



Tempting Alec (Club Tales #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It was only supposed to be one night at the club. Now she's the CIA analyst with dangerous intel and he's the Cerberus operative sent to protect her.

Grier Marsden

A brilliant CIA analyst has always preferred the safety of her computer screen, but when a top-secret file reveals a mole within the agency, she doesn't know who she can trust. An explosion at the safehouse where she is hiding leaves her racing for her life with Alec McKennon. She recognizes him from Club Southside. Other than one night with him at the club she doesn't know much else about him.

Alec McKennon

Alec is a former Navy SEAL Commander turned Cerberus agent out of Chicago. He is known in the field as being relentless and mission focused. He was surprised when he recognized Grier from their night at the club but the exploding bomb kept him focused on getting them to safety. As they race against time their uneasy alliance turns into a partnership forged by necessity and mutual respect.

But as trust becomes a luxury they can't afford, the line between ally and enemy blurs, and Grier's growing suspicions threatens to unravel not only their mission, but their lives. Can they expose the mole before it's too late? And when the dust settles, will they have the courage to confront the feelings that have ignited between them?

Tempting Alec is a pulse-pounding romantic suspense where trust is fragile, love is dangerous, and every choice could be their last.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 1

Alec

S omewhere in the

South Arabian Sea

Five Years Ago

Alec McKennon crouched low in the inflatable craft as it sliced through the pitch-black waters off the coast of Somalia. The moon was a mere sliver in the sky, offering little light by which to navigate. The only sounds were the hum of the boat's engine, muffled beneath layers of thick black rubber, and the rhythmic crash of waves against the hull. Each wave sent a spray of saltwater into the air, soaking Alec's tactical gear and leaving a bitter taste on his lips. But he barely noticed; his mind was focused, his senses heightened by the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

He glanced at the men around him, members of the SEAL Team under his command, each one a seasoned warrior, their faces obscured by camouflage paint and night-vision goggles. They moved with the quiet efficiency of professionals, checking weapons, securing gear, and preparing for the imminent assault. Alec's heart pounded in his chest, but outwardly, he was the picture of calm. Years of training had drilled into him the importance of maintaining composure no matter the situation.

Ahead, the outline of the unflagged ship came into view, a dark silhouette against the even darker horizon. The ship was small, barely more than a blip on the radar, but it

was carrying a deadly cargo: Iranian-made weapons bound for Yemen, destined for the rebels. Alec knew the stakes. The rebels had been wreaking havoc in the region, their missile and drone attacks becoming increasingly brazen. If these weapons made it to their destination, the consequences could be catastrophic.

The mission had come together quickly. Intelligence had pinpointed the ship's location, and the SEALs were launched from one of the US Navy's mobile sea bases that had become a critical asset in the Navy's efforts to try and restrict arms shipments in the region. Backed by drones and helicopters, the SEALs were tasked with boarding the rebel vessel, neutralizing any threats, and seizing the illicit cargo.

As the inflatable craft drew closer to the rebel ship, Alec signaled to his team. The men rose to their feet, their movements synchronized and fluid. The boat slowed, and Alec could hear the faint creaking of the rebel ship's wooden hull as it rocked in the waves. With practiced ease, the SEALs tossed grappling hooks over the side, the metal claws biting into the wood with a satisfying thunk. Alec was the first to climb, his gloved hands gripping the rope tightly as he ascended. His boots found purchase on the slick wood, and in seconds, he was over the rail and on the deck.

The rest of the team followed in quick succession, fanning out silently, weapons at the ready. The ship was eerily quiet save for the gentle lapping of the sea against its sides. Alec moved forward, his M4 carbine sweeping the shadows, searching for any sign of the crew. His earpiece crackled to life as he spoke into the comm system.

"Alpha team, with me; we're moving to the bridge. Bravo team, secure the cargo hold. We're on the clock."

The way they had planned it, Alpha team was tasked with securing the bridge and neutralizing the crew. Alec moved quickly, his steps light and measured. The ship was small, and it didn't take long to reach the narrow staircase leading to the bridge. He could hear the faint murmur of voices from above, the low tones indicating that

the crew was unaware of the SEALs' presence.

He signaled to the man behind him, and they began to ascend the stairs, weapons trained on the door at the top. Alec's heart thudded in his chest, each beat echoing in his ears. He was acutely aware of the weight of his rifle, the tension in his muscles, the steadying breath he took before reaching the door.

In one fluid motion, Alec kicked the door open and swept into the room. The crew inside barely had time to react. Alec's M4 barked twice, the suppressed shots barely more than a whisper in the night. Two men went down before they could even reach for their weapons. The third froze, his hands in the air, his eyes wide with fear. Alec's team moved in, securing the room and cuffing the survivor.

"Bridge secure," Alec reported into his mic, his voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through him.

"Copy that," came the reply.

"Bravo team, what's your status?" asked Alec.

There was a brief pause before the voice of Bravo team's leader crackled over the comms. "We've secured the cargo hold. Confirmed Iranian-made weapons. Looks like cruise and ballistic missile components, along with air defense parts."

Alec allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction. The mission was going smoothly, but they weren't out of the woods yet. They needed to get the crew under control, secure the ship, and rendezvous with the mobile sea base without drawing attention from any hostile forces in the area.

He turned to the crewman who had surrendered. The man was shaking, his eyes darting around the room as if looking for a way out. Alec crouched down in front of

him, keeping his voice low and calm.

“Who’s in charge here?”

The man hesitated, his gaze flicking to the bodies of his comrades before settling back on Alec. “The captain,” he said in broken English. “He’s...he’s in his quarters.”

Alec nodded. “Take me to him.”

The crewman didn’t argue. He led Alec and two other SEALs down the narrow passageways to a small cabin near the aft of the ship. Alec motioned for the others to take positions on either side of the door before kicking it open.

Inside, a middle-aged man with graying hair scrambled to his feet, his hand reaching for a pistol on the table beside him. Alec was faster. He crossed the room in two quick strides, slamming the man against the wall, the barrel of his rifle pressed to the man’s chest.

“Don’t,” Alec warned, his voice cold.

The man froze, his hand hovering above the pistol before slowly raising it in surrender. Alec shoved him against the wall, pulling the pistol from its holster and tossing it to one of the other SEALs. The captain looked at Alec with a mixture of anger and fear, his breath coming in quick, shallow gasps.

“Are there any other crew members?” Alec demanded.

The captain shook his head, but Alec could see the lie in his eyes. He tightened his grip on the man’s collar, bringing his face closer. “Don’t lie to me.”

The captain swallowed hard, his gaze dropping to the floor. “Three...three more in

the engine room.”

Alec nodded, satisfied. He keyed his mic. “Bravo team, we’ve got three more in the engine room. I’ll take two men with me to get them. Secure the weapons.”

“Roger that,” was the reply.

“Okay team; let’s wrap this up.” Alec pushed the captain into a chair, securing his hands with zip ties before turning to his team. “Let’s clear the engine room and get the hell out of here.”

The team moved quickly, their movements swift and precise as they descended into the bowels of the ship. The engine room was hot and noisy, the thrum of the machinery filling the space with a constant vibration. Alec’s team spread out, weapons ready as they approached the room’s entrance.

Inside, three men were hunched over the controls, their backs to the door. They didn’t hear the SEALs approach until it was too late. Alec and his men burst in, weapons trained on the crew members. The men froze, their hands going up in surrender as they turned to face the intruders.

“Down on the ground, now!” Alec ordered.

The men complied, dropping to their knees with their hands on their heads. Alec’s team quickly secured them, and Alec keyed his mic again.

“Engine room secure. We’ve got the ship.”

“Commander, we’ve got a drone feed showing a small boat approaching from the east. Might be a patrol. We need to move.”

Alec felt a spike of urgency. The last thing they needed was a firefight with a patrol boat, especially while they were still aboard the rebel ship. He looked at his team, each man ready and waiting for the next command.

“Let’s get the crew topside and secure the cargo,” Alec ordered. “We need to be off this ship before that boat gets here.”

The SEALs moved with practiced efficiency, herding the captured crew members to the deck and securing them in a corner. Alec oversaw the operation, his eyes constantly scanning the horizon for any sign of the approaching boat. The night was still dark, the sea still choppy, but Alec knew they were running out of time.

As the SEALs began to transfer the missile components and other weapons to their inflatable craft, Alec kept one eye on the drone feed. The small patrol boat was getting closer, its outline becoming visible against the dark water. It wasn’t large, but it was heavily armed, and Alec knew they couldn’t risk an engagement.

“Move faster,” Alec urged his team, his voice tense.

The SEALs worked quickly, loading the last of the cargo into their craft. Alec could hear the hum of the patrol boat’s engines now, a low growl that seemed to vibrate through the deck of the rebel ship. They were cutting it close, too close for comfort.

Finally, the last of the weapons were secured, and Alec signaled for the team to board the inflatable. As they pushed off from the rebel ship, Alec could see the patrol boat closing in, its spotlight cutting through the darkness, sweeping over the water.

“Go, go, go!” Alec shouted to the boat’s driver.

The inflatable’s engine roared to life, and they sped away from the rebel ship, the small craft skimming over the waves. Alec kept his eyes on the patrol boat, watching

as it approached the rebel vessel, its spotlight now fixed on the ship. The SEALs had timed their escape perfectly; the patrol boat was too focused on the rebel ship to notice the small inflatable disappearing into the night.

As they raced back toward the mobile sea base, Alec finally allowed himself to breathe. The mission had been a success—they had secured the weapons and neutralized the threat without losing a single man. But Alec knew this was just one battle in a much larger war. The rebels would continue to receive support from Iran, and the US Navy would continue to intercept shipments, trying to stem the tide of weapons flowing into Yemen.

Alec focused on the here and now. The inflatable craft sped across the dark waters, the men around him silent and alert, their mission complete but their guard still up. Alec scanned the horizon, his mind already shifting to the debrief, to the next mission, to the constant, unending fight to keep the world just a little bit safer.

The mobile sea base loomed ahead, its lights a beacon in the darkness. Alec's heart rate began to slow as they neared the ship, the adrenaline of the mission fading into a deep-seated weariness. As they pulled alongside the massive vessel, Alec knew that tonight, at least, they had made a difference. But he also knew that tomorrow would bring another mission, another challenge, and the fight would continue.

Naval Base Coronado

San Diego, California

Two Months Later

“Commander, are you sure I can’t change your mind?” The admiral had flown in after being informed that Alec had chosen not to re-enlist and had tendered his resignation.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“But why, Alec? You’re up for another promotion, which you’re a shoe-in for...”

“I appreciate that, sir, but it doesn’t change anything. I’ve put in my twenty years and it’s time for me to hang up my flippers. My body has taken more abuse than it was ever designed to do. Frankly, sir, I’m tired of fighting for people who won’t fight for themselves. I’m tired of risking my life for people who would spit in my face after we’ve saved them.” Alec shook his head. “No, I’ve been offered a job by Robert Fitzwallace.”

“Damn that man. He scoops up the best of the best and then hires out as a private mercenary...”

“Fitzwallace has never worked against the interests of the United States or the United Kingdom; nor would he.”

“I know. I know. Hell, Fitz is a friend, and if I’m being honest, I don’t blame him. He’s put together one of the best black ops and security firms in the world. So, you’ll be relocating to London?”

“He’s given me my choice of locations. I’ve decided to relocate to Chicago.”

“Brrr,” said the admiral with a smile. “Damn cold in Chicago, but I hear his Club Southside is the hottest spot in town.”

Alec grinned. He was well aware of Fitzwallace’s growing number of clubs: Baker Street in London, Club Southside in Chicago, and Carriage House in Charleston. Alec had played at Baker Street more than once, and one of Fitzwallace’s enticements was a compensation package which made his Naval salary look like chump change and included playing privileges at all three clubs.

As he signed the final paperwork that would separate him from the Navy, he leaned back before standing and snapping the admiral a final salute. “It’s been an honor, sir.”

“The honor has been mine, Alec,” said the admiral returning the salute and then extending his hand.

As Alec left Naval Base Coronado, a bald eagle cried out overhead. Alec looked up and smiled. He had no idea where the eagle was going. Alec might know where he was going, but he hadn’t a clue what his future held. Best he get on to finding that out.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 2

Grier

C IA Safe House

Moscow, Russia

Present Day

Grier hunched over her laptop, the glow from the screen casting shadows across her face in the dimly lit Moscow safe house. The walls, bare and cold, seemed to close in on her as she fought against the boredom that had settled over her like a heavy blanket. The hum of the computer was the only sound, punctuating the silence of the small, nondescript room. They'd told her going 'into the field' would be exciting, dangerous; they'd lied.

At least back home in her little cottage outside of Langley, Virginia, her life had a certain predictability. She could go to work in her little cubicle. At the end of the day, she could come home, pull off her clothes, including her bra, and indulge in the wonderfully sexy romance novels set in lifestyle clubs. There, the men were incredibly dominant and the women found peace in their submission to caring Doms who saw to all their needs—physical, emotional, mental, not to mention sexual. Somehow her vibrator no longer seemed enough.

Her fingers idly tapped against the keys as she scrolled through encrypted files, her mind far away from the task at hand. She couldn't shake the memory of that night in

Chicago, when she'd felt safe and cut off from the rest of her life. She'd dared to venture out to Club Southside, the city's most well-known and exclusive lifestyle club. The pulse of the music, the dim lights, and the smell of expensive liquor had exceeded all of her wildest fantasies.

And then when her nerve had started to fail her, he was there—tall, dark, magnetic. He'd stolen not only her breath away, but her ability to speak. He'd looked like every fantasy she'd ever had dressed in his leathers—muscular with a sculpted chest and chiseled abs showing through this leather vest with a prominent bulge in the front of his leather pants. His piercing blue eyes had locked onto hers the moment he entered the room, and it had been impossible to look away. The way he moved, with a quiet confidence that sent a shiver down her spine, still lingered in her thoughts.

He'd been about her age, but he exuded confidence and experience. His hair had been thick and unruly and made him sexier than anyone had a right to be. If looks could be believed, he was exactly what she'd come looking for—a Dom, with a capital D, not a daddy Dom or a soft Dom... but a truly dominant Dom. One who would take her to her breaking point and bring her back down, giving her the aftercare she so desperately needed. This would be her first time, and it both excited and scared her.

“You're G?” he asked in a deep, low voice.

Grier could do nothing but nod.

He smiled. “First time?”

Another nod. God, he was going to think he'd gotten stuck with a submissive who couldn't speak. He stretched out his hand, helping her to her feet. Grier had purchased a black brocade corset which seemed to make the most of her figure—chubby or curvy, depending on how charitable one wanted to be—as well as a matching pair of boy shorts. The woman at the corset shop had tried to talk her into

a skimpy thong, but Grier had declined. She'd also purchased a pair of stiletto heels, which now caused her to wobble when she walked.

The Dom who would only be known as 'Sir' stopped and kneeled down, running his hand firmly down the back of her calf. "Let's get these off. I don't want you to hurt yourself. Inflicting pain is my job."

Grier's entire body shivered. She might be limited to calling him Sir, but she would forever in her mind think of him as Master McSexy.

As they walked into the dimly lit dungeon, Grier's heart was pounding in her chest, echoing in her ears with every step she took at his side. She couldn't help but wonder if every lithe blonde in the place was wondering what he was doing with her. Truth to tell, she was wondering the same thing, but she decided she was just going to go with the flow and enjoy herself. After all, it was just a one-night stand, right?

Her tongue was glued to the top of her mouth, her eyes locked onto his. She saw a gleam reflected back at her, a gleam of power, of delight, and she hoped this long-held dream wasn't about to turn into a nightmare.

As he led her to the frame, she tried to keep her breathing steady, her hands trembling only slightly. The air in the club was thick with anticipation, the pulse of the music like a heartbeat, amplifying the tension. She could feel eyes on her from all around the room, from the observant couples sharing a private booth in the corner to the lone wolf at the bar, nursing a drink. She'd been ambivalent about having an audience and so had let him choose. She wondered now if that had been a mistake, but she refused to back down.

He ran his fingers up her arms, his eyes on hers, staring into her soul, until her lips parted. Master McSexy escorted her up onto the stage and turned her to face the audience. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pick up a wicked looking blade

and felt the spine of the knife on her back as it slipped beneath the lacings.

“I’ll buy you new ones,” he whispered in her ear.

The corset fell away as did the boy shorts when he cut them away, smiling as she was bared to anyone and everyone who’d come to watch the show on the main stage. Master McSexy was said to be a whipmaster, one of Club Southside’s best Doms with a flogger. If everyone hadn’t been watching her, judging her, Grier might have tried to cover herself with her hands. But that gaze of his demanded she be brave, that she prove him, and everyone else, wrong for thinking she would bail. Instead, she lifted her chin and stared back at him, defiant, for now.

“Brave, are we?” he chuckled, music to her ears, even if he was goading her. She tilted her head to the right, just watching him, anticipation making her squirm, which made him smile.

Master McSexy securely fastened her wrists to the top of the frame, and she found herself glancing at the crowd again, even though she knew she shouldn’t. Their faces were a mix of awe and curiosity; some even looked jealous. For a brief moment, Grier felt like she was the center of attention—in a good way—a living, breathing art exhibit.

But then, the reality of the situation settled in. Master McSexy reached over to a table, picking up a flogger, shaking its falls out. Grier could feel her heart pounding against her ribs. This wasn’t an art exhibit. This was Club Southside, where rules were made to be broken, but only with consent. She had agreed to this—craved this.

As he unbuckled his belt, Grier felt a wave of nerves wash over her. She had never been one to seek out pain, but something about Master McSexy and his flogger intrigued her. She bit her lip, tension spreading through her body like wildfire.

“Are you ready, G?” he asked, his eyes never leaving hers. She could see the hunger in them, a hunger that matched her own. She nodded, swallowing hard as she forced herself to meet his gaze.

As he flicked the flogger, she could feel every eye in the room focused on them. The stage lights seemed to burn brighter, highlighting every detail of their bodies. Grier could see the anticipation in the audience, the way they held their breath as they waited for Master McSexy to strike. Her heart pounded in her chest, echoing through the silent room.

Master McSexy gripped the flogger, flexing his fingers around the handle and seeming to find its weight reassuring and adequate to the task. He ran it through the air, a soft hiss escaping from the tips. The audience gasped in unison, a chorus of surprised whispers filling the air.

“Are you sure about this, G?” he asked again, his voice low and rumbling like thunder.

She gulped, her throat suddenly dry. She could feel the sweat breaking out on her forehead. Her body trembled with the anticipation of the pain to come. But there was something else, too—a rush of adrenaline, a high that was almost euphoric.

“Yes, Sir” she whispered. “I’m ready.”

And with that, the room seemed to hold its breath as Master McSexy raised the flogger high above his head. The music stopped, the lights dimmed, and the first strike came down hard, across her back, and she couldn’t help but let out a gasp. The pain was sharp and sudden, but it wasn’t unbearable. It was a reminder of what she’d agreed to, what she had craved. Grier had never felt so alive, so exposed, so vulnerable.

Master McSexy continued, strike after strike, each one more precise and powerful than the last. She could feel her skin burning, her muscles tensing, her heart pounding in her chest. She was alive in a way she'd never been before. If people had known she worked for the CIA they would have thought it exciting, but it wasn't. Day after day she worked in her little cubicle deciphering code. It was nothing compared to this. Her back was on fire, but she didn't want it to end. Instead, she wanted more.

As the whip continued to dance across her back, each strike bringing with it a mix of pain and pleasure, she could feel the crowd's energy shifting. They were captivated by this scene, hungry to witness something raw and dangerous. And Grier knew that she was giving them just that.

Master McSexy was a master of his craft, his flogger moving with a grace and precision that was almost beautiful. She could feel her body responding to each strike, her skin tingling and her muscles growing tense. She had never felt so alive, so exposed, so vulnerable.

And yet, there was something about this situation that was empowering. She was taking control of her own desires, stepping into a world that was taboo and dangerous, but felt utterly exhilarating and oddly safe. She could feel the energy of the audience, their eyes on her, their collective breath held as they watched the scene unfold.

"You're doing very well, G," he breathed into her ear when he paused for a moment, his hands coming around to cup her breasts, to tease her nipples as the crowd around them went wild. Grier didn't really hear them, though; all she could hear was his voice. "I didn't think you'd make it this far. You have beautiful nipples, by the way." He gave them a hard tweak.

He moved away before she could respond, his fingers leaving her nipples aching for more.

The flogger resumed its dance through the air, landing on her bottom now, slicing a new layer of burning, pleasurable pain across it.

Grier could feel her cheeks flush with heat, but it wasn't just because of the pain. It was also because of the arousal that was building up inside her with each strike. She knew she was pushing herself, testing her limits, but it felt so good.

Master McSexy continued to lay the flogger down across her body, his movements fluid and precise, never missing a spot. Grier could feel her body responding, her core tightening, her breaths becoming shallower. She was completely under his control, at his mercy, and it was the most exhilarating feeling she'd ever experienced.

As the music started to play again, she could hear the crowd cheering, their energy pulsing through the club. Grier could feel the heat of their stares, their lustful gazes, and it only fueled the fire within her. Master McSexy laid the flogger down and came to examine his handiwork. In some ways she was so turned on, she thought she'd let him fuck her in front of the crowd, but in others, she just wanted him to leave her be and let her revel in the way her body seemed to be singing.

She could feel his fingers dancing over the welts on her skin as he came around to face her, his fingers moving across her hip and down her abdomen, to slide directly over her clit. "Mm, I knew you'd love the flogger, but I didn't know you'd love it this much. You're so wet for me, G. You're absolutely soaking."

He brought his middle finger up to lick it clean, smiling seductively at her when her mouth fell open in shock. "I'll give you something to fill that with later, if you'd like."

Her eyes raced up from the finger he'd stuck back between his lips to his eyes, while her mouth watered instantly.

“Like that idea, huh?” Master McSexy said, his lips coming close to hers, whispering against them, before he moved to the table where he kept his tools. He looked it over, holding up objects for the crowd to either cheer or jeer at.

For a moment, she felt totally out of control, like she had no say in any of this, but one word would stop it all, the word no. She didn’t want to say it, though; she didn’t want to end up like so many of the other women he’d used his flogger on, a puddled mess of pleased exhaustion on the floor.

“You did very well, G,” he said, a hint of admiration in his voice. “I’ve never seen anyone take as much pleasure in pain as you do.”

She smiled, a little shyly, feeling a sudden wave of emotion.

“I’ve never felt this way before,” Grier admitted. “I’ve never felt so alive.”

Let me get you cut down. We can head up to one of the privacy rooms or just get settled in the lounge.”

Grier nodded. In many ways she wanted nothing more than to go up to one of the rooms and spend the rest of the night pleasuring and being pleased by Master McSexy, but that was more than she could allow herself. Being here at the club was risky enough; if someone found out, she could get her security clearance revoked and be out of a job, but there was something about the risk that only added to her arousal and the appeal.

She had wanted to experience this for so long. When the CIA had assigned her to talk to the romance novelist Samantha Coltraine about code cracking, they’d found they had far more in common than either of them had imagined they would. They’d become friends, and that friendship had led to an invitation from Samantha to experience a night at Club Southside. Samantha had assured Grier her confidentiality

would be assured.

“I need to go use the ladies’ room,” she whispered to Master McSexy, her confidence beginning to fail her.

“Of course, G. Do you want me to take you or have one of the other girls go with you?”

“No. No. I’ll be fine.”

It wasn’t technically a lie. She would be fine. In fact, she’d be better than fine if she could just slip away from the Club and get to the train station.

Inside the submissives’ salon, Grier had changed quickly and slipped away into the night. Samantha called and texted. It was only once she had made her getaway and was on the train headed for home that she sent Samantha a text assuring her that she was fine and thanking her for a marvelous experience. Then she blocked Samantha’s number as the train rambled down the track and into the night.

Grier had always prided herself on being unflappable, but something about that man had rattled her, and she hadn’t been able to shake off the experience or him. She didn’t even know his name, but the memory of his rugged features and the heat of his touch had been hard to forget. There had been so many times since that night she’d been tempted to find out, but she had reminded herself that night at the club had been a one night stand and nothing more.

A sudden blip on her screen pulled her back to the present, snapping her out of the memory’s grip. She leaned closer to the laptop, her heart picking up speed as she realized what she was looking at. The file she had been working on for what felt like an eternity had finally begun to give up its secrets.

Her hands moved with purpose now, decrypting line after line of code. Each word that appeared on the screen made her pulse quicken. This was it—the file that could expose a high-level mole within the CIA. The implications were staggering, and Grier felt a mix of excitement and fear wash over her.

She had been chasing shadows for so long, and now, she was on the verge of a breakthrough. But the stakes were higher than ever, and the walls of the safe house seemed to close in even more tightly. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, that somehow, someone knew she was getting close.

Her green eyes narrowed in focus as she continued to work, her mind no longer wandering. The man from Chicago was pushed to the back of her thoughts, replaced by the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She had a job to do, and there was no room for distraction. Not when the truth was so close.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 3

Grier

Grier was still hunched over her laptop, her fingers moving rapidly across the keys as she decrypted yet another layer of security on the file. Layer after layer—they didn't want anyone to be able to decrypt it, but Grier was better than they were. The dimly-lit house was eerily quiet, save for the low hum of the computer and the occasional creak of the old wooden floors beneath her. The room was small, its bare walls and sparse furniture giving it an oppressive, claustrophobic feel. But Grier barely noticed. Her mind was sharp, focused on the task at hand, the boredom that had plagued her earlier now replaced with a razor-sharp intensity.

She was close, so close, to uncovering the secrets buried within the file. Her green eyes, sharp and intelligent, flickered with determination as the last line of code unraveled before her. The information she was about to uncover could shake the very foundations of the CIA. Her heart raced as the final lock clicked open, and she leaned in, eyes narrowing as the screen displayed the decrypted data.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion shattered the silence, ripping through the building with a force that knocked Grier out of her chair. The blast wave sent her sprawling across the floor, her laptop skidding out of reach. A high-pitched ringing filled her ears, and for a moment, she couldn't move, her body paralyzed by the shock. Smoke began to fill the room, thick and acrid, stinging her eyes and lungs as she struggled to regain her bearings.

Panic surged through her as she realized what had happened. The safe house was

under attack, and she was caught in the middle of it. Her laptop—she needed her laptop. Grier forced herself to move, crawling on her hands and knees across the floor, her vision blurred by the smoke. Her fingers brushed against the cool metal of the laptop, and she clutched it to her chest, the only lifeline she had in the chaos that surrounded her.

Stumbling to her feet, Grier fought through the haze, her analytical mind racing to assess the situation. She had to get out, had to escape before the entire building came down around her. But as she turned toward the exit, a strong hand suddenly grabbed her arm, yanking her back with a force that nearly sent her sprawling again.

She whipped around, her eyes wide with fear and anger, ready to fight off whoever had grabbed her. But the sight that met her stopped her cold. Standing before her, his face half-hidden in the shadows, was a man with intense blue eyes and rugged, battle-hardened features. His grip on her arm was firm, unyielding, and his gaze swept over her with a mixture of urgency and calculation.

It was him. The man she'd only known as Master McSexy.

Grier's heart skipped a beat as recognition slammed into her. She'd known he was no ordinary man. Samantha had shared he was a former SEAL Commander and was now a Cerberus operative. Cerberus was one of the most elite and dangerous forces in the world. Samantha had wanted to assure Grier that her anonymity was assured. Those piercing blue eyes, that commanding presence—she had seen them all before—felt them all before—in a very different setting.

Club Southside.

The memory hit her like another explosion. The man standing before her was the whipmaster, the man who had brought her to the edge of ecstasy and beyond in that dark, decadent club in Chicago. The man she had run from, terrified of the intensity

of what she had felt, of the power he had wielded over her. And now, here he was, in the flesh, standing before her in the middle of a war zone, his eyes locked onto hers with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat.

For a split second, Grier hesitated, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. How could this be happening? How could the man who had haunted her dreams for months now be here, in this very moment, pulling her toward the chaos of the Moscow night? She wanted to ask him, wanted to demand answers, but there was no time, no space for questions. The urgency of the situation pressed down on her like a physical weight, crushing her hesitation beneath its overwhelming force.

His grip tightened on her arm, his expression unreadable as he scanned the room, his military training kicking in as he assessed the dangers. “We need to move,” he said, his voice low and commanding, leaving no room for argument. There was no recognition in his eyes, no sign that he remembered her from that night in Chicago. To him, she was just another mission, another objective to be completed.

But Grier knew him. She knew the man behind those eyes, knew what he was capable of—and that was what scared her the most. The power he had over her then, the way he had unraveled her with just a look, was nothing compared to the force of his presence now, in the midst of danger.

“I’m Alec McKennon. I’m with Cerberus. We need to move.” She hesitated. “Grier, now,” Master McSexy snapped, his voice cutting through her hesitation like a knife.

How did he know her name? That was a stupid question to ask herself in the middle of this insanity. He must have been given her name when they’d given him the job of saving her. Wait. Was he saving her? If so, saving her from what? Did the Russians know she was here? What she was doing?

Alec McKennon. She liked his name. It was a strong, confident name.

He pulled her toward the door, dragging her into action, his movements decisive and sure. The building was collapsing around them, the smoke thickening with every passing second. Grier's analytical mind, which had been racing to find a way out, now clamped down on the situation with cold precision. There was no time to question, no time to think. She had to trust him, had to follow his lead, or she wouldn't make it out alive.

They moved through the corridors of the safe house like shadows, Alec—she really liked his name—leading the way with an ease that belied the danger they were in. He moved with the confidence of a man who had faced death countless times and come out the other side. Grier followed, her heart pounding, her laptop clutched to her chest like a lifeline. The air was thick with smoke and dust, and the sound of distant gunfire echoed through the building, a stark reminder of the peril they were in.

Alec stopped suddenly, pressing her back against the wall as he peeked around a corner. Grier could feel his breath against her ear, could smell the sweat and gunpowder that clung to his skin. It brought her back to that night at Club Southside, the memory so vivid it was almost tangible. She could feel the weight of his hands on her, the way he had controlled every movement, every sensation. She had never felt so alive, so utterly at someone else's mercy—and it had terrified her.

But this was different. This was real, and the stakes were life and death. She forced the memory away, focusing on the present, on the danger that surrounded them. Alec pulled back, his expression grim as he met her eyes.

"Two hostiles," he whispered, his voice barely audible over the sound of destruction. "We need to take them out quietly."

Grier nodded, her throat too dry to speak. She wasn't a soldier, wasn't trained for this kind of combat, but she wasn't helpless, either. She reached into her pocket, pulling out a small, concealed blade—a tool of last resort. Alec noticed the movement, his

eyes flicking to the knife with a brief flash of approval before he nodded.

He moved first, slipping around the corner like a shadow. Grier followed, her heart in her throat as they approached the two men standing at the end of the hall, their backs turned to them. Alec moved with lethal precision, taking down the first man with a swift, silent strike. The second man barely had time to react before Alec's arm was around his throat, cutting off his air supply until he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Grier watched, her breath coming in shallow gasps as Alec turned back to her, his eyes sharp and focused. There was no hesitation, no doubt in his movements. He was a man who had done this countless times before, and it showed.

"This way," Alec said, jerking his head toward the stairwell at the end of the hall.

Grier followed, her legs trembling with the effort to keep up. The stairwell was dark and narrow, the walls lined with cracks from the explosion. The air was thick with dust, making it hard to breathe, but Alec didn't slow down. He moved with purpose, his hand still gripping her arm as he led her down the stairs.

They reached the ground floor, and Alec paused, his eyes scanning the area for any signs of danger. The front entrance was blocked by debris, the metal door twisted and bent from the blast. He cursed under his breath, his jaw tightening as he assessed their options.

"Back entrance," he said, more to himself than to Grier. "Come on."

They moved through the building, dodging fallen beams and navigating around piles of rubble. Grier's mind was racing, trying to keep up with the pace Alec was setting. The air was growing thicker with smoke, and her lungs burned with each breath, but she pushed the discomfort aside, focusing on the goal: escape.

Finally, they reached the back of the building, where a small, unmarked door led to the alley. Alec paused, pressing his ear against the door to listen for any signs of movement on the other side. Satisfied that it was clear, he slowly pushed the door open, the hinges creaking loudly in the otherwise silent night.

The alley was dark, the only light coming from the flickering streetlamps at the far end. The city was quiet—too quiet, as if holding its breath and waiting for something to happen. Alec stepped out first, pulling Grier along behind him, his hand never leaving her arm.

They moved quickly, sticking to the shadows as they made their way down the narrow alley. The sound of distant sirens grew louder, a reminder that the authorities would soon be on the scene. They had to disappear before that happened, or they'd be caught in the crossfire between the local police and whoever had attacked the safe house.

As they reached the end of the alley, Alec paused, his eyes scanning the street ahead. It was empty, but that didn't mean it was safe. He turned to Grier, his expression serious.

"Stay close," he said, his voice low and urgent. "We're not out of this yet."

Grier nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. The reality of the situation was beginning to sink in, the full weight of the danger they were in pressing down on her. She had been in dangerous situations before, but nothing like this. This was a new level of fear, a new level of vulnerability. But she didn't have time to dwell on it, didn't have time to let the fear take over. She had to focus, had to stay sharp if she wanted to survive.

They moved out into the street, keeping to the shadows as they made their way toward a parked car at the far end of the block. Alec had clearly planned their escape

route, his movements deliberate and precise. Grier followed, trusting him to get them out of this alive.

But as they reached the car, a sudden shout rang out from behind them, followed by the sound of gunfire. Grier's heart jumped into her throat as Alec spun around, pulling her down behind the car for cover. The bullets struck the pavement around them, sending shards of concrete flying into the air.

"Stay down!" Alec ordered, his voice harsh with urgency.

Grier obeyed, her body trembling with fear as the gunfire continued. Alec returned fire, his shots precise and controlled, each one finding its mark. Grier could hear the sound of the attackers falling, their bodies hitting the ground with sickening thuds. But the gunfire didn't stop, and Grier knew they were outnumbered.

"Move!" Alec shouted, grabbing her arm and pulling her toward the car's passenger side. "Get in!"

Grier scrambled into the car, her hands shaking as she fumbled with the seatbelt. Alec was already in the driver's seat, the engine roaring to life as he slammed his foot on the gas. The car shot forward, tires screeching as they sped down the street, bullets whizzing past them.

Grier glanced back, her heart racing as she saw the dark shapes of their attackers disappearing into the distance. They had made it, they had escaped—at least for now. But the danger was far from over, and Grier knew they were still being hunted.

As the car sped through the darkened streets of Moscow, Grier's mind raced, trying to piece together what had just happened. Who had attacked the safe house? How had Alec known to find her there? And why didn't he seem to recognize her? The questions buzzed in her mind, but there were no answers, not yet.

She turned to Alec, her green eyes searching his face for some sign of recognition, some indication that he knew who she was. But his expression was hard, focused, his mind clearly on the task at hand.

“Alec,” Grier said, her voice trembling. “Do you know who I am?”

Alec’s jaw tightened, his blue eyes flicking to her briefly before returning to the road. “Does it matter?”

Grier’s heart sank at his response, but she didn’t push further. This wasn’t the time for personal revelations or confrontations. They were still in danger, still being hunted, and they needed to stay focused if they wanted to survive.

As they drove through the dark, empty streets, Grier felt a strange mixture of fear and excitement, the same conflicting emotions she had felt that night in Chicago. Alec McKennon was a man who commanded her attention, who drew her in despite the danger, despite the fear. And now, once again, she was in his hands, trusting him with her life.

But this time, the stakes were higher. This time, there was no room for mistakes, no room for hesitation. Grier knew that if they were going to survive, she had to trust him completely. And that was the scariest thing of all.

They drove in silence, the tension thick in the air. Grier’s mind raced, trying to make sense of everything that had happened, trying to figure out what their next move would be. But all she could think about was Alec, the man who had saved her life, the man who had once brought her such incredible pleasure.

The man from whom she had run.

Now, there was no running. Now, there was only the fight for survival, and Alec

McKennon was her only ally in that fight.

The car sped into the night, leaving the burning remains of the safe house far behind. But Grier knew that the danger wasn't over, not by a long shot. And as she glanced at Alec, she couldn't shake the feeling that her life had just taken a turn she could never have anticipated.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 4

Alec

Alec gripped the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles white against the leather as he maneuvered the car through the labyrinthine back alleys of Moscow. The city loomed dark and imposing around them, the streets slick with rain and lined with towering, crumbling buildings that seemed to close in on them with every turn. The engine growled as he pushed the car faster, navigating the narrow roads with a precision born from years of experience. His senses were on high alert, every nerve in his body tuned to the possibility of pursuit.

He glanced at the rearview mirror, his sharp blue eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement. Nothing. Yet the uneasy feeling gnawed at him, a sensation he had learned long ago not to ignore. The attack on the safe house had been swift and brutal, and it was only by sheer luck and his honed instincts that they had escaped. Now, they were on the run, with no clear destination, only the immediate need to stay alive.

It had been meant to be a simple extraction—go in, get the girl, and get out. No fuss, no muss, but as he'd approached the safe house, he'd seen what he assumed to be FSB agents moving towards the house. Somehow, they must have gotten wind of Grier's being there. How the hell had that happened?

He'd been tasked with extracting one of the CIA's encryption analysts from a CIA safehouse in Moscow. If the FSB knew she was there and where the safehouse was located, Alec had to wonder why she was there at all and more importantly, who had

tipped the FSB off? The whole thing seemed a little wonky to him.

When the attack had started, Alec had set some countermeasures and rushed to get the woman to safety. He'd been given her name and her picture to ensure he was getting the right person. When Kingston Coltraine, the head of Cerberus operations in Chicago, had handed him the file and he'd opened it, it had been like a punch to the gut. It was her. It was G—the woman who had haunted his dreams for months. They'd had an intense session and Alec had thought they'd really connected. He'd allowed himself, for that all-too-brief session, to imagine the possibilities. Only she'd shut them down by slipping away like a thief in the night.

Alec glanced at Grier as she sat beside him—her body posture rigid, her hands clutching her laptop, the glow of the city's sporadic streetlights casting her features in sharp relief. She looked more like a scared rabbit than a CIA analyst, and the frustration that had been simmering in Alec's gut since they fled the safe house flared up again. He didn't know what the hell the Agency was thinking, sending someone like her out into the field. She was out of her depth, and it was up to him to keep her alive.

"Do they even train you people before they send you out here?" he muttered under his breath, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

Grier shot him a sharp look, her green eyes flashing with indignation. "I wasn't supposed to be in the field," she snapped back, her voice laced with irritation. "I'm an analyst, not an operative."

Alec gritted his teeth and kept his eyes on the road, biting back the retort that sprang to his lips. He knew she was right. He also knew that part of his irritation had nothing to do with the CIA. Analysts were supposed to be behind desks, not dodging bullets in the middle of a foreign city. But none of that made their situation any less precarious, and it didn't change the fact that her inexperience and lack of training

could get them both killed.

Alec forced himself to focus. If they were going to get out of this alive, he needed to tamp down the leftover emotions from that night at the club. They were being hunted, and he couldn't afford to be distracted. He had to think like a SEAL, like the man he had been before joining Cerberus—always one step ahead, always prepared for the worst. They needed to disappear, to find a place to lay low until he could figure out their next move.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, Grier stiffened beside him, her hand flying out to grab his arm.

“Alec, look!” she hissed, nodding toward the side mirror.

Alec glanced over and his heart skipped a beat. There, in the reflection, was the unmistakable glint of headlights, closing in fast. He cursed under his breath. He had missed it, had been too caught up in his frustration to notice the tail. But Grier had seen it. Despite her inexperience, she had spotted the danger he'd overlooked.

“Hold on,” he barked, yanking the wheel hard to the right.

The car veered sharply, tires screeching as he darted down a narrow alleyway, the walls of the buildings flashing by in a blur. The car behind them followed, its engine roaring as it tried to close the distance. Alec pushed the accelerator to the floor, his eyes scanning the maze of alleyways for an escape route. They couldn't keep this up forever; they needed to find shelter, somewhere to regroup and plan their next move.

Up ahead, he spotted a large, dilapidated building, its windows boarded up, its facade crumbling with age. An abandoned warehouse, by the looks of it—perfect. Alec sped toward it, turning sharply into a side street that led to the rear of the building. He slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching halt behind a row of rusted-

out dumpsters. They were hidden from the main road, at least for the moment.

“Get out,” Alec ordered, already moving as he spoke.

Grier didn’t hesitate this time. She scrambled out of the car, clutching her laptop to her chest as Alec led the way toward the warehouse. He pushed open a rusted metal door, the hinges groaning in protest, and ushered her inside. The darkness swallowed them whole.

Alec pulled the door shut behind them, securing it with a broken pipe he found on the floor. The air inside was thick with dust, the scent of mildew and rust pervasive. The warehouse was vast, filled with the ghostly remains of old machinery and stacks of forgotten crates. It was the kind of place that had seen better days, long abandoned and forgotten by the world.

“Over here,” Alec said, leading Grier deeper into the shadows.

They found a corner near the back of the warehouse, where they could hunker down and avoid any prying eyes. Alec knelt beside her, his eyes scanning the darkness, his mind racing as he considered their options. The only light they had came from the faint glow of Grier’s laptop as she powered it on. They couldn’t stay here long—eventually, their pursuers would find the car and trace them to the warehouse. But for now, it would have to do.

Grier was already typing furiously on her laptop, her fingers moving across the keys with amazing speed and a precision that surprised Alec. She was clearly in her element now, the fear and uncertainty she had shown earlier replaced by a laser focus on the task at hand. Alec watched her, his initial frustration beginning to soften. She might not be an operative, but she was sharp, and she clearly knew her stuff.

“What are you working on?” Alec asked, his voice low.

“I’m pulling up the files I decrypted right before the attack,” Grier replied, not looking up from the screen. “The information in here—it’s about a mole in the CIA. Someone high up. This isn’t just about the weapons shipments to Yemen, which is what I was working on before they sent me here. It’s bigger than that.”

Alec felt a chill run down his spine. A high-level mole within the CIA was bad news—worse than he’d imagined. And if the mole was involved in arms deals with Iranian-made weapons, it meant the situation was far more dangerous than he’d thought. He leaned closer, his eyes narrowing as he watched the lines of code and data scroll across the screen.

“Whoever this mole is, they’ve covered their tracks well,” Grier continued, her voice tense with concentration. “But there are patterns, connections that don’t add up. If I can just—there!” She paused, her eyes widening as she pointed at the screen. “Here it is. This is the link I’ve been looking for.”

Alec looked at the data, trying to make sense of it. He wasn’t an analyst, but he had seen enough classified intel in his time to recognize the significance of what Grier had found. “What does it mean?”

Grier’s voice was grim. “It means the mole has been working with someone inside Cerberus. There are encrypted communications here, sent directly to one of your operatives. Whoever it is, they’ve been feeding the mole information for months—maybe longer.”

Alec’s blood ran cold. The implications were staggering. Cerberus was more than just an organization to him—it was family. The men and women he worked with were the best of the best, people he trusted with his life. The idea that one of them could be a traitor, working with a mole in the CIA, was almost too much to bear.

“Are you sure?” Alec asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Grier met his gaze, her green eyes filled with a mixture of determination and sorrow. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Alec sat back on his heels, his mind reeling. He had seen betrayal before, had dealt with traitors in the field, but this was different. This was personal. The thought that someone he considered family could be responsible for the mess they were in now, for the attack on the safe house, for the lives lost—even if they were the enemy—it was almost more than he could process.

“Who is it?” Alec asked, his voice tight with tension. “Who’s the operative?”

Grier hesitated, her fingers hovering over the keyboard as if she were reluctant to type out the name. Alec could see the conflict in her eyes, the way she wrestled with the knowledge she had uncovered. Finally, she typed a few more commands, and a name appeared on the screen.

Alec’s heart sank as he read it. “No,” he breathed, shaking his head in disbelief. “It can’t be.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“Not really. It’s a code name, but it’s one I recognize as a Cerberus operative.”

“How can you work with people you only know by their code name?” she asked.

He quirked his eyebrow at her. “Pot? Meet kettle,” he said sardonically.

She grinned at him sheepishly. “Right. Sorry.”

It didn’t matter that he didn’t know the identity behind the code name, the evidence was there, clear as day. Alec’s mind raced, trying to reconcile the name on the screen

with the person he knew. It didn't make sense, and yet... it explained so much. The inconsistencies, the strange behavior, the way certain operations had gone sideways for no apparent reason. It all pointed to this.

Grier's voice broke through his thoughts, soft but insistent. "Alec, I know this is hard to believe, but we have to face the facts. Cerberus has been compromised. And if we don't act now, if we don't stop this, more lives will be at risk. We have to expose the mole, no matter what."

Alec clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms as he fought to keep his emotions in check. He wanted to deny it, to argue that there had to be some mistake, but deep down, he knew she was right. The evidence was undeniable, and if they didn't do something, the consequences could be catastrophic.

But even as he accepted the truth, a new fear crept into his mind. If Cerberus had been compromised, it meant that the circle of those he trusted had just shrunk to only those people closest to him. And that realization shook him to his core.

"How do we do this?" Alec asked, his voice rough with emotion. "How do we take down the mole without bringing Cerberus down with it?"

Grier sighed, her shoulders slumping with the weight of the task ahead. "We need proof—concrete evidence that ties the mole to the traitor inside Cerberus. Once we have that, we can go to someone we trust, someone who can help us expose the truth without causing too much collateral damage."

Alec nodded, his mind already working through the logistics. It wouldn't be easy. They would have to move carefully, avoid drawing attention to themselves while they gathered the evidence they needed. And they would have to do it quickly, before the mole realized they were onto them.

“I know someone,” Alec said finally, his voice steadier now. “Someone we can trust. But we’ll need to be careful. If the mole gets wind of what we’re doing, we’re as good as dead.”

Grier looked at him, her eyes searching his face for any sign of doubt. “Who?”

Alec hesitated, the name on the tip of his tongue. But before he could speak, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed through the warehouse, shattering the fragile silence. Alec’s heart jumped into his throat as he sprang to his feet, pulling Grier up with him.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered, his eyes scanning the darkness.

Grier’s breath caught in her throat as she clutched her laptop to her chest. Alec could feel the tension radiating off her, the fear that had been so palpable earlier now returning in full force. He motioned for her to stay behind him as he drew his weapon, the familiar weight of the gun reassuring in his hand.

They moved quickly, slipping deeper into the shadows of the warehouse, Alec’s senses on high alert.

The footsteps grew louder, closer, and Alec tightened his grip on his weapon, his heart pounding in his chest. Whoever was out there was getting closer, and Alec knew they had only moments to act.

He motioned for Grier to stay put as he crept toward the source of the noise, his movements silent and controlled. The darkness was thick, making it difficult to see, but Alec’s training had taught him to rely on more than just his eyes. He listened, the sound of his own breathing barely audible as he edged closer to the intruders.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, the noise stopped. Alec froze, his body

tense, every muscle coiled and ready to strike. The silence stretched on, the seconds ticking by like hours, and Alec's mind raced with possibilities. Were they being stalked? Had the intruders realized they were there?

A faint whisper reached his ears, the sound barely audible but enough to set Alec on edge. He moved closer, careful not to make a sound, his eyes straining to see in the darkness. The shadows shifted, and Alec caught a glimpse of movement—a figure slipping through the shadows, heading toward where he had left Grier.

Panic surged through Alec as he realized what was happening. He had to act, had to stop them before they reached her. But as he stepped forward, ready to engage, another sound stopped him in his tracks—a faint, almost imperceptible click, followed by a low hum that sent a chill down Alec's spine.

A bomb.

Alec's heart pounded as he spun around, searching for Grier. She was still in the shadows, her eyes wide with fear, but she hadn't moved. Alec didn't hesitate. He darted toward her, grabbing her arm and pulling her with him as he ran for the exit.

"Go!" he shouted, his voice raw with urgency.

They sprinted through the warehouse, Alec pushing Grier ahead of him as they raced toward the door.

The seconds stretched on, the air thick with the tension of impending doom, and Alec's mind raced as he calculated their odds. The bomb could go off any second, and if they didn't make it out in time...

They burst through the door just as the explosion rocked the warehouse, the force of the blast sending them sprawling to the ground. Alec's ears rang, his vision blurred as

he tried to process what had just happened. The warehouse was in flames, the heat searing against his skin as he struggled to his feet, pulling Grier up with him.

“Run!” he shouted, the urgency of the situation overriding everything else.

As they disappeared into the shadows, Alec couldn’t shake the feeling that this was only the beginning. The mole, the traitor, the explosion—everything was connected, and the answers they sought were still out there, waiting to be uncovered. But Alec knew one thing for certain: they couldn’t do it alone. They needed to get back to Cerberus—to people and places he could trust. Whoever it was would be looking for them to head to London, but Chicago was his home base and being in the States would place certain constraints on the CIA. So, Chicago would be their destination.

The trust between them was fragile, but it was all they had. And Alec knew that if they were going to survive, they would have to learn to rely on each other, to trust each other—no matter how difficult it might be.

They ran, the heat of the fire licking at their heels as they fled into the night. The city loomed behind them, dark and unforgiving, but Alec’s mind was already working, already planning their next move. Grier was by his side. They were in this together now, whether they liked it or not, and the only way out was forward.

Chapter 5

Grier

Grier's lungs burned as she struggled to keep pace with Alec, each step a battle against the unforgiving terrain of rural Russia. Once outside the city, Alec had found a safe place for her to rest while he scrounged for supplies. He found protein bars and bottles of water as well as a pack in which to carry them. Then he found an old, beat-up truck outside the city and had hot-wired it to add distance between them and whoever it was that was chasing them. The truck's full tank had taken them far away from the Russian capital and towards the closest body of water that could provide an escape. That made sense, he was a SEAL—no doubt he'd feel more comfortable stealing a boat than an airplane.

When the truck had run out of fuel, Alec had pulled it into the undergrowth and hidden it as best he could. They were now on foot and alone. The ground was treacherous, a mix of mud, rocks, and tangled roots that threatened to trip her with every hurried step. The air was thick with the scent of pine and damp earth, and the only sounds were the rustle of leaves and the distant call of birds.

Alec moved with effortless grace, his long strides devouring the ground. He didn't look back, didn't check if she was keeping up—he simply expected her to follow. And Grier was determined to do so, no matter how much her body protested—and it did. She wasn't in shape for some kind of commando marathon.

She had never felt so out of her element. The safe, familiar environment of her office, with its rows of cubicles filled with computer monitors and stacks of classified files,

felt like a distant memory. There, she was in control, her mind sharp and focused, able to unravel the most complex puzzles with ease. But here, in the wilderness, where survival depended on physical endurance and instinct, Grier was painfully aware of her limitations. Every stumble, every labored breath was a reminder that she wasn't built for this.

But she refused to be a liability. Alec's earlier frustration was palpable, and she could sense his doubts about her ability to handle herself in the field. Grier wasn't about to give him any more reason to question her. She pushed herself harder, forcing her legs to move faster, ignoring the burning in her muscles and the sharp pain in her side.

As the night closed in around them, swallowing them up in the countryside, Grier focused solely on keeping up. She was so absorbed in the effort that she almost ran into Alec when he suddenly stopped. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she looked up at him, her heart pounding with exertion and tension.

Alec held up a hand, signaling her to stay quiet. Grier followed his gaze and saw what had made him stop. Just ahead, partially hidden by the thick underbrush, was a small group of men dressed in worn camouflage gear, their weapons slung casually over their shoulders. Local militia, by the look of them—potentially dangerous, but not well-organized. The kind of men who could usually be swayed with the right words or the right amount of money.

Grier's pulse quickened, her mind racing as she assessed the situation. They were outnumbered, and Alec's gun wouldn't be enough if things turned ugly. Her first instinct was to retreat, to avoid confrontation, but the militia had already spotted them.

Alec's body tensed beside her, and Grier knew he was preparing for a fight. But she also knew that violence would only make things worse. They couldn't afford to make any more enemies, not when they were still being hunted.

Without thinking, Grier stashed her laptop in Alec's pack. Stepping forward, she slid out from behind him. His hand shot out to stop her, but she shook him off, her heart hammering as she approached the militia.

"Hello!" she called out in Russian, her voice steady despite the fear gnawing at her insides. "Our vehicle has broken down, and we're lost. Can you help us?"

The men stopped, their eyes narrowing as they took her in. Grier could see the suspicion in their faces, the way their hands hovered near their weapons. But she also saw the curiosity, the way they exchanged glances, unsure of what to make of her. She had their attention, and she knew she had to act fast before they decided she was a threat.

One of the men, taller and older than the others, stepped forward, his eyes flicking to Alec before returning to her. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Grier's mind raced, piecing together a plausible story. "We're tourists, traveling in the area. My brother and I," she lied smoothly, gesturing to Alec. "...we got lost. We don't want any trouble."

The man studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Grier could feel Alec's eyes on her, the tension radiating from him as he waited for the militia's response. She knew he was ready to take control if things went south, but she also knew that would only escalate the situation.

"You speak Russian," the man said finally, his tone more curious than hostile.

"Yes," Grier replied, offering a small, hesitant smile. "I studied it in school."

The man's posture relaxed slightly, and Grier felt a flicker of hope. She could work with this, play up the image of a couple of lost, ill-prepared and harmless tourists. She

just needed to keep them talking, to distract them long enough for Alec to figure out their next move.

“We don’t mean any harm,” she continued in Russian. “We’re just trying to find our way back to the main road. Can you help us?”

The man looked back at his comrades, and Grier could see them relax as well, the tension easing from their stances. The danger wasn’t gone, but it had lessened.

“The main road is far from here,” the man said, his tone almost conversational now. “But we can help you. Follow us.”

Grier forced herself to smile again, even as her mind raced. If they followed the militia, they most likely would be led into their camp, surrounded by even more armed men. It was a trap, and she knew it. But refusing their offer would raise suspicions, maybe even provoke a violent response.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice steady. “That’s very kind of you.”

The man nodded, gesturing for them to follow. Grier turned to Alec, who was watching her with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. His blue eyes were sharp, calculating, and she could see the wheels turning in his mind.

Grier met his gaze, silently willing him to trust her judgment. She knew he was used to being in control, used to making the decisions in the field, but this time, she had the advantage. She could speak their language fluently, understand their culture in ways he couldn’t. And she knew how to handle men like these.

After a moment, Alec gave a barely perceptible nod, a signal that he would follow her lead. Relief washed over Grier, but she didn’t let it show. Instead, she turned back to the militia, her expression calm and composed as she fell into step beside them.

They walked in silence, the men exchanging occasional glances, their weapons still within easy reach and Alec's tucked out of sight. Grier kept her breathing steady, her mind focused on the task at hand. They had to find a way out before they reached the militia's camp, but that was easier said than done.

As they neared a bend in the trail, Grier caught a glimpse of a narrow path leading off into the forest. It was overgrown and barely visible, but it might be their best chance to escape. She had to act quickly.

"Wait," she said suddenly, stopping in her tracks. "I think I dropped something from my pocket."

The men stopped, turning to look at her with confusion. Grier pretended to fumble with her jacket, searching for something that wasn't there. She could feel Alec tense beside her, ready to act at a moment's notice.

"I'm just going to check what it was," she said, taking a step back toward the overgrown path. "I'll be quick."

The men exchanged uncertain glances, but before they could react, Alec moved. In one fluid motion, he grabbed Grier's arm and pulled her toward the narrow path, his movements quick and decisive. The militia shouted in alarm, but Alec was already dragging her into the underbrush, the dense foliage swallowing them up as they fled.

They ran, the sound of the militia's pursuit growing fainter with each step. The forest closed in around them, the branches clawing at Grier's clothes as she struggled to keep up with Alec's relentless pace. Her heart hammered in her chest, the adrenaline surging through her veins as they plunged deeper into the wilderness.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Alec slowed to a stop, his breath coming in harsh gasps. Grier collapsed against a tree, her legs trembling with exhaustion, her

chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

Alec was already scanning the area, his eyes sharp and alert, his body tense and ready for action. Grier watched him, a strange mix of admiration and frustration bubbling up inside her. He was so damn capable, so unflinchingly confident in the face of danger, so incredibly sexy, and it all combined to make her feel small, frumpy, and inadequate in comparison.

But then Alec turned to her, and the look in his eyes wasn't one of frustration or disappointment. It was something else, something she couldn't quite place. Respect, perhaps? Gratitude?

"Nice work back there," he said, his voice rough from exertion. "You handled yourself well."

Grier blinked, surprised by the unexpected praise. She had been so focused on surviving, on not being a burden, that she hadn't even considered that Alec might acknowledge her efforts. A small, tentative smile tugged at her lips.

"Thanks," she said, her voice still shaky from the adrenaline. "I wasn't sure it would work, but..."

"But it did," Alec finished for her, his expression softening for the briefest of moments. "You got us out of there without anyone getting hurt. That's what matters."

Grier nodded, feeling a strange warmth spread through her chest. For the first time since they'd fled Moscow, she felt like she was more than just a burden, more than just an analyst in over her head. She had contributed, had made a difference, and Alec recognized that.

As the tension between them began to ease, Alec motioned for her to follow him.

“We need to find a place to camp for the night. We’d be safer if we kept moving, but we both need to rest.”

She doubted he needed to rest but appreciated that he recognized she did. Samantha had once told her that a true Dom, not some wannabe, took care of his sub—saw it as his responsibility. Maybe having left him that night in Chicago had been a mistake.

Grier nodded in agreement, pushing herself away from the tree and falling into step beside Alec. They walked in silence, the only sounds the crunch of leaves beneath their boots and the distant call of an owl. The forest had grown darker, the moon having taken to hiding behind the clouds, leaving them to navigate by its faint light whenever it appeared, and yet that meager amount seemed to be enough for Alec.

After what felt like hours, they came upon a small clearing, sheltered by a thick canopy of trees. It wasn’t much, but it would provide some cover and a place to rest for the night. Alec set to work quickly, gathering branches and leaves to create a makeshift bed, while Grier searched for firewood.

As they settled in for the night, Grier found herself watching Alec, her thoughts drifting back to everything that had happened. He was a force of nature, a man who thrived in situations that would break most people. But there was more to him than just strength and skill. There was a depth to him, a dedication to his mission that went beyond duty. And Grier couldn’t help but feel drawn to that, even as she reminded herself of the dangers of getting too close.

Emotional attachments were a liability in their line of work. She knew that. She had seen it time and time again, how feelings could cloud judgment, how they could lead to mistakes that cost lives. But as she sat there, watching Alec’s strong, capable hands as he tended to the fire, she couldn’t shake the pull she felt toward him.

The fire crackled softly, casting flickering shadows across Alec’s face. His blue eyes

glinted in the firelight, and Grier's breath caught in her throat as he turned to look at her, his gaze intense and unreadable. She felt a flush of heat rise in her cheeks, and she quickly looked away, cursing herself for the sudden rush of attraction.

But Alec didn't look away. He shifted closer, his movements slow and deliberate, and Grier's heart skipped a beat as she felt the warmth of his body beside her. She forced herself to remain still, to keep her breathing steady, even as her pulse quickened.

"So, the G stood for Grier," Alec said, his voice low and rough, sending a shiver down her spine. He did remember her.

"Yes."

She decided she might as well take the bull by the horns. Turning to face him, her green eyes met his, and the air between them seemed to crackle with tension. Grier's mind screamed at her to pull back, to maintain her distance, but her body refused to listen. She was drawn to him, to the strength and intensity that radiated from him, and she couldn't fight it. It had only been one night, one scene with no real sex involved, but it had haunted her.

Alec reached out, his hand brushing against her cheek, the touch sending a jolt of electricity through her. Grier sucked in a sharp breath, her pulse pounding in her ears as he leaned in closer, his lips hovering just inches from hers.

And then he kissed her.

The kiss was fierce, demanding, and Grier found herself responding with an intensity that surprised even her. She had never been one to lose control, to let herself be swept away by passion, but with Alec, it was different. He ignited something inside her, something primal and undeniable, and she couldn't resist it.

Alec's hands were everywhere, his touch possessive as he pulled her closer, his lips never leaving hers. Grier's mind spun, her thoughts a whirlwind of desire and confusion, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. She didn't want to stop.

Alec shifted, pushing her down onto the makeshift bed of leaves and branches, his body pressing against hers with a force that left her breathless. He was dominant, commanding, and Grier found herself responding to his control in ways she had never imagined. She arched against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she lost herself in the heat of the moment.

Every touch, every kiss, was a reminder of the power Alec held over her, and Grier was both thrilled and terrified by it. She had always prided herself on being in control, on keeping her emotions in check, but with Alec, all of that went out the window. He made her feel alive in a way she had only felt once before—that night at Club Southside—and it was far more intoxicating than any liquor or illicit drug could have been.

As the passion between them reached its peak, a small voice in the back of Grier's mind warned her of the dangers of letting herself get too close, of allowing herself to be vulnerable in a world where trust was a luxury she couldn't afford. And yet, as Alec's hands roamed over her body, she couldn't bring herself to care.

So, for now, in the quiet darkness of the Russian wilderness, Grier allowed herself to forget all of that, if only for a little while.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 6

Alec

Without thinking, his hand reached up, tracing the line of her jaw. She didn't pull away, didn't recoil, didn't run. He knew this was a bad idea. She'd made it clear in Chicago that she wanted nothing more to do with him, and yet, she'd haunted his dreams for months. Her lips had parted effortlessly when he'd fused his mouth to hers, slipping his tongue past her teeth to explore the recesses within. Grier moaned as he did so, her fingers wandering down his neck, over the expanse of his chest hidden beneath the heavy sweater he wore.

"Alec..." she moaned, his name on her lips feeling like a jolt of electricity.

The sizzle of arousal that surged through her seemed to frighten her. Alec knew he should back off, knew he should leave her alone and let her pull away, but he couldn't. His hand clamped around hers, guiding it insistently towards the growing hardness between his legs. A gasp escaped her lips, both from shock and the undeniable thrill that coursed through them both.

"Alec, I didn't mean..." But the words died in her throat. There was no denying the raw desire in her eyes as they fixed on his, dark and hungry.

"Shh." It was a whisper, and it was a command.

She seemed lost in the heat of the moment, her hand betraying her inner turmoil as it plunged into his jeans to wrap around his engorged length. He was hard, impossibly

so, and the reality of what he was planning to do struck him with a dizzying force.

“I want you, Grier. I’m going to have you unless you tell me right here, right now, to stop.”

Did he want this? Did she? Alec realized the answer to the first was obvious, the answer to the second was not nearly as important as it should have been. She’d wanted him that night in Chicago; she wanted him now. He could smell her arousal, feel her nipples stiffening beneath the thermal shirt she was wearing. The questions swirled in his mind, tangled up with the adrenaline that had kept them alive thus far. But as her grip tightened and a low moan reverberated from his chest, the answers seemed to matter less and less.

“Alec, we can’t just have sex here in the wilderness.”

“Can’t we?” he rumbled, cutting off her protest.

Her fear was palpable, seeming to choke her with its thick fingers. Instead of pushing him away, her fingers betrayed a curiosity that had been building since their harried escape. She struggled with the waistband of his jeans until he reached between them to unbutton the fly, allowing his thick, hard cock to fully escape the confines of his jeans. His groan vibrated through the cold air, and something within her seemed to unfurl, hungry, and wanting—something he’d had a glimpse of that night when he’d used his flogger to take her to the edge of bliss.

“Grier,” he growled softly, as his hands found their way under her shirt, rough and warm.

The touch of his fingertips against her sensitive skin forced a cry from deep within her. It was madness, this conflagration of need amidst the shadows of the extreme danger they were still in. Not only did they need to make it out of Russia alive, but

they also needed to uncover the mole or moles Grier had discovered. Alec's hands moved lower, one pressing on her stomach to hold her in place while the other slid beneath her leggings, straight to the spot he wanted to touch the most.

His breath hitched as his fingers teased her, the heat of his skin and the roughness of his touch making her shiver beneath him. Alec had never felt so alive, so vulnerable, and so reckless. The thought of how dangerous this was only seemed to heighten the intensity of the moment.

"Alec, we shouldn't..." she murmured, the words catching in her throat.

"Is that a no, Grier?"

The primitive need that had taken hold of him wouldn't be denied, and his body craved the connection that only she could give him.

Silence was his only answer.

"Then I'll take that as a yes. Your safeword is 'red.'"

He tugged her leggings down to her knees, exposing her sex to the cold Russian air, but he knew she wouldn't feel it, not really. The heat between them burned bright and would keep them warm. As his fingers slipped deeper, his thumb now strumming against her clit, she arched into his touch, each movement drawing a low moan from her. It was clear that her resistance was waning, and Alec knew that the line between life and death had never felt so thin. The kisses between them became more fervent, interspersed with nips.

She'd left him in Chicago with no word or warning. A little bit of payback was in order.

He was on fire, every touch sending sparks skittering across his skin, igniting something primal within him. Something that had been lying in wait since he'd discovered she'd run off into the night. His jeans clung to him, a reminder of their reality, even as he lost himself to the sensations overwhelming his senses.

Alec splayed her labia, increasing the pressure and speed with which he played with her clit, before inserting two fingers deep inside her core and stroking, mimicking what he planned to do with his cock. She was tight, but her moan of pure pleasure told him she found the feeling as intoxicating as he did.

“Show me how you come, Grier. Show me how your body moves. Let me hear the sounds you make.”

Harder and faster he stroked her, curling his fingers up as he dragged them back. He gazed into her eyes, dark green pools reflecting back his own desire, as her body shuddered with a small release. The sounds she made might not have echoed through the wilderness around them, but they filled Alec's mind with a sweet pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. In that moment, it wasn't about anger or fear, it was about being alive, here and now, with her.

His cock was heavy in her hand, and she ran her fingers up and down its length, feeling the tension and the heat radiating from him. He was certain she could feel his urgency, the desperation behind her eyes as she watched him touch her only made him more aroused, more eager to satisfy this craving they shared.

Panting, her stare locked onto Alec's eyes, dark and intense, the same eyes that wanted to watch her unravel. Her breath came out in ragged pulls, each one syncing with the erratic beats of his heart. Then his lips crashed against hers, raw and urgent.

“Alec,” she murmured against his mouth as the world exploded, feeling her body tense as if her own voice was a trigger. She shook against him, her body wracked

with the pleasure sparking from his fingers up into her brain. She arched her back as his lips pressed into hers, but she was gone, lost to him and only him.

He didn't think, didn't question any of it as she came down. He tugged her closer, his hands shoving down his jeans with a swift movement. In the space of a heartbeat, he thrust up into her, joining their bodies, filling her completely as her pussy spasmed with need. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing. It was just the two of them and this primal need neither could deny. Alec's movements were sure and relentless, pounding into her with a rhythm that matched the hammering of his heart within his chest.

"Again, for me, Grier," he breathed out, an order wrapped in velvet. His hand found its way to her still-vibrating clit, chasing another rush, another high. His name fell from her lips like a chant, spurring him on. "Come for me again."

His hands slipped beneath her, grasping the globes of her ass roughly as he thrust into her, sparking bright spots of pleasure. Alec drove himself so deep inside of her, it was as if she became one with him.

The forest echoed with their primal cries as they surrendered to their raw desires. The danger they were in seemed to melt away, replaced by a fierce, all-consuming passion that left no room for fear or doubt. Her hands clung to him beneath his sweater and clawed at his back, desperate to pull him closer, her nails leaving trails of blood and lust.

Their bodies moved in a frenzy, their pace matching the wild beating of their hearts. Sweat glistened on their skin, mingling their scents into a heady cocktail. The cold walls of the night melted away under her touch, replaced by the fire that blazed between them.

Her pussy pulsed with each thrust, each gasping breath, each ragged moan. He was

lost in the rhythm, in the fire that burned within their joined flesh and in the desire that coursed through his veins. She arched against him, her back bowing, as the sensations started to build into something that made his breath catch in his chest, as the base of his spine began to tingle, and the world narrowed down to a single pinpoint.

“Alec!” she gasped out his name once more, everything sharpening into vivid sensation as she clamped down around him, triggering his own release, his motions growing more frantic until he stilled, his release hot and sudden before he collapsed on top of her.

He lay there for a moment, savoring the pleasure before reality crashed back down on him. They weren’t out of danger, and she wasn’t a trained operative. She needed to rest. With a groan of regret, he withdrew from her and pulled their clothing back into place. Grier tried to pull away, but Alec prevented her from doing so. Spooning up against her back so she was between him and the fire, he soothed her with word and touch until, exhausted, she fell asleep.

Alec woke with a start, the morning light filtering through the dense canopy of trees above, casting dappled shadows across his makeshift bed of leaves and branches. He blinked, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep, and instinctively reached for his weapon. His senses, honed by years of training and combat, were immediately on high alert. But the forest around him was still, the only sounds the distant chirping of birds and the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze.

He turned his head and saw Grier sitting a few feet away, her back against the rough bark of a tree, her laptop balanced on her knees. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, her fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard as she pored over the data she had been working on. Alec watched her for a moment, the morning quiet broken only by the faint tapping of keys.

She hadn't noticed he was awake. Alec could see the intensity in her eyes, the way she was completely absorbed in her work. It was a side of her he hadn't fully appreciated before—the analyst, the thinker, the one who could see patterns and connections where others saw only chaos. He knew she was trying to piece together the identity of the mole, using every scrap of information she had. It was impressive, really. But it also worried him.

People like Grier had a tendency to overthink, to get lost in the details. Alec knew that in their line of work, too much analysis could be just as dangerous as too little. In a situation as fluid and dangerous as theirs, there wasn't always time to dissect every piece of data, to explore every theory. Sometimes, you had to trust your instincts, make a decision, and move.

He sat up slowly, his movements careful so as not to startle her. But Grier was so engrossed in her work that she didn't even look up. Alec sighed inwardly, running a hand through his hair. He needed to bring her back to the present, to make sure she was focused on the immediate danger they were in—not just the puzzle she was trying to solve.

“Have you been at it all night?” he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

Grier's head snapped up, her eyes widening in surprise before they softened in recognition. “I didn't wake you, did I?”

“No,” Alec replied, pushing himself to his feet and stretching out the stiffness in his muscles. “But you should have gotten some rest.”

“I'll sleep when we're safe,” Grier said, her tone dismissive as she turned back to her screen. “I think I'm getting close. There are patterns here—communications that don't add up. If I can just figure out who's behind them...”

Alec walked over to her, crouching down beside her to get a better look at the data on her screen. It was a mess of encrypted messages, timestamps, and IP addresses—information that meant little to him but was clearly significant to Grier.

“I don’t doubt you’re onto something,” Alec said carefully. “But we can’t afford to get bogged down. We need to stay mobile, keep ahead of whoever’s hunting us.”

Grier frowned, her fingers pausing over the keys. “I know that. But this is important, Alec. If we can identify the mole, we can stop them. We can end this.”

Alec sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He could see how much this meant to her, how determined she was to solve the mystery. But he also knew that in their current situation, time was a luxury they didn’t have.

Before he could respond, his satellite phone buzzed in his pocket. Alec’s hand shot out, and he quickly checked the screen. The secure channel indicator flashed—a call from Cerberus. His stomach tightened as he glanced at Grier, who was watching him with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

Alec stood up, turning away from Grier as he answered the call. “McKennon.”

“Alec, it’s Seth,” came the familiar voice of Seth Newcomb, one of the senior operatives in Cerberus. His tone was tense, urgent. “We’ve got a situation. You and Grier are in deep. The CIA and the FSB are both on your trail. They’re closing in fast. I don’t know that you can trust the Agency.”

Alec’s grip tightened on the phone. He had known they were being hunted, but hearing it confirmed by Seth sent a jolt of adrenaline through him. “How close are they?”

“Too close,” Seth replied. “The CIA’s got a team sweeping the area, and the FSB is

using every resource they've got to track you down. You need to move, now."

Alec's jaw clenched. This was exactly what he had feared. They were being squeezed from both sides and staying in one place—even for a few hours—was no longer an option. "Understood. We'll be out in five."

"One more thing, Alec," Seth added, his voice lowering. "Be careful who you trust. We believe Cerberus has been compromised."

"What do you mean?"

"We're pretty sure we have a mole. We don't know who it is yet, but they've got resources. They're feeding information to both sides. When you have an extraction location, send it to me, King or Fitz only. We want to keep the circle small on this one."

Alec's chest tightened at the implication. Someone within Cerberus, someone they knew and trusted, was pulling the strings. It was a chilling thought, but there was no time to dwell on it. "Thanks for the heads-up."

The line went dead, and Alec shoved the phone back into his pocket, turning to face Grier. She was already on her feet, her expression tense.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"We've got company—both the CIA and the FSB," Alec said tersely. "We need to move."

Alec didn't wait for her to agree. He grabbed their gear, his movements quick and efficient, but he couldn't shake the nagging feeling in the back of his mind. Grier was smart, dedicated, and damn good at her job—but she wasn't a field operative. She

wasn't used to this kind of pressure, this kind of danger. And the fact that she was still pushing herself, even after everything they had been through, worried him.

He rummaged around in his pack, finding a smaller knapsack for Grier to carry. He put her laptop in it but kept the flash drive. When she quirked her eyebrow at him, he answered her unasked question. "Just in case we get separated. If that happens, keep heading toward the coast. I'll find you. Do whatever you have to do but stay alive and keep moving. Trust me."

As they packed up, Grier spoke, her voice calm but determined. "Alec, I don't know that we shouldn't be trying to hook up with the Agency. They have the resources, the reach. We need their help to take down the mole."

Alec froze, his gaze locking onto hers. "The Agency?" he repeated, his voice laced with disbelief. "Grier, they're the ones hunting us."

"Not all of them," Grier argued. "There are people in the Agency who can be trusted. If we could get to them, if we could convince them of what's really going on, we'd have a better chance of exposing the mole."

Alec shook his head, his frustration mounting. "And what if there's more than one mole? What if there's a whole damn nest of them working from inside Cerberus and the CIA? What if the Agency is compromised all the way up? We can't risk it."

"We can't do this alone, either," Grier countered, her eyes flashing with determination. "Cerberus is good, but they're not infallible. We need allies, Alec."

Alec clenched his fists, his mind racing. He understood Grier's point, but the idea of putting their trust in the CIA, an organization that had already proven to be riddled with corruption, didn't sit well with him. He had seen too much, experienced too much, to believe that they could rely on anyone but themselves.

“We stick with Cerberus,” Alec said firmly. “There’s nobody at the Agency I trust—present company excepted.”

Grier opened her mouth to argue, but then seemed to think better of it. She sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. “All right,” she conceded, though her tone was far from convinced.

Alec turned away, not wanting to get into a debate about it. They didn’t have time. As they prepared to move out, he glanced at Grier, noticing for the first time the dark circles under her eyes, the lines of exhaustion etched into her face. She looked worn out, physically and mentally, and Alec’s gut twisted with guilt.

The night before had been intense, passionate, and Alec had given in to the heat of the moment, losing himself in her. But now, in the cold light of day, he couldn’t help but feel like he had taken advantage of her vulnerability, of the stress and fear they were both under. She needed rest, not more pressure, and he had pushed her even further.

“Grier,” he began, his voice softer now, “you’re exhausted. You need to take it easy.”

Grier shot him a surprised look, then shook her head. “I’m fine, Alec. We need to keep moving. I can handle it.”

Alec frowned, her words doing little to ease his concern. He felt a surge of protectiveness, a desire to shield her from the dangers they were facing, and it caught him off guard. He wasn’t used to feeling this way—his focus was always on the mission, on getting the job done. But with Grier, things were different.

It both comforted and unsettled him, this unfamiliar urge to look out for someone other than himself or his team. He didn’t want to see her hurt, didn’t want to push her to the breaking point. But at the same time, he knew they didn’t have the luxury of

slowing down, not with the walls closing in around them.

“Just promise me you’ll speak up if it gets to be too much,” Alec said, his tone more insistent. “I don’t need you pushing yourself to the point of collapse.”

Grier met his gaze, her gaze softening. “I promise,” she said quietly.

Alec nodded, knowing she was right, even if he didn’t like it. They had to keep moving, had to stay ahead of the forces hunting them. But as they set out into the forest, Alec couldn’t shake the worry gnawing at the back of his mind. Grier was strong, smarter than most people he knew, but she wasn’t invincible. And the thought of losing her, of failing to protect her, was something he couldn’t bear.

He pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand. They had a long road ahead of them, and the stakes were higher than ever. Alec had to stay sharp, had to keep them both alive. But as they made their way through the dense undergrowth, Alec found himself glancing at Grier more often than he would have liked, the protectiveness he felt for her growing with every step.

And that, more than anything, made him uneasy.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 7

Alec

Alec moved through the dense underbrush with practiced ease, his eyes scanning the surrounding forest for any signs of movement. The air was thick with the scent of saltwater, a clear indication that they were getting closer to the coast. The distant sound of waves crashing against rocks reached his ears, offering a brief moment of solace in the otherwise tense journey. But despite the progress they were making, Alec's mind was far from at ease.

He stole a glance at Grier, who was a few paces behind him, her expression focused as she navigated the uneven terrain. She hadn't complained once since they set out, despite the grueling pace he'd set. Her resilience impressed him, as did her sharp mind—always working, always piecing together the fragments of the puzzle they were tangled in. But it was more than just respect for her abilities that had Alec on edge. It was the growing attraction he felt toward her, an attraction that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

It was wrong, and he knew it. There was no room for personal feelings in a situation like this, where every decision could mean the difference between life and death. And yet, the more time he spent with Grier, the more those feelings took root. He admired her strength, her determination, and the way she handled herself under pressure. But it was more than that—he found himself drawn to her in a way he hadn't expected, in a way that threatened to cloud his judgment.

Alec shook his head, trying to push those thoughts aside. He couldn't afford to let his

emotions interfere with the mission. They were being hunted by both the CIA and the FSB, and one wrong move could get them both killed. His priority had to be their survival, nothing else.

As they reached a small clearing, Alec held up a hand to signal a stop. “We’ll take a break here,” he said, his voice low but firm. “Just a few minutes, then we keep moving.”

Grier nodded, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow. She dropped her pack and immediately reached for her laptop, the familiar routine of checking her data giving her a sense of control in a situation where they had so little.

Alec watched her as she powered on the device, her fingers flying over the keys with a practiced precision. He felt a pang of something—worry, affection, he wasn’t sure what—but he shoved it down. This was no time for distractions.

“Anything?” Alec asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Grier frowned, her eyes narrowing at the screen. “I just received a message. It’s from Levi Mendelson.”

Alec stiffened. Levi Mendelson was the CIA Deputy Director and Grier’s mentor, a man she trusted implicitly. But trust was a dangerous thing in their current situation. “What does it say?”

Grier’s brow furrowed as she decrypted the message. “It’s short. He says we can’t trust anyone and that we should head for a specific location—a safe house near the coast. He’s urging us to go there as soon as possible.”

Alec’s instincts immediately went on high alert. Every fiber of his being screamed that this was wrong, that they were walking into a trap. “Grier, we can’t trust that. It

could be a setup.”

Grier looked up from her screen, her eyes wide with concern but also with determination. “Alec, Levi wouldn’t betray us. He’s the only one who knows the full scope of what’s happening. He’s the one who convinced me I was needed in the field. If he says we need to go to this location, then we should listen.”

Alec felt a surge of frustration. She was smart, no doubt about it, but this was too risky. “I get that you trust him, but we’re in a situation where trust can get us killed. We don’t know who’s compromised and who isn’t. For all we know, Mendelson’s been turned, or someone’s using his credentials to lure us in.”

Grier shook her head, her expression resolute. “Levi wouldn’t do that. He’s always been straight with me, and he knows what’s at stake. If he says this location is safe, then I believe him.”

Alec clenched his fists, his mind racing. He could see the logic in her argument, but his gut told him otherwise. It wasn’t just about the mission anymore—he couldn’t stand the thought of leading her into a trap, of losing her because he didn’t fight harder to keep her safe.

“Grier,” he said, his voice lowering as he took a step closer to her. “I’m asking you to trust me on this. My instincts are telling me something’s wrong. We can find another way, another place to regroup. We don’t have to take this risk.”

Grier’s eyes softened as she looked up at him, the tension between them palpable. “Alec, I do trust you. But I also trust Levi. He’s been like a father to me, guiding me through my career. I can’t just dismiss what he’s saying.”

Alec felt a sharp pang in his chest, a mixture of anger, fear, and something he couldn’t quite name. This was more than just a mentor’s advice to her—this was

personal, and it made her vulnerable in a way that scared him.

And then it hit him. He realized with startling clarity that his concern wasn't just about the mission. He cared about Grier, cared about her safety more than he cared about anything else, including the success of the operation. The revelation shook him to his core. He was trained to prioritize the mission above all else, to keep emotions at bay, but here he was, willing to risk everything to protect her.

The realization made his resolve even stronger. "I'm not letting you walk into a trap," Alec said, his voice firm but tinged with something deeper, something protective. "We're not going to that location. We'll find another way."

Grier's eyes flashed with frustration, but there was something else there too—a flicker of understanding, of something unspoken passing between them. She opened her mouth to argue, but the words seemed to catch in her throat. Instead, she sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"Okay," she said quietly, her tone tinged with reluctant acceptance. "We'll do it your way."

Alec felt a rush of relief, but it was tempered by the weight of his newfound realization. He had just made a decision based on his feelings for her, and that terrified him. He had let his emotions dictate his actions, something he had always been trained to avoid.

She nodded. As he finished redistributing the items in their packs—ensuring she had food and water with her—Alec couldn't bring himself to regret the decision. Protecting Grier felt right, even if it went against everything he had been taught. He just hoped that, in doing so, he wouldn't be leading them into even greater danger.

The coastline loomed ahead, the scent of saltwater growing stronger with each step.

Alec's mind remained focused on the task at hand, but his heart—a heart he had long thought hardened by years of battle and betrayal—was beating for something, someone, he hadn't expected.

And that, more than anything, made him feel vulnerable in a way he hadn't felt in years.

GRIER

Grier followed Alec cautiously through the dense foliage, her heart pounding in her chest as the small fishing village came into view. The scent of the sea was strong in the air, and the distant sound of waves crashing against the rocky shore provided a deceptive sense of calm. But Grier's mind was anything but calm. It was a swirling storm of conflicting emotions and loyalties, each one tugging at her in different directions.

She had always been loyal to Deputy Director Mendelson, the man who had recruited her into the CIA and shaped her into the analyst she had become. Mendelson had been a mentor, a guiding force in her life, and she owed much of her career to him. But now, in the midst of this deadly game of cat and mouse, she found herself questioning everything. Alec had saved her life and kept her safe, and as more time passed, her trust in him had grown stronger. He was a man of action, of instincts honed by years in the field, and she had come to rely on him in ways she had never expected.

But that reliance came with a price. Alec's distrust of Mendelson and the CIA weighed heavily on her. She knew he had his reasons—valid reasons, given the situation—but it didn't make it any easier to reconcile with her own loyalties. She felt torn, caught between the world she had known and the new, terrifying reality in which she was now living.

As they approached the outskirts of the village, Grier glanced at Alec, his expression grim and focused. They had agreed to approach carefully, aware that the FSB or the CIA could be lurking anywhere. But the closer they got, the more Grier's nerves frayed. She was an analyst; she hadn't been in any dangerous situations until Moscow. This wasn't what she'd signed up for.

Just as they reached the edge of the village, the world around them erupted into chaos. The crack of gunfire, coupled with shouting Russians, shattered the stillness, and Grier's instincts kicked in, driving her to the ground as bullets whizzed past her. Alec was already moving, his weapon up and firing as he barked orders she couldn't fully hear over the deafening roar of the ambush.

"Get down!" Alec shouted, his voice cutting through the noise as he grabbed her arm and pulled her behind a stack of wooden crates. The FSB had found them, and they were outnumbered.

Grier's breath came in short, panicked bursts as she made sure her laptop wouldn't be lost. She'd taken the mandatory courses in self-defense and the ones she'd endured before being sent into the field, but nothing could have prepared her for the sheer terror of being under fire, for the gut-wrenching realization that their lives were hanging by a thread.

Alec fired off a few more rounds, his expression set in a grim mask of determination. "We need to move," he said, his voice steady despite the chaos around them. "Stay close to me." He began moving at a fast clip.

But before Grier could respond, another volley of bullets slammed into the crates, sending splinters flying in all directions. The force of the impact knocked her off balance, and before she knew it, she was tumbling backward, her vision spinning as she hit the ground hard and her knapsack was ripped away. Dazed, she struggled to regain her bearings, reaching for the laptop, committed to ensuring its safety. The

world around her was a blur of movement and noise.

When she finally managed to sit up, Alec was gone. The realization hit her like a punch to the gut—she was alone, separated from the one person she had come to rely on in this nightmare. Panic surged through her, threatening to overwhelm her senses, but she forced it down, knowing that giving in to fear would only get her killed.

She scanned her surroundings, her mind racing. The village was a maze of narrow alleys and crumbling buildings, the perfect place for an ambush. The FSB agents were closing in, their shouts growing louder as they swept through the area, searching for her. She couldn't stay here—she had to move, had to find cover and regroup.

Grier pushed herself to her feet, every muscle in her body protesting as she darted toward the nearest building, clutching the knapsack to her chest. Her mind raced as she ducked into a narrow alley, her heart pounding. She had no idea where Alec was, no way of knowing if he was even still alive. The thought made her stomach churn, but she couldn't afford to dwell on it. She had to survive, had to rely on her own skills and instincts.

As she moved deeper into the village, Grier's training kicked in—the lessons she'd assumed she would never need coming back to her in flashes. Stay low, keep moving, don't let them pin you down. She remembered the hours spent in simulations and drills, thinking she would never need any of it. But this was real, and the stakes were higher than they had ever been.

She slipped into a small, dilapidated building, her breathing ragged as she pressed herself against the wall. The gunfire had lessened, but she knew it was only a matter of time before the FSB agents found her. She needed to think, needed a plan. But all she could think about was Alec—where he was, if he was safe.

No. She couldn't afford to be distracted, not now. Grier forced herself to focus, to

push down the fear and worry gnawing at her insides. She had made it this far, and she wasn't about to give up now.

She scanned the room, her eyes landing on a rickety wooden ladder leading up to a small loft. It wasn't much, but it would give her a vantage point, a place to hide and assess the situation. Grier climbed the ladder, wincing as the wood creaked under her weight and discovering that doing so holding onto the knapsack wasn't as easy as they made it look in the action films. The loft was small, barely more than a crawl space, but it was better than nothing.

As she crouched in the shadows, Grier's mind raced. She had no idea how many FSB agents were out there or what their strategy was. But she knew one thing—they wouldn't stop until they found her. She had to be ready, had to be smart.

The minutes stretched into what felt like hours, the tension in the air so thick it was almost suffocating. Grier strained to hear any sign of movement below, her grip on her computer so tight her knuckles were white. She could feel the sweat trickling down her back, the adrenaline coursing through her veins like fire.

And then she heard it—the faint sound of footsteps, cautious and deliberate, moving through the building below. Grier's heart pounded in her chest as she held her breath, listening intently. The footsteps grew closer, and she knew they were about to find her.

She shifted her position, her muscles tense and ready. The moment of truth was here, and she had no choice but to face it. The door below creaked open, and Grier caught a glimpse of a shadow moving through the room. She couldn't see the agent's face, but she could feel the threat, the danger lurking just below the surface.

The agent moved closer, his footsteps slow and measured as he scanned the room. Grier waited, her breath shallow, her mind racing through her options. She couldn't

stay hidden forever. Sooner or later, they would find her. She had to act, had to make a move before it was too late.

With a silent prayer, Grier adjusted her grip on her computer and prepared herself. The agent was directly below her now, his back to the ladder. She had the advantage, the element of surprise. It was now or never.

Grier took a deep breath, then leaped from the loft, her body crashing down on the agent below. They hit the ground with a thud, the force of the impact knocking the wind out of both of them. The agent struggled, but Grier was ready. She swung the knapsack containing her computer into his temple, sending him crumpling to the ground, unconscious.

Grier rolled off him, her breathing ragged as she scrambled to her feet. Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions, but one thing was clear—she had done it. She had survived. The realization sent a surge of adrenaline through her, a mixture of relief and triumph.

But there was no time to celebrate. She needed to find Alec, to get out of this village before more agents arrived. Grier took a moment to steady herself, picked up the FSB agent's gun, then turned to bolt out of the building, her instincts guiding her through the maze of alleys and streets.

Chapter 8

Alec

Alec moved through the maze of alleys and streets, his mind laser-focused on one thing: finding Grier. The village was a labyrinth of narrow passageways, the air thick with the tension of the ambush that had erupted around them. He could hear the distant shouts of the FSB agents, the crack of gunfire echoing through the narrow corridors, but all of that faded into the background as he pressed forward, his senses attuned to the slightest sound that might lead him to her.

When he'd noticed she'd become separated from him, he had veered down a small alley, away from their last position, in the hopes of luring their pursuers after him with the idea that once he had led them away, he could double back for her. Alec knew he had to be quick as not all of the FSB agents would follow him, some would try and get Grier.

His breath was steady, his movements precise as he fought his way through the agents blocking his path. Alec had been in countless firefights before, had faced down enemies in the most dangerous corners of the world, but this was different. There was a gnawing fear at the back of his mind, a fear that he might not reach her in time. And that fear fueled him, driving him to move faster, to strike harder.

He rounded a corner and caught a glimpse of Grier, her figure darting through the shadows as she ducked into a dilapidated building. That should keep her safe for a bit. If she'd managed to elude their pursuers, they would regroup and begin searching for her building by building. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to admire her

ingenuity and courage. She was holding her own, fighting to stay alive and free with a determination that filled him with both pride and worry.

Alec refocused his mind and his actions. He couldn't lose her, not now, not after finding her again and feeling as though they were on the cusp of something special and lasting. The thought of her being captured, or worse, was enough to make his blood run cold. But there was also something else—a deep-seated admiration for the way she handled herself. Despite being out of her element, Grier had proven time and again that she was capable of surviving in this deadly game. It was one of the things that made him believe they could have a future, but that also made it difficult to keep his emotions in check.

He fought off another wave of agents, his movements fluid and lethal, every strike aimed to incapacitate quickly. The closer he got to Grier, the more intense his focus became. He could hear the footsteps of more agents approaching, the faint sound of their radios crackling with orders, but he ignored them. Grier was close, and nothing was going to stop him from reaching her.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Alec turned a corner and saw a lone FSB agent slip into the building in which she'd taken refuge. He made his way into the building from another side, planning to save her. Only Grier had other plans. She crashed down on top of the agent and then used her laptop to incapacitate the man. He didn't want to be that guy when he had to explain to his superiors that he'd been taken out by an analyst with only her computer as a weapon.

Grier was standing in the middle of the building, her chest heaving with exertion. Even in the grungy thermal shirt in the middle of a firefight and fighting for their lives, he could appreciate the size and the way her breasts moved. She scooped up the FSB agent's gun—did she even know how to fire one?—as she looked for the best exit, her eyes scanning the area for any sign of danger. Her gaze locked onto his, and for a split second, the chaos around them seemed to fade away.

A wave of relief crashed over Alec, so intense that it nearly took his breath away. He didn't think—he just acted, closing the distance between them in a few swift strides. Before he knew what he was doing, Alec grabbed her, pulling her into his arms and kissing her fiercely. The world around them melted away as he poured all of his fear, relief, and desire into that kiss, his grip on her tightening as if he could shield her from everything if he just held on tight enough.

Grier responded with equal intensity, her hands fisting in his sweater as she kissed him back. It was raw, desperate, the culmination of everything they'd been through together. For that brief moment, nothing else mattered. It was just them, two people who had fought tooth and nail to survive, finding solace in each other.

But the moment was short-lived. As soon as Alec turned on his satellite phone, it buzzed as the FSB agent began to come around, breaking the spell. Alec gave him a swift kick to his head, putting him down again. He pulled back, breathless and shaken, his forehead resting against hers for a heartbeat before he reluctantly let her go to answer.

"Seth," Alec muttered, recognizing the secure line as he answered, "what's the situation?"

"Alec, we've got a new problem," Seth's voice crackled through the line, tense and urgent. "Intel just came in—there's another team closing in on your location. It's not just the FSB. We're picking up chatter about a third party, possibly mercenaries, who've been hired to take you both out."

Alec's grip on the phone tightened. "Mercenaries? Who the hell hired them?"

"We don't know yet," Seth replied, his voice grim. "But it's bad. We need to get you out of there ASAP. I'm sending you coordinates for a rendezvous point—one of our operatives will meet you there and get you both out."

“Who’s the operative?” Alec asked, already memorizing the location Seth was giving him.

“Kane,” Seth said, and Alec felt a twinge of relief.

Kane was a Cerberus operative he knew well from Chicago—reliable, tough, and one of the few people Alec would trust with his life. “He was close by and should be waiting for you at the extraction point. You need to move fast, Alec. We don’t have much time.”

Alec glanced at Grier, who was watching him with concern, clearly sensing the urgency in the conversation. “We’re on our way,” he said, then paused as Seth added something else.

“There’s another thing, Alec. Deputy Director Mendelson reached out—he’s offering a different extraction point, says it’s safer. But I don’t like the timing of it. We’ve already got Kane in play, and I trust him a hell of a lot more than Mendelson. It’s your call.”

Alec’s instincts screamed at him to follow Seth’s advice. He trusted Kane, knew the man would get the job done. But when he looked at Grier, he could see the conflict in her eyes, the loyalty she felt toward Mendelson warring with the trust she had begun to place in Alec.

“Mendelson’s offering us an out,” Alec said to Grier, his voice low. “But Seth’s got one of our people—a man I know and trust—ready to extract us. We need to decide now.”

Grier hesitated, her brow furrowing in thought. “Levi’s always been there for me,” she said softly, the weight of her words evident in her tone. “But if you think Cerberus is the safer option, then I say we go with Cerberus. I trust you, Alec.”

Alec nodded, his decision made. “We stick with Cerberus. We’ll go dark until we can rendezvous with Kane.”

“I’ll let him know to expect you. Once you rendezvous with Kane, he’ll get you out to Chicago—we’ll bypass London altogether. There are more restrictions on the CIA operating in the US than in the UK. It’ll buy us some time.”

Alec didn’t argue, just nodded in agreement. He felt a mix of relief and something else, something deeper. She was putting her trust in him, fully and completely, and that meant more than he could put into words.

They didn’t waste any more time. Alec led Grier through the village, their pace quick and cautious as they navigated the narrow streets. The tension between them was palpable, not from fear or uncertainty, but from the unspoken connection that had grown stronger from the moment he’d entered the Moscow safehouse. Alec couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between them—something that went beyond the mission, beyond survival.

As they neared the outskirts of the village, Alec glanced at Grier, his mind racing with thoughts he had long tried to suppress. He needed to focus on the mission, to keep his emotions in check, but it was getting harder with every passing moment. Finally, as they ducked into the cover of the forest, Alec couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Grier,” he said, his voice strained as they slowed their pace, the sounds of the village fading behind them. “There’s something you need to know.”

Grier looked at him, her eyes wide with curiosity and concern. “What is it?”

Alec took a deep breath, the words catching in his throat. He had spent years burying his past, keeping his emotions locked away, but with Grier, he couldn’t do that

anymore. He owed her the truth, if nothing else.

“I have feelings for you. You need to know I resigned my commission to join Cerberus,” he began, his voice rough. “I was a Navy SEAL, but I left it all behind because I couldn’t stand the bureaucracy, the way the system was failing people on the ground. My father—he’s a retired Admiral, Navy through and through—he didn’t take it well. My family...they’ve never forgiven me for leaving. I lost them when I made that decision.”

Grier’s expression softened, a look of understanding crossing her features. “I have feelings for you, too. Truth to tell, you haven’t been far from my thoughts since that night in Chicago. I owe you an apology for that.”

Alec flashed her an evil grin. “Yes, you do, and believe me, I mean to make you pay for that.”

She grinned back with nothing but lust in her expression. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“You can count on me. I’ve spent years trying to bury my need for a connection that’s deeper than just control and pleasure,” Alec continued, his gaze fixed on the ground in front of him. “But with you...it’s different. I can’t keep pretending it doesn’t matter—that you don’t matter. I don’t know if I can go back to the way things were before.”

Grier reached out, placing a hand on his arm, her touch grounding him in a way nothing else could. “You’re not in this alone, Alec,” she said softly. “Whatever happens, we’ll face it together. I don’t want to be alone anymore, either.”

Alec looked at her, his chest tightening with emotions he had long tried to ignore. He had always been the one to protect, to lead, but with Grier, he felt something

different—vulnerable, exposed, but also...connected, stronger.

“Thank you,” Alec said, his voice barely above a whisper. It was all he could manage, but it felt like the most honest thing he had said in a long time.

Grier gave him a small, reassuring smile, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Alec allowed himself to hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe, they could make it through this together, and that he didn’t have to face the darkness alone.

They continued their journey toward the extraction point, their steps in sync as they moved through the forest. Alec’s mind was still focused on the mission, on getting them out safely, but the weight on his shoulders felt a little lighter. He had shared a piece of himself with Grier, something he had never done with anyone else, and it had changed something between them.

As they reached the rendezvous point, Alec’s phone buzzed again. It was Seth, confirming that Kane was in position and ready to extract them. The relief that washed over Alec was palpable, but it was tempered by the knowledge that this was just the beginning. They still had a long way to go, and the road ahead was fraught with danger.

But as Alec looked at Grier, standing by his side, ready to face whatever came next, he felt a surge of determination. They would get through this, together. And whatever happened after that, he knew one thing for sure—he would fight to keep her safe, no matter the cost.

They made it out of the forest and into the clearing to find a small, fully-armored and armed helicopter with stealth capabilities. Alec was certain he’d never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Kane Chaplin hopped out of the pilot’s seat, sliding open the side entry. “Alec? You

ready to go?”

“I’ve never been so ready. Grier Marsden, Kane Chaplin.”

“Good to meet you, Ms. Marsden, but how about we save the happy reunion until we can do it properly at Club Southside?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Grier, who was trying to hide her fear of the chopper.

Alec took her hand, bringing it up to his lips to kiss her fingers. “It’ll be all right, baby. Trust me.”

Grier shook herself and then looked up at him with her green eyes clear and trusting. “I do.”

Alec helped her into the chopper, following her in and strapping himself in beside her, making sure she had on the headset that would allow her to hear and speak with both him and Kane. Kane closed the door before getting back into the pilot’s seat and starting up the engines.

“So that’s the way it is?” quipped Kane.

“That’s the way it is,” replied Alec.

“Good for you.”

Alec shot his friend a smile because for the first time in years, he had found something worth fighting for beyond the mission, something worth risking everything for. And that was a battle he was ready to face.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:53 am

Chapter 9

Grier

Grier sat in the luxuriously appointed safe room at Cerberus headquarters in Chicago, her fingers flying over the keys of her laptop as she worked to decipher the code that had plagued her since Moscow. She had expected a small room with a narrow cot and a rickety desk. What she'd found instead was a welcoming suite that could rival the best hotel rooms in the world.

The room was quiet, the only sound the soft hum of the computer and the occasional murmur from the operatives stationed outside. The walls were reinforced steel, but they'd been painted a soft, neutral cream color that provided the perfect backdrop of the luxurious furnishings. It was a stark contrast to the Agency's Moscow safehouse and the chaos and danger they had just escaped. Here, within the confines of Cerberus, Grier felt a sense of security, but it did little to calm the turmoil raging inside her.

She and Alec had settled in together. She spent her days mostly working on trying to find the answers to the questions she had. But her nights were spent reveling in Alec's arms. He was an inventive, caring and passionate lover who managed to take her to heights of ecstasy she had only previously imagined.

Alec was somewhere in the building, likely meeting with Seth or checking in with Robert Fitzwallace, the legendary head of Cerberus, about their next move. The thought of Alec brought a mix of emotions—relief, gratitude, and something deeper that she was still trying to sort out. They had been through hell together, and the

connection they had forged in the heat of danger was undeniable. But now, in the relative safety of Chicago, Grier found herself grappling with feelings she wasn't sure how to handle.

She pushed aside her work and leaned back in the ergonomic chair, rubbing her tired eyes. The code she was working on was intricate, layered with multiple levels of encryption designed to keep out even the most skilled cryptographers. But Grier was determined to crack it. She needed to prove to herself—and to Alec—that she was more than just an analyst stuck behind a desk. She wanted to contribute, to be part of the solution, not just someone who needed protecting.

As she sat there, lost in thought, the door to the safe room creaked open, and Samantha Coltraine slipped inside. Samantha was one of the few people at Cerberus who Grier had known before this nightmare had befallen her. Since their return to Chicago, it had been Samantha who often offered a kind word or a listening ear when things got tough.. Today, she wore her usual warm smile, but there was a hint of concern in her eyes as she took in Grier's exhausted expression.

"You look like you could use a break," Samantha said, crossing the room to sit beside her.

Grier offered a weak smile. "I'll rest when this is done."

Samantha gave her a knowing look. "You're going to burn yourself out, Grier. You've been through a lot. It's okay to take a moment for yourself."

Grier sighed, closing the laptop and rubbing her temples. "I don't know how to stop. Every time I try to relax, my mind just keeps going over everything that's happened. I can't shut it off."

Samantha nodded sympathetically. "It's hard to switch gears when you've been in

survival mode for a while. But you can't do everything by yourself. That's what Alec is here for, and the rest of us. We're a team."

Grier hesitated before speaking, her voice quiet. "That's just it, Samantha. I'm not used to this. Depending on other people, letting them in. I've always been the one who could handle things on my own. But now, with Alec... I don't know what's happening. I feel like I'm losing control."

Samantha studied her for a moment, then reached out to place a hand on Grier's. "You are. Or at least I think there's a part of you that would like to. I can tell you from experience that giving up control has a lot to recommend it, especially when there's a hunky Dom willing to take it."

Grier blushed. "Are you talking about what happened in Chicago? Or something more?"

"I'm talking about whatever you want to talk about."

Grier looked down at their hands, the warmth of Samantha's touch grounding her. "Both, I think. Alec and I... we've been through so much together. I trust him in ways I've never trusted anyone before. But the idea of a future with him, given the worlds we come from... I don't know if it's possible. And then there's this other part of it, this thing he showed me at Club Southside. It's... overwhelming."

Samantha's eyes softened with understanding. "You're talking about the dungeon, aren't you? The dynamic between you and Alec."

Grier nodded, feeling a flush rise to her cheeks. "I've always been strong, capable. But when I'm with Alec, I find myself wanting to let go, to be... submissive. It scares me, Samantha. I've never felt like this before, and I'm not sure what it means."

Samantha squeezed her hand gently. “Grier, it’s not uncommon for strong women to crave a space where they can let go of control. It doesn’t make you weak. It’s about finding balance, about having a place where you can find peace, where you don’t have to be in charge all the time.”

Grier looked up, her eyes searching Samantha’s face. “But what if I’m not enough? What if I can’t reconcile these two parts of myself? I’ve always wanted the fairy tale romance, the happily ever after. But I don’t know if that’s possible with Alec.”

Samantha smiled gently. “Grier, fairy tales aren’t about perfection. They’re about finding someone who understands you, who accepts every part of you—the strong, the vulnerable, the capable, the focused, the brilliant. Alec sees all of that in you, and he’s still here. I don’t think he has plans to go anywhere—at least not without you.”

Grier’s throat tightened with emotion. “I’m just not sure if I can be what he needs.”

“You don’t have to be anything other than yourself,” Samantha said softly. “If you want to explore that side of yourself with Alec, then talk to him about it. You might be surprised by what you discover.”

Grier sat in silence for a long moment, Samantha’s words echoing in her mind. She had spent so much time trying to be strong, trying to be everything to everyone, that she hadn’t allowed herself to truly explore what she wanted, what she needed. But with Alec, she felt safe enough to do that, to push her boundaries and see where it led.

“Would you do something for me?” Grier asked quietly, breaking the silence.

“Of course,” Samantha replied.

Grier hesitated, then nodded as if making a decision. “Would you ask Alec to show me the dungeon at Club Southside? When it’s closed, I mean. I want to see it, to

understand what this could be.”

Samantha’s smile was warm, supportive. “King would tell me to tell you that you need to ask him yourself. But King isn’t always right. He can be a bit rigid about the roles of Dom and sub. I’d be happy to talk to Alec for you.”

Grier felt a strange mixture of anxiety and anticipation at the thought. She had no idea what to expect, but she trusted Alec. Whatever happened, she knew he would guide her through it.

That night as she lay nestled in his embrace, he said, “I understand from Samantha that you’d like to return to the dungeon and have a look around. You should have asked me yourself.”

Something about the mock severity in his tone made her laugh. “Yeah, she said you Doms could be sticklers for protocol, but would you mind showing me your world?”

“Not at all. It would be my honor. She also said I need to let you get more sleep.”

“I don’t know that Samantha knows everything.”

Alec’s deep chuckle as he wrapped her tighter in his arms made her believe that her world was finally being set right. The next day, however, that same world was turned upside down.

She had just finished her morning coffee and was back at her laptop, sifting through the data she had been working on, when she stumbled across something that made her blood run cold. Her fingers froze over the keyboard, her breath catching in her throat as she stared at the screen in disbelief.

It was a message, encrypted but unmistakable in its intent. The communication was

between the mole they had been hunting and someone she knew well—Agent Tyler Simmons, a close colleague and friend. The realization hit her like a physical blow, knocking the air from her lungs.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head in denial. “It can’t be.”

But the evidence was there, undeniable. Tyler Simmons was the mole. He had to be. The person she had trusted, had worked alongside for years, had betrayed them all.

Grier felt the ground shift beneath her, the world she knew crumbling around her. She struggled to breathe, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of it. How had she missed this? How had she not seen the signs? Now that she had the key to who the mole was, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

She replayed every interaction she had ever had with Tyler, every conversation, every mission they had worked on together. Had it all been a lie? Had he been playing her the whole time?

The betrayal cut deep, deeper than she had ever imagined possible. Tyler had been one of the few people she had trusted implicitly, someone she had considered a friend. And now, that trust had been shattered.

Her hands shook as she closed the laptop, unable to look at the screen any longer. She felt sick, her stomach churning with a mixture of anger, disbelief, and overwhelming sadness. She had been fooled, and the thought of it made her feel weak, foolish.

A knock on the door startled her, and she quickly wiped at her eyes, trying to pull herself together. The door opened, and Alec stepped inside, his expression immediately turning to concern when he saw the look on her face.

“Grier, what’s wrong?” he asked, crossing the room in a few quick strides to kneel

beside her.

She looked at him, her vision blurred with unshed tears. “It’s Tyler,” she whispered, as if saying it quietly might not make it true. “He’s the mole, Alec. He betrayed us.”

Alec’s expression hardened, but there was no surprise in his eyes, only a deep sadness. He reached out, taking her trembling hands in his, his touch grounding her in the midst of her turmoil. “I’m sorry, baby,” he said softly. “I know how much this hurts.”

“I should have seen it,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “I should have known. I trusted him, Alec. I trusted him with everything.”

“That’s not a weakness, Grier,” Alec said, his voice firm. “Your ability to trust, to see the good in people, is one of your greatest strengths. Tyler took advantage of that, but it doesn’t mean you were wrong to trust. It means he was wrong to betray that trust.”

Grier shook her head, the tears spilling over despite her efforts to hold them back. “But I was so blind, Alec. I didn’t see it, and now... now everything is falling apart.”

Alec pulled her into his arms, holding her close as she cried, her body trembling with the force of her emotions. He didn’t say anything, just held her, his presence a steady anchor in the storm of her grief.

When the tears finally subsided, Grier pulled back slightly, looking up at Alec with red-rimmed eyes. “What do we do now?”

“We expose him,” Alec said simply. “We take what you’ve found, and we make sure the Agency knows what he’s done.”

“And if the Agency does nothing?”

“There’s nothing and there’s nothing. If they just quietly take him out or rendition him to find out who his contacts were and how deep the conspiracy goes that’s one thing, but if they refuse to move on him, then Cerberus will see that he’s neutralized as a threat.”

Grier nodded, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. “You’re right. We can’t let him get away with this.”

Alec’s expression softened, his hand gently brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. She looked into his eyes, seeing the determination and resolve there, and felt a flicker of hope. Alec was right—they would get through this. She wasn’t alone in this fight, and with him by her side, and Cerberus backing them both, she felt stronger, more capable.

That evening, Alec called a meeting with those on the Cerberus team he knew absolutely that he could trust, over pizza and beer they began to formulate a plan to expose Tyler. Grier couldn’t help but feel a sense of purpose, a renewed determination to see this through. The betrayal still stung, and the pain of it would take time to heal, but she knew she wouldn’t let it break her.

And as Alec and the team talked through their next steps, Grier felt a quiet strength growing within her, a belief that they could overcome whatever came their way. She wasn’t the same person she had been when she’d been sent to Moscow—she was stronger, wiser, and more determined than ever.

With Alec by her side, Grier knew they could face whatever challenges lay ahead. They would expose the truth and bring Tyler to justice. And maybe, just maybe, they could find a way to build a future together, despite the odds.

As they worked late into the night, Grier found herself looking at Alec with a new sense of clarity. She had fallen for him, there was no denying that now. And while the

future was uncertain, one thing was clear: she was ready to fight for it, for them, no matter what it took.

Chapter 10

Alec

That evening, Alec led Grier down to the dungeon. Club Southside was closed so they would have the whole place to themselves. As he opened the door for her, Grier stood frozen for just a moment. Alec took her hand and led her into the dungeon. The last and only time she had been here, she'd been single-minded in what she wanted and what she had allowed herself to experience. Alec meant to show her there was a whole lot more to D/s than that. Her wide eyes took in every minute detail of the smaller staging area as if she wanted to memorize it all. Yet when her gaze landed on him, he saw nothing but intrigue reflected back.

Alec guided her toward one of the leather upholstered machines, carefully explaining its purpose and usage. She listened attentively, asking questions that revealed an unexpected curiosity and eagerness. He realized he wanted to see her tied up, aching for his touch. He'd thought to give her a bit more time to settle in, but seeing the tension pent up in her body, perhaps it would alleviate some of her concerns and see the life they could build together. Maybe what she needed wasn't the gentle lover he'd been since their return, but the Dom who could see to all of her needs.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered softly, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"Here? Now?" Grier stuttered, her eyes flickering to the floor momentarily before meeting his again.

He gave her a pointed look and she swallowed hard, her hands moving to strip herself

of her leggings and sweater. He was so glad they'd already had the safe sex and birth control talk, both agreeing to being exclusive and healthy with Grier on birth control and Alec not needing to use a condom.

It was an intimate moment, a dance of desire and apprehension that set Alec's soul racing. God he'd never wanted a woman the way he wanted Grier, and this was after more than a week of having her two or three times a day. It hit him like a sudden clap of thunder that it was because he loved her. Not that he was or could be falling for her, but that he was already down the rabbit hole, and he was deeply in love with her.

As Grier drew the sweater over her head, she revealed a delicate ruby red bra that did little to offer her actual support, but certainly made her breasts look amazing. But it was when she peeled off the leggings that he had to remind himself to breathe. Not only wasn't she wearing any panties, someone—he suspected Samantha—had instructed her in the proper grooming for a sub, which was to say completely bare.

“You're beautiful, Grier,” he groaned. “Absolutely, stunningly beautiful.”

Taking her by the hand, Alec led her to the sleek black piece of equipment against the wall. Whispering its function in her ear as he stood behind her, rubbing his hard cock—still trapped in his jeans—along her backside while he reached around to fondle her breasts, he could feel her shudder and saw a blush rise in her cheeks.

“You're not the least bit afraid, are you, Grier?” he murmured, his voice closer to a gruff whisper.

“Not at all. I'm told it's just a matter of the pain enhancing pleasure—a delicate balance that you learn to appreciate.”

Helping her into place, Alec nodded, taking his time to adjust the equipment until it was perfectly suited for her curvy frame. His hands roamed over her body

possessively, something he realized she enjoyed, taking care of every single strap until she was securely restrained.

Her trusting eyes shimmered with the promise of unknown exhilaration as she looked up at him, a soft plea on her lips. “It won’t hurt too much, will it?” she whispered hesitantly.

“No, but if you need me to slow down, just say yellow. If you want me to stop, say red.” He offered her a reassuring smile, stepping back to take in the entire image of her bound and waiting. The sight was almost too much to bear.

Alec slipped his knife out of the scabbard at his waist and slipped it beneath her bra, pulling it until the fabric broke. Now she was naked and waiting for his next move. He didn’t intend for her to have to wait long.

Her breasts were huge, and Alec had already found he couldn’t fit them in his hands even if he tried. They were also incredibly sensitive and responsive. He returned to her, reaching between them to roll her hardening nipples between his fingertips. The mere sight of the pleasure crossing her face made his cock strain against his fly, and he swallowed hard, trying to hold himself back.

“Have you ever had nipple clamps on?”

Grier shook her head. “No, I’ve only ever read about them.”

Alec chuckled. “The experience defies description. You should enjoy it, I think, as you like it when I tug, pinch, or bite your nipples.”

He’d come down and set up a tray with some of the toys he’d wanted to show her. Walking over to it, he picked up a pair of nipple clamps. He headed back to her, sliding the clamps into his pocket, running his hands along her silky-smooth skin.

God, he loved the feel of her skin.

Her breathing became erratic as she wasn't completely sure what to expect. Grabbing one of her breasts, Alec sucked her nipple into his mouth before giving it a hard nip.

Grier's gasp filled the room, a mixture of surprise and pleasure that sent a jolt of arousal and anticipation through his system. Alec pulled back, releasing her nipple, which was now standing at attention, taut and begging for more.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the clamps. "These," he said, dangling them in front of her eyes, "are going to make you feel so good."

There was an initial flash of apprehension in her eyes, but it quickly turned to lust as he explained the mechanics of it—how the pain was only momentary before it gave way to pleasure—trust replaced fear. With a nod from her, Alec attached the clamps onto each nipple, adjusting them until they were perfectly situated.

The gasp Grier emitted was louder this time, sending a delicious shiver down his spine. Her hands were clenched tightly by her sides as she took a moment to adjust to the new sensation. He could see her fighting herself not to wriggle against her bindings as she looked at him. Her nipples were turning the most glorious raspberry color, and he could see she wanted to feel more.

Alec stepped back to the tray and brought up a brand-new magic wand he'd purchased just for her. He picked up the harness and slipped the wand into it before attaching it to the binding around her middle. Sliding it into place, he pressed it firmly against her clit.

Grier's eyes went wide, and she gasped when he flicked it on. She began to writhe as Alec removed his clothes, taking his time to fold them neatly, placing them on the bench next to hers. He could tell the vibrations from the wand were already taking

effect as her breathing became more ragged and erratic.

Alec placed his hand on her thigh, feeling the silky skin tremble under his touch. He increased the speed of the vibrator, eliciting another gasp from her.

“Don’t you dare come until I tell you to,” he growled at her, watching a shiver run through her body not just at the words, but at the tone of his voice.

Grier bit her lip and nodded, even as her face flushed with arousal. Reaching between her legs, Alec found what he wanted—a wealth of her natural lubricant pooling just inside the entry to her core. Her body arched up as his fingers found that place inside her, wet, ripe and ready. The wand still buzzed harshly against her, the sheer intensity of it causing her to writhe desperately. She was biting down on her bottom lip now, trying to prevent any more noises from escaping, but her efforts were futile.

Alec slipped another finger inside her, the slickness making it easy for him to pump in and out. Her walls clenched around him, and he couldn’t hold back the groan at the tightness.

“Look at me,” he ordered, his voice hoarse with desire. Her eyes fluttered open and met his, glittering with suppressed need. “Are you ready?”

She nodded quickly, not trusting herself to speak, but unable to prevent a small whimper from escaping her lips. Alec removed his hand and the wand from between her legs, swiftly replacing it with the head of his hard, throbbing cock.

Alec guided his cock to her core before thrusting deep inside her. A gasp was wrenched from her as he buried himself to his root, the heady pleasure of being inside her again causing him to momentarily pause to revel in the sensation.

“God, you’re so tight,” he murmured, beginning to rock his hips against hers.

Their bodies shifted against each other in a perfect rhythm, each thrust sending a jolt of pleasure through both of them. He watched as her eyes went wide at the stretch, her breath hitching with each move he made. Alec knew he could be a lot to take and loved watching her do so each time he entered her.

Her nails dug into the palms of her hands as Alec lifted her legs to wrap around his waist, a low groan slipping from her lips as he angled his hips to hit that sweet spot deep within her. When she squeezed around his length, he knew she was dangerously close to the edge.

Suddenly, he pulled out entirely before reentering her in one swift, harsh motion causing her back to arch with a surprised cry. Alec grinned wolfishly at the responsiveness of her body. The way she moved with him was addictive. He reached up to capture her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. Grier was panting heavily, her chest rising and falling with each of her ragged breaths. He lowered his lips to hers, swallowing her moans as he drove into her harder.

“Do you like that?” he asked, his voice husky with desire. Her answer came in the form of a sharp nod as her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Alec chuckled before murmuring against her ear, “I want to hear you say it.”

Her lips parted and the words tumbled out between breaths, “Yes...yes, Alec...please... don’t stop...”

That was all he needed to hear to release the last bit of control he’d been holding onto. His thrusts became erratic but purposeful as he chased their high. Grier’s body tensed, a clear sign she was on the brink of her release. Alec plowed into her over and over again, faster and harder.

Her body convulsed, and her gasps turned into screams as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. He watched with satisfaction, feeling simultaneously

powerful and captivated. Her release was a beautiful thing to witness—pure, raw, and unabashed.

With every whimper, she clenched and unclenched her fists. Alec could feel his own climax approaching. Grier was a volatile force of nature he knew he'd never be able to resist. He gripped her hips harder, holding onto the anchor she provided in the storm of their shared passion. Grier's cries grew louder and then softened into a low moan—a sound that pulled at something deep within him and sent him spiraling over the edge.

With one final thrust, Alec groaned as his body shuddered against hers as he rode out the waves of his climax. Finally sliding out of her, he watched his cum pool at her entrance. God, that was a sight worth seeing. He pulled on his jeans and wrapped a blanket around her before releasing her from her bonds and the nipple clamps, catching her as she sagged against him.

"I love you, Grier," he whispered, unsure of whether she'd recovered enough to hear him.

Lifting her up, he took her back upstairs, asking Royce if he'd mind cleaning up his play space. It was something the Doms did for one another so the Dom who had a sub in his arms could focus his attention on her.

He took her into their room and sat in the large, leather wingback before the electric fireplace, cradling her close.

Grier's finger came up to trace his stubbled jawline. "I love you, too," she whispered.

Chapter 11

Alec

Langley, Virginia

Alec stood in the shadows, the night air cool against his skin as he watched the building across the street. The Cerberus team was in position, every member keyed up and ready to execute the plan they had spent the last forty-eight hours meticulously crafting. The weight of what they were about to do hung heavily in the air, a mixture of tension, anticipation, and adrenaline that always accompanied a high-stakes operation.

Grier was beside him, her expression focused as she checked her equipment one last time. Alec watched her out of the corner of his eye, his mind racing with everything that had led them to this moment. They had come a long way since their harrowing escape from Moscow, navigating a treacherous path of deception, betrayal, and danger. And now, they were about to bring it all to a head.

Tyler Simmons, the mole who had betrayed them all, was inside the building, along with several key players in the broader conspiracy they had uncovered. Alec's jaw tightened as he thought about the man Grier had once called a colleague, a man who had betrayed not only her but the entire intelligence community. Tonight, that betrayal would come to light, and Alec was determined to see justice served.

But it wasn't just about justice—it was about protecting Grier, ensuring that the truth was revealed and that the people responsible for this mess were held accountable. It

was about making sure that the woman he had come to love more than anything in the world could finally have some peace and safety.

“Are you ready?” Grier’s voice broke through his thoughts, bringing him back to the present.

Alec nodded, his gaze locking onto hers. “I’m ready. We’re going to take him down, Grier. And we’re going to make sure this never happens again.”

She offered him a small, determined smile, her green eyes gleaming with resolve. “We do this together.”

Together. The word echoed in Alec’s mind, filling him with a sense of purpose and determination. He had been a lone wolf for so long, relying on his instincts and training to get him through the toughest situations. But with Grier by his side, he had found something more—someone to fight for, someone who made him believe that maybe, just maybe, there was more to life than the mission.

Alec reached out, his hand brushing against hers in a brief, reassuring touch. “Let’s finish this.”

With a final nod, they moved into position, the Cerberus team converging on the building from all sides. Alec led the way, his movements silent and precise as they slipped through the shadows, the plan unfolding like clockwork. Every member of the team knew their role, and Alec trusted them implicitly.

Grier’s role was crucial. Her skills as an analyst and cryptographer had been instrumental in uncovering the evidence that would bring Tyler down. Her skills hadn’t gone unnoticed by those at Cerberus. Perhaps it was time they hired a cryptographer of their own. Now, she would be the one to upload the files, ensuring that the entire Agency as well as those of several allies saw the truth. Alec’s heart pounded in his chest as he thought about the danger she was walking into, but he

pushed those fears aside. She was strong, capable, and he had no doubt she would get the job done.

They reached the back entrance, and Alec signaled to the team. In unison, they breached the door, moving swiftly and silently through the dimly lit corridors. The building was a maze of offices and storage rooms, but Alec knew exactly where they needed to go. The intel they had gathered indicated that Tyler and some of his co-conspirators were meeting in a secure conference room on the third floor, discussing their next move.

As they made their way through the building, they encountered several guards—FSB agents who had been stationed to protect the meeting. Alec took them out quickly and efficiently, his training kicking in as he neutralized the threats without hesitation. Kane was right beside him, his movements fluid and controlled as he provided cover, his focus unwavering. Kane's primary role in the op was to ensure Grier's safety. Unbeknownst to her, Alec had made him swear if things started to go sideways, Kane would get Grier out and back to Cerberus in Chicago.

They reached the stairwell and began their ascent, the tension building with each step. Alec could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, sharpening his senses as they neared their target. He could hear the faint murmur of voices as they approached the third floor, the sound growing louder as they moved closer.

Alec held up a hand, signaling for the team to stop. He pressed his ear against the door leading to the conference room, listening intently. Inside, he could hear the sound of a man's voice, calm and confident as he discussed the next phase of their operation. The arrogance in his tone made Alec's blood boil, but he forced himself to stay focused. They needed to catch him in the act, to expose him for what he was. Grier met his gaze, and Alec nodded. It was time.

He signaled to the team, and they moved into position. Alec counted down silently, his heart pounding in his chest. Three. Two. One.

They burst into the room, weapons drawn, and chaos erupted. Tyler and his co-conspirators reacted instantly, reaching for their guns, but Alec and the Cerberus team were faster. Shots rang out as they engaged the enemy, the sound deafening in the enclosed space.

Alec's focus was razor-sharp as he moved through the room, taking down targets with lethal precision. He caught a glimpse of Grier out of the corner of his eye, her expression fierce as she fought her way to the computer terminal where she would upload the files. Despite the chaos around them, she moved with purpose, her every action deliberate and controlled.

As Alec dispatched another agent, he turned just in time to see Tyler trying to make a run for it, darting toward the door on the far side of the room. Without hesitation, Alec gave chase, his legs pumping as he closed the distance between them. He tackled Tyler to the ground, the two men grappling for control.

Tyler was strong, but Alec was stronger, years of training giving him the edge. He pinned Tyler to the floor, his hand gripping the man's collar as he stared down at him, fury and betrayal burning in his eyes.

"It's over, Tyler," Alec growled, his voice low and dangerous. "You're done."

Tyler sneered, his lips curling in defiance. "You think you've won? You have no idea what you're up against."

Before Alec could respond, the door to the conference room burst open, and Deputy Director Mendelson strode in, flanked by several armed agents. Alec's blood ran cold as he realized what was happening—Mendelson was part of this, had been all along.

"Alec McKennon," Mendelson said, his voice smooth and confident. "I have to say, I'm impressed. You and Grier have caused quite a bit of trouble for us."

Alec tightened his grip on Tyler, his mind racing. “Us? So, it’s true—you’ve been working with Tyler this whole time.”

Mendelson smiled, a cold, calculating expression. “Tyler was just a pawn. The real power lies with those who control the flow of information, who manipulate the truth to serve their own ends. You and Grier were never supposed to make it this far, but I underestimated you. A mistake I won’t make again.”

Alec’s jaw clenched as he stared down Mendelson. He could see the smug satisfaction in the man’s eyes, the confidence of someone who believed he had already won. But Alec wasn’t about to let Mendelson walk away from this.

“You’ve underestimated Grier, too,” Alec said, his voice low and steady. “And that’s going to be your downfall.”

Mendelson’s eyes flicked to Grier, who was standing by the computer terminal, her fingers flying over the keyboard as she completed the upload. Alec could see the moment Mendelson realized what was happening, the brief flash of panic in his eyes before he masked it with anger.

“Stop her!” Mendelson barked, but it was too late.

Grier hit the final key, and the room was flooded with the sound of data being transmitted. The files they had gathered—evidence of Tyler’s betrayal, Mendelson’s involvement, and the broader conspiracy—were being sent to secure servers, where they would be made available to several allied governments.

Alec released Tyler and stood, his eyes never leaving Mendelson. “It’s over,” Alec said, his voice filled with quiet triumph. “The truth is out.”

Mendelson’s face twisted in rage, but he knew he was beaten. The agents flanking him lowered their weapons, unsure of what to do now that their leader had been

exposed. Alec could see the defeat in Mendelson's eyes, the realization that his carefully constructed web of lies had unraveled.

Alec didn't waste any more time. He moved to Grier's side, his hand resting on her shoulder as they watched the data upload complete. The tension in the room was palpable, but Alec felt a sense of calm wash over him. They had done it. They had exposed the truth, and now, justice would be served.

As the Cerberus team secured the room and took Tyler, Mendelson, and the rest of those with them into custody, Alec turned to Grier, his expression softening. "You were incredible, Grier. We couldn't have done this without you."

Grier looked up at him, her eyes filled with a mix of relief and exhaustion. "We did this together, Alec. And now... it's over."

Alec nodded, but there was a part of him that knew their journey was far from over. The immediate danger had passed, but the implications of what they had uncovered would ripple through the intelligence community for years to come. And then there was the matter of what came next—both professionally and personally.

In the aftermath of the operation, Alec and Grier found themselves in a quiet moment of reflection. The Cerberus team had taken control of the situation, and the building was secure. But as they stood there, the weight of everything they had been through began to settle over them.

"We should probably get ready for our debriefings," Grier said, her voice tinged with a note of finality.

Alec nodded, though the thought of parting ways—even temporarily—filled him with a sense of unease. They had faced so much together, and now that the immediate threat was over, Alec couldn't help but wonder what would happen next.

“Grier,” Alec began, his voice hesitant as he searched for the right words. “I know we’ve been through hell and back, and I don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for. But I need you to know that what I feel for you... it’s real. And I don’t want to walk away from that.”

Grier met his gaze, her eyes softening as she stepped closer to him. “Me either, Alec. I meant what I said, too. I don’t know how this is going to shake out, but as long as we end up together, I can be okay with however it ends up. A long time ago, I told Samantha I wanted my own fairy tale romance and ending. I never thought I’d get it, but I was wrong.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. “You are my storybook hero, Alec, and I’ll be damned if anyone ever takes you away from me.”

He stood looking down at her, not quite sure what to say.

“Kiss the girl, you stupid sonofabitch,” said Kane. “If you don’t, I will, and I’d say she deserves it, don’t you?”

Alec chuckled. “You even try, and I’ll knock your teeth down your throat. And yeah, I think she deserves it.” He took Kane’s teasing prompt to kiss Grier with a restrained ferocity and passion that promised so much more. Lifting his head, he smiled down at her before kissing her again. “One step at a time, Grier, together.”

With that unspoken agreement between them, they shared a quiet moment, the world around them fading into the background as they acknowledged the deep connection they had forged. It wasn’t going to be easy—nothing worth having ever was—but Alec knew they were both willing to do whatever it took to have it.

The following morning, as they parted ways for their respective debriefings, Alec watched Grier walk away, a sense of optimism settling over him. He’d found someone who understood him, who accepted him for who he was, and that was a rare and precious thing. He had no idea what the future held, but for the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to finding out.

Hours later, Alec waited outside the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, his breath visible in the cool evening air as he waited for Grier to emerge. He had made arrangements for this moment, a small gesture to show her just how much she meant to him. She wanted a fairy tale ending, well, he was going to see that she got one.

When Grier finally stepped through the doors, her eyes widened in surprise as she saw the horse-drawn carriage waiting for her, Alec couldn't help but smile. He stepped forward, offering her his hand as he gestured to the carriage.

"Your carriage awaits, my lady," Alec said, his tone light but filled with meaning. "You want that fairy tale ending; well, I mean to see that you get it."

Grier settled into the carriage, leaning against him with her head resting on his shoulder as the horses began to trot towards the private airstrip where a Cerberus jet waited to take them home. Wrapping his arm around her, pulling her close, Alec felt a sense of peace he hadn't known in years. The world was still a dangerous and unpredictable place, but for now, in this moment, he had everything he needed.

Their future fairytale was theirs to write, one chapter at a time.

Kane's story is in *Enticing Kane*. [Click here to read it.](#)

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