



The Dreamboat (The Portland Protectors: EHM Security #4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: They call me Dreamboat for a reason. My friends say I'd flirt with my shadow if it got me laid, and they're not wrong. I'm a good-looking man with a high sex drive and I love a good time. I know what I like and have no trouble getting it.

As a former Navy SEAL, I'm highly trained to handle dangerous situations. The security firm I work for with my three best friends in Portland has given me a new lease on life, away from danger.

Everything is great until I piss off the wrong people. And they want me dead.

Now this protector needs a protector.

And he happens to be the one man I cant forget. The one I hooked up with a few months ago in Vegas. The one who sees me for who and what I am and still seems to want me. And that's scarier than any enemy Ive ever faced..

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LAS VEGAS- FIVE MONTHS AGO

The pulsing beat from the club music fueled my growing need for the sexy man I'd been lusting over for years. Every throb shot another bolt of desire straight to my cock as I held on to his hips and glued myself to him. New Year's Eve in Vegas was a rare chance to let loose, and I intended to take advantage of every moment of it.

What were the odds that we'd end up in the same club on the same night? A billion to one? Whatever it was, I was the fucking winner. Dancing with him for the last hour had been a frustrating exercise in self-control.

Commander John Langdon was six-foot-three of sculpted muscle with dark hair and a beard sprinkled with gray. His chiseled jaw and rough edges had always done it for me. And when he got all bossy, all I could do was smile.

Being a former Navy SEAL and security specialist with EHM, we rarely got the chance to just let loose. Our services were in high demand because there was always another assignment or a client to protect. So when I suggested we should get out of Portland to Dare, he was all in. We were the last two single men at EHM, and we needed to live it the fuck up. I knew he was still moping over someone, but that was okay. He could watch me have fun from his barstool.

When the commander and I made eye contact earlier in the evening, he'd given the look I'd been waiting for. We eventually found our way to one another on the dance floor, and when I'd reached for him, sparks exploded between us when his mouth slammed down on mine the first time. And there was no way I could keep my hands to myself.

As I clung to his broad shoulders, I leaned in to breathe in his spicy cologne with notes of cinnamon mixed with clean sweat. The familiar scent combined with a testosterone-filled man created an overpowering desire that was almost impossible to control.

John must have been feeling it too because he pressed back against my shaft, giving me the green light that he wanted more. So my hands did their job and snaked around his waist. One finally settled above the button of his jeans while the other roamed across the sculpted plains of his chest.

How far could I go without getting us arrested? I guess we'd see.

The decorated SEAL team leader wrapped his long left arm behind my leg to pull me closer. His right hand caught mine, then pushed it down over his dick before anchoring his hand on top.

Hello big daddy.

Slipping my hand free, I ran it under his shirt, then down the front of his jeans. Thank fuck they weren't tight because he was packing an anaconda.

I growled when his hot skin contacted my palm. Circling my fingers around it, I stroked his cock the way I'd like it. Evidently it worked because the rumble of his groan rippled through my chest as I explored his body before I pulled my hand away.

There was one thing I was certain of. If we'd been naked, my dick would be in his ass in less than a second. And since he was only a couple inches taller than my six-foot-one, the slide home would be an easy endeavor. So when the time was right, I'd let the big guy fuck me into oblivion.

But for the time being, I had to settle for grinding myself harder against him. His

touch, the way he smelled, and the eagerness we both felt had me ready to explode. And I'd almost reached the end of my patience. So I tugged Commander closer to whisper in his ear.

“Let’s get out of here before we get arrested.”

I felt his smile as he turned his head to kiss my cheek. Twisting in my arms as I held on, he grabbed my face and took my mouth in another searing kiss before pulling back to whisper against my lips. “Let’s go, Pretty Boy. Time to fuck.”

I shivered again, then heard myself giggle as he led me off the dance floor and back through the club.

Where the fuck did that come from? I was a goddamn Navy SEAL, an underwater demolition specialist, and a badass motherfucker.

I didn’t giggle.

Except I did.

For him .

I ignored the warning signs going off in my head that this would not end well for me. I wasn’t afraid of John in the least. I could take him. But it was the warmth in his eyes when he looked at me that was dangerous. Not to mention the feel of his lips and tongue pressed to mine, and the way the sound of his deep voice poured over me and calmed something deep inside. I was a bee to his honey, and that was going to be a high stakes game I was going to lose.

But I liked risky adventures. And even though I knew I should have walked away and let him go, there was no way I could pass up a good time with his big dick. So when

he pulled me out the door and headed to the parking lot, I went willingly like a duck to water.

Commander lead me through the parking lot before stopping beside a big-ass truck parked in a relatively dark corner of the lot. He unlocked the doors, pulled open the back one, and ushered me into the backseat. I didn't hesitate one second.

"We're fucking in public?" The prospect of doing something like that thrilled me.

"The first time."

He smiled at me as he ripped off his t-shirt and unbuckled his jeans. Lifting his hips, the Commander pulled them down just enough to let his big cock spring free.

Glancing over at me as I drooled on myself, he grinned. "Hurry up, Dreamboat, and get on my dick. We don't have a lot of time. After all that grinding on my ass, I gotta nut at least once before we go back inside."

More dumbass giggling escaped from me as I ripped my shirt over my head and shoved down my jeans. He reached for me as I scrambled like a crab over onto his lap.

John rubbed his hand down my chest, tracing my tattoos with his fingertips. But before I lowered myself, he stopped me.

"Wait."

I huffed like a teenager not getting their way as he reached into the pocket of the seat behind me.

"Need a condom."

My brows shot up. “You fuck a lot in the backseat of your truck, huh?” He handed me a packet of lube while he suited up.

Commander smiled, making the fine lines around his eyes appear. I studied his meticulously styled dark hair as I tore open the packet with my teeth. It had a hint of gray at the temples and was just long enough to make me want to mess it up for him. There was something about the way he looked up at me through those long lashes, then flashed his sexy grin that made me stupid.

“I don’t fuck irresponsibly. I’m always prepared.”

I laughed. “You must have been a hell of a boy scout. Bet you earned that preparedness badge, didn’t you?”

His gaze held mine, making my breath catch in my chest. Something passed between us as we stared at each other for a long moment. I tried to look away, but John wasn’t having it. Reaching up, he cupped my face.

“I’ve had my eye on you a long damn time, Dreamboat. Ever since the first joint mission in Central America, I’ve dreamed of having you. And once will not be enough.”

He curled his fingers around the back of my neck and pulled me in for another scorching kiss before letting me go. Tapping the side of my bare thigh to get my attention, he held his cock ready for me. “Lube. Then on your knees, Pretty Boy.”

I wanted to argue, just to be an asshole, but complied with his request. After squeezing the contents of the packet onto his cock, I tossed it onto the seat. Bracing my hands on his broad shoulders, I positioned myself over him. And when his tip touched my entrance, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and dropped my head back to absorb the beginning of the delicious burn.

“I need your eyes on me when I take you.” He gripped my hip with one hand, and my dick with the other, slowly stroking just enough to keep me on edge.

More warning alarms went off in my head, blaring that this was too intimate, even for fucking in a truck. But there was something about the John Langdon that just did it for me. It was impossible for me to be the smartass I was known to be.

Nodding, I stared into his hazel eyes as I sunk down the rest of the way onto him. I needed the stretch and more of the burn to remind me this was just a fuck. I wanted to feel the ache tomorrow.

“Fuck, you’re big,” I hissed, biting my bottom lip.

John's right hand found my face and wiped the sweat away. “Careful, sweetheart,” he said soothingly. “Don’t hurt yourself and ruin our fun. Like I said, this is just the first time.”

All I could do was stare as he gently pulled my lip free from my teeth. Swiping his thumb over the mark they left behind, he looked into my soul with an expression I didn’t want to recognize.

Goddamn, this was risky. “Don’t call me sweetheart. Call me Dreamboat.”

He chuckled as if he expected my response. “Well, I guess you can call me Commander.”

When I was fully seated, I closed my eyes at the fullness and dropped my head onto his shoulder. His damn cologne was driving me crazy, but it was the only out I had to stop looking at him.

“Look at me, sweetheart,” the asshole whispered with a teasing lilt in his tone. “Give

me control tonight.”

I frowned but obeyed his command. Bracing my knees on the seat, he worked his hips to rock slowly inside of me. I lifted my head long enough to scan his face, then down to the strained tendons in his thick neck.

Looking at the Commander was not a good idea, but I couldn't help myself. He was more handsome now than the last time I'd seen him. And there was something about John Langdon that allowed me to lower my guard.

“Oh fuck,” I muttered as he picked up the pace. As I lifted my head from his shoulder, I knew if I wasn't careful, I'd lose my mind and do something crazy tonight. And when he cupped my face and looked into my eyes, I was toast.

“Happy New Year,” he whispered, then brought his mouth to mine, rendering me speechless.

It was official. I was fucked more than one way right then. But I'd deal with it tomorrow when I didn't have his dick in my ass.

The next morning, I was startled awake from a nightmare. I turned, ready to tell him about the ridiculously real dream, but John wasn't in bed with me. And by the looks of things, he was gone.

I released a sigh and fell back onto the pillow. It was probably for the best and my head fucking hurt. But the scent of him lingered on the pillow and made me smile.

It had been fun, and he'd saved me the hassle of sneaking out when he was in the shower. When my ass finally stopped hurting, I'd forget all about Commander John Langdon.

Escape plan averted.

Until the Commander showed up in Portland five months later with a secret that would change our lives forever.

CHAPTER 1

COMMANDER JOHN LANGDON

As I waited for my flight to finish boarding, I got comfortable in my first-class seat and took one last look out the window. The cloudless blue sky and mild temperatures of Southern California were a bonus when I agreed to take over the command of one of the SEAL Teams at Coronado five years ago. The other was the opportunity to be closer to my nineteen-year-old daughter. But my last deployment had been the catalyst I needed to retire from the Navy. That and memories of what happened in Vegas.

Now here I was, leaving again, but not back to Virginia. I was headed to Portland to explore a job offer from my friend and former SEAL Jesse “GQ” Evans. He needed someone to train his new hires that hadn’t come from the military, and that was right in my wheelhouse.

And there was someone I wanted to see. Someone who had rocked my world in Las Vegas and happened to be one of GQ’s best friends.

“Good morning. I’m Christine. Can I get you anything, sir? I have fresh coffee brewing.”

I looked up into the light eyes of the flight attendant as she smiled down at me. “Yes, that would be great. Thank you, ma’am.”

Before she could ask the next question, she leaned closer as several passengers

slipped by, toting all their shit with them to shove into the overhead compartments. When the smell of her perfume invaded my personal space, I turned my head back toward the window and leaned further away.

“Would you like cream and sugar?” she asked when the walkway was clear.

“No thank you. Just black.”

“Okay. One black coffee coming up.”

I returned half a smile as she headed toward the galley, dodging the last few passengers as they proceeded toward the back of the plane.

There was a time when I might have engaged in some mild flirting with her. Christine was attractive and at one time just my type. As pretty as she may be, she held no interest for me.

Every time I closed my eyes, all I saw were Brent’s warm brown ones and that shit-eating grin that made me smile. We’d met a few years ago when both of our teams were called up for a joint mission. So when I saw him that night in Vegas, it was as if the stars had aligned to bring us back together. We’d had a hell of a night partying and fucking around, and just thinking about it made my pants a little tighter.

I’d never experienced such magnetic attraction and chemistry with someone, and when he let me know the feeling was mutual, it was all I could do to get us someplace private. That’s how we ended up being more than a hookup that night. Both of us drunk on each other and feeling an intense connection.

“Here you go,” she said, breaking me out of my daydream about Brent as she handed me my coffee.

She must have noticed the situation in my lap because her demeanor changed completely. Tucking her red hair behind her ear, she tilted her head and met my gaze.

“Can I get you anything else? Breakfast pastry? We also have egg bites if you prefer the protein option.”

Looking up at her, she handed me a napkin.

“No. I’m good. Thank you, ma’am.”

Thank god the pilot announced we were ready to pull away from the gate, sending Christine off for her preflight duty. I was sure she’d check on me a hundred more times in the two and a half hours it would take to get to PDX in Portland. But I’d consume myself with my phone, reading the book I’d started a couple of days ago.

When the plane landed at PDX, I grabbed my bag, avoiding eye contact with Christine. I’d stuffed the napkin with her phone number into my coffee cup and deposited it in the trash right before we landed.

Taking out my phone, I dialed up GQ as I walked out of the plane. Lowering my head, he answered at just the right time.

“Hey, old man. Where are you?”

“Walking off the gateway, asshole. Where do you want me to meet you?”

“Outside baggage claim. Black Suburban.”

I smiled as I looked around for the sign to lead me to where I needed to be. “Of course, you have a Suburban. All security dads drive those kinds of cars.”

“Just get out here,” he laughed. “You’ll be driving one too very soon.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“On my way,” I said, then ended the call.

After weaving around passengers and kiosks, I finally made my way to the doors where I found my friend leaning against the car, talking to the security guard. Evidently, he had found a way to charm the guy into letting him park in the loading zone without causing an issue. That was so like him.

Looking up, he raised a hand as I approached. “Commander. It’s been too long old friend.”

He pulled me into a bro-hug and clapped me on the back.

“Yeah, it has.”

Jesse looked at the security guard. “Thanks, man. I’ll tell Dominick to leave you tickets for the Fan Event at Will Call.”

The guy smiled. “Thanks, Mr. Rossi. My kids will love that.”

I smirked at him being called by his husband’s last name.

We slid into the front seats and GQ started the car. He looked over at me, knowing I was going to bust his balls. “You hungry? We can grab an early lunch, or head to the office. Your call.”

I shifted in my seat as I fastened the seatbelt. “Well, Mr. Rossi ,” I teased, “I’ve only had coffee, but I’m not really hungry. I can wait.”

I'd never admit I was apprehensive about seeing Brent again. I could stare down an enemy tank or insurgents without losing my cool. But somehow, Brent made me all nervous inside.

"Okay. You alright over there?" he asked, glancing at me. "You're not usually this stoic."

I snorted out a laugh. "Yes, I am. And I'm fine."

"Whatever you say, Commander."

We talked about the upcoming football season and how this might be Alex Hayes' last one as the Pirates quarterback. I knew Jesse was tight with a lot of the players, especially since his husband, Dominick Rossi, was the kicker, and his brother Cooper was married to their tight end, Greg Foster. Not to mention his business partner, Aidan Hayes, was married to Marcus Monroe, the Pirates All-Pro wide receiver.

"You go to every game?" I asked, shifting to look at him as he drove us toward Portland.

"Not every game. Livie and I go to all the home games, and when they play in San Francisco and Seattle. If Greer is going to the away games, sometimes we might tag along."

"You should come to San Diego and see a game sometimes. The Sunrays are rebuilding. They're going to be really good when the new owner takes over. Might even change their name."

He laughed as he made the turn toward the interstate. "Since when did you become a football fan?"

I shrugged and looked out the front window. “I’ve always liked football, but have never had time to watch it. You know how things go between deployments. But they did offer me a job as head of security.”

Jesse’s head whipped toward me. “Seriously? What did you say?”

I grinned as I relaxed back into the seat. “I told them I had another offer on the table and I’d get back to them.”

He looked at me again. “You mean my offer, right?”

I nodded. “Yes. And if Daredevil is looking to scale back, I could entertain stepping into that role. I could buy him out if things work out.”

I let that hang in the air for a moment, waiting for what I knew was coming. “You going to tell me why you’re hesitant to take my offer? I thought this was a done deal.”

Shifting my gaze out the window, I decided to just tell him. “It will depend on Brent. I told the Sunrays I had another offer to consider. I asked them to give me a few days to sort it out.”

Jesse was quiet for a moment before he asked more questions. “What does any of this have to do with Dreamboat? Why would you be concerned? I’ve already told him and everyone else you were coming on board. If it’s about the money...”

I held up my hand. “It’s not about the money. Never has been. Like I said, it’s about how he feels about working with me.”

He went quiet again, then pulled off the interstate. Neither of us said anything as he pulled into a parking lot and stopped the car. Turning in his seat, his brow furrowed

as he looked at me.

“What exactly are you talking about John? I don’t understand. Dreamboat can work with anyone.”

I sighed and shifted once again to look at him. “If you don’t already know this, then I’m assuming he hasn’t said anything. So keep it confidential.”

GQ nodded. “Should I be worried? What did he do?”

I laughed. There was no way I was telling him everything before I spoke to Brent. It was no one’s business but ours.

“Before that last deployment, we hooked up in Vegas. Fuck if I know what he did to me,” I lied, “but I haven’t been able to get him out of my mind. I guess I might be the one with the feelings, so I have to find out if the attraction is still there. If it’s a problem for him, I’ll take the job in San Diego.”

My friend blinked at me, then started laughing. “You and Dreamboat are adults. Hell, he’s probably slept with half of Portland if what he says is true. But he’s never mentioned anything to me about having a history with you. Daredevil might be a different story. He loves torturing us with tales of his conquests.”

I huffed out a breath. “Well, we do. And I don’t want to make anything weird with him. I don’t want to interfere with the team.”

Jesse stared at me for a moment. “I appreciate that, but if you’ve got feelings for him, you might want to keep them to yourself for a while. I’ve never known him to do more than one and done. ”

I looked out the window and nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too. But it

might be easier said than done.”

GQ grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Commander. He’ll piss you off a hundred times the first day.”

I looked forward to it.

CHAPTER 2

brENT

“You excited to see him tomorrow?”

I side-eyed my best friend and former SEAL, Austin Wentworth, aka Daredevil. He was being an asshole, but I knew how to get under his skin.

“You excited about spending a week with Greer?”

I raised my brows at him, then took another pull of my beer, waiting for his response.

Dare scowled, but didn’t reply. Unlike me, he had a love-hate thing going on with the Pirates owner, Greer Rowan. And by love-hate, I mean he loved the guy but hated to admit it. But GQ, Phantom, and I knew the real story since he’d spilled his guts to us last week.

“My situation is different,” I supplied. “I’m not harboring ten years’ worth of messy feelings like you. I’m more of a one-and-done, no-repeats guy. No matter how good the lay is.”

“Classy,” he grunted. “And I don’t have feelings for him.”

I scoffed. “Really? The way you two look at each other says differently. You see, the difference between me and you is I know better. I’m just a man who loves being balls deep in a tight ass or face down while some big man pounds me into the mattress.

And John's dick was particularly memorable.”

Dare rolled his eyes, then shoved my shoulder, making me laugh. I wasn't ready to admit seeing the Commander again was a thrill. He'd been a hell of a fuck.

“We'll see how you react when you see him again. You forget I know you, and I've never heard you talk about a hookup after the fact. Not like you do him. And whether you realize it or not, you bring him up every once in a while. Something is different about him, and I'll be studying every expression you make tomorrow, and serving you with a side of analysis.”

I laughed to cover the unease crawling up my spine at his assessment. I could handle seeing John once in a while. But every day might be a problem because I'd want to jump on him. Of all the motherfucking former SEALs GQ could have hired, he had to hire mine.

Well, not mine.

But the best ass-wrecking hookup I'd ever had.

The one person who got so deeply under my skin that I still thought about him when I was home alone in the dark. The memory of his too-handsome face and the way his eyes fixed on mine like he could see my soul scared the shit out of me. It was also thrilling.

All along, my plan had been simple: spend my life as a SEAL as long as I could, and fuck my way around the world with whoever interested me. No settling down, no finding the one, and no falling in love. I knew what happens when you love someone too much. You eventually lost them. I'd seen it firsthand when our teammate was killed in action.

I shifted in my seat, the memories weighing heavier than I wanted to admit. That's why I kept my distance—why I didn't let anyone in too deep.

And I'd watched my parents fall apart when my brother died. It had wrecked them to the point that they were numb 24/7. They'd let go of me without knowing they'd done it.

So, no relationship entanglements would ever convince me they were worth it—because all they did was lead to getting hurt. I'd seen enough to know better. Just look at Dare, quietly pining for Greer all this time, denying it to everyone, even himself. That was reason enough for me to stay single for the rest of my life. You couldn't get hurt if you weren't involved.

“Why are you suddenly so quiet? That's highly unlike you.”

I smirked, then absently peeled the label from my Portland IPA.

Dare sat his bottle down and turned toward me. “What's going on? Does the thought of seeing the commander get you off kilter?”

I shrugged, staring at my bottle. “No. But I can admit he affects me in some kind of way. Makes me soft.”

His eyes went wide. “That's not good. Soft is never good in a hookup.”

I laughed and shoved him with my shoulder. “That's not what I mean, asshole. It's just...” I thought about how to put it into words. “I don't know. I can't explain it. But I refuse to leave myself vulnerable.”

He nodded slowly, looking at me. “You like him.”

I scrunched up my face in protest. “No. It’s not like that. He’s a good fuck, but I don’t like him like him. It’ll be fine.”

Daredevil laughed. “If it feels like you have unfinished business, maybe you should just fuck him out of your system. Like fuck buddies.”

I grinned and pointed at him. It was easier to deflect than admit being around John made me feel things I didn’t want to feel. “Yes. That I can do. Is that what you’re gonna do with Greer?”

Dare grunted a non-answer, so I went back to drinking my beer and watching the baseball game on the big screen. I could have fun with John if he was up for it. But then Dare caught me off guard.

“You’re thirty-five, man. Maybe it’s time for you to reconsider finding someone. You don’t want to live your life alone.”

I slowly panned my gaze toward my ridiculous friend. “No. Just no. I won’t be alone as long as I have you.”

He snickered and drank his beer. But I wasn’t finished. So I turned on my stool toward him.

“First off, how is settling down with one person remotely possible when there are so many sexy people out there in the world to explore? Any self-respecting sex god knows not to limit his prowess.”

“Phantom did it,” he replied. “He’s demi and got himself a rock star. And so did Jesse. We never thought they’d commit to anyone, and look at them now. Both of them stupidly happy.” Relationships might work for some, but I wasn’t Phantom or Jesse.

I nodded. “True, but are you ready to settle down? I mean, you don’t hook up. At all.”

Dare now peeled the label from his bottle. “Yeah, well... That’s complicated.”

He was fooling himself if he thought we couldn’t see how he felt about Greer, and maybe I was doing the same thing.

The following morning, Dare and I headed out to run through downtown Portland before going to the office. We’d made it our daily cardio when we were both in town, and I enjoyed running with him. He didn’t talk much which left me to carry a lot of the conversation. All it took was one look to know he had something on his mind. Hopefully, a week away on the beach in Costa Rica would give him some perspective.

After returning from our run, we showered and changed before heading into the office. Anticipation mixed with a dose of apprehension filled my mind as we headed out of the condo.

What if he didn’t want to hook up again?

What if he’d already settled down?

There wasn’t anything I could do either way, so I’d just move on. But seeing him every day might be a problem.

When we reached the parking lot, I looked over at Austin. “Want to ride together?”

“Can’t,” Austin said, running his hand over his head. “I’ve got some errands to run, and I have to go to the stadium.”

I snickered. “Yeah, okay. No problem.”

Pulling my keys from my pocket, I clicked the fob as we approached our almost identical black Tahoe's backed into their parking spaces. One look at them sitting side by side and I knew we wouldn't be going anywhere.

"What the fuck?"

Austin stopped and looked at my SUV, then at his. Both were sitting closer to the ground than we'd left them, meaning all eight tires were flat.

"Goddamn it," he said, scanning the area around the parking deck for anything out of the ordinary. He walked around his Tahoe, checking the body and tires, while I moved to get a closer look at mine.

Squatting down I ran my fingertips over the rubber before spotting three spaced-out cuts in the tire wall. My hackles rose as I stood up to check out the others.

Austin walked around to where I was checking the back tire. He ran his hand over his head while he looked at the undamaged car parked next to the Tahoe.

"They've been cut," I said as if he didn't already know.

"Ya think?"

He could be such a smartass.

Moving around to the other side of the Tahoe, Dare followed and pulled out his phone. Leaning down, he took pictures of each vehicle.

"Who the fuck would do this?" I said, standing to rest my hands on my hips. "A single tire is one thing. But they're going to have to be towed. And the rims are going to be fucked up. We're looking at a couple of grand each at least."

Austin looked around, mirroring my stance. “Insurance will cover it. But we gotta get a police report.” He took out his phone and started to dial 911. “Call Jesse.”

I nodded and took out my phone. He answered on the second ring.

“Hey, where are you guys?” His tone was relaxed, like every other day.

I sighed. “Waiting for the police.”

“Why? What happened? Where are you?” Alarm was evident in his tone, making me smile.

“Hang on Dad, and I’ll tell you. But it’s gonna cost you a pretty penny.”

“Brent,” he growled, impatiently, “what the fuck are you talking about?”

“All four tires were slashed on both cars. Looks like damaged rims. We’re not gonna make it to the meeting.”

Jesse let out a weighted sigh as I heard the sound of his chair moving back against the floor. “Okay. We’re coming to you. Call Phantom and tell him to meet us at the condo.”

GQ ended the call, leaving me to look at my phone. John was on the way, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I wanted to see him again, but just the thought of what might happen between us created a ball of anxiety in my gut.

“Police are on the way. What did GQ say?”

I looked up at my friend. “They’re, umm... coming here. Guess I’m gonna see the commander before I have my coffee.”

But I was wrong.

Right before the police showed up, my phone rang with a call from my mother. I knew it was trouble because she never called.

CHAPTER 3

JOHN

The concerned look on GQ's face put me on edge. Our casual conversation about how fast kids grow was quickly forgotten when he stood from his chair and relayed what had happened.

The ride across town was filled with one-sided conversation, but no matter what he said, all I wanted to do was see Brent. And that was new territory for me.

“One of the perks of working for EHM is the condo. When we first moved the company here, we leased it so my team would have a place to stay. We still had outside contracts to fulfill, and I didn't want them to pay rent when they might not even be in town. When Simon was ready to sell, it made sense tax-wise to buy it from him.”

“That's a pretty good perk,” I agreed. “If you don't want privacy.”

He smiled, then glanced over at me. “True. But you could live there if you take the job. But it would be with him. And Daredevil unless something changes.”

I furrowed my brow. “You mentioned that yesterday. What could change?”

He sighed as he slowed at the light. “His brother is trying to buy a hockey team and wants him to come back to Chicago to help run it. I think he's considering it.”

My eyebrows shot up. “They’ve got that kind of money?”

He nodded. “Yep. Texas oil family.”

That made no sense. “Why the hell was he in the Navy if he had that kind of life waiting for him?”

“Austin didn’t want it. Wanted to be his own man.”

I chuckled and ran my hand over the back of my head. “Do you think he’ll go back to Chicago?”

GQ gave me a sardonic smile. “Not if Greer Rowan has anything to do with it.”

Before I could ask who Greer Rowan was, he turned into the parking area beside a residential building. It wasn’t difficult to find where they were parked with the two police cars out front.

My eyes sought out the man I’d been waiting to see. The man ten years younger than me who’d caught my attention when we met a few years ago, then recaptured it in Vegas.

“John, you okay?” he said as he looked at me with a knowing smile.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. “Yeah, I was just getting a lay of the land.” I was such a liar.

GQ laughed, bringing me back to the present. “You’re gonna have to get out of the car for us to do our job.”

Normally I would have barked out a harsh response to his smartass comment, but

who was I kidding? My life was on hold until we talked. So instead, I got out, closed the door behind me, and smoothed down my shirt and dark jeans.

A wave of realization washed over me. Shaking my head, I chuckled at my ridiculous behavior. I was acting like I wanted to impress him. But reminding myself I'd already had Brent didn't quell the nerves. My hair had a little more gray than before, and deep down I hoped he still found that sexy.

When we closed the distance to the group, I looked over the faces of the men standing before me. But the one face I wanted to see wasn't there.

GQ spoke to the police officers while I looked around for him. While they filled him in, I looked at Daredevil. "Where's Brent?"

I was ninety-nine percent sure Austin knew what had happened between us that night in Vegas. He was at the club and watched us groping each other. It was embarrassing, really.

"Gone," he replied.

A pang of disappointment shot through me. "What do you mean gone?"

"I mean he's not here. His mother called right after he called GQ. Evidently his father was rushed to the hospital in Colorado Springs. So he left for the airport."

Concern and disappointment filled me as I ran my hand over my head. "What happened?"

"I have no idea. She called and asked him to come home."

Propping my hands on my hips, I wanted to go back to PDX and go with him. That

was my big flaw. I tended to be overprotective, and I was almost positive he wouldn't like that.

GQ turned back to us after he ended his call.

"The dealership is sending two tow trucks." He looked around and frowned. "Where's Dreamboat?"

Daredevil explained the situation, making GQ frown. "It has to be bad for her to call him."

I was confused. "Why? The man is his father."

He nodded. "Yes, but it's his story to tell. Get enough alcohol in him and he'll sing like a canary."

I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, but I wasn't feeling it. "Should someone go with him?"

"No. If he needs us, he'll call," Daredevil added. "He's a grown man."

I raised one brow at his smart answer. But I let it go.

"Well, this day has already been a shit show." GQ looked at Daredevil. "You take my car, and I'll have Phantom drop us back at the office. It looks like we'll be rescheduling our meeting."

I ran my hands over my head. I detested feeling out of control, but this is what came with being emotionally invested in someone else.

It wasn't long before the tow trucks arrived and loaded the SUVs on the flatbed,

leaving us free to head back to the office with Phantom. I heard them talking, but paid little attention to what was being said. I picked up bits and pieces of a conversation about Patrick Griffin's rehab after his automobile accident and the implications for the startup for Fallen Angel's late summer tour.

As I stared out the window unseeing as we made our way through downtown Portland, my mind kept wandering back to Brent. Why was his mother calling him such a big deal? I looked down at my phone and wanted to text him, but I didn't have his number. We'd never exchanged them in Vegas. No reason to, really. Even though I could ask GQ for it, I wouldn't put him on the spot, considering the circumstances. Brent had enough to deal with, but it still didn't keep me from worrying.

My mind continued to jump from one thing to the other until Phantom pulled up to the office. It was located in a gated, residential neighborhood behind Aidan and Marcus Monroe's home. The way GQ explained it Aidan wanted to be closer to home for their three children since Marcus still played for the Portland Pirates. I had to give it to the guy because I'd missed out on most of Laura's life. It was time I wished I could get back.

"We'll reschedule as soon as I hear from Dreamboat," GQ said to Phantom.

The big guy I knew to be a cyber specialist looked in the rearview mirror at me. "Glad to have you on the team, Commander. Don't worry about Dreamy, he'll be okay. We've got him."

I tried to smile and nodded. "Thank you. I guess we'll see what happens."

He chuckled. "That we will."

When he pulled away, GQ led me back into the office. It was quiet, so I knew we were alone. When we sat down in the comfortable chairs in the lobby area, he looked

over at me.

“Why don’t you come to stay with us at our apartment? We have more than enough room, and under the circumstances, maybe give Brent some time to get back here. I know that doesn’t help with your decision.”

Rubbing my fingers across my jaw, I wanted to ask for his number, but relented. “Okay. I’ll stay with you and Dominick until we can talk face-to-face. ”

GQ nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s get your bag from the hotel, and then I’ll take you for the best burger in Portland and get you set up with some contacts.”

I nodded and got up. “Sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER 4

brENT

The last time I walked into a hospital was the day my younger brother died. We were two years apart, and losing him changed me forever. I might as well have died too, because that was the day I knew I was alone in the world until I found my brothers in the Navy.

No one knew this side of me. I worked hard to push it down and out of my head. Only after Nate died did I tell Daredevil, Phantom, and GQ I'd lost a sibling. I'd built walls around my heart to block out the pain from not only losing Matt but also from the pain of losing my parents. They were never the same after that.

As I walked down the hallway on the cardiac floor, I was assaulted by the familiar smell of the disinfectant and sounds of rubber wheels rolling on the floor as the nurses pushed their equipment carts in and out of rooms. The blips and alarms going off when a heart stopped made it almost too real for me.

I clenched my jaw and relied on my training to block it out and push it all down. Smothering the grief, I thwarted the memories and concentrated on the job I had to do. It wasn't about me. It was about getting to my mother and checking on my father.

When I reached his room, I knocked lightly, then pushed through the door. My heart was ready to leave my chest as I stepped in to find my mother bent over, rocking back and forth in the chair.

Panic surged through me when I looked over at the space with no bed where my father should have been lying.

“Mom?” I called, my voice breaking.

She looked up, her eyes swollen from crying, then broke down again.

“Brent,” she cried, then covered her face with her hands.

I went over and pulled her to her feet to wrap her in my arms. She clung to me and cried into my shirt.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I can’t handle everything here alone.”

Tears welled in my eyes. She’d never needed me before because she always had my father to rely on. “I’m here, Mom. I’m here.”

She cried more before getting herself together. I kissed her hair and hugged her tightly, bracing myself for her answer. “Where’s Dad?”

She pulled back and wiped her eyes. “He’s gone down for testing. They think he might need bypass surgery.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just held her, letting her know she wasn’t alone. And when she’d settled, she continued talking.

“He’s stable right now. But they have him on blood thinners until they figure out what’s wrong. He could bleed out in the operating room.”

What was I supposed to say? I wanted to be supportive, but I also couldn’t offer false hope to set her up for a harder fall.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Let’s wait and see what the doctors say. Okay?”

She leaned away and fisted my shirt in her hands. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen, but she cut me deeper than any physical wound ever could.

“What am I going to do if he dies? I’ll have lost everything. Him and your brother. I’ll have nothing left. And I’ll be alone.”

She confirmed what I’d always known. I didn’t matter. I was invisible to her. But before I offer any platitudes on how she’d never be alone as long as she had me, the door opened and he was wheeled back into the room.

Pushing out of my arms, she wiped her face before going to his bedside. She pasted on a smile as my father was brought back in, his monitor beeping and an IV drip attached to the bed.

“Mrs. Trainor,” the nurse said, “the doctor will be in shortly to let you know the results, but for right now, we’re keeping everything as is until we get a new order from him.”

The nurse glanced over at me and gave a small smile. “And who might this be?”

Without looking at me, my mother answered. “This is Brent.”

The hurt I tried to push down must have shown, or she was just experienced at reading people.

“Hello, Brent. I’m sure your father is happy you’re here.”

I watched as my father’s eyes met mine. Smiling, I walked over to his bedside and reached for his hand.

“Hey, Dad. How are you feeling?”

His face inched up into a small smile. “Like I’ve had an elephant sit on my chest. But it’s much better now. I’m glad you came. We’re going to need you.”

My heart swelled as I nodded like an eager kid. “Of course. I’m here for anything you need. I can stay with you at night so Mom can get some rest. GQ won’t have a problem with me staying.”

“You don’t need to stay here, son,” he said. “But what I really need is for you to look after the dog while I’m in here. Mom will stay with me. We’re used to it being just the two of us.”

I glanced over at the nurse, who gave me a pitying look as she charted his vitals. Embarrassment for being dismissed and shame that I ever thought I might be important to them filled me up.

“Your father’s right. I’ll be staying here with him until he’s discharged. You can go to the house and make sure Winston gets fed and taken outside.”

Hurt and rage fought for dominance inside of me. I put my hands on my hips and ground my teeth together to keep myself from saying something I’d regret. I tried to suppress it all as much as I could, but I couldn’t stop it. “So you called me to come dog sit.”

My mother looked at me as if she were confused. “Yes, son. I called you to come help. And that’s what we need. You to take care of the dog while we’re here.”

Why had I bothered to answer her call? Things were no different from they were back then.

“So you don’t need me here at the hospital, just at home,” I clarified. I needed to hear her say it.

She huffed out a breath and skewered me with her gaze. “Yes, Brent. Why are you being so difficult?”

Taking in a deep breath, I pushed the pain down and nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

I stepped back and leaned against the wall until the doctor came in. My parents talked to each other, but never acknowledged me. If I thought they really cared, I’d say they were mad at me for leaving Colorado. But I knew that wasn’t the case. When my brother died, they had essentially buried me, too.

So when the doctor came in and confirmed my father wouldn’t need surgery and could go home tomorrow, I slipped out the door.

I knew what I had to do. Heading down the hall to the elevator, I pushed the button harder than necessary as I waited. The entire walk to the car, I tried to figure out why I kept coming back for more hurt from them. Did they even realize what they’d done to me?

The drive to my childhood home gave me time to process some of the hurt. When I pulled into the driveway, I sat in the rental car and looked at the place I’d grown up. Until Matt had gotten sick, my life was ideal. But the three years he battled childhood cancer had not only taken his life but ours as a family, too. And we’d never recovered.

I got out and made my way to the front door. Locating the hidden key inside the hanging fake fern my mother swore no one would ever find, I unlocked the door and went inside.

“Winston!” I called.

The sound of his too-long nails on the hardwood floor made me smile as he came running toward me, whining when he heard my voice.

Squatting down, he all but jumped into my arms. “Hey, boy. How ya doing?” I rubbed him all over as he ran circles around me, not sure what to do with all his excitement.

After Matt died, a grief counselor suggested we get a dog to help us deal with the loss of my brother. But my parents didn’t take that advice even though I’d begged for a dog until a few years ago when I left the service. For whatever reason, they’d managed to cut me even deeper than before.

After I’d fed Winston, I found some clippers and trimmed his nails. His coat needed to be brushed, so I went in search of something to adequately do the job on his golden coat. When I couldn’t find his brush, I settled on my mothers. She’d never know if I removed the fur and washed it with her shampoo. He deserved to be taken care of by someone who loved him.

Once he was cleaned up, we’d gone out for a walk around the neighborhood. Not much had changed since the last time I’d stopped by.

When we returned home, I sat on the sofa in the quiet home and looked around. Winston placed his head in my lap as I looked at the walls covered with photos of Matt and a few of me. My senior football photo, one of me in my cap and gown, and the first formal picture of me when I graduated from Basic Training. If I took them down, I would disappear.

Allowing the tears to slip down my face, I ran my hand over Winston as I gave myself thirty minutes to grieve for my family. Then I opened my phone and booked a

return flight to Portland for the next morning.

I was determined to go home and get on with my life.

So the next morning, I fed Winston and told him I wished he could come with me and promised to come back to see him.

When I boarded my flight, I had two and a half hours to push down the hurt and become the same person I was before I left. And by the time my plane landed, I was back to the best version of me I could muster, and the one my brothers knew.

I took a deep breath outside the door to the condo before walking in. Austin was in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. By the looks of him, he'd been out for a run and was just now getting his first cup.

“Hey. I’m surprised to see you back so soon. How’s your dad?”

I sat down on the stool and nodded. “He’s going home today. My mom has it under control.”

He nodded slowly. “You didn’t need to stay longer?”

I shook my head and practiced my lie. “Nope. He’s going to be fine, and they knew I needed to get back to work.”

Austin stared at me a minute longer, then gestured toward the coffeemaker. “You want one?”

I stood and stretched. “Nah. I’m going to grab a shower and probably take a nap. I didn’t sleep well last night. Just gonna take the day and rest up, maybe hit the gym this afternoon.”

“You gonna talk to John? He looked disappointed when you weren’t here yesterday. Jesse put off the meeting until you returned.” He kept his eyes on me as he sat his coffee cup down and crossed his arms.

“Eventually. Just not today.” I needed to change the subject. “When do you leave?”

Austin sighed as the muscle in his jaw tensed. “Tomorrow morning. I wanna run before I get on a plane for eight hours.”

I nodded. “Yeah, let’s do it. I’ll go with you. Need to get back into my routine.”

“Okay. I’m heading to the office after I shower,” he said, walking toward his bedroom with his coffee in hand.

“Hey,” I called out, making him turn and look at me. “Don’t tell them I’m back yet. I’ll do it later.”

Austin nodded. “Get some rest. Glad your dad’s okay.”

“Yeah, me too. See ya later.”

I needed to shower the last twenty-four hours off my skin. Some sleep and getting back to my life were what I needed.

The next morning, Dare and I went out for our morning run. I put my earbuds in and cranked up my music as we ran through downtown Portland.

I could tell he had a lot on his mind, so I didn’t try to hold a conversation. If he wanted to talk, he would. But between songs, I heard him say something.

“Huh?” I asked, removing my earbud. “I missed what you said.”

He huffed out a breath. “Just scolding myself.”

I elbowed him. “It’s only a week. You can make it work.”

He looked over at me with a raised brow, then slowed to a walk to cool down. “If you were going to spend a week with the Commander on a tropical beach, you’d be okay with that? You’d just get through it?”

I laughed and intentionally blew off the question. “Yeah, but I wouldn’t have to worry about GQ. He has Dominick.”

“That’s not the Commander I’m referring to, and you know it.”

I groaned and ran my hands through my hair to push it back off his face.

“Yeah, okay. It would be a struggle with him .” But what he didn’t know was the struggle would be keeping my hands off of him.

“That’s what I thought. Any more advice for me, Romeo?”

I made a lewd gesture of jerking off at him until he shoved me.

“Jerking it won’t help.”

“Well,” I said, heading to the coffee shop we frequented. “The way I see it, you’ve got two choices. Grow up and hear him out or fuck the hell out of each other and get it out of your system.”

Austin scoffed. “You could fuck the Commander for a week.” He paused. “But wait,” he said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. “You’ve already done that.”

I flipped him the bird as I laughed at him. He was so stubborn when it came to Greer.

“Fuck you very much, buddy. But okay. You do your scowling, angry thing bro because it’s been working so well for you.”

Dare followed me into the coffee shop as I sauntered up to my favorite barista. Caleb had flirted with me since the first time I’d come in here. He was cute, but a little too young for my tastes. Commander had ruined that for me, but Dare didn’t need to know that. I had to live up to my reputation as a self-professed man whore.

“Hey, sexy. What can we get you this morning? The usual?” he asked, tilting his head to the side to get his dark hair out of his eyes.

I knew my flirting drove Austin crazy, so I let it fly.

“Hey, Caleb. That’s exceptional customer service there. Memorizing my order for me.”

“Thank you,” he beamed. “I do my best to take care of my special customers.”

He winked, making me grin from ear to ear.

Austin was edgy because he was leaving with Greer today. But he pulled out his wallet and slapped down a twenty.

“When you’re done flirting, bring mine to the condo. I’ve got to go pack,” he grumbled, heading for the door.

“It might be a while, Dare,” I called, winking at Caleb. He knew I loved to get Dare stirred up.

“Hurry the fuck up. I don’t have all day. I’ve got a plane to catch.”

I grinned. “Remember what I said!”

Dare grunted as he walked out the door, making me laugh.

“You love getting under his skin, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said, watching as Dare texted on his phone as he walked. “But he doesn’t really care what I do. He’s just pissy because he’s got to do something he doesn’t want to do.”

Caleb frowned as he made my iced coffee. “Then why is he doing it?”

I turned back to Caleb. “The man is his brother’s best friend. And he’s kinda in love with him.”

CHAPTER 5

JOHN

I'd been in Portland for three days and had never been so anxious in my life. I was forty-five years old and couldn't recall a single time I'd felt this much low-key anxiety for such an extended period. Not even on deployment. When we were sent in, shit needed to be taken care of in a timely matter. My team went in and got the job done.

But waiting around for Brent to get back so we could talk was killing me. There was no way I could decide my future until we discussed our impromptu wedding in Vegas. I just wanted to know when he was coming back.

Coffee. That's what I needed.

As I walked out toward the kitchen in Jesse's high-rise apartment, I heard the distinct sound of Livie talking to one of her dads. It made me smile while filling me with regret for the time I'd lost with my daughter.

"Papa, can I have chocolate milk with my breakfast?"

I rounded the corner and stopped to watch them. She sat on the cabinet looking hopefully at Dominick as he scrambled eggs in a bowl.

"I think we better save that for this afternoon. We need to start the day with protein to build strong muscles and make our brains work," he said, leaning over to kiss the end

of her nose. “But you can definitely have it after school.”

She giggled as he went back to adding milk and some cheese into the bowl. I continued watching them until Jesse snuck up behind me.

“Good morning,” he whispered, making me jump.

I scowled as he laughed, more relaxed then I think I’d ever seen him. He’d obviously just finished a workout if his sweaty t-shirt and shorts were any indication.

“Motherfucker. Sneaking up on a SEAL can get you hurt.”

He laughed and ran his hands through his blond hair. “True. Whatcha doing creeping on my husband?”

“I’m not creeping on him,” I said, looking back into the kitchen as he plated eggs for his daughter. “I just didn’t want to interrupt them.”

The wistful tone in my words prompted him to put his hand on my shoulder. “You wouldn’t. We’re happy to have you here, John. But I have to admit sometimes I stop and watch them together too. He loves her so much, and I’m not sure what we’d do without her.”

I turned to look at him just as my phone pinged with an incoming text. Jesse stepped back as I pulled it from my pocket. Glancing at the screen, my mood shifted as I read the message.

Austin: Good morning. Trainor’s at the coffee shop near our condo. Doesn’t have his phone on him. Wanted to know if you could meet him there for coffee now that he’s back. I’m headed out of town.

I breathed out a heavy sigh, despite finally getting what I'd been waiting for. He wanted to see me? The stupid grin on my face didn't go unnoticed as I quickly typed a response.

Me: Be there in ten.

"Good news?" he asked, as I checked my watch for the time.

"Yeah, I hope," I said, looking at him. "But I've gotta go. Brent wants to meet for coffee."

Jesse grinned. "He texted you? I didn't know he had your number."

I shook my head. "No. It was Daredevil." I clapped him on the shoulder before heading toward the door. "I'll see you later."

With an entirely new sense of anxiety, I took the elevator down to the bottom floor and headed out to find my husband.

Once I was on the street, I broke into a light jog, ready to get to him. Again, I couldn't remember a single time in my life I'd been this eager to get to someone. But the last thing I needed to do was run in and jump him. So I slowed my roll and walked the last block and a half.

Checking my watch again, I closed in on the local coffee shop and reached for the door. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air as I held the door for several people to enter before me, but once inside, I stopped and looked around for him.

With my hands in my pockets and my heart beating like a damn teenager with their first crush, I scanned the shop until I found him standing by the register. I smiled to myself as I memorized the man I hadn't seen in way too long.

Brent's dark hair was a little longer than the last time I'd seen him, as was the beard he wore over his chiseled jaw. He was dressed in a gray t-shirt with the sleeves cut out to reveal his incredible shoulders and arms. The shirt clung to his torso and showed every single muscle in his upper body. His black sweats fit him perfectly and showed off that bubble butt that was mine.

A barely audible growl rose from my chest and startled me. I don't know how long I'd been standing there staring at him when I noticed the barista turn and look at me. The kid's eyes went wide, drawing Brent's attention my way.

He raised to his full height and drew his shoulders back. I couldn't read his expression as we stood there looking at each other like two cowboys from an old western movie ready to duel. I wasn't sure which one of us would draw first, but evidently, it was me.

I relaxed my expression and took the steps to close the distance that separated us. Brent never took his eyes off me as he walked toward me, like two magnets drawn together. Memories of our night flooded me, making me want to reach out to him. But I didn't. I stopped right in front of him, leaving only a foot or so between us.

The glint in his eye as he took in my face and my longer hair made me think he might remember our night, too. He'd asked me to come, so I was going to make our reunion memorable. Like a goddamn romance movie when two long-lost lovers finally reunite.

And I couldn't help myself. My hands found his upper body while one slipped under the hem of his shirt, greeting me with warm skin and the scent of fresh man's sweat.

"Hello, sweetheart."

His eyes narrowed and for some damn reason, I thought that was the right time to pull

him in for a kiss. Smooth move, Ex-Lax.

The moment his lips met mine, all the world fell completely away. The familiar taste of him sent a fire up my spine. His palms found my chest, and I fully expected him to push me away. But he didn't. He balled my shirt in his hands and pulled me closer to deepen our kiss.

We couldn't get close enough.

"Holy... fucking... shit," I heard someone say from behind me, breaking me out of our kiss.

Brent pulled back and looked me in the eye. His lips were swollen, just like after he sucked me off, and I had a hard time looking away.

"That's a hell of a greeting. And don't call me that. Call me Brent."

The familiar retort had me smiling at him. "I've missed you. Don't you greet all your friends that way?"

"Not usually. Dare doesn't like it when I kiss him."

"I bet," I laughed. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

He pushed back a couple of inches, just enough to adjust himself in his sweats. Studying me for a single moment, his brows furrowed. "What are you doing here?"

I wiped away our kiss from my lips as blood made its way back to my brain. "I came to see you. Austin texted that you wanted to meet for coffee. He said you didn't have your phone on you, so you asked him to text me instead. So here I am."

Brent took a step back, held up his phone, then propped his hands on his sexy as fuck hips. I knew there was a prominent V under that fabric that I wanted to trace with my tongue.

But now I wasn't so sure he wanted that as he slowly closed his eyes and tilted his face down toward the floor. He huffed out a breath. "That asshole. I didn't ask him to text you, John."

My brow furrowed, and I took a step back, suddenly embarrassed by my actions. I glanced around the room, noticing only half the people in here were staring like they couldn't wait to see what happened next.

A self-deprecating chuckle escaped from me as I breathed out, rubbing the back of my neck. Grabbing his hand, I pulled him away from the middle of the floor toward a table in the corner. I sat down and motioned for him to do the same. When he was seated, we looked at one another again.

"I should probably say I'm sorry, but I'm not."

He huffed out a small chuckle and ran his fingertips over his still kiss-swollen lips. "That was one hell of a hello, Commander."

"Yeah well," I said, relaxing momentarily, "We both know you bring out that uncontrollable side of me."

Brent smiled. "I guess you do the same to me if Vegas is proof of anything."

I stiffened in my seat, just enough for him to notice. "About Vegas," I began. "We need to talk."

Brent leaned back and smirked.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, drumming his fingers on the table. “Wait. Let me guess. You want to know if we can hook up again?”

I shifted in my chair, suddenly a little uncomfortable that he could read me so well. Was I that transparent? “Something like that.”

“John, let me put your mind at ease. I can see you’re nervous by the way you’re squirming in your seat.”

I furrowed my brow and gave him a hard look. “I’m not fucking squirming.”

He grinned. “Oh, you are, John, you are. You’re concerned that if we give in to this mutual attraction, I’m going to develop feelings for you. But let me stop you there. That’s not me.”

Brent leaned closer across the table, causing me to do the same. I could smell him and it was driving me crazy.

“I don’t do feelings or relationships. And I certainly don’t do love. So we’re good to fuck around if you want.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying. You never intend to have a relationship of any kind, or to get married.”

He sat back and stretched his arms over his head. My eyes snagged on the sliver of exposed skin. “That’s what I said. No worries about that from me. Ever.”

I nodded as a plan formed in my head. I knew what I had to do.

But he kept talking. “Just don’t fall in love with me and we’ll be fine.”

I tried not to smile, but he was so fucking cute when he lied like that.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that Brent.” I knew it was a lie. I was already on my way down. “At this point in my life, I’m not looking for a fuck buddy. I want one person to settle down with. Get some dogs, maybe a house, and travel.” He didn’t need to know I was referring to him.

“And as long as you don’t have a problem with us working together, then we’re fine.” I lied right back. We were both big fat liars.

“Oh... yeah, okay. I guess being an old man like you, that’s probably wise.”

I raised one eyebrow at his smartass comment, making him chuckle. He rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced over at the counter. The twink barista looked up and smiled, then pointed to the cups he’d left on the counter.

Brent raised a finger as if to tell him to hang on a minute.

As I watched, he turned back to me, but his smile didn’t light up his face. “I can be your wingman. Maybe I can help you find the one you’re looking for.”

One look into his eyes proved he was full of shit. And we both knew it. The undeniable attraction we shared was unprecedented. But no matter how much bullshit he spouted, I couldn’t stop smiling whenever he was around. And that made my decision to stay very easy.

He pulled out his phone and stood up. “I’ve got to run. Gotta go home and shower before my doctor's appointment.”

“You okay?”

He smiled down at me as he pushed in the chair. “Yep. Just my regular checkup and STI check. Time for a refill on my Prep.”

I gave him a nod and stood up. “Hey, we need to talk about Vegas.”

He frowned and shook his head. “I don’t think we do. It’s in the past. Let’s just leave it there. ”

I was already irritated. “Then give me your number.”

He laughed. “Okay, Commander. Give me your phone.”

The smartass reached for it and opened my text messages. Before he handed it back to me, his pinged.

“See ya later,” he said as he walked back to the counter to collect his coffee.

As I watched him flirt with the baby barista, I knew there was no way to leave what I had to tell him in the past. Now was not the right time to hold that conversation. So it would wait until we were alone at home.

Trying to hide my smile, I found GQ’s number and gave him a call. He answered on the second ring.

“Hey, everything okay?”

“Yes,” I said, keeping my eyes on Brent. “I’m officially accepting your offer, so I’m gonna need a key.”

CHAPTER 6

brENT

I could feel John's eyes on me as I left the coffee shop. I had shit to do, and no time to worry about my new roomie. He was a grown-ass man and could take care of himself. But as I walked the three blocks to my condo, I couldn't help but analyze what happened.

John wanted it as much as I did, and that had been some movie shit right there. Who wouldn't want to be grabbed by a handsome man in the middle of a coffee shop only to have the fuck kissed out of you?

I groaned as I ran my free hand over my head. I didn't do that romantic shit. But somehow, that asshole made my heart beat a little faster every time I saw him. Now all I felt was ... rejection. He'd turned down my offer to be fuck buddies but wanted to be friends.

As I waited for the light to change, I finished my iced coffee. Tossing the empty cup into a recycling receptacle, I pulled out my phone. All of this was Dare's fault. He's the one who sent him to find me. That asshole.

I opened my messages and sent him a text.

Me: You mother fucker!

Checking the time, the plane wasn't supposed to take off for another fifteen minutes.

Surely he hadn't turned his phone off yet.

When I got to the condo, I took the stairs two at a time until I reached our door. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I looked down at the doorknob and listened for movement. Since the incident with the tires, I have been on alert for any unusual activity. But all I heard was the upstairs neighbor's dog running across the floor.

After a very intense workout with Phantom at our new training facility, I stopped by the grocery store and my favorite deli to pick up dinner for two. I hadn't seen John at the office, so I had no idea if he was home. Either way, I wasn't going to be rude and eat in front of him. If he wasn't there, I'd just put it in the fridge.

As I climbed out of the Tahoe, my phone pinged with an incoming text. I sat the bag in the front seat and surveyed the area before I retrieved it from the charger. The screen lit up with a text notification.

Daredevil: Serves you right.

I laughed at his snarky reply. He hadn't been gone half a day, and I missed him. But I still owed him a big ass prank for sending John to find me.

Pocketing my phone, I grabbed the bags and locked the car. Ever since the car had been vandalized, I'd been hyper-aware of my surroundings. If we could catch the asshole who'd done it, maybe we could save some other person thousands of dollars in repairs.

GQ planned to set John up with a vehicle but gave him the keys to Dare's Tahoe until the dealership had one ready. All the vehicles in our growing fleet had a special communications package, as well as bulletproof glass. It was something Jesse insisted on since we may be transporting clients. I thought it had to do more with how Nate

died, but I didn't bring it up.

Climbing the stairs to the condo, I dropped the bag to the ground before I reached the door. A black-and-white photo was held in place by a survival hunting knife. The image of me jogging alone down by the waterfront had a red "x" across my face while the knife was placed through my chest.

Momentarily surprised, I whipped my head around, but luckily the setup of the floor plan left no place for anyone to hide. Careful not to touch the door handle, I quickly unlocked the door and swept the bags inside out of the way with my foot.

Closing the door, I made sure the lock was engaged, then headed to the kitchen to find a plastic bag.

With one in hand, I went to get my gun and tucked it into the waistband of my track pants. Opening the bag, I turned it inside out and opened the door. Checking the area outside the door, I covered the knife handle with the bag and jerked it out of the wood. The picture remained attached to the deep gouge in the wood, so I carefully used the plastic to remove it. Carefully, I maneuvered it into the bag and zipped it closed.

After a quick assessment of the damage, I went back inside, making sure to lock the door. Striding to the kitchen, I tossed the bag on the counter as unease crept up my spine, taking away my appetite.

Reaching back for my gun, I took it out of the back of my pants and placed it on the granite countertop. My first response was to call out to Daredevil, but I was alone. And suddenly, I'd never felt more so in my entire life.

I opened the cabinet that held all our cookware, placed the bag inside the largest pot, and covered it with the lid. Then I slid it to the back of the cabinet. I didn't want John

to see it when he came in, because it was none of his concern. I wouldn't drag him into the mess I'd created.

Calling GQ should have been my first reaction, but whoever had left that left it for me. Not Daredevil. Not EHM, but me.

I was a motherfucking Navy SEAL, and I could take care of myself. Now my priority was to figure out who had it out for me, but also to protect my brothers from whatever shit I'd caused.

Picking up the bags, I unloaded them and put the food in the refrigerator. Maybe I'd eat when John got home, but right now, nothing appealed to me.

Shaking it off, I put my key in the door and entered the apartment. It was quiet as I'd expected. I was a grown man but hated the quiet. It reminded me how alone I was. So I went for the remote and turned on the TV to the Sports Channel for background noise.

Before heading to the shower, I sent Dare another text.

Me: You sent him to me, didn't you?

All I needed him to do was admit he'd done it before I fucked with his stuff. But the asshole still wasn't replying.

Me: You just wait.

Three commercials later,, and he still hadn't replied, so I tossed my phone on the counter and headed for my room. Needing to shower, I pulled up my shirt but stopped when I smelled John's cologne. Ripping it over my head, I buried my nose into the spicy scent that would forever remind me of him. He'd worn it that night in Vegas,

and I'd never forget it. His scent had been all over my skin and the bed the next morning. Even though I didn't remember how we'd gotten to my room, it was evident he'd been there from the smell alone. And I wanted it all over me now.

I tossed my shirt on my bed and headed into the shower. My dick was a damn battering ram, and I needed some relief.

Stroking myself gently, I turned on the water and waited for it to warm up. My usual supplies were waiting for me, and when the water was ready, so was I.

Stepping into the oversized shower, I rinsed my body from head to toe before moving out from under the spray. I grabbed my lube and squirted it directly onto the mammoth that protruded from the tile wall. Running my hand and fingertips over the veiny textured dildo reminded me of John's big dick.

I smeared the excess lube around my opening, then turned to back myself onto it. It soon gave way to the pressure as I impaled myself an inch at a time, the raised veins of the silicone setting off my nerve endings.

When I was fully seated, I stroked myself as I adjusted the angle to hit my favorite gland. My pleasure was cresting, so I bent forward, braced my hand on the wall, and let my hips do the work.

I called his name over and over in my head, recalling the memories from the first time we fucked until I covered my hand and the shower wall. The release was euphoric, but the high didn't last long.

Fucking hell, I could not let him affect me like this. He didn't want the arrangement I offered, so that was that. It wouldn't take long for me to get over that whole thing.

After soaping up my dildo and washing away all my cum, I washed my hair and

body, then got out.

When I was dressed, I made my way back to the kitchen to pick up my phone and keys. Before turning off the TV, the commentator was going on about how this might be Alex Hayes' last season with the Pirates. I guess Dare would have the scoop when he got back from his trip with Greer.

Flipping off the TV, I headed out the door, resigned to get on with my day.

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CHAPTER 7

JOHN

I had very few things in my apartment in San Diego, so packing up took almost no time. I had just closed the box of kitchen items that I was planning to donate when Laura stopped by.

My 24-year-old daughter from a previous relationship was a grad student at San Diego State studying journalism. She worked part time in social media for the San Diego SunRays and hoped to stay on permanently.

“I brought you some SunRays merch to wear in Portland. I’m sure everyone will love it up there.”

I laughed. “You’re trying to get me in trouble, aren’t you?”

She stepped into my apartment and directly into my arms. “Duh. They have a good team up there, but the Rays are better. Just ask me.”

I closed the door and motioned toward the kitchen. She took a seat on the countertop while I moved the last box.

“You know EMH has close connections to the Pirates, right? Like the two owners are married to players.”

Before she could answer, I cut her off. “Hey, if you ever wanted to come to Portland,

maybe Aidan could get you an interview with Greer Rowan and their communications team.”

Laura smiled placatingly at me. “I can’t see myself leaving San Diego anytime soon. I like it here plus mom and Richard live close by.”

“Yes, how are your mother and Dick?”

She pointed an accusing finger at me but laughed anyway. “Don’t be mean. He’s a nice guy.”

I scoffed and leaned against the countertop across from her. “Maybe so, but I’m going to miss you. That’s all.”

“And I’ll miss you. You could still take the job with the Rays.”

“I could,” I said, “but there’s something important I need to take care of in Portland.”

Laura grinned at me. “Some thing , or some one ?”

I raised my brows, trying not to smile when he came to mind. But I was finding that impossible to do. “Someone. And he needs me, whether he wants me or not.”

Her expression changed, and I could see her trying to read between the lines. “Who wouldn’t want you? You’re the best.”

I raised a brow. “Your mother, for one.”

Laura went wide-eyed. “Touché, but she doesn’t count.”

When we were together, Carrie didn’t want to be a military wife. Much less one of a

SEAL who disappeared in the middle of the night and might not come home. She wanted stability for our daughter, and when she met Richard, he gave her what she needed. Now she had an accountant and our daughter.

“Is that all you’re going to tell me? There’s more to the story than you’re letting on.”

I looked at the young woman who had become my best friend and gave in. “His name is Brent. He’s thirty-five, and a former SEAL. He works for EHM as well.”

She stared at me while I squirmed. Some tough commander I was when one look from my kid had me folding like a house of cards.

“You love him, Dad?”

I ran my hands over my head and looked up at the ceiling. I could deny this until my dying day, but what was the point? What would that get me? So I told her the truth. “Yes, I love him. We met a while back in Vegas...”

I paused. Was I going to tell her when I was pretty sure he didn’t know?

But my daughter, who loved a salacious story, beat me to it. “You got married, didn’t you?”

I covered my face and sighed when she laughed at me.

“It’s not funny,” I insisted. “It’s serious. And he doesn’t know.”

If I thought that was going to get her to stop laughing, I was wrong. She only laughed more. So I waited her out.

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t be laughing, but that’s some drama TV shit right

there.”

“I know,” I sighed, scrubbing my hands over my face. “It’s a mess.”

When she got her laughter under control, I looked at her. “You see why I have to go to Portland? I have to at the very least get divorced.”

“Is that what you want? A divorce?”

I shook my head. “No. I want to try to make a go of this thing. He’s charming in a frat boy kind of way, funny, and sweet. And the attraction is unreal.”

She curled her lips in, but it didn’t hide her smile. “It’s okay, Dad. Go to Portland and turn on the charm. You’ll have him falling for you in no time.”

I grunted, not so sure it would be that simple.

She opened her arms, and this time I walked into hers for the hug.

The next morning, I loaded up my truck for the drive to Portland.

Needing some time to put things into perspective, I decided to take the Pacific Coast Highway and enjoy the beauty of the ocean. The thirteen-hundred-mile drive gave me time to figure out where to start and how best to handle all this with Brent. But when GQ called nine hundred miles in, the picture got very clear.

“Something has come up, and I need some surveillance.”

“Okay. Give me the details.”

I heard his chair move back. “Greer Rowan is being sued by a former player. His

attorneys contacted me about checking the guy out. I'm going to send Dreamboat with you. He and Daredevil forcefully helped the former player leave the stadium. It's a miracle they aren't suing me."

I chuckled, understanding what he meant. "I bet they enjoyed that."

"Yeah, probably too much. I'll send you the details as soon as you get back, then you guys can take off."

"Okay. I should be back in Portland later tonight."

"Sounds good."

When the call ended, I knew I'd done the right thing by taking this job. Now I could tell him everything and he couldn't run away from me.

CHAPTER 8

brENT

“I’m sending you with the Commander to San Francisco for a couple of days to do some surveillance on your buddy, Clay Turner.”

I blinked at GQ as I sat across from his desk. “Come again?”

He grinned at me like he knew something I didn’t. “You heard me. It’s standard procedure and shouldn’t take more than two or three days to get what they need. It’s for Greer.”

My pulse kicked up an extra beat or two at the thought of being on a boring surveillance assignment with John. My mind went back to the kiss in the coffee shop. The possibilities were endless of ways to occupy ourselves while we waited, except he didn’t want a fuck buddy. He wanted a partner.

Ugh. What a waste of a good time. Unless he changed his mind. Or couldn’t keep his hands off me.

“Dreamboat! Stop thinking with your dick and listen,” he laughed.

“Are you serious? You’re sending me to the gay capital of the world and don’t expect me to think about it?”

He tilted his head to the side and gave me that smartass grin of his. “Are you going to

be okay to go with the Commander?"

I huffed out a breath. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

That was a lie. I was dying inside knowing my sexy new roommate had a dick like a baseball bat and didn't want to break down my door anymore. It was like buying a Lamborghini just to look at it. What the fuck was wrong with him?

"Are we doing twenty-four-hour surveillance, or do we get to have some fun?"

"You can do whatever you want after work. How's that?"

I raised my brows. "That works. But book us in the Castro since we have limited time. I don't want to go speeding across town like Cinderfella trying to get my coach to the club by midnight."

GQ burst out laughing. "You're a dumbass. And it's one room. You're sharing."

I was horrified. "How am I supposed to hook up with John in the room? It might be awkward for him unless he's into watching. You should think about that since he's new."

GQ threw his head back and laughed. "You'd love an audience. And knowing you, I bet you'd invite him to participate."

I shrugged. He wasn't wrong.

"By the way, when was the last time you spent all night with someone?"

New Year's Eve in Vegas. But I didn't tell him that.

I shrugged. “It’s been a while. But I wouldn’t want to be rude. I couldn’t leave him out.”

GQ’s expression changed as he studied me. “What’s going on with you? Something’s up.”

“No there’s not. What makes you think that? I’m the same me as always.”

I wasn’t ready to tell him what happened when I went home. Or that I was a little shaken that someone wanted me dead. They were my problem to deal with, not my team. My friends had enough to deal with and didn’t need my fucked up problems on top of it.

“I know you, and I know when you’re hurting. Is your dad going to be okay? You can take more time if you need it. John can handle San Fran alone.”

“My dad is fine. And I’ve got this. We’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t sure he believed me, but that was okay. “Take some downtime after work, but don’t scar the commander. We need him.”

I rubbed my index finger along my bottom lip, thinking about that statement. Maybe I could find a way to make him change his mind. I could stir up some jealousy in the man. Get him so hot and bothered that he couldn’t keep his hands off me. Then we could repeat Vegas, except with less alcohol and more fucking.

“No matter what you think,” I said, standing, “I’m still a professional. I’ll do my job 110%.”

GQ smiled. “If I didn’t already know that you wouldn’t be part of this team. I only hire the best. And that includes you.”

I nodded, not knowing how to respond. My teammates were everything to me.

I'd just gotten out of the shower when I heard the front door close. My skin was still damp and beaded with water as I rubbed the towel over my head. Wrapping it around my waist, I headed out toward the living area to meet John.

"Hey, you're back. Need some help?"

John's eyes roamed over my face, then down my bare chest and over my tattoos to where the towel hung low on my hips. His duffle dropped from his shoulder to his elbow as he swallowed thickly and nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

Walking toward him, it was nearly impossible to control my smile. Especially when he looked at me like a starved man. When I was close enough to hear his rough breathing, I kept my eyes on his as I reached out to take the strap from his shoulder.

John reached up and circled my wrist with his fingers and tugged me forward. He dropped the duffle to the floor and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me impossibly close. I ground my hips into him as we met in a scorching kiss, making me forget my name. Somehow, there was still enough blood in my brain to maneuver us until his back hit the door.

His groans of pleasure at my use of force made me even harder than I already was.

Pulling back, I pressed into him with my chest as I bit at the skin along his neck. His hands roamed my skin as I unclasped my towel with one hand and tugged at his button with the other.

John's hand went to the crease between my ass cheeks. "I've wanted this ass for so fucking long."

I smiled and sucked his neck before answering. "All you had to do was ask."

Sliding from his arms, I worked his jeans open and yanked them down as I went to my knees. Looking up at him, he ran his fingers over my head, massaging my scalp as he looked down at me. "I've missed your mouth on my dick."

"I've missed your dick in my ass," I replied before licking the leaking tip. He tasted sweet and salty, just like I'd remembered as it coated my tongue.

"God damn, sweetheart," he said as I licked along the vein, stopping to run the tip of my tongue under the head.

I looked up to tell him not to call me that when he guided me back to his cock. It was so hot that he took control like that. He held my head gently as he fucked in and out of my throat, making my eyes roll back in my head.

Saliva and pre-cum leaked from the corner of my mouth as my eyes watered. He pulled back and leaned down to kiss me. His tongue swirled in my mouth as he sucked on my tongue before he ended the kiss to look at me.

"If it's too much, you tell me."

I almost lost it when I saw what was there in his eyes. As he cradled my head, his expression was one of adoration and something else, shocking my system. I wanted nothing more than to please him and keep that look on his face. But when he looked at me as if I might mean something to him, I had to let that shit go.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm just here to suck your dick."

The words hurt to say because I could never be what he wanted. And he didn't want what little I had to give.

“Then get back to it, sweetheart before I come all over your pretty face.”

The emotion was gone as need took over. So I did as I was told and went back to work on his cock as I jacked myself. John fucked my face as he cursed and moaned, panting out “so good” and “good fucking boy.”

The praise lit me up as he shot his load down my throat. I swallowed down all he gave me, then pulled off to clean him up.

Neither of us said anything as I tucked him away, but left him to zip his pants. I didn’t want to catch his pubes in his zipper. That shit hurt.

Getting to my feet, I stood in front of him and looked him in the eye with the intent of finishing myself off. I braced my left arm on the door over his shoulder as I stroked myself. But he would have none of that.

“I’m gonna do that,” he growled as he knocked my hand out of the way and took over. “Kiss me while I make you come.”

My mouth found his as my body rose to a new height. My upper body leaned against his as he spread his legs to give himself room to work. And when his middle finger found my hole, I pushed back for more. Lost in sensation, he pressed his finger forcefully against my entrance, making me come all over his hand.

My head dropped back and rolled on my shoulders as he fucked me with his finger.

“That’s it. Come all over me, sweetheart,” he murmured as I blissed out.

My head collapsed forward onto his shoulder as I caught my breath. John rubbed his soft beard along my face, making me feel a connection I had zero business feeling.

Pushing off the door, I looked into his eyes for a single moment before grabbing my towel and wrapping it around my waist. I wanted to say something smart or make some dumb comment, but all my smartassery had left me. So I pulled on my mask and went back to this never happened.

“I was about to order dinner. You hungry?”

He nodded, lifting his heavy gaze back to mine. “Yeah, I could eat.”

I nodded and backed away. “I’m gonna get dressed, then I’ll help you unload.”

When I turned, he reached for my hand, stopping me from moving away. Glancing over my shoulder, he had that look on his face that could break my heart if I let it. “Hey, we need to talk. I have something important to tell you.”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I know. GQ told me. We’ll talk over dinner.”

Pulling out of his hold, I slipped through his fingers and made my way to my bedroom to put on the armor to protect my heart.

CHAPTER 9

JOHN

My first night in Portland had not ended the way I'd hoped. I had grandiose ideas that after that spectacular blow job, we'd have dinner, settle in to watch some TV and talk. Maybe even end up together in my bed.

But that's not how it went.

After we'd brought in my things from the car, we'd ordered Thai and Brent left the apartment. To say I wasn't happy was an understatement.

"Where are you going?"

"Out," he replied. "Why?"

He looked amused by my question as I looked around the apartment, hoping some reason would occur to me that he needed to stay in with me. But I came up empty.

"I thought we could talk... or something."

The left side of his beautiful mouth pulled up into a grin as he turned to face me. He folded his arms across his chest, giving me another look at the tattoos on his left arm.

"I think we've already done something . So I'm going out."

I scowled at him, failing at trying to keep my cool. Give me a SEAL Team under fire, and I was cool and collected. But this guy, my husband, kept me off kilter.

“Then I’m coming with you,” I said, rubbing my hand over my head. “Give me ten minutes, and I’ll be ready.”

Why the fuck was I acting this way? Oh, now I remember. He didn’t know we were married. And I’d told him I didn’t want a fuck buddy. I headed toward my room, but he stopped me in my tracks.

“I’ve got a Grindr date, John. Do you still want to go? That’s not your thing.”

It wasn’t lost on me that I was being irrational, but panic filled me as I whirled on him. “Why do you need to do that when we just had sex?”

He grinned before turning to head toward the door. “Where did you think I was going? Nutting once might be enough for you, but not for me. I’ll see you later. Don’t wait up.”

So there I stood, watching my hot-as-fuck husband walk out the door. And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it but watch him go.

Two hours and forty-nine minutes after he’d walked out, Brent strolled back into the dark condo. The only light came from the glow of the TV as I stretched out on the sofa after a shower, watching a baseball game.

Keeping my eyes on the screen, I stared unseeing until he walked over and stood in front of me. I looked up into the molten chocolate eyes of the man I wanted to throttle. Then fuck. Then throttle again.

“I thought I told you not to wait up,” he said softly as he gazed down at me.

“I didn’t. Just couldn’t sleep.”

Brent nodded, then turned to look at the game on the TV. “Who’s winning?”

“No fucking idea,” I grunted, shifting my eyes back to the game.

I was terrible at concealing my feelings from him. He’d have to be deaf to miss the tone in my voice, and I had zero justification to act like I did. But all it did was make him smile around pursed lips.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how my night went?”

I glanced back up and narrowed my eyes at him. “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“Because you’re obviously not happy that I left. ” He sat down on the edge of the sofa by my hip. The spot where our bodies touched was like a valve release, allowing my anger to slip away.

Brent turned his head to look back at me as I stared at his handsome profile. When our eyes met again, I wanted to grab him and hold him close. I could see doubt in his eyes, and I knew he wouldn’t let me in. “For the life of me, I can’t figure out why you’d care John. You turned down my offer.”

He was right. I had. “Did you go to get back at me?”

He shrugged, but kept his eyes on me. “Possibly. Or maybe I just needed to get my head on straight.”

My hand went to his back and under his shirt. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t keep my hands off him. And from the way he leaned back into my touch, he needed it as much as I did.

“I want to change my answer,” I said, shifting to my side. My dick was hard from his proximity and the cologne he wore. As I pressed my cock forward against his hipbone, he shivered when I ran my hand over his skin.

“You sure about that?” Brent stared at me, waiting for my reply.

“Yes. But there will be no one else for either of us. Exclusive fuck buddies.”

He looked at me and smiled. “I’ll think about it and let you know.”

And with that, he got up and walked into his room, closing the door behind him.

I stayed on the sofa, considering my options. It all boiled down to two things. I could try to make him jealous, like he’d done me, and hope he realized he wanted me after I told him our truth.

Or I could be his exclusive lover and make him fall in love with me. It was as obvious as the nose on my face that he was attracted to me, just like I was him.

So there was only one option. I’d have my cake and eat it too, and hope it didn’t backfire on me.

The next day was filled with EHM business. Brent and I didn’t talk about the night before, but went on as if it hadn’t happened.

I couldn’t decide what he was thinking, but by the end of the day, I was ready to relax.

“Let’s go out to dinner. I’m craving a burger.”

Brent nodded. “Alejandro’s?”

“Perfect,” I replied as my stomach growled. “But I need to shower first.”

A wicked grin took over his face. “The green bottle is Dare’s favorite. Might want to use the gray one.”

I huffed, wondering what he’d done to the gray bottle. When I stayed at Jesse’s apartment, he’d told me about the pranks they used to play on each other when they were in the service. And if Brent was telling me to use the gray bottle, then I was surely going to use the green one.

Turning on the water, I stripped out of my workout clothes and stepped under the spray. Reaching for the bottle, I popped the lid and smelled the contents. It was some high-end brand that did double duty as both shampoo and body wash.

Pouring out the silky blend into my hand, I washed my hair and body, enjoying the fragrance and the way it made my body feel.

I cut off the water and stepped out onto the bath mat. Reaching for the towel, I noticed the oily film that coated my skin and caused the water to bead off.

“That motherfucker,” I said, wrapping a towel around my waist.

Charging out of the bathroom, I stormed down the hallway, covered in some kind of oil. I threw open his door to find him stark naked, bent over the bed with a giant bottle of lube and a horn-shaped dildo.

“What the fuck did you do to the shampoo?”

One look at my oily skin had him laughing, and me wanting to shut him up. But the fucker took off out of the room and into the living room.

“Come on, Commander. Show me what you got.”

Dreamboat crouched into a wrestling stance, arms extended out while he held the dildo in his right hand like a weapon. Never one to be one-upped, I threw off my towel and grabbed my dick. “As soon as I catch you, I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

He cackled and bounced around, making his dick swing in the air. That had to hurt, but I wasn’t backing off. I lunged for him, but he slipped out of my grasp.

Fucking oil.

“I’m gonna fuck you with this horn, Commander. You’ll love it.”

“Not if I take it away from you,” I said as we circled the sofa. Reaching out, I swatted it out of his hand, both of us scrambling to the floor to capture the prize.

Just when I had it within my grasp, the sound of a key sliding into the lock made us both freeze. Until Brent popped his head up from the floor.

CHAPTER 10

brENT

“What are you doing here? I thought you were in Costa Rica until Wednesday?”

I stood buck naked with John staring at Daredevil and Greer.

“Today is Wednesday, asshole. But I think the better question is, what the fuck are you doing with that giant ass dildo?”

I forgot I was holding it.

“Wait. Is that a horn?” he asked in a tone only dogs could hear. Austin freaked and slammed his hand over Greer’s eyes.

I looked down at the dildo, then back at John. He was fucking stunning with his naked body and tattoos on display. His dick was hard and his skin shimmered in the light, giving him an ethereal glow. Then it hit me at the same time Austin asked the question.

“Why the fuck are you so shiny? What have you two been doing while I was gone?”

John pointed at me. “Ask that asshole,” he growled, reaching down to grab the towel. “All I did was take a shower and come out looking like this!” He gestured to his impressive physique and the coating on his skin.

“Is that oil?” Austin asked as he tried to keep Greer’s eyes covered. What the fuck was up with that?

“Yep. It’s baby oil. But the prank was supposed to be on you for calling him. Apparently, this old guy doesn’t know his colors.”

John growled, then reached out to grab me again, but I slipped out of his hands, laughing my ass off as I jumped behind the sofa.

Greer let out a groan, but I couldn’t pay attention because John was still trying to catch me. Damn, this was fun. And just like GQ said, the audience made it even better. I’d almost forgotten they were here in the room until I got close enough to hear Austin talking to Greer. “I’m sorry, babe. Did I hurt you?”

Time stood still as I screeched to a halt in the middle of the floor, but my grin was wicked.

“Babe ? I thought you hated him?”

My best friend turned to scowl at me, still pressing his "babe" against the door.

“I thought you hated the Commander. But here you are, naked and oiled up like some kind of Turkish Oil wrestling competitor.”

I laughed, but wasn’t ready to explain. “Yeah, I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Austin shook his head at me like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “I don’t understand you sometimes, Dreamboat. Why don’t you just admit you like him and fuck each other’s brains out like normal people?”

A rumbling chuckle came from John. “That’s what I said. But he has to play these

dumbass games.”

Austin turned back to Greer, where he was still plastered to the door. While I grinned at them, a pillow flew across the room and hit me in the head.

“Cover your damn self. We have company.”

Before I could flip him off, I heard Austin talking to Greer. “Can we just go home and come back tomorrow?”

“You are home, dummy,” I snorted. “Did you hit your head?”

Austin turned back to face me. “No, asshole. We got married. And by the way, I’m moving out. Now you and Jon Cena over there can wrestle all you want.”

“Be nice,” Greer chuckled, patting him on the back.

What did he say?

“Married? Are you serious?”

Austin held up his left hand so I could see his ring.

“Holy fuck! Congratulations, man. We need to celebrate.”

He shook his head. “Not with you naked! And don’t tell anyone. We want to do that. Go put some fucking clothes on.”

I snorted. “I have my fucking clothes on. I’m in my birthday suit.”

John laughed over my shoulder. “God damn. I don’t know why I like you.”

“Yes, you do. It’s because of my...”

“Get the fuck out of here!” Austin yelled, making me jump.

I grabbed John by the hand and tugged the slippery fucker toward my room. “We need to shower and get out of here before we’re late.”

He grunted, then pulled me back against his chest. His oil-covered cock rested between my ass cheeks. Leaning in, he bit my earlobe, making my dick jerk and pre-cum pool. “I’m tired of these fucking games. I’m slick and ready to sink into your ass.”

I grinned. “That can be arranged. Bed.”

“Shower,” he commanded, making me shiver. “Get in there, spread your cheeks, and hold on to the damn wall. And if you need prep, you do it now.”

“Yes, sir, Commander, sir.” I stepped a few feet in front of him, bent over, and inserted the tip of the horn in my ass. My eyes rolled back in my head as I teased myself with it.

“Mother of god,” he groaned from behind me. “Push it in more. You know I’m bigger than that. And don’t fucking tease me, or I won’t let you come.”

I shivered at his words and waddled into the bathroom, clenching my asshole around a rainbow colored unicorn horn dildo.

Yanking open the shower door, I reached in and turned the water on just as John stepped up behind me with a suited up cock. The minute he took hold of the horn and started fucking me with it, I almost lost it right there.

“Gonna... cum...”

He leaned closer. “No fucking way. You wait until I give you permission.”

I whimpered at his commanding and domineering side. I’d do anything he told me to do. So I stepped under the warm water as he followed me in. When the door was closed, he put his hand between my shoulders and urged me over.

Before he yanked out the horn, he gave it an evil twist until he grazed my gland. I released a moan worthy of a porn star, making him chuckle.

“There it is,” he crooned, before shoving it deeper, only then to remove it completely. I was a wanton hussy and ready to be railed.

“Give it to me,” I whined.

He chuckled again. “So needy. I’ll give it to you after you answer my question.”

John wedged the tip of his cock just inside my hole and reached around to fist my cock. “What? What’s the question?”

I fucking loved this side of him.

“Did you really go out and fuck someone last night?” he asked as he held my cock in a death grip.

“Why?” I answered, knowing what it would do to him. “Why does it matter?”

He leaned over my back and took my face in his left hand while his right choked my chicken. “Because you’re mine, goddamn it. And that’s the way it’s going to be.”

I shivered as he took my mouth in a searing kiss and then pulled back. “Answer the fucking question.”

I blinked at him. “No. I went for a beer.”

His entire expression changed when he took my mouth again before slamming home. My back arched as he held me close, railing my ass like no one ever had. He clutched my body to him as he jerked my cock.

We were both climbing to the edge of something unbelievable and when he hit my gland and jerked me hard, my body went stiff as I exploded all over the wall. My asshole clenched around his shaft as he chanted in my ear.

“So fucking tight ... god bless America,” he crooned in my ear as he filled the condom with his release.

I sagged forward as both our knees went weak. My head rested against my arm braced on the tile wall as John caught his breath. Before I was ready, he took a step back and withdrew from me to dispose of the condom.

The warm water cascaded over my back as I expected him to get out and leave. But I was wrong. The pop of the cap of my shower gel caught my attention as big hands moved over my body, massaging and washing me tenderly. I didn’t want this from him. I needed the rough and commanding, not the sweet and sensual. But John gave me no choice in the matter.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he asked, his demeanor completely different. I wanted to tell him not to call me that, but it was pointless. He was going to do whatever the fuck he wanted to do.

“Yeah, Big Daddy. I’m good.”

I expected him to balk at my nickname, but he just chuckled and continued to wash me, then himself. Washing him was out of the question. It was too intimate for me, and I was fine as long as we kept this primal. Only fulfilling each other's carnal needs.

He must have sensed what I needed, because he popped me on the ass cheek, leaving a delicious little sting behind. "Let's go. I'm starving."

I nodded as he stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. He tossed it to me and grabbed a second one for himself. I watched as he dried off, never making eye contact. And for some reason, that settled me inside.

"I'm going to get dressed. "

I nodded, then went to dry myself.

John looked over at me and started laughing. "What the fuck are all those doing stuck to the wall?"

I followed his gaze to the collection of dildos suction cupped to the shower wall. "I keep them handy," I said. "Leaving them attached means I can fuck myself any time I want. GQ recommended the tentacle."

John's eyes went wide. "Nope. I don't want to know."

I grinned as he exited the shower. "Brent," he called. "I meant what I said. You're mine."

And with that, he walked out of the bathroom, leaving me grinning.

Ten minutes later, we were dressed and ready to go. I motioned toward Dare's room.

“I’m going to see if they want to get dinner.”

I closed the distance and heard them talking as if they were right on the other side of the door. These two had gone and gotten married, and when Dare said something that must have been sweet to Greer, I had to make fun of him.

“Awww,” I crooned from outside his door. “You two are so fucking sweet. Did you hear them?”

John’s deep chuckle made me smile. “You’re such an asshole.”

“Dare loves me. Right buddy?” I asked through the door.

“Not so much right now. What the fuck do you want?”

I laughed. “I don’t want anything, but your brother has been blowing up my phone trying to get in touch with you. You might want to call him.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “He said it was something about a business proposal.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dare replied. “I’ll call him tomorrow.”

“Okay. We’re heading to get some dinner. You two want to join us?”

“No,” he called out. “We’re going home. Next time.”

“Alright. We’ll talk tomorrow. Later Greer.”

“Goodnight, gentlemen,” he replied.

As we walked toward the door, I glanced over at John. He wasn’t shiny anymore, but it still made me laugh.

“That was fun.”

He eyed me before he slung his arm over my shoulder. “You just remember what I said.”

I grinned. “Yes, sir, Commander, sir!”

CHAPTER 11

JOHN

The next morning, Brent and I drove to PDX to catch a flight to San Francisco after his early morning meeting. As he drove, a sports radio talk show host went on about the losses in personnel the Pirates had endured, along with the potential retirement of Alex Hayes.

“Are you a Pirates fan?”

Brent smiled over at me, his aviators making him look hot as fuck. “I wasn’t until I got here. We work for Greer sometimes, and now that he and Austin and married, I bet we do it more.”

I looked out the window. “I’m a SunRays fan.”

“Better not tell the boss that.”

I huffed. “My daughter works for them. In social media.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “I didn’t know you were a dad.”

“Surprising, I know. Her mother and I never married. She didn’t want the military life.”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-four going on thirty.”

I watched Brent smile out of the corner of my eye.

“What does that mean?”

I chuckled, thinking about her advice. “She knows what’s best for her and me. She’s my best friend.”

When we were stopped at a light, Brent looked my way. “It must be nice to have a close relationship with your kid. You’ve always got someone in your corner.”

There were so many red flags pinging in my head. My degree in psychology had almost taken me down the path to becoming an intelligence profiler, but the SEALs had won out.

“It is,” I said holding his gaze. “Laura is amazing. Beautiful and smart as a whip. Has no problem telling me what she thinks. Tells it like it is.”

“Sounds familiar,” he teased as he drove on. “What’s the last thing she told you?”

I shifted, wanting to see his face when I answered him. “She told me to take the job here. And to find what made me happy.”

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “And you think whatever that is, is here in Portland?”

I smiled at him, then looked out the front window. “I know it is.”

We listened to the radio the rest of the way until he pulled in and parked in the hourly parking lot. Climbing out of the Tahoe, I grabbed my bag and slung it over my

shoulder. He locked the doors, and we walked side by side to the terminal.

Once we were checked in, we headed toward TSA to go through security. I had TSA Pre-Check, but I didn't know if he did. So I pulled out my wallet and retrieved my military ID to hand over.

The security officer looked up and nodded his head. "Thank you for your service, Commander Langdon."

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you. Yours too."

The man smiled appreciatively as I deposited my bag in the plastic bin for the scanner.

When I was through security, I waited as Brent finished up before heading to our gate. Our conversation had been limited since the car, and I needed to change that. So when we found seats at the gate, I struck up a conversation with him.

"Ever been to San Francisco?" "Lame. Just lame. I sucked at small talk."

Brent grinned at me. "Yes. Have you?"

I nodded. "Yep. But never to the Castro."

"You're going to love it. There is some fun as hell clubs we can go to."

I nodded. "As much fun as the one in Vegas?"

He stared at me a moment, then smiled. "I'm sure we can find out. If you're up for that."

“Depends on if you understand who you’re going home with.”

Did I just fucking say that? Was I going to get into this here and now at the goddamn gate?

Brent looked over at me as I stared him down. I refused to show anything but confidence to him because somewhere deep down, I knew he needed me to be strong. Liked it even.

“I’m assuming that’s you. Right?”

“Exactly.”

His smile widened, and I could hear my heart beat in my ears. “What do you remember about Vegas?”

He sat back and propped his left ankle over his right knee. He was the picture of relaxation. “What do you mean?”

“What do you remember about that night?”

He licked his lips and nodded. “The truck. I definitely remember the truck.”

“Do you remember what happened after that?”

He let out a breath and ran his fingers over his lips. “We went back in to dance. And got another drink.”

“Yes, that’s right. Do you remember stripping out of your pants on the dance floor?”

He laughed. “We must not have gotten arrested, because we didn’t wake up in jail.”

I smiled. “No, we didn’t. When the bouncer headed our way, I pinched the fuck out of your leg and told him something had bitten you. Thought it was a scorpion.”

He burst out laughing. “That’s how I got that bruise! I thought it was from the truck.”

“Nope. It was me. Do you usually get that drunk when you go out?”

He shook his head. “No. But I hadn’t been feeling good, so I took some cold medicine before we left the room. I wasn’t going to waste an epic night feeling like crap.”

Shifting in his seat, he furrowed his brow as he looked at me. “John, why do you keep asking me about Vegas? Did I do something or get myself in trouble that I don’t remember?”

I couldn’t lie to him. “We definitely did something. No trouble, or anything like that.”

Brent’s smile fell away as he looked at me. “What did we do?”

Right as I started to tell him, our flight was called for boarding. I stood, ready to board when priority boarding for military members was called, but Brent caught me by the arm.

“That’s why you’re here in Portland, isn’t it? What did we do, John?”

I looked him in the eye, then leaned closer. “Let’s board and I’ll tell you everything.”

I walked away from him toward the gate, hoping he was following me. The attendant scanned my boarding pass and I walked on, stopping before I entered the jetway to find him.

I watched as he charmed the gate attendant with that heartbreaking smile, then walked toward me. He motioned for me to go on, so I proceeded toward the plane. We found our seats in 1A and 1B and stowed our bags in the overhead compartment. When we were seated, Brent leaned closer.

“Tell me we didn’t do something really stupid.”

I shrugged. “Depends on what you consider stupid. I wouldn’t say it was stupid. I’d like to think it was supposed to happen.”

Brent considered my words, then froze in his seat. “We didn’t.”

I smiled and kissed his cheek. “Oh, we did, sweetheart. You’re a married man, Mr. Langdon.”

CHAPTER 12

brENT

“Fuck me. That really happened?”

John went wide-eyed and laughed. “I wouldn’t make that up.”

I sighed and ran a hand over my head. “I seriously thought I dreamed that. I woke up with a massive headache and you were gone, I honestly thought it had been a nightmare. Who gets married and leaves no clue behind when they split?”

“Oh, it wasn’t a dream, and I didn’t split. I got deployed.”

Deployed? Holy fuck. “How did I miss that?”

“I don’t know,” he chuckled, leaning closer. “You were dead to the world after we fucked the last time. And I have to say I was thankful. I couldn’t get it up after three times and the begging was unattractive.”

I laughed and shoved his shoulder. “Fuck off. I didn’t beg.”

“You did. Multiple times. When we went back into the club, you kept going on and on about how it was the best sex of your life. And every time someone got close to us on the dance floor, you told them, and I quote, ‘that big dick is all mine.’ You even covered my crotch with your hand and told one guy we were getting married. So I gave you what you wanted.”

Holy hell. I rubbed at my temples because I remembered saying that. “I said it would be cool to have a permanent fuck buddy.”

John continued to laugh at me. “Yes, you did.”

Memories resurfaced as passengers continued to board. When the door was closed and we sat through the safety demonstration, I looked at him. “I think the bigger question here is why would you say yes? We all know I’m a dumbass, and it all sounds just like me. But not you.”

“I like it when you beg,” he teased. “Whether it’s for my cock or my mouth.”

I flipped him the bird, making him reach out for my hand. He laced our fingers together, and for some fucking reason, I didn’t object. John tightened his hold as the plane thundered down the runway and lifted into the air. He must have been nervous during take-offs.

When we’d reached our cruising altitude, I looked down at where he was holding my hand. “What are we going to do about this?”

John looked at me. “I can let go if it bothers you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not about holding my hand. About this marriage thing. I still can’t believe we did that.”

He squeezed my hand. “What do you want to do?”

“I asked you first.”

John smirked at me. “Nothing. I don’t want to do anything about it— at least not right now. We’ve already agreed to be exclusive fuck buddies, and we work and live

together. Being with you is a hell of a lot of fun, so I want to see where this goes. Plus, there are tax advantages.”

The thundering in my chest had returned. “Are you insane? Why would you want to stay married to me?”

Our eyes met and something passed between us. “If you can’t tell, genius, I kinda like you.” He held up his free hand and indicated an inch. “About this much.”

I tried not to smile. “Don’t make it weird.”

“Okay. How about this? You love my dick, as proved by your begging, and I love your tight ass. How’s that? Built-in any-time sex machine. What more could a man ask for?”

I had to think about that. Keeping it about sex could be okay. “Can I still date?”

“No, dumbass. You know the answer to that. All your dates belong to me. Along with all your sex toys and orgasms. All mine. Got it?”

“Geez,” I said, smiling at him, “I was just asking.”

“No,” he replied, “you were just trying to push my buttons and be an asshole.”

Your asshole, evidently.

The flight attendant approached with a smile on her face. “Ready for breakfast, gentlemen?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Me and the ball and chain are ready.”

John groaned. “Why do I like you so much?”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been wondering.”

After breakfast, we settled into a discussion about what we were here to do. And tracking down Turner wasn’t going to be difficult to do with Phantom’s help. So when the plane landed, we picked up our rental car.

“GQ said you knew the guy we’re looking for.”

“You bet I do,” I said, putting on my sunglasses. “Dare and I had the pleasure of escorting him off the premises of GRE when Greer personally cut him from the team.”

“What happened? Isn’t that the coach’s job?”

I opened the door and slid onto the leather seat of the SUV. “I have no idea, but the coach was there. We just happened to be there too on another matter when we heard the yelling. We walked in on Patrick Griffin laying him out in the locker room. Evidently, the asshole had been causing problems for the defense, and it must have reached a boiling point for Patrick to wail on him. He probably ran his fucking mouth about Cole and Patrick’s relationship.”

John glanced over at me as I programmed the GPS with our first stop. “Who’s Cole?”

It hadn’t occurred to me that he didn’t know the scoop on them, so I filled him in on that whole story and about Patrick’s accident.

“So he’s suing Greer for wrongful termination since Patrick threw the first punch and didn’t get his contract terminated. Also claims no team will sign him. All we have to do is prove that’s not true. Phantom located him down here, living very close to the

practice facility for the Rush.”

John frowned. “But the team has the right to cut any player. It doesn’t sound like he has a leg to stand on in court.”

I shrugged. “Maybe not. Personally, I think it's more about revenge and smearing Greer’s reputation to the public. He’s a good guy. Dare’s known him for a long damn time from when they both lived in Chicago before he joined the Navy. GQ would do anything for him, and that’s why we’re here and not some local PI.”

Shortly after we got on the road, my phone beeped with a group text from GQ. John’s phone pinged as well, letting me know he’d been added.

“I’ve got it. It’s a group text.”

Opening my messages, I chuckled at the first message.

GQ: Morning assholes! It’s official. I’m a genius!

Phantom: Debatable

Me: What about this time?

GQ: Dare went and married Greer!

Daredevil: Exactly how does that make YOU a genius? More like a meddler to me.

GQ: I knew you were supposed to be together, and I made you go. Therefore, I’m responsible. You should name your first kid after me.

Me: I don’t think Asshole is a good name.

GQ: Fuck you, Dreamy

Phantom: @Daredevil – congrats man. I'm happy for you.

Daredevil: Thanks. I appreciate it.

Me: That's all that matters. You looked happy when you came home last night. When are we celebrating?

GQ: Were you asleep during the meeting, Dreamy? Bernardo's. Saturday night. 8 pm. Remember?

Daredevil: The Commander has worn him out. Literally.

Daredevil: Confirmed. We're in. Gotta go. Greer's waiting.

Me: Fuck you Dare! And bow chicka wow wow! Don't forget the lube!

Daredevil: You guys should ask Dreamy about being naked with the Commander last night. Both were oiled up and wrestling. With a unicorn dildo.

Phantom: Oh fuck. Sounds like something GQ would do.

GQ: Fuck you all.

GQ: And it would be fun. Get to work. All of you.

I burst out laughing at my stupid friends. Don't know what I'd do without them. They were my family.

John glanced at me as he drove. "What's so funny?"

“I wouldn’t read that last text thread if I were you.” I knew he would.

“Why? What’s in it?”

I grinned. “Marcus has arranged dinner for everyone Saturday night for Dare and Greer. Bernardo’s at eight p.m. And it’s my duty as Dare’s best friend to plan something special.”

“Oh lord,” he muttered, but I could see the smile on his face.

We rolled up to the practice facility for the California Rush after making a stop at a local grocery store. John parked on the street to give us a prime view of the parking lot.

Their summer season had already begun, making it very easy to stake out the practice facility. But four hours in, no one fitting Turner’s description showed up or left. His trademark floppy black mohawk was a dead giveaway.

“Why didn’t GQ just call the team office and ask if they’d signed him?”

I looked at him. “What makes you think he didn’t?”

He laughed humorlessly. “The reason we’re sitting here like two cops on a stakeout in a cheesy TV show. That’s why.”

I grinned. “You don’t like my company, Commander?”

“That’s commander husband to you. And I like your company fine. Just seems like there might be a better way to go about this than sitting for hours on end.”

He was grumpy, but I had a whole arsenal of things we could do while sitting in the

car.

“Wanna play cards?” I asked.

John slowly panned to me. “No.”

“Twenty questions?”

“No.”

“How about... Truth or Dare?”

When I saw his jaw tick along without a definitive no, I took that as a yes. So I leaned closer and rubbed my hand up and down his thigh. “Truth or Dare, John? All you have to do is dare me to blow you, and I’ll take it all right here.”

He clamped his hand down over mine. “No. As much as I enjoy your hands and mouth on me, you’re going to get us arrested. Public sex isn’t really my thing.”

“Evidently it’s kinda your thing. Didn’t stop you in Vegas.”

He snorted. “That was different. It was Vegas. Anything goes there.”

I agreed and looked around at the nearly empty parking lot in front of us, and the tree-lined street we were parked on. No houses or buildings, only landscaping trees and a big concrete parking lot.

Leaning in closer to him, his breathing was a little more shallow, but he never took his eyes off me. “Didn’t stop you from fucking me in the back of your truck, now did it?”

I was taunting him and I knew it. Never in my life had I ever had to work this hard to blow a guy. But John's reluctance made it that much more fun. Plus, making him a little uncomfortable gave me the upper hand momentarily.

"Truth or Dare, John?"

He sighed out an exasperated huff. "Truth."

Okay, I guess we're playing the game.

There was one big thing I wanted to know. "Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

John looked out the front window, then back at me. "I was in service. Kinda hard to tell Command I needed to duck out early to go find my hookup husband. I had no choice but to wait."

I nodded. "Okay. That works. How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

He laughed. "Do you seriously think I would just make that up?"

"Probably not. But where's the proof? Do we have pictures or a marriage license? I didn't wake up with a ring on my finger and I sure don't see one on yours."

"As far as the rings go, you wanted to get them tattooed on. But when you decided you wanted the tattoo on our penises, I drew the line."

He grabbed his cock and shuddered, causing me to burst out laughing. That sounded just like something I would say.

"I want to see the pictures. And the marriage license."

“After I get my question. Truth or dare sweetness?”

“Dare, of course.”

He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. I saw the sparkle in his eye and dreaded his question immediately.

“Since you are so anti-relationship, I dare you to agree to a ninety-day trial marriage without bringing up divorce or a separation.”

“What makes you think staying married to me would be a good thing? What could you possibly get out of this?”

He shifted in his seat to look at me. “It’s purely selfish on my part. And I told you. I really like you and the sex is phenomenal. Not sure I’ve ever felt as alive as I do when we’re together. I never know what to expect and your crazy ass makes me forget the horrors of war. You’re fun to be with. And I like telling you what to do.”

What he wanted went against everything I believed in. It wouldn’t be difficult to have this sex on a stick man to myself for three months. It would be like having my own live porn channel starring me and him.

“What happens after the three months?”

He smiled and reached for my hand. “Let’s just play it by ear.”

What if I let myself fall for him and at the end of the three months, he doesn't want me anymore? How would we work together?

“Come on, Dreamboat. Take a chance with me. I dare you.”

I leaned in a little closer to him, drawn to him like no one ever before. We were mere inches from each other, and I wasn't sure either of us noticed. Staying away wasn't an option, so I might as well get all the fat dick I wanted. It was only three months, and I couldn't fall in love with someone in that short time.

“What are the terms? I know you won't let me date. Anything else?”

He smiled. “Just one little thing.”

I raised a brow. “What's that?”

“We sleep in the same bed, every night for ninety days.”

I nodded. “Makes jumping on your dick more convenient. But you have to agree to my terms.”

John looked amused. “And what's that, sweetheart?”

I growled, making him laugh. “You have to let me blow you right here, right now. You only live once, so live a little,” I whispered, my breathing a little raspier from being so goddamn turned on. “Let me suck you off. I dare you.”

John narrowed his eyes at me as he leaned back and flicked the button open to his jeans. “You're trouble.”

I watched as he slowly lowered the zipper, then lifted his hips to pull down his jeans. He was going fucking commando, making me giggle.

Holy fuck, I was already ruined.

John looked me in the eye as he reached over and put his hand around my neck.

“Here ya go, sweetheart. It’s all yours,” he said, as he pushed my head down for me to swallow him whole.

CHAPTER 13

JOHN

We were the worst fucking first-time PI's in the business. I'd gotten so distracted by Brent and his amazing dick sucking skills that we'd completely missed every car in the parking lot had left.

"We can't do that again. At least not while we're supposed to be working."

"We're not PI's. We're security specialists. There's a difference."

I sighed as I made the turn to get back on I-280 to head north to our hotel. "We had one job. And we failed in our mission, soldier."

Reaching over, he rubbed his hand over my thigh. "Relax, John. It'll be fine. We'll get what we need tomorrow."

Nodding, I kept my eyes on the road while his heat radiated through my pants, doing crazy things to my heart. I needed to change the subject before he slipped his hand away.

"How did you convince GQ to book us at The Hotel Castro ? Or do I want to know?"

Brent smiled and patted my thigh. "I told him we needed to be in the middle of the action if we had to spend the day hunting down Turner. We were lucky as hell that they had availability. It only has twelve rooms."

“Really? It was that easy?”

“He’s a stand-up guy. Since he’s all loved up with Dom and Livie, he does whatever he can to make us happy. Now that Dare’s married, I guess it’s about me. That now means you too.”

He removed his hand and sat up to get his phone. “Gotta check us in using the App.”

Brent took care of the room as I took exit 52 from the interstate onto Diamond Street.

As we drove north up and down the iconic hilly terrain in San Francisco, the bay came into view from atop a hill. The neighborhood was filled with old and new family homes that sat side by side, sharing a common wall, sandwiched together with no space between. It made me anxious just looking at all the cars parallel parked on the street.

“Okay, we’re checked in,” he said, drawing my attention to him. “But you’re not gonna be happy, hubs.”

I grinned at his nickname as I glanced over and gestured toward the houses. “Why? And could you imagine living that close to your neighbors?”

“The only room available has two twin beds.” He glanced over at the passing houses after dropping that bomb. “Holy fuck that’s close.”

I laughed. “Very little yard work to do. That could be a plus.”

“But what if the walls are thin? I wouldn’t want my neighbors to hear me railing someone.”

“True,” I replied, not mentioning the only railing in his future would be with me. I’d

let him have a turn at my ass if he wanted it.

“You are loud when you beg. I’m going to have to find a way to shut you up. Might have to find a toy store close by.”

“Last time I checked, there were 576. And I’m not any louder than you. We’ll make a video and see who’s the loudest.”

Smirking at this outrageous conversation and how he knew that odd piece of trivia, I made the turn onto 18th Street. “So you want to make a sex tape. I guess we could do that.”

Pulling up to the modern-looking hotel that sat on the left, I parallel parked on the street close to the entrance. When we got out, I grabbed my bag and automatically reached for his. “Looks like they have a terrace.”

“Yeah, they do. I’ll take you up there tonight.”

Following Brent to the door, he pulled it open, then held it for me to enter ahead of him. I smiled at the gesture he probably didn’t realize he was making.

“Age before beauty,” he teased, winking at me.

“Smartass,” I mumbled, trying not to smile.

We passed the Lobby Bar and took the stairs to our room. As promised, two single beds sat inside the originally decorated space. Its vibe was perfectly San Francisco, and the shower was more than large enough for two.

Tossing our bags on the other bed, I leaned down to test the firmness of the mattress. I chose the one against the wall, because it would keep one of us from falling out. He

just thought we weren't going to share a bed.

"What's the plan?" I asked as he grinned down at his phone. I was almost afraid to hear his answer.

"Hell, yeah! Tonight is Underwear Night at my favorite club. You up to grab some dinner, and head over there?"

I held up my hand. "Wait. What exactly does that mean?"

That beautiful grin I was falling for took over his face. "We strip down to nothing but our underwear. And I brought some of my favorites. They're so barely there we could probably fuck on the dance floor."

I was going to have a heart attack. "We are not fucking on the dance floor. We can stay here for that."

Later that evening we walked around the neighborhood and grabbed dinner before heading to the club. The music was loud, and the bass was thumping, but we didn't last long. Our night in the Castro came to a screeching halt with one look.

Everything was fine as we danced to the pulsing beat of S&M by Rihanna. Hot and sweaty half-naked bodies rubbed against one another, but Brent was in my arms, bumping and grinding on me on the dance floor. We got lost in the music, our hands roaming all over each other.

I had my hands on his ass pressing his erect shaft next to mine. When the music morphed into Diamonds by Rihanna , it was impossible to stop myself from devouring his mouth. Brent was with me until I felt the first cramp hit his abdomen.

Pulling back, I took his face in my hands and looked into his eyes. His brows shot up

as his hand left my hip and went to his stomach.

Leaning in to speak directly into his ear, I quickly developed a new plan. “Let’s get some air.”

He nodded as another cramp hit him. “John...”

I grabbed his hand and led him from the floor. With my free hand I pulled out my wallet and fished out a fifty. As luck would have it, I found our server taking an order at a table on the edge of the dance floor.

I tapped him on the shoulder and handed him the money. “We’ve got to go. My husband isn’t feeling well. Will this cover it?”

One look at Brent told him what he needed to know. “Yes, thank you. Go, go..”

I drug him out the door, thankful as fuck we weren't in our underwear yet, and into the cool evening air. We were only four blocks from the hotel, but I flagged a taxi down anyway.

“I can make —”

“No,” I barked, opening the door. “We’re taking a taxi.”

Brent slid in as I gave the address to the driver. “Can you step on it? There’s a big tip in it for you if you hurry.”

The man’s eyes widened with a knowing smile, but the grunt and groan from Brent were misinterpreted. “Yes, sir.”

With one arm wrapped around his shoulders, I reached across him and put the

window down. Then I grabbed my shirt that was tucked in my back pocket. I handed it to him and whispered in his ear. “If you need to, use this until we get out.”

Nodding, he held it over his mouth while cramp after cramp hit his body. I could feel every jerk and twist that I knew was not going to stay inside him much longer.

When the driver made the turn onto 18th Street, I reached for my wallet and pulled out another fifty. Was it too much to pay? Absolutely. But it didn’t matter. I just needed to get him to our room as soon as possible.

He pulled up in front of the hotel and I handed him the money. “Thank you,” I said, opening the door. I got out as Brent quickly followed.

“Hang on, baby. Almost there.”

We hurried to our room, Brent still clutching my shirt to his face. Entering the code, he moved quickly to the bathroom where he emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet.

Grabbing two washcloths, I wet them with cold water. As I rang out the excess, I located the trash can. Luckily, it had a liner.

Stepping back into the bathroom, I stood over him to offer the washcloth. “Here, sweetheart,” I murmured, handing him a cloth.

“Thank you,” he said, taking it to wipe his mouth. “It must have been...”

Another round of vomiting ensued, so my job became flushing the toilet. I lowered myself onto the floor when things had slowed down and wiped his face with the clean cloth I held.

Brent turned his head and propped it on his arm across the toilet rim. He looked at me with exhausted red eyes as I continued to run the damp washcloth over his face. “Why are you in here?”

I gave him a soft smile and kissed his bare shoulder. “Because you need me. And this is where I want to be.”

He remained quiet as I stroked his face until the next loud rumble from his body filled the silence. “I think it's the other end.”

I nodded and got to my feet. He followed and assumed the position. I gave him privacy for that part but gathered the trash can and opened the door to the balcony before I took back the trashcan.

“I’m going to order some ginger ale from the bar.”

He nodded as I stepped out onto the balcony to call downstairs. There was a grocery store across the street, and when he was stable, I’d hop over there and grab some necessities for him.

A soft knock came from the other side of the door. I opened it to find a man holding a tray with several bottles of soda and cups of ice. Over his shoulder were more washcloths and towels.

“Here you go, sir. Can I get you anything else?”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the towels and the tray. “Do you know when the store across the street closes?”

He looked at his watch. “In half an hour. If you need something, I can go get it for you. The bar is almost empty.”

I glanced back toward the bathroom and nodded. “That would be great. Electrolyte water and some saltine crackers will be a good start. Maybe a few bananas.”

I opened my wallet and handed him some money. “Thank you. I really didn’t want to leave him.”

Brent, as if proving my statement, started up again.

“No problem. I’ll knock and leave it at the door. Your change will be in the bag.”

He turned and walked away as I returned to take care of my husband.

When it appeared his body had nothing more to expel, he leaned over and rested his forehead on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked. “Not the way I saw the night going.”

I brought my hand up to cup his neck. His skin was clammy and I knew he’d feel better after a shower. “It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s not your fault. Shit happens. Literally.”

He chuckled, nodding.

“Would you like to take a quick shower? I think you might rest easier.” I kissed his face and ran my hand lightly over his head.

“Yeah. That would be good.”

He didn’t move to get up, so I kissed his cheek. “Come on, I’ll help you up.”

Brent lifted his head and met my eyes. Something crossed there and I knew he was

trying to figure out how to push me away. But that wasn't happening.

So I got to my feet and held my hands out for him. He took them as I pulled him up. Turning to the shower, I twisted the knob to warm the water as he stripped out of his jeans. He'd never made it back into his shirt, and his shoes and socks were gone long ago.

Standing exposed in front of me, my heart gave a squeeze for the insecure little boy inside this grown-up body. So I went with my instinct and stripped off my clothes as well. Stepping into the shower, I held my hand out for him. Brent took it and stepped under the water with me.

I'd never been more thankful to find the pump dispenser of shampoo and body wash that hung on the shower wall. I gathered the soap into my hands and lathered him up. Massaging the tense muscles that I knew would come with such violent actions of being sick, he let me clean him from head to toe. And when I rinsed the soap away, he stepped into my arms and let me hold him.

And for the first time in a long damn time, I knew what had been missing from my life. It was him.

CHAPTER 14

brENT

I woke the next morning wrapped around John with my head on his chest. He held me tightly and as soon as I realized we were piled on a single twin bed, it all made sense. And I was almost positive I was lying in a pool of my own drool. Thank god I'd brushed my teeth.

My stomach rumbled violently, waking him. "You okay? Need to go back to the bathroom?"

Lifting my head, I wasn't quite ready for the ribbing I expected to receive. It was mortifying that my hookup had to take care of me after a bout of food poisoning.

But what I saw when I looked into his soulful eyes was the last thing I expected. He was concerned, and for some damn reason, cared about me. And that look in his eyes made me think of something else I wasn't ready to face. But I had to look away because that stare hit me hard.

"I don't think so. Not yet." I groaned as I tried to shift onto my side. Everything hurt.

John sat up but didn't take his hands off me. "Be careful. Don't fall off the bed."

Whether I wanted them or not, strong tattooed arms tethered me to him as he shifted his back to the wall. He was being so fucking sweet to me.

“Lay on your back, sweetheart.”

I complied like a good soldier as he stayed perpendicular to me. Sighing, I relaxed into the comfortable bed as he draped his arm across my hips. He avoided placing the full weight of it over my stomach but held me in place.

I closed my eyes and draped my forearm over my forehead.

“Would you like to try some more Gatorade? I’m sure you’re dehydrated.”

“No, not yet,” I murmured, dropping my arm.

My head tipped to the right until it made contact with his shoulder. Soft lips found my temple as he released my hip to stroke my head. And when his long fingers began to massage my skull, I was lost in his comfort.

“How did you know I had a headache?”

“I possess mystical powers of observation. And I’ve had food poisoning before. It ain’t pretty.”

I huffed out a quiet laugh, but that hurt. So his long fingers went back to massaging the pressure points on my skull and left me temporarily pain-free.

“You’re good at this.”

I felt him shrug. “Comes with the territory. Being a parent will do that. Prepares you for bathroom combat on all fronts. It’s part of the mission you can’t avoid no matter what.”

“Makes sense.” My replies were all short because words rattled my brain.

John's lips found my head and lingered a little longer. It took everything in me not to curl into him and ask him to hold me again. But as it turned out, I didn't have to ask. The mind reader himself slipped his right hand between my shoulder and the bed, then pulled me to him until we were chest to chest.

My neck rested on his biceps, immediately slowing my throbbing headache. His lips found my forehead, making a fucking tear slip from my eye. I hadn't been cared for like this since before my brother got sick. And he was opening old wounds without even knowing it.

"I'll get in my bed." I tried to push away, but he refused to let go.

"Stop. Are you uncomfortable?"

"No, but you must be."

John chuckled lightly. "You're not getting away from me, so do us both a favor and just relax. I've got you, sweetheart. I've got you."

Emotions I had suppressed and didn't want to feel welled up inside me. Every wall I'd built around my heart was beginning to take on tiny fractures that could eventually leave me in ruins. But no matter how hard I tried, there was something about Commander John Langdon that kept me coming back for more.

The only escape I had was to go back to sleep. And when I was out, if my body clung to him, my head didn't need to know.

By late afternoon, I felt more like myself. John had spent the entire day asking me to drink something and if I was hungry.

"I can run across the street to the market and get some popsicles if you want."

I smiled at him even though I felt like total shit. “You missed your calling, Nurse Langdon. You don’t have to do all this. If we’d been at home, I would have slept through it all.”

He sat down on the bed across from me.

Leaning forward, he braced his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers over his mouth before pointing at me.

“And you honestly think I would have left you alone to deal with all that?”

I squirmed as he stared at me. “I would hope so. I’m a grown-up. I can take care of myself.”

John frowned at me, then sat up. Releasing a humorless laugh, he ran his hand over his dark hair, which was still damp from the shower. The slightest movement caused the scent of his aftershave to fill the space between us. He didn’t even have to touch me to make me want him.

“I guess I’m going to have to remind you what kind of man I am.”

He didn’t have to show me anything. I already knew, and the idea of getting close to him scared the motherfucking shit out of me.

Standing, he moved the three feet from his bed to mine as I turned onto my side to give him room to sit.

John pivoted and cupped my face.

Without thinking, I put my left hand over his. “What kind of man are you?”

Our eyes locked as he swept his thumb back and forth over my cheek.

“I’m the kind of man who gets what he wants. I thrive on a challenge and don’t run when things get difficult. I’m a man who knows when they’ve found someone special, it’s okay for things to get messy. I trust my instincts. So much so that I willingly married a man in a drive through ceremony in Vegas officiated by Santa Claus.”

My eyes widened. “No fucking way.”

He sighed and stood up. “One day you’re going to believe me the first time.”

Reaching for his back pocket, he pulled out his wallet and opened it. Within seconds he pulled out two pieces of paper, then put them on the bed in front of me.

My heart had begun to hammer as I slowly sat up. I glanced up at him as I picked up a photo. Sure enough, there we sat in his truck with Santa Claus hanging out the window of the drive-thru chapel while Mrs. Claus looked on.

I picked up the second paper to find it was a photocopy of our marriage license.

“Holy shit, John,” I said, my voice pitching higher than normal.

He shrugged and sat back down. “I told you. So if you think for one minute that I would allow you to suffer alone, you’d be dead wrong.”

Before a full panic attack could set in, he put his hand back on me.” Brent, the most important thing you need to know is I’m all in. I know you’re going to need some time to wrap your head around it, but I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart. If I have to keep reassuring you every day, I’ll do it. You’ll either get sick of hearing it, or you’ll finally believe me.”

John leaned over and kissed me like he'd never kissed me before. And I wasn't sure what I was going to do if he ever changed his mind about me.

CHAPTER 15

JOHN

We checked out of the hotel and headed back to the practice facility in hopes of getting what we needed. After a little internet search, I discovered that Rush had an open practice today. So if our boy Turner was there, he'd be easy to find.

Brent was feeling better, but I was still careful with what I allowed him to eat, much to his displeasure.

"I think I can handle a burger, " he announced from the passenger seat.

I looked over at him when I stopped at the light. "If you shit in this car, I'm going to kill you."

"But that's illegal."

"Only if they find the body. And I'm a SEAL. I know things."

Brent's laughter made me smile. The stupid kind that made my face hurt. And when he leaned over and put his hand on my thigh, I knew he was playing dirty.

"But last night you said you were all in. Remember?"

His eyes were filled with mischief, and I knew he was on the road to recovery.

“I draw the line at cleaning up shit. I’ll buy you some damn diapers.”

When I pulled into the parking lot of a chicken place, I gave him his options. “You can have mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese.”

“Toddler food. That will fill me up,” he griped. It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest something else fill him up, but I’d wait until a more appropriate time than the drive-thru of a chicken joint.

“You can get the family size. Just humor me. Because if that doesn’t settle well on your stomach, I’m leaving you on the side of the road and going home.”

Brent found that hilarious, so when I pulled up to the window, I ordered three carbohydrate specials and two electrolyte waters.

“You’re not hungry,” he asked as I pulled around to the pickup window.

“I am,” I said, pulling out my wallet.

“John, you can order real food for yourself. It’s okay.”

I shook my head as I looked over at him. “I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry.”

That look of confusion was back on his face that I was beginning to recognize. I turned back to pay the attendant, then took the bags when she handed them to me.

Passing them to Brent, I pulled into a parking space so we could unpack our food and eat.

“So what’s the plan,” he asked around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“We lucked out. Practice is open to the public today. If he’s there, we’ll find him quickly.”

Brent nodded and continued to eat. “We need to get his autograph and a picture as proof. We need to buy some Rush shirts or something.”

He was right. “We can stop in the team store at the stadium. But I’ll be the one to get the autograph. You take the picture. The fucker knows who you are.”

Brent grinned from ear to ear. “I’d love to walk up to that fucker and laugh in his face.”

“No,” I growled. “Absolutely not. You’re gonna get yourself in trouble like that. Does GQ know you’re such a loose cannon?”

He shrugged and shoveled in a spoon of macaroni and cheese. “This shit is good,” he murmured. “And GQ assigns me to the jobs that need a smooth talker. Phantom is too nice and Dare is too reserved. He sits back and assesses the situation while I go do the dirty work.”

“And by dirty work you mean...”

He grinned, like a chipmunk with his cheeks full of nuts. “I use my personality to get them talking. I can extract information from people without them realizing I’m doing it. They tell me all kinds of shit.”

I nodded, wondering if he’d used that tactic on me. Tossing my container into an empty paper bag, I drank some water as he finished off two pint containers of potatoes. Good to see his appetite was back.

When we reached the stadium, we walked into the team store to buy some merch. We

wandered around until we found the cheapest shirts we could find. When he pulled out a bright orange t-shirt with the words My D is Better than Your D on it, I couldn't help but smile.

"I'm not paying full price for something I'll never wear again," he said, reaching for my shirt.

"What are you doing?"

Brent leaned in close and whispered to me. "I'm buying your piece of shit shirt. Can't I buy my new hubs a shirt to throw away?"

I groaned and rubbed the bridge of my nose. "You're going to get us kicked out of here."

He grinned. "Only if we fuck in the dressing room."

I burst into flames as he laughed at me. He was such a shitass, but damn, I loved being with him.

I put my hand on his back and urged him forward. "Pay for the shirts and let's go. I'll be outside."

While he went to the register, I walked out of the store to check in with GQ.

Me: Heading into open practice. Will update you afterward.

The dots bounced on the screen as I waited for his reply.

GQ: Good. Don't let him go off the rails. When will you be back?

Did he know him?

Me: Yeah, okay. Going to try to get a flight back tonight.

GQ: Good deal. Keep me updated. Party tomorrow night.

Me: We'll be there.

I pocketed my phone as Brent exited the store. "Let's go change at the car."

"Not necessary," he said, stripping his shirt over his head and replacing it with the new bright orange one. I held out my hand and he took it.

I shook my head but the smile on my face was stupid again.

"What did I miss?" he asked, looking confused.

"Nothing. I'll change in the bathroom rather than here on the sidewalk. I wanted your shirt, but I'll also hold your hand."

"Oh." He smiled as his cheeks pinked. When he tried to pull it away, I just tightened my grip and kissed his cheek.

When the fuck had I become a cheek kisser?

We walked hand in hand to the entrance. When we had cleared security, I found a bathroom to change in. "Don't get in trouble while I'm gone."

Brent snorted. "Go change. I'll be right here."

Nodding, I headed into the bathroom, found an empty stall, and changed into my own

ugly shirt. The fucker had exchanged the one I picked out and bought me one exactly like his. Warmth crept into my chest and gave me hope convincing him to give us a real chance might not be so difficult after all. I knew he was still suffering from losing his younger brother, and I wanted to be the one to take care of him and to be his emotional support.

I exited the bathroom to find him scrolling on his phone as he leaned against the wall. One look at him made me smile. He was beautiful inside and out, and in an unguarded moment, I let myself think of him as mine. And when he looked up at me, that smile that lit up his face lit me up inside too.

“Nice shirt. Your D might be better than my D.”

It suddenly occurred to me why he’d bought me one too. Laughter erupted out of me, and that alone was fucking new. I didn’t just spontaneously laugh. That shit only happened with him.

“There’s only one way to find out when we get home. Let’s go lover boy. We have work to do.”

Brent laughed and followed me into the stadium. We found some seats close enough to the players on the field to get a good look.

It didn’t take long for us to spot him. Turner wore number fifty-seven and was running drills with the rest of the defense. While we watched them go through their practice, the Pirates fan leaned into me and provided color commentary.

“That fucker has nothing on Griffin. Patrick could run circles around him. He was so good that he was hand picked to replace Jackson Kincaid when he retired. Greer went all out to get Patrick.”

“I thought he wanted to play for Portland?”

He nodded. “He did. But no one knew that he and Cole were together until he said something to Foster when he and Coop were having a rough time.”

I turned to look at him. “How do you know all this shit?”

Brent turned that electric smile on me. “It’s my superpower. And I listen when people talk. When you’re not partnered up, you learn a lot.”

“Guess you’re going to have to find another superpower now.”

The rapid whistles on the field caught our attention as we looked down to find two players pushing and shoving.

“A hundred dollars says one of them is Turner. He’s a dick like that.”

I nodded and leaned into him. “Get a video of this. It might help their case.”

Brent hurried and got his phone to record the coaches and other players pulling them apart. Turner was red faced and screaming at his teammate. And when it was all over, he went toward the Rush entrance to the locker room.

“Let’s go down there and wait. You can stop him for an autograph when he comes back out.”

Brent stood and I followed as he led us through the stadium. He pulled out his phone and made a call.

“Hey. What’s the best way to get down to the locker room? We’re on the concourse level B.”

I stood back and listened as he looked around and gave landmarks to whoever he was talking to.

“Got it. Thanks.”

He ended the call and smiled at me. “Phantom. Fallen Angel has performed here, and he knows every door and security zone like the back of his hand.”

“I’m impressed. Where are we going?”

“Right down here,” he said, leading me to a door that was hidden from sight by a large pillar.

Brent opened the door that led down two flights of stairs. When we reached the bottom, he opened the last door that opened up into the home team’s tunnel.

Pointing to the left, we found the entrance to the locker room. “You stand here, and I’ll get out of sight. When he comes out, talk to him about some shit. Here’s the program for him to sign.”

I took the booklet he produced with a marker clipped to it. “Where did this come from?”

“I bought it with our shirts.”

“Good thinking. Go,” I said.

I pulled out the program and waited as players began to trickle out. Sure enough, twenty minutes later, Clay Turner came out wearing a scowl.

Stepping forward, I engaged him in conversation. “Hey, Turner. Can I get an

autograph for my kid?”

He looked at me, the scowl still present, but conceded. “Sure.”

He took the pen from my hand as I handed him the booklet. “Make it out to Brent. He’s a big fan. Watched you play in Portland.”

He snarled as he wrote, but I kept going. “You like it down here?”

“It’s better than playing with a bunch of fags even if these guys are all idiots.”

Turner capped the pen and handed it back to me. But before he could walk away, my hotheaded husband walked up and shot off his mouth.

“Fags, huh?”

Turner’s head snapped up at the sound of Brent’s voice. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Brent grinned. “Came to see if you were as shitty down here as you were in Portland. Greer did the right thing firing your homophobic ass.”

He lunged at Brent and I stepped in, automatically shifting to commander mode. “Back the fuck off.”

Turner looked at me, anger oozing from him. “You a fag too?”

I didn’t dignify his question with a response, but my husband did. “What’s the matter, Turner? Why are you so threatened?”

He stepped closer and looked him up and down. “I bet I could make you like having a

dick in your ass.”

The dumbass roared in anger, catching the attention of all the staff moving around.
And then all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER 16

brENT

The ride to the airport was quiet, making me feel like I was in trouble. I was a grown fucking man, and most of the time, I gave zero shits what anyone thought of me. The only people who mattered were the ones in my circle, and it had grown substantially when we moved to Portland. But John was different.

Yes, he was my ... husband. It was difficult to wrap my mind around, but not as much as it did three days ago. Before this trip, that would have freaked me the fuck out. My heart no longer pumped all my blood to my feet when I thought about it.

Even though I never saw myself as someone who would eventually get married, John had been different from the very beginning. And the longer I thought about it, the more it failed to terrify me.

I was busy booking our return flight while he drove as quickly as possible. “We can make the seven p.m. flight if we get there in the next hour. Want me to book it?”

He checked the GPS for traffic along the route, then nodded. “Yeah, go ahead. We’ll make it.”

“Okay. I need your phone to book yours.”

Reaching for it, I looked at him. “Passcode?”

John glanced at me sheepishly, then cleared his throat. “123123.”

I smiled. “Afraid you’ll forget the code? You know any hacker with half a keyboard could break into this, right?”

“Hardy har. Just book the fucking ticket.”

I bit my lip and went back to work. Ten minutes later, I had us booked in first class for our return flight to PDX.

When I closed his app, the overwhelming urge to look at his photos overtook me. I sat my phone on the seat and opened his photos app. The last photos he’d taken were from today, but as I scrolled on, my breath caught in my chest.

John had taken a photo of us on the bed at the hotel. I was plastered across his chest, passed out while he smiled up at the camera. He was exhausted, but he also looked ... happy. After hours of dealing with my sick ass, he still looked happy.

Scrolling on, I found pictures of the apartment, and then a beautiful girl that looked like him. The look on her face matched him, and it was the same one in the photo earlier. Happiness.

Allowing myself to fall for him was more dangerous than any mission I’d ever been on. But I wasn’t sure I could stop myself even if I tried.

“Get us booked?” he asked, glancing over at me momentarily.

“Yeah, we’re good to go.” I darkened the screen on his phone and went back to my own.

I had a fuck ton to think about, but wouldn’t go back on my word. I’d agreed to

ninety days with him before we decided what we were going to do.

Staring out the window as we approached the airport, I thought about my friends. Telling Dare what we'd done would be easy since he'd just eloped with the man he loved to hate. Phantom wasn't married yet, but he and Adam might as well be. Then there was GQ and Dominick. They were perfect for each other and Livie.

I glanced over at John and his chiseled jaw. His features were relaxed as he sang along with the song on the radio. Could I see myself with him?

He must have felt me staring. "You okay? You're not getting a goddamn burger if your stomach is upset. Maybe we should wait to eat until we get to Portland. We can grab something and take it home. Tomorrow we're going grocery shopping."

I nodded, making no argument, but continued to stare at him. "Whatever you want to do is fine with me."

John slowly panned to me, making me smile. Then he put his hand on my forehead.

"What? What did I do now?" I laughed.

"Just making sure you didn't have a fever. It's unlike you to agree."

I laughed and pushed his hand away. "Oh fuck off."

But he caught it and held my hand in his. His smile was warm and reached his eyes. Right then I knew I had no chance of coming out of this thing with him unscathed.

After we turned in the car and grabbed our bags, we ceremoniously dropped our Rush shirts in the trashcan outside the airport. After checking in and clearing security, we found seats at our gate. As we settled in, John elbowed me.

“Did you really have to do that today?”

I scowled at him and then spoke very low. “What’s wrong with the way I handled it? Turner’s a homophobic dickwad and his management needed to see it. It will save that owner a ton of trouble in the end. If they let him go, then that will prove he had a contract, and it’ll help Greer. So the way I look at it, I was protecting Dare.”

“So you’re saying a protector also needs a protector.”

I thought about that. “I guess we all need someone to have our backs now and then. Not me, but most people.” I leaned closer and dropped my timbre. “And I gotta tell you that that 'back the fuck off' in that authoritative tone really did it for me.”

“Uh-huh.” His mocking tone made it difficult not to smile.

“It did. And if you would’ve heard how he spouted off at Patrick, you’d understand. I’m sorry if it bothered you, but I did what I had to do to make sure we got what we needed. That’s who I am. Plus Patrick is joining our team as Cole’s bodyguard.”

John went quiet until my stomach growled. “I guess we should find you something else to eat.”

He sat up and looked around at the offerings in the terminal. “How about I grab some snacks and a soda?”

“It’s okay. I can wait until we get back. And I’m getting a burger.”

John shook his head at me, then sat back. “Whatever. But I’m not staying up all night with you again. So eat at your own risk.”

I grinned, then threw his words back at him. “But you said...”

“I know what I said. And if I’m staying up all night, it’s because we’re fucking. No praying to the porcelain god.”

“You could sleep in your room and you’d never hear it.”

“Nope. We have an agreement. Ninety-days.”

I wasn’t going to tell him three days had already passed. If he wanted to start over, far be it from me to mess with the schedule. That meant three more days for him to rail me. Or for me to rail him.

Shifting I looked at him. “Sorry about that. We could have had a good time.”

John bumped his shoulder into mine. “Stop. We had a good time. I didn’t hate it. Any of it.”

Thinking back on our time together the last three days, the only terrible part was when I was in the bathroom. John was there to help me through it. And I wasn’t sure I’d ever told him how much I appreciated it. I never wanted him to think I wasn’t grateful for him being there.

“I don’t remember if I ever thanked you for taking care of me. I’m just not used to it, that’s all. I’ve kinda been on my own since my brother died, and I don’t want you to think I’m an asshole.”

John tilted his head closer to me. “Here’s the thing, sweetheart. You’ll never be an asshole to me. I see who you are, and I’m always going to be on your side. I’m your protector, whether you want me or not. No matter how many people you piss off, or how much you run that sweet mouth when you should shut the fuck up, I’m going to stand right there beside you come hell or high water. So get used to it.”

As much as I wanted to tell him to fuck off, and to stop calling me sweetheart, I knew he wouldn't. And somewhere deep inside of me, I hoped he never did.

On the flight home, we opted to order pizza. John thought it would be easier on my gut than a greasy burger, so I decided to humor him.

When we walked up to the door of the condo, John stopped and ran his finger over the wood. "What happened to the door?"

I leaned in and ran my fingers over the deep gouge. "I don't know," I lied. "Weird."

He unlocked the door and pushed it open for me to walk in. Placing the pizza on the coffee table in front of the TV, I went to my room to drop my bag while John turned on the lamp and locked the door.

When I returned, he stood going through the guide until he found a baseball game. "This okay?"

"Yeah, that's good," I said, walking into the kitchen to grab a couple of beers and some plates.

I settled onto the sofa next to him and sat back as the energy drained out of me. My head hurt from the lack of food, but I wasn't sure I was hungry anymore.

As he opened the beers, I leaned my head back on the sofa, stretching my neck from side to side to loosen the muscles. When that didn't relieve the pain, I ran my left hand over my head and squeezed the back of my neck.

"Tired?" he asked, handing me a plate with a small slice of pizza.

I smiled at the portion size and sat up. "Yeah. It just kinda hit me all of a sudden."

“You need some food. And you’re still recovering from the other night. It might take you a few days to get back to normal.”

When I didn’t reply, John looked over at me. As our eyes met in the dim light, what I saw made my stomach quiver. It made me want to crawl into his lap and forget about eating.

“Let’s eat dinner, then I’ll help you relax.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. I was swimming in unfamiliar waters, and normally my first response would be a smartass joke to lighten the moment. But a bigger part of me wanted to give in and let him take care of me. Like he’d been doing for the last three days.

“You don’t have to do that, but I’m not gonna argue with you.”

His face broke into a smile. “That’s a first. Maybe I should take a picture to commemorate the moment.”

“Now who’s the smartass,” I said, taking a bite of my pizza. I’d never admit that I loved the way he could read me so well and diffuse my anxiety.

We watched the game while we ate and settled into a comfortable conversation about baseball and the teams we thought would make it to the World Series. And when we were finished eating, he took our plates, the box, and empty bottles to the kitchen.

I stood to stretch as he returned. He tossed a bottle on the sofa, then took the hem of my shirt in his hands. “Take it off, please.”

I blinked at him, hung up in his eyes, as he smiled. “You don’t want massage oil all over it. It might stain.”

Nodding, I took it and tossed it on the sofa. “Where do you want me?”

He grinned. “Between my legs on the floor.”

There were so many lewd jokes running through my head, but for the first time, maybe in forever, I just wanted to comply. So I got on the floor and leaned against the sofa between his legs.

The soft snap of the bottle lid caught my attention until his big warm hands worked on the taut tendons in my neck. He massaged the sore muscles at the base of my skull, then worked his way down to my neck and shoulders.

“That feels so fucking good,” I groaned as he worked out the lactic acid that had lingered in my body.

John chuckled as he bent down and kissed the side of my neck. The rasp of his beard against my skin sent shivers over my skin and up and down my spine.

I lifted my arm and ran my fingers through his hair as his hands worked down my arms, squeezing and massaging the soreness away. I didn’t want him to stop.

“John,” I moaned as he left open-mouthed kisses along my jaw and bit lightly on my earlobe. He was hitting every erogenous zone I had.

“Take yourself out,” he whispered into my ear as his hands left my body.

My cock was already hard as I hurried to unbutton them before I blew in my pants.

“I’m so hard,” I said between shuddered breaths.

“I know, sweetheart.”

With my cock out in my hand, my head fell back against him as he brought the bottle of Almond Oil around in front of me to drizzle more over my dick.

“Hold it until I tell you to move,” he whispered again.

I nodded as I tried to breathe. This bossy side of him was really working for me.

“What if I can’t?”

His arms went over my shoulders as I watched him drizzle more into his hand. John sat the bottle down and rubbed his hands together before sliding his oily hands over my shoulders and down my chest.

“I won’t let you cum, sweetheart.” He bit my earlobe, sending a new wave of chills over my skin.

Long fingers massaged my ribs and down my sides while my eyes rolled in the back of my head. I tried to absorb the sensation as pre-cum bubbled up like magma and leaked from the head of my dick.

“John...”

“I know. One minute. I’m getting there.”

An eternity later, he finally wrapped his big hand over mine as we jerked me off together with long, slow motions. And when his left hand went to my jaw and turned my face to him, he stared into my eyes. “Let go, sweetheart.”

He took my mouth in a different kind of kiss, and I let go, my cum releasing from me as unwanted tears slid down my face.

CHAPTER 17

JOHN

The following morning, I slipped out of bed and left Brent sleeping. I didn't remember him being such an octopus in his sleep, but I wasn't complaining. Normally I didn't care to be touched when I slept. But it was different with him. Even if I had to contort my body like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible dodging all those laser beams just to get out of bed. I even turned the pillows so that if he rolled back over, he'd have something to hug.

It all boiled down to no matter how clingy he was, I loved the feel of him in my arms, and how his squirming all night left his Joe Malone all over my skin. If I didn't think he'd flip the fuck out and run, I'd tell him how I really felt with all the words. But I knew the best plan of action was to let him come to the conclusion we belonged together on his own.

I slipped out of his room and headed to mine for some shorts. Brent had been exhausted last night after his massage and collapsed into bed. So when he woke up, I wanted to have breakfast ready for him.

I'd just turned the coffeemaker on when I got a glimpse of him heading toward the kitchen. Clad in only workout shorts, his eyes were barely open as he scrubbed his hands over his face. My eyes trailed down his chest before I turned away.

"Morning," he said. His arms slid around my torso, bringing his bare chest to my bare back. He leaned his chin on my shoulder as he pulled me closer. It was exactly the

reaction I'd been hoping for.

"Morning, sweetheart." I tried not to give myself away.

"Whatcha doing?"

I smiled and turned so he was in my arms. "I was going to make you breakfast, but we don't have much to work with. Do you guys ever cook?"

"If by cook you mean heat up a frozen dinner, then no. We eat out."

"We need to fix that. How about I take you to breakfast then we head to buy some groceries."

Brent smiled. "You know how to cook?"

"I do. And I'm going to cook for us tomorrow. We've got that dinner tonight."

He leaned in and kissed my chin. "I think I owe you something this morning."

I kissed the tip of his nose. "No, you don't. Last night wasn't about that. It was me taking care of you."

"But I'm supposed to take care of your needs for the next ninety days."

I ran my right hand across his cheek before curling my fingers around the back of his neck. With my left arm holding him to my chest, I took a little chance.

"Brent, I enjoy taking care of you and having someone I care about in my life. I'm a protector and a caregiver."

He stared into my eyes, confusion still there. “What have I done to make you care about me, John? My own parents could give a shit anymore.”

I leaned in and kissed him sweetly. “We’re like peanut butter and jelly, you and me. We’re good alone, but when put together, it’s a perfect pair. You’re addicting like sugar and I’m the savory balance to your sweetness. Jelly may run, but the peanut butter isn’t going anywhere. We’re meant for one another. You just have to let me get onto the bread.”

I kissed his cheek as he took a deep breath. His chest rose and fell a little more quickly than normal. I hope I hadn’t sent him into panic mode.

“What if my brand of jelly doesn’t go well with your peanut butter?”

Smiling, I humored him with a response I knew the hurt young boy in him could live with. “The peanut butter and the jelly have a ninety-day return policy. If for some reason the jelly and the peanut butter don’t work together, they can be returned. But the peanut butter wouldn’t be the same without his favorite jelly.”

A smile crept across his handsome face. “Okay. I can try to do this for ninety days.”

I grinned and nodded. “Deal. But I might lose the receipt.”

And I pulled his mouth to mine as he melted into me.

“This is going to be so much fun,” Brent mused, rubbing his hands together like some kind of movie villain. We were early for the party, so I knew I had time to grill him.

“Why?” I asked, warily. “What have you done?”

He looked over at me. “Why do you assume that I’ve done something bad? Is the

trust in our relationship already waning, Mr. Peanut Butter?”

I laughed at his put-out expression. “I know you, sweetheart. You will do anything to get a laugh. It’s one of your superpowers. So what the fuck have you done? I need to be prepared.”

Brent leaned back and looked at himself in the mirror in the visor. “I might have arranged for some surprise entertainment. I owe Daredevil a payback for sending you to the coffee shop. Especially when you used the special shampoo I’d made for him.”

“But that worked out well in the end with you on my cock. Why do you need to get him back?”

He looked over at me with a devious grin. “Because it’s my turn. And it’s what we do.”

I groaned and reached for the door handle. “You’re gonna make me have to peel Dare off you, aren’t you? I should have worn something different.”

Brent caught my forearm before we got out of the car. “Relax. It’ll be fine. And you look hot as fuck and smell even better. I just want to lick you all over.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t start something you can’t finish and make me hard before we go into a room full of people.”

He snickered. “Okay, fine. But I’ll make it up to you tonight when we get home.”

Brent wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, but I could see something else lingering there. Something he thought he could hide from me.

“What’s on your mind?”

He nervously tapped his fingers over his lips. “I don’t want to tell anyone about us for a while. Just don’t want to look like a failure if this ends.”

I knew I still had a lot of work to do with him despite his words earlier. But I gave him the assurance he needed. “I won’t mention anything if you don’t.”

I refused to acknowledge his decree of the relationship failure part of his request.

“Okay,” he sighed in relief.

I ignored it and got out of the car. My instinct was to reach for his hand, but I shoved it in my pocket instead. There would be a day when we didn’t have to think about it. We’d just hold on to each other the way we were meant to.

When we walked into Bernardo’s, we were met by the hostess who pointed us into the dining room. I didn’t recognize many of the people in the room other than my teammates and Aidan, but I was sure that would change. Half of them were very big men that I assumed were from Greer’s team.

“Hey, Commander, glad you could make it.” GQ held out his hand for me to shake.

“Thank you for the invite.”

“Let me introduce you to everyone, Commander,” Dominick said. “Most of these guys are my teammates and their husbands.”

I nodded as Brent put his hand on my shoulder. “What do you want from the bar?”

“Scotch and soda, please,” I replied with a smile. Brent grinned at me before he realized what the fuck he was doing. I raised my brows and smiled.

“I’ll be back,” he said, moving away.

I watched for a moment, then turned back to Dominick. “Sorry.”

“No. I’m glad he’s playing nicely with others.”

I chuckled and nodded. “That’s to be determined.”

Dominick motioned me forward and introduced me to Jackson Kincaid and his husband Simon. “Jackson is the reason I’m the kicker. Without his relentless efforts to find me a job on the team, I’d probably still be the water boy.”

Simon smiled up at his husband. “That’s just the way he is.”

Dominick continued to introduce me to his friends until GQ interrupted the conversations in the room.

“The newlyweds are here!”

One look at Daredevil and Greer caused whistles and catcalls to fill the room. I’d never seen Daredevil smile like that before, but when he raised their clasped hands into the air, I saw the true happiness written all over his face.

I looked around for my ray of sunshine as he made his way across the room with our drinks.

“They look really fucking happy,” he said, looking at them as he handed my drink to me.

Turning my gaze from him back to our teammate, I had to agree. “That they do.”

We sipped our cocktails as GQ approached Greer and Daredevil carrying two glasses of wine. The conversation around us was low enough that we could hear them.

“It’s good to see both of you happy. Makes me proud that I could play a part in that,” GQ grinned.

“Under different circumstances, I’d bust your balls for that GQ. But this time, I have to admit you were right.” Dare held out his hand to shake.

GQ was obviously proud of himself. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Maybe you should add matchmaking to the list of services you guys offer,” Dominick added. “Dreamboat’s the only one who isn’t partnered up now.”

Brent spit his drink out and started to cough. I patted him on the back, trying to keep the smirk off my face.

Daredevil snorted. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

Jesse looked at him like he already knew, then looked over to wink at me. Fucking hell.

It was amusing to watch this bunch together. They hovered around talking, and when one of the players put his hand on Greer’s shoulder, I leaned to Brent. “Who is that?”

“You don’t recognize him? Heisman Trophy winner Declan Miller? He’s the running back.”

I held up my hand. “Okay, super fan. I don’t memorize the roster. I’m from San Diego. Ask me about those guys.”

Brent rolled his eyes at me in faux disgust.

“How’s married life treating you?,” Declan asked Greer. “You know we’re all going to need this story, right, boss? We had no idea you swung our way.”

Declan grunted, then looked at the blond guy who had to be his husband. “Babe, why are you being mean to me?”

The guy sighed. “I swear to God we can’t take you anywhere. It’s none of our business.”

“Oh yes, it is,” Marcus added. I knew him. “We need the deets, boss man. We all thought you were sweet on Dr. Sanchez.”

Greer’s face turned red. “Um. Well. I do care for Eliana. Like a sister. She’s a good friend. Not like my sister, but a nice sister.”

Austin barked out a laugh, catching everyone by surprise. “All you gents need to know is I am a very lucky man.” He leaned down to kiss his new husband squarely on the mouth, making Greer’s cheeks heat again.

I’d been waiting for Brent to add his two cents’ worth. “You aren’t getting out of the story, Dare. We all want to know what happened to send you two down the aisle within a week.”

He stepped forward and shook his hips like he did on the dance floor. “Bow chicka wow wow.”

Holy hell. I reached forward and wrapped my arm around his shoulders to pull him back to me. “Settle down, lover boy.”

“Oh, good!” Phantom added from across the room. “Your keeper is here.”

Everyone laughed as Brent flipped him off. And much to my happiness, he didn’t step out of my hold until it was time to sit down. The smile didn’t leave my face for a long damn time.

Later, when the strippers showed up, I knew exactly what he’d done.

CHAPTER 18

brENT

When we left Bernardo's, I wasn't ready to call it a night. I needed something to clear my head, but I wasn't quite sure what to do.

The events of the last few days had left me feeling off balance. Seeing all my friends tonight with their men drove home the fact that I was the odd man out. Phantom had Adam, GQ had Dominick, and now Daredevil was married to Greer. While I was more than happy for them, it was becoming clear that my previous life plan to avoid intimate relationships might blow up in my face. All my avoidance was going to leave me lonely. And alone.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

I'd given up trying to stop John from using that term of endearment. He was going to do what he wanted to do and nothing would stop him. Not even me.

"Nothing," I said, looking out the window as we drove toward the condo.

John sighed. "You forget that I know you. You can't lie to me."

"You don't know me. You only know what I allow you to see."

There was something wrong with me. Three days in, and I was already pushing him away when I wanted to pull him closer. How could I go from an evening surrounded

by my friends to feeling lost?

John reached over and placed his hand on my thigh. His warmth was a life preserver that I wanted to cling to in order to escape my cluttered mind. So instinct took over, and I placed my hand on top of his.

We rode the rest of the way in silence until he parked the car. When I reached for the door handle, John spoke.

“I can imagine how you’re processing all that love and happiness back there. And I bet you’re rolling everything around in your brain and it has you tied in knots.”

Turning to look at him, I found that warm expression again that I was growing accustomed to. I felt myself letting him in. “What makes you think that?”

He smiled knowingly at me. “I can read you pretty easily, sweetheart, because we’re more alike than you know.”

John reached up and cupped my face. “I’m a good listener if you want to talk about it.”

I laughed sardonically. “That’s the last thing I want to do. I just want to get out of my head and stop thinking for once. Maybe I’ll go run.”

Shifting to get out of the car, he reached for my arm. I turned back to look at him. “I can help get you out of your head if you’d like.”

I could see where this was going. But I couldn’t take him being sweet to me like he’d been all week. “With your dick? I could be down for that.”

He shrugged. “You like it when I’m in control.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “What do I have to do?”

John trailed his fingers down my face. “You just have to let me take care of you and trust that it will be okay. Can you let me do that for you?”

Nodding slowly, I turned and got out of the car. My curiosity was piqued by what he might have in store. And the more I thought about it, the more aroused I became.

I wanted to ask questions but didn’t know what to ask, and in the end, it didn’t matter. John took control of the situation the minute the door closed behind us in the condo.

Standing in the middle of the floor, I heard the door locks engage and his soft footfalls as he crossed the room. My breathing became a little more labored at the thought of him touching me, but that’s not what I got.

John came to a stop behind me. I could feel his heat radiate from his chest, even though he wasn’t touching me. My body was tense and every muscle was taut in anticipation. I closed my eyes and waited for his words. When his warm breath skirted along my neck, chill bumps blanketed my skin.

My head tilted to the left, pulling my eyes closed when John’s lips found their way to my neck. Releasing a weighted sigh, I savored the feel of his lips on me as he left soft kisses under my jaw and along the tendon of my neck.

I stepped back against him, needing to be closer. For him to blanket my body with his. He kissed the sensitive skin under my ear and wrapped his arms around me.

Wrapped in his warmth, he spoke softly. “Go to your room and get undressed. I’ll be there in a moment. Okay?”

Reluctantly, I pulled out of his embrace. I nodded and stepped away. His hands

slipped away from my body, leaving me to miss his touch. I unbuttoned my dress shirt as I walked toward my room. When I got to the door, I turned to find John watching me, still standing in the place I'd just vacated. The prideful expression he had on his face accompanied by his smile and the soft look in his eyes released some of the apprehension I'd been feeling.

I wanted to please him, and putting that look on his face made me happy. I'd done that, and it was a heady feeling. And I wanted more.

I walked in and crossed the room to the wingback chair that sat in the corner of the room. Carefully, I removed my clothes and folded them with practiced military precision. When he entered the room, I was completely naked, just as he asked. But he was not.

I frowned. "It's going to be difficult to do this with you dressed."

He smiled as he came closer. "I want to look at you. Is that okay?"

I shrugged, my face heating as he walked around me. "Whatever you want."

"Good," he murmured, placing a kiss on my shoulder as he circled me. My skin heated as his gaze trailed over me. And when he stood in front of me, he leaned in and placed a kiss on my lips.

"Kneel for me, sweetheart."

I was temporarily shocked at his words, but the longer I looked at him, the more I wanted to comply. So I dropped to my knees and sat back. Looking up at him, I saw pride and adoration on his face again, and the hint of something I was afraid to name.

"Like what you see?" I asked. I could even hear the hope in my voice.

John ran his hand over my head. “I love what I see, and you are such a good man.”

As I stared up at him, trying to make sense of why this was affecting me this way, a tear slipped down my cheek, just like the night before. I wasn’t embarrassed, because somehow I knew he wasn’t going to tease me about it. Whatever happened here, I was safe with him.

John wiped away the tear, then stepped back out of my reach. He unbuttoned his shirt as I watched him expose himself to me. He stripped away the hard exterior we had to wear every day and showed me who he was. But if I were being honest with myself, I knew who John was.

When his attire matched mine, he got on his knees in front of me.

“I want to touch you,” I said, wanting to make him feel good.

His smile was warm as he took my face in his hands. “You can. But I’m going to need something from you first.”

My smile matched his. “What’s that?”

John took my face in his hands and looked into my eyes. “I’m going to need you on your back looking at me while I— take you out of your head. Think you can do that?”

I sighed dramatically, acting like a fool, as usual. But the seriousness in his eyes stopped me in my tracks. I nodded and got to my feet.

Crawling onto my bed, I stretched out across the duvet and tucked my hands behind my head. John stood and looked down at me, stroking his cock.

“I’m gonna take you bare unless you have an objection. I don’t want anything

between us.”

I shook my head. “No objection here. You own my ass for ninety days. You can have it as long as you want it.” The teasing remark was meant to lighten the serious mood, but as he crawled onto the bed between my thighs, all humor left his gaze.

“And you own mine.” Lowering himself onto me, he held my gaze until his lips met mine. Warm, wet kisses ensued as I ran my hands over his strong shoulders and long arms. Reaching down, I took our straining cocks in hand until we were both leaking.

John pulled away from my mouth, leaving me breathless as he continued kissing down my torso. His cock slipped from my hand and when he engulfed my shaft with his mouth, I sucked in a deep breath as my eyes rolled into the back of my head.

When he’d teased me long enough, he pulled off and kissed my thigh. “Roll over, babe.”

I complied, knowing exactly where this was going. I was ready for him to shove his way into my body and leave behind a memorable burn. But that’s not what I got.

Crawling over me, he braced his hands beside my head and lowered his upper body onto my back. John enveloped my lower body with his knees and legs along my hips while he gently thrust his cock along my crease. He wasn’t seeking entrance, but building the anticipation while he placed kisses along my neck and shoulders. Working his way lower, his stubble tickled my spine as he licked a trail down to my ass.

“God you’re making me crazy. Just fuck me already. I can take it.”

“No,” he chuckled softly. “I’m taking my time with you. You just lay there and enjoy what I give you. You aren’t in control. I am. Remember?”

I rolled my shoulders off the mattress as my body broke into shivers. His touch, his words, and his affection for me came charging through my brain and taking me off guard. He wanted control, and I wanted to give it to him.

John sat back on my lower legs and kneaded my ass. He pulled my cheeks apart and leaned down to bite my ass. I yelped, making him chuckle. And when he was good and ready, he tapped my hip. “Up on your knees, but keep your shoulders and chest on the bed.”

Following his directions, I got up just like he asked and stuck my ass out. I shook it for good measure, earning myself a playful pop on the ass.

“Stop it,” he said. “Shaking your ass at me isn’t going to get me to go any faster, sweetheart.”

More shivers crested over me when he ran his stubble across my ass cheeks. And when he reached between my legs and took my erect shaft in his hand, I almost lost it from sensory overload.

“You are trying to kill me, aren’t you?” I whined as he stroked me just enough to be irritating.

“Only in the best way,” he murmured against my skin. And then he attached his mouth to my hole.

Moaning like the wanna-be-porn-star I was, John intensified his mission like a man starved. I pushed my ass back to get closer because I’d forgotten how good it felt to do this. Usually, I was the top doing all the ass-eating, so this trip down memory lane was making me giddy and would make me cum if he wasn’t careful.

I lost track of time when he alternated his mouth and fingers on me, and just when I

thought my eyeballs might stay permanently in the back of my head, he finally took pity on me.

My ass and my skin were wet from his mouth, and when the cool air ghosted over my skin, another big shiver ripped from me.

Another tap on my hip got my attention.

“Turn over, baby. I wanna see your face when I take you.”

Flopping to my back without argument, I looked up into the face of the man whose dick I was falling for. Unable to take my eyes off him, John coated himself in lube and snapped the bottle shut. Tossing it to the side, he leaned down and took my mouth in a tender kiss. I wrapped my arms and legs around him as he managed to slide into me while I clung to him.

We groaned in relief as he inched himself inside me, gently thrusting his hips while still attached to my mouth. I loosened my monkey hold on him and reached for my cock. Two strokes in, he batted my hand away.

I yanked my head back when he shifted his hips to hit my prostate. Electricity arced through me as he worked his body like a male dancer in and out while touching every sensitive spot, building my pleasure to a new height.

With stamina I didn't know he had, John worked my body over, then stopped to kiss me stupid, only to pick himself up and keep going.

Normally, I was a chatty fucker during sex, but this was different. There was a connection we both felt, and I didn't want my stupid mouth to ruin this for him. Or myself. And that was a first.

I lost track of everything except John the last time he started up again. And when my release was approaching, he didn't stop. He grabbed my shaft with one hand and balanced his body with the other when my channel began to contract.

He stroked me through my release, and when he came a few strokes later, his eyes closed momentarily before opening to pin me with his gaze.

A confusing mix of feelings washed through me, but this time they felt more right than wrong. Something was changing inside me, and it had everything to do with John Langdon.

When our lips met again, I think my heart claimed him. And for the first time in a very long time, I felt loved.

CHAPTER 19

JOHN

We'd settled into a new routine that centered around work during the day, and exploring Portland at night. Greer and Austin had gone back to Costa Rica after the party for an extended honeymoon before the pre-season started. That meant we needed to pick up the loose ends for GQ.

It wasn't long after we'd turned over our intel on Clay Turner to GQ that the lawsuit had been dropped. Of course, we never told anyone about the more sensitive details of the mission. We chose to keep them to ourselves.

We started each morning crawling out of bed at the crack of dawn to run. Brent never wanted to go the same way twice, so we zigzagged our way across the city. We'd discovered multiple new routes around town that always ended at a local diner for breakfast. I wasn't going to complain because it was a great way for me to learn the lay of the land, and there was no time for me to cook.

Every night that we had an opportunity to stay in, Brent ended up on top of me on the sofa and the octopus games began.

Again I wasn't complaining. I'd smiled more in the last three weeks than I had in the last three years.

Longer summer days meant warmer nights for us to explore the city's nightlife. At the end of the day, we'd meet up somewhere like Alejandro's for a beer and a burger

when our schedules had taken us in different directions. We'd sit at the bar and talk, always some part of our bodies touching as we talked to the bartenders and watched the game. Alejandro and Ben joined us sometimes, and it quickly reaffirmed that I'd made the right decision moving to Portland. Laura had been right. My happiness was here. I needed her to come visit or I could take Brent to San Diego.

So when Austin and Greer returned, I told GQ we were off the clock for the weekend.

"Look," I said, sitting across from him in the office. "We've covered everything for the last three weeks. I want to stay home, cook for my hu—homie, and watch some sports."

The fucker grinned at me. "So things are going well?"

I tried to suppress a smile. "They are going as well as could be expected."

"Glad to hear it. So coming here was the right decision. I knew it would be."

I rolled my eyes and stood from the chair. "I'm going home and find my roommate."

"Hey, one thing. Can you stop by the training center sometime this weekend and check on the progress? The last of the equipment should have been installed today, but give them another day. I'd go, but we're supposed to take Livie to the beach this weekend since training camp starts next week."

I nodded. "Sure. We can do that. Maybe we'll forgo a run to work out."

GQ nodded and waved me off. "Go start your weekend."

I wasn't going to argue with that.

On my way home, I called Brent. He didn't pick up the phone, so when I stopped at Safeway to grab some steaks and what I needed to make my homemade pasta sauce, I sent him a text.

Me: Getting groceries. I'll be home soon. ETA?

When he didn't respond, I pocketed my phone and headed into the store. Grabbing a cart, I made my way through the store, tossing in items I thought Brent would enjoy.

Twenty minutes later, I left with everything we needed for a luxurious weekend of seclusion in our condo. I didn't want to go anywhere or do anything outside the walls of our home. All I wanted was forty-eight uninterrupted hours to show him what life could be like. Lazy mornings in bed, sitting on the sofa watching baseball and pre-season football, kissing endlessly for hours.

When I got home, I walked up the stairs with my arms full of grocery bags. Before I could put them down, the door swung open to the most handsome man I'd ever seen. I knew the smile on my face was stupid, but that's what he did to me.

Every. Fucking. Time.

"Hey, I was coming down to help you. Is that everything?"

I was struck dumb as he stood there bare-chested and wearing athletic shorts. Brent was relaxed and looked at me the way I looked at him. Like if he touched me, he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself.

"Hey to you. This is it. I tried to call. Did you get my message?"

Brent nodded and took several bags out of my hand. "Just saw it. I was with Patrick and Phantom. Cole and Adam were having a jam session, so I stuck around for a bit."

“How’s he doing?” I asked, unloading the bags onto the counter. “GQ wants me to train him as soon as he gets the all-clear from his doctors.”

Brent snorted and pulled out two beers from the refrigerator. He popped the tops and handed me one. “You won’t have to worry about him not being ready. Simon won’t release him until he’s fully recovered.”

I stopped and looked at him. “Simon Kincaid?”

He nodded and leaned back against the counter. “Yeah. He was the team doctor but works part-time as a private physician. When they got Parker, he pulled back because he wanted to be with Parker since his mom had just died.”

He tipped his beer back and drank half of it, but averted his eyes from me. “They love both of those kids so much.”

Brent looked up and smiled at me. “So what’s for dinner? Looks like you bought out the store.”

I put down the bag I was holding and walked over to him. Opening my arms, I pulled him in for a hug. He wrapped his around me and nestled his face into my neck. Holding him closer, we stood quietly, holding on to each other.

“You’re a good man,” I whispered into his hair. “No matter what anyone else thinks, who you are is enough. ”

Brent pulled back and looked at me. I cupped his cheek and kissed his forehead.

“I’m not enough for them. Never have been.”

“When you say them , I’m assuming you’re talking about your parents.”

He sighed. “Yeah. Ever since Matt got sick, things have never been the same. I don’t blame them for giving all their attention to him. They were supposed to. I’ve just become invisible to them.”

Brent was still holding on to me as I looked into his eyes. “I know that hurts you, but you’re not the problem. No matter what, I’m here for you and you can tell me anything. I’ll always be on your side. But I’m curious. Did your family get grief counseling?”

I felt the tension in his body begin to relax in my arms.

“For a while. But it didn’t help in the long run. My parents became like pod people. I don’t recognize them anymore.”

I kissed his forehead and hugged him to me. “I want you to think about this. We cannot control how others think or how they feel. We can only control ourselves and how we process things. But here’s what you’re missing,” I said, rubbing my hand over his back. “You share an unbreakable bond with your team. You can’t go to war and live and survive without having it. Most people will never experience this in their lifetime. Those men are your family by choice. They choose you, and that choice makes your connection stronger than biology. You’re enough for them, and enough for me. You always have been.”

Brent squeezed me tightly, then stepped out of my arms. “What are we having for dinner? I’m starving.”

I grinned at him, proud that he’d opened up, but he was ready to let the heavy go. “Steak and salad. And if you’re good, you can have dessert.”

“Oh yeah? And what would that be?”

I bit my bottom lip. “Me.”

“What do you want for breakfast? I can whip up just about anything.”

Brent came walking out of the bedroom with a towel around his hips. Rather than getting his own coffee, he reached for mine and took a drink. “Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee?”

“Nah, I just needed a taste of yours. And I think I need to replenish my protein level.”

I grinned and pulled out a skillet from under the cabinet. “It’s your fault.”

“My fault? I didn’t do anything.”

He was such a cute liar. “Oh, you did. And you know it.”

Brent smirked at me. “I’m going to get dressed.”

He walked toward the bedroom, but stopped and turned. “Dare is coming by later to pick up the rest of his things. Otherwise, I’d stay naked all day.”

“And you’d get fucked all day,” I replied, going back to rummaging through the cabinet.

Brent’s laughter filled me with a kind of joy I hadn’t known in a long time. And every time I thought about how his parents could ignore him, made me incredibly angry. Every time he walked into the office, he brought smiles to everyone’s faces. I don’t understand how they couldn’t see it.

Turning on the oven, I reached into the cabinet to get a cookie sheet to cook the bacon when Brent came walking into the kitchen and dumped his collection of sex

toys in the kitchen sink.

I stared down at the menagerie of silicone toys with suction cup attachments, including the infamous unicorn horn, unsure of what to say. But he had words. He always had words.

“Quite a collection, huh? I’ve ordered a couple more.”

Standing with his hands on his hips, he looked down at them in the sink. I knew he was waiting for me to say something.

“Why are they in the sink? We prepare our food in here.”

He smirked up at me. “What’s the big deal? You eat my ass and they’ve been in my ass. What’s the difference?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “But why are they in here?”

“I’m gonna put them in the dishwasher. But we can’t use the heated dry cycle. Could you imagine what a repair guy would say if he had to come fix the dishwasher because all my dildos melted down there? I bet GQ would just buy a new dishwasher.”

Laughter bubbled up in me as I thought about what Dare would say. And then it occurred to me what he was doing.

“Wait. Are you really going to put them in the dishwasher, or are these out here just to get a rise out of Dare when he gets here?”

Okay. Bad choice of words.

“You’re catching on! I am going to wash them, but then I’m going to suction all of them to the kitchen counter so he’ll see them when he comes in. It’s fun as hell watching him turn fifty shades of red and then yell at me. You know, like he did the last time he came home.”

I threw my head back and laughed, then opened the dishwasher. “Here you go. Top rack only.”

CHAPTER 20

brENT

I never really intended to put all my sex toys out on the counter for Austin to find. Sure, it would have been funny as hell, but that little display was for John's benefit. The way I figured it, he would lose his shit and tell me I was too much. But he did the opposite and gave me one more reason to fall for him even more.

After breakfast, we hand-washed the dishes since the dishwasher was occupied. The last thing we needed was my ass smelling like maple syrup. Or maybe we did.

"What are you thinking about or do I not want to know?"

I grinned, but decided to keep that ridiculous thought to myself. That might be a tasty surprise one day. "Nothing really."

"Your face says otherwise."

As soon as we had it all cleaned up, John went to the refrigerator and pulled out two packages of ground beef, an onion, green pepper, and fresh tomatoes.

"You can't be hungry."

He smiled. "No, but I am going to make the meat sauce for the lasagna. It takes a while, and I figured we could burn some calories on the sofa while it simmers for a couple of hours."

I rubbed my hands together. “Now you’re talking. What do you need me to do?”

The doorbell sounded before he could give me directions, so I went to answer it. I swung the door open to find my best friend standing outside the door.

“Why didn’t you use your key?” I asked, stepping aside to let him in.

Dare laughed as he entered the condo. “You know why. It’s not safe around here anymore. Last time I got to see way more than I bargained for.”

“So did your husband,” I laughed. “Speaking of husbands, where’s Greer?”

“At home. He had some business to take care of, so I thought I’d pack up the rest of my stuff.”

I nodded, but my smile slipped from my face.

“What’s wrong?”

I cleared my throat and stuffed my hands in my pockets. Looking at the floor, I tried to get control of the emotion I was feeling. All this letting my guard down with John was messing me up.

“Brent. What’s going on? Is it your dad? Is he okay?”

I chuckled humorlessly. “It just occurred to me that you’re not going to be living here anymore.”

My voice cracked as I looked away from him. Austin didn’t say anything, but I knew him well enough to know this was just occurring to him too.

“Yeah, that’s actually just hitting me too.”

I glanced up at him as he looked around at the place we’d shared for more than three years. Neither of us was big on showing our emotions. That’s how we got through losing Nate. We pushed it all down and held each other up.

“We’ve lived together for a long time. In the service, and Cheyenne. Now here. I don’t know how to live alone.”

Dare smiled at me, but I could see the emotion behind his eyes. “You’re never going to truly be alone, Dreamy. We may not live in the same space anymore, but I’m always going to be here for you. So are GQ and Phantom. We are best friends and brothers until the day we die. We’ll always have each other’s six no matter what.”

I nodded, still looking at the floor. Emotion was clawing its way up from the pit of my stomach. “I know. And I’m happy for you. But I could use a promise that you won’t go back to Chicago.”

Dare smiled. “I’m not leaving. My husband owns a football team. And I’ve got these friends I don’t think I can part from. But you’ve also got that man in there who adores the ground you walk on. Don’t push him away.”

Nodding, I reached up and hugged the fucker. “I’m happy you got him,” I said, kissing his cheek. “I love you brother.”

“Love you too.” He clapped me on the back. “I’m going to go pack up.”

I nodded as he walked to his bedroom. “Don’t forget your shampoo,” I called over my shoulder.

Dare laughed. “Oh no, I’m leaving that here for you and the Commander. You two

seemed to enjoy that.”

I chuckled and waved him on.

Rubbing away the pain in my chest, it occurred to me he was right. John cared about me for some damn reason. Maybe he even loved me. And I felt the same way about him.

I walked into the kitchen, no longer afraid to need the reassurance he gave me every day. But when I rounded the corner, I found him much different from when I left him a few minutes ago.

Something was wrong. John had both hands flat on the counter as he looked down at the ingredients and pots covering the counter. His jaw was tense like he was holding back his anger and his brow was furrowed as he peered down at the counter.

My heart sank when I saw what he was looking at. And when his eyes met mine, I felt his anger from across the room.

“John—”

He cut me off. “What the fuck am I looking at here, Brent?”

I frowned and propped my hands on my hips before I straightened my spine and stalked over to pick up the bag that held the hunting knife and my picture.

“None of your fucking business,” I said, snatching it off the counter.

“The fuck it’s not! Why did you hide this from me? From Dare? When did this happen?”

He was uncharacteristically losing his shit. But I was losing mine too.

“I can take care of myself and I can find whoever is doing all this shit. This doesn’t concern anyone but me. It’s about me.”

John ran his hand over his head and threw his hands in the air. His voice got louder the more frustrated he got with me.

“I bet Daredevil won’t agree with your bullshit. Neither will GQ or Phantom. And if you think for one goddamn fucking minute that I’m going to let you handle this alone, you’re full of shit!”

Daredevil came into the kitchen, his brow furrowed. “What the hell is going on?”

John walked over and grabbed the bag from my hand, then held it out for Daredevil. “This asshole has been hiding this from everyone.”

Dare took the bag and looked at the contents. “What the fuck, Brent? Where did this come from?”

“The motherfucking door” John barked. “That’s where the gouge came from, isn’t it? You lied to me. You said you didn’t know how it happened!”

Fury grew inside me the more he came at me. The rational side of me knew it was out of fear, but I didn’t need any of them involved in this.

“I’m a goddamn Navy SEAL. I don’t need any of you to protect me from whatever nut job is doing this shit. I’ll find them. So back the fuck off and let me handle it.”

John gritted his teeth together and I could see the hurt in his eyes before he turned and walked away. He stopped in the middle of the floor and turned to look at me.

“You’re not doing this alone. I won’t allow it.”

I threw my hands up. “Why are you so fucking determined to take care of me?”

John leveled me with his expression. “Because I fucking love you. I fell in love with you the minute you touched me on the dance floor in Vegas. And if you think I’m going to allow my husband to deal with this bullshit alone, you’re out of your goddamn mind.”

He turned and walked out of the kitchen without another word.

Daredevil stared at me, wide-eyed as the front door opened and slammed shut. I waited for him to come charging back through the door, but he didn’t.

“Dare—”

He picked up the bag and looked at it. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because this isn’t about you. That proves it. You have a new husband and a new life, and I’ve pissed someone off. I’ll find them on my own.”

He laughed humorlessly. “He’s right. You are out of your fucking mind.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re all overreacting. I can handle it.”

“I have no doubt that you could, but you don’t have to handle it alone. Would you let me do it alone if it had been my picture instead of yours?”

As much as I wanted to say yes just to placate him, we both knew the truth. “No. I’d kick your ass.”

“Then why should we let you do it alone? You know good and well that Jesse is going to lose his shit. And Michael...”

I hung my head, but he didn't get it. “You all have families now.”

“And so do you. And you have that man who just stormed out of here. Who loves you. Who you're married to,” he trailed off. “We're your fucking family asshole and it pisses me the fuck off that you dismiss our brotherhood.”

My head was starting to hurt, so I sat down at the bar. “I'm not. I just wanted to protect you all from my bullshit. That's what we do. We protect one another.”

Dare released a heavy sigh. “That's right. But you forget, we're protectors too. So deal with it.”

He took out his phone and sent a message. My phone pinged, and I knew I'd been busted. “Let's go,” he said, moving toward the door.

My brow furrowed. I didn't want to go anywhere. I needed to stay here and wait for John.

“Where are we going?” I asked, moving to get my shoes.

“I'm taking this to Phantom and calling GQ. You're going to go find your husband.”

CHAPTER 21

JOHN

What the fuck was I going to do with him? He drove me goddamn crazy, and I wanted to fuck some sense into him. Tie him to the bed and rail his ass until he got it through his fucking head that he was not alone in all of this.

I'd never walked away from a fight before, but I needed a minute to get my head on straight. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why he'd ever think he was alone in this.

But as I ran my hands through my hair and paced outside the condo, the answer became pretty clear. Brent had to experience unconditional love and trust to know what they felt like. He needed to know what it was like to have someone who got you, warts and all, and wanted both the light and dark side that came with the good and the bad. He needed to know that person was me because his fucking parents had all but destroyed that for him.

Standing out here while he was dealing with all that inside was not conveying the message I was sending. So as I turned to go back inside, I came face to face with him and Daredevil on the stairs.

Daredevil glanced over at his friend. "Didn't have to go far to find him."

Brent shoved him in the shoulder. "Go find your own husband."

“Oh I will, but right now I have to take care of this,” he said, raising the bag. “Phantom can get started on processing it for prints and all that high-tech stuff he does.”

“Good,” I replied. “I’ve got him.”

Dare clapped me on the shoulder as I stood toe to toe and eye to eye with Brent. “Good man. And congratulations I guess. You’ve got your work cut out for you keeping this one in line.”

Brent shot him the bird, making Dare laugh.

“We’ll be in touch. Keep your cell handy.”

We stood in silence, just taking inventory of each other. I wanted to reach out and shake him, but at the same time, I wanted to feel him in my arms more. I wanted to protect him from all the horrible things that could hurt him. I just wanted him.

Reaching out, I pulled him to my chest. I deeply inhaled the scent of his body wash and cologne, giving me a temporary sense of peace. I knew this shit was far from over, but transferring my warmth and love to him this way was what I needed. And he’d just have to deal with it.

But the way he was holding on to me gave me hope things might be okay.

I ran my right hand over the back of his head and clutched him to me. “I’m sorry for how I handled things, but I’m still mad as hell at you,” I whispered into his hair.

He chuckled, just like I thought he would. “I know, John. But you need to understand, I couldn’t put my team in danger. They have people counting on them.”

I pulled back enough to glare at him. “And you don’t? I’m not sorry I busted your balls for hiding that shit, and I am highly distressed that you felt like you had to lie to me about it.”

“I didn’t exactly lie about anything! I just chose not to share some information about how the door got knicked up. I’m trained to keep things confidential.”

“Not from me!” I was gonna lose my shit here in the foyer, and I sure didn’t need the neighbors calling the cops. Although that might get his attention at how serious this was.

“I fucking love you, you idiot. I’m aware that you have very little experience with unconditional love, but all I want from you is a chance to make this work. I can see and feel the way you feel about me every time I touch you, but goddamn it Brent, if someone were to hurt you because you didn’t tell me...”

I balled my fist and brought it to my mouth. Looking away, I had to get myself together before I went full Nicholas Sparks on his ass. He didn’t get it. But there was something else he might get.

I ran my fingers over his shoulder where his skeleton frog tattoo sat. I had one myself in memory of the teammates we’d lost.

“You and I have been in dangerous situations where we didn’t know if we’d come back home. It’s part of the job. And we know what it feels like to lose a teammate. But I’ve never experienced the fear of losing someone I love the way I love you.”

Brent cupped my face, but let me finish.

“This situation is not just about you,” I said. “This is also about me. It’s about all of us, but especially us as a couple. You cannot continue to push me away and expect

me not to fight back, because I will do whatever it takes to prove myself to you.”

He hugged me tightly and kissed the side of my face before pulling away. “I hear what you’re saying, and I understand I probably should have let them know. But that fierce protector in you is also in me. If I could have taken that blast for Nate, I would have.”

I curled my lips in and let out a heavy sigh. While I understood where he was coming from, this was a completely different situation.

“John,” he said, cupping me around the neck. “I’m trying really hard not to fall in love with you. But I’m failing miserably.”

Lowering my forehead to his, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to relax for a minute. “Good to know.”

“And John, I’ll try not to shut you out, but it’s gonna take me some time. Not because I don’t want to trust you, but because I need to learn how again.”

I took his face in my hands and peered into his eyes. He showed me his sincerity and passion, and I could see my love reflected back at me. “I love you, and I need you to get used to hearing that.”

The look that came over his face alerted me that our serious conversation was over. “Are you one of those lovey-dovey people, John?”

I groaned and pulled him off the step. “Shut up. And yes, I am. So get the fuck used to it.”

“I can definitely get used to fucking.”

I ran my hand over my face and tried to hide my smile. “God, why do I like you so much?”

He laughed like a lunatic. “You don’t like me, John. You love me.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said, tugging him toward the exterior door to the building.

“Where are we going?”

“GQ asked me to check on the training facility, and we need to go now before things blow up.”

Brent stopped and looked at me. “What about the sauce?”

Fuck. He was right. “I’ll go put the meat away while you get the car. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” he said, turning for the parking lot.

Right as I reached the door to enter the building, my worst nightmare came to life before my eyes. Shots fired out, and I turned to see a car speeding down the street.

And Brent was on the ground in a pool of blood.

CHAPTER 22

brENT

The distinct metallic smell of blood and the sound of John's panicked speech registered and broke through the unconscious state I was in. I could hear his fear in the panicked words emergency and ambulance coming from him in a tone I'd never forget. It was the same tone GQ used when Nate was dying in his arms.

I felt his hands on my body as he kneeled to turn me over. My head ached, and blood ran down my face and into my eyes, leaving my vision skewed. I could feel the immediate throb of a headache.

"Brent, god can you hear me, baby, please," he pleaded as he ripped his t-shirt over his head and brought it to my forehead.

Somehow, I managed to open my eyes just enough to register where I was and when the sound of sirens registered again. John was looking for something, running his hands all over me. But he was wrong.

"Not...shot," I groaned as I tried to move.

"Baby, oh god, baby, you're awake. Thank god. Be still. Don't move."

I brought my hand up to touch the sticky mass of bloody t-shirt on my forehead.

"Were you hit?" he asked, hovering over me.

I shook my head just enough for him to get the message because that fucking hurt.
“No. Landed weird. Hit my head.”

John carefully picked me up enough to cradle me in his arms. The side of my head rested against his chest while my lower body remained on the pavement. I winced at the noise and closed my eyes as the sirens got closer.

“Stay with me, baby. I’m right here. Help is on the way.”

My eyes closed on their own and things were a little fuzzy from that point on.

I heard vehicle doors opening, equipment being moved, and the sound of feet pounding the pavement. The conversations of two or three people talking that I zoned out on, the familiar sirens of police cars, and John’s rapidly beating heart in my ear all battled for my attention. But it was the sound of his heartbeat that won out. I could listen to it for the rest of my life.

“He’s conscious,” John said as he shifted me from his chest. “But his forehead is bleeding pretty bad.”

I opened my eyes when the shirt was removed and the voice of a much calmer paramedic filled my ears. Her voice was firm, yet soft. I bet she was a mama. “Brent, do you know what day it is?”

I nodded. “Sunday.”

“Good. Can you tell me how this happened?” she asked.

“I told you how it happened,” John barked. “He doesn’t need to be talking.”

I released a half-laugh half-huff at his remark. Looking at her, she ignored him to pay

attention to me. “He’s just protective.”

He grunted and then got up from the ground when the paramedics moved in to work on me. I told her what I knew as I watched the police officers approach John.

The paramedic got my attention again before they moved me to the gurney. “We’re taking you in to get you cleaned up and checked out. That cut on your forehead is still bleeding, so we’re going to let the doctor make the call.”

I closed my eyes as they moved me carefully to the gurney and strapped me to the board. The tight bands around me were nothing like John’s arms, and I missed them. But thankfully the bumpy ride to the ambulance was short-lived.

“I’m going with him,” John told one of them from outside the truck. “He’s my husband.”

The lady paramedic patted my shoulder but looked at John. “Do you have a shirt you can put on?”

I watched as he looked back at the condo. “I need two seconds to grab one. Do not leave without me.”

She nodded then patted me on the shoulder. “We’ll take good care of you, I promise.”

Two hours later, I sat reclined on a bed in the ER. A plastic surgeon had been called to stitch up the area on my forehead, and the other doctor ordered a CT of my head. John stayed by my side the entire time along with Dare and Phantom. But the minute Simon Kincaid walked into my room, John began asking for an MRI. He’d been using Doctor Google even though I told him not to.

“Commander,” Simon replied, putting his hand on his shoulder, “the CT will show us

everything we need. But if anything unusual appears, I'll order one. Okay?"

John looked from me then back to Simon. "Okay. If you're sure."

I smiled, knowing the kind of doctor Simon was. He had a reputation for being a hardass, and I hoped John remembered what I'd told him about Alex Hayes' concussion.

"I have a reputation to live up to. I'm a Navy man myself with a teenager and one in training. Not to mention a stubborn former linebacker for a husband. It's like having three children sometimes."

There was no missing the fondness for his family in his tone. He was trying to reassure John, who kept his eyes on me.

"He's like a teenager sometimes too. I've got my hands full."

Simon chuckled. "I can imagine. But you love him anyway."

John laughed while I was busy turning red. How did he know about us?

"I'm going to go see if I can get radiology to move a bit faster. Hang in there a little longer. I can admit you if you'd be more comfortable."

"Fuck no," I said. "I'll have my own personal nurse. He's used to taking care of me."

Simon nodded. "Okay. I'll be back."

He walked out of the room as Daredevil and Phantom stood guard by the door like I was some kind of dignitary. Dare looked furious and probably blamed himself for not having my six, but it wasn't his responsibility anymore. Phantom typed away on his

phone, probably already working on finding the car.

“You two don’t have to stand guard. Commander’s here.”

“The fuck we don’t,” Dare said. “Someone tried to shoot you, Brent. And we’re not going anywhere until we catch that motherfucker.”

“Won’t be long,” Phantom added. “The asshole must not be from around here. It won’t be hard to track him down with all the cameras.”

“Think it was Turner? He’s the only one I think I’ve pissed off lately.”

“And we’ll be stopping that shit,” John added, making me smile and my friends laugh.

Phantom shook his head. “Not likely to be him. The Rush have been in Cleveland for the last two days.”

His phone pinged with a string of messages. Three phones from around the room started pinging with text messages from the group chat. It didn’t take a genius to figure out it was GQ since he was the only one of us not present.

Phantom laughed at whatever he was reading, but my best friend didn’t bother to pick up his phone. Neither did the man of my dreams.

“They’re on their way back. Said he’ll be here to check on you as soon as he can.”

Simon walked into the room carrying a stack of papers. “Everything looks good, but you are definitely concussed. I’ll let you go home as long as you’re not alone.”

John looked at me when he replied to Simon. “If I have my way about it, he’ll never

be alone again.”

CHAPTER 23

JOHN

All my life I'd heard bad things happen in threes. Was it a superstition or a wives' tale, or maybe me just looking for bad things to happen? Who knew? But we'd already had two and I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Brent had been home from the hospital for less than forty-eight hours when the call came at four-thirty a.m. We were both sound asleep when the phone started ringing. I rolled over from where I was spooning him to blindly reach for it on the nightstand.

"Who in the hell is calling at this hour of the morning?"

I swiped to answer the call without looking.

"Hello?" I grumbled into the phone.

"Brent, he's gone. He's gone. Just like that, he's gone," the woman wailed on the other side of the line. Whipping the covers back, I got up out of bed. As I walked toward the living room, I pulled the phone from my head and looked at the screen. Mom.

"Mrs. Trainor? This is Commander John Langdon. Who's gone?"

"Oh my god," she wailed. "My husband. He's gone. He died. Where is Brent?"

I rubbed my hand over my face in shock.

“John, what’s going on?” I heard him ask as he moved toward me.

I stood and went to him as I spoke into the phone. “Hold on, I’ll get him.”

She continued to sob as I reached out for him. The effects of the concussion still had him off balance.

“It’s your mother. She said your father has passed away.”

His brown eyes filled with tears as he took the phone from my hand. “Mom? What happened?”

I wrapped my arms around him as the sounds of her sobbing and muffled screams filled the quiet night. I couldn’t make out the words.

“I’m coming,” he said, pushing out of my arms. “I have to get a flight, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He paused, then said, “I love you, Mom. I’m on the way.”

When he removed the phone away from his ear, I took it from him and tossed it on the chair. I reached for him, but he took a step back and held up his hand.

I put my hands on my hips and looked at the floor. It killed me not to hold him and took every bit of self-control I had not to simply take what I wanted. But this wasn’t about me. He was pushing me away out of self preservation. Even though I knew I needed to give him some space, it still hurt.

“What time is it?” He asked, looking around the room.

“Four-thirty. What can I do?”

His brow was furrowed as he processed the new information. But when he looked at me with those tear-filled eyes, I couldn't help myself. All my good intentions flew out the window in record time.

Moving to him I took him in my arms. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

Brent let me hold him a minute, then pushed out of my arms. "I've got to book a flight."

"I'm going with you."

He looked up at me with a confused expression. "Why? You don't need to come with me. I can do it alone."

"No, you fucking can't. I'm going with you and stop trying to push me away."

I was the world's worst at taking my own advice, but for the second time in less than forty-eight hours, I experienced panic like never before. I was terrified of losing him because he'd become my world in less than a month.

"John..."

"Don't John me. I'm your husband and I'm not letting you go bury your father alone. So stop this bullshit and let me take care of you."

I ran my hands through my hair and fisted the ends. Seeing my frustration must have broken through to him, because this time, he came to me.

"Okay," he whispered, hugging me to him. "You can go with me. Just don't be alarmed by her behavior."

I nodded and held him as tightly as I could without hurting him. “Thank you,” I whispered into his hair. “I’ll take care of everything.”

He nodded and pulled away. Picking up his phone, he sat down and watched as the screen lit up. “I’ll check flight times.”

“Okay, but don’t book anything yet. I’ll text GQ and let him know what’s going on.”

I went to the bedroom, got my phone, and called Dare. I hated to wake him up this early, but it couldn’t be helped. And when he picked up the phone on the second ring, he sounded fully awake and very on edge. I knew he was concerned about his best friend.

“Commander? What’s wrong?”

“He’s fine,” I reassured him, rubbing my temples. “But his mother just called. His father died, so we’re going to Colorado Springs.”

I heard Greer in the background mumble something before Dare responded. “Take our plane. It’ll be faster. Greer’s going to call Jason and see how soon you can leave.”

I forgot he was rich as fuck. “Okay, that would be good.”

“How is he?”

I looked up as if I could see him in the living room. “I’m not sure. I’m at a loss here on how to handle him. I guess you’d know better than I would.”

Dare huffed. “He’ll get quiet for a while, then seem like nothing is wrong. But don’t let him push you away. Give him some space, but not for too long. His parents weren’t the best after his brother died. Who knows what this will do to his mother.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

“Hold on a minute.”

I heard him talking to Greer, so I got up and looked in on him. He sat on the chair, staring out into space with his phone in his hand. The outside light picked up the reflection of the tears on his face.

It wasn't difficult to see he was reliving something, and if I had to guess, it was when Matt died.

“Commander,” Dare said, drawing my attention back to him.

“Yeah, I'm here.”

“Jason can have you in the air in two hours. Go to the private terminal at PDX. Brent knows how to get there. You can leave the car parked in the lot while you're gone.”

“Thanks, Austin. And tell Greer I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, no problem. Keep me updated on what's going on, will you? I'll come out for the funeral.”

“I'm sure he'll appreciate that.”

“Okay, I'll call GQ and Phantom. Talk soon.”

The call disconnected before I could thank him, and I got up to go back to Brent. He was bent over, his head in his hands. I hated to interrupt him, but it couldn't be helped.

Walking into the room, I sat down next to him on the sofa.

“I haven’t checked flights yet.”

I put my arm around him. “That’s okay. We’re taking Greer’s plane. He’s already called the pilot. We need to be there by six-thirty.”

We sat another moment before he got up. “I need to shower and pack.”

I stayed seated on the sofa as he walked into his bedroom and closed the door.

Ninety minutes later we rolled up to the private terminal at PDX. I followed the signs as Brent stared out the window. When I parked the car, we got out and collected our bags from the back.

Brent was quiet as we walked through the small terminal. I wanted to hold his hand, but he had them both stuffed in his pockets.

We checked in at the desk where the attendant pointed us to the plane. We exited the building and made our way to the tarmac where a leer jet sat waiting. But as we walked around the front of the plane, Austin and Greer stood by the steps talking to a lady who looked to be our flight attendant.

Brent stopped and looked down at the ground. I stood and watched as Austin left Greer’s side and walked up to grab him into a hug. He held on to him and spoke quietly as they embraced. Brent shook his head as if he agreed, then pushed away from him. He wiped his face, then looked over at me.

I smiled softly and gave him a single head nod to reassure him I wasn’t upset that he’d pushed me away. If Dare could bring him comfort, then I was okay with that. Or at least I’d try to be. I was only human.

Dare came over and shook my hand. “Keep me posted. Have a good flight. Sandra will take good care of you, and you should let her. She’s Greer’s second biggest fan after me.”

I chuckled. “Okay. Will do. And let me know if anything comes up on finding the shooter.”

When the lady and Greer approached us, I reached for Brent out of habit.

“We’re ready when you are, gentlemen. Jason says we’re good to go.”

I nodded. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She laughed. “I’m Sandra. Ma’am is my mother-in-law.”

“And she’s the best at her job,” Greer added. “I wouldn’t know what to do without her.”

“Aww, Greer. The feeling is mutual.” She leaned over and patted his cheek. “I’d do anything for you and that husband of yours.”

We chuckled when Greer blushed. “Careful what you ask for. We might take you up on that someday.”

Brent looked over at me and smiled. “Ready, Commander?”

I wasn’t used to him calling me that anymore, but I’d let it go under the circumstances.

“I’m ready,” I said. And I followed him onto the plane.

CHAPTER 24

brENT

The flight to Colorado Springs felt like it took half the time on a private plane, even though I knew the flight time was essentially the same. Maybe it was because I dreaded what I had to do. Every time we deployed somewhere, the time to get there seemed so much shorter than when we were coming home.

John sat across from me on the sofa, occasionally chatting with Sandra, while I chose the recliner. I knew I'd pushed him away, and that needed to change. My head still hurt, and I knew he could make things better.

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I got up and went to him on the sofa. He looked up at me as I sat down, leaving space between us.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No. My head hurts," I said, lying down. I put my head on his thigh and immediately felt somewhat better. Just being close to him gave me peace like I'd never experienced before I met him.

John ran his fingers over my head, careful to avoid the injured area to massage the headache away.

"I'm sorry for pushing you away this morning. I know how this is going to go, and I really didn't want you to see her dismiss me again like she did the last time I was

here.”

“What happened?”

As he gently massaged my scalp, I closed my eyes and told him the story. He listened without saying anything and just let me talk. “Ever since Matt died, it’s like they’ve become strangers.”

I turned onto my back to where I could see him. He scooted down a little on the sofa to lean back.

“Does it bother you to talk about him?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I haven’t talked about him in a long time. He was fourteen when he died. I was sixteen. He had leukemia, but it wasn’t the cancer that killed him. It was a reaction to the chemo.”

John changed the topic from death quickly. “Were you close?”

I smiled. “Yeah. I was two years older than him. We both loved football and when we got old enough to play, we were on the same team. He was better than I was, though. That’s how they found the cancer. Middle school football. He had bruises all over his body that wouldn’t heal, and he was losing weight. Mom took him to the doctor and they sent him over to the children’s hospital for testing. He didn’t stand a chance at that point. He’d been hiding it. Even from me.”

John ran his fingers over my head, relaxing me more. And the words kept flowing from me.

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t prevent that from happening.”

He was wrong. “I was supposed to protect him. I was the older one. My job as his older brother was to take care of him. And I failed at that.”

I didn’t realize I was crying until John wiped my tears away. I couldn’t remember ever telling all this to anyone.

“All this time, my parents have been punishing me for failing my brother. They stopped being parents, stopped attending my games, stopped showing up for anything unless they had to. And when I went off to college, it was a relief to have the reminder gone. They didn’t argue with me about going into the Navy. They just didn’t fucking care. And I deserved it.”

John cupped the side of my face. “Look at me, Brent. You are not responsible for Matt’s death. Cancer is not something you could have protected him from no matter what you did. This is not your fault. And I will keep telling you that for the rest of our lives until you believe it.”

God, I wanted to believe him. How could he love me when my own parents didn’t? And now the floodgates holding back all this guilt and pain inside me were cracking under pressure. I wanted to believe John, but it was difficult after twenty years.

“And as far as your parents go, that’s bullshit. Every bit of that is on them. Not the shoulders of a sixteen-year-old. Now sit up. I need to hold you.”

His commanding tone brought me comfort, and I needed to feel his arms around me. I stood up and wiped my face as John wrapped me in his arms. He kissed my face and my forehead, being very careful around my injury.

A bump of turbulence had us sitting back down, but he didn’t let go of me. As we sat on the sofa, I thought about what he’d said. I hated the thought of John seeing how I knew my mother was going to treat me. But I had to be there to bury my father. No

matter how much of my life they'd missed, they were still my parents. He deserved my respect, even though they'd never returned it.

"You're a good man, sweetheart. And you're not alone in this life."

I nodded but didn't reply. Things were changing. My brothers had found their partners and with time, they'd go about living their lives and raising their families. I just hoped they didn't leave me behind too.

I sat with my head on John's shoulder as Sandra approached. "Gentlemen, can I get you anything to eat? Or bring some coffee or juice? We have about thirty minutes before we land."

"Coffee would be great, ma'am," John replied. "I take mine black, and he likes five pounds of sugar in his."

I laughed. "Not quite that much, asshole. Three packs will be fine."

Sandra smiled at us. "You two make the cutest couple. You remind me of the newlyweds. Have you been together long?"

John chuckled. "Funny thing. We got married on our first date on New Year's Eve in Vegas."

Her eyes widened as his mouth broke into a big smile. "How romantic is that? And you work with my sweet Austin? That just makes my heart happy."

I smiled at her enthusiasm. "Your sweet Austin, huh?" I couldn't wait to call him that. "What makes him so sweet?"

"He loves my Greer. And it's written all over both of them. It's beautiful to see. They

are going to make the best fathers someday. Do you two want kids?"

I sat up and held up a hand. "Oh no, I am a kid. I don't think the Commander here wants more than that."

John chuckled. "Never say never, sweetheart. I wouldn't mind a kid or two in addition to you. Never got the chance to raise Laura, so maybe it's something for us to think about."

I slowly panned to him, making him laugh. I loved that sound and the look on his face that said he was happy. Not just in general, but because of me.

There was no denying it any longer. Despite every wall and obstacle I put between us, I'd never stood a chance. He was selfless and saw the good in me when I thought there was none. And if he'd survive a few days with my mother, he'd be a keeper.

"I guess we can think about it."

He grinned at me. "I'd love to think about that with you."

CHAPTER 25

JOHN

As we taxied to the gate, Brent's mood became more solemn. I reached for his hand and laced our fingers together, letting him know I had his back. Like some people, he dealt with difficult situations with humor.

When the plane came to a stop, both of our phones buzzed with a text from Daredevil that we'd been waiting for.

Dare: We got him. Portland PD has him in custody.

A sense of relief and calm settled over me, knowing the motherfucker had been caught.

Brent: Anyone we know?

The dots bounced as Dare typed away.

Dare: Calvin Turner. Clay's younger brother.

Me: We just landed. We'll call soon.

Dare: Sounds good.

Dare: By the way, the plane is going to return to Portland and will come back to get

you. Don't book commercial flights.

Brent: Thanks Dare.

I blew out a heavy breath. "Now the police can handle it from here."

"Should have known it would have something to do with that homophobic asshole. I hope they can prove he was in on it."

Brent stood but was a little wobbly on his feet. I reached out to steady him.

"Attempted murder and conspiracy come with hefty consequences. If he was involved, they'll find it."

He nodded and took a deep breath.

"How's your head?"

"It hurts a little, but I'll be fine. We better go so they can head back."

Picking up our bags, I slung them both over my shoulder as we headed for the door.

Sandra reached out to hug Brent. "I'm sorry for your loss. We'll be back to pick you up when you're ready to come home."

Brent smiled. "Thank you. Do you have kids?"

She laughed. "Lord yes. Three of them."

"I'm sure you're a good mama."

She grinned and patted his face lightly. “You’re a sweet talker, aren’t you?”

“More like a shit-talker,” I mumbled, making him laugh.

“He’s right. But thank you for your hospitality. I see why Greer loves you so much.”

“I just call them like I see them,” she said. “We’ll see you again soon.”

“Thank you,” he replied. He reached for his aviator sunglasses as we walked in the morning light toward the terminal.

After we picked out our rental, I slid into the driver’s seat after stowing our bags in the back. Brent entered the address on the GPS as I pulled out of the parking space.

When we’d finally gotten on the road, it occurred to me that we hadn’t arranged accommodations.

“Where are we staying? With your mother or a hotel? I don’t have to stay with you if it makes it easier for you.”

I saw him do his patented slow pan out of the corner of my eye. “I’m staying with you wherever that may be. We’ll see what happens when we get there. But if you want to find us a place to stay as a backup, that might be good.”

I smiled and held my hand out to him. “That will give me something to do.”

We talked about what it was like growing up here and some of his favorite places to hang out. He held my hand as I drove to his childhood home in a suburban neighborhood in Colorado Springs. The closer we got, the more rigid he became. And when I pulled up in front of the ranch-style house, he didn’t get out of the car.

“Are you ready to go in?” I asked, holding onto his hand.

“No, but I don’t have a choice. So let’s go.”

“Wait,” I said, “who am I to you? Are we playing the friend card? We don’t have rings, so they’d never know if you don’t want them to.”

He laughed. “Fuck that. I am who I am. And I am married to you. I have the Santa photo to prove it.”

My heart nearly exploded right there, and I had to kiss him. So I twisted in my seat to face him as I reached over, tucked my index finger into the collar of his shirt, and pulled him to me.

“I love you, Dreamboat. Don’t forget that.”

He smiled and kissed me. “And I love you, Commander. Don’t you forget that.”

I wouldn’t. I couldn’t.

When we got out of the car, I put on my aviators that allowed me to do surveillance with no one knowing... I met him behind the car and walked by his side to the front door.

He rang the bell as a dog barked from inside the house.

“You don’t have a key?”

“I do, but I don’t want to scare her. And that’s Winston.” He smiled as the dog began to whine.

The door swung open as a woman who looked as if she'd had no sleep stood before us. The dog came bounding out as the woman turned and walked back into the house.

"Hey buddy," he said, squatting down to pet the dog. "I told you I'd be back."

Brent stood and looked up to where his mother had been standing. Raising his brows, he let out a weighted sigh as we entered the house.

Winston followed as we walked toward the woman sitting on the sofa with her head in her hands. Brent went over and sat down beside her.

"Mom, how are you?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him, void of expression, then over to me. "Terrible." She looked at the bandage covering his stitches and the bruising under his eyes. "What happened to you? And who's this?"

Before he could say anything, I stepped forward and offered my hand. "I'm Commander John Langdon, ma'am. We spoke on the phone earlier this morning. I'm sorry for your loss."

She blinked at me. "You work with him?"

"I do." Fine choice of words, as Brent smiled at me. I raised a brow as I took a seat.

"Mom, John is my husband."

Her face crumpled and her eyes furrowed. "Husband? What are you talking about?"

"We got married last New Year's Eve in Vegas before John's last deployment."

She wiped the hair out of her eyes. “Why did you marry a man? Is this a joke, because it’s not funny. Your father would...” she trailed off as the realization that he was gone set in.

Brent reached out to wrap his arms around her while she cried into her hands. “Can I get you anything? Do you want something to drink?”

“No, I just want your father back,” she cried.

“I know,” he whispered to her. “Me too.”

I looked around and found a box of tissues on an end table. Pulling out two, I handed them to Brent for her. She took them and dried her face, but didn’t return his hug, but patted his leg. My heart broke for him.

“Have you eaten, Mrs. Trainor? I can go get you something if you’d like.”

She shook her head no as I glanced at Brent.

“Have you slept? We can handle things if you want to go lay down, Mom.”

“I have to go to the funeral home when your uncle gets here. We have to make the arrangements.”

“Okay, we can go with you,” he offered.

The door opened quietly as a man and woman walked in carrying two small suitcases. Mrs. Trainor looked up, then got off the sofa. I watched in disbelief as she walked over and hugged the man, then the woman. Standing, I moved over beside Brent as he stood from the sofa.

The man walked over and Brent stepped forward. “Hey Uncle Pete. It’s good to see you.” The man reached out and pulled my husband into a hug.

“Hey, Brent,” he said, pulling back to look at his bandaged forehead. “Sorry about your dad. What happened to your head?”

He reached up and touched the bandage. “Work accident.”

I wanted to correct him, but he turned to me and held out his hand for me to walk into his outstretched arm. “Uncle Pete, this is my husband, Commander John Langdon. John, this is my mom’s brother.”

He graciously held out his hand to shake as the man smiled at me. “Pete Wallace. Nice to meet you, John. Welcome to the family. Sorry, it’s under these circumstances.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

He turned back to Brent. “Are you coming with us to make the arrangements?”

“I need him to stay here in case anyone stops by,” his mother said from across the room. “Someone needs to be here.”

“I’ll be happy to stay if Brent wants to go,” the lady replied.

But his mother cut her off. “It needs to be him, but thank you, Jean. Brent will be happy to stay here, won’t you son?”

I cleared my throat, trying to hold my tongue when Brent put his hand on my back. “Sure, Mom. No problem.”

She nodded as Pete looked apologetically at Brent. “We’ll be back soon.”

He curled his lips in, then squeezed his nephew’s shoulder. Turning, he walked over to his sister and opened the door for her and his wife. When they were gone, my husband looked at me.

“Book us a place to stay. Somewhere we can relax and accept dogs.”

Winston barked and came to stand by Brent’s side.

CHAPTER 26

brENT

I'd had enough for one day by the time we'd left my parent's house. John had stood by me the whole time. We took Winston for a long walk around the neighborhood when people started to drop by. My mother ignored me most of the time, and every time Uncle Pete or Aunt Jean engaged us in conversation, my mother found some way to derail it.

She hadn't looked twice at Winston all day, and if I hadn't fed him, who knows when he would have eaten. So when we left for the night, I informed her he wouldn't be staying the night.

"I'm taking Winston with me. You have enough to worry about," I said, not taking no for an answer.

"That's fine," she said. "Thank you for coming."

Did she think I wasn't staying for the funeral?

"John and I will be back in the morning." I leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Try to get some sleep, Mom."

She nodded and watched me as I picked up his food and leash. I knew she had something on her mind as she stood there brooding.

“What’s on your mind?”

She released a breath and looked away. “Did you have to marry a man?”

“I’m bisexual. You’ve known this about me for years. It’s not new information.”

She clenched her jaw. “Your father would be so disappointed.” Her voice cracked as she ripped away what was remaining of my self-worth.

I looked down at the leash in my hands. “Why is that exactly?”

“First your brother. Now this,” she said, reaching into her pocket for a tissue to wipe her eyes.

“What about Matt?” I asked. “And what exactly is the now this that you’re referring to?”

My rising volume must have caught John’s attention because before I knew it, he appeared by my side. She looked up into my eyes, then over to John.

“This is none of your concern. This is between me and my son.”

John slipped his arm around my waist. “I’m sorry, but your son is also my husband. And if you have something to say, it’s definitely my business.”

She hardened her jaw as an emotional outburst bubbled to the surface. “Okay., then you should know your husband is the reason his brother died. He was supposed to look after him. And Brent let him hide that something was wrong with him. He was going to grow up and be someone special.”

John’s hold on my hip tightened, and for the first time, I felt his fury and protective

side completely take over his body. His voice dropped to a sinister-sounding level, taking me by surprise.

“What kind of mother are you to put that weight on a boy’s shoulders? If something was missed, it was your failure to pay attention. Maybe if you hadn’t been so self-absorbed in your own life you might have seen the signs. Brent is not to blame for Matt’s death. If you want to blame someone, then look in the mirror. Don’t you fucking dare blame him for it.”

Her eyes went wide as her body began to shake.

“Brent is a highly decorated Navy SEAL with ten years of service to the United States. He put his life in harm's way more than once to protect his team and held his brothers up when a teammate was killed in action. If you want to talk about someone being special, then you sure as hell better be talking about him, because he is the best fucking man I know and have ever had the honor to serve with.”

I stood and watched in awe as my husband put my mother in her place. Is that really the way he saw me?

“We won’t be coming back here until you apologize to him for how badly you’ve treated him. He’s your fucking son! And you will not treat my husband that way.”

I looked up to see my Uncle Pete standing in the doorway. I'm sure he'd heard the conversation, and I was equally sure he was going to defend my mother. But he surprised me.

Pete walked up to John and put his hand on his shoulder. “You guys go ahead and take Winston. I’ll take it from here.”

“Uncle Pete,” I said, but he didn’t let me finish.

“It’s okay, Brent. We’ll talk later.” He smiled and pulled me into a quick hug.

“Pete! You’re going to let them talk to me like that? Mike never...” she cried.

“It’s hard to argue with the truth,” he said to my mother. “You and I are going to have a long talk after all this is over with.”

John took my hand and pulled me away. I looked into his warm hazel eyes and fell a little more in love with him.

“Let’s go, sweetheart. I have a nice surprise for you.”

Nodding, I released the heavy weight I’d been carrying inside since my brother died and followed him to get Winston.

CHAPTER 27

JOHN

After dinner, we took our wine and went out to the hot tub. The temperature had dropped to a comfortable sixty degrees, making the heat of the hot tub ideal.

Winston was happily chewing on a bully stick on the deck, close enough that we could see him.

Directly overhead, the clearing gave us a perfect view of the stars.

“I guess we’re going in naked,” Brent said, stripping out of his clothes. “No bathing suit. Shame.”

I grinned as I disrobed. “You love being naked. It’s like a hobby for you. I bet you’d like a nude beach too, wouldn’t you?”

“Probably,” he agreed as I walked into the bathroom to get some towels.

I watched through the open doors as Brent stepped into the hot tub. When he was settled, I grabbed some supplies and tossed them on the bed on my way out to him. I had special plans for later tonight if he was up for it.

Stepping into the hot bubbling water, I sat down across from him. Reaching for my wineglass, I took a sip of the Syrah that paired well with the ribeyes we’d had for dinner.

Brent grinned at me. “You afraid to sit over here, Mr. Trainor?”

My eyes went wide. “No, Mr. Langdon. Not at all.”

He chuckled and took a sip of his wine before placing it safely on the ledge. I watched as he extended both arms over the back and tipped his head back to look at the stars.

My husband was fucking beautiful and I’d never get tired of staring at him. But he was more reserved than usual, so I let him lead most of the conversation.

“My dad used to take Matt and me camping when we were younger. We called it the boys trip so my mother wouldn’t want to come. The first time, he made a whole production out of taking us to the store to buy a tent and supplies. We had all the camping gear you could imagine.”

“Sounds fun,” I said.

Brent smiled as he went on talking. “It was. We set up our camp and went fishing. Dad taught us what poison ivy looked like so we’d know if we got into it. One trip was about learning how to build a campfire from scratch. We spent at least two hours that trip collecting rocks by the river before he taught us different ways to stack the wood to make it burn.”

I smiled imagining him teaching our kids how to do that one day.

“He was a good dad. And I’ve missed him.”

I didn’t miss the emotion in his voice. So I reached for my wineglass and moved to his side of the hot tub. I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him close. Brent rested his head on my shoulder.

“I know you do, sweetheart. Losing a parent, no matter what the relationship is isn’t easy. It’s something we’ll all go through. But you are not alone in this life.”

He turned his head to look at me. “I want a life with you, John. I want to go to bed and wake up with you every morning. You’ve made me realize I can let you in without being hurt. And I’m so fucking happy you didn’t give up on me.”

Shifting, I cupped the side of his face. “I’ll never give up on you, and I’ll tell you how much I love you a hundred times a day. Because I do.”

Brent brought his mouth to mine for a kiss before pulling away. He got up and climbed onto my lap as I wrapped my arms around him.

His mouth descended onto mine again as I tasted the wine on his tongue. My hands roamed over his defined body, stopping to squeeze his butt checks, but avoiding his sensitive areas.

He tipped his head back to breathe as his hips thrust against my abdomen. “Baby, I need you to open me up.”

I kissed down his neck, stopping to suck gently on his collarbone.

“I’m fine. You can fuck me. It’s your job now.”

Chuckling, I removed my hands from his ass and cupped his face. His eyes locked on mine as I swept my thumb over his bottom lip. “I accept that job, but tonight, I want to give myself to you. I want to make love with you.”

My husband pulled back and looked at me. “Really? I thought you were a top only kinda man.”

“I have been until now. And if I’m going to trust anyone with my body, it’s you. Only you.”

Brent swallowed and shook his head. “I’ll take good care of you, I promise.”

I looked into his eyes and saw my forever. “I know, sweetheart. I trust you implicitly.”

Our lips met once again until it was time to get out. Standing, I reached for a towel and then handed it to him. Grabbing my own, I got out and then held my hand out to him. He smirked at me like I knew he would.

“Let’s go, Winston,” I called over my shoulder, then closed the doors when he was inside. He settled down on the carpet, then went back to ignoring us with his chew.

I turned to Brent and looked at him as he stroked himself. “Lay down on the bed.”

Stepping forward, I cupped his face. “You still have a concussion. So how about when you get me ready, I get on top and ride you.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you can take it as you please.”

Smiling, I kissed his lips, then crawled onto the bed as he asked.

“Bend your knees, babe.”

I complied as he found the lube I’d laid out. I expected him to make a big deal out of it, but he surprised me with his serious demeanor.

Standing at the edge of the bed, I watched as he bent down and took the head of my cock into his mouth. Sparks ignited in my spine as he began to simultaneously

massage my balls. It didn't last long though.

"Scoot to the edge of the bed, babe," he said, patting the edge.

I did as he asked while he got on his knees. Gripping behind my knees, he pushed me forward to give him access to my hole. The first swipe of his tongue almost shot me off the bed.

"Relax," he cooed and went back to work eating my ass. He continued until my breathing changed, then lowered my legs to the bed.

I looked into his eyes as he carefully applied lube to his fingers. Brent followed me onto the bed and leaned onto his side and rested his cock on my hip. Watching my face, he went back to my entrance, circling a little more with his slick fingers before he slipped the first one in.

Reaching for his shaft, I squeezed him lightly through the intrusion. I gritted my teeth and concentrated on the feel of his cock in my hand. As my muscles loosened, I found myself craving more.

"You are so tight, babe," he said adjusting his angle. "Let me see if I can reach..."

Fireworks went off behind my eyelids making me want more. My cock was leaking on my stomach as he moved another finger in.

I let out a loud low groan as he continued to touch my gland every few thrusts inside me. My spine began to tingle as I worked my hips in unison with his fingers. But this was going to be over if he kept hitting my spot.

"Babe, I'm getting..."

He popped off my cock and carefully added a third finger. I was riding the edge of a gigantic release and needed to pull back. He'd never get his perfect dick in me if I didn't divert.

"I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States of America," I recited.

Brent started laughing but didn't stop fingering me. "Hang on Commander, we're almost ready."

Nodding, I started over as I concentrated on the pledge. When he withdrew his fingers from me, my recitation stopped.

Panting and sweating, I reached for my cock, almost afraid I'd blow and end this thing.

"Don't touch that. Not yet anyway." He moved to his back and spread his legs. With his cock in his hand, he squirted more lube onto his shaft and coated it well.

The humor had slipped away as I positioned myself on my hands and knees over him. When we'd lined up correctly, he reached for my hip with his right hand as he rubbed the head of his bare cock along my hole.

"Whenever you're ready, babe. Easy does it," he coached.

Nodding, I lowered myself onto him until the head of his cock breached me. I pulled off, then lowered myself a little more. As I worked my way onto him, he murmured how much he loved me and how good I felt.

When I had taken all of it, I leaned forward and kissed him. The incredible feeling coursing through my body at simply having him inside me is indescribable. All I knew was this was the man for me.

He slowly began to work himself in and out of me, little thrusts making the burn subside. I stayed like that, basically on all fours as he took me from the bottom until we were both panting. Every time he grazed my gland I sucked in a breath, relishing the new sensations within me, making me crave more and bringing me to the edge.

“Jerk yourself baby,” he said, varying his rhythm to maximize my pleasure. “Come all over me. Mark me as yours,” he panted, shifting his position to hit my gland just where I needed it most.

“Holy fucking hell!” I whined as my cock pulsed and my asshole clenched.

“Yeah, baby,” he said from below me. “So fucking good.”

I willed my eyes to stay open as I watched him fall apart under me, his eyes locked on mine.

Brent reached up and took my face in his hands. His expression was open and loving, and for the first time, I think I saw the real him. I was sure I was the first person to ever see him like this.

He pulled my mouth to his and kissed me tenderly.

CHAPTER 28

brENT

After John's first bottoming experience, we'd gone back into the hot tub before falling into bed. We'd both passed out after a very long day.

I woke before John but didn't stir. As the morning sun filtered through the trees, I couldn't help but think about my father. Doubts crept into my mind as I thought about what my mother had said.

Did he hold me responsible for Matt's death like she did? I knew I'd never come back to Colorado Springs because of the way she felt about me. I wanted to tell myself it was the grief talking, but I knew better.

The ache in my heart was not as severe knowing I had John. He'd be enough for me when my brothers moved on with their lives. It was how it was supposed to be. And John had saved me.

Winston came over and laid his head on my side of the bed. I smiled as I reached out to rub his face.

John stirred behind me. "Good morning, sweetheart. How are you feeling?" He kissed the side of my head.

"I'm okay," I replied. "But Winston needs to go out."

John rolled to his back and stretched. “I’ll take him out. You rest.”

“I’m fine,” I said, sitting up. “I’ll get him some breakfast and start the coffee.”

As he slipped into shorts and a t-shirt, I watched admiring his body. I was a lucky asshole in every way.

“Come on, Winston. Let’s go see what’s outside,” John said, walking to the front door. He picked up his phone and tucked it into his pocket. That was my reminder to find mine.

When they came back in a bit later, Winston came loping to me in the kitchen. I squatted down to him and rubbed him all over.

John smiled and leaned against the cabinet. His arms were crossed over his chest as he looked down at me. I could see the love in his eyes now. That lovey-dovey expression Dare wore when he looked at Greer was right there staring back at me.

“I can see us with a dog, can’t you?”

I smiled at Winston. “Yeah, but this guy is special. Let’s get you some breakfast.”

Standing, I went to wash his bowl and grab him some food. It wasn’t the highest quality, and that disappointed me.

“Before we leave, I want to transition him over to a better quality food,” I said, rubbing my hand over his golden fur. “And maybe take him to the vet. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hasn’t seen one.”

John furrowed his brow. “They haven’t been taking care of him, have they?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Is it a money issue?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “They just haven’t been the same. I don’t know why they got him to begin with.”

John was quiet for a moment before he looked up at me. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Yes, actually. I’m starved.”

“Good,” he said clapping his hands together. “Pancakes and bacon then.”

I put Winston’s bowl down and turned to make a cup of coffee.

John pulled out pancake mix and a huge pack of bacon. I sipped my coffee as he hunted for a cookie sheet, then turned on the oven.

“I thought we might go fishing today. Sit down by the river and see if we can catch dinner. What do you think?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. We should go after breakfast. We’re more likely to catch them early in the day.”

He grinned at me. “Learn that from your dad?”

“Actually, yes. I did.”

“The fishing poles are stored downstairs under the deck. We can head out...” He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

I looked at him quizzically, but he smiled. “I ordered some things for delivery when I took Winston out. Can you grab them?”

“Damn you eat a lot,” I quipped. “I might have to get a second job to pay for your groceries.”

“Smartass,” he mumbled as he continued laying out bacon on the cookie sheet.

Winston barked at the door as I reached for the handle. Swinging it open, I found the last thing I expected.

Dare and Greer stood on the porch carrying overnight bags. My best friend turned and smiled at me. “Hey, asshole. We came for the funeral.”

My stupid eyes filled with tears as he pulled me in for a hug.

“You didn’t think I’d let you go through this without me, did you?”

I pulled back and looked at him, my damn eyes leaking. Greer squeezed my shoulder but walked around us to talk to John.

“How did you know we were here?”

He motioned toward John. “Your husband and I texted most of the day yesterday. When I told him we were coming for the service, he said he’d rented this house for a few days and there was room for two more.”

Looking back, I saw John leaning against the counter talking to Greer. When his eyes met mine, he smiled and nodded, making my damn eyes leak again.

“Come on,” Dare said, swinging his arm over my shoulder. “I was promised breakfast

and fishing today.”

I laughed and swung my arm around him. “Thank you for coming.”

“You couldn’t have kept me away. And I brought your dress whites. We’re going as motherfucking Navy SEALs.”

We spent the rest of the day relaxing with our friends. We had a good time fishing, and when Greer caught a larger fish than Dare, I thought he'd be irritable. But he wasn't. He was actually proud of him.

Greer and John hit it off immediately. We spent the evening around the fire pit talking and retelling stories about our time in the service.

When our conversation turned toward Portland, Greer gave us a standing invitation to join them in his suite if we wanted to watch the Pirates play.

"My daughter, Laura, works for the Sun Rays. She's a social media guru for them."

Greer brightened at that. “They’re getting a new owner. There’s even talk they may change the name." He leaned over and took Dare's hand. "There’s something to be said for a fresh start. Change is good.”

I looked at John, and couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER 29

JOHN

I hated funerals. As the leader of a SEAL Team, I attended a lot of them. The worst were the ones when we buried a teammate. And watching my husband bury his father was going to be excruciating.

Brent put up a good front, but under all the outlandish behavior beat the heart of a tender soul. A child who had been weighted down with blame that didn't fit the size of his shoulders. Once we were out of here, we weren't coming back.

After shaving, I put on some shorts and gave Winston one last walk outside before we had to leave for the visitation.

Greer and Austin were upstairs getting ready, and Brent was in the shower. I wanted to give him some private time to release some emotions before I smothered him with love.

When I walked back in with Winston, Dare was coming down the stairs. Freshly shaved and wearing his dress whites, he looked like he was still in service.

“Looking sharp. Any tight buttons?”

He chuckled and ran his hand down his uniform. “I was worried, especially after the honeymoon. We ate more than we should have, but the food in Costa Rica was so damn good.”

I smiled, a bit worried about my own. “I can’t thank you enough for coming and bringing the uniforms. He needed you.”

“Like I told him, I wouldn’t let him go through this without me. But I’m fucking happy he has you.”

I was the lucky one. “Well, I’m keeping him.”

Brent came walking out, beard neatly trimmed and shaved. His dress whites fit perfectly and all the medals decorating his chest made me proud as fuck that he was mine.

He bit his lip and smirked as he looked me over in my athletic shorts. “Time to get dressed, babe.”

I nodded and kissed him lightly on the way to our room. “I’ll be back.”

When I returned ten minutes later, all three men were waiting for me. I entered the room with quite a few more medals than he wore, and by the look on his face, he appreciated my attire as much as I appreciated his.

“My god,” Greer said. “It’s like Top Gun meets An Officer and a Gentleman all over again. You might have to wear that more, sweetheart.”

Dare beamed at his new husband's appraisal. “Whenever you want, babe.”

I looked at my own husband and smiled. “You look fucking fantastic. I’ve got to get a ring on that finger or I’ll be fighting the women off.”

“No penis tattoo?” he teased.

I shivered at the thought. “Still a hard no.”

He laughed and looked at his watch. His good mood deteriorated the closer we got to the visitation. Brent had declined to go by the funeral home to see him prior to today, and I was worried this was going to be more difficult than he thought. But he was a grown man, not a child, and could make his own decisions.

“I guess we need to go.”

He squatted down in front of Winston and told him to be a good boy while we were gone. I looked over at Dare who nodded at me.

We opted to take one car in hopes of avoiding his mother’s house after the burial. As I drove through town toward the funeral home, I reached over and took Brent’s hand. Dare and Greer talked quietly about buying a mountain house, leaving Brent to his thoughts. I wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but I knew he was mentally preparing himself to deal with his mother on top of the hurt about his father.

When I pulled into the parking lot, only a few cars were in the lot. An attendant motioned for me to park in line for the procession to the cemetery.

I looked at Dare over my shoulder. He placed his hand on Brent’s shoulder. “You got this. We’re with you.”

He nodded and patted Dare's hand, then took a deep breath. “Yeah, let’s go.”

We got out of the car and smoothed down our uniforms. I placed my hat on my head, as did Brent and Austin. I looked Brent over and gave him a smile. He took my hand and walked toward the entrance.

When we walked in the door, we were directed to the room where the family would

receive visitors. As we stepped in, Mrs. Trainor's eyes went wide. I saw a momentary flicker of pride cross her face before it slipped away to the bitter frown she wore.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek out of unwavering respect.

"We're to stand here until it's time to go to the chapel. You can take your place beside Pete."

He nodded and motioned toward Dare. "Mom, this is my best friend, Lieutenant Austin Wentworth, and his husband Greer Rowan. Guys this is my mother, Rebecca Trainor, and my Uncle Pete and Aunt Jean."

While they exchanged condolences, I looked around. The casket was not in the room, and I needed to find it in order to give him a moment alone with his father before the casket was closed. So I approached one of the staff members and told him what I needed.

"The casket is in the chapel, sir. You may go in through the side door."

"Thank you," I said, then pulled Dare aside to let him know where we'd be.

I took Brent by the hand and whispered to him. "Come with me. You can have some time with your dad if we go now."

He nodded once, then followed me to the chapel.

I pulled the side door open and followed him in. The room was filled with flower arrangements that surrounded the silver casket by the altar.

As he approached, silent tears began to fall. And when he saw his father, he finally broke.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” he whispered through tears. “If I’d known that was the last time I’d see you, I would have stayed.”

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders to reassure him he wasn't alone. As I went to step back, he grabbed my hand. Words weren't necessary as I stood by my husband while he wept for his father.

CHAPTER 30

brENT

I took a deep breath and said goodbye to my father. I'd always remember the good times we had before Matt got sick. If we ever decided to have children, I'd make it my mission to be the best father to ever father.

The chapel doors opened behind me, but I didn't turn around. John kissed my cheek, then stepped away.

My Uncle Pete came to stand beside me at the casket. We stood looking at my father.

"He called me after he got out of the hospital a couple of weeks ago, and asked me to come down to see him."

I furrowed my brows. "Why?"

"When he was in the hospital, they discovered he had pancreatic cancer. It was advanced and they gave him a few weeks. He wanted me to help him get his affairs in order, and the first thing on the list was you."

My heart began to pound. "Why didn't he tell anyone? Did mom know?"

Pete shook his head. "No. He didn't want her to know."

He let that sit a moment before he pulled out an envelope from the inside pocket of

his jacket. As he held it in his hands, I grabbed onto the side of the casket to steady myself.

Before I could take another breath, John was beside me. "I'm here, baby. It's okay."

I nodded, getting myself together.

"He wrote you a letter, son. Your dad made me promise to get it to you before you left after the funeral. But the way my sister has behaved is appalling, and I wouldn't blame you if you never came back."

I swallowed a lump in my throat as I stared at my father's last words to me.

"Just know we love you, and he loved you. But I would wait to read this after the service. I just wanted to make sure you got it before you left."

Nodding again, I took the envelope with shaking hands. I looked down at my father's familiar handwriting on the front and brought it to my nose. It smelled like him, and I was terrified of what he had to say.

"Uncle Pete, is this going to make it worse than right now?"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "No son. If that were the case, you wouldn't have received it."

I nodded as tears fell down my face. An avalanche of pain and regret came pouring out as my uncle hugged me. I stood and cried like a little boy, but I didn't care. And when I could get myself together, John pulled some tissues from his pocket and handed them to me.

"Thank god it's not a handkerchief. Those things are gross."

We laughed at my unintended joke, but I knew it would be okay.

“You’re a lucky man, Brent. It would make your father happy to know you had such a strong support system.”

He pointed to the back of the chapel. I turned thinking he meant Austin and Greer. But when I saw them, tears welled in my eyes and I had to grab my knees to get a hold of myself.

John rubbed his hand over my back and my uncle patted my shoulder. “Your family’s here, sweetheart. They’ve all come to make sure you’re okay.”

Along with Austin and Greer stood Phantom, in his dress whites, along with Adam Spencer. GQ also wore his uniform and stood by Dominick.

Patrick Griffin and Cole Bradley flanked them, as Aidan and Marcus stood by. The door opened again and in walked Jackson and Simon Kincaid.

John handed me more tissues as I turned to him. “How many do you have in there?”

He laughed and kissed my cheek. “Enough to last a lifetime.”

And with him and our friends here, I knew I was going to be okay.

After the service, my father was interred in the cemetery next to my brother. As my mother sat in the front row with Uncle Pete, my brothers, and my husband stood shoulder to shoulder with me. Dare, GQ, and Phantom were to my left, and my Commander to the right. Four white uniforms of men who were bonded together through the good and the bad. And one white uniform meant to be by my side for the rest of our lives.

My heart was heavy with my father's words close to my heart. Immediately after my uncle had handed the letter to me, I'd stepped into the restroom and placed it in the inside pocket of my jacket. When I came out, I was momentarily at peace, like he'd bestowed a sense of calm over me. And every once in a while, when the emotions snuck up on me, I could smell him. I'd like to think he was with me.

We stayed behind after my mother had already left the cemetery. Uncle Pete had taken her home, but returned before we left.

When he got out of the car, I watched him walk across the cemetery lawn. By the look on his face, I knew it wasn't something bad. I'd had enough of that. And when we got back to Portland, I'd have to deal with the mess of Calvin Turner. Aidan assured me the police had enough evidence against Turner to put him away.

"Brent, I wanted to say goodbye before you left, and to bring you these."

He handed me the bag he'd been carrying. "What's this?"

"Winston's favorite chew toys."

My heart pounded as my fucking eyes started to fill again. "I don't understand."

He chuckled. "Your husband came to me about taking Winston home with you, but he didn't need to ask. Your dad wanted you to have him. It's all in the letter."

I grabbed my uncle and hugged him as more tears slipped down my face. He held me just like my father used to and I couldn't stop crying. Of course, John was ready with the tissues.

"Your aunt and I love you, Brent. If you ever need anything, I'm here for you. All you have to do is call."

I nodded and wiped away the tears. "I will. I promise."

He smiled and hugged John, emotion thick in his throat. "Take care of him, Commander. And keep in touch."

John nodded. "We will, sir. Thank you again."

I watched my uncle walk across the lawn and get in his car. John wrapped his arm around my back. "You're a doggie daddy now, sweetheart."

I chuckled. "I think you mean we're doggy daddies now. Winston has two parents. Not just one."

A big hand landed on my shoulder. "You're going to love the family vet. Callum's great," Jackson said.

"Family vet?" I asked.

"Yeah, Callum is our vet, and Simon is the family doctor," Aidan added. "And I'm everyone's attorney. Coop is the therapist, and Declan is the horse trainer. Christian is the go-to for all the school questions for the kids. Greer is the one to call when you need to get somewhere fast. Cole and Adam provide the music to this chaos we call life."

I was confused. "I'm just a bodyguard. I'm not part of the Pirate family."

"The fuck you aren't," GQ added. "You and Dare are the real protectors. Phantom is the brains and me and Patrick are the beauty. Commander is part of this too. Doubly so since you two got married. There's no getting out of it. Simon has already treated you. So it's like an unbreakable connection to everyone."

Everyone went quiet.

“Wait. They’re married?” Simon asked Jesse.

“Oh hell,” Dominick added. “You guys didn’t know?”

Marcus laughed. “Well, I did. Perks of sleeping with the boss. But we’re gonna need that story, Dreamy.”

“Oh my,” Greer said, a blush creeping up his face.

“You always need the story, don’t you?” Aidan asked his husband.

Marcus kissed his cheek. “I’m a romantic like that.”

“We’ve got another Cooper and Greg on our hands,” Jackson grinned. “How long’s it been? They kept it from us for a year.”

Simon chuckled. “They thought they kept it from us.”

“Well, I knew,” Adam added wrapping his arm around Phantom as we all walked toward the cars. “My He-Man will tell me anything if I…”

Phantom put his hand over Adam’s mouth. “Oh no, Darlin’. We’re not sharing what we do at home with anyone.”

Cole laughed. “I think we rank up there in terms of epic love stories.”

“And definitely length of time,” Patrick added, kissing Cole on the cheek.

Dare snorted. “I have three words,” he said, pointing at me. “Turkish Oil Wrestling.”

I laughed. "I thought you were gonna say unicorn dildo."

"And now we're gonna need both of those stories too, man. I heard Santa Claus is involved? Kinky. I like it." Marcus wiggled his eyebrows, making Aidan groan.

John pulled me closer. "I think we've found our people, sweetheart."

I looked at all these men who had come to support me of all people. "I think we've had them all along."

When we got back to the cabin, I took off my uniform and hung it up. Redressing in jeans and a t-shirt, I put the rest of my things in my bag.

Pulling out the letter, I sat down on the bed and looked at it. I could hear my friends in the family room and for once, I wasn't the center of attention.

Tears were beginning to rise to the surface and I needed a place to read it where I could break down. So I headed out onto the deck and down the stairs. I took a seat at the fire pit and sat back. I looked up at the trees and felt the whispering winds brush across my face. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of the evergreen trees.

Lifting the envelope to my nose, I could smell my dad's cologne. I carefully unsealed it and removed the letter. Leaning forward, I unfolded it and looked at my father's familiar handwriting. Tears filled my eyes as I felt the loss of him even more now.

Dear Brent,

If you're reading this, I've passed. Your uncle was kind enough to grant my dying wish to deliver this to you. I hope that I've been good enough of a man to join your brother, but I'm not so sure I deserve it.

My brush with death last week gave me a new perspective on life. When the doctors told me I had a month at best, I knew what I needed to do. I'm too late to make things up to you, but I want you to know how proud I am of you. Your mother and I didn't make it easy on you, but there are some things I want you to know.

I am so proud of the man you've become, Brent. You have picked yourself up and moved on when we couldn't. I know I haven't been a good father to you since your brother died, and wasting that time with you is the biggest regret of my life.

Every time someplace in the world was in chaos, I prayed you weren't involved.

I don't blame you for Matt's death. There is nothing you could have done to prevent it. You were the best big brother he could have ever have. And he loved you dearly. Your mother needs someone to blame, and she chose you. I should have put her in her place. She needs help, and I hope she'll get it. She's not your responsibility.

I'm sorry for putting my own pain ahead of yours. It's the worst feeling in the world to bury your child, and I hope you never know what it feels like. But that's no excuse for how we treated you.

I'm sorry I haven't been there for you, and I'm sorry I emotionally abandoned my fifteen-year-old son. You are twice the man I am, and I hope you share all that love in your heart with someone. I wish I could have seen your children, but know I'll be watching over you and your family.

I want you to take Winston. He was always meant to be yours. I got him for you when you got out of the service, but selfishly held on to him because he was a connection to you. I know you'll give him a better home than we ever could.

I'm sure I've forgotten something, but the most important thing is for you to know is how much I love you. You're a good man, son. Share that love and watch it grow.

Love,

Dad

Tears streamed down my face, making the ability to see the paper very difficult. The last time I'd cried like this was when my brother died. He might not think he deserved to be with Matt wherever he might be, but I did. And maybe they'd find Nate too.

As I folded it back up, Winston ran up and put his head in my lap. He looked up at me with sad brown eyes until I put my hands on him.

"Hey, buddy," I said, rubbing his head. "Ready to live in Portland? You're gonna love it. We run every day."

As I dried my eyes on my sleeve, John made his way to me. I looked up into his eyes as he approached.

"Are you okay, sweetheart? Can I get you anything?" He squatted down in front of me and wiped away the remaining tears I'd missed.

"No. I've got everything I need right here."

He pulled me up and wrapped me in his arms. And I knew without a doubt I was where I was meant to be.

When we boarded the plane back to Portland, John took Winston up the stairs to get him settled. I was the last to board. Turning, I took one last look over the mountains and the place I'd grown up. I'd loved it here as a kid, exploring with my brother.

As difficult as it had been, I was finally getting the unexpected closure I needed. I never imagined that I would leave here with more than I came with.

I could leave behind the pain and hurt.

And I was moving on with the man I loved and more friends than I ever thought I'd have.

I smiled and looked up, hoping my dad and brother were together. At least there was comfort in knowing Matt wasn't alone any longer.

"Ready to go, sweetheart?" John called.

I nodded, wiping my eyes.

"Yeah, let's go."

I couldn't be happier about what was to come with John by my side.

JOHN

CHRISTMAS EVE

The riverfront cabin I'd rented for the Christmas holidays was decorated with warm white lights and smelled like pine and cinnamon mixed with cranberries. The fresh balsam fir we'd bought was decorated with colored lights and ornaments I'd picked up at the store. This was our first Christmas together and I intended to make it special for him.

Brent had stepped outside onto the deck to call his Uncle Pete to wish them a merry Christmas. Since his father's funeral six months ago, Pete had stepped into the role of Brent's father. They talked at least once a week if not more, and my husband's wounds were beginning to heal.

I also kept in contact with Pete like he'd asked. Brent was my first priority, and making him happy was all I wanted because he sure as fuck did it for me.

I'd just removed a tray of his favorite ginger cookies from the oven, making the huge house smell even more like Christmas. And as if he could smell them from outside, he and Winston came through the sliding door that overlooked the river below and headed straight for me.

"I'm starting to think maybe I know why we chose that Santa Claus drive-thru."

"We? You mean you . You chose the Santa Claus option. I wanted the Star Trek wedding with Spock marrying us."

Brent threw back his head and laughed as he stuffed hot cookies into his mouth, then slipped one to Winston.

“Well,” he said around a swallow of milk I’d poured him, “Thank you for giving me a choice.”

I glanced at him as I added to the massive pile of baked goods I’d been creating all day. He stared back at me with his head tilted to the side.

“Are you planning on us eating all these things? We’re gonna have to run twice a day to burn all these calories off.”

“Or we could fuck them off.”

He smiled and pointed his cookie at me. “Now you’re talking. Let’s start now!”

He whipped his long-sleeved henley over his head before I could get a word out.

“Not yet, big boy,” I said. “Later.”

He whined a bit and looked over at me. “Why not? We have this huge cabin and the fireplace.”

My husband slid around the granite countertop and pressed his body against mine. Placing kisses down my neck, he slipped his hand into my sweats and took hold of me.

“Fuck,” I breathed as he pressed his constantly hard dick along my crease. Ever since that first night in Colorado, I’d found I liked giving myself to him. But not right now.

“Stop,” I groaned. “You’re going to derail my plans.”

He did as I asked and dropped his forehead onto my shoulder. “Then what am I supposed to do with this?” He was talking about his erection.

“You could jack off for me while I watch. Or you could behave and pretend you have self-control like a grown-up.”

He laughed. “You’re so mean to me.”

“And you love it when I’m mean to you.” I turned and pulled him in for a kiss. “Normally I would be all over that, but I want to give you your Christmas gift first. Then we can fuck all over this huge cabin if you want.”

Brent grinned and nodded. “Okay. I’m holding you to that.”

He took another cookie and returned to the stool at the bar. “Why did you choose this big house? We don’t need this much space.”

“I know, but the location directly on the river where we can fish from the deck was too good to pass up. I know it doesn’t look like much on the outside, but when I saw the listing online, I thought it was perfect for our first Christmas.”

My husband smiled and nodded. “It is kinda perfect. The gas fireplace and wall of windows is amazing.”

When I finished plating the cookies, I went to the fridge and pulled out a charcuterie board I’d made for us for Christmas Eve. It was filled with meats and cheeses, fruits, pickles, chicken skewers, chocolate, and even Red Velvet Christmas cookies. Everything he loved and enough to feed an army or two former Navy SEALs.

“Can you get the wine and meet me on the sofa? The game starts in half an hour.”

“On it, babe,” he said, heading to get the glasses.

“Oh, bring the red too, would you? And we’re going need more wine glasses.”

“Why? It’s just more to clean up.”

I sighed. “We are not mixing white and red wine like it’s some Witch Doctor soft drink concoction. It doesn’t work that way. Just humor me.”

“Fine,” he said, returning with four glasses and two bottles of wine.

When he sat down on the sofa, I checked the time. Eyeing the box under the tree wrapped in solid gold wrapping paper, I grinned at my genius. This was going to be epic.

I’d been ordering shit for delivery all day, so when the knock came on the door, he wasn’t phased.

“God, would you give the credit card a rest? The car is only so big, babe!”

I laughed and got up to answer the door. “Turn on the game, would you?”

The Pirates were playing in San Diego, then flying back tonight. It was the next to last regular season game for them, so we’d catch it in person next week.

When I opened the front door, I motioned for our guest to be quiet. He knew what I’d planned, and had played along perfectly.

“Sweetheart,” I called to him as he surfed channels.

Brent turned to look at me but found Pete smiling at him. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

He bolted from the sofa and hugged his uncle. “What are you doing here? I just spoke

to you. You were on the way to church.”

Pete laughed. “No, I was on the way here. Jean stayed in Colorado with your mother because I wanted to be with you. We’ve been planning this for a while. John thought it might be good to spend Christmas together.”

My husband looked at me and smiled. “You are something else, you know that? Now I’m surprised Dare isn’t here.”

I laughed as another knock came on the door. Brent’s eyes went wide as Dare and Greer walked in. He burst out in uncontrollable laughter.

“Well Merry Christmas to you too, asshole,” Dare laughed, then pulled him into a hug.

“Why aren’t you two in San Diego?” He turned and pointed to the TV.

“It was a simple decision,” Greer said, “we wanted to be here.”

Before Brent could unravel that thought, another knock sounded from the door. I hurried to answer it.

“Hey Dad.” Laura walked into my open arms.

“Hey to you. I’m so glad you’re here,” I said, almost choked up.

She pulled back to look at me. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“Come on,” I said, beaming at her. “Let me introduce you to the rest of the family.”

When everyone had settled in on the sofa with a glass of wine and something to eat, I got up and went to the tree. I pulled out the box wrapped in gold paper. Dare and

Greer pulled the coffee table out of the way as I got down on one knee in front of my husband.

“John,” he said as I took his hand.

“Brent, we didn’t have a fairytale beginning. You don’t even remember what happened when Santa pronounced us husband and husband and we’ve never gotten around to buying rings. So I wanted to make it right. I want a memory we can tell our kids about being surrounded by the people we love the most.”

Pete reached into his bag he’d brought in and handed it to Brent.

“What’s this?”

He smiled at his nephew. “Something I thought you might like.”

Brent looked at me as if he didn’t know whether to open it now, or let me finish. He didn’t know I’d orchestrated all of this. Not yet anyway. “Open it, sweetheart.”

Reaching into the bag, he pulled out an eight by ten photo frame that held a picture of the three of them. His brother, his father, and him.

Clutching it to his chest, he bent forward as tears filled his eyes. When he could speak, he looked up at his uncle. “Thank you, Uncle Pete.”

“If they were still with us, I know in my heart they’d be here for this,” he said, motioning back to me.

Brent looked into my eyes, then placed the frame on the table, making me smile.

“You were saying?”

I took his hand in mine. “Brent Trainor, love of my life, and my ride or die. Would you please do me the honor of remarrying me?”

His face split into the most beautiful smile, his eyelashes damp from tears. “I’d love to remarry you.”

I kissed him and handed him the box. “I think we need these to get things started.”

Like a kid at Christmas, he ripped the paper open and opened the ring box that held two gold wedding bands. When he went to pull them out, I stopped him.

“We’re going to do this right without Santa Claus this time.”

I looked over at Pete who already knew what I wanted. I’d planned this meticulously.

Taking him by the hand, I looked into his eyes. “We’re going to renew our vows tonight before we exchange those rings.”

Brent nodded as I got to my feet and pulled him up.

“Pete, would you do the honors? Laura, I need you by my side.”

My husband looked at his friend with tears in his eyes. “I guess that means I need you by my side, asshole.”

Dare flipped him the bird, making all of us laugh, while Greer pulled out his phone. He was going to serve as our photographer.

So in front of the people we loved most in the world, we renewed our vows to one another.

When I saw him again that night in Vegas, I knew he was meant to be mine. And I’d

spend the rest of my life proving it to him.