she was speaking to a wounded animal. He couldn't look at her. Couldn't tear his gaze from the little girl on the screen.

His little girl.

He dragged his eyes away from the phone just long enough to glance up at the photo of himself as a baby.

Gray eyes stared back at him. Same damn tilt of the chin.

He snapped his gaze back to the phone, to Navy's face, and everything fell away—all the silence, questions and dead ends.

It was right there in front of him, staring back with his own eyes.

“Oh my god.” The words fell from his lips, jagged and raw.

Willow patted him on the arm, her touch featherlight. “Let the record show...I said nothing. See you at the bonfire.” She turned for the door, footsteps whispering over the floorboards.

His head shot up, voice coming out in a rough, broken rasp. “I need to speak to Rhae.” His hands were still clenched around the phone, knuckles white with strain.

Willow paused at the doorway, her long braid swinging like a pendulum along her spine.

When she glanced back, her eyes shimmered with unspoken things, her mouth tipping in a sad sort of smile.

“I know.” Her gaze softened, lingering just a moment longer.

“See you at the bonfire. Bring my phone with you.”

And then she was gone, and Denver was left with nothing but the echo of her footsteps and the image of his daughter burned into his mind.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

R hae sat in her office, door closed, blinds drawn. The air felt too thick, pressing against her lungs, suffocating.

She forced herself to take deep breaths, but it didn't help. Her hands were shaking. She stared down at them, palms flat on the desk, knuckles white. Everything was too quiet, the silence wrapping around her like a shroud.

Dear god. Denver.

Seeing him again...she wasn't prepared for that.

Seeing the way his lip curved when he looked at their daughter, cooing and gurgling like there wasn't a storm beating down their door, slayed her.

Denver's eyes. She could still feel the burn of them. Could feel the shock, the pain, the confusion.

Hell, she hardly knew what happened. How could she explain how she got to the Black Heart Ranch with an infant? She couldn't expect him to understand.

A shuddering breath escaped her, and she pressed her hands to her face, palms cool against her flushed skin. She'd been ready for a lot of things, but not them being on the same ranch with a thousand words unspoken between them, and a secret she wasn't sure now if she was prepared to share.

Her gaze drifted to the small playpen that served as a crib for Navy in the corner of the office. The baby was asleep, cherubic cheeks rounded, her pink lips giving the

occasional suck in her sleep, one chubby hand splayed.

Rhae watched her for a moment, heart giving a painful squeeze. Everything she'd done, she'd done for Navy. Every choice, every sacrifice. Staying off the grid. All of it was to protect this precious little soul and to give her the best possible life a momma could.

A fat tear slid down her face, unstoppable.

The ranch felt like a safe place. Now everything felt fragile again, a soap bubble hovering in the air, easily shattered by the slightest mountain wind.

She swiped away the tear, but another fell in its place.

A rap on the door made her bolt upright. She dashed her palms over her face and slapped a pleasant look there in its place.

"Come in." Her voice wavered only slightly. Maybe whoever was walking through her door wouldn't notice.

Oh, god. What if it's Denver?

Panic swept her, but a second later a familiar face popped around the doorframe.

Willow slipped through the door. The sympathy in her eyes wavered, softened by the flicker of uncertainty. Her gaze darted to the sleeping baby before settling on Rhae.

"You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Willow cocked her head in a way that made words unnecessary.

She threw up her hands. “Fine. I’ve been better.”

Willow stepped closer, leaning her hip against the desk. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No.” Her response was too quick, too sharp. She couldn’t help it—part of her heart was back there in that barn, cracking wide open with every second that Denver stared at their daughter. “I just need...a minute.”

“Make it a fast one, because it’s bonfire night.”

She shook her head. “I’m sitting this one out.”

The idea of attending the weekly ranch bonfire tonight shook her to the core. What if Denver showed up? He had every right to—it was his family, after all. His, not hers.

A lump lodged in her throat, hot and constricting.

“You have to come. You know how everyone looks forward to passing the baby around.”

It was true. The veterans who sat around the fire, the same ones who played with Navy or put her to sleep, all lit up when they saw her coming with the baby in her arms. The sight of Navy getting passed around, toasty warm in the arms of those rough military men, to the arms of her uncles...

and her Aunt Willow...choked Rhae up even more.

She couldn’t get a single word out.

“Come on, Rhae. You would encourage your patients to face their fears.”

She gaped at Willow. “This is a little different.”

“But is it? It’s a gorgeous night for a bonfire, and Auntie Willow needs some Navy snuggles.”

“But Auntie Willow isn’t going to say anything, right?”

“Nope. Not a word.” Her beautiful eyes widened, accentuating her long, thick lashes. The same ones Navy inherited.

Dammit.

“All right, I’ll go.”

Willow bounced on the toes of her cowgirl boots. “I’ll put the baby in her footie pajamas!”

Rhae moved to lift the sleeping child into her arms. For a beat, she stared down at her peaceful face, thinking how innocence smoothed out everything.

And connecting the shape of Navy’s eyes to her father’s.

This wasn’t the first time Willow followed her back to her quarters.

The rooms were small but adequate for her and Navy.

It consisted of a small sitting room with a TV she rarely got to watch, since she worked long hours and motherhood made her collapse into bed every night.



She barely had a few minutes to scroll on her phone before sleep claimed her.

The bedroom was larger, big enough for a dresser and a queen-sized bed. When she first arrived, she emptied out the closet to create a tiny nursery nook for the crib, and Oaks had been kind enough to add some shelves where she stocked diapers and supplies.

Willow went straight to the dresser. “Top drawer, right?”

“Yes.” She gently laid Navy on the bed, but her eyes popped open anyway. Wide awake as if she already knew what was about to happen. She gave a big, gummy smile, the few teeth she had glinting white. The new one hadn’t yet broken through.

Rhae issued a sound, almost like a sob, but smiled back at her daughter. She stuffed her hands in her pockets, awaiting what was to come from all of this.

“Ohh, she’s so cute.” Willow hovered over Rhae’s shoulder, pink cotton footed pajamas in hand.

“I’m biased, but she is the cutest baby of all time.”

“Those eyes...”

Rhae gulped. “If you don’t mind getting her in her pajamas, I’ll just change clothes.”

“Of course.” Willow reached for the baby, earning a giggle from her.

Rhae grabbed some jeans, a thermal T-shirt and boots, and went into the bathroom to change. As she dressed, she avoided looking at her reflection in the mirror. She didn’t want to see that terrible thing on her own face.

Hope.

Hope that Denver would be there. Hope that he wasn't.

What was she doing anyway? She should stay in her room, turn in early.

In the other room, Navy let out a squeal of delight. With a fortifying breath, Rhae walked out to find her child on Willow's hip. She had Navy's little knit cap drawn over her head and her thick blanket thrown over her shoulder.

"We're all ready."

"I see that." Rhae draped a quilted jacket over her arm and reached to take the baby as a way to distract herself from what she was about to walk into.

Navy tipped forward, arms out for her, and Willow transferred her over with a light laugh.

They walked out together, which Rhae was grateful for.

As they crossed the lawn and circled the barn to reach the open spot where the bonfires were held, her heart picked up a beat.

Denver couldn't have been on the ranch long, but it shook her knowing that they could have crossed paths any moment, just like today.

"He probably won't even show."

Willow offered her a sympathetic look. "Last I saw, he was in the office."

She jerked her head to pierce her friend in her stare. "Did you speak to him?"

“My lips were sealed.”

The bonfire was going full force, its orange flames leaping into the air. Waves of heat blurred the friendly faces of the men who sat around in a mish-mash of lawn chairs and even a couple old stumps.

The chair she usually sat in was left open for her, and she made a beeline for it while giving the group a quick scan for Denver.

He wasn't here.

She felt her shoulders droop in relief and took her seat with Navy nestled in her lap. She avoided everyone's gazes by fastidiously swaddling the baby in the blanket. The minute she finished, a set of masculine hands shot outward.

“I'll take her for a while, Miss Rhae.”

She looked up into Kyle's eyes and gave him a nod and smile.

He took the baby with care and anchored Navy in the crook of his arm, turning a little so she could stare with wide eyes at the flickering flames.

Talk was the same as always—ranch work, horses, fences that needed repaired. The quiet of the night settled over them, knitting them together tighter.

“All right, quit hoggin' the baby. Hand her over.” Colt reached out to take Navy out of Kyle's arms.

She couldn't help the smile stretching over her face. They all loved Navy before they ever knew the truth.

They didn't know she was family, just always treated her like it.

Her gaze darted to the corner of the barn and back to the group whenever someone shifted in their seat.

They were all there, the Malones and their wives and girlfriends. Carson and Layne were speaking in low tones, the firelight glimmering in their eyes that were filled with love whenever they looked at each other.

Oaks's wife Shiloh was tucked against his side on the bench, a cozy plaid blanket draped over both of their legs.

Colt and Gray were deep in conversation about some ranch equipment that had blown a gasket, while the women they loved, Aspen and Honor respectively, chatted about the upcoming wedding between Carson and Layne that would be taking place on the ranch very soon.

The baby made it to Oaks's muscular arms. Rhae's heart squeezed.

They all loved her. Maybe it was enough.

Laughter broke out near the fire, and Navy squealed with delight.

The smile froze on Rhae's face as she saw him.

Denver emerged from the shadows, hands tucked in his pockets, shoulders hunched as if he'd braced himself against a storm. Her heart stopped, and then kicked back into a frantic rhythm, drumming against her ribs with painful insistence.

He was coming toward her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver's stare found Rhae the instant he turned the corner. Every step he took toward that fire brought a flood of questions...and a flood of emotions.

With the way they left things, he had no idea where he stood with her. No promises were made. If she felt anything for him, she buried it as deep as he did.

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He issued a low rumble. The wind snatched the sound, but it echoed back through the rustle of tree branches. And as he drew closer, the crackle of the fire met his ears.

She didn't know he was watching her, which gave him a few more seconds to study her. She wore her hair a bit shorter, falling to the tops of her breasts with a part down the middle, but it had the same soft, thick texture that made his fingers clench just looking at it.

She had on a thick jacket that hid her shape, but he knew every curve. Every silky inch of her drop-dead sexy body. She was just sitting there, looking relaxed. But he saw her tell—the way her hands were stuffed in her pockets instead of casually resting in her lap spoke volumes.

She was concealing her nerves from everybody else, but she couldn't hide them from him.

Except she hid more than nerves. For all these months.

She wasn't holding the baby. A quick glance around the group revealed the pink bundle in his brother Colt's arms.

Seeing his brother holding the child— his child, if he was right—made his heart squeeze with a sharp pain. He overfilled his lungs with air in an attempt to calm his nervous system, SEAL style.

Denver was ten steps away from the fire, still in the ring of shadow beyond the flickering light. But at that moment, Rhae looked up and saw him.

Her gaze fastened on him. For a heart-throbbing moment he thought he could read everything in her eyes. All the things she never could show him before when they were having clandestine meetings.

Her chest heaved, and she stuffed her fingers deeper into her coat pockets.

“Denver. Glad you could join us,” Willow called out from her seat next to Rhae.

Everyone swung their heads to look at him, tossing out greetings and nods. He ignored all of them and grabbed a lawn chair on his way to Rhae.

There wasn’t much of a gap between her chair and the one Willow was in, but he carried the chair straight to the gap and made it fit. The arms touched. The chair was wedged, but it would work.

He felt Rhae stiffen as he plunked into the seat. His forearm brushed hers, and she drew it tight against her body.

“I would have moved.” Willow smirked.

“No need.”

All the guys and his brothers were staring.

His gaze fell on the baby. The guy they called Dutch held out his arms to take her from Colt, and his brother passed her over.

Denver’s throat thickened.

Deliberately, he leaned over and made eye contact with Rhae. Direct. Full of purpose.

“Take a walk with me. Talk with me.”

Those misty blue eyes traveled over his face for a long heartbeat that he felt to his toes.

He held out a hand, half expecting her to refuse. But she took it.

The warmth of her fingers clasped in his own did things to his body he wasn't prepared to analyze, but it did worse things to his goddamn heart.

He pulled her to her feet, and he ignored all the questioning stares as he led her into the darkness.

He didn't let her go, and she didn't pull away. His brain felt like he'd just walked into the thick fog of a flash-bang used to disorient enemies, and his head ached like always. Somehow, he managed to guide them far away from the fire.

The black shapes of cattle grazing in the pasture and the silhouette of the mountain soaring high into dark sky were their only witnesses.

He stopped and turned to her. Christ, she was even more beautiful than he remembered, even from the memories etched in his mind. She fisted her hands, as if holding back a flood, and inched them toward her pockets.

His stare locked on hers, fierce and unyielding. “Is there a man in your life?”

Her eyes widened a fraction, but it was enough for him to catch. She shook her head, hair brushing on her coat. “No.”

He took an abrupt step closer. “Christ, Rhae. Where did you come from? How did you get here?”



She leaned in, and her face tipped up.

Unable to stop himself, he cradled the back of her head, fingers threading through her silky hair, and lowered his lips to hers.

Her hands moved to his chest, but not to push him away. His heart thundered under her touch.

The kiss wasn't gentle. It was raw and unrestrained. Months of longing filled him with desperation. His lungs burned with a growl of ownership he couldn't release.

Angling his head, he deepened the kiss, plundering her sweet mouth and pulling little cries from her, the same noises that haunted his damn dreams.

He yanked her against him, pouring unasked questions into the kiss and receiving no answer in return, but she was here. With him.

She melted, going on tiptoe, delving her fingers into his hair that was longer than it had been in a decade or more, as if he might vanish if she let him go.

His lips moved across hers with an unwavering knowledge of her body, and she responded with the hunger of a woman who had been starved far too long.

A soft gasp against his mouth made him tighten his hold on her as he swallowed the sound and deepened the kiss even more, bracketing her face with his hands.

When they finally broke away, he was breathless and she was trembling. Hell, he might be trembling too, if he could ever admit a man like him was capable of such a thing.

Dropping his forehead against hers, he stared into her eyes, glimmering in the faint

light of a moon tucked behind a shield of clouds.

“You’re here,” he whispered again.

Her thumb brushed the spot on his cheek that felt like it belonged to her—over the dimple that appeared when he smiled. His brothers-in-arms liked to tease him about it, but he always told them the ladies loved it.

Only one lady mattered.

“You’re here,” she whispered in response.

A quiet cry cut through the night, shattering the delicate spell between them. Rhae whipped around at the sound of her child—their child. Her instinct was as sharp and palpable as a SEAL’s.

His hand slipped from her waist, and he looked toward the glow of the fire.

“That’s Navy.”

He took her hand. “I’ll walk you back.”

He didn’t let go of her hand, even when the firelight grew brighter and they stepped into the circle in full view of his family and the ranch guys. The laughter surrounding them faded as they watched Denver and Rhae take their seats they’d abandoned in such a hurry.

Rhae looked to her baby cradled in Willow’s arms.

“She just woke up when I took her from Dutch. She’s settled now.”

Willow's stare landed on him. She shifted the baby toward him, brow arched in question.

"Not right now." His voice came out gruff. "I'm holding Rhae's hand."

Willow nodded but thankfully said nothing.

For the first time in years, Denver felt as if time had slowed down. Here, it wasn't like the military where they were always in hand-to-hand warfare against the clock. There was no urgency to move, fight or survive. He wasn't just grabbing moments.

He was living them.

The only good to come out of his military medical discharge was this...

Time to figure things out.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae clasped Navy to her chest. The familiar weight of her child mixed with the scent of baby shampoo and detergent made for sensitive skin, were things she was used to. Having Denver walking at her side wasn't.

Every nerve in her body had come alive when he kissed her, and they tingled more with each step they took toward her quarters.

In true Denver style, he didn't speak. Their encounters had taught her that he was a man of few words, but the ones he'd gritted out tonight eddied in her mind like smoke from the bonfire. They twisted around old memories and clawed into fresh ones.

Take a walk with me. Talk with me.

Is there a man in your life?

The expression in his eyes, like he was willing to burn down the world if she said the thing he didn't want to hear, made her stomach drop over and over again.

And he murmured, You're here, almost unhinged her.

Months of loneliness and the devastation of knowing Navy would grow up without ever knowing this man surged to the surface. Now they hovered there with the pain, hope and a million other things she couldn't put a name on.

Their footsteps were quiet on the carpeted hallway leading to her room. When she stopped at the door, she started to shift Navy to reach for the handle, but Denver got it

first.

He pushed the door inward. The lamp in the corner she had set on a timer wreathed the small space in tones of gold.

Wordlessly, she walked into the bedroom and straight to the crib. The baby's blanket held a hint of woodsmoke from the fire, and she discarded it and her little cap before gently easing the baby onto the mattress.

Navy didn't move, in that deep sleep only babies could achieve. For a heart-bending second, she stared at the curve of her plump cheeks, aware that Denver wasn't standing beside her.

So far, he hadn't acknowledged or interacted with Navy. Nothing had been discussed either.

Yet she turned away from the crib, seeking the man like her soul needed to meld with his or die.

He stood in the bedroom doorway, watching her. Shadows played in his eyes, but when they lit on her, some faded away.

She reached for him, planting her hands on his solid steel chest. Her heart's pattering turned to a thunder that couldn't be ignored.

She threw herself at him just as he reached for her. Those strong arms she'd craved all this time clamped around her, and he lifted her, turning for the sitting area rather than the bed.

It was just as well. What she wanted to do to this man would surely wake their daughter even if she was sleeping like a rock.

His mouth crashed down over hers, and she sucked in a sharp gasp, digging her fingers into his muscled shoulders and dragging him closer.

They collapsed to the sofa, but it was so small that they rolled to the floor almost instantly, tearing at buttons and zippers.

His hands on her felt so good, so right. How could this be wrong? She'd been in love with Denver. Still was.

Though he never indicated having feelings for her, she felt a throb in him now. A deep need that her body understood.

"Christ, you're beautiful." He bared her breasts to his questing lips, and she arched on a gasp as he closed his mouth around her tight bud.

Sucking in soft pulls wasn't nearly enough for her. She mashed her hand over the back of his head, pushing him harder and harder until she was shaking with need and soaking wet.

When she got his shirt off, her hands went straight to exploring his body for new marks and scars. Her fingertips paused over a raised ridge of skin, but she never expected him to tell her how he got it or any of the others. They were just part of him.

He moved to her other breast, swirling his tongue with maddening, warm flips over her straining nipple. And she skidded a hand down his washboard abs, moving toward the thick erection she fantasized about when she was alone in the shower.

It was exactly as she remembered, stiff, long and the head slick with precum. She ran her thumb over it, tearing a growl from his lips.

"I need you," she rasped.

“Not until I’ve had my fill of you.” His gray eyes were dark with the throb of promise. He tore away the rest of her clothes, leaving her bare naked on the thick area rug.

His gaze skimmed over her face, her breasts. When he reached her stomach, she knew he was seeing the scars of her own battle. The stretch marks on her belly were marks she was proud to wear, because they made her a mom before she ever held Navy in her arms.

The pad of his thumb swished over one mark, deeper and darker than the rest. Then his gaze flashed to hers.

She almost heard his unspoken words.

I know.

She didn’t respond. Now wasn’t the time, and he was moving down, down, down her body, spreading her thighs.

When he buried his tongue between her legs, she swallowed a cry and threw her head back, eyes squeezed shut in the throes of bliss.

Over a year had passed since she’d been touched by Denver or any other man, and she was primed and ready, on the verge of coming after the first long, thorough lick on her pussy.

She dug her fingers into his hair, longer than she’d ever seen it. A thought passed through her mind like a shooting star arcing through the night sky. How did he get here? How long would he stay?

Her heart squeezed, and her pussy flooded as he tongue-fucked her the way he knew

would make her cling to the ceiling.

Slow flicks back up to her clit had her rocking her hips to meet his tongue. As soon as he sucked on her clit, she was coming apart, her orgasm slashing through her with so much force it stole her breath.

Biting back her screams, she bucked for more, and he gave it to her. Oh, god, did he.

He awakened her body in ways she never knew before, and now felt everything even sharper.

“I’m clean,” he roughed out.

“I’m on birth control,” she answered.

Then he was with her, plunging his cock deep into her core, seating himself in a way only Denver could fulfill her.

Their mouths crashed together with a slippery passion, and she raked her fingers over his spine to drag him deeper. His muscles churned under her hands. She hooked her thighs tight around him and met his every thrust.

Their bodies met, a collision of longing and time lost. For her, heartbreak. For him? She didn’t know, but it didn’t matter right now, because his hands cradled her ass, pulling her up into him, pulling her closer as if afraid she might slip away.

She swallowed another cry as his cock stroked that deepest spot inside her and she clung to him, grounding herself in the moment that she knew all too well could be gone tomorrow.

He took her mouth again, claiming her. The months apart melted away, leaving only



them in their purest state, raw and unguarded.

Her inner walls flexed. Her orgasm was barely a gasp away.

“Denver!”

He stiffened, on the verge of release too. But his lips moved so tenderly over hers that longing bloomed inside her and flooded her eyes with tears.

Emotion coursed through her, a hard, fast storm that hit along with her release. When his cum flooded her pussy, her body shot higher.

His heart thundered against her breast as he came, his stare fixed on her face in a look that stole her damn heart all over again.

They collapsed on the rug, breathing hard. Her hearing automatically sought out any sounds coming from her child, but the place was silent, all but for the pounding of her own heart in her ears.

Denver’s rough knuckle grazed her chin, and he tilted her face up to meet his stare. In his face, she saw the echo of the long, brutal journey they’d both experienced—one without each other.

In his eyes she saw something that lit a flame of hope in her chest.

A promise of what could be.

A reclamation of everything they once were...and could become.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, he and Rhae fell into bed in a tangle of limbs. She slept as hard as he remembered, turned on her side, a beam of watery sunlight streaming across her beautiful face.

Hell, he didn't know how he got here, let alone her. He never planned to come home to the Black Heart. And to find Rhae here...and their child ...

He looked into the little closet Rhae had pushed the crib into. The baby seemed to sleep just as heavily as her mother.

Something sweet and unfamiliar surged through him.

The sky outside the window was brushed with the very pale blue streaks of early dawn when Denver slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Rhae. His body was conditioned for early mornings—years of ranch life, followed by military life made sure of that—and old habits died hard.

On silent feet, he paced into the small living room no larger than some of the hotel rooms they'd shared during their meetups and began dressing. Finally, he tugged on his boots and quietly slipped out of Rhae's quarters.

The hallways were silent at this time of day, but he heard the clatter of plates and silverware as he approached the cafeteria that served the veterans. Several men sat at tables, grouped in twos and threes, and a few solo diners too.

Nobody paid any attention to him as he headed straight to the coffee station.

He set out two paper cups and filled each with coffee. Black for him, cream for Rhae. With drinks in hand, he turned to go back to his sleeping lover.

One of the vets he'd worked with on various ranch chores, a guy they called Dutch,

stood a few steps away, waiting to refill his coffee cup.

He recalled that his real name was Decker, and his brothers hadn't filled him in on how he got his nickname, but military men tended to make up interesting nicknames for the brothers they fought with.

A newspaper was tucked under his arm, the Willowbrook News from the local town.

Denver grunted at the sight of it. "You've got some pretty light reading there."

Dutch smirked. "Yeah, all five pages of it."

"Don't forget the obituaries mixed with advertisements on the back."

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“Oh yeah, that will take another thirty seconds to read.” Turning it over, Dutch displayed several square ads and a single obituary photo. They shared a laugh.

Then Dutch’s eyes flicked to the coffees he held. If he had questions about what Denver was doing in the cafeteria, he didn’t ask.

Denver lifted his jaw in the cowboy nod. “I’ll be out of your way and let you get your coffee.”

Dutch’s stare rested on him for a beat. Then he said something completely unexpected considering they had only repaired fence and baled hay together. “It’s good to have you here.”

Touched, he said, “Thanks, man.” He slipped away as easily as he’d come.

On his way back to Rhae, he ran into Rodney—the guy who’d just finished his third tour. Since his arrival on the Black Heart, he didn’t talk to many people, and he hadn’t been at last night’s bonfire either.

He offered him a nod of greeting but Rodney just stared through him, eyes hollow and fixed on something far away.

Denver hesitated, wondering if he should do more for the guy, but in the end, he kept walking. Some ghosts never left a person. That he knew too well.

When he entered the room, he heard the hum of the shower running behind the closed bathroom door. He set the drinks down on the coffee table and was just straightening

when he heard the tiniest whimper.

His breath hitched, and his feet were moving before he even registered the sound.

Navy was fussing in her crib, small hands flailing, her face bunched up in the beginning of a cry.

Heart pounding as hard as if he'd just escaped capture by the enemy, he approached the crib and looked down at her.

God, she was so small. Impossibly tiny. The gear he carried into combat weighed ten times as much as she did.

Her faint brows puckered and her mouth opened wide as if about to issue a siren scream.

His hands flexed at his sides, uncertainty slithering up his spine. But her whine turned into a cry, and instinct overtook hesitation.

He leaned down and scooped her up, hands gentle but firm. When he drew her against his chest, his chest burned. Navy fit perfectly against him, her head cradled in the crook of his arm.

Her tiny fingers curled in the fabric of his shirt.

"Christ," he murmured around the lump lodged in his throat.

He stared at her, heart hammering his ribs. The world narrowed down to the warmth of her and the weight of her in his arms.

Jesus. He thought he'd been a man until now. But he wasn't. Not even fucking close.

This changed everything. The need to protect, shelter, to be everything she would ever need slammed into him so fiercely that he staggered like he just took a bullet.

“Hi, Navy.” His voice cracked. And he was crying because he didn’t know how not to. “I’m your daddy.”

Navy blinked up at him, her mouth forming a perfect little O. But she didn’t scream. Her big gray eyes fixed on his face.

His chest tightened, a sensation that hurt. He’d never been afraid of dying. Not in combat, not in the dead of night on a mission. But the idea of not being around for her? Of missing first steps, first words, scraped knees and pigtails?

It gutted him. He wanted—needed—to be here for every single one of them.

And he would die to protect her.

The shower cut off, and a wisp of steam trickled from beneath the crack in the bathroom door. He heard the rustle of a towel and Rhae humming softly.

Denver didn’t move or breathe, just held Navy closer. The baby stared at him as if she understood everything going through his mind.

The bathroom door creaked open, and Rhae peeked out. She was wrapped in a towel and damp strands of hair clung to her cheek. When she spotted him—and what he was holding—she froze.

“Denver?”

He swiped a hand over the tears running down his face and turned to face her fully. “She was fussing.” His voice was gravelly from emotion. “I didn’t want her to cry.”

Her eyes brightened and tears swam in the depths as she approached them. She put a hand on his arm, warm from her shower. “It’s good. Really good.”

His chest heaved as he returned his attention to Navy.

Rhae’s throat clicked as she swallowed. “How did you know? Did Willow tell you?”

He gave a rough shake of his head. “No. I looked up the birth certificate. Did the math. Why...why didn’t you name me as the father?” Hurt made his jaw flex.

Rhae wrapped her arms around herself. “How could I put you on the birth certificate? On paper, you’re dead.”

Silence fell between them, thick and heavy. Navy started to squirm in his arms, and he shifted her over his shoulder, her little cheek resting on him in a way that made another tear leak from the corner of his eye.

Finally, he nodded. “That is a problem.”

Rhae issued a sorrowful snort.

“You knew you were carrying my child when we were together last time.” He didn’t mean for it to sound accusatory, but Rhae still winced.

She looked away. “I didn’t know how to tell you. I was going to tell you in the morning. You always said you were going to leave...then you always stayed.”

I never could walk away from you.

Her eyes shimmered. “But I got up, and you were gone. You were dead on paper, off the grid. Even if I could have found your ghost ops team, I wouldn’t have wrecked

your life by telling you that you had a child. Your team and the job were everything to you.”

He exhaled slowly, the weight of her words settling over him. He couldn't be angry. She had shouldered all of it on her own, and the realization clawed at him with guilt. “I get it. I do.”

At that moment, Navy stiffened in his hold, and an explosion burst out of the little girl.

He jerked and almost dropped her like a grenade, while Rhae doubled over, laughing her head off.

He looked at the baby in horror. “That came from her?”

“Who else?”

“She's so tiny.”

“But she's mighty.” Rhae's eyes leaked with amusement and probably some emotion too. “I guess it's time for your first daddy duties—changing a poop diaper.”

He stared at Rhae for a long beat. Maybe for the first time in his life, he was a little out of his element.

“I don't know where you keep the supplies. I've never changed a diaper before.”

She chuckled and reached for Navy. “I'm joking. I'll handle this one.”

He followed her to the dresser that had a pad on the top. She laid the baby down and Navy kicked her legs and flapped her arms in excitement while Rhae worked the row



of snaps on her pajamas.

“Well, she looks lighter.” His comment made Rhae laugh again.

He watched her quickly change her daughter— their daughter. He cradled the baby’s head in his palm. “I want you to know,” he whispered, “I’m in this.”

Navy’s gray eyes stared up at him unblinking. When he met Rhae’s gaze, tears made her eyes glisten. “Oh, Denver...”

His heart squeezed as he felt its space grow too small to fit the size it had become.

Looking on, he took in everything as Rhae stripped off the baby’s pajamas and dressed her in a white layer that snapped at the bottom.

He marveled at how she squeezed Navy’s chubby arms and legs into a pair of pants and a matching top.

Across the room, her abandoned watch chimed.

She scooped up the baby and held her out to Denver. “I’m running late. I have to get ready.”

She rushed into the bathroom and shut the door, leaving him alone with Navy.

He bounced the little girl against him, testing her weight. Her little hand landed on his cheek in a surprising smack. A laugh burst out of him.

“I guess I deserve that for waiting so long to meet you. Navy...” The name fit her so well. Rhae had chosen perfectly.

A knock at the door pulled his focus from the small world he was rapidly sinking into. He shifted her in his arms and went to answer it.

A tall guy in a worn baseball cap stood there, hands shoved in his pockets. “Just checkin’ to see if Rhae needs any help with Navy this morning.”

Denver’s spine straightened. “I’ve got Navy.” His voice left no room for argument.

The guy backed off with a duck of his head in acknowledgement, and Denver closed the door, hand resting protectively on the wood for a moment longer.

Navy had her fist in her mouth, wet with drool.

“I’m here for you, Navy. You and your momma.”

The words came out quiet, but it was an oath. A claiming of his child and her mother.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The scratch of Rhae's pen on the notepad filled the office, punctuated by the occasional gurgle or thump of a tiny body moving across the floor nearby.

Her gaze flicked between the observations she was writing about the last client to where Navy rolled on her stomach. The baby pushed onto her hands and knees and took off quickly toward a stuffed lion, her favorite toy.

She latched on to its ratty tail and dragged it over to her. When she rolled into a sitting position and flapped the lion, a smile crossed Rhae's face.

The baby was always active at this time of morning after waking from her morning nap, half of which she took in Kyle's arms as he fed her a bottle.

With Navy occupied, she returned to her notes.

Kyle made steps forward and back all the time, but the past few weeks, she'd noted a trend toward progress.

He was getting more involved around the ranch and finding a support system in the other guys he worked with.

She was really pleased with his progress.

She turned to filling out a form the program needed for funding, but it was difficult to concentrate on the mundane document with a bubbly bundle of joy that kept drawing her attention.

A knock sounded, and before she could respond, the door opened. Denver stepped inside. For a moment, he paused in a pool of sunlight slanting through the window, and Rhae's breath caught.

Every rugged line of his body was highlighted by the sunlight, from the sharpness in his eyes to the angle of his jaw, all the way down his carved body to the toes of his dusty cowboy boots.

Her lower belly clenched at the memory of what that machine of a body did to her.

Then her gaze roamed back to his shoulders, taut with the weight of something unspoken that he carried with him since the first time he ever stepped into her office years ago, in another office in another part of the world. Then, he had just come out of the hospital following a head injury.

Her stare moved over his face as if she could see his reason for leaving his SEAL team etched there. But she only made out the faint lines of fatigue around each gray eye.

He closed the door. "Hey." His gaze traveled to Navy, who gave a delighted squeal and slapped the floor with her chubby palms.

He swayed his gaze back to Rhae. "It's almost lunch."

"Yes. You planning on stealing me away to the cafeteria? I think it's chili day."

His lips quirked at one corner. "Probably." Instead of moving toward her, he crossed the room to Navy.

Used to receiving all the attention every time the office door opened, Navy looked up at him, interest in her eyes as she watched her daddy sink to the floor in front of her.

Rhae's throat tightened as she looked on, pen and paper forgotten.

"Hi, Navy. What's this?" He picked up the lion and held it in front of her. She reached for it. A deep rumble that came up from her belly burst from her as she mimicked the lion's roar.

Denver laughed, looking at Rhae. "You teach her that?"

She nodded. "She loves animals and picks up all the sounds quick. The only one I'm stumped about is the turtle."

He huffed with amusement and handed the baby her lion.

Rhae leaned back in her seat, arms wrapped around herself, watching without interruption. He needed this time with Navy in an even bigger way than the other guys did.

Navy tossed the lion, and he caught it out of the air, raising a giggle from the baby. Denver's smile echoed the simple joy they gained from being with each other.

He threw it back to her, and she squealed, scooping it up. The dimple popping in her cheek matched the one in his.

They played this game for a few minutes, tossing the lion around. Finally, he cupped the baby's head in one broad hand. Navy blinked up at him in awe.

Denver began to speak, voice low and rough. "You know, Navy, I used to think I knew what mattered in my life. My team, my mission. I had purpose."

Being the therapy baby made Navy quiet and alert whenever one of the men started talking to her like this. She stilled, listening to the lull of her father's voice.

“But then I got hurt.”

Rhae held her breath, listening, searching his body for signs of injury. If he had suffered some physical injury, she would have seen it last night when they were intimate. The scar she’d felt on his back was healed.

“I couldn’t do my job the way I used to.

It became apparent to my teammates too...” He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple a jagged lump bobbing up his throat before dropping low again.

“I was medically discharged. Got a signature and a pat on the back for years of service. They just hand you a folder and tell you to find a way back to the world of the living.”

He bowed his head, struggling to speak, and Rhae’s vision blurred with tears for what he had been through. Was still going through.

He reached out and took Navy’s little hand. The sight of him squeezing it lightly made Rhae’s heart squeeze too.

“The worst part,” he continued, “was leaving them behind. My brothers.”

Long seconds ticked by in silence. Rhae fought to control the tears that threatened to flood out of the dam Denver broke.

“We were in the middle of tracking a real bad guy. Someone who does things that keep you up at night. I had to leave them to face the threat without me. I can’t have their six anymore.”

Rhae brought a shaking hand to her lips, pressing down hard to trap in any sound of

despair. Denver had to keep talking. He needed this.

“They don’t talk to me anymore. Probably can’t.

Operational silence, maybe. Or maybe they blame me for getting that last head injury.

I could have stayed back behind the line, let somebody else lead and I wouldn’t have gotten hurt.

” He let out a low sigh. “It’s...hard. I gave everything to that life. ”

He looked up at her then, and Rhae saw it—the ache, the guilt, the isolation he never let anyone see but she always sensed in him.

A heartbeat ticked by, then he ruffled the light hair on the back of Navy’s head. “But I have new jobs to do. A job that matters more than I ever thought possible.”

Rhae opened her mouth to tell him that he hadn’t let down anyone. But at that moment, the baby lurched across the floor on hands and knees.

She grabbed on to a side table. Chubby fists gripped the wooden bar between the legs, and she pulled herself to a standing position.

A grin stretched over Denver’s face. “Look at you,” he said quietly.

Navy’s legs stiffened, holding herself upright for one beat, two...then she let go.

Rhae’s heart shot into her throat as she wobbled for a moment then started to pitch sideways.

Denver reached out, catching her in his strong, sure hands. He pulled the baby into

his arms and grazed the top of her head with his lips. “I got you,” he whispered.

Rhae exhaled a shaky breath. “Your job of protecting the world isn’t over, you know.”

He looked over, understanding dawning in his eyes.

She smiled a small, teary smile. “It just looks different now.”

He nodded slowly, cradling Navy against his chest. She rested there like she always knew where she belonged.

“Want to grab that lunch now?” He sounded lighter after purging.

Rhae nodded and set aside her notebook. She locked the papers away in her desk drawer and hooked the diaper bag over her shoulder. Denver reached the door with Navy in his arms, holding it open for Rhae.

They walked out of the office together and navigated the corridors slowly as a unit. Dare she think of them as a family?

She didn’t speak her thoughts but let them roll around in her mind as they reached the cafeteria. As soon as the guys eating lunch saw her and Navy, they threw her hesitant waves. She smiled back and grabbed a tray.

Denver shifted the baby to one arm and took a tray too, while Navy latched on to his dog tags. They moved slowly down the small lunch buffet. He grabbed the chili and a few packs of crackers, along with a sandwich, and Rhae chose the chili as well.

Rhae threw him a look. “You know, I’m jealous of your coordination. It took me weeks to figure out how to hold a baby and fill a tray with food.”



He smiled, but his eyes were sad. “I missed so much.”

She hesitated, gaze steady on him. “But you’re here now.”

They set their trays down, and she took the baby while he fetched the high chair against the wall that was here for Navy and any other child who came to visit the patients on the Black Heart Ranch.

Navy smacked her hands on the tray with a demand that made them both laugh.

Rhae took out a jar of baby food and a rubbery spoon. She also dumped a handful of Cheerios on the tray for the baby to feed herself. Denver watched all this.

“You look like I’m dealing with a matter of national security.”

He reached out a hand. “Can I try to feed her?”

Touched deeply, she passed him the spoon. He read the label of the baby food jar. “Mushy mush.”

She laughed. “It doesn’t say that.”

“Might as well.” He gave the grayish pink goo a dubious look before sniffing it. “Smells like fruit.”

“Because it is, silly. Navy loves it.”

He scooped up a big spoonful and before he could get it to Navy’s mouth, she grabbed his hand and guided it to her eager lips. They laughed again and soon he got the hang of feeding her, taking intermittent bites of his own meal.

Companionable silence settled over them. After a while, Denver cleared his throat. “You know...I’d like to hold a family meeting.”

Rhae raised a brow. “A meeting?”

He nodded. “And I want you there, Rhae. You and Navy.”

The weight of his words was an anchor in her chest. She knew what he meant by it—inclusion, commitment.

“Then we’ll be there,” she said softly.

His smile was slow, but it reached his eyes.

In that moment, Rhae knew. This was the beginning of something stronger. Not perfect...not easy. But real.

And just like Denver didn’t know where he stood in a world without his SEAL team, she didn’t exactly know where she stood with him.

But she would fight like hell to keep it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The Malone family living room was nothing like Denver remembered from his years growing up. Then, the house was a place to avoid, a dark tomb ruled by his father, complete with the iron fist.

Now, it was a blend of warm light, lived-in charm, and history carved into every corner. Pictures lined the walls, new photos placed there with Willow's eye to detail. Others were older and sun-faded but still proudly displayed.

Fluffy pillows lined the oversized leather couches, and a knit blanket, fraying but loved, draped over the recliner no one dared move from its sacred corner. The one they used to curl up in with their ma, who was gone too soon from their world.

Denver stood near the hearth, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. Despite his calm demeanor, his heart thudded against his ribs.

His brothers and their ladies—girlfriends, fiancées and even wives—sat scattered around the room. Carson leaned forward, elbows on knees, his throat visibly working. At his side, Layne's eyes were huge, as if she already knew what to expect from any gathering with so many Malones involved.

Oaks sat next to Shiloh, their fingers laced together. Colt had his arm stretched along the back of the couch behind Aspen. Gray had Honor tucked close beside him, one thoughtful fist pressed to his mouth like it was the only thing holding his words in.

Willow perched on the ottoman like she always did during serious talks, eyes sharp, scanning faces like she was cataloging reactions for later analysis.

Denver didn't know how to begin. But the silence stretching longer and longer was starting to make everyone lean in with concern.

"You remember the tree?" he said finally, voice rough.

Colt blinked. "Which one?"

"The one I fell out of. I passed out cold. You guys carried me home. I think I was four."

Oaks winced. "You split your head open. Mom cried more than you did."

"Then there was the horse," Denver added. "Got kicked trying to untangle the reins. Same deal. Knocked out."

Gray nodded slowly, expression tight.

"Thing is," Denver continued, exhaling hard, "those weren't the only times. There were more. Four more, maybe five. But there was no tree, no horse. Just missions. Combat. Explosions. One time in Italy..." His gaze fell on Rhae, sitting perfectly still with a sleeping Navy in her lap.

"I was missing for a while. Because I didn't know who I was."

"Jesus, Denver," Carson hissed.

"I didn't tell anyone. Didn't want to be benched. Didn't want to be weak."

Carson's jaw clenched. "You were active through that?"

Denver nodded. "Until I couldn't. They pulled me. Medical discharge. It was official.

But it can't be public...because of what I was doing."

His gaze shifted to Colt.

Colt met his eyes, jaw tight. "I know."

Denver gave a subtle nod. "Colt caught wind that I was alive, after you all believed me long dead. He did some digging and found me."

"Until a few weeks ago," Denver said, looking around the room, "I was, to the civilian world, missing in action. Presumed dead. There's not a lot of people who come back from that." He tried to lighten it. "Me and Jesus have that in common, I guess."

His half-assed joke earned a weak chuckle from Gray, who dropped his fist from his lips and rubbed his face.

Willow gave a quiet sniff. The sound haunted the hell out of Denver. Of all of his siblings, he knew that going into Blackout would cause Willow the most pain.

Rhae dipped her head, and he saw a tear drop onto the yellow blanket covering Navy.

Oaks tightened his grip on Shiloh's hand, eyes wide. "You came for our wedding. It made that day so much more special to us."

Everyone nodded. It was the day he couldn't hide from his family anymore. The day he came back from the dead.

"We get it," Carson said. "We knew something was going on. Military life...there are things you don't talk about. We respected that."

“Yeah,” Oaks agreed. “But it’s good to have you back.”

Willow exhaled sharply. “That’s all nice, but do you know how many secrets get kept around here in the name of military service?

I’m great at keeping secrets. Excellent, actually.

And I’m positive there’s at least one thing I know that not everyone in this room is aware of.

And quite honestly, it’s killing me. So… spit it out.”

Denver looked to Rhae, who sat quietly beside the fireplace, her hands resting on Navy. She gave a single nod, steady and strong.

“Rhae and I…we had a relationship. One we weren’t supposed to have. I wasn’t allowed to get close to anyone while I was in the special unit. But I did. And then I disappeared.”

He glanced at Rhae again, feeling fragments of his hardened exterior crumble away, exposing soft inner bits he never showed a single soul.

“And we had Navy.”

The room reacted in a ripple. Carson rubbed his throat like the words stuck there. Oaks stared, mouth open. Colt dropped his head forward, eyes shutting for a moment. Gray covered his mouth again, knuckles white.

“We’re uncles?” Oaks’s voice sounded like rough gravel.

Rhae gave a shy, teary smile. “Yeah. You are.”

Suddenly, the tension broke. The brothers leaned forward, all trying to talk at once. Carson asked about her birthday. Colt demanded that Willow share her phone's album of Navy photos. Gray already pulled out his phone to add her birthday to the family calendar.

"You know we all think so highly of you, Rhae." Shiloh smiled at Rhae and then at Denver. "Now that I know, I'm wondering why I never saw it before. Navy's eyes... They're Malone eyes."

Honor shifted to the edge of the sofa, looking as if she was about to leap up and start hugging everyone. "I'm so thrilled to add you to our growing family!"

Rhae issued a teary laugh, and her cheeks flooded with a blush that had Denver's blood pumping to have her again.

Carson broke in. "Willow already made Rhae an official part of the Black Heart family. Just the other day, she added Rhae to the website."

Willow bobbed her head with enthusiasm and held up her phone. "It was going to be a surprise, but I guess now's the time to tell you, Rhae. Your photo's on the therapy site."

Rhae's smile froze. Denver was staring at her when her face drained of color.

"Wait...what?" she choked out.

Willow beamed. "It's a great photo of you too, right here on the front page."

"Oh my god. No. No, no, no! This can't happen. You can't put me on the website!"

Dead silence followed her panicked words.

“It needs to come down.” Rhae’s fingers dug into the blanket covering Navy, but he saw the violent tremble of them. “Immediately!”

Denver’s instincts blared with the sirens of an air raid. He reached her in three steps and held out his hand. “Come on.”

Honor jumped up to take the baby from her, and Denver secured Rhae against his side. When he led her to the security agency office, she moved woodenly, without a sound.

Denver sat at the desk and pulled up the website. It only took a quick login and few keystrokes to make her picture disappear.

He looked up at Rhae, as white as a sheet and looking about ready to bolt. “Problem solved,” he said gently. “Now you have to tell me what’s wrong.”



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae couldn't believe this was happening. Not now, not when things were falling into place with Denver.

She glanced at the door, the urge to escape flaring hot inside her very tight, hot chest. And right on cue, as if her daughter sensed her high emotions, the low grunts and noises of Navy fussing trickled down the hallway.

She swung toward the door, ready to go to her. But Denver blocked her path.

She plastered a hand over her chest in an attempt to still her heart. "Navy's fussing."

His eyes pierced her like a tactical laser. "The uncles and aunts have it under control. You're staying right here. We are having this talk."

The air between them crackled.

She stood stiff and silent.

He guided her to the long leather sofa, and she reluctantly sat. Denver leaned against the big wooden desk, his focus drilling into her.

"I know you're hiding out on the ranch."

His words punched her, rocking her forward. She threaded her fingers in her hair and stared at the grain of the rustic wood floor. "You can't know that, Denver."

"Oaks told me you've only left the property twice in six months to take Navy to a

doctor checkup.”

Oh, god. They were watching her that closely?

She shook her head, casting off the thought of the Malones watching her. They were trained to observe the habits of the people in the security agency. And before that, they needed to be observant to stay alive.

She swallowed hard, saying nothing. What was there to say?

Denver continued. “You don’t even go into town for supplies. You have them delivered. That’s not just a cautious single mom. That’s someone hiding.”

The words hit her like a slap. Not because they were wrong.

Because they were dead-on.

Now the thing she was trying so hard to keep sealed was exposed under Denver’s scrutiny.

“Rhae.” His gentle tone brushed over her senses. “Who are you hiding from?”

She unthreaded her fingers from her hair and lifted her head to meet his gaze. Her heart thundered in her chest. The last thing she wanted was for Denver to know, because she knew exactly how he’d react. Denver Malone wasn’t one to sit still while someone he cared about was threatened.

“Rhae. Tell me who you’re hiding from.”

She issued a heated breath. “My father’s business partner.”

She felt him go dead still, each inch of sinew hardening to solid granite. Gone was the playful dimple in his cheek. In its place was a tendon flickering with tension as he locked his jaw.

He blinked just once. “What happened?”

Unable to look at him, Rhae’s gaze drifted to the computer and the website he’d just wiped her identity from. “When my parents died, he stepped in.”

“I didn’t know your parents were dead.”

“We never discussed our pasts.” Because there had been no future for them.

Except now a future was possible.

“They died in a car accident. I’m the quintessential orphaned child, right down to the reason behind me becoming a psychologist—to help people deal with heavy feelings I struggled with after it all happened.”

His stare settled on her, kind and coaxing. “Go on.”

“He helped out with legal stuff, house repairs, groceries. He was a fixture of my life, even as a legal adult once I didn’t need him anymore. He was kind...until he wasn’t.”

Denver’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t interrupt.

She couldn’t tell him everything. Couldn’t describe the way Robert Ravencroft had slipped into her life like a savior, then twisted her grief and vulnerability into something possessive and wrong.

She couldn’t tell him about that OB appointment, where Robert had shown up

uninvited, offering to take care of everything . Pushing abortion like it was a business decision. Then when she refused, he offered to raise the child with her—his version of a perfect little family.

“I didn’t see it at first,” she whispered. “Then...he started showing up. At random places. Watching.”

Denver leaned forward. “Where?”

Her stomach rolled. “The daycare.”

His expression darkened instantly.

“I never told him where I enrolled Navy. But he was there. Outside, watching through the glass like he had every right.” Her voice broke. “I lost it. I pulled Navy out that same day. I couldn’t stay. I couldn’t risk it.”

His fists clenched at his sides, slow and controlled. His knuckles whitened.

“He freaked you out,” he said. “Now he’s freaking me out.”

She looked up at him then. From the set of his shoulders to the fire in his eyes, he was totally special ops bad-ass. She’d known it would come to this if he found out. And still, seeing it now made her breath hitch.

“I took the job here because I needed to disappear.” She pressed her fingertips into her temples. “I needed somewhere safe and private, off the beaten path, where someone like him couldn’t just walk in.”

Denver pushed off the desk, closing the gap between them. When he crouched in front of her, her throat tightened with tears she never let fall. He didn’t touch her, but

his presence loomed, intense.

“You should’ve told me.”

“I didn’t want you involved.”

“Tough,” he snapped. “I am involved. I’ve been involved since I saw you in that goddamn barn and the instant I found out about Navy.”

The way he spoke, in that forceful tone, told her that he was already moving toward action.

“Why didn’t you tell me from the start? Tell my brothers?”

She shook her head. “I was trying to keep you all out of it. I didn’t want this to touch you too.”

“You think I give a damn about that? You think any of us do? We protect our own, Rhae. My job of protecting people isn’t done, remember?” His voice sharpened to honed steel with a lethal edge aimed at her stalker and not her.

He pushed to his feet and paced once, hands on his hips.

“Give me his name.”

She didn’t respond.

“I’ll find it either way,” he said, quieter now. “I’ll pull court records, dig through anything I can get.”

She believed him. After all, he already tracked down Navy’s birth certificate.

Rhae wrapped her arms around her middle. It was no use now. The secret was already bleeding out between them, and he wasn't the kind of man who walked away from a threat.

"Robert Ravencroft," she said softly.

Denver froze.

"That's a hell of a name."

She nodded. "He sold the business. Now he's part owner of a chain of wellness spas, big on clean beauty and yoga retreats. His public face includes a charming smile and a spotless reputation. No one would believe he's dangerous."

"I believe it," Denver said darkly.

She looked at him, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you going to do?"

He turned sharply for the door. "Handle it."

"Denver—" She stepped forward, alarm tightening her chest. "Please don't rush into something. He's not—he's not someone who plays fair."

Denver paused in the doorway, turning to her, his face unreadable. "I won't make a move until I know exactly who I'm dealing with. But I will learn. I'll find out everything I need. You're not dealing with this alone anymore."

Tears welled in her eyes but hung there, unfallen. "Don't do anything reckless."

He hesitated. For a moment, the strain in his face relaxed just slightly. "I won't. But I'm not letting him keep you in a cage, either. That's over."

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

Denver's gaze moved over her—relaxing, warming—before turning away. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

And just like that, he was gone.

She stood alone in the office, surrounded by silent screens and steady blinking lights. Horses meandered across the top of the Black Heart Therapy Ranch website. The land outside the ranch carried on untouched, quiet and calm.

But inside her, everything had changed.

The weight she'd been carrying for months had finally shifted. Not gone—never gone—but it was no longer hers alone to bear.

Denver knew.

And he wasn't going to let this go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver burst into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. For what he planned to do, he needed to be alone, away from prying eyes. In time, he would tell his family what Rhae told him.

Robert Ravencroft. He repeated the name to himself, carving it into his mind like a target.

This wasn't just some asshole with a warped idea of family. Rhae had spent months hiding here on the ranch. And before that...hell, he didn't know where she was.

Thinking of a strange man standing at the daycare window watching Denver's child had him curling his hands into fists.

The man had been too involved in Rhae's life, but no more. Denver was going to find him and put a stop to what he was doing.

Rhae had run long enough. Now it was Denver's time to hunt.

His old childhood bedroom was like all the other rooms in the house, a mix of faded memories and new additions that reflected adult life.

At some point in his absence, Willow had removed his rickety old bunkbeds and replaced them with a king-sized bed.

The walls that were once gray had been transformed to a smokey blue the color of the mountain view through the window.

And there was a new desk butted against one wall. The first thing he'd done after his medical release was buy a laptop, and he opened it now, plunking into the desk chair to get to work.

He opened a privacy-focused web browser and got to work. First, he planned to find Rhae and then work backward to find the snake.

He sifted through social media, Google searches and made some deeper dives into the banks and city records. What he found...was nothing.

No checking accounts. No records on the car she drove. No networks with other professionals.

Essentially, Rhae had been a ghost until his sister added her to the Black Heart



Therapy Ranch website. But now that he deleted that information, the link was dead.

Fuck. She was a dead woman walking. He was a dead man walking.

The sounds of the house faded into the back of his awareness as he continued to dig. When he found a bunch of search engine alerts set on her, a thread of certainty wove through him.

Leaning closer to the screen, he began tracing them, hacking them in reverse.

And tracked the alerts straight to the guy.

Denver rocked back in his seat, eyes fixed on the screen. One of his headaches was growing behind his eyes. Before long, it would spread to his vision and wipe it out in a blinding migraine, and the low ringing he always heard in his ears would increase.

That fucker was trying to find her, and recently too. The latest search alert was dated two weeks before.

Thank god Rhae never revealed her location.

The fact that she managed to hide herself without a trace filled him with a sense of pride. She'd always impressed the hell out of him with her quick brain and knowledge of people and the world, but this was next level.

One question continued popping up in his mind when they had their discussion about who she was running from. She said Robert Ravencroft sold the business. So where did her father's portion go?

Ten minutes turned into twenty as he fell down rabbit hole after rabbit hole. He searched records of sale and tax records related to the business connected to Ravencroft.

"Ah." He sat back in his chair again, staring at the words on the screen.

Rhae received an inheritance following her parents' deaths. A sizable one.

No one could accuse her of being with him for money...not that she knew what his family had either.

After their old man died, he and his siblings sold the ranch in Texas and made a killing off it. That they then dumped into several lucrative investments and sank more into the ranch in Wyoming.

Carson took a portion of his dividends to start the security company, while Oaks funded the therapy program. Colt and Gray were busy working with government contracts to train military personnel on the ranch, and Willow had her horses and horse therapy.

Their money compounded so damn fast that they left it up to their financial advisor to tell them what they could or couldn't spend when it came to high-priced items, such as the family jet that benefitted the security company.

He tapped a fingertip on the desk.

Rhae's account was locked to her. But she wasn't accessing it—at all.

Because Ravencroft was the trustee.

The minute she put in a request for a withdrawal, he would find her.

The fucker was financially abusing her.

Denver ground his molars until they ached. On one hand, if she hadn't felt she was in danger, she might not have ended up at the ranch. But she'd been living in fear for so long.

His whole body locked as fury rolled through him, a crack of thunder that

reverberated to his core.

He'd devoted his life to keeping people from living in fear.

This ends today.

He started typing, hacking into the trust account. Once he was in, he changed the name of the trustee to himself.

Yeah, it was a taunt.

Let the bastard come for me.

Yeah, he was also technically still dead, but by the time Ravencroft discovered the change, his paperwork might have come through.

He wouldn't underestimate anybody let alone when it came to Rhae and Navy. He would put together a plan with his brothers as soon as he could gather them together.

A tap at the door brought his head up. He met Carson's gaze.

"What are you doing?" He walked right over to the desk.

"Protecting Rhae."

Carson's expression shadowed. "What does Rhae need protection from?" he asked slowly.

Denver filled him in. All the while, he worked, backing out of the account after saving the change he made.

“Denver, you realize this looks like you’re in a testosterone-fueled rage, right? Have you thought this through completely?” He waved at the screen.

“Actually, yeah. I did. Rhae’s name and photo were on the website for almost forty-eight hours, plenty of time to send a hit to Ravencroft.

He already knows where she is. I can either let him think that he’s winning...

or I can show him she’s fully supported with the might of the Malones and the Black Heart. ”

Their gazes locked.

“I went with support.”

His brother drew a deep breath. “How do you think he’s going to take that?”

“Hard to say.”

The screen blinked once. Then again.

Then the sound filled the room—a beep alerting him of a request for intel he just placed.

Denver leaned forward, jaw tight as the archived thread loaded in layers of gritty, encrypted text. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, eyes narrowing at the string of characters that had just come to life from the dark web’s depths.

There it was.

An old post, timestamped five years ago. A vetted escrow contract. An encrypted

conversation chain.

Payment terms.

His gut twisted.

Carson stood behind him, arms crossed. “What is that?”

Denver scrolled, highlighting the transaction record. “Looks like Robert hired a hitman to kill Rhac’s parents.”

The silence snapped tight like an electrical storm between them.

“You’re fucking serious ?”

“Yeah.” Denver’s voice was low, cold. “I had a hunch. Took some digging, but I started piecing things together once I saw how the money moved. Escrow on his new business venture was funded the same week her parents died. That part alone wouldn’t be enough—but the payout went to a wallet I found mentioned in another forum post, bragging about a successful ‘job’ that paid out in full. ”

Carson rubbed a hand down his face. “Okay, I don’t understand half of what you just said, but I think you might’ve just poked the bear.”

Denver turned, expression hard. “Look around, Carson. We’re the bigger bears.”

He clicked again, tracing the transaction path. “See this?” He pointed. “That’s the original wallet where the payment went. The coin gets washed through mixers, but a sloppy move left a chunk routed to a secondary wallet.”

“And that matters because...?”

Denver's mouth quirked grimly. "Because that secondary wallet made a deposit to an exchange account...tied to an email address I've already seen linked to Ravencroft's shell company." The spa chain Rhae had mentioned.

Denver clicked again, revealing the email. There was no doubt now. A digital fingerprint, one Robert Ravencroft hadn't wiped clean.

He didn't want to be right, for Rhae's sake. More fury pounded through his system.

Carson exhaled slowly, shifting his stance. "You know this isn't something we can fail at, right?"

"Who said anything about failing?"

"We either execute this perfectly, and everything works in our favor, or the guy's going to take us apart with lawsuits."

"Don't worry. I don't fail."

"I was coming in here to make you an official offer for a position on the team," Carson muttered, shaking his head. "And damn, we could use someone with your skills. But I need to know—seriously—that you can take direction. I can't have you going rogue on us, no matter how righteous your reason."

Denver straightened and swiveled his chair toward him. "I'd accept, but I need to know that you'll let me help organize this team. Based on the looks of that office and how you run things, the agency is all over the place. I can't work like that."

Carson gave him a flat look. "You saying my leadership's sloppy?"

"I'm saying the team's good—but there's no structure, no command flow. If I'm

going to be part of this, I want to make it better. Sharper. More lethal when it counts.”

Carson eyed him for a beat. “What do you have in mind?”

Denver turned back to the monitor, eyes scanning the intel he’d compiled—wallets, timestamps, IP addresses, a digital exhaust plume no one but a predator could follow.

Exactly what Ravencroft was going for...and the thing Denver was skilled at ripping apart.

The bastard went after the wrong woman.

“First, someone needs to take charge of logistics—off the field and on. Comms, coordination, fallback plans. Second, we need layers—intel, operations, extraction. Third, we build profiles on threats like Ravencroft before they hurt people, not after.”

“You sound like a guy already halfway to running the show.”

“I sound like a guy who’s tired of cleaning up messes that never should’ve happened.”

Carson cracked a faint grin. “Fine. You want to be my second?”

Denver’s gaze darkened. “I want to be the last name a man like Ravencroft ever hears.”

Carson nodded once. “Then we do it right.”

Denver’s jaw flexed. “Damn right we do. We’re Malones.”



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae brushed her fingers over the downy hair on Navy's head, her heart tangled with a dozen emotions.

Her bottle was still half-full, but Navy's rounded belly rose and fell in the rhythm of sleep that made Rhae ache with tenderness. Peace like this had become the norm after she settled in at the Black Heart.

Now she saw how precious the feeling was.

She turned away from the crib where her baby slept, moving on quiet feet to the front of her quarters.

The space was quiet except for the ticking of a wall clock somebody placed here long before she took over the space. Beyond the windows came the distant hum of the wind blasting down from the mountains. On a normal night, these sounds would comfort her.

Tonight, it scraped over her like sandpaper.

She padded to the couch and picked her book up off the side table, tucking her legs beneath her. She stared at the same page for five minutes before giving up.

With a sigh, she lowered the book to her lap and stared into space.

She'd told him everything. Well, almost everything.

Robert Ravencroft.

Her fingers tightened on the book.

Thinking his name felt like cracking open her ribs, letting Denver look into a part of her that had been bracing for impact for months.

Fear had no place in her life, in her daughter's life or on this ranch. It was what made her feel so at home here. Now one small mistake, made by Willow in the name of honor and respect, had kicked the legs out from under her.

She stood and crossed the room, flicking off the lamp on the way to the bedroom. Navy turned her head, sighing in sleep. She felt drawn to the baby, and moved to stand by the side of the crib, looking down at her innocent daughter and grounding herself in all the reasons why she had to be strong.

Then came the knock. Muted but firm.

Rhae's pulse kicked up, and she hurried to answer it.

For a moment, she simply stood there, hand resting on the handle. Through the wood came a deep, quiet voice.

"Rhae. It's me."

She opened it.

Denver stood there, framed by the dim lights illuminating the hallways at night. But his face was in shadow.

He stepped closer, his gaze locked on hers, dark and unreadable.

He didn't say a word.

He dipped his head and kissed her.

Without warning and without apology, just rough and real, his mouth claimed hers as he eased her backward so he could close and lock the door.

Her breath hitched along with her heart, and she buried her hands in his shirt, dragging him closer. Needing to feel his body heat, the shield of his chest and the strength of his arms.

He angled his head and plundered her lips for long heartbeats, dissolving her worries that he couldn't handle what she'd told him. He kissed her like the truths she'd told him—about Navy, about what she was running from—didn't scare him at all.

He kissed her like he'd already chosen to bear the weight of those things.

When he lifted his head, she searched his eyes and saw it there—the unwavering fury. But it wasn't aimed at her. It was aimed at the person who had hurt her. Deeper in his gray eyes was a spark of steel that spoke another dangerous truth—that he wouldn't let it happen again.

She was shaking.

And for once, she didn't mind letting him see it.

“My god, Rhae.” He scooped her off her feet, carrying her in a few silent strides to the bed.

When he laid her down on the mattress, he turned his head, stare fixed on the baby.

Rhae didn't follow his gaze. She skated her fingers over his jaw, falling more in love with him by the second.

“She won’t wake up if we’re quiet.”

He swung his head to meet her gaze. “Then we’ll be quiet.”

Joy and desire exploded inside her. Pushing upward, she sought his kiss even as he took her mouth. In quiet rustles, they stripped each other. Exploring and tasting, aware of each other in ways she’d come to realize few people ever got a chance to experience in life.

He tore from the kiss, chest heaving, and grazed his lips over her chin, down her throat. She arched, biting off a small moan. He traced a path between her breasts, then swished his head to the side to capture one nipple between his lips.

She swallowed a cry, fingers scoring over his shoulders and down his back.

He writhed at her rough touch and responded with a gentle nip to her belly as he slipped down her body.

When he pressed her knees up and back, spreading her to his warm mouth, she lost all sense of reality. In each flick of his tongue, every thrust into her pussy, she gave herself up to Denver a little more.

As if the man didn’t already own her, body, heart and soul.

Her insides licked with liquid heat as her orgasm rushed up, fast and furious. Her mouth opened on a silent scream, and she twisted her fists in the sheets to keep herself tethered to the world.

Then he was moving again, taking her mouth at the same moment he thrust his cock inside her. Deep. Stretching.

Her insides clutched at him, and she rocked upward to meet his thrust. His eyes glinted in the nightlight she kept on in the bedroom for the times she had to get up, and the fierce look on his face made her heart throb faster.

“Rhae.” His murmur was a caress.

“Denver!”

He rolled with her, settling her on top, straddling him. She threw herself into driving them both higher and higher, kissing him with all she had inside her for long, lonely months.

His arms felt like a safe haven and his body, a solid promise—strong enough to hold her, steady enough to never let her fall.

They rolled again, and he hooked one of her legs over his shoulder.

Her eyes rolled up in her head at the deep angle that...hit...every...spot.

“Oh, god,” she whispered.

“Fuck!” was his answer against her lips.

The rhythm grew frantic, then desperate, as if neither of them could stand to be separated a second longer, not after all that had come between them.

His hand slipped downward, and his thumb found her clit.

Her whole body locked around him, and she bit back a sharp cry.

“Denver—” she choked out.

“I got you. I got you.”

She shattered in his arms in a blinding rush that left her trembling and clinging to him. His release followed with a deep, broken sound, his body crashing against hers in a series of final thrusts.

For a long moment, they lay tangled, breathing hard.

Rhae’s head rested over his thundering heart. “I didn’t mean to drag you into my mess.”

“Our mess. What’s yours is mine now.”

They turned their heads at the same time to look at their precious little girl, fast asleep, unaware of the storm hovering over them.

They lay in the quiet, holding each other like survivors washed up on the shore.

And, for the first time in months...she didn’t feel alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver nearly dropped the wine trying to open the door without a sound. With his arms full of provisions, he backed into Rhae’s rooms. When he turned, she was already standing there.

Wearing his T-shirt.

Not the one he wore there this evening. One of his old shirts.

“I wondered what happened to that shirt.” He kept his voice pitched low so he didn’t

wake Navy.

Rhae rushed forward to take the wine from him, and he shifted a box of stolen cupcakes to his empty hand.

“Where in the world did you get all this?”

His gaze landed on her toned legs, and he was rendered immobile as he watched her stride to the coffee table and set down the wine.

“Raided the bunkhouse.”

“The bunkhouse!” Her surprised whisper was just as good as the look on her face.

He grinned and quietly set everything down on the coffee table with the wine. “The guys are gonna think I’m pregnant when they see the array of things I looted from their stash.”

“Don’t even joke about pregnancy. And I wasn’t aware there were ranch hands living in the bunkhouse, let alone ones that drink wine.”

“I think the bottle was a gift.” He dropped to his knees and began pulling items out of the bags—cold leftover chicken from the fridge, a jar of homemade pickles, potato chips and the cupcakes.

Rhae knelt beside him and opened the box to reveal three cupcakes with blue frosting. She tilted her head. “B-K-E.” She read the icing letters on the tops. “What does that mean?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. I think they’re from somebody’s birthday.”

She dropped back to sit on her heels. “We can’t steal someone’s birthday cupcakes, Denver!”

“We can. I did.” He stuck his finger in the blue frosting and brought it to her lips.

Her eyes gleamed with desire as she parted her lips for a taste. The instant her tongue darted out and delicately licked his finger, he groaned.

She leaned over and brushed a kiss over his jaw. “This is a lot of food for a midnight snack.”

He wagged his brows at her. “We need the energy for what I have in mind.”

She giggled in a whisper. Their entire conversation had taken place in whispers, and it left him feeling like a teenager sneaking around their parents—except their “parent” was nine months old and drooled on everything. It was ridiculous. And it was perfect.

He waved a hand toward the food. She reached for a cold drumstick, and he got up to open the wine. Her gaze followed his every move.

The way she looked at him sent a hot wave through his stomach.

Warm lamplight spilled over her, highlighting her tousled hair and making her eyes gleam.

Using a knife, he managed to work the cork out of the bottle. It gave a soft pop that made both of them freeze, listening for Navy to stir. When no sound followed, he carried the wine back and held it out to Rhae.

She looked between him and the wine. “Am I supposed to drink straight from the bottle?”



He gave a slow nod.

Slowly, she brought it to her lips and took a test sip. Before she could fully swallow it, he kissed her. Hard.

She gulped down the wine, trying not to laugh, and looped one hand around his neck to keep kissing him back.

They broke apart, and he took a chomp out of the drumstick she was holding, which coaxed another laugh from her.

“Are you trying to seduce me with a floor picnic?”

“Is it working?”

She took another sip before nodding. Her eyes aglow.

Gone was the worry—the fear—he’d seen in their depths after she heard Willow had added her to the website.

He took the drumstick out of her hand and set to work finishing it off. A giggle burst out of her, and she slapped her hand over her mouth to silence it, her gaze darting to the open bedroom door.

“If you wake her up, you’re rocking her back to sleep!” she hissed.

“If it means getting you underneath me again, I’ll do everything in my power to get her to sleep quick.”

And just like that, the lightness between them thickened with heat.

Rhae's lips parted. Her cheeks flushed.

She didn't wait—she just climbed into his lap and kissed him. He dropped the chicken back into the box and swiped his greasy fingers on his jeans before planting his hand over her spine, drawing her against him as their mouths melded.

He groaned into her mouth, his cock already hard under her sweet ass in his lap. Aching to be inside the place he dreamed about all of these months apart.

She threw herself into the kiss, growing wilder by the second, tasting of wine and lust.

“I can't get enough of your mouth,” he growled as he plundered her.

Her breath grew ragged. Her hips rolled against his rock-hard cock.

Tearing his mouth away, he went for her neck, skating his lips to the sensitive spot he knew would make her writhe. “I should have brought whipped cream.”

She giggled. “Next time.”

He ran his hand under the shirt she wore—his shirt—skimming over her bare spine.

Her skin was hot and silky, her breath catching as he dragged his fingers along each vertebra. She shivered, hips pressing down on him with clear intent.

“God, Rhae.” He kissed the curve where her neck met her shoulder. “You keep doing that and I'm not gonna last long.”

“That's the idea,” she whispered, lips teasing along his jaw.

She shifted in his lap, tugging the shirt up and off without ceremony and tossing it away.

The low light brushed over her skin like a lover's touch.

Every part of her was soft, strong, real—her body, her curves, the slight dip at her waist, the swell of her breasts.

All of it his to memorize again and again.

And now that he knew she'd carried his child, he understood the light pink marks that streaked her abdomen.

He stretched his fingers over the marks and delved deep into her eyes. "I wish I could have seen you carrying our child."

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Me too." She dropped her forehead against his, shivering lightly as he explored her body.

He cupped her breasts, brushing his thumbs over her nipples, and she gasped, arching against him.

"This okay?" His voice was rough.

Her hands framed his face. "It's perfect. You're perfect."

He kissed her hard then, hands sliding to her hips as she ground down again, heat meeting heat through too much clothing. She made a frustrated sound, and they were fumbling with his waistband, laughing quietly when his fly caught, and then...nothing but skin.

He lay back, letting her take control, watching her with dazed hunger as she sank onto him with a breathless moan. His hands gripped her thighs, but not to guide—just to anchor himself.

She moved slowly at first, savoring it, savoring him . It was different this time. Slower. Deeper. Less frantic, more connected. Her eyes locked on his, and it felt like more than just sex. Like she was giving him something she hadn't dared let go of before.

Love. Trust. A place in her future.

He reached up, brushing her hair back as her rhythm picked up. "I missed you."

"I know," she whispered. "I missed you too. More than I should've."

"No such thing."

She bent to kiss him, bracing herself on his chest, and that small movement changed everything.

He hit deeper, her moan shattering into the space between them.

"Denver—"

"Right here," he promised, holding her steady, letting her ride him until she trembled in his arms. "I've got you, Rhae. Always."

Her climax built fast and hard, body coiling, breath catching. When she broke apart above him, he caught every sound with his mouth, every shiver with his hands. And when she was still shaking, he gave in too, groaning her name as he followed her over the edge.

They collapsed together on the blanket, tangled and breathless.

He pulled her close, one hand stroking her back as she laid her head on his chest, heart still racing.

The room was warm. Quiet. Safe.

After a few minutes, she whispered, “I’m scared.”

“I know.” He kissed her temple. “But you don’t have to be. Not with me here.”

“You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

He went still beneath her, then said quietly, “I know what I’m capable of. And I’m telling you right now—Robert Ravencroft won’t get near you or Navy. Not while I’m breathing.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide.

He held her gaze. “You don’t have to run anymore, Rhae. You have me. And I’m not going anywhere.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae stepped out onto the wide back deck that encompassed the length of the veterans' building, blinking against the slanting rays of afternoon sun. Crisp air teased her skin, reminding her that this would be one of the last meals she and Navy would get to eat outside with winter approaching.

The scent of mountain pine filled her nose, along with the smell of something salty and savory.

She turned to see Denver walking toward her with a tray. His grin so damn charming that it made her heart flex—and that tormenting dimple in place in his cheek.

In her arms, Navy wiggled to be released. She quickly moved to slide the baby into the high chair already set up waiting.

Rhae looked over the tray of food. “So I’m not imagining it. I really did smell prosciutto.”

With a chuckle, he set the tray down and leaned in to pull her against him.

She moved willingly, eagerly, into his arms. This would never get old even if they were together for the rest of their lives.

Nothing had been set in stone, and she needed to slow down the trip of her heart, but being with Denver again gave her the hope that someday...they might be a real family.

He kissed her soundly before taking her by the upper arms and turning her to face the

tray. A full charcuterie was spread out there—folded meats, cubed cheeses, black and green olives and some fresh fruits for Navy.

It was so perfect, so charming, that it pulled a laugh out of her.

“First the floor picnic, now this. Are you trying to seduce me with snacks again?”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her ear. “Is it working?”

“Hell yes.”

Navy pounded on her high chair tray, demanding attention, food or both. They laughed and sat down at the rustic wood table to share the afternoon snack.

Rhae handed Navy three broken chunks of banana. With a squeal of delight, Navy hurled one over the deck rail.

Denver’s eyes sparkled. “She’s got an arm on her. Softball player, maybe?”

“Don’t get any ideas.” Rhae took a small dish and began filling it with her favorites.

He watched Navy stuff her mouth full of banana. The tender expression on his face left Rhae’s chest tingling with emotion.

“So what’s with the charcuterie on a random weekday afternoon?” She popped an olive in her mouth.

He leaned in, eyes glimmering. “Your birthday.”

She gasped. “You knew it was my birthday?”

He sat back. "I know a lot about you, Rhae. I'll never let another one go without being here. This day matters. You matter."

His words hit somewhere deep and quiet inside her. How was it possible to be even more head over heels for him than she was?

Shaking her head in awe, she nibbled the food and watched Denver interact with the baby. Seeing them together left her breathless.

When he picked up a cracker, Navy pounded on her tray again. He laughed and held up the cracker. "Can she eat this?"

She nodded. "She may only have three teeth, but they get the job done."

"Is that normal? To have three teeth?"

"Depends on the time of life, I suppose." She flashed a grin at his amused look. "Some babies get teeth faster or slower than others. Navy is right on track."

She thought about Denver confronting her the previous day with the fact that she'd only left the ranch twice to take the baby for checkups. Luckily, the fresh air and ranch life kept Navy from getting sick, and that allowed Rhae to fly under the radar a little while longer.

But now...

Denver handed Navy a cracker, and she mashed it into her mouth. He laughed at her antics, reaching out to cup her round head in his broad palm.

"You know it's your momma's birthday, Navy. Did you tell her happy birthday?"



“She gave me a fat, wet kiss on the cheek this morning.”

His lips curved in a rugged smile that pierced Rhae’s heart even deeper.

He slanted a glance her way. “This is just the beginning of your birthday celebration, Rhae.”

She straightened. “What do you mean?”

“When I was in the military, we never got to do this. We had to keep things quiet. No dinners, no date nights. No birthdays. I’m allowed to now, and I’m going to do it right.”

“Oh, Denver.” She leaned in and kissed him, a brushing of lips that made her toes curl in her boots. Navy shrieked again, breaking the moment, and they sat back, laughing at their daughter’s demand to be the center of attention.

She reached for a piece of cheddar. “So what’s the plan?”

“You, me, dinner out tonight. Just us.”

Her mind spun, her heart already picking up an extra beat of worry.

Denver continued, “I already talked to Willow. She insisted on watching Navy. She has a whole lineup of baby activities—block towers, movies, dance parties. You won’t have to worry about a thing.”

The cheese seemed lodged in her throat. “You want to...leave the ranch?”

He nodded. “Just for the evening. I made a reservation. There’s a little place in town—quiet, candlelit. You’ll love it.”

The ranch. Leaving.

She hadn't done that in...months. Six of them, to be exact, if Oaks was keeping track—and he probably was.

“I don't know,” she said slowly. “It sounds amazing, but...”

“But?”

“I don't know if I can.” Her voice was a whisper, even though no one but him could hear. “I've gotten so used to staying here. It feels...safe. Like a shield.”

He gave her a direct look. “I know. But Rhae, you're not hiding anymore. And you're not alone. I'm here. I've got this handled.”

She shook her head. She wasn't hiding, not exactly. Not from the world, anyway. But the more she thought, she realized maybe she had become tethered to the ranch in an unhealthy way.

What kind of therapist told her clients to face fear, build strength, then turned around and hid behind locked doors?

He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “Look, I know you're worried about leaving the ranch, leaving Navy. You've done what you had to do to protect your daughter at all costs. But I want to give you time away. The town is small. No one is going to see us, not the way I plan to do things.”

That settled her nerves a little bit. Her eyes burned, but she blinked the sting away and forced a smile. “Okay. Dinner tonight.”

He grinned. “Damn right. It's a date.”

They shared the rest of the snack, laughing while Navy smeared banana across her face. Then Rhae kissed Denver and took the baby out of her chair.

“Thank you for this, Denver. Really. It meant a lot to me.”

He stood, hovering over her, all man and muscle and protectiveness. “Back to work?”

“Yes. A couple more sessions this afternoon. You?”

“Heading to the security office. Carson’s got some light assignments for me.”

Her brows lifted. “So...you’re working for Black Heart Security?”

“Helping out a little. Nothing dangerous.”

She nodded, reassured. The old Denver—the always on alert, waiting for the phone call from his commanding officer Denver—would have jumped at any assignment. This version, the man who brought her charcuterie and wanted to take her to dinner, was different.

He was hers.

Her office smelled faintly of lavender and eucalyptus, the scent she always used to calm patients. She took a deep breath, smiling to herself as she spotted something new on the desk.

A bouquet of flowers. Rich blooms in deep pinks, reds, and purples. Roses, lilies, something wild and thorned.

Her heart stuttered.

Setting Navy on her playmat, she crossed to the desk, fingers trembling slightly as she picked up the small white envelope tucked between the stems.

No return address. Just her name.

She slipped the card free.

Happy Birthday, Rhae. You look so beautiful when you smile. I miss seeing it in person. Soon. —RR

Her knees buckled.

She hit the chair hard, her fingers numb around the card.

Her mind spun. Robert. He was somewhere out there— watching . Of course, he knew her birthday. He had control of all her finances.

But now...he knew where she worked. Where she lived .

Her body felt cold despite the warm sunlight trickling through the window.

He'd found her.

Everything Denver said earlier about having it “handled” evaporated like mist.

Panic beat a war drum in her chest. She had to go. She couldn't risk it.

She stood and moved fast—sweeping Navy off the floor, rushing out the door, across the hallway, and down to her quarters. She shut the door behind her and locked it before hurrying to the bedroom.

She set Navy down on the floor and then flattened herself on the floor, reaching her arm under the bed for her suitcase. Yanking it free, she pushed into a sitting position, hair trailing in her eye.

The small suitcase she kept packed with essentials stared back at her.

Denver would call it a go-bag.

She'd hoped she would never need it.

She started pulling things from drawers—Navy's onesies, the baby monitor, her beloved stuffed lion with the ratty tail.

The prescription bottle for the anti-anxiety meds she hadn't touched in months.

No time to think. No time to call Denver. No time to breathe .

She'd have to be gone by sundown.

Because everything was not handled .

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver tapped twice on the door before pushing it open. "Hey, birthday girl—ready for dinner?"

He stepped into the room, expecting to see Rhae zipping up her boots or brushing her hair, and Navy sitting on the floor, playing with her toys.

Instead, he froze at the sight before him.

A suitcase. A duffel bag. Both packed to the seams.

He stalked to the bedroom to see her sitting on the edge of the bed, Navy clutched to her chest. Her dresser drawers hung open, and garments dangled out.

The sight punched him in the gut.

“What the hell, Rhae?” He kept his voice low, trying to keep the edge of panic from creeping in. He scanned her taut face. “Where are you going?”

She looked up at him. The moment their gazes met, he saw it—panic, raw and deep. Her breath came fast and shallow.

“He found me.”

Her panic latched on to him too, crawling under his skin. His hand twitched toward his spine, reaching for his sidearm.

“Who?” He already knew the answer—he just needed to confirm his target.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

“Robert.” Her voice cracked. Picking up on her mother’s distress, Navy began to whine. “He sent me flowers.”

“Where are they?”

“In my office.”

“You’re sure they’re from him?”

Her blue eyes liquified. “He signed the card.”

A cold dread settled in his chest. “You didn’t get rid of them?”

She quickly shook her head. “I was too freaked out to think about tossing them in the trash. I didn’t touch anything after I read the note. I just came straight here.”

“And started packing. Fuck!”

The baby began to whimper now, her bright eyes darting between him and her mother, responding to the tension in the air.

“Let me take her.” He held out his arms, and Rhae passed the baby to him without hesitation.

He cradled Navy in one arm and wrapped the other around Rhae. His woman.

“I can’t stay here, Denver. He knows where I’m at!”

He cupped her face in one hand. “Rhae, look at me.”

She did, eyes wide and shiny with fear.

“You’re safe here. You and Navy both. I swear to you. You’re surrounded by a fortress full of men who know how to shoot to kill, who live for this kind of threat. I’m no slacker either. And believe me, no one will take you or Navy from me. Ever.”

“But the card. He knows where I am!”

“And he made the mistake of revealing that.” He’d already guessed Ravencroft was a cocky motherfucker. Just going after the daughter of his former business colleague, one much, much younger than him, was enough of a sign. But now his inflated ego had put him in the line of fire.

“I’ll have my brothers run forensics on the flowers and the card. First, we’ll track the flowers to find out who delivered them and when. We’ll check the security cameras too. If there’s anything on the flowers or card—fingerprints, DNA—we’ll find it.”

She stared at him in silence. He saw the small glimmer of hope in her eyes, but she got up to pace, shoving her hands in her pockets. “You think that’s enough to stop him? I don’t.”

“No. But I don’t think he’s stupid enough to be in the area.” He’d seen men like this before—guys who hid behind the screen, tried to control people from afar.

Denver was here to tell the bastard that he was dead...fucking...wrong.

She shook her head. “Even if I stay...”

“You are staying, Rhae. You and Navy are in the safest place.” He had to prove to her



she was safe. The best way to do that was to go ahead with their dinner plans.

Navy squirmed in his arms, and he bounced her against his chest. She let out a giggle that broke the pressure. Both of them looked at their daughter.

Rhae leaned forward, lowering her head into her trembling hands.

He dropped to his knees in front of her. Now that Navy was within reach of her momma, she tipped toward her.

Rhae took the baby into her lap and cuddled her close. Denver placed a hand on each of them—the most precious things in the world.

“We’re not letting him spoil your birthday. That’s why we’re sticking to the plan. We’re going out to dinner. Navy will stay with Auntie Willow. She spent ten minutes telling me all about the baby activities she has lined up for her.”

Rhae let out a watery laugh. “Besides block towers, movies and a dance party?”

“It’s changed to three Disney movies, coloring books and crayons and a bedtime routine tighter than most military ops.”

She laughed again, the sound snuffling. “Leave it to Willow.”

“I already have Carson running point, and now that we have a new development, I’ll make sure the rest of my family is on high alert.” He traced the curve of her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “We’ve got this, Rhae.”

“I don’t know...” She stared down at Navy in her lap.

He wrapped his arms around them both and pulled them close. “It’s going to be fine.

You deserve a birthday dinner. A night off the ranch, just the two of us.”

She stayed pressed against his chest for a beat, fingers twisting in his shirt. Then she nodded slowly. “Okay. I’ll go.”

He exhaled. “Good. Let’s get ready then and take Navy to the house.”

As she chose a dress to wear and slipped into the bathroom, he took Navy into the living room. While the baby crawled around, his mind returned to the damn flowers. A veiled threat.

And why hadn’t he thought to send her flowers for her birthday? The irritation in his chest was like a dozen sharp blades, slicing back and forth through the air.

Checking that the bathroom door was still closed, he placed a quick call to Carson. “Heads-up,” he said in a low voice the second the call connected. “We’ve got a situation. Flowers showed up at Rhae’s office from Ravencroft.”

“Shit. I’ll bump up patrol. Are you still headed to Prairie Ember for dinner?”

“It took some convincing on my part, but yes. She’s getting ready now, then we’ll bring the baby to the house. Keep extra eyes on Navy and Willow tonight.”

“On it. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Send someone to get the flowers out of Rhae’s office and run forensics on them.”

“Got it.”

“Thank you.” His gaze fell on the baby, sitting on the floor innocently playing with a rubber cow.

“I got your six, bro.”

The words brought a lump to Denver’s throat.

“And Denver? You’re doing the right thing taking her out to dinner despite what happened. She can’t live in fear and hide.”

“I know.” He ended the call. At that moment, the bathroom door opened. Navy heard it and crawled at Mach speed across the floor, which made him laugh.

Rhae stepped out, and he sobered, his cock twitching at the sight of her dressed up in a fitted blue dress that enhanced the color of her eyes.

Her hair hung in loose waves just below her collarbones, shiny and soft, a beacon for him to touch it.

To thread his fingers into the locks and kiss her until she was shaking.

She came forward, smiling at the baby, and picked her up.

He sauntered over to her. “Your momma looks beautiful, doesn’t she, Navy?” he said.

Her eyes pooled with emotion. “And your daddy is the most handsome man on earth.”

He issued a soft noise in his throat and leaned in to brush a kiss over her temple, not wanting to mess up her lip gloss. “I’ve got my family on guard. Navy will be completely safe.”

Her lips compressed. He could see she had something to say. He just wasn’t ready for

what it was.

“You don’t have to worry about Navy. Robert doesn’t want her.”

He stared down at her. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes were filled with shadows. “When I found out I was pregnant...he showed up at my OB appointment...”

“Go on.” He clenched his fists.

“He tried to convince me to terminate the pregnancy.” Her voice broke. “He said we could start a family together. That the baby was a mistake, and I’d thank him later.”

His entire body locked, every muscle tightened with fury. “He. Fucking. Said. That. To. You.” He could almost feel his blood boil.

“I thought he would back off after that. Then he showed up at the daycare, like I told you, and that’s when I disappeared. I cut off everyone and moved. I...” she nibbled her lip, “made efforts to hide myself.”

He was going to kill the bastard.

Rhae looked up at him with glassy eyes, watching his reaction like she expected him to run. To judge her. To back away.

But all Denver saw was strength. Resilience. The sheer force of will it must’ve taken to protect herself and Navy, to walk away from everything and rebuild her life, stunned the breath out of him.

She nodded, her breath hitching with emotion. “You’re right. I can’t let him scare me

off. I've come this far."

He stepped in close and cupped her cheek. "You're so damn strong."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and he caught it with his thumb.

"I mean it," he whispered. "I've done some dangerous things. Seen people fall apart under far less pressure. But you? You're a force of nature."

She leaned into him, her hand planted on his chest.

"I'm not going anywhere." He pitched his voice low. "You and Navy—you're mine. And I'll destroy anyone who tries to take you away from me."

Her breath caught, and something shifted between them. More than just heat or need. Something deep. Something real.

It slammed into him like a freight train.

This wasn't just attraction. This wasn't just about Navy or the past they shared. He loved Rhae. Until now he never could admit he was in love with her, right down to his bones.

And he was ready to burn down the world if it meant keeping her safe.

She swallowed hard. "I was so scared."

"I know." He kissed her forehead. "But you don't have to be anymore. I've got you."

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae tilted her face toward the office window, soaking in the sunlight streaming in. The glow from dinner still clung to her too, just as warm.

She sat at her desk, a file open before her. A pen rested between her fingers, paused for too long as she let distractions intrude on updating patient notes.

Her mind kept drifting back to the previous evening, how she'd been sitting on the edge of her bed, shaking, her bags packed. Ready to run.

And how Denver had stopped her with nothing more than his unwavering certainty that he—and the rest of the team—would keep her safe.

Now the fear she'd carried like a deadweight for so long had eased. It wasn't gone entirely, but Denver made it more manageable by dulling it with his mere presence.

Navy giggled on the floor nearby, smacking squishy blocks around. A smile tugged at Rhae's lips in reaction. One thing about babies was they were trusting and without any burdens.

Her mind drifted again. The dinner had been more than she ever expected. She'd only driven through the nearby town of Willowbrook on her way to the Black Heart Ranch. She'd been so focused on arriving that she didn't take the time to really see her surroundings.

This time, Denver pointed out the few small sights. She was surprised to learn that he didn't grow up in the area—the Malones grew up in Texas. The Wyoming ranch had been their summer home until their father died.

She laughed when he told her the story of how his sister Willow believed the town was named after her when she was little, and showed her the jewelry shop perched on the quaintest corner in town that Honor owned and ran when she wasn't busy helping the ranch veterans with art therapy.

Then Denver surprised her by bypassing the restaurant parking lot and ushering her through the kitchen entrance. He told her they were dining at the chef's table, like it was no big deal.

"Oaks told me about it," he told her, staring into her eyes. "He said it was worth every damn second."

He wasn't wrong.

They were seated at a small table right in the kitchen, with the chef moving around the space like a maestro.

The food was art, the conversation easy, the wine flowing.

The quiet intimacy of the atmosphere continued to cling to her.

She could almost feel Denver's fingers interlocked with hers like they'd never been apart.

The flicker of the candlelight in his eyes, the way his voice dipped low when he told her, This is just the beginning of your birthday , had settled something deep inside her.

She didn't remember the last time she'd felt safe enough to enjoy something so simple.

A knock interrupted the memory.

“Come in,” she called.

Navy stopped playing to look up at the door, her hands waving in excitement. And no wonder—every time the door opened, she had a new playmate.

Willow pushed open the door with a gentle smile, a young man trailing behind her.

Rhae stood to greet them. “Hello.”

“Rhae Rivers, meet Justin.”

They shared a nod, and she smiled but didn’t expect one in return from him. She dealt with enough vets that she understood their need to ease in, to warm up in their own time.

“I’m showing Justin around,” Willow said. Her gaze lit on the baby, who crawled to her aunt with lightning speed. “Hi, Navy! How’s my favorite baby?”

Willow squealed in answer.

“Is it me or is she crawling faster than ever?”

Rhae bobbed her head. “Oh, she’s faster. Believe me. I’m going to need to invest in a good pair of running shoes very soon.”

They shared a smile.

Rhae looked to the young man. “Navy is my daughter. She’s in the office a lot.”



He was broad-shouldered, twitchy in a way like he was trying to act casual. “You’re the one I’m supposed to talk to, right?”

“I’m the therapist, yes. Or one of them. Bella is one of the other therapists on the ranch. Her office is right down the hall.”

“One of the guys said you’re good. How do I get on your schedule?” he asked without preamble.

She offered a gentle nod. “We don’t really do appointments here. It’s an open-door policy, meaning my door is always open. If someone is already in here, then the guys come back later on. It makes for a less rigid experience.”

Justin nodded, satisfied. “Cool. I’ll be back.”

He turned for the door. Willow tossed a shrug at Rhae and followed him out.

Rhae frowned at the abruptness of the interaction but chalked it up to Justin’s nerves. Most of the new arrivals were coiled tight when they came to the Black Heart.

She stacked up some blocks for Navy, who crawled back over just to knock them down. Chuckling, Rhae returned to her notes, scribbling a few on one of her earlier sessions that morning.

Another knock came at the door, softer this time. She could almost guarantee by that knock who would open the door.

And she was right. Kyle poked his head in, a shy smile on his lips. “Hey, I saw the time. It’s almost Navy’s naptime.”

“Yup.” She waved. “Come in.”

He went straight to pick up the baby, who was already crawling toward him. “Hey, peanut. How are you today?” he asked her with a gentle smile on his face. He immediately moved to the sofa and Rhae went to fetch her bottle.

While he fed her, he patted Navy’s back. Rhae’s heart always melted whenever she watched one of the big tough guys fall over the nine-month-old.

Pat, pat, pat. His hand thumped in a light rhythm. “She always falls asleep when I pat her.”

“That’s because you’re so good at it.”

As usual, Kyle began to talk in a low voice, telling Navy about his day...and more. The telling of a battle and a friend lost brought tears to Rhae’s eyes. She ducked her head so he couldn’t see, busy taking notes.

The baby slumped in his hold, her lips slowing around the bottle nipple.

The door creaked open, and a low voice rippled through the space. “I didn’t know you had someone scheduled. It wasn’t on your calendar.” Denver stood there, his stare locked on Kyle and Navy.

Rhae looked up, brows raising. He checked her calendar for times to pop in and see her?

“I didn’t. Kyle’s helping with naptime. We don’t really do appointments here. Sometimes the guys stop by to chat. Or hold the baby.”

Kyle looked down at the sleeping Navy, and he smiled. “Therapy baby.”

Denver pushed off the doorframe, his expression snapping closed like a vise. “Okay.

I'll see you at dinner." Without another word, he left.

Silence trailed in his wake.

Navy started sucking again, and Kyle returned to talking about his past. Calm and comfortable.

Rhae stared at the door, a distant portion of her mind on Denver's reaction.

Kyle shifted, settling Navy more deeply into his chest. "Is he the one?"

Rhae blinked at his sudden question. "What?"

He grinned. "You've got that look. Like the world's a little less heavy today."

She didn't answer. The warmth in her chest said enough.

Kyle's voice softened. "I used to have someone like that."

Rhae remained quiet, letting him talk.

"She didn't wait. When I deployed, she thought I wouldn't come back. I did, but I wasn't the same. I wasn't mad at her. Just...sad, I guess."

"I'm sorry," Rhae said gently.

He shrugged. "That's life, right? But Navy..." He looked down at the sleeping baby, brushing a finger along her cheek. "She helps."

Rhae smiled, touched in places she hadn't realized were still raw.

He stayed a while longer, then gently passed Navy back to Rhae and slipped out, leaving her with a quiet office and a full heart.

She looked down at her daughter, sleeping so peacefully in her arms, and whispered, “You’ve got a whole army behind you, baby girl.”

Then she glanced at the clock. Dinner was in an hour, and she had things to say to Denver.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver leaned back in the desk chair in the Black Heart Security office, glaring at digital tracking maps on the monitor. Stress ground in his shoulders like overworn gears.

Ravencroft had fucking reversed the changes Denver made to the trust, switching the name of the trustee back to his own.

He pushed away from the desk and strode to the door, prepared to go find Carson, when his brother appeared in the doorway.

“Just the guy I was looking for.” He cut his fingers through his hair.

Carson eyed him. “What’s the matter?”

“Close the door.”

His brother did as he instructed, and Denver turned the computer monitor for Carson to see. “Take a look at this shit.”

Carson came to lean over the desk, peering at the screen for only a beat before he

straightened. “Ravencroft switched the name on the trust back?”

“Yeah. It’s a standoff. First the flowers, now this.”

“He’s escalating.”

They shared a look. Both of them knew what that meant in their world of threats and counterstrikes.

“He’s trying to push her. To get into her head. He knows she’s scared of him, and he’s using it to back her into a corner.”

Carson’s expression darkened by the minute. “I feel awful that she didn’t come to us when she first came to the ranch. We would have put a stop to it.”

“I appreciate you saying that. It means a lot to me.” Denver wiped a hand down his face, trying to regroup. “I hate to tell her this after we had the best damn night on her birthday.”

Carson moved to sit in the chair across the desk, leaving the big leather chair to Denver, a move that wasn’t lost on Denver. Not that he thought Carson was placing him in charge, but on this case involving Rhae, he took point.

“Prairie Ember is always the best place to take the ladies. Guarantees you’re getting some action afterward.”

His bold statement made Denver laugh, and some of the tension eased between them.

“The chef’s table was the best decision. The place was unreal, the chef and waitstaff doted on us. The wine pairings were superb.”

“Since when do you drink wine?”

He shrugged. “Rhae likes it. I’m still a bourbon man.” He issued a slow trickle of a sigh. “It’s the first time we just got to... breathe together.”

Carson nodded. “Sounds like it was high time.”

“It was. I’ve got a dozen other things planned too. Not just for Rhae, but for all three of us.” Navy’s adorable face loomed in his mind’s eye. Seeing her in another man’s arms in Rhae’s office sat wrong with him, but now wasn’t the time to address the matter.

“What kind of things do you have planned?”

Denver cocked a brow at his brother. “You looking for some pointers for date nights with Layne?”

Carson scrubbed a knuckle over his upper lip. “Maybe.”

“Picnics. Trips to the river. Dumb family photos with hay bales in flannel shirts.”

“You’ve gotten full-on soft, brother.”

“I don’t feel like I can do those things until Ravencroft is brought to justice.”

Carson’s smile faded. “We’ll double down on the guard surrounding Rhae and Navy.”

Denver’s gut blazed like flash in the pan. “Ravencroft isn’t a threat to Navy. He urged Rhae to end the pregnancy.”

“Jesus.” Carson’s hands curled into fists.

“He showed up at her OB appointment and tried to convince her to start a family with him instead.” His jaw clenched so hard his teeth hurt. “But I still want a heavy watch on Navy. We can’t let anything happen to...my daughter .”

They paused a beat at the spoken words.

Denver ground his molars again. “If Ravencroft comes within a hundred miles of me, I’ll fucking kill him just for proposing an abortion. Then I’ll bring him back and torture him for scaring Rhae.”

“I don’t blame you.” Carson looked about to kill for him. “Layne went through some shit too. Things I had to put an end to.”

“Obsessed men are no fucking joke.”

“You can say that again.” Carson sat back in his chair. Slowly, the heavy moment passed. Then he cleared his throat. “Enough fire and brimstone. Let’s talk wedding. You got your tux?”

“Hanging in my closet.” Denver smirked. “I’m ready when you are, boss.”

Carson gave him a mock scowl. “You own a tuxedo?”

He shrugged. “I grew up in Texas, not the wilderness of Wyoming. I know how to dress up.”

“Speaking of the wedding,” Denver added, “Layne’s okay with us brothers planning something pre-wedding, right? We were thinking bonfire night. Just family. Rhae and I will bring Navy, keep it mellow. S’mores, drinks, maybe cornhole.”

“Do not bring a cornhole set to my pre-wedding party,” Carson deadpanned.

“Too late. Already bought the boards.” Denver stood with a grin.

They shared a chuckle as they left the office. But Denver’s humor faded fast as he checked his watch. Time to pick up the girls.

His girls.

He crossed the gravel lot, boots crunching as he made his way toward the big rustic-looking lodge that housed the therapy program. A cool, fall wind raised dust. Soon snowflakes would be dancing in the air and they could bundle Navy up and take her out to play in the snow.

He was still thinking about Rhae’s trust fund, about Robert, and all the ways this could spiral. Then he started thinking about Kyle holding his daughter, feeding her a bottle, putting her to sleep.

Things Denver had never done.

It bothered the hell out of him, but he was still trying to figure out how to express that to Rhae when he reached her quarters.

He knocked on the door, and she was ready for him, baby in arms. His heart squeezed at the sight of their faces. Having Rhae in his life was so damn unexpected that it ripped the breath out of his lungs.

But having a child? There weren’t words.

He leaned in to brush his lips over Rhae’s and then held out his arms for the baby. She passed Navy into his care, and the three of them walked over to the house again.



When they reached the kitchen, he spotted the high chair set up at the corner of the long table, and his heart melted even more at the sight.

Dinner with his whole family was loud and chaotic, exactly what Denver hadn't realized his soul needed. They gathered around a long wooden table set with platters of grilled chicken, roasted vegetables and cornbread, passing the food from hand to hand.

Navy sat in her high chair, banging her plastic spoon like a warrior queen, grinning each time someone gave her attention. Rhae laughed beside him, her smile warmer than he'd ever seen it.

She needs this too. A family.

"You gotta try this peach cobbler." Layne slid a dish toward him.

Denver accepted it. "Looks dangerous."

"Dangerously good." Rhae brought a bite to her lips.

He caught her eye. Under the table, her fingers brushed his. The touch and the look in her eyes were a subtle thank-you he felt down to his bones.

At the head of the table, Carson raised a bottle of beer toward him. "Good to have you back from the dead, man."

"Good to be here." Denver lifted his bottle too.

For the first time in a long time, he had something to fight for that wasn't just about honor or duty. It was about a woman who'd carried herself through hell. About a baby who giggled in her high chair like nothing bad could touch them here.

He was going to make damn sure that was true.

Robert Ravencroft had no idea the kind of war he'd just walked into.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae lay on her side, her head resting on Denver's muscled arm. He lay on his side behind her, emitting a furnace's worth of heat. The moonlight sliced through the bedroom curtains in silvery ribbons, painting the room in a silver glow.

Navy had been asleep for hours. The space was quiet.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt so much peace.

Denver shifted slightly, and his lips grazed her nape. The scrape of his rough beard against her sent a shiver dancing over her skin. "You still awake?" His voice was heavy with meaning.

"Mmm." She arched not-so-slyly, pressing back against the thickening steel pressed against her backside. "Barely."

"Barely, hm?" He slid a hand up her thigh, beneath the sleep shirt she wore. His shirt. The one she stole on a whim during one of their encounters and stuffed into her own bag to take home as a souvenir of their time together.

That shirt might just be faded gray cotton with a Navy logo across the front...but to her it was a testimony that when they were together, they were something. Something good, warm and beautiful.

She'd never held out hope that their encounters would lead to something permanent. Now her view had shifted.

Her mind hit pause as his fingers spread over her belly, splayed like he was claiming

every inch of her.

“You wore this on purpose.” His voice was low, rough. “You knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.”

She twisted to face him, gaze roaming over his rugged features, sharp and handsome. She cupped his jaw. “I was hoping,” she whispered.

“You know, I’m going to be conditioned to get an erection every time I hear a whisper.”

She burst into silent laughter, shoulders shaking.

He flipped her onto her back, hovering over her, his gray eyes deep pools of want...and something else.

Her breath hitched at the sight. God, it stole the air from her lungs.

He looked at her like she was his from top to bottom, left to right, and beginning to end. Like everything in his life had led him here to her and Navy.

To a them.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Rhae,” he murmured, so much reverence in his tone.

He kissed her, deep and slow, taking all the time in the world. He slipped his hands under her shirt, pushing it upward, skimming his fingertips over her bare nipples. Then he dipped his head to taste them.

She gasped at the liquid heat of his tongue stroking around her hardening bud. Arching into him, she threaded her fingers in his hair. “Denver.” There was urgency

in her whisper.

“Shh. Let me take my time with you tonight.”

Just like that, she was gone, swallowed by sensation and the love pulsing inside her.

He stripped his shirt off her before he worked his way lower, dragging her panties down her thighs. When he spread her legs, his gaze locked on hers. Slowly, he brought his lips to her inner thigh and pressed a tender kiss there that made her pussy squeeze with need.

He went down on her, hands holding her right where he wanted her. She lost herself to the rhythm of his mouth working over her slick pussy, tracing a path from clit to opening and back again, until she was squirming. Aching.

“Oh!” Her back bowed off the mattress as he sank his tongue inside her again.

His answering moan vibrated to her core. He tongued her shallowly before slithering up to suck on her clit again. The building pressure became a wild pulse low in her belly.

“Please!”

He worked her faster, with more insistence, driving her toward the explosion she knew was so damn near.

She latched on to his shoulder, anchoring herself to the world. To this man. She never wanted to be parted from him again.

He flashed a look at her face, hunger in his gaze.

Her body shot upward. She bucked into his mouth as her release struck hard and fast, stealing over her like a tidal wave.

When the contractions ended, he was hovering over her, licking his lips. “I love watching you come apart for me, baby.”

Without a word, she wrapped her thighs around him and pulled him into her. He plunged deep in one slick move that ripped a groan from both of them. Navy slept deeply and didn’t rouse at the noise.

She clung to him as he rocked inside her. Pleasure sparked up her spine with every thrust, but she wasn’t on fire just from the way he made her body feel—it was the way he looked at her.

“You feel so damn good,” he grated against her lips.

She kissed him, frantic, nails raking over his shoulders and down his back.

He let out a growl and pinned her arms over her head, bracing himself over her. The dominant action sent a new flood of need straight to her pussy. He took her deep, hard. Her body responded with a shudder. Her eyes fell shut.

“Denver!”

“Look at me. I want to see your eyes when I make you come.”

Her stare locked on his, and their bodies ground together with a wild tempo as they both let go. Wave after wave crashed over her. His hot cum soaked her as he buried his cock to the hilt.

He pulsed inside her, muscles rigid, a guttural groan rumbling in his chest. For long

moments, neither of them moved. His heart thundered along with hers.

She tucked her head against his chest and drew lazy circles on his muscled spine.

“I’ve never felt anything like that,” she whispered.

“I have. Every time I’m with you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Rhae buried her face against his chest, he felt her tremble with the aftershocks of their lovemaking.

Denver tightened his hold on her. The feelings his mouth hadn’t yet figured out how to say rattled around his brain.

He rolled off her, catching her hip and bringing her onto her side into the wreath of his arms. He tucked her head under his chin and listened to the sound of the wind at the windowpane.

He would do anything for Rhae and Navy. Nobody and nothing would ever hurt them as long as he was alive. Even after, they’d have to go up against his family.

He thought of his other brotherhood, his SEAL team. Blackout Charlie. His leader, Constantine, Julian Chase, his closest friend who had just found love himself before Denver was released for medical reasons.

Denver had tried to warn Chase of the dangers of loving a woman—because he already knew the pain of leaving Rhae behind in all those hotel rooms.

It damn near killed him.

Now he was never letting her go.

Her breath ghosted over his neck, leaving a streak of warmth through his chest.

“I didn’t really want to leave the ranch after I found the flowers.”

He smoothed his hand down her spine in a soothing stroke. “I know, baby. You don’t have to run. I’ve got you and Navy.”

She tipped her head back to look at him, the moonlight bathing her beautiful face in silver-blue. Damn if the way she looked at him didn’t make his chest ache.

“But what if—”

He pressed two fingers to her lips, silencing her. “No what-ifs. He’s not getting anywhere near you. There’s a small platoon of men prepared to fight—”

He saw the alarm on her face and hurried to add, “Not that it will come to that. Rhae, I would die to protect you and Navy.”

She issued a soft noise.

He traced a finger down the curve of her cheek. “More than that, I will live for you. The military might have thrust me back out into the world of the living, but it’s you who brought me back to life.”

“Denver.” Her eyes pooled. “I’m in love with you.”

“I know, baby. And I’m in love with you.”

Hearing the words broke something wide open inside him. He wrapped her tighter in



his arms and kissed her with all the love and passion exploding inside him. His chest burned with everything she made him feel.

They fell into a comfortable silence, still after their stormy past.

“Do you think it will always feel like this?” she whispered after a long time.

“No. I think it will be better.”

She moved against him, lips brushing over the skin of his chest. She let out a sigh that sounded with hope. “Better than last night’s chocolate souffle?”

He chuckled. “Now I don’t know. Maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

She batted his arm lightly, and he grinned.

Their legs tangled together, and they drew even closer in the darkness.

“Denver?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For everything. For loving me. But most of all, for Navy.”

He brushed his thumb over her chin, drawing her gaze to his. “I was going to thank you for giving me the family I needed all along.”

Two tears slipped from her eyes, and she didn’t try to swipe them away or hide them from him. She let them fall.

With Rhae in his arms and Navy sleeping a few feet away, his world finally felt real.

His future solid.

He was never letting go.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The office was quiet, lit by the mellow afternoon sun filtering through the blinds. The beams of light fell across the playmat where Navy sat babbling to her stuffed lion. Occasionally, she'd pause to slap at the rectangle of light on the floor as she learned about the world.

Rhae smiled at her. "What did you find, Navy?"

Her daughter looked up at her, drool on her chin from the tooth still trying to break through the gum, and kicked her legs excitedly. She picked up her lion and flapped him around, gurgling louder.

Throwing a look at the clock, Rhae saw it was getting close to the time when Decker Jansen, the veteran known as Dutch, came in each week. He wasn't quite ready to talk—not about the big things—but he came willingly and regularly to sit with Navy.

He didn't say much to her daughter, but she saw how he settled around her.

Dutch had a very interesting case. When he arrived at the Black Heart Ranch, he didn't speak a word. It wasn't that he physically couldn't. He just didn't.

Over the course of months he was in the program, he did everything on offer to expedite the healing process, bouncing between her office and the resident psychiatrist, Bella. He also participated in horse therapy with Willow, and recently had begun art therapy with Honor.

At some point, he had a breakthrough. Rhae wasn't quite sure what did it—maybe all of the sessions finally put him at ease, or it was being around other veterans with

similar pasts, or both.

Either way, the day Dutch walked into her office and he answered her greeting with a deep, “Hello,” she almost fell out of her chair.

Right on time, he knocked on the door. She hurried over to swing it wide, a smile on her face.

“Glad to see you today, Dutch.”

He dipped his head in greeting, saying nothing. A frown tugged at her brows, but she didn’t let him see. His silence was probably nothing.

He walked over to Navy, and she saw the guarded expression in his eyes vanish as he looked down at her little girl.

Navy squealed at the sight of him, her arms shooting up to be picked up.

He smiled gently and picked up her daughter, moving to his usual armchair and settling her in his lap.

Rhae took the sofa, notepad in hand. For several minutes, she simply jotted observations about Dutch. His shoulders seemed stiffer, pushing upward toward his ears higher as he seemed to curl into himself tighter.

“Navy still hasn’t gotten that tooth she’s been working on,” she said to get the conversation going.

He tipped his head, studying Navy’s drooling mouth but said nothing.

Rhae’s chest hollowed out. A setback. She’d worked with several military persons

who experienced them, and they were never easy to break through.

Navy wiggled to get out of Dutch's lap, and he set the baby on the floor. She crawled a few feet away and rolled on her back, gnawing on her rubber cow.

Dutch moved to sit beside her. When she dropped the slobbery toy, he handed it back to her. Navy dropped it again, and he placed it in her hands.

Soon they were playing the drop it and pick it up game. Rhae looked on, watching Dutch's face. Under the ball cap he wore low over his eyes, he was ruggedly handsome. She couldn't see any scars on the surface—all of his were buried under the skin.

Navy let out a giggle as he made the cow trample over her belly.

A low noise from the doorway brought her head up to see that Denver had pushed it open. He took up the whole doorway, arms crossed.

Rhae shot to her feet, moving to stop him from entering during a patient's session, but before she could take a step, he crossed the room. In two long strides, he planted himself between Dutch and the baby.

"I've got this," Denver said casually. Too casually. "I'll play with my daughter today."

Dutch blinked, thrown.

Rhae swallowed a gasp and lurched toward Denver. She laid a hand on his arm, trying to haul him out into the hallway to talk. But Dutch felt too out of sorts after the interruption.

He gained his feet and hurried to the door. Right before he vanished through it, Rhae called out, “We’ll catch up soon, Dutch. Come back later.”

But he’d already ducked out of the office, gone.

As soon as the door clicked shut, the atmosphere in the room changed. The air seemed to thin. The sunlight seemed harsher now, even though nothing had changed.

Rhae slowly turned to Denver. “What the hell was that?”

Denver shrugged.

“You mean you don’t know why you came through a closed door into one of my sessions and made my patient feel unwelcome?”

“He was just playing with the baby.”

“Is it that you didn’t want him near Navy? He’s trustworthy—all of these guys are. If I thought Navy was in any danger, they wouldn’t be around her.” She settled her hands on her hips, fuming inside.

Denver’s eyes flared with a gray warning. “She’s my child.”

She sucked in a breath. “Yes. She’s your child. But she’s everybody’s baby, Denver. You don’t understand this place yet.”

His brow lowered, expression tightening. “What does that mean?”

“It means Navy’s not just a baby. She’s...a bridge. She disarms people. She helps them talk when they can’t even look me in the eye.” Her voice was trembling now, half anger, half desperation for him to understand. “She’s part of the healing here.”

He stared at her like she'd betrayed him. "My child is a therapy baby?"

The words were clipped. Cold. And it pissed her off more than she expected.

"You're twisting it," she snapped. "It's not like I strap her to a chair and wheel her into sessions. These men—your fellow veterans—they gravitate to her. She gives them something to hold on to."

His jaw flexed. "And I'm supposed to be okay with that?"

"Jesus, Denver." She pressed a hand to her forehead. "You don't get to swoop in after months away and start gatekeeping who gets to love her. She's mine too."

He turned away, hands on his hips, breathing hard.

Rhae continued, voice gentler now. At this moment, she needed all of her wisdom and empathy about how he must feel to step into Navy's life later than he wanted.

"I know you missed a lot. I know it hurts. But that doesn't mean you get to shut everyone else out. This place? These people? They helped raise her when I was falling apart."

From losing her life to Robert Ravencroft.

From losing Denver.

He didn't answer.

She stepped closer, taking in the waves of irritation rolling off him, filling her nose with the pine and sap scent of him. He had been splitting wood.

She pitched her voice quieter. “You’re jealous.”

“No, I’m—”

“You are. And I get it. I do. But you can’t bring that energy into this space. Not with my clients. Not with our daughter.”

He spun to face her again, eyes full of something wild and protective and... lost . “I just...I hate the way they act like she belongs to them too.”

“She kind of does,” Rhae said faintly, meeting his eyes. “Not like we do. Not as parents. But emotionally? Navy is their anchor. And whether you like it or not, she’s helped them. More than any of us expected.”

Denver’s expression shifted between hurt, confusion and defensiveness.

“Please understand I’m not saying this to keep you out,” she added. “I’m just trying to explain how things operate.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m just a guy trying to catch up.”

That cracked something in her, piercing through her anger. She stepped forward and laid a hand on his chest.

“You don’t have to catch up,” she whispered. “Just be here . With us. For her. That’s all she wants.”

He swallowed hard, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m trying, Rhae. But it’s hard.”

“I know.”



They stood like that for a moment, quiet, breathing in sync.

Then she pulled back slightly. “But we’re not going to solve this right now. We’re both too keyed up. And I have a session starting in ten minutes.”

“I thought you told me you don’t really have appointments.”

“I don’t. But Gabe comes in around this time every day after chores.”

Denver nodded, stepping back. “Yeah. Okay.”

Her heart squeezed as she looked at him. “Can we talk more later? When Navy’s asleep?”

He hesitated, then gave her a tired nod. “Yeah. I’ve got a lot of work to do with the security agency if I’m going to be part of it. I’m not sure what will be harder—organizing the office or my brothers.”

She offered him a sympathetic smile.

Needing the contact, he brushed his fingers over her knuckles. “I’ll see you later.”

She walked him to the door and opened it for him. He turned back once before stepping out, eyes searching hers.

“I didn’t mean to mess anything up.”

“Nothing that can’t be remedied with a conversation.” Her voice was gentle. “But you do have to trust me.”

He gave her a faint smile and left.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Rhae leaned against it, head tilted back, staring at the ceiling. Her chest ached. With love, with frustration, with longing.

This wasn't just a disagreement or a misunderstanding.

This was the hard part of becoming a family.

It was about making room for each other's pain, even when it stung.

She glanced down at Navy, who stared up at her with wide, trusting eyes.

"I hope we figure it out, sweet pea," she whispered.

Because she wanted this life with Denver.

She just needed him to understand that love wasn't measured by possession—it was measured by presence.

Maybe tonight, after Navy's bath and bedtime, they could sit down and talk more calmly.

And maybe—just maybe—he'd start to believe that sharing love didn't mean losing it.

It meant making more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver paused outside Rhae's office, jaw clenching and unclenching in time with the

aching throb of his heart.

He didn't like how he left things with Rhae and for being so damn possessive of Navy. Hell, he hadn't even picked her up or kissed her soft, round cheek.

And he'd really fucked things up for Dutch. Denver was no therapist, but he saw how the man's face closed off as he walked out.

Dammit.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

He walked down the long hallway, past other closed office doors—Bella’s office and the small medical facility where the resident doctor tended to the veterans’ physical health.

Suddenly, one of the doors opened and Willow stepped out. She gave him a hard look.

“What happened?”

“Who said anything happened?” He took off, walking fast. But his sister was tall and her legs were long enough to keep up with him.

“I just ran into Decker. Dutch,” she added at his blank look. “He came out of Rhae’s office, looking upset.”

Fuck. Just when he thought he couldn’t feel worse.

Willow tipped her head toward the exit leading to the wide veranda. “Let’s talk.”

He let out a groan, but she clapped a hand on his forearm, forcing him to follow her.

Once they were outside in the chilly, open air, he could breathe a little easier, but his chest still felt too tight. He moved to lean against the rail, the same one that Navy had pitched a banana over while he and Rhae laughed.

Willow stepped up beside him. “What really happened?”

He planted his hands on the rail. “I walked into Rhae’s office and Dutch was there.”

“You just walked in? Without knocking first?”

“I didn’t hear any voices, so I figured she was alone.”

“Ah.”

“Dutch was on the floor, playing with Navy.” His voice grew tight, the words feeling sharp.

“And you got upset,” Willow filled in the blank for him.

He nodded, letting out a trickle of breath.

“Denver, you’re Navy’s daddy, but Navy is everyone’s baby.”

“That’s what Rhae said.”

“These guys don’t go to therapy—they walk into that office to help Rhae. They come visit her under the guise of offering support, and while they’re feeding Navy or playing with her or just watching her sleep...they share.”

Damn, he’d fucked it up for Dutch. And Kyle too, when he barged in and took Navy from him the other day.

Willow continued in an understanding voice. “With Rhae, there’s no appointment to dread, no pressure to feel. No misery. They come in claiming they’re fine, but they leave lighter. They need Rhae...and they need Navy.”

He leaned forward, dropping his head between his shoulders. “I see it now. It makes

sense. I'm being a selfish jerk, which is hard as hell to admit."

She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I admire you for admitting you were wrong."

Wrong, yet with a reason.

He'd gone to find Rhae to tell her that he was still tracking Ravencroft, that he was digging deeper for information on him. Having that on his mind might have made him hyper-protective when he saw Dutch playing with Navy.

It felt too close to Ravencroft trying to take his place with Rhae.

But he still had wrongs to right.

Leaving the Blackout team meant he could no longer do anything for those brothers. But he could do more for these new brothers—both his siblings and those in the vets program...even if it meant sharing his daughter.

"It's a small sacrifice to share Navy with them," he said quietly. "Even though I'm jealous of the quality time I've missed out on."

"They're your brothers too. Your circle is widening. And Navy will always be your daughter. Your bond with her is going to be deeper."

He wrapped one arm around Willow, pulling her into a brotherly hug. "Thank you for saying that."

"I meant every word, Denver. You're a beast of a protector, just like every Malone."

"Including you." He gave her a light squeeze and then let her go. "Thanks, Willow."

“I’m always here.” She threw him a smile and a wave and walked away, leaving him wondering when it would be her time to take some advice from them instead of doling it out.

He stood there for a while longer, gazing out at the ranch. The grass had turned to gold at the tips, waving in the cool breeze. Beyond that, the mountains were as familiar to him as his own face in the mirror. They represented strength and a solid foundation.

He had to echo the mountain and make things right by apologizing to Dutch.

Denver found him chopping wood, picking up where Denver had left off earlier before the urge to see Rhae and Navy took over and he set down the ax.

Dutch swung it in a smooth arc. The blade came down directly in the center of the log, sending two pieces shooting off to either side. He was just positioning another chunk of wood when Denver stepped up next to him.

Dutch swung the ax down but said nothing.

“I owe you an apology, man.”

Dutch met his gaze.

“I thought some other guy playing with my daughter made me look like a bad dad. I had a bad father, and well...the thought of becoming like him bothers the hell out of me.”

Dutch’s eyes filled with understanding.

“It never occurred to me that you and the other guys enjoy spending time with Navy

too. I won't interfere again."

The veteran didn't speak. Was that normal for him? Denver swore he'd heard the man speak when he first came home to the ranch. But how long ago was that?

"I'm grateful there were so many people in Navy and Rhae's life to love them and support them when I wasn't around. That shouldn't change just because I'm here. No hard feelings?" He held out a hand to Dutch.

The man took it without pause, rough fingers wrapping around Denver's. Though he didn't speak, his direct gaze showed Denver that all was forgiven.

As Denver walked away with the thump of the ax striking wood behind him, he couldn't help but wonder what he could do now to help his new brother heal.



## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae sat on the office floor across from Navy, rolling a ball to her daughter. Navy splatted her palm down on the rubber, and it rolled out of reach.

“Get it, Navy! Get the ball.”

With an excited squeal, the baby crawled away after it.

A small chime sounded from Rhae’s desk, one she didn’t hear very often. A new appointment notification.

She pushed off the floor and took a few steps to the desk, leaning in to check the schedule on her computer.

Justin—3:00 pm

Her eyebrows lifted. She’d told the new veteran on the Black Heart to take his time, get used to the place and there was no hurry.

She’d also told him that most of the guys didn’t book appointments. She thought having a session looming over a man might offer him a little peace of mind, but he must prefer more structure.

“Three o’clock.” It was a little different from what she was used to, but she’d roll with it.

She glanced at Navy. The baby had circled back to her playmat and was rolling around on her belly, her obsession with the ball shifting to a stuffed caterpillar that

rattled.

“You gonna be a good girl for Momma’s session?”

Navy blew a raspberry and kicked her heels.

“That’s what I thought.”

The knock came promptly at three. Rhae hurried to open the door and found him standing rigid in the doorway, shoulders squared.

“Justin. So nice to see you today. Come on in.” She stepped back.

He gave the room a quick scan before he nodded to her. “Ma’am.”

She closed the door. “We’re not so formal here. Call me Rhae.”

“All right.”

“Take any seat you feel comfortable in.”

He glanced at Navy on the mat. A few toys were scattered around the room as usual. He nudged a rattling toy out of his way with his boot before sinking into the chair.

She observed the new vet, taking in his body language and reactions to things that, even when they were new to the ranch too, didn’t seem to bother the other vets. Like the baby and her toys.

He didn’t bend to pick up the toy or shake it for Navy. He didn’t comment on Navy either. No glance of curiosity or a gentling of his expression like she saw from the other guys.

He settled with his spine ramrod-straight, obviously stressed about the visit.

“I wasn’t sure when you’d feel ready to come,” she started off mildly, hands in her lap and no pen or paper for taking notes. She wanted to keep things relaxed, casual. She’d found from working with dozens of military personnel, as well as the vets here on the ranch, that this approach worked best.

“Had some stuff to get off my chest,” he dove right in. “I thought I’d come talk.”

This was unusual—no warmup, just straight to it.

She nodded, mentally noting his detachment and the flat tone of his voice. “I’m here to listen to whatever you have to say.”

“I was in a unit in Ramadi. Five of us were tight-knit. Brothers.” His gaze focused on a point on the wall, not in a far-off way, but like he was reading a script written on a prompter. “Three are dead now. One is still active. As far as I know, anyway. I fell out of touch with him.”

She offered an encouraging nod.

“We called ourselves the Ghosts.”

She’d heard similar things from other men. But the dispassionate way he talked about a brotherhood was far different from how those men talked. Loyalty and pain, she heard over and over again as a common theme. This felt...detached.

He could have a dissociative disorder. She would need to speak to him further to find out.

“Two were taken out by IEDs. One by friendly fire. Shit happens.” He forced a small

shrug.

She let her gaze roam over his face. There was no flicker of emotion and no grief burning in his voice.

Of course, every patient handled things differently, but Justin threw her a little.

“Was it hard losing them?” she asked softly.

“Yeah. Sure. They were my guys.” He sounded so mechanical. “I figured you’d want to hear that.”

Her ears perked up. Figured you’d want to hear that? As if he was attempting to check off all the boxes she might have for him. To give her the answers he thought she expected?

“Tell me what you’ve been dealing with since coming home.” She sat back in her seat, hoping he would relax more, but he still sat stiffly.

Just then, a knock interrupted them. She stood and moved to answer it, throwing a glance at the clock. Her other patients didn’t typically drop in at this time of day, so she thought they’d be free of interruptions.

When she opened it, she saw Honor standing there.

The woman was wearing one of her long, flowy dresses with flowers on it, a thick cardigan that looked hand-knitted over it, and her new addition of cowboy boots that she’d been wearing with every outfit now that she spent so much time on the ranch with Gray Malone.

She smiled at Rhae. “I hope I’m not interrupting you. I thought I’d take Navy with

me to art therapy. We're fingerpainting today."

"Oh yes! Let me get her for you." She left the door slightly ajar, but Honor saw the new patient and tactfully remained in the hallway.

"I'll just be a moment, Justin," Rhae murmured to him as she scooped up Navy and snagged her thick blanket off the desk chair.

She felt his stare following them across the office, but he didn't speak.

Honor reached for the baby, and Navy let out a squeal of joy to see Auntie Honor. "Ready to paint, little bean?" she asked Navy, taking the infant and wrapping the blanket around her.

"She shouldn't be hungry for a while, but she'll still try to eat the paint." Rhae and Honor shared a laugh. She leaned in to brush a kiss over Navy's head. "Have fun with Auntie Honor."

As Honor settled Navy on her hip and turned to go, Rhae caught sight of Justin's face.

He grimaced. Not in a subtle way. His lip curled in distaste, as if she'd just peeled smelly onions in front of him.

Honor caught it too. Her gaze landed on Rhae's for a brief second. Then she let out a cheery, "Be back in an hour! Tell Momma bye!"

Rhae threw them a wave and quietly shut the door, turning to Justin.

"Sorry about that. Everything okay?"

“Yeah. I just don’t like kids.”

Another oddity around here. Even the guys who didn’t think they enjoyed children melted like butter around Navy.

“That’s fair. But you’ll see her around the ranch. She’s kind of a staple around here.”

He let out a low grunt and shifted uncomfortably. “I guess I’ll adjust.”

She schooled her reaction. Not everyone loved children. She couldn’t take offense. But her gut prickled.

He rambled about missions and his platoon, told her about guarding oil fields and tracking insurgents. But his terminology was off, and it seemed like he was recycling words from a movie.

At the end of the session, Rhae leaned forward in her seat. “You’ve been through a lot. But you don’t have to worry—I’ve got your six.”

She said it like she said it to all the guys, showing him that she was in his corner. That she had his back.

Justin blinked, but he didn’t react.

At all.

Maybe he’d only served in the military a short while.

Or maybe he hadn’t served at all.

The thought was a black cloud breaking over her, leaving her cold inside and out.

But that was silly. The Malones researched the vets they accepted into the program. Their natural instinct to protect, coupled with owning a security company, wouldn't allow them to let just anybody on the ranch.

Still, she was left with a sinking feeling she couldn't shake.

After he left, she opened a notebook and wrote some notes about their session.

Check service record. Discrepancies in language, detachment, no standard emotional cues.

She was just tucking the note into Justin's file when the door opened. This time, it felt like sunlight flooded in.

Denver entered, a smile on his face.

Behind him, stood a man. Tall, dark-haired. Stacked with muscle.

And as stupidly handsome as the rest of the Malones.

She launched to her feet. "Let me guess. Another brother?"

Denver smirked. "What gave it away?"

"The eyes." All the Malones had the gray eyes, including his daughter.

Their gazes locked for a moment in a silent acknowledgement of this. Then Denver waved a hand at his brother.

"This is Theo."

She rounded the desk and crossed the room to shake his hand. “So good to meet you, Theo.”

They clasped hands, his palm warm and rough. His eyes held secrets, just like all the Malone men, but he offered her an easy smile that lit the gray depths.

“I thought I’d bring him by to meet you before you got busy with another patient,” Denver said.

She shifted her gaze to the open door behind them, but Justin wasn’t in sight.

“We just passed the newcomer to the program. Justin, right?” Denver asked.

She nodded.

“How’d the session go?”

She hesitated. Doctor-patient confidentiality kept her from talking about it, but she didn’t need to. Denver picked up on the shift in her.

His eyes sharpened. “Anything I should know?”

Luckily, Honor put a stop to the conversation by appearing with a bundled-up Navy in her arms, fingers streaked with the residue of blue paint.

Rhae let out a laugh and reached for her child. “Hi, Navy!”

Navy grinned and leaned forward into her.

Honor relinquished her with a laugh. “Success. She only tried to eat the paint once.”



“That’s what I call a win.”

Denver’s gaze softened on her and Navy, but she didn’t miss the flicker of worry in the depths when she avoided telling him about the session.

She shifted Navy in her grasp. “Why don’t you go see Daddy?”

She felt Theo’s surprise. His head snapped to look at Denver, then his gaze narrowed on the baby, gray eyes working over the child’s face as if trying to pick out the family resemblance.

Denver took Navy from her. The baby grabbed on to his finger, her little digits clamped around his long one, bringing a lump to Rhae’s throat.

“Meet your Uncle Theo.” He wagged his finger, moving her hand with it, and she giggled.

Theo’s focus settled on Navy’s sweet face. The baby stared up at the new person with unblinking interest.

“Hi, Navy.” His voice had suddenly grown a bit hoarser.

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“Why don’t we sit down and have a chat?” Rhae suggested. “Navy’s about ready for her bottle.”

As they all settled in the office for a talk, Denver cuddled Navy in his lap and smoothed his palm over her round head.

The look on his and Theo’s faces was so different from the expression on Justin’s face—that raw scorn—that Rhae’s mind kept returning to it.

It hadn’t just been Justin’s discomfort from being around a child.

It was total disdain.

Later, when she was alone, she would do some digging into the vet’s record. Something just wasn’t right.

And she wasn’t taking any chances.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver pushed open the door of the veterans’ building and held it for his brother. His kid brother, home after God knew how long.

The last Malone brother, returned to the fold.

The door closed behind them with a quiet whoosh , and they stood there for a long moment, side by side, looking out at the fields speckled with cattle and the occasional

horseman checking the herd.

The scent of sawdust carried on the breeze, its source an old tree that had been struck by lightning and was taken down by some of the veterans who worked the ranch.

“Damn, I missed this view.” Theo tugged his cowboy hat lower to shade against the bright sun that danced off every surface, like diamonds so bright it pierced their eyes.

Denver nodded in agreement. But the peaceful scene didn’t totally wipe out the tension from that crease Rhae wore between her brows, put there by the newcomer to the program.

Theo tipped his head back and closed his eyes, breathing in the air. Denver let him have his moment. When he first returned to the ranch, he soaked up the atmosphere for days, but the newness never faded.

“I forgot how good it smells here.”

Denver grunted. “Beats sand and diesel fumes.”

Theo chuckled, then glanced over at him. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a kid?”

He stiffened, the weight of his words landing heavy in his chest. “I just found out too.”

“Wow.” Theo shook his head. “Wow.”

“I know.” Denver scrubbed a hand over his face. “I still can’t quite believe it.”

“She’s cute.”

“I know. Just like her momma.”

Theo gave him a side-eye that reminded him of so many times in their youth when they could say so much with a single look. “So you’re with Rhae?”

“We’re working things out.” His voice roughened. “I love her.”

“That’s all that matters.”

They crossed the gravel lot, their boots crunching in rhythm. The path leading to the main house curved around the barn, but Denver angled toward the side yard instead.

Theo lifted his jaw toward the single tire swing dangling from a rope tossed over a tree limb.

One of the last testaments that any of them had ever been kids.

Even in childhood, they all carried too much on their shoulders, each of them trying so hard to avoid their old man and protect the rest of the Malone pack too.

“You don’t want to head into the house yet? You avoiding Willow?” Theo’s voice rang with an edge of amusement.

“Thought you might help me with a chore.”

“Still passing your chores on to the rest of us. Just like old times.”

“You miss manual labor. Don’t lie.”

Denver led the way to a wood pile stacked near the fence line, an ax propped against the pile. A second splitting ax was already lodged in a stump, ready for someone who

needed to blow off some steam. Which might be any of the Malones or veterans.

He pulled a pair of work gloves out of his back pocket and tossed them to Theo. His brother caught them easily in one broad hand.

Denver pulled out a backup pair from his coat pocket. “Thought we’d split some wood for the bonfire tonight.”

“What’s at stake?”

Denver chuckled. “You always were the most competitive of us all.”

“You mean the best.” He sidled up to the stump and pulled the ax from the wood.

They grinned at each other, the unspoken dare igniting them as easily as it did when they were kids racing horses bareback across the ridge.

Denver hefted a stump off the pile and dropped it across from Theo’s.

Each of them swung their ax, bringing them down a split-second apart.

For long minutes, there was only the thwack of the axes and grunts of effort.

The crack of logs breaking clean filled Denver’s soul with an unnamable satisfaction.

Stealing a peek at his brother’s face, he’d say Theo felt the same.

“C’mon, bro. My pile’s bigger than yours.” Theo twitched his head toward the wood.

“I’m pacing myself.”

“You’re swinging like an old man.”

Denver laughed. “Old man, huh?” He doubled his efforts, a challenge to his brother, who responded by doubling down on his own efforts.

They kept at it until the sun dipped lower in the sky, lengthening the shadows of the fence posts across the ground.

“So,” Denver paused to swipe the back of his hand over his forehead, “how’d you end up here? Medical leave?”

Theo’s expression closed a bit. “Something like that.”

Denver frowned. He knew that look on Theo’s face. He’d worn it not too long ago after his own shift from his SEAL team to being sent home to civilian life, back to the land of the living.

Theo lowered his ax and met Denver’s eyes. “They’re short-listing me.”

“For?”

“For Charlie team. To replace you.”

The words slammed into Denver. A leap of his heart followed at the mention of his brothers that nobody was supposed to know about, then transformed to a cold weight in the pit of his gut.

“Shit.” He leaned on the ax, trying to master his emotions. “If you know about Blackout, you know what it all means.”

Theo gave him a stiff nod.

“Who approached you?”

“Commander Barrett.”

The man who recruited Denver all those years ago. He’d been through so much in the name of freedom. Brothers lost. New brothers joining the team.

He cocked a brow at Theo. “Any idea what you want to do?”

“Thought I’d talk to you before I gave them an answer. I love the brothers I serve with now. I know how isolating Blackout will be.”

Denver wasn’t sure he knew the half of it, but he refrained from speaking.

“I love the rush. Being pushed to be better.”

He understood that too.

“I love making a difference...and Blackout is at the top of the game.”

“Better than protecting embassies?” He gave Theo a taunting smile. It had been a joke among the Malone brothers that Theo had even softer hands than Gray, who’d only flown jets in the military.

Theo let out a snort. “Asshole.”

“Are you asking my advice? Or seeking my blessing?”

He shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Well, I can’t sway you one way or another.

I loved Charlie team. I miss my brothers every goddamn day.

I won't lie it's been difficult, coming to terms with the fact that they can't reach out to me very often, if ever again.

"He shifted his jaw, grinding his molars against the emotion rising inside him like a tide.

He went on, "But there are other ways to save people."

Theo held his gaze, waiting to hear what those were.

"Look what our brothers have done. Oaks chased down a Russian trafficker to save Shiloh. Carson used every skill in the book to save Layne from her kidnapper. Colt has Aspen in his life because he was able to hunt down her stalker. And without Gray, Honor's ex would have probably killed her."

"And you? Will you join the security team?"

He didn't hesitate to nod, something that surprised even him. Until this moment, he hadn't fully committed to Black Heart Security. To his place here.

"Yeah, I'll join them. I like the work. I doubt it comes with the same rush as an op, but there are people who need us. Private clients, people who need help. We're still in the business of protecting people."

Theo's lips twisted at one corner. "Carson said you stormed in and demanded to reorganize the entire agency."

Denver laughed. "I can whip them into shape."



They sobered. Denver eyed his brother, thinking about losing him to Blackout. He loved Charlie. But the more selfish part of him wanted his brother in his life.

“You’re trying to talk me out of joining Blackout.”

He shook his head. “I’m just trying to make you see there’s a choice. You don’t have to keep climbing rank. You don’t have to switch to a bigger and better team.”

Theo eyed him. “Who said it’s bigger and better?”

He grunted. “Because it fucking is, and you know it too or you wouldn’t be standing here thinking about making the move.

Look, all I can say is that...I’m glad I got that last head injury.

I’ll gladly live with the headaches, the dizziness and the ringing in my ears as long as I can see Rhae smile at me, watch my daughter take her first steps... and hear her call me Daddy.”

His throat closed off then, tears burning the backs of his eyes.

Theo nodded to himself, head bowed.

“Think about what you really want in life. You can still have the glory without giving up your own dreams.”

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The end of the workday always left Rhae's desk littered with scribbled notes and manila folders. She tried her best to keep it tidy, but today had been especially busy. Her office door hadn't quit swinging all day.

She jotted one last line down before snapping the folder closed and filing it under the appropriate name in the filing cabinet. She hummed quietly as she worked, a tune that helped Navy fall asleep.

She slipped each file into its place and closed the drawers with a satisfying click.

She turned, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and saw him there.

Denver.

Heart jogging in her chest, she looked him over.

He stood there like a storm had pitched up in her doorway and settled into calm. Late afternoon sunlight highlighted the hard planes of his face and caught the dark stubble on his jaw.

His face was tender, his gaze warm. He looked at her as if she were the only thing keeping him in this moment.

"Hey," she said, feet moving automatically toward him.

"Hey yourself." He stepped inside the office, the door whispering shut behind him.

“What’s up this afternoon?” Something was different about his energy. As if he wore determination like a worn work jacket.

Casting a look around the room, he closed the gap between them. “Where’s Navy?”

His interest in the baby made her heart twist in the most delicious way.

“With Auntie Layne. She asked to take her for a little photoshoot. Apparently she has a flower crown and the most perfect basket for her.”

His lips turned upward...and stole her heart all over again.

They stared at each other, inches away but not touching.

“I spoke to Dutch.”

She blinked in surprise. “You did?”

Nodding, he slipped his hands in his jeans pockets. “I had to clear the air.”

Heat rushed through her. There was something wildly sexy about a man who didn’t just protect with his fists, but could face his emotional demons too.

“That’s...” She floundered for the right words. “That’s a big deal.”

He dipped his head in a nod. “I needed him to know that I understand now...how important Navy is to all of the guys.”

Her mind wandered to Justin and how uneasy it made her that he didn’t like the baby, even though her unease made no sense.

What made people so amazing were their differences.

Besides, she didn't know his story yet. After the busy day she had, there wasn't time to dig into his past as she'd planned to.

Her conclusion was simply that Justin didn't need to enjoy time with Navy to receive treatment or find a path toward healing.

Denver took a step closer, bringing a flood of his heat over her body. A sizzle of desire flickered through her.

"It felt like the right thing to do. For you. For Navy." He lifted his hand, stroking the rogue strand of hair behind her ear, rough fingers lingering on her cheek.

Her breath caught, and her pulse tripped faster.

"I love you, Rhae."

His words slammed into her like a warm wave—deep, throbbing. Powerful.

Then he was sweeping her off her feet and turning for the office door. Their lips crashed together as he carried her down the corridor toward her quarters.

He navigated the building like he carried a map of it in his mind. Not surprising from a SEAL. Her SEAL.

Her past, present...her future.

They reached the room, and she reached out automatically to punch in her security code.

Denver kicked the door closed behind them and strode to the bedroom, his mouth finding hers again before her back even touched the bed.

She melted into him, heart thundering, arms clinging tight to his broad shoulders as he laid her down. His kiss was warm and firm, filled with hunger but laced with something deeper. Something charged.

The same special sensation she got the last time they were together before they went their separate ways eighteen months before.

“You feel how much I love you?” he rasped against her mouth.

“Yes,” she breathed, fisting the back of his shirt, dragging him closer. “But I want to feel all of it.”

That tore a low growl from his chest, and he answered by easing her top up and over her head, baring her to the cool air and his hot gaze.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, trailing a hand down the curve of her side. “God, Rhae, you’re everything.”

She arched into his touch, the soft brush of his palm sending a shiver through her. He kissed down her throat, across her collarbone, taking his time, worshipping every inch of her with his lips and hands.

Her body lit up under him, every nerve attuned to his, like her skin remembered this dance even if her brain couldn’t keep up.

He stripped off her top and plucked at the clasp of her bra, releasing it in one go. The heat of his stare on her breasts made her nipples pucker before he ducked his head and captured one in his mouth.

She issued a sharp cry—she could make noise now that Navy wasn't sleeping mere feet away. Arching upward, she threaded her fingers into his hair, twisting as he drew on her nipple with more force. Then more.

A whimper was followed by a gasp as he lightly grazed her sensitive flesh. Her mind spun.

When he finally peeled off her pants and underwear, he paused, looking down at her like he was trying to sear this moment into his memory.

“I missed too much of your life.” His voice was a husky rasp. “Too much of her life. I’m not missing a damn second more.”

She reached for him, curling her fingers into the collar of his shirt, catching the chain of his dog tags and making them rattle. “Then stop talking and show me.”

That broke the dam.

Denver stripped quickly, and her breath caught when he settled over her, skin to skin. Heat pulsed between them, but deeper than that was the aching rightness of this—of him, of them.

His mouth found hers again, slower this time. A kiss that spoke of promises kept and futures imagined. He slid into her in one smooth, perfect thrust, and Rhae gasped, her arms tightening around him.

He groaned against her neck. “You feel like home.”

She pressed her lips to his shoulder, overwhelmed by the truth in his voice. Every word she longed to hear all those long months apart crashed over her now.

Her eyes slipped shut at the sound of them. “So do you.”

They moved together in a rhythm as old as time, the world narrowing to the warmth of his body, the scent of his skin, the deep, primal connection between them. Each stroke went deeper, not just physically, but emotionally—undoing her piece by piece and rebuilding a them.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, her hips meeting his thrusts with equal urgency. The room filled with their sounds—gasps, moans, whispered “I love you” that bled into kisses.

Without Navy in the next room, they didn’t have to hold back. And Denver didn’t. He made love to her with raw, aching passion, murmuring her name like a prayer between kisses.

When the pleasure crested, it stole her breath. The tight coil inside her snapped, and a gush of liquid heat flooded over his cock even as an explosion of stars arced behind her eyelids.

She didn’t bother to muffle her cry. “Denver!”

His shoulders tensed. His hips jerked out of rhythm. Then suddenly, he thrust deeper. He thrust home.

Letting go, he followed her into ecstasy, her name a groan on his lips. Shuddering hard in her arms.

Holding her like he might never let go.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fading rays of the sunset poured through the windows, casting a golden haze over Rhae's little sitting room. Toys were scattered across the rug like confetti, a patchwork of soft blocks, teething rings and the rubber cow that Navy liked to chomp on.

Denver sat cross-legged on the floor, his back against the couch, while Navy climbed all over him like a jungle gym.

Rhae lounged nearby, leaning against a pile of cushions, her long legs stretched out and her hair loose but tangled from earlier...

activities. She looked relaxed in a way that melted his damn heart.

This—this right here—was everything.

"You're gonna be a climber, huh?" he said as Navy crawled onto his thigh, then tried to hoist herself up by gripping his shirt.

"She's part monkey." Rhae laughed, rolling a little stuffed fox toward their daughter. "Definitely gets that from your side of the family."

"Hey." Denver feigned offense. "We Malones are just adventurous."

He just hoped Navy didn't follow in his footsteps by falling out of trees and being kicked by horses—the two head injuries that had made him susceptible to more and more throughout his career as a SEAL.

But he couldn't regret any of it. After all, it had placed him right where he wanted to be.

Navy shrieked happily, wobbling off his lap and heading toward the coffee table with



that clumsy determination only babies had. She reached upward, catching hold of the support bar. She slapped one hand down, then the other, fingers gripping the edge.

Denver's breath hitched as she hauled herself up—knees locking, belly out, wide stance like a little sumo wrestler. As they looked on, Navy began to move down the edge of the coffee table, holding on to the bar.

“Look at her,” Rhae whispered, sitting up straighter.

“Whoa,” Denver murmured. “Is she—?”

“She's going to be walking before we know it!” Rhae's voice was gentle with awe. “And she's only nine months!”

“Smart like her mama.” Denver's voice was thick, the pride swelling in his chest too big to contain.

Rhae turned to look at him, her mouth curving in an emotional smile. “And strong like her daddy.”

He met her gaze, the quiet bond passing between them like a spark. Yeah. They'd made this little miracle—this fierce, determined, gummy-smiling girl.

Navy let go of the table.

Time stopped.

One chubby foot shifted sideways.

Then—plop. She dropped straight onto her diapered bottom with a little grunt.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Navy's brows knitted together. Her mouth wobbled.

Oh no.

"Wait for it," Rhae whispered. Both of them sat frozen.

Navy's lip pushed out, her face contorting into the very beginnings of a storm.

"Aw, hell no. I'm not watching my baby cry." Denver lunged forward. He scooped her under the arms and blew a loud raspberry against her belly, tickling her sides with his fingers.

She squealed. Laughed.

Crisis averted.

He sat back with her in his lap, heart pounding but light. "That's right, baby girl. Nothing gets you down."

Rhae exhaled a small laugh, her hand over her heart. "You're a lifesaver."

"I'm a..." his throat worked, "a dad." The admission struck his heartstrings.

He settled Navy against his chest and pressed a kiss to her round head. "I think that means I'm officially qualified for emergency giggle duty."

Rhae crawled over to join them, her head landing against his shoulder, her hand resting on Navy's tiny back. "Oh, Denver...you're the best dad Navy could ever ask for. And the best partner I could ever ask for."

The room was quiet for a beat, full of that rare kind of peace that seeped into their

bones.

This was what he wanted. What he'd never let himself dream about before—because it had seemed too good, too fragile.

Now it was real. He could feel it in the weight of Navy's head on his chest, in the way Rhae's fingers threaded through his.

And still...something lurked beneath the joy. A shadow under the light.

"Rhae..." he said quietly.

She turned her face to look up at him. "Hmm?"

"I don't want to ruin the moment, but I need to say it."

She didn't move, just waited.

"I know this feels like peace. Like we're safe. And we are, for now. But Ravencroft's still out there. And I'm getting closer. I've been working angles, getting intel."

Her expression changed—still soft, but watchful now.

"I'm gonna bring him down." Denver's voice roughened on the promise. "I'll bring him to his knees and have him begging for mercy before he ever gets near you or Navy again."

Rhae's hand moved over his, squeezing.

"I'll be the shield between you and that bastard. You won't ever set eyes on him again. I'll make sure of it."

Rhae nodded slowly, tears shining in her eyes, but they didn't fall.

They didn't need to. He saw everything in her face.

Gratitude.

Fear.

Love.

He leaned over and kissed her temple, breathing in the sweet scent of her shampoo and feeling the steel underneath her softness. She'd been through hell, but he'd walk through the flames to keep them from swallowing her.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The clock ticked by in a steady rhythm, a quiet companion to Rhae. She was rarely alone, but Honor had stopped by to take Navy to art therapy with the guys again.

Rhae had kissed her daughter's chubby cheek before passing her off to Honor. She was a godsend, and Rhae appreciated how much her daughter loved their special visits.

She looked toward the playmat, just laying there on the floor, all the little toys sprawled across it ready for Navy to come back and play.

She returned to writing her notes about the last therapy session.

Her patient was making big leaps in his mental health, but most of the credit should go to the hard work on the ranch.

Repairing fence, moving cattle to better grazing land and cleaning out the barn gave that veteran more grounding in the real world than Rhae ever could.

But she was proud to be part of his care.

A knock on the door made her look up. Quickly, she closed the notebook and pushed away from her desk, calling out, "Come in!"

The door opened, and surprise washed over her. "Justin."

He stepped in, darting a look around. "Is this a good time?"

“Of course.” She offered him a smile, though she knew it didn’t reach her eyes. She still wasn’t quite sure about the man, as their last session hadn’t felt very productive. But sometimes it happened. She could only hope this session was an improvement on their time together.

She wished she had found a few minutes to dig up more about him. But there would be time for that later.

She waved a hand at the room. “Sit anywhere you like.”

He moved to the armchair again, sinking into the heavy leather. Everything about his posture was stiff. Even his clothes—jeans and a flannel shirt—seemed to be out of place on the man.

She took the sofa opposite him and met his gaze. “I see you took my advice to skip the appointment and just popped by for a chat today. How are things going?”

“Fine.” He didn’t relax into the seat. Not unusual for any patient let alone a new one.

She sought to put him at ease and sat back, crossing her legs and resting her hands in her lap. “Have you been assigned any work on the ranch?”

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, drawing her attention to his build.

Compared to a lot of the veterans she worked with, Justin didn’t carry as much muscle.

The mental note made her wonder again just how long he was enlisted, since the men seemed to harden with each year they spent in the military.

“Been doing some work in the fields, leveling out the ground.”

She bobbed her head. “It’s beautiful land—nice to spend time outdoors.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t sound like he was committing to her view on the beauty of Wyoming. He lifted a hand to his forehead, swiping a finger through the sheen of sweat there.

The day wasn’t very warm, so she could only surmise he was highly uncomfortable. Seeking to put him at ease, she got up and crossed the space to her desk to pick up a new notebook. Often she found that having her attention directed elsewhere helped patients lower their defenses.

The clock continued its ticking, but it didn’t ground her like it normally did. It seemed to be counting down, extending the short minutes since Justin arrived.

When she returned to her seat, she offered him a small smile of encouragement and put pen to paper, jotting a note about how uncomfortable he was. Sweating. Eyes darting around the room, landing on anything but her.

She asked him some more questions, which he answered with the same calm aloofness that he had every question she asked so far.

Detached, she wrote in her notes.

She was secretly glad that Navy wasn’t here, that she was out with Auntie Honor, getting kisses and fingerpainting with people who cared about her. She couldn’t shake the disquiet inside her when she thought about the way Justin sneered at the baby.

She watched him now. His expression was unreadable. He didn’t casually slouch like the other veterans—he perched on the edge as if ready to jump up at any moment.

The other guys used Navy as a buffer between them and her when they talked.

Since Justin didn't enjoy Navy time and the notebook hadn't worked, she needed to find a new way to make him comfortable.

She closed the notebook and carried it to her desk, hoping that having the desk between them might make him feel safer.

"Have you ever been on a ranch before now? Growing up, maybe?" She left the prompt open for him to start talking about his past.

"No. Not before I came here."

"Never been around animals?"

"Not big animals like these."

"Some of the guys are intimidated by the cattle at first. I admit I was frightened by the horses when I first got here too."

"I'm not frightened."

She was getting somewhere, even if getting Justin to talk was like pulling teeth. She pulled open a desk drawer and withdrew a file with blank intake forms. She would have him fill out a questionnaire before they wrapped up today's session.

They'd be making slow progress, but there was no timeline. And she was patient.

She asked him another question about what he'd expected from ranch life. When he didn't immediately respond, she stood and turned to her filing cabinet. As she shifted around some files, Justin started talking in a slow, even tone.



She listened to him intently, aware that he seemed to open up more when she was occupied with another task. Encouraged by this, she continued sorting through files.

The creak of leather of the chair he sat in told her that he was finally getting more comfortable.

But the next creak didn't sound normal.

A prickle ran up her nape. She straightened a little, half turning to face him.

A sharp sting jabbed the side of her neck.

Her gasp was strangled, and her hand flew to the spot just below her ear.

Pain exploded like fire through her skin, riding along her veins. Her gaze fixed on Justin's face and his image began to swim in her vision.

Her knees buckled.

She tried to twist to see him, but the edges of the room blurred.

"What...what did you do?" she rasped, barely a whisper.

Justin replaced the cap on the syringe he just jabbed her with and slipped it into his pocket. He studied her like a problem he was finally solving.

"Nothing you need to worry about." His voice was too calm. Too smooth. "We're just going to take a little trip."

Her brain scrambled in a fog of static. She reached out to hold on to the filing cabinet, but her arms turned to rubber. She stared down at her hands, unable to feel them.

They weren't connected to her body anymore.

She was floating.

Her legs buckled, and she collapsed to the floor. "I can't go. I...can't." She began crawling in the slowest of slow motion, trying to drag herself to the door.

His footsteps were slow and precise as he approached. "In another minute or two, you won't even be able to talk."

Terror clenched her throat. She tried to scream, but it came out as a whimper, no louder than Navy's sleepy sighs. Her vision spiraled inward. Tunneled. Black spots swelled. Her thoughts collapsed into a vortex of panic.

Navy.

Denver.

Help me.

Justin crouched beside her, checked her pulse, and then hauled her up like a sack of laundry.

She couldn't fight him. Her limbs were useless. Her head lolled.

The world twisted sideways as he dragged her to her feet.

Somehow, she was able to stand again. She hardly felt her feet, let alone the new burst of panic in her chest when he propelled her to the rear exit no one ever used.

A vehicle waited. Her mind struggled to take in the details, but there was nothing to

remember. The SUV seemed too nondescript.

He opened the passenger door and urged her inside, buckling her in like she was a child.

“Wouldn’t want you bumping around back here,” he muttered, almost thoughtfully.

She jerked her head, trying to bite him, but she moved too slow. Her jaw didn’t move.

Tears streamed from her eyes, but she couldn’t even feel them on her cheeks.

The hum of the engine was the last thing she heard clearly before her body gave in, the blackness swallowing her whole.

When she woke again, everything was wrong.

The hum was deeper, vibrating through her bones. The seat beneath her wasn’t that of a car—it was cushioned and narrow. She blinked like her eyelids were weighted, and it felt like it took ages for her vision to adjust.

The sound wasn’t coming from a car engine.

It was a plane.

Her gaze moved sluggishly around the empty cabin. No one else was onboard.

Her breathing hitched.

Rhae dug her fingers into the seat. Her wrists weren’t bound, but her limbs were too heavy to move more than a twitch.

She turned her head slightly, and agony shot down her neck. Her focus fixed on two other seats beside her, and then she saw she wasn't really alone on this flight.

One was occupied.

Justin.

He faced forward, arms crossed, perfectly still as if this was just another flight and she wasn't even there.

He changed out of the jeans that were too clean and the flannel shirt that looked so out of place on him.

Now he wore a crisp, buttoned-up shirt and slacks.

He looked more like a businessman than a criminal.

She let out a small gasp.

"You're awake," he said without looking at her. "That's good. We'll be landing soon."

"Why..." The word rasped from her throat, dry and garbled.

He finally turned his head, his expression so bland it sent a chill deeper than any sedation could reach. "Keep quiet."

She couldn't form a sentence, but her mind was starting to come back to life, her thoughts stringing together once more.

In the minutes that followed, she tried to picture Navy's face. The way she giggled

when Auntie Willow kissed her belly. The chubby arms flailing in delight when Denver walked into the room. The way she'd just started pulling herself up, standing proud and strong.

She was going to miss her first steps.

Tears streaked down her face.

Would she ever see them again?

Would Denver come?

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

She thought about his arms around her, the way his voice dropped when he promised to protect her. The man who would walk through fire for her.

Please, Denver.

Find me.

\* \* \* \* \*

The baby's cries hit Denver first. That indignant squawk she made when she didn't like something—usually being taken away from her favorite toy or when Rhae wasn't in sight. But this time, her arms were outstretched toward him.

Honor stood in the office doorway holding Navy, her brow furrowed in a way that told him something wasn't right.

“Was Rhae going anywhere today?” she asked without preamble.

Denver's heart stuttered. He jolted to his feet, launching the desk chair against the wall. “No. Why?”

Honor bounced Navy gently, as if trying to soothe the baby and herself. “I just saw her in the passenger seat of a dark SUV. The new guy—you know, Justin—he was driving.”

“What?” he practically roared.

Navy's small mouth crumpled, and she let out a howl. His daddy heart couldn't stand it and he strode over, taking her from Honor's arms. He cradled her over his shoulder and patted her back. All of these gestures were so weirdly instinctive to him.

As instinctive as the knowledge that Rhae was in danger.

Honor's voice came out shaky. "I thought she looked weird."

"Weird how?" Fresh panic struck his chest like a bomb. She couldn't be dead. He couldn't have lost her.

Honor scraped her fingers through her loose waves. "Kind of...limp."

"Christ!"

"A-At first, I thought she was just going somewhere with him. But then I realized she would never leave without telling someone, and she wouldn't leave Navy. I had Navy with me or else I would have run up to the vehicle. I'm sorry, Denver!"

The room began to blur in front of him. "Go find my brothers," he snarled.

Honor spun in a swirl of hair, jewelry and floral patterns and ran for it. Her voice rang out across the house as she called out all of his brothers' names.

Carson hit the doorway first, eyes burning with knowledge that scared the fuck out of Denver.

"We have to check the security cameras. Rhae's gone. Justin took her."

As if Navy understood that her mother, her whole world, was missing, she let out a wail. He bounced her, but she only cried harder.

Willow skidded into the room. “Honor told me Rhae’s missing.” Her gaze landed on the baby. “Give her to me.”

Carson rushed to the computer monitor to pull up the security camera footage just as the room filled with more of his brothers.

“Who would fuck with the Malones?” Theo asked the question that flitted around the edges of Denver’s mind.

“Pull up the cams on the front parking lot.” He shoved through the group to reach the desk, leaning in to stare at the screen.

Carson’s fingers flew over the keys.

“Keep rolling back. Honor?”

“Right here.” Her voice wavered as she lifted her head from Gray’s chest.

“How long ago did you see her in the SUV?”

“I came to find you right away. Maybe three minutes?”

Carson ducked his head in understanding and rewound the footage to the timestamp.

The screen flickered, and there she was—Rhae. Being led out the door by Justin. She looked off. Slack in a way that made Denver’s gut knot into something cold and mean.

Honor had edged up to the desk. “There,” she whispered, pointing.

Justin opened the passenger side and helped Rhae in like it was nothing—like he



wasn't abducting the love of his life and mother of Denver's child.

"Motherfucker!" Denver growled. "He drugged her. Look at her face. She's not even aware."

Willow squashed in to see. She gasped. "Oh, god... I—I saw him earlier this morning. I gave him coffee. I asked him how his day was. He—he seemed totally normal."

Denver saw the guilt sliding into his sister's eyes. "It's not your fault. You didn't know what he intended to do."

"The bastard duped all of us," Oaks added from the other computer, not looking up from the screen as he worked some other angle. Denver didn't know what it was, but he trusted his family like he trusted his SEAL team.

"We're going to get her back." His voice was cold and firm with deadly calm. The sound of it carried around the room, silencing every person in it.

He swept a glance around the room. "Where's the rest of the team?"

"Colt was in the next town, installing a security system. Aspen's with him. They're on their way back now," Willow filled them in. In her arms, Navy had settled, but her big gray eyes were homed in on Denver.

His gut squeezed like a hard fist.

I'll get your mother back—or die trying.

The office was starting to feel too cramped. "Meet me in the ops room. Now," he barked to everyone.

The conference room that was rarely used by the team had been upgraded to Denver's specs over the past few days by Carson as an enticement to get Denver to stay. Now it felt like the nerve center of a black ops compound. Whiteboards, monitors and computer systems filled the space.

He pointed to the big screen, but Oaks was already on it, and the footage of Justin stuffing Rhae into the back of the SUV appeared.

Denver took a deep breath and let the leadership settle into his bones. This was the moment to organize, to pull the team together. They needed direction.

They needed to save the woman he loved.

"Colt's still fifteen minutes out," Theo informed him.

"Tell him to get to the edge of Willowbrook and be on the lookout for a black SUV."

Theo looked up from his phone. "How do you know where they're headed?"

"Anybody with a brain is going to get out of town fast. The mountains block easy access to the west. That means they're probably headed east."

With a nod, Theo thumbed the command to their brother.

Denver firmed his jaw. "She's been taken. Drugged, forced into a vehicle by a man calling himself Justin. Oaks? The therapy program is your brainchild. I want everything you've got on the man. My bet is that he isn't a veteran. He's a plant."

"On it."

"We have to assume this was premeditated. Willow?"

“Here.”

“Find out who the last person who had therapy with Rhae was. Question them to see if they saw Justin heading to her office.”

She passed the baby to Honor and whirled toward the door without a word.

“We’ve already pulled video. We’ll get plates. We’ll run them. But I want digital trails too. Oaks, you’re on tech. Start analyzing his intake file and run his facial ID through the program. Find out who he really is.”

“Copy that.”

“Gray, Theo, you’re with me. When we make our move, it’s going to be fast.”

“Copy,” they each echoed.

At that moment, Layne and Shiloh rushed into the room, clinging to each other’s hands as if they might disappear too.

“What can we do to help?” Shiloh asked.

Honor looked up from the fussy baby she was cradling in her arms. “I could use a bottle for Navy.”

“I’ll go.” Layne was already turning for the kitchen before the words were out of her mouth.

With his daughter well cared for, Denver pulled out his phone and dialed a secure line. It rang twice before someone answered.

“Dante here.”

Denver’s gut knotted at the familiar sound of Dante’s voice. His brother-in-arms. He missed the son of a bitch so much. Missed them all. But that was for another time.

“It’s me.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I need help.” Denver’s voice cracked.

“With what?” Dante asked without hesitation.

“I need intel. I need to find my woman. My baby momma.”

“Tell me what you need.”

“I need you to trace someone who calls himself Justin. A man posing as a veteran on the Black Heart Ranch in the therapy program. He took her, Dante. And he’s got a head start.”

“Send me everything you’ve got. And Denver?”

“Yeah?”

“Say that again.”

“What?”

“Baby momma?”

His throat tightened. “Yeah. She’s the mother of my child. The woman I love. My woman.”

“On it.”

“I know you are. I taught you everything you know.”

“Do I need to remind you that your paperwork hasn’t cleared yet? You can’t take this to the authorities. You’re still dead to the world, Denver.”

“For what I intend to do, it’s better if I’m a ghost.”

A loaded silence hovered in the room.

At that minute, Willow and Layne rushed back in, Willow’s face a mask of worry and Layne carrying a warm bottle for Navy.

He hung up and turned to Willow. “Print everything we have on Justin. Stick it in a manila envelope. I’ll hand it off to the cops on behalf of the Black Heart team.”

Willow blinked, already grabbing files from the computer system and hitting print. “Got it.”

The team was running like a well-oiled machine. Knowing that he was responsible for oiling those gears didn’t make Denver feel any better. His gaze lit on Navy, cuddled in Honor’s arms, eyes dipping farther shut with each swallow she took.

He would get her mother back for her. For their precious family.

A few minutes later, Willow passed him the envelope—fat with paperwork and reports, screenshots and security footage.

In big red letters, she'd written URGENT.

He gave her a look. "Nice touch."

She gave a weak smile. "Figured the cops would open it faster."

Denver took the envelope and slid it under his arm. They'd get the intel into the hands of the police, but they all knew too well how local authorities played by the rules.

They didn't have time for rules. Under it all, his heart beat a brutal rhythm.

He should have vetted every fucking man who ever walked into her office.

Part of him—the one that had once led ops in the dead of night and walked away from explosions like they were raindrops—was screaming now.

She'd been taken.

He would get her back. For his daughter and the storm threatening to tear apart her innocence.

And this time? He wasn't risking a special ops team.

He was risking everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The first thing Rhae noticed was the smell.

Before her eyes blinked open, it surrounded her—musty books, aged wood polish, dust and the faint smoky scent of her father's bourbon. Beneath it all was a location so familiar it rooted her in place with dread.

Her parents' home in New Jersey.

She'd know that mixture of bourbon, books and time-worn leather anywhere. The stale air of the house that had been long closed up filtered into her lungs as she drew a shallow breath.

Her stomach turned, and she gulped down the nausea and panic rising inside her.

When she forced her eyes open, the dim light trickling through the familiar heavy draperies on the tall windows sent a piercing pain to the back of her skull. She let her eyes move slowly side to side, taking in the washed-out, gray glow of the space.

She was right. Her father's study.

The world tilted.

She was lying on the old, tufted leather couch, the one guests always joked looked like it belonged in a 1950s psychiatrist's office. Her legs were stiff. Her hands tingled. Her throat was dry.

She sat up slowly, every muscle screaming that she wasn't ready. Her heart

hammered behind her ribs as her gaze darted around the room.

Oh, god. Everything was exactly the same.

The framed diplomas on the walls. The Tiffany-style lamp that had flickered her entire childhood. Her father's worn leather recliner, still angled toward the fireplace.

Her mother's cardigan lay draped over the arm of the chair, slouched like she had just shrugged out of it. The sleeves sagged, worn and stretched. Her father's reading glasses were still perched on the table next to it, right where he'd always left them when he got up to pour a bourbon.

But they were dead. Both of them. Gone for years.

No one had been here since the estate was settled, only months after Robert Ravencroft assured Rhae that he would handle everything on her behalf and in the memory of his late business partner and dear friend.

The house had been locked up, preserved like a shrine.

She shivered.

Her fingers reached up to touch the back of her neck, tender and sore from some physical abuse she'd sustained getting here.

Her pulse quickened, fragments of memory filtering in through the fog in her mind. The file cabinet. Her office. Justin.

She jerked upright, stumbling to her feet. Her legs trembled under her weight, but she made it to the center of the room before freezing.



Tiny black circles were dotted near the ceiling— cameras.

New.

Her parents would never have put surveillance in the house. Her father was old-school in his beliefs. He preferred to retain the integrity of the original Victorian-era structure.

And the doorknob glinted too—metal, modern. No lock was visible on this side of the door. It could be bolted shut from outside.

Panic slammed into her chest.

She wasn't just in a place filled with sad memories of that fateful day when she lost both her parents. She was trapped in it.

“Good. You’re awake.”

Rhae jumped, her heart leaping up her throat.

Justin’s voice snaked behind her like smoke. She spun, heart thudding. He stood by the tall window that overlooked the back yard, where she used to chase fireflies in the summer and build snowmen in winter.

Now the man standing before her turned that memory into something jagged and ugly.

“I thought it might be comforting,” he said, still watching the grounds. “To be back where it all started.”

“Why am I here?” she managed, voice rough.

He turned toward her, smiling like they were just catching up after a long time apart. “You needed a break. You’ve been working so hard. I thought it might be nice for you to reconnect with your roots.”

Her mouth went drier. “Justin, this isn’t okay. You drugged me.”

“No harm done. That was only temporary.” He waved his hand like what he did was nothing. “I only gave you enough to bring you here without a fuss.”

Her breath shuddered in and out. She had to think. Use your training. Use the damn skills. The ones she taught others to calm anxiety, to ground themselves.

“I don’t understand,” she said slowly, modulating her voice like she was in a session with a volatile client. “But maybe...you can help me. Help me understand what’s going on, Justin.”

He tilted his head, smiling like she was a particularly clever student. “That’s what I like about you. You’re so calm. So rational.”

She forced herself to nod, though her insides screamed. “You always seemed insightful too. Self-aware.”

He beamed.

“Can I go into the kitchen? Get a drink of water?”

“You’ll leave when I say you can.”

She stuffed her hands deep in her pockets to hide the fact that her hands were shaking. She’d counseled patients through delusions, through psychosis and paranoia, but this wasn’t a session. This was her life.

Her big life with a big future with her daughter and Denver.

Oh, God. Navy.

She swallowed hard. “Navy,” she said before she could stop herself. “Where is she? Is she okay?”

Justin’s eyes narrowed, his voice flattening. “You don’t need to worry about the baby. I’m sure she’s fine on the ranch.”

“She’s...very attached to me,” Rhae said carefully. “Babies need bonding. Familiar scents. Otherwise, they can—”

“I know how child development works,” he snapped, then caught himself and smoothed his hands down the front of his shirt. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

“It’s okay,” she said softly, backing a half step closer to the door. Useless—the drug was still rolling through her veins, making her much slower than he was. But she needed to keep him talking. Keep him stable .

“You’ll have more privileges soon,” he said. “Once I know I can trust you.”

She nodded. “Of course. Trust is earned. It’s built over time. That’s what I tell my clients.”

He smiled again, but this time none of his smiles ever reached his eyes. He had to be planted on the Black Heart Ranch by Robert. Justin never would have known to bring her here without instruction.

Rhae glanced at the cameras, one near each corner. Her stalker could be watching

now.

Denver, please find me.

She refused to let herself cry. Couldn't.

But she let the words fill her chest like a mantra.

Denver will come. He'll always be there for me. He'll tear through the very rock of the earth to get to me.

If he even knew where she was.

A tremor moved through her body, and she folded her arms tighter.

He moved toward her suddenly, and her breath caught—but he only picked up a blanket from the couch and offered it to her.

“You're cold.”

She nodded, letting him place it around her shoulders. She had to keep playing along and be the calm, therapeutic voice of reason, not the screaming, terrified mother she was inside.

“Rest a little,” he said. “You'll feel better with sleep. And when you wake up, maybe we can talk more.”

“Okay.” She said the word like it was a prayer. “I'd like that.”

He nodded approvingly, then moved to the door, slipping out and closing it behind him.

Sure enough, she heard the heavy bolt of a lock slide into place.

She was alone—well, except for whoever was watching her through those camera lenses.

Rhae sank back onto the couch and folded into herself, her arms around her knees. Her teeth chattered, but she didn't know if it was from fear or the cold house.

She stared at the sweater still draped over the chair. Her father's glasses. The stillness of the room—the frozen grief of a house no one had touched in years.

Her past had swallowed her whole.

But this wasn't where she died.

This wasn't the end.

Her eyes moved to the ceiling, locking on a camera.

Her voice didn't work—her throat too tight to speak—but inside she whispered:

Find me, Denver. Please. I'll hold on. Just come.

She glared straight at the camera and forced out another set of words for a different man. "Go to hell, Ravencroft."

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver's boots thudded in a steady rhythm across the porch, each step shaking his already rattled core.

How? How had it happened? The ranch was practically a fortress. But clearly, they had some work to do to secure it better.

They didn't know yet if Justin was really a troubled veteran with an obsession over Rhae...or if he had infiltrated the therapy program as an imposter.

Denver stood at the edge of the steps, head thrown back to the Wyoming sky. It was streaked with fiery orange and bruised lavender. Any other day, he might consider it beautiful. But he couldn't see any of its beauty now.

All he saw was Rhae.

The ache inside him couldn't even be called gnawing. It felt as if he was being ripped apart.

He hadn't been there to stop that bastard from taking the woman he loved. But he had been steering clear of her during office hours, not wanting to get in her way or step on the toes of any of the veterans she treated.

But his instincts had failed him. This never hit his radar.

He paced the porch again, passing the same set of chairs and the same smooth wood railing, gripping his phone like it was the lifeline to her soul.

Another set of boots ground against the gravel driveway. Denver looked up at Gray. As his brother drew closer, he saw the tendon leaping in his clenched jaw.

"Find anything in her office?" Gray mounted the steps.

"Her phone was on the desk."

Gray compressed his lips. As if Denver didn't already feel the statement to the marrow of his bones. If only Rhae had her phone, they might have a chance at finding her location.

"Any sign of the needle he stabbed her with?"

"No. He must have taken it with him." Denver balled his hands into fists, gaze tracking across the land as if he could find her out there. Without that syringe, they had no way of knowing what Justin drugged her with.

"He took her alive, Denver. Don't lose sight of that."

His brothers kept telling him that, reminding him that if Justin wanted her dead, they would have found her in her office.

"I need Dante to come through with something. Anything! "

Gray rested a hand on his shoulder. His eyes fogged with empathy. "The waiting game is maddening. Believe me, I know it. When Honor's ex took her right out from under my nose, I didn't know how to look at myself in the mirror. I still struggle knowing I let her down."

Denver let out a noisy breath. His throat was too tight to speak. Every second that ticked by felt like a hammer pounding into his ribs. It had been hours since Honor saw Rhae in the passenger seat of Justin's vehicle. A lifetime since he saw the camera footage showing him that she'd been taken.

And an eternity since every cell in his body started screaming for action. Every delay in receiving the intel made him feel like he was failing her all over again.

He braced both hands on the porch post, head hanging low. "Fuck," he muttered,

barely audible.

Behind him, the screen door creaked open and closed. Footsteps that could only belong to his sister were light, like she didn't want to spook him, but her presence centered him a little.

Willow touched his shoulder. "You need food, Denver. Something. Even just water."

"I need Rhae," he snapped, then instantly regretted the acid in his voice. He exhaled hard. "Sorry."

Willow's voice didn't waver. "You're not wrong. But she wouldn't want you burning out."

That cut deep. Rhae, with those sweet smiles that made him never want to walk away, but somehow always knowing if he didn't return to his SEAL team, he would be shattered.

The thought didn't make him feel better.

He rubbed his hands over his face and turned around, back against the post. His gaze landed on Willow, and she was holding Navy in her arms. The baby reached for him, her tiny fingers wiggling.

Denver's chest cracked wide open.

He took her, clutching her to his chest, burying his face in the sweet baby scent of her hair.

"I'm gonna bring your mama home," he whispered into her ear, voice breaking. "I promise."



Navy gurgled and patted his cheek, innocent and trusting. That trust tore him apart.

Theo came out next, quiet and solid. The two of them locked eyes, an entire conversation passing between them without words. Theo had Denver's six. Always had. And right now, Denver needed every ounce of backup he could get.

"Oaks is tracking a vehicle matching Justin's make and model. Just waiting on confirmation," Theo said quietly.

Denver nodded. Good news. A step forward. But the pressure in his chest didn't let up. He kissed Navy one more time and handed her back to Willow.

"Make sure she gets something to eat."

Willow's eyes shimmered, but she nodded. "I will." She started to turn for the door but stopped and swung back. "When you bring Rhae home, she's going to be so proud of the father you are."

He hoped she was alive to see it.

He turned back toward the gravel driveway, clinging to the clawing sensation in his chest. He needed the pain to focus on getting Rhae back.

Just then, Carson pulled up in the SUV. He climbed out, stone-faced and controlled.

"I delivered the information to the cops. They're searching every clip of footage they can get their hands on."

"Which won't be much. Willowbrook's the size of a postage stamp and the crime's so low, nobody needs a security camera."

“There are some at the intersections. If Justin traveled that way, they’ll see his vehicle. Colt’s on lookout, but he’s pretty sure they left town before he posted up on the border of town.” Carson tugged the brim of his Stetson. “Any news from your SEAL buddy?”

“No.” His voice sounded as a croak.

His shoulders heaved. Bowing his head, he struggled to hold up the walls of himself threatening to break.

Suddenly, his brothers were surrounding him, a hand on his shoulder. Another on his arm. A solid presence on his six. The show of support pushed tears into his eyes, and he blinked hard, forcing them back.

Carson squeezed his shoulder hard. “We’re here for you. And for Rhae and Navy.”

Theo’s voice came from behind him. “You’re not alone, man.”

Denver stood straighter. The old SEAL inside him resurfaced.

And god help the man who stood between Denver Malone and the woman he loved.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

Rhae sat on the leather couch where she'd spent hours curled up as a child reading books while her father worked from home. She drew her knees to her chest, just like she did back then, when her world was pure and unstained by terror.

She stared down at the photo album in her lap, her shaky finger moving over a picture of her small family—her mother, looking bright and fresh in hiking gear, her father standing tall and strong next to her.

Smoky blue mountains provided the backdrop to the memory of a family vacation to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Rhae was eleven years old when she took that picture—off-center, slightly tilted in a way she thought was edgy and cool. At the time, she was really into photography and had fancied herself a professional after reading one book on the topic.

She wasn't part of the photo, but her creative license lived on in that skewed photo of her parents at the top of the mountain.

Each image in the album struck her with the force of memory. Her mother's elegant smile at the summer garden party. Her father holding her as a toddler, pride and love radiant in his face.

The Christmas holidays, the long afternoons on the terrace, the quiet evenings in this very study. It all felt so close, but the house smelled stale, like time had tried to forget them. And yet everything remained eerily untouched.

It felt like her parents had simply stepped out for a moment to do some shopping or

run an errand.

But they hadn't. They were dead.

Everything about this place was insanely wrong.

She snapped the album shut and pushed to her feet, looking around even though she knew she was alone. Justin had locked her in hours ago.

Despite the cameras, she had gone to the windows first, seeking an escape, but her heart sank to see the thick steel bars covering each window. She avoided looking at them now—the feeling of being trapped in a cage was far too terrifying for her already muddled mind to handle.

When she reached the desk, she paused, breathing in the faint leather and ink scent that she associated with her father. Then, tossing a defiant look at the camera in case Ravencroft was watching, she dropped into his leather chair and began searching through his desk drawers.

One was filled with pens and pencils, notepads that would never be used and one of her father's cigars still in the plastic wrapper.

She pulled it out and brought it to her nose, but years stuffed in a drawer had stripped away the smell. She put it back and sifted through the other drawers, skimming old files for clients of Rivers and Ravencroft.

With a small dip of her stomach, she realized her habit of taking personal notes and using an old-fashioned file system for her patients was something she learned from her father.

She flipped through the files, scanning the names for any familiar ones. When one

caught her eye, she pulled it free and spread it out on the leather desk blotter.

The contents were dull. Only a signed contract and a few invoices.

Rhae moved to close the file, but the cover stuck on a page. Seeing the sticky note tacked to the back of the sheet, she flipped it over.

And her heart launched into her ribs with a hard thud.

A note written in her father's scrawling handwriting.

Her breath caught. Goose bumps rolled up her forearms.

Rhae,

If you're reading this, then something has happened. I never wanted you to carry this burden, but you've always been braver than I gave you credit for.

You must be careful. Trust no one tied to my business.

Especially Ravencroft. If anything goes wrong, it will be him.

He always had designs far beyond our agreements. If he comes for you, run.

Her breath trickled out in a weak rush. Her father knew to warn her.

But of what?

Her vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. Her father had tried to protect her, but what would make him leave a note in such an obscure place?

She turned the files over and read the name on the tab again: Pearl. Of course. Why hadn't she realized it before? Pearl was her grandmother's name. He knew if she came looking, the name would stand out to her.

Her heart thundered fast. Was it possible the file was a decoy? A fake way to convey information to Rhae?

She searched the documents again, but there was no other connection to her family in the contract or invoices.

What did her father want her to know? That note made it sound like he knew his life was in danger.

A faint creak on the floorboards outside the study door had her snapping the file shut and stuffing the sticky note in her pocket. Just as the door opened, she stood to face whoever was entering.

Ravencroft stood in the doorway.

Dressed in his usual tailored gray suit, he looked totally out of place among the collection of worn, well-loved things.

Her throat clicked on a hard swallow as she watched the man obviously calling the shots.

Not for long.

She tilted her jaw and met his stare. It was time to throw out all the stops. "My father left me a note."

Ravencroft didn't immediately respond. He stepped inside and quietly closed the

door. “I was wondering when you’d find one of your father’s notes. He left enough of them. I thought I got them all—where did you find it?”

Her mind whirled. “There were more?”

He started toward her. She cast around on the desk for some object to defend herself. A paperweight or a letter opener. But there was only a book and a framed photo of her in high school.

“He warned me about you,” she told him.

“Of course he did.” His tone was buttery smooth. “But it changes nothing, Rhae.”

Suddenly, realization broke over her like an icy wave. She felt the undertow tearing at her footing.

“You killed them.” The words left her mouth before her mind caught up to the meaning. Her voice cracked but didn’t falter. “You killed my parents. You orchestrated it all. To get me?”

He tilted his head as if considering whether to deny it.

Then he shrugged.

“They were in the way. Edward planned to take off with you and your mother. To disappear with you. He wanted to protect you. I wanted to own you.”

Bile rocketed up her throat. Her heart thundered.

“You watched me grow up! I was a child!”

He took a step toward the desk, toward her. The heavy walnut furniture wouldn't stop him if he wanted to rip her out from behind it and carry her out the door.

Denver! Hurry!

She reached out and snagged the first thing she saw—a rather thin book her father had left on the desk. She held it up like a weapon as Ravencroft stepped closer.

“You always were spirited, even then. I thought you'd grow up and see reason.”

“Reason? What reason?”

“That we belong together.” He started around the desk.

“Don't come any closer!”

“Rhae.” He rolled her name off his lips with a tenderness that made nausea swirl up her throat. “Marry me. Be mine.”

“Never.” She bit the word off with all the vitriol she could conjure.

He smiled. Now that she knew his plan for her, she remembered seeing the same glint in his eyes whenever he gave her that smile.

“You were always running off, doing your own thing. I allowed it for a while. This time, you don't get to run.”

The panic that had been simmering inside her exploded. “I'm not your possession!” She launched over the desk and made a break for the door.

But Ravencroft had longer legs, and he reached it first, barring her way.



“Let me go! You know you won’t get away with this. Now that I know what you did to my parents, you’re going to jail.” She was still holding the book in front of her like a shield.

Too late, she saw the mistake in her words. He either controlled her from this moment forward...or he ended her life to stay out of prison.

No, no, no. There had to be some way out.

“You’re not my possession—not yet. But you will be.”

“You think you can keep me locked up in here?”

“Don’t be dramatic, Rhae. You’ll have privileges—if you earn them.”

Blind panic shot through her again, but she slammed it down. Use what you know, a voice from deep inside her said. Use your training.

Her therapist mind switched back on, and she steadied her voice. “What is it you really want, Ravencroft? Power? Control? Maybe you’re trying to fix something that’s unresolved or you felt powerless in your youth. I’d like to help you explore that.”

His expression didn’t change, but he didn’t move toward her again. He stilled in the doorway.

“You always were a clever girl. But I’m not your patient.”

“No. But you’re still human. Some part of you wants to be understood.”

“I don’t need understanding. I need obedience.”

“Obedience isn’t love.” Her stomach wobbled at the mere thought of submitting to any person, let alone this man.

“Love is an illusion. Only loyalty matters.”

Tears flooded over, and she was helpless to keep them at bay. “You murdered my parents. You’ll never have my loyalty.”

That small quirk of his lips vanished. He jerked out a hand and reached for the note sticking out of her pocket. She made a grab for it, but he unfolded it and skimmed the words her father had written, warning her of this.

He crumpled it in his fist and dropped it on the floor. “It changes nothing. You can fight and scream, Rhae. But nobody is coming for you.”

We’ll see about that.

He didn’t know Denver. Didn’t know his family. The Malones would never stop searching for her. They would reunite her with the man she loved and with her child.

When he left the room and locked her in, she thought she would feel relief at being alone. But fear and his words gnawed at her.

The house was sealed tight. She hadn’t shared anything about her family with Denver—he wouldn’t know where to start looking for her.

And Ravencroft had been planning this for years.

She collapsed against the bookshelf, legs buckling. Her lungs burned for air.

A foot away lay the crumpled note, and she closed her fingers around it, holding in

the last remnant she had of her father. This room was filled with photographs of her parents.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

She would not let their deaths be for nothing.

Even if she was terrified, even if she didn't know how to fight Ravencroft, she had to find a way to endure. Denver would come for her. She had to cling to that belief.

Her SEAL wouldn't stop until he found her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second Denver got confirmation from Dante, his heart stopped beating—and then roared back to life like a war drum.

“She’s alive.” His voice cracked. For a moment, he pinched the bridge of his nose hard, chest heaving with emotion and relief.

Dante’s voice came over the encrypted line. “Satellites tracked movement from a private jet to a convoy on the ground in... You’re not gonna fucking believe it, man.”

“What? Tell me.”

“She’s in New Jersey at the Rivers’ family estate.”

“Jesus.” His fists knotted, and he bowed his head. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

Dante continued talking, filling him and his brothers—filling in the Black Heart

Security team—with every scrap of intel he dug up. “After her parents died, the estate remained in Rhae’s name, with a trustee.”

“Robert Ravencroft.” The name scalded the back of his throat and burned a path of rage through him.

“It’s undergone some renovations.”

“Like what?” His voice held an edge.

“Fortifications. Gates. Bars on the windows.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Are you telling me that Ravencroft made the house into a prison?”

To keep Rhae inside.

He already knew she came from New Jersey... so damn close to the Blackout Charlie team’s base, a mansion seized by the government and granted to the team for use as a base, hiding them in plain sight.

His team could provide backup. They could get to Rhae within minutes .

He could practically feel the ghosts of past missions breathing down his neck, and that old sensation of floating accompanied the ringing of his ears, a product of the medical condition that ended his contract with the Charlie team in the first damn place.

Even as these thoughts tripped through Denver’s mind, he knew it was impossible for Charlie to step in. Unsanctioned missions would get them in deep shit with their commander.

“Thank you, Dante. I... There aren’t words.”

“Always got your six, man. Good luck.”

Denver ended the call and turned to face his brothers.

Carson slipped a fresh clip into his sidearm and slipped it along his spine. “We’re doing this?”

“Dante confirmed. She’s at her family’s estate in Jersey.” His voice was raw, stripped of everything but certainty. “We storm the estate tonight.”

Gray already had a map up on the big screen, checking the coordinates.

Willow had the baby perched on her hip. Their matching gray eyes were wide and locked on Denver. “Will someone please take the family jet already?”

Carson gave a dry snort. The joke among the family was that Willow wanted to take the jet everywhere, and would fly five miles into town for supplies if she could.

“Yes, Willow. We’re taking the jet.”

“Good,” she snapped, then relented. “Because I’m not letting you take my niece on the road.”

Denver stepped toward her, brushing a kiss over Navy’s head. The little girl squealed and reached for him, her tiny hands clamping on his old dog tags like they were her favorite toy. He kissed her again, on her forehead and then her cheek.

He lifted his gaze to Willow. “Navy won’t be going. Keep her safe for me. Guard her with your life.”

Willow clutched the baby closer. “I will.” Her voice broke.

He kissed Navy once more, the weight of his role as her father settling into his chest like armor. Then he turned and walked out the door, every step forward sharpening into a stride of purpose. Now that he knew Navy was safe, he could focus on one thing: bringing her mother back.

Theo fell in beside him, gear slung over his shoulder. “You good?”

“No,” Denver said honestly. “Not until she’s home.”

Theo nodded, jaw tight. “You’re not going alone.”

“I never expected to.”

His brothers fell in around him, linked through comms devices. Their presence meant more than he could admit.

“I’m glad you’re with me,” Denver said as they crossed the parking area to the security SUV and piled in, Carson at the wheel.

When they arrived at the airfield, Colt was there waiting. He pressed a kiss to Aspen’s forehead before joining them, leaving his life partner standing there with worry pinching between her dark brows.

The jet was sleek and ready. His brother Gray was a former Navy pilot and it was only right for him to take the cockpit, running checks, with Carson barking orders to a two-man ground team helping load equipment.

These weren’t just buddies. They were family. His blood brotherhood. It had started with SEAL Team Blackout Charlie, but it had expanded. He’d widened his

circle—and the core was stronger than ever.

As the jet powered up and lifted into the sky, Denver strapped in and opened the tactical plan Dante had sent. They had a thermal scan of the estate—multiple floors, one secure room, and guards rotating through in lazy patterns. Too confident. Too comfortable. That would be their downfall.

“She’s in the study,” Denver said quietly. “Looks like she’s being watched. Cameras in all four corners.”

His blood ran cold at that. The idea of Rhae locked up, watched but isolated...it twisted something primal in him.

“We go in quiet,” Denver said to the Black Heart team as they soared above the clouds. “Drop in hard, sweep the estate, extract her and neutralize Justin, or whoever the fuck he really is. No witnesses.”

Carson looked up from the map on the laptop. “Neutralize?”

“He touched her. He doesn’t leave.”

Theo turned in his seat, brows raised. “You want this to end in blood?”

Denver’s jaw ticked. “I want this to end.”

Theo leaned forward. “And Ravencroft?”

Denver’s spine stiffened. “I’ll pull that bastard apart, piece by piece.”

They landed at an airstrip close to the estate as sunset flooded the sky. Too bright for a stealthy infiltration, but they’d make do. The air smelled of cold stone, moss and



rain—bringing back a wave of nostalgia for Charlie team. He turned his head in the direction of the base, not far away.

There was a car waiting, and the drive was short—but too long for Denver.

As soon as they arrived, he took off for the house, his boots grinding the gravel with precision. “Let’s go get her.”

The estate loomed in the dark like a mausoleum untouched by time. He never asked for specifics about Rhae’s youth. It was something they could never share. Now he was seeing her life in the twisted iron railing and manicured hedges.

He could also feel the ghosts here. And he could imagine her, so vulnerable, locked inside that fucking prison Ravenscroft created for her.

He signaled his team forward, ducking under the hedge line and moving up to a basement door hidden between shrubs.

“I got the door.” Theo rushed in silently. In no time, he had the door wired with explosives. When they detonated with a quiet pop , Denver wasted no time.

He followed the map in his mind, inching toward the east wing, where he’d seen lights burning faintly behind curtained windows.

She was there. He could feel her in his bones.

Blood pounded so loud in Denver’s ears that he barely registered the creak of old floorboards. One turn. Another.

And then he was outside the study.

One look at the door filled him with rage. It was fitted with a deadbolt and two padlocks. As if that would keep him out.

He glanced to Theo. “No hiding our position now. Hit it.”

Theo shot the locks off.

Denver kicked the door in.

And there she was.

Rhae.

She huddled on the leather couch, eyes wide. Her lips parted in a gasp the second she saw him. “Denver—”

Relief hit him so hard it buckled his knees, but he didn’t falter, didn’t stop. He rushed in and scooped her up.

“Hey,” he breathed, voice shaking. “Hey, baby. I’m here.”

“Denver,” she sobbed, collapsing into him.

He wrapped her up, cradling her against his chest, settling himself in her scent, her warmth, her trembling frame. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. It’s over.”

But it wasn’t.

Ravencroft slinked into the room behind him and Theo.

He caught sight of the bastard out of the corner of his eye. In one swift move, he

shoved Rhae behind him and aimed his weapon between Ravencroft's eyes.

"Make one move and I fucking drop you," Denver growled.

Ravencroft smiled. The look in his eyes was unhinged as hell. "She doesn't belong to you."

"She never belonged to you."

"Maybe not. But she's here. With me."

"Not anymore." He grasped Rhae's fingers with his free hand. "Theo, tie the fucker up."

Before Theo could move, Ravencroft whipped out a gun.

The shot exploded through the room. Rhae's shriek blended with Denver's shot.

He dropped the man with a clean shot right through the shoulder. Ravencroft flew backward with a scream, clutching the wound as Theo rushed in to secure him.

Into the comms device in Denver's ear came Carson's voice. "We've got Justin in custody!"

Denver didn't wait for what came next. He was already carrying Rhae out of the room, cradling her tight against him, whispering that she was safe, that he loved her, that he'd never let her go.

He would never let anyone come between them again.

Not Ravencroft.

Not the ghosts of their pasts.

He would be her shield. Her sword. Her safe place.

And Navy's too.

Forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

The Wyoming sun sank low in the sky, casting the Black Heart Ranch in a glimmer of gold. The field just beyond the house had been transformed for the evening event.

Carson and Layne's wedding preparations began almost the minute the Malones returned safe and sound with Rhae. The past week had been a flurry of activity, and all their hard work paid off.

Rows of white chairs sat in neat formation facing a wooden arch with ivy and cream roses twisting around it. Twinkling strands of Edison bulbs already glowed lightly in the twilight evening. The wind carried the notes of a violinist warming up, along with the scent of roses and fresh-cut hay.

Everything shimmered in a magical wonderland perfect for the eldest Malone and his bride-to-be.

It was unexpectedly elegant for a place known for dusty boots and callused hands, and perfect.

Carson and Layne wanted something small and meaningful, black tie at Layne's request, and including only their closest friends at Carson's.

Rhae stood at the edge of the deck in flowing champagne-colored silk that all the bridesmaids were wearing. When Layne shyly came into her office and asked her to be in the wedding, Rhae couldn't have been more touched.

The light breeze teased at her loose updo, playing with the artful curls framing her face. Her stomach flipped with nerves, but not for the newlyweds. She was happy for

them—overjoyed, actually.

But the evening carried a different weight for her...one none of the Malones knew about.

“There you are.” The deep voice stroked her senses, and when she turned to meet Denver’s gray eyes, his gaze caressed her.

He approached in a sharp black tuxedo that shouldn’t have fit his rugged frame so perfectly—but of course, it did. His hair was pushed back with just enough defiance to say I wore the suit, but I’m still me , and the slight rasp of stubble across his jaw made her throat tighten.

“All the guests are here. It won’t be long now.”

“There aren’t many chairs out on the lawn. When you said a small gathering, I didn’t think it would be this small. But of course, Layne doesn’t have many people on her side.” She looked down at her hands linked in front of her, trembling slightly with her nerves. “I don’t even have as many as her.”

He moved in, fingers lifting to brush the curl next to her cheek. “This little curl has a mind of its own.”

She smiled softly, unsure what to say.

“And you’re wrong. You do have family. You have me and Navy...and all the Malones. Whether you want us or not.”

Emotion rose up sharp in her chest. She blinked rapidly. If she ruined her makeup by crying, Willow would kill her, after the hour she spent painstakingly applying it.

He ducked his head to meet her eyes. “You okay? You’re quiet.”

She hesitated. What she had to say would surely bring on a flood of tears.

“If you want to talk about what happened...back at the estate with Ravencroft—”

Surprise washed over her. She shook her head. “No. I wasn’t thinking about that.” She already knew that Justin and Ravencroft were both rotting in jail cells for what they did.

Something unreadable passed through his eyes. Eyes that their daughter shared. “Then what is it?”

She reached for her glittery clutch bag sitting on the deck railing. Her hands trembled harder as she fumbled with the clasp. She pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

When she lifted her gaze to Denver, his stare intensified. “I have a surprise for you.”

He took it, curiosity clear in his expression as he unfolded the page.

Recognition hit immediately.

He blinked, then blinked again. His throat clicked when he struggled to swallow down the emotion.

“Navy’s birth certificate,” he said slowly.

She nodded. “I had it updated. You’re listed now. As her father.”

His hands tightened around the paper. “But how? I’m not alive on paper. Unless...”

She nodded. “You are now. You’re not a ghost anymore. Instead of un-alived, you’re re-alived. So I had her last name officially changed.”

His eyes slipped shut, and he gripped the paper tighter, as if afraid he’d drop it or all that it meant would go up in smoke. “I’m officially Navy’s father.”

“You always were, Denver. But now it’s real in every way.” Her throat clamped off, and the tears swam in her eyes. She held them wider, hoping the breeze would dry them out before her makeup got ruined.

“This... Rhae, this means so damn much to me.”

He stared down at the paper as if seeing something sacred. He was silent for a long beat, then he folded the paper and slipped it into the inside pocket of his tux jacket.

“You gave me more than a surprise.” His voice was hoarse. “You gave me a life back.”

Her throat ached at the passion in his voice.

He cupped her face, pressing a slow, deep kiss to her lips that seemed to anchor them both to the earth. When he pulled away, his thumb brushed over her lower lip like he didn’t want to let go.

“I have something for you too,” he murmured.

Her eyes widened slightly. “You do?”

He reached into his tux pocket again and pulled out a small black velvet box.

Her breath stalled.



He opened it.

Inside sat a delicate ring—an oval diamond set in a vintage-style band, flanked by two smaller stones. Not oversized. Not flashy. Just beautiful.

Rhae's knees almost gave out.

“I know this isn't traditional,” he said quietly. “And maybe the timing is crazy. But I've never been more certain of anything. I love you. I love our daughter. I want to build a life together, not just exist in one.”

“Denver...”

“I'm not asking for a perfect future. Just ours . Messy, real, beautiful. Will you marry me?”

Tears sprang to her eyes. Her heart swelled, bursting against her ribs.

“Yes,” she whispered, then louder, with a watery laugh. “Yes. Hell yes.”

He grinned and slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

She stared down at it in wonder, then looked back up to find his eyes blazing with heat.

“You've never been in my room, have you?” He pitched his voice low.

She blinked, caught off guard. “What?”

“I need five minutes with you. Maybe ten.”

“What—Denver, the wedding—”

“We still have time. It won’t start for fifteen minutes. No one will notice. Come on.”  
He pulled on her hand. “Call it...an early wedding gift.”

Laughing breathlessly, she followed him.

Denver’s room was tucked at the end of the house. As he led her down the corridor, family photos that she longed to stop and look at flashed by. Another time, she would come and see them all. Now that she was family too—that ring on her finger officially made her part of it—she could do that.

Inside his room, the bed was made military-tight. The curtains were drawn against the fading light. And everything smelled good, like cedar, clean linen...and him.

She caught sight of the shelf filled with helmets, medals and old trophies of gold men clutching footballs.

“You played football?” she asked.

“Linebacker.” He huffed a laugh. “Didn’t help my head. Took too many hits on the field.”

She fixed her stare on a shiny bronze plaque. “You were good.”

“Could have had a full-ride scholarship. I chose the military instead.” He shook his head. “Didn’t matter anyway. Concussions sent me out of the military before I was ready.” He tugged at his bowtie—not his dog tags—and pulled it off. “That led me here. To you. To Navy. I’d trade it all for that.”

Her heart squeezed.

He touched her, a hand on the small of her back, warm and strong, bringing her closer.

The air changed, became charged.

His fingers roamed up the zipper along her spine. “You wore this dress to kill me,” he growled.

“You wore that tux to tempt me.”

He kissed her hard, backing her toward the bed as she attacked the buttons of his jacket and tore it off his shoulders. Then his shirt, revealing steely muscle.

The zipper moving down her spine sent tingles to every corner of her body. She shrugged her shoulders, letting the gown slip off them to pool around her high heels.

She reached for his belt and fly, hungry for that stiff length bulging against his pants. When she reached his erection, wrapping her fingers around it, her gasp mingled with his groan.

“How many minutes now?” she whispered urgently against his chest, already gliding to her knees. That damn tormenting dimple in his cheek had her pussy flooding with want.

But he caught her arms and pulled her up. “Not that kind of time.” His eyes burned into hers for a split second before he claimed her lips again. He lifted her, and they fell to the bed.

As his body came down over hers, he let out a rasp. “I’ll never get enough of you.”

“Then take me.” With one hand, she worked her panties down and off one high-heel.

She parted her legs, wrapping them around his muscled hips.

And he looked into her eyes and joined them in one swift, thorough, filling thrust.

Every stroke tightened the knot of lust in her core. Every brush of his mouth over hers ignited passion as bright as the first bonfire that rekindled their relationship.

He grasped her hip, pulling her up, into him, deepening every plunge of his cock inside her slick heat. The hunger inside him exploded out of control. She'd never seen Denver like this, so out of his head with passion and need.

It spurred her to the peak, and her release struck. Her mouth opened on an O of bliss. Then Denver issued a rumble, and he was fitting his cock so deep as streamers of cum bathed her inner walls, over and over.

It was the kind of heat that healed scars. In both of them.

When their need was slaked—for now, at least—he lifted a muscled arm and glanced at his watch. He gave her a sexy, lazy smile. “Seven minutes. Gives us three to get dressed.”

He performed a pushup to stand at the side of the bed, one hand extended to her.

She took it, and he hauled her up. In a rushed flurry, they dressed again, helping each other with zippers and buttons. As he worked nimbly at his bowtie, Rhae looked in his mirror, attempting to smooth her hair.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:46 pm*

“There’s no help for it.” His voice came from behind her. “It just looks sexier now.”

She whipped a lipstick out of her purse and reapplied it in a swift sweep. Then she caught sight of the ring on her finger.

Staring down at it, she didn’t think her heart could get any fuller than it was right this moment. She looked up into his adoring gaze. The man who had given her Navy. A home. A life.

“I love you, Denver. Always have. Always will.”

He leaned in, pressing a tender kiss between her brows. “And I love you and Navy with all of my being.”

Together, they walked out to join the wedding party. Theo was holding Navy, her full, fancy dress swallowing his arm. When the baby saw her parents, she let out a squeal that made everyone around her laugh.

She really was everybody’s baby.

And Rhae was exactly where she belonged.

\* \* \* \* \*

Denver stood just outside the tent, drink in hand, staring at the purple darkness creeping over the ranch. His tux jacket was unbuttoned, his bowtie abandoned in the depths of his pocket.

Next to Navy's birth certificate.

His heart flexed. Every time he thought about Rhae's surprise, his emotions engulfed him like a tide.

He brought the glass to his lips, the aroma of aged bourbon filling his nose and overpowering the scent of the steak that Mr. and Mrs. Carson Malone served at their wedding reception.

From across the yard, Rhae caught his eye.

His heart tumbled again. Christ, she was stunning in that dress. It hugged her body like a secret only he knew. When she lifted the champagne flute to him, beckoning him to come to her, her engagement ring flashed in the twinkling fairy lights strung across the lawn.

He started toward Rhae but only made it a few feet before Layne walked into his path, decked out like a model in her wedding finery.

"The DJ is setting up. Hope you've got your dancing shoes on. Carson's making everyone dance."

He hiked up a brow. "Carson? My brother Carson?"

"Uh-huh." She grinned.

"The same man you just married?"

She grinned like the happiest woman on earth. "The same one."

He gave her a flat look. "Then I guess I'm going to dance."

She patted his arm. “See you on the dance floor, Denver.”

She bustled off in a swish of satin, her dress whispering around her as she entered the tent.

Rhae crossed the space to meet him. As he approached, he felt his cock thicken with desire. He couldn’t get the feel of her underneath him out of his head.

Eyes sparkling with love and the reflection of the lights, she tilted her face up to him. “Hey there, handsome.”

“Hi, gorgeous.”

She hooked her hand around his nape, drawing him down for a kiss. Their mouths scarcely brushed when the music started. A loud, thumping beat rolled from the speakers.

Denver groaned against Rhae’s mouth. “Oh, god. Not this song.”

“You all know what time it is!” the DJ shouted over the microphone.

“Cupid Shuffle” blasted across the tent. Groans and cheers broke out in equal measure.

Rhae was already laughing. She grabbed both of his hands and hauled him onto the wooden dance floor, the same one used at Oaks’s wedding. The Malones seemed to be handing it down from family wedding to wedding like an heirloom christening gown.

Rhae grabbed him. “Come on, SEAL. Let’s see what those hips can do.”

He dug in his heels. “I don’t even know the moves.”

“That’s the point!” She tugged him into the middle of the guests forming a dance line.

He caught sight of Carson and flipped him the bird. His brother only grinned and gave him a salute in return.

“Damn. I guess I’m doing this.” Denver moved in step to Rhae’s moves, half swaying, half lurching to the left, then to the right.

Someone shouted the steps like they were in bootcamp, which had Rhae howling with laughter every time Denver went the wrong way.

He leaned in as they stepped and turned. “Don’t worry—I’m going to get revenge.”

“On your brother for picking the music, or me?”

“Both of you. Only his punishment is going to be much, much, much different from yours.” His eyes hooded as he stared down at her.

She shot him a wink. “Sounds like sweet payback.”

When the chorus repeated for a third time—and Denver was sufficiently humiliated—he ducked out of the tent and made a beeline for the bar. With a fresh drink in hand, he battled to restore his dignity by leaning nonchalantly against the rustic wood bar and appeared masculine.

Theo appeared beside him with a smirk and a glass of bourbon. “Nice moves.”

“Shut up,” Denver said without heat.

Theo chuckled low and deep as he took a sip of the alcohol.

They watched Rhae dancing to a slow song with Navy, droopy from being passed



around the family like a bouquet. The little girl had one hand tangled in her momma's hair and the other clutching the strap of her dress.

A lump formed in Denver's throat.

"What'd you decide about Blackout?" he asked, his voice low.

Theo glanced at him sideways. "You really asking? Or are you hoping I already made the smart choice?"

"There is no smart or dumb choice. Only a choice."

Theo stared at his glass a moment. "How could I leave all this? Plus, you guys would be lost without me."

Denver eyed him, then nodded slowly. "Agreed."

Theo laughed. "Really? That easy?"

Denver sipped. "I'll let you get a big head if it keeps you out of danger."

There was silence for a beat, the kind that was laced with deep understanding—the kind you didn't get outside of war zones, blood bonds and brotherhoods.

"I love this place, man," Theo finally said, his voice quieter. "I didn't think I would enjoy being back here. Not after all the bad memories our father built for us. But it feels...cleansed. It feels right."

"It is."

Willow appeared then, swaying to the music with a wine glass in hand. "Well, well. Look at the stoic warriors getting all sentimental."

“You’re sentimental every time you walk past a bakery,” Theo shot back.

She grinned and smoothed a hand down her slender hip that wouldn’t hold an ounce of fat even if she ate everything a bakery had to offer. “I do love donuts. Now, Theo...” She turned toward him with a predatory twinkle in her eyes. “When are you getting married?”

He choked on his drink, violently sputtering bourbon. “Jesus, Willow!”

Denver tried not to laugh but failed.

“I don’t even have a woman,” Theo protested.

Willow waved him off. “Minor detail. Listen, when you do get one, I have a very specific order.”

“An order ?”

Willow began holding up fingers. “She has to be a country girl at heart. But also a fashionista. She should know how to two-step and how to thrift. Be able to ride a horse but also rock high heels. Bonus points if she can make killer cinnamon rolls and shoot a gun.”

Denver let out a low whistle. “You trying to find Theo a wife or describing yourself?”

“I’m rounding out the crew,” Willow said, dead serious. “I love every single one of my sisters-in-law, but I like to shake things up with variety.”

Theo looked helplessly at Denver. “Can she do this?”

“It’s Willow,” Denver replied. “The woman who thought the town of Willowbrook was named after her. She does what she wants.”

Willow raised her glass in triumph. “Exactly.”

They shared a laugh, and Denver let the warmth of it soak in. It had taken them a long time to get here—to this place where the ghosts were fewer and the laughter came easier.

He looked across the dance floor at the two most important people in his life. Rhae smiled at him easily, as if she could breathe without scanning every shadow. Navy’s head rested on her shoulder, her eyes shut, content in her mother’s arms.

Willow tilted her head at him, mischief returning. “So...when are you going to announce your engagement?”

Denver paused a beat. “What engagement?”

“Oh, please.” She rolled her eyes. “I put two and two together the first time I saw you and Navy side by side. I knew she was your daughter in that moment. And you think I didn’t notice Rhae’s wearing a ring?”

Theo’s lips twitched and his attention bounced between Denver and Rhae. “Do tell, brother.”

Denver took another sip. “I’ll announce it when I’m ready.”

“Well, good,” Willow said with a sly smile. “Because that time is now.”

“What? No, Willow. It’s Carson and Layne’s day—”

She gave him a pointed stare. “Layne’s the one who suggested it, silly. Did you think most of your sisters-in-law didn’t already see that rock on her hand?”

Before he could process that thought, Willow had him by the arm, dragging him

toward the DJ booth. The man behind the mic handed her the microphone like she was royalty, which—all of them had to face it—she kinda was in these parts.

Denver looked out across the crowd. The music cut. Everyone turned.

And then his eyes found Rhae.

She was still swaying with Navy, cradling her. She looked radiant and surprised, eyes meeting his with that spark—that flicker that had ruined him from the start.

“Denver has something he wants to say.” Willow handed him the mic and stepped back.

Denver curled his fingers around the mic and cleared his throat, feeling about twenty pairs of eyes on him. Friends. His family. His brothers. Rhae and Navy. His entire heart.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” he began. “I didn’t want to take over Carson and Layne’s day.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd. The newlyweds drew closer to each other.

“But I also can’t keep this to myself anymore.”

He looked at Rhae. At Navy. At the ring on her hand that fit her like fate guided it all.

“I proposed,” he said simply.

Gasps, cheers.

“And she said yes.”

The applause was instant, deafening, joyous. Rhae's eyes shimmered with tears, and even Navy cracked her sleepy eyes as if she knew this was something huge and she couldn't miss it.

Denver handed the mic back and made his way toward his girls. People slapped his shoulders, his brothers pounded him on the back and his sisters-in-law hugged him, shouting out congratulations.

When he reached Rhae, she handed him Navy and threw her arms around his neck.

He bowed, his lips to her ear. "Willow made me do it."

She laughed. "I know. But it was perfect."

They kissed in the center of the crowd while Navy snuggled between them, the future wrapped up tight in their arms.

And in that moment, surrounded by everyone he loved, Denver realized something simple and profound.

He hadn't just found peace.

He'd built it—with her.

He came home broken, but she gave him a reason to heal. And now, with their daughter in his arms and forever in his grasp, Denver Malone was finally whole.

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